

Hunt on, yet no trace

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of the artefacts until the stolen idols are retrieved.

Despite protests from citizens and art connoisseurs, it was sending the statues along with 143 other artefacts to the Guimet Museum in Paris under an agreement signed with France. Forty-two relics have already been shipped to the French capital.

Education and Cultural Affairs Adviser Ayub Quadri yesterday said, "I think we should not send the rest of the artefacts before resolving the theft case."

Talking to The Daily Star the same day, a number of incumbent and former government officials said it is not possible to make off with the relics weighing 64 kilograms without connivance of those working in the area.

Civil aviation officials and cargo terminal staff said the statues, sculpted around 1,500 years ago, were stolen sometime between 10:00pm Friday and 12 noon Saturday.

Staffers from Civil Aviation Authority of Bangladesh (CAAB), Biman Bangladesh Airlines, customs, Ansar, armed police battalion, air force, police and intelligence officials were working in the area during that time.

Besides, Air France, Voyager Airlines, Homebound Courier Services and the French embassy personnel were present.

"Nobody even from those agencies can get into the area beyond airside cargo check-in without security passes," said Khurshed Alam Sarkar, a deputy director of CAAB.

An official seeking anonymity told The Daily Star last night, "Whoever has stolen the statues must have had help from the ones working in the area between the cargo terminal and the aircraft."

ASM Shahjahan, former adviser to caretaker government and an ex-IGP, said it is not possible for an outsider to go there and pull off such a daring theft. Officials present in the

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area are very likely to have a role in the incident.

"An organised group did this according to a plot. The investigators should work to unmask the mastermind behind the heist," he added.

During a visit to the cargo village and runway at the ZIA yesterday, The Daily Star correspondents found around 100 people working there.

Most of those queried said they did not know anything about the incident as they were not on duty during that time.

Meanwhile, sources close to the investigation said the customs completed checking of the artefacts at 10:00pm Friday and handed those over to Air France. They have the video footage of the entire checking.

The relics had been carried beyond the airside check-in in trolleys of Homebound, the shipper agent hired by the France government. With the help of Voyager Airlines, the company that conducts loading and unloading, the Air France completed placing the artefacts on the pallets at around 3:30am Saturday and ferried those to the aircraft at around 12:00pm.

"So we assume the theft took place in between 10:00pm Friday to 12:00 noon on Saturday," said one of those involved in investigation of the theft.

Police sources said an official of the cultural affairs ministry had requested the police forces to leave the cargo village area at around 2:00am, saying no more security escort was needed.

Meanwhile, a number of prominent citizens yesterday lodged a complaint with the Anti-corruption Commission and with the chairman of the National Board of Revenue, citing major irregularities in shipping the artefacts to France.

Shamsul Wares, Shishir Bhattacharjee, Prof Serajul Islam Chowdhury, Vaskar Rasa, Prof Rehnuma Ahmed, and Nisar Hossain are among the signatories to the complaint.

Xmas today

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Jesus Christ.

It is the most important festival for all the Christians of the world.

On the eve of the occasion, the Christian community of the country has urged all to lend a hand to the victims of Cyclone Sidr and this year's back-to-back flooding.

According to Christian beliefs, God entered the world of men through his son, Jesus Christ, on this day.

It is also a celebration of rebirth, new beginnings, forgiveness and peace as a new year approaches. It is time for the Christians to renew their relationship with God and with their fellow human beings.

The day is a public holiday.

The celebrations of the festival starts on the Christmas Eve with singing carols in public spaces like lobbies, restaurants and lounges.

Special prayers will be held at churches.

The churches and adjoining grounds will be decked out with colourful tiny blinking lights and illuminated Christmas trees will be placed with a star standing right on top. Besides, Santa Claus will hand out Christmas presents to the children, family gatherings will take place and Christmas Day feasts will be held.

Members of police and Rapid Action Battalion (Rab) will remain on guard at the churches across the country. In a press release yesterday, Rab said that stringent security measures have been taken up apprehending subversive activities on the Christmas day by some vested quarters.

A number of organisations, individuals and Sonargaon Hotel, Dhaka Sheraton and The Westin Dhaka have arranged parties featuring Christmas carols, games and dance shows.

In separate messages yesterday, President Fakhruddin Ahmed and Chief Adviser Fakhruddin Ahmed greeted

the Christian community on the occasion.

The president in his message said the ideals of Jesus Christ of human welfare and glory of sacrifice have inspired people to follow the path of truth, welfare and peace.

Appreciating the contribution of the Christian community to education and social development, he hoped that concerted efforts by all the communities will continue for building a happy and prosperous Bangladesh.

In his message, the chief adviser said the teaching and ideals of Jesus Christ show a bright path of peace in today's unstable world.

"All of us would have to be careful in maintaining the glorious history of communal harmony in the country. I hope the contribution of Christian community as well as other communities will be strengthened in future," he said.

Greeting all on the occasion, Archbishop Poulinus Costa, head of the Christian community in the country, urged people to extend help to the Sidr victims "who are passing inhuman lives out in the winter without food and clothes."

"It is not that we'll only do meritorious during Christ's birthday celebration. We've some duties too," he said reminding all the sufferings of the victims of the Sidr and this year's floods.

Bangladesh Christian Association, Bangladesh Hindu-Buddhist-Christian Oikya Parishad and Bangladesh Chhatra Jubo Oikya Parishad also greeted the countrymen on the occasion.

Greeting the Christian community, political parties including Awami League, BNP and Bangladesh Workers' Party hoped peace and happiness will be established across the globe following the ideals of Jesus Christ.

Cold wave

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Rajshahi, Chapainawabganj, Pabna, Lalmonirhat, Kurigram, Nilphamari, Gaibandha, Joypurhat, Bogra, Rangpur, Naogaon and Natore are suffering badly as the cold spell has been lashing the region for the last few days.

Sirajganj Deputy Commissioner Ibrahim Khalil said they have started distributing warm clothes among the destitute.

Meanwhile, road and river communications between Dhaka and 16 south and south-western districts remained snared for hours yesterday as ferry and launch movement on Patura-Daulatdia channel was suspended for seven hours due to dense fog, reports our Manikganj correspondent.

Hundreds of vehicles got stranded at both Patura and Daulatdia ferry terminals causing chaos among thousands of passengers.

Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Corporation (BIWTC) Assistant General Manager Bidyut Kumar Saha told The Daily Star that the service was suspended twice from 11:30pm to 2:00 am and 3:30am to 8:00am.

About 100 people suffering from cold related diseases have been admitted to different hospitals in Nilphamari, reports our Nilphamari correspondent.

Some of them are in a critical condition, sources said.

District Relief Office sources said apart from warm clothes about 1200 blankets would be distributed among the destitute.

Education still

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four categories, one each for local and non-resident Bangladeshis (NRB).

The recipients are: in Arts' and Culture, NRB artist Monirul Islam and singer Kalim Sharifi, in Science, Technology and Innovation, Grameenphone co-founder Iqbal Z Quadir and local rice researcher and farmer Haripada Kapali, in Health and Medicine, Europe-based cancer specialist ABM Fazul Karim and MR Khan and in Education and Research NRB economist Fazle Hussain and Chittagong University economist Jamal Nazrul Islam.

"It's true that primary education couldn't be ensured for the disabled. But recently we have initiated some measures that would ensure their education," says MA Hye Howlader, social welfare secretary and vice-president of the national coordination committee for the disabled.

"I hope the scenario will change in the next couple of years as we have included ministries concerned in the latest action plan. If the next government monitors the steps the scenario is to change soon," he adds.

But in many of the developed and even developing countries education programmes now include restructured curriculum, modified examination systems, and other necessary facilities like free books, uniforms, transport and technical supports.

Besides, the governments also secure employment and rehabilitation for the disabled in both private and public sectors.

In Bangladesh, such a situation is still a far cry. But the disabled here have not lost hopes or yielded to life's struggle.

Only this year, disabled athletes from Bangladesh have won 15 gold medals in the Special Olympics World Summer Games against all odds.

Since 1995 Bangladesh have been participating in the Special Olympics and have bagged 37 gold, 22 silver and 19 bronze medals in the last three meets.

"If the disabled are provided with education and necessary facilities and technical support they can work like a normal person and their performance in service is satisfactory," says Hye Howlader.

He adds that they have recently managed jobs for 70 people in Gazipur as a move to ensure employment of the disabled.

A study says around 1.6 million disabled children await admission to schools at a time, while the government is able to teach only 1,335 in 78 institutions across the country.

The government doesn't even know the actual number of the disabled in the country. Censuses by non-government organisations, however, claim 10 percent of the population are disabled.

The government provides 80 percent of the budget of SWID, an NGO that provides education facilities to around 7,500 intellectually disabled people in 46 educational institutions. However, the benefited are only 3 percent of around 1.4 lakh such people.

A USAID report on "assessment of educational needs of disabled children in Bangladesh", however, claims only 1,500 out of 2.6 million disabled children are under the government education programme.

Around 10,000 to 15,000 children are under the education programmes of around 400 NGOs, the report adds.

The government does not have a monitoring system for the activities of the NGOs and the funds they are receiving in this regard.

Of the 78 institutions, 69 are for children with blindness under 'Integrated Education Programme' and

one is for the disabled.

The tenure of DCC expired on May 14 this year, but the field-level task of its voter listing is still going on while the voter listing of RCC, KCC, SCC and BCC is almost at the final stage.

Meanwhile, 1.74 crore voters have been registered across the country as of December 19.

Polls to 4 city

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(lifting of emergency) for holding the local body elections.

Sakhatwai said this when the reporters asked about Adviser Mainul Hosein's Sunday's remarks that the caretaker government will discuss lifting of the state of emergency if the EC asks for it.

"We don't want to call it state of emergency... We'll request the government, when it deems necessary, to create a suitable atmosphere for facilitating the local body elections," he said.

About the delay in holding the local body election he said, "We were always determined to hold city corporation elections in March (2008). But due to Sidr, the SSC examinations have been deferred to March 27. So, our schedule has also been delayed naturally," Sakhatwai told the journalists.

He was briefing the newsmen after visiting voter-listing centres at Kakoli High School and Dhanmondi Govt Girls' High School.

"Electoral to Dhaka City Corporation (DCC) won't be possible in April. We'll hold it separately," Sakhatwai said when asked if the EC would also hold the DCC election in April.

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Nepal set

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to be eliminated once a special assembly charged with rewriting the constitution is elected. The vote had been delayed indefinitely by the Maoists' withdrawal from the government, and officials now say they want to hold it in the first half of 2008.

"Now there is nothing else there needs to be done," Prachanda, the Maoist leader, who uses only one name, told reporters. "There is no monarchy left in the country."

The current monarch, King Gyanendra, heads a dynasty that dates to 1769, when a regional ruler led an army down from the hills and conquered the ancient city of Kathmandu. He established a line of kings that have been traditionally considered reincarnations of the Hindu god Vishnu, to be venerated by their subjects, over whom they have held sway for centuries.

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