



Tents housing displaced Palestinian families are erected between the rubble of homes and businesses destroyed by the Israeli military, in the Sheikh Radwan neighborhood of Gaza City on Friday. PHOTO: AFP

## NCP mulls ties with Jamaat beyond polls

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under the same alliance, party insiders said.

A party leader, preferring anonymity, pointed out that the selection of NCP Convenor Nahid Islam as the chief whip of the opposition in parliament "indicates that the parties are marching ahead towards a formal political alliance".

Contacted by The Daily Star, Monira Sharmin, secretary of the party's election management committee, said, "This is a political alliance, focused on reforms and centered on elections.

"Since reform initiatives and election-related discussions and activities lie ahead, the alliance will move forward keeping both political realities and reform priorities in mind."

She added, "From the beginning, we've said that the main objective of this alliance is to work together on reform issues. As it is functioning as a coalition in parliament, the partners will work jointly wherever there is an opportunity for coordinated action in parliamentary activities."

Another senior leader, preferring anonymity, said that in the next local government elections, the NCP is expected to remain aligned with Jamaat. "If the current trajectory

continues, it could yield positive results for the NCP.

"The NCP will try to get Jamaat's backing in the upcoming local elections as the party is planning to nominate its Chief Coordinator Nasiruddin Patwary as a mayoral candidate for Dhaka South City Corporation polls and its spokesperson Asif Mahmud Shojib Bhuyain for Dhaka North City Corporation."

Earlier, the Local Government Division formally requested the EC to take necessary steps to organise polls for DNCC, DSCC and Chattogram City Corporation. Following the request, the EC has initiated preliminary preparations, with elections expected after Eid-ul-Fitr. Government officials have also indicated that local elections will be prioritised.

Asked, NCP Member-Secretary Akhter Hossen declined to clearly state whether the party would transform its electoral alliance into a political alliance. "The context of the alliance, which was election-centric, is not yet completely over. So, it is not yet time to give a final answer to this question."

He explained that alliance politics is common in Bangladesh, pointing to historical coalitions led by the Awami League, BNP, and leftist parties. "Every party has its own ideology

and workforce. We will decide on the alliance based on what is needed for the country."

Akhter said the NCP would continue its activities according to its own plans. "Our organisation has already expanded significantly, and we are hopeful it will continue to grow. We have seen that people are very interested in the 'Shapla Koli' [Water Lily Bud – the NCP's electoral symbol]. Therefore, we will continue to promote this symbol across the country."

Last October, the NCP had announced it wanted to contest the election independently. However, Nahid Islam on December 28 announced they had decided to join the electoral alliance led by Jamaat.

He had added, "This is not an ideological alliance; it is an electoral understanding. Our goals and principles will continue. For now, the focus is on electoral cooperation."

Following the declaration of joining the alliance, many leaders and activists decided to leave the NCP.

During the election campaign, Nahid reiterated, "We have always said this is an electoral alliance. Its future and whether we continue together after the polls will be decided later. But on reform issues, we will remain united."

## Dhaka resumes visa services

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categories of visas and certain trade. Some trade restrictions were also imposed by Bangladesh.

In the face of demonstrations in various parts of India, including in front of the Bangladesh missions in New Delhi, Kolkata, Mumbai, Guwahati and Agartala, Dhaka largely suspended the visa services in late December.

The situation began changing recently. Indian Minister for External Affairs S Jaishankar visited Dhaka on December 31 to attend the funeral of former prime minister Khaleda Zia.

Later, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi congratulated new Prime Minister Tarique Rahman and sent him a letter that was handed over by Indian Lok Sabha Speaker Om Birla, who attended the oath-taking ceremony of the new cabinet on February 17.

On February 18, Aniruddha Das, assistant high commissioner of the Assistant High Commission of India in Sylhet, said all categories of Indian visas will gradually return to normal processing levels.

"At present, medical and double-entry visas are being issued, and initiatives have been taken to resume travel visas and other categories," he said while exchanging views with journalists at the Sylhet Zilla Press Club.

The Indian High Commission in Dhaka, however, has not confirmed the matter.

"We have no such update as of now. We will announce it formally when we resume issuing tourist visas," an official of the Indian High Commission in Dhaka told The Daily Star yesterday.

Bangladesh foreign ministry officials said there have been good gestures from the Indian side.

"We appreciate this. We are expecting that India will also resume tourist visas at the soonest," an official told this correspondent.

According to India's Bureau of Immigration's data, in 2023, 2.12 million Bangladeshi tourists visited India, and as of August 2024, the number stood at 1.29 million.

The number decreased during and after the July uprising.

The majority of the Bangladeshis visit India for treatment, while many others do so for travelling and business purposes.

Foreign ministry officials said Bangladesh missions since late December have been issuing visas to Indians on a need-to-basis case, including for the projects funded by the Indian government, students and businesses.

"Now, we will be expanding issuance of visas of all categories," an official said.

## Home ministry, police differ on withdrawal

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place until February 15, three days after the national election.

Home ministry officials said there is no provision in the existing policy guidelines to continue the gun facilities beyond the stipulated period. However, police said the withdrawal may take time and will be implemented gradually, subject to security clearance by intelligence agencies.

The facilities should be withdrawn automatically now that the election is over, said Md Delwar Hossain, acting secretary of the home ministry.

A formal letter has already been served regarding the end of firearm licences and gunman facilities in view of the post-election reality. The Daily Star has learnt from home ministry officials involved with the proceedings.

The ministry will now determine who will retain the special security arrangements and whose privileges will be withdrawn before issuing further instructions, said Abeda Afsaree, deputy secretary of the home ministry's political wing-4 that oversees the issue.

Earlier, the interim government had approved the temporary security measures after many political leaders expressed concern over personal

safety following an attack on Sharif Osman Bin Hadi, spokesperson of Inquilab Mancha, the day after the election schedule was announced on December 12. Hadi was shot and later died in Singapore on December 18.

In the wake of the incident, several leaders applied for security facilities.

Security was provided to Anwar Hossain Manju, chairman of Jatiya Party (Manju); Oli Ahmed, president of the Liberal Democratic Party; Yunus Ahmad, secretary general of Islami Andolon Bangladesh (IAB); independent candidate Muhammad Shakhawat Hossain (Hiru); and several leaders of the National Citizen Party, among others.

At the time, the home ministry strengthened security, including gunmen, for three political figures: Syed Muhammad Rezaul Karim, ameer of IAB; BNP's Meherpur-1 candidate Masud Arun; and Zonayed Saki, the chief coordinator of Ganosamhati Andolon.

Security was also provided to Bangladesh Jatiya Party Chairman Andaleev Rahman Partho; Gono Odhikar Parishad General Secretary Rashed Khan; BNP's Dhaka-13 candidate Bobby Hajjaj; and Biplobi Workers Party General Secretary Saiful Haque.

On December 14, the home ministry

issued the "Firearm Licence and Retainer Appointment Policy 2025 for Politically Important Persons and Candidates for National Parliament", allowing politically significant individuals and candidates to obtain firearm licences and appoint armed guards under defined conditions.

Implementation letters were issued and executed through district administrations.

Discussions are ongoing over whether those who received the facilities but lost in the election should continue to enjoy such privileges.

For instance, Bobby and Zonayed, who have been elected and appointed state ministers, are now entitled to state security under existing rules.

"Security arrangements would be withdrawn gradually now that the election is over," said SM Nazrul Islam, additional commissioner of Dhaka Metropolitan Police.

Retaining the gunman facilities beyond the approved period would not be lawful, said Mohammad Mahfuzur Rahman, chairman of Osmani Centre for Peace and Security Studies.

If the facilities are indeed illegal under existing rules, they should be withdrawn as quickly as possible, he added.

## Venezuela grants amnesty to 379 political prisoners

AFP, Caracas

Venezuelan authorities have granted amnesty to 379 political prisoners, a lawmaker said Friday, after a new law was enacted by interim authorities following the US toppling of former leader Nicolas Maduro.

Venezuela's National Assembly unanimously adopted the law a day before, providing hope that hundreds of political prisoners behind bars may soon be released.

National Assembly deputy Jorge Arreaza, the lawmaker overseeing the amnesty process, said in a televised interview on Friday that the 379 prisoners "must be released, granted amnesty, between tonight and tomorrow morning."

"Requests have been submitted by the Public Prosecutor's Office to the competent courts to grant amnesty measures," he said.

Opposition figures have criticized the new legislation, which appears to include carveouts for some offenses previously used by authorities to target Maduro's political opponents.

It explicitly does not apply to those prosecuted for "promoting" or "facilitating... armed or forceful actions" against Venezuela's sovereignty by foreign actors.

Interim President Delcy Rodriguez has leveled such accusations against opposition leader Maria Corina Machado, who hopes to return to Venezuela at some point from the United States.

The law also excludes members of the security forces convicted of

"terrorism" related activities.

"Many of us are aware that the amnesty law does not cover our relatives," Hiowanka Avila, 39, told AFP outside the Rodeo I prison near Caracas, where many of the detainees are ex-soldiers or officers.

Her brother Henryberth Rivas, 30, was arrested in 2018 for allegedly taking part in an assassination attempt against Maduro using armed drones.

Arreaza said earlier that "the military justice system will handle" relevant cases for members of the armed forces, "and grant benefits where appropriate."

Many relatives of prisoners across Venezuela have waited outside jails for weeks for the potential release of their loved ones.

Hundreds have already been granted conditional release by Interim President Delcy Rodriguez's government since the deadly US raid that seized Maduro.

The NGO Foro Penal had said before the announcement that some 650 were detained, a toll that has not been updated since.

Foro Penal director Alfredo Romero said Friday that receiving "amnesty is not automatic," but would require a process in the courts, viewed by many as an arm of Maduro's repression.

Rodriguez defended her government Friday in a speech on state television, saying "we are building a more democratic, more just, and freer Venezuela, and it must be with the effort of everyone."

Opposition politician Juan Pablo Guanipa, a Machado ally, announced

his release from detention shortly after the bill was passed.

Earlier this month he had been freed from prison but then quickly re-detained and kept under house arrest.

"I am now completely free," Guanipa wrote on social media.

He called for all other political prisoners to be freed and exiles to be allowed to return.

Earlier on Friday, he rallied with supporters in his hometown of Maracaibo, Venezuela's second city.

The legislation has also faced criticism from rights groups over its potential use to excuse abuses under Maduro and his predecessor Hugo Chavez.

Exiled Venezuelan opposition figurehead Edmundo Gonzalez Urrutia on Friday said there would be "no lasting reconciliation without memory or responsibility" in his country.

"A responsible amnesty is the transition from fear to the rule of law. It is the pledge that power will not be exercised again without limits and that the law will be above force," Gonzalez Urrutia wrote on X.

Exiled in Spain, Gonzalez Urrutia is widely considered the rightful victor of 2024 presidential elections marred by fraud allegations in which Maduro was declared the winner.

Hundreds, perhaps thousands, of Venezuelans have been jailed in recent years over plots, real or imagined, to overthrow the government of Maduro -- who was taken to New York to stand trial on drug trafficking and other charges.

## US evacuates troops from ME bases

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join another US aircraft carrier, the USS Abraham Lincoln.

The NYT report also said forces have been evacuated from Bahrain, where the US Navy's 5th Fleet is based. American forces remain stationed at bases in Iraq, Syria, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Jordan and the United Arab Emirates.

The withdrawal is being interpreted as a precautionary measure amid rising tensions about a possible US attack on Iran, with Tehran expected to respond by striking American forces in the region.

Asked on Friday if he was considering a limited strike to pressure Iran into a deal, Trump told reporters at the White House: "I guess I can say I am considering" it. Asked later about Iran at a White House press conference, Trump added: "They better negotiate a fair deal."

Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araqchi said after indirect discussions in Geneva this week with Trump's Special Envoy Steve Witkoff and son-

in-law Jared Kushner that the sides had reached an understanding on main "guiding principles," but that did not mean a deal was imminent.

Araqchi, in an interview on MS NOW, said he had a draft counterproposal that could be ready in the next two or three days for top Iranian officials to review, with more US Iran talks possible in a week or so.

Military action would complicate efforts to reach a deal, he added.

After the US and Israel bombed Iran's nuclear facilities and some military sites in June, Trump again began threatening strikes in January as Tehran crushed widespread protests with deadly force.

Referring to the crackdown on Friday, Trump said there was a difference between the people of Iran and the country's leadership. He asserted that "32,000 people were killed over a relatively short period of time," figures that could not immediately be verified.

Hours after Trump's statements on the death toll, Araqchi said that

the Iranian government has already published a "comprehensive list" of all 3,117 killed in the unrest.

"If anyone doubts the accuracy of our data, please speak with evidence," he posted on X.

Araqchi gave no specific timing as to when Iranians would get their counterproposal to Witkoff and Kushner, but said he believed a diplomatic deal was within reach and could be achieved "in a very short period of time."

United Nations spokesperson Stephane Dujarric reiterated concerns about heightened rhetoric and increased military activities in the region.

"We encourage both the United States and the Islamic Republic of Iran to continue to engage in diplomacy in order to settle the differences," Dujarric told a regular news briefing at the UN.

Meanwhile, Serbia and Sweden have urged their citizens in Iran to leave the country amid the rising tensions.

## Trump raises US global tariff rate to 15%

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Yesterday's announcement is the latest in a careening process that has seen a multitude of tariff levels for countries sending goods into the United States set and then altered or revoked by Trump's team over the past year.

It also appears on its face to be an attempt to circumvent the Supreme Court's latest ruling, which offered perhaps the firmest rebuke yet of the Republican leader's sweeping and often arbitrary duties, his signature international trade policy.

The new duty by law is only temporary -- allowable for 150

days. According to a White House fact sheet, exemptions remain for sectors that are under separate probes, including pharma, and goods entering the US under the US-Mexico-Canada agreement.

Trump spent much of the past year imposing various rates to cajole and punish countries, both friend and foe.

On Friday, the White House said US trading partners that reached separate tariff deals with Trump's administration would also face the new global tariff.

The conservative-majority high

court ruled six to three on Friday that a 1977 law Trump has relied on to slap sudden rates on individual countries, upending global trade, "does not authorise the President to impose tariffs."

Trump, who had nominated two of the justices who repudiated him, responded furiously, alleging without evidence that the court was influenced by foreign interests.

"I'm ashamed of certain members of the court, absolutely ashamed, for not having the courage to do what's right for our country," Trump told reporters.

## UN panel set to evaluate

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From Bangladesh, the Professor Muhammad Yunus-led interim government had submitted its country statement to the UN CDP without seeking any deferment, he said.

There was also a decision by the interim cabinet in March last year that Bangladesh would graduate on time, as the country met all three criteria set by the UN CDP in two consecutive triennial assessments.

Bangladesh was supposed to graduate from the LDC group in November 2024, but the UN extended the transition period by two years to November 24, 2026, considering the severe fallouts of Covid-19.

"Usually, the head of government writes to the UN CDP for such an extension of graduation, but in Bangladesh's case, the ERD secretary sent the letter," Debapriya said.

"For instance, in the case of deferring the LDC graduation of Solomon Islands, the head of government wrote to the UN CDP requesting deferment as the country had severely suffered from the fallouts of a tsunami and other natural calamities."

Originally, Solomon Islands was supposed to graduate at the end of

2024, but after assessing the country statement and the government's request, the deadline was deferred to December 2027.

"Basically, the head of the government in the letter describes the country's fragile economy and anything unanticipated which is beyond control as it is a matter of the political decision of the heads of the government," he added.

In its letter to the UN CDP, the newly formed BNP-led government argued that an extension would provide vital policy space to stabilise the macroeconomy, consolidate reforms, and complete priority actions under the STS.

It said the five-year preparatory period had been "severely disrupted by a succession of overlapping external and domestic shocks", including the lingering effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, sluggish global recovery, the Russia-Ukraine war and its impact on energy and food markets, tightening global financial conditions, delays in trade recovery, instability in the Middle East, and growing uncertainty in the global trade regime.

Domestically, the letter cited irregularities in the financial sector, the July 2024 uprising that led

to a change in government, and the unresolved repatriation of the Rohingya to Myanmar, which required significant budgetary allocations.

According to the government, these shocks triggered macroeconomic instability, slower GDP growth, elevated inflation, declining private and public investment, a falling tax-to-GDP ratio, pressure on foreign exchange reserves, reduced imports of capital machinery and raw materials, and weak job creation.

The banking sector and capital markets also faced serious governance and macroeconomic challenges, contributing to a reversal in poverty reduction gains, the letter said.

Earlier, leaders of major business chambers and trade bodies requested the interim government to seek deferment, but no letter was sent to the UN CDP in this regard.

Different studies suggest Bangladesh may lose 14 percent of exports, or \$8 billion in trade annually, as the country will lose its preferential trade benefits upon graduation. With graduation, local exporters will no longer receive export incentives, as the government provides nearly \$1 billion a year on export receipts.