

Army chief leaves Dhaka for Russia, Croatia

UNB, Dhaka

Chief of Army Staff General Waker-Uz-Zaman left Bangladesh for Russia yesterday morning on an official visit.



Following his stay in Russia, Gen Waker will travel to Croatia on April 10, according to a press release from the Inter-Service Public Relations Directorate.

During the visit, he will hold courtesy meetings with senior military and civil officials of both the countries and exchange views on enhancing bilateral cooperation in defence and related sectors.

He is also expected to visit several military installations and arms-manufacturing facilities, the ISPR said.

After wrapping-up his visit, the army chief is scheduled to return home on April 12.



Workers preparing and arranging ledgers at a shop in Chattogram's Andorkilla on Saturday. The demand has skyrocketed ahead of Halkhata, a festival the traders celebrate by starting afresh with a new book on Pahela Baishakh, with the hope that all customers would settle their dues before the Bangla New Year.

PHOTO: RAJIB RAIHAN

4-yr-old raped while visiting grandparents

Imam sent to jail over rape of teenager with disabilities

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Benapole

A four-year-old girl was raped allegedly by her step-uncle while she was visiting her grandparents' house in Maheshpur upazila of Jhenaidah on Friday night. Police found out about the incident yesterday after she was admitted to a hospital. No arrest was made and the family was yet to file a case till the writing of this report last night around 9:00pm.

The accused has been on the run since the incident came to light.

According to the girl's relatives, she went to visit her grandparents with her mother on Thursday. On Friday night, the child's step-uncle took her to a field and raped her. Later, the child told her family about the incident.

She was taken to Jibannagar Upazila Health Complex first and then sent to the One Stop Crisis Centre of Chuadanga Sadar Hospital, said Mostafizur Rahman Sujon, medical officer at Jibannagar Upazila Health Complex.

Jibannagar Police Station Officer-in-Charge Mamun Hossain said, "The child lives in Jibannagar, and the incident took place in Maheshpur. However, if a case is filed with this police station, we will investigate and take action."

Meanwhile, in Brahmanbaria, a district court yesterday sent a man to jail in a case filed over the rape of a 17-year-old girl with physical disabilities in Bancharampur upazila on April 1.

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Dhaka confident of riding out tariff storm

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For example, Bangladesh is now exporting small plastic bags worth \$4 million per month, with the US as the largest and fastest-growing destination. "We cannot, and should not, ignore this market."

Manzur said he hoped the government's outreach to the US would yield results quickly. "I hope that within the next 24 to 48 hours, we'll be able to give our buyers some really good news."

Former BGMEA President Rubana Huq echoed this hope. "We're expecting a letter from our side that President Trump might tweet himself. That's the kind of impact we're aiming for."

Tapan Chowdhury, managing director of Square Pharmaceuticals Ltd, said the business community was "truly worried". However, after Sunday's discussions, they see a roadmap.

Chowdhury also called for support for other industries than garments. He said India once supplied about 30 percent of US pharmaceutical imports, and it has already lost some of that share in the sector, causing a drop in the share prices of Indian companies.

"This shift presents an opportunity for Bangladesh, especially for our pharmaceutical industry. Opportunities are emerging from all directions. For policymakers, this is a pivotal moment," he added.

Finance Adviser Salehuddin Ahmed said Bangladesh was prepared to expand its commercial ties with the US, even if with the import of more essential goods such as LNG.

He emphasised that the government will ensure that exports from Bangladesh continue to flow. "Our garment sector is more competitive than many others. American consumers know this, and we aim to strengthen that perception further through private sector efficiency."

Ahmed also stressed that beyond goods, there are many services Bangladesh can import from the US and offer other services in return.

Addressing the complex nature of trade barriers, he said: "Tariffs don't always tell the full story. Non-tariff measures -- regulations, certifications and customs delays -- can also distort trade. We want to make sure American businesses don't face unnecessary hurdles here."

The government, Ahmed said, will work quickly to rationalise and streamline those barriers.

Commerce Adviser Bashir Uddin said they agreed that the tariff and non-tariff barriers in US-Bangladesh trade should be reviewed.

"Accordingly, we are taking steps to reassess and remove tariff-related and non-tariff barriers that hinder our trade," he said.

Planning Adviser Wahiduddin Mahmud said other countries like China and those in Europe were retaliating against the US over new tariffs, and it was unclear where the trade war would stop.

"The whole world will be jolted. But for us, things are going on according to the plan," the adviser said.

He also said it was not possible to pass the burden of the hiked tariffs on to the workers. "Wage cannot be reduced. We rather need to improve productivity and capacity to supply world-class garments."

Khalilur Rahman, the chief adviser's high representative on Rohingya and other priorities, said the government has been discussing this matter with US authorities since February. "Today, I feel encouraged by our discussion with the business community."

He said the Bangladesh ambassador to the US spoke with the Assistant US Trade Representative. "The signals we're receiving from there are aligned with our thoughts. So, we believe we'll be able to finalise our positions within a day or two."

Earlier, Bashir Uddin said he consulted US Embassy Chargé d'Affaires Tracey Ann Jacobson about communication strategies for negotiation with the US government.

61 pro-AL lawyers land behind bars

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The court, however, granted former president of Dhaka Bar Association Abu Sayeed Sagar and 18 female lawyers bail in the same case.

Judge Md Zakir Hussain of Dhaka Metropolitan Sessions Judge's Court passed the order after the accused appeared before the court and submitted bail petitions through their lawyers.

During the hearing, the defence lawyers told the court that their clients had received anticipatory bail for eight weeks from the High Court.

The HC also asked the lawyers to surrender before the lower court before the expiration of that bail. In compliance with the court order, their clients surrendered and sought bail, the defence said.

The prosecution opposed the bail petitions saying that the charges brought against the accused were

serious and heinous.

The judge then ordered law enforcers to send them to Dhaka Central Jail in Keraniganj.

On February 6, lawyer Mohammad Ali Babu filed the case against 144 pro-AL lawyers for assault, vandalism, and attempted murder on August 4 last year.

According to the case statement, the pro-AL lawyers illegally assembled outside the Dhaka Bar Association building on August 4. The pro-AL lawyers attacked other lawyers and members with sticks and explosives.

The accused also vandalised the chambers of pro-BNP lawyers, damaging documents, including bank cheques.

The complainant was allegedly attacked by the group while he was returning to the Bar Association from a court that day.

How our media got politicised

FROM PAGE 1

However, the licensing of these channels came with specific terms and conditions that would remain in effect permanently.

These conditions included broad and ambiguous requirements, such as maintaining "respect for Bangladesh's history, culture, liberation, the spirit of the Liberation War, and social and religious sentiments". Additionally, broadcasters were prohibited from airing content that could be seen as undermining "sovereignty, national unity, development, and the national image".

The conditions also required broadcasters to air special programmes on August 15, March 17 (Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's birthday), and other significant dates related to the Liberation War. However, this particular clause was revoked during the subsequent BNP tenure.

In 2001, after the BNP government came to power, the High Court revoked ETV's licence, and intelligence agencies seized broadcasting equipment from TV stations, citing the need to halt terrestrial broadcasting. As a result, the channel was shut down. It was only after 2005, when the new owners of ETV agreed to operate solely as a satellite channel, that it was allowed to resume operations.

During the BNP tenure, 10 television channels began transmission -- NTV, RTV, Banglavisión, Boishakhi TV, Desh TV, Channel One, Islamic TV, SNTV, CSB and Diganta TV.

"There are allegations that these channels were given licences on political grounds, because their owners are either directly or covertly related with BNP," says the report.

Both NTV and RTV belonged to Khaleda Zia's private secretary and parliamentarian Moaddeq Ali Falu. When Falu was jailed in 2007, RTV changed hands and went over to Bengal Group. There are allegations that a state intelligence agency was involved in this share transfer, noted the report.

Channel One's owner was Giasuddin Mamun, known to be close to BNP acting chairperson Tarique Rahman.

Khaleda Zia's parliament adviser and MP Salauddin Qader Chowdhury got the licence for CSBTV, while BNP parliamentarians Mufshiqur Rahim, Salahuddin and Nasiruddin Pintu were given licences for DeshTV and SNTV respectively.

Khaleda Zia's brother Maj Gen (ret'd) Sayeed Iskandar brought forth Islamic TV and former city corporation mayor Sadek Hossain Khoka was behind Banglavisión, notes the report.

Boishakhi TV's owner AYM Kamal was close to BNP leader Mirza Abbas, it says.

CSBTV's licence was cancelled during the I/II caretaker government on allegations that it was broadcasting anti-government content.

The 15-year-AL regime was one of anarchy, says the report.

To ensure the media followed its instructions, the government offered various incentives and took punitive measures. It exercised control through mechanisms such as granting publication and broadcast licences, imposing excise duties, regulating government advertisement allocations, delaying ad payments, restricting access to government establishments and official programmes, issuing threats, engaging in harassment, and even resorting to violence.

When granting media licences, the most influential factor became the political affiliation of the investor or the media outlet, says the report.

Even in the absence of evidence showing relevant experience or proof of the required capital investment, applicants who identified as "Awami League supporters" or claimed they intended to establish a TV channel to promote the ideals of the Awami League were given priority, it says.

Journalists who acted as sycophants of Sheikh Hasina were given multiple licences for TV channels, or placed as editors and chief executives in organisations, or given jobs as press

officers in foreign embassies.

These media organisations became the mouthpieces of the ruling Awami League and it became a rule to slander the opposition and portray opposition activists as criminals.

Any time anyone presented a dissenting opinion on screen, the state intelligence agencies were activated to remove their presence on TVs, the report says.

Many news managers and journalists were summoned to the DGFI headquarters and threatened, and in some cases, their employers were forced to fire them.

The AL administration shut down Diganta, Channel One, Islamic TV, and SNTV.

Between 2009 and 2014, 27 television stations were issued licences.

"These licences were given to AL party members, their family members or business groups closely allied with them."

While inspecting the licences of different houses, the media commission found that the relevant ministries did not even put up a semblance of verifying the documents submitted with the applications.

"Verifying these documents should have taken a while, but it can be noticed that at least seven channels were given licences within 3-4 days of application [submission]," says the report. "It is clear that these licences were given on political grounds."

In addition to the terms defined in 1996, the AL government also attached conditions like one stating that the stations must broadcast content advocating against terrorism, criminal activities, and political violence. It also became mandatory for them to transmit via Bangabandhu satellite.

"Such terms and conditions, especially the ones that are politically driven, will make it impossible for any media to operate in an impartial and independent manner. These terms and conditions force the TV channel to always be pro-government."

The national broadcast policy states that radios, TVs and online platforms cannot broadcast anything that is "anti-state", "hurts religious sentiments", or "alters the historic heritage of Bangladesh" or does not conform to the laws, culture, and heritage of the country.

The kind of restrictive terms and conditions that are relevant for TV stations, are also applicable for FM radio stations, notes the report.

The channels too made pledges to serve the AL when applying for licences.

For example, when AsianTV was launched by the chair of Bangabandhu Shainik League Harun-Or Rashid in 2011, he said that he wanted to establish a TV station to be a part of "Honourable Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's vision to create a digital Bangladesh". He was then a parliamentarian.

Salman F Rahman and Nazmul Hasan Papon were granted licences for Independent TV after pledging to "support the activities of the Awami League government". At the time, Papon was a member of parliament, while Salman secured a loan of Tk 300 crores from banks to establish the channel.

Morshedul Alam, the chairman of Bengal Group, was granted Channel 52 after committing to implement "Vision 2021". Similarly, the application for Channel 21 pledged to fulfill the Awami League's vision of establishing "Vision 2021 and a Digital Bangladesh".

In 2022, Titus TV was bought by Bashundhara Group and renamed TSports. Titus TV's application for licence stated its commitment to "create the Golden Bangla that embodies the spirit of the Liberation War, and that was dreamt of by the best Bangalee in a thousand years, Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman".

When Bangladesh Chhatra League's former general secretary Ismat Kadir Gani applied for Channel 5 in 2021, he identified himself as a "committed worker of the Awami League". He used the logo of Mujib's centennial on his application and declared his commitment to work to implement the Father of the Nation

Bangabandhu's dream.

Global TV's application by AL parliamentarian Mamunur Rashid Kiron said the channel wants to begin broadcasting to implement a Bangladesh whose ideals are governed by those of the Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. He also said that the channel would partake in Sheikh Hasina's dream to create a Digital Bangladesh.

Channel 9's application stated, "Our channel will highlight the development activity of 'Vision 2021'. As part of a pro-liberation force, we will focus on the development activity of the present government to build a digital Bangladesh."

Contacted, Channel 9 Managing Director Enayetur Rahman Bappi said, "I had simply purchased the licence. I don't know on what grounds the channel got the licence."

Channel 9's licence was sought by Brig Gen (ret'd) Syed Shafayatul Islam, who was the former general secretary of AL.

Duronto TV was given a licence at a time when its owner, former state minister for foreign affairs Shahrar Alam was himself a member of the parliamentary standing committee on information and communication services.

Green TV's owner Syed Golam Dastagir Gazi applied for licence in 2013 pledging to implement Bangabandhu's vision and ideals, Sheikh Hasina's dream Bangladesh, and AL's Vision 2021.

DBC Channel got its clearance in only three days while Iqbal Sobhan Chowdhury was Sheikh Hasina's press adviser.

Bashundhara Group's News24 and AL politician Kamal Ahmed Majumdar's Mohona TV continued to broadcast misinformation against their business and political rivals, unabated because they were close to the government, reads the report.

Then parliamentarians Saber Hossain Chowdhury, Mohibul Hasan Chowdhury, Bidyt Barua, Mofazzal Hossain Chowdhury Maya, Obaidul Muqtadir Chowdhury, Apu Ukil and AL's business ally Chowdhury Nafeez Sarafat were all given licences to launch online portals based on their close political relationship with the party.

The AL muzzled three private TV stations which had obtained licences during the BNP regime, and stopped publication of the BNP-leaning Amar Desh. Its editor and publisher were arrested and jailed for five years. He faced as many as 124 cases including one accusing him of plotting to kidnap and murder Sajeed Wazed Joy.

Jaijaidin Editor Shafiq Rehman was also accused in the same case and placed on remand. In 2019, Abul Asad, the editor of Dainik Sangram was jailed for five years.

Prothom Alo Editor Matiuur Rahman was slammed with 55 cases under the Digital Security Act and The Daily Star Editor Mahfuz Anam faced 84 cases, of which 16 were for sedition.

Journalist leaders Shawkat Mahmud and Ruhul Amin Gazi were jailed for more than a year, and journalist Oliullah Noman was arrested.

ETV's chairperson Abdus Salam and journalist Kanak Sarwar were jailed for broadcasting a speech of BNP acting chairperson Tarique Rahman.

The commission noted that such media outlets, particularly those who had encouraged the deposed prime minister to repress the July-August mass uprising, whitewashed their AL links by replacing them with those of the BNP.

Many journalists were politically pressured to leave their positions while many TV channels fired their staff members in managerial positions and replaced them with journalists identified to be from "anti-Awami League politics". The commission documented massive overhauls in 29 media organisations.

"The level of change we have seen in the media is unprecedented," commented Abul Kalam Azad, one of the researchers who worked on the report.

Nagorik TV, a channel owned by

Mohammadi Group's owner Rubana Huq and her son Navidul Huq saw the most number of staff members being fired, 40 in total. This includes their head of news, Dip Azad and two news editors. The commission spoke to many from the station who said that Azad, a secretary general of the AL faction of Bangladesh Federal Union of Journalists, was considered a liability by the channel.

Navidul said that the cuts had nothing to do with August 5.

"Media spending had gone down and we had started downsizing in 2023. We cut 20 people from the news team and reduced our overall manpower by 30-40 percent. All were paid full compensation. This was done in response to market conditions."

He said no journalist was terminated because of allegations of being politicised.

Especially outside Dhaka, journalists have been accused of being AL supporters and booked under different types of legal cases, including murder charges.

In Ekattor TV, the channel's chief Mozammel Babu, who had been widely criticised for turning the station into a mouthpiece for the Hasina government, was removed, and its special correspondent Shafique Ahmed, who covered the BNP, was given the charge of chief operating officer and head of news.

Shafique said, "I have been a journalist for 26 years and a planning editor and senior special correspondent at Ekattor TV. I was promoted based on my qualifications. Everyone knew about the work of this TV before August 5. After August 5, I asked the board if they wanted to be a political mouthpiece, and they said they did not. Ekattor's editorial policy and chair's directive is to make it a TV for the people."

All five media organisations owned by the Bashundhara Group have experienced massive changes. Right after August 5, Kader Gani Chowdhury, a member of BNP Media Cell and Ziaur Rahman Foundation, was given the charge of East West Media Ltd, as a deputy managing director. Kader used to be a journalist at the pro-BNP Dainik Dinkal.

Abu Taher, executive editor of Bangladesh Pratidin, was appointed editor of the newspaper in late August last year. Taher had been elected as the senior vice chair of the Jatiya Press Club from a BNP-Jamaat supported panel. Following the ouster of Hasina, he became the chairperson of the Club.

Bashundhara's newspaper Kaler Kantho, television station News24 and online portal Banglanews24.com also saw a multitude of staffing changes in key positions, with BNP-leaning individuals being promoted, notes the report.

"We have learnt that these were done in consultation with the political party itself," said Azad.

At the Beximco-owned Independent TV, the heads of news retained their positions, but their authority was curbed. A journalist named Mostafa Kamal, who the report identified as belonging to the BNP camp, has been given control over the station as its main head of news. Following August 5, when crowds tried to attack the television station, Kamal tackled the situation. Ashish Saikat, who had previously held that post, was asked not to come back to work.

In DBC TV, four people in managerial positions lost their jobs, and Samakal's BNP-beat journalist Loton Ekram was recruited as an editor at the station.

At Boishakhi TV, the head of news was replaced with Ziaul Kabir Sumon, who had worked at Diganta TV in the past. Their news editor was replaced by a reporter who covered the BNP beat.

At Desh TV, the AL-beat reporters were fired and their managing director was arrested and jailed on charges of attempted murder.

The media institutions, criticised for being allies of the deposed dictator, have neither reflected on their past actions, nor apologised, and are going about business as usual.

When the commission invited them to critically assess their past coverage, the commission faced their reluctance.