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The big catch

Fishermen in Cox's Bazar find the going good, but the sword fish they call the 'flying one' thinks otherwise.

Star photo: A K M Mohsin

Making sense of the mystery of Lalkhan Madrassah and its maulanas

Following several reports about certain madrassahs being used as training grounds for armed terrorists, The Daily Star sent its special correspondent and chief photographer to Chittagong and Cox's Bazar area. They spent a total of five days visiting all the areas mentioned in press reports. This is the first report following their investigation.

Lalkhan Bazar madrassah, in the heart of the Chittagong city, is like any other institution of its type, excepting that it has come under recent focus as a possible training centre of a shadowy terrorist outfit called Harkatul Jihad, which came into national attention following an assassination attempt on poet Shamsur Rahman.

During interrogation of the suspects, police came across

startling information on this organisation, which was reported to have been in existence from a decade ago and had trained an estimated 25,000 people at the madrassah.

Indoctrinated in extreme ideals preached by Mollah Mohammad Omar and his followers in Afghanistan, this madrassah was trying to impose their kind of Islam through the barrel of AK-47s

and rocket launchers. These stories printed in various newspapers prompted the Star to launch an investigation on the organisation and the madrassah.

Against the backdrop of what had been said about it and the location of the madrassah that runs on public donations from home and abroad, this correspondent and Chief Photographer A K M Mohsin visited the madrassah on Friday last.

Located on the slopes of a shaven hiltop, above a slum at its entrance, the madrassah had been set up in 1981. The ownership of the 20-acre land is still disputed. A court case is

A Daily Star Investigation

By Shehab Ahmed

pending.

To the north-east lies the Dampara police lines. On the western side is the home of late M R Siddiky, a politician and businessman who served as Bangladesh ambassador to USA.

On the north is Baitul Aman Housing Society. On the southern side, at the entrance of the madrassah, there is a crowded slum.

It was a fear-filled entry for both of us when a bearded dar-

wan opened the gates, letting our auto-rickshaw in without asking any question, something that further increased our fear.

As we got down in front of an incomplete two-storey mosque, drawing its architectural heritage from the Arabians, we came across some people, children and adults taking baths at the mosque facility.

On inquiry about any available staff, a young maulana came forward and demanded

our identity. The encounter, for both of us, was uneasy. I handed him my visiting card, which brought a smile on Maulana Hidayet Hossain's face, a man in his early thirties. He thanked us for coming. "You are the only journalist who had bothered to come here to know about us," he said with a broad grin.

As we sat down under a tree beside the mosque, we found some children playing around, including three children of Nur Ahmed, a farmer from Banskhali of southern Chittagong. He had come to escort his sons to be in time for the madrassah's opening.

Other than the children and a few bathers washing themselves in a huge tank on the madrassah field, senior students or the faculty were yet to be in. The Eid holidays were still on.

The bathers have come from the police lines. One of them explained, "We have come to take bath before Juma prayers."

"I would definitely answer all your queries," volunteered Maulana Hidayet Hossain in the absence of the Principal. "So much had been written about the madrassah but nobody has yet bothered to pay a visit here and get our side of the story."

Hossain said when the madrassah opens sometime the following week, the management would give a full reply to what has been said about the institution.

He denied that there had been any arms training of any one ever on the premises of the madrassah. "The question of Harkatul Jihad using our premises for training its cadres does not arise," Hossain said adding that the campus is "too open and without any boundary walls", with a densely populated slum on one side and a housing estate and police lines adjacent to it.

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Sundarbans basks in world heritage glory

From Morshed Ali Khan

HERON POINT, The Sundarbans, Feb 4: Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina today officially unveiled the World Heritage Sites plaque at a ceremony here.

The world's largest mangrove was formally recognised as the World Heritage Site by the UNESCO on December 6, 1997.

The Sundarbans is a wonder of the nature. We will have to save this natural gift," Hasina said while addressing the guests.

"With the increase in population, the demand for forest resources is increasing. Trees are top dying and the Sundarbans is facing a threat. We not only have to save it but also enrich the forests," Hasina said.

This is for the first time that the World Heritage Committee of UNESCO recognised a mangrove forest as a world heritage. The 1,400 square kilometres of the forests have been recognised as of "exceptional universal

value."

Meanwhile, UNB adds: The Prime Minister reached the remotest point of the Sundarbans to see the wildlife and unveiled the world heritage plaque.

The total area of the Sundarbans is 6017 sq kilometer. The Sundarbans World Heritage site is composed of three wildlife sanctuaries - East Wildlife Sanctuary, South Wildlife Sanctuary and West Wildlife Sanctuary.

The total area of the World Heritage site is 1400 sq km out of which 910 km is land area and 490 km, is water area.

After unveiling the plaque, the Prime Minister boarding a launch travelled through the deep forest of the Sundarbans, seeing spotted deer and various types of birds.

Addressing the gathering, the Prime Minister said due to the top dying of the Sundari trees, the largest mangrove forest has come under a threat and with it the world famous Royal Bengal Tiger and Estuarine Crocodile. If this trend continues then it will not be possible to maintain the heritage of the Sundarbans.

"So, we will have to protect the forest," Hasina said adding that the government has taken all possible steps in this regard.

The lack of sweet water flow in the tributaries of the Padma flowing through the Sundarbans increased salinity in the area which caused the top dying of Sundari trees, she said.

But, the Prime Minister said, after the signing of Ganges Water Sharing Treaty the flow of river Gorai increased a lot helping to save the unique mangrove forest.

Hasina hoped that the forest department will be able to save the forest with their sincere and hard labour and mentioned that the government has approved a Tk 382 crore bio-diversity conservation project to protect the forest.

JS snippets

By Nazmul Ashraf

The BNP lawmakers did not like it. Several of them simply started shouting when Deputy Speaker Abdul Hamid gave the floor to a second woman MP in a row to put questions to LGRD minister Zillur Rahman in the House yesterday.

"Woman members take shorter time and ask good questions," a smiling Hamid responded to the BNP members who were teasing the Chair.

Sabita Begum, the second of the two, wanted to know from the minister some statistics related to her Kishoreganj constituency.

Minister Zillur Rahman, also from Kishoreganj, was frustrated by Sabita's query. "I hoped she would ask for something. And I was also ready to give. But she frustrated me by asking for some statistics only."

"She often frustrates us," commented the Deputy Speaker, who too hails from Kishoreganj.

The elderly minister hastened to tell Hamid, "You're supposed to know it better."

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Deadly burners for city hospitals

By Naimul Haq

The government has purchased five highly polluting incinerators for two hospitals without prior approval of the Department of Environment (DOE).

The incinerators can significantly pollute the air, mainly from extremely toxic dioxin and furans produced during combustion of chlorinated plastics like polyvinyl chloride or PVC. Long term burning of chlorinated waste causes various diseases including cancer, according to environmental scientists.

The incinerators are on the 'red list' of the department. Such device which produces maximum environmental pollution must get prior clearance from the department even before preparing specifications," a high official of DOE told The Daily Star.

The incinerators, three for Dhaka Medical College Hospital (DMCH) and two for Chittagong Medical College Hospital (CMCH), were procured by an ADB assistance to destroy hospital waste including highly polluting plastics. The total cost of the incinerators was about Tk 72 lakh.

"However, the DOE official

said, "We were not informed about the decision to purchase the incinerators. The hospital authorities, after installation of the incinerators requested us to examine and give clearance."

All hospital waste are now dumped in roadside garbage bins or elsewhere in the absence of a proper waste disposal system. This largely contributes to spread of deadly diseases.

DOE officials indicated that the hospital authorities may not get approval for using the incinerators due to safety and other reasons. Although DOE officials have not yet officially inspected the incinerators, there is "a very little chance" of getting approval because those are located close to residential areas, they said.

An incinerator must be located at least five kilometers away from any residential area whereas DMCH is surrounded by university residential quarters," an official said.

Besides, the chimney of an incinerator has to stand as high as at least 30 metres for safety reasons. This is one of the two major criteria, which must be met before getting the clearance.

When contacted, an ADB (Asian Development Bank)

expert preferring not to be named said, "The local experts who included users, teachers and technicians prepared the specifications of the incinerator. Based on their approval, a tender committee was formed to review the specifications. In addition, an expert who works for the National Health Services in UK also reviewed the specification of the incineration technology."

However, according to the DOE officials, the incinerator technologies do not fulfill safety regulations of the government.

Asked if the technical description of the incinerators comply with DOE's safety regulations, the ADB official said, "Our concern is to help the hospitals scientifically destroy the toxic waste generated within the hospitals."

Referring to burning of highly polluting (chlorinated waste) plastics, the ADB official said, "The incinerators would be involved in burning least quantity of plastics."

Ralph Ryder, a co-ordinator of Communities Against Toxics (CATs), a coalition of long suffering groups in the UK and Ireland living with unsafe methods of waste disposal, provided

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Khaleda calls 48-hour hartal

By Staff Correspondent

Opposition leader Khaleda Zia yesterday called a 48-hour hartal for Feb 9-10 and warned the government of dire consequences if any attempt was made to resist the strike.

"This 48-hour hartal could be prolonged if the government lets loose its henchmen as it did during the previous strikes," Khaleda told a rally organised by the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) at the Paltan Maidan.

The BNP called the hartal to press the government to meet its four-point demands.

Khaleda warned that it could lead to a movement to topple

the government if the demands were not met.

The four-point demands, which include resignation of the Chief Election Commissioner, were made on Jan 6 last, with a 30-day ultimatum to the government. The BNP later added cancellation of municipal polls scheduled as a fifth demand.

Khaleda Zia said that her party would cancel the result of municipal polls scheduled for Feb 23-25 once the Awami League was toppled from power.

Khaleda then asked the prospective candidates in the elections to boycott the polls.

"There would be no credibility of this election at home and abroad," she said. "Moreover, we have decided to cancel this election as soon as the Awami League falls from power."

The Leader of the Opposition in Parliament alleged that the CEC Muhammad Abu Hena is behaving more like an "activist of Awami League", and claimed that people have lost confidence in him.

"You (Hena) have no moral right to keep this scared post as all opposition parties, who represent majority of the people, have expressed their no-confidence in you," Khaleda said. "So you quit just now," she demanded.

Other opposition parties joined the BNP in calling the 48-hour hartal. The Jatiya Party faction headed by former dictator Hussain Muhammad Ershad declared an identical hartal programme from a rally at the Osmany Uddyan. The Jamaat-e-Islami and the Islami Oikya Jote also called hartals for Feb 9-10 from separate rallies yesterday.

At the Paltan rally, Khaleda Zia said the four-point demands have been raised to ensure free and fair polls. She

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