

# *The Daily Star*

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Your right to know

About 300 Languish in Jails After Terms

## **6 foreign prisoners freed, 20 more await their turn**

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The jail authorities have started freeing the foreign nationals languishing in Bangladeshi jails for years after serving their sentences because of diplomatic and bureaucratic tangles.

They took the step after failing to repatriate them through the normal procedures.

At least six foreign prisoners -- four Myanmarese, one North Korean and one Tanzanian -- were freed in the last one month.

Inspector General of Prisons (IG-Prisons) Brig Gen Zakir Hassan told The Daily Star, "We have taken the step on humanitarian grounds and also considering the sufferings they are enduring."

"We have already freed six foreigners taking bonds from their relatives and lawyers in the last one month," he said, adding that they hope to free 20 more foreign nationals in the next one month.

Jail sources said at present a total of 878 nationals from 11 countries are in various prisons in Bangladesh. Of them, jail terms of 286 foreign nationals expired long ago.

Sources said of the foreign prisoners, 515 are Myanmarese, 330 are Indian, 12 are Pakistani, seven are Nepali, five are Tanzanian, two are Kenyan, three are Malaysian and one each from Saudi Arabia, Ghana, Liberia and Hungary.

The jail terms of 30 foreign nationals expired 15 years ago while 80 others had served their terms five years back.

As per the normal procedure, the jail authorities send necessary papers to the home ministry, which forwards the information to the foreign ministry for repatriating the foreign prisoners.

Then, the ministry contacts the embassies or high commissions of the countries concerned.

Sources said the authorities concerned could not collect information about the foreign prisoner -- mostly Indian and Myanmarese -- who do not have any passport.

Referring to the Indian guerrilla leader Anup Chetia, who has been jailed for over 10 years, the IG-Prisons said, "His jail term ended in December, 2004. After expiry of jail term, he sought political asylum in Bangladesh, which the government turned down."

"Later, his lawyer filed a writ petition, which is now pending with the High Court. We cannot do anything about him, until the court delivers its verdict," he said.

A few NGOs have been working for repatriation of the foreign prisoners, Zakir Hassan said,

adding that the country has to shoulder the cost of keeping them in jail.

Talking to The Daily Star, former adviser to a caretaker government Sultana Kamal, also the executive director of Ain O Shalish Kendra, welcomed the move and said, "We are also carrying out our activities in this regard."

Replying to a query, she said, "In most cases, we do not receive any response from the embassies or high commissions of the countries concerned as they often do not want to acknowledge the prisoners as their nationals for not having any passport."