

MIGRANT WORKERS Yunus urges KL to issue multi- entry visas

DIPLMATIC CORRESPONDENT

Chief Adviser Prof Muhammad Yunus urged Malaysia to issue multiple-entry visas for Bangladeshi workers employed there to facilitate their return home as and when required.



He raised the issue when Malaysian High Commissioner to Bangladesh Mohd Shuhada Othman called on him at the State Guest House Jamuna yesterday.

Yunus also urged that the entry of 18,000 Bangladeshi workers, who missed the deadline to join their work in Malaysia last year, be facilitated.

Mohd Shuhada Othman said a joint technical committee, comprising officials from both countries, held a meeting in this regard in Kuala Lumpur on December 31, and a similar meeting was planned to be held on Tuesday.

Recalling his meeting with Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim in Dhaka in October, the

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This picture, taken from the Israeli side of the border with the Gaza Strip, shows smoke plumes rising from explosions above destroyed buildings in northern Gaza yesterday amid the ongoing Israeli offensive in the Palestinian enclave.

PHOTO: AFP

63 lawyers, including Chinmoy's counsels, get bail

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, Ctg

A Chattogram court yesterday granted bail to 63 lawyers, including the counsels of former ISKCON leader Chinmoy Krishna Das, in a case filed over clashes and vandalism on the court premises on November 26.

The violence broke out following the rejection of bail of Chinmoy, who was arrested on charges of disrespecting the national flag.

Yesterday, Additional Metropolitan Magistrate Sarker Hasan Shahriar passed the bail order after the lawyers surrendered before the court seeking bail, said Public Prosecutor Mofizul Hoque Bhuiyan.

Senior Supreme Court lawyer Subrata Chowdhury, who represented the lawyers during the hearing, told The Daily Star, "The court heard all parties. We informed the court that the death of lawyer Saiful Islam Alif [amid clashes on November 26] was a tragic incident, and the perpetrators must be punished.

"However, the accused lawyers were not involved in the clashes or vandalism. Additionally, no lawyer's name was mentioned in the murder case filed by Alif's father. The court carefully reviewed the arguments and granted bail."

The case was lodged by Alif's brother following the clashes. The court granted bail to 63 out of the 66 accused on a bond of Tk 5,000 each.

The hearing was held under tight security, and some of Alif's associates reportedly objected to the court's decision to grant bail.

On November 25, Chinmoy, also the spokesperson for Sammilita Sanatani Jagaran Jote, was arrested at Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport in Dhaka in the case filed with a Chattogram police station.

Reform panels aim to ensure power balance

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Ali Riaz, chief of the Constitution Reform Commission, Badiul Alam Majumdar, chief of the Electoral Reform Commission, Itekhazuzzaman, chief of the ACC Reform Commission and Safar Raj Hossain, chief of the Police Reform Commission, confirmed this newspaper yesterday that they are set to submit their reports tomorrow.

"The balance of power will not be limited to the president and prime minister. A balance of power will be established by creating more institutions to place the government's executive branch under surveillance and prevent the prime minister's misuse of power," Ali Riaz told The Daily Star yesterday.

Badiul said their recommendations would be discussed internally within the government and also with political parties. He hopes these discussions will lead to a consensus.

After taking charge in August, the interim government formed at least 15 reform commissions to strengthen weakened democratic institutions, and establish a state system rooted in public ownership, accountability, and welfare.

The first six commissions for reforming the constitution, electoral system, police, judiciary, public administration, and the ACC were formed on October 3. They were given

90 days to submit their reports.

The deadline for the Judiciary Reform Commission was extended to January 31 and the remaining five to January 15.

OTHER RECOMMENDATIONS

The Constitution Reform Commission is likely to recommend the inclusion of equality, human dignity, and social justice in the preamble to the constitution in line with the proclamation of the 1971 Liberation War.

The commission plans to propose enhancing parliamentary standing committees' ability to monitor the government's activities and hold the executive branch and prime minister accountable. It will also recommend repealing Article 70 of the constitution, which practically stops MPs from voting against party lines.

The Electoral Reform Commission is set to recommend the reintroduction of "No" vote option on ballot papers and direct election to seats reserved for women. The commission is also in favour of increasing the seats for women to 100 from 50, and the total number of lawmakers in the lower house to 400 from 350. It is likely to recommend 400 seats for the upper house.

Members of the commission said they were likely to recommend

a non-party caretaker government system ahead of polls, amending the law for the appointments of election commissioners and their chief, increasing the EC's authority under the Representation of the People Order (RPO), and making the EC more accountable.

They are also considering recommending provisions that will require candidates to disclose their foreign assets in their affidavits and the verification of the information provided in the affidavits.

Sources in the Police Reform Commission said that their recommendations might include freeing law enforcement agencies from political influence.

They will also stress the importance of reducing corruption and ensuring accountability through exemplary punishment of offenders in law enforcement agencies.

The commission is likely to propose guidelines following High Court Division and Appellate Division directives regarding arrests without warrants under Section 54 of the Code of Criminal Procedure (CrPC) and the treatment of individuals on remand under Section 167 of the CrPC.

These directives include: police officers must disclose their identity and present ID cards after arresting

the suspects; reasons for arrests must be recorded in a register; relatives of the arrestee must be informed within an hour; detainees should have access to a lawyer or relatives; interrogations during remand must occur in a designated room with a transparent glass wall, where a lawyer or relative can observe the proceedings.

The ACC Reform Commission is likely to recommend ensuring the appointment of neutral persons as ACC commissioners and chairman. The reform commission is likely to propose repealing the controversial section 54 of the ACC Employees (Service) Rules. The section gives the ACC secretary absolute authority to transfer investigation officers. It also permits the dismissal of employees without prior notice.

Employees argue that this provision undermines their ability to conduct independent and impartial investigations.

According to sources, the commission may recommend expanding the current three-member ACC to a five-member body by amending the Anti-Corruption Commission Act 2004. Additionally, the commission is considering a proposal to establish integrated ACC offices in all 64 districts, up from 36.

Bangladeshi cattle trader shot by 'BSF' in Lalmonirhat

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Lalmonirhat

A Bangladeshi cattle trader was shot allegedly by the Indian Border Security Force along Patgram border in Lalmonirhat on Sunday night.

Shahidul Islam, 42, of Kashidanga village of the same upazila, was shot around 11:30pm, said Subedar Jahangir Alam, commander of Shamsnagar BGB company camp.

Other cattle traders rescued and admitted him to a clinic in Rangpur city, Jahangir said.

A group of five six cattle traders were smuggling in cattle from India's Maynati village in West Bengal's Cooch Behar district, he said.

A BSF patrolling team fired bullets, and one of them hit Shahidul in his leg, he added.

A family member of Shahidul said that he was now out of danger.

ICT orders CID

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"The CID has informed the prosecution that court approval is necessary to proceed with verification. This has created challenges in certifying the evidence, which led us to seek the court's guidance," Zoha added.

Acknowledging the petition's significance, the three-member bench led by Justice Md Golam Mortuza Majumdar directed the CID and BTRC to verify the evidence. Justice Md Shofiqul Alam Mahmood and Justice M Mohitul Hoque Anam Chowdhury were also part of the bench.

Chief Prosecutor Muhammad Tajul Islam later told reporters that all digital evidence must be certified by the CID in line with the law before being presented in court.

"We have collected substantial digital evidence from multiple sources. To ensure its certification, we submitted a petition requesting the court to instruct the CID to expedite this process," he said.

Tajul, however, dismissed allegations of a lack of cooperation from government agencies. "This is an ongoing process. There's no need to blame any agency at this stage. If non-cooperation persists, legal measures can be taken under the law, but for now, we seek everyone's cooperation to prevent misunderstandings."

He also said the petition was not limited to obtaining call records for any specific individual but aimed at verifying the certification of all relevant digital evidence.

Hasina, Rehana

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The complainant in Rehana's case is ACC Deputy Director Md Salahuddin. Assistant Director SM Rashedul Hasan is the complainant in Bobby's case, while Assistant Director Afnan Jannat Keya lodged the case against Azmina.

In Rehana's case, the accused include Hasina, Tulip, and 15 others, including officials from the housing ministry and Rajuk.

Similarly, in the case against Bobby, the accused include Hasina, Tulip, and 16 others. In the case against Azmina, the accused include Tulip, Hasina, and 16 others.

Earlier, on Sunday, the ACC filed another case against Hasina, her daughter Saima Wazed Putul, the secretary of the housing ministry, and 16 others for allegedly abusing power to secure six 10-katha plots in Purbachal.

This is the fourth probe initiated by the ACC against Hasina following her removal from office on August 5.

On December 22, 2024, the commission began investigating Hasina and her son Saieeb Wazed Joy over allegations of laundering \$300 million to the United States.

On December 17, 2024, the ACC launched a probe into two complaints of embezzlement amounting to Tk 80,000 crore involving Hasina and her family in nine major projects,

including the Rooppur Nuclear Power Plant.

OPPOSITION WANT TULIP FIRED

UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer faced fresh pressure yesterday to sack Tulip Siddiq, his anti-corruption minister, amid claims that she lived in properties linked to her aunt Hasina and the Awami League party she led, reports AFP.

Tulip has insisted that she has done nothing wrong.

Earlier this month, Tulip referred herself to Starmer's standards adviser. Asked yesterday whether Tulip's position in the UK government remained tenable, senior British minister Pat McCadden told Sky News she had "done the right thing" with the self-referral.

He insisted the standards adviser had the powers to "carry out investigations into allegations like this".

"That is what he is doing, and that is the right way to deal with this," McCadden said.

But UK opposition politicians want Siddiq fired.

"I think it's untenable for her to carry out her role," the Conservatives' finance spokesman Mel Stride told Times Radio on Sunday.

"It's inappropriate for Tulip to be in the position that she holds at the moment. She is the anti-corruption minister in government."

Floodwaters gone months ago but sufferings linger

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could build the new house.

Md Liton, who has been helping Sajjad, had his own home swept away. Along with that, the paddy he cultivated on an acre of land was destroyed.

"I have been spending my nights sleeping under a makeshift shed.

"After some initial flood assistance, there has been no help. I'm now trying to survive as a day labourer and by helping people build new homes for themselves."

Liton further said 12 homes of the village were completely destroyed but only three families got financial assistance from different companies and organisations to rebuild their homes. He, however, was not lucky enough.

The situation is no different in the neighbouring district of Noakhali.

Tajul Islam, a timber trader of Babunagar village in Begumganj upazila, said his house had been waterlogged for over a month since the floods.

"My house was not washed away completely but it has been severely damaged. The corrugated tin sheets have to be changed, and the wood and bamboo were also destroyed.

"My business is also not going too well as people don't have money in their hands in the face of such a situation. And so, I don't have money to fix my own house either."

GOVT SUPPORT 'NOT ENOUGH'

The late August floods caused damage worth an estimated Tk 14,421.46 crore, and the government would need to increase its budget for relief distribution, according to a study of the Centre for Policy Dialogue released on October 6 last year.

Noakhali endured 29.07 percent of the damages, followed by Cumilla at 23.51 percent; Feni at 18.61 percent; and Chattogram at 11.63 percent.

According to data from the DC offices, over 90 percent of the populations in Feni and Noakhali – the hardest hit districts in the August floods – have been severely affected.

in Noakhali and 110 in Feni.

At least 8,453 houses – 50 concrete, 350 semi pucca and 8,053 thatched – have been completely damaged, while 1,46,439 were partially damaged.

Noakhali DC Estiaque said, "Though the government is initially providing 90 houses, the support is not enough for the victims," adding that the government is supposed to allocate more houses later.

The district administration has provided aid to nearly 21 lakh flood-affected people in 87 unions and eight municipalities across nine upazilas of the district. The relief measures include Tk 58.98 lakh in cash, 1,800 metric tonnes of rice, 1,000 packets of dry food, Tk 15 lakh for baby food, and Tk 15 lakh for animal feed.

Meanwhile for Feni, the government has prepared a list of 8,659 families who have lost their homes. According to the list, 1,798 houses have been completely damaged, while 6,941 were partially damaged.

Of the 110 houses to be built by the government for the victims, 35 will be in Feni Sadar upazila, 20 in Fulgazi, 20 in Chhagalnaiya, 20 in Parshuram, 10 in Daganbhuiyan.

The army was given the task to build these houses, Feni DC Saiful said.

Meanwhile, the government has also allocated 400 bundles of corrugated tin sheets and Tk 12 lakh in six upazilas.

In Fulgazi upazila, the Bangladesh Army has provided four bundles of corrugated tin sheets to 157 families and repaired 15 houses, while the Bangladesh Navy repaired 85 houses.

In both districts, different international development partners, including UNDP, WFP, Bangladesh Red Crescent Society, BRAC, As-Sunnah Foundation, Mastul Foundation YPSA, RIC, Gulf Co-Operative Society have provided cash assistance to some selected flood victims to help them repair their damaged homes.

However, the number of recipients is far less than the number of victims.

DEPENDENT ON DEBT

In Noakhali's Subarnachar upazila, all the crops grown by Jamal Uddin in Char Amanullah village were damaged in the floods.

"I had to take a loan from an NGO to do so. Now, they come to my house every day for the repayment in instalments, but I am unable to pay it.

"I work as a day labourer and there has barely been any work for me since the floods. I worked only four days this month [last month] and was able to make only Tk 2,400.

"How am I supposed to pay back this month's instalment of Tk 8,000?"

Md Mainuddin, of Char Darbeshpur village, never had to purchase rice as he would grow his own. "But the flood damaged all my crops, my fish farm and my house.

"I had to take a loan of Tk 10 lakh from the bank to start my business afresh. Now I have to pay Tk 48,000 per month for two years. But I don't have any income to be able to do so."

Speaking to The Daily Star, Noakhali's Fisheries Officer Md Iqbal Hossain said at least 85,000 fish farms were flushed out during the flood, resulting in a loss of Tk 600 crore.

"But none of the farmers received a single penny from government as support."

Md Saiful Islam, executive director of NGO Sagarika Samaj Unnayan Sangstha, said the number of people taking loans from them has shot up since the flood.

In June and July 2024, the NGO distributed Tk 111.53 crore among 11,538 borrowers before the flood.



However, during the flood in August and September, 7,725 people took loans worth Tk 62.79.

In October and November, after the flood, loan distribution rose sharply and 17,261 people took loans worth Tk 128.24 crore.

Saiful said a total of 30 NGOs have been working to assist in flood-affected areas. "I believe the amount of loans given has increased in all NGOs as the victims need them to start working again."

Mohammad Kamruzzaman, branch manager of TMSS (Tangail-based NGO Thengamara Mohila Sabuj Sangha) in Noakhali, told The Daily Star that the organisation has disbursed over Tk 100 crore in microloans. TMSS currently operates 17 branches in the district.

"Borrowers primarily take microloans to rebuild homes damaged by the floods or to invest in agricultural activities," he said, adding that the demand for loans has been overwhelming since the flood.

"We carefully evaluate each applicant to ensure they have the capacity to repay the instalments before approving the

loans."

FARMERS' WOES

In Subarnachar upazila's Char Amanullah, 50-year-old Jamal Uddin pulled out some paddy from his crop field to show this correspondent.

"See? There's no grain in these paddies. We had to cultivate the Aman rice in late September after the floodwater receded.

"We had to spend double the money as we had to cultivate twice. Yet, we could not harvest any grains as yet."

Jamal is now struggling to repay the loans he took from an NGO to bear the expenses of his Aman cultivation.

Haridas Kahar, 65, said, "Last year, I managed to harvest 200 maunds of rice. This year, all the crops were ruined by floods."

With no options left, he began working as a labourer at a local brick kiln.

Like them, at least 3.93 lakh farmers – 2.25 lakh in Noakhali and 1.68 lakh in Feni – lost all their crops and fish, said officials of the agriculture department, adding that crops on 82,000 hectares of land – 50,418 hectares in Noakhali and 32,486 in Feni – have been damaged.

Visiting at least five upazilas in these two districts, The Daily Star saw farmers struggling to keep up with the cost of cultivation in the face of no support from the government.

On the other hand, many farmlands remain barren as farmers could not cultivate anything this season.

Md Rubel Hossain, from Aloka village in Parshuram upazila, said he cultivated Aman on 120 decimals of land. "But all the rice was washed away during the flood. There was also sand deposited on most of the croplands in my village and other surrounding villages, making it difficult for us to replant."

He said some farmers were provided with Boro seeds and Tk 1,000 cash from the government. "But only some farmers got those. Like many others, I did not get anything."

The agriculture department said around 250 hectares of land in Feni's Fulgazi and Parshuram upazilas were covered in sand that came in with the floodwater from the upstream during the flood.

In some places, there is five to 10 feet of sand covering the crop field.

In Noakhali, even larger swaths of potential land remain barren due to saline water coming in after the breach of river embankments.

At least 46,265 hectares in Subarnachar and Hatia upazilas have been rendered infertile due to salinity and waterlogging.