

NBR, C&F agents

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strike since July 21 to press home their 12-point demand.

Leaders of the Federation of Bangladesh Clearing and Forwarding Agents (FBCFA) will hold a meeting in Dhaka today to plan a further action programme following a "non-response" by the NBR.

"We may call nationwide work abstention at all the customs house from Tuesday to press home our legal demands. The NBR can not impose any irrational regulations," FBCFA President Abul Fazal Talukder said yesterday.

The association leaders will meet NBR Chairman Khairuzaman Chowdhury and urge him to take immediate action for realisation of their demands, he said.

The C&F agents should withdraw their work abstention for the greater interest of the country, NBR member (Customs) ATM Sarwar said, adding, "If they have any demands, they can discuss with the NBR officials."

The NBR urged the exporters and importers to continue their normal business through self-clearance system.

It also suggested the traders to shift their consignments to other land ports from Benapole as interim measures.

If importers start a self-clearance system promptly and massively, it will help eliminate goods jam at ports, an NBR press release yesterday said, adding that the business community welcomed the resumption of a self-clearance system.

FBCFA President Abul Fazal, on the other hand, said most of the importers and exporters have no idea about the technical know-how of clearing and forwarding process.

Only the professional groups who have valid registration as well as vast experience in C&F can conduct it, he added.

The C&F agents' 12-point demand includes cancellation of the present valuation and classification committees, fixation of duty of the "clear report of findings" of consignments, and delivery of the products within 24 hours of arrival.

They also demanded that fines on non-PSI goods be not more than 10 to 12 percent and the consignments be weighed only during the verification.

Meanwhile, the Benapole C&F agents staged a demonstration in front of the Customs House yesterday and formed a platform named "Janatar Mancha" to continue their agitation, our Jessore correspondent reports.

CEC decides

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consensus on the issue, sources said.

"It does not warrant a consensus of all the three members," CEC MA Aziz told reporters replying to a question whether the decision was taken on consensus. "We took the decision on the basis of opinions expressed in the dialogue with the political parties," he added.

A total of 53 political parties took part in the three-day-long dialogue held amid boycott by the mainstream opposition parties including Awami League (AL).

The number of parties invited to the talks however was 117. Of the participants, 37 including the ruling parties favoured a fresh voter list.

The CEC at the beginning of the discussion about the voter list said the electoral laws would have to be amended to prepare a fresh list. But later he shifted from his position saying that preparing a fresh list does not necessarily require amendment to the laws.

The two election commissioners however appeared to be sticking to their earlier legal stances on the voter roll.

Faced with such disagreement, the EC had to follow the precedents of previous voter lists, sources said. "There was no need at all to arrange the dialogue when at the end of the day the Election Commissioner had to rely on the precedents to take the decision," said a senior EC official.

"We are going to prepare a fresh voter list considering the way they [lists] were prepared in the past," CEC MA Aziz told reporters after announcing the decision.

The commission had prepared voter lists in 1983, 1990, 1995 and 2000 without having to amend the electoral rolls.

"We will start preparing the list as soon as we get the financial support from the government," Aziz said, adding that the EC secretariat has already been directed to take necessary preparations.

Election Commissioner AK Mohammad Ali while leaving his office told reporters that the EC has decided to prepare the list in accordance with the Electoral Rolls Ordinance 1982.

He however alleged that his opinions about the legal aspects of the voter roll during Saturday's meeting were not properly recorded.

The EC secretariat officials said in a couple of days they will seek from the finance ministry a fund of over Tk 200 crore.

A total of 7.48 crore people are now registered as voters with the last roll prepared in 2000. The EC officials expect the number will rise by about one crore as the list will include those who have become eligible to be voters in the last five years.

As the decision is taken, the secretariat will soon start the enumeration job, employing about five lakh officials for around eight months.

An estimated 650 tonnes of papers will be required to print materials like manuals, registration forms, identity cards, draft lists and the like. Printing the final list too will need a mammoth amount of papers.

All 7 rescued

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"I can only thank our English colleagues for their joint work and the help they gave in order to complete this operation within the time we had available that is, before the oxygen reserves ran out," he said.

The sub surfaced at 4:26 p.m. local time Sunday, some three days after becoming entangled in 600 feet of water off the Pacific Coast on Thursday and after a series of failed attempts to drag it closer to shore or haul it closer to the surface. It was carrying six sailors and a representative of the company that manufactured it.

The men aboard waited through grinding hours of uncertainty. Officials said they were wearing thermal suits to warm them against temperatures of about 40 F inside the sub. In order to conserve electricity, they used communications equipment only sporadically to contact with the surface. They tried to stay to stay calm, among other reasons, to conserve oxygen.

"The crew were steadfast, very professional," Pepelyayev said on Channel One television. "Their self-possession allowed them to conserve the air and wait for the rescue operation."

Yelena Milashevskaya, the wife of crew member Lt. Vyacheslav Milashevsky, told Channel One television that when she got the call saying her husband was alive, "My feelings danced. I was happy, I cried."

In an echo of the Kursk sinking, President Vladimir Putin had made no public comment by Sunday on the mini-sub drama. Putin remained on vacation as the Kursk disaster unfolded, raising criticism that he appeared either callous or ineffectual.

Defence Minister Sergei Ivanov travelled to the site of the rescue operation on Saturday. But in sharp contrast to the August 2000 Kursk disaster, when authorities held off asking for help until hope was nearly exhausted, Russian military officials quickly sought help from US and British authorities. All 118 people on board the Kursk died, some surviving for hours as oxygen ran out.

Media gag continues

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parliament and preparation of the voter list for the next parliamentary election.

Election Commissioner AK Mohammad Ali yesterday expressed his dismay over the restriction. He told The Daily Star over telephone, "It only proves our point that the EC secretariat must be under the commission's control."

"They [officials] don't belong to the Election Commission [staff], rather to the secretariat. Ask them why they do not let the journalists enter my office," he added.

He however said the EC secretariat officials were only carrying out the directives of the higher authorities. "They are bound to obey their superior officials."

The EC secretariat officials who work at the offices of election commissioners yesterday prevented a group of journalists from meeting the commissioners. Personal secretaries (PS) to both the commissioners told the journalists that the higher authorities have directed them not to allow any pressman.

"If you should meet the election commissioner, you will have to take permission from the higher authorities," Abdul Hafiz, PS to AK Mohammad Ali, told the journalists waiting to meet the commissioner.

Abdul Motaleb, PS to M Munsif Ali, told the reporters the same. The officials also said they might lose their jobs if they allow the journalists to meet the election commissioners. Despite having an appointment with M Mohammad Ali, this correspondent was denied access to his office.

CEC Aziz yesterday evening brushed aside the allegation of imposing restriction on the election commissioners' speaking to the press. He said his office did not serve any such directive.

EC Secretary SM Zakaria too denied imposing any restraint. "I am

not aware of this. I control officials at the secretariat. I do not control the Election Commission," he told the reporters.

Asked about 'directives' from the higher authorities, he said, "I'm not all in all. There are authorities even higher than me."

The secretary had boycotted the EC meetings of former CEC MA Syed for the last two years. But he has been attending the meetings regularly since Justice MA Aziz took over the charge in last May.

Against a background of such rift between the secretary and the EC, the immediate past CEC in his reform proposals said holding elections freely and fairly will not be possible without an EC secretariat independent of government control.

The two election commissioners were in favour of revising the existing electoral roll while the CEC wanted a fresh one. The election commissioners are also of the opinion that a voter list could not be prepared afresh without amending the electoral laws while the CEC says that there is no legal bar to preparing a fresh voter list.

Besides, the CEC reacted sharply when Election Commissioner AK Mohammad Ali last week had disclosed to a private television channel the schedule for elections to women's reserved seats. The CEC rearranged the schedule at an emergency meeting and described the disclosure act as surprising.

Apparently irked, the CEC said, "It should be none but the CEC who would brief others about the commission's decisions or what is going on inside."

Following the incident of disclosure, the two election commissioners have been asked not to talk to the press.

HC verdict

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Attorney General AJ Mohammad Ali assisted by Additional Attorney General Fida M Kamal moved the petition for the government while Barrister Tanjibul Alam for the petitioner, Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust (BLAST).

Blast, on July 6, 2003, filed the writ petition as a public interest litigation in the High Court challenging the validity of the Gram Sarkar Act 2003.

A High Court bench comprising Justice ABM Khairul Haque and Justice ATM Fazle Kabir on August 2 delivered the judgement observing that the Gram Sarkar Act is against the spirit of the constitution and this law should not be upheld.

In the verdict, the court observed that legally Gram Sarkar was formed as a supporting organisation for the union parishad (UP) and not as part of administration or local government. It termed the law self-contradictory and dubious.

Gram Sarkar is a non-elected body, which is formed with selected members. But this non-elected body has been imposed on UP which is an elected body, the court observed.

Since the act was enacted two years ago, the BNP-led coalition government constituted 39,786 Gram Sarkar units with the target to form 40,392 units, which neither serve as part of the administration or the local government.

All the Gram Sarkar units have been formed comprising the supporters and activists of the ruling parties.

Court hears

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Constable Rasul informed the court he knew nothing about the arms smuggling and unloading, though he was present on the scene that night.

Rasul said he received an anonymous telephone call at around 12:20am and informed on-duty Sergeant Alauddin about the incident.

"At around 12:55am, up to 25 unidentified people arrived at the jetty when the arms and ammunition were being unloaded.

But Sgt Alauddin neither tried to arrest anyone nor fired a blank shot," Rasul said, adding, "No-one of the accused made any attempt to jump on the water or flee the spot." Two cases were filed in connection with the arms haul.

Police filed charges of the first case on June 11 (received on June 13) last year, accusing 39 people. But the number of accused in the first information report and the charge sheet differed.

Following a court order, a supplementary charge sheet was submitted on August 26 where the number of accused was raised to 43, and another person was included in the list later.

Seven of the 44 are now behind bars and 24 are out on bail. Thirteen accused including the three masterminds -- Hafizur Rahman, Din Mohammad and Abul Kashem Madhu -- are absconding.

New estimate

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a statement on the revision adds that additional drilling is required to confirm the southern extent of the coal basin.

"This further confirms the quality of the Phulbari resource," said Asia Energy's Joint Managing Director, Mr. David Lenigas. "We are also excited by the prospect of still more coal to be found at the southern end of the basin."

Asia Energy has drilled more than 100 exploration holes in the Phulbari area and, pending final authorisation by the Government of Bangladesh, is planning to start mining operations there in 2007.

Earlier Asia Energy told The Daily Star that it is preparing a 30 year open pit coal mining plan for the Phulbari Project, which would require relocating around 50,000 people of about a 100 villages and a part of Phulbari town. In return, the project would fetch the government \$200 million annually.

Working in Bangladesh from 1998 under an agreement with the government, the company started from last year a \$20 million feasibility study. The study will be completed by September and then the company will submit a proposal to the government to develop the mine.

If the plan is approved, under the coal development policy, 1993, the government will get only a 6 percent royalty from Asia Energy, plus different types of taxes.

Dhaka-Kolkata

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upcoming SAARC summit in Dhaka. He said Bangladesh is working on developing the proposed Transasia railways and highways. He also stressed the need for increasing export-import trade with neighbouring Nepal and Bhutan.

The meeting observed that to materialise the investment proposal of Tata group, both countries require an improvement in rail lines.

The Indian delegation proposed development of rail lines from Shialdah station in Kolkata up to Joydevepur, crossing the Jamuna bridge. They observed that a railway line could also be drawn from Bogra-jamtoli and Hawra for cargo and passenger services.

The acceleration of Chittagong port would bring huge economic benefit to Bangladesh, the Indian side observed.

Natwar meets Khaleda

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the hope the existing good ties between the two neighbours would strengthen further.

Briefing reporters, Foreign Secretary Hemayetuddin said the prime minister has accepted the invitation and expressed her willingness to visit India "at a convenient time".

She reciprocated by inviting the Indian prime minister to pay a visit to Bangladesh, in addition to his trip to Dhaka for the Saarc summit.

The Indian side has accepted the invitation and said their premier would visit Dhaka at a convenient time this year.

Khaleda termed the Indian external affairs minister's visit to Bangladesh part of confidence-building measures.

Both Khaleda and Singh emphasised the need for such visits from both sides to boost bilateral relations.

Singh informed Khaleda that his Bangladesh trip and discussions at various levels were "fruitful, useful, successful and constructive".

He is going back home with a

very good impression and would discuss at appropriate level the matters of resolving the outstanding issues between the two countries, Hemayetuddin told reporters.

On Indian river-linking project -- a latest add-on to the existing irritants in the bilateral ties -- Singh reassured Khaleda India would not take any unilateral decision that may affect Bangladesh.

About trade imbalance and sharing waters of common rivers, he said high-level visits from India would take place soon, including the trips by the Indian commerce minister and water resources minister, when the Indian side will make its effort to resolve various issues.

The Indian side also gave assurance of cooperation in the IT sector in Bangladesh.

Indian Foreign Secretary Shyam Saran and High Commissioner in Dhaka Veena Sikri were present.

Foreign Minister M Morshed Khan and Foreign Secretary Hemayetuddin accompanied Khaleda during the meet.

Natwar pushes

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Dialogue (CPD), a local think-tank, and India International Centre (IIC).

Singh said both the countries must proceed expeditiously to sign, not just a revised trade agreement for which there is agreement on both sides, but go a step further and try and conclude a Free Trade Agreement (FTA).

Responding to his comment, Foreign Minister M Morshed Khan said there is a perception problem about FTA in Bangladesh. "By and large FTA limits different things," he observed, urging his Indian counterpart to rename and renegotiate FTA.

Morshed said the two countries should seriously try to increase two-way trade and narrow the huge trade imbalance between them.

Referring to Indo-Sri Lankan experience in bilateral FTA, Singh said an FTA with Bangladesh could also bring significant benefit to both the countries.

"We must improve road, rail and air links between the two countries because this is the necessary infrastructure which is vital for augmenting the volume of bilateral trade and investment," he said, adding that other supplementary agreements such as bilateral investment protection and promotion agreement also need to be concluded.

Indo-Bangla bilateral trade last year was about \$1.6 billion, which though substantial, does not fully capture the potential that exists between our two countries, Singh observed, saying that a huge volume of trade still takes place on informal basis.

"Both the countries need to take a certain number of initiatives so that the full bilateral trade and economic potential can be realised," he added. "I reiterate the obvious importance of a dialogue, because in an era of growing tensions we need to remind ourselves that there is virtually nothing in this world that cannot be resolved through dialogue," the Indian minister said.

About "illegal immigration" and border management, Singh said, "We will try and be as flexible as we can on all these issues subject to our responsibility to safeguard India's national sovereignty and territorial integrity."

"The issue of illegal immigration is a serious issue that needs to be addressed. Similarly, we must ensure that our territories are not allowed to be used for any activities inimical to each other's interests," the Indian foreign minister added.

He suggested resuming the talks on boundary issues at the earliest.

Singh said these issues are of utmost importance to both the countries and there is no alternative to sitting together and sorting out whatever differences two countries have through a process of constructive dialogue.

The Indian minister said he is happy that high-level visits are now occurring with the desired frequency that should characterise the two friendly countries. "I am here to take stock of bilateral relations and see how to take them forward."

A stable, prosperous, secular and democratic Bangladesh is not just in the interest of its people but clearly in the interest of India and the region as a whole, Singh said. "...We respect Bangladesh's sovereignty," he added. "There is traditional goodwill for Bangladesh in India and I am convinced the same is the case here,"

Rebels kill 32

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Baghdad. Violence erupted when the crowd started throwing stones at the building.

Two people were also killed in Baquba when a roadside bomb targeting a police patrol exploded in the town centre. Seven Iraqis were killed at Al-Sharqat, 300km north of Baghdad when their bus hit a roadside bomb at 11:00 am (0700 GMT) Sunday. The dead included three children.

Eleven others were also killed in a string of separate rebel attacks across Iraq.

Two US soldiers were also reported killed in a bomb explosion near Samarra, north of Baghdad, on Saturday, the US military announced Sunday, bringing the total US military personnel casualties since the March 2003 invasion to 1,820 according to an AFP tally based on Pentagon figures.

Singh mentioned. He felt that Indo-Bangla relations are far below their potential and this is something for which both countries must take responsibility.

"We also hope that the prime ministers of our two countries will meet sooner rather than later and certainly at the Saarc Summit later this year. You will appreciate that these visits are necessary to provide political impetus to the relationship."

"Countries across the globe now see India as an indispensable economic partner and are seeking mutually rewarding economic and commercial links with our emerging economy," he said, asking should not India's neighbours also seek to share in the prospects for mutual prosperity that India offers?

About the regional integration, the Indian minister said South Asia is the least integrated and so the challenge for the intellectuals of Saarc is to convert a least integrated geographic area into a fully integrated economic and trade area.

Speaking at the dialogue, Morshed Khan said increasing two-way trade between the two countries and significantly narrowing the large trade imbalance is an objective worth pursuing seriously by both the countries.

"Enhancing access of Bangladeshi products to India, through concrete steps, will certainly be welcome to us," he said. "We shall continue to encourage trade creating investment from India that may play its own important role in increasing trade."

There is a need for constructive appreciation of forward movement that highlights the value of cooperation, the Bangladesh foreign minister said. "There is no dearth of goodwill, I can assure you, in Bangladesh in this regard."

Morshed said even the best of neighbours have differences between them. "The important thing to emphasise is that none of these differences are beyond resolution as long as we keep our dialogue open, remain engaged effectively with each other and move forward."

India and Bangladesh face common challenges to alleviate poverty and bring development and prosperity to the doorsteps of the people, Morshed mentioned.

Prof Rehman Sobhan, chairman of CPD, presided over the dialogue held at Brac Centre Inn where Deb Mukharji, former Indian high commissioner in Dhaka, also spoke. Dr Debapriya Bhattacharya, executive director of CPD, made a presentation on the topic.

Zambia deports

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recognise" the details of the Saudi claims, which came to light one month to the day after the attacks.

There was no immediate comment from the Prime Office or the Home Office, but Foreign Minister Tony Blair has previously rejected suggestions of an intelligence failure.

Fifty-six people were killed, including four apparent suicide bombers, in the July 7 morning rush-hour bombing of three underground subway trains and a double-decker bus.

It was the deadliest attack ever in the British capital, and was followed two weeks later by an attempted copycat attack in which the explosives, stuffed into rucksacks, failed to go off.

Saudi security sources were reported Sunday to be investigating whether two al-Qaeda operatives were in phone contact with a British ringleader of the plotters of the July 7 bombings.

Money transfers were thought to have been made from Saudi Arabia to Britain in the first six months of the year through businesses in the two countries, it was reported.

The Observer and the Sunday Telegraph said the investigations revolve around two Moroccans, identified as Kareem al-Majati and Younes al-Hayari, both alleged to have been senior figures in Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda network.

The two were killed in separate shoot-outs in Saudi Arabia in the weeks before July 7.

The Observer quoted a Saudi official as saying: "It was clear to us that there was a terror group planning an attack in the United Kingdom. We passed on all this information to both MI5 and MI6."

Niko's latest drilling

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has the provision that there should be a joint account of Bapex and Niko, \$4 million was deposited to Niko's account ignoring the share of benefits with Bapex.

Prof Alam expressed fear that the total gas structure in Tengratila field with a gas reserve of some 1,190 billion cubic feet worth more than Tk 25,000 crore has become inactive.

Speakers at the seminar blamed the political leaders and the bureaucrats who, they said, do not consider the national interest in signing contracts with the foreign companies.

Economics Professor Anu Muhammad of Jahangirnagar University blasted the businessmen and the industrialists who consume the major portion of the gas but do not protest the imbalance contracts including the PSCs with the foreign companies.

National Committee to Protect

Oil, Gas, Electricity and Port will soon go to the court challenging the JVA between Bapex and Niko Resources, the committee convenor engineer Shahidullah said.

"National Citizens Commission" headed by Dr Kazi Khaliquzzaman has been formed in a bid to review all the previous production sharing contracts, assess the total gas reserve in the country and formulate a strategy on how to make the best use of gas, Prof Abul Barakat, general secretary of Bangladesh Economic Association (BEA) said.

Nuruddin Mahmud Kamal, former chairman of Power Development Board, Mujahidul Islam Selim, general secretary of Communist Party of Bangladesh, Workers Party President Rashed Khan Menon, former Petrobangla chairman SK Abdullah, Sylhet Division Development Action Forum convenor advocate Abed Raja, DU Professor Serajul Islam Choudhury also spoke at the seminar.

Two jailed, fine

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khal area and collected Tk 1,32,000 from 14 illegal footpath occupiers.

Later the court raided Shahid Faruq road in northern Jatrabari, where they collected Tk one lakh from two people and sent them to vigorous imprisonment for selling food items lacking manufacturing and expiry dates.

The court also fined Rafiqul Islam, the owner of Sonali Traders from the same area, Tk 50,000 for selling cosmetics items without expiry dates.

Chittagong Mobile Court
A mobile court yesterday sent two people to three-days' imprisonment and seized an illegal edible oil factory, issuing an arrest warrant against its owner.

The court also fined Tk 21,100 to 12 businesses.

Chittagong City Corporation (CCC) magistrate Syeda Sarwar Jahan found the edible oil factory named 'Sun City Consumer Products Ltd' near Foy's Lake area and sealed it for running without a BSTI license. She also issued a warrant against Shah Alam, the owner, in his absence.

The factory, located at a secluded place near Foy's Lake, had long been manufacturing and marketing unsafe soybean and mustard oil, course and salt with the brand name 'Energy.'

"Local people had no idea of such an illegal factory at their area and they knew it as a poultry firm," the magistrate told journalists.

BSTI field officer Aslam Sheikh said the owner earlier applied for a license for Sun City but the food watchdog authority disapproved the appeal for lack of desired quality of the company's products.

Change to govt

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almost impossible to collect within a stipulated period," he said.

With Saifur in the chair, the meeting was attended by LGRD and Cooperatives Minister Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan, Health and Family Welfare Minister Dr Khandaker Mosharraf Hossain, Industries Minister Motiur Rahman Nizami, Communication Minister Barrister Nazmul Huda, Agriculture Minister MK Anwar, Textiles and Jute Minister Shajahan Siraj, Food and Disaster Management Minister Chowdhury Kamal Ibne Yusuf, Commerce Minister Air-Vice Marshal (ret'd) Altaf Hossain Chowdhury and Education Minister Dr Osman Farruk. Secretaries and senior officials of the concerned ministries were also present at the meeting.

"Yet, the owner has continued his illegal business," Aslam said.

The court sentenced Lake View hotel manager Liton Barua and USTC Cafe manager Milton to three days imprisonment and fined them Tk 3,000 each for mixing harmful colours with food and for having a dirty kitchen. Magistrate Sarwar Jahan also sentenced the two to another seven-days' jail in default of payment.

Some students of the University of Science and Technology, Chittagong (USTC), being informed of the mobile court presence, approached the magistrate and requested her to have a glance of their canteen.

Magistrate Sarwar Jahan then went to the spot and found its kitchen dirty and unhygienic. She instantly threw away all the cooked meat, much to the rejoice of the students.

Among others, the court levied penalties on Shahjalal Sweets, Ocean Fast Food, Chittagong Hotel and Restaurant, Shah Amanat Store at Khulshi area and Chandrima Mukta Mahubb hotel at Baropool area.

20km human chain

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On July 23, the girl, a class IX student of Ullah Bharatkhali Girls High School, went to