

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 stames 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-IGB, said it is not possible for an outsider to go there and pull off such a daring theft. Officials present in the

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 heist.

Police sources said an official of the cultural affairs ministry had requested the police force 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, Askar 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 a 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 Iajuddin Ahmed and Chief Adviser Fakhruddin Ahmed greeted

Fakhruddin

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went to Madina to offer ziarat at the holy Rawja Mubarak of Prophet Hazrat Mohammad (SM) and offered prayers at Masjid-e-Nababi.

On December 20, the CA exchanged greetings with Saudi King Abdullah Bin Abdul Aziz at a reception the king hosted for the heads of state and government of different countries who performed hajj.

Biman starts

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facing trouble in carrying out the pilgrimage including problems in procuring the holy water of Zamzam well.

Religious Affairs Secretary Mohammad Ataur Rahman received the returnee hajis at ZIA.

Biman will operate 84 more dedicated return hajj flights until January 25, 2008 bringing 35,473 Bangladeshi hajis home.

The same number of pilgrims traveled with Biman to Saudi Arabia to perform the hajj. Some 10,000 pilgrims availed the services from Saudia, bringing the total number of Bangladeshi hajj pilgrims this year to 45,407 including 5,572 ballottee hajis, who performed the hajj under the management of Bangladesh government.

The first flight of about 543 ballottee hajis is scheduled to arrive at 10:35am today, the sources said.

Boeing 747s and DC 10s are flying the hajis home.

Operations of the hajj flights began on November 12.

NRBs

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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 Sharafi, 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 Fazlul Karim and MR Khan and in Education and Research NRB economist Fazle Hussain and Chittagong University economist Jamal Nazrul Islam.

The arts and culture award has been named after renowned artist Joydul Abedin, while the science and technology award is named after eminent architect FR Khan, the health award after national professor and renowned physician M Ibrahim, and the education and research award is named in honour of scientist and noted educationist Quadrat-e Khuda.

Eminent jurist and politician Dr Kamal Hossain, a senior adviser to the organisers, told the briefing that there needs to be sincere formulation of a policy for NRB participation in Bangladesh, as they bring in the most foreign currency for the country.

"Better educational institutions and improved environment for research are required to induce non-resident Bangladeshis to come back to the country," Dr Kamal said adding that a large number of expatriates have shown interest in returning if the conditions improve.

It is about time that the NRBs are recognised and honoured for their work abroad and their contribution to Bangladesh, he added.

North South University Vice Chancellor Hafiz G Sidiki told the press that NRB scholars could help improve the conditions by teaching here or help Bangladeshi students obtain scholarships in foreign universities.

"We invite talented teachers to come back and take some classes here or take students over for scholarships," he added.

Polls to 4 city

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

Sakhawat said this when the reporters asked about Adviser Mainul Hosen'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," Sakhawat told the journalists.

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

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

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.

Nepal set

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be eliminated once a special assembly changed 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 Katmandu. 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 once held nearly absolute sway.

In the centuries since, that was often the case in Nepal, a near-feudal wonderland for hash-smoking hippies and mountain climbers looking to scale Himalayan peaks, such as Mount Everest.

But Gyanendra, the 12th Shah dynasty monarch, has never enjoyed the popularity of his predecessors and Sunday's deal to eliminate the throne was received largely with indifference in Katmandu.

"Before kings were part of people's heart," said Mata Pasad Rimal, 60, a retired government official. "Now people have turned against him. The king has lost his position and popularity; it will be best for him to leave the palace."

Gyanendra came to the throne in 2001 after a palace massacre in which the crown prince is accused of gunning down Gyanendra's older brother, the late King Birendra, and much of the royal family and then killing himself. The murders helped pierce the mystique surrounding Nepal's royalty.

Four years later, Gyanendra dismissed Nepal's parliament and seized total power, saying he would bring order to a chaotic political scene and quell the Maoist insurgency.

Education still

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failed the projects and educational programmes taken by the government and around 400 NGOs, experts say.

Moreover, international policies including the UN convention signed over the last 50 years by the government have also yielded little result, they observe.

"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 governments monitor the steps the scenario is sure 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 sector.

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 has been participating in the Special Olympics Summer Games 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 41 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

'Special Schools for Blind', seven for hearing and speech disabled children, one for intellectually disabled, and only one for providing training, employment, and for rehabilitation.

The schools for the children with hearing and speech disability and for the intellectually disabled students hardly have adequate facilities including necessary technical equipment, qualified teachers and instructors.

Moreover, the government can only ensure special facilities to around 600 disabled children in 13 institutions.

It has a single training centre to train up 25 teachers for the disabled, while two other NGOs including one in SWID also have separate training centres.

The Tk 5,000-crore programme taken under the Primary Education Programme-2 (PeP) in 2002 has turned out to be unsuccessful as the government succeeded to bring only a handful of disabled under it.

But the programme pledged to ensure children's rights including primary education.

The PeP-1 was not successful either due to lack of coordination and consensus among the donors over the focal point of the programme.

But in many developed and developing countries including India, locomotion disabled and mildly disabled children have access to an integrated education in general schools.

Moreover, severely disabled children have access to special education arrangement. And with universalised compulsory schooling, general education systems have massively expanded and special education developed apace.

Many of these countries under their education programmes provide part-time classes, non-formal education, education through open schools, universities for children with special needs, restructured curriculum, a modified examination system as well as scholarship for the benefit of these children, counselling for parents, allowances for books and stationery, uniforms, transport, readers and escorts, residence facilities and other assisting devices.

As a result, about 95 percent of the disabled students in the United States attend to general schools.

"Babu used to bite people coming close to him or shout loudly or hurt himself. He liked to spend times in solitary environment. But he has changed after we took him to a school. He can now talk, count and even identify friends," says Yeasmin, mother of Akib, a mentally disabled child.

"If we don't take him to school for one week he becomes the same person he was earlier," she adds.

"For ensuring quality education a competent and sensitive policymaking body is required in national level," says Sabir Bin Shams, executive director of Advancing Public Interest Trust.

"The people working in national level have hardly any idea about the issue of disability while the government's policies don't seem to have been taken considering fundamental rights and needs of these people," Shams adds.

"Even if education is ensured to the disabled under the existing curriculum, which has little application, the disabled would hardly be able to bring any change to their life or make themselves self-dependent."

Amini

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Hossain, Khaled Mosharraf, Shafiqur Rahman, Mizanur Rahman and Saiful Islam.

Of the accused, Amini and six others were granted bail by the High Court on March 11 while Mizan and Saiful have been absconding.

The IO prayed for issuing arrest warrant against them and an order to attach their properties. He also dropped the names of 13 other accused from the charge sheet, as their involvement in the incident was not found.

Moulavi Rashid Ahmed filed the case against Amini and 21 others on February 27 for looting valuables worth about Tk 30 lakh from his house at Barakatra in the capital on June 9, 2003.

Teachers' Release

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Quadri to the Duta leaders that the teachers and students would be released within 15 days that expired on December 23.

But the teachers are unlikely to be released soon as the hearing of a case against them was yesterday deferred to December 31.

Arefin Siddique said, "The government has lost its credibility and acceptability to hundreds of thousands of teachers and students throughout the country by not respecting its own commitment."

He said all the DU teachers and students are now in deep frustration for such an incident. "The outcome of frustration is never good for the country," Arefin said.

About the role of the DU vice chancellor (VC), the Duta leader said the VC has repeatedly assured them that the government would release the teachers soon. "But we're not seeing reflection of the assurances."

Arefin said they are still hopeful about the release of the teachers and students. "We want a congenial atmosphere at the country's public universities."

Duta acting President Prof Tajmeri S Islam said, "I and my colleagues have become extremely disappointed by government's behaviour."

She said the government had told the Duta leaders that the detained teachers and students would be released through a "respectful and acceptable" process. "But now I'm in confusion what the government actually wants to say by using such words—respectful and acceptable," Tajmeri said.

She said the teachers' association will call a meeting very soon to take further steps seeking release of the DU teachers and students.

Says Mainul

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and decide financial penalties instead of sending them to jail, the issue has already generated public debate.

"There are differences of opinion, which is not right. It is creating confusion to some extent," Mainul said.

He brushed aside any uncertainty regarding the formation of the commission due to the confusion.

He said at first the government was considering forming the commission only for businessmen so that the complaints against the businessmen could be dealt with quickly and they could go on with their businesses and continue their economic activities.

But many people and the media raised question as to why only the businessmen would have access to commission, why not the politicians, he said adding that the government has decided to allow the politicians have access to the commission.

The government wants to repatriate the sum of money that have been siphoned off abroad. The Truth Commission is needed to make that happen, said the adviser.

The draft proposal for establishing the commission has yet to reach the law ministry, he said.

Quadri accepts

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went missing while in the custody of Air France sometime between 10:00pm Friday and 12 noon on Saturday.

The adviser said the government's main concern now is to retrieve the stolen idols and detect the persons involved in the theft.

Queried if the remainder of the relics would still be sent to Paris for display at Guimet Museum, he said, "My view is that it will not be right to send those before the matter [missing of the Vishnu statues] is resolved."

He said the decision would be taken at the government level.

Asked why the artefacts were being sent despite protests from eminent citizens and art connoisseurs, Quadri said there was opposition against sending of the age-old objects on apprehension that those might not be returned. But there was no fear that those might go missing here in Bangladesh.

Pro-Thaksin party

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The PPP's closest rival, the Democrat Party, was set to win 165 seats, the Election Commission said, with five smaller parties dividing up the rest.

Democrat leader Abhisit Vejjajiva has refused to bow out, saying he was prepared to form a coalition government if the PPP fails to do so.

The result has left the shape of the new government in the hands of the smaller parties, who are certain to face pressure from the royalist generals who ousted Thaksin.

Two of the minor parties -- Chart Thai and Puea Pandin, which together have 62 seats -- have discussed forming an alliance that could turn them into crucial power brokers.

The small parties contacted by AFP were either unable to confirm PPP's claim that they were close to forming a government, or said they were still negotiating.

Analysts said it was difficult to predict which way any of the minor parties were leaning.

Also hanging over the polls are a slate of fraud claims filed with the Election Commission.

Pak polls

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campaign, scheduled rallies in their opponents' home districts Monday in an effort to poach voters from each other. Both candidates, who pledged to work together against Musharraf, were hoping to win enough seats to loosen the former army chief's grip on power.

Sadiq ul-Farooq, a leader of Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League-N party, said Musharraf was pushing for a ruling party victory in the Jan. 8 election to preserve his authority.

"Musharraf would prefer a docile prime minister to legitimise all of the actions he had taken after imposing emergency rule," ul-Farooq said.

"Only people like Pervez Elahi can serve in this job, and President Musharraf is fully backing him," he told The Associated Press. Elahi, the candidate of the Pakistan Muslim League-Q, has emerged as a potential threat to win the premiership.

Nawaz Sharif, back from exile for next month's parliamentary elections, yesterday blasted President Pervez Musharraf as a failed leader largely under US control.

With just two weeks to go in what has been a bitter campaign, Sharif told around 3,000 supporters that he had ignored five phone calls from then US president Bill Clinton after Pakistan tested an atom bomb in 1998.

"But Musharraf prostrates himself after just one phone from Washington," he said -- an apparent reference to Musharraf's decision to join the US "war on terror" after the September 11 attacks on the United States.

"We have become a laughing stock all over the world," said Sharif, who was ousted as prime minister by Musharraf, his army chief at the time, in a 1999 coup.

Sharif, who has been banned from running for office himself, was to address voters on behalf of his party's candidates Monday at a rally in southern Sindh province, Benazir's home region. Benazir travelled Monday to Sharif's eastern Punjab province for a large rally. Elahi was campaigning in the city of Jehlum, near his home district.

Probe complete

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Siraj, Mizan, Noor, and Shahid were also involved in the torching of the military vehicle.

Administrative Corporal Kamrul Hasan of the Army Headquarters filed two cases in connection with the incident.

Quoting from the case documents police said the army vehicle was stranded in a traffic jam in front of Aziz Super Market on August 21. At that time a uniformed chauffeur and Rifat Chowdhury, son of Lt Gen Jahangir Alam Chowdhury, were in the car which was taking Rifat to Bangladesh Secretariat from Bangladesh Medical College.

All of a sudden, a mob attacked the car and torched it staging a demonstration there obstructing law enforcers from carrying out their duties, in violation of the emergency power rules. The mob also assaulted the uniformed chauffeur, according to police.

COURTS RECORD STATEMENTS OF COMPLAINANTS IN 2 CASES

Two Dhaka courts yesterday completed recording statements of the complainants of two cases filed against four Dhaka University (DU) teachers and 15 students for violating Emergency Power Rules in August this year, reports our court correspondent.

The complainants are Sergeant Shawkat Ahmed of Nilkhet Police Box and Sub-Inspector (SI) Rezaul Karim of Shahbagh Police Station.

The detained teachers are Prof Sadrul Amin, president of Dhaka University Teachers' Association, Prof Anwar Hossain, general secretary of Duta, Prof Harun-ar-Rashid, dean of the Science Faculty, and Prof Neem Chandra Bhowmik, chairman of the department of applied physics.

Lawyers for Prof Sadrul Amin, Prof Anwar Hossain, Prof Harun-ar-Rashid and a detained student named Moniruzzaman cross-examined Sergeant Shawkat Ahmed for an hour and Additional Chief Metropolitan Magistrate Golam Rabbani recorded his statement.

After recording the statement, the court fixed December 31 for next hearing of the case.

Later, the teachers and the student were brought to the Court of Metropolitan Magistrate Habibur Rahman Siddique where the defence lawyers cross-examined the com-

If even a handful of them are found to have merit, authorities have 30 days to order by-elections that could shuffle the balance among the parties.

Despite the political jockeying, the PPP's strong showing in the election was seen as a repudiation of the coup.

Thais 'want to put the past 15 months of military rule behind them and turn back to the democratic path', the Bangkok Post said in an editorial.

A PPP-led coalition government would set the stage for Thaksin's political comeback, ending his self-imposed exile in Britain, where he has bought Manchester City football club.

The junta dissolved Thaksin's Thai Rak Thai (Thais Love Thais) party and banned him from political office, but the man who made a fortune in telecoms has remained a dominant and divisive figure in Thai politics.

The PPP campaigned on promises to bring back Thaksin's populist economic policies and to bring him back to Thailand.

But few analysts believe the election will resolve deep divisions between anti-Thaksin urban dwellers and the rural masses, who remain loyal to the deposed leader.

The PPP draws most of its support from farmers, the majority of Thailand's 64 million population, who remember Thaksin's efforts to boost the rural economy during his five-year rule.

The Democrat Party is popular among Bangkok's middle-class, who last year spearheaded anti-Thaksin protests that culminated in the coup.