

SANCTIONS AGAINST AZIZ Washington notified Dhaka beforehand

Says foreign minister

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Foreign Minister Hasan Mahmud yesterday said the decision regarding the US sanctions against ex-army chief Gen (ret'd) Aziz Ahmed was first conveyed to the Bangladesh embassy in Washington.

The sanction was imposed not under the visa policy, but under a different law, the minister said, adding that he did not know whether any sanctions were being imposed on anyone under the US visa policy.

Hasan was speaking at a "Meet the Reporters" event at the Dhaka Reporters Unity.

"If the visa policy is imposed for destroying the democratic process, then I think this policy should be imposed against those who beat police personnel to death, attack hospitals and the residence of a chief justice, and burn people to death," he said.

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With no voters in the vicinity, security personnel sit idle at the polling centre at Dashgaon Noagaon High School in Sylhet's Gowainghat upazila during the upazila polls around 9:30am yesterday.

PHOTO: SHEIKH NASIR

Decomposed bodies of woman, two children found

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Mymensingh

Police recovered the decomposed bodies of a woman and two children from the Kakchar area in Mymensingh's Trishal upazila yesterday. The victims were identified as Amena Begum, 30, wife of Ali Hossain, and their children Abu Bakkar, 4, and Anas, 2, of Kakchar Nayapara village in Trishal.

The bodies were found buried.

On information, police recovered the bodies around 3:00pm, said Kamal Hossain, officer-in-charge of Trishal Police Station.

Police suspect they were murdered somewhere else a few days ago and the bodies were later buried at Kakchar, a remote area of Trishal, said the OC.

The bodies have been sent to Mymensingh Medical College Hospital morgue for autopsies.

Police, the Police Bureau of Investigation (PBI) and Rapid Action Battalion (Rab) have started investigating the incident, said Md Rakibul Akter, superintendent of police at PBI Mymensingh.

Police are looking for Ali Hossain for questioning.

The filing of a case is underway, said law enforcers.

Buddha Purnima

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Gautama in Kopilabostu at the foothill of the Himalayas.

He attained supreme enlightenment at the age of 35 and finally departed into nirvana at the age of 80 in 483 BC.

The day is a public holiday.

On the occasion, President Mohammed Shahabuddin and Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in separate messages greeted the members of the Buddhist community.

In his message, President Shahabuddin said Gautam Buddha always sought welfare for mankind and preached equity and friendship to establish peace and harmony in the world.

The ideals and philosophy of Buddha can play an important role in establishing peace in society, removing unrest and intolerance from the world, and saving people from moral degradation, he said.

Noting that Bangladesh is a country of communal harmony, the president said, "People of all religions in this country have been observing their respective religions and rituals with great splendour which is a bright tradition of the people of this country."

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, in her message, said, "In today's world, it is necessary to follow the teachings of Buddha to suppress the brute force maddened by violence, prevent the degradation of values, and build a peaceful society."

She added that the constitution guarantees equal rights to people of all religions and castes, adding, "We believe religion is for individuals while festivals are for all."

On the day, newspapers will publish articles while Bangladesh Betar, Bangladesh Television (BTV) and private TV channels broadcast special programmes highlighting the significance of the day.

The celebrations usually start with lighting lamps, hoisting the national and religious flags atop the Mohabihar, and the recitation of sacred verses from Tripitaka.

The Buddhist devotees are expected to offer various gift items, including fruits, flowers, and candles, to statues of Lord Buddha on the day.

Second phase too marked by low turnout

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spreading propaganda and falsehood about the elections so that people lose interest in polls, he told journalists at the AL president's Dhanmondi office after the voting ended.

If the CEC's estimate is proven to be correct, this would be the lowest turnout in upazila polls since 2009, said EC sources.

The turnout was 36 percent in the first phase of upazila elections held on May 8.

The figure was 70.57 percent in the 2009 upazila polls, which dropped to 61.23 percent in 2014. On average, it stood at 40 percent in the 2019 upazila polls conducted in five phases.

In the January 7 national election, the voter turnout was 42 percent.

The BNP and many other political parties are staying off the upazila polls, like they did during the January 7 national election saying that the EC is "not capable of holding the elections in a free and fair manner".

POLLS VIOLENCE

In Cox's Bazar, Saifur Alam, 38, of Mammora village, a supporter of chairman candidate Abu Taleb, was stabbed to death by rivals in Eidgaon upazila yesterday evening.

Speaking to The Daily Star, Taleb, president of the upazila unit AL, alleged that activists of his rival candidate Samsul Alam, who contested the polls with "motorbike" symbol, carried out the attack in

Fixed expenses to eat up 40pc of next budget

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ministry projects that it may go up even more.

In the current fiscal year, the government allocated Tk 94,376 crore for interest payments, which crossed Tk 1,00,000 crore in the revised budget for the first time.

The finance ministry is going to increase the allocation by 23 percent in the next fiscal year.

Seeking anonymity, a finance ministry official said the increase in the government's treasury bond interest rate and taka's depreciation could drive up the allocation for interest payments when the next year's budget will be revised.

Finance ministry data shows that in July-January of the current fiscal year, interest payments totalled Tk 60,555 crore, a year-on-year increase of 26 percent.

The payment on the domestic front rose 15 percent to Tk 51,213 crore. Interest payment on foreign loans went up threefold.

The cost of funds, mobilised through the sales of treasury bonds, has been on the rise. This has led to an increase in the interest expenditure.

The interest rate of treasury bonds has gone past 12 percent from 8 percent in June 2023, shows Bangladesh Bank data.

They needed to sanction someone and picked me

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Aziz said Al Jazeera in a report titled "All the Prime Minister's Men" had made similar allegations, and many, including civil society members, termed them "baseless, false and fabricated".

"I served as the director general of the BGB for four years and as the army chief for three years. I didn't help any of my brothers secure contacts during those years... If anyone can prove that corruption took place in buying spyware [during that period], I would be ready to face any consequences."

The former army chief said that almost the entire process to have military hardware was completed

Though the sales of savings instruments such as national savings certificates are currently low and the interest rates against them have fallen, many of the schemes have matured. This means the government's expenses in this segment have also gone up.

As of September 30, the government's outstanding debt stock was Tk 16,55,156 crore.

In the current fiscal year, the government's allocation for subsidies and incentives is Tk 1,11,000 crore.

A finance ministry official said that though a final figure was not fixed, it was likely that the next year's allocation would be close to that of the current fiscal year.

In several years before FY19, the government didn't provide subsidy to the power sector.

From FY19 to FY22, the government subsidy in the sector was between Tk 7,000 crore and Tk 11,000 crore. In FY23, it rose to Tk 22,000 crore.

The subsidy in the power sector stands at Tk 35,000 crore in the current fiscal year. The government is likely to keep the amount of subsidy the same in the next budget.

Though the government hiked the prices of electricity, gas and fuel several times over the last two years,

subsidy expenditure in the sector is yet to come down due to huge arrears, said the official.

The government, however, is planning to reduce subsidy in power sector gradually. For this, it could hike electricity price on four to five times a year, the official added.

In the current fiscal year, allocation for government employees' salaries and allowance is Tk 80,463 crore.

Officials said the allocation would increase by 9 percent in the next fiscal year.

However, if pension and gratuity are included, the expenditure in the sector will surpass Tk 1,00,000 crore.

Though the government's expenditures in several priority sectors increased over the years, it could not make allocations for the health and education sectors in line with the Eighth Five-Year Plan.

Due to resource constraint, the government cannot raise allocation for social safety net significantly.

In the case of old age allowance, elderly people get only Tk 600 a month.

Though the social welfare ministry asked for an increase in the monthly allowances under several safety net schemes, the finance ministry did not raise the allocation due to resource constraint.

US slaps sanctions

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him or to discredit the government as he had held an important position during the tenure of the Awami League government.

Aziz was the chief of army staff between June 2018 and June 2021. He led Border Guard Bangladesh between 2012 and 2016.

Yesterday, he said he was ready to accept any consequences if anyone could prove that he gave contracts to his brothers or relatives when he was the army chief and the director general of the BGB.

Aziz is the eldest of five brothers. His brothers Tofail Ahmed, also known as Joseph; Haris Ahmed and Anis Ahmed hogged headlines during the 1990s and the 2000s for murder, extortion, and possession of illegal firearms.

Joseph alone was accused in 10 cases filed in connection with extortion and possession of illegal firearms.

Joseph was sentenced to death and Haris and Anis to life imprisonment in a murder case in 2004.

Aziz got media attention after Joseph got clemency in the murder case in 2018 and Haris and Anis in 2019.

Al Jazeera on February 1, 2021, aired a documentary titled "All the Prime Minister's Men" in which it claimed that Aziz exerted influence to help his three convicted brothers get various contracts.

Media spotlight was back on him again. He was the army chief then.

The army headquarters and the foreign ministry refuted the allegations made by the Al Jazeera, labelling it "false" and "slanderous".

TALE OF JOSEPH, HARIS, ANIS

Joseph was a Chhatra League leader of Mohammadpur. He entered the political arena under the guidance of his elder brother Haris. He later joined Subrata Bain's gang known as the "Seven Star", infamous for carrying out murders, abductions, extortion, illegal occupation of land and establishments, and tender manipulation.

Joseph and Haris became "top-listed criminals" in the 90s, according to media reports.

On May 7, 1996, Freedom Party leader Mostafizur Rahman Mostafa was shot dead in broad daylight in Mohammadpur. The following day, Mostafa's wife Rashida Parvin filed a murder case.

Haris and Anis had then fled the country, according to media reports, and they had been on the run in the

eyes of the law for decades.

Joseph was arrested and a Dhaka court on April 25, 2004, sentenced him to death in the murder case while Haris and Anis were sentenced in absentia to life imprisonment.

The High Court in September 2007 upheld the death sentence of Joseph, but the Supreme Court on December 9, 2015, commuted his sentence to life imprisonment.

After serving 20 years, Joseph was freed on May 27, 2018, following a presidential clemency with about one and a half years of his sentence remaining. A month later, Aziz became the army chief.

Jail sources at that time said the process of Joseph's release began on March 31, 2018, and the procedure for getting the president's clemency was initiated on June 7, 2016, by his mother.

Haris and Anis, who had been fugitives, in the murder case got clemency from the government under Section 401 of the Code of Criminal Procedure in March 2019.

Interpol issued a red notice for Haris on October 25, 2005, and withdrew it in 2019 following a Dhaka Metropolitan Police commissioner's request, according to a letter of National Central Bureau of Bangladesh Police, dated April 7, 2021.

Haris's name was on the list of the "wanted persons" on the Bangladesh Police's website for several years. His name was removed after he on March 23, 2021, wrote to the home ministry and said the government had pardoned him and his brother Anis. He claimed himself to be a well-established businessman since the 90s and a "shining star" in the Awami League since the 80s.

The home ministry approved his request and forwarded the letter to the inspector general of police the same month, according to media reports.

The three brothers are now believed to be abroad.

OTHER SANCTIONS

The US on December 10, 2021, imposed sanctions on Rab and seven then incumbent and former top officials of the force for alleged violations of human rights, including extrajudicial killings and enforced disappearances.

In May last year, a few months ahead of the January 7 elections, Washington announced a visa policy, saying those undermining the democratic elections in Bangladesh would be denied US visas.

Plot thickens over AL MP Azim

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mystery within a day or two."

Asked about the unconfirmed information that something very bad might have happened to Azim, the home boss said, "We too have heard the same, but we are yet to get any confirmation."

The MP's personal assistant, Abdur Rouf, had no information about his whereabouts till last night.

"MP's daughter Mumtaz Ferdous Doreen will visit the Indian High Commission in Dhaka tomorrow [today] to seek an Indian visa. She will travel to Kolkata as soon as she is granted the visa," he said.

Earlier in the day, Home Minister Asaduzzaman said, "The MP went to India after crossing the immigrations in Bangladesh and India properly. All government agencies are working on the matter."

"The National Security Intelligence, and the Special Branch of police are working with the Indian police and intelligence agencies," he told reporters at the Secretariat in the afternoon.

The three-time MP went to India on May 12 on a personal visit to receive treatment. A general diary was filed with Baranagar Police Station in North Kolkata on May 18 regarding his going missing.

Mammora village.

Delwar, a supporter of Taleb, said, "A group of activists of the chairman aspirant who contested the polls with 'motorbike' symbol tried to abduct me. When Saifur came to my rescue, they stabbed him to death on the spot."

Samsul could not be contacted over the phone for comments.

Rafiqul Islam, additional superintendent of Cox's Bazar police, said Saifur was killed in a clash between the supporters of two chairman candidates and it took place far away from the polling station.

Police were investigating the incident, he said.

In Chattogram, at least 15 people were injured as supporters of two chairman candidates clashed at Jobra Government Primary School polling centre in Hathazari upazila.

In Rajshahi, at least eight people were injured in two clashes between the supporters of two chairman contenders at two polling stations.

At least 12 houses of supporters of a chairman aspirant were set on fire allegedly by rivals in Para Kachua village of Gaibandha's Gobindaganj upazila.

In Jajira upazila of Shariatpur, at least five journalists and a policeman were injured in an attack allegedly by supporters of a chairman candidate. In Cumilla, another journalist

was physically assaulted at Shishpur

Government Primary School polling centre of Cumilla Sadar South upazila.

In Gazipur, an assistant presiding officer was injured in an attack by the supporters of a chairman aspirant in Sreepur upazila.

In Laxmipur, a union parishad chairman was detained by law enforcers for around four hours over influencing Ramganj upazila parishad polls.

In Noakhali's Sonaimuri upazila, a mobile court directed police to file a case against six polls officials on charges of assisting a man in casting fake votes.

MPS' RELATIVES DID WELL

According to unofficial results of yesterday's polls till 11:45pm, almost all the relatives of the AL lawmakers, who took part in the elections defying the party's directives, have won.

Incumbent Chairman Nazrul Majid Mahmud, younger brother of Narsingdi-4 MP Nurul Majid Mahmud Humayun, was elected chairman of Manahardi upazila.

Nazrul Islam, brother of Jamalpur-1 MP Noor Mohammad, became the winner in the chairman polls to Bakshiganj Upazila Parishad.

Incumbent Chairman Golam Hasnayan Russel, son of Pabna-3 MP Mokbul Hossain, became Bhangura upazila chairman.

Jamil Hasan Durjoy, brother of Gazipur-3 lawmaker and State

Minister for Primary and Mass Education Rumana Ali, was elected as Sreepur upazila chairman.

Ehsanul Hakim Sadhon, cousin of Rajbari-2 MP and Railways Minister Zillul Hakim, became Baliakandi upazila chairman.

Sirajul Islam Khan Raju, father of Bogura-3 MP Khan Mohammad Saifullah Al Mehedi, won Adamdighi upazila chairman post.

Naem Hasan Joarder, nephew of Chaudnaga-1 MP Solaiman Haque Joarder, was elected as Chuadanga Sadar upazila chairman.

Bulbul Ahmed Token, brother of Kushtia-1 MP Rezaul Haque Chowdhury, won the chairman polls to Daulatpur Upazila Parishad.

Incumbent Chairman Faizul Haque Rome, uncle-in-law of Narail-2 lawmaker Mashrafe Bin Mortaza, won Lohagara upazila chairman post.

However, incumbent Chairman Golam Sarwar, younger brother of Comilla-10 MP AHM Mustafa Kamal, lost the polls in Cumilla Sadar South upazila.

Seventeen chairman aspirants, who are relatives of AL lawmakers, took part in yesterday's polls, according to Transparency International Bangladesh.

[Our correspondents from respective districts contributed to this report.]