

'Feels like Eid'

BNP grassroots invigorated by Tarique's speech

SAJJAD HOSSAIN

BNP leaders and activists are energised by the party's Acting Chairman Tarique Rahman's speech, which has brought new hope and clear direction ahead of the upcoming election.

For the past 17 years, grassroots leaders and activists had mainly heard Tarique's messages through video or written statements. Hearing him speak in person for the first time in years made many party members emotional and more confident.

Hearing the party's second in-command speak directly after a long time sent a positive signal, said Mohammad Mojibur Rahman, a professor at Dhaka University's Institute of Education and Research.

"His speech came at an important time ahead of the election. Now it depends on how leaders and activists understand and follow his message," he said.

Internal problems and divisions within the party could be resolved following the speech, and his guidance could also help reduce dissatisfaction over party nominations, said Al Masud Hasanuzzaman, former professor of government and politics at Jahangirnagar University.

"The speech made grassroots leaders and activists more confident and enthusiastic," he added.

Many grassroots activists shared their reactions after Tarique's speech.

BNP activist Jasim Uddin from Pirojganj upazila in Thakurgaon said he could not see Tarique clearly due to the large crowd, but hearing his speech made him happy.

"He asked us to stay united and walk the difficult path ahead together - his words inspired me," Jasim said.

Jubo Dal leader Didar Mia from Manikganj said he was excited to see Tarique even for a brief moment.

"He spoke and used words in a way that reminded me of Khaleda Zia. He asked us not to fall into any trap or provocation," he said.

Tarique urged party leaders and activists to remain patient and united, setting aside internal problems ahead of the election, said Kawser Hossain, activist from Kuakata Poura BNP.

Hearing Tarique speak in person removed longstanding uncertainty among party members, said Chhakra Dal leader Rashed Khan from Munshiganj.

"Our leader has returned. This will strengthen the party's organisational activities," he said.

Tarique's return also addressed critics who had questioned his absence, said BNP leader Shakil Hossain from Gaffargaon in Mymensingh.

"He spoke about equality for all people, regardless of religion or identity, and warned us to remain cautious so

that no internal disorder is created," he said.

Tarique Rahman focused on public safety, especially for women, said Parveen Akter, a BNP activist from Dhaka's Shyamnagar ward.

"He said the country is not safe for



He [Tarique Rahman] spoke and used words in a way that reminded me of Khaleda Zia. He asked us not to fall into any trap or provocation. Didar Mia, Jubo Dal leader from Manikganj

everyone right now and that an elected government is needed," she said.

The large gathering itself demonstrated BNP's strength, said Jubo Dal activist Kawser Hossain from Keraniganj.

He began his speech with the words 'Dear Bangladesh', which shows the party puts the country first," he said.

"We need to explain the party's plans to voters and address our weaknesses," he said.

Many party members said his return and speech would give the BNP a strong push in its efforts to win the polls.

Meanwhile, grassroots leaders and activists from across the country gathered in large numbers to see Tarique, saying the moment marked the end of years of waiting.

Sixty-year-old Ruhul Amin arrived in Dhaka from Bhaluka in Mymensingh yesterday morning at 4:00am.

"I saw Khaleda Zia at a programme in Mymensingh in 2008. Today, her son Tarique is returning, so I came to see him. It was very cold, and at my age, it was difficult. But I can endure this much hardship for the party," he added.

Toyeb Ali Babu, the upazila BNP general secretary from Nilphamari, said he reached the venue around 4:00am after travelling overnight by train.

"Today feels like Eid for us," he said.

Arifil Islam, a BNP supporter from Nilphamari, said: "It's my first time in Dhaka. I don't know the city. I will try to see my leader."

A bride for 17 days, Salma's life ends

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body from the hospital.

Belal received treatment at Lakshmipur Sadar Hospital, while Samia received treatment with her sister in Dhaka.

Salma's mother Nazma, and their two sons - four-month-old Abir and six-year-old Habib - managed to escape without major injuries.

Speaking to The Daily Star

"They were preparing for the formal reception to be held in Ramadan. And then this happened.... What was the fault of my daughters?"

Belal Hossain, father of Salma

yesterday, Belal said Salma was an HSC first-year student at Bhabaniganj Degree College and also a kindergarten teacher. She married Yasin Arif, who has been living in Oman since 2019, just 17 days ago.

"They were preparing for the formal reception to be held in Ramadan. And then this happened.... What was the fault of my daughters?"

They [the miscreants] locked the house because they wanted to kill us... Both doors of my house were locked. I had to break open the tin fence to get my wife and children out."

Belal broke down as he recalled, "The fire was so intense that despite hearing my daughter's cries, I could not save her. What can be more tragic for a father?"

On December 23, he filed a case with Lakshmipur Sadar Model Police Station against unnamed accused in connection with the incident.

The station's Officer in Charge Md Wahid Parvez said they recovered two locks from garbage near the house. "We're trying to identify those responsible and investigating whether Belal had any rivals."

'I have a plan'

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The BNP leader also called for a country that embraces all citizens, from the hill tracts to the plains, regardless of religion or identity.

Tarique's main goal is to create a Bangladesh where everyone can leave their home and return safely.

Emphasising law and order, he urged people to remain calm and reject violence or provocation, regardless of political affiliation or religious identity.

In his 15-minute speech, Tarique said they want peace in the country three times.

"Peace and security must be ensured for everyone, of every age, profession and faith," he said.

He mentioned Sharif Osman bin Hadi, Inquilab Monch's spokesman, who was gunned down about a fortnight ago.

Tarique said Hadi wanted democracy and economic rights, and to repay the "debt of blood" owed to those martyred, the nation must build the Bangladesh they envisioned.

Without naming specific nations, Tarique warned that "agents of hegemonic powers are still plotting conspiracies".

He urged the public, especially the youth, to remain "patient and vigilant".

The responsibility lies with the younger generation to lead the country and build a beautiful nation on a democratic and economic foundation.

Urging calm in the face of "provocation", he concluded with a prayer, asking for divine guidance and mercy to help build the Bangladesh people aspire to.

"Let us all take a pledge together

that those who take charge of running the country in the coming days will try their best to govern in line with the righteousness of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH)."

He also sought prayers for his mother Khaleda Zia before ending the event.

"As a son, my heart is lying beside my mother's bed in that hospital room. But I cannot abandon the people who have given their lives for the people of this country. That is why I am standing here today to express my gratitude to you before going to the hospital."

With slogans alongside party leaders and supporters: "Let us all pledge together - together, we will work, together, we will build our Bangladesh," he added.

Earlier, in a welcome speech, BNP Secretary General Mirza Fakhrul

Islam Alamgir said: "Today is a day of joy for us. Under Tarique's leadership, we hope to win the election on February 12 and establish democracy and the rule of law."

He also sought prayers for his mother Khaleda Zia before ending the event.

After Fakhrul's remarks, the convener of the reception committee and a member of the party's standing committee, delivered brief speeches.

The other standing committee members present on the reception stage included Khandakar Mosharraf Hossain, Mirza Abbas, Gyeswar Chandra Roy, Dr Abdul Moyeen Khan, Nazrul Islam Khan, Amir Khosru Mahmud Chowdhury, Selima Rahman, Iqbal Hasan Mahmud, Hafiz Uddin Ahmed and AZM Zahid Hossain.

Leaders from different political parties, especially the partners of the party's simultaneous movement, were also present.

Shafiqur to run from Dhaka-15

Collects nomination form

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami Ameer Shafiqur Rahman established a collection form for Dhaka-15 constituency to participate in the 13th national parliamentary election and referendum scheduled for February 12 next year.

A delegation led by Jamaat's assistant secretary general Ehsanul Mahbub Jubayer collected the nomination paper from the returning officer's office in Dhaka's Agargaon in the morning.

Dhaka regional election officer Md Yunus Ali, also returning officer for Dhaka-13 and Dhaka-15 constituencies, said, "A nomination form was collected today [Thursday] on behalf of Jamaat Ameer Shafiqur Rahman for Dhaka-15 parliamentary seat."

Dhaka-15 comprises Kafrul area.

Other candidates who have collected nominations for Dhaka-15 are: Dr Ahammad Sajedul Huq Rubel (Communist Party of Bangladesh-CPB); Md Shafiqul Islam Khan (BNP); Alamgir Ferdous (NCP); SM Fazlul Haque (Islami Andolan Bangladesh); AKM Shafiqul Islam (Gonoform); Md Tanzil Islam, and Khan Shoaib Amanullah.

The deadline for submitting nomination papers is December 29.

Mother, son

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Doctors said last night that Khaleda's physical condition remains unchanged and that she is responding to treatment.

Her last meeting with Tarique was on May 6 this year, when she left London for Dhaka after receiving advanced treatment for nearly four months. She travelled to the UK on January 8.

The BNP chief has been undergoing treatment at Evercare Hospital since November 23, following the advice of her medical board after she was diagnosed with infections affecting her heart and lungs. She is also suffering from pneumonia.

Now 80, Khaleda has long battled multiple health complications, including liver cirrhosis, arthritis, diabetes, and ailments affecting her kidneys, lungs, heart and eyes. She has a permanent pacemaker and has previously undergone stent placement for her heart.

Lakhs of leaders and supporters from across the country participated in the programme organised to welcome Tarique.

To ensure wide coverage of Tarique's speech, the party installed around 1,000 microphones, enabling people gathered at various points in and around the venue to listen to his address.

In addition, around four dozen screens were set up across the area, allowing leaders and activists to follow the programme from different locations amid the massive crowd.

As Tarique's vehicle reached in from the stage, the entire venue echoed with slogans of "Tarique Zia" as leaders and activists chanted in unison, creating a charged and festive atmosphere.

headed towards Evercare Hospital to see his mother Khaleda Zia. Zubaida and Zaima were waiting for him there.

Thousands of BNP activists and supporters, lining both sides of the road leading to the hospital with party flags, banners and messages in hand, welcomed him with loud cheers and slogans.

Many were seen wearing T-shirts featuring Tarique's portrait and welcome messages.

Heavy security measures had been in place around the hospital and adjacent roads since morning, with members of the army, BGB, police and APBn deployed.

Tarique reached the hospital premises around 5:50pm. After visiting his ailing mother, Zubaida, Zaima and he left the hospital around 7:30pm to go home together.

They got off the red and green campaign bus in front of House-196 on Gulshan North Avenue around 8:40pm and disappeared through the white gates of their home in Bangladesh.

Today, Tarique is scheduled to visit Ziaur Rahman's grave in the afternoon and then move towards Savar to pay respects at the National Martyrs' Memorial.

Tarique returns to a roaring reception

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Shahjalal International Airport at 11:42am on a hazy December day, it marked Tarique's return to Bangladesh's political stage.

While the BNP had forbidden its followers from gathering near the airport, crowds eager to see Tarique thronged the streets all the way from Mohakhali.

The airport area was mostly devoid of public transport, and passengers commuting to and from the airport were seen walking with their luggage.

At the airport, Tarique, his wife Zubaida Rahman, and daughter Zaima Rahman, were received by senior BNP leaders, including Secretary General Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir and Standing Committee member Salahuddin Ahmed.

Right after landing, he made a phone call to Chief Adviser Prof Muhammad Yunus, thanking him for the security arrangements.

"How is your health? Please keep us in your prayers. On my and my family's behalf, I would like to thank you. You have made various arrangements, especially for my security. Thank you so much," he said, according to an audio clip shared on his Facebook page.

The family was then greeted by Zubaida's mother Syeda Iqbalmand Banu at the airport's VIP lounge at 11:56am.

Zaima, who had left Bangladesh as a 13-year-old, embraced her grandmother in an emotional reunion. The family captured the precious moment in photographs, with Zaima sitting between Tarique and Banu.

While being ushered out of the VIP lounge and towards the bullet-proof bus waiting for him, he took a little detour to a patch of green.

He bent down and unlaced his Oxford boots to feel the wet, dewy winter grass with his bare feet. Surrounded by cameras capturing his every moment, he scooped up a piece of earth and gripped it in his palm - his first time touching the soil of his motherland in 17 years.

Zubaida and Zaima left for their Gulshan residence in a white microbus, while Tarique climbed onto a campaign bus. The specially prepared vehicle, painted red and green, featured large portraits of Tarique flanked by his parents - former president and founder of the BNP Ziaur Rahman and party Chairperson Khaleda Zia. Slogans highlighting democracy and

political struggle were also displayed. Tarique took the front passenger seat of the bus, which headed towards his reception on the July 36 Expressway, also known as the 300 Foot Road - packed with party leaders and activists.

Members of the security forces formed a cordon around the bus and escorted it towards the stage. The vehicle moved slowly, owing to the huge turnout of party leaders and activists.

Standing near his seat in the bus, Tarique repeatedly waved and offered salutations to the assembled supporters. As he came into their sight, the air was filled with chants and cheers.

Many of them, especially those who came from outside Dhaka, had spent the night under the open sky, hoping to get a front-row view of their star.

It took Tarique over three hours to reach the reception stage from the airport. Members of his party's standing committee and leaders of allied parties were already waiting on stage for him -- so was a mammoth rally.

And Tarique came prepared. As he got on the stage, he moved aside the ornate cushioned chair

prepared for him and pulled up a plastic chair -- a symbolic gesture showing that he did not take his role as a leader lightly.

For the past 17 years, Tarique had delivered public addresses virtually -- over a webcam, from his study, his voice quiet and composed.

Yesterday, he rolled up his sleeves, gripped the sides of the podium, his voice thundering into the microphone, while a sea of people rejoiced at seeing their leader in the flesh for the first time in nearly two decades.

Drawing inspiration from Martin Luther King's famous saying, "I have a dream", Tarique announced in his maiden speech, "Dear brothers and sisters [...] I have a plan... for the people of my country, for my country."

The main road near the reception area was full of people as Tarique spoke.

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