

Hamas leader vows no arms handover

Rejects 'foreign rule' in Gaza; US-led peace board to meet Feb 19

AGENCIES

A senior Hamas leader said yesterday that the Palestinian Islamist movement would not surrender its weapons nor accept foreign intervention in Gaza, pushing back against US and Israeli demands.

"Criminalising the resistance, its weapons, and those who carried it out is something we should not accept," Khaled Meshal said at a conference in Doha.

"As long as there is occupation, there is resistance. Resistance is a right of peoples under occupation ... something nations take pride in," said Meshal, who previously headed the group.

A US brokered ceasefire in Gaza is in its second phase, which foresees



A resident stands near apartment buildings damaged by a Russian air strike in Kramatorsk, Donetsk region, Ukraine yesterday. Kyiv's foreign minister has said the Ukrainian and Russian leaders need to meet in person to hash out the hardest remaining issues in peace talks, and that only US President Donald Trump has the power to bring about an agreement. PHOTO: REUTERS

Iran defies US threats

FM insists on right to enrich uranium

AFP, Tehran

Iran will never surrender the right to enrich uranium, even if war "is imposed on us", its foreign minister said yesterday, defying pressure from Washington.

"Iran has paid a very heavy price for its peaceful nuclear programme and for uranium enrichment," Abbas Araghchi told a forum in Tehran.

"Why do we insist so much on enrichment and refuse to give it up even if a war is imposed on us? Because no one has the right to dictate our behaviour," he said, two days after he met US envoy Steve Witkoff in Oman.

Araghchi said Washington's continuation of sanctions on Iran and its recent military deployments "raise doubts about the other party's seriousness and readiness to engage in genuine negotiations."

"We are closely monitoring the situation, assessing all the signals, and will decide

- » Iran not intimidated by US naval deployment in Gulf
- » Top Trump negotiators visit US aircraft carrier in ME
- » Iran arrests another activist over critical statement

whether to continue the negotiations," he said. "Their military deployment in the region does not scare us," Abbas Araghchi said.

Trump's lead Iran negotiators Steve Witkoff and Jared Kushner on Saturday visited the USS Abraham Lincoln aircraft carrier in the Arabian Sea, the US military said, with Washington and Tehran due to hold further talks soon.

The US military's Central Command (CENTCOM) said the two top officials visited the nuclear-powered vessel in a post

on social media.

In his own social media post, Witkoff said the aircraft carrier and its strike group was "keeping us safe and upholding President Trump's message of peace through strength."

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu will meet Trump in Washington on Wednesday to "discuss with him the negotiations with Iran", the premier's office said.

Netanyahu "believes any negotiations must include limitations on ballistic missiles and a halting of the support for the Iranian axis", his office said in a statement on Saturday, referring to Iran's allies in the region.

Meanwhile, prominent Iranian activist Ghorban Behzadian-Nejad was arrested for his contribution to a statement critical of Iran's authorities, written in the wake of their deadly crackdown on protests, the reformist daily Shargh reported on Saturday.

that demilitarisation of the territory -- including the disarmament of Hamas -- along with a gradual withdrawal of Israeli forces, reports AFP.

Hamas has repeatedly said that disarmament is a red line, although it has indicated it could consider handing over its weapons to a future Palestinian governing authority.

Meanwhile, the Board of Peace touted by US President Donald Trump will hold its first leaders meeting on February 19, a US government official confirmed on Saturday, without offering further details.

The planned meeting was first reported by Axios, which said the gathering would also serve as a fundraising conference for the reconstruction of Gaza.

"We can confirm the Board of Peace meeting is scheduled on February 19th," the official said.

Women's rights activists slam Jamaat

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in misogynistic speech or behaviour and demanded an end to the use of religion in politics.

The protest was organised by the International Women's Day Celebration Committee, a platform of 61 women's and human rights organisations, in front of the National Press Club in Dhaka.

Similar demonstrations under the same banner took place simultaneously in 50 districts outside the capital, organised by Durbar Network and local partner organisations.

The protest aimed to reject misogyny and the misuse of religion in politics and to demand an equal, democratic Bangladesh for women, men and people of the third gender.

Bangladesh has 23.7 million working women employed across agriculture, education, health, nursing, services, industry including the garment sector, office and clerical work, banking, retail and hotel businesses and domestic labour.

The Jamaat leader's remarks amounted to obscene and demeaning attacks on nearly 25 million working women, Manisha said.

The keynote also referred to an interview given by Shafiqur to Al Jazeera, in which he stated that no woman could ever become the ameer of Jamaat-e-Islami, citing inherent differences between men and women. Speakers pointed out that Bangladesh has been governed by women prime ministers for more than three decades and that Jamaat-e-Islami had previously been a partner in governments led by women.

Protesters further criticised Jamaat for failing to nominate any women candidates in parliamentary elections despite agreeing to a proposal to allocate at least 5 percent of nominations to women.

While Jamaat's constitution does not explicitly bar women from becoming party leaders, the party enforces exclusionary practices in reality.

The statement also cited remarks by Jamaat leader Md Shamim Ahsan at an election rally in Barguna-2, in which he described the Dhaka University Central Students' Union as a "drug den and brothel", and verbal abuse of women and the Women's Reform Commission by Hefazat-

e-Islam leaders at a rally at Dhaka University's TSC last year.

They also referred to events at Dhaka University involving the promotion of an "ideal woman" narrative and the public defence of individuals accused of harassing women over their clothing.

"We have seen in the manifesto of one political party that all the provisions and benefits for women are framed in terms of their children or childcare, with no mention of their workplace rights or other entitlements -- the focus is entirely on mothers and children, implying that a woman exists only for reproduction," said Kazi Gulshan-Ara Dipa of Karmojibi Nari.

Women make up more than half of the country's population, and if this half remains confined to the home, the economy cannot function.

"Therefore, women must be recognised as full human beings. No discriminatory or hateful remarks against women should ever be tolerated," she added.

Also yesterday, another group of 11 women's and human rights activists submitted a memorandum to the Chief Election Commissioner demanding the withdrawal of the remarks, an unconditional public apology to working women and the cancellation of the Jamaat leader's candidacy under the EC's code of conduct.

In the memorandum, the signatories expressed deep concern over a statement posted from Shafiqur Rahman's verified X account, rejecting the party's claim that the post was the result of hacking.

They noted that no official statement, credible evidence or transparent investigation had been made public.

Media reports regarding the alleged hacking, including contradictory statements from law enforcement and the absence of concrete proof, were cited as further grounds for questioning the claim.

The memorandum noted that for decades, working women in Bangladesh, including those in the garment industry and other sectors, have made vital contributions to their families, society and the national economy through their hard work. Publicly demeaning these

contributions is directly opposed to constitutionally guaranteed equality, human rights, women's dignity and social justice.

Such statements foster a culture of hatred, discrimination, and violence against women, putting the safety, dignity and work environment of women workers at risk.

Remarks of this irresponsible nature from someone in a political leadership position are entirely unacceptable, it added.

The memorandum was sent by a group of women's and human rights activists, including Moshrefa Mishu, general secretary of the Democratic Revolutionary Party; Samina Luthfa, a professor at Dhaka University; Shabnam Hafiz, president of the Garment Workers' Liberation Movement; Ferdous Ara Rumi, spokesperson of National People's Alliance; Nafisa Raihana, organiser of the Women's Political Rights Forum; Zakia Shishir, women's affairs secretary of the State Reform Movement; Tabassum Mehanaz Mimi, lawyer and rights activist; Sultana Begum, president of the Green Bangla Garment Workers' Federation; Shamim Ara Neepa, central member of Jonobhashya; Marzia Prabha, member of the Democratic Rights Committee; and the organisation Naripokkho.

Dhaka seeks UN help for probe

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On Thursday, Inqilab Moncho staged a sit-in near the chief adviser's official residence, Jamuna, demanding an impartial investigation under United Nations supervision into the killing of Hadi, who was its spokesperson.

Hadi was shot in Dhaka on December 12 last year as he was preparing to run as an independent candidate from the Dhaka-8 constituency. He died at a Singapore hospital on December 18.

Following his death, a case was filed over attempted murder with Paltan Police Station on December 14, which was later converted into a murder case.

The case was subsequently transferred to the DB.

Army picking up Bangladesh Times staffers

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Times office set a troubling precedent. "I strongly protest and express deep concern. Taking away employees of an institution at night without any specific allegation is completely unacceptable.... Whatever the justification, this is an extremely negative and violent precedent for Bangladesh's free journalism."

He added that if there were objections to any news report, there were appropriate legal and institutional mechanisms to address them.

"But picking up people in such an authoritarian manner, even if they were later returned, has sent a very harsh message -- not only for that particular institution; it has created an intense climate of fear across the entire media in Bangladesh."

Referring to recent attacks, vandalism, looting, and arson at the offices of The Daily Star and Prothom Alo, he said the role of law enforcement agencies, including the army, was

questionable.

"Only two days ago, the army at a press conference described the media as 'the mirror of the nation'. It was very pleasing to hear. The spokesperson also said the media should be able to report without fear. But is this [incident at Bangladesh Times] an example of what happens after fearless reporting?"

"I want to ask -- without approval from the highest authority, can any army officers undertake such an action? If that is possible, then where does command and control exist within the army?"

Iftekharruzaman urged the army and all institutions to refrain from such activities and stressed the need to find ways to address the growing pressure on free media in Bangladesh.

Meanwhile, the Bangladesh Journalists in International Media (BJIM), in a statement yesterday, also expressed serious concern over the incident at the Bangladesh Times office.

Polls code violations rampant

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generated photos and video clips, the TIB report said.

The study found the state-run media to give more coverage on one political party and its leader. It was also true for private media.

For example, between October 1 and December 11 last year, BTV broadcast news for 144 minutes 19 seconds for a party, and 27 minutes and 2 seconds for another party, TIB said.

However, the graft watchdog did not name the parties.

Influential parties continued campaigns after 12:00am, but the EC was indifferent in taking actions. However, in the cases of individual candidates, it took strong actions, including issuing show causes and imposing fines, it added.

Many of the campaigns also targeted women and opposition candidates, and used religious and sexual slurs, but the EC has not taken adequate measures to stop them, the study said.

The parties allegedly nominated candidates without considering their qualifications and popularity, which is why those who contributed more to the parties were deprived of nominations, it added.

Influential political parties allegedly paid cash to voters as well as to presiding officers and assistant presiding officers, and even allegedly threatened them for influencing the polls.

The TIB report said the EC has not

NCP vows country

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selling of judicial verdicts" during the 18-month tenure of the interim government led by Dr Muhammad Yunus. He warned that if that party takes power, it will "tear Bangladesh apart".

ACCOUNTABILITY AND JUSTICE

Nahid promised that an NCP-led government would prosecute all individuals responsible for enforced disappearances, extrajudicial killings, and torture during the previous administration.

He said various state agencies were complicit in these crimes and vowed to identify and bring to justice all "criminals hiding within" the forces.

He criticised the interim government's "Operation Devil Hunt" for failing to produce significant results in apprehending criminals or recovering weapons.

ECONOMIC RECOVERY

Highlighting economic crimes, he cited a white paper revealing that \$234 billion was siphoned abroad during the fascist regime. He pledged comprehensive legal measures to repatriate the laundered wealth and create a public trust, to be managed by international professionals, to oversee recovered assets.

The NCP leader vowed to end "capacity charges" in the power sector, which force the government to pay companies like Adani, Summit, and S Alam even when electricity is not produced. "We will not pay another taka to these enemies of the people."

On commodity prices, he promised to dismantle syndicates of businesspersons, politicians, and bureaucrats who create artificial market crises, pledging fast-track trials and heavy penalties for market manipulators.

FOREIGN POLICY SHIFT

On foreign policy, Nahid vowed to break the "subservient policy framework" toward India, prioritise national self-respect, revive SAARC, and address the silence over killings by India's Border Security Force at the border.

He proposed transforming the military into a high-tech force rather

than expanding personnel numbers and called for mandatory military training for citizens aged 18 and above to establish a mass defence system.

GOVERNANCE REFORMS
The NCP convened detailed radical administrative shifts, including decentralisation of education, health, and infrastructure to upazila level. He pledged to increase the education budget to five percent of GDP while implementing strict teacher accountability.

On law enforcement, he proposed renaming and restructuring the police force with equal male and female recruitment, adding, "Every police officer involved in killings, torture, and extortion will be brought to justice."

His healthcare reforms include banning private practice for government doctors and ensuring specialists serve designated hours in public hospitals.

SOCIAL ISSUES

Regarding women's rights, Nahid said there would be no state-imposed dress code, ensuring women are not forced to wear hijabs or prevented from wearing sarees. He committed to ending the "culture of harassment" and creating safe environments for women.

On minority rights, he emphasised that all religious and ethnic groups should be treated equally under the law.

Rejecting comparisons to Afghanistan, he proposed a governance model balancing religious observance with liberal values, citing Malaysia and Turkey as examples.

On public services, Nahid proposed an overhaul of the transport system, ensuring no roads are closed for VIPs and requiring ministers to use public transport at least once a week.

He declared zero tolerance for food adulteration, promising mobile testing labs and licence cancellation for proven offenders.

The NCP chief urged voters to support the 11-party alliance to liberate the country from Indian domination, fascist forces, and extortion culture on February 12.

BJIM is closely monitoring the evolving situation surrounding Bangladesh Times and is deeply concerned by allegations that members of the Bangladesh Army entered the newsroom, took several journalists to an army camp for questioning, and later released them," it said. Condemning the incident, which included claims by the journalists during a Facebook Live broadcast that they were pressured to remove content or issue clarifications while at the camp, the organisation called for an immediate, transparent explanation from the authorities and stressed the importance of ensuring the safety of journalists while protecting editorial independence from intimidation or interference.

Regarding the army drive, the Inter-Services Public Relations yesterday stated that the journalists of Bangladesh Times were "invited for a discussion on two to three news-related matters", and that the issue was later resolved.

interim government was responsible to play role for "Yes" vote for the referendum. Therefore, the EC had no logical or legal base to disagree to the government position.

"The Election Commission's independent role would not be questionable if there was discussion on the campaign for 'Yes' vote with the interim government."

Iftekharruzaman said holding the parliamentary election and the referendum on the same day has been identified as a major pressure and challenge for the EC and the relevant institutions.

The EC, government institutions, law enforcement agencies, armed forces, political parties -- everyone must fulfil their responsibilities for a level playing field in the polls, he said.

"Equal competition is not only for parties and candidates -- it is for voters. Voter safety must be ensured, especially for minorities, women, the elderly, persons with disabilities, indigenous people, and gender-diverse communities," he said.

Iftekharruzaman said political parties should remember that for 16 years, people were deprived of voting rights. If leaders at all levels accept the people's verdict, a fair and peaceful election is still possible.

"We believe that only if all parties act in accordance with the law it will be possible to conduct the election and the referendum in a free and fair manner."

He said as per the mandate, the