

JP leader gunned down in Mongla

JCD vice-president injured in drive-by bomb attack in Khulna

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, *Khulna*

Unidentified gunmen shot and killed a local Jatiya Party (JP) leader in Mongla in Bagerhat Tuesday night, the second political murder since December 15 that prompted a wave of protest and an indefinite hartal from yesterday in the upazila.

Witnesses said the gang of two attacked 55-year-old Abdus Salam, general secretary of JP's Mongla Poursabha unit, at about 9:30pm when he was walking home to Kumarkhali from mosque after prayers.

Salam, also former acting chairman of Mongla Poursabha, was declared dead on arrival at Mongla Upazila Health Complex after he suffered bullet wounds to chest and head in close-range fire.

The murder sent local traders shutting their shops and brought life to a near-standstill in security fears that led to deployment of additional police in the area.

Hundreds of people brought out an overnight procession after the killing and demanded immediate removal of Officer-in-Charge of Mongla Police Station Shahabuddin Khalifa, blaming him for law and order downslide.

Women repression doubles

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The incidents of women repression doubled last year compared to 2002, a study carried out by a legal aid group said yesterday.

The Bangladesh National Women Lawyers Association (BNWLA) study said 5,207 women were repressed last year, up from 2,511 in 2002.

It said 1,550 women were raped and 424 women and children were gang-raped last year. One hundred and sixty-six women were killed after rape and 15 committed suicide after rape.

As many as 266 women were killed by their in-laws, 26 burnt with acid and 124 tortured in dowry-related violence, the survey that gathered information from newspapers said.

Nine women committed suicide to escape torture or dowry.

The study said 562 women were also compelled to commit suicide for other reasons.

The BNWLA said 740 women and children were killed, 204 women were physically tortured, 254 burnt with acid, 329 trafficked and 537 abducted last year.

Twenty-seven incidents of fatwa took place involving women during the period.

As many as 577 women died in unnatural circumstances, the study said.

Cost-of-living index surges over 10pc in 2003

Consumer report says

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Cost of living went up 10.48 percent in 2003 due to soaring prices of consumer goods and services including house rent, according to the annual report of Consumers Association of Bangladesh (Cab).

The Cab report said prices of commodities shot up 4.84 percent and blamed the government for its failure to control the price hike of essentials.

The report said the government's decision to hike up prices of public utilities and transport fares at the behest of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund has also made life difficult for consumers in general.

Cab reported a price hike of 5.41

percent for rice, 6.06 percent for flour, 6.89 percent for oil, 19.36 percent for eggs and an average of 6.92 percent for onion, garlic and other spices.

It said the government's open market policy has led to destruction of local industries due to inferior goods including medicines from neighbouring countries entering the domestic market unchecked.

A recent survey conducted by Midas and International Consulting Group estimates that the number of small and medium enterprises shut down in last five years stands at 5.65 lakh.

Cab urged the government to immediately formalise the Consumer Protection Act pending for years to check adulteration and protect consumer rights.

Morshed hopes

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In reply to a question about unequal economic status of the Saarc countries, Khan said Bangladesh will seek withdrawal of tariff and non-tariff barriers within one year from three developing member states -- India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.

And four leased developed countries (LDCs) within the bloc -- Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal and the Maldives -- would follow suit after 10-12 years to have a level playing field for equitable economic benefit of the people, like in European Union (EU) and other economic groupings, he observed.

Khan, who will attend the meeting of the Saarc council of ministers beginning in Islamabad today, said the January 4-6 summit will focus on Safta, poverty alleviation and social charter.

Bangladesh, he said, has already finalised its report on poverty alleviation, containing recommendations on how to deal with the problem, which will be placed during the summit for approval.

Khan, however, said Dhaka would stress implementation of the recommendations instead of holding those as a mere paperwork in the report.

Billing the 12th summit as a milestone for Saarc, he said the moot, being delayed by one year, will focus more on economic issues to cope with prevailing trend in global economies.

In reply to a question, he said

although Saarc cannot discuss contentious bilateral issues as per its charter, multilateral political issues like situation in the Middle East and the 'road map' for peace might be discussed at the summit level.

On terrorism, the foreign minister said every member country is committed to combating terrorism under the Saarc anti-terrorism charter. "It's a fact that only an individual country cannot combat it unilaterally -- it needs concerted efforts by all member states."

"To combat terrorism, it requires political will and commitment by political leadership and combined efforts by all member states," Khan told the newspapers.

He said Prime Minister Khaleda Zia, who will lead Bangladesh delegation to the three-day summit, will hold bilateral meetings with the Saarc leaders on the sidelines of the summit.

To a query, Khan said they would try to settle the issue of stranded Pakistanis through amicable discussion with the Pakistan government.

Tigers kill

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In another incident Monday, a tiger killed Sachin Mondal and Haripada Mondal, fishermen of Kaikhali village under Shyamnagar upazila, when they were catching fish in Mathabhangha canal, sources said.

Peacekeepers' bodies

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grieving relatives sobbed and held each other in tears.

Prime Minister Khaleda Zia, who also holds the defence portfolio, received the bodies and showed last respects to the mortal remains at the airport on behalf of the nation with due military honour.

A 103-member team of Bangladesh Army accorded a guard of honour to the officers in the presence of chiefs of the three services Lieutenant General Hasan Mashud Chowdhury, Rear Admiral Shah Iqbal Mostaba and Air Vice-Marshal Fakhrul Azam.

LGRD and Cooperatives Minister Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan, Relief and Disaster Management Minister Chowdhury Kamal Ibne Yusuf, Home Minister Altf Hossain Chowdhury, Textiles Minister Abdul Matin Chowdhury, State Minister for Liberation War Affairs Rezaul Karim, State Minister for Tourism and Civil Aviation Mir Mohammad Nasiruddin and the UN resident coordinator were present.

The officers deployed to

Benin's two strife-riven neighbouring countries Sierra Leone and Liberia on UN peacekeeping missions were among the 119 people killed in the crash that came after Boeing 727 of Union Transport of Africa botched its takeoff, clipping a building before tumbling into the Atlantic Ocean.

The Bangladesh peacekeepers were picked up in Freetown on their way home after serving with UN missions. Fellow servicemen disembarked the coffin of Lieutenant Colonel Shamsul Arefin first from the aircraft at 7:30pm and all coffins were carried to a designated place at the airport by batches of six military pallbearers.

The wife of Captain Alauddin Sardar, another peacekeeper, fainted when her husband's coffin was disembarked. She was treated in an ambulance kept on standby.

The premier placed wreath on each coffin as army bugle played the last post at 8:05pm and consoled the bereaved.

Final prayers were also offered for the peacekeepers -- Lt Col Arefin, Major Abdul Rahim Mia, Major Mirza Abdul Baten, Major Rownak, Major Mustafizur Rahman Chowdhury, Major Musharrar Hossain, Major Intiaz Uddin Ahmed, Captain Arifur Rahman Talukdar, Captain Abdul Mabud, Captain Rafiqul Islam, Captain Zahidul Islam, Captain Alauddin Sardar, Captain Farid Uddin Ahmed, Captain Raqibul Hassan and Senior Warrant Officer Sahfiqul Islam.

Nine of them will be buried in Banani army graveyard and six in their family graveyards today with state honour after state funerals.

The first namaz-e-janaza will be held in the Army Stadium at 8:00am, followed by a second at 10:00am at the National Eidgah, where the bodies will be kept to enable people to pay their last respect.

The BCL activists put up barricade at Battali and Sholoshahar stations and blocked university shuttle trains plying to and from the city while university buses moved with few students and teachers.

They also staged a sit-in on Chittagong-Rangamati approach road.

The BCL will hold a procession and a rally on the campus tomorrow to realise their demands.

The Pro-Jamaat-e-Islami Islamic Chhatra Shibir cadres allegedly led by Habib Khan gunned down Ali Mortuza Chowdhury, senior vice-president of the BCL, CU unit, in Chhararkul area under Hathazari upazila on December 29, 2001.

However, police failed to nab any of the six accused in the case.

Brothers accused of killing 2 cops granted bail

UNB, Dhaka

Two brothers accused of premeditated murder of two policemen and looting their arms were yesterday granted bail by the vacation bench of the High Court.

The bail order came upon a petition filed with the court by accused Askar Sheikh and Aslam Sheikh after they were refused bail by the lower court.

According to the case, in the evening of March 11 this year, armed gangsters attacked a patrol police team with bombs at Sheikhpara BK Roy Road, Khulna, leaving two cops dead on the spot. They also took away the arms and ammunition of the cops.

Blue Panel sweeps DUTA polls

DU CORRESPONDENT

The main opposition Awami League-backed Blue Panel yesterday swept the election of Dhaka University Teachers' Association, bagging the posts of president and general secretary and seven others in the 15-member executive committee of the Duta.

Prof. AAMS Arefin Siddique of mass communications and journalism department was elected president and Prof. Md. Aktheruzzaman of Islamic history and culture general secretary.

The ruling BNP-Jamaat-backed White Panel got the remaining posts including of joint secretary and vice-president.

Prof. Mohammad Nurul Amin Bepari and Dr. ABM Obaidul Islam of White Panel were elected vice-president and joint secretary.

Prof. Shafique Uz Jaman of Blue Panel was elected treasurer.

The left-leaning Pink Panel formed a polls alliance with the Blue Panel.

Some 980 teachers cast votes in the elections contested by the Blue and White panels, held at the DU Teachers' Club.

Prof. Arefin Siddique bagged 481 votes against 475 of his rival Prof. AKM Sirajul Islam Khan. Prof. Md Aktheruzzaman polled 549 votes while his opponent Tahmina Akther Tofi drew 394 votes.

Prof. Mohammad Nurul Amin Bepari secured 480 votes and his opponent Prof. SM Mahfuzur Rahman 459 votes. Dr. ABM Obaidul Islam got 468 votes and his rival Dr. Md Harunar Rashid Khan 461 votes.

The newly elected treasurer, Prof. Shafique Uz Jaman, bagged 475 votes and his opponent Prof. M Farid Ahmed 469 votes.

Dhakaites welcome

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public celebrations and ensure that midnight revelers steer clear of trouble.

"About 3,000 police and paramilitary BDR have been deployed at 41 points in Dhaka city to check any trouble," said Dhaka Metropolitan Police (DMP) Commissioner Ashraf Huda.

Gulshan, Banani, Baridhara, Dhaka University, and city outskirts including Ashulia, Buriganga bridge area and Meghna Ghat that are traditional party areas saw extra security measures.

Like previous years, the Dhaka University campus and the posh Gulshan, Banani and Baridhara areas turned out to be revelers' paradise. Many blasted crackers in alleysways dodging the watchful eyes of police and BDR troops.

The DMP had already slapped a limited ban on traffic movement in and around Gulshan, Banani, Baridhara and Dhaka University in a bid to avert any untoward incident on the New Year's Eve.

The Kemal Ataturk Avenue and Dhaka University campus were open only to cars from 8:00 last night to 4:00 this morning. Fire brigade, ambulance and other emergency services were exempted, said a DMP press release.

Law enforcers were empowered to search any car at Kemal Ataturk Avenue and Shahbagh crossing entry points.

Rajuk

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regular prices caused a loss of Tk 12 crore to the government.

Both plots were sold at Tk 3 lakh per acre (1 acre equals over 3 bighas or nearly 65 kathas) as against the regular price of Tk 10.70 lakh a katha in 1994 and Tk 15 lakh a katha in 1998. The Rajuk co-operative has built a shopping complex on the land.

In a show cause notice, the Office of the CAG asked the secretary of the ministry to respond to its findings of financial anomalies in allocation of the plots, but the ministry never responded.

The subcommittee, formed on December 13 to probe the allegations, asked the authorities concerned to submit all relevant documents to it to file lawsuit against those responsible for authorising the unlawful allocations.

In its report, the subcommittee also asked Rajuk to take action against those responsible for not implementing a Rajuk inquiry report in this regard.

The subcommittee will again discuss its report in its next meeting.

Yesterday's meeting also discussed some other audit objections involving education, health, communication and agriculture ministries.

Savings certificate

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Three-year term certificates offer 7 percent interest in the first year, 8 percent in the second and 10.5 percent in the third year.

Five-year certificates now offer 12.5 percent interest and three-year ones 12 percent.

An official of the Sanchaya Paridaptar (director of savings certificate) explained the implications of the changes. "If you invest Tk 100 on a five-year certificate, you will now get Tk 55 in profit after five years. And for a three-year certificate, you will get Tk 31.5 in profit after three years," he pointed out.

The Internal Resources Division of the Ministry of Finance also issued another circular yesterday cancelling a part of the Sanchayapatra Rules 1977 that allowed taking bank loans by depositing the savings certificates.

Secretary of the Internal Resources Division Khairuzzaman Chowdhury told The Daily Star, "The new steps have been taken as part of the overall financial reforms. The high rates of interest on savings instruments have been putting pressure on the budget. Besides, by lowering the interest rates, we are encouraging investment in the private sector."

About the small investors, who heavily depend on savings certificates, he said, "They will be affected very little because we have lowered the interest rates by a small propor-

tion." The IMF dictated that the interest rates on such certificates should be adjusted with the treasury bills. But this has not been in the case of the new rates as it would require accounting skill of the customers to understand it.

"People who will buy the certificates simply need to know what they are buying and what they will gain," said a finance ministry source.

The government has been reducing its savings instruments from 2002 on the donors' advice and closed several savings schemes that year. But the sale of savings certificates continued to rise.

Till August last, the outstanding amount of savings certificates stood at Tk 30,566 crore. The government has to spend about 11 percent of the revenue budget just to pay the interest on the savings certificates.

As savings certificates are very popular among senior citizens, the government intends to create an alternative scheme for them. A pensioner's scheme is being planned for retired officials and employees, sources said.

The government is also considering a policy barring bank money holders from buying savings certificates in a bid to legalise their money. To that end, all certificate buyers will be asked to provide their tax identification number (TIN) and photographs.

All waste, but who cares?

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reports and a subsequent order from the prime minister," said an RHD engineer requesting anonymity.

He said the money wasted in the process was 'nominal', but declined to give the amount.

"The dividers will now stay in their place but we will increase their height as the level of the surrounding road surface has increased over the years due to carpeting," he said.

The removal was being carried out under the Tk 25 crore 'Airport Road Beautification Project', a component of Dhaka Urban Transport Project, and includes repair of broken sidewalks and widening of road space.

The project is being jointly implemented by Dhaka City Corporation (DCC) and the RHD.

Another RHD engineer requesting anonymity told The Daily Star that it was inconceivable how the removal of road dividers could add to the beauty of the road as suggested by the project name or reduce traffic jam.

"One of the reasons the concrete dividers were put up was to block the high beam of vehicle headlights coming from the opposite direction to avoid the blinding effect it has on drivers," he said.

Dr Nazrul Islam, a geography professor of Dhaka University, said the project is fraught with lack of coordination between the implementing agencies, resulting in waste of taxpayers' money.

"The dismantling of the dividers and their subsequent restoration show that the project is being implemented in an unplanned way," he said, adding that the main task of road dividers is to ensure road safety.

He said widening of the road is very important but the dismantling of the dividers was totally unnecessary.

Monjur Anshur Bhuiyan, executive engineer of the RHD (Dhaka Division), declined to comment on the reconstruction of the dividers.

Under the project, the Airport Road will have six to eight lanes and two-foot-wide footpaths on the Mohakhali side and three-foot-wide on the airport side, said Quamrul Islam Siddique, executive director of Dhaka Transport Coordination Board (DTCB). Trees will be planted on the airport side for beautification, he added.

"After the work is finished, the Airport Road will be the most beautiful of all roads and accommodate a greater volume of through traffic," he said.

The project is expected to finish by July 2004.

2 cos illegally barter govt work orders to third party

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Two construction companies have bartered their Tk 40 crore work orders for gas pipeline installation through the Jamuna Multi purpose Bridge to another company without notifying the authorities concerned.

Shahidul Islam, chairman of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on the Energy and Mineral Resources Ministry, revealed it to a committee meeting yesterday.

"Don Construction and Business King, the construction companies, were awarded the work order. But they sold it to an unidentified party for only Tk 20 crore," he said.

To halt gas pilferage by some big industrial groups, the committee has recommended installation of central metering system for each group, Shahidul told journalists after the meeting.

Some 30 private companies have about Tk 300 crore in gas bill arrears and the committee asked the ministry to take immediate steps to realise the dues, he added.

An estimated Tk 12,132 crore investment is needed for the country's gas sector till 2020, he said quoting the speakers at the meeting.

Committee members and officials concerned were present at the meeting.

Year of soaring crimes

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The working atmosphere for journalists, particularly their security, also did not improve. There has been no let-up in assaults on newsmen working at the grassroots level as in most cases they are targets of hooligans enjoying political backing from one party or the other.

The recovery of over one lakh bullets of Chinese rifles and powerful explosives weighing 120 kg from an abandoned truck and from a political activist's house at Jogarpara village in Kahlalu of Bogra in June last was an eye-opener to the country's security intelligence. It showed them how Bangladesh had long been used as a route for international trade in illegal arms.

The recovery of four AK-47 rifles, two revolvers, 20 hand grenades, four time bombs, a huge quantity of ammunition of AK-47 rifles and explosives at Kuril Badda in the capital in November took people by surprise.

Murders of political leaders and activists by rival party men and a sense of insecurity reportedly prevailing among the members of the minority communities sent an unhealthy signal to the international communities about the 13-year-old democratic order in the country.

As many as 11 members of a Hindu family, including a four-day-old baby, were burnt to death as alleged robbers set their house afire in a remote village at Banshkhal in Chittagong on November 19.

Mental Hospital

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injection could not be given to the patients and medicine supplies to the outpatient wings were also cut.

Local police said hectic lobbying by some local ruling coalition leaders for Zillur was holding back progress in the robbery probe.

But the assistant superintendent of police in Pabna, Jahan Mian, dismissed the allegation, saying the probe was on.

On the motive for the robbery, he said: "The incident was a drama to distract people's attention from medicine theft."

Travel agents defer strike by two weeks

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The travel agents, scheduled to go on an indefinite strike from today, has deferred their agitation by two weeks considering the plight of Hajj pilgrims and smooth functioning of Hajj flights that began yesterday.

At an emergency general meeting yesterday at a city hotel, the Association of Travel Agents of Bangladesh (Atab) reset a January 15 deadline for the Board of Airlines Representatives (Bar) to reverse its decision to reduce travel agents' commission. They would now go on indefinite strike from January 16 if their demand were not met by then.

Some 40,000 non-ballotees, who are handled by the Hajj Agencies Association of Bangladesh (Haab) that also supported the agitation, found themselves in a sticky stew when Atab announced its strike plan on December 27 last year.

The agents opted for strike programme after Bar, an association of 17 airlines operating in Bangladesh, on December 8 decided to reduce travel agencies' commission from nine percent to seven percent from January 1, 2004.

About 1,400 travel agents protested the Bar decision claiming that the commission cut will have spillover effects on the non-ballotee pilgrims as well as other local passengers, some 75 percent of whom are in the low

Auto-rickshaw workers call strike today

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Dhaka District Auto-rickshaw Workers' Union (DDAWU) enforces a dawn-to-dusk strike today to realise their nine-point demand.

The DDAWU leaders alleged in a statement yesterday that Communications Minister Nazmul Huda did not fulfil his promise to supply 15,000 CNG auto-rickshaws to drivers who were affected due to a government ban on two-stroke three-wheelers.

The proposal was aimed at providing bank loans at a low interest rate to the drivers to help them procure and run CNG three-wheelers for a living, it said.

The DDAWU also demanded an end to corruption at Bangladesh Road Transport Authority and implementation of government-fixed Tk 300 daily deposit to CNG auto-rickshaw owners.

The DDAWU would also organise a rally at Muktagong in the city today to press home their demands, it added.

DDAWU President Azizul Haq Mukta and General Secretary M Zakir Hossain signed the statement.

2 truck drivers abducted in Khagrachhari

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Khagrachhari

Armed miscreants abducted two truck drivers at Milonkarbari point in Khagrachhari yesterday.

According to police, abductors captured the drivers at gunpoint at about 4:30pm when they were going to Khagrachhari from Dighinala.

Both trucks were loaded with wood, police added.

However, police failed to rescue any of the abductees till the writing of this report at 7:30 last evening.

income bracket and travel to the Middle East to work mostly as labourers.

Presided over by Atab and Haab President MA Muhaimin Saleh, yesterday's meeting also decided to go to court for an injunction on the Bar decision coming into effect.

The Atab chief said, "If commission is reduced, they (travel agents) would no more be able to offer discount to passengers."

"If the BAR decision stands, foreign airlines, which control over 60 percent of the \$350 million ticket market, would be able to remit \$7 million in excess a year to respective countries," he said.

Atab members will also wear black badge from today, observe a token strike on January 7 at the National Press Club and submit a memorandum to the prime minister on January 10.

Biman, which will ferry 25,000 Hajj pilgrims in 81 special flights this season, yesterday started its Hajj flight. In the first flight, 274 pilgrims flew out for Jeddah from Zia International Airport at 5:00 pm.

N'ganj Jubo Dal leader David arrested

BSS, N'ganj

Police arrested Momin Ullah David, joint convener of the Jatiyatatabadi Jubo Dal's Narayanang town unit, at Panorama Plaza Shopping Centre at Bangabandhu Road in the town yesterday.