

Philippine general, aides freed

REUTERS, Manila

Muslim rebels released a top Philippine general, a senior government official and their aides yesterday after holding them for two nights in their camp on a remote southern island.

"I okay, I'm glad this crisis is over," Brigadier-General Ben Dolorfino, commander of military forces in Manila, told reporters after arriving at the military's base on Jolo island, 950 km (600 miles) south of the capital.

Dolorfino, a Muslim convert, insisted he and Ramon Santos, head of the government's truce panel, were not hostages of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) on Jolo because they were not disarmed and were allowed to use their mobile phones.

"We agreed to the invitation to stay for a while," he said.

Dolorfino and Santos had flown in on Friday morning for talks with the MNLF about a shaky 1996 peace agreement and clashes between government troops and its members.

Naser Rahman

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as his reach extended to almost all departments of the government.

There is also wide range of allegations against Naser from extortion to grabbing of government land during the BNP-Jamaat-led coalition government rule.

Naser was elected member of parliament from Moulvibazar 3 constituency in the by-election on November 12, 2001 with BNP ticket. The seat went vacant after his father M Saifur Rahman dropped one of the two constituencies he had won in the general election of October 2001.

Naser had established a monopolistic influence in banking sector during the alliance rule. He made a huge amount of money as he alone supplied all money counting machines for Bangladesh Bank and other nationalised commercial banks.

Many projects where Naser had direct or indirect interest and involvement were passed in the cabinet committee on purchase. He took a huge amount of commission for his role to approve projects from the purchase committee. He used to collect 15 to 25 per cent commissions from four-party alliance activists in exchange of winning their tenders of development works worth crores of taka.

During the coalition government Naser's loyalists were awarded work orders for development works worth around Tk 1,000 crore without any tender in public works, local government, water development board, zila parishads, public health department, roads and highways, north south irrigation project, forest department and pousarabha.

For instance, one of Naser's close relatives won the work order of Tk 14 lakh project for constructing Syed Mostafa Fountain near the collectorate building in Moulvibazar town. Moreover, Naser influenced the authorities to allocate an additional Tk 10 lakh for the project.

It is also alleged that Naser received a whopping 20 per cent commission from contractor of the Tk 3.27 crore bridge construction project at Lunguchhara on Moulvibazar-Kulaura road as he used his influence in winning the bid, said sources.

Sources also said Naser influenced the authorities to allocate a staggering Tk 30 lakh for constructing an alternative road, which hardly requires Tk 8 lakh, during construction of the bridge.

Naser allegedly collected Tk 30 lakh as commission for helping win a tender of Tk 8 crore for a road extension and sodium lights installation project in Moulvibazar Pourasabha.

He reportedly used government funds to erect barbed wire fences with concrete pillars around 15 square kilometres area at Hail Haor to protect his fish farm inside. He also allegedly spent public funds to fence his two privately owned houses in Moulvibazar.

On October 24, 2003, Nuruzzaman, a contractor, held a press conference at Dhaka Reporters Unity and alleged that Naser Rahman demanded Tk 2 crore from him after he had won a work order for the development work of Fenchuganj-Rajnagar-Moulvibazar-Jagadishpur regional highway.

Following his allegation, Naser filed a false case against Nuruzzaman under Speedy Trial Act. Later, Jatiyatabdil Chhatra Dal goons attacked Nuruzzaman and injured him seriously.

Naser used his political influence to obtain a lease on behalf of his elder brother Shafiqul Rahman on a 200-acre hilly land for tea cultivation for a price of a stunning Tk 1000 at a rate of Tk 5 per acre only. Earlier, his brother Kaiser Rahman had acquired a lease on another 100 acres of land in the vicinity where landless people used to live. Naser himself grabbed around 60 decimals of land worth several lakh taka near Sarak Bhaban on the outskirts of Moulvibazar town by preparing forged documents.

Naser had reportedly bagged most work orders at National Board of Revenue (NBR) with his influence.

Sources also said Naser Rahman was the key player of a business syndicate responsible for unusual price hike of sugar during the immediate past government. His father, then finance minister M Saifur Rahman, was compelled to reduce import tariff on sugar before the end of fiscal year 2006-2007.

Besides, Naser patronised a powerful organised gang that emerged at Chittagong port, Dhaka Inland Container Depot and Zia International Airport.

He also has a grip on greater Sylhet as well as on police and civil administration in Moulvibazar. All postings and transfers in the area had to be approved by him while he made an enormous amount of money from new posting and transfer seekers.



PHOTO: STAR
BNP Chairperson and former prime minister Khaleda Zia offers Akheri Munajat at Biswa Ijtema at Tongi on the outskirts of the city yesterday.

Nazmul Huda

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four-party alliance government.

Huda even allotted a costly piece of land of Bangladesh Railway in the heart of the city for his wife's human rights organisation for a minimal price.

He also played the key role in awarding the 900-metre Karnaphuli Bridge project to a pre-determined Chinese bidder, allegedly backed by Hawa Bhaban, based on a faulty design in July last year.

The government, however, did not take any measure to investigate the allegations. Former prime minister Khaleda Zia rather scolded the chairman of a parliamentary standing committee for his initiative to investigate these allegations.

Huda, vice-chairman of BNP, was elected from Dhaka-1 constituency three times and was made information minister for the 1991-1996 tenure of the then BNP-led government and communications minister for 2001-2006.

Huda is considered the most corrupt among the ministers in the four-party alliance government. Even a few of his party colleagues raised voices against his alleged

corruption, including taking bribes and illegal commissions from various parties, while introducing the CNG-run auto-rickshaws and CNG filling stations.

It is alleged that Huda collected a huge amount by making clients pay Tk 3 lakh for a CNG-run auto-rickshaw whereas its real price was about Tk 1.5 lakh. He also took bribes for providing registration numbers for about 25,000 auto-rickshaws.

The parliamentary standing committee on communications ministry formed a sub-committee to investigate the allegation but the sub-committee could not do its task because of Huda's non-cooperation.

Even a new allegation arose that the corrupt minister "managed" the lawmakers, who raised the issue of his corruption at the committee meeting, by providing them with extra financial facilities.

Huda gave a piece of railway land worth more than Tk 5 crore to his wife's human rights organisation for just Tk 5,000.

He also allotted railway land for different private companies and

organisations in exchange for bribes.

The authority for allocating land for filling stations was later given to the then state minister for communications Salauddin Ahmed.

Huda is also alleged to have taken commissions from bridge toll collectors and road construction contractors across the country, making hundreds of crores of taka.

Noor-e-Amina, Huda's palace in hometown Dohar, reflects the enormity of his wealth, which he amassed in different ways in the last five years. He also established a dazzling modern farmhouse by Dohar-Srinagar road beside the Padma.

According to media reports, a brother of Huda used to control transfer of officials of the Roads and Highways Department (RHD) during Huda's tenure as communications minister. The two brothers allegedly took a huge amount of money from the officials for transfers.

Many people loyal to Huda also made money in the name of road construction during the last five years as he favoured them while awarding the contracts.



PHOTO: PID
A delegation of Bangladesh Federal Union of Journalists (BFUJ) led by its President Manjurul Ahsan Bulbul calls on Information Adviser Barrister Mainul Hosein at Secretariat in the city yesterday.

Midnight crackdown on 'corrupt' politicians

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member of parliament (MP) Lotus Kamal, and Svechhasebak League General Secretary Pankaj Devnath.

The security forces also raided the houses of Ali Asgar Lobi, a former BNP MP, Hasnat Abdulla, former chief whip and cousin of AL President Sheikh Hasina, Juba League Chairman Jahangir Kabir Nanak, and its Secretary Mirza Azam, but did not find any of them.

The forces seized two firearms and 137 bullets from Ruhul Quddus Talukder's house at Alapur in Natore town and his village home at Ramsa, Kazipur early yesterday.

None of Jamaat-e-Islami however was arrested during the drive and none of the detainees were produced before the court or handed over to police till filing of this report yesterday evening.

According to well placed sources, the detainees are being interrogated in army custody but details of it could not be learnt immediately and the government did not make any official statement in this regard.

However, advisers to the caretaker government Barrister Mainul Husein and Maj Gen (retd) Matin yesterday said the detainees were arrested 'most probably' on charges of corruption.

Although military governments cracked down on politicians in the past, successive political governments miserably failed to rise above narrow party interests, and rather arrested and harassed only rival politicians.

Former military ruler HM Ershad however was punished for corruption and served time in jail, creating the lone exception in the political culture.

Since assuming power on January 12, the seemingly resolute interim government uttered strong words promising curbing of corruption, and de-politicisation of the administration and public institutions.

Saying that pervasive corruption and plundering of national wealth by a handful of dishonest people pushed the

national economy, society and politics into a disastrous state, Chief Adviser Fakhrul Islam said in his January 21 address to the nation that tough actions would be taken soon in a methodical way to curb corruption.

Although the joint forces detained over 41,000 across the country since the declaration of emergency, top corrupt politicians and businessmen, excepting BNP Senior Joint Secretary General Tareque Rahman's business partner Giasuddin Al Mamun, remained untroubled until yesterday.

The operation to apprehend the big fishes began after the clock had ticked zero hours. Split in several teams, the joint forces comprising members of the police, armed forces, Bangladesh Rifles (BDR) and Rapid Action Battalion (Rab), having the power to arrest anyone without a warrant under the rules of emergency, raided the houses of the 'corrupt' top politicians and businessmen.

The combined forces picked up Mohammad Nasim around 1:30am yesterday from his Dhamondi residence in the capital at about 1:15am.

"Entering our house, the forces asked him (Nasim) to go with them. As I asked why and where they are taking him, they gave no explanation and said they had orders from their bosses," wife of the former home minister told reporters.

The forces searched the chest of drawers of Nasim and took away some of his diaries too.

"When I asked, from where we'll get information about him, the officers remained silent for a minute and suggested us to contact the local police station," Nasim's wife added.

Salauddin Quader Chowdhury was taken into custody from his Dhamondi house at about 2:30am. His family moved to another house after his arrest, Salauddin's personal assistant Mujibur Rahman told The Daily Star. "We are totally in the dark about where he is

being kept," he said.

The joint forces last night arrested Falu from his house in Old DOHS in the capital.

Abdul Wadood

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severely beating up at least eight journalists. A few thousand leaders and activists of Awami League (AL) and even BNP left the district due to his cadres' repression.

He currently has eleven cases filed against him, including murder cases and cases filed under the Explosives Act.

In the last five years, since he was elected legislator, at least five deputy commissioners (DCs), five police superintendents, and a Bangladesh Rifles (BDR) regional commander were changed in Khagrachhari. It is alleged that those transfers were carried out under his orders.

The daily Samakal Khagrachhari correspondent Indrajit Banik had his bones smashed by Wadood's men, one of many incidents that silenced local journalists there.

He also filed 37 cases against journalists and newspapers, including Prothom Alo, accusing them of publishing "baseless and defamatory" news.

Wadood is accused in the Juba League leader Yasin murder case. Assailants in 1999 hurled bombs at Yasin's car and

then hacked and shot Yasin to death, soon after he joined the Awami League (AL) from BNP.

In 2002, Sirajul Islam hacked Yasin Member to death in front of his family. Siraj was reportedly one of Wadood's bodyguards but not a single witness came forward to testify fearing a potentially fatal reprisal.

He is also reported to have been involved in the murder of Principal Madan Gopal Goswami in Manikchhari on April 25, 2002.

Wadood was also at the forefront of fanning up flames of ethnic violence between the two communities in CHT. He used local Bengali settlers' demand of cancelling the CHT Peace Treaty to win the 2001 elections and polarised district politics.

Although he never publicly spoke against the peace treaty, he surreptitiously set up the

"Samaodhikar Andolan" (equal rights movement) to act as a mouthpiece of anti-indigenous propaganda.

Before the BNP-led government came to power in October 2001, he owned a tin-shed house in Khagrachhari. It later turned into a palace-like mansion "Baithak", allegedly on three acres of state-owned land.

Men close to Wadood Bhuiyan carried out most of the criminal activities there. They are Afzar, Millat, Chairman Joynal, Abdus Salam, Contractor Selim, Mahfuz and Babul.

His men also allegedly shared the government ration allocated for the 2.5 lakh people in 78 Guchcha Grams (cluster villages).

He reportedly has strong control over all eight upazilas in Khagrachhari with his brothers, cousins, nephews and royal deputies acting as the chief of gangs operating in the

upazilas.

The lawmaker, who rose to the limelight during Ershad rule in the 80's, is reported to have earned at least Tk 150-200 crore in the last five years through extortion and other illegal means.

Wadood also allegedly took

Dulu

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nephews, who terrorised the people of Natore and gradually took over the district's underworld.

Dulu reportedly met with Bangla Bhai several times in 2004 and maintained the contact until the militant leader was arrested on March 6 last year. Several newspapers reported that on April 18, 2004, Bangla Bhai and his aides visited Dulu's house in Natore after openly holding a rally in front of an adjacent mosque. The then Natore Sadar assistant superintendent of police escorted Bangla Bhai back to his den allegedly under Dulu's direct instructions.

Dulu also allegedly sent a number of his hired hands to protect Bangla Bhai during the March 16, 2004 gunfight between the police and Bangla Bhai's gang on Sadihanpur Bridge, Rajshahi.

When the police captured several of the criminals, they introduced themselves as the state minister's men. All but one of them were released that very night.

When Dulu's nephew Sabir Ahmed Gama, who was notorious for criminal activities in Natore, was killed on February 7, 2004, Dulu's another nephew Dalin led a band who ransacked villages and burned down at least 40 houses with gunpowder.

Most of the victims were reportedly Natore Awami League leaders or activists, who later fled the district. When these attacks were reported, Dulu's men led by Natore Jubo Dal General Secretary Babul Chowdhury brutally attacked the daily Janakantha correspondent GM Iqbal Hasan on February 9, 2004.

According to a police report released in 2005, at least nine cases were filed in Natore in connection with the violence but all of the cases were closed as no-one dared to testify as witness. Locals even became scared to talk to the newsmen as Dulu's men had already assaulted several people for talking to the press.

Dulu was allegedly involved in the murder of Naldanga Chhatra League leader Afasir on the very night of October 1, 2001, when the BNP-led coalition won the national election. In 2002, Dulu's aide Dumbell's men killed two other AL men. In July 2004, another AL leader Ibrahim Hossain was picked up from his house and shot.

A number of others, including leaders of district AL and its front organisations, were seriously injured as they were beaten up, hacked and shot in public by Dulu's men throughout the course of 2005 and 2006.

Dulu's aides including Dumbell, Sohel, Tipu, Dollar and Ferdous led the attacks. District investigative officers said probes into all the incidents were stalled by the end of the BNP-led coalition government's tenure in 2006.

Dulu is also reported to have made inactive the 'Lathi-Banshi Samity', an organisation of the Natore traders, when it took initiative to stop extortion in the