

Russian attacks kill seven in Ukraine

REUTERS

Russian attacks killed a family of three late on Friday in the southeastern Ukrainian city of Zaporizhzhia and four more people in the country's north and east, officials said.

Zaporizhzhia regional governor Ivan Fedorov said on social media the city had been struck more than 10 times, with a 14-year-old girl and her parents killed in the attacks and 12 people wounded, including an infant.

At the scene, rescue teams sifted through piles of debris amid the din of a buzzsaw, and could be seen carrying away at least one body.

"Russian terrorism continues to destroy families all over Ukraine," First Deputy Prime Minister Yulia Svyrydenko wrote on X on Saturday in response to the attack.

Prosecutors in the northeastern Sumy region said late on Friday that Russian forces dropped at least six guided bombs on the village of Krasnopillia, killing two people and injuring at least two.



Media Reform Commission Chairman Kamal Ahmed, along with other members, handing over their report to Chief Adviser Professor Muhammad Yunus at the State Guest House Jamuna yesterday.

PHOTO: CA PRESS WING

Special law proposed to shield journos

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"We hope that the interim government and the future elected government will implement these recommendations," he said.

Prof Yunus said, "We want to swiftly implement the reform proposals that can be completed now. For that, I would like the reform commissions to promptly present the recommendations that can be quickly implemented."

Despite the presence of constitutional guarantees, institutions, and laws, media freedom in Bangladesh has not been ensured due to inadequate law enforcement and institutional inefficiency, according to the 12-member Media Reform Commission, which was formed on November 18 last year.

A significant portion of the media has become biased as a result of investments by political and business interests, leading to a decline in public trust and overall media credibility, according to the commission report.

The report emphasised that responsible media is indispensable for establishing democracy and a pluralistic society.

To improve media standards, the commission recommended strengthening the role of supervisory institutions and developing an internal accountability system within the media.

"Political will, from political parties and institutions, including the ruling government, is needed to uphold the constitutional and civil rights to freedom of expression and free access to information," the report said.

OWNERSHIP
Kamal said that the media did not reach its current state overnight. It is the result of long-term changes and practices that have severely impacted the independence of journalism.

"We have observed that a major issue in Bangladesh is the infiltration of black money into the media industry. Additionally, the problems in media ownership have become a significant challenge," he said.

Against this backdrop, the commission proposed that medium and large media companies issue shares to the public and be listed on the stock exchange.

It also said that founding directors, individuals, institutions, companies, or family members should not be able to have more than 25 percent of the shares. Employees should get 5 percent of the shares.

The commission recommended an ordinance to ban cross platform ownership, where the owner of a television channel cannot own a newspaper, or vice versa.

It said such ownership is prohibited in the US. In the UK, a law prohibits the owner of a television channel from holding more than 20 percent of shares in a local newspaper. In India, a bill on this issue is awaiting parliamentary debate.

The commission recommended a "one house, one media" policy, where no single company, group, individual, family, or entrepreneur should own multiple media outlets.

"Measures must be taken to ensure transparency in media ownership so that people can make informed choices. Additionally, this will discourage the infiltration of black money into the media," said the

Bodies of four Rohingyas found, 25 rescued

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near the shore immediately joined local fishermen in a rescue operation, successfully saving 25 people, he said.

Although the sunken boat was later recovered, neither the missing BGB member nor any other individuals could be found, he added.

REPORT

SEPARATE REGULATOR

The reform commission recommended the formation of an independent "Bangladesh Media Commission" replacing the Press Council and a Broadcasting Commission. This will bring all types of media under the supervision of a single institution, and ensure accountability and freedom of press.

The Bangladesh Media Commission, as a regulatory body, will determine the qualifications and disqualifications of publishers and editors to ensure that those convicted of criminal offences or loan defaulters cannot become owners/editors of media outlets.

This commission will set graduation as the minimum educational qualification for journalists, develop a code of conduct for them and ensure its implementation.

It will recommend licences for broadcasting media (TV and radio) and online portals, and ensure compliance with their terms.

The commission will provide redress for complaints from individuals, institutions, or groups harmed by false or motivated news.

PROTECT JOURNALISTS

Besides a separate law to ensure the safety of journalists, the reform commission recommended reviewing cases against journalists under the Penal Code, Information and Communication Technology Act, Digital Security Act, Cyber Security Act, and Contempt of Court Act.

Based on the review, appropriate steps must be taken for the submission of final reports by the police or the withdrawal of cases by the relevant government prosecutors, the commission said in its report.

All criminal defamation laws, like in sections 499, 500, 501, and 502 of the Penal Code, 1860, and section 29 of the Cyber Security Act, 2023, should be repealed, the report said.

It said the provisions of the proposed Cyber Security Ordinance that have raised concerns among journalists and rights activists, and section 5 of the Official Secrets Act, 1923, should be amended to emphasise national security and include legal protections for investigative journalism.

WAGES

The commission recommended that the minimum entry-level salary for journalists be aligned with that of Grade 9 officers in the Bangladesh Civil Service.

Since the cost of living in Dhaka is high, a "Dhaka allowance" may be added to the salaries of journalists staying in the capital, Kamal said.

Journalists outside Dhaka should be promoted to staff correspondent after working as a correspondent (retainer) for three years.

OTHER PROPOSALS

Currently, newspaper circulation is considered for enlistment on the government's media list.

The reform commission proposed that circulation be replaced by number of copies sold as the criterion for enlistment.

It said the advertisement rate for newspapers, which had not raised for a decade, should be increased now and then annually in line with inflation. Government and autonomous

organisations should also promptly pay the dues owed to newspapers for published advertisements.

Customs duties on newsprint imports for the newspaper industry should be reconsidered, the report said.

The circulation numbers of English newspapers should not be compared with Bangla newspapers when determining government advertisement rates, according to the reform commission. Therefore, the maximum and minimum advertisement rates for

English newspapers need to be rationalised.

Arrangements should be made for easy-term, low-interest loans for the media, the commission added.

Additionally, it said a review of applications for private TV station licences shows that the process was not transparent or competitive. The issuance of these licences was primarily based on political considerations and, to some extent, business connections.

The government's policy has a provision that TV station licences will be issued for an initial period of five years and renewed after reviewing their proper operations. "In this context, all licences issued over the past decade and a half need to be reviewed," said the reform commission.

It also recommended having an acceptable and reasonable television rating point (TRP) system. Fees must be paid for the broadcast of government announcements and advertisements on television.

The government should direct cable operators to complete digitisation within one year so that television channels can generate revenue.

The decline in radio listeners and the dramatic drop in advertising revenue have put FM radio broadcasting in an existential crisis.

The security deposit kept by the government against radio station licences should be returned, and the provision for keeping a security deposit, along with the annual renewal system, should be abolished. Arrangements should be made to allocate government advertisements to FM radio as well.

The reform commission said the policy for online news portal registration should be updated and the registration should be done by the proposed media commission.

It said since the registrations granted to online portals over the past decade were not based on any transparent and specific policy, but through the arbitrary exercise of government power, they need to be reviewed.

The annual renewal system for online portals after registration should be abolished and government advertisements on online portals should be allocated based on specific policies, ensuring transparency and fairness.

Kamal said the reform commission proposed the establishment of an independent Jatiya Samparchar Sanghstha, merging state-run BTV, Bangladesh Betar, and Bangladesh Sangbad Sangstha.

BSS can play the role of the Jatiya Samparchar Sanghstha's news section, he said.

"The rescue operation was still ongoing," Ashiqur Rahman told this newspaper around 5:30pm.

Meanwhile, Teknai Upazila Nirbahi Officer Sheikh Ehsan Uddin said he had heard from locals that four bodies were recovered from the sea after the boat capsized.

"But I don't know any other details."

Local fishermen who participated in the rescue operation alongside the BGB said that after speaking to survivors, they came to know that some 40 to 50 people were on board when the boat capsized.

She said she got to learn about the interim government's emphasis on dialogue, participation, inclusion and transparency.

But, she does not think all these fundamental issues could be resolved before the elections.

"So, what is key is to make sure that

BNP sniffs ploy to delay the polls

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impose an outright ban on the party, it said.

BNP leaders maintain that such decisions should be left to the people rather than being enforced through a government directive or political manoeuvring.

The party's standing committee member Salahuddin Ahmed said, "We cannot back any action that undermines national stability and unity. Politics should remain in the hands of politicians and must be conducted in the interest of the nation."

He also said the BNP believes the AL must face trial for genocide and crimes against humanity under article 47 of the constitution, which allows amendments to the International Crimes Tribunal Act.

"The court should decide whether the Awami League can continue participating in elections and political activities."

At the same time, Salahuddin slammed the government for initially considering legal amendments to prosecute the ALs as a party, only to backtrack later.

"Instead, the government opted to suppress the party's political activities using police force."

He said the people of Bangladesh had rejected AL's "fascist politics" through the July uprising. He accused the party of failing to show repentance or seek forgiveness for their crimes.

Stressing their party's commitment to a multiparty democracy and inclusivity, BNP leaders said endorsing a move to ban a party contradicts its core values. They

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He stressed the need to prioritise the national election over local government

further warned that creating political turmoil and involving the military in such matters could destabilise the country ahead of the December election.

Speaking to this newspaper, BNP Secretary General Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir said, "It [the demand for a ban on the AL] is an attempt to create an anarchic situation in the country and ultimately delay the electoral process."

"By making such statements [like the army exerting pressure to bring the AL back], certain groups are trying to make the patriotic armed forces controversial and pit them against the people for an ulterior political motive ... It's very dangerous for the country's sovereignty and independence, which we can't support," he added.

BNP leaders accused the NCP of attempting to pressure the interim government by manufacturing political crises, one after another. The party believes taking such action (banning AL) through an executive order would set a bad precedent.

While BNP acting chairman Tarique Rahman did not directly address the issue, he urged the interim government to avoid actions that might allow fugitive allies of the previous regime to regain influence in politics.

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polls, warning, "The allies of the fallen autocrat still hold thousands of crores of taka looted from the state and the people. In such a situation, holding local polls before the national election would mean creating an opportunity to rehabilitate these fugitive fascists back into politics."

At the same event, Fakhrul urged caution: "We believe that at this moment, wherever we are, we must act responsibly. Those of us in politics, in different professions, connected to the government and the people -- we must all speak and act in a way that smoothens the path to democratic progress."

BNP Senior Joint Secretary General Ruhul Kabir Rizvi further clarified the party's stance, questioning why the AL should be banned if it is led by individuals not involved in corruption or violence.

"If someone leads the Awami League without committing crimes, without being involved in student killings, without being involved in laundering money -- then why can't the Awami League participate in politics?"

"If swift justice is ensured and the criminals are prosecuted, and if the people then allow them to engage in politics, we have nothing to say."

The NCP leaders made their demand and allegations against the army after Chief Adviser Prof Muhammad Yunus stated that the interim government has no plans to ban the AL. However, he added that individuals within the party accused of crimes, including murder and crimes against humanity, would be prosecuted in Bangladeshi courts.

Some proposals may weaken future govts

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conference at the BNP chairperson's Gulshan office yesterday.

The party will submit its opinions on key recommendations to the National Consensus Commission today.

"Instead of presenting the proposals directly, they are framed as leading questions. For example, the spreadsheet asks, 'Do you support implementing the proposals through a constituent assembly? Answer yes or no.' But the question of whether or not we agree on the concept of a constituent assembly should come first."

Fakhrul criticised the recommendation to establish new commissions, including a National Constitutional Council, arguing that the descriptions of these commissions' jurisdictions and functions indicate a clear intention to undermine and limit the powers of the executive and legislative branches as much as possible.

Reading from a statement at the press conference, Fakhrul said, "The state of the National Consensus Commission's spreadsheet, along with various statements from commission members and certain political parties, raises questions about whether these recommendations are part of a pre-planned initiative, making it difficult to determine if they truly serve the interests of democracy."

Referring to the recommendations of the constitution and electoral reform commissions, the party observed it is "evident that there is an unjustifiable attempt to appoint unelected individuals to state positions, which is unwarranted".

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"Only an elected government -- accountable to the people and committed to justice and good governance -- can successfully make meaningful reforms."

The primary responsibility of the interim government, he added, should be implementing necessary reforms through consensus, organising a free, fair, and credible national election as soon as possible, and handing over power to an elected government.

Consensus holds key to path forward

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uprising led to a change in the political landscape. Now, the interim government has undertaken massive reforms before the national elections.

Muhammad Yunus led government has formed several reform commissions, and he is now leading the National Consensus Commission.

While the BNP, the country's largest political party, is seeking elections after minimum reforms, the newly-formed National Citizen Party and some other parties want more reforms before the polls. There is also debate over the banning of the Awami League, whose top leaders face murder cases.

"Yunus and all the political parties can at least agree to some core principles, and that these political parties commit to them through the July charter and in their own manifesto."

This will give true meaning to the reform initiatives, said the British national.

"You cannot fix all the problems, but at least lay the foundations that allow the path to elections to happen."