

## You're in for defeat if you oppose '71

Says Adviser Mahfuj

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Adviser Mahfuj Alam yesterday said that those who oppose the Liberation War have historically been defeated for standing against the oppressed people of Bangladesh and are destined to face the same fate in future.

To do politics here, one must recognise the nation's bloody struggle for independence and the birth of Bangladesh, he said in a Facebook post.

"Criticism what happened after the Liberation War. Analyse history – no problem there. Even debates on what transpired during the war are acceptable. However, all discussions must begin by acknowledging the Liberation War itself.

"For example, we can discuss Sheikh Mujib's transformation into a fascist. He was indeed a fascist. However, like many other national



SEE PAGE 7 COL 5



The construction of a median strip on Darus Salam Road in the capital's Mirpur-1 area has been left incomplete for around a year, putting pedestrians and vehicles at risk. This photo was taken on Monday.

PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON

## JCD, Swechhasebak Dal clash leaves 30 injured

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Narayanganj

At least 30 people were injured in a clash between factions of the Jatiyatabadi Chhatra Dal (JCD) and Swechhasebak Dal in Rugganj upazila of Narayanganj yesterday.

The three-hour running battle, which began around 11:30am near the Golakandail bus stand, also left two with gunshot wounds.

Traffic on the Dhaka-Sylhet highway was disrupted.

The police said the clash stemmed from a dispute over control of a local market.

Selim Prodhhan, a controversial figure previously linked to an online casino scandal, claims ownership of the land, which was formerly controlled by local Awami League leaders. Following a change in government, supporters of BNP leader Mostafizur Rahman Dipu Bhuiyan took control of the property.

During the violence, Prodhhan's house was vandalised, with several vehicles inside and outside the premises torched.

Witnesses reported that the situation was brought under control after police, with army support, arrived at the scene.

Locals and police sources said that the clash involved supporters of BNP executive committee member Mostafizur Rahman Bhuiyan Dipu and Selim Prodhhan.

SEE PAGE 7 COL 5

## People take the hit as workers' strike halts trains

FROM PAGE 1

Like them, thousands of train passengers suffered at railway stations across the country. Some waited in uncertainty while others left seeing no hope.

Police personnel were seen at the station to manage the crowd and prevent any untoward incidents.

Mohammed Gias Uddin, who was seen waiting at Chattogram Railway Station with several pieces of luggage, had purchased a ticket for the Subarna Express to return to Dhaka.

"I have several bags, so I chose the train for a smoother journey. The railway authorities could have informed us via text, but they didn't," he said.

Zia Habib, another passenger, waited for two hours at the station for the Cox's Bazar Express. "Later, I was compelled to travel by bus," he said.

Hanif Ali, Joydebpur railway station master, told our Gazipur correspondent that hundreds of passengers were stranded at the station.

Farida Akhtar, 25, who was heading to Joypurhat from Thakurgaon Road Railway Station, said, "After travelling 15km to reach the station, I learnt that the trains are not running. Why weren't online ticket sales halted if the service is suspended?"

Similar situation was reported from Pabna, Khulna, Sylhet, and other districts.

THE MEETINGS

The rail adviser visited Kamalapur Railway Station around 10:00am. He criticised the protesting workers

for enforcing the strike holding the passengers hostage.

Replying to a question, he said some of the staffers' demands had already been met, but the work abstention continued despite progress being made.

He said they were open to discussions. If necessary, the government would take "other steps" to resolve the issue.

State-run BRTC arranged buses on some routes to help the train passengers get to their destinations, he said.

After he left the station an hour later, railways ministry secretary Fahimul Islam and other top officials of his ministry and BR went to the VIP waiting room at the station. Shimul Biswas joined them.

Around 1:00pm, some mid-level leaders of the union held a meeting with Shimul in a separate room.

After the around one-hour meeting, Shimul informed the railways ministry secretary about the union's position.

Around 3:30pm, the rail secretary and other officials left without making any comments to waiting journalists.

WHY THE STRIKE?

Due to manpower shortage, locomasters, assistant locomasters, guards, and travelling ticket checkers have traditionally worked beyond their duty hours and received extra pay for that.

They also received pension benefits based on the pay for their extra work until 2021.

But in November that year, the Awami League government declined

to grant pension benefits on the extra work.

Following a strike in April 2022, the railways ministry intervened and decided to continue the pension benefits. However, the staffers have long been demanding cancellation of the November 2021 order, saying in a changed situation their benefits could go away again.

In addition, newly recruited assistant locomasters, who were appointed in 2022, have not been receiving most of these benefits, as their appointment letters stated they would not receive extra pay during their service or after retirement.

In December last year, the newly recruited locomasters went on work abstention, demanding benefits their predecessors got, while their predecessors stopped taking on additional duties for several days. They also demanded cancellation of the 2021 gazette.

They stopped their protest following an assurance by railway authorities.

The finance ministry on January 23 this year issued a circular saying the newly recruited assistant locomasters will get 100 percent "running allowance" instead of 75 percent. However, the "running allowance" would not exceed their monthly basic salary, it said.

It did not say anything about their post-retirement benefits.

On January 22, the association at a press conference in Chattogram announced the indefinite nationwide strike from yesterday.

ways to legalise undeclared wealth.

For instance, people are selling properties for prices far higher than their registered value.

This creates massive amounts of unaccounted money, which are funnelled into buying cars, appliances or other assets.

"This creates a system where black money thrives – we will try to address this."

Regarding corruption in government projects, he acknowledged that the menace still remains.

"We are trying to tackle this, but it's not easy. The same old players remain in the system under new names, making real changes difficult."

Asked about the grievances of the White Paper Committee about the government's failure to implement the recommendations, he said: "We will review their suggestions within the next two to three months, but some of them have been addressed."

For example, the government has established task forces to bring back billions of dollars siphoned out of Bangladesh and has sought international support where necessary.

The interim government is also trying to fix the tax system, which is responsible for one of the lowest tax-to-GDP ratios in the world.

The previous government has issued several statutory regulatory orders to benefit certain firms and individuals, Ahmed said.

"After coming to power, we cancelled the SROs. We are separating the tax policy from the tax administration. In 2008, the government tried to do this but failed. I know some officials are standing in the way – who wants to give up power? But I will implement it before I leave."

Ahmed blames the persistently high inflation on supply-side issues.

"It's not that essentials are unavailable – they get stuck in one place without being distributed."

He pointed out that even officials

like consumer rights officers or magistrates can't bring about meaningful changes alone. Extortion during transportation of goods is also raising costs, which is fuelling inflation.

Regarding the recent increase in value added tax and supplementary duties, he said the tax rate has already been brought down for several goods and services that are widely consumed by the general public.

"The rest do not affect the general population. For instance, the VAT on biscuits priced above Tk 200 per kg is logical. Whoever buys biscuits that cost Tk 200 per kg has the ability to pay VAT."

Asked about the ADP, he said the interim government will focus on local roads and culverts to boost rural job creation.

It will not take on any sophisticated project but continue with existing mega projects such as the deep-sea port, he said, adding that the ADP budget may be pruned by about Tk 50,000 crore.

"Some people criticise us for not revising the budget introduced by the previous government. Actually, it is difficult to revise the budget in such a short period. Though the budget was not revised, we have cut government costs except for the necessary expenditures."

One such necessary expenditure was vehicle purchase for the Bangladesh Police as 300 of their vehicles were burnt down during the July uprising.

"The next budget will be pragmatic – it won't be an unpopular budget."

Yet, the much-maligned power sector subsidy will continue. "Otherwise, people and businesses will suffer."

The main targets of the budget will be macroeconomic stability, containing inflation, ensuring energy supply and taking steps for the agricultural sector so that farmers do not suffer, Ahmed added.

## Bring in swift reforms to stop future repression

FROM PAGE 1

Multiple police officers told HRW that they believed that directives to use excessive force during the July-August uprising came from the political leadership.

"I believe that during the unrest, the role of the police was determined more by political leaders than by the officers in the field," said one police officer.

Another police officer told HRW that he witnessed senior officers in the Dhaka Metropolitan Police Headquarters watch live CCTV footage and direct officers on the ground to shoot protesters like "they were ordering someone to shoot in a video game."

Another officer said, "Senior officers ordered us to be strict and not to spare any criminals spreading anarchy. They didn't explicitly use the word 'fire,' but their instructions were clear: Apply the highest force, do whatever you think is necessary to control the situation, take a hardline approach."

He told HRW that as he understood it, the home minister, Asaduzzaman Khan, and the inspector general of police, Chowdhury Abdullah Al-Mamun, gave directions to the Dhaka metropolitan police commissioner, Habibur Rahman, who instructed the deputy commissioners.

One police officer later told HRW, "The police also shot at onlookers observing the scene from their homes, intending to create fear and send a message that people should not watch what was happening around them."

Another officer said, "I witnessed officers firing at vital organs.... In many cases, I witnessed live ammunition being fired even when officers' lives were not in danger."

Officers involved in enforced disappearances also told HRW that former prime minister Sheikh Hasina and senior members of the then government had knowledge of incommunicado detentions and that, in some cases, Hasina directly ordered enforced disappearances and killings.

The report quoted another officer as saying, "In my 10-11 years in the job, I've witnessed disappearances and killings by Rab. These things are real. The disappearances and crossfires that Rab engages in are impossible without the approval of police headquarters, the Ministry of Home Affairs, or especially the home minister."

HRW interviewed Mir Ahmad Bin Quasem (Armaan) who was held in enforced disappearance since 2016. He said that he encountered an officer who told him that when he joined his unit, he was informed that Armaan, Abdullahil Amaan Azmi, a former brigadier general, and Humam Quader Chowdhury had been forcibly disappeared and were being held there, and that "any decision to release them has to be taken by Sheikh Hasina".

Azmi, Hummam and Armaan are all sons of prominent opposition politicians.

## EC preparing to hold polls with year-end on mind

FROM PAGE 1

At another event in Dinajpur, Sanaullah urged the EC officials to make sure that Rohingyas do not get in the voter list.

Meanwhile, Chief Election Commissioner AMM Nasir Uddin yesterday said they do not want the EC's independence enshrined in the constitution to be compromised.

He told reporters after a meeting with European Union Ambassador Michael Miller at the EC office.

The EU ambassador also opined that the EC should remain independent. Otherwise, the nation's expectations cannot be fulfilled, the CEC said.

While speaking at a programme on Sunday, Nasir said that there is no doubt that the EC's independence

"There are also troubling indications that security forces are obstructing the investigations by the newly formed commission of inquiry into enforced disappearances. The commission members said that while it had located eight new sites of unlawful detention, there were concerned over security forces' attempts "to destroy evidence linked to these secret cells," stated the report.

The Daily Star could not independently verify the allegations that came up in the HRW report.

ABUSES CONTINUE

The report noted that law enforcement and security agencies continue to perpetrate abuses.

"Due to the deeply ingrained systemic obstacles to accountable governance, a disturbingly familiar pattern of security force abuses and political reprisals has reemerged, this time targeting perceived Awami League supporters," said the report.

"For instance, in the first two months since the interim government took office, over 1,000 police cases were filed against tens of thousands of people, mainly Awami League members, accusing them of murder, corruption, or other crimes."

HRW reviewed eight First Information Reports (FIRs) filed in relation to the July and August killings, naming up to 297 individuals each, including Hasina and Awami League ministers and up to 600 unnamed individuals.

Five plaintiffs in the eight cases told HRW that they did not know who was named as the accused when they filed the case. They said the police or local politicians simply told them to sign the papers.

Two plaintiffs told HRW that local political leaders opposed to the Awami League asked them to sign the police reports, though they were not sure against whom they were filing the cases.

HRW interviewed the mother of a student protester who was killed in Dhaka's Lakshimbazar area, who said that when she went to file a case at the magistrate court, police and local political leaders simply told her to sign an FIR that had already been written and named 50 accused as well as 200-300 unnamed accused.

Among those named in the FIR that she signed were 47 Awami League former ministers, lawmakers, and Awami League student activists, as well as a teacher and two doctors, found HRW. She told HRW that she does not know who some of these people are or how they would be involved in her son's murder.

The report noted that law enforcers continue to file criminal complaints against large numbers of "unknown" people. It called it "a common abusive practice in Bangladesh, which in effect authorises the police to arrest almost anyone and repeatedly re-arrest detainees even though they are not

named accused in a case."

Police have pursued criminal charges against journalists for what was seen as backing the Hasina government in their reporting during the Monsoon Revolution, said HRW.

"As of November, authorities have filed murder charges against at least 140 journalists in relation to their reporting on the Monsoon Revolution," said HRW, adding, "For example, police in Chattogram are investigating charges against 28 journalists for having 'produced false and fabricated contents concealing the true events during the student protest.'"

HRW spoke with two healthcare workers, Amzad Hossain and Nizam Uddin, who had been working at the Chittagong Medical College Hospital during the student protests, who were accused of killing a student protester, Wasim Akram.

"On that day (July 16) we were helping the duty doctors with Wasim's body along with three other bodies of people who were also killed during the protest. We even helped the families to get the bodies for the last rites. When I found my name was among those listed in the case involving the killing of Wasim, I was shocked. I was at the hospital on that day and was performing double duty as so many injured students were brought to the hospital," said Amzad Hossain to HRW.

The report also noted that the overall security situation has disintegrated. "Groups promoting extremist Islam are attacking minorities, particularly those from Hindu and Ahmadiyya communities. Ethnic minorities in the Chittagong Hill Tracts endure continued discrimination and violence by the authorities," it said.

The report recommended that the interim government should take steps to structurally reform the home ministry to ensure the political independence of staff overseeing law enforcement.

"HRW spoke to police officers who described a system in which promotions depended on political sponsorship and bribes. HRW has also documented the use of the police awards as an incentive for repression. This systemic political interference led to the understanding that as a security force officer one's duty included crackdowns on political opposition," said the report.

They also urged the government to ensure that take steps to ensure that the prosecution and the judiciary are independent of the executive and protected from political control and interference.

"To end arbitrary arrests and enforced disappearances, the interim government should build systems prohibiting filing cases against unnamed accused and mass arrest warrants, revising laws that allow for vague and overly broad charges to target critics," said the report.

The HRW said that the government should also disband the Rapid Action Battalion.

send personnel, conduct a needs assessment, and deploy a mission to evaluate the situation before informing the EC about what kind of assistance they will provide.

The EU also expressed its desire to send observers during the polls, the CEC said adding, "We have assured them of a free and fair election. We have dedicated all our efforts to ensure a transparent, impartial, and acceptable election."

Michael Miller told reporters, "And I have come with a message of support for the reform ambitions of the interim government for holding an election transparent manner in line with international standards."

[Our correspondents in Dinajpur and Thakurgaon contributed to this report.]

Nasir added that the EU would