

BANGLA ACADEMY AWARD ‘Those involved in anti-people politics won’t get it’

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The Director General of Bangla Academy, Mohammad Azam, has announced that the 2024 Bangla Academy Literary Awards will be cancelled for any recipients if they are found to have engaged in genocide or anti-public political activities.

Addressing a press conference at the Secretariat yesterday, Azam clarified that the announcement of the awards has been suspended due to allegations, but the awards have not yet been cancelled.

“We have observed various reactions and opinions from different quarters regarding the recently announced awardees,” he said.

“Primarily, if we find direct evidence linking anyone to past genocide or anti-public politics, as alleged, we will certainly cancel the award.”

Azam assured that the review process would be completed within three working days.



Blocking the street with vehicles near Kashipur intersection in Khulna city, tanker workers yesterday demanded the release of Ali Azim, general secretary of the Khulna Divisional Tanker Workers’ Union, who was arrested in a case filed over vandalising a BNP office. They went on a strike for an indefinite period.

PHOTO: HABIBUR RAHMAN

Confusion ensues over a man’s death

Family claims cops beat him dead; police say he fell ill during raid to arrest another person

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Shariatpur

The death of a man in Shariatpur’s Zajira upazila on Saturday night has sparked confusion, with the victim’s family and police offering conflicting accounts of the incident.

Family members claimed that Milon Bepari, 55, a resident of Naodoba area, was beaten to death by police during an anti-narcotics drive.

The police denied the allegation and said Milon died after falling ill at the scene of an arrest.

Speaking to this newspaper, Milon’s son Al-Amin said some eight to 10 people identifying themselves as members of the Detective Branch of police went to their home around 9:30pm on Saturday night.

“I was at our grocery shop adjacent to our home. I suddenly heard my father’s screaming a few yards away. I went out of the shop and saw that they were beating him mercilessly.”

“Then I entered our house to call my mother. A few minutes later, I along with my mother went there and saw my father lying on the ground. My father was bleeding from his mouth.”

“As we started shouting, the DB men took their four motorcycles and fled the scene quickly. When we took my father to the Zajira Upazila Health Complex, on-duty doctors declared him dead.”

Contacted, Shariatpur district DB Inspector Abu Bakar Matubbar said the DB members conducted an anti-narcotics raid on Saturday night in the Kazikandi area and detained a drug dealer Mozammel Majhi, 45, who is accused in multiple criminal cases.

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HC benches

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The minimum age to be an apex court judge should be 48, and Article 96 of the constitution needs amendment to set the retirement age of judges at 70, up from the current 67 years.

The reform commission also suggests forming a Supreme Judicial Council (SJC) to ensure discipline and accountability among the SC judges; establishing an SC secretariat for full independence and separation of the judiciary; forming a permanent and independent attorney service for appointing prosecutors without political influence; establishing an independent criminal investigation agency in order to ensure the proper investigation process in the judicial system.

The recommendations include appointing honest, efficient and resourceful retired district judges for two to three years for quick disposal of cases in the districts where a large number of criminal appeals, criminal revisions, civil appeals and civil revisions are pending.

Considering the large number of cases under trial and the increasing population, jobs should be created for judges and support staff so that there is one judge against 800 to 1,000 cases.

To ensure transparency, the wealth statements of the apex court and lower court judges should be submitted to the SC every three years and uploaded on court websites.

Similarly, the wealth statements of the supporting officials should be available on the internet.

There must be complaint boxes at the SC and email IDs where people can put down their concerns or grievances, complaints of corruption. The SJC will look at the complaints.

Three SC judges should be in a primary investigation committee to probe the allegations of corruption against lower court judges. Based on the merit of a complaint, the committee will instruct the aggrieved whether to file a departmental case.

The Judiciary Reform Commission sent a copy of its summary report to Adviser Syeda Rizwana Hasan, who is coordinating all the reform commissions.

The judiciary commission is likely to submit its final report by January 31, its member and senior SC lawyer Tanim Hussain Shawon told The Daily Star.

Around 15,000 people, including commoners, lawyers, judges and others gave their views on reforms to the commission so far, he added.

To establish permanent HC benches at the divisional cities, the constitution’s Article 100 should be replaced with appropriate provisions.

Article 100 says, “The permanent seat of the Supreme Court shall be in the capital, but sessions of the High Court Division may be held at such other place or places as the Chief Justice may, with the approval of the President, from time to time appoint”.

The proposed permanent HC benches will deal with cases from specified regions.

The chief justice may, on his own motion or on the application from a party, transfer a case from any bench to another appropriate bench.

Infrastructure, including accommodation for judges and support staff, must be built and necessary budget allocation must be ensured for smooth functioning of permanent benches.

The eight-member Judiciary Reform Commission was formed on October 3 last year with former Appellate Division judge Justice Shah Abu Nayeem Mominur Rahman as its chief.

Other members include retired HC judges Justice Emdadul Haque and Justice Farid Ahmed Shibli; former district and sessions judge and former registrar general of SC Syed Aminul Islam; former district and sessions judge Masdar Hossain; Dhaka University associate professor Kazi Mahfuzul Haque Supan; and a student representative.

Holding local govt elections first

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doing our preliminary work and homework so that as soon as the rules of the game are fixed, we can jump into work,” he said, adding that the EC has started the new voter registration process.

A survey conducted by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics at the request of the Electoral Reform Commission last December found 65 percent of the people favour local government elections before the next national polls under the interim government.

Major political parties, including the BNP and its allies, have said they are against local government polls before the national election, which they say is possible by the middle of this year.

The Jatiya Nagorik Committee, however, is in favour of local government polls first. It also supports national polls after the reforms based on the reports of the reform commissions.

The Jamaat-e-Islami favours national polls after necessary reforms but without any hurry.

The CEC said local government elections are not the EC’s constitutional responsibility. “If they [Local Government Division] are ready, they will let us know how many seats are vacant and where elections are needed. They haven’t requested us yet. So why are you asking me about it? This is not under my jurisdiction.”

“Political parties will need to agree on whether they want local elections to delay the national election,” Nasir said.

Responding to a question, the CEC said elections under caretaker government were held on some occasions within three months as the then ECs were well aware of what they would need to do.

But this EC has taken responsibility under a special circumstance, with no groundwork for the polls done and the “rules of the game” – how the election will be held or electoral regulations – have not yet been finalised, he added.

The CEC said, “Reports from the reform commissions have started coming in, but it is still uncertain how much of those will be acceptable and what will ultimately be included in the regulations.”

Asked if the Awami League would be able to run in the national election, the CEC said when the election schedule is announced, the election will be held among the political parties that are registered with the Election Commission at that time.

“A political debate is going on about which party will be able to join. Let’s see what decision comes out of this debate,” he said.

Nasir said anyone found guilty of irregularities during previous national polls would not be allowed to work in the upcoming elections.

REFORM PROPOSALS

The CEC criticised the reform commission’s proposal for overseeing the EC’s legal, financial, and administrative matters by a parliamentary committee instead of a ministry, empowering parliamentary committees to probe allegations against an EC after its tenure, and forming independent bodies to look after demarcation of constituencies and NID activities.

“If I have to answer to a parliamentary standing committee, then where will my independence be?” he said.

The EC is an independent body, he said regarding the recommendation to form an independent authority for demarcation of constituencies.

Creating another independent body would complicate matters, as

the demarcation of constituencies is a constitutional power of the EC. Establishing another authority will go against the spirit of the constitution, he said.

If the EC violates its oath, a parliamentary committee will investigate the matter after the EC’s tenure and recommend actions to the president, the CEC said while talking about another suggestion.

“No one is above the law. Even the president faced trial after leaving office. When election commissioners are no longer in office, many laws are there to hold them accountable.”

Arguing that giving such powers to parliamentary committees would undermine the EC’s independence, the CEC said, “Take, for example, during a local election, if an MP or a parliamentary committee member requests the EC to move a polling centre closer to their residence and if I refuse, they might say that just wait for four years then we will see.”

The reform commission in its report submitted to the chief adviser on January 15 suggested that the responsibilities of voter NID cards and voter registration be handed over to an independent department. “If I prepare the voter list and another authority is responsible for it, then what control will the Election Commission have?” he said.

Describing members of the Electoral Reform Commission, led by Badiul Alam Majumdar, as highly experienced, the CEC earlier said, “They have made many recommendations. I cannot say whether all of them are good, bad, or acceptable to us. Only the wearer knows where the shoe pinches.”

“Someone can make recommendations, but only the implementer knows if they are feasible.”

Students of DU, 7 colleges clash late into night

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200 students blocked the Science Lab intersection leading to a heavy traffic congestion in the adjoining areas.

They advanced towards Nilkhet as the evening progressed. Students of Eden College also gathered at the New Market intersection after 12:30am.

Hasnat Abdullah, one of the coordinators of the Students Against

Discrimination, then went to the scene to calm the DU students when the groups were chasing each other and throwing brick chips at each other.

The DU authorities called a meeting with the principals of the seven colleges at the DU VC’s office today, said a notice issued by DU public relations office.

Late into the night, Pro-VC Mamun issued a video statement saying, “The events that unfolded following my interaction with the students of the seven colleges is unfortunate. This has saddened me deeply. I believe that a healthy communication is key to eradicating this misunderstanding. I request all to be patient while we try to solve this issue.”

Experts at the workshop urged global actors to engage in collective action to find lasting solutions for the Rohingyas.

The need for regional diplomacy, peacekeeping initiatives, and a unified response to the Rohingya crisis was echoed throughout the discussions.

The continued instability in Myanmar, compounded by the absence of strong governance, has left the Rohingyas in a perpetual state of vulnerability, further underscoring the need for international solidarity.

James Goldman, deputy high commissioner and development director at the British High Commission in Dhaka; Chowdhury Rafiqul Abrar, former professor of international relations at Dhaka University and executive director of RMMRU; Sohela Nazneen, senior research fellow at the University of Sussex, UK; and Md Rafiqul Islam, professor of peace and conflict studies at Dhaka University, spoke at the workshop.

Artificial crisis

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Abdus Salam Aref at a press conference to announce a 15-point demand to the government.

The migrant workers, who have limited means, are suffering the most from the spike in airfares as the cost of their outbound journey has increased substantially.

The main reason behind the surge in airfares is the practice of booking group tickets without passenger names or travel documents, he said.

Some airlines operating on Middle Eastern routes are blocking group seats months in advance via emails without requiring passenger names, passports, visas or work permits, according to the ATAB.

These airlines often partner with specific agencies, creating PNRs (Passenger Name Records) without providing any details of the travellers.

Because of this practice, as many as 60,000 seats on the Saudi Arabia route of 11 airlines including Fly Dubai, Jazeera Airways, Gulf Air and Salam Air are blocked, according to Aref.

“The prevailing situation will be resolved to a large extent if these blocked seats are opened up,” he said, while urging the civil aviation ministry and the Civil Aviation Authorities of Bangladesh (CAAB) to take immediate measures on the discriminatory practice.

The ATAB demanded a task

force comprising representatives of concerned ministries and CAAB to conduct drives against the unscrupulous travel agents and airline staff.

It also demanded the airlines determine reasonable minimum and maximum fares for various routes.

Hidden fares, private fares and group ticket practices must be stopped.

Tickets for migrant workers and Umrah pilgrims must include the fare and agency details. This transparency will prevent overpricing.

Airlines must impose a maximum sales ceiling per agency to curb syndicate practices. Some agencies currently hoard 10,000-20,000 tickets, leading to syndication, according to ATAB leaders.

The ATAB mentioned several other reasons including fewer flights by different Middle Eastern foreign carriers, an increase in outbound migrant workers to Saudi Arabia and delays in remitting foreign airlines’ profits for the hike in airfare.

Contacted, CAAB Chairman Monjur Kabir Bhuiyan said: “We will take strict actions and we will play our due role to address this issue. We have already spoken with different stakeholders and wrote to different airlines urging them to maintain affordable air ticket prices.”

US-funded projects stare at fund crunch

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humanitarian assistance for the Rohingya in Bangladesh since the outbreak of violence in August 2017, making itself the biggest donor.

Although the current suspension is for three months, there is no indication whether the US will resume all its funding commitments after that.

An official of a USAID-funded project on HIV prevention in Bangladesh said the Trump policy has created fears among the staff about their job safety.

“My job is my livelihood. I am a mid-career job holder working in the development sector for long. Now, I am fearful of what happens next. I don’t know what to do if the funding is terminated,” he told The Daily Star last night.

The NGO executive said that not just livelihoods but development projects in diverse sectors including health, food, agriculture, nutrition and climate change will be affected if US funds are terminated.

Donald Trump has also withdrawn from the World Health Organization and the Paris Climate Agreement and declared that he would advocate drilling and production of more fossil fuel in the US.

“This means, the global efforts to move away from fossil fuel will be heavily affected,” said Humayun Kabir, former ambassador to the US.

According to the UNDP, Bangladesh faces a critical need for \$12.5 billion annually to address the escalating climate crisis, but significant financing gaps in adaptation and mitigation remain, threatening economic growth.

Kabir says if implemented, Trump’s policy will lead to lowering of fuel prices globally, which can have positive impacts on the economy, but

the impact on climate change will be devastating.

“We will also be affected by lower climate funding for adaptation,” he said.

Trump’s executive order is already in force, with raids being conducted against undocumented migrants that left millions of immigrants in panic.

Kabir said the main target of Trump policy is to reduce the undocumented migrants from South America. An estimated 11 million migrants in the US are undocumented.

According to a rough estimate, there are about one million Bangladeshi origin immigrants in the US, and a portion of them might be undocumented.

According to the central bank, Bangladesh received \$511.96 million in November and \$565.04 in December last year from US, making it the largest source of foreign remittance.

“If those undocumented are detained and deported, it will definitely affect Bangladesh economy and the migrants’ families,” Kabir said.

Prof ASM Ali Ashraf, chairman at Dhaka University’s international relations department, says the immigrants are a very important part of the US economy and any wholesale deportation is unlikely as it may face legal cases.

He explained that the Trump administration will review if the Biden administration has made any fund commitment with favouritism and resume funding if there is no such indication.

In countries like Bangladesh, the US fund is very well rationalised and comes for true needs of the people.

“I think eventually humanitarian assistance policy will not have much change in Bangladesh,” he said.