

The lord of land

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In March 2005, he created a "BNP village" by allocating 94 plots out of 100 in Uttara and Banani to ministers, state ministers, BNP leaders and activists.

Asite in Khilgaon, earmarked in the master plan as a public park, was allocated to some of Abbas' family members under a scheme called Rehabilitation Zone on the pretext that they were affected and lost their land when Kamalapur railway station was built over 40 years ago.

It is also alleged that Abbas over-saw the leasing out of some petrol pumps in the city to his relatives.

The Ministry of Housing and Public Works under his leadership involved experts from the Institute of Architects Bangladesh, Bangladesh Paribesh Andolan (Bapa) and Rehab to amend the Building Construction Rules.

It was approved and gazetted in April 2006. But Abbas had other ideas in mind as implementation of the new rules was deferred until December 2006.

Abbas and his associates hurriedly got plans approved for at least five multi-story buildings in Khilgaon, Shahjahanpur and Shahidbagh. The Daily Star obtained the Rajuk approval numbers of these buildings. Ministerial sources said all these approved plans, including two for two twenty-storey buildings, did not have clearance from the Department of Environment, Wasa, Desa or CAAB as required by the law.

The then minister had thought about such a plan much earlier, sources said. Months ago he took personal initiatives to stop construction of a police cooperative market in Rajarbagh in front of his project area. He instead handed over an acre of land to the police cooperative in Gulshan for Tk 1,001 only.

The Gulshan land is directly situated over a project to build a connecting elevated road for easing traffic in the city.

The ministry also formulated Private Housing Land Development Rules, a guideline to streamline real estate developers, which are filling up thousands of acres of wetland and flood flow zones.

Just before handing over power Abbas was reported to have used the rules secretly to amass fortune for his campaign in the next elections. He suddenly embarked on authorising leading real estate developers to fill up thousands of acres of flood flow zones, wetland, retention ponds and natural canals in and around the capital.

Ironically, Abbas had earlier instructed Rajuk to file cases with various police stations against the same developers for violating the Wetland Protection Act, 2000.

The city slid further into chaos in terms of development in the last five years under Abbas' watch.

He has conveniently kept silent as major roads were declared viable for commercial use without any guidelines. Height restrictions on building construction in different zones were secretly negotiated. He completely overlooked the aspect of parking facilities and construction rules, while also continuing to allow new commercial buildings indiscriminately.

Besides, he kept quiet as a new trend of converting footpaths into parking lots swept the city. Slowly life in the capital city has been pushed into a virtual impasse.

Most people now consider Abbas' contribution as total failure. His failure to address the staggering problems of the cities is more talked about than his involvement in corruption and nepotism, which too weigh heavily on him.

Critics within his own administration find him "a man without vision craving for instant publicity."

A top official of his ministry said although Mirza Abbas hardly meddled in the lucrative "transfer business of engineers", as happened with his predecessors, he was adamant about finding new projects for his supporters. Abbas used his office in preparations for the general elections, awarding several projects amounting to crores of taka to his supporters in his constituency, especially at the Banasree housing project.

He influenced Rajuk to release over Tk 20 crore to build and repair 15 roads in Banasree. Never before had Rajuk paid for developing a private project.

Again, he forced Rajuk to release Tk 12 crore for construction of foot over-bridges in his constituency, a job always carried out by the Dhaka City Corporation.

The work was awarded to a company called Chittagong Dry Dock in violation of all rules. Sources said the project was initiated without any procedure whatsoever. Abbas even influenced Rajuk to pay an advance of Tk 7 crore to the company. Rajuk sources said they are now fearful about the foot over-bridge project as they had no experience in such structures.

It was in 2003 when Abbas made headlines. He took a firm decision not to allow Jamuna Group to fill up the flood plains of Ashulia for their housing project.

His determination to stop the real estate giant was instantly welcomed by the people. But the joy was short-lived. At one point, it became clear that Abbas was merely 'settling some old scores' with the Jamuna Group using his office.

For the months and years that followed, city dwellers and terrified landowners in its peripheries watched helplessly as big developers took over thousands of acres of flood plains and agricultural land and openly filled them up. All the while, Abbas remained a silent spectator.

He however maintained that Rajuk

filed cases against 'everyone' under the Flood Plain Protection Act and those are now pending with the courts of justice.

In plot allocation, there are numerous allegations of corruption against Abbas. In sector 6 of Uttara, he allocated three plots on Road 13 measuring 3.3 bighas to a company he is closely associated with.

The land was given to the company for building a school under a scheme called "institutional allocation". The Tk 50-lakh-per-katha plot was handed over for just over Tk 5 lakh.

In a "Note of Dissent" by the parliamentary standing committee on housing and public works ministry it was observed that the government had incurred a loss of Tk 59 crore in that plot allocation.

Similar allegations of plot allocation in throwaway prizes to his own men in Karwan Bazar, Tongi Industrial Area, Joar Shahara, Baridhara J-Block and Badda are rampant at the ministry and Rajuk.

When Abbas took over, he knew well that one of his first priorities was to bring reforms in Rajuk to check its phenomenal corruption, which was responsible for unplanned urbanisation and sufferings to the common people.

He was also expected to address the huge corruption crippling the Public Works Department under him. Town planners, architects and environmentalists say had Abbas been willing, he could have greatly benefited from his image as a political heavyweight with his influence under Jubo Dal and Dhaka city BNP to bring in at least some changes in Rajuk and PWD.

They said Abbas had the opportunity to finish the Detail Area Planning (DAP) to enable town planners and Rajuk to control construction mayhem in the city.

Abbas, however, told The Daily Star five years are too little a time to wipe out corruption whose roots date back 40 years.

Doing nothing to improve the situation, Abbas instead kept Rajuk under his firm control, putting selected persons -- engineers from the Bangladesh Railway -- at its top.

His bond with the railway is quite old, with the Kamalapur station and railway officers' colony situated within his own locality and some of his near ones having contracts for railway supplies.

In his inner circle, Abbas is known as a sympathetic man with wide connections, but his critics allege he has his sympathy also stretched towards individuals controlling the Sayedabad bus terminal activities.

As a cabinet minister, he became the talk of the town when he allegedly sheltered the sacked officer-in-charge of Motijheel Police Station, man accused in the killing of college student Qamrul Islam Momin on September 13, 2005 over a land dispute.

In June the same year, he was also one of the accused in the extra-judicial killing of a Juo League activist, Abul Kalam Azad Sumon, in a case filed by the victim's father.

In his own locality, he is generally regarded as a "very helpful man". But some people have their grievances against him too. A businessman in Khilgaon speaking anonymously alleged Abbas used his influence to change the original design of the country's first-ever flyover in Khilgaon to protect his party activists' residential plots.

By omitting a loop of the flyover, he has deprived a large section of the city population of its advantages, he added.

Bogra deputy jailer

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also drawn against Sub-Inspector Saiful Islam of Bogra Sadar Police Station allegedly for neglecting duty and allowing BNP leader Mahabubur Rahman to meet Mir Nasir, sources said.

Fazlul Haque will join the Rajshahi Central Jail.

As per rules, no one except family members can meet a detainee once a month.

Mir Nasir, who fell ill at Bogra Jail after hearing the news of his son Mir Helaluddin's arrest on Friday afternoon, was shifted from hospital to Bogra Jail at about 11:30am yesterday "as he was feeling better", hospital sources said.

Proxy prisoner

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resident of Akua of Rajnagar upazila in Moulvibazar, had surrendered before the court during its proceedings and obtained bail. But he jumped bail and left for the UK. He never returned fearing he would have to serve time in Bangladesh.

Meanwhile, family members of Shahid contacted Amzad Ali, a poor man of Ghorgaon of Rajnagar upazila, and made an agreement with him that Amzad will serve Shahid's time in prison and in return, Amzad would receive Tk 50,000 initially and a monthly salary of Tk 3,000.

Amzad surrendered before the Court of Additional District Magistrate (ADM), Moulvibazar as Shahid Khan on November 21, 2006.

The court sent him to jail but a few days later his secret arrangement with Shahid's family came to light.

The Superintendent of Moulvibazar District Jail said on hearing the matter from other prisoners and jail staffs, he informed the police through the additional district magistrate (ADM), Moulvibazar.

Salman

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moveable declared wealth is Tk 1.34 crore, while his wife Rezina Naser owns Tk 1.25 crore worth moveable and immovable properties.

Former communication minister Nazmul Huda in his statement blasted the newspapers for his present situation claiming that he had been victimised by the free newspapers.

Nazmul Huda did not mention the value of his declared wealth while submitting the statement of wealth to the ACC. Unlike others, he did not reveal the amount of money he has in banks. Huda however gave an explanation about the foreign currencies seized by joint forces.

Mirza Abbas owns immovable properties worth Tk 1.85 crore while the amount of his declared moveable properties is Tk 4.04 crore. His declared bank balance is Tk 4.24 crore.

Afroza Abbas, wife of Mirza Abbas, declared her total wealth to be worth Tk 20.53 crore while Kamala Khatun, mother of Mirza Abbas, claimed to have wealth equivalent to Tk 4.24 crore.

Mohammad Ali Asghar Lobi declared owning two BMW cars worth Tk 40 lakh and Tk 30 lakh. One of his businesses, enterprises, Rupsha Overseas Ltd, has Tk 22.25 crore in a bank account while his personal bank balance is Tk 24.52 crore.

Declared moveable and immovable properties owned by his wife Khushnood Asghar is Tk 4.2 crore.

Salman F Rahman held shares of 40 companies worth Tk 103,79,13,450. His non-agricultural properties are worth Tk 88,38,778. His inherited non-agricultural properties are worth Tk 96,91,957.

He has a bank balance of Tk 12,34,312 in six banks. The amount of his liabilities is Tk 29,28,10,704. The amount of his liabilities he inherited from his mother is Tk 29,28,98,829.

In his statement, Nazmul Huda showed that he owns a flat in Dhanmondi, which he inherited from his father.

He also owns a Bungalow in Gulshan in the city, which he also received by inheritance. Huda's family owns a flat on the 15th floor of Meherba Plaza.

In Baxibazar, Huda along with his 10 brothers and sisters jointly own six kathas of land and at his village home a two-storied and a three-storied building.

Huda owns five cars including a brand new Cadillac four-wheel-drive vehicle and a luxurious Toyota Crown. Huda, however, did not mention the prices of his cars.

Huda has a bank account in Woori Bank and several other accounts under his name, his wife's name and under joint accounts in Standard Chartered Bank Motijheel branch. He has also a bank account in the same branch under his law firm's name. Huda also has a bank account in Agrami Bank's National Press Club branch. In National Bank Huda has a credit card and a bank account. He also has a bank account in Prime Bank.

Shopping malls

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Security guards of the Bashundhara Shopping Mall said that they did not allow any shopper to enter after 6:30pm. The mall was closed at 7:00pm, they added.

Contacted, Desa authorities said that around 50 megawatt (MW) of power shortage was covered in their area yesterday due to the electricity rationing measure. The Desa faces a shortfall of 150 to 200 MW electricity regularly.

Our staff correspondent from Khulna reports that all shops and shopping malls in the metropolitan city remained closed after 7:00pm yesterday, except the drugstores, kitchen markets, hotels and tea stalls.

Two mobile teams of western zone power distribution company were seen patrolling the city to check if the government order was being complied with or not.

Khulna metropolitan city has been experiencing severe power crisis for the last two months.

Govt warns

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statements, Law Adviser barrister Mainul Hossain yesterday said, "Although this is causing us problems, the government is still showing tolerant attitude."

But it may not show the same in future."

He was talking to the reporters after a meeting on law and order held at the law ministry that discussed different parties' political activities in the name of other functions.

Attended by Communications Adviser Maj Gen (ret'd) MA Matin, Education Adviser Ayub Quadri and other officials concerned, the meeting strongly criticised political statements during the Shaheed Day and International Mother Language Day, meetings sources said.

"The political leaders turned the programmes of Shaheed Day into a political one, which did not appear acceptable to the committee under the existing state of emergency," a meeting source said adding "They are not barred to hold political programmes indoors, but are prohibited to hold such programmes under cover," he added.

Talking on the political parties' allegation that 'one person' (referring to Nobel laureate Muhammad Yunus) is violating the emergency rules through the declaration of forming a political party, Mainul said, "The government has not banned party politics...People are not even asked to refrain from criticising the caretaker government. The emergency rules have only prohibited making provocative statements and creating any provocative law and order situation."

The law adviser sought cooperation from all in their "task to free the nation from the crisis and ensure healthy politics."

Abbas, six others

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accompanied him all along to the room of Director Tankin Haque Siddique.

Abbas' wife Afroza Abbas, his sister Ishrat Mirza, brother-in-law Fida Hossain and lawyer NH Khan were with him when he submitted his wealth statement.

Uniformed, the army and Rab men stood in line along the corridor as the journalists and onlookers were busted out of the building. A personal staff of Abbas at that time went inside with some medicine for the former mayor of the Dhaka City Corporation.

As plain-clothes officers from different intelligence agencies crammed the room, Abbas looked nervous and was looking for some water frantically. He also wanted a cigarette from his relatives.

Later, the former public works minister still managed to deliver a brief speech to the newsmen waiting on the premises. He accused a section of the media for the way things have panned out against him.

He expressed displeasure for being at the ACC as a corruption suspect. He said some newspapers "treated him and his family ruthlessly".

Soon after he was done with his about seven-minute speech, the security personnel asked the journalists to go out of the precincts.

Mirza Abbas came out of the ACC at 1:10pm. As cameras clicked away from a scrum of photographers, he was whisked away in a microbus.

Afroza Abbas came out of the ACC minutes before her husband. Spotting a correspondent of The Daily Star, she said, "Your paper never speaks for justice or principles while my husband has always been on the right path."

CASE AGAINST ABBAS

The joint forces seized a huge sum of local and foreign currencies and other items from the South Shahjahanpur residence of Mirza Abbas on February 4.

A case was lodged against him with Motijheel Police Station Saturday.

Police said they filed the case under the Special Powers Act, Money Laundering Act and Excise Act.

The items seized included sales slips for gold ornaments worth Tk 40 lakh, 4,600 US dollars, 17,000 baits, 418 Singapore dollars, 432 Malaysian ringgits, several mobile phone sets and five passports.

The complainant of the case Sub-Inspector Rafiqul Islam alleged that Abbas had kept those in his possession evading a huge amount of taxes. When the security personnel were busy with Abbas, Hafiz Ibrahim, former BNP lawmaker and elder brother of controversial BNP lawmaker and businessman Giasuddin al-Mamun, slipped inside the ACC.

As he came out of the commission building at around 12:40, two security men grabbed him by the hand and others hemmed him in. Soon he was taken away in a microbus.

Engineer Mosharraf entered the commission at 9:30am and after around 20 minutes he was held by the law enforcers. As he stepped out of the office after submitting his wealth statement, up to six security personnel surrounded him, got him outside the main entrance and picked him in a car.

Former energy secretary ANH Akhter Hossain and MA Quayum, commissioner of DCC ward No 21, came to the commission in between 9:50am and 10:50am and were picked up identically by the security personnel. Sources said as of last night the detainees were in the custody of Rapid Action Battalion (Rab).

The arrests were made despite the ACC Secretary Delwar Hossain's assurance that no one [of the corruption suspects] would be held on the ACC premises. At a press briefing later in the day he said as far as he was concerned, none was arrested inside the ACC compound.

"There is no legal bar on making arrests on the ACC premises or outside. But on ethical ground I said it would be better not to arrest anyone there," he added.

Newly appointed ACC Chairman

Hasan Mashhud Chowdhury said, "There is nothing to say about the captures of those who have been branded as corrupt."

GIASUDDIN SURRENDERS

Our Narayanganj Correspondent adds: Rejecting the bail prayer, a Narayanganj court yesterday sent former BNP lawmaker Muhammad Giasuddin to the district jail.

Earlier, he surrendered to the Court of First Class Magistrate Anwarul Islam.

Locals including the supporters of BNP in Fatulla and Siddhirganj exchanged sweets on the news of Giasuddin's arrest.

Fatulla Thana BNP at a rally on October 27 declared him persona non grata. Giasuddin had unleashed a reign of terror in the area during the last BNP-Jamaat rule.

Police and court sources said Giasuddin, also vice-chairman of Narayanganj district BNP, entered the court compound, wearing a veil. But just before getting into the court, he took off the cover.

Giasuddin's lawyer Masud Khan however claimed his client did not wear any veil.

The former lawmaker's counsel appealed for a division status in prison and instructions necessary for his representative to furnish his wealth accounts to the ACC.

The court said the jail authorities would ensure facilities for Giasuddin as per the jail code, while the ACC will take necessary steps with regard to submission of wealth statement.

The Rab on February 4 filed a case with Siddhirganj Police Station, accusing Giasuddin of illegal possession of foreign currencies.

Police filed a general diary (GD) after the joint forces seized Tk 10 lakh from his house on February 22.

SYLHET

Our staff correspondent from Sylhet reports: Sylhet city BNP chief and a Ward Commissioner Ariful Haque Chowdhury surrendered to an army camp at the Sylhet stadium yesterday afternoon.

One of the 50 corruption suspects he was handed over to the Kotwali Police Station immediately. Later, he was produced before the Sadar magistrate's Court.

The magistrate ordered he be sent to the Sylhet jail on month detention.

Reportedly very close to former finance minister M Saifur Rahman, Ariful went into hiding soon after the present caretaker government took over.

TRIAL OF BIGWIGS

Meanwhile, the advisory council on law and order yesterday said trial of the detained political bigwigs and others accused of graft will begin by March. Those who still remain untouched will be rounded up soon after the government finishes gathering information about their corruption. It also said that specific charges against the ones in detention would be made public once the first information reports (FIRs) are lodged.

Asked why those including some Hawa Bhaban men whose names came up in the media frequently for wide-scale corruption are not held, Law Adviser Barrister Mainul Hossain said, "We're exercising utmost caution in going after the top corrupt who are yet to be captured."

He added, "We know that people are talking about the issue and we have discussed it at today's [yesterday's] meeting. We're working on that."

Mainul, also chairman of advisory committee, was talking to the reporters after the meeting at the law ministry.

On bringing minor charges like misappropriation of relief materials or possession of foreign currencies against those arrested on corruption allegations, he said, "Major graft charges against them will be disclosed after the FIRs are filed and the trial begins."

Queried when they will act against the crooked bureaucrats and tender manipulators, Major Gen (retired) MA Matin, a member of the law and order committee, said 20 task forces and monitoring cells are working on the matter.

ACC chief declares

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yesterday afternoon, Mashhud said, "If everyone provides their efforts together, we will succeed in our fight against corruption, and we will be able to fulfill the expectations of the people."

Mashhud presented his statement of wealth to reporters at the briefing and said, "All ACC staff have been asked to submit their wealth statements by March 15." He also declared his wife's assets and her liability.

Calling for support of all citizens of the country, the ACC chairman hoped to wipe out the disgrace of corruption of the past.

He said whatever the ACC does, it would follow the law and it would not resort to "arm-twisting" in their fight against corruption.

ACC Commissioner Mannan, in reply to a reporter's question whether the ACC can work free from government influence, said, "If the ACC were not established as an institution, then these problems would appear."

"It has often been the case that people have exerted their power by exploiting the loop holes in the laws and procedures," said Mannan, stressing that greater commitment to the legal professionalism of the ACC should be prioritised.

In this regard, Mashhud said if they wanted to put an acceptable system in place and if anyone trying to disrupt this system to serve their purpose shall be resisted, then the ACC would fight them.

He said there are many good things mentioned in the present ACC Act, adding that the act requires changes to increase the commission's efficiency.

ACC Commissioner Habibur said, "No one is above the law," adding that even if a former adviser was accused of corruption, then steps would also be taken against him.

Electronics shops fined for fraud

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

A mobile court in the capital yesterday raided two electronics goods assembling plants at Patuatuli and fined seven people Tk 42 lakh for evading tax and deceiving consumers with false claims.

The mobile court led by Metropolitan Magistrate M Rokondul Doula raided the two electronics goods assembling factories -- Nipu Electronics Company and YP Quality Speakers -- both owned by Sheikh Ibrahim.

The court found the owner guilty of tax evasion as his plants were assembling imported electronic components meant to be sold in the country as spare parts only.

Components imported from different countries were being used in the factories to manufacture various electronics appliances including television, radio, cassette & CD players, refrigerators and speakers.

Magistrate Rokondul Doula said The Daily Star that these factories were misleading the consumers by using numerous phoney stickers such as "Made in USA", "Made in Korea", "Made in Japan", etc instead of using stickers stating "Assembled in Bangladesh".

"Besides, they were assembling their goods with imported components that were to be sold as parts only, not for assembling. They were evading a huge amount of tax by doing so."

Joint forces accompanying the mobile court arrested seven employees from the factories. They are Mohammad Ali, brother of the owner, Mohammad Aslam, manager of the two factories, Enamul Haque, Badrudduza, Billal Hossain, Abdul Kuddus and Rafiqul Islam. The court fined each of the arrestees Tk 6 lakh or one year's imprisonment while issuing an arrest warrant against the owner.

The mobile court then referred the case to National Board of Revenue (NBR) for investigation of the tax evasion. Deputy director of NBR Lutfar Rahman was probing the matter to determine the amount of tax evaded by the factories.

HC asks ACC

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personal appearance is mandatory for submitting wealth statement of any of the bigwigs on the corruption list.

Dr Iqbal's wife and brother filed the petition challenging the ACC refusal to allow submission of wealth statement on behalf of Dr Iqbal yesterday, seven hours before the expiry of a 72-hour deadline.

Barrister Rakanuddin Mahmud and Barrister Shafigue Ahmed appeared for the petitioners backed by former law minister of the immediate-past BNP government Barrister Moudud Ahmed and Barrister Rafique-ul Huq.

Essentials' prices

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rather assist them in running businesses smoothly.

He asked them to release goods from their depots and destroy the rotten wheat or rice if there are any in the warehouses.

PETTY OFFENDERS TO BE FREED

On the Independence Day, the government will release 2,500 to 3,000 inmates who are serving for minor offences and are detained on suspicion.

"We'll free them considering the gravity of the charges against them. The decision has been to take some load off the jails crammed full of prisoners," Mainul said.

ACTION FOR NOT SUBMITTING FIREARMS

From March 1, the government will start returning the licensed small arms to those who had submitted them in response to an earlier notification.

It will take legal action against the owners of 2,351 pistols and revolvers for not surrendering those by the deadline. The revolvers and pistols submitted to the government totalled 6,676.

"The government may cancel their licences or issue arrest warrants against them," said a meeting source.

About the 'extensive' legal weaknesses that the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) has long been faced with, Mainul said, "I don't think there is any major weak point. The commission has already drafted some rules and are working to find whether they need anything more."

The reorganised anti-graft body will have necessary logistic support from the government, he added.