

Fair polls can't be held before certain reforms

Says Sarjis at Sylhet DC office

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Sylhet

Sarjis Alam, a coordinator of the Anti-Discrimination Student Movement, yesterday called the Election Commission the most corrupt institution of the Awami League regime.

He said a fair election is not possible without reforming the commission first.

"The revolution was not just for elections. People suffered for 16 years because of the corrupt system, and the Election Commission was the most corrupt institution [of that system]. We cannot hope for a fair election without reforming it," he said.

Sarjis, also the general secretary of the July Memorial Foundation, made the remarks while talking to journalists after disbursing financial aid to families of the martyrs of the mass uprising at the deputy commissioner's office in Sylhet.

He said a list of around 1,600 martyrs was made, and financial support was extended to their families.

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A security personnel inspects the blast site after an explosion at a railway station in Quetta, in Pakistan's Balochistan province yesterday. Story on page 12.

PHOTO: AFP

Jubo Dal activist hacked to death

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Benapole

A Jubo Dal activist was hacked to death allegedly by his rivals inside the Jhikargacha Pilot Girls' High School in Jashore yesterday afternoon.

The deceased Piyal Hasan, 28, son of Kitab Ali of Mubarakpur Biswaspara village, was a follower of Imran Samad, general secretary of BNP's upazila unit.

The victim's family blamed local Chhatra Dal and BNP leaders for the killing.

According to local sources, Piyal had a dispute with Shamim Reza, president of Chhatra Dal's upazila unit, over political dominance in the Jhikargacha area.

In a continuation of the feud, Shamim and his associates attacked Piyal with explosives near the Jhikargacha Railway Station yesterday.

As Piyal sought refuge at the Jhikargacha Pilot Girls' High School, his assailants followed him inside and hacked him to death on a balcony.

Locals rushed Piyal to the Jhikargacha Upazila Health Complex, where he was pronounced dead.

The police later sent the victim's body Jashore General Hospital.

The victim's younger brother, Suman Hasan, said, "Piyal had apologised to them several times, but they still hacked my brother to death."

He claimed the attackers were followers of Mortaza Elahi Tipu, former president of BNP's upazila unit. Contacted, Assistant Superintendent of Police Nishat Al Nahian said, "The murder took place over a previous dispute." The police have identified those involved in the murder, he added.

Yunus pledges

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The commission members said they would give the government an interim report by mid-December.

Law Adviser Asif Nazrul said the government is ready to extend the tenure of the commission even by two years if needed and issue necessary directives, including creating a legal provision for protecting victims.

Commission Chairman Justice Moyeenul Islam Chowdhury, a retired High Court judge, told the meeting that they received some 1,600 complaints as of October 31, scrutinised 400 complaints, and interviewed 140 complainants.

"We are overwhelmed by the number of complaints. Many people are still not coming to the commission fearing retaliation from members of law enforcement agencies. From this, we can understand that the number of incidents is much higher than reported so far," said a commission member.

The victims of enforced disappearances could be at least 3,500, he said, adding that they were working on identifying the perpetrators of the crimes and who ordered them.

The commission member said that many of the victims are in jail, some even facing death sentences, as they were forced to give confessional statements before the court after they were shown arrested.

Some disappearance victims are believed to be languishing in jails in India, he added.

During the meeting, commission members sought the government's support in protecting the evidence found in secret places where victims were kept.

"Many victims told us that they did not see the sun for years. They could sense that it was a new day only when breakfast was served," said a commission member.

The member requested the government impose an injunction on foreign trips of the accused individual and, if possible, cancel their passports.

Home Adviser Lt Gen (retd) Jahangir Alam Chowdhury, who also attended the meeting, said they would do it once they were provided with a list of accused by the commission.

Mahfuz Alam, special assistant to the chief adviser, emphasised the importance of putting the findings of the commission in the public domain and exposing the individuals who supervised the incidents of enforced disappearances.

Advisers Salehuddin Ahmed, Nurjahan Begum, Adilur Rahman Khan, M Sakhawat Hussain, Nahid Islam, Asif Mahmud, Lt Gen (retd) Abdul Hafiz, Cabinet Secretary Sheikh Abdul Rashid, and CA's Principal Secretary Siraj Uddin Mia were present at the meeting, among others.

South Sudan floods affect 1.4 million, displace 379,000: UN

AFP, Nairobi

Devastating flooding in South Sudan is affecting around 1.4 million people, with more than 379,000 displaced, according to a United Nations update that warned about an upsurge in malaria.

Aid agencies have said that the world's youngest country, highly vulnerable to climate change, is in the grip of its worst flooding in decades, mainly in the north.

Rampal befouling 2 Sundarbans rivers

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of mercury, a toxic metal, has risen in the rivers.

"The power plant is not the only factor here. There are cement factories in the area too," he says.

The plant, with a rated capacity of 1,320 megawatts, occupies 915 acres, 14km north of the Sundarbans, a World Heritage Site recognised by UNESCO.

Between February and April this year, CEGIS teams found that the civil works for the ETP had been done, but the mechanical and instrumental components were incomplete.

Prof Ainun Nishat, noted expert on water resource management, said, "If the water [from the power plant] doesn't go through the ETP, the polluted water will flow to nearby water bodies and cause serious damage."

Since February 2023, the CEGIS collected water samples from 14 places near the power plant on four occasions. It found that the mercury level was less than 0.001 mg/L. The government set acceptable level is 0.0001 mg/L.

Prof Abdullah Harun Chowdhury, who teaches environmental science at the Khulna University, says phytoplankton and zooplankton, the microscopic organisms vital to aquatic ecosystems, absorb mercury. From there, mercury enters the body of fish and reduces its ability to breed.

Humans and other animals consuming such fish will face health impacts, he adds.

"Local villagers bathe in the river and use the water for daily chores. But the water is no longer safe for such use."

The CEGIS report marks the power plant as "partially compliant" with the plant's Environmental Management Plan.

In 2017, Greenpeace released a study titled "Projecting the air quality, toxic and health impacts of the Rampal coal-fired power plant."

The study warned that the plant would emit so much mercury that fish in approximately 70 square kilometres around it would become unsafe for consumption.

According to Noor Alam, convener of Bangladesh Poribesh Andolon in Bagerhat, the water of Pasur has

become evidently polluted.

The CEGIS report highlights several other violations by the Rampal plant.

There are two settling ponds to collect silt, but during heavy rains, the ponds get flooded and the water from the construction site reaches the Maidara without any proper treatment. "This is very concerning in terms of aquatic biodiversity and water quality," reads the report.

During the visit, team members found that many parts of the permanent drainage channel have been blocked by dirt and other construction residuals.

This has created water logging in the drain and an unhealthy environment for the workers, says the report.

The living quarters of the workers around the plant were unsanitary, with organic and inorganic waste scattered on roads.

The CEGIS team also found that the conveyor belt, which takes coal from the jetty to the plant, was uncovered, allowing coal dust to disperse in the air and water.

Waste bins in the plant are of 650 colour codes, but the labels are not Bangla or English, making it difficult for workers to properly segregate waste.

The CEGIS report recommends immediate cleanup of the banks of Maidara, proper disposal of construction waste, appropriate dust control mechanisms, and prevention of the spread of coal ash into the environment.

Prof Anu Muhammad, who advocated against the plant when the project was conceived, says, "We told them that this project would pollute rivers."

If the plant continues operation, the river will be destroyed.... "It will harm the entire food chain in the Sundarbans. No technology will be able to fix this."

The government must find a way to stop this plant. "Stopping it may pose some challenges, but letting it operate will be much worse."

Sharif Jamil, member secretary of Dhoritri Rokhlay Amra, said, the pollution in the Pasur and Moidara was

spreading to canals and rivers within the Sundarbans.

Chemistry Prof Abdus Salam of Dhaka University said, "When coal is burned, it produces substances like mercury, sulphur dioxide, and hydrocarbons. If these are not treated by the ETP before being released into the water, biodiversity will suffer. They are violating the law."

The CEGIS has yet to determine the volume of waste produced by the plant, says its Executive Director Fida.

As of last month, the project made 98 percent progress.

Asked why the Department of Environment had not taken action when the condition for ETP was violated, Masud Iqbal Shameem, director (environment clearance), recently said he was not aware of the CEGIS report.

"We will look into the matter soon. Our local office will also look into it," he said.

RAMPAL GM SAYS ETP WORKS

When reached out, Anwarul Azim, deputy general manager of the plant, sent a text saying that the CEGIS report did not "give the correct status of ETP commissioning, which has already been communicated to it with a request to issue a corrigendum in this regard."

"ETP was fully operational even before commissioning of the Unit-I and its performance guarantee test was done in September 2023."

No water is being discharged from the ETP and the treated water from the ETP is reused by the plant, he said.

"Direct water discharge consisting of rejection from reverse osmosis plants [high salinity water due to presence of natural salt]... is being discharged, as it is techno-economically not feasible to treat and utilise them."

"All other waste water from the plant and sewage etc are treated and the treated water is reused for which Full-fledged ETP and Sewage Treatment Plant are operational."

"The maximum possible length of jetty conveyor is covered."

"As far as mercury is concerned, the power plant has no source of the pollutant...."

Millions suffer

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presence of crocodiles. The children too do not have much space for play and end up dangerously close to the water.

As the government recently banned catching young fish in the Sundarbans, many families slid further into poverty, rendering many children unable to attend school.

Sutarkhali Union Parishad Chairman Masum Ali Fakir, told The Daily Star, "When there are possibilities of a storm or high tide, the people here can't sleep. They stay awake with their children until the danger passes."

"Here, even basic necessities are scarce. Life is so difficult that no one will understand until they experience it themselves."

This is just about the families on one island.

Like them, millions of people live in the country's coastal areas that are at increasing risk of rising sea levels, river erosion, severe cyclones and saltwater intrusion.

Between 2000 and 2019, Bangladesh experienced 185 extreme weather events, making it the seventh most vulnerable country to climate change.

In 2019, at least 4.1 million people were displaced because of climate disasters.

Tropical cyclones have ripped through coastal communities, costing an average of 0.7 percent of the gross domestic product per year.

Rising sea levels have forced people to leave their homes, while the amount of land affected by salinity has increased by 27 percent since the 1970s, affecting both crops and livelihoods.

Citing data from Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the Nationwide Climate Vulnerability Assessment report, published in June 2023, said climate change has put around 36 million people and their livelihoods in a vulnerable state in the coastal regions.

Professor Emeritus Ainun Nishat, of Brac University, said with the 29th climate conference (COP-29) is about to

kick off tomorrow (November 11), many delegates will gather and multiple issues will be discussed.

"But how much would that benefit those like Sakhina? From the beginning, scientists have been proving that human activities are causing climate change, resulting in increased natural disasters, making countries like Bangladesh more vulnerable."

"The conference does little for the millions of distressed people in our coastal areas."

He said that during COP-15 in Copenhagen, a global fund was promised, in which developed countries were supposed to deposit \$100 billion a year to help underdeveloped nations battle climate change.

With COP-29 about to start, even the first \$100 billion has not been raised.

COP-28 in the UAE had agreed on a loss-and-damage deal, with pledges totalling approximately \$655 million so far. However, there are concerns, about the size and volume of the fund.

Meanwhile, many of the pledges were made in the form of loans instead of grants, which will push vulnerable countries further into debt.

"Basically, our government needs to take its own action for the vulnerable people of the country, who're soon going to face a more dire situation," said Ainun Nishat.

In 2022, Bangladesh had finalised the National Action Plan (NAP) on climate change (2023-2050), to reverse the effects of climate change.

The NAP identified 113 major interventions in 11 climate stressed regions across the country, for which \$230 billion would be needed.

However, Bangladesh has so far received grants worth only \$268 million from the Green Climate Fund, Adaptation Fund and the LDC Fund.

The average annual loss due to climate-related disasters in Bangladesh is estimated around \$3 billion (1-2 percent of the GDP), though this figure can be much higher in individual years.

(Our Khulna Correspondent contributed to this report.)

Trump prepares to withdraw: NYT

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will have a draft updated analysis out for a 60-day public comment period before the end of the year, a department official said.

Some people on the transition team are discussing moving the headquarters of the Environmental Protection Agency out of Washington, the report said, citing unnamed people involved in the discussions.

The development came as Trump's victory in the US presidential election had already darkened the outlook for a strong deal at the COP29 climate summit next week and will increase pressure on Europe and China to lead international progress in curbing planetary warming.

Trump, who has called climate change a hoax, and his policy advisers have floated removing the US from the underlying UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) ratified by the US Senate in 1992.

Climate negotiators and observers preparing for the COP29 conference from Nov. 11-22 in Baku, Azerbaijan, said Trump's decisive win over Vice President Kamala Harris in the November 5 polls reduces the ability of countries to agree a new global finance target, or increase the pool of countries that should contribute - goals for the summit.

The EU and US had planned to push China and rich Gulf states to start paying into UN climate funds.

"Pushing for more ambitious climate finance is going to be almost impossible without the US buy-in, which will demotivate developing countries from taking seriously the climate ambitions

of the West," said Elisabetta Cornago, a senior research fellow at the Centre for European Reform.

Failure to land a strong climate finance deal would be a particularly big setback for the 45 country group of Least Developed Countries in UN climate negotiations, which is demanding countries pay up.

Any weakening in the US stance on tackling climate change, however, would make it vital for Europe and China to hold firm. The US, China, and the 27-country European Union are the world's biggest historical polluters.

"If one of the three-legged pillars is wobbling or uncertain, the other two need to hold fast," a European diplomat told Reuters.

US states and cities, meanwhile, are planning to step up and fill the US void at the upcoming climate summit to encourage other countries to keep working toward Paris climate goals.

The US Climate Alliance, America Is All In and Climate Mayors will send delegations to COP29. The groups were formed in 2017 after Trump withdrew the U.S. from the Paris Agreement the first time, a move the Biden administration reversed. They represent nearly two thirds of the U.S. population and three quarters of US GDP.

A report by the University of Maryland in September found that if Biden administration climate laws and policies are rolled back, non-federal entities like states and cities can achieve a 48% emissions reduction by 2035 - falling short of previous US commitments to reduce greenhouse emissions at least 50% compared to 2005 levels by 2030.