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People's Right to Know

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OVER THERE... OH NO... NOWHERE: A villager, left, on the Meghna bank points to the spot midriver where a launch capsized with about 750 passengers Tuesday; men and women, middle, scour the river for their relatives; and people from outlying areas wait for their near and dear ones.

Hopes dying down

15 bloated bodies recovered, more float downstream, no sight of sunken launch, raging currents frustrate rescuers, villagers keep vigil on Meghna banks

STAR REPORT

Fifteen bloated bodies were retrieved from the Meghna downstream yesterday, two days after an overcrowded launch capsized in the Chandpur confluence after being sucked into the eye of an eddy.

Four of the bodies were found floating in the choppy river in Chandpur while 11 in Sadar, Daulatkhan and Borhanuddin upazila on the offshore island of

Bhola, local administration sources said.

Driving rains and fierce currents in the confluence of the Padma, Meghna, and Dakatia rivers frustrated all attempts by searchers to trace the triple-deck MV Nasrin-1.

Police Superintendent of Chandpur Mohammad Bakhtiar Alam told reporters that the body of a 45-year-old man was found in the Meghna at Harisava, another eight kilometres off the scene.

Among the dead was Lulu Mia, 40, from Charputa union, but the identity of the rest were not known immediately.

As the bodies were brought to Lalmoheh, the supposed last stop of the capsized craft, hundreds of grieving people converged at the launch ghat -- some sobbing, some beating their chests with hands.

The relatives of the missing gathered on riverbanks last night as

reports of floating bodies broke.

UNB adds a 60-year-old businessman, Lulu Haji, died of a heart attack as he received wrong information that his son was also travelling home by the launch that capsized.

BODIES FLOATING

Earlier, people in villages along the Meghna found bodies and belongings of the launch passengers floating in the treacherous waters downstream in Chandpur, but could

not retrieve those due to raging currents.

Witnesses at Chandpur said they saw two bodies in the confluence early yesterday.

"After floating for a fleeting moment, the bodies went underwater," said Khorshed, whose son Helal, 14, is feared drowned in the accident.

Khorshed, a rickshawpuller, has been keeping a round-the-clock

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Insurance plan for passengers ditched

Welfare fund launched

RAFIQ HASAN

The government has abandoned its mandatory life insurance plan for marine passengers in the face of opposition by launch owners.

Instead, it introduced a welfare fund on July 1 for passengers killed or injured in launch accidents, shipping ministry sources said.

The proposed mandatory life insurance for launch passengers was abandoned as launch owners pressed for a number of provisions, which go in favour of them, said a top official of the shipping ministry.

Shipping Minister Akbar Hossain also admitted that life insurance for launch passenger could not be

introduced because of non-cooperation of launch owners.

Chairman of Bangladesh Launch Owners Association Kalimullah could not be contacted for his comment.

A trustee board headed by the chairman of Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority (BIWTA) has been formed to run the fund and compensate launch mishap victims.

However, the amount of compensation is yet to be decided.

Earlier in 2000, the government had proposed to amend the Insurance Act, 1938 to bring marine passengers under mandatory life insurance coverage. The act covers

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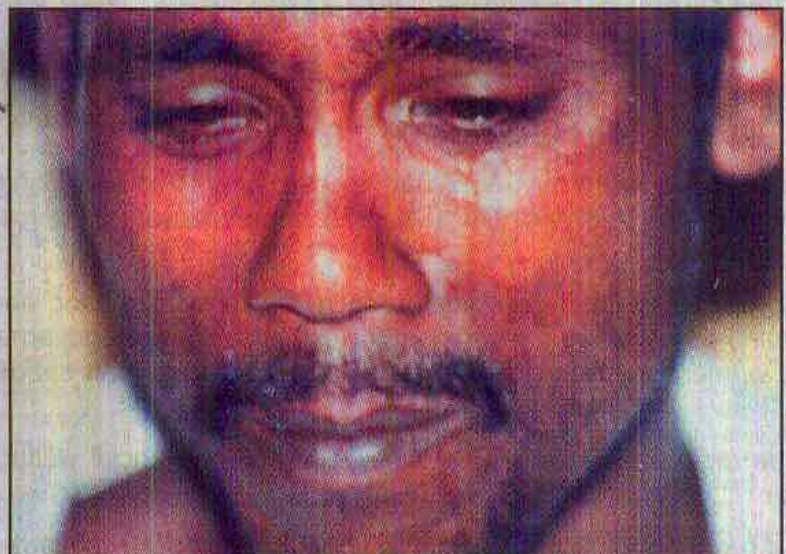
Year-wise disasters at a glance

Year	Number of Accidents	Death
1977	05	29
1978	07	20
1979	08	73
1980	01	04
1981	03	20
1982	02	Nil
1983	03	29
1984	05	41
1985	12	80
1986	11	426
1987	11	51
1988	11	108
1989	05	32
1990	13	168
1991	11	19
1992	17	05
1993	24	183
1994	27	303
1995	19	40
1996	20	147
1997	11	104
1998	10	140
1999	06	141
2000	08	387
2001	01	9
2002	02	480
2003	04	208
Total	257	3247

STAR GRAPHICS

LEFT ALONE AT JOURNEY'S END: Mohammad Ali from Lalmoheh may be lucky enough, but not his father, brother and sister who probably drowned in Tuesday's launch disaster in the choppy waters of Meghna. Now in Chandpur, Ali still pins hopes on rescue operations that may bring his loved ones back to him.

PHOTO: SK ENAMUL HAQ



Confluence a serial killer

SHAMEEM MAHMUD

The confluence of three mighty rivers close to Chandpur town has turned into a death trap for south-bound launches, as over 1,500 passengers died in serial sinkings at the monsoon-swollen meeting point in last 10 years.

The capsizing of MV Nasrin-1 with 750 passengers aboard in the confluence Tuesday revived the memories of the launch disasters that left another 500 people missing during the same period. The 10-year count has been swelled by 50 more deaths in minor accidents.

Officials of Bangladesh Inland

Water Transport Authority yesterday claimed that they instructed the launch captains to avoid the converging waterways of the Padma, Meghna and Dakatia that turn dangerous because of raging currents fed by rains.

The latest vessel disaster is the most deadly in Bangladesh in which about 530 people were feared drowned, but only 18 bodies were retrieved downstream until yesterday.

On August 20, 1994, MV Dinar heading to Shariatpur went down in the turbulent waters of the confluence and more than 200 passengers met watery graves, officials said.

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Commentary

Moves against media

Some disturbing new occurrences

MAHFUZ ANAM

Within the last three weeks warrants of arrests were issued against five editors and one executive editor on defamation charges. First, warrants were against the editors of Prothom Alo and The Daily Star, then against the editor of Jugantar and finally against the editor, advisory editor and executive editor of Daily Janakantha.

In addition to the arrest warrants, defamatory and utterly false and fabricated charges were made against the editor of this newspaper

from the floor of parliament. In the second onslaught, exemplary punishment for Star editor and reporter was demanded of the Speaker for interpreting the Bangla word Bua as a maidservant which was directed at the leader of the opposition by the PM's advisor on parliamentary affairs during the latter's budget speech. The Speaker accepted the petition and sent it to the House Privileges Committee to examine and give opinion whether or not any member's privilege was breached.

Only a few days back, police went to the studios of Channel-i and ATN

Bangla, two private TV channels, within hours of broadcasting a story concerning the ammunition haul in Bogra. The story, which was also run by other newspapers, said that police recovered huge quantity of bullets and explosives from houses of both opposition and coalition activists and suspected their involvement in the affair. Following the police visit one station withdrew the story and another broadcast the same blaming the opposition in place of a coalition partner, which they did in the original version. On

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Bill for free anti-graft body placed in JS

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Law, Justice and Parliamentary Affairs Minister Moudud Ahmed last night introduced in the Jatiya Sangsad a bill seeking to form an independent anti-corruption commission.

On Monday, the cabinet approved the Anti-Corruption Commission Bill, 2003, in a bid to deliver an election pledge of the coalition government.

The commission will impartially investigate the offences of corruption and grant sanction for trial.

The bill proposed that the commission would consist of three commissioners, among whom one would be nominated as its chairman by the president.

The president will appoint the three commissioners from among

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No reason to resign: Akbar

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Shipping Minister Akbar Hossain yesterday denied flat out any possibility of his resignation over Tuesday's triple-deck launch capsizing in which about 530 passengers were feared drowned.

"I am not a person to quit. If I quit, then who would work?" Akbar told The Daily Star over telephone last night.

The minister said the aim of a good minister is to work and tried to work better.

Akbar shrugged off the responsibility of serial launch accidents saying that all vessels were not built during the BNP rule.

"We took action against 40 unfit launches, but the previous government did not do anything," he

claimed.

"Their licences will not be renewed unless the flaws are corrected," he said of the action taken by the government. He has admitted that those launches are still plying various waterways.

Asked why he did not visit the accident site of MV Nasrin-1 that sank in the Meghna near Chandpur Tuesday night, Akbar said, "I will go there after the vessel is traced. I will try my best to salvage it." He said all the people concerned of his ministry have already been dispatched to the spot for investigation.

Besides, Water Resources Minister Hafiz Uddin Ahmad and State Minister for Religious Affairs Mosharef Hossain Shajahan are also on the scene, the minister said.

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Tales from Chandpur

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, Chandpur

Finding Tuesday's tragic launch capsizing and the loss of so many lives to much to bear, a young man got indifferent to his own life. He threw himself into the river Dakatia near Chandpur Launch Terminal from a berthed launch yesterday to commit suicide.

Jamal Uddin, 33 who sports a beard, came all the way from Chandina in Comilla to Chandpur yesterday morning after he watched with horror the TV footage of the incident on Wednesday night.

"I came here to see the situation, but I was shocked hearing the wailing of the people who lost their near and dear ones. It seemed to me that life is meaningless and I jumped into the river," a soft-spoken Jamal said. He said he does not know how to swim.

Jamal, who got married two years back and has no offspring, said he earns his livelihood by working as an

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