INDIAN VOTER LIST ROW

Delhi police detain top CJP leaders after flash protest

United INDIA bloc leaders vow to intensify fight against CEC; SC flags 14 'defects' in Rahul's plea

AGENCIES

India's youth-led Cockroach Janta Party (CJP) said yesterday that key leaders had been detained after entering an iconic protest site in New Delhi blocked by police.

Delhi Police said on Monday that Jantar Mantar in the heart of the capital had been taken off the list of designated official protest sites. The site has been sealed off for several days by yellow metal barricades and guarded by a heavy police presence.

But a video posted online by CJP leader Abhijeet Dipke yesterday showed protesters clambering over the barricades, running into the empty space and waving the national flag -- before police chased and detained them.

"CJP sneaks inside to reclaim Jantar Mantar," the group said in a post on social media, adding that the 20 people detained included leaders Saurav Das, Ashutosh Ranka and Ajinkya Shinde. "All of them have been detained by Delhi Police," it added.

"You cannot denotify the resistance," Dipke said, tagging Modi in his post.

In an attempt to keep up the pressure on the government, Rahul Gandhi hosted a high tea for leaders from the INDIA bloc as well as student bodies.

"Today I have invited the leaders of the INDIA alliance, opposition MPs, student organisations, and people from civil society to my home for tea. In this people's movement to protect democracy, we are all together... no matter what happens, or which institution plays a role or doesn't, political resistance will continue, people's resistance

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Security personnel detain student activists during a protest demanding the resignation of the nation's Chief Election Commissioner Gyanesh Kumar over alleged voter roll irregularities linked to the "special intensive revision" (SIR), in New Delhi, India yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Any flight to Saudi will do

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Nasir said he went to the airline's counter at the airport and was told to remain prepared so that he could be accommodated on another Saudi-bound flight, subject to seat availability.

Mohammad Ruhul Amin was originally scheduled to travel to Riyadh on October 11. His recruiting agency later arranged a ticket for Jeddah, and he was expected to fly last night.

Workers affected by earlier cancellations are also being rerouted.

Mohammad Rezaul Karim said his agency had asked him to remain in Dhaka for another couple of days while it searched for a seat on another Saudi-bound flight.

Mohammad Shahin, whose visa remains valid for several months, has sought another month's leave and said he would consider travelling via Jeddah or Madinah if necessary.

Recruiting agencies say such rerouting has become a race against time.

"We are trying to find alternative flights to send our workers to protect them and their visas. We are also exploring other airports that are safe and operational," said Belayet of MRJ Global.

Once a visa expires, it becomes very difficult to renew, said representatives of Udayan Overseas Employment Service and GM Overseas, while urging workers to contact agencies well before expiry.

The government says it is trying to address the problem through diplomatic channels.

Workers whose travel has been disrupted, including those on leave and those facing visa expiry, were a concern for the government, Nurul Haque Nur, state minister for expatriates' welfare and overseas employment, told The Daily Star.

Bangladesh had faced similar difficulties when the Middle East conflict escalated in February, and Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries had provided opportunities and flexibility at the time.

The government is now trying to resolve the latest cases through diplomatic discussions, he said.

The government is closely monitoring the situation of Bangladeshi migrant workers affected by the conflict, and ensuring their safety and providing consular assistance remain the immediate priority, said Humaiun Kobir, the state minister for foreign affairs.

"Our diplomatic efforts are focused on protecting the employment rights of Bangladeshi workers and maintaining engagement with host countries to minimise disruptions to their livelihoods," he told The Daily Star.

The foreign ministry was also strengthening coordination with the Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment and other agencies.

For workers who may be forced to return, rehabilitation and reintegration would become important, he said, adding that the government wanted returnees to have access to appropriate support and livelihood opportunities.

In a directive dated October 12, CAAB told airlines operating direct and transit flights to Saudi Arabia to notify affected passengers through SMS, phone calls, email and other channels about cancellations and schedule changes, and provide information on rebooking and refunds.

Airlines were also told to guide passengers facing visa or immigration problems, assist stranded travellers and appoint focal points to coordinate with airport authorities.

Biman did not respond to The Daily Star's queries on whether affected passengers are being directly notified of cancellations or rescheduling through SMS or other channels.

The disruption has also brought Bangladesh's reliance on Middle Eastern labour markets into focus.

Nur said the government is mapping alternative markets in Asia-Pacific and Europe and strengthening skills training, while acknowledging that prolonged disruption in the Middle East could slow its overseas employment plans.

Bangladesh should not respond simply by looking for new destinations for low-skilled manpower, said Hossain Zillur Rahman, chairman of Power and Participation Research Centre.

"Instead of looking for new markets for unskilled labour, we should look at developing targeted markets for targeted professional manpower export."

Bangladesh should prepare not only for the immediate three to six months but also for the medium-term consequences over the next one to two years, he added.

But for Ridoy and Nasir, the concerns are immediate: whether a seat can be found before their visas run out.

MBS moves from palace to palace

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One of the officials said the investigation also aims to find out why air defence systems did not provide earlier warning of the attack in which the Houthi missiles and drones flew over 1,000 kilometres (620 miles) to reach Riyadh.

The incident has exposed vulnerabilities in Saudi Arabia's defence system and signalled a dangerous inflection point in an expanding Mideast conflict that began more than seven months ago when the US and Israel launched their war against Iran.

Meanwhile, Houthi-run Al-Masirah TV yesterday reported an attack on the Yemen Oil Company in Sanaa.

The attack came shortly after the Saudi-led coalition ordered the evacuation of the facility ahead of a military operation.

Houthis also warned yesterday they would target Riyadh's airport, a refinery, and an Aramco facility in Dammam if the Saudi-led coalition follows through on its threat to strike an oil facility in Sanaa.

Saudi Arabia has in recent weeks launched strikes against the Houthis and is backing a Yemeni government counteroffensive after the group seized strategic territory along the Red Sea coast last month.

Press Council seeks suo moto powers

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presented at a meeting of the parliamentary standing committee on the information and broadcasting ministry at the Jatiya Sangsad Bhaban yesterday.

Representatives of the ministry's departments and agencies submitted recommendations aimed at making their activities "more dynamic and people-oriented", according to documents.

Committee Chairman Aman Ullah Aman presided over the meeting, attended by Information and Broadcasting Minister Andaleeve Rahman, State Minister Yaser Khan Chowdhury and other committee members.

The Press Council suggested empowering itself to investigate and take action against reports deemed harmful to national integrity, independence and sovereignty, contrary to public taste or journalistic ethics, or detrimental to public interest.

It also recommended effective penalties, including fines, for editors, publishers, and journalists in cases filed by aggrieved individuals over false, harassing or unethical reports.

The council sought exclusive jurisdiction over journalists' rights and professional misconduct, and proposed appointing a district judge as a member to strengthen its quasi-judicial powers.

To improve professional standards, it recommended a registration and certification system for journalists, modelled on the Bangladesh Bar Council.

EDITORS' QUALIFICATIONS, JOURNALISTS' FINANCIAL SECURITY

The council recommended amending the Printing Presses and Publications (Declaration and Registration) Act to set specific educational and professional requirements for newspaper editors.

Section 12(2)(j) of the existing law says an editor must have reasonable educational qualifications or adequate training or experience in journalism for a newspaper's declaration to be authenticated. The council said the requirements are not clearly defined, allowing virtually anyone to become an editor.

It proposed making a bachelor's degree, relevant training and at least 10 years' journalism experience mandatory for editors.

To improve journalists' financial security, the council proposed cancelling a newspaper's declaration if it employs journalists without appointment letters or fails to pay their salaries and allowances for three consecutive months or more.

It also suggested requiring newspapers receiving government benefits to submit annual audit reports to the district magistrate's office, the Department of Films and Publications and the Press Council. A monitoring committee comprising representatives of the three institutions would oversee regular publication and inspect newspaper offices.

For financial independence, the council sought authority to collect a levy of one percent of newspaper circulation revenue or a rate fixed by the authorities.

It also proposed setting up a research cell to study media freedom and ways to improve journalistic standards.

'CONTRADICTION'

Prof Gitiara Nasreen, a member of the Media Reform Commission, said retaining the Press Council contradicted the commission's recommendation for an independent media commission to oversee journalistic standards and codes of conduct, and guide media outlets towards professional practices.

She questioned why separate bodies were needed when the proposed commission could cover all media.

She also questioned the Press Council's independence, citing its placement under the information ministry and the potential influence of the executive and the judiciary.

"The commission should not be punitive. Its primary role should be to guide the media, address journalists' professional concerns and ensure they can work independently without interference," she said.

BTV, FILM ARCHIVE

Committee members stressed the need to consider the social impact of programmes and news broadcast by Bangladesh Television (BTV), according to a press release from the Parliament Secretariat.

They said BTV should not become a commercial channel but function as a media institution accountable to the state and society, with clearly defined goals and objectives.

They also emphasised the importance and relevance of news and called for programmes that appeal to the public.

The committee stressed including the history of the 1990 mass uprising and the July mass uprising, along with the 1971 Liberation War and other significant events, in historical documentaries and archival materials preserved by the Bangladesh Film Archive.

Fury as US federal agents search anti-Trump lawmaker's home

AFP, *Washington*

US federal agents searched the Washington home of Democratic congresswoman Ilhan Omar on Monday as part of what officials said was a criminal investigation, marking a dramatic escalation in President Donald Trump's confrontation with the outspoken lawmaker.

Omar said she was "ok" following the operation but accused the administration of targeting political opponents just three weeks before she seeks re-election in the November 3 midterms.

The early morning search -- described by Trump's "border czar" Tom Homan as part of a longstanding probe -- was conducted by agents from Homeland Security Investigations (HSI), the investigative arm of US immigration enforcement.

"Make no mistake: this is an attempt to target political enemies and weaponize federal law enforcement," Omar wrote on X.

"For ten years, Trump has targeted me with baseless lies and smear campaigns. This is just the latest escalation in his campaign of political intimidation."

The operation also sparked a furious backlash from Democrats who accused Trump of abusing government powers to pursue his political opponents.

Fox News reported that the search was linked to a criminal fraud investigation concerning immigration paperwork submitted on behalf of the Somali-born congresswoman by her late father when she was a child.

The president was asked about Omar hours after the operation and said she was being investigated "very carefully."

"I've always found her to be totally crooked personally, but that has nothing to do with me. I think she's a terrible person, just a complainer.

PUBACHAL PLOT SCAM

BTMA president, Partex MD sentenced to 14 yrs

COURT CORRESPONDENT

A Dhaka special court yesterday sentenced Amber Group Chairman Showkat Aziz Russell, Partex Group Managing Director Ashfaq Aziz Rubel and six former Rajuk officials to 14 years' imprisonment each in a corruption case filed over allocating plots in the Purbachal Residential Project.

Judge Md Abdus Salam of the Special Judge Court-9 delivered the verdict in their absence in the courtroom, said a court employee.

The court also issued conviction warrants as all eight were absent during the verdict, he added.

According to the judgments, Russell and Rubel were sentenced to seven years' imprisonment and fined Tk 10 lakh each for their abetment of criminal misconduct. They were also convicted for seven years and fined Tk 10 lakh each for abetting criminal breach of trust.

The six former Rajuk officials include former Rajdhani Unnayan Kartripakkha (Rajuk) chairman Iqbal Uddin Choudhury and former members: SD Foyej, AKM Wahedul Islam, SM Jafar Ullah, HM Jahurul Haque and Rezaul Karim Tarafdar.

All six were sentenced to seven years in jail and fined Tk 10 lakh each for criminal misconduct. Each of them was also convicted for seven years and fined Tk 10 lakh for criminal breach of trust.

The verdict said each of the eight accused would have to serve an additional year in prison for each Tk 10 lakh fine in default of payment.

"The sentence will run concurrently," the verdict also read.

The period the accused had already spent in custody would be deducted from their sentences, it added.

According to the verdict, the court ordered the cancellation of the plot allotments to Rubel and Russell, sons of Partex Group founder MA Hashem, and the plots confiscated in favour of the state.

According to the case documents, Rubel and Russell, also the president of the Bangladesh Textile Mills Association, deposited Tk 1.5 lakh each as security for a 10 katha plot each.

As they were not allotted plots in the first phase, they withdrew their deposits in December 2003, rendering their applications paid off and cancelled. They did not apply again.



Showkat Aziz



Ashfaq Aziz

However, in June 2004, Rajuk allotted the two plots, measuring 10 kathas each and totalling 20 kathas, against the cancelled applications without any recommendation from the selection committee.

To favour the applicants, the board meeting unlawfully decided that the plots could be allotted if the applicants repaid the withdrawn deposits along with 17 percent interest.

The move amounted to an abuse of power and deprived eligible applicants of their rightful opportunities.

On February 8, 2017, Sylvia Ferdous, assistant director of the Anti-Corruption Commission, filed the case with Motijheel Police Station. Then on September 4, 2018, ACC Deputy Director Mirza Zahidul Alam submitted a charge sheet in the case.

On August 26, 2019, the court framed charges against the eight accused.

During the trial, nine witnesses testified.

"I have been targeted as I criticised different activities of the immediate past government," Russell told The Daily Star last night.

He said when he was given the plot as there were fewer applications against many number of plots, he said, adding that the value of the plot was less when he bought it.

"Its price has increased now," he said, adding that he will appoint a lawyer soon to seek bail from court.

Rubel could not be reached for comment about the verdict.

Big farmers get half: WB

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rationalisation for several years and is expected to make fertiliser-subsidy reform a key condition of its upcoming loan programme.

The subsidy matters more to poorer households relative to income: combined direct and indirect benefits equal 1.04 percent of income for the poorest quintile, compared with 0.10 percent for the richest, the report said.

"These findings indicate that poorer households have less capacity to absorb the loss of support, even though richer households capture more benefits," the World Bank said.

Mustafa K Mujeri, former director general of the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS), said, "What matters is how subsidies on fertiliser and other farm inputs can be delivered effectively to small and marginal farmers."

Mujeri said removing agricultural subsidies is not easy because they support food security and production. "Keeping fertiliser prices low for farmers is not enough; it is also essential that fertiliser reaches them when they need it," he said, pointing to problems with availability and dealer distribution during the farming season.

The World Bank also cautioned that farm size is "an incomplete indicator of poverty", noting that about three-quarters of marginal rice farmers consumed more rice than they produced, potentially exposing them to both higher input costs and higher food prices. It said more effective targeting should therefore consider household welfare alongside cultivated area and input needs.

Bangladesh uses about 66 lakh tonnes of fertiliser a year, with more than 85 percent of requirements met through imports. Domestic production is constrained by gas shortages, ageing plants, and operational disruptions, leaving the subsidy bill exposed to global supply disruptions, price volatility and exchange-rate depreciation.

The vulnerabilities became particularly evident after the Russia-Ukraine War in 2022 and the Middle East conflict in 2026, adding pressure to the budget and foreign exchange reserves, the World Bank said.

Agricultural subsidies have absorbed about 80 percent of the agriculture ministry's budget since FY2022-23, up from 63 percent in FY2018-19.

Across the broader food and agriculture portfolio, subsidies accounted for 41.5 percent of spending, while agricultural research received just 4.2 percent -- nearly Tk 10 was spent on subsidies for every Tk 1 allocated to research.

The World Bank said redirecting part of the spending towards research, extension, soil health, and irrigation "could generate higher long-term returns than untargeted input subsidies". Investments in storage and marketing could also support diversification, private investment, and rural jobs, it said.

"Paper-based, poorly monitored distribution gives authorities little real-time information on low levels of supply and rising prices," the World Bank said.

Weak dealer oversight "allows diversion and unauthorised mark-ups", while farmers "reportedly pay above official prices". Higher costs and delays can be particularly difficult for cash-strapped farmers during critical stages of crop growth.

Only about 5 percent of farmers apply nutrients in the right balance, meaning part of the subsidy pays for fertiliser that does not raise yields, the report said. Small and marginal farmers also have less contact with government extension officials than larger farmers.

Administered fertiliser prices could be increased in small, preannounced steps over several cropping seasons, with changes communicated before farmers make planting and input-purchase decisions.

The World Bank warned that sudden increases could force cash-strapped smallholders to reduce fertiliser use or absorb higher costs, putting yields and food prices at risk.

In the near term, the World Bank said Bangladesh should secure fertiliser supplies for coming cropping seasons, maintain buffer stocks, and ensure timely distribution. Such measures "should complement, not delay" reforms to pricing and targeting.

The BNP government's farmer card initiative and digital farmer registry could provide the foundation for shifting "from subsidising supply to supporting demand", the bank said. The registry would identify actual cultivators, including tenants and sharecroppers, and record their land, crops and soil information, allowing support to be matched to holdings and input needs.