

Robbers on the prowl, safety at stake

MIZANUR KHAN

Dhaka has witnessed a series of robberies recently, as professional gangs of thieves have become very active despite the deployment of elite forces like Rapid Action Battalion (Rab), Cheeta and Cobra. Police sources said criminals have become engaged more in robberies at night, as they cannot mug on the roads during the day for fear of Rab.

"These gangs single out a house, make a study on the number of males and females in it and their movements. When finally, all the hurdles have been well studied, they go into operation," said a police officer on duty at Tejgaon last week.

"Domestic helps give out all information, and the plans are put into action when the gangs receive green signals from inside. From beginning to end these gangs are aided by these domestic hands," he added.

According to media reports, more than 50 robberies took place and nearly Tk 3 crore in cash, gold and other items were cleaned out in the last two months. When contacted Dhaka Metropolitan Police (DMP) could not give the specific numbers of incidents, but high officials of the DMP said they

are aware of the increase in robberies in the city. They claim that they have now brought the situation under control.

"We cannot give you the exact figure as many incidents go unreported," said one official.

"Figures mentioned in the media are not correct. All incidents, which are reported, are not always robbery. If anybody takes away a motorcycle we cannot call it dacoity," said MM Mizanur Rahman, acting police commissioner of the DMP.

"It was on the rise. But the situation has improved after we arrested a few culprits and recovered some stolen goods from different places," he said.

According to the police, 23 robberies took place under 22 police stations across the capital in November. In December the number exceeded 30. In most cases robbers introduced themselves as guests to get inside houses.

"Robbers come in as guests, ring doorbells and enter the houses," said another police officer.

City dwellers are wary of the rise in such incidents. "We do not open the door on hearing the doorbell. We first make sure that the person is known and then open the door. We do not permit our bua (cook) to open the gate. I

do it myself," said Kaniz Fatema, a homemaker in Mohammadpur.

In other cases criminals cut window or verandah grilles and enter the houses at night and when people resist they were harmed bodily.

It has also been reported that robbers wear black attires claiming themselves members of Rab to enter targeted houses or shops. A gang of 10 robbers identifying themselves as Rab members entered Rangs Toshiba showroom at Lalbagh on January 2 and looted electronic goods worth over Tk 8 lakh.

Police acknowledged the rise in burglaries and said though the law and order situation has improved over the weeks the number of robberies has increased.

"Robbers got a free hand as law enforcers were busy with the cross-country no confidence human wall or with picketers during hartals," said a top-level police officer.

Rod and cement businessmen, meanwhile, claimed that at least 20 truckloads of rod and cement were hijacked last month and in most cases police failed to net the criminals and recover the stolen goods.

On December 21, two incidents -- one in Demra and the other in Shewrapara -- took place where

goods worth nearly Tk 13 lakh were robbed. Three people were injured in these incidents. In Demra local people caught a robber and handed him over to the police.

On December 20, three incidents took place and on the same day police arrested four of a gang preparing for a robbery operation.

On December 15, 16, 17 and 19, four robberies took place in Kamalapur, Mohammadpur, Uttara and Goran. Valuables worth nearly Tk 10 lakh were robbed and Cobra, the special team of Detective Branch, arrested six robbers involved in the Uttara incident.

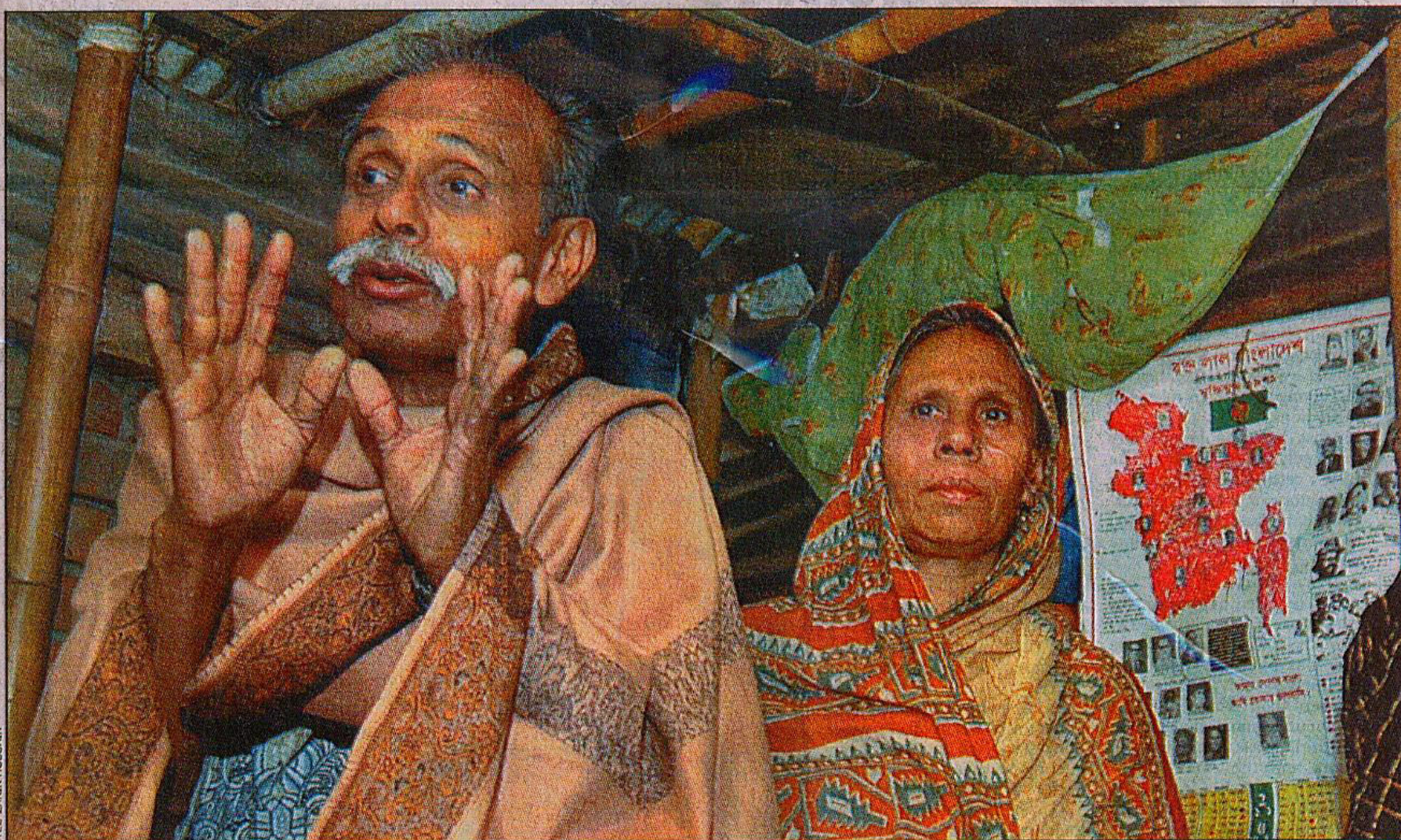
Another four incidents took place in Shayampur, Tejgaon and the plush shopping mall -- Basundhara City -- in Panthapath on December 14, and on the day before three incidents took place in Shyampur, Sutrapur and Bailyroad.

In Jatrabari, Khilgaon and Rampura three robberies took place on December 10 and detective branch police arrested nine robbers with arms involved in the Jatrabari incident.

On December 7 an incident of robbery took place in a house in Tallabag while on December 6 two incidents occurred in a furniture shop in Panthapath and in a house in Sabujbag respectively.



Caught red-handed: A group of young men were caught with wares stolen from a money-exchange in Motijheel last November.



Mosharraf Sheikh and Nazma Begum battling for survival.

Freedom fighters yearn for better living

SABRINA KARIM MURSHED

After 33 years of independence, happiness still eludes Birangana Nazma. "They (Pakistan occupation forces) abducted me from my house in front of my family and shot my father when he protested," she recalled.

Kidnapped by the occupation forces with the help of collaborators in May 1971 from Bhajundi village in Moksudpur upazila of Gopalganj, Nazma, the then sixteen-year-old 'Kanan Bala,' languished in a concentration camp for a month.

Born in a Hindu family, Kanan Bala was deserted by her own family when freedom fighters rescued her from the camp. "My parents refused to accept me fearing social stigma. Then I married Mosharraf and became a Muslim," she said.

Mosharraf's family also abandoned him for marrying a tortured Hindu girl. He said even their children did not know the fact until it came to light through media. "My elder daughter reacted when she came to know everything. But later she was convinced that it's matter of pride to have such a brave mother."

2002.

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The freedom fighters' family was enlisted for allowance in the year 2000 but the government stopped the Tk-300 per month allowance two years later since the authorities thought it would need verification whether they were real freedom fighters.

"Do they need more evidence than this?" said Mosharraf showing the mark of bullet injury in his shoulder he sustained during the Liberation War.

He said their names are on a single list of freedom fighters.

But officials said they are verifying the names of existing four lists and if anyone's name is found in at least two lists he or she would be entitled to get the allowance again.

The Ministry of Liberation War Affairs has started work to make a fresh list of freedom fighters, which will be notified through a gazette. "We have decided to make a final list," said Mamta Uddin, joint secretary of the ministry.

He earlier told Star City that those freedom fighters having their names in all the lists, or at least in two of them, are accepted as 'indisputable' by the ministry. "But those names that exist in only one list are being investigated," he said.

"We are investigating so that the names of fake freedom fighters do not exist in the final list."

Nazma and Mosharraf have

been identified as real freedom fighters by the local selection committee. However, Mosharraf said the committee has not sent the list to ministry as yet. "They said they would sent it only when the ministry asks for it."

When asked, the joint secretary said the upazila selection committee headed by nirbahi officer is preparing the list. "They will decide on a priority basis whom to provide the allowance in line with the national policy and guidelines," he said.

A valid freedom fighter's certificate from the ministry and less than Tk 12,000 annual income are the criteria for getting the allowance. "If Mosharraf and Nazma are certified freedom fighters and if the committee finds them eligible, they would get it soon."

Factories lack fire & emergency escapes

SULTANA RAHMAN

Working in a garment factory is risky but authorities are indifferent about the risks, while workers take for a struggle for survival.

Most factories lack emergency exits with the collapsible gates kept under lock and key making it impossible to flee from danger.

The recent fire at a knitting plant in Siddhirganj burnt alive at least 22 and injured more than 50 others on January 7. Workers said the number of casualties was so large as they were stuck in the four-storey building with only a side door open while the main gate and the emergency exit at the back were shut fast.

"Surrounded by flames, we cried for help but none came. Many of us climbed back to the second floor to escape through another exit but that too was closed," said a worker of Shaan Knitting.

Workers panicked and rushed from one floor to another looking for escapes but found all exits locked.

"As the flames fanned we found ourselves trapped inside," said Habib, another survivor.

On a visit to a few garment factories in Moghbazar and Mirpur workers said and staff confirmed that collapsible gates

are often kept locked to make maximum use of the time limit of a single shift.

Lokman, a guard at ARC Sweaters in Moghbazar said: "The gates are closed at a certain time to ensure security of workers. We just follow instructions given by the management and open them up according to the time schedules given to us."

Giving reasons for locked entrances, Salam Mahiuddin, a supervisor of Smirty Garments of Mirpur said: "This is done to avoid unnecessary problems caused by local goons."

The risks of fire and fire-related incidents are high in most of the 2,308 listed garment units in the city.

Considering these incidents the Department of Fire Service and Civil Defence (FSCD) formulated a law making it mandatory for factories to have an emergency or fire exit to avoid fire-related casualties.

Many factories half-heartedly comply with the rule installing light, narrow staircases that engineers say cannot withstand pressure of rushing workers.

BGMEA and FSCD officials admit that some fire exits are faulty but defend themselves by saying those were built before

formulation of the fire safety law.

When a factory is constructed clearance and a licence on fire-safety must be obtained from the FSCD, according to the fire-service ordinance, but those who comply with the regulation alleged that others buy fire-safety certificates from the authorities.

FSCD certified about 105 garment factories at Goran in Khilgaon, but locals say there are more than 250 factories without fire escapes in the area.

An FSCD official said they have just four inspectors to supervise 2,308 garment factories in the city. Such an inadequate inspection team can hardly monitor the safety measures in the garment industry, he said.

Apart from the last accident in Siddhirganj, at least 198 garment workers died and more than 1,000 were injured in fire-related incidents in 1990-2001, according to a study made together by Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) and Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies (BILS). Of the 14 serious incidents of fire across the country during the same period, 13 took place in Dhaka. Exits were locked in most of the fire incidents.

