

TIGER CENSUS

Experts stress joint census every 2 years

449 paw prints found so far

PINAKI ROY, back from the Sundarbans

Wildlife experts from India, Bangladesh and United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) were exhilarated after finding 449 pugmarks or tiger paw prints four days into the Sundarbans tiger census that began on February 26, and stressed the importance of such joint surveys on a regular basis.

"It would be great if we could do it regularly. We agree (to do so) in principle but our fund is very limited," said Minister for Environment and Forest Shajahan Siraj.

The UNDP gave \$50,000 for the ongoing census, which focuses on the Bangladesh part of the Sundarbans.

Till yesterday, 22 out of 32 teams participating in the weeklong census have reported their findings. The number of pugmarks is expected to go up once all teams, each comprising eight members, submit their data and the figures are tallied up.

A given number of pugmarks does not necessarily indicate the presence of an equal number of tigers since multiple marks can come from an individual animal. Minister Shajahan Siraj told The Daily Star that a conservative estimate puts the number of tigers in the Bangladesh part of the Sundarbans at no more than 350, although he said the number could be higher.

"We would come to know the exact figure after the cluster computer analysis of the pugmarks. We have to

take the computer software from India. It will take more than four months to know the exact result," said Ali Kabir Haidar, coordinator of the census.

But the number of paw prints found so far is encouraging enough for the two governments and the UNDP to want to jointly monitor the world's largest mangrove more frequently to ensure its sustainability. Presence of tigers means the forest, the natural habitat of the big cats, is still able to sustain the animals.

"As the Sundarbans is a single ecosystem, we are very keen to hold the census every two years jointly with Bangladesh. If we want to save the Sundarbans, we have to save the tigers," said Atanu Kumar Raha, chief conservator of forest (South) of India's West Bengal. Six experts from India have come to assist the census.

M Aminul Islam, Sustainable Development Advisor of the UNDP, said the Sundarbans is a single ecosystem and therefore a joint effort instead of separate approaches by the two countries is necessary to conserve the world heritage site. "We have to remember the ecosystem transcends political boundaries."

Meanwhile, forest officials were very glad they were frequently getting pugmarks. The 32 teams are spending busy days collecting the telltale marks of the elusive big cats.

The census will continue till March 3.

Norwegian JV buys SoE

UNB, Dhaka

Three enterprises of Bangladesh Forest Industries Development Corporation (BFIDC) were yesterday sold to a Bangladesh-Norwegian joint venture (JV), anticipating those would be profitable under private ownership.

The JV Nordic Woods Ltd purchased the Cabinet Manufacturing Plant, Wood Treating Plant and Mangrove Tannin Plant located in Khulna -- are under consideration for Tk 8 crore, which is 54 percent of the total permanent assets of the three units.

Two other state-owned enterprises -- Kalichapra Sugar Mills in Kishoreganj and Bangladesh Oil Mills Ltd in Khulna -- are under consideration for handover to private hands next month, according to a source in the Privatisation Commission.

Privatisation Commission Secretary M Abdul Majid and Managing Director of the JV Azam J Chowdhury signed an agreement on the transfer at the Privatisation Commission yesterday.

Privatisation Commission Chairman Enam Ahmed Chowdhury chaired the make-over ceremony, also attended by Environment and Forest Minister Shajahan Siraj and State Minister Jafrul Islam Chowdhury as chief and special guests.

Permanent member of the commission Nazmul Ahsan and BFIDC Chairman Subhash Chandra Roy Chowdhury, among others, addressed on the occasion.

The commission took the decision of the handover of the three losing concerns in 2002 and floated the first tender thereafter, the source said.

The commission has been preparing for the last one year to hand over 14 factories including the three, the source added.

"But the process slowed down due to some problems including legal disputes and the government also could not invite tender after April 12, 2003," he said.

Only three factories -- Zinat Textiles, Deshbandhu Sugar Mills and Nishat Jute Mills -- were handed over in last two years.

Shun violent

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democratic and constitutional process of removing a government.

Termining AL's hartal a terrorist activity, she wondered how the main opposition party could claim itself to be the proponent of democracy and human rights when it hinders people from going to work, assaults women in rickshaws, sets passenger buses on fire and damage other national properties in the name of hartal.

The government cannot allow anyone to commit such crimes, she said, and accused the AL of resorting to frequent hartals to hinder the widespread development programmes of her government.

She blamed the AL for the attack on eminent writer Dr Humayun Azad ahead of its hartal programme, saying it was a ploy to disrupt peace by creating an issue. She expressed her shock at the incident and said Azad would be provided modern treatment facilities and his attackers arrested for punishment under the speedy trial act.

Communications Minister Barrister Nazmul Huda, State Minister for Labour and Manpower Amanullah Aman, State Minister for LGED (Local Government, Rural Development) and Cooperatives Ziaul Haq Zia, lawmakers Dr Dewan M Salahuddin Ahmed and Barrister Ziaur Rahman, and local BNP leaders also addressed the rally.

India goes to polls

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news conference yesterday.

Counting of the vote will start on May 13.

For the very first time the polls in India will be fully electronically devised across the 543 Lok Sabha (Lower House of bicameral parliament) constituencies, engaging a total of 1.75 million Electronic Voting Machines (EVM).

The first phase of the polls, covering 141 Lok Sabha seats will be on April 20, while the second covering 137 seats, the third covering 83 seats and the concluding phase covering 182 seats are slated for April 26, May 5 and May 10 respectively.

Earlier on February 6, Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee dissolved the parliament, eight months ahead of its time.

Along with the parliamentary polls, elections for new legislatures in four states of Andhra Pradesh, Orissa, Karnataka and Sikkim will also be held.

Of these four states the Congress runs only Karnataka, while BJP and its allies run the rest three.

Alliance candidate

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polled 81,587 votes in 71 centres of 101 while his nearest rival independent candidate Korban Ali trailed with 21,322 votes.

Independent observers said the turnout of voters was poor in the absence of the main opposition, Awami League, which boycotted the polls apprehending large-scale rigging.

Two candidates, Rezaul Haq of JSD and Korban Ali of BJP, withdrew from the race midway through the polling alleging widespread irregularities and rigging by the BNP candidate. They informed the assistant returning officer of boycotting the polls at 1:30pm.

Korban said his agents were forced out of most polling centres.

He termed the polling farce.

DIESEL CRISIS

Irked agri ministry to talk with the energy

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The agriculture ministry will immediately take up with the energy ministry the issue of an acute diesel supply shortage facing the farmers.

Lawmakers present at yesterday's meeting of the parliamentary standing committee on the agriculture ministry expressed the fear that by the time the government imports diesel and fertiliser, farmers may miss out on the peak boro season.

They were also wary that insufficient irrigation and fertiliser will affect the growing rice plants.

The ministry also informed the parliamentary committee that an official probe into the alleged question paper leak in written exams for recruitment of block supervisors (BS) on January 30 found the former director general of the Department of Agriculture Extension (DAE) and an additional director of DAE involved with the scam.

Talking to The Daily Star after the two-hour meeting held at the Cabinet Room of the Sangsad Bhaban, parliamentary committee Chairman and BNP MP Abdul Mannan said apart from departmental actions corruption charges would be pressed against the officials involved.

The exams for recruiting the BS have been suspended after the leak was proved in Mymensingh, Abdul Mannan said adding that the parliamentary committee had asked the ministry to ensure 'watertight' security for the question papers next time.

Mannan said Agriculture Minister MK Anwar had assured the

meeting of normal urea supply in the country and import of 50,000 triple super phosphate (TSP) soon.

The committee chairman acknowledged that there has been a diesel crisis and that the farmers have been forced to buy diesel at a price higher than normal to irrigate boro lands. He said diesel consignments from abroad are expected soon.

Half of Bangladesh's annual food output comprises boro rice.

Jatiya Party lawmaker and committee member GM Kader told The Daily Star the government should have taken the import measures much earlier. "Now, by the time fertiliser and diesel consignments reach here, farmers would miss the peak boro irrigation season."

Kader said Anwar assured the meeting that he would look into the problem and take up the issue with energy ministry so that diesel import is expedited and farmers get it at fair price.

It was alleged in the meeting that district-level fertiliser monitoring committees were not active enough to redress farmers' miseries as unscrupulous traders were hiking farm input prices.

The agriculture minister warned against hoarding and artificial price hike on the pretext of price fluctuation in the international market. He also told the meeting that steps would be taken to make the monitoring more stringent.

State Minister for Agriculture Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir, other committee members and the ministry officials were also present.

When elected leaders

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by the side of a person in time of their need.

What we have here is an example of the supreme arrogance of power that seems to have gripped the minds of Khaleda Zia and her team. When the highest administrator of the country -- that is the true function of a prime minister -- feels that law is nothing more than a plying and the government machinery is a toy that can be used in any way one pleases without any sense of right or wrong or any thought of being accountable to anybody, then we have a serious case of delusion of power leading to its serious abuse that threatens civic rights of ordinary citizens.

Let us recall that of all the enormous executive power of the US president, Nixon fell on the rather small issue of wire-tapping of a few delegates to the Democratic Party convention at the Watergate complex in Washington DC in the late sixties and early seventies.

To add insult to injury, the Inter Services Public Relations (ISPR) press release issued by the Ministry of Defence, which is the only official explanation we have as to why Hasina was prevented from going to the CMH, makes a mockery of public intelligence. It says she was prevented to see Prof Azad on doctors' advice. Did the doctors order that Hasina be stopped on the road several kilometres from the hospital? Did the doctors order that the main gate be closed on the opposition leader's face? Many of us, on numerous occasions, visited critical patients at the CMH when doctors prevented us from going inside the intensive care unit (ICU). What happens then is that we meet the near and dear ones of the patient, express our sympathy, good wishes and solidarity with the suffering family and leave. Hasina could have been allowed to do the same. Instead, we have the most horrible example of whimsical use of power which now involves the case of a severely injured intellectual -- a man far away from the world of politics and partisan rivalry.

We have no tears to shed for Ershad, but recently he was, without any rhyme or reason, prevented from travelling abroad in another case of arbitrary and whimsical use of power. Several weeks ago, Hasina was prevented from paying respects to the soldiers who died in a plane crash in Sierra Leone.

No one needs to be reminded of the bitterness that marks the personal relations between Khaleda and Hasina. We hear about it almost every day from the speeches they make about the other. However, what we want to underscore here is the regular and almost routine abuse of power by the government against the opposition and ordinary citizens against whom the ruling power takes umbrage. Who is prevented from going where and who is stopped from going abroad are but small issues compared to the plethora of serious national concerns that are staring us in the face. But these small incidents form an acid test for a government's respect for law and can be taken as a barometer of its mindset about democracy and values such as a political system represents.

Phones are tapped, income tax files recalled, people investigated and surveillance is ordered simply because one has fallen foul of the powers that be. We can predict the response of the government -- we are doing nothing compared to what they would do to us. During their time...

(A long narration follows). So it is all about revenge while the country, its people, its human-rights record, its economy, its student

Rajuk projects to come under lens

JS body recommends structural change to make it dynamic

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

A parliamentary sub-committee is to probe widespread allegations against Rajuk (Rajdhani Unnayan Katiripakkha) in its different housing projects including Purbachal, Uttara and Rupnagar.

The standing committee on housing and public works ministry yesterday came down heavily on Rajuk for its lack of transparency, recommending the ministry to bring structural changes in the Rajuk to make the organisation more dynamic and accountable.

Ruling BNP lawmaker Alamgir Haider Khan will led the three-member sub-committee formed at a meeting of the standing committee at the Sangsad Bhaban and will submit report within 45 days.

"At the backdrop of widespread allegations of corruption raised against Rajuk, especially in the implementation process of different housing presents, we wanted to probe it," Shahjahan Chowdhury, chairman of the parliamentary standing committee, told The Daily Star coming out of the meeting.

"The meeting also observed there is no accountability and transparency in the Rajuk activities. The officials must be accountable for their deeds."

B Chy

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Memorial Hospital on the Biswa Road.

With the people's cooperation, he hoped to form party units at all level across the country. The party will reflect aspirations of farmers, workers and the people against oppression and injustice, he said.

"The main target of my party will be to eradicate poverty and establish a society that is free of corruption and crime," said Chowdhury, adding that he is yet to finalise a name out of 127 for his party.

He also blamed the government for failing to run the country. "We did not free this country for the frustrating situation we are in now," he added.

"Terror rules the country now. People are being killed in daylight. Criminals chop university teacher with butcher knife to take life. People are no longer safe."

"No work can be done without kickbacks. There was corruption before. But now it has widened to the maximum extent. The government and persons close to the ruling alliance are involved in the corruption."

"People have not voted anyone to power for accumulating family wealth. Nobody has been elected to rob people's money," he said.

Termining the ruling alliance non-transparent, he alleged that the government attacks anyone who is critical of it. "They attack the motorcade of the (Opposition) politicians and behave rudely with people," Chowdhury said.

People voted for development, improving law and order, and establishing their rights. "But the government failed in all aspects because it was busy filling its own pocket," he alleged.

After the rally he told the press that he has advised his son Mani Chowdhury, a ruling party parliamentarian, not to 'keep relationship with a party of hooligans and corrupt people'.

6 civil surgeon

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surgeons involved in the corruption in line with the recommendations of the parliamentary standing committee on the health ministry of the seventh parliament.

The officials of the ministry could not explain the corruption and sought time to clarify the issue.

Committee Chairman Harun Al Rashid said the body would discuss the issue at its next meeting and asked the officials of the ministry to come up with a report identifying the guilty.

Committee sources said similar allegations were found against at least 16 civil surgeon's offices and the body would discuss the allegations at its next meeting.

Chaired by Harun, the meeting at the Jatiya Sangsad Bhaban was attended by committee members and officials concerned.

Taiwan

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Bangladesh authorities," Shih said, adding that "Bangladesh would open an office in Taipei later this year."

The office will be headed by Frank Chen, former deputy chief of the ministry's department of general affairs.

Shih said the opening of the office was "a breakthrough" for Taiwan as it would be the second Taiwanese mission in the region since 1995 when it opened an economic and cultural office in the Indian capital.

Neither Bangladesh nor India recognise Taiwan which Beijing regards as part of its territory waiting to be reunified with China, by force if necessary.

The liaison office in Bangladesh would help "enhance our bilateral cooperation in fields such as the economy, trade, culture, education and technology," the Taiwanese ministry said in a statement.

Prof Azad

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tasked the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) with investigation.

"He is still unconscious," Azad's wife Latifa Kohinor told The Daily Star last night, adding, "Doctors said they cannot say anything before the 72-hour anaesthesia spell wears off tomorrow morning (Monday)."

Doctors at the Combined Military Hospital (CMH), where Azad is now being treated for severe head and jaw wounds, allowed Latifa to see her husband in the morning.

"I held his hand and called him at the Intensive Care Unit (ICU), but he could not answer," she said.

"Doctors told my mother they would take her there again later in the day, but did not do so," Azad's daughter Smita said at 9:00 last night, adding his condition remained the same.

An army officer, visiting the author at 8:00pm, said his health was improving, but he was not out of danger, adding, "His temperature and blood pressure are normal. He now responds to verbal cues."

The CMH authorities said they would allow up to seven relatives to see Azad from today and asked his wife to submit a list.

"The government gave the case priority," State Minister for Home Affairs Lutfozzaman Babar told journalists after a meeting of the home ministry monitoring cell that decided to transfer the case from Ramna police to the CID for a quick probe.

Prime Minister Khaleda Zia assured Azad's family of best treatment at home.

"The government will send him abroad for better treatment, if necessary," a government source quoted Khaleda as telling Azad's another daughter Mouli Azad and son Anannyo when they called on her at her office.

Azad's brother Sajjad Kabir, sister-in-law Shamsunnahar Gafur and Prime Minister's Political Secretary Haris Chowdhury were also present. But Azad's family declined to comment on the 10-minute meeting with Khaleda.

A high official of the home ministry

claimed Azad regained consciousness for a short time when his wife went to meet him.

"Doctors gave us the impression that his health improved. He can now move his hands and see," he said.

The Court of Chief Metropolitan Magistrate remanded Abu Abbas Bhuiyan, a Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL) leader of Dhaka University unit, in police custody for five days after arrest on Saturday with suspected links to the attack.

Sub-Inspector Mahbubur Rahman of Ramna police, who was investigating the case, told the court Abbas and his accomplices carried out the attack, branding him as a bomb-maker with a past of campus violence.

"I hope we will find the motive for the attack and identify his accomplices once we can interrogate him in remand," he said.

But main opposition Awami League General Secretary Abdul Jalil alleged the police implicated the BCL leader to harass opposition adherents.

Intelligence agencies were engaged to trace the attackers, believed to have ties with fundamentalists.

"Since Dr Azad talked to the attackers for long, we hope we'll be able to arrest the attackers once we can talk to him after his recovery," the ministry official said.

Mahi threatens

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strained relations with the ruling BNP since his father Prof B Chowdhury resigned from the presidency, expressed solidarity with the general students and teachers, who were demonstrating on the campus demanding immediate resignation of the home minister and immediate arrest of the culprits.

"Members of parliament represent the people. Being people's representative it's not possible for me to take a position against the people," he said.

Grenade attack

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Hossain of Khulna Police Station.

"The powerful grenade was made in Pakistan," a high official of Khulna Metropolitan Police (KMP) said, adding the assailants forgot to take the pin off the grenade -- the reason it did not explode.

Witnesses said the attackers secreted themselves in Shaheed Hadis Park to home in on the mayor's official car that also carried KCC Public Relations Officer Abu Taher.

The attack that came at 2:35pm is reminiscent of the killings of New Age newsman Manik Saha in a bomb attack on January 15 and main opposition Awami League city unit president Manzurul Imam on August 25 last year in a city reeling from underground violence.

High police officials visited the scene after the incident that sent hundreds of people including political leaders, KCC officials and employees flocking to the Gagan Babu Road home of the mayor to see him.

Outraged at the attempt on the mayor's life, the KCC Karmachari Union brought out a procession and decided to stay off work for an hour today in symbolic protest.

The KCC unionists threatened to enforce a shutdown of the corporation, going on an indefinite strike if the attackers were not arrested by this evening.

Jamaat-e-Islami lawmaker Mia Golam Farwar, also president of the welfare group's Khulna chapter, and its General Secretary Saiful Huq condemned the attack.

Khulna district and city BNP leaders and activists in sharp reaction demanded immediate arrest of

the attackers, but adherents of the pro-mayor group and supporters of the district BNP brought out protest processions that ended up in chases and counter-chases in an apparent internal conflict spreading panic.

Acting Police Commissioner Sajjad Ali said police opened a vigorous investigation into the attack.

A general diary was filed with Khulna Police Station and security was tightened in the city and around the mayor's home.

Case filed

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leader of violating the Cantonment Act No. 118 and Army Regulation No. 518.

Some other opposition activists have also been implicated in the case.

Hafiz spoke in the House responding to treasury bench lawmakers Monjur Kader and Mashur Rahman, who spoke on point of order. Prime Minister Khaleda Zia and other lawmakers thumped desks as the minister made the statement.

The minister said supporters accompanying Hasina assaulted some army personnel inside the cantonment on Saturday night, which is a punishable offence.

Hafiz termed Hasina's attempt to enter the cantonment and reach the CMH a 'planned incident' designed to 'break the morale' of the armed forces by crating chaos inside the cantonment. He said cantonment is not a place for carrying out 'subversive activities'.

Hasina accuses Jamaat

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for his progressive writings.

"The government's attitude in the last two days made it clear that criminals harboured by the BNP-Jamaat coalition and patronised by Prime Minister Khaleda Zia tried to kill Dr Azad in a planned way," Hasina alleged at a press conference at the Dhanmondi office of the main opposition Awami League (AL).

The reaction of Hasina, also president of the AL, came a day after prime minister Khaleda Zia yesterday blamed the party for the attack on Azad, a professor of Bangla at Dhaka University, near Bangla Academy on Friday.

Khaleda in her speech to a rally in Basabo alleged that the AL carried out the attack to create panic among people ahead of its hartal.

"The prime minister in her usual manner tried to shift the blame onto the Awami League once again," Hasina said, adding the comment was bent on saving the real assailants.

"It's clear from the writings of Dr Azad who was angered by him and masterminded the attack to silence his outspoken criticisms."

Referring to the demand for a ban on his latest work, Pak Sar Zamin Saad Bead, by Jamaat legislator Delwar Hossain Sayeede, Hasina said since then the writer, who never sided any political party, was receiving death threats.

She alleged that a bomb attack ripped through the shrine of Hazrat Shahjalal (R) in Sylhet days after Sayeede criticised a function there. She remarked that the attack was an attempt by the anti-liberation forces

to avenge their defeat in Bangladesh's liberation war against Pakistan in 1971.

"In recent days, Dr Azad himself expressed fears of attack on him by the communal forces," Hasina said.

Condemning the grisly attack with butcher's knife, Hasina demanded formation of a neutral people's inquiry commission to uncover the motive for the attack and unmask the real criminals. She asked the government not to harass innocent people framing them in false cases.

The AL chief was also critical of the prime minister for barring her from visiting Azad at the Combined Military Hospital in Dhaka.

"Even people going to the hospital to donate blood to Dr Azad was stopped," he said.

"Why does the government want to conceal the latest condition of the injured educationist who is fighting for life at the hospital?" she asked.

She urged the CMH authorities to broadcast regular bulletins on the latest condition of Azad.

Asked whether the AL would announce a programme protesting the attack on Azad, Hasina said her party had already expressed solidarity with the movement of Dhaka University teachers and students and would lend all-out support to them.

On the premier's comment that she would not step down a day before the expiry of the coalition's tenure, Hasina said the prime minister made similar remarks after the February 15, 1996 'sham polls'.