

Malaysia expels two boats ferrying about 300 Myanmar migrants

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Malaysia yesterday said it expelled two boats ferrying about 300 undocumented migrants from Myanmar from the country's waters.

The Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency (MMEA) said the boats were located two nautical miles (3.7 kilometres) southwest of the northern resort of Langkawi late Friday evening.

"MMEA provided assistance, including food and clean drinking water, before expelling the boats out to the national maritime border to continue their journey," Director-General Mohd Rosli Abdullah said in a statement.

"We are also working closely with Thai authorities to obtain additional information on the movements of these boats."

On Friday Malaysian police detained almost 200 suspected Rohingya migrants from Myanmar after their boat ran aground in Langkawi.



Chief Adviser Prof Muhammad Yunus poses for photo alongside UK MP Rupa Huq and a delegation led by her after a meeting at state guest house Jamuna in the capital yesterday.

PHOTO: PTD

Sacked major Zia applies for withdrawal of cases

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Syed Ziaul Haq, a sacked army major who had been convicted in a case filed over the 2015 murder of writer Avijit Roy, has recently applied to the law ministry to withdraw all the cases filed against him.

Zia, who was sentenced to death in the case, also applied to the home ministry to call off a Tk 20 lakh bounty declared on him by police headquarters when the Awami League was in power.

After the murder of Avijit, law enforcers said for years that Zia was the top leader of the al-Qaeda-inspired domestic militant outfit Ansar al Islam.

Zia's lawyer M Sarwar Hossain told The Daily Star that the applications were sent to the ministries on December 29.

"We have applied to the law adviser and the deputy commissioner of Dhaka to withdraw the false cases filed against my client," he said.

"We also applied to the inspector general of police, and the home ministry to withdraw the bounty on Zia."

Sarwar said, "It was by luck that he managed to flee from his residence during a raid or else he would have been killed by the police because the previous government was bent on continuing the drama of militancy as per the prescription of a neighbouring country."

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Internal democracy still a mirage

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"If we want to really institutionalise democracy, political parties will need to practise it within their ranks," she said. "They have turned politics into personality cults."

She explained that unable to retain general members, the parties increasingly rely on dynastic politics. "Policies are no longer important in the political parties," she said.

Jahan writes that following restoration of electoral democracy in 1991, the political parties failed to institute processes and practices that strengthen internal democracy.

SELECTION, NOT ELECTION

Awami League leaders said council meetings had increasingly become a rubber stamp in the hands of the party president only to endorse her preference.

During the last AL council in 2022, Sheikh Hasina stressed the need for new leadership and handed over responsibilities to councillors at a closed-door session, to which the entire auditorium had burst out into a loud "No!"

As the designated election official of the council took the microphone and asked for names of party president, councillors shouted in unison, "Sheikh Hasina, Sheikh Hasina!"

Veteran leader Amir Hossain Amu then took the floor, saying there was no other alternative. "We all want her at the post for as long as she lives."

Consequently, Hasina was re-elected as AL president unopposed. The councillors also empowered Hasina with absolute authority to select other office-bearers—which she did.

The story is not too different for BNP. Khaleda Zia was elected as party chair unopposed in 2016. A week ahead of the council, Jamir Uddin Sircar, BNP standing committee member and chief election commissioner for the council, declared the two top leaders, chairperson and senior vice chairman, had been elected unopposed. "Nobody came forward to contest the elections," he said.

A week later, during the session, Khandaker Mosharraf Hossain told councillors as they have full trust in Khaleda Zia in all matters, they could entrust her with the responsibility to pick people for the standing committee (BNP highest policy making body) and the executive committee.

The councillors readily agreed. Khaleda did not decline either but said she needed to do more homework before picking her team.

MP NOMINEES HANDPICKED

The relevant law – Representation of the People Order, 1972 – stipulates a bottom-up nomination process for MP aspirants of political parties. They are required to be nominated from the grassroots by local leaders. This list is supposed to be finalised by a nomination board.

However, both the major parties blatantly violate these provisions. The AL announced its MP nominees for the 2024 election after Hasina interviewed over 3,350 aspirants.

International corruption watchdog Transparency International

said in a report that candidates were not nominated based on local recommendations. "All nominations had been decided through interviews at the central level." Prior to the 2018 polls, Hasina had claimed that there had been surveys to gauge public perception at the local level before handing out nominations.

In the NP's case, over a dozen grassroots leaders had told this newspaper that they had not prepared any list of aspiring candidates for MP nominees. They were all picked centrally in the 2018 polls.

As for the Jatiya Party, it was always the leader who chose nominees without paying heed to the legal provisions.

Even a cursory look into the history of each party's leadership explains the situation with further clarity.

AWAMI LEAGUE

Hasina, elder daughter of Awami League's iconic leader Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, was made party chief in February 1981 while she was in exile in India at a time when the party was crumbling. Since then, Hasina has led unopposed for 43 years, much longer than luminaries like Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani or her father, who remained at the helm for eight years—second longest stint as AL president.

In his book "Muldharar Rajniti Bangladesh Awami League: Council 1949-2016", Harun-or Rashid writes that Mujib resigned as party president in 1974, amid protest by councillors, in line with a provision barring presidents, prime ministers or ministers from holding party positions.

This provision, introduced in 1955, was annulled in 1992, Harun added.

Hasina took over AL presidency for the ninth term in 2022 at 75, although in June 2007, she had proposed that leaders above 60 would not remain on the party's key policy making bodies. "All leaders above 60 will be accommodated in the advisory council," Hasan Mahmud, Hasina's aide at the time, had told the press.

The party has held 22 councils in 75 years. The last was one in December 2022.

BNP

Khaleda Zia, widow of the party's founder Ziaur Rahman, entered politics at the request of party workers in 1982. In March 1983, she was appointed senior vice chair. Khaleda went on to become elected, unopposed, as the party's chair in May 1984. She has remained in that position for 40 years.

Party leaders on February 8, 2018 announced that senior vice-chairman Tarique Rahman, Khaleda's elder son, will run the party as its acting leader in her absence as she was sent to jail.

The BNP has held six council sessions in 46 years—the last one in 2016.

JATIYA PARTY

Founded in 1986 by military dictator Hussein Mohammad Ershad, Jatiya Party's charter vests its leader with absolute power to appoint office bearers at will. Ershad remained at the helm of his party until his death in 2019.

According to a Centre for Policy

Dialogue working paper, Ershad told the party's council in 2009 that there was no need for an acting chairman since he was ready to resume leadership and serve this position "until death".

BANGLADESH JAMAAT-E-ISLAMI

The Islamist party has had four full-fledged leaders in 45 years since its revival in 1979, while its charter stipulates election of a party chief every three years.

Ghulam Azam was elected party chief in 1979 but was replaced by Abbas Ali Khan as acting head in light of the trouble over Azam's citizenship. Abbas remained in the position till his death in 1992, while Azam was officially the party chief till 2000, when he quit due to ill health.

Matiur Rahman Nizami worked as the party leader from 2000 to 2016. But Maqbul Ahmed filled in as acting chief from June 2010 to May 2016, when Nizami was in jail for war crimes and subsequently hanged.

Maqbul was elected ameer in May 2016 and held the office until 2019.

Shafiqur Rahman was elected in November 2019 and remains as party chief.

OTHERS

National Awami Party (NAP) (Muzzaffar) faction president Muzaffar Ahmad was the longest serving party leader in Bangladesh, remaining in charge for 52 years until his death in August 2019. He had become president of the erstwhile East Pakistan NAP in 1967.

Gono Forum leader Dr Kamal Hossain was elected as emeritus president for life in October 2023 after he resigned as party president, a position he had held for 30 years since founding the party in 1993. The party has so far held seven councils.

"Out of respect for Dr Kamal Hossain, no one challenged him for the post of president," said its General Secretary Mizanur Rahman.

Workers Party President Rashed Khan Menon has led the leftist party for 20 years since 2004. He was general secretary between 1992 and 2004. The party has held nine councils in 38 years.

Hasanul Haque Inu has been the president of his faction of the Jatiya Samjantrik Dal since 2002. Inu was general secretary between 1986 and 2002.

The party decided in 2010 that none of its leaders would be elected president or general secretary more than twice in a row. That provision was suspended in 2016.

Mujahidul Islam Selim was either general secretary or president of the Communist Party of Bangladesh for 30 years between 1993 and 2022. It became the only party in Bangladesh to have term limits on its leadership when the party congress decided in 2012 that no one would be elected president or general secretary more than two consecutive terms.

Bangladesher Samajtantrik Dal was founded in 1980 by some renegades of the Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal. Khalequzzaman was the top leader either acting as convenor or general secretary for 42 years until March 2022. He is now the party's chief adviser. Although the party constitution stipulates a council every four years, it held its first congress in

March 2022. Its Assistant General Secretary Razequzzaman explained that they held internal conventions several times and a conference in 2009 to elect party leadership.

ASM Rab left the JSD in 2001 and formed his faction of the Jatiya Samjantrik Dal (Rab). He has been the president since then.

Andaleev Rahman Partha became president of the Bangladesh Jatiya Party in 2008 after the death of his father Nazim Rahman Manzur. Partha remains in charge of that faction while Anwar Hossain Manju has remained chairman of another faction since 2002.

Zonayed Saki has been the top leader of Ganosamhati Andolon since its foundation in 2002 while Badruddin Umar remains president of the Jatiya Mukti Council since its foundation in 2003.

Former president and BNP stalwart, AQM Badruddoza Chowdhury founded the Bikalpa Dhara Bangladesh in 2004 and served as president for 20 years until his death in October 2024.

Oli Ahmed founded the Liberal Democratic Party in October 2006, and has remained its leader since then.

Islami Andolan Bangladesh (erstwhile Islami Shashontantra Andolan) was formed in 1987 by Syed Fazlul Karim, also known as Charmonai pir. Fazlul's son Rezaul Karim was made the party chief following Fazlul's death in 2006.

Khelafat Majlish was founded in 1989. Its founding chief Azizul Haque, better known as Shaikhul Hadith Azizul Haque, remained at the helm until his death in 2012.

Bangladesh Tarikat Federation was formed by Syed Najibul Bashar Maizbhandari in 2005 and is still the party chairman.

Dilip Barua has been the leader of Bangladesher Samyabadi Dal since 1987. Krishak Sramik Janata League's President Abdul Kader Siddique has been in that same position since its foundation in December 1999.

Revolutionary Workers Party of Bangladesh was founded by faction of leaders and activists of the Workers Party in 2004. Since then, Saiful Haque has been the general secretary.

Bangladesh Khelafat Andolan was founded by Muhammadullah Hafeez Huzur in 1981. He remained the leader until his death in 1987, after which his elder son, Shah Ahmedullah Ahsraf became chief and remained in that position till November 2014. Ataullah Ibne Hafeez was made chief of the party that year, and remains in that position.

Zaker Party was founded by Maulana Mohammad Hashmatullah, renowned as the Pir of Atrashi in Faridpur, in 1989. Since then, Hashmatullah's son Mostafa Amir Faisal has been the party chair. The party needs to hold a council every four years and has held four councils to date. Zaker Party Secretary General Shameem Haider said, "No one else was interested in running for chairman in the last couple of councils."

UKBCCI Chairman Iqbal Ahmed OBE and UKBCCI President MG Molla Mia are leading the delegation.

Siddiqi invited British businesspeople, including those of Bangladesh origin, to invest in the country, saying the interim government has undertaken sweeping reforms to attract foreign direct investment.

Rohingya repatriation

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Bangladesh has hosted nearly 1.2 million Rohingyas since the mass exodus triggered by a Myanmar military crackdown in 2017. Despite international pressure and periodic talks, progress on repatriation has been negligible. Observers argue that without engaging the AA, now a crucial stakeholder in Rakhine, any meaningful resolution to the crisis remains unlikely. Ignoring the AA's role in the region's power dynamics is a recipe for failure.

According to Imtiaz Ahmed, professor of international relations at Dhaka University, it is crucial to establish communication with all ethnic groups in Myanmar. "The fragmented sovereignty within Myanmar has created a complex situation, and our security forces already have some connections with the ethnic minorities there. If we had engaged with the Arakan Army, the situation might have unfolded differently."

"Our communication should not be limited to the AA; we must build connections with other ethnic groups as well. These relationships do not necessarily have to be open; they can be developed through various discrete channels. The AA's control over a significant area is a reality we must acknowledge. While key strategic points remain under Tatmadaw's control, communication does not need to be confined to traditional diplomatic channels."

He added that incentives should be offered to encourage the AA to facilitate the repatriation of Rohingyas. Currently, Bangladesh finds itself in an awkward position regarding the Rohingya crisis. Resolving this issue is impossible without the involvement of China and India, as both nations have aligned interests in this matter.

A NEW WAVE OF REFUGEES

Unlike earlier arrivals, many among the latest influx of Rohingyas are financially solvent, having initially tried to remain in Myanmar despite worsening conditions. However, deteriorating security and a severe shortage of commodities have left them with no choice but to flee. Most have bypassed designated refugee

camps in Bangladesh, opting instead for informal settlements.

The situation has also displaced over 200 individuals from other ethnic minorities in Rakhine, highlighting the broader humanitarian fallout.

Inside Myanmar, over 400,000 Rohingyas remain in Rakhine, many confined to 33 squalid internally displaced persons (IDP) camps. With farming disruptions now stretching into a second year, entire communities are being forced to abandon their homes. Recruitment efforts by the Arakan Army are targeting young people in rural villages, further compounding fears of a large-scale migration.

Bangladesh's response to the crisis has drawn criticism for its lack of strategic direction. Although Dhaka recently appointed a Director General for Rohingya Affairs and Special Envoy, Khalilur Rahman, to spearhead repatriation efforts, gaps in policy and implementation remain glaring.

"There is no question about the government's sincerity, but the problem is they are still struggling to strategise," said an official involved in the process.

At a recent informal consultation in Bangkok, Touhid Hossain reiterated the need for a comprehensive roadmap to address the crisis. He called on Myanmar and regional powers to create conditions conducive to the Rohingyas' safe and dignified return, warning that failure to do so would perpetuate instability across the region.

A HUMANITARIAN IMPERATIVE

The ongoing impasse has placed immense strain on Bangladesh, already grappling with the burden of hosting the world's largest refugee camp in Cox's Bazar. With no viable solution in sight, experts are urging coordinated international action to address the crisis.

The Rohingya issue is not just a bilateral problem; it's a regional and global humanitarian challenge that demands urgent attention, experts say.

As Rakhine's conflict intensifies and the AA consolidates its power, hopes for Rohingya repatriation become increasingly dim.

Trump to be sentenced

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Trump entering the White House as a convicted felon.

The 78-year-old Trump potentially faced up to four years in prison but legal experts – even before he won the November presidential election – did not expect Merchan to send the former president to jail.

"It seems proper at this juncture to make known the Court's inclination to not impose any sentence of incarceration," the judge said, noting that prosecutors also did not believe a jail term was a "practicable recommendation."

Trump, who is expected to lodge an appeal that could potentially delay his sentencing, denounced the decision late Friday.

"This illegitimate political attack is nothing but a Rigged Charade," he wrote on his platform Truth Social.

Calling Merchan a "radical partisan," Trump added that the order was "knowingly unlawful, goes against our Constitution and, if allowed to stand, would be the end of the Presidency as we know it."

Trump was convicted in New York in May of 34 counts of falsifying business records to cover up a hush money payment to porn star Stormy Daniels on the eve of the 2016 election to stop her from revealing an alleged 2006 sexual encounter.

Trump's attorneys had sought to have the case dismissed on multiple grounds, including the Supreme Court's landmark ruling last year that former US presidents have sweeping immunity from prosecution for a range of official acts committed while

in office.

Merchan rejected that argument but he noted that Trump will be immune from prosecution once he is sworn in as president.

"Finding no legal impediment to sentencing and recognizing that Presidential immunity will likely attach once Defendant takes his Oath of Office, it is incumbent upon this Court to set this matter down for imposition of sentence prior to January 20, 2025," the judge said.

Trump spokesman Steven Cheung denounced Merchan's decision to set sentencing for the former president, calling it a "direct violation of the Supreme Court's Immunity decision and other longstanding jurisprudence."

"This lawless case should have never been brought and the Constitution demands that it be immediately dismissed," Cheung said in a statement.

"President Trump must be allowed to continue the Presidential Transition process and to execute the vital duties of the presidency, unobstructed by the remains of this or any remnants of the Witch Hunts," he said.

"There should be no sentencing, and President Trump will continue fighting against these hoaxes until they are all dead," Cheung added.

Trump also faced two federal cases brought by special counsel Jack Smith, but both were dropped under a long-standing Justice Department policy of not prosecuting a sitting president.

CA reiterates 2 possible polls timelines

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vote in the last three elections. There was a fake parliament; fake MPs and a fake Speaker. The whole country got their voice back, which was taken away forcibly," said Yunus.

During the meeting, Rupa also enquired about the reform initiatives undertaken by the interim government and the political parties'

participation in those initiatives.

Yunus told Rupa about the repression of the people during the regime of ousted prime minister Sheikh Hasina and explained how it led to the July uprising.

James Goldman, deputy high commissioner and development director of the British High Commission in Dhaka, was also

present at the meeting.

Earlier, Rupa met Special Envoy to Chief Adviser Lutfy Siddiqi, BIDA Chairman Ashik Mahmud Chowdhury, and Senior Secretary for SDG Affairs Lamiya Morshed over trade and investment in Bangladesh.

A delegation from UKBCCI is currently on a three-day visit to Bangladesh.