

Saudi king pardons rape victim

AP, Riyadh

A gang-rape victim who was sentenced to six months in prison and 200 lashes for being alone with a man not related to her was pardoned by the Saudi king after the case sparked rare criticism from the United States, the kingdom's top ally.

Outrage over the sentence prompted unusually strong comments from President Bush, who said that if the same thing had happened to one of his daughters, he would be "angry" at a government that didn't protect the victim. The White House called the sentence "outrageous."

In past weeks, Saudi officials have bristled at the criticism of what they consider an internal affair but also appeared wary of hurting their image in the United States.

Bush's National Security Council spokesman Gordon Johndroe said the White House thinks the Saudi king "made the right decision" by pardoning the woman.

With the pardon, King Abdullah appeared to be aiming at relieving the pressure from the United States without being seen to criticize Saudi Arabia's conservative legal system, a stronghold of powerful clerics adhering to the strict Wahhabi interpretation of Islam.

Justice Minister Abdullah bin Mohammed al-Sheikh said the pardon reported by Saudi media Monday does not mean the king doubted the country's judges, but that he was acting in the "interests of the people."

"The king always looks into alleviating the suffering of the citizens when he becomes sure that these verdicts will leave psychological effects on the convicted people, though he is convinced and sure that the verdicts were fair," al-Sheikh said, according to the Al-Jazirah newspaper.

"Certainly, we're pleased that that action occurred," State Department deputy spokesman Tom Casey said. "I think everyone was rather astonished by the initial verdict and I hope this puts this case to rest. We're glad that this particular case has been dealt with and that the king has taken the actions that he has."

The victim, known only as the "Girl of Qatif" after her hometown in eastern Saudi Arabia, was in a car with a man in 2006 when they were attacked and raped by seven men.

She was initially sentenced in November 2006 to several months in prison and 90 lashes for being alone in a car with a man with whom she was neither related nor married, a violation of the kingdom's strict segregation of the sexes.

The woman, who was 19 at the

time of the rape, has said she met the man to retrieve a picture of herself from him because she had recently married.

The seven men who were convicted of raping both the girl and the man were initially sentenced to jail terms from 10 months to five years. Their sentences were increased to between two and nine years after the appeal.

The case sparked increased international outcry recently after the court more than doubled the sentence last month to 200 lashes and six months in prison in response to her appeal, joining the U.S. criticism, Canada called the ruling barbaric.

Earlier this month, Bush expressed his anger over the sentencing.

"My first thoughts were these," Bush said. "What happens if this happens to my daughter? How would I react? And I would have been I'd been very emotional, of course. I'd have been angry at those who committed the crime. And I'd be angry at a state that didn't support the victim."

The controversy erupted as the United States was trying to ensure Saudi Arabia's participation in the November Mideast peace conference in Annapolis, Md. which the kingdom attended.

In the U.S. ahead of the conference, Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Saud al-Faisal was visibly irritated when he was asked about the case by journalists. He said that the storm being raised over it was outrageous, but also promised the sentence would be reviewed.

The kingdom's Justice Ministry has defended the sentence, saying the girl was having an illicit affair with the man.

Woman's body

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The body of Rokeya Begum, 45, a single parent of two, was discovered when a fallen tree was removed from a ditch close to her house on the bank of Baleshwar. Apparently she was washed into the ditch by tidal surges and held underwater by the fallen tree.

Mattur Rahman, local union chairman (JP) chairman, and Faruk Chowdhury, local UP member, told journalists that she was missing since November 15. They claimed her body did not decompose much as the ditch was filled with saline water during the tidal surges.

Four other members of the family including, Kajol, her grand daughter, Laily, her sister-in-law, Koituri and Zaman, her niece and nephew were killed during Sidr.

Officially the death toll now stands at 350 in Patharghata upazila with 140 still missing.

'Huji' man

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A tin-shed mess at Comilla Para in Maddhya Badda around 1:30am. "As the Rab members knocked on the door of a room, the three criminals opened the door and fired at least eight bullets, leaving the two Rab members wounded," said Siddiqur Rahman.

He said as the Rab members got wounded, the crime fighting force retreated for cover and started firing back. During the gun battle that ensued, over 100 bullets were fired. At one stage of the gunfight the three young suspects came out of the tin-shed mess and tried to run away.

But the elite force members arrested Rony unhurt with a firearm in his possession after chasing the fleeing group for a few hundred metres. Rab also found wounded Kamal near Gulshan Lake and took him to a nearby hospital where doctors declared him dead.

"We have arrested a criminal and interrogating him to know whether they have any other identities," Rab Legal and Media Wing Director Commander SMAK Azad told The Daily Star.

Siddiqur Rahman said two young suspects rented a room of the mess on December 3 for Tk 1,900 a month, one of whom identified himself as an employee of Destiny Group while the other gave his identity as a quality controller in a buying house. He said later another young man joined them as a lodger in the mess.

Naser's wife

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secured bail from CMM's Court," DIG (Prisons) Major Shamsul Haider Siddiqui told the news agency.

On December 2, the Metropolitan Sessions Judge's Court sent her to jail rejecting her bail prayer. She was admitted to the prison cell of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University on December 15 for treatment.

On May 27, Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) Deputy Director Moniruzzaman filed the case with Gulshan Police Station against Rezina and her husband Naser, son of former finance minister Saifur Rahman, on charges of amassing wealth worth about Tk 6.23 crore by "illegal means".

UK envoy

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Ten Tusscher met the adviser and discussed the human-right situation in Bangladesh.

Anwar Choudhury said there will be municipal elections very early next year to be followed by the general election.

"I hope 2008 will be remembered for free and fair elections that will lead to more sustainable democracy thereafter," he said.

Dutch Ambassador Bea Ten Tusscher said they congratulated the government on framing laws for establishment of national human rights commission and "we also raised certain human-rights cases."

She said the adviser promised to look into those cases.

Ms Tusscher said statistics show that human-rights abuses have come down and encouraged the government to continue this on positive track.

To another question, the envoy said the question of lifting state of emergency was not discussed at the meeting.

She said they invited Bangladesh to attend a nuclear fuel conference to be held in Germany in February next year, sponsored by Germany, the Netherlands and the UK.

The Adviser said the government will work hard with the country's development partners to ensure that the state of human rights in Bangladesh is no less standard than that of the civilised world.

Suicide attack

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No one has claimed responsibility for the attacks, but officials blame militants linked to the Taliban and al-Qaeda who have expanded their influence in areas near the Afghan border.

Meanwhile, Pakistani security forces apprehended 17 pro-Taliban rebels as part of the ongoing operation against militants in the restive northwestern valley of Swat, the army said Monday.

The arrests came just days after the army claimed it had cleared almost all of the embattled northwestern valley of militants, killing hundreds of them in recent weeks.

According to government reports, around 330 militants have been killed in the area during the recent campaign to clear the scenic valley of fighters.

"Our troops arrested the 17 militants Sunday from different parts of Swat," chief military spokesman Major General Waheed Arshad told AFP.

He said all the arrested militants were allied with Fazlullah, a pro-Taliban cleric.

Fazlullah, who is in hiding, is known as "Mullah Radio" for broadcasting fiery speeches over his private FM radio station. The cleric has called for a holy war against the Pakistan government.

Arrest warrant

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them. It also fixed December 24 for next hearing of the cases.

On December 12, ACC Assistant Directors Abu Sayeed and Jahangir Alam, also the IOs of the cases, submitted the charge sheets against the three accused before the Chief Metropolitan Magistrate's (CMM) Court.

The IOs prayed for issuance of arrest warrants against the accused and the order to attach their properties as they have been absconding since the cases were filed.

The IOs, however, dropped Manju's daughter Shima Hossain from the charge sheet.

In the first information report (FIR) filed with Dhanmondi Police Station on July 25, ACC Assistant Director Sheikh Faiaz Alam, the complainant, said the accused took Tk 1 crore bribe from Al-Amin Construction Company Ltd between February 17 and February 20, 2000 promising to award it a Roads and Highways Department (RHD) construction job.

The FIR further said the managing director of the company Amin Ahmed Bhuiyan gave Manju the money in two pay orders. Manju was communications minister at that time.

On the same day, the ACC assistant director filed the second case with Shahbagh Police Station. In the complaint, Faiaz Alam said the accused took Tk 75 lakh as bribes from China National Overseas Engineering Corporation sometime between February 13 and February 18, 2001 to get it secure work order of the RHD.

The liaison officer of the company Taherul Islam Patwari

handed over the money to the accused, the complainant added.

On June 26, Manju was sentenced to five years' simple imprisonment and was fined Tk 10,000 for possessing 21 bottles of liquor at his Dhanmondi home.

There is also a graft case against Manju pending with the Special Court for Dhaka Division.

GANI CASE
ACC Assistant Director SMM Akhter Hamid, also the IO of the case, submitted the charge sheet against Gani and his wife Mohsen Ara to the CMM's Court, showing 52 people as prosecution witnesses.

The IO also prayed for issuance of arrest warrants against Mohsen Ara and the order to attach her properties, as she has been absconding since the case was filed against her.

On July 26, ACC Deputy Director Golam Shahriar Chowdhury filed the case with Uttara Police Station for concealing around Tk 4.30 crore.

The case was filed under sections 26(1), 27(2) of the Anti-Corruption Commission Act-2004, section 5(2) of the Corruption Prevention Act-1949, section 15(Gha)(5) of the Emergency Power Rules-2007 and Section 109 of the Bangladesh Penal Code.

In the statement submitted to the ACC on June 26, the couple showed their assets of Tk 3,70,15,000. However, the ACC later found they owned more assets worth around Tk 4.30 crore.

The joint forces arrested Osman Gani at his Uttara house on May 29 this year. During the raid, they found Tk 1 crore in cash hidden at unusual places inside the house.

Meaningful polls

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Victory Day organised by the BNP at Engineers' Institution in the capital.

Blasting the chief election commissioner (CEC) for his recent remarks on BNP constitution, Delwar said it is not the duty of the Election Commission (EC) or the government to make such comments as the party men will decide what the party constitution will be.

"Any others from outside the parties should not interfere in their activities nor comment on their constitutions," he said.

The CEC was reported to have said some parties including the BNP were required to change their constitutions to registration.

Delwar said there is no reflection of neutrality of the EC in its activities. No one except party men can dictate about a party leadership, he added without explaining it.

The former chief whip said the authorities arrested many leaders on charges of corruption. And politicians are not involved in corruption now. But has it put an end to corruption? And who are involved in corruption now? he asked. The people know who are now making money through corrupt practices, he said.

BNP Standing Committee member Dr RA Gani said no one should raise any demand or debate which would harm national unity.

Criticising the EC, Nazrul Islam Khan, joint secretary general of the party, said the EC appointed 14-party leader Dr Kamal Hossain as its lawyer to fight BNP.

Goyeshwar Chandra Roy, another joint secretary general of the party, called for unity of the people to restore democracy in the country.

Participants in the discussion included party leaders Shamuzzaman Duda, Sohrab Uddin, Shirin Sultana and Sultan Salahuddin Tuku, Jubo Dal General Secretary Moazzem Hossain Alal, and Amar Desh Editor Amanullah Kabir and columnist Ebne Golam Samad.

ACC starts gathering

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Meanwhile, the ACC approved the filing of three cases against three people including one against former home minister Altf Hossain Choudhury in connection with amassing wealth illegally and concealing wealth information in the statement submitted to the commission.

The drive is the first ever initiative by the anti-corruption body in combating institutional corruption.

"The ACC would work as a specialist institution against institutional corruption. As the process is time-consuming, the ACC is preparing a database so that the drive against institutional corruption could go on all the time," Hanif Iqbal told The Daily Star.

The director general, however, refused to reveal names of these organisations for the sake of a flawless investigation and so that the drive does not panic people.

"All organisations plagued with corruption will be brought under the drive... slowly and gradually," he added.

Explaining how the commission is selecting organisations for investigation, he said, "The ACC is holding mass communication programmes against graft and at the same time trying to know about people's perception of different service-oriented organisations. Negative public perception would be considered in selecting an institution."

Meanwhile, ACC sources said at the beginning the ACC would focus its probe into corruption in institutions related to education, health, and fertiliser production and distribution.

The commission is also collecting information regarding corruption at Power Development Board (PDB), Dhaka Electricity Supply Authority (Desa), Water and Sewerage Authority (Wasa), Telegraph & Telephone Board, Titas Gas Transmission and Distribution Ltd, sources revealed.

The ACC will analyse different systems of organisations to find out how the corruption was institutionalised there. Then it will look into different issues of the institution like appointment process to identify the individual offenders.

In case of an individual offender identified during the drive, the ACC might go for legal actions against the person.

The ACC sources say they would conduct their investigation in accordance with the work pattern of an organisation. For instance, if an organisation's task is related to procurement, the commission will check transparency in its procurement process.

Baby dies

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for her life in Dhaka Medical College Hospital (DMCH) at the time of filing this report last night. Local residents, however, caught one of the killers red handed.

Family members of Parveen said pressing the calling bell at 11:30am two young robbers entered the South Jatrabari residence of the victim on the 1st floor of a six-storey building robbing Parveen of her neck chain. As she tried to resist the robbers, they stabbed her in the abdomen.

Hearing the cry of Parveen for help, her neighbours rushed to the spot and caught one of the robbers, Mehedi Hasan Tara, 24. Another robber, Hamim, however managed to escape. Tara was also admitted to DMCH after being injured at the hands of the people catching him.

DMCH sources said Parveen was 10-month pregnant, and was in critical condition.

UK minister

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The First Information Report (FIR) of the case approved to be filed against Altf Hossain Choudhury mentions that Altf concealed information about wealth worth Tk 59 lakh in the wealth statement submitted to the commission.

The FIR also added that he amassed property worth Tk 2.56 crore beyond his known sources of income.

The ACC will also file a case against Khulna City Corporation Mayor Aminur Haque for concealing information about his wealth worth Tk 53.05 lakh and amassing wealth worth Tk 74.22 lakh illegally.

Another FIR approved yesterday was against former deputy commissioner Md Hasan in connection with amassing Tk 5.35 crore beyond his known sources of income and concealing information about his wealth in the statement submitted to the commission.

The cases will be filed under sections 26(2), 27(1) of ACC act and 15d(5) of Emergency Power Rules.

DU violence

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accused, Prof Neem Chandra Bhownick, also cross-examined the complainant.

On August 22, the case was filed against some 6,000 unnamed students and teachers of DU and outsiders for violating the EPR, vandalising public and private property, obstructing police duties, and assault on law enforcers on DU campus and in adjacent areas.

But on September 9, police pressed charges in the case against four DU teachers and 15 students of the university for instigating violence on the university campus and at Shahbagh in the capital on August 22.

The four teachers and one of the students are now in jail custody. The detained teachers are Dhaka University Teachers' Association (Duta) President Prof Sadrul Amin, its General Secretary Prof Anwar Hossain, Science Faculty Dean Prof Harun-or-Rashid and Applied Physics Department Chairman Prof Neem Chandra Bhownick.

After completion of the cross-examination, the court fixed December 24 for next hearing of the case.

Family members of the detained teachers and the student expressed their frustration over the next hearing date as it would fall after the Eid holidays as well as the December 23 deadline of the Duta's demand for their release.

Data following assurance from the government had earlier postponed its demonstration scheduled for December 9.

However, on December 11, a Dhaka court framed charges against the accused for breaching the EPR.

Hearing of another case against the accused on charge of instigating violence is set to be held tomorrow.

Prof AAMS Arefin Siddique, former president of Duta, said the assurance from the government made the teachers hopeful that the government would take steps for the unconditional release of the detainees before the December 23 deadline, "but today's development in the court frustrated the teachers and the family members of the detainees as everyone hoped that the detainees would be freed before the Eid vacation."

If the teachers and students are not released within the deadline, congenial academic atmosphere in the university might be hindered, he added.

Another former president of Duta, Prof Sharif Ullah Bhuiyan, said if there is goodwill on the government's part, the teachers can be released anytime.

No comment was available from Duta Acting General Secretary Dr Mamun Ahmed over the issue.

NCBs achieve

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three banks continue to be under-manned, the BB governor said the GCBs would undertake a process to recruit staff on their own. Besides, the government has already been approached for recapitalisation of the three banks, he added.

The meeting was told that the banks were running short of capital due to government borrowing.

BB data shows, the three GCBs have realised only Tk 45 crore between January and September against the year's target of Tk 216 crore from the top 20 defaulters.

During the period, Tk 600 crore has been realised from other defaulters against the target of Tk 880 crore.

Of the GCBs, Sonali Bank Limited has recovered only Tk 3.29 crore from the top defaulters while its target is Tk 169 crore. The recovery rate against the target is only 1.94 percent.

Agrani Bank Limited has retrieved only Tk 2.39 crore, which is 12 percent of the target of recovering Tk 19.8 crore of classified loans.

Janata Bank Limited, however, has already recovered 143 percent of its target. It has recovered Tk 39.47 crore from the defaulters when it had aimed for Tk 27.5 crore.

In case of other defaulted loans, Sonali Bank realised Tk 293 crore against the target of Tk 440 crore, Janata Bank recovered Tk 141 crore against Tk 165 crore and Agrani Bank realised Tk 166 crore against a Tk 275 crore target.

According to BB data, capital shortfall at the GCBs stood at Tk 6,643 crore as of September 30, 2007. Of the amount, Sonali Bank has Tk 4,310 crore, Agrani Bank Tk 1,948 crore and Janata has a shortfall of Tk 959 crore.

The BB asked for suggestions on how the banks should earn the minimum capital status.

Credit growth at Sonali Bank in the first nine months of the year has risen by 0.03 percent on the corresponding period last year. Janata Bank and Agrani Bank, however, have seen negative credit growth, 7.81 and 1.48 percent.

Govt to buy

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at Tk 33 to Tk 39 per kg, increased by 50 percent during the year. The prices are going up every month.

TCB data also show that the lowest grade rice like Chinese Iri is selling at Tk 25 to Tk 27 per kg, up by 40 percent from that a year ago.

Price of atta also marked a similar rise by 46 percent over the last one year and now sells at Tk 35 to Tk 38 per kg.

Rice price is considered as one of the major indicators of consumer price index.

Food ministry officials said purchase of rice and wheat, approved yesterday, is part of the government efforts to ensure food security by building up a good stock.

Earlier on December 10, the purchase committee had approved procurement of 43,000 tonnes of rice at a cost of Tk 115.52 crore. It had also relaxed procurement rules to expedite purchase.

After the meeting yesterday, Mirza Azizul Islam told the press, "We are procuring directly from the private sector to save time as the common import procedures take at least 45 days."

The committee declined to approve the seven rental power projects because the tender authorities -- Power Cell of the power ministry -- have not ensured how gas or oil will be supplied to these power plants when installed.

Robbers kill

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motorcycle. The robbers on two motorbikes waylaid the banker at around 9:30am and fired twice on him.

They fled the scene after looting the bag containing the money.

Locals took Moniruzzaman to Singair Sadar hospital from where the doctors send him to Manikganj Sadar Hospital at around 12 noon. Here the attending doctor pronounced him dead on arrival.

Doctors found two bullet wounds his body, one on the right side of his chest and the other on his right hand.

Police Superintendent Imtiaz Ahmed said the driver of the rented motorcycle Biltu, 33, also from Singair, has been arrested and taken in for interrogation.

He said police suspect the robbery was preplanned and Biltu might be involved.

Meanwhile a probe committee been formed with officers in charge of Manikganj Sadar Police and Singair Police, to investigate the incident.

Moniruzzaman, a resident of West Dohora Village in Manikganj, is survived by his wife and three children.

Meanwhile, a gang of robbers looted a house at Nabagram village in Manikganj Sadar Upazila in the early hours yesterday.

Sources said the gang of masked robbers broke into the house of Abdul Aziz, an official of Asian Development Bank in Dhaka, at around 2:30 am. The robbers, all carrying weapons, first broke down the grill leading to the porch and then entered the house by breaking down the door.

They looted valuables worth about Tk 5 lakh including 25 tolas of gold in ornaments and Tk 10,000 in cash.

Russia starts

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The Russian Foreign Ministry stressed in a statement that deliveries were made under control of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). It added that spent fuel from Bushehr would be "returned to Russia for reprocessing and storage" -- part of a plan to ensure that the fuel does not go astray.

IAEA officials monitored the sealing of the nuclear fuel two weeks ago at a factory in Novosibirsk ahead of the delivery.

"The decision to send fuel -- which in its current state is fit only for civilian use -- marked a diplomatic victory for Russia, which has been building Bushehr since 1995, amid countless delays and international tensions."

"The Russian-Iranian cooperation on the Bushehr power station visibly demonstrates that one can effectively and reliably guarantee the realisation of national plans on developing the civilian atomic energy sector," the Foreign Ministry statement said.

In addition to rejecting US calls for the suspension of Bushehr, Moscow has also sold Iran anti-aircraft missiles and other high-tech weapons reportedly deployed by Iran's military in defence of nuclear installations.

Iran has repeatedly refused to cede to the key demand of the West that it suspend uranium enrichment work, a potential nuclear weapons-making process, despite

already having been slapped with two sets of UN sanctions.

Western powers, led by the United States, are pushing for a third UN sanctions resolution against Tehran.

But Ahmadinejad said that a new resolution against Iran was "out of the question" and Russia's delivery of fuel now seems to make further UN measures even less likely.

"Russia and China, which were already against sanctions, will now be even more confident," Lukanov said.

Meanwhile, the Israeli daily Maariv reported over the weekend that a delegation left Israel for Washington last week "with the goal of proving to the Americans that the Iranian nuclear weapons programme is definitely still in development."

Convict

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militants in the district, they added.

Son of Abdul Karim of Palikada village under Joypurhat Sadar upazila, Mansur was sentenced to life imprisonment in absentia in the serial bombings case in the district.

He was also wanted in a case filed after a clash between police and IMB activists at the house of Montezar Rahman at Uttar Moheshpur village in Khetlal upazila of the district on August 14, 2003.

Nizami, Mojaheed

his nephew Osman Gani and fellow freedom fighter Golam Mostafa alias Tukub Ali on November 25 in 1971.

Meantime, another Dhaka court will give order today on whether to approve of registering a seditious case against Mojaheed, Abdul Quader Mollah and Shah Mohammad Hannan, former chairman of Islami Bank, as a regular one.