

DEADLY DRUG WAR Duterte attends ICC hearing by video link

AFP, The Hague

Former Philippines president Rodrigo Duterte failed to show up in person at the International Criminal Court yesterday at the opening of his crimes against humanity hearing over his deadly crackdown on narcotics.

The 79-year-old, the first ex-Asian head of state to face charges at the ICC, was following by videolink during a short hearing to inform him of the crimes he is alleged to have committed, as well as his rights as a defendant.

Sounding frail and wearing a blue suit and tie, he spoke briefly to confirm his name and date of birth. The presiding judge allowed him to follow proceedings in absentia due to his long flight to The Hague.

Duterte stands accused of the crime against humanity of murder over his years-long campaign against drug users and dealers that rights



groups said killed thousands. In the prosecutor's application for his arrest, he said Duterte's alleged crimes were "part of a widespread and systematic attack directed against the civilian population in the Philippines."

"Potentially tens of thousands of killings were perpetrated," the prosecutor alleged of the campaign that targeted mostly poor men, often without proof they were linked to drugs.

Victims' families have welcomed the trial as a chance to get justice, while Duterte supporters believe he was "kidnapped" and sent to The Hague amid a spectacular fall-out with the ruling Marcos family.

As he landed in The Hague, the former leader appeared to accept responsibility for his actions, saying in a Facebook video: "I have been telling the police, the military, that it was my job and I am responsible."

In his application for arrest, the prosecutor quotes from some of Duterte's pronouncements when he was running for president.

He is cited as saying the number of criminal suspects killed "will become 100,000... I will kill all of you" and the fish in Manila Bay "will become fat because that's where I will throw you."



A general view shows the Ponte Vecchio and the high level of the Arno river in Florence during floods in Tuscany yesterday. Heavy rain swelled rivers and flooded streets in Florence yesterday, with authorities issuing a red weather alert for the historic Italian city and its surroundings, urging residents to stay indoors.

PHOTO: AFP

China urges end to ‘illegal’ sanctions on Iran

AFP, Beijing

China yesterday urged an end to "illegal" sanctions on Iran as it hosted Iranian and Russian diplomats for talks Beijing hopes will restart long stalled negotiations on Tehran's nuclear programme.

The United States withdrew from a landmark 2015 deal, which imposed curbs on Tehran's nuclear development in return for sanctions relief, during US President Donald Trump's first term.

The Republican president has called for a new nuclear deal with Iran since his return to the White House in January but Tehran says no such agreement is possible so long as sanctions remain in place.

The effort to secure a pact was given new urgency last month when the UN nuclear watchdog said Iran had significantly increased its stockpile of highly enriched uranium.

Beijing hosted Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister Kazem Gharibabadi and Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov for talks yesterday it said it hoped would help "resume dialogue and negotiation at an early time".

Meeting the diplomats, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi stressed "the comprehensive agreement on the Iranian nuclear issue is an important



achievement achieved through dialogue and negotiation".

"Now the situation has reached a critical juncture again. We must buy time for peace, resolve disputes through political and diplomatic means, and oppose the use of force and illegal sanctions," he said.

And the US should demonstrate "political sincerity and return to talks at an early date", said a statement from Beijing's foreign ministry, which outlined propositions from China on the Iranian nuclear issue.

"All parties should... refrain from actions that might escalate the situation," the statement added.

Gharibabadi, in turn, hailed the "constructive" talks in Beijing and said Iran's nuclear programme "is peaceful in nature".

"Our nuclear programme has never been diverted to non-peaceful purposes," Gharibabadi said.

"But unfortunately, some countries are trying to create an unnecessary crisis in this regard."

"The main root cause of the current situation is the unilateral withdrawal of the United States," Gharibabadi said.

The Russian and Iranian officials met China's Vice Foreign Minister Ma Zhaoxu earlier yesterday and "exchanged views on the Iran nuclear issue and other issues of common concern", Chinese state media said. Ma reiterated after that meeting China's support for "political and diplomatic engagement and dialogue based on mutual respect".

"We emphasised the necessity of ending all illegal, unilateral sanctions," Ma told reporters.

"The relevant parties should work to eliminate the root causes of the current situation and abandon sanctions, pressure, and threats of the use of force."

Trump has reinstated his "maximum pressure" policy of sanctions against Iran, mirroring his approach during his first term.

He sent a letter to Tehran this week urging nuclear talks and warning of possible military action if it refuses.

Funding cuts force WFP to stop food aid to 1m in Myanmar

AFP, Yangon

The World Food Programme will be forced to cut off one million people in war-torn Myanmar from its vital food aid because of "critical funding shortfalls", it said yesterday.

The United States provided the UN's World Food Programme (WFP) with \$4.4 billion of its \$9.7 billion budget in 2024 but Washington's international aid funding has been slashed under President Donald Trump.

The WFP says more than 15 million people in the country of 51 million are unable to meet their daily food needs, with more than two million "facing emergency levels of hunger".

"More than one million people in Myanmar will be cut off from WFP's lifesaving food assistance starting in April due to critical funding shortfalls," it said in a statement.

Without immediate new funding, the WFP said it will have to cut aid to vulnerable groups including children under five, pregnant and breastfeeding women and the disabled -- assisting only 35,000 of them.

The UN warned last year that Rakhine state in Myanmar's west faces an "imminent threat of acute famine". WFP said the upcoming cuts would hit 100,000 internally displaced people in Rakhine -- including members of the persecuted Rohingya minority -- who will "have no access to food" without its assistance.

Lanka adjusts train timings to tackle elephant deaths

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's wildlife and railway authorities announced yesterday a series of low-tech measures, including adjusting timetables to reduce night-time train collisions, following the worst wildlife accident that killed seven elephants.

The measures came after seven elephants were run over on February 20 by an express train near a wildlife reserve in Habarana, some 180 kilometres east of the capital Colombo, making it the worst accident of its kind.

Authorities said they had identified vulnerable stretches of railway tracks in elephant-inhabited forest areas in the island's northern and eastern regions, and mitigation measures were already underway.

Authorities were deploying power-set trains, which have better braking power, to minimise collisions.

Wildlife Conservation Director Manjula Amararatna said 138 elephants had been killed by trains in the past 17 years since authorities began collecting data.

Two weeks ago, the government announced that 1,195 people and 3,484 animals had been killed in a decade due to the worsening human-elephant conflict on the island.

Killing or harming elephants is a criminal offence in Sri Lanka, which has an estimated 7,000 wild elephants, considered a national treasure partly due to their significance in Buddhist culture.

Intimidation, harassment for speaking up

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"This relentless attack has left me traumatised."

Her family is terrified, forbidding her from protesting, and Shidda is deeply concerned for her safety.

"The way I have been made recognisable is intended to get me killed," she said, while expressing a lack of faith in the country's legal system.

Adrita Roy, another JU student and activist under the "Bangladesh Against Rape and Abuse" platform, has faced harassment since protesting the home adviser's remarks on the Lalmatia mob violence.

Failing to come up with any counterargument to her activism, her critics have resorted to body-shaming her and labelling her a "Shahbagi", a slur for female activists.

"Just as people were once labelled Jamaat-e-Islami supporters, now they are tagged as 'Shahbagis' -- the pattern remains unchanged," she added.

Farzana Sithi, a key figure in the

July uprising, has faced unimaginable levels of both online and offline harassment.

More than 250 fake accounts are spreading misinformation, trolling, often using AI-generated images and videos to tarnish her reputation.

"I did not receive any assistance from law enforcement. Some suggested private firms could disable fake accounts, but their services cost dollars -- I can't afford that. I still use public transport. And is this even my responsibility?"

She says the situation now is even more dangerous than during the student protests in July last year, which forced her into hiding amid false cases and threats.

Recently, Farzana has also faced physical threats. "A group in Uttara called me an atheist and said I deserve to be slaughtered. I had to flee quickly, but why should I? Did I do anything wrong by speaking up?"

Despite everything, Farzana remains committed to her activism.

There is also a clear double standard in how harassment is handled. While men like Nahid Islam receive support when body-shamed, women like Umama Fatema face relentless bullying and threats with no solidarity.

"Harassment targeting women's appearance is deeply personal and abusive, yet when women report such incidents, the response is minimal. This shows a frustrating disparity where men are supported, but women are silenced and further victimized," said Umama.

Shireen Huq, the chief of the Women's Affairs Reforms Commission, called the incident "deeply upsetting".

"These women led the July movement and inspired us all but now they are facing harassment. It's depressing. But I urge you, don't back down. The space you've fought for belongs to you. Don't let fear take it away. Stand firm, because if we give in, we lose everything."

Govt to revoke

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write-up titled "A Plea for Bangladesh--and for Myself: Bangladesh's Descent into Anarchy under Yunus--The World's Silence is Painful." In the write-up, Harun praised the "abusive fascist regime" and portrayed Bangladesh's situation under the interim government as a descent into anarchy.

The ministry condemned his statements, saying they misrepresented the realities under Chief Adviser Professor Muhammad Yunus. "It appears Mr Harun has a hidden agenda or ulterior motive," the ministry statement said.

Instead of returning, he moved to Canada and has been writing on Facebook, describing himself as a "persecuted diplomat," "exiled novelist," and "secular"--an apparent attempt to gain sympathy abroad, the statement said.

It added the ministry does not tolerate such actions from its officials and will take stern measures as necessary.

3 children raped, four suspects held

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while the other two are juveniles, reports UNB.

The child's father filed a case with Shibganj Police Station accusing them, said Golam Kibria, officer-in-charge (OC) of Shibganj Police Station.

According to the case, the girl had offered Taraweesh prayers at a nearby mosque on Thursday night. On her way home after prayers, the accused took her to a nearby mango orchard and raped her in turns.

Later, she told her parents about the incident. The next morning, locals detained the perpetrators and handed them over to the police.

The child was admitted to the hospital for treatment, and the three accused were produced before the court in the afternoon, said the OC.

In Sirajganj, a case was filed on Thursday over the rape of a 9-year-old girl at the child care centre of a local NGO in Raiganj upazila on Sunday.

The accused is a 15-year-old teenager from Narua village. He has gone into hiding along with his family after the incident.

The victim is undergoing treatment at a hospital, Raiganj Police Station OC Md Asaduzzaman, reports our Pabna correspondent.

He said the child care centre of the NGO was being operated at the house of Abdul Alim and that the accused's mother was a teacher there.

According to the case statement, the accused took the victim to his room on Sunday morning during school hours and raped her. Afterwards, the victim became ill and was taken to the hospital.

SpaceX hails govt move to cut red tape

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"The fact that he will do everything to support the licensing of Starlink and has actually formed a team is a sign that he wanted to move quickly and the estimate is that they're looking to have it within 90 days in Bangladesh, which is extraordinarily fast," he said.

But the reality is, it may take a little longer. However, from start to finish of the process, Bangladesh may be the fastest country in the world, he said.

Numerous issues had previously hindered US businesses from entering Bangladesh. Thankfully, the landscape is changing, and many are now exploring opportunities in the country.

"I really believe that Bangladesh is a country that was not on the radar of the Americans and European [companies]. The new government coming in is very significant. He [Yunus] is a well-known international

figure, well-known economist, very famous for all the work he's done around the world, including in the US. And of course, we know Grameen US is a big entity."

He said another multi-billion dollar US firm would be coming to Bangladesh following Starlink.

"And you know, I have to tell you, Professor Yunus will see all of them. So he's not someone where there are layers of people between him and the government. He will see and support that.... The US relationship with Bangladesh is going to expand."

About Starlink's business model in Bangladesh, pricing strategy, the number of ground stations and gateways, and whether it would partner with mobile operators as it did in India, he said that other members of the Starlink team were handling these aspects and his role focused solely on high-level engagements.

"I think the first part is always that Starlink needs to work directly with

the government to get the spectrum and get the licensing. That's the first element. Once they have that, then they'll work with a multitude of local operators and there's an ecosystem that's created from that. Again, once you're licensed in the country, you'll see many. It's a very open model, so you'll see many businesses then able to cooperate with Starlink and SpaceX."

Richard believes Bangladesh should embrace the fact that the global community and Muhammad Yunus are engaging now.

"If you look at this incredible transition of power, it highlights what really Bangladesh is about -- the acceptance of Muhammad Yunus coming in, the fact that the youth picked someone of his age -- it shows that they weren't looking to run the government themselves. There was an awareness that they didn't have the experience. So who better than bringing in Muhammad Yunus?"

BNP forms support cells

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Affairs Secretary, Barrister Kaiser Kamal, and Health Affairs Secretary, Rafiqul Islam, will serve as the central coordinators of the cells.

Expressing concern over the rising incidents of violence against women and children, Rizvi particularly mentioned the case of the eight-year-old child from Magura.

"The nation cannot accept the brutal death of the girl from Magura after she was subjected to rape. People had expected the rule of law to be firmly established at the grassroots level. However, due to the slow and lenient actions of the administration, criminals are being encouraged in various ways."

The BNP leader demanded strict enforcement of the law to punish the perpetrators of such crimes and restore justice in society.

"The rule of law must be established immediately to ensure exemplary

punishment for real criminals. We strongly reiterate our demand for the swift and exemplary punishment of those responsible for the death of the eight-year-old child."

'COMMITTED TO LEADING CHARGE'

In a Facebook post yesterday, BNP acting chairperson Tarique Rahman said that the party is committed to leading the charge and creating a safe, equal, and fair society for all, irrespective of gender, creed, or political opinion.

"The tragic death of an eight-year-old child rape victim from Magura has left us all in shock, shame, and sorrow. Young children and women across the country should never face violence, assault, and harassment. We must look inwards as a nation, as a people, to ensure these injustices do not happen in a Bangladesh where everyone's liberties and rights are to be respected."

"I'm determined to do everything possible to support victims of such horrific crimes in their journey for justice. Our party, BNP, has formed two dedicated cells--one for medical support and the other for legal assistance. These cells, which include many women doctors and lawyers, will provide free, professional, and if necessary, discreet support to victims and their families."

"The interim government must take immediate action and significantly improve the law and order situation to safeguard every mother, sister, and daughter in every corner of Bangladesh. As the political party that pioneered women's empowerment in Bangladesh, BNP is committed to leading the charge again and creating a safe, equal, and fair society for all, irrespective of gender, creed, or political opinion."