

We're now ready to hand over power to elected representatives

Yunus tells expats in KL
DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENT

Chief Adviser Prof Muhammad Yunus yesterday said the interim government is prepared to transfer power to an elected administration.

"We are now ready to hand over power to elected representatives. I've already announced the election timeline. The government is working to ensure voting rights for expatriates in this election," he said while addressing a views-exchange meeting with Bangladeshi expatriates in Kuala Lumpur.

Earlier in a televised address marking one year of the July uprising, Prof Yunus announced that the general election would be held in February.

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A low-pressure system, coupled with high tides, triggered unusual tidal surges at St Martin's Island, leading to erosion along its northern and western beaches. The photo was taken recently.

PHOTO: COURTESY OF MOHAMMAD SOHEL

Polls cannot be held in February

Says NCP's Patwary
STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Chief Coordinator of the National Citizen Party Nasiruddin Patwary yesterday said the upcoming election cannot be held in February next year.

Speaking at the National Youth Conference, organised to mark International Youth Day at the Krishibid Institution in Dhaka's Farmgate, the NCP leader said, "The election date has been announced for February, but it cannot happen then.

"If the polls are held before completing reforms, the government must return the lives of my brothers who were killed in the uprising..." he added.

Patwary alleged that the election was being planned under the same "fascist" constitution and system.

Addressing the event as the chief guest, NCP Convener Nahid Islam said, "The equation is not yet complete. Those who think they've figured it out already are on the wrong track. We made concessions last year, and in the July Declaration, but in the July Charter we will not give even a one percent concession.

"We will only take part in the election after ensuring the objectives of the July Charter are fulfilled," he added.

He also warned that without unity within their ranks, another 1/11 could occur, adding, "We want elections, but there must be change. There will be no compromise on the July Charter. No political party will be able to come to power without implementing its pledges."

Move to send peace mission to Myanmar

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Rohingya refugees and faces challenges in addressing Rohingya trafficking through the sea.

Anwar Ibrahim said he commends Bangladesh for taking the initiative in multilateral forums in New York, Kolkata, and Malaysia.

"I believe the close relationship between Malaysia and Bangladesh will continue to be forged with respect, trust, and a great commitment to bring about mutual progress, not only for the welfare of the people of both countries, but also for the peace, stability, and prosperity of the region," he said.

Prof Yunus is on a three-day visit to Malaysia at the invitation of Anwar Ibrahim, who was the first to visit Bangladesh after the formation of the interim government on August 8 last year.

Earlier, Prof Yunus was accorded a red-carpet welcome with a guard of honour as he arrived at the Malaysian prime minister's office.

The two leaders first held a one-on-one meeting, preceded by a restricted session with select senior officials.

Later, they led delegation-level talks covering a wide range of bilateral issues, including trade, investment, migration, energy cooperation, the blue economy, education, and cultural exchange.

STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP

Bangladesh and Malaysia have reaffirmed their commitment to transform Bangladesh-Malaysia relations into a deeper, future-orientated strategic partnership,

according to a statement from the chief adviser's office.

Bangladesh and Malaysia yesterday signed five Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) and three Exchange of Notes in diverse areas of cooperation on defence, energy, education, investment, diplomatic training etc.

"Our two countries share a deep bond rooted in history, religion, and cultural empathy. Malaysia is a unique partner of Bangladesh, particularly in human resources, trade, and people-to-people contact," the chief adviser said at the start of the delegation-level talks.

He emphasised the need to boost trade and expand cooperation in migrant worker welfare, education, and efforts to resolve the Rohingya crisis.

The leaders discussed Bangladesh's aspiration to deepen engagement with ASEAN, including its bid for Sectoral Dialogue Partner status, and sought Malaysia's support during its ASEAN chairmanship.

Yunus invited Malaysia to participate in the upcoming Conference on the Rohingya Crisis in Cox's Bazar and the UN-led international conference on the Rohingya issue in New York in September.

On economic matters, the two sides agreed to accelerate negotiations on a Bangladesh-Malaysia Free Trade Agreement, strengthen investment cooperation through Special Economic Zones, and operationalise

the Malaysia-Bangladesh Joint Business Council.

Highlighting the growing bilateral trade imbalance, Dhaka sought greater market access for Bangladeshi products such as medicines, batteries, footwear, ceramics and jute.

Bangladesh sought Malaysia's support in developing its Blue Economy and Halal industry, including establishing a Halal Economic Zone outside Dhaka, and expressed interest in joining the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP).

RECRUITMENT

Prof Yunus thanked Malaysia for facilitating the entry of nearly 8,000 Bangladeshi workers, who could not enter Malaysia because it had frozen foreign labour recruitment on May 31 last year, and for introducing multiple-entry visas, allowing workers to return home during emergencies without risking their jobs.

Both sides underscored the importance of transparent and fair recruitment processes to reduce costs and safeguard worker welfare, the CA office statement said.

Currently, there are about 1.2 million Bangladeshi workers in Malaysia, but some 4,00,000 of them are undocumented, and the recruitment cost for the Bangladeshis between 2022 and 2024 ranged between Tk 4,50,000 and Tk 6,00,000, much higher than that of Tk 78,000 fixed by the two governments.

At the delegation-level talks,

Expatriates' Welfare Adviser Asif Nazrul urged Malaysia to take steps to regularise the undocumented Bangladeshi workers.

He also requested recruiting more skilled and professional Bangladeshis, including doctors and engineers, noting that Bangladesh's state-run agency BOESL is capable of handling recruitment for Malaysian companies.

He also called for opportunities for Bangladeshi security guards and caregivers.

Malaysian officials confirmed that Bangladeshi workers will now be entitled to the same social security benefits as Malaysian workers and will be able to lodge complaints in Bangla.

Anwar Ibrahim said he places Bangladesh as an important partner because Bangladeshi workers have been instrumental in contributing to the development of both countries.

"You have made some proposals and were given priority, particularly to assist the stranded workers," he said, adding that Malaysia has continued to have energy cooperation with Petronas and with Axiata in the telecommunications sector.

"Now, we want to strengthen this into halal industry, STEM, research, and semiconductors."

Bangladesh also requested "Graduate Pass" visas for thousands of its students in Malaysian universities. Currently, up to 10,000 Bangladeshi students are studying in Malaysia.

Grounded planes put Biman's schedule

FROM PAGE 1

Aviation experts said technical issues are common in any airline; however, the recurring nature of the problems has raised concerns about the safety standards and maintenance practices at Biman.

According to Biman, over last 30 days, several international flights to Abu Dhabi, Bangkok, Dammam, Singapore, and Kuala Lumpur have faced problems mid air.

A plane had to return due to a malfunctioning toilet.

Allegations have been raised that engineers working at Biman are not doing their jobs properly. Multiple sources attributed the crisis to improper execution of scheduled "checks" and "servicing," a shortage of experienced engineers, and a lack of spare parts.

However, a Biman official said employees in the engineering and maintenance section are overburdened and fatigued due to a shortage of manpower. The airline authorities have formed several investigation committees this month over the incidents. They have also made comprehensive technical inspections mandatory before any aircraft can take off.

On August 10, a Boeing 787 was grounded at Rome's Leonardo da Vinci Airport due to a fault in its flaps. With no alternative flight available, 262 passengers were accommodated in hotels at Biman's expense.

The following day, on August 11, a Dash-8 aircraft returned to Dhaka after 20 minutes into the flight to Chattogram due to an excessive rise in cabin temperature. Passengers were later flown to Chattogram in another aircraft.

On August 6, a Bangkok-bound Boeing 737 returned from Myanmar airspace after excessive vibration was detected in one of its engines.

On August 7, an Abu Dhabi-bound Boeing returned to Dhaka after an hour due to three malfunctioning toilets.

On August 9, after arriving at Singapore's Changi Airport, a

Boeing aircraft suffered a technical problem.

A senior pilot of Biman, requesting anonymity, said two Boeing 737 aircraft, taken on lease in 2010, are suffering frequent technical issues despite having had a "D-check" maintenance done at Biman's hangar recently.

"Concerned pilots reported 13 to 14 issues about these two aircraft to the engineering department. Officials said they would fix the problems, but the day after repairs, two flights were forced to return to Dhaka due to excessive engine vibration," the pilot said.

Kazi Wahidul Alam, an aviation expert and a former member of Biman's board, warned that if such a situation continues, the possibility of a disaster cannot be ruled out.

"At a time when the carrier needs to rebuild its reputation, these repeated incidents are eroding passengers' confidence," he added.

According to Biman, on July 16, a Boeing 787-9 was grounded at Dubai International Airport due to a "wheel defect". It returned home 30 hours late.

On July 30, a mechanical fault left a Boeing 737 stranded for six hours at Sharjah Airport.

A senior Biman pilot, wishing anonymity, said, "This is the right time to critically assess how long Biman should continue to rely heavily on the Boeing Component Services Program (CSP), or whether it should move toward developing its own spare parts management strategy based on sound engineering and financial analysis."

Raoshan Kabir admitted the frequency of recent problems was worrying, but insisted passenger safety was never compromised.

"Even if a small issue is detected, an aircraft will not fly until the problem is fully resolved," he said. "Our skilled engineers are investigating and fixing each incident properly."

He, however, said each technical fault is different, making it harder to identify the cause.

Businesses for deferment of LDC graduation by 6yrs

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Manufacturers & Exporters Association of Bangladesh (LFMEAB), said while entry to the LDC club is voluntary, graduation is not.

"That's the first point. Second, even if we set aside arguments about whether the data is correct or manipulated, the three criteria -- once met -- do not necessarily mean readiness," he said.

From the private sector's perspective, particularly in footwear and leather goods worth \$1.8 billion in exports, Bangladesh risks "severe social and economic disruptions" without deliberate mitigation measures, he said.

"As business people, we look at balance sheets, profit and loss, and competitiveness. We do not believe it is in Bangladesh's best interest to put ego before economic realities. No other country has as much to lose as Bangladesh."

"Graduation shouldn't be a leap of faith, but a controlled landing," he added.

Asif Ibrahim, vice chairman of Newage Group of Industries, said Bangladesh is "certainly not ready" for the transition.

"There are many points that can be attributed to our non-readiness... We stand to lose duty-free, quota-free market access under the GSP EBA scheme," he said.

Md Fazlul Hoque, managing director of Plummy Fashions Ltd, said Bangladesh "certainly needs some sort of extension" and it is "very much possible" if Dhaka pursues it.

"Our biggest competitors, like Vietnam and India, have already secured FTAs. India just signed one with the UK, the third-biggest market for Bangladesh, and Vietnam has FTAs with the EU and Canada. Meanwhile, Bangladesh is only negotiating with Bhutan, with no real initiative for our biggest markets post-graduation," he added.

Mahfuz Anam, editor and publisher of The Daily Star, said in a video message that LDC graduation

is "very directly related to the future of Bangladesh" and marks a "tremendous achievement" built over many years.

Pointing out that Bangladesh will have to compete with much more advanced economies, he asked, "Is Bangladesh prepared, is the economy prepared, is the private sector prepared?"

These questions, he added, are "unfortunately not being addressed".

Mustafizur Rahman, distinguished fellow of the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD), said graduation is both a testament to the country's progress and a wake-up call for urgent action.

"Graduation means that Bangladesh has attained some modicum of capacity," he said in an online interview on August 10 as part of the roundtable, pointing to the UN's criteria -- GNI per capita, the Human Asset Index, and the Economic Vulnerability Index -- all of which Bangladesh has met. "Mortality rates have fallen, literacy has risen, and disaster management has improved. We have overcome some major impediments to development."

The opportunities, he noted, include a stronger global image, improved creditworthiness, and greater investor confidence. "If a foreign direct investor comes, they will think this country has graduated from the LDC group; it must have internal capacity, otherwise it could not have done it."

Yet, the challenges are equally daunting. Foremost among them, the loss of international support measures such as preferential market access and TRIPS-related waivers for pharmaceuticals.

"Seventy percent of our exports enjoy duty-free access. After graduation, these will face tariffs in many markets, putting enormous pressure on competitiveness," Rahman warned.

without licensing fees, but after 2026, "the price of something like insulin could go up seven or eight times", Rahman said.

Beyond trade, compliance costs in labour standards, environmental protection, and intellectual property rights will rise sharply. This, Rahman argued, will require a two-pronged approach: the private sector boosting productivity and meeting compliance requirements, and the government ensuring a more efficient business environment.

"Interest rates, port turnaround time, customs clearance -- these directly affect competitiveness. If our institutions work better, if the cost of doing business comes down, our exporters can survive without special preferences," he said.

MA Razzaque, chairman of Research and Policy Integration for Development (RAPID), called the shift "perhaps the most challenging development transition we have experienced as a nation".

Despite a 30-40 percent currency depreciation, real competitiveness has not improved as the country is known for weak infrastructure and high cost of doing business, he said. "Any extension after LDC graduation is a big bonus, and any country should try its best to obtain it."

He warned that Vietnam has already secured duty-free EU access through an FTA, while Bangladesh "did not take proper notice". The priority, he said, is to drive reforms that enhance export competitiveness.

Prof Selim Raihan of Dhaka University's economics department said the issue was initially approached "with a celebratory tone" without grasping the realities. "Five or six years ago... there were hopes that many things would be done, but not much happened," he said.

Prof Raihan, also the executive director of the South Asian Network on Economic Modeling (Sanem), raised many questions: Are we confident that over the next five or six years, we will make a difference?

What makes us confident? Are we looking at fundamental issues?

"Are the political players, such as the political parties and bureaucrats, aligned with the kind of discussions and challenges we have raised so far?"

Noting that Bangladesh is the only LDC to have used the TRIPS waiver extensively in pharmaceuticals, he suggested, "We must involve the right stakeholders in these discussions to get their support and innovate given the challenging global context."

Abdul Muktedir, managing director of Incepta Pharmaceuticals, cited bureaucratic delays in registering new drugs -- with more than 1,000 applications pending -- as proof of a lack of preparation. "Can you imagine we had to wait more than two years for a simple Drug Control Committee meeting in the ministry to get new drugs registered in the country, so that people could benefit from lower pricing?"

"There is no denying the fact that we need more time. We must pursue this strongly," he added.

He also warned about the magnitude of difference in prices, saying a tablet costing \$7 can end up being sold at \$1,000.

Nafis-Ud-Doula, a director of Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA), called for immediate UN talks to seek an eight-year deferment. He noted the economy of Nepal, which is also graduating, is different from Bangladesh because it is not too dependent on export.

Anwar Hossain, CEO of Standard Group, stressed building institutional market access capacity. "If we compare our marketing capabilities, we are far behind India, Sri Lanka, Vietnam, and other competitors. We need to start immediately on building institutional market access capacity."

"Whether graduation happens automatically or we get an extension -- even if it is, if we do not start today, we will remain in the same place even after six years," he added.

doors of prosperity are open," he added.

The party members must be careful that no one can accuse the BNP of rigging the vote the way the Awami League did, said BNP Secretary General Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir.

"No one should be able to point fingers at us and say that we took it by force like the Awami League did. No one should be able to say that. This is very important because now that the big party, the Awami League, is not there, we have to take that responsibility and work to ensure a completely neutral and fair election."

If something goes wrong in the country, the BNP is blamed for it.

"Since BNP will run the state, they try to malign this party and bring it down as much as possible," he added.

Swechhasebak Dal Central President SM Jilani presided over the event, while BNP Publicity Secretary Sultan Salahuddin Tuku, Ganosambhati Andolun Chief Coordinator Zonayed Saki and Nationalist Democratic Movement Chairman Bobby Hajjaj also spoke at the event among others.