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200 RU teachers seek a day's leave, Hasina's release

RU CORRESPONDENT

Some 200 teachers of Rajshahi University (RU) decided to go on leave en masse today in an extraordinary move to demand the release of Awami League chief Sheikh Hasina.

Their other demands include lifting the ban on politics, holding general elections at the earliest possible time -- before the timeline declared by the Election Commission and freeing educational institutes including RU from corruption.

The teachers in a joint press handout yesterday afternoon announced the decision.

At least 181 teachers belonging to Progressive Teachers' Association (PTA) yesterday submitted their leave petitions and the others are to follow today.

In the handout, the teachers expressed their concern about the way the present government is conducting its affairs as it is veering off from its primary responsibility of holding a free and fair election.

SEE PAGE 15 COL 3

Hasina's arrest

FROM PAGE 1
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 Alami 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.