



Politicians urged to break crime-link

Wallich also asks government not to interfere with NGOs

STAR REPORT

Reiterating concern over the nexus between crime, police and criminalised politics, World Bank Country Director Christina Wallich yesterday warned that such political practices threatened the rule of law and undermined democratic institutions, transparency and accountability.

"The links between crime, police and criminalised politics -- the violence and extortion associated with the police themselves, protected and patronised by both political parties -- were discussed last year. We are obliged to voice the

same concern today," Wallich said at a dinner hosted in honour of the heads of delegation to the Bangladesh Development Forum (BDF) at Sonargaon Hotel.

A number of ministers, including Finance and Planning Minister M Saifur Rahman, and secretaries also attended the dinner.

Focussing on law and order, she said: "Some ethnic and religious minorities are abused and pressured to give up their land and livelihood. Mob justice and gruesome killings of presumed culprits are highly disturbing."

Wallich added both major

political parties in Bangladesh had a responsibility to break links with crime and should work together to eradicate corruption in police.

"We are concerned about abuse of the Special Powers Act and deplore the mass arrests taking place in the last weeks, just as we deplore the anti-democratic and extra-constitutional tactics of the opposition party played out in the streets and by political threat," she said.

Referring to the assassination of opposition lawmaker Ahsanullah Master on Friday, Wallich said, "Yesterday's tragic events are a sobering reminder of the cost to country and family, of continued violence."

"Decisive leadership, breaking the links between criminals and their political patrons, making the streets, the schools, and the business establishments safe for living, and for making a living, could be the most popular measure that this government could take, for the citizens of Bangladesh," Wallich said.

"The government should make human security a priority. We urge the police reform proposal under discus-

sion be agreed by July," she said, asking the opposition to collaborate with the government in strengthening human security and police reform.

Mentioning that 'corruption drains public resources, including donors', and 'Bangladesh's best-educated elites prosper abroad and despair of change at home', Wallich urged the government to put the Anti-Corruption Commission into operation and appoint commissioners of the body in six months.

A full timetable for implementation of the Anti-Corruption Commission Act is needed by the end of the year."

Remarking that the act will not be enough, Wallich said: "A comprehensive national anti-corruption strategy, backed by both parties, is needed. A broad consultative process to develop this strategy, improving law and order and giving up patronisation of criminalised politics should be the number one priority of this government."

Speaking on non-governmental organisations, she said, "NGOs must be allowed to operate free of political interference and undue bureaucratic

control. We strongly urge consultations with NGOs, experts, and donors before any regulations are finalised.

"Yet it appears that the government is again considering inappropriate and restrictive legislation for NGOs."

On micro-credit, Wallich said the government should not interfere with or set ceilings on micro-credit interest rates.

"We are also concerned about alleged corruption in the selection of NGOs by some government departments for implementation of donor-funded projects."

She also called for 'transparency due process, and an early conclusion to the investigation into certain NGOs', saying, they were holding up service delivery to thousands of poor beneficiaries.

"For Bangladesh to prosper economically, across-the-board political and economic governance changes are needed. Without them, growth will be less -- Bangladesh will not reap the full benefits of recent reforms -- and could even fall behind in the society of nations," she said.