

Six to hang for Ashulia killings

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when they were deliberately targeted by armed political activists and law enforcement personnel.

"The deliberate targeting of such persons strikes at the very foundation of humanity and the rule of law," said tribunal member Judge Md Manjurul Basit.

Those sentenced to death are former Ashulia Awami League general secretary and former independent lawmaker Muhammad Saiful Islam; former Ashulia police station officer-in-charge AFM Sayed Rony; sub-inspector Abdul Malek; assistant sub-inspector Bishwajit Saha; constable Mukul Chokdar; and local Jubo League leader Rony Bhuiyan.

Seven police officials were sentenced to life imprisonment: former Dhaka Range deputy inspector general Syed Nurul Islam; former Dhaka superintendent of police Md Asaduzzaman Ripon; additional superintendents of police Abdullah Kafi and Md Shahidul Islam; and inspectors Masudur Rahman, Nirmal Kumar Das and Arafat Hossain Arzu. Sub-inspector Arafat Uddin and assistant sub-inspector Kamrul Hasan were sentenced to seven years' imprisonment, while Sheikh Abzalul Haque was acquitted after turning an approver.

Of the 16 accused, eight are currently in custody — additional SPs Shahidul Islam and Kafi, inspector Arzu, sub-inspectors Arafat Uddin, Abdul Malek and Abzalul Haque, assistant sub-inspector Kamrul Hasan, and constable Mukul Chokdar. The remaining eight are absconding.

Defence lawyers for four of the convicted said they would appeal to the Appellate Division of the Supreme Court after receiving the full written judgment.

TRIBUNAL'S OBSERVATIONS

The tribunal said it imposed the death penalty "with the utmost restraint", concluding that the gravity of the crimes, the manner of their commission, and the absence of mitigating circumstances left no alternative consistent with justice.

It found the accused guilty of crimes against humanity "of the gravest character", committed as part of a "widespread and systematic attack" on civilians involving coordinated action by armed political cadres and state law enforcement officials, including senior officers.

Police personnel, legally bound to protect life, instead abused public trust, aggravating the crimes to the highest degree, the tribunal said, citing indiscriminate firing on protesters and a calculated disregard for human life.

The court found that five victims were killed and later burned, while another was injured but alive when set on fire along with the bodies. The victims were identified as Sazzad Hossain Sajal, As-Sabur, Tanjil Mahmud Sujoy, Bayezid Bostami, Abul Hossain, Omar Faruq and Mohammad Shahabul Islam.

"These crimes were intended not only to take life, but to terrorise a population, suppress dissent and establish domination through fear," the judgment said.

The tribunal ruled that no sentence short of death could reflect the gravity of the offences or restore public confidence in justice.

The case stems from violent attacks on protesters on August 4 and 5, 2024, in the industrial Ashulia area. Families searched for missing relatives before charred bodies were later discovered.

Tribunal Chair Justice Nozrul Islam Chowdhury said Saiful Islam was sentenced to death on seven counts of murder under charge 1 as

crimes against humanity. He was also given multiple life sentences for other offences, including inhuman acts such as burning bodies, political persecution, abetment, complicity, command responsibility and conspiracy.

The court ordered confiscation of all of Saiful Islam's property, directing that the proceeds be distributed among the victims' families. It also imposed fines ranging from Tk 5,000 to Tk 100,000 on several convicts.

AFM Sayed Rony received the death sentence for his role in the killings, along with additional life terms for other inhuman acts. Jubo League leader Rony Bhuiyan was sentenced to death for killing the seven victims, while SI Malek, assistant SI Bishwajit and constable Mukul were sentenced to death for burning the bodies and to life imprisonment for their role in the killings.

REACTION

As the eight accused in custody were being escorted out of the courtroom after the verdict, Abdul Malek shouted that he had not received justice and briefly lost consciousness.

After regaining consciousness, he again shouted, "I am innocent."

His brother, Golam Hossain, said the real perpetrators who set the bodies ablaze were not made accused. "I took my brother away before the incident took place. We are deprived of justice," he said.

Mukul's wife, Soumamiya, said her husband was innocent and that she would not accept the verdict.

The wives of Shahidul Islam, Kafi, Arafat Uddin and Mukul broke down in tears inside the courtroom.

Defence counsels reiterated that they would challenge the verdict before the Appellate Division after receiving the full text of the judgment.

Killings

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fortunes by siphoning off Bangladesh's money abroad."

Urging voters to reject what he termed old-style politics, he said, "The politics that kills people, builds secret torture cells, plunders the country's resources and turns politics into business, that politics will, In Sha Allah, be shown the red card on February 12."

Again, pointing at rivals, he warned, "Don't lose your temper. If you want to do politics, come with a cool head. If you lose your temper, you lose."

He promised development projects for Rajshahi if the Jamaat comes to power, including establishing a dental college and reviving Rajshahi Sugar Mills by stopping theft.

The Jamaat chief also pledged to ensure that national resources benefit citizens and told party activists, "From now on, keep watch. No vote robber, vote thief, or vote engineer will be spared."

Earlier in Naogaon, the Jamaat leader assured protection for minorities.

"Why should non-Muslims live in a culture of fear? We want to dismantle that culture altogether."

"Those who talked about minority rights — have you not seen what the former fascist government did to you in the Santal villages (Sahebganj, Gaibandha)? Are they not our brothers and sisters? Are they not citizens of this country? We promise that we will embrace everyone and move forward together."

Terming Naogaon the agricultural capital of northern Bangladesh, the Jamaat chief said nearly one-tenth of the country's crops are produced there, but farmers still do not get fair prices.

He promised storage facilities, fruit-processing industries, road upgrades and tourism development through preservation of archaeological sites.

Addressing rallies in Chapainawabganj and Godagari, Shafiqur spoke of a nationwide momentum for change.

"From the banks of the Teesta to the sea ... There is now a mass surge in favour of freedom, justice, fairness, and a humane Bangladesh."

He also pledged mango-based industries and improved river-centred communication networks in Chapainawabganj.

In the evening, Shafiqur also joined a rally in Natore as the chief guest and introduced the alliance's candidates in the district's four constituencies.

The Jamaat ameer concluded the day's campaign in the capital's Shewrapara, which falls under his constituency (Dhaka-15).

Jamaat promises prosperity

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For instance, foreign direct investment will be increased to \$15 billion by 2030, or the provision of Tk 10,000 loan for 100,000 meritorious students for up to five years, or tripling the health budget in phases are so matter of factly mentioned that it is no more than scheduling the entry of trucks into Dhaka. Notably, however, the manifesto is completely silent about economic disparity. Other lofty pledges include \$5 billion worth of exports and 2 million jobs in ICT sector by 2030, another five million jobs through government initiatives, 500 international standard athletes in five years, 1.5 million freelancers through e-hubs at upazilas and 500,000 new entrepreneurs within five years.

While there is no outright pledge to establish a theocratic state based on the shariah, the manifesto clearly announces that religious edicts will become more significant so far as finance and banking is concerned. It promises support for growth and success of Islamic banking and insurance, new laws and legal reforms to support Islamic insurance, and even shariah compliant financing mechanisms in agriculture.

Islamic shariah will play a significant role in personal law and family courts as the manifesto pledges to reform and preserve them in light of religion. Jamaat also pledges to bring significant reforms in education to regulate the different

streams. The manifesto outlines four streams after the eighth grade—Islamic, science, general, and technical education through the higher secondary levels. There will also be funds and facilities, special institutes and sponsorships for Islamic scholarship.

The foreign policy section must be mentioned, even if passingly, because of its rather conspicuous omission of Pakistan. It pledges to build a peaceful, friendly, and cooperative relations with "neighbouring and nearby countries—including India, Bhutan, Nepal, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Maldives, and Thailand—based on mutual respect and fairness". It is immediately followed by, "The strengthening of relations with countries of the Muslim world shall be a key foreign policy priority", which reads more like a compensatory afterthought.

Under labour and employment, the manifesto clarifies the five-hour workday issue that appears to be persistently hounding the Jamaat chief. The party pledges, "safe and dignified working environments for women" and adds, "During maternity, with the mother's consent, working hours will be reduced to five hours per day."

Although the Jamaat leader, Shafiqur Rahman, had told Al-Jazeera that a woman could never be the head of his part considering the social reality of Bangladesh, the manifesto pledges that women, ethnic minorities and

religious minorities will have significant representation in the Jamaat's cabinet. That would be quite a tall order, since Jamaat has nominated no women, and one Hindu in the upcoming election.

The manifesto reiterates the party's pledge to protect women and ensure their safety. Towards the very end of the document, under the section "Inclusive state for all", it elaborates on this vision for "Women will move without fear." The measures—dedicated bus services, CCTV cameras, separate compartments in double-decker buses and emergency helpline numbers—suggest a tendency to further segregate women in the name of protection. It pledges "religious awareness initiatives" to ensure women's rights to property and VAT exemption from all children's food products.

Given Jamaat's history and controversial role in the liberation war, its pledge to adopt programmes to "firmly establish the ideals and objectives of the Great Liberation War—equality, human dignity, and social justice—within state and national life" does merit some scrutiny. Another pledge, which reads, "The accurate history of the Liberation War will be presented to students," appears to suggest that this was not the case till now and thus, that history might need some revisions if Jamaat comes to power.

Thousands arbitrarily detained, denied bail

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secret detentions declined following the fall of the Awami League government in 2024. However, it said arbitrary arrests have persisted, particularly after the interim government banned Awami League (AL) activities in May last year.

According to HRW, hundreds of AL leaders, activists and supporters remain in jail as murder suspects, with courts routinely rejecting bail petitions. The report cited the nationwide "Operation Devil Hunt", under which at least 8,600 people were arrested, while many others were detained under the Special Powers Act and anti-terrorism laws.

In July, clashes in Gopalganj between security forces and AL supporters left five people dead. Police detained hundreds and filed murder cases against more than 8,400 individuals, most of whom were unnamed. The government denied carrying out mass arrests.

HRW also highlighted a sharp rise in mob violence by political parties and non-state actors, including religious hardliners hostile to women's rights and to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people. Citing figures from Ain o Salish Kendra, the report said at least 124 people were killed in mob attacks between January and August last year.

Data from rights group Odhikar showed that since the interim government took office, at least 40 people have been killed by law enforcement agencies, including 14

allegedly due to torture. Political violence injured nearly 8,000 people and killed at least 81, the report added.

Freedom of expression and association remain restricted, HRW said, noting that the ban on AL activities has curtailed rallies, publications and online speech.

Journalists faced numerous attacks last year, largely by political activists and mobs, while writers were prosecuted under laws criminalising "hurting religious sentiment".

Although the interim government repealed nine controversial provisions of the Cyber Security Act in March, HRW said the law still falls short of international standards.

The International Crimes Tribunal, tasked with prosecuting abuses committed during the AL era, sentenced Hasina and former home minister Asaduzzaman Khan Kamal to death in absentia in November. Former police chief Chowdhury Abdullah Al Mamun, who testified for the prosecution, received a five-year prison term.

"The tribunal had been fraught with violations of fair trial standards, and while the interim government amended the law that establishes the court, introducing some improvements, it still lacks important due process protections and includes the death penalty, in violation of international human rights law. The interim government also gave the tribunal broad powers to prosecute and dismantle political organizations," the report says.

to the constituency. He said senior central leaders are visiting the area together to convey that message to voters.

Taher stressed that maritime connectivity and economic linkages are essential for modern development, adding that with long-term planning, Maheshkhali and Kutubdia could be developed into advanced economic zones similar to Singapore.

He added that if their combine forms the government, Hamidur Rahman would be able to play

The interim government also formed a commission to investigate enforced disappearances and extrajudicial killings. By August last year, it had received more than 1,850 complaints, but HRW said officials obstructed investigations and destroyed evidence. In October, cases were filed against 28 suspects.

HRW further reported attacks on ethnic and religious minority communities, including mob violence against Hindu families in Rangpur in July and ongoing abuses in the Chittagong Hill Tracts.

About violence against women, the report said, "Sexual and gender-based violence remained widespread, and women and girls had little recourse to seek protection or access justice. Women played a pivotal role in the 2024 uprising, but were not adequately represented in the interim government."

It mentioned that nearly 20,000 supporters of Hefazat-e-Islam rallied in Dhaka to oppose recommendations on women's rights soon after a commission formed by the government proposed criminalising marital rape, ensuring equal parental rights, reforming inheritance laws and increasing women's representation in parliament.

The report also mentioned that reform efforts have stalled, with recommendations from several government-appointed commissions yet to be implemented amid political divisions.

an important national role, and under his leadership, the identity of Maheshkhali and Kutubdia would gain recognition both nationally and internationally.

Referring to previous elections, the Jamaat leader said although changes in power and leadership had taken place, the fundamental needs of the people remained unmet. Identifying graft as one of Bangladesh's major problems, he said the combine is committed to eliminating corruption if elected to power.

Operations resume

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or two. The adviser also assured them of meeting their other demands.

Given such assurances, they are postponing the strike for two days in consideration of the country's interest.

The indefinite strike would resume from Sunday if the government did not respond positively by Saturday, he added.

However, after the meeting, Sakhawat told reporters that the planned agreement with DP World to operate NCT would go ahead.

Although negotiations with DP World are yet to be settled, he said the government would not do anything that goes against the country's interest.

He asked the protestors to call off the work abstention, as it was inhumane to shut down the port ahead of Ramadan, which was causing immense suffering to the people.

Earlier in the morning, agitating employees staged demonstrations in front of Sakhawat as he arrived at the port to hold meetings with port officials, law enforcement agencies and protesting workers.

The demonstrators surrounded him, chanting slogans against DP World, the proposed agreement and senior officials of the Chittagong Port Authority, including its chairman.

Meanwhile, the High Court in its verdict on the writ petition filed against the deal justified the direct selection of the Dubai-based DP World to operate the NCT without an open public bidding process.

Such direct selection is permissible under the Public-Private Partnership (PPP) Act, the Government-to-Government (G2G) policy and the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) signed between Bangladesh and Dubai.

On January 29, the HC bench on Justice Zafar Ahmed delivered the verdict rejecting a writ petition filed by Bangladesh Jubo Arthanitibid Forum that challenged the legality of the government's move to award a contract to DP World for container handling at NCT.

In the full text of the judgment, the HC bench rejected claims made by the petitioner's lawyer Ahsanul Karim that the interim government lacked authority under the PPP Act due to the absence of a prime minister or cabinet committee.

"Mr Karim's argument is not only fallacious but also absurd. An interesting aspect of this case is that

the petitioner has no objection to other projects proposed to be undertaken by the DPW. Their only objection is against the NCT project at Chittagong Port, which raises eyebrows," the HC judge said in the full text of the verdict.

Bangladesh Jubo Arthanitibid Forum has filed a leave to appeal petition with the Appellate Division of the Supreme Court challenging the HC verdict and also seeking status quo in respect of the entire process of awarding a contract for NCT to DP World.

The Appellate Division is set to hold a hearing of the petition on February 9.

Meanwhile, in a joint statement, leaders of 10 major business chambers and trade bodies yesterday expressed deep concern over the deadlock at Chattogram port, terming it a "great disaster".

Due to the suspension of port activities, exportable goods could not be shipped and imported goods could not be released from vessels, making it difficult to meet strict delivery deadlines for international buyers, the statement said.

The economy suffers losses of several thousand crores of taka even from a single day's deadlock at the port.

The leaders warned that Bangladesh risks losing work orders if the crisis continues, as international buyers may shift to alternative sourcing countries.

If the stalemate is not resolved quickly, additional costs on imported goods may also affect the prices of essential commodities meant for Ramadan sales and any delay in releasing imported goods could disrupt timely supply to consumers and raise the price levels.

The stalemate, which started on January 31 with the partial suspension of port activities, severely disrupted operations, leaving more than 15,000 TEUs of export containers stranded at private oil docks as well as on board ships stuck at the jetties.

The number of container ships queued at the outer anchorage rose to ten yesterday, with most waiting idle at sea for two to five days.

As many as 13 vessels, including ten container ships, were stranded at the port jetties for four to six days due to the three-day stalemate until Monday and the complete suspension of vessel movement since Tuesday morning.

Expressing frustration, port users such as shipping agents said the crisis could have been avoided if the government had taken steps to resolve the issue much earlier.

Likely to focus on justice

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and expanding old-age allowances.

The manifesto will also promise the formation of a media commission to ensure freedom of information and expression, as well as measures to ensure the independence of the Election Commission, transparent administration, and the creation of an anti-drug task force.

Party insiders said commitments will include faster police and security services through automation, instant and emergency ambulance services, and expanded healthcare access.

There will also be special focus on technology-based startups, freelancing and the creative economy through startup funds and IT training.

For women, the manifesto will pledge equal opportunities at workplaces, the establishment of a women entrepreneurs' fund, and an increase in maternity allowances.

It will also propose special tribunals to prevent the grabbing of minority properties, security cells, and strict programmes to prevent communal attacks.

The BNP plans to create employment for around 45 million youths aged between 18 and 33, introduce unemployment allowances, and provide free internet services at educational institutions and public spaces.

Within 180 days of forming the government, the party will launch a national e-wallet. Under the slogan "Sheaf of Paddy's pledge — transactions will be digital," the platform will integrate services such as PayPal, enabling payments for daily shopping, bills, fees and taxes.

Two standing committee members said the manifesto will commit to upholding the rule of law at every level and restoring human dignity and democratic values.

They said enforced disappearances,

JP looks to retain its northern strongholds

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Islam, a businessman from Rangpur city's Mulatol area, said it is commonly believed that elderly voters remain loyal to the Jatiya Party, while younger voters may swing.

Jatiya Party Chairman and Rangpur-3 candidate GM Quader said the region remains firmly under the party's influence. "Rangpur is still the stronghold of the plough. We are working to retain it," he said.

"No one will be able to break this stronghold as we do not support extortion, corruption, terrorism or politics of murder," he added.

Despite obstacles, he said party candidates were continuing their campaigns. "If the election is free, fair, neutral and peaceful, victory for the plough is assured."

Outside Rangpur, the party's campaign has faced mixed responses. In Mymensingh district, Jatiya Party candidates are contesting in six of the 12 constituencies.

In the IT sector, BNP plans to create new industries with the goal of generating two lakh direct jobs and eight lakh indirect jobs through freelancing. It will establish vocational institutes in every district and set up the country's first AI-driven data centre campus under a cloud-first strategy.

In education, primary and secondary teachers will be given tablet computers for modern training, and multimedia classrooms will be introduced. The "Learning with Happiness" course will be launched from Class Six, technical education will be made mandatory for all, and foreign languages will be introduced as third languages from the secondary level.

If elected, the BNP will work to establish sports as a profession. Sports will be made compulsory from Class Four, and sports teachers will be gradually appointed in every educational institution.

For environmental protection, the manifesto will pledge the excavation or re-excavation of at least 20,000 kilometres of canals and rivers to ensure water flow, alongside major projects such as Teesta Barrage modernisation and Padma Barrage-type initiatives. Around 250 million fruit and medicinal plants will be planted nationwide.

The party will also promise the development of Qawmi madrasas, the formation of an Islamic research fund, modernisation of religious education and ensuring a free environment for religious practice.

Monthly honorariums and festival allowances will be provided to khatibs, imams, muazzins and other religious leaders, along with financial support for renovating places of worship and strengthening the Imam-Muazzin Welfare Trust.

Some voters say the party's presence there is weaker than that of its rivals. "Amid campaigns by BNP, Jamaat and their rebel candidates, the Jatiya Party's campaign has lost much of its charm among common voters," said Ashraf Ali, a businessman in the city.

However, Jatiya Party candidate for Mymensingh-8 Fakhrul Imam disputed that assessment. "We are working in the field round the clock and going door to door. We are getting very good response," he said.

In Barishal division, the Jatiya Party is contesting in one of the 21 constituencies. The party's Barishal-3 candidate Golam Kibria Tipu is currently in jail, with his daughter Habiba Kibria campaigning on his behalf.

One of her campaign slogans reads: "Your single vote can bring my father back from jail to serve you." [Our correspondents from Lalmonirhat, Mymensingh and Barishal contributed to this report]