

OFFICE OF COMPTROLLER AND AUDITOR GENERAL

6.4 lakh objections struck off at one go

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The Office of the Comptroller and Auditor General (OCAG) has decided to consider 640,000 general audit objections, filed from 1971-1972 to 2009-2010 fiscal year, as resolved.

In an order issued on Sunday, the office said the decision was made because the traditional audit objection settlement activities were not being considered as “cost effective”.

Most of the general audit objections are related to methodical and managerial errors and those are less significant in consideration of financial irregularities, said the order.

“We have settled all general audit objections filed from 1971-1972 to 2009-2010 fiscal year, except those involving serious financial irregularities, through an office order issued on June 14,” a top CAG official said on Wednesday.

The official said they have already informed the officials concerned regarding the order.

Officials said there were about 8 lakh unresolved audit objections, and 80 percent of them were general audit objections. Decisions on a large number of objections had been pending for several decades, and settling those was one of the major challenges for the CAG office.

About 80 percent of the unresolved audit objections are general audit objection in nature, the office order said.

It said both the executive authorities and the CAG office need to engage huge manpower, time and resources to resolve the audit objections. That’s why timely quality performance and financial audit cannot be brought to the desired level.

In order to better use the manpower, time, and money of the executive

authorities and the CAG office, ease the sufferings in the pension approval process, and strengthen the activities of quality audit settlement and financial audit, the CAG of Bangladesh has made the decision to consider all general audit objections, filed from 1971-72 to 2009-2010 fiscal year, as settled, said the office order.

However, steps will be taken in line with court orders if there is any case in connection with the unresolved audit objections, added the order, signed by Deputy CAG Mahbubul Hoque.

A letter attached to the order said most of the general audit objections were so old that those became insignificant with the passage of time. The rate of resolving the objections was very low considering the amount of time and work hours spent on those.

“Identifying those involved in the audit objections become tough as the objections were filed long ago. That’s why decisive measures cannot be taken in regards to most of the objections,” said the letter.

As a constitutional body, the OCAG is responsible for auditing government receipts and public spending. It also ascertains whether expenditures have yielded value for money in government offices, public bodies and statutory organisations.

The OCAG audit report includes serious unresolved audit objections which are sent to parliament’s Public Accounts Committee (PAC) for discussions.

Replying to a query from a lawmaker, former finance minister AMA Muhiith in June 2016 told the previous parliament that 876,013 audit objections involving Tk 778,739.85 crore were pending decisions.

The amount was more than double of the 2016-17 fiscal’s proposed budget figure of Tk 340,605 crore.

When critiquing courts danger

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Perhaps the earliest such case can be traced back to March 13, when a deputy assistant engineer of Satkania upazila in Chattogram was arrested for posting a news item titled “one found with coronavirus in Boalkhali” when in fact that was not true.

Though he realised his mistake and removed the Facebook post later, people started sharing its screenshots on Facebook and police arrested him. They charged him with “spreading rumours to create panic” when it was probably just an honest mistake, and there was no visible social effect of his post. After all, news literacy -- the skill of being able to verify which news is true or impartial and which is false or biased -- is lacking among a large part of the general populace.

As 55 academics said in a statement circulated to the media on June 16, “maintaining etiquette in cyberspaces can only be done through community management, not through the use of any illogical, malicious criminal law.”

Ten days later, two government college teachers were suspended for criticising on Facebook the lack of safety equipment for doctors. The Secondary and Higher Education Division said their Facebook posts went against Government Servants (Discipline and Appeal) Rules-2018.

But upon reading the said rules, it is not immediately clear which rule they broke, because the grounds on which a civil servant can be penalised are avoiding duty, ignoring orders, dishonesty, lodging false complaints, corruption, desertion and terrorism.

Data from BPO shows that at least three teachers have been arrested (excluding the two this week) for their social media activity since the coronavirus pandemic started.

On April 16, all nurses were banned from speaking to the media, and on April 23, Health Minister Zahid Maleque ordered health officials not to talk to the media. On May 3, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University followed suit by silencing their healthcare workers as well.

Since then, it has been a herculean

task to get front-line health workers to tell the media their needs on record -- even as they used one pair of gloves for multiple patients, refrained from going to the bathroom to make that single PPE suit last throughout the shift, even as they got sick and died.

A photo of a man trying to comfort his ill wife after being turned away from hospitals went viral this week, and was published on the front pages of two national dailies. The situation is so dire that when this correspondent got in touch with the man, he requested to be left alone because he holds a government job.

While frontline workers have been barred from speaking to the press, journalists have been unable to ask questions to top officials of the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS) since April 8. Even as the DGHS holds press briefings every day tirelessly, information is orated with little scope for justification, and there is no space for getting any additional information outside the day’s agenda.

Case in point, the DHGS DG yesterday said the pandemic was likely to stay in the country for the next two to three years. When the DG stated that this was according to public health experts, questions naturally arise who these experts are, what epidemiological modelling they did, and what the overall science behind the statement is, but no such questions could be asked.

Grasping the gravity of the statement, such background information could have only served to bolster the declaration, as evidence, and help the media treat it with the importance it merits.

Blocking public access to question government officials also results in the spread of misinformation, as speculation reigns supreme -- such as the “VIP hospital” debacle in April when rumours spread that VIPs will be taken to a special hospital meant only for them.

Muzzling, silencing, restricting access to information can hardly keep the discourse clean, it only serves to make the waters muddier.

RU teacher held over FB posts

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Engineering of RU, was arrested from campus quarters, said Golam Ruhul Kuddus, additional deputy commissioner of Rajshahi Metropolitan Police.

Zahidur, who is also assistant provost of Madar Bux hall of the university, was arrested in connection with a case filed under Sections 25, 29 and 31 of the DSA, he said.

Tapos Kumar Saha, a lawyer, filed the case with Motihar Police Station on Wednesday night.

According to the case statement, Zahidur criticised former health minister Mohammed Nasim in two Facebook posts on June 1 and 2, with intentions to “defame” Nasim and “hurt public sentiment”.

At that time, the veteran political leader was fighting for his life in hospital after contracting the coronavirus.

ADC Kuddus said the RU teacher did not mention anyone’s name in the Facebook comments, but the plaintiff claimed that the comments were against Nasim as he shared a news report from Channel i Online on Nasim’s health condition and commented that public

opinion over the news should be brought under government notice.

The arrestee, Zahidur, was also former information and research affairs secretary in Narail district. After his Facebook posts, his primary membership of the party was revoked on June 16.

Meanwhile, BRU lecturer Sirajam Munira’s suspension has been effective since her arrest on June 14.

Sirajam is now in Rangpur jail.

The BRU press release said that under the order of Professor Dr Nazmul Ahsan Kalimullah, vice-chancellor of BRU, the suspension letter was prepared and signed by the university registrar Abu Hena Mostafa Kamal.

It added that Sirajam was suspended for violating university discipline.

Sirajam Munira, lecturer of the Bangla department, made an insulting comment about Nasim on Facebook after the formal health minister’s death.

Later, the university registrar sued her under the DSA.

(Our correspondents from Rajshahi and Dinajpur contributed to this report.)



Congress party supporters shout slogans as they gather around a flag displaying the country and flag of China along with an inscription reading ‘Boycott Made in China’ before burning them during an anti-China demonstration in Kolkata, India yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Gone mostly unheeded

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A few days ago, the Central Technical Group under the DGHS primarily identified 45 areas in the capital as “red zones”.

It also put in the “red zone” category 11 areas in Chattogram city, the entire Gazipur district, and several upazilas in Narsingdi and Narayanganj.

But this created confusion among people about when their localities will be put under strict lockdown.

As of yesterday, the government was yet to issue any circular with details of the places to be categorised as “red zones”.

Asked, Habibur Rahman Khan, additional secretary at the Health Services Division of the health ministry, claimed that they are taking into account the recommendations of the national advisory committee.

“That’s why the government is planning to go for [zone-based] lockdown. If they [the committee] ask for a complete lockdown of an entire area, that will be difficult because it will halt economic activities,” he told The Daily Star on Sunday.

About the area-wise lockdown, he said, “It is a huge job; multiple ministries are involved here... hopefully, the list of the zones will be announced soon.”

However, Habibur had told the committee at its June 4 meeting that they would finalise the list of zones within a week, according to a meeting source.

The additional secretary had also informed the committee that the high-flow oxygen therapy devices would be procured and installed at 39 public hospitals across the country within two weeks, said the source.

But a member of the committee,

seeking anonymity, said the devices are yet to be purchased.

“We have been pressing for ensuring oxygen supply [at public hospitals] from the very beginning. But there is hardly any progress...,” the member said, adding that the rise in the number of deaths and infections shows that the measures to control virus transmission are not working.

At its June 10 meeting, the committee reminded the health ministry and the DGHS to take steps immediately to procure necessary equipment for providing high-flow oxygen therapy at the public hospitals.

Dr Mohammad Shahidullah said, “We have been saying this from the very beginning, but there has been much progress in this regard.”

“Besides, we have said time and again to appoint technologists since many posts are lying vacant. But we don’t know why it’s being delayed,” he said.

Habibur Rahman could not say how long it would take to install the high-flow oxygen therapy at the hospitals.

“Oxygen cylinders are being imported... The local companies are also supplying cylinders,” he said.

There are many more instances where recommendations from the national technical advisory committee were not taken into account.

The committee, at its first meeting on April 20, recommended that information on vacancy of hospital beds for Covid-19 patients be put online so that they don’t face difficulties in finding beds.

But there is no progress in this regard.

The suggestion on easing shutdown is another glaring example.

On May 28, the committee warned that the number of covid-19 cases would rise unless the requirements for preventing virus transmission are met before easing shutdown.

But the government, apparently desperate to resume business activities, decided to reopen shopping malls, all types of shops and other businesses from May 10 on a limited scale ahead of the Eid-ul-Fitr. A day late, it resumed transport services.

And the country started seeing a steady rise in infections and deaths after the reopening.

Yesterday, the number of coronavirus infections crossed the 100,000-marke with the health directorate confirming 3,803 new cases. The caseload now stood at 102,292.

Thirty-eight deaths from the virus were recorded within 24 hours till yesterday afternoon, taking the death toll to 1,343.

Prof Nazrul Islam, a member of the advisory committee, said, “We don’t know whether the recommendations are being implemented or not. You [journalists] better ask the government about it.”

“They [government] are saying they are working based on the recommendations from the technical committee. But I assume that [they are not] taking [the recommendations] into consideration.”

He warned that the decisions such as reopening of businesses for economic reasons may backfire.

“If transmission continues to rise, the economy will ultimately suffer more,” added the virologist.

Iran rejects US sanctions on Syria

Vows to boost trade with ally

REUTERS, Dubai

Iran yesterday condemned as inhumane a fresh round of US sanctions against its regional ally Syria and said it would expand its trade ties with Damascus.

The United States on Wednesday imposed its toughest sanctions targeting Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to choke off revenue for his government and force it back to UN-led negotiations on ending his country’s war.

“As the world is involved with the Corona pandemic, the imposition of such inhumane sanctions will only exacerbate the suffering of the Syrian people,” Foreign Ministry spokesman Abbas Mousavi told state media.

CURBING HUMAN TRAFFICKING

It’s Kuwait’s top priority right now

Says interior minister; MP Shahid admits to ‘involvement in bribe’, denies other charges

DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENT

Combating human trafficking is one of Kuwait’s highest priorities, said its Interior Minister Anas Al-Saleh, terming the country’s security a “red line”, reported Kuwait Times on Wednesday.

The comment came after the arrest of Bangladeshi MP Mohammad Shahid Islam alias Kazi Papul who is accused of human trafficking, money laundering, fraudulence in workers’ recruitment and bribing.

Anas Al-Saleh, also Kuwait’s deputy prime minister and minister of state for cabinet affairs, made the statement during the parliament’s discussion on Wednesday of a letter from MP Abdulwahab Al-Babtain regarding the assignment of the interior minister to prepare a report on human trafficking and the ministry’s mechanism to combat it.

Saleh affirmed that the names of those involved in the so-called human trafficking are with the public prosecution.

Shahid was arrested by Kuwait’s Criminal Investigation Department on June 6.

Bangladesh embassy in Kuwait wrote to Kuwait’s foreign ministry to know the reasons for his arrest, but it is yet to get any response.

During interrogation by Kuwait’s prosecution, Shahid, an independent lawmaker from Laxmipur-1, confessed to bribing Kuwaiti officials with millions of dinars to get job contracts for the company -- Marafie Kuwaitlea Group -- that he jointly owns with a Kuwaiti.

In February this year, the Anti-Corruption Commission of Bangladesh also opened an investigation on charges that he laundered Tk 1,400 crore. He is also accused of laundering money from Kuwait to the USA.

Kuwait Times reported that Shahid denied all charges that have been filed against him, except for “involvement in bribe”.

He has admitted to offering gifts and assisting his friends in what he called “several agencies” and they in turn helped him complete the company’s transactions.

Quoting sources, the newspaper reported that the public prosecutor is expected to summon three persons whose names have appeared during the investigation -- the names of people whom the Bangladeshi said he offered gifts.

They include a Kuwaiti who manages a group of well-known businesses, another Kuwaiti who runs a factory and the third one is a senior official in one of the ministries who has been suspended from work for three months, and 50 percent of his salary has been deducted upon a ministerial decision pending investigation.

The prosecution has also summoned approximately 20 employees working in the firm that is run by the accused, including the accountant, and listened to their statements regarding the salary payments for the employees. It is believed the accused runs three other companies.

The prosecution has yet to summon people related to the case, whether witnesses or people whose names were mentioned during the investigation, except for the 20 employees, reported the daily.

The source stressed that the prosecution’s investigation and the statements of the accused did not mention any names other than the three people referred to and who the prosecutor is going to summon to investigate on charges of accepting bribes, it reported.

Regarding the defendant’s statements, the source stated that the defendant mentioned during the investigation that he came to Kuwait in 1984 and has always respected the laws of the country.

Shahid has 34 government contracts and is employing 9,000 workers through cleaning tenders, Kuwait Times reported.

He is accused of recruiting thousands of foreign workers, mostly Bangladeshis, and charging huge amounts of money and of paying low salaries and deducting salaries.

ACC to probe

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ACC Chairman Iqbal Mahmood said masks and PPEs are linked to the health security of doctors, nurses and health workers.

“The commission will unearth the truth and bring responsible persons to the book,” he said.

Anyone found involved in the irregularities will be made accountable, Iqbal added.

Earlier on June 10, the commission decided to enquiry into the allegations.

On June 3, ACC sent a letter to the Ministry of Health asking for the probe findings.

After the detection of COVID-19 patients in Bangladesh, Central Medical Stores Depot supplied PPEs to government hospitals those included packets of masks labelled as N95 masks.

But upon opening the packets, the government physicians found ordinary face masks in them.

On April 20, the health ministry formed a three-member committee led by the ministry’s Additional Secretary (Development) Saidur Rahman. The committee submitted its report within three days.

The ministry, however, is yet to publish the report or announce what action it had taken after the report was submitted.