

VGF card anomalies

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some village, said he did not get the card either.

The list grew longer as Ismail, 55, Latif Jomaddar, 50, and Maksuda Begum, 45, all from the neighbouring village of Mostaqpur, also complained that they were yet to receive the VGF card.

All of these affected people alleged that even though the VGF cards are supposed to be for the worst-affected victims of the cyclone, the people having close ties with the local UP members, especially their relatives, have received the cards.

Kamruzzaman, chairman of Nilganj UP, explained why some of the victims are being left out of the special feeding programme. "I need about 7,500 VGF cards for distribution, but the upazila administration gave me only 5,000. And this is why some eligible recipients are being deprived of the VGF programme."

District Relief and Rehabilitation Officer (DRRO) Abdul Malek, however, rebutted the UP chairman's criticism, saying, "We have been distributing the VGF cards according to the demand."

The local UP chairmen and members are distorting the fact and making all these accusations for political gains, Malek added.

Villagers under Angaria Union in Dumki upazila alleged that the local UP members are listing multiple members of a household to be the recipients of the VGF card.

Rafiq, Shanu and Gias Uddin, three brothers living in the household of their father Menaj Uddin at Rupashia village in Angaria Union, have been listed as recipients of the VGF card.

Names of Monjed Ali's three sons -- Siddiq, Rezaul and Shah Alam, who

live with their father, have also been included on the list.

Local UP member Sekander has included their names on the list in exchange for money ranging from Tk 25 to Tk 50 from each, the villagers claimed.

Sanjoy Kumar, upazila nirbahi officer (UNO) of Dumki, said, "We are verifying the VGF list turned in by local UP chairmen and members."

DRRO Abdul Malek said, "We are getting complaints against different UP chairmen and members for their involvement in irregularities in the VGF card distribution process. We are going to take action against them. They must be punished."

Meanwhile on Saturday night, amid widespread allegations of irregularities in listing VGF card recipients and distribution of the cards, joint forces arrested five UP members of two union parishads under Patuakhali Sadar Upazila.

They are Zakir Hossain and Eskandar Ali of Badarpur Union Parishad, Khokon Hawlader, Mainul Islam alias Zia and Nurul Haq of Bara Bighai Union Parishad.

Sources at Patuakhali Sadar Police Station said the five UP members were arrested for violation of rules as they have distributed the VGF cards to more than one person of a family and manipulated the recipients' list to include names of their close ones.

Kohinur Begum, sadar upazila project implementation officer, filed two separate cases with the Patuakhali Sadar Police Station on Sunday against the arrestees.

"We will take legal action against the UP members after investigation," said Delwar Hossain, officer in charge of the police station.

30 lakh tonnes

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director of Brac, said at a joint press briefing with CPD.

It is essential that the government ensure smooth supply of fertiliser during the Boro season to offset this shortage, he added.

Executive Director of CPD Mustafizur Rahman and senior research fellow of the organisation Uttam Deb were also present at the briefing.

"An agricultural rehabilitation programme needs to be initiated immediately to generate employment and increase food production to minimise the effect of rising food prices and household level food insecurity," states the report jointly commissioned by Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) and Brac.

The report was prepared after Brac and CPD researchers consulted over 120 farmers in different parts of the Sidr-affected areas recently.

The package should include smooth supply of fertiliser and seeds, tilling equipment, low-lift pumps for irrigation and agricultural loans, the report states.

The report notes that irrigation facilities are absent in the cyclone-affected areas and a huge number of cattle were lost in the disaster. Due to these reasons, the small and marginal farmers should be given power pumps and power tillers immediately on easy terms, it added.

The CPD-Brac report states that the farmers demand seasonal crop loans of Tk 4,000 per bigha for irrigation and cultivation of hybrid-Boro, to be repaid in one or two instalments after the next crop harvest.

The fish farmers on the other hand asked for a much higher amount, Tk 20,000 to Tk 50,000, for fish cultivation in large ponds, to be repaid within two years with a six-month grace period.

Talking to the reporters, Mahub said that the current government plan to supply only fertiliser and seeds to Sidr-affected farmers is not enough, adding that it should also include irrigation facilities and loans.

He said the NGOs alone cannot provide the irrigation tools and facilities package and the farmers should be assisted through coordinated efforts by NGOs, the private sector and the government.

CPD Executive Director Mustafizur Rahman said that due to Cyclone Sidr, there would be a 10 lakh tonnes rice shortage worth Tk 2.5 crore. He observed that food distribution rather than availability will be the bigger challenge that will require the provision of a safety net and income-generating programmes.

Senior research fellow of CPD Uttam Deb said that cash-for-work schemes for the landless should be introduced as they do not have any assets left after the cyclone.

Rangs building

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Several floors of Rangs Bhaban caved in Saturday night killing at least four. Dozens are still missing and are feared trapped under the rubble injured or dead. The building was being demolished when it caved in.

Rajuk hired three private construction firms to ensure enough structural support so that rescuers can move in.

The firms started placing steel support bars inside the building yesterday. More than 100 workers of the three firms were engaged with the job.

Among the four killed, the bodies of three were seen hanging from different places in the building or partially buried under the rubble. None dared to recover the bodies fearing further collapse of the building.

Selim Newaz Bhuiyan, deputy director of the Fire Service and Civil Defence, yesterday said one of their teams was waiting in front of Rangs Bhaban for clearance from Rajuk and start rescue operations.

An executive engineer of Rajuk told The Daily Star, "We are hopeful that the work of supporting the structure would be complete by Tuesday evening and after that the bodies of the labourers would be recovered."

Engineers of the hired firms, however, said it would take at least 72 hours to complete their job.

Survivors and relatives of the missing labourers were seen waiting around the building. Missing labourer Delwar's brother Alauddin from Faridpur was seen crying in front of the building. Apparently believing his brother is dead, he said he came to Dhaka to take the body of his brother.

Other survivors who were also waiting for the bodies of their fellow workers said if they were allowed, they would recover the bodies.

Various political parties and social organisations yesterday demanded punitive actions against those who were responsible for the uncontrolled collapse of the building during its demolition.

Govt to procure

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ministry has already announced its plan to import 5 lakh tonnes of rice from neighbouring India and other countries.

The purchase committee also approved a proposal placed by the industries ministry to appoint a foreign firm at a cost of Tk 103 crore to repair and rehabilitate the burnt gas compressor and turbine of Ghorasal Fertiliser Factory.

Sundarbans after Sidr

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local people in Sharankhola and Chandpur ranges to mark the "trees to be sold" even before completion of a damage assessment, they added.

"Fortunately, the government order came and the forest department's move to sweep clean a quarter of the Sundarbans has stopped," an environmentalist said.

The environmentalist who declined to be named has just returned from the forest after a weeklong visit to see the damage caused by Cyclone Sidr last month.

From the general impression, forest department high officials had earlier told the press Sidr has damaged at least one-fourth of the Sundarbans, 10 percent severely.

The 600,000-hectare Sundarbans offers more than 400,000 hectares of forest, the remaining part comprising water bodies.

However, a leading environmentalist speaking anonymously told The Daily Star the forest department might inflate the damage assessment so that an unscrupulous section can benefit from selling trees.

The forest department is perceived to be one of the most corrupt departments of the country and often accused of damaging forestry and wildlife instead of protecting them.

The environmentalist explained to The Daily Star why regeneration of the forest is the best when it is left alone. "The decaying trees provide good nutrients for the soil. If the forest floor is swept clean, it will become difficult for regeneration as direct sunlight may dry up the sub-soil."

"In addition, the logging activities will bring in hundreds of wood cutters. It will be a living hell for the

wildlife that already lost their habitats in the cyclone.

"The animals should also be left alone to help them find their new homes and settle down," he added.

The forest department usually works on its own as there is no agency to monitor its activities. Allegations are rife that unscrupulous officials thrive on selling trees illegally.

"They illegally lease out parts of the forest to woodcutters, even to outlaws, and make quick cash," said another environmentalist. "This was exactly what was about to happen here."

"My impression of the real damage is that the forest has lost about 10 percent trees. Judging from the nature of the Sundarbans, it will take about five years to regenerate and make up for this loss," he noted.

"Already I have seen new sprouts coming out in the damaged areas."

Hamidur

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Hatimarachara village of Tripura.

Later, he was awarded with "Birshreshtha", the country's highest gallantry award.

The remains of the 17-year-old freedom fighter were exhumed from the grave on Sunday and handed over to a Bangladesh delegation, reports AP.

His remains will be brought to Dhaka today.

Later, the remains will be taken to National Parade Square where 21 gun salutes will be heralded to pay tribute to the war hero, said a press release of Inter Services Public Relations.

Hamidur's remains will be buried in state honour at Mirpur Intellectuals' Graveyard today.

President Iajuddin Ahmed will receive the remains and place floral wreaths on the coffin.

Death threat

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harassed and threatened with severe consequences, including death threats, since he had filed the sedition case.

Unknown miscreants were following him around all the time, he said.

Fazlur filed the case against Jamaat-e-Islami Secretary General Ali Ahsan Mohammad Mojaheed, Assistant Secretary General Abdul Quader Mollah and former chairman of Islami Bank Shah Md Abdul Hannan for their anti-state activities.

Referring to the stories run against him in the Daily Sangram, Fazlur said one Tofazzel Hossain Kamal, a reporter of the newspaper, had approached him right after he filed the case. Kamal had asked Fazlur what party he supported and who had instigated him to file the case against those named.

The Daily Sangram ran two reports against him right after this incident, he said.

Fazlur denied the allegations published against him - reports, which he complained, were written with intention to cast a shadow on his own character.

Since filing of the case, the government has said that a private person could not file a sedition case. Fazlur asked at the conference how it was that Barrister Omar Sadat, in the very recent past, had filed a sedition case against Dr Kamal Hossain and some other eminent

lawyers.

Fazlur Rahman's lawyer Abu Mohammad Abdur Razzak, who is also coordinator of the legal aid committee of Bangladesh Tarikat Federation, was present at the conference. He told the reporters that a set of eminent lawyers, including Barrister Rafique Ul Haq and Dr Kamal Hossain, has expressed their solidarity with the sedition case.

This set of eminent lawyers have also offered their assistance to all people who will file sedition and murder cases against war criminals, Razzak added.

Meanwhile a Dhaka court hears matters today related to government approval for registering the sedition case as a regular case.

Metropolitan Magistrate Mohammad Emran Hossain Chowdhury on Sunday fixed the date for the hearing and asked the complainant to be present. The court also asked the deputy commissioner (prosecution) to appear before the court during the hearing.

Fazlur Rahman filed the sedition case with the Court of Chief Metropolitan Magistrate. The court initially ordered Tejaon Police Station to register it as a regular case. But Tejaon police refused to register it as a regular case, saying they did not have necessary government sanction to register such a case.

The OC then sent back the case file to the court seeking directives about the next course of action.

Climate change

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"We might have something like a global civil war," said Schnellhuber.

According to the Nobel-winning Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), by 2100 global average surface temperatures could rise by between 1.1 C and 6.4 C (1.98 and 11.52 F) compared to 1980-99 levels.

The Unep document, issued on the sidelines of the December 3-14 meeting of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), is the starkest warning yet by a United Nations agency on the security risks that flow from climate change.

These perceived risks -- also shared by a growing number of political and military think-tanks -- stem from competition over dwindling water resources as well as tensions arising from the aftermath of major storms, failed harvests or other catastrophes.

The report, "Climate Change as a Security Risk," placed the spotlight on a number of "regional hotspots," including:

-- NORTH AFRICA: Worsening water shortages, dwindling crop yields, galloping population growth and "poor political problem-solving capabilities" will intensify the potential for political crisis and migratory pressure. The Nile delta will be at risk from rising sea levels and salinisation of farmland.

-- SAHEL: Climate change will exacerbate the problems of a region characterised by weak states, civil wars and refugee flows.

-- SOUTH ASIA: India, Pakistan and Bangladesh face "especially severe" risks from climate change, led by glacial retreat in the Himalayas that will threaten the water supply for millions of people. Sea-level rise and cyclones will threaten the coastline of the Bay of Bengal and changes to monsoon rains will hit agriculture.

40 immigrants

drown off Turkey

90 others presumed dead or missing

AFP, Ankara

At least 40 people drowned off the Turkish coast in one of three incidents that left at least 90 other hopeful migrants to Europe missing or presumed dead, officials said Monday.

As many as 85 people may have been aboard a 15-meter (45-foot) boat that capsized on Saturday in the Aegean Sea off the western Turkish town of Seferhisar, near Izmir.

"Forty bodies have been found so far and only six survivors," said Orhan Sefik Guldibi, the top administrative official in Seferhisar.

"We still have hope of finding survivors, but every passing hour is working to our disadvantage," Guldibi told AFP by telephone.

The nationalities of the migrants were not immediately clear, but Guldibi said the majority were believed to be Palestinians, Somalis and Iraqis.

In a separate incident, some 40 Africans died at sea off Senegal as they were trying to reach the Spanish Canary Islands, police quoted survivors as saying.

They were aboard a boat that set off at the end of November from Diogue Island in southern Senegal, with 130 people aboard. Only 90 were left when it ran aground north of Dakar on Saturday.

Police spokesman Colonel Alioune Ndiaye told AFP that survivors had spoken of 40 people who "died at sea and were thrown overboard" during the voyage.

At least 50 people were missing after another immigrant boat -- also heading for the Canary Islands -- sank in the Atlantic.

Officials in the town of Dakhla, on the coast off Western Sahara, said the boat had set out from Mauritania and sank on Saturday some 28 nautical miles (more than 50 kilometres) offshore.

Alerted by a Moroccan fishing boat, the Moroccan navy rescued six survivors, the officials said, adding that the search was continuing for any more.

In October, an Italian-based monitoring group said nearly 1,100 migrants had lost their lives trying to reach the European Union so far this year. The group put the death toll since 1988 at 10,335.

During an EU-Africa summit in Lisbon at the weekend, Spanish Prime Minister Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero called for a pact to combat illegal immigration in Europe, which he termed "the dramatic result of a collective failure."

A European Union border agency patrolling west African coasts since last year alongside several west African countries, has successfully warded off illegal migrants heading to the Canary Islands, the main entry point into Europe.

After a record 31,000 Africans landed in the Canaries in 2006, the number of arrivals there has dropped by more than 60 percent so far this year.

Turkey, which hopes to join the European Union, has long been a major staging post for migrants from poor Asian and African countries trying to sneak into prosperous Europe.

Guldibi said the vessel that capsized in the Aegean was carrying 60 to 70 people, while the coast guard said in a statement that there were some 85 people on board.

Footage broadcast on the NTV news channel showed at least 15 bodies laid out on the shore in black bags.

Turkish authorities detain illegal migrants on an almost daily basis as they attempt to try to cross to Greece by land, or brave sea journeys to Greece or Italy, often aboard unseaworthy vessels.

3 killed

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about 5:00pm. The bus caught fire leaving two passengers dead on the spot and 16 others wounded.

The injured were rushed to Manikganj Hospital where the on-duty doctor declared Akter dead. Seriously injured Dulal, 40, son of Ifaj Uddin Mollah of Shibhalaya upazila was shifted to Pongu Hospital in the capital.

A long tailback developed on Dhaka-Aricha highway as vehicular movement on the road remained suspended for two hours due to the accident.

Deputy Commissioner of Police Ataur Rahman along with Police Superintendent Imtiaz Ahmed visited the spot.

Meanwhile, a person was injured yesterday as the gas cylinder of her CNG-run private car exploded at a CNG filling station at Tikatuli in the capital.

Witnesses said the gas cylinder of the private car of Naznin Berek of Laxmibazar in old Dhaka exploded while it was being refuelled at the CNG filling station of HS Enterprises Ltd at Tikatuli at about 1:00am.

Naznin, who stood near the car, sustained injuries to her hand.

Another car was also badly damaged in the explosion.

Ex-PSC member

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the verdict after examining records and prosecution witnesses.

In his income tax return, Prof Rahman concealed wealth worth over Tk 2.13 crore which he had earned illegally in five years since 2002.

Additional Assistant Tax Commissioner Amjad Hossain filed a case against him on October 7 for evading income tax of over Tk 57.12 lakh.

4 RU teachers

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president's office after taking care of the legal process involved," Mainul said.

"The government doesn't at all intend to detain university teachers. Since there were cases filed against them, the government had to clear them legally after their appeal to the government for absolving them of the charges," the lawyer said.

As news of the presidential clemency reached Rajshahi in the morning, family members of the detained teachers, their relatives, and journalists started gathering at the jail gate from 10:00am.

But the jail authorities told the families that they had yet to receive any information regarding the mercy.

As the number of people at the jail gate was increasing, the authorities deployed extra forces including detective branch personnel in and around the jail compound.

By 12:00pm, hundreds of students and teachers from Rajshahi University were at the jail gate and around 2:00pm more students from the management and mass communications departments joined the crowd.

Hundreds of other students of the departments gathered in front of their departments boycotting their classes and examinations, and celebrated the freedom of their teachers, dancing to the beats of patriotic songs.

Kolpona Roy, the eldest sister of Moloy Kumar Bhomik, was also waiting in the crowd at the jail gate since morning, who was frequently breaking down in emotional outbursts, while Mamun's wife Udicha Islam was running back and forth from the jail gate to the waiting crowd as rumours were springing every few minutes that the jailed teachers were about to walk out that gate.

"What a fate my brother had!" exclaimed Moloy's sister with tears rolling down her cheeks, "He returned home from the liberation war in 1971 and today he is being freed from a jail."

"Moloy went to the war at the age of 14. As he was absent and we were not getting any news of him, we thought he might have been killed."

But on December 10 of 1971 he surprised us all by returning home, and soon he was hurrying to go back to the front again, but before he could do that we won the war."

On December 10, 2007, Moloy again suddenly appeared through the jail gate with three of his just freed colleagues around 3:45pm, to go home again.

The four freed teachers hugged their wives and other family members as they were welcomed by the waiting crowd.

Their colleagues and students received them at the jail gate with flowers, some of whom broke down in tears embracing the freed teachers.

Police on guard there were visibly baffled by the huge rush of well-wishers of the freed teachers as they walked out of the jail compound.

Pak election race

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the vote. It will enhance the credibility of the elections," PML-Q head Chaudhry Shujaat Hussain told reporters at the launch of his party's manifesto.

Fears the election would be boycotted and sustain international criticism had haunted Musharraf and his former ruling party, created in 2002 to contest elections under his banner after poaching most of its members from Sharif.

Musharraf came under intense worldwide fire for cracking down on opponents, rights activists, lawyers and the media when he imposed his state of emergency on November 3. He has promised to lift it by December 15.

Hussain said the PML-Q would focus on rights, political reconciliation and tackling Islamic extremism.

In a reminder of that violence, which has claimed some 700 lives this year so far, a suicide bomber blew himself up next to a school bus near a military base in northwest Pakistan earlier Monday, injuring five children.

"Our manifesto is based on human rights and values, tolerance, harmony and a free media," Hussain told a news conference.

The party's secretary general, Mushahid Hussain, said it wanted to end the months of political chaos that culminated in the emergency rule.

"We make it clear that culture of revenge will have to be replaced with a culture of reconciliation. We will have to make our minds and attitude democratic," he said at the same briefing.

AL won't join

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forces have also been invited.

The AL Central Working Committee (ALCWC) took the decision at a meeting held at detained party chief Sheikh Hasina's political office in Dhaka on Monday.

"We'll not take part in the programme as war criminals have also been invited," a senior AL Leader told The Daily Star after the meeting.

The meeting noticed that many leaders were not invited as their position has not been mentioned on the invitation card. A number of leaders told the meeting that the AL should not attend the programme for all these reasons.

The AL has decided to observe the Martyred Intellectuals Day and Victory Day in a befitting manner with elaborate programmes.

The meeting chaired by acting president Zillur Rahman demanded that the government should not register Jamaat-e-Islami, which used religion for political gains, with the Election Commission (EC) so that "war criminals can't take part in polls".

It also asked the government to take legal action against Jamaat leaders for their audacious comments

against the Liberation War and repression of women in 1971.

The meeting also demanded unconditional release of Hasina to forge national unity to overcome the disaster caused by Cyclone Sidr. The AL leaders observed that if Hasina were released, it would be easy to coordinate the mass people's relief operations.

The leaders alleged that "false" and "fabricated" charges are being brought against the AL president one after another. They expressed firm determination to continue legal battle to free the AL chief.

The meeting expressed concern over the health of Hasina and urged the government to ensure better medical facilities for the former premier.

The meeting also demanded withdrawal of all "false and fabricated" charges against Hasina's sister Sheikh Rehana and release of the party general secretary and other detained leaders and workers.

Meanwhile, a team of the party led by Organising Secretary Mahmudur Rahman Manna goes to Patuakhali to distribute relief materials among Sidr victims today.

"We are happy that the government showed its goodwill and rational approach towards us...but some of our colleagues of Rajshahi and Dhaka universities are still suffering in jails, we hope, the government will show the same compassion towards them also", Bhomik said coming out of the jail.

"Our release is of no value unless our colleagues are also freed", he said.

Later at the grave of Shamsuzzoha, Bhomik told journalists, "We heard the media is broadcasting that we had sought presidential clemency."

"I want to make it clear that we never sought any mercy from anyone. If anybody claims so, he should show the proof. If the claim comes from the government then it is an insult to the teaching community."

"If the government claims that we sought mercy, they must prove it. We are ready to go to jail again if necessary. It is a matter of the teaching community's prestige."

Talking on the matter of presidential clemency, Sayed Selim Reza Newton also expressed his astonishment. Rejecting the government's claim he said, "There was no question of mercy petitions. Neither we nor our wives had submitted any petition to the government for mercy."

"We are disappointed at the government's claim. We suffered in jail long enough because we did not want to seek mercy. We could have been freed much earlier if we had sought mercy."