

Democracy can help Bangladesh to next chapter
Says US envoy to India

DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENT

US Ambassador to India Eric Garcetti has said that a swift restoration of democracy in Bangladesh is in its best interests.

"I think we have an opportunity. Both of us [India and US] want to see democracy and democratic elections to be established in Bangladesh as soon as possible and that can help Bangladesh open its next chapter," Garcetti said in an interview with the Indian television channel *Wion* yesterday.

The outgoing US envoy said both the US and India want to see a peaceful and democratic South Asia.

"We share these principles. We are coordinating together on that. We spoke about it: whether Bangladesh or any country, religious minorities should not be persecuted.

"It is not about the past, it is about what we can do together, and India and the US have never acted together more closely than today."



Palestinians gather to receive food aid being distributed in Deir al-Balah, in the central Gaza Strip, yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Proclamation to take some more time

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"It will take some time ...," he said about how long it would take to prepare the proclamation.

The issue of proclamation surfaced as the Students Against Discrimination and the Jatiya Nagorik Committee on December 30 said they would formally proclaim the uprising the next day. Student leaders also said the "Mujibbadi" constitution would be invalidated.

Initially, the Chief Adviser's Press Wing said the government had no involvement in the event. However, that very night it said the government would take the initiative to prepare the proclamation based on national consensus.

Later that night, the student group and the Nagorik committee announced their support for the government initiative and decided to hold a "March for Unity" programme instead of the event for the proclamation.

The Students Against Discrimination and the Jatiya Nagorik Committee also threatened demonstrations if the proclamation was not made by January 15.

Yesterday, in his opening speech of the meeting held at the Foreign Service Academy, Prof Yunus said his government was the outcome of the unity the people demonstrated during the uprising and asked political parties to extend their support to the government.

"When we work alone and suddenly

see you are not around us, we feel weak," he said, adding, "We were born from unity and unity is our strength."

He said the government called for the meeting after students who led the uprising came to him and told him that there would be a proclamation and insisted on him being part of it.

Prof Yunus said if the proclamation was unanimous, then it would be good for the country and it would enhance Bangladesh's image globally.

A total of 27 representatives of the BNP, Jamaat, Ganosamhati Andolok, Gono Adhikar Parishad, National Democratic Party, Gono Front, Basad (Marxist), Students Against Discrimination, AB Party, Khelafat Movement, Jasad, Rashtora Sonskar Andolok, Khelafat Majlis, Islami Andolok Bangladesh, and Nizam-e-Islami joined the meeting.

After the meeting, leaders of Students Against Discrimination and Jatiya Nagorik Committee said the proclamation would be a historic document of a new political settlement for a democratic Bangladesh.

Member Secretary of Students Against Discrimination Arif Sohel said, "The document will have historical significance in the establishment of a prosperous and democratic state and the July movement will be recognised globally."

"Further discussions will be held regarding what should be included in the document to reflect the aspirations of the students and people who took to

the streets in July."

Convenor of Jatiya Nagorik Committee Nasiruddin Patwary said Bangladesh cannot move towards the democratic transition without this document.

"For this reason, we have called upon all democratic forces and the people who are committed to democracy, who have fought for it over the last 15 years, to unite through this declaration," he said.

BNP's standing committee member Salahuddin Ahmed said the most urgent matter was to maintain the anti-fascist national unity, which was created through the July uprising.

Regarding the proclamation, he said, "There were some discussions about the proclamation, and political party leaders gave their suggestions. We questioned whether the declaration on the July uprising, after five and a half months, was really necessary. If it is, its political, historical, and legal significance needs to be determined.

"... We want to make an inclusive political statement with all the political parties who have been involved in the anti-fascist movement. We must ensure that no fascist power or fascist collaborators can plant the seeds of disunity within us.

"We must ensure that no rift is created in the unity against fascism over this proclamation. If it turns into a political or historical document, we must respect it. But while formulating

it, all relevant parties should be included, and their suggestions must be taken into account."

Miah Golam Parwar, secretary general of Jamaat-e-Islam, said all the parties in the meeting felt the necessity of a proclamation.

"However, if we rush, there might be mistakes... Time is needed and we need to exchange views with political parties and various stakeholders.

"We will provide separate proposals that will be later compiled into one cohesive declaration," he said, adding that the process should not be delayed too much as it could create room for chaos or conspiracies.

Zonayed Saki, chief coordinator of Ganosamhati Andolok, said the proclamation should not be drafted hastily or carelessly.

"The issues of content as well as legal and political aspects of the proclamation must be addressed through consensus," he said.

Joint Secretary General of Islami Andolok Bangladesh Gazi Ataur Rahman said they emphasised the need for ensuring that the spirit of the July uprising is reflected in the proclamation.

On Prof Yunus' comment about feeling weak, the IAB leader said, "We told him [Yunus] that you need to understand why you are feeling weaker.

"Why is there a growing distance between you and the political parties? Why is there a lack of coordination? It is your responsibility to bridge this gap,

and if you fail to do so, we will all suffer," he said.

Asaduzzaman Fuad, general secretary of AB (Amar Bangladesh) Party, said that they proposed that the proclamation briefly mention all the historic events -- from the Battle of Plassey in 1757 to the Liberation War and all movements over the last 15 years.

"The proclamation should be concise. It will help all parties reach a consensus, as larger documents leave more scope for disagreements," said Fuad.

Hebaz-e-Islam's Senior Joint Secretary General Md Junaid Al Habib said they suggested the inclusion of Shapla Chittar incident (of May 2013) in the proclamation.

Mohammad Rashed Khan, general secretary of Gono Odhikar Parishad, said they told the meeting that the declaration must acknowledge the 2018 quota reform movement and the road safety movement. It should also clearly mention victims of enforced disappearances and killings over the last 15 years.

He said almost all political party criticised the government for sending them draft proclamation just two hours prior to the meeting.

He said all parties asked whether the draft was made by the government, the students, or a private organisation. He said the government failed to provide a clear answer.

Secretary General of Khelafat Majlis Ahmad Abdul Kader, Secretary General

ROHINGYA REFUGEES
30 children, eight women rescued by Teknaf police

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, Cox's Bazar

Police have rescued 38 Rohingya refugees after they illegally entered Bangladesh territory by crossing the Bay of Bengal through the Teknaf coastline in Cox's Bazar.

Among those rescued, eight are women, and the rest are children, said Inspector Shovon Kumar Saha, in charge of the Baharchhara Police Investigation Centre in Teknaf.

"They were rescued from Noakhaliapara in Baharchhara union Wednesday evening. They are now in police custody."

Human traffickers took them to a hill in Noakhaliapara by boat, the official said, adding that they were waiting to be taken to different Rohingya camps, where they have relatives.

"We are waiting for instructions from higher authorities. They (authorities) have been informed,

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Elect leaders by secret ballot

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The same process of voting should be followed to form a three-member panel that would nominate candidates for national polls.

The changes in electoral laws to ensure fund transparency were proposed by the Anti Corruption Commission Reform Commission. The commission unveiled the recommendations after submitting their reports to Chief Adviser Prof Muhammad Yunus on Wednesday.

The Electoral Reform Commission proposed changing the Representation of the People Order, 1972, under which the EC registers the political parties.

The commission suggested that people convicted by the International Crimes Tribunal be disqualified from becoming a general member or committee member of a political party.

It said a special law is needed to prevent individuals accused of serious human rights violations -- such as enforced disappearances, extrajudicial killings and attacks on journalists -- from becoming general members or committee members of any political

party if charges against them are accepted by an ICT.

The commission said that political parties should prepare a list of party members, publish it on their websites and update it once a year.

No parties should be allowed to have sycophant student, teacher or labour wings, or foreign branches under any kind of names, the commission said.

A person must be a party member for at least three years to vie for nomination in parliamentary elections.

A party will be able to take a minimum membership fee of Tk 100 and a maximum donation of Tk 50 lakh from any individual.

Donations should be received via banking channels and disclosed in the tax returns of the respective individuals.

The reform commission suggested auditing the annual income and expenditure reports submitted by registered parties to ensure transparency in their fund management.

The Electoral Reform Commission said election expenses should be fixed at Tk 10 per voter and all these expenses

PROPOSED REFORMS FOR PARTIES

- ☛ Elect leadership by members' secret ballot
- ☛ Nominate polls candidates through panel created by members
- ☛ Bar people accused of enforced disappearances, extrajudicial killings from party
- ☛ People convicted by ICT cannot be party members
- ☛ No separate student, teacher or labour wing
- ☛ Publicise financing and income-expenditure info

must be managed through the banking systems or mobile financial services.

It said the expenditures should be closely monitored by the EC and the returns of election expense accounts for candidates and parties will be

audited, and penalties will be imposed for discrepancies.

The ACC Reform Commission suggested that political parties and candidates disclose detailed information about their financing and

income expenditure to the public.

With the assistance of the National Board of Revenue and ACC, the EC can verify accuracy of the information provided by candidates in their electoral affidavits and take appropriate action where necessary.

All elected representatives at all levels must submit their and their family members' income and wealth statements to the EC within three months of assuming office and annually thereafter, and the EC will publish these declarations on its website, states the reform commission report.

"Political parties should not nominate individuals involved in corruption or irregularities for party positions or elections," said the ACC Reform Commission.

Its chief Iftekharuzzaman said, "We are not talking about only those convicted for corruption, but also those involved in extortion and grabbing."

"We are seeing that these people are being expelled from party posts. So, we can only hope that political parties will be firm while keeping these people out of election nomination," he said.

Prof Dilara Choudhury, a former teacher at the Department of Government and Politics at Jahangirnagar University, said the proposals to increase internal democracy and transparency in funding were positive.

"The use of black money must be stopped in politics. At the same time, democracy should be ensured among the political parties. Otherwise, there is no point in talking about democracy," she said.

"But the implementation of these recommendations depends on the political parties. Again, the Election Commission should take a proactive role so that the parties keep their financial activities transparent," she said.

Chief Election Commissioner AMM Nasir Uddin said that they will review all the recommendations prepared by the Electoral Reform Commission.

Speaking at an event organised by the Reporters' Forum for Election and Democracy, he said the implementation of the proposals would depend on the decision-making authorities, the political parties, and the capacity of the Election Commission.