



PHOTO: STAR

Ignoring the risk from a running train that may arrive at any time, children play cricket on railway tracks at now abandoned Darwani Railway Station in Nilphamari district. Manpower crisis forced the authorities to virtually close the once busy station a few years ago.

12 sued on war crime charges in Patuakhali

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Patuakhali

Twelve alleged collaborators of Pakistani occupation forces were sued on war crime charges in Golachipa upazila of the district on Tuesday.

Reaz, son of late Sahabuddin of Khalishakhali village under Golachipa upazila, filed a petition case with the Judicial Magistrate's Court.

The accused are Abdul Motaleb Mridha, 70, former UP chairman of Amkhola UP

under Galachipa upazila, Jalal Mridha, 65, Abdul Haque Howlader, 70, Jainal, 68, Jabibur Rahman, 65, Amir Hussain, 68, Kanchon Ali, 68, M M Motaleb Mridha, 63, of Amkhola villaged under the same upazila, Faizul Islam, 65, of Aulapur village, Abdul Maleq Khan, 65, of Jamura village, Rustam Sikder, 70, of Telikhali village and Abdus Sattar, 63, of Kalatala area of Patuakhali Sadar upazila.

In the case statement, the complainant said the accused caught two freedom

fighters--Badsha and Hanif-- at Chinguria in Golachipa upazila while they were going to Patuakhali town on November 14, 1971.

The accused brought Badsha and Hanif to Amkhola Bazar and tortured them. Later, the accused slaughtered Badsha and Hanif and threw the bodies in Amkhola river.

The judicial magistrate accepted the case. He is likely to issue an order in this regard on Sunday, court sources said.

Physically challenged youth burnt alive, houses gutted

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Thakurgaon

A physically challenged youth was burnt alive and five houses were gutted in a fire at Kuapara village under Sadar upazila yesterday.

The deceased was identified as Arfan Ali, 28, son of Abdul Jalil.

Fire fighters and locals said the fire originated from an oven at the kitchen of Jali's house at around 11:00am and soon engulfed the adjacent houses.

Arfan was alone inside the house while his parents were working in a nearby cropland during the incident.

On information, fire fighters from Thakurgaon district headquarters rushed to the spot and brought the fire under control after an hour's frantic efforts.

Upazila Chairman Sultanul Ferdous and Upazila Nirbahi Officer (UNO) Sultana Pervin visited the spot soon after the incident and gave Tk11,000 to victim's family.

Other affected families were also given Tk.1000 from upazila parishad.

On the day, three houses were gutted in a fire at Jagorani village under Sadar upazila at around 12:50pm. Locals extinguished the blaze.

The fire originated from a kitchen of Hafizur Rahman's house and soon spread to three rooms of the house. Fire fighters rushed to the spot and brought the blaze under control after half an hour.

Train journey in western zone turns boring, risky

11 trips cancelled daily for shortage of drivers, field staff, 64 out of 161 stations closed

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Nilphamari

Western Zone of Bangladesh Railway (BR) sees increasingly poor service and risky journey due to acute shortage of engine crew and field operational staffs.

In last three years 59 people died in 807 train accidents in Western Zone.

Forty-six of the 161 stations in Pakshi and Lalmonirhat divisions under this zone have been closed while 27 others are operating only partially although there is a network of 1489 km railway track -- 936 km broad gauge and 553 km meter gauge, said BR sources.

On an average, eleven train trips are cancelled daily while punctuality rate has come down to only 70 percent in Western Zone.

In January this year, 324 trips were cancelled in the zone.

With a large number of employees going on retirement every year, manpower shortage has rose up to 30 percent as appointment to the posts of locomotive masters (train drivers) and field operational staffs in the zone has remained suspended since 1985.

Only 350 stationmasters are in service in Western Zone against 538 posts. Forty-five more will retire this year.

Now 271 of the 762 posts of locomotive masters in this zone are vacant. The crisis will worsen as more 58 locomotive masters will go on retirement by June this year.

As the locomotive masters often have to do overtime work to keep trains operational, they become fatigued and it increases risk of accidents.

Shortage of manpower also hinders scheduled check up of engines after returning from a journey, making them

vulnerable to accidents during next operations.

At present 155 train guards are working against 207 posts while 21 more will retire by 2010.

Now 575 people are in service against 695 posts of points' man. Fifty-two more will retire by this year.

Only 64 gatemen (posted at the gates of rail crossings) are now working against 173 posts. The rail authorities, however, have engaged 72 people as gatemen on daily wage basis.

Shortage of stationmasters and points men also creates problem in signalling system and causes delay in trains' reaching destination.

Due to complexities arising from shortage of field operational staff and engine crews, punctuality rate in Western Zone has come down to only 70 percent, said railway sources.

Passengers are losing confidence

on rail service and it sees declining income.

"Stations are being closed down one after another while train trips have to be cancelled on regular basis due to manpower shortage. The situation would worsen in near future," said Zahurul Islam, divisional traffic superintendent of BR Western Zone at Lalmonirhat.

In last year, the Western Zone had placed to the railway ministry some proposals including two-year job extension of the railway employees scheduled to retire in 2009 and 2010 and contact-basis appointment of the retired rail employees who are in sound health, said Abdul Wahab, chief operating superintendent of Western Zone of Bangladesh Railway.

"The situation will improve if the proposals are granted and new manpower is recruited," he said.

Char people opt for chilli farming because of high yield

KM REZAUL HOQUE, Gaibandha

Chilli cultivation is gaining popularity among the people of remote Deluabari Char on the Jamuna due to its high yield.

Growers are now making a huge profit by cultivating chilli on the char where they could not produce anything just couple of years ago.

Afsar Mollah, who first cultivated chilli on the char (newly emerged land-mass) under Fulchhari upazila of Gaibandha last year, told this correspondent that he cultivated chilli on 25 bighas of land on experimental basis and got 150 maunds of green and 30 maunds of dried chillies.

Afsar earned Tk 3 lakh by selling both green and dried chillies last year. He cultivated jute and vegetable on the land couple of years ago, but it was hard for him to get back the production cost.

Seeing the success of Afsar, many people of the char have started cultivating chilli on their lands. Growers are collecting green chilli this season and making a good profit by selling it.

Afsar has cultivated chilli on 40 bighas of land this season and is expecting around 170 to 180 maunds of crop yield.

"My chilli field draws

attention of the people who visit here to see chilli production," said Abdur Rouf, another grower of the area.

Chilli cultivation has spread to other villages of

Fulchhari upazila. Most of the farmers of Bagari and Kholabari villages have started cultivating chilli on their lands, said upazila agriculture officer Yusuf

Rana Mondol.

As many as 1,200 hectares of land have been brought under chilli cultivation in the upazila this season, the official added.



PHOTO: STAR

Farmers collect chilli at a field in Deluabari Char on the Jamuna River in Fulchhari upazila of Gaibandha district as chilli cultivation has become a profitable initiative in the area.

PHOTO: STAR

People join a colourful procession brought out by the district administration in Panchagarh town marking the 90th birthday of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and National Children's Day yesterday.

DISPUTE OVER LEASE MONEY

Landowners' men hurt 40, torch betel leaf gardens

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Kushtia

Around 40 lessees were injured as a gang hired by landowners attacked them at Bandarbhita village in Alamdanga upazila under Chuadanga district yesterday.

The criminals also torched six betel leaf gardens raised by the lessees.

The incident followed lessees' protest against landowners' decision to double the lease money unilaterally.

Around a hundred small farmers of Bandarbhita have been cultivating betel leaf taking lease of around 500 bighas of land from different people of the area for five years, said police and locals.

The period of lease contract will end in 2012.

Several days ago, the landholders unilaterally

increased the lease money to Tk 12,000 from 6,000 and warned the farmers not to go to the garden without payment of the increased money, sources said.

When a few lessees went to the betel leaf garden yesterday, men belonging to an Chand Mohammad attacked them with bamboo, iron rods and other weapons at about 2:30pm. They mercilessly beat up farmers Hafizur, Alef and Tikka.

As the news spread, other lessees rushed to the spot but they also came under attack by the men of landowners.

Around 40 lessees were injured during the incident.

The hired goons also set fire to six betel leaf gardens on the leased lands.

Police and Rapid Action Battalion from Chuadanga rushed to the spot and

brought the situation under control.

The injured were admitted to Chuadanga Sadar Hospital.

They include Hasem, Shahid, Hafizul, Ummat, Matiar, Monwar, noor box, Hannan, Taleb Asikul, Mamun and Badal.

Seriously injured Shahid was shifted to Dhaka Medical College Hospital as his condition deteriorated.

The lessees alleged that the landowners' men made the attack and torched the betel leaf gardens to oust them.

A tense situation was prevailing there.

Patrol has been increased in the area to avert any untoward situation, said Chuadanga Police Superintendent Nazrul Islam who visited the spot.

50 injured as rival groups clash in B'baria

UNB, B'baria

Over 50 people, including policemen, were injured in a violent clash between two groups of people at Natay village in Sadar upazila on Tuesday.

Locals said the clash broke out at noon between Chandni group and Nasir group over establishing supremacy in the area. Nasir group first attacked UP

member Takdir Hossain at local Chand market.

Later, both the groups equipped with lethal weapons and sticks attacked each other, leaving 50 people from both sides injured. During the two-hour long fighting, the clashing groups damaged some houses and shops and exploded bombs, creating panic among the local people.

Police lobbed six teargas shells to bring the situation under control. Four of the injured--Takdir Member, Faruk Mia, Ershad Mia and Javed Mia--were admitted to Brahmanbaria Sadar Hospital and local clinics while Manik Mia was admitted to a hospital in Dhaka.

Additional police have been deployed in the area to fend off further trouble.