

Night of horror

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Located right next to the Gulshan Lake, the two-storey Western-style ritzy café with large windows and a manicured lawn, was a favourite hangout for both expatriates and Bangladeshis.

On the ground floor, Italian national Nadia Benedetti was at a farewell dinner with eight other Italian businesspeople. It was past 8:00pm.

Just a few yards away, Faraaz Ayaaz Hossain was catching up with his friends Abinta Kabir and Tarishi Jain.

Sitting at the table at one end of the hall, Makoto Okamura was dining with six other Japanese nationals. Hasnat Karim, a former teacher of a private university, was with his family to celebrate his daughter's birthday.

Tahmid Hasib Khan, who arrived in Dhaka from Canada in the morning, was sitting in the gazebo by the lake with his friends Fairuz Maliha and Tahana Tasmia.

The chefs and stewardesses were busy preparing and serving food.

Around 8:45pm, five young men, each with a backpack, appeared at the gate. As they were entering, gatekeeper Nur Alam enquired about their identities. As they walked in ignoring him, the guard asked, "Where do you want to go?"

"Get lost," shouted one of them, punching Alam in the right eye. They stormed the premises, shouting Allahu Akbar.

Dressed in cargo pants, jeans and T-shirts, they burst through the door. Carrying semi-automatic rifles, grenades and machetes, they stood with their backs to each other and fired indiscriminately as they continued yelling Allahu Akbar.

Shrieks and screams were heard from all directions. Panicked and bewildered, the diners dived under tables and chairs. Restaurant employees scammed for safety.

"You don't have to be scared. We will not kill the Muslims; place your heads on the table," the gunmen said.

The nation's worst hostage crisis was unfolding. People stood aghast at the extent of terror not seen in Bangladesh ever before.

The chilling siege ended after 12 hours, but brought shockingly grim news for the country and beyond: nine Italians, seven Japanese, two Bangladeshis, one Bangladeshi-American and one Indian were dead.

During the siege, the militants held the diners hostage and tested whether they could recite verses from the Holy Quran.

The Italians were the first victims of the mindless shooting. Then the militants shot other foreigners dead. They used the victims' phones to publish images of the bodies on social media.

The law enforcers could not initially fathom the situation. As they tried to close in on the place, the gunmen opened fire and hurled grenades, sending a wave of panic in the area. Two police officers got killed.

When para-commandos began

their drive codenamed "Operation Thunderbolt" and stormed the restaurant, they found traces of mindless butchery. Twenty hostages, including 17 foreigners, were brutally murdered. The floor was strewn with the bodies.

More than three years after the massacre on July 1, the survivors still recount the gruelling hours of the siege.

"It was a horrific night. I did not think I would be alive," Delwar Hossain, who was the assistant chef at the restaurant, told The Daily Star on Saturday.

Delwar, who got re-appointed in the freshly opened Holey Artisan Bakery, said he along with eight other staff had taken refuge in the restroom. The attackers found this out around 2:30am and made them come out.

Delwar saw bodies lying in a pool of blood.

"Don't be afraid. We will not kill you. Listen to me," Nibras had told them, adding that the mission was to kill foreigners.

Delwar said, "I spent the night in fear as I listened to the gunshots and haunting screams. I still shudder at the thought of the horrific night."

The manifestation of brutality is also narrated in the charge sheet of the case filed later.

Around 12:30am, the five gunmen put out lights in the hall room and started hacking the guests -- both Bangladeshi and foreigners -- lying on the floor, said the charge sheet.

It also mentioned the brutality of the attackers as described by Sat Prakash, a survivor.

He heard a woman groaning in excruciating pain.

"She is not dead yet," said the attacker while hitting the victim with a sharp weapon.

Twenty-year-old Faraaz, a student at Emory University's Goizueta Business School in the US, was killed along with his friends -- Abinta, a Bangladeshi-born US citizen and also a student at Emory University, and Tarishi, an Indian student of the University of California.

As the night wore on, the militants asked the chefs to cook for the hostages and the staffers. They were using mobile phones, tablets and laptops and reading news and laughing.

At daybreak, the gunmen allowed several hostages to walk out of the restaurant. But they didn't release the staffers, who were rescued later by the para commandos.

Five terrorists and a chef of the café were killed in the commando operation. Another injured staffer later died in hospital.

Following the café siege, law enforcers launched a massive crackdown on terror networks and eliminated a number of militants.

A Dhaka court on November 27 last year sentenced seven militants to death for their involvement in the attack, terming it a disgraceful attack aimed at assassinating the non-communal character of Bangladesh.

Sampadak Parishad slates

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Digital Security Act (DSA) out of whom 37 have been arrested. These arrests have created an atmosphere of fear and intimidation making normal journalistic work extremely risky if not nearly impossible," said the statement.

The statement, undersigned by Sampadak Parishad President Mahfuz Anam, and Secretary General Naem Nizam, expressed grave concern about the increasing instances of police action against the media professionals.

"This attack on journalists and the media is occurring when Bangladesh, in fighting the Covid-19 pandemic, needs reliable and independent media the most to protect itself from fake news and panic generated by misinformation," noted the statement. "An attack on the media at this time is to endanger our possibility of stable recovery."

It observed that DSA is the most frequently used law even though other time-tested laws to dispense justice exist, simply because under DSA, the police can arrest on suspicion and without warrant, and because 14 out of its 20 provisions are non-bailable which ensures the person arrested remains in jail.

"As such whenever a case is lodged, the police promptly arrests and when an accused is brought before a magistrate he or she is almost automatically sent to jail," pointed out the press release.

The Parishad observed that the most common reasons for arrests under DSA are criticising local administration, spreading rumours, covering protests, making defamatory remarks, harming religious harmony, writing false news, and said, "These reasons for arrest are

by definition vague and subject to wide and arbitrary interpretation."

"The Parishad feel that the DSA has become a plaything in the hands of a vested quarter who use this anti-press and anti-freedom of expression law whimsically and at will to harass and intimidate journalists and to prevent them from exposing corruption and misuse of funds that the government is presently allocating for the people, especially the poor."

Statistics show that more journalists, teachers, and intellectuals have been arrested under DSA than cyber criminals, especially in the last six months, said the Parishad.

"From the outset Sampadak Parishad opposed this law as we knew of its evil consequences on free media and freedom of speech. At that time the law minister assured the media that DSA was enacted only to prevent cyber-crime and will never be used to curtail freedom of the press," it added.

"Given our original objection and the experience of the last two and half years we are more convinced than ever that DSA must be scrapped if freedom of speech and freedom of the press is to have any meaning," said the statement.

The Parishad urged the parliament to take expeditious steps to remove this anti-freedom law from the country's statutes.

It also demanded the immediate release of all journalists arrested under DSA and withdrawal of the cases against them, and furthermore, called for measures against those who have blatantly misused this law for personal gains.

Highest 64 deaths in one day

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16 while a record 4,014 infections on Monday. The first coronavirus case in the country was confirmed on March 8 and the first death on March 18.

Among the newly deceased, 52 were males and 12 females. Thirty one of them were from Dhaka division, 12 from Chattogram, seven each from Khulna and Rajshahi, three from Barisal, and two each from Sylhet and Mymensingh divisions, shows DGHS data.

Of the deceased, 51 died in hospitals and 13 in homes, according to the data.

Seven of them were aged between 31 and 40 years, six between 41 and 50, 21 between 51 and 60, 16 between 61 and 70, 11 between 71 and 80 and the other three were aged between 81 and 90 years.

In 24 hours till 2:30pm yesterday, a total of 18,426 samples were tested across the country, taking the total number of Covid-19 tests to 766,460.

Meanwhile, 1,844 Covid-19 patients recovered in those 24 hours, raising the

total number of recovery cases to 59,624, which is 40.98 percent of all confirmed cases.

In the same 24 hours, 547 Covid-19 patients were admitted to hospitals while 727 were released.

SERVICES FOR PREGNANT WOMEN
At the online briefing yesterday, Prof Nasima said health services for pregnant women were available at all upazila health complexes, district hospitals and medical college hospitals across the country.

"Following health rules, pregnant women can take at least four services from these, including... Trained healthcare providers, including midwives, are ready to serve pregnant women," she said.

In case of any emergency, she urged all to contact the nearest healthcare staffers or health establishments by calling phone numbers mentioned in health cards.

She also urged family members to take care of the pregnant women.



The damaged portion of the Postogola bridge on the Buriganga. The crane, inset, of BIWTA rescue ship Prottoy hit the structure on Monday while going to salvage the sunken launch Morning Bird in Sadarghat area. Movement of traffic on the bridge remained suspended since Monday evening. The photos were taken yesterday.

PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON



Testing fee for whose benefit?

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But the government shifted from the stance as it has set fees -- Tk 200 and Tk 500 -- for Covid-19 testing at the public health facilities. For fixing the fees, the health ministry cited the reason as "to avoid unnecessary tests and ensure better management".

The move to levy the fees comes at a time when the country is witnessing a continuous surge in Covid-19 deaths and infections. A record 64 patients died and 3,682 new cases were reported in 24 hours till yesterday afternoon.

Talking on the issue, public health experts said none of the other South Asian countries charges any fee for the tests at their public healthcare facilities. Besides, imposing such a fee at government-run facilities is rare anywhere in the world.

They also said the government move would serve as a setback in efforts to contain the spread of the virus as many, especially those from the poor section of the society, might not be able to get tested at public hospitals and booths even if they show symptoms.

It will eventually increase the risk of further transmission of the virus, at a time when the country still lags behind in terms of aggressive testing of people as suggested by the World Health Organization and virologists, they said.

The fees will be an additional burden on people whose life and livelihoods have already been affected badly by the pandemic and the subsequent two-month-long shutdown that brought economic activities to a grinding halt, they added.

According to a health ministry circular, issued on Sunday, one has to pay Tk 500 for Covid-19 testing if samples are collected from home. The fee will be Tk 200 if samples are given to dedicated sample collection booths or public hospitals.

Private hospitals and health facilities charge each person Tk 3,500 for Covid-19 testing. The fee goes up to Tk 4,500 if samples are collected from an individual's home.

The circular said many, who did not show any symptoms, provided their samples for testing as it was free of cost. It also said the revenues from testing have to be deposited to the government treasury.

But experts rejected the government statement on "unnecessary testing", saying people throng hospitals and testing booths only after developing symptoms or out of fear.

"Test, test, and test -- this is the

key to stopping the outbreak. But the government has taken an opposite move," said Prof Nazrul Islam, a member of the National Technical Advisory Committee (NTAC) on Covid-19 which advocates for expanding the testing coverage.

"Due to the decision, we will be able to know the infection rate only among the affluent people. It's because the poor will prefer buying two kilograms of flour to spending the fees for testing," he told The Daily Star.

He said the NTAC would inform its formal opinion on the matter soon.

Dr Mushtaq Hussain, consultant at the Institute of Epidemiology, Disease Control and Research (IEDCR), said, "We have no knowledge on any government [in the world] taking money for Covid-19 tests from its citizens. But this not the main issue here; the reality is that the decision will discourage the marginalised people from getting tested."

As a result, he said, the virus would transmit further.

"If there was a mechanism for isolation based on symptoms, then this would have no impact. But ensuring isolation for each confirmed case through testing is not possible. So things would be worse without testing," he added.

Beginning the testing in late January, the country has so far tested 766,460 samples. The testing facilities were expanded over the time and now the tests are being done at 68 Polymerase Chain Reaction (PCR) labs at both public and private facilities.

Forty-three of them are government labs and those of armed forces, police hospitals and other autonomous bodies.

But the testing has been disrupted at some places due to a shortage of kits and a lack of bio-safety labs and skilled manpower.

A total of 18,426 were tested in 24 hours till 2:30pm yesterday.

It is, however, still low compared to other countries.

The UAE is on top of the list in terms of conducting Covid-19 tests. It carried out 317,109 tests for each of its one million people, while the number is 98,469 for the US, according to Statista.com.

WHO CHARGES WHAT?

Bangladesh stands at the 28th position with 4,452 tests while India and Pakistan are in the 26th and the 27th positions with 6,086 and 5,715 tests.

Budget passed amid pandemic challenge

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Talking to this newspaper, AB Mirza Azizul Islam, former adviser to a caretaker government, said it is impossible to achieve the GDP growth target of 8.2 percent in this fiscal year. Anything around 5 percent will be considered good given the pandemic-induced economic crisis.

Ahsan H Mansur, executive director of the Policy Research Institute, said the government passed the budget without finding "innovative ways" to implement it.

"It will surely be difficult to execute the budget ... There is no specific indication of how the government will manage the health sector in dealing with the Covid-19 pandemic," he pointed out.

The government did not even keep in mind the "new poor" and had no job creation plans for them, he added.

Zahid Hussain, former lead economist at the World Bank's Dhaka Office, said implementation of the budget will be "subject to challenges never experienced before," in addition to the usual ones such as revenue shortfall and slow ADP implementation.

BUDGET ALLOCATIONS
The government has allocated Tk 103,117 crore for 19 stimulus packages to put the economy back on track amid daunting challenges posed by coronavirus pandemic. The combined support accounts for 3.7 percent of the country's GDP.

Of the amount, Tk 5,000 crore went to the export industry, Tk 20,000 crore to the micro, small and medium enterprises, Tk 30,000 crore to large industries and services, and Tk 5,000 crore to the agriculture sector.

The packages have been provided for food security, social safety net, special allowances and incentives, and in the form of low-cost loans to the affected micro, small, medium and large industries and services, as the pandemic-induced shutdown paralysed the economy.

The Local Government Division got the highest allocation of Tk 36,301 crore, followed by Road Transport and

Highways Division (Tk 29,442 crore) and the health ministry (Tk 29,245 crore).

The overall budget deficit will be Tk 190,000 crore, which is 6 percent of the GDP.

Out of the amount, Tk 80,017 crore will be financed from external sources, and Tk 109,983 crore from domestic sources -- Tk 84,983 crore from the banking sector and Tk 25,000 crore from savings certificates and other non-bank sources.

The revenue collection target is Tk 378,000 crore, and the NBR has been tasked with collecting the bulk of it -- Tk 330,000 crore.

The government aims to collect Tk 15,000 crore from non-NBR tax and Tk 33,000 crore from non-tax revenue sources.

Besides, Tk 4,013 crore will come from foreign grants.

The development expenditure has been increased to Tk 215,043 crore in the new fiscal year, which is about 6.27 percent higher than that in the revised development budget of the outgoing fiscal year.

Of the amount, Tk 205,145 crore is for the Annual Development Program, which has already been approved by the National Economic Council.

The operating expenditure (excluding loans, advances and debt repayments, and structural adjustments) has been estimated at Tk 346,160 crore, which is 18 percent higher than that in the revised non-development budget of the outgoing fiscal year.

Salaries and allowances of government employees account for 19 percent (Tk 75,060 crore) of the total non-development expenditure.

WHAT EXPERTS SAY
About the budget deficit, Mirza Azizul said the government should not be dependent on bank borrowing to meet the deficit, rather it should manage this from the central bank.

He further said it is appreciable that the government has given priority to agriculture, health and social safety net programmes. But it has to ensure proper utilisation of funds and that there is no

corruption.

About the health budget, Ahsan said the government increased the allocation for the sector but the question is how it will be utilised.

The implementation record of the health budget is very poor, he noted. Zahid said expenditure allocations in the budget are not consonant with the priorities in a pandemic-affected economy. Health and social protection needed much larger allocations than provided in the budget. This can be corrected moving forward.

"Public service delivery has gained a new significance in the corona world. Life without water, soaps, masks and social distancing is life full of health risks, not just for an individual but also those near and around."

If these cannot be ensured, you can just forget about the macroeconomic targets and the allocations in the budget, he mentioned.

"The worsening health crisis would overwhelm the health system and the entire machinery of the government. Effective public policy attention to these is a precondition for budget implementation to proceed without disruption."

The economy cannot regain full functionality if people remain engulfed by the fear of the virus and the risk of seeking any kind of healthcare from the existing health system, he mentioned.

Fresh initiatives are needed to support the millions of new and old poor who are struggling to make ends meet day in, day out.

"Financing will be a major challenge in fiscal 2020-21. A large revenue shortfall is a near certainty. Enhanced foreign financing will help but not likely to suffice. The banking system is highly stressed with falling deposit growth and loan recovery rates.

"There are limits to deficit monetisation because of the associated macroeconomic risks. Fiscal austerity is the way out. There is considerable room for savings in both the non-development and the development budget. These need to be identified and locked in before it is too late," he added.

LAUNCH CAPSIZE

Moyur-2 owner, 6 others sued

2 more bodies recovered from wreck

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Seven people, including the owner of Moyur-2 which hit and sank another launch in the Buriganga on Monday, were charged with negligence causing deaths.

Meanwhile, rescuers recovered two more bodies yesterday after they salvaged the sunken boat Morning Bird nearly 26 hours after capsizing, using the manual airlifting method.

The death toll rose to 34. One body was recovered from the Engine room of the launch while another floated to the surface itself.

The seven accused are launch owner Mosaddek Hanif Swad, 33, his employee Abul Bashar Molla, 65, launch master Jakir Hossain, 54, engine driver Shipon Hawlader, 45, Shakil Hasan, 28, Sukani Nasir Midha, 40, and Ridoy, 24.

Police could not arrest anyone of them.

Faridul Islam, superintendent of River Police in Dhaka said they carried out drives at their houses and possible places but the accused went into hiding.

Shamsul Alam, sub-inspector (SI) of Sadarghat River Police Station, filed the case early yesterday with Keraniganj Dakshin Police Station.

River police is investigating the case. The accused were charged for negligence that caused deaths of the people and some other offences under section 280, 304A, 437 and 34 of Penal code.

"The drive is on to arrest the accused," the SI said.

A novice was allegedly at the helm of Moyur-2 when the vessel slammed into Morning Bird -- causing it to sink in the Buriganga at the capital's Shyambazar Monday.

BIWTA, RHD

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the crane was lowered at its minimum height while the ship was crossing under the bridge. This has happened due to carelessness," Sabuj Uddin Khan, additional chief engineer (Dhaka zone) of RHD, told The Daily Star yesterday.

The RHD, through the road transport and bridges ministry, would write to Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority (BIWTA) asking it to take actions against those responsible for causing the damage, he said.

The official said they conducted a preliminary assessment and found the bridge to be "repairable". The RHD will only allow light vehicles to use the bridge by setting a barrier to two out of its four lanes. However, no heavy vehicle will be allowed to access the bridge until further notice.

Refuting the allegations, the BIWTA said the crane was lowered at its minimum height. It blamed the "low height" of the bridge for the damage.

The RHD on Monday evening restricted the movement of traffic on one of the four lanes of the busy bridge that connects Dhaka with southern districts. The bridge was totally closed to traffic at 9:00pm.

The damage was caused to the Bridge on Monday when Prottoy, a salvage ship of BIWTA, was heading towards Sadarghat launch terminal from Narayanganj to rescue the sunken launch, Morning Bird, in the Buriganga.

The ship could not cross under the bridge after hitting the structure and the vessel was anchored nearby. As it could not reach the spot, the Morning Bird was salvaged yesterday morning using an alternative method.

Sabuj Uddin Khan said their experts visited the bridge and found one of its girders damaged badly and another partially. However, the real picture of the damage could be known after a scan of the bridge is completed today with a special device, he added.

The RHD official said it was not possible for them to tell now how much money would be needed for the repair.

BIWTA'S VERSION

Talking to reporters at Sadarghat launch terminal, BIWTA Chairman Commodore Golam Sadeq yesterday said they have four salvage ships which are normally kept at accident-prone spots so that those can be mobilised promptly.

"Yes, we have a failure as we could not bring the salvage ship here. But we have carried out the rescue operation using alternatives ways," he said.

Talking to this newspaper, Sadeq, however, said the crane of the salvage ship was lowered at its minimum height when it hit the bridge. He said the ship could not cross under the bridge due to rise in water level of the river in the rainy season.

"Actually, the master of the salvage ship wanted to reach the accident spot as early as possible. So, he might have made the mistake," he said.

He said they have already raised the issue of some 13 low-height bridges hampering the planned operation of circular water buses around the capital.

Talking to this correspondent at 8:00pm yesterday, Golam Mostafa, executive engineer (Munshiganj division) of RHD, said they were setting up barriers to some lanes of the bridge. He said they might open the bridge to traffic on a limited scale after 10:00pm.