

Rat runs into a raft of snags

SHARIFUL ISLAM

The Rapid Action Team (Rat), billed as the modern strike force, is running into a raft of snags, including shortage of personnel and lack of logistical support, overshadowing its earlier success in netting criminals.

Even regular operations of Rat are being hampered, as its bills for cellphones and transports used in anticrime drives have been pending with the finance ministry for approval for the last five months, a Rat official said, not wanting to be named.

Rat sources said cellphone lines of many team members are disconnected, as they could not pay the bills.

"To arrest extortionists in the transport sector,

The Rapid Action Team (Rat), grouped into 23 teams, is working in different parts of the city. It swung into action from January 25 as a proactive force of 133 members trained up by the army. Another 145 members came in on May 5 to swell the ranks

we need to go to terminals by taxicab in guise of passengers. It costs a lot. Who will pay the bills?" the official said.

With only 272 members, the team finds it difficult to deal with all complaints they receive every day.

Apart from that, the Ministry of Home Affairs, Police Headquarters and the Police Commissioner's Office are referring sensitive cases like extortion and abduction to Rat. Police stations also suggest that complaints go to Rat for help, he said.

"Our prime goal is to make Rat a place of trust and confidence of people," Rat Deputy Commissioner Mazharul Hoque said.

"If anybody complains to us, we try to save the victim with all efforts," he said, adding: "We ensure their safety too."

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The team consists of one deputy commissioner, 15 assistant commissioners, 17 inspectors, 21 sub-inspectors, 20 sergeants, six assistant sub-inspectors, 11 head constables, 43 nayeks and 138 constables.

Since October 10, Rat has filed 23 cases against listed criminals and 10 of them have been disposed of.

Rat has also lodged 214 cases against criminals after arrest in action since October 10. Of them, 86 cases were filed under the Speedy Trial Act, 23 under the arms act, 111 under narcotics control act

and another 22 under other acts.

Rat members unearthed two illegal firearms-manufacturing factories in Mirpur and Shyampur and seized firearms.

Eighty percent of the accused were sentenced after conviction by court -- a rate higher than in other departments of police with a 55 percent success rate.

Rat has so far arrested 86 criminals who in the name of top criminals like Kala Jahangir extorted ransom. It arrested 42 listed criminals: one of them is Liakot Hossain who also featured on the police list of 23 top criminals in the city.

On April 17, Rat members arrested their colleague Assistant Commissioner Kazi Mohammad Shafi Iqbal in the act of taking Tk 3 lakh in bribe from a man at Mouchak Market.

Neglect set to kill Baldha plants



High-rise buildings surrounding Baldha Garden, left, keep sunlight from reaching its collection of plants, and varieties like rare orchids, right, are at risk of extermination.

SOHEL ISLAM

Rare plants and flowers of the Baldha Garden may be soon become extinct. Pollution, high-rise structures obstructing sunlight and negligence are the major threats the garden is facing.

"We have already shifted saplings of most of the rare species to the Botanical Garden in Mirpur. The plants need sunlight. So the shade caused by the high-rise buildings and dumping of waste nearby can seriously hamper their growth here," said Superintendent of the Baldha Garden Md Delwar Hossain.

The centre of the problem is an under-construction 12-storey building overlooking the garden. "Labourers of construction site often throw liquid rice-starch smack on top of the conservatory house which houses exotic orchids and indoor plants," Hossain said.

Environmentalists, civil society

groups and the local people had raised their voices against the damaging impact the high-rise could have on the garden but nothing has come out of it. The garden, located in Wari on 3.15 acres of land, is divided into two parts the Psyche and the Cybele.

The public entry to the Psyche has been restricted ever since it was built, while the Cybele is open for all from 8 am to 4 pm. The entry fee is Tk 5 per person. Zamindar of the then Baldha estate Narendra Narayan Roy Chowdhury initiated this family garden in 1909. He collected rare species of plants from different continents to enhance its grandeur.

The garden was completed in 1936. Narendra Narayan Roy Chowdhury passed away in 1942 and the Calcutta High Court looked after the garden until the Pakistani government took over.

Baldha Garden became the responsibility of the Forest Department in 1962. The quality of maintenance of the garden is very poor.

There are about 18,000 plants, with 800 species of about 350 genera of 92 families. Only five gardeners have been employed to look after these precious plants and it goes without saying that such a small number of employees can't maintain it properly.

"Forty gardeners took care of the garden at its beginning. Although the number of trees and plants have increased over the years, the number of gardeners have been reduced to a mere five," said Hossain.

The surrounding land was lower than the garden when it was being prepared but over the years the height of the area has increased. The Psyche cannot discharge water during the rainy season

anymore because it is on a lower plane now.

The concrete pathways in the garden are in a dilapidated condition. The two-storey Tower House, from where the Zamindar gazed with pleasure at his garden, is now the office of the superintendent.

Cracks have appeared in the Tower House and its plaster is coming off. It has not been repaired since its construction.

"We have sent a project proposal of Tk 9 crore to the government. If it is approved then the Baldha Garden can still be saved as we will raise its ground level," Hossain said. "We have also proposed to raise the height of cactus, orchid and conservatory houses up to 40 feet to bring in adequate sunlight. The sunlight may salvage the damage done by the high-rise buildings," felt Hossain.

The Baldha Garden boasts of rare

varieties of dendrobium, vanda and catlia. These are not found in any other place in Bangladesh. 2500 orchids, 3200 cactus, 3000 ornamental trees, 2200 aquatic plants, 400 creepers, 5800 bushes, 500 trees are also found in the garden.

The Narayan Roy Chowdhury collected exotic plants like the famous Adansonia digitata from the tropics of Africa. Camellia japonica came from Japan while the Maranth and Anthurium arrived from South East-Asian tropical islands. The Araucaria was brought from Australia, the Euphorbia and cacti from Mexico, the Poplar from Pakistan, the Salix from Afghanistan, the Pothos from Java and Sri Lanka.

All these varieties make the garden a heaven for botany experts and tree lovers.

Auto-rickshaw fares to curve down after Eid

CITY CORRESPONDENT

The auto-rickshaw fares are likely to be reduced from next month.

Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA) recently informed the communications ministry about its decision.

As per the decision, the four-stroke CNG-run autorickshaws will charge Tk 10 instead of the present Tk 12 a kilometre. For the next every kilometre the fares will be Tk 4 instead of Tk 5, sources said.

The government was supposed to scale down the autorickshaw fares as per an agreement with the associations of owners and employees of auto-tempo, auto-rickshaw and auto-truck on April 16.

But the decision was stalled in view of an appeal by the associations citing insuff-

urged the communications minister to defer the fares cut till Eid on 'humanitarian grounds'. In their plea, they cited shortage of filling stations, rising cost of auto-rickshaw and its spare parts, tax increase and spiral of prices of essentials during Ramadan.

Sources said the ministry would not heed to any further appeal and has decided to reduce the fares after Eid as sufficient numbers of CNG filling stations have been set up.

To popularise the use of CNG, the government has allowed tax-free import of machinery and equipment and leased out land for filling stations, they said.

There are 20 refuelling stations now and 25 more are going to be set up by December. Most of the fuelling stations



A policeman stops a CNG scooter to check its documents.

efficient number of filling stations. The communications ministry extended the deadline till July 15 and the fares were supposed to go down from the next day.

The BRTA was given the responsibility to monitor the whole process. On October 29, it finally communicated in writing about its decision to the ministry to reduce the fares. The BRTA, however, proposed to stick to the current rate till February next, sources said.

The day after the BRTA letter was sent to the ministry, the associations again

operate at least 16 hours daily, they pointed out.

Official sources said the government has so far granted permission to set up 1,928 CNG stations and 911 conversion workshops across the country. The CNG vehicles rose to over 16,000 till September 2003 against 1,624 in October 2001.

Before introducing the CNG, the government banned movement of about 35,000 old two-stroke auto-rickshaws, mainly responsible for alarming air pollution in the metropolis.

Slow pace in shifting prisoners from city



The severely overcrowded Dhaka Central Jail compound in Old Dhaka.

CITY CORRESPONDENT

Dhaka Central Jail will take at least another five years to shift on-trial prisoners to ease its overcrowding, as fund crunch is slowing the construction of a new jail at Teghuria in Keraniganj.

After a recent cabinet committee meeting on jail reforms, Law Minister Moudud Ahmed told newsmen that the authorities started acquisition of 200 acres to construct the Keraniganj jail for 8,000 on-trial prisoners.

Earlier, a jail was built for 200 convicts at Kashimpur in Gazipur and some inmates were shifted from Dhaka. Another jail for 300 women convicts is under construction in Kashimpur.

Yet another jail for 1,500 convicts is under construction in Kashimpur, and Tk 126 crore has been approved at a meeting of the Executive Committee of National Economic Council (Ecnc) for that, but only Tk 57 crore has been disbursed.

"Although the work is going on at a slow pace, we have already accommodated 50 convicts transferred from Dhaka Central Jail. The prime minister will inaugurate the new

building after Eid-ul-Fitr," a jail official said.

Dhaka Central Jail is crammed with over 11,500 prisoners, more than four times in excess of its capacity of 2,650.

According to the jail code, a prisoner must have 36 square feet inside a cell and another 36 square feet free space should be left for movement.

"The cells are now used only for sleeping," the official said.

Dhaka Central Jail accommodates three categories of prisoners: on-trial prisoners, convicts and prisoners in detention.

"About 6,000 prisoners are currently awaiting trial and about 4,500 are convicts," said a source at Dhaka Central Jail.

Dhaka Central Jail is situated on 25 acres. It was established in Dhaka in 1826 on a side of the old fort of Islam Khan Chisti who became the governor of Bangla in 1610 and established its capital here. The jail hospital now only bears traces of the old fort.

The government has been planning to shift the prisoners from the historic place since independence. Several plans have passed through ages, but almost all fell flat.

Removing prisoners from the central jail will pave the way for conservation of a historic monument.

Rejoinder

The Deputy Post Master General, Foreign Post, in a rejoinder on the news item "Notoriety, thy name is Foreign Post Office" published on November 10 said that the theme of the photograph does not go with the report. "The bags seen in the photograph were put on the mail transmission point. It seems that the photograph was taken while two authorised officials were taking away the mail bags for next action from the mail receiving point. So the term used in the news item "unaccounted for" is not true," the rejoinder added.