

Road dividers on all highways

Says communications minister

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The government will take steps to set up road divider on all the highways of the country gradually to minimise the number of road accidents, Communications Minister Syed Abul Hossain said yesterday.

"I have already taken consent from the prime minister in this regard," he said at a view exchange meeting on "Finalising the guidelines of running overload control station", held at Sharak Bhaban in the city.

Initiatives are already on to construct four lanes and median on different roads, including Dhaka-Chittagong Highway and Joydevpur-Mymensingh Highway, said the minister.

He also pointed out that overloading and lack of median are the major causes of road accidents.

Citing an example the minister said accidents were a regular phenomenon in the city's Airport Road sometimes ago, but the situation changed once road divider was built. The minister blamed the last caretaker regime and the BNP-led four party alliance government for the poor condition of highways, saying they did not maintain the roads properly.

He said Tk 990 crore maintenance budget for the current fiscal is quite insufficient, considering that of previous years.

"We will start the work after receiving fund from the government as we have already got assurance on it," said the minister.

26 killed

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Neither the Ha-Meem officials nor the fire brigade could say what caused the blaze.

DG Shahidullah said the factory had enough fire-extinguishers, but the workers were not trained enough to use those.

Of the unfortunate 26, eight died at Shin-Shin Japan Hospital Ltd, one each at Nightingale Medical College Hospital and Doctors' General Hospital in Ashulia, five at Ashulia Centre for Women and Children Health, four at Dhaka Medical College Hospital, three at Enam Medical College Hospital in Savar, one at Savar Combined Military Hospital and three at the factory.

The bodies of the three who died inside were recovered from the ninth and tenth floors of the factory in the evening.

Witnesses said four out of seven exit staircases were closed. Desperate to flee the heat and smoke, some workers jumped off the windows, while some fell trying to get to the ground using rolls of cloth.

Many others were injured hurtling down the stairs.

Survivors said around 300 workers were either having lunch on the top-floor canteen or working on the ninth floor.

Mozammel, one of the injured, said, "As someone screamed 'fire', many ran out of the 10th floor while many like me stayed in the canteen thinking it was something about the agitation over wages."

"Within minutes, we were enveloped in thick smoke. We then ran to the staircases but failed to go down for excessive heat," he continued.

He said they broke the windowpanes and hung long cloths to climb down. Many fell to the ground trying to get down this way.

Another survivor Mohammad Morsalin said soon after the fire began, the ninth and 10th floors became dark with smoke and it was extremely hot.

Sample-section worker Mujibor Rahman said all three emergency exits and exits for women were closed and a few could not get out through the three other staircases.

Worker Ruma and her elder sister Hamida said although they could get down using a staircase, many who were late to respond failed to escape.

She alleged that many were trapped as a security guard of the factory locked a

Bodies of boy and woman recovered in city

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Abul Hossain mentioned that his ministry would go for setting up weighbridges and overload control stations on highways. Ministry officials are holding meetings with the stakeholders to make the stations useful, he added.

Chief engineer of Roads and Highways Department (RHD), Azizur Rahman said plying of overloaded vehicles on highways is reducing the longevity of roads.

In many cases drivers remain reluctant to use the overload control stations and at times they manage permission for plying overloaded trucks bribing on-duty staff, said an RHD official.

According to a Buet study, faulty road construction causes 25 to 30 per cent road accidents, said KM Enayetullah, secretary general of Bangladesh Sarak Paribahan Malik Samity.

TRAIN ACCIDENT

The Ministry of Communications would take steps to evict all mobile shops from railway stations and also remove illegal structures, said Minister Syed Abul Hossain.

Responding to a question after the programme he said the driver, who took a cup of tea from a station, is responsible for the recent train accident in Narsingdi.

A three-member committee is working to fix the compensation for the victims of the accident, he added.

If it is late, he would try to help them personally as a minister, he said, adding that he would also request the prime minister to give money from her fund, if necessary.

Police yesterday recovered body of an unidentified 10-year-old boy from Suhrawardy Udyan in the capital's Shahbagh.

Nazir Uddin, sub-inspector of Shahbagh Police Station, said they found the body around 10:00am from a bush in the park. A coloured ribbon was wrapped around his neck.

Police suspect he might have been strangled.

The body was sent to Dhaka Medical College morgue for an autopsy.

Meanwhile, police recovered body of a woman from East Islambagh in the capital's Chawkbazar area early yesterday.

The deceased was identified as Reshma Akhter, 25, daughter of Abdur Rahman.

Mohammad Ali, officer-in-charge of Chawkbazar Police Station, said all members of the family except Reshma went to attend a religious function around 10:00pm on Monday.

After returning home around 1:00am, they found the front door of the flat locked from inside, he added.

Later, they broke open the door with the help of the neighbours and found Reshma hanging from the ceiling of her room, the OC said.

Police sent the body to Dhaka Medical College for an autopsy.

Reshma along with his seven-year-old son had been living in her parents' house since she was divorced seven years back.

An unnatural death (UD) case has been filed in this connection with Chawkbazar Police Station.

South Korea's army chief resigns

BBC ONLINE

The head of South Korea's army, Gen Hwang Eui-don, has resigned.

Defence officials confirmed that Gen Hwang stepped down after reports in the press linked him to a financial scandal involving a property investment.

His resignation comes amid heightened tensions on the Korean peninsula after North Korea's deadly shelling of a South Korean island last month.

South Korea's defence minister resigned after criticism of his response to the attack, which killed four people.

Two marines and two civilians died in the shelling of Yeonpyeong island near the disputed Yellow Sea border on 23 November.

It was the first attack of its kind on South Korean civilians since the Korean War ended in a ceasefire in 1953.

Trapped in smoke

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Mokbul, who made a dramatic escape, told this correspondent.

Rasel, another worker, said some 200 people were in the canteen just before the fire broke out. He said four of the five stairways of the building were opened but workers could not use them, as so many of them were rushing to it at a time.

"We could not use the stairs due to the heavy smoke. Many jumped out of the floor without thinking about the consequence," said Rasel, who himself jumped from the tenth floor.

He said he was luck to sustain only slight injuries. But his co-worker Rezaul, died after he jumped from the same floor, he added.

Mokbul along with some other workers used a roll of denim cloth as a rope and climbed down the building breaking open a window.

The factory has a committee that holds monthly meeting with the workers on fire drill, Rasel said, adding, they were also trained to use the fire fighting equipment.

"But we could not see the equipment due to the plumes," said Rasel, who was being treated at Doctors General Hospital and Diagnostic Centre at Ashulia in Savar.

Some 11 workers were rushed to the hospital with minor injuries, said M Abdul Moteleb, a physician at the hospital.

WikiLeaks

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Police conducted the search reportedly in connection with SQ Chowdhury's controversial role during the Liberation War in 1971.

Asked about this, Detective Branch ADC Mashur Rahman said they raided the house on information that Chowdhury was there.

Khaleeda siding

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to protect the perpetrators of 1971.

The premier was speaking at a discussion at Bangabandhu International Conference Centre in the capital with AL Presidium Member Syeda Sajeda Chowdhury in the chair. The ruling AL organised the discussion marking the Martyred Intellectuals' Day.

The main opposition BNP on December 9 extended support to the countrywide hartal called by Sammilita Olama Mashayekh Parishad president Muhiuddin Khan in protest against the National Education Policy that has been passed recently.

Hasina said the countrymen witnessed the evidence of BNP-Jamaat's looting when they were in power.

"The looted items were shifted in boxes in last few days.... Her broken suitcase has turned into a magic box.

"BNP doesn't love the country and its people. It only knows to loot. Their main job is to patronise killers and militants," she noted.

Bepza chief

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as they did not receive any official order as of yesterday.

Meanwhile, the Detective Branch (DB) of Police yesterday produced detained Moshrefa Mishu, president of Garment Workers Unity Forum, before a Dhaka court with remand prayers -- each for 10 days -- in three cases. Of the cases, two were filed earlier with Kafur Police Station and one with Khilkhet Police Station on December 12. Mishu was not accused in the FIR of any of the cases.

Detectives yesterday claimed that Mishu has links with other countries that are competing with Bangladesh in the garments sector and that she is trying to destroy the sector in the country.

Monirul Islam, deputy commissioner (DC) of DB, said they have information that Mishu played a vital role in the recent unrest in the sector. Mishu several NGOs in the name of workers' welfare while maintaining links with some other countries that are competing with Bangladesh in terms of obtaining work orders, the DC added.

Asked Jebunnesa Jebu, sister of Mishu, trashed the DB allegations and challenged police to prove the claims.

Mishu was arrested at her Bhuber Goli house in the capital early yesterday.

The court yesterday placed Mishu on a two-day remand in connection with the case filed with Kafur police on the charges of van-

dalising Outright Fashion Ltd in Shearapara, damaging and setting fire to vehicles and impeding police duty on June 30.

It, however, rejected the remand prayer against the case filed with the same police station on charges of damaging National Wool Wear Ltd in Mirpur and vandalising vehicles and barring police form discharging their duties on December 9.

The court fixed today (Wednesday) for the hearing on the case filed with Khilkhet police on charges of injuring 20 police personnel, damaging 60 vehicles and setting fire to a few of them in the area on December 12.

DC Monir said in preliminary interrogation they found that Mishu has never been a garment worker although she claims herself a workers' leader. Besides, she has no source of income but frequently visits other countries, added the DC.

Mishu used to collect money from workers in the name of their welfare, said the DC, adding that they have information that she used to threaten factory owners of labour unrest if they do not pay her.

Several organisations including Revolutionary Workers Party of Bangladesh, Bangladesh Samajtantrik Dal, Bangladesh Garments Sramik Sanghati and Gonotantrik Baam Morcha condemned the arrest and demanded Mishu's immediate release.

Justice

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and placed wreaths.

Many carried national flags and wore black ribbons. Organisations carried banners with slogans demanding a speedy war crimes trial.

On December 14, 1971, the Pakistani occupational force and their local collaborators -- Razakar, Al-Badr and Al-Shams -- abducted and killed frontline intellectuals and professionals to cripple the emerging nation intellectually.

The killers dragged renowned academics, teachers, writers, doctors, engineers, journalists and other eminent personalities out of their homes blindfolded, taking them to the killing grounds at Rayerbazar, Mirpur and other places in the capital.

After the butchery, the bodies were left to rot. The day is observed as Martyred Intellectuals' Day.

President Zillur Rahman and Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina placed wreaths at the Martyred Intellectuals' Mausoleum at Mirpur in the morning.

They stood in solemn silence for a minute while bugle played the last post. Cabinet members, lawmakers and heads of the three services were also present on the occasion.

Khaleeda Zia, leader of the opposition in parliament and BNP chairperson, accompanied by her party colleagues, also paid tribute to the martyrs.

Different political parties and socio-cultural organisations observed the day through various programmes, including seminars, discussion and silent processions. Black flags and national flags at half-mast flew across the country.

Hijacked SHIP Families seek PM's help

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, Ctg

The families of abducted crewmembers of the hijacked Bangladeshi ship MV Jahan Moni have urged Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to take steps for rescuing them.

The call came from a human chain formed by Bangladesh Sochetan Nabik Samaj in front of Chittagong Press Club yesterday afternoon.

Meanwhile, the pirates did not contact with the owner of the ship or make ransom demand in last two days, said officials of SR Shipping Ltd, the owning company, and Brave Royal Ship Management, the operating company, of the hijacked ship.

Around 60 seamen working in different shipping companies and families of three crewmembers of the hijacked ship took part in the human chain.

The family members are: Bilkis Rahman, mother of engine cadet Md Shahrar Rabbi, Third Officer Md Kamrul Hossain's wife Mina Parvin and son Moin Hasan, and general steward Jashim Uddin's elder brother Nijam Uddin.

The seamen in the human chain urged the government to take safety measures in the piracy prone areas in the sea.

The family members said the government should take immediate steps to negotiate with the pirates.

Third Officer Md Kamrul Hossain's wife Mina burst into tears while talking to The Daily Star.

Mina, who has been living in the port city's Madarbari area with her two children, is passing sleepless nights since the pirates hijacked the ship.

Her son Moin is an SSC examinee and daughter is a student of class II at a city school.

Moin said he could hardly concentrate on his study rather he is worried about his father.

Rahmat Ullah, technical officer of Brave Royal Ship Management, told this correspondent they tried to contact with the pirates through satellite phones for several times in last two days but got no response.

Regarding ransom, Rahmat said the pirates have not yet made any formal ransom demand.

Earlier on Sunday, some crewmembers talked with their families over phone when the pirates contacted the ship owners for the first time.

The crewmembers also informed about ransom amount to their families.

Urmila Sharmin, wife of second engineer Abul Bashar, told The Daily Star the pirates demanded \$ 9 million as ransom.

HC moves to stop mobile theft

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The High Court asked the government why it should not direct the state to block the use of stolen, unauthorised, and illegal mobile phones by using international mobile equipment identity (IMEI) numbers.

It asked the government on Monday to respond to the court's order for explanation within four weeks.

IMEI is unique 15-digit identification number of a mobile handset unique to it. It is like the fingerprint of a person.

A division bench of Justice AHM Shamsuddin Chowdhury Manik and Justice Sheikh Md Zakir Hossain issued the rule following a writ petition filed by Mobile Phone User Development Society, a private organisation.

The organisation recently filed the writ petition seeking directives to the government to block the IMEI of handsets that are stolen, illegal, unauthorised and unapproved from being used.

The secretaries to the ministry of law, home and post and telecommunications, chairman of Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (BTRC) and national monitoring cell of the home ministry have been made respondents to the rule.

The Department of Telecommunication of India disconnected all the mobile handsets without IMEI number last year to stop misuse of lost stolen, snatched, illegal and unapproved mobile phone sets.

Recently, intelligence agencies in Bangladesh traced the culprits, who launched a bomb attack on lawmaker Fazle Noor Taposh, using the IMEI numbers of the criminals. The criminals had used brand new SIMs but investigators were able to catch them as they used their old handsets.

One can check the IMEI of a GSM mobile handset by pressing *#06#. No two mobile handsets in the world should have the same IMEI number.

Palestinians want US guarantees before talks

AFP, Ramallah

Palestinian leader Mahmud Abbas was hoping to secure a series of US guarantees before resuming peace talks with Israel, as he met with Washington's Middle East envoy.

George Mitchell returned to the region on Monday for the first time in months on a mission to salvage peace talks between Israel and the Palestinians a week after Washington admitted that direct negotiations were off the menu.

Mitchell is trying to secure Palestinian agreement to discuss the key issues of the conflict through indirect negotiations with the Israelis.

Ahead of the morning meeting, a senior Palestinian official said Abbas was hoping to get Washington's answer to a list of demands laid out in a letter handed to US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton last week by chief Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erakat.

"Last week, Erakat delivered a letter to Hillary saying that they want US guarantees and answers before returning to any negotiations, direct or indirect," the official told AFP, speaking on condition of anonymity.

"We are now awaiting the answer to that letter."

The letter lays out two key requests on which the

Palestinians are conditioning their return to any peace talks with Israel.

Firstly, it demands US guarantees that there would be "a complete halt to settlement in the West Bank and east Jerusalem."

It also calls on the United States to recognise a Palestinian state based on Israel's borders of before the 1967 Six-Day War in which the Jewish state seized the West Bank, including east Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip.

If Washington refuses, the letter asks that the administration of President Barack Obama not take steps to prevent the Palestinians from seeking such recognition from the UN Security Council.

"If there was no agreement on these points and no recognition by the administration of a Palestinian state, then the US administration was requested not to block the Palestinians from going to the Security Council and the General Assembly," the source said.

"Abbas is waiting for US answers to his request, which he expects Mitchell will have during his meeting today in Ramallah."

The letter also asks for Washington to reaffirm its commitment to ending Israel's occupation of the territories seized in 1967 and the establishment of a two-state solution, with a Palestinian state within those borders.

Of '71 butchers

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Witnesses said during the nine months of liberation war many Bangalees were tortured, shot and beheaded by the Biharis. The bodies were later thrown into a 30-ft deep water tank in an abandoned pump house, aptly named Jalladkhana (butcher's den).

"Anyone who had heard stories of the torture chamber feared it", recalls Md Fariduzzaman who lost his father in the Mirpur blood-bath.

"A horrible stench hung in the air surrounding the place and human lard floated in the flood water in the neighbouring areas during monsoon", he added.

When the war was over the pump house was abandoned and the tank was covered with heavy cement slabs. However, the macabre acts were exposed a few months later when gas released from decomposing bodies burst open the slab.

"They thought they could hide the atrocities by hiding the bodies but truth cannot lie buried," he said adding, "Truckloads of skeletons were excavated by locals in 1973."

After Bangabandhu was assassinated in 1975, relatives of the deceased stopped visiting the pump house out of fear. It remained abandoned for many years with its stories forgotten except in the memories of those who lost their loved ones there, said Fariduzzaman with a sigh.

In November 1999, based on eyewitness accounts, Liberation War Museum (LWM) with the help of Bangladesh Armed Forces excavated the tank and found 70 skulls and 5,392 bones bearing the marks of untold brutality.

Eight years after the excavation, LWM built a memorial at the torture chamber and at the mass grave leaving the structure of the pump house intact.

Today, Jalladkhana lies squeezed in between multi-storied buildings, slums, makeshift shops and the adjacent Biharis camps in Mirpur section 11.

"Families of the victims visit the memorial to pray and pay respect to the souls of the departed", said KM Nasiruddin, in-charge of the memorial.

The memorial compound is bordered with a triangular walkway. Names of 400 killing fields found across the country are engraved on marble rails along the walkway. Soils collected from six important killing fields from six divisions are on display in clay pots on altars as symbol of respect to the martyrs at the memorial.

At the centre of the memorial is a mural titled 'Jibon Abinashwar' (life is immortal). Made of burnt bricks, the mural depicts the mutilated bodies of the martyrs telling the stories of their sacrifice.

The two ends of the triangular walkway meets in front of the pump house with a bell hanging at the entrance which visitors ring before entering the pit.

The 30 feet deep tank of death from where the skulls and bones of the martyrs were recovered, is now covered with glass with an engraving saying-- "We bow our heads in deep respect to all martyrs."

Visitors need to bow their head in order to see the inside of the tank.

Mirpur was actually liberated on January 31, 1972, one and a half months after the liberation of the country on December 16, 1971.