

2018 BNP PROTEST Charges framed against Alal, Tuku, 87 others

COURT CORRESPONDENT

A Dhaka court framed charges yesterday against 89 leaders and activists of BNP and its affiliated organisations in a case filed over instigating destructive activities during a demonstration in 2018.

The demonstration was held ahead of a court's verdict on BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia in the Zia Orphanage Trust graft case in 2018.

BNP leaders Sved Moazzem Alal and Tuku Hossain Alal, AKM Fazlul Haque Milon, Shamsur Rahman Shimul Biswas, Sultan Salauddin Tuku, Habibun Nabi Khan Sohel and Saiful Alam Nirob are among the accused in the case filed with Ramma Model Police Station in February 2018.

Alal, Milon, Shimul Biswas, Tuku, Solel, Nirob and 82 others, now on bail and Enamul Haque, SEE PAGE 6 COL 4



Palestinians walk past the rubble as others search for belongings in the aftermath of an Israeli strike near a UN-run school sheltering displaced people in Khan Younis in the southern Gaza Strip yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Anti-quota protests swell across univs

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He added, "We're not against the freedom fighters; rather, we have no objection to increasing the facilities for those who are real freedom fighters. But we want the quota system gone."

Their demands include the formation of a commission to reform the quota system and also to ensure vacant positions are filled with candidates selected on merit in the absence of quota candidates.

Also, they demand that individuals be allowed to use the quota system only once in their lifetime for any type of competitive public examinations, including university entrance tests.

THE SC SAYS

Yesterday morning, a six-member bench of the Supreme Court's Appellate Division, headed by Chief Justice Obaidul Hassan, held a hearing on the government's petition for a stay on the HC verdict that termed its 2018 circular abolishing quotas illegal.

However, much to the dismay of the protesters expecting a stay, the apex court asked the government to submit a leave-to-appeal petition after the full text of the HC judgment is released.

The HC verdict came on June 5 this year, following a 2021 writ petition that challenged the legality of the quota abolishment.

Since then, students have taken to the streets demanding the reinstatement of the government circular.

PROTESTS ESCALATE

Once the news of the Appellate Division's decision spread, students of Dhaka University began gathering in front of the Central Library from 11:00am.

They brought out processions on different roads on the campus and around 12:20pm blocked the Shahbagh intersection, for the third consecutive day. They stayed there till 6:00pm.

Despite bouts of rain, the students

stayed put, chanting slogans like "Bury the quota system", "No place for discriminations in my golden Bangla", "No more tears for the meritorious", and "Keep the country's talent in the country, abolish the quota system".

They also sang patriotic songs and recited poems.

Meanwhile, traffic came to a halt on the roads leading to Bangla Motors, Science Lab and Kakrail due to the blockade.

On the other hand, leaders and activists of Chhatra League, the pro-ruling party student body, took position at different dormitories, including Zahirul Huq Hall and Surja Sen Hall, to prevent students from joining the protests.

Asaduzzaman Farid, joint secretary of Zahirul Huq Hall BCL, said they were on alert to prevent the anti-quota demonstrations at the hall.

Sharjis Alam, a master's student of Zoology and one of the leaders of the anti-quota protesters, was allegedly forced to vacate the Amar Ekushey Hall of DU around 10:00pm.

He claimed that Chhatra League leaders in the dorm forced him to leave.

As the news spread, hundreds of students from different halls gathered in front of the dorm around 11:45pm and started chanting slogans.

Hall provost Prof Ishtiaq M Sayed was seen trying to calm the students.

Saddam Hossain, president of Amar Ekushey Hall unit of Chhatra League, said they did not force anyone to leave the dorm. "Who stays or not depends on the hall authority, not them."

Around 1:00pm, students of Sher-e-Bangla Agricultural University blocked the Agargaon thoroughfare for an hour, said Ahad Ali, officer-in-charge of Sher-e-Bangla Nagar Police Station.

Jagannath University students also blocked roads near their campus on Chittaranjan Avenue and Ray Saheb Bazar for over an hour and half

since 12:00pm.

They too shouted anti-quota slogans such as "No place for discriminations in Bangabandhu's Bangla", "Rise again with the spirit of '18", "Let the meritorious be free!".

The blockade caused traffic congestion on both roads.

Halal Ahmed, one of the protesters, said, "We'll continue our movement until the quota system is abolished."

Students of Jahangirnagar University brought out a procession on campus and then blocked the Dhaka Aricha highway around 12:20pm for almost an hour, leading to traffic jams.

AFM Sayeed, officer-in-charge of Ashulia Police Station, said though the blockade was lifted around 1:00pm, it took time for traffic to go back to normal.

Cumilla University students blocked the busy Dhaka-Chittogram highway, a commercial artery between the capital and the port city, in Beltai area of south sadar upazila for three hours from 12:30pm.

They lifted the blockade only after Deputy Commissioner Khandaker M Musfiqur Rahman and Superintendent of Police Abdul Mannan ensured that the protesters' message would be conveyed to the higher authorities.

After a procession on their campus, several thousand students of Rajshahi University braved the rain and blocked the Dhaka Rajshahi highway for over two hours from around 10:00am. Slogans like "Let the weapon of 2018 roar again", "We want merit-based recruitment, no quotas except for the disabled" were chanted.

Hundreds of Chittagong University students blocked the Chittagong-Khagrachhari highway for around two hours from 11:45pm.

Fatema, a sociology student, said, "Because of the quotas, meritorious students are not being recognised. It's unacceptable that a talented student with high exam scores may not get a

job while some others can benefit from the quota system."

The Barishal-Kuakata highway was also blocked by students of Barisal University for five hours.

QUOTA SYSTEM

The quota system has long been criticised as the reason for bureaucracy being devoid of merit in the long run.

While giving a lecture at Dhaka University in January 2018, the late Akbar Ali Khan, a former adviser to a caretaker government and former cabinet secretary, had said it was "the biggest problem in the cadre service".

He said, "No other country in the world has such a bizarre system."

A study conducted by Akbar Ali Khan and Kazi Rakibuddin Ahmad, also a former secretary and former chief election commissioner, recommended reducing the number of quotas.

In the report, which they submitted to the Public Service Commission in 2008, they termed the system "unjust".

In 2018, the government issued the circular, abolishing the quota system, in the wake of massive student protests for reforms.

Until then, about 56 percent of government jobs had been reserved for candidates from various quotas. Of this, 30 percent were for the children and grandchildren of freedom fighters; 10 percent for women; 10 for people from underdeveloped districts; five for members of indigenous communities, and one percent for persons with physical disabilities.

The quota system was introduced through an executive order in 1972 and had been amended several times since.

From 1972 to 1976, 20 percent were recruited on merit.

Merit-based recruitment then increased to 40 percent in 1976, which continued till 1985 before it was further upped to 45 percent.

The country's image as a garment powerhouse defined by the sheer volume of shipments will be seriously dented. Clothing exports, which make up about 10 percent of the economy, are an important indicator that sets the country apart from its peers.

SOME ESTIMATES ARE OBSOLETE NOW

It is going to create serious data chaos. Whatever Bangladesh has estimated in the past has now become "mostly irrelevant", said Fahmida Khatun, executive director of the Centre for Policy Dialogue.

The EPB publishes figures based on the data from the customs department. Apparently, for procedural reasons or otherwise, the customs department took into account the same export data more than once in many cases, known as double or triple counting.

As per the EPB data, exports were \$47.47 billion in the July-April period of fiscal 2023-24. However, the amount stood at \$33.67 billion after the correction, according to data released by the central bank on Wednesday.

But it's not clear for how long such wrong data entry has been going on.

Good policy framing depends on authentic data. Poor quality data gives wrong signals to the policymakers.

"If policymaking is done based on unreliable data, then policies become irrelevant and defunct," Fahmida said. Unfortunately, citizens have been misled about the real economic situation due to such anomalies perpetuated by government organisations, she said.

These errors show the extent of data governance or a lack of it

in Bangladesh. Without quality information, informed policy-making is difficult, said MA Razzaque, chairman of the Research and Policy Integration for Development.

The

export data mismatch will have an impact on GDP estimates because value addition from exports is included in the GDP calculation. The ratio of value addition is nearly 60 percent. So, the GDP impact will be as much as \$6 billion, Razzaque said.

Md Deen Islam, associate professor of economics at Dhaka University, said this correction would lower the GDP growth rate, with exports contributing less to overall economic output, GDP growth rates for the period will need to be revised downward, and future projections for economic growth will need to be adjusted to reflect the more accurate export figures, potentially leading to more conservative growth estimates.

The significant revision could create temporary confusion and mistrust among stakeholders, including businesses, investors and international partners, he said.

"Revisions might lead to questions regarding the credibility and reliability of economic data published by national agencies," he added.

Deen Islam said policymakers may need to reassess their strategies to stimulate economic growth and stabilise the macroeconomic environment as the revised export figures indicate a significant decline.

However, the reconciliation of export data provides a more accurate picture of Bangladesh's economic landscape, which is crucial for effective policy-making and strategic planning, said Deen Islam.

[Refayet Ullah Mirdha and Md Mehedi Hasan contributed to this report]

Biden vows to stay 'to the end' Rejects pressure to quit race

REUTERS, Washington

US President Joe Biden vowed to stay in the 2024 presidential race during calls with campaign staff and meetings with Democratic lawmakers and governors on Wednesday evening, as he sought to shake off calls for him to drop out after his shaky debate performance last week.

Biden dialed in to a call with worried members of his campaign team and told them he wasn't going anywhere, according to two sources familiar with the call.

"No one is pushing me out. I'm not leaving. I'm in this race to the end," Biden said in a separate email blast by his campaign, urging supporters to "pitch in a few bucks" to help defeat his Republican rival Donald Trump in the November 5 presidential election.

The president met virtually and in person with 24 Democratic governors and the mayor of Washington, DC, on Wednesday evening to reassure them he is up to the job of standard-bearer for the party after the faltering debate performance.

Only three of the governors - the leaders of New York, Minnesota and Maryland - met with reporters afterwards, vowing to stand with Biden after what they called an honest discussion about his bad performance in last week's debate.



Beijing open to working with Delhi

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project regarding the Teesta river is for Bangladesh to decide upon. That decision must be respected by all of us."

In 2020, Bangladesh's water resources ministry wrote to the Economic Relations Division seeking a \$983.27 million loan from China to implement the Teesta project that includes dredging, creating reservoirs, and building townships along the river.

But, after her India visit last month, Hasina told reporters that her government will implement the Teesta project with assistance from India and it has got assurances from the neighbouring country in this regard.

At yesterday's event organised by the Diplomatic Correspondents Association, Bangladesh, the Chinese envoy replied in the negative when he was asked whether there was tension between India and his country over the project.

He said China placed a proposal regarding the Teesta project following a request from Bangladesh and was awaiting a response.

When asked if India and China could work jointly on the Teesta project, he said: "We are ready. We are open... But it's Bangladesh [which] has to make decision in this regard. China is open about whatever proposal Bangladesh gives."

Asked how many documents could be signed during Hasina's China visit,

the ambassador said he could not comment on the specifics.

Discussions between the two countries will focus on infrastructure, trade, the financial sector, the digital economy, education, media cooperation, and the development of Bangladesh's southern region, he said.

Through the PM's visit, the envoy said, the two sides will further enhance coordination and cooperation on regional and international issues.

He said China supports Bangladesh's bid to become a partner country of the BRICS and hopes Bangladesh will be a BRICS member soon.

China highly appreciates Bangladesh's humanitarian spirit in sheltering more than one million Rohingya refugees, he said.

He said China is actively persuading all parties involved in the conflict in Myanmar to achieve a ceasefire and dialogue, thus paving the way for the repatriation at an early date.

Asked whether Bangladesh and China are going to sign any defence deals during Hasina's visit, he said he was not sure.

The countries will have more defence cooperation in future, he said, adding that defence cooperation serves as a pillar of the relations of the two countries.

DCAB President Nurul Islam Hasib and General Secretary Ashiqur Rahman Apu also spoke at the event.

It's time for serious stocktaking

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important riddle: despite reports of solid showing in the export market month in and month out, why was the foreign currency reserves not bouncing back?

At the same time, the dwindling dollar stockpile was not due to rampant capital flight through trade mis-invoicing: the discrepancy between the NBR data and the central bank data is not too wide.

More importantly, the balance of payment adjustment has raised a few uncomfortable questions.

Was there no oversight on the EPB's data collection practice? Why did the EPB and the NBR not sit down at the close of a fiscal year to reconcile their entries? Who should be held responsible for this scandal? Or, was this intentional all along and the authorities are doing a mea culpa now that they were caught by the IMF?

The event also gives rise to a bigger existential question: was the oft-peddled narrative of Bangladesh being an economic star performer over the past decade or so a sham?

Exports and remittance are the two big drivers of the Bangladeshi economy. The stellar GDP growth reported over the years was pinned on the impressive growth registered by the two sectors.

Surely, Bangladesh's actual GDP is markedly lower than what was reported all this while. About one-third of the country's GDP comes from industrial output, which is dominated by merchandise for the export market.

This also raises another question: is Bangladesh really ready for graduation from the least-developed country bracket in 2026?

Bangladesh's LDC graduation was determined by its economic performance and now that it needs revision, surely the scheduled timeframe for graduation should be calibrated too.

With graduation from the LDC bracket, Bangladesh will lose all the trade benefits it currently enjoys. With

the trade privileges, Bangladesh's exports flattered to deceive. Will the exporters be able to manage without it? Can the Bangladeshi economy afford a further drop in exports?

There must be serious stock-taking by the Awami League government of more than 15 years to this end.

And yet, the biggest damage the readjustment of the balance of payment data has done is not material - there is no change in the net balance of payment and foreign exchange reserve scenarios -- but psychological: it raises questions on the credibility of all data provided by the government.