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Char villagers still bay for bandits' blood

3 more robbers lynched; death toll rises to 34

SHARIFUL ISLAM and BISHAWIT DAS, from Noakhali

Three more alleged jungle robbers were killed while two others had their eyes gouged out yesterday by angry villagers on the remote char areas of Noakhali, raising the death toll from lynching to 34 in four days.

Lynch mobs continued to seek out suspected robbers as they had fled their deep forest hideouts in the face of combing operations by law enforcers since Sunday.

Thousands of vengeful villagers have joined the manhunts and are on the lookout for every opportunity to take the law into their own hands.

Eight robbers were killed on Sunday, 19 on Monday and four on Tuesday by frenzied villagers who have long lived under the threat of loot, murder and rape by robbers.

During yesterday's incident, locals caught alleged bandits Abul Kalam from Char Majid and Jasim 'Commander' from Nayagram in the morning as they fled their hideouts in the deep forest during a combing operation.



Smoke billows across rice paddies yesterday on a Noakhali char after village houses of alleged robbers were set alight by lynching mobs.

Jungle rule to end jungle rule

SHARIFUL ISLAM and BISHAWIT DAS, from Noakhali

People on the chars of seaboard Noakhali district are preparing to celebrate their 'freedom from robbers' fiefdom' after eight years of unspeakable torment, but at a cost of 34 lives as law remained starkly absent.

An apparent end to the 'jungle rule' enforced by four infamous gangs in 100 square kilometres came by another jungle rule. Lynching on the sidelines of a police-coastguard operation turned the char villages a ghostly place where blood flows to avenge blood.

Unmindful of the violence, locals say they were preparing to celebrate 'the liberation of the dark zone' in the month of Bangladesh's liberation.

'We'll celebrate independence in a befitting manner in this liberated zone this year,' said Sabir, a university student from Samirhat in Char Jabbar Police Station.

The gangs ran supreme in their fiefdoms where they killed people, looted their houses, extorted money and abducted and raped women at will.

These landless people, who arrived from Hatia, Sandwip and surrounding islands, losing their homes to river erosion, found themselves in the middle of nowhere.

"So far at least 200 people have

been killed and more than 2,000 women raped by the gangs," said local legislator Mohammad Shahjahan.

"The words of the gang leaders are virtually law in this battered region," said one-time gang operative Hanif.

"Each of the gang leaders command 200 to 300 members equipped with firearms. Each gang has uniform of its own."

"Our gang had red uniform," said Bahauallah, arrested operative of Bashir Majhi gang.

Some influential locals patronised the robbers to capture chars and build fish farms there, locals said.

"They maintained liaison with gang bosses and paid regular tolls to them," said Habibur Rahman, officer-in-charge of Char Jabbar Police Station.

"They used the gangs to occupy lands and maintain their grip on fish farms."

"They not only paid money to the robbers, but also supported them with arms and ammunitions," Rahman said.

"They got arms and ammunition supplies from Dhaka, Chittagong and India," he added.

"We did not lease out the lands where the fish projects have been established," said Noakhali Deputy Commissioner (DC) Mostafa Kamal

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Pajero drags woman garment worker to death

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

A Pajero sports utility van (SUV) knocked down a woman garment worker and dragged her over one and a half kilometres to death on Tongi Diversion Road yesterday, echoing the killing of a physician in a near-similar incident in July.

Nahar Begum, hit by the Pajero north of Gulshan Shooting Club at 7:00am, was pulled up to Tibet crossing after she snagged her sari on the rear wheel cover of the vehicle, police and witnesses said.

Pedestrians tried to chase the Pajero down to save the 25-year-old worker of Armana Fashion Limited in Tejgaon, but the vehicle sped on, leaving a trail of blood all the way.

A traffic policeman joined the chase to capture the vehicle and its driver fled, leaving his SUV close to Tibet Chemicals. Nahar was found dead, her sari entangled with the rear wheels.

"She was heading for work. We tried to save the girl. We found her covered in blood -- listless. It happened in a matter of minutes," said a witness to

the incident that drew a large crowd.

"She could have been saved if the driver had stopped when we chased," said another witness, adding the killer Pajero is off-white.

Tejgaon police seized the vehicle and contacted Bangladesh Road Transport Authority to know that it was registered twice -- in one Ruhul Amin's name and with a travel agency.

Police recovered and sent the body to Dhaka Medical College Hospital for an autopsy, where Nahar's brother, Alauddin, told journalists about her life and struggle to stay afloat in Dhaka.

Daughter of Darad Ali of Namapara in Uttara Badda, Nahar joined the garment factory as a thread cutting helper on a monthly pay of Tk 1,000 two and a half months ago.

"Everyday, she walked more than three kilometres to her workplace. She was hard at work," said Alauddin, a rickshaw-puller.

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Draft bill on HR body gathers dust for a year

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The draft bill of a National Human Rights Commission, prepared about a year ago, is gathering dust at the Cabinet Division as the World Human Rights Day was observed yesterday.

The commission, envisaged to reduce violation of human rights, was one of the election pledges of the ruling alliance.

Law Minister Moudud Ahmed told The Daily Star yesterday that the government would set up the proposed commission 'during its tenure'.

The alliance, coming to office, formed a cabinet committee led by the law minister on December 10 in 2001 to prepare the draft bill.

After a series of meetings the committee finalised the draft and sent it to the Cabinet Division on January 23 this year.

Since then, the bill has not been placed before the cabinet meeting.

Sources said the commission is now low on the government's priority list as it feels violations of human rights have reduced, a view contradicted by human rights groups and press reports.

The draft bill stipulated a five-member commission led by a retired judge of the Appellate Division of the Supreme Court, which must have one woman member.

The commission is supposed to investigate any human rights violation and recommend actions. It could probe any such incidents by the defence forces.

The human rights commission was also a demand of the international donors who thought good governance critically depends on the rule of law.

But government insiders said the pressure is no more seen as a major one because of the 'flagrant human rights' violation in the West.

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Saifur talks of special steps to ensure EPZ workers' rights

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Finance Minister M Saifur Rahman yesterday said the government will take special measures to ensure workers' rights in the exclusive industrial zones, protecting the investors' interest at the same time.

He said this to US Ambassador Harry K Thomas when the latter called on him and asked the government's latest position on the issue.

The minister while briefing the newsmen on his hour-long meeting with the US envoy said they discussed issues of mutual interest of the two friendly countries.

He categorically said the government will not take any step that may affect foreign investment.

On foreign investors' concern aired at a press conference Tuesday, Saifur said it would be a cause of concern if they withdraw investment from Bangladesh.

"We will have to consider the interests of both the workers and investors," the minister said, adding that the government is examining the experiences of other countries in this regard.

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ADB okays \$286m for power corporatisation

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The Asian Development Bank (ADB) yesterday approved a loan package of \$286 million to help Bangladesh corporatise four power distribution zones and build a 200MW plant in Siddhirganj.

Under this package, dubbed as power sector development programme, \$100 million will be used to bring financial stability to the sector, says a press release.

The funding was required as part of the ADB-prescribed reforms process that led to the creation of the Power Grid Company (PGCB) or Dhaka Electric Supply Company (DESCO).

The PGCB and Desco will use the fund to pay off their outstanding bills with the Power Development Board (PDB) and help corporatise four other sectoral entities to improve governance and financial discipline.

PDB sources said the government is in the process of corporatising Khulna Power Distribution Zone (KPZ) and talks on the Northern Distribution Zone with the ADB are ongoing. The government has

already appointed the managing body for the KPZ.

The two other distribution zones, which will be corporatised in future, are the Central Power Distribution Zone (CPDZ) in Mymensingh and Sylhet, and Chittagong Zone.

German lender KfW has offered to be the main financier in corporatising the CPDZ and the World Bank in Chittagong Zone.

The donor communities stayed away from funding the energy projects since 1991 until recent times due to Bangladesh's poor reforms record.

The rest \$186 million of the ADB fund will be used in the Siddhirganj project to upgrade steady power supply from there by improving the load generation capacity. The plant, construction of which will require another \$148.5 million, is expected to reduce load shedding during peak hours.

The Nordic Development Fund will finance \$9.6 million the government and executing agencies \$98.7 million. Rest \$34.2 million will come in the shape of domestic borrowing.

A new load dispatch centre will also be set up in the capital to reduce

power generation cost.

The project will upgrade electricity services in 10 towns in the underdeveloped northwest districts and provide connection to 300,000 new customers.

"The sectoral approach addresses not only some of the financial and governance constraints, but also provides investment in generation capacity that will have a major long-term impact on the performance and viability of the power sector," said Mats Elerud, an ADB energy specialist.

"The programme aims to improve the sector's financial and economic viability over the next five years and to enhance oversight and governance, paving the way for sustained growth."

"The investments in the northwest distribution system should have a positive impact on the growth of cottage industries and enterprises that depend on electricity as well as services such as water supply and health services," he said.

The programme is due to complete by the end of 2004 and the Siddhirganj project by 2007.



Green and red again flutters in the wind ahead of Victory Day. A trader gazes up at the flowing national flag displayed for sale at Gulistan in Dhaka.

AL likely to axe Hazari

Considers a probe body dossier on him at a meeting today

REAZ AHMAD

Six months after commissioning a probe into the alleged criminal activities of godfather-famed Awami League (AL) leader Joyal Hazari, the party is likely to expel the former lawmaker soon.

The AL will take up a 500-page investigation report, prepared by a three-member committee headed by AL Joint Secretary Syed Ashraf Islam, for action when the AL Central Working Committee (ALCWC) sits in a crucial meeting in Dhaka this morning.

Party chief Sheikh Hasina, who will chair the 73-member ALCWC meeting at the new AL office in Dhanmondi, is expected to listen to the views of frontline leaders about the 'third force' on the political stage.

A formal support to the leftists-called Saturday's hartal is also likely to figure on the meeting agenda.

The AL formed the probe body in June this year to investigate the

allegations against Hazari, who hogged the headlines for crimes in Feni blamed on 'his gang' during the AL rule and is pegged as one of the main instruments in the party's debacle in the October 2001 ballot.

The expulsion move comes at a time when the main opposition party is smarting from internal feuds, largely fuelled by its godfather-famed former leaders.

The probe against Hazari, a fugitive from justice, was ordered after his backers last May marred an extended meeting of Feni district AL, attended by central leaders including General Secretary Abdul Jalil and Organising Secretary Saber Hossain Chowdhury.

The probe report, likely to bring Hazari's 'notorious past' to light, is being opened amid AL's move to form a new party committee in Feni by mid-January as part of its plan to hold councils in all thana and district units.

Legislator Bir Bahadur and Fazle

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Police officer stabbed, robbed of revolver

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Gang operatives stabbed a sub-inspector (SI) of police and took away his revolver from a running vehicle in Badda last night, police said.

Siddique Hossain was returning to his Khilgaon house from work on a Rider taxi that also sat the gangsters posing as passengers.

The gang stabbed him, snatched his revolver and pushed him down from the vehicle at about 10pm.

On-duty policemen found an injured Siddique near the Kawla Bridge and rushed him to the Combined Military Hospital (CMH). Police, quoting doctors, said his condition was critical.

Duty officer at Badda Police Station said they busted a Rider along with the driver.

Meantime, three persons including an industrialist were injured in separate incidents at Dhanmondi and Mohammadpur yesterday.

Mohammad Shahjahan, owner of Reliance Tannery at Hazaribagh and Esarunnesa Memorial Hospital in Badda, was attacked while getting in his car in front of his Dhanmondi

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Prime Minister Khaleda Zia talks bilateral issues with Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak at Geneva yesterday.

Khaleda, Mubarak talk on coop

BSS, Geneva

Prime Minister Khaleda Zia and Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak have agreed to further strengthen ties in various fields, including trade and economy, between the two countries

The two leaders had a meeting yesterday on the sidelines of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) at Palexpo, the conference venue.

During the meeting, Khaleda sought Egypt's support to

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Panels plagued by factional feuds

DU deans' election today

HASAN JAHID TUSHER

Internal feuds both within the BNP-Jamaat-backed White Panel and the AL-backed Blue Panel have come to the fore in DU (Dhaka University) deans' election of the seven faculties.

A number of teachers recently reported rivalries within the White Panel over political differences between the BNP and Jamaat-e-Islami.

Failure to get nomination has also been a bone of contention for aspirants within the White Panel. Sources said some teachers left out of the race had distanced themselves from the campaign for panel nominees.

However, there have been efforts in both camps to mend the internal differences. Leaders of both panels organised separate Iftar parties during Ramadan to work out their differences.

Prof. Abul Khaer, president of Dhaka University Teachers'

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Contractor shot dead in front of son

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

A group of suspected extortionists shot dead a contractor of Roads and Highways Department (R&H) in front of his son in the city's Kalyanpur yesterday morning.

Abdul Jabbar, 45, bled to death after receiving a bullet in the chest just as he was about to get into his car to drop off his 7-year-old son Prince at school on way to work.

Jabbar's Manager Monir Hossain and Driver Salam were also bullet-hit as they tried to catch the killers.

"The incident happened at around 7:30am. Salam and I were inside the microbus parked on the driveway and waiting for my boss (Jabbar) and his son to get down. As they were about to get into the vehicle, two youths of about 25 years of age came running. One of them pulled out a revolver and shot my boss from a close range," said Monir.

He said Jabbar had seen the men pulling out their revolvers. He pulled his son away from the line of fire just as one of the gunmen opened fire.

Jabbar hunkered down on the ground to protect his son and took a bullet on the left side of the chest.

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"Although bullet-hit, my boss caught one of the gunmen, but he wasn't strong enough to hold on due to profuse bleeding," he said.

"Salam and I jumped out of the microbus and caught one of the gunmen. But the other guy shot both of us in the leg and we fell on the ground as both men ran away," Monir said.

Meanwhile, Jabbar's family members rushed out of the house. Despite being bullet-hit, Salam drove Jabbar and others to Suhrawardy Hospital where doctors pronounced the contractor dead.

Salam and Monir were admitted to Suhrawardy Hospital and Dhaka Medical College Hospital (DMCH).

The victim's body was handed over to his family after autopsy at the DMCH.

Jabbar's brother Abdur Rahman said unidentified extortionists were trying to get his brother on the

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