

4 US senators urge Yunus to ensure reforms

DIPLMATIC CORRESPONDENT

Four US senators have written a letter to Chief Adviser Muhammad Yunus stressing the urgent need for democratic reforms and accountability in response to widespread protests in Bangladesh, demanding substantive political and institutional changes.

They also called for stronger law enforcement and swift action to hold accountable those responsible for attacks on vulnerable communities, including the Hindus and Rohingyas in Cox's Bazar.

Senator Ben Cardin (D-Md.), chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, along with senators Chris Murphy (D-Conn.), Chris Van Hollen (D-Md.), and Jeff Merkley (D-Ore.) signed the letter on Friday.

They said the world has witnessed how the people of Bangladesh have courageously demonstrated the transformative power of collective action. This transition presents a historic opportunity to reform institutions, protect human rights, and ensure inclusive participation in governance.

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Standing on the Bhabadaha sluice gates, people fish in the Hari river using nets, locally known as “Khuchuni”. They are getting a good catch as fish of nearby farms, flooded during heavy rains, has ended up in the river. The photo was taken in Jashore’s Abhaynagar upazila on Thursday.

PHOTO: HABIBUR RAHMAN

3,000 tonnes of hilsa export to India okayed

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Akhtar over the last few days said the government will not allow hilsa export to India so that the local consumers get ample supply.

The demand for Bangladeshi hilsa is high in India, especially in West Bengal, during Durga Puja.

Usually, the government allows export of hilsa to India as a friendship gesture during the puja.

Kazi Belayet Hossain, president of the Bangladesh Frozen Foods Exporters Association (BFFEA), said he received a letter yesterday from the commerce ministry for dissemination among BFFEA members for seeking export permission.

Hilsa export has been banned for many years but every year the government relaxes the ban during the puja on request of the Indian government, Hossain said adding perhaps this time too the government agreed to allow permission because of the diplomatic efforts between the two countries.

But, there is a possibility of price hike of hilsa in the local markets as the exporters will start procuring hilsa from the markets for exporting to India, Belayet said.

Last week, a senior official of the commerce ministry said they received nearly 50 letters seeking export permission.

India's Fish Importers Association yesterday termed the move a “positive development”, reports our New Delhi correspondent.

The association's Secretary Syed Anwar Maqsood said, “We are happy that our efforts with the interim government of Bangladesh to bring hilsa bore fruit.”

In fiscal 2023-24, Bangladesh exported 664.86 tonnes of hilsa to India for \$7.71 million, according to data from the Department of Fisheries.

In fiscal 2022-23, Bangladesh exported 1,376.42 tonnes of hilsa worth \$13.68 million. That year, Bangladesh produced 5,71,342 tonnes of hilsa.

DU suspends 8 students

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Food Science; Ahsanullah, a student of mathematics; and Al Hussain Sajjad and Wajibul Alam, both students of geography and environment.

Two other suspended students, Firoz Kabir and Abdus Samad, went into hiding and have not been arrested by police.

Additionally, the provost of Fazlul Huq Muslim Hall, Shah Md Masum, has been replaced by Md Elias Al-Mamun, a professor at the department of pharmaceutical technology.

Meanwhile, the University Teachers' Network yesterday criticised the administration at three universities – DU, JU, and RU – and questioned their role as they failed to control mob incidents at their respective campuses.

The teachers protested all mob violence and lynch incidents, and demanded exemplary punishment of those involved.

The University Teachers' Network held the rally at the base of Aparajeyo Bangla.

At the rally, speakers asked why vice-chancellors failed to intervene during the mob violence at their respective campuses.

They went on to say that respective teachers, university administrations, and the government were also accountable for these incidents.

Balance will still be the mainstay

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The US, which is the number one superpower, is our single biggest export market, and a major source of our remittance. Our relations with Europe is also very important. As a bloc, the European Union is our biggest export destination. So our ties with different country are different.

TDS: We've seen some hiccups in our relations with India, and anti-India sentiment here after the fall of the Awami League government. What would be our strategy to stabilise this relationship?

Touhid: Our strategy will be to protect our interests. It does not mean we will ignore India's interest. For India, Bangladesh is a very important country when it comes to security. India's Northeast region suffered from insurgency, which was removed with our cooperation.

You need to remember that we are going through a phase of revolution and there may be some conflicts of interest. However, the relationship was very profitable for India during the previous regime. This led India, especially its media, to take a negative approach towards the current situation in Bangladesh. Most of their accusations were baseless. I believe these aspects will eventually be removed.

TDS: Will you take the initiative to bring back Sheikh Hasina from India?

Touhid: If our court issues orders to bring her back, we will take the necessary initiative. It is up to India how it will cooperate. I don't want to speculate anything. We'll see when the time comes.

India has its interests in the relationship with Bangladesh, just like we do. So the relationship has to be based on mutual interest and respect. We're only talking about the relationship between the two governments when it has to be people-centric so that the people benefit from the relationship. It is not an ideal situation for governments to say that the relationship is good while people here have anti-India sentiments.

TDS: What are your expectations from India?

Touhid: There are many expectations, but some small issues make the relationship bitter. For example, border killing. Just the other day, a 14-year-old girl was killed at the border. This is in no way justifiable. If India sincerely wants it, border killing can be fully stopped.

Then, there is the water-sharing issue. People have bitter feelings about

the Teesta deal. It's not our concern what problem India's Centre and West Bengal government have. India has to solve it. The water is a liability for us in the rainy season, which is natural, and we aren't asking India to stop it. However, when this water is an asset in the dry season, we're not getting it. This is not acceptable. We know the water level is low in the dry season. But whatever water is there should be shared. Even if we can have an interim agreement with India on Teesta, it'll have a positive impact on the minds of the people of Bangladesh.

TDS: What will the interim government do about the agreements and Memoranda of Understanding with India that have been criticised?

Touhid: The interim government will do whatever is needed for the sake of national interest, regardless of its tenure. We'll take care of all the issues.

MoUs and agreements are different. Conditions of agreements are to be implemented. If that is to change, it needs to be done as per the provisions of the agreements. For MoUs, we have to know peoples' expectations and seek expert views. We have to revisit the MoUs based on all these factors. If we have to sign any agreement, we will do it, protecting the interest of both parties.

TDS: Will revisiting MoUs or signing agreements take place anytime soon?

Touhid: It's not that we'll start working tomorrow on this. It will come as part of the normal process. India too has to have its time. They won't sit with us tomorrow if we ask them for a meeting today. We'll try to take initiative on each issue based on priority in a mutually agreed time. It won't happen in a week or two, but we may take initiative in the next few months, or at least by this year.

TDS: Chief Adviser Professor Muhammad Yunus has said he wants to revitalise the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (Saarc). Is it possible, given the Pakistan-India enmity?

Touhid: I don't think it is impossible. I want to be optimistic. When Saarc was working, it was not that it brought about a huge change. But, some work was really going on, for example on meteorology, agriculture, free trade, etc. Then Saarc was going ahead even when India and Pakistan were engaged in small fights sometimes. The process was suspended by India's initiative. India-Pakistan conflict won't end overnight. But other South Asian countries should not be victims of this Indo-Pak enmity. All the other

countries are eager to cooperate through Saarc.

Chief Adviser Prof Yunus is very interested in resuming the Saarc activities on whatever small scale. We want to come out of the stalemate.

TDS: Bangladesh has a lot of baggage in terms of human rights abuses. Can the government come out of this?

Touhid: A major objective of this government is to work in the area of human rights. Rights activists are in the council of advisers. The UN fact-finding mission will look into all of the rights violations and killings that took place in the last weeks of the previous government. Even post-August 5 attacks over political ideologies or on minorities – all can come under this investigation. Everyone has the right to get justice. We want transparency in the whole process of the investigation.

TDS: Will the foreign ministry undergo reforms to function more effectively, keeping in mind that the economy is a big part of our diplomacy?

Touhid: The foreign ministry, like any other time, will play an auxiliary role. We will extend support to other ministries as per their need. In some cases, re-allocation of business may be required. From our side, we can raise the issues that arise in the areas of overseas employment, foreign investment or export.

TDS: Prof Yunus has a global standing. How can we best utilise it in diplomacy?

Touhid: We have started benefitting from this already. You know that 67 Bangladeshi migrants were pardoned by the UAE president after Prof Yunus directly spoke to him. We will use his standing for our just demands.

TDS: How shall we navigate in the geopolitically changing world, especially amid the global power competition in the Indo-Pacific?

Touhid: We'll try to have our interests protected despite such competitions. We'll follow the path where we have our best national interest.

TDS: Aren't our national integrity, track record of human rights and democracy important for this?

Touhid: We're working to establish democracy on a strong footing. It'll be truly representative. There won't be any fake elections. The purpose of the sacrifice of the young people and their aspiration is democracy. We will work to that end. Reforms on human rights will be visible soon. So we are on the right track.

visit to some flood-hit areas in Feni's Chhagalnaiya upazila, ICT Adviser Nahid yesterday said attempts were made to worsen law and order in the country.

“There is a long-standing problem in the CHT region and we will have to solve it ourselves,” he said.

Meanwhile, Foreign Adviser Md Touhid Hossain, while briefing reporters at his ministry, yesterday said he did not know anything about any conspiracy from abroad to create unrest in the CHT.

Violence broke out in two hill districts following the death of a Bangladeshi named Md Mamun in a mob beating. He was accused of stealing a motorbike in Khagrachhari town on Wednesday morning.

The following day, at least 30 houses and businesses belonging to indigenous people came under arson attacks in Khagrachhari's Dighinala upazila.

On Friday, four people were killed and at least 72 others injured as violence flared up in Rangamati town and Khagrachhari's Dighinala and Sadar upazilas.

[Our staff correspondent from Chattogram and district correspondent from Rangamati contributed to this report]

‘Pay Tk 5 lakh or there’ll be no Durga Puja’

Several temples in Dakop get anonymous letters

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Khulna

Several temples in Dakop of Khulna received anonymous letters threatening to not allow them to celebrate Duga Puja unless they pay Tk 5 lakh toll each.

The letters, delivered to the leaders of various puja celebration committees, also said failure to comply would result in severe consequences.

Hindu community leaders have voiced their concerns and some are considering cancelling festivities at their temples altogether.

On Friday, representatives of four temples filed a general diary (GD) with the Dacope Police Station.

One of the community leaders said a meeting was convened where many members expressed a desire to forgo the celebrations. However, they decided to proceed with the puja.

Shekhar Chandra Goldar, president of Kamarkhola Sarvajanin Durga Puja Celebration Committee of Dakop, said, “Our members are no longer interested. This year we have to stop the puja.”

This paper received three copies of the letter sent to three temples. The content is the same, but the sender's address is different on the envelope.

“If you want to perform Durga Puja in 2024, you will have to pay Tk five lakh. Otherwise, you will not be able to worship in any way,” read the letter.

It also threatened that if the letter was shared with the authorities or the media, those responsible would be “cut to pieces”.

Dubious cases

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for reasons other than seeking justice, and this will undermine the credibility of the charges.

They also urge police to be careful when registering such cases.

“It will be impossible to ensure justice for the real victims through cases that seem to be aimed at harassing people,” veteran Supreme Court lawyer ZI Khan Panna told The Daily Star.

Hasina, former ministers Obaidul Quader, Anisul Huq, Asaduzzaman Khan and Hasan Mahmud and some other influential leaders of the Awami League are among the remaining accused in the six cases analysed by this newspaper.

During AL's 15-year rule, numerous cases were filed that appeared to be aimed at harassing hundreds of BNP-Jamaat leaders, activists, and dissidents. Putting them behind bars was the priority, rather than proving the charges in trial proceedings.

In multiple instances, opposition party members were accused of crimes that did not even take place. Dead people or those living abroad were accused of vandalism and arson.

Dukhu, the man who filed the case for his cousin Lablu's murder, persistently refused to talk to this newspaper.

A local AL leader from Rangpur, who was accused in the case, said, “I was in Pirganj on August 5. How could I have taken part in a killing in Dhaka? There were no means of travelling in those days. I think they accused me for the sole purpose of harassing me.”

On July 20, Muhammad Habib, 45, organising secretary of a front organisation of Liberal Democratic Party in the capital's Kadamtali, was shot dead as police along with AL men opened fire on protesters, according to a case filed by his widow Ayesha Begum.

She filed the case on August 28 with Jatrabari Police Station accusing 57, of whom 50 are from Cumilla's Chandina.

Contacted, Ayesha, a mother of four, said, “I just signed on the complaint. I had no idea who was being accused. A friend of my husband, also a leader of his party, made the list of accused. That

man is from Cumilla. I just want justice for my husband.”

Anwar Hossain Aynal, who is from Bakshiganj, Jamalpur, filed a murder case with Uttara East Police Station over the killing of his brother Fazlul Karim on August 5. Of the 39 accused, 24 are from his hometown.

Anwar could not be reached for comment.

Asked why the accused are from Jamalpur, he said, “Many of them might have been in Dhaka and some were in the village... We requested the investigating officer to drop the names of those not involved in the incident.”

Akter Hossain, another person from Bakshiganj, filed a murder case with the same police station against 17 over a murder on August 5. Eleven of the accused are from Bakshiganj upazila.

Akter said police and AL men fired at the victory procession that day, killing his younger brother Ripon.

“I visited the spot after the incident and came to know that the people from my upazila were there during the killing,” he said.

On August 5, Mirazul Islam, 21, got shot in Jatrabari area around 9:00am. He died three days later.

His father Abdus Salam, a resident of Lalmonirhat, on August 24 filed a murder case with Jatrabari Police Station against 36 people, including three former lawmakers from the district. No police or ruling party men, who were seen by locals shooting in the area that day, were accused in the case.

Khurshid Alam Khan, a noted criminal law expert, said, “It is clear that such cases are aimed to harass. Police should be cautious.

“Moreover, the complainants may face legal trouble for filing such cases.”

The government maintains that no innocent individuals will be harassed in these cases.

The Police Headquarters on September 10 ordered officers to drop the names of individuals against whom there was no evidence.

ZI Khan said, “The government should make a list of dubious cases and ensure that no innocent people suffer. The Supreme Court can also seek a list of these cases from the government and give the necessary directives.”

Rivers around Dhaka

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0.2 mg/l to 5.00 mg/l.

DO levels below 5.0 mg/L cause stress to aquatic life. Lower concentrations cause greater stress. Oxygen levels that go below 1-2 mg/L for a few hours may result in large fish kills.

Other rivers in and around Dhaka city and its suburban areas like the Turag, Balu, Shitalakhya and Dhaleshwari show a similar kind of testing result.

Apart from those rivers from the central part of the country, the other rivers from Chattogram and Khulna city like the Karnaphuli and Moyuri are also severely polluted as per the parameter of the report.

“Generally, those rivers around the city centres and industrial belts are considered polluted. We cannot say if the rivers where there are no industries are fully polluted,” said Masud Iqbal Shamim, director of DoE.

The water of the Jamuna (Brahmaputra), Ganges (Padma) and Teesta are still in good shape as there are no pollutant industries on the banks of these rivers.

“But the government needs to be careful and act about the Meghna river as it is one of the main sources of drinking water and some private economic zone has been built on the bank of the Meghna,” Shamim said.

Because of severe pollution earlier in 2009, the government declared five rivers – Buriganga, Shitalakhya, Turag, Balu and Jallong Dawki – as ecologically critical areas (ECA) to protect from further pollution.

In 2011, the government took up a project to bring in fresh water from the Jamuna to the Buriganga. The

government spent over Tk 100 crore for the project but no progress was visible.

In 2016, the government shifted the tannery industries from Hazaribagh to the Savar tannery estate and made a central effluent treatment plant (ETP) for them.

But none of the initiatives helped much to curb the pollution.

Currently, there are around 2,500 industries with ETP, which is around 86 percent of the total industries in Dhaka and in suburban areas that require ETP.

But in most cases, those industries do not use ETP to maximise their profits.

The DoE also does not have sufficient manpower to conduct drives in every pollutant industries.

Currently, the DoE has only 67 inspectors against the posts of 157 posts.

Asked about controlling the pollution of rivers, Syeda Rizwana Hasan, adviser to the ministry of water resources and environment, forest and climate change, said that they are preparing an action plan and also preparing actions for cleaning up the rivers.

“There are some measures we can take immediately like controlling pollution from municipal waste dumping and regularly monitoring polluting industries and factories,” she said.

But for the rivers to get back to life, a solution to sewage discharge is needed.

“That will be a costly thing to do and is time-consuming. But at least we should commit to get it done at least in phases without delay.”

The DoE also tested the water of three lakes in Gulshan, Dhanmondi and Hatir Jheel at 13 points and 73 groundwater stations of 3 districts in Bangladesh under the same programme.