

Russia ready to negotiate directly with Ukraine for peace

Says Kremlin; Putin declares 3-day May ceasefire to mark WWII victory

AGENCIES

Russia yesterday said it was ready to negotiate directly with Ukraine, but that recognition of its claims over five Ukrainian regions, including Crimea, was “imperative” to resolving the conflict.

Since launching its Ukraine offensive in February 2022, Russia has seized large parts of four Ukrainian regions and claimed them as its own, in addition to Crimea, which it annexed in 2014.

Ukraine has denounced the annexations as an illegal land grab and says it will never recognise them, while European officials have warned that accepting Moscow’s demands sets a dangerous precedent that could lead to future Russian aggression.

Russian President Vladimir Putin yesterday declared a three-day ceasefire in May in the war with Ukraine to mark the 80th anniversary of the victory of the Soviet Union and its allies in World War Two.

The Kremlin said the 72-hour ceasefire would run for three days



Relatives and friends mourn during the funeral ceremony of a 17-year-old and his parents -- Oleg and Viktoriia -- killed in a Russian missile strike on Thursday in Kyiv yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

either side of May 9, when Putin will be hosting international leaders including Chinese President Xi Jinping for lavish celebrations to commemorate victory over Nazi Germany.

On Sunday, US President Donald Trump said he believed Volodymyr Zelensky might concede Crimea as part of a settlement -- a suggestion the Ukrainian leader has previously balked at.

“The Russian side has repeatedly confirmed its readiness, as confirmed by the president, to begin negotiations with Ukraine without any preconditions,” Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told state media yesterday.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said in an interview with Brazilian newspaper O Globo published yesterday that “We remain open to negotiations.”

“But the ball is not in our court. So

far, Kyiv has not demonstrated its ability to negotiate,” he said, adding Moscow’s position on the conflict was “well known”.

“International recognition of Russia’s ownership of Crimea, Sevastopol, the Donetsk People’s Republic, the Lugansk People’s Republic, the Kherson and Zaporizhzhia regions is imperative,” he said, using the Kremlin’s names for the Ukrainian regions.

Russia has repeatedly set out its demands for a Ukraine settlement, including that it be allowed to keep the five Ukrainian regions it claims as its own, that Ukraine be barred from the NATO military alliance and that the country “demilitarise”.

Zelensky said last Friday that Ukraine would “not legally recognise any temporarily occupied territories”, and has previously called the demilitarisation

demand “incomprehensible”.

Trump, who boasted before his inauguration he could halt Russia’s assault on Ukraine within “24 hours”, launched a diplomatic offensive to stop the fighting after taking office in January.

But he has so far failed to extract any major concessions from Russia.

After meeting Zelensky on the sidelines of Pope Francis’s funeral, Trump upped his pressure on Vladimir Putin, telling his Russian counterpart to “stop shooting” and sign an agreement.

The White House has said that without rapid progress, it could walk away from its role as a broker. Trump indicated that he would give the process “two weeks.”

US Secretary of State Marco Rubio earlier Sunday stressed the importance of the week ahead.

“We’re close, but we’re not close enough” to a deal to halt the fighting, Rubio told broadcaster NBC. “I think this is going to be a very critical week.”

US envoy Steve Witkoff held a three-hour meeting with Putin in the Kremlin last week, where they discussed the possibility of direct talks between Kyiv and Moscow.

Russia and Ukraine have not held direct talks on the fighting since the start of Moscow’s offensive in 2022.

Meanwhile, Russia over the weekend announced it had taken full control of its Kursk region with the help of North Korean troops, more than eight months after Kyiv launched a cross-border ground assault.

Putin thanked North Korean leader Kim Jong Un yesterday for help with the operation, which has denied Kyiv a key bargaining chip in future talks with Moscow.

The Russian army yesterday said it had taken control of the village of Kamianka in the northeastern Kharkiv region, in its latest battlefield advance.

People did not make sacrifices for a ‘superhuman’

Khasru protests CA’s polls remark

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

BNP Standing Committee member Amir Khasru Mahmud Chowdhury yesterday said people’s 16-year-long fight and sacrifices were to restore democracy, not to hand over the country to any “superhuman.”

“The struggle was for democracy, restoring the democratic order, reclaiming voting rights, and ensuring people’s ownership of the country,” he said after holding meetings with leaders of allied parties -- NAP (Bhasani), Amjanatar Dal, and Bangladesh People’s Party.

He was responding to a journalist’s query about the chief adviser’s recent interview with Al Jazeera, where he claimed that the interim government was not facing public pressure to hand over power quickly.

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Meghna Alam granted bail in extortion case

COURT CORRESPONDENT

A Dhaka court yesterday granted bail to model and Miss Bangladesh Foundation Chairperson Meghna Alam in an extortion case filed with Dhanmondi Police Station.

Dhaka Additional Chief Metropolitan Magistrate Md Sanullah passed the order after her lawyer Mohima Badhan submitted an application seeking bail.

There is no legal bar for her release from jail, said her lawyer Badhan.

In the petition, lawyer Badhan sought bail on the grounds that no specific allegation was brought against Meghna.

She was implicated in the case filed for “harassment”, argued her lawyer, adding that as a

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Many cases being filed for personal gains

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“Nowadays, people write their complaints themselves and bring them in. The police must register these as cases. It does not matter if they are true or false, there is no scope for verification,” the IGP said during a press conference at the Foreign Service Academy yesterday, marking the first day of the four-day Police Week.

“Later, investigations determine how much of the allegation is true and how much is false. We extract the truth through investigation and submit it to the court,” he added.

The IGP further said, “Often, we are faced with unreasonable demands. Requests come in to detain someone, to release someone, to award someone.”

He requested that “as far as possible, fewer unreasonable demands” be made to him.

However, Baharul Alam did not specify who makes such demands.

Referring to the situation after August 5 last year, the IGP said, “Since then, many have filed cases with dishonest intentions to extort money from people or to harass them. Perhaps 5-10 people committed the crime, but cases were filed naming another 300 individuals. Even yesterday, such a case was filed.”

Instructions have already been issued to ensure that no one is arrested in a harassing manner. Only those against whom allegations are found to be true during the investigation will be arrested, he added.

Meanwhile, Law Adviser Asif Nazrul, at a press briefing held at the Osmani Memorial Auditorium yesterday, said that there is a directive in place stating no one should be arrested if a complaint lacks

objectivity.

Speaking about the recent case filed against over 400 accused, including actor Iresh Zaker, the adviser said, “There is no restriction under Bangladeshi law on filing cases. People are filing cases as they wish. Many of these cases are harassing and malicious. Cases are being filed to grab land, property, and businesses. This is extremely unfortunate and regrettable.”

“Once a case is filed, we try to provide redress through the police and court administration. When too many people are implicated, it becomes difficult for us to manage. However, we cannot prevent people from filing cases,” he added.

“You [reporters] have seen; the home ministry has repeatedly said that if a complaint lacks objectivity, no one should be arrested,” he said.

Aid allocation to be trimmed

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Officials from the planning and finance ministries said Bangladesh has historically struggled to utilise foreign aid effectively, with the situation worsening this fiscal year due to political shifts following the mass uprising.

At the start of the current fiscal year, unused foreign funds totalled \$42.85 billion. Even if the entire foreign aid allocation is fully utilised this year, only about 16 percent of the available pipeline would be used.

Finance ministry officials said that a 20 percent utilisation rate of the aid pipeline is generally considered satisfactory.

From FY2010-11 to FY2020-21, foreign fund utilisation hovered between 11 percent and 13 percent. However, utilisation improved over the next three fiscal years, rising to as much as 19 percent by FY2023-24.

According to an Economic Relations Division report, slow project implementation results in delayed aid disbursement, leading to time and cost overruns. This, in turn, negatively impacts the balance of payments and increases reliance on domestic borrowing.

The ERD report identified multiple causes of implementation delays, noting: “Projects are often designed without proper planning or feasibility studies.” It further observed that those involved in project preparation are frequently inadequately trained.

In many cases, poor project design necessitates revisions of Development Project Proposals (DPPs) or Technical

Project Proposals (TPPs) even before work begins, the report said.

“The lengthy approval process of the DPPs/TPPs takes longer to start projects. Sometimes, projects are not adequately staffed with the right kind of people,” it added.

Frequent transfers of project officials, procurement-related bottlenecks, and land acquisition challenges were also cited as major impediments to timely implementation.

Finance ministry officials warned that delays not only drive up project costs but also lead to higher commitment charges paid to lenders.

A recent portfolio review report by the Asian Development Bank (ADB) said that a commitment charge of 0.15 percent per year is levied on all undisbursed loan balances for ordinary capital resource loans, starting 60 days after loan agreements are signed.

As undisbursed balances are calculated daily, the timing of disbursements significantly affects total commitment charges. Bangladesh paid the ADB \$3.58 million in commitment charges last year, according to the report sent to the government in February.

The ADB report also highlighted multiple factors contributing to project deadline extensions and cost overruns, including underestimated civil works costs at appraisal, changes in scope and design during implementation, delays in land acquisition and relocation of utilities, slow mobilisation, inadequate contractor inputs, and the lingering

impacts of Covid-19.

To illustrate the consequences, the ADB cited three delayed projects. One example, the Greater Dhaka Sustainable Urban Transport Project, was approved in April 2012, with an estimated cost of \$255 million and an original completion deadline of December 2017. The ADB’s contribution was initially set at \$160 million.

However, the deadline was later pushed to December 2022, and additional financing was required to cover cost overruns. The project’s total cost rose by 94 percent to \$494.39 million, and the ADB increased its loan by 63 percent to \$260 million.

AK Enamul Haque, director general of the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies, said that project underutilisation and delays stem from frequent changes of project directors, poor designs and political manoeuvring.

“Usually, foreign funding comes with many requirements that are difficult to meet. The process is much easier when no donor is involved,” he said.

He added that over the past two decades, many officials preferred to use government funds, which come with fewer restrictions.

“Good governance, accountability, and transparency are crucial to improve the current challenging situation,” he said. “The first suggestion everyone makes is that we need good governance. It is very important to create an environment where laws are followed.”

137 journalists sued so far

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the journalists, who encouraged Sheikh Hasina with their speeches and questions in TV talk shows, were being accused in criminal cases.

“Many of the journalists benefited from Sheikh Hasina and became owners of television channels. They aided and abetted her during the uprising,” he said.

When asked why murder cases were being filed against journalists, Faruqi said, “They might not be directly involved, but they aided and abetted through their speeches.”

Supreme Court lawyer Jyotirmoy Barua, however, said, “It is alarming to see that a large number of cases have been filed against journalists across the country on the allegation of their involvement in murders during the July movement.”

He told The Daily Star that politically empowered goons were using the criminal process for personal gains.

The lawyer said even in places where no student movement took place or no one died, journalists, among others, were being falsely implicated in criminal cases.

Referring to journalist couple Farzana Rupa and Shakil Ahmed, who have been sued over murder, he said they might have committed other offences for which they could be booked, but the allegation of their involvement in murder sounds vague.

“Journalists face threats and become victims of physical violence randomly in our country. Implicating them in murder cases has been a new phenomenon since August 5. This definitely violates their professional freedom, which is guaranteed by article 29 of the constitution,” he said.

Contacted, Muhammad Talebur Rahman, deputy commissioner (media) of Dhaka Metropolitan Police, said cases are being investigated with sincerity. The accused would be relieved if the allegations against them were found to be false, he said.

He added that investigators have been instructed not to harass anyone innocent.

HIGHEST CASES IN DHAKA

In Dhaka, 19 criminal cases have been lodged against 77 journalists in connection with murder, attempted murder, unlawful assembly, rioting, and other charges.

Two of the cases were filed with the International Crimes Tribunal.

Law enforcers have already arrested several journalists, including Rupa, Shakil, Mozammel Babu, Shyamal Dutta, Sheikh Muhammad Jamal Hossain, and Arif Hasan, in connection with the cases.

So far, Jamal has secured bail.

Most recently, on April 20, a case was registered with Mirpur Model Police Station against Sheikh Hasina and 407 others, including 24 journalists, over the killing of BNP activist Mahfuz Alam Shraban during the July uprising in the capital’s Mirpur area.

In Chattogram, two cases were lodged against 33 journalists, accusing them of attempted murder and abduction.

In Bogura, 22 journalists, including four working in Dhaka, were accused in eight cases. Four of the cases involve murder charges.

In Rajshahi, three cases were lodged against 14 journalists for their alleged involvement in vandalism, extortion, and assault.

In August last year, a case was also filed against 28 journalists with

the International Crimes Tribunal accusing them of crimes against humanity and genocide.

Referring to a press conference, the complaint said the accused journalists “through different questions, made instigating remarks and provoked Sheikh Hasina to eliminate the protesting students and ordinary people”.

It also claimed that these journalists, described as “sycophants” of the then government, published “false news to instigate the genocide and crimes against humanity”.

Naemul Islam Khan, former press secretary to Hasina; Iqbal Sobhan Chowdhury, former media adviser to Hasina; Farida Yasmin, former president of the Jatiya Press Club; Shyamal Dutta, editor of Bhorer Kagoj; Mozammel Babu of Ekattor TV; Nabanita Chowdhury; Subhash Singh Roy of abnews24.com; Ahmed Jobaer of Somoy TV; Tushar Abdullah of Ekhon TV; Saiful Alam, editor of Jugantor; Naem Nizam, editor of Bangladesh Pratidin; and Abed Khan, former editor of Samakal, were among the accused.

Meanwhile, the Dhaka Union of Journalists yesterday condemned and protested the filing of a murder case against 24 journalists.

In a statement, DUJ President Sajjad Alam Khan Topu and General Secretary Akhter Hossain said bringing unspecified and sweeping allegations against journalists poses a serious threat to freedom of expression.

“If professional journalists continue to face such cases consistently, the culture of fear within the profession will never be eliminated,” the leaders said in a press release.

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capital’s Mirpur area on August 5.

Among the accused are 24 journalists; at least 36 former ministers and state ministers; over 41 former lawmakers from the Awami League government; six former advisers to Hasina; businesspersons from seven major groups; five former election commissioners; three former Bangladesh Bank officials; Supreme Court lawyers; doctors; and at least 77 police personnel, including six former inspectors general of police.

Ariful Islam, 22, another listed witness who worked at the same pharmaceutical company as Shraban, also expressed surprise. He said he was not even aware when the case was filed.

“I know about the incident but didn’t know I was made a witness,” he said, adding that he spoke to a journalist last August but was never approached by anyone after that regarding the case.

Similarly, another witness, Hirok, 34, said, “I don’t know anything about this [being made a witness].”

Hirok, who described Shraban as a distant relative, said he helped take the body home in Naogaon but declined to be a witness when asked.

“They put my name in without my

knowledge,” he said.

Joyntul Abedin, a listed witness with consent, said he knew Shraban from Naogaon. Asked about the large number of accused, he remarked, “You’re a journalist; you know how these cases work. One person commits the crime, and 10 others are accused. It’s a reality. I can’t say anything more.”

He claimed the case was prepared at an “administrative office in Paltan” before being submitted to court. He, however, did not elaborate.

Contacted yesterday, Bappy, the plaintiff, said those accused were named because of their support for Sheikh Hasina.

Asked why it took nine months to file the case, he said, “I was gathering the names through various means, including newspapers, Facebook, and help from ‘some people from the administration’. That’s why it took nine months.

“For example, I knew the names of the accused but didn’t know their fathers’ names. I took support from others to gather such details.”

The case also names actor Iresh Zaker as accused number 157.

In this regard, Bappy said, “He supported Sheikh Hasina, so I included his name.”

When told that Iresh had extended his support in the July movement, Bappy replied, “I don’t know about that. As far as I know, he supported Sheikh Hasina.”

Initially, Bappy denied Shraban’s political involvement but later acknowledged some links.

“My family has ties with BNP. I have connections with BNP members here [Naogaon]. My brother was somewhat involved in politics, but he was more focused on his job.”

Regarding the number of accused, he said, “It was a mass killing. Maybe 10 people were the main culprits. The others are their associates.”

Meanwhile, Cultural Affairs Adviser Mostofa Sarwar Farooki yesterday termed the naming of Iresh Zaker in the case “deeply troubling and disturbing”.

“I personally know Iresh Zaker. He was involved with the July movement. The state did not file the case; someone else did. In the new Bangladesh, everyone has the right to file cases, but some are abusing this freedom,” he told reporters at his office at the Secretariat.

He expressed hope that police would conduct a proper investigation and uphold the truth.