

Zardari, Sharif put up united front, mull coalition

EU concerned about election, urges Pak gov't to free political detainees

AFP, Islamabad

The leaders of Pakistan's main opposition parties put up a united front yesterday for next week's general elections after polls showed them pulling ahead of President Pervez Musharraf's allies.

Party officials said Asif Ali Zardari, the widower of slain former premier Benazir Bhutto, agreed at a meeting late Tuesday with Nawaz Sharif, another ex-prime minister, to work together after Monday's polls.

Two polls released in recent days tip Benazir's Pakistan People's Party (PPP) as the most popular in the country since her assassination in December, followed by Sharif's, with allies of Musharraf in third place.

"Both agreed to work together after the elections, regardless of which party wins a majority," a senior PPP official, who accompanied Zardari to Sharif's house for talks, told AFP.

At a joint press conference late Tuesday, Zardari told reporters that

he would "take along all democratic forces" if his party wins the polls.

PPP spokeswoman Farzana Raja said yesterday the two leaders had agreed to cooperate but that any decision on a post-election alliance "will be taken by the party's central executive committee."

A spokesman for Sharif's party said there were "several issues on which both sides have agreement and there are a number of issues on which both sides can work together in a post-election scenario."

Sharif was set to address a major rally in central Punjab province later Wednesday, defying security concerns following Benazir's murder at a political meeting seven weeks ago and a subsequent wave of suicide attacks.

The European Union yesterday expressed concerns about the elections, urging authorities to improve arrangements and free political detainees.

6,500 MT rice

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being sold at \$340 per tonne at Bardhaman in West Bengal.

The desperate traders paid a higher price to import over 10,000 tonnes of rice which remained stuck on the Indian side of the Petrapole border.

Sources said if rice is imported at \$505 per tonne, the retail price per kilogram of rice will be about Tk 35.

Unscrupulous traders in Benapole, Sharsha, Jhikargachha, Navaron, Noyapara and Jessore started hoarding huge quantity of rice to make extra profit.

Taju, owner of Taji Enterprise, said the traders have to incur loss due to sudden hike in the import price.

Clarification

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"We would like to put on record that no ransom money was paid by Brac to the abductors. Nor, to the best of our knowledge, any ransom money was paid by his family. The father of abducted Hemonta Chakma, Mr Pratindra Lal Chakma, who is also the headman of No 86, Fatikchhari mouja has stated in writing that no money was given by the family," said the clarification.

"We feel that the initiatives of the law enforcing agencies, who promptly set to locate the abducted person, led to his quick release."

The clarification further said, "As you are well aware, the matter of abductions is a sensitive issue which has long term implications for people involved in development activities in the area and also for local residents. Any wrong news will have long term consequences like encouraging abductions."

Birsreshthas

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of Birshreshtha Sepoy Hamidur Rahman in Jhenidah, is being changed into Hamid Nagar. Sector commander Maj Gen (Retd) CR Dutta will inaugurate the library plus museum at the village in memory of Hamidur Rahman on March 9.

Agarpur, the union of Birshreshtha Captain Mohiuddin Jahangir, will be turned into Jahangir Nagar in Barisal. Lt Col (Retd) Kazi Nuruzzaman will inaugurate the library and the museum in memory of Jahangir.

Birsreshtha Sepoy Mostofa Kamal's village Moutupi in Bhola district will be renamed Mostofa Kamal Nagar and former Army Chief Maj Gen (Retd) KM Saifullah will inaugurate the library and the museum in memory of Mostofa Kamal on March 23.

Bagpachra, the village of Birshreshtha Ruhul Amin in Noakhali, will be turned into Ruhul Amin Nagar and Air Vice-Marshal (Retd) AK Khondokar will inaugurate the library and the museum in memory of Ruhul Amin on March 12.

Salamatpur, the village of Birshreshtha Lance Nayek Munshi Abdur Rouf, will be renamed Rouf Nagar in Faridpur district. Lt Gen (Retd) Meer Shawkat Ali will inaugurate the library and the museum in memory of Rouf.

Mohishkhola, the village of Birshreshtha Lance Nayek Noor Mohammad Sheikh in Narail will be renamed Noor Mohammad Nagar. The library and the museum will be inaugurated at the village by Col (Retd) Abu Usman Chowdhury on March 18.

Laxmanpur, the village of language martyr Abdus Salaam in Feni, will be renamed Salaam Nagar and Language Movement veteran Dr Halima Khatun will inaugurate the library and the museum at the village in memory of Salaam.

Language martyr Rafiq Uddin's village Paril in Manikganj will be turned into Rafiq Nagar and Language Movement veteran Begum Rawson-ara-Bachchu will inaugurate the library and the museum at the village in memory of Rafiq on March 23.

Pachuya of Mymensingh district, the village of language martyr Abdul Jabbar, will be renamed Jabbar Nagar. Language Movement veteran Abdul Matin will inaugurate the library and the museum in memory of Jabbar on February 19.

According to a statement of the LGRD ministry yesterday, the government has asked the authorities concerned to complete the projects before the Independence Day on March 26.

Prof Yunus

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"The politicians have to move forwards if they want to work for the welfare of the country and its people. I don't want any post or leadership. I'm only trying to say what is good for the country," said the Nobel Laureate.

Dr Yunus said if the opportunities for curbing corruption and bringing about political reforms are not utilised properly now, the entire nation would have to pay for it.

The Nobel laureate said he would support any move for welfare of the nation.

Akbar Ali

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should rather design a three-to-five-year plan immediately. Moreover, the government will have to take some hard decisions that are relating to the common people," he said.

The present government is not directly responsible for creating an economic emergency, but they should prepare for facing such challenges, he said.

Dr Akbar said the first task of the government should be providing all necessary support for the poor or fixed-income people who are likely to be severely affected due to the existing economic crisis.

The former adviser said if the government cannot help the poor and fixed-income people, it would be very difficult for them to survive.

"The government will be required to raise the deficit financing in order to ensure food security of the poor people," he said, adding that such deficit financing will not pose any problem to the economy as the country has a good foreign reserve.

About 40 percent of the population are poor, facing serious problems in their daily livelihood due mainly to the price hike of essentials such as rice and edible oil, according to experts.

Local food prices are going up because of price spike in the international market. Dr Akbar said prices may not be cut locally in the upcoming years as climate change and expansion of farming for bio-fuel have ushered in a huge change in the global agriculture.

"We need to put all-out effort into our agriculture and the government will have to take strict decision as to fertiliser and diesel policies," he said.

Criticising the government for not starting disbursement of diesel subsidy to the tune of about Tk 750 crore, he said any decision should be implemented properly.

Dr Akbar said although the economy has some good indicators, robust foreign reserve and a favourable exchange rate and economic growth, the country is facing some major challenges including high inflation rate and negative investment growth.

Hasina not produced

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while the rates offered by Wartsila and Sumitwere \$5.82 and \$6.17.

The prosecution said Hasina approved the project summary on October 11, 1997 after owners of Sumit Group and United Group paid the eight pay-orders to Natasha Ahmed and Nasrin Ahmed, daughters of Budrunessa Nahid, as the price of their house adjacent to the house of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

The house was donated to the Bangabandhu Memorial Trust for the Bangabandhu Memorial Museum.

Defence counsel barrister Shafique Ahmed informed the court about the recent HC judgment that quashed the extortion case against Hasina filed by businessman Azam J Chowdhury. The court also declared the government approval to bring the case under Emergency Power Rules (EPR) illegal, he said.

"This particular (Tk 3 crore graft) case stands in the same place," Shafique argued.

He said the date of occurrence of the incident mentioned in the case is 1997 whereas the state of emergency was declared on January 11 last year and the Emergency Power Ordinance was promulgated on January 12.

"The law does not permit bringing of an offence committed before the declaration of the state of emergency under the EPR, so why should Hasina be in jail?" Shafique said, adding that Hasina is also seriously ill.

He also argued that the money was given to the Bangabandhu Memorial Trust as the price of a piece of land donated to it for the Bangabandhu Memorial Museum.

Reading out an article from a Bangla newspaper and a report from an English daily, barrister Shafique said the power plant project was given to the lowest bidder and the donation was given to the trust.

The graft case against Hasina cannot be maintained, he argued, urging the court to grant her bail.

Chief prosecution lawyer ABM Sharifuddin Khan Mukul argued that there is yet no copy of the HC judgment that declared inclusion of the EPR in Azam Chowdhury's case illegal and quashed it.

He said the facts of a case never die. Even if a section of a case is declared illegal, the case itself never dies.

Referring to the defence's argument that the money was paid as a donation, Mukul said Hasina illegally favoured to the Sumit Group.

Hotel manager

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The investigation clearly shows that the Summit Group paid eight pay-orders not to the trust but to two women as per Hasina's desire, Mukul said, adding that the record of the trust is being examined.

Mukul also told the court that Natasha and Nasrin have given confessional statements under section 164 of the Criminal Procedure Code (CrPC) saying they received the pay-orders in their names from the then prime minister Sheikh Hasina.

He argued that this kind of donation is illegal.

He opposed the bail petition, saying another bail petition for Hasina in connection with this graft case is already pending with the HC, so another petition is not maintainable.

Barrister Shafique, however, countered that there is no bail petition in the HC in connection with this case.

He said they had filed a writ petition with the HC challenging the inclusion of the EPR in this case and seeking bail.

According to section 498 of the CrPC, there is no bar to entertaining this petition even though there is a bail prayer in that writ petition, the defence argued.

Advocates Syed Rezaur Rahman and Yusuf Hossain Humayun of the defence also made submissions while Public Prosecutor Advocate Syed Shameem Ahsan Habib assisted Mukul.

2 robbers killed

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responding to the call for help from the local mosque loudspeaker, began to assemble there.

The gunfight began at about 12:30am in neighbouring Bagha apzila where police and ansar teams, lying in wait for the fleeing robbers, opened fire on them, said police.

Locals later found three bullet-wounded robbers who were taken to Lalpur Health Complex where doctors declared two of them dead.

Police, however, could not recover the loot.

Of the injured, assistant sub-inspectors Abdus Sabur, Abdul Jalil and Ziaur Rahman, police constables Amzad, Ansar, Gafur and Abu Hanif, ansar members Shah Alam, Saiful and Yasar Ali and locals Mojibor Rahman Sadar, Tutul and Khoda Bux were treated at police hospital and Lalpur Health Complex.

68 Titas staff

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The Daily Star already published details of the illegally earned properties of former sales assistant Abdul Kadir Mollah, former deputy manager Emdadul Haq, and former receptionist Olifa Akhter.

Police arrested the ex-employee of the hotel named Shiplu from Kadamtala within seven hours of the grisly attack. They also picked up seven suspected sex workers from the hotel who had witnessed the gruesome attack.

Police said Shiplu admitted to the killing.

Hotel staff said Shiplu, who was formerly employed as a hotel boy, fled the hotel about a week ago with Tk 60,000 he collected from customers who visit sex workers at the hotel.

Following the incident, the hotel manager Sohrab threatened Shiplu of handing him over to the police and taking legal steps against him. This enraged Shiplu.

Early yesterday morning Shiplu and three others, armed with sharp knives, waited for the victim at the hotel gate. They attacked Sohrab when he came down with an outgoing boarder at around 6:00 am.

"Sohrab tried to escape by running up to the first floor of the hotel but the attackers chased him into a room and stabbed him indiscriminately," said Shirin Akhter, one of the seven arrested who witnessed the attack.

Talking to newsmen at Kotwali Police Station, Shirin said that as Sohrab cried out for help, Shamim and Alam rushed to his aide and the attackers stabbed them as well. They fled after slaughtering Sohrab.

The whole incident was over within five minutes, she said.

Shirin added that she believed the attackers slaughtered Sohrab to ensure his death.

The police was called in and they recovered Sohrab's body with his throat half-cut and sent it to Mitford morgue.

The victim's brother has filed a case with Kotwali police in this regard.

Shamim is undergoing treatment at Dhaka Medical College Hospital with five stab wounds on different parts of his body. Alam is at Chest Diseases Hospital in Mohakhali with wounds on his chest and abdomen.

Local shop owners alleged that sex trade that continue in different residential hotels in Nawabpura area often lead to criminal attacks in the hotels.

BoP

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To stabilise the BoP and competitive value of taka, "vigorous efforts are needed to further boost up export earnings and workers' remittances."

Capturing new markets, export diversification, more skilled manpower exports and moving to high-end products would be key to match global market demands and increasing exports, the report notes.

Between July and January in FY 08, the country imported 13.61 lakh tonnes of rice worth \$455 million, upped from 2.04 lakh tonne worth \$42 million during the same period in FY 07.

Besides, LCs have been opened for 21.99 lakh tonnes during the same period, compared to LCs for 2.89 lakh tonnes in the corresponding period in FY 07.

Wheat imports have gone up by 150 percent in July-January FY 08, with LCs in this same period rising by 95 percent.

Edible oil imports went up by 56 percent between July-January FY 08, with LCs to purchase edible oil upped by 100 percent in the same period.

Chemical fertiliser imports upped by 67 percent with a rise of 41 percent for LCs between July-January FY 08.

The foreign exchange reserves also likely to dip below \$5 billion with the country expected to pay \$600 million for the import bill to the Asian Clearing Union. Bangladesh's foreign exchange reserve stood at \$5.44 billion yesterday.

BB sources say the foreign exchange reserve needs to stay above \$5 billion to match the country's present import volumes.

Bird flu

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infection in the district in the last three months.

Meanwhile over three hundred poultry farms remain closed in the district due to bird flu infection, officials sources said.

This round of culling was arranged after about a thousand fowls died at Usha Poultry Farm in Vabaniur under Shujanagar municipality. Jyapurhat Livestock Research Institute confirmed the presence of the H5N1 virus, which causes bird flu, in the dead fowls.

Livestock office sources said they cullled 4,946 fowls and destroyed 3,153 eggs at the farm. The team also cullled over 181 free range fowls, 18 ducks and 137 pigeons from different households within one kilometre radius of the affected farm.

Local administration has imposed red alert in this area.

Our Khulna correspondent adds: Khulna district livestock department has cullled 13,702 fowls from 73 poultry farms during a massive operation in the city on Tuesday night.

The operation was carried out at Shabujbag and Shahanghat areas under Sonadanga thana of the metropolitan city. The team also destroyed 763 eggs.

Hannan Shah

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and requested a few minutes to be prepared. The police however did not allow him the time and took him along at 9:00pm on way to the Gazipur Police Station.

Hearing the news of his arrest, a number of BNP followers gathered in front of his house and chanted slogans demanding his release.

Shah Riazul Hannan, son of Hannan, told journalists that his father was arrested on false allegations and the Hannan family would continue their legal battle to free him.

Earlier yesterday, Hannan held a meeting with Khandaker Delwar Hossain, the Khaleida Zia-appointed secretary general of BNP, in the capital to discuss party affairs.

However, the two leaders, after emerging from the closed-door meeting at Delwar's flat, did not disclose the topic of discussion.

"We have discussed organisational matters," Hannan told journalists after the meeting that lasted around 45 minutes.

Hannan refused to make any further comment on party affairs and the unification process, saying that he was optimistic and he would speak with the media after further discussions with other leaders of the party.

Earlier, when Hannan arrived at the Delwar residence at 11:15am, he was greeted by a number of leaders and activists of BNP including Joint Secretary General Nazrul Islam Khan, Acting Office Secretary Ruhul Kabir Rizvi, former lawmakers Sohrab Uddin, Selim Reza Habib, Kazi Rafiqul Islam, former Chhatra Dal president Habibun Nabi Sohel.

BNP leaders said most of them want the party unified as soon as possible and they believe that the release of Hannan and the recent statements made by four senior members of the BNP standing committee would help the pro-Khaleida leaders gain the upper hand.

Although Delwar categorically said that the pro-Saifur faction must cancel its decision taken on October 29, Saifur Rahman said any strings

Jyapurhat, and savings of Tk 20 lakh in different banks.

Taskforce sources said the implicated Titas staff themselves submitted their wealth statements, which the taskforce found to be untrue.

Taskforce officials said they interrogated 450 former and present staff of Titas, 136 of whom admitted to their involvement in corruption and promised to handover their illegally amassed properties to the government.

Following the promise, 117 already handed over their illegally earned properties to the government, signing undertakings with the taskforce where they said they will never ever get involved in corruption.

Corrupt Titas Gas staff amassed the illegal properties through multi-pronged corruption including theft, abuse of power, taking of bribes in exchange for giving jobs to incompetent people, and nepotism.

Lt Col ATM Hasan, commanding officer (CO) of the taskforce, yesterday said, "Handing over of properties illegally amassed by Titas staff, proves that corruption was actually committed in the agency, the range of which was so widespread that even class four employees also became millionaires."

"Unearthing of the corruption in Titas Gas sheds light on similar corruption being committed in other government service sectors," said the CO adding that he was assisted by Capt Md Anwarul Islam, Capt Sohana Sabrina, and Capt Hanifur Rahman Bhuiyan in the investigation.

attached to the unification effort

would not be acceptable to his faction.

Four standing committee members -- Dr RA Gani, Tanvir Ahmed Siddiqui, M Shamsul Islam and Khandaker Mahbubuddin Ahmad -- in separate replies to a notice issued by the HC regarding the factional feud in BNP, said the October 29 meeting was not a meeting of the standing committee since only the party chairperson is empowered to call such meetings.

The HC had issued rule on the acting secretary general and six standing committee members following a writ petition filed by Khaleida-appointed Secretary General Delwar, challenging the Election Commission's invitation to the Saifur-led faction of BNP to represent the party at electoral reforms dialogue with it.

Some leaders were hopeful that Hannan would take the initiative to unite the party as per the direction of detained party chief Khaleida through her attorney Mahbub Uddin Khokon.

On Sunday, the HC granted a three-month interim bail to former minister Hannan who had been detained in charge of violating emergency power rules.

He was arrested on November 7 in connection with violence near the grave of late president Ziaur Rahman at Sher-e-Bangla Nagar where BNP followers had gathered to observe the National Revolution and Solidarity Day.

On January 30, the HC declared Hannan's detention illegal and granted him bail. Fatulla police arrested him again on February 7 at the gate of Narayanganj Jail in connection with a separate case.

A police sub-inspector had filed a general diary against him with Fatulla Police Station on charge of violation of emergency power rules as he allegedly attempted to hold a rally on Link Road. The HC issued the bail order after he appealed for cancellation of the case.

Obama hammers Hillary

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victories in Texas and Ohio on March 4, the next big night of nominating clashes, to keep her hopes alive.

Senator Obama, 46, celebrated in midwestern Wisconsin, where he hopes to drive another dagger into Senator Hillary bid to be the first woman president on February 19.

"We won the state of Maryland. We won the Commonwealth of Virginia. And though we won in Washington, DC, this movement won't stop until there's change in Washington, DC," he said.

Obama barely referred to Hillary, instead turning his fire on McCain, in a preview of a potential November general election matchup.

"John McCain is an American hero. We honor his service to our nation," said the Illinois senator who has rocketed to the forefront of US politics in just four years, on a quest to be America's first black president.

"His priorities don't address the real problems of the American people, because they are bound to the failed policies of the past."

As Hillary team suffered another night of losses, her deputy campaign manager Mike Henry reportedly resigned, two days after the former first lady decided to replace her campaign manager Patti Solis Doyle, US media said.

But a defiant Hillary showed no sign of giving up the fight.

"We're going to sweep across Texas in the next three weeks, bringing our message about what we need in America, the kind of president that will be required on Day One to be commander in chief, to turn the economy around," she said after flying west even before Washington area voting had closed.

"I'm tested. I'm ready. Let's make it happen!" she told rowdily in El Paso in a veiled reference to Obama's

perceived inexperience.

McCain, 71, also seemed to preview a contest with Obama, striking the charismatic Democrat's signature theme of "hope."

"Hope, my friends, is a powerful thing. I can attest to that better than many. For I have seen men's hopes tested in hard and cruel ways that few will ever experience," said the former Vietnam war prisoner.

"I do not seek the presidency on the presumption that I am blessed with such personal greatness that history has anointed me to save my country in its hour of need."

"I seek the presidency with the humility of a man who cannot forget that my country saved me."

With most of the vote counted, Obama led Hillary 64 percent to 36 percent in Virginia, 75 percent to 24 percent in Washington, and 59 percent to 34 percent in Maryland.

In a rolling count of nominating delegates by RealClearPolitics.com, Obama led with 1,259 to 1,210. A total of 2,025 delegates is needed for the nomination.

McCain led Republicans with 797 delegates to Huckabee's 240. Republicans need 1,191 for the nomination.

Exit polling showed Obama making inroads into Hillary's support base, in a trend that could spell disaster for her if repeated nationwide.

In Maryland, Obama won among men and among voters of every age group and income level, expanding his political base and anguring well for key states to come.

Gen Moeen

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last year but had postponed it due to his pre-occupations at home and abroad.

This time his visit is almost confirmed and officials concerned are making the final arrangements of his tour and discussing with the Indian officials about his meetings with top government officials.

Sources said Moeen is likely to leave Dhaka on February 24 and return home on March 2. Dates and time of his meetings are yet to be finalised.

An important official of the Indian High Commission in Dhaka also confirmed Moeen's visit. The Indian media has already published a number of reports regarding the visit of General Moeen, the official said.

During his visit, Moeen is expected to pay courtesy call to President Pratibha Devi Singh Patil, Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh, External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee and Defence Minister AK Antony.

He will also hold meetings with Indian Chief of Army Staff General Deepak Kapoor, Chief of Naval Staff Admiral Suresh Mehta and Chief of Indian Air Force Air Chief Marshal Fali Homi Major.

Sources said the visit of the Bangladesh army chief to India is being considered significant as the army-backed caretaker government in Bangladesh is currently carrying out various important tasks, including anti-corruption drives, reforms and proceeding towards the general elections by December this year.

The army has been playing an important role and extending all-out support to this government to achieve the goals.

The army chief is also expected to visit Aijmeer Sharif and the Tajmahal in Agra.

Crime wave hits

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They say these criminals extort hefty amount from them to 'ensure' uninterrupted production in a problem free environment. A bleak future awaits the expansion of garment business in and around Kalma if this situation persists, they observe.

They further blame the law enforcement agencies for not taking initiatives to check crime despite being repeatedly informed.

The recent burglary occurred at the machine room of Garden Fresh Preservation (GFP), a cold storage in Kalma, on February 6. Robbers made off with a number of parts worth Tk 20,000 after unscrewing those from a transmitter. The GFP filed a case with Savar Police Station on February 8.

Earlier on January 8, a gang of around 10 made an attempt on a factory near GFP past midnight. The gang arrived in a bus and surrounded the factory taking position at several strategic points. The authorities filed a general diary with Savar police.

Sources and eyewitnesses say in both cases criminals came on a bus and took strategic position splitting into groups. They are organised gangs and getting more and more strategic overnight, they observe.

The robbers were equipped with firearms, sharp weapons and sticks. But their attempt failed as neighbours, mostly workers and labourers, arrived on the scene. The authorities concerned beefed up security on their own as law enforcers have yet to make a strong move.

"Since the month of Ramadan I've encountered three such attempts and managed to foil those. But this time they were so organised and strategic that they broke in, tied up me and my son, and took away machinery parts."

says GFP night guard Golam Mustafa.

The guard shows the range, special blade to cut iron rod, necessary electronic equipment to unscrew machinery and sacks left by the robbers.

"I can neither quit nor pay more attention to my job since there is a security concern for my life as well," says Golam.

Speaking anonymously, a top official from an industry said, "I've informed authorities and law enforc