

Yunus listens to ‘chilling’ Aynaghar stories, to visit secret prisons

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Chief Adviser Prof Muhammad Yunus will soon visit the “joint interrogation cells” popularly known as Aynaghar, said a statement yesterday.

The Chief Adviser’s press wing issued the statement after the Commission of Inquiry on Enforced Disappearances met Prof Yunus.

The commission members briefed him on the progress of investigations and requested him to visit Aynaghar.

His visit would give hope to the families of the victims of enforced disappearances, they said.

The commission’s investigation found an instance where a six-year-old was kept in a secret prison, said the release.

“The incidents uncovered by your investigation are chilling. I will soon visit Aynaghar,” the statement quoted Prof Yunus as saying.

The government formed the five-member inquiry commission led by Justice Moyeenul Islam Chowdhury on August 27 last year to investigate the enforced disappearances
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Members of the Commission of Inquiry on Enforced Disappearance pose for a photograph with Chief Adviser Prof Muhammad Yunus at the state guesthouse Jamuna after a meeting yesterday afternoon.

PHOTO: CA’S PRESS WING

SEDITION CASE

HC may hear Chinmoy’s bail petition today

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The High Court is likely to hear today the bail petition of Chinmoy Krishna Das, a former ISKCON leader, in connection with a sedition case filed over disrespecting the national flag.

“We will mention the bail petition of Chinmoy Krishna Das to the High Court bench of Justice Md Atoar Rahman and Justice Md Ali Reza for its hearing at the first half on Monday. If the court allows us to move the petition, then we will argue for his bail,” Apurba Kumar Bhattacharjee, the principal lawyer for Chinmoy, told The Daily Star yesterday.

The lawyer said he submitted the petition on behalf of his client on January 12.

The petition has been included as item No 306 in yesterday’s cause list of the HC bench for its hearing. But the petition was not heard yesterday as it was towards the bottom of the list, Apurba said.

Citing the petition, the lawyer said the sedition case against Chinmoy is not acceptable as there is no government order for filing the case.

A government order is mandatory for filing a sedition case under section 196 of the Code of Criminal Procedure (CrPC) against a person, and
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Clear \$845m

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APJL will waive Late Payment Surcharge applicable for the period of January to June 2025 if PDB pays the monthly invoices during this tenure within due date, the letter said.

The decision has been made as the company faces a severe cash crunch and to enable the PDB to clear the outstanding payments, adds the letter signed by MR Krishna Rao, president of APJL joint coordination committee.

“We request the PDB to consider the aforementioned proposal and clear the outstanding dues as per above modalities as the same is in the interest of both PDB and APJL.”

Earlier this month, Adani asked the interim government for a timeline by which the dues would be paid.

The PDB signed a 25-year power purchase agreement with Adani power in November 2017.

Since August, Adani repeatedly requested the interim government to immediately clear the dues.

Over the payment issues, Adani shut one of its two coal-fired units in November last year. The 1,496 megawatts (MW) plant has since been supplying 400MW-700MW from a single unit.

Govt to send teams

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by the Entrepreneurs’ Organisation at the Hotel Renaissance Gulshan, Dhaka.

Asked about a timeframe to bring back the money, Salehuddin said it would be difficult to say how long the process would take.

Noting that the white paper on the state of the economy last month unearthed how money was laundered abroad during the Awami League regime of Sheikh Hasina, the adviser said, “Now we are trying first to identify the money launderers and the places where the money has been transferred.”

The panel on the white paper assessed that an average of \$16 billion was illicitly siphoned off from Bangladesh every year during the 15-year rule of Hasina.

As per the report, the laundered money was sent to or routed primarily through the UAE, the UK, Canada, the US, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Singapore, and India, as well as a number of other tax havens.

Besides money laundering, Salehuddin also commented on a report recently published by a media outlet on the next budget.

UK MPs withdraw

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Hasina’s niece Tulip Siddiq resigned as city minister over her previously undisclosed links to her aunt’s party, the Awami League, triggering accusations that the party was interfering in British politics.

The report accused Prof Muhammad Yunus’s administration of “using the law as a political weapon” and empowering “hardline Islamists”.

Experts, however, criticised it for citing a relatively low estimate of deaths, and claiming that most had occurred after Hasina had fled the country rather than as a result of violence by her police and armed forces.

Rupa Huq, a Labour MP who has recently spent time in Bangladesh, criticised the report in the House of Commons this week, calling it a “hatchet job on the interim government of Bangladesh”.

Rupa claimed that Chief Adviser Yunus had personally raised the report with her, asking: “What is your government doing, issuing these falsities in the name of parliament?”

A spokesperson for the APPG said: “The group has decided to shift its focus exclusively towards the Commonwealth of Nations as an institution and, as such, will no longer be producing country-specific reports.”

Forex market in disarray

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Exchange Dealers’ Association. Some banks even quoted Tk 122 per dollar for remittances and export proceeds, and sold it at the same rate. Market insiders claim these figures exist only on paper and do not reflect the actual rates in the market.

Then there’s an interbank exchange rate of Tk 122 per dollar, according to central bank data. Yet, discrepancies abound. A treasury head at a private commercial bank explained that the new exchange rate regime’s requirement to maintain uniform rates for remittances and export earnings has stripped banks of profitability.

“Banks have no margin now because we cannot buy dollars for less than Tk 122 per dollar, but we are forced to sell them at the same rate,” he said, requesting anonymity.

In the face of these challenges, new practices are emerging in the market. For example, banks show the prescribed rate while providing dollars to some importers, but a portion of the foreign exchange actually comes from exchange houses and aggregators. Importers are increasingly relying on this method to source dollars.

“This workaround resembles hundi [illegal channels of remittance], created by the rigid restrictions under the new exchange rate regime,” said the CEO of a private bank.

Mohammed Amirul Haque, managing director of Premier

Cement Mills PLC, criticised the central bank’s portrayal of the market, asserting that it misrepresents the actual conditions.

“The forex market has become more corrupt over the last two years. Banks officially quote Tk 122 per dollar, but the actual rates charged to importers range between Tk 125 and Tk 128,” he said, highlighting the increasing burden on businesses.

Meanwhile, many banks are shifting away from spot transactions to forward contracts to avoid losses from the volatile spot exchange rates. Spot transactions involve the immediate exchange of currencies at the prevailing rate. Sudden and unpredictable fluctuations in the exchange rate can lead to significant financial losses for banks.

By opting for forward contracts, banks agree to exchange currencies at a pre-determined rate on a future date. This shields them from unexpected swings.

IMPACT ON REMITTANCE

Bangladesh achieved a record \$2.64 billion in remittances in December, spurred by a more flexible exchange rate. Yet, during the first 11 days of January, many banks received minimal or no remittances – an indication that the strict controls on dollar rates have begun to impact remittance inflows. Islami Bank was an exception, securing over \$100 million during the same period.

State-owned banks have been hit hard under the new exchange

rate regime, struggling to secure remittance inflows since its introduction on December 31. To address the issue, the central bank has urged exchange houses and aggregators to prioritise state banks for selling dollars. Mohammad Shahriar Siddiqui, assistant spokesperson for BB, described this move as a “moral suasion” to ensure timely payments for essential imports and government obligations.

But private bank executives said this approach could destabilise the market further, pushing remittance flows out of formal banking channels.

Economists too fear that continued restrictions could suppress remittance flows, depriving the economy of a critical source of foreign exchange.

“The exchange rate should be freely floated, and the central bank must enhance its monitoring to ensure that no one artificially inflates the exchange rate,” Mujeri said, stressing the importance of safeguarding the market against abuse.

Mujeri also explained that a freely floated exchange rate would help reduce the gap between official and unofficial rates, encouraging higher remittance inflows.

“If there are two types of rates in the market, it will harm remittances,” he said, pointing out that the availability of higher rates in the hundi market diminishes the appeal of formal channels.

apart from lowering of the interest rates, Bangladesh will seek to speed up the disbursement of loans that have been slow over the last few months and buy four vessels and railway coaches.

He said Bangladesh will also seek detailed information on China’s plan to build a mega-hydropower dam across the Yarlung Tsangpo River in Tibet, which can have implications on the lower riparian countries including India and Bangladesh.

Meanwhile, during a meeting with Hossain at the foreign ministry yesterday, Chinese Ambassador Yao Wen said they are ready to sign “implementation plan” on exchange of hydrological information with Bangladesh during the visit.

Yao also told Hossain that China is “seriously considering” lowering its interest rates for Bangladesh.

Hossain sought Chinese support for developing fruit storage and preservation capacity in Bangladesh.

He also said Bangladesh is ready to provide land and other logistics for setting up a full-fledged tertiary-level Chinese hospital in Purbachal.

He also requested China to designate at least three to four top-notch hospitals in Kunming so that Bangladesh nationals can go there for advanced treatment.

Rohingya issue will also feature prominently during Hossain’s visit to Beijing, especially on improving the conditions in Rakhine State for the Rohingyas to return, Hossain said.

Dhaka needs to engage the Arakan Army (AA) to secure the Bangladesh border with Myanmar as it is now controlled by the AA, Haque said.

“India and China are both engaging with the Arakan Army. Why not us? We have greater security issues along the border,” he said.

‘Should we grieve, rejoice, or cry?’

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hundreds streamed down a sandy path, returning to an apocalyptic landscape piled with rubble and destroyed buildings.

“We came here at six in the morning to find massive, unprecedented destruction,” said Walid Abu Jiab, who returned to Jabalia.

“There is nothing left in the north worth living for.”

Thaer al-Masri, 41, from Beit Lahia, said he could not describe his feelings. “Should we grieve, rejoice, or cry over what has happened? The only real emotion we feel is pain and loss – the loss of our home, our friends, and our city.”

In the southern city of Khan Yunis, people who had not yet returned celebrated their pending homecoming.

“I feel like at last I found some water to drink after getting lost in the desert for 15 months. I feel alive again,” Aya, a displaced woman from Gaza City, who has been sheltering in Deir Al-Balah in the central Gaza Strip for over a year, told Reuters via a chat app.

“I’m very, very happy,” said Wafa al-Habeel, a resident. “I want to go back and kiss the ground and the soil of Gaza. I am longing for Gaza (City) and longing for our loved ones.”

Aid workers say northern Gaza is particularly hard-hit, lacking all essentials including food, shelter and water.

Jonathan Whittall, interim chief of the UN’s OCHA humanitarian agency for the Palestinian territories, said on X that the first trucks started entering following the truce, after “a massive effort” to prepare for a surge of aid across the territory.

Hundreds of trucks had been waiting at the Gaza border, poised to enter. Some were loaded with prefabricated houses.

The truce had been scheduled to begin at 8:30am (0630 GMT) but a last-minute dispute over the list of hostages to be freed on the first day led to the holdup.

Qatar, a mediator of the truce, later confirmed it had gone into effect.

Later, the Israeli military said that three hostages have been released by Hamas and they were with its forces in the Gaza Strip.

“The three released hostages are being accompanied by IDF special forces and ISA forces on their return to Israeli territory, where they will undergo an initial medical assessment,” the military said in a statement.

Earlier, the Hostage and Missing Families Forum campaign group identified the three as women and named them as Emily Damari, Romi Gonen and Doron Steinbrecher.

Hamas said it was waiting for Israel to furnish “a list containing the names of 90 prisoners from the categories of women and children” also to be released on the first day.

A total of 33 hostages will be returned from Gaza during an initial 42-day truce, in exchange for around 1,900 Palestinians in Israeli custody.

The truce is intended to pave the way for a permanent end to the war, but a second phase has yet to be finalised.

It follows a deal struck by Qatar, the United States and Egypt after months of negotiations that had generated false hopes.

In a televised address on Saturday, Netanyahu called the 42-day first phase a “temporary ceasefire” and said Israel had US support to return to the

- First trucks carrying humanitarian aid enter Gaza
- Israeli forces start withdrawing from parts of the enclave
- Three female Israeli hostages, 90 Palestinians to be freed on first day
- 19 Palestinians killed in Israeli bombardments before truce takes hold

war if necessary.

In Gaza City, well before the ceasefire went into effect, people were already celebrating, waving Palestinian flags in the street.

The Israeli army warned Gaza residents early yesterday not to approach its forces or Israeli territory.

“We urge you not to head towards the buffer zone or IDF forces for your safety,” military spokesman Avichay Adraee said on Telegram, adding that “moving from south to north via Gaza Valley puts you at risk”.

Israeli forces had started withdrawing from areas in Gaza’s Rafah to the Philadelphia corridor along the border between Egypt and Gaza, pro-Hamas media reported.

In Israel, the ceasefire was met with guarded optimism.

“I don’t trust our side or their side,” said taxi driver David Gutterman. “Always at the last moment something, a problem, can pop up, but all in all, I’m happy.”

Shai Zaik, an employee at Tel Aviv’s art museum, said he had “mixed feelings” but was “full of hope” that the hostages would return after so many disappointments in the last year.

Israel has prepared reception centres to provide medical treatment and counselling to the freed hostages before they return to their families. Health workers have warned of the psychological challenges the captives will face upon release.

Egyptian Foreign Minister Badr Abdelatty said 600 trucks a day would enter Gaza after the ceasefire took effect, including 50 carrying fuel.

The war’s only previous truce, for one week in November 2023, also saw the release of hostages held by militants in exchange for Palestinian prisoners.

Since October 2023, Israel’s military campaign has destroyed much of Gaza, killing at least 46,913 people, most of them civilians, according to figures from the Hamas-run territory’s health ministry that the United Nations considers reliable.

The truce took effect on the eve of Donald Trump’s inauguration for a second term as president of the United States.

Trump, who claimed credit for the ceasefire deal after months of effort by the outgoing administration of President Joe Biden, told US network NBC on Saturday that he had told Netanyahu the war “has to end”.

“We want it to end, but to keep doing what has to be done,” he said.

Under the deal, Israeli forces will withdraw from densely populated areas of Gaza and allow displaced Palestinians to return “to their residences”, Qatar’s prime minister said in announcing the deal.