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Hasina's arrest resented at House of Lord's seminar

US congresswoman concerned

Staff Correspondent

Speakers at a seminar in London on human rights situation in Bangladesh yesterday criticised the use of emergency powers, saying the practice undermines the rule of law.

Expressing concern at custodial torture, they said some detainees were wrongfully arrested and subjected to ill treatment by law enforcers, according to a message received in Dhaka.

International Bangladesh Foundation organised the seminar at the House of Lords with Lord Avebury in the chair. Members of the British Parliament (MP) and the European Parliament (MEP), peers of the House of Lords, and representatives of Commonwealth Secretariat, Liberation, Saferworld, Ahmadiyya Muslim Association, International Crisis Group, Jago Bangladesh, London School of Economics and University of London addressed the seminar.

British MPs expressed concern at the 'undignified arrest' of former Bangladesh prime minister and Awami League President Sheikh Hasina, and rejection of her application for bail. It was also suggested that a delegation of parliamentarians should visit Bangladesh to observe the situation.

Speakers were also critical about restrictions on freedom of political parties to decide on how to democratise themselves. They suggested lifting the ban on political activities before the next general elections.

The seminar criticised detention of a large number of people and lack of prosecutorial and judicial capacity to hold their trials promptly.

In his inaugural speech, Lord Avebury said while attention has rightly been focused on the caretaker government's strategy for genuinely free and fair elections, reformation of the political system, and eradication of corruption, there is concern also about problems of human rights.

He said establishment of a national human rights commission, as promised by the government, is a priority.

Ashraf Uddin, acting high commissioner of Bangladesh, gave a comprehensive presentation on the caretaker government's commitment to minority and human rights in its reform plans.

He said a draft of the law on the Human Rights Commission is about to be circulated among stakeholders for consultation.

Baroness Uddin, chair of All Party Group on Bangladesh, Amnesty International's South Asia Researcher Abbas Faiz, Conservative Friends of Bangladesh Chair Ms Ann Main MP, Labour MP David Drew, Human Rights Watch Asia Director Brad Adams, and European Friends of Bangladesh Chair Dr Charles Tannock MEP also took part in the discussion.

Other contributors included Harry Cohen MP, Tower Hamlets Mayor Councillor (Cllr) Ann Jackson, Awami League representative MA Rahim, BNP representative Barrister Jushna Miah, Gano Forum's representative Cllr Ayub Korom Ali, Respect Cllr Lutfa Begum, Bangla TV's MS Alam Liton, ex-Cllr Talal Karim and Akik Rahman Chowdhury.

The AL representative said Sheikh Hasina was arrested and imprisoned under the emergency powers that appear to deny her basic legal rights, including legal representation.

Lord Avebury in his concluding remarks said, "We as fellow members of the Commonwealth, and with the ties of family and history that bind us together, want to see Bangladesh go through a new liberation, emerging with strong political, legal and human rights institutions."

Speakers also discussed the 'failure' to bring to justice criminals who committed outrages during the last government's tenure, and the need to curb the activities of fanatics who stir up religious hatred.

US LAWMAKER'S CONCERN

US Congresswoman Yvette D Clarke has expressed fears that the detention of Awami League chief Sheikh Hasina could be extended indefinitely without a trial as, she said, the former prime minister has 'no right' to contest the charges, hire an attorney, or get bail.

In a letter, Clarke urged US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice to use all diplomatic resources to encourage the "military government" to adhere to international human rights laws and to advocate for fair and open legal proceedings for everyone who has been arrested, including Sheikh Hasina.

"If the Bangladeshi government will not grant basic human rights and fair trials to those imprisoned, then they should be released immediately," she said in the letter dated July 24, copy of which was available to The Daily Star.

Expressing concern over delay in holding the next parliamentary elections, Clarke urged Rice to initiate a discussion with the chiefs of both the caretaker government and the army to lift the ongoing state of emergency and set a date for elections so the economic, political, and social reforms needed to assist Bangladesh can be instituted.

Clarke said Hasina was arrested one week after she spoke out against attempts by the Directorate General of Forces Intelligence to infiltrate two major political parties and create a new party of leaders who are more in line with the "military government".

Even before Hasina's arrest, the army had already attempted to push her into exile, the US congresswoman said.

She said people have remained in custody without trials, without speaking with an attorney, without being brought before a judge and without being formally charged.

"Under the temporary military government, trials are being conducted by special tribunals with no jury and the proceedings are closed to the public with only a judge present," Clarke said.