

3 FREED FROM CUSTODY NCP asks Hannan Masud to explain his role

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

National Citizen Party yesterday sought an explanation from its leader Abdul Hannan Masud regarding his role in securing the release of three young men from police custody.

According to a show-cause notice signed by NCP Joint Member Secretary (Office) Saleh Uddin Sifat, three individuals were detained on Tuesday from a residential area under Dharmodi Police Station on charges of "creating chaos" by identifying themselves as "coordinators".

Among the three was Saiful Islam Rabbi, who had earlier been relieved of his position as Mohammadpur Thana coordinator of the Students Against Discrimination "due to moral misconduct", the notice said.

"Despite this, you [Abdul Hannan Masud] appeared at the police station and ensured their release through an undertaking," the notice said.

The notice further instructed Hannan to submit a written explanation to the chief of the party's disciplinary committee within the next three days.

He will also have to explain why organisational measures should not be taken against him.

NBR plunges into turmoil

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The platform of tax, customs, and VAT officials and employees said they will submit a memorandum to the chief adviser, followed by sit-in demonstrations at NBR offices across the country today.

However, export-related functions and international passenger services will remain unaffected, the protesters said in a statement.

The group further threatened complete work abstention in all tax, customs, and VAT offices, excluding Customs Houses and Land Customs Stations, on May 24-25. A full work stoppage will begin on May 26 across all relevant offices.

The protest casts a shadow over the NBR's revenue goals. In the first 10 months of the current fiscal year, the tax authority collected Tk 2.85 lakh crore, reflecting a modest year-on-year growth of nearly 3 percent, according to provisional data.

The government has lowered its revenue target for fiscal 2024-25 by Tk 18,500 crore to Tk 463,500 crore. With Tk 178,500 crore still to be collected as of April, the ongoing unrest poses a clear risk to meeting that goal.

WHY NBR EMPLOYEES PROTESTING?

The protests were triggered by a midnight ordinance issued on May 12 by the interim government, which dissolved the NBR and the Internal Resources Division and created two separate divisions – one for tax policy and the other for revenue collection.

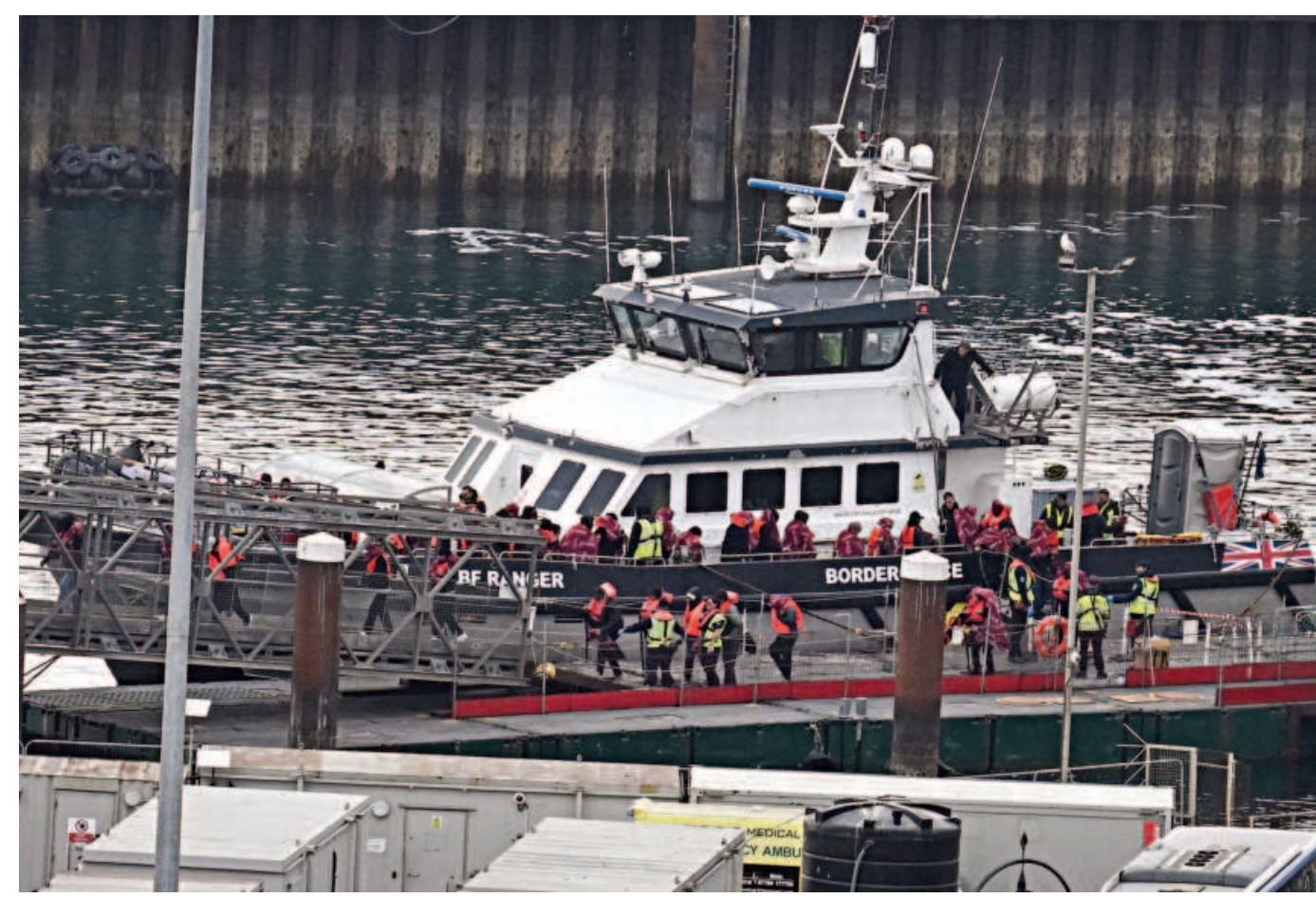
While the government argues that the structural overhaul is aimed at preventing conflicts of interest between policymaking and implementation, revenue officials claim that provisions of the ordinance are discriminatory.

Their principal grievance lies in a clause that allows civil servants from the general administration cadre to lead the two new divisions, sidelining experienced officers from the revenue cadre.

Protesters say they are not opposed to the separation itself, but demand clarity and fairness in the appointment process, particularly in ensuring that seasoned professionals from the revenue sector are included in key policy roles.

The ordinance states that a "suitably qualified" individual will head the policy division, but does not mandate prior experience in the revenue sector, a key point of contention.

The aggrieved employees grouped under the banner of the NBR Reform



Migrants rescued at sea while attempting to cross the English Channel from France disembark from the Border Force vessel 'Ranger' upon its arrival at the marina in Dover, southeast England, yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Ashraf Ahmed, former DCCI president, warned that unless the policy unit is aligned with growth objectives, the reforms may prove ineffective. "We need tax reforms that support investment – for instance, the removal of stamp duties on bonds helped create a bond market," he said. "Administrative disputes have little bearing on taxpayers or the broader economy."

NBR Chairman Abdur Rahman did not respond to requests for comments over the phone.

CALLS FOR A SOLUTION

"Resolving this situation is essential. We're already witnessing its impact on revenue collection, and if it escalates further, the consequences could be serious," said Muhammad Abdur Razzaque, chairman of the Research and Policy Integration for Development (RAPID).

Razzaque said the unrest, if handled wisely, could serve as a turning point for genuine reform. "If the government realigns the structure and addresses all stakeholders' concerns, it could lead to a stronger, more functional NBR," he said.

He added that the tax authority should be developed into a career-based institution that promotes professionalism. "But that requires institutional thinking – not disruption in the name of reform," Razzaque said.

Ittekhuzzaman, executive director of Transparency International, Bangladesh, recommended an "independent strategic" review that should incorporate the NBR reform committee's report and draw on lessons from international best practices.

More importantly, it should address the sources of deep-rooted internal resistance that, over the years, have turned the NBR into a haven for tax evaders and money launderers, while creating a hostile environment for honest taxpayers, he said.

Towfiqul Islam Khan, senior research fellow at the Centre for Policy Dialogue, criticised the lack of transparency in the reform process. "This shouldn't be seen as a turf war between civil service groups," he said.

"The previous regime's poor record of transparency and accountability should not be repeated by the interim government."

He stressed that reforms of such magnitude, legal and institutional, require consultations with stakeholders across the political, business, and expert communities. "The last major attempt in 2008 failed due to a lack of political consensus. This one must succeed."

Regarding demands to publicly expose dismissed personnel involved in misconduct, he responded with caution: "Our values teach us not to shame others publicly. But if limits are crossed, we might have no choice."

Officers spoke openly about the targeted smear campaign against Gen Waker and the army in general, the sources said.

According to Gen Waker, these are not merely an attack on the army, but part of a bigger plan to weaken public confidence in the armed forces.

He explained that these forces believe that if they can weaken the army and its leadership, they can push the country into chaos and then take advantage of the situation for their personal gains.

"But they are mistaken. We will not allow anyone to harm Bangladesh," the army chief was quoted as saying.

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Talks only on sending aid to Rakhine, not corridor

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for emergency evacuation, which is not applicable here.

Asked about his citizenship, Khalilur said he does not have a US passport.

On April 27, Foreign Adviser Touhid Hossain said the interim government agreed in principle to provide humanitarian passage, not corridor, to Rakhine state with certain conditions. He, however, did not mention the conditions.

Since then, political parties have been critical of the issue, saying it is a matter of security, independence, and sovereignty and that any such decision should have been taken in consultation with all stakeholders.

"We don't have any divergence of opinions with our army. I had a detailed discussion with the army chief. We are on the same page. I'm also working closely with the foreign ministry," said Khalilur, who is also high representative of the chief adviser on Rohingya and other priority issues.

Asked about the rumours of US pressure for the humanitarian channel, he said there is no pressure from anyone.

He explained that the Arakan Army now controls 90 percent of the Rakhine state where there is a shortage of food and medicine as all the supply channels to Rakhine have been severed because of the conflicts between the Myanmar junta and Arakan Army.

He said some Rakhine people

also approached Bangladesh border senders food and medical aid. "If that increases, we may face a new wave of refugees, which we want to avoid."

Bangladesh is already overburdened with the 1.2 million Rohingya and cannot accept any more from Rakhine. This crisis needs a sustainable solution, which lies in the repatriation of the refugees, he said.

The security adviser said the Arakan Army has assured Bangladesh that repatriation is one of their core principles, and they would initiate it once conditions are favourable.

Bangladesh is considering this strictly on humanitarian grounds under clear conditions, he said, adding, "Aid must be non-discriminatory. It must not be used for military purposes. Also, Rohingya participation in any emerging administrative, political, and security structure in Rakhine must be ensured."

"We told the Arakan Army directly: any ethnic cleansing or exclusive governance by Rakhines alone will not be tolerated – it would amount to an apartheid-like state, which we reject."

The UN will be in full charge, including safety and security of the aid, and Bangladesh will secure the border and ensure no drugs or weapons cross through if there is finally such cross-border aid arrangement, he added.

"If the Arakan Army doesn't stop its military actions and Myanmar

doesn't stop airstrikes, no aid will be sent from our side."

The UN said that for any cross-border arrangement, all sides – Arakan Army, Myanmar, and Bangladesh – must agree.

Asked if Myanmar agrees to such a cross-border arrangement for aid to Rakhine, why it cannot support aid delivery internally, Khalilur said Myanmar may have strategic or tactical reasons for not opening certain areas. "But we won't force it open either."

"We will consider this option only on our terms. If aid can be delivered without using our territory, great. If people are starving and crossing into our territory, it's a problem for us. So, it must happen on terms that safeguard our national interest."

CITIZENSHIP
Khalilur said some people are questioning his citizenship, but the fact is that he has only one nationality: Bangladeshi.

"Though I lived in the United States with my family, I never held an American passport. If simply living abroad makes someone a foreign national, then others – such as Mr Tarique Rahman – would fall under that category too."

He said these baseless accusations are hurtful and unjustified and requested everyone to speak with responsibility.

"If there is any claim against me, prove it in court. As a Bangladeshi citizen, I have rights, and I expect those to be respected."

Ishraque joins in as protests swell

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believe a neutral election is not possible under this government, as some of its advisers are conspiring against the BNP."

Meanwhile, all civic services of DSCC have been suspended due to the demonstrations and work stoppages by various employee unions supporting Ishraque.

With the Nagar Bhaban locked, all internal operations have ceased, and its eight regional offices outside the main building have also shut down, DSCC Administrator Md Shahjahan Mia confirmed to The Daily Star.

"For the past few days, all civic services inside the Nagar Bhaban have been suspended. Today [yesterday], the regional offices outside the building have also been closed. As a result, we are unable to provide any civic services to the residents of Dhaka south," he said.

Regarding communications with the employee unions, he added, "We've informed our higher authorities ... They'll take necessary decisions."

Around 10:30am, demonstrators had gathered at key locations including Matsya Bhaban, Kakrail and the Jatiya Press Club to press home their demands.

On Tuesday, the bench had set yesterday for delivering the verdict following the conclusion of the hearing.

On March 27, Dhaka's First Joint District Judge and Election Tribunal Judge Md Nurul Islam overturned the 2020 DSCC election results, declared Ishraque the rightful winner, and instructed the EC to issue a gazette notification within 10 days.

The EC complied and published the gazette on April 27, officially recognising Ishraque as DSCC mayor.

However, on May 14, a DSCC resident named Mamanur Rashid

41 Aussie MPs urge Yunus for election roadmap

DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENT

As many as 41 Australian MPs wrote to Chief Adviser Muhammad Yunus calling for a specific electoral roadmap, justice for victims of the Monsoon Revolution and supporting justice for the victims of the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB).

"We urge your administration to immediately and publicly announce a specific, time-bound electoral roadmap. This is an urgent and non-negotiable step toward ensuring credible, transparent and inclusive elections in Bangladesh," they said in a letter yesterday.

Delays or ambiguity at this stage will only deepen public distrust and jeopardise the country's democratic future.

"The people of Bangladesh and the international community are watching closely. We call on your leadership to act decisively. We are prepared to engage constructively to support this essential step toward restoring democratic legitimacy," the letter said.

The MPs include senators Larissa Waters, David Shoebridge, Jordon Steele-John, Fatima Payman, Lidia Thorpe, Penny Allman Payne, Mehreen Faruqi, Steph Hodgins-May, Barbara Pocock, Peter Whish-Wilson, Dorinda Cox, Nicki McKim, Sarah Hanson-Young, Elizabeth Watson Brown, Abigail Boyd, Amanda Cohn, Katherine Copsey, Sue Higginson, Cate Faehrmann, Anasina Gray-Barberio, Aiv Puglielli, Sarah Mansfield, among others.

The letter comes at a time when Yunus remains unwilling to commit to a definite timeframe five months after announcing that the next general elections would be held between December this year and June next year.

Iran lawmakers ratify partnership treaty with Russia

AFP, Tehran

The Iranian parliament ratified a 20-year strategic partnership treaty with Russia yesterday, state media reported, consolidating closer ties between the two countries amid growing tensions with the West.

The deal, which was signed by Presidents Masoud Pashayev and Vladimir Putin in January, was already ratified by Russia's State Duma last month.

It passed the Iranian parliament with 191 votes in favour, eight against and three abstentions among the 212 members present, Iran's official IRNA news agency reported.

The treaty provides for joint efforts to counter common security threats but stops short of a mutual defence agreement.