

People will decide if the claims against me true or not

Says Prof Yunus on ACC's graft case after getting bail

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Nobel laureate Prof Muhammad Yunus yesterday said the people would decide whether the ACC's charges against him are true.



He said this after a Dhaka court granted him fresh bail in a case filed over misappropriation of around Tk 25.22 crore from Grameen Telecom Workers' profit participation fund.

Talking to reporters in front of the Dhaka Metropolitan Sessions Judges' Court, he said, "I am here with a heavy heart. The Anti-Corruption Commission accuses me of corruption. It has been said that my crimes include forgery, embezzlement, and money laundering.

"You have known me for a long time. Please consider whether these crimes could have been committed by me."

Judge Syed Arafat Hossain of the Special Judge's Court-4 of Dhaka granted bail to Prof Yunus and 13 others, said Belal Hossain, bench assistant of the court.

The Nobel laureate said he was going from one court to another, but could not find the answer.

"I am not the owner of Grameen Bank. If anyone had taken the interest [on loans], it is the Grameen Bank owners... When I was fired from Grameen Bank, 97 percent of the institution was owned by its members... I was just an employee.

"It has been said that I suck poor people's blood. I made one crore poor people bank owners. I gave them ownership."

Yesterday, the court set June 2 for a hearing on the charge framing.

On April 2, the Metropolitan Senior Special Judge's Court of Dhaka accepted the charges pressed against Yunus and the 13 others.

On February 1, ACC Deputy Director Gulshan Anwar Prodhan pressed charges against them.

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Hilsa up for sale at the wholesale fish market on Barishal city's Port Road yesterday, a day after the two-month ban on fishing in hilsa sanctuaries ended at midnight on Tuesday. The national fish, netted from local rivers including the Kirtankhola and the Arial Kha, was selling for Tk 52,000 to Tk 1,20,000 per maund, depending on size.

PHOTO: TITU DAS

Doubts grow over Gaza truce deal

Hamas studying truce proposal 'in positive spirit'; 28 more Palestinians killed in Israel strikes

AFP, Palestinian territory

Doubts grew yesterday over the fate of a Gaza truce plan that, as the week began, had raised hopes of an end to nearly seven months of Israeli offensive in the Palestinian enclave.

Israel was still waiting for Hamas's response to the latest proposal, said an Israeli official not authorised to speak publicly.

Mediators have proposed a deal that would halt fighting for 40 days and exchange Israeli hostages for potentially thousands of Palestinian prisoners, according to details released earlier by Britain.

Any such deal would be the first since a one-week truce in November saw 80 Israeli hostages

exchanged for 240 Palestinian prisoners.

Humanitarians are struggling to get aid to Gaza's 2.4 million people, hundreds of thousands of whom have fled to Rafah, the territory's southernmost point, the United Nations says.

Hamas chief Ismail Haniyeh said yesterday the Palestinian group was studying a proposal for a truce with a "positive spirit".

In a call to Egypt's intelligence chief Abbas Kamel, Haniyeh said he "appreciated the role played by Egypt", which along with Qatar and the United States is mediating the talks, and "stressed the positive spirit of the movement in studying the ceasefire proposal", according to a statement on Hamas's official website.

Second session of 12th JS begins

UNB, Dhaka

The 12th parliament went into its second session yesterday at 5:04 pm.

Prior to this, the Business Advisory Committee met at 4:00 pm to determine the session's duration and agenda.

Speaker Shirin Sharmin Chaudhury presided over the committee meeting, setting the stage for parliamentary proceedings.

The decision to convene the session was made by President Mohammed Shahabuddin on April 15.

The maiden session of the 12th parliament, which began on January 30, concluded on March 5 after 22 working days.

Lightning strikes kill 11

STAR REPORT

At least 11 people died and nine others were injured in lightning strikes in five districts yesterday.

In Cumilla, four people, including two farmers, were killed in lightning strikes in Chandina, Sadar South, Debidwar, and Bhurichang upazilas in the evening.

The victims are Daulatur Rahman, 47, of Chandina, Atikul Islam, 50, of Sadar South upazila, Mukhlesur Rahman, 58, of Debidwar, and Alam Hossain, 22, of Burichang upazila.

Additional Superintendent of Police (Cumilla Sadar circle) Kamran Hossain confirmed the matter to The Daily Star.

In Rangamati, three people died and seven others were injured in the morning, reports UNB.

The deceased are Najir Ahmed, 50, of Sylheti Para in Rangamati town, Baharjan Begum, 55, of Baghaichhari upazila, and Tripura Gihini, 37, of Sajek.

In Cox's Bazar, two workers died at Chhari Para in Pekua upazila early in the morning.

The deceased are Didarul Islam, 35, and Md Arman, 25, of the upazila.

In Khagrachhari, a schoolboy was struck by lightning while picking fallen mangoes during a thunderstorm at Matiranga upazila in the morning.

The deceased is Yeasin Arafat of the upazila's Ibrahim Para.

In Sylhet, farmer Babul Ahmed, 48, died and two others were injured while they were harvesting boro paddy at Dighirpara East union of Kanaighat upazila in the afternoon.

Lightning strikes kill 250 people on average every year in the country, according to the Bangladesh Meteorological Department.

12kg LPG cylinder now costs Tk 1,393

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

A standard 12kg LPG cylinder will now cost Tk 1,393, down by Tk 49 from Tk 1,442, according to the Bangladesh Energy Regulatory Commission (BERC).

BERC at a press briefing said the new price came into effect from 6:00pm yesterday.

According to the new rate, a kilogramme of bottled liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) will be sold at Tk 116.08 at the retail level, down by Tk 4.10 from the previous Tk 120.18.

This adjustment follows a rational scale across various LPG cylinder sizes, ranging from 5.5kg to 45kg, addressing the need for a proportional price revision across different consumer segments.

Furthermore, the price for "auto gas", the LPG variant used in motor vehicles, has also been lowered from Tk 66.21 per litre to Tk 63.92.

LPG prices marketed by the state-owned LP Gas Company will remain unchanged. This exception is attributed to its local production and the company's minimal market share, which is less than five percent.

Climate of fear stifling media in South Asia Stuck inside the boat hull, they suffocated

FROM PAGE 1

"Media Defence for Crisis Reporting", Sabina Inderjit, vice president of the International Federation of Journalists, said the ongoing economic crisis in the region has had a huge impact on press freedom.

"Most mainstream media outlets are dependent on government advertisements. However, the government is not willing to share advertisements with the media outlets that are critical of it."

Additionally, subsidies to newspapers have been cut down due to the economic crisis, resulting in a large number of journalists leaving the profession and the closure of hundreds of newspapers in the region, she added.

Apart from the government clamping down on press freedom, most of the media houses are owned by corporations, which results in compromised credibility as the corporate houses want to be on the right side of the government, Sabina noted.

Citing statistics on attacks on journalists, she said the press is under threat because the internet is being restricted in many countries and laws are being formulated to control the media.

Participating in the discussion, TIB Executive Director Ittekkharuzzaman said they acknowledge the global decline in democracy and press freedom.

"It is all related to the political game that goes on... All our institutions are so discretionary and politically controlled. It is a one-sided game."

About the Digital Security Act, he said it was framed to not only target the media but also the civil society.

"In the name of DSA, now the Cyber Security Act, a state of insecurity has been created in everyone in this country, and media, of course, is the main target."

Journalists and media experts from Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, India, the Maldives, and Sri Lanka took part in the discussion, which was moderated by Shafiqul Alam, bureau chief of Agence France-Presse in Dhaka.

The panelists for this session were Hezekiel Dlamini, adviser for UNESCO's Communication and Information for South Asia in the New Delhi regional office; Yeshe Pelmo, programme officer of Journalist Association of Bhutan; Radhika Roy, litigation counsel of Internet Freedom Foundation; Mohamed Junayed Saleem, senior member of Maldives Journalist Association; Viranjana Herath, chairperson, and founder of Media Law Forum; and Ashita Singh, associate project officer of UNESCO's New Delhi Regional Office.

Earlier, in a separate discussion titled "Journalism in the Face of Environmental Crisis", the speakers said the space for freedom of media and civil society has been shrinking in Bangladesh as the laws meant to safeguard those are in fact harmful. They said people have taken advantage of the loopholes in the laws for "targeted abuse" against journalists reporting on crucial issues such as environment degradation.

Media reporting and activities by the civil society to protect the environment has become more challenging amid the shrinking space for press freedom, they added.

The campaign to save the environment has become tougher because those who are harming it mostly belong to the influential quarters that get protection from a section of the authorities concerned, who are also a part of the process and benefit from collusion, the panelists observed.

State Minister for Information and Broadcasting Mohammad Ali Arafat, who was the chief guest at the discussion, said the government will welcome any kind of criticism as long as it is grounded in facts.

"We do have an understanding that press freedom is all about right reporting... At the same time, disinformation also exists in our society and elsewhere."

When press freedom is abused through disinformation, it adversely affects the democratic progress of society and the people at large, he said, stressing the need for collective efforts to fight disinformation.

Pointing at the shrinking space for media, TIB's Ittekkharuzzaman said that in the case of laws like Cyber Security Act, which has replaced the Digital Security Act, there has been "purposeful, spiteful and targeted" misuse or abuse against reporting on graft, misgovernance and a lack of accountability.

He said the dysfunctionality of key state institutions has made things worse.

Due to an insecure and intimidating ambience, journalists and civil society activists have to undergo "involuntary self-censorship".

He called upon the authorities concerned to uphold the freedom of media and civil society and end the "shoot the messenger culture".

Rejwanul Haq, chairman of Broadcast Journalist Center, said journalists face risks while reporting on environmental issues because those who are destroying the nature are influential.

Swedish Ambassador to Bangladesh Alexandra Berg von Linde said that while the media and government have different roles and responsibilities, the former can support the latter by serving the society with facts and information.

Susan Viza, Unesco representative to Bangladesh, said the key role of journalists, while reporting on environmental issues, should be to bridge the gap between the scientists, government and civil society to ensure that the people are getting credible information.

Power price

FROM PAGE 1

The subsidy for power is around Tk 35,000 crore and around Tk 6,500 crore for gas this fiscal year.

The finance division this fiscal year paid the power division around Tk 19,000 in bonds and cash but unpaid bills amount to around Tk 60,000 as of last January, officials said.

A power division high officials said despite the hikes in electricity prices, Tk 7 to Tk 8 has to be subsidised for every unit of power produced.

"This is the main reason for the piling up of unpaid bills," the official said, adding that this time the IMF mission wanted to know the plan for reducing the arrears and subsidy burden.

The official said the government would withdraw the subsidies for the power and energy sector as it had done for petroleum fuels.

The IMF mission also wanted to know whether the Rooppur Nuclear Power Plant would require any subsidy.

"We told them that the per unit generation cost for the Rooppur plant would be low and would not need any subsidy," the official said.

Power division officials said the first unit of the 2,400 megawatt Rooppur plant would start production next March.

The IMF has been insisting on reducing the subsidy for the power and energy sector and diverting the money saved to the social safety net programmes.

The IMF mission will end its tour with joint meetings with finance division and Bangladesh Bank officials on May 6 and 7, according to finance division officials.

Rain, at last

FROM PAGE 1

The average rainfall in Bangladesh was one millimetre last month.

According to the BMD, the average rainfall in April is 134mm.

"It was the driest month in the country since 1981," Abul Kalam Mollik, a meteorologist at the BMD, told The Daily Star.

BMD officials and experts said May could bring some relief. There might be rain and the heatwave spells usually seen during this month would be much shorter, albeit slightly humid.

"There will be rain and thundershowers from May 2 to May 8. After that, temperature may rise and there might be two to three mild heatwaves and one to two severe heatwaves in May," said meteorologist Mollik.

FROM PAGE 1

A few miles into sea en route to Italy, the boat started taking in water. "The ones inside the hull started yelling and banging the deck from below, but there was no space for even one more person on the deck. We were sitting on top of each other. Slowly the noise stopped. I could do nothing but sit and listen to them die," he said.

Nineteen-year-old Badhan Mandol was inside the hull when the water started seeping in.

"There was a small access hole. I don't know how I managed to climb out. Another migrant let me sit on his lap," he said, adding, "The others suffocated to death as fuel started leaking below."

While the boat chugged on, with its engine failing at times, they were intercepted by the Tunisian coast guards.

"Initially the coast guards wanted our fuel, but we had only two canisters left. I had myself thrown out a few canisters to lighten the load of the boat," said Gurudas. "They boarded the boat and opened the access hatch to search for fuel and found bodies instead. They pulled out two people, both Bangladeshis. One of them, Manotosh Sarkar, was alive. His lips were moving and he had a pulse."

The coast guards evacuated Manotosh of Rajoir upazila in Madaripur and he is still receiving treatment in Tunisia, said Badhan.

A plane carrying the eight bodies landed in Dhaka at 12:30pm.

The bodies were of Mamun Sheikh, Sajal Bairagi, Nayan Biswas, Rifat Sheikh, Sajib Kazi, Imrul Kayes Apon, Md Abdur Kaiser, and Rassel Sheikh.

"They're all from Madaripur and Gopalganj.

The incident left nine dead, eight Bangladeshis and a Pakistani. The 44 others on the boat were rescued.

Their boat journey was the last leg of an already horrifying ordeal fraught with torture.

Gurudas and Badhan were locked up in a flat in Tripoli for one and half months, where they waited for their "game", a colloquial term for the perilous journey from Libya to Italy.

"On the day the 'game' began, six of us were piled into the boot of a minivan and smuggled to a 'game ghor' [cell]. They beat us indiscriminately with metal pipes when we protested for being put in the boot," said Gurudas.

He could not say where the "game ghor" was.

The "game ghor" housed 90 migrants, mostly Bangladeshis and some Sudanese.

"They gave us food every other day, sometimes rice and potatoes, sometimes just bread. There was one bathroom for all of us. The water shortage was so acute that we used

our gamchha [traditional towel] to collect our sweat and sucked on it," said Gurudas.

Several times a day, the traffickers would beat them up, usually if one asked for food or water.

Gurudas said he had sold off his ancestral land and borrowed from loan sharks to pay Tk 14 lakh (\$12,750) for the journey from Bangladesh to Italy.

After seven days in the "game ghor", they were piled onto a pickup truck. "We were made to lie down... stacked like fish in two layers. They then covered the flatbed with tarpaulin."

Gurudas said deceased Mamun Sheikh had become sick during this leg of the journey. "He was already half dead when we got off the truck at Zuwara," he said.

That evening, they were kept hidden in a holding place they called "khwabja-ghor". Late at night, they were called out and made to wade into the water where the boat waited. "They made us run and beat us if we did not," said Gurudas.

A few miles into the sea, they were first intercepted by a boat with Libyans. Their boat was reeled in and they were transferred to a detention centre.

The conditions in the detention centre are horrific with the migrants being beaten, forced to live in substandard conditions, and re-trafficked.

"At the detention centre, they were given six litres of water every other day to be used by 30 people," said Badhan. "They made us sit facing the wall and beat our backs with rods."

"I wanted to go home but I was told that I would have to pay Tk 15 lakh more," he added.

After eight days at the detention centre, they were re-trafficked by the prison guards.

Badhan and Gurudas identified them as members of law enforcement as they carried guns.

"The guards of the detention centre called us out one night and made us get into a vehicle. We changed vehicles a few times and came back to the same 'game ghor'," said Gurudas. They were transported to a holding cell near the coast the same day and made to board the 10-foot boat.

It was this boat journey that ended in the deaths of eight Bangladeshis.

A case was filed with the Airport Police Station on April 19 by Sunil Bairagi, father of deceased Sajal Bairagi.

The charges include murder (Section 302/34) and violations of the Human Trafficking Prevention Act.

Juboraj Kazi, 24, of Madaripur, and his father Mosharraf Kazi, who lives in Libya, have been accused in the case. Juboraj has been arrested.

As news spread of the bodies having landed, a shadow of grief descended across homes in Rajoir upazila.

Sajal's mother was sitting against a pile of hay and staring into nothingness.

Mamun's mother collapsed on her doorstep, bawling uncontrollably, while his friends picked up shovels to dig a grave.

Nayon's mother crept into a dark corner of a room in her home and wept silently.

Astonishingly, neighbours gathered outside were talking about hopes of making it to Italy.

"My son will go next after Eid. I hope he does not die like Mamun," said a mother as she watched Mamun's mother grieve.

Schools to resume

FROM PAGE 12

The government's move came as almost all secondary-level schools remained closed yesterday in line with High Court directive although the education ministry did not officially announce the closure.

Amid the sweltering heat, the HC on April 29 ordered closure of all primary and secondary schools and madrasas until yesterday.

Abdul Majid, Dhaka district education officer, yesterday told this correspondent that almost all secondary schools were closed.

Secondary schools in Bagerhat, Barishal, Gazipur, Jhenidha, Khulna, Mymensingh, Narayanganj, Narsingdi, and Rajshahi remained shut yesterday, said officials of the respective districts.

However, some secondary schools in Dinajpur were open yesterday.

Akhara Parveen, head teacher of Dinajpur Zilla School, said schools were kept open as they did not get any directive from the ministry concerned.

Asked about the issue, a top education ministry official said the ministry wanted to lodge an appeal with the Appellate Division of the Supreme Court against the HC order of closure, but it could not do so for not having the copy of the order.

The ministry was not able to file the appeal Wednesday as it was a public holiday. Yesterday was a holiday for the court.

Schools and colleges were scheduled to reopen on April 21 after the Eid and Pahela Baishakh holidays. But the education ministry initially extended the closure until April 27 and reopened all schools and colleges on April 28 ignoring the concern of parents over the heatwave.

On Monday, the education ministry again announced closure of all schools and colleges in 27 districts for April 30.