

Indonesia ferry fire kills five as hundreds rescued

AFP, Jakarta

An Indonesian ferry fire killed at least five people yesterday, the country's coast guard said, while more than 200 others were saved with many jumping overboard to flee the huge blaze.

The KM Barcelona 5 ferry was engulfed in flames off the coast of Sulawesi island, Indonesia's Maritime Security Agency said, just weeks after at least 19 people were killed when a ferry sank off the popular resort island of Bali.

"Five people were reported dead, two of whom have yet to be identified. Meanwhile, 284 people have been evacuated safely," the agency, also known as Bakamla, said in a statement.

The fire broke out at the ferry's stern as it was on its way to Manado, the capital of North Sulawesi province, with some passengers jumping overboard with life jackets, the statement said.

Fishermen also helped evacuate the victims to nearby islands, the statement added. Those injured were taken to the nearest health facility, Bakamla added.

The accident happened about one hour away from the resort town of Likupang, in the northern tip of Sulawesi, Manado search and rescue agency head, George Leo Mercy Randang, told AFP.

A video released by the Manado agency showed a Bakamla vessel spraying water on the ferry, which was still emitting thin black smoke.

"What is important is that we are prioritising rescue before nightfall," George told AFP, without confirming the total number of people who were on board the ferry.

Neither he nor Bakamla gave a cause for the fire.

ON THIS DAY LAST YEAR

2nd day of curfew, clashes continue

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also confirmed that six others, who had been wounded in earlier violence, succumbed to their injuries. With these deaths, the total toll rose to at least 140 since July 16.

Most fatalities were caused by gunshot wounds. The previous night, the government extended the countrywide curfew until further notice in an attempt to curb the ongoing unrest over the quota reform protests.

In the capital, clashes erupted in Signboard, Chittagong Road, Shanarpur, and Dhania areas when law enforcers attempted to clear the Dhaka Chattogram highway. Witnesses said police and Rab personnel opened fire indiscriminately. By 5:00pm, joint forces managed to clear the roadblocks and reopen the highway. DMCH confirmed the arrival of five bodies and admitted over 70 injured from the affected areas – many with bullet wounds.

In Bashundhara, confrontations occurred throughout the day between police and several hundred protesters at the main gate on Pragati Sarani.

In Mirpur, a group of agitators vandalised four Dhaka Mass Transit Company Limited vehicles near the Metro Rail Station at Mirpur-10 around 3:30pm. Around 15 attackers targeted the vehicles during an inspection by officials.

Elsewhere, two were killed and at least 22 injured in Narayanganj and Narsingdi.

In Narayanganj, an unidentified youth was brought dead to the 300-bed hospital in the morning. Eleven more with bullet wounds were admitted. Seven others, including a critically injured 16-year-old, were taken to a private facility in the Signboard area.

In Narsingdi, an unidentified 18-year-old was brought dead to the Sadar Hospital in the afternoon. Doctors suspected rubber bullets as the cause.



A father wailing in agony as he rushes his bullet-hit son to a hospital in Matuail, Dhaka, on the afternoon of July 21, 2024.

FILE PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

Throughout the day, agitators tried to block the Dhaka-Aricha highway between Radio Colony and Genda, but police foiled their efforts.

Meanwhile, the Supreme Court curtailed the quota in public service to 7 percent, down from 56 percent. The court ordered that 93 percent of civil service positions be filled based on merit. It also overturned a previous High Court judgement reinstating quotas. The law minister said a circular would be issued soon.

Later in the day, three coordinators, Nahid Islam, Sarjis Alam, and Hasnat Abdullah, suspended the shutdown programme for 48 hours, demanding withdrawal of the curfew, reopening of universities, restoration of internet services, and safety for protest coordinators.

However, other coordinators rejected the decision and reaffirmed their commitment to a nine-point demand. Allegations emerged that Nahid had

been abducted and tortured and that the suspension announcement was made under duress. Nahid later confirmed he was picked up by plainclothes men, tortured into unconsciousness, and dumped under a bridge in Purbachal.

The US State Department issued a travel advisory, warning against travel to Bangladesh due to the unrest and allowing voluntary departure of non-essential embassy staff and families.

Political reactions also poured in. Jatiya Party Chairperson GM Quader claimed the Supreme Court verdict reflected the government's will, not the students'. BNP Secretary General Mirza Fakhurul Islam Alamgir urged the government to resign, alleging it was using state media to defame the movement.

UN Human Rights Chief Volker Türk expressed grave concern, condemned the attacks on students, and called for an impartial investigation.

Five-member search panel proposed

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of the Opposition, the Speaker, the deputy speaker from the opposition bench, and a representative from the third-largest party in parliament.

Most parties have agreed to various aspects of the proposal, said Riaz, but some reservations remain.

The BNP, for instance, said it would decide after internal discussions.

The Jamaat-e-Islami accepted the size of the committee but insisted that the chief adviser must be selected through consensus, not ranked-choice voting.

The National Citizen Party supported the framework but argued the chief adviser should not come from the judiciary.

According to the commission, the Speaker will supervise the search committee. Within 24 hours of its formation, the committee must invite nominations for chief adviser from registered political parties, parliamentary parties, and independent MPs. Each party or independent MP may nominate one individual.

The Parliament Secretariat will receive nominations for the next 24 hours. Within 72 hours, the committee will meet to review all proposed and eligible names, and select one individual to be appointed by the president.

If the committee fails to decide within 120 hours, the ruling alliance and the main opposition will each propose three names, and the third-largest party will submit two. All names will be made public by the Speaker.

Each major bloc will choose one nominee from the other's list, and one from the smaller parties' list. The nominee receiving the most selections

will become chief adviser.

As a last resort, the committee will use a ranked-choice vote, with the president appointing the final candidate based on that result.

This is the fourth proposal from the commission on how to appoint the chief adviser, amid persistent deadlock. On July 13, it had proposed a 13-member search committee. Earlier suggestions included a seven-member panel and an 11-member parliamentary committee, and even a return to the retired chief justice model under the 13th amendment.

Speaking to reporters, BNP Standing Committee member Salahuddin Ahmed said, "A consensus has already formed that the judiciary should remain outside the caretaker system."

On the issue of holding multiple top positions, he said, "There is near unanimity that the prime minister and Leader of the House can be the same person, as their roles are closely linked. But debate continues on whether that person should also be party chief."

He added, "To illustrate, in the UK, the cradle of democracy, the party chief often becomes the prime minister.... But the opposite must also be allowed."

Salahuddin reiterated BNP's openness to dialogue and urged all parties to balance global norms with local realities.

Jamaat Naye-e-Ameer Syed Abdullah Muhammad Taher said his party could support a five- or seven-member search committee, but only if the chief adviser is chosen unanimously.

He warned that ranked-choice voting "would open the door to negative political practices" and proposed appointing the outgoing chief justice if

the committee fails to reach consensus.

Taher supported allowing the same person to serve as prime minister and Leader of the House but not party chief, saying that would "ensure a better balance of power and allow the emergence of alternative leadership."

Ariful Islam Adib, senior joint convener of the National Citizen Party, echoed that concern. "One of the main reasons we fail to develop alternative leadership is that a single individual holds three critical roles," he said. "This not only blurs the line between state and party but extends party loyalty into institutions like the judiciary."

Regarding the caretaker system, he said his party earlier proposed a five-, seven-, or 11-member selection committee that would take nominations from the ruling, opposition, and third-largest parties. He also stressed that the judiciary must remain out of the selection process.

Prof Riaz said the commission has been discussing the formation of an upper house in parliament for several days. While there is no disagreement on establishing it, there are two differing views on the process of forming it. "Political parties have entrusted the commission to decide on how the upper house should be formed," he noted.

A decision regarding the matter will be finalised soon, he added.

For the upper house, some parties, including the Jamaat and NCP, want a proportional representation system, in which parties gain seats in proportion to the number of votes cast for them.

Others, including the BNP and its allies, want the upper house seats to be distributed as per the proportion of seats in the lower house of parliament.

Audits expose hidden bad loans

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Islamic Bank, and Exim Bank. The findings suggest that these banks have been submitting questionable data to regulators for years.

The forensic audits, which examined the banks' financial statements up to September of last year, paint a starkly different picture from the official records. While Bangladesh Bank's reports indicated the six lenders held a combined Tk 35,044 crore in NPLs, the international auditors' assessment places the figure at a staggering Tk 147,595 crore.

The discrepancy is particularly glaring for three banks. First Security Islamic Bank's NPL ratio was found to be 96.37 percent, a dramatic increase from the 21.48 percent it reported. Similarly, Union Bank's NPL ratio stands at 97.80 percent, compared to the previously stated 44 percent, and Global Islamic Bank's is 95 percent, up from 27 percent.

The reviews also uncovered a significant capital shortfall. The combined provision shortfall for all six banks has reached Tk 115,672 crore until September of last year, according to the AQR reports.

These revelations have spurred the central bank to take decisive action. Under the newly enacted Bank Resolution Ordinance 2025, a framework established following the political transition last year, five of the six banks were slated for merger. The new ordinance grants the central bank expanded authority to resolve distressed financial institutions.

ICB Islamic Bank has been excluded from the merger plans due to the presence of foreign investment.

As of September last year, the six banks held investments or loans worth Tk 1,93,537 crore against deposits of Tk 1,60,030 crore, underscoring the pressure on their balance sheets, according to the AQRs.

A senior BB official alleged that these banks had been "providing false and fabricated data to the central bank for years during the previous government regime".

Banking expert Md Arfan Ali, former managing director of Bank Asia, said the AQRs were a much-needed move to expose the true health of the Islamic banks.

"This will help determine whether the banks can continue independently or the government needs to take them over temporarily with capital support and later transfer them back to private ownership or to other investors," he said. He stressed the need for strict loan recovery mechanisms, particularly against willful defaulters, and stronger regulatory controls to prevent future crises. "Strong regulatory control is needed to prevent such practices in the future."

KPMG audited First Security Islamic, Global Islamic, and Union Bank, while Ernst & Young audited Exim Bank, Social Islamic, and ICB Islamic Bank. The audit firms submitted their findings to the central bank earlier this year, and The Daily Star has reviewed copies of the reports.

MERGER SLOWED

After the fall of the previous regime last year, the central bank has already restructured the boards of the five banks

slated for merger. Four of them – First Security Islamic Bank, Social Islamic Bank, Union Bank, and Global Islamic Bank – had seen significant influence from S Alam Group, a business conglomerate known for its ties to the previous ruling party.

The formal merger process began this month under the Bank Resolution Ordinance, but differences over Exim Bank and Social Islamic Bank's inclusion have slowed progress.

Both banks have pushed back. Md Nazrul Islam Swapan, chairman of Exim Bank, said the bank's financials are stronger than those of the other institutions and that the merger decision has triggered fresh deposit withdrawals.

Md Rezaul Haque, director and former chairman of Social Islamic Bank, echoed the concern, saying the bank could recover on its own and should be excluded from the merger plan.

Despite the resistance, officials at the central bank confirmed that work is underway to execute the merger under a newly created dedicated department, the Bank Restructuring and Resolution Unit.

However, one senior official at the unit, speaking on condition of anonymity, told The Daily Star that the process has slowed due to the central bank's lack of prior experience with such a large-scale restructuring.

Mohammad Abdul Mannan, independent director and chairman of First Security Islamic Bank, welcomed the move. "It's a good decision by the regulator," he said. "But the process should be expedited."

DU, JU set for Sept polls

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eligibility, the commission clarified that students from the 2018-19 academic session whose master's results have already been published will not be eligible to vote or contest in the DUCSU or hall union elections.

Others who will not be included in the voter list are 385 of the named DU students, among 500, in a case filed with Shahabag Police Station over an attack on July 15 during the uprising last year. Around 126 others who were suspended based on a university probe will also not be allowed to vote.

JAHANGIRNAGAR UNIVERSITY

JU authorities recently announced a fresh election date – September 11 – after deferring the polls previously scheduled for July 31.

Seeking anonymity, a JU faculty member said final decisions on disciplinary actions against the students involved in attacks on July protesters last year will be made by August 4, and the election schedule will be announced the same day.

A JU committee is supposed to complete its probe into July mass uprising related allegations against faculty members and staffers by August 31. The investigation report will be sent to the International Crimes Tribunal in early September. The polls date was set, considering all these issues, said the faculty member.

Student organisations at JU appear divided over timing of the polls.

Chhatra Dal and Gonotantrik Chhatra Sangsad insist that the Chhatra League activists involved in attacks on July protesters must be brought to justice before polls are held.

Zahir Uddin Babor, convener of JCD unit at JU, said, "The university administration has yet to bring to

book the BCL activists involved in the attacks. They still occupy seats in dormitories, and many teachers and staffers who backed them hold key posts. A fair and acceptable election is not possible under such circumstances."

On the other hand, Amartya Roy, president of JU Chhatra Union, said, "We view the deferral of polls as a calculated move. It suggests that the administration and certain student bodies don't want the election at this time. If the polls are postponed again, it will be seen as a repetition of past tactics."

CHITTAGONG UNIVERSITY

Following students' demands, the administration formed a committee on January 4 to draft guidelines for Chittagong University Central Students Union (CUCSU) election.

The committee was supposed to submit its report by January 26 but failed.

On February 17, the authorities held a meeting with student groups and pledged to prepare a CUCSU constitution based on their observations. The draft constitution now awaits Syndicate's approval.

CU Pro-VC Prof Kamal Uddin said election guidelines will be presented at a Syndicate meeting on July 24. "We aim to hold the polls by September and are moving forward with that target in mind."

Roman Rahman, member secretary of Student Rights Council, said, "We held meetings [with university authorities] and heard promises but there is still no election roadmap."

Sudipto Chakma, president of CU Chhatra Union, said the

Govt to import

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The government will procure high-quality grain at competitive prices, according to the statement.

In recent government purchases, wheat was priced at \$270 per tonne. As per this rate, the planned imports would cost about \$200 million.

The agreement will enhance trust and trade cooperation between the two countries, ultimately benefiting both nations, said Food Adviser Ali Imam Majumder.

Bangladesh currently exports over \$8 billion worth of goods annually to the US, its single largest export market, while imports from the US stand at just over \$2 billion.

Subsequently, US President Donald Trump imposed a 35 percent tariff on Bangladeshi goods – significantly higher than the rates applied to Vietnam (20 percent) and Indonesia (19 percent), the country's main competitors on apparel export to the American market.

To help narrow the trade deficit, Bangladesh is also planning to purchase 14 Boeing aircraft from the US.

The negotiations with Boeing are at an advanced stage, although the delivery timeline depends on the company's production capacity, said Commerce Secretary Mahbubur Rahman last week.

The total value of the aircraft deal has not been disclosed yet.

"We are trying to reduce the trade gap between Bangladesh and the US by increasing imports from America," Rahman said, adding that his ministry has been consulting with business leaders from the crucial garment and pharmaceutical sectors as well as trade experts ahead of the negotiations.

Bangladeshi officials are preparing for a third round of talks in Washington next week with the view to sealing a reciprocal tariff agreement before the new rates take effect.

The government also plans to include private sector representatives in the upcoming talks, a move business has recently advocated for.

In addition to government-led purchases, private sector importers are being encouraged to source more goods such as soybeans from the US.

In April, Chief Adviser Muhammad Yunus wrote to Trump offering to increase imports of US cotton, wheat, LNG and soybeans.

A similar offer was made by Commerce Adviser Sk Bashir Uddin, who is leading the Bangladeshi delegation in the talks, to United States Trade Representative Jamieson Greer.

The MoU for wheat import was signed by Md Abul Hasanath Humayun Kabir, director general of the Directorate General of Food, and Joseph K Sowers, regional vice president of the US Wheat Associates.

US Ambassador to Bangladesh Tracey Ann Jacobson, Rahman, and other senior officials from both sides were present during the signing.