

Russia, Ukraine exchange over 300 POWs

AFP, Moscow

Russia and Ukraine swapped more than 300 prisoners of war yesterday in an exchange brokered by the United Arab Emirates ahead of New Year's Eve, officials from both countries said.

The two sides have exchanged hundreds of captive soldiers since Russia began its military assault on Ukraine in February 2022, in one of the few areas of cooperation.

"On 30 December, as a result of the negotiation process, 150 Russian servicemen were returned from territory controlled by the Kyiv regime. In return, 150 Ukrainian army prisoners of war were handed over," the Russian defence ministry said.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said Kyiv received 189 people as part of the deal, including soldiers, border guards and two civilians from the Russian-occupied city of Mariupol.

"We are working to free everyone from Russian captivity. This is our goal. We do not forget anyone," Zelensky said.



PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON

With underground iron rods sticking upright and no safety barrier in between, an elderly man walks on a wooden plank placed on a dug-up side of the Shaheed Captain Mansoor Ali road in the capital's Kakrail. The situation has been like this for over a week as Dhaka South City Corporation has been carrying out development works there, posing risks to pedestrians and vehicles alike.

Nation sees tectonic shifts

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The peaceful protests quickly gathered momentum to morph into a nationwide movement that forced Sheikh Hasina to flee Bangladesh on August 5 and seek refuge in India, where she has been staying until now.

The interim government, headed by Nobel Peace Prize winner Professor Muhammad Yunus, has been at the helm since the transition and focused on reforming democratic institutions that had been systematically destroyed by the Awami League's self-seeking interests throughout the 15 years it had been in power. On top of that, the incumbent was saddled with a crumbling economy, spiralling inflation, high unemployment and widespread corruption at every pore of public administration and the police, which were in fact the main factors behind strong public discontent.

The initial task, therefore, for the non-partisan interim government, was to stabilise the economy, restore law and order and help build back public confidence in government institutions -- each task more challenging than the next. In addition, there were a string of protests across the country from almost every section of the people who felt wronged during the last 15 years and, although short-lived, intense floods along the eastern flank of Bangladesh.

A month into office, the interim government established six reform commissions -- covering elections, constitution, judiciary, anti-corruption, police and administration -- which are expected to submit reports in January. Their recommendations, some of which have already been reported, are meant to become the initial building blocks of a truly democratic dispensation of this republic.

These recommendations will then be discussed among political parties striving to strike a national consensus. In fact, in a recent development, the chief adviser has said he would be heading a national consensus commission that will presumably hold discussions with all the political parties, leading to a concrete timeline for polls.

This idea of elections after reforms has already divided the political establishment into two streams. One prioritises reforms over elections. A student-led party, which is still in the making, will presumably champion the idea of cementing the reforms before even thinking about elections. The student representatives in government and other student leaders of the July uprising have indicated as much.

The other stream wants elections quickly after only the reforms necessary for the polls. Led by the BNP, the main political rival of

the AL regime, this stream is of the opinion that reforms are an ongoing process, not a one-off event, and reforms can truly be implemented only by political parties with the people's mandate.

The discord between the streams is becoming starker with time. Barely a couple of weeks ago, BNP acting chairman Tarique Rahman emphasised the need for quick and decisive action so far as reforms were concerned. He stressed that the people had a right to know the interim government's intentions about the timeline of these reforms. His remarks betrayed a growing impatience after the chief adviser indicated that the elections could be held by late 2025 after minimal reforms, but might take a little longer and be scheduled by mid-2026 if desired reforms were carried out. The BNP has called for further clarity on the election schedule and a concrete roadmap.

Of the two most significant reform commissions, one has been tasked with making recommendations for the elections, including the next one, to be free and fair. The other one is going to suggest major constitutional changes like limiting the prime minister's terms, bicameral parliament and a bar on prime ministers from heading their party.

Political analysts have pointed out that a timeline for implementing the reforms is critical. They argue that

if key reforms, particularly those related to elections and the constitution, are not finalised before the elections, the political situation may remain unstable, and the promised reforms might never be fully realised. They warn that without clear progress on these fronts before elections, lasting and meaningful changes would remain difficult to achieve. At the same time, the endorsement of the political parties is also essential for these reforms to take root in essence.

Eminent political analyst Al Masud Hasanuzzaman told The Daily Star that there was no doubt about the necessity of a political consensus for meaningful reforms. "Without it, the process will likely be futile," Stressing consensus, he said, "In the absence of unity, the political landscape may face significant fractures in the coming days."

He indicated that given Bangladesh was sailing into uncharted waters, there was bound to be some "trial and error" in the process before finding the right course. He explained this complex and challenging situation necessitated a political compact for proper planning and implementation of these reforms.

Due largely to the significant transitions of 2024, which earned it the Economist's Country of the Year crown, Bangladesh's future is as fraught with challenges as it is filled with possibilities.

Jimmy Carter passes away

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people to assemble on that day in their respective places of worship, there to pay homage to the memory of President James Earl Carter," Biden said.

World leaders and former US presidents paid tribute to a man they praised as compassionate, humble and committed to peace in the Middle East.

"His significant role in achieving the peace agreement between Egypt and Israel will remain etched in the annals of history," said Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi in a post on X.

Chinese leader Xi

Jinping told his American counterpart Joe Biden that he was "deeply saddened" by the death of former US president Jimmy Carter, Chinese state media said yesterday.

"Deeply saddened by the passing of former USA President Mr Jimmy Carter. A statesman of great vision, he worked tirelessly for global peace and harmony. His contributions to fostering strong India-US ties leave a lasting legacy. My heartfelt condolences to his family, friends and the people of the US," Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi said in a statement.

Carter, a Democrat,

became president in January 1977 after defeating incumbent Republican President Gerald Ford in the 1976 election. His one-term presidency was marked by the highs of the 1978 Camp David accords between Israel and Egypt, bringing some stability to the Middle East.

But it was also dogged by an economic recession, persistent unpopularity and the Iran hostage crisis that consumed his final 444 days in office. Carter ran for re-election in 1980 but was swept from office in a landslide as voters embraced Republican challenger Ronald Reagan,

the former actor and California governor.

Carter lived longer than any US president and, after leaving the White House, earned a reputation as a committed humanitarian. He was widely seen as a better former president than he was a president -- a status he readily acknowledged.

The Carter Center said there will be public observances in Atlanta and Washington. These events will be followed by a private interment in Plains, it said.

Final arrangements for the former president's state funeral are still pending, according to the center.

Cops complicit in crimes

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ensuring preservation of agricultural products and smooth supply of fertiliser.

The chief adviser addressed the officials via videoconference from his office in the capital's Tejgaon.

He instructed the field-level officials to work tirelessly to keep the prices of essentials at a tolerable level and ensure their smooth supply during the upcoming Ramadan.

"Ramadan is approaching, and special attention have to be paid to market prices. You will have to work not only on the market prices but also on exploring ways to ease the transportation of goods.

"Paying special attention to rising commodity prices it is crucial now to ensure that they are not causing difficulties to the people. We must focus on controlling the prices

and make every efforts to address the situation effectively," he said.

Yunus directed the administration officials to remain vigilant to ensure reforms are completed smoothly.

He mentioned that several of the 15 reform commissions will soon submit their reports. Following this, the government will engage in talks with political parties and citizens, paving the way for creating an electoral atmosphere in the country.

The chief adviser said the morale of the police had been affected by widespread criticism of their role during the mass uprising.

"It is important to rebuild their confidence.

Those guilty must be held accountable, while the innocents should be allowed to perform their

duties without fear.... This will help restore the credibility of law enforcers."

Yunus advised the administration officials to ensure that new school textbooks are distributed efficiently.

He noted that some students might not receive their new books on the first day of the new academic year. If books don't arrive on time, or if some students receive them while others do not, handling the matter in an orderly manner and keeping everyone informed will help maintain calm.

The chief adviser also urged the administration officials to work upholding the spirit of the July uprising so that people realise a missive change had taken place.

Yunus also called upon the administration officials to remain prepared for unforeseen events, such as

floods, which often catch the government off-guard. The local administrations should be empowered to identify and address potential issues swiftly before the government in Dhaka becomes aware, he added.

A total of 19 officials, including divisional commissioners, police commissioners, range police chiefs, deputy commissioners and superintendents of police spoke at the event.

The chief adviser said the feedback and opinions shared by the officials would help the government make better decisions.

Cabinet Secretary Sheikh Abdur Rashid, who moderator of the event, said the chief adviser will soon hold a similar videoconference with the officials from the remaining 33 districts.

Iran confirms arrest of Italian journo

REUTERS, Dubai

Iran confirmed the arrest of Italian journalist Cecilia Sala for "violating the laws of the Islamic Republic", Iran's official IRNA news agency reported yesterday.

Sala, 29, who works for the newspaper Il Foglio and the podcast company Chora Media, was detained in Tehran on Dec. 19, according to the Italian foreign ministry.

Italy's Foreign Minister Antonio Tajani on Saturday declined to say whether the case might be linked to the arrest of an Iranian in Italy this month at the request of the United States.

The case of the Italian journalist being held in Iran is "complicated", but Rome hopes to bring Sala home quickly, Tajani said.

Bangladeshis' homes, shops

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He then converted his visa to business visa and opened a grocery store.

"My warehouse was looted. They also damaged the tin roof by throwing stones," Ziaul said, adding, "I watched the whole thing on CCTV as they looted my shop, but I was powerless."

"Since the October election, we spent at least Tk 5 lakh to bribe the local administration for ensuring security of ourselves and our businesses. But now we are not getting any support despite repeated appeals," Ziaul said.

He said, "We have bought land and a house in the country, but now we want to return to Bangladesh. We do not know how long we will be able to survive here"

During the conference call with those living in Mozambique, Md Ayub, a Bangladeshi living with his family in the Matola suburb of Maputo city in the southern tip of Mozambique, said he has to go (disconnect the call) as some people attacked his home.

This paper later learnt that Ayub's home had been attacked and that he sought help from the Bangladeshi community

there.

Another Bangladeshi, Enamul Haq, from Maputo said he has been living in Mozambique with family since 2007. "I have four superstores in four provinces and all them have been looted. Now I am hiding in the homes of the natives paying them handsome amounts for safety."

Anisur Rahman, a Bangladeshi community leader there, told this newspaper that there are around 8,000 Bangladeshis, including about 500 women and 800 children, in Mozambique. He said Bangladeshis do not directly migrate to the country. Most convert their tourist visas to investors' visas and set up grocery stores in rural areas. These shops are mostly being looted by people who come out of forests.

He said, "We are caught in the conflict between the ruling and the opposition parties. We are in different hideouts now."

"Since there is no Bangladeshi embassy, we want a solution through the intervention of the interim government. We are helpless here. In one province alone, more than 90 percent shops were

looted."

Asked about seeking help from local police or the army, Anisur said, "The army is observing as silent spectators. We do not get any help from the police."

He said many Bangladeshis have lost their passports and other necessary documents in the chaos and some do not have the money to fly home.

"We are communicating with the Bangladesh embassy in Lisbon and seeking help. Please help us, save the lives of these people," Anisur said.

Thousands of miles away, Laila Muntajeri Deena, charg   d' affaires of the Bangladesh embassy in Portugal, responsible for Mozambique, told The Daily Star, "We are continuously communicating with the Bangladeshi community leaders in Mozambique, and sending reports about the conditions to the foreign ministry in Dhaka."

"We have advised the Bangladeshis not to panic and to stay safe as the situation is not good."

"We have asked the community leaders to make an area-wise list, including the locations and number of women and children, so that we can provide support in case of

any emergency."

Asked about sending aid to those in danger now, Deena said, "It may not be possible to go there right now. But we will update our ministry about the situation from time to time."

"... Our South Africa mission is also collecting information as they are close [to Mozambique] in terms of distance."

On December 25, Al-Jazeera quoting local authorities reported that a suspected riot inside a jail in Mozambique's capital has left at least 33 people dead and 15 injured, and more than 1,500 inmates escaped.

According to a DW report on Sunday, thousands of families are crossing the border into Malawi as political violence in Mozambique continues. The DW quoted an official saying that situation is "dire".

Dominic Mwandira, commissioner for Malawi's southern border district of Nsanje, said around 2,500 families had reached there.

"About 11,000 people crossed the Shire river to enter Malawi, while an additional 2,000 crossed the Ruw river," the AFP quoted him as saying.