

SHIP-BREAKING YARD
HC asks for
report on
Feb 6 blast

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The High Court yesterday directed the chief inspector of Directorate of Explosives to submit a report by February 6 on the explosion at a ship-breaking yard in Sitakunda that killed four people on January 18.

It also ordered the director general of Department of Environment to submit a report within the same deadline on whether the ship that exploded had obtained any environmental clearance certificate from his office.

Earlier on January 19, the HC bench of Justice AHM Shamsuddin Chowdhury Manik and Justice Sheikh Md Zakir Hossain issued a suo moto rule asking Master Abul Kashem, owner of the ship, to explain why he should not be penalised for contempt of court for dismantling a ship defying HC restrictions.

The court issued the rule following a report published in The Daily Star on the same day.

The bench yesterday kept Abul Kashem, owner of Mak International Corporation, standing in the courtroom dock for around five hours on charge of contempt of court.

In addition to that, the court asked him to appear before it on February 6.

The bench also directed the officer-in-charge of Sitakunda Police Station to notify the court on the same day whether any case had been filed in connection with the ship explosion in Abul and if so, the development of the case so far.

Sheikh Fazle Noor Taposh appeared in the court for Kashem, while Syeda Rizwana Hasan and Iqbal Kabir Lytton, both leaders of Bangladesh Environmental Lawyers Association, argued against ship breaking.

Statement

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Investigation officer of the case, Sub-Inspector Saiful Islam of Ashulia Police Station, produced Sultan Mohammad Ratan and Hossain Gazi before the court of Senior Judicial Magistrate Masrur Salehin.

SI Saiful said the 30 people had been sent back to Rab. Commander M Sohail, director, Legal and Media Wing of Rab, told The Daily Star they would hand over the workers to their relatives.

Rab said they raided Ekota Brickfield in Ashulia Wednesday evening after a tip-off from intelligence sources and rescued the workers, including two men chained by their legs.

Billal Hossain, one of the workers, had filed a case with the police station accusing 11 people of Ekota Brickfield of torture and forced labour.

UK pledges

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the official residence of the British Prime Minister.

Hasina had a one-to-one dialogue with Cameron before a delegation level meeting, which lasted for 40 minutes from 10:30am.

During the meeting Sheikh Hasina sought British cooperation in the fields of health, infrastructure, school-feeding programme and climate change, Rashed Chowdhury, minister (press) at Bangladesh High Commission in the UK told the UNB.

Cameron praised the socio-economic programmes of Hasina's government and her pragmatic leadership on climate change.

He also lauded Hasina for her government's role in fighting terrorism and hoped the two countries would work together in combating terrorism.

The two leaders also discussed human rights issues.

Prime Minister's younger sister Sheikh Rehana, Foreign Minister Dipu Moni, Sylhet City Corporation Mayor Badruddin Qamran Chowdhury, Ambassador at Large M Ziauddin and Bangladesh High Commissioner to UK Prof Sayeedur Rahman Khan were present during the meeting.

Earlier, Cameron received Sheikh Hasina at the main entrance of his residence.

BNP bags one

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candidates did better than their rivals. In seven divisions, they won 92 of 236 mayoral posts and AL-backed contestants 88.

Rebel candidates from AL won 22 and those from BNP 11.

Fresh from a morale-boosting performance in the local body polls, the main opposition has dealt a blow to the ruling party by winning Habiganj-1, traditionally an AL stronghold.

AL leader Dewan Farid Gazi had been elected from this constituency in 1973, 1996, 2001 and 2008. Jatiya Party candidate won the seat in 1991 election.

In the last parliamentary election, Gazi defeated his rival BNP candidate Sheikh Sujat by 72,592 votes. As a grand alliance candidate, he polled 1,52,080 votes against Sujat's 79,488.

Yesterday it was a different election day for Sujat. He got 81,330 votes, while AL candidate bagged 80,045. Abdul Munim Chowdhury of Jatiya Party, a component of AL-led grand alliance, bagged 22,220 votes helping Sujat prevail on Mushfiq.

On the other hand, Brahmanbaria-3 constituency election had been a BNP bastion till the last parliamentary election. The party won the constituency in 1979, 1991, 1996 and 2001. It did not contest the polls in 1986 and 1988.

In 2008, Lutful Hai of AL won the seat by defeating BNP-led four party alliance candidate. In yesterday's by-election, Mukhtadir of AL got 1,25,141 votes and BNP candidate 84,631.

POLLS HELD PEACEFULLY Earlier in the day, voting in the by-elections and municipality polls went off peacefully except for a few stray incidents.

The Election Commission has expressed satisfaction at the conduct of the polls.

But the main opposition BNP, which had repeatedly called for army deployment in the by-elections, has demanded re-voting at five polling stations in Brahmanbaria-3.

The party will come up with a formal reaction to the by-polls through a press briefing at the Jatiya Press Club in the capital at 10:30am today.

Talking to reporters at the EC Secretariat yesterday afternoon, Election Commissioner Brig Gen (retired) M Sakhawat Hossain said, "The elections under the present government have been freer and fairer than those under the previous political governments."

Referring to the balloting yesterday, he observed it proves free and fair election is possible by deploying regular law enforcers.

Besides, he added, depending on the army for elections does not always go with the spirit of democracy.

The same afternoon, BNP alleged rigging and violence at five out of 126 polling centres in Brahmanbaria-3.

Briefing journalists at its headquarters in the capital, the party's standing committee member Nazrul Islam Khan claimed the ruling AL men and law enforcers had beaten up many of their activists and ousted agents from different polling stations in both Habiganj-1 and Brahmanbaria-3.

Yesterday's elections were considered a crucial test for the EC as well as the two major political parties that fought a close battle in the countrywide municipal polls a week ago.

Meanwhile, voting in 12 municipalities--Parbatipur in Dinajpur, Magura, Charfahad in Bhola, Madhabdi in Narsingdi, Jajira in Shariatpur, Madan in Netrakona, Madaripur sadar, Daganbhuiyan in Feni, and Cox's Bazar sadar, Chakoria, Moheshkhali and Teknaf in Cox's Bazar--went off without any untoward incidents, our local correspondents report.

Our staff correspondent Najmul Alam Nobin from Habiganj reported low voter turnout in the area. Locals and the election officials said the thin presence of the voters might be because of their lack of interest in the by-election and many being busy in Boro cultivation.

Both AL and BNP candidates have accused each other of influencing the

elections.

Returning Officer Mohammad Emran, however, said the voting was cent percent peaceful, and there have been no incidents of rigging or violence.

He said though rival candidates had raised allegations of voter intimidation, no evidence of that was found.

Earlier, BNP's election agent Abdul Khalek told The Daily Star that voting was going on peacefully.

Voters too said they faced no obstructions while coming to the polling centres.

AL candidate Mushfiq Hussain Chowdhury told The Daily Star that the election was peaceful except that some policemen had threatened his supporters.

Our staff correspondent Pankaj Karmakar and local correspondent Sheikh Shahidul Islam from Brahmanbaria report: The presence of women voters was much better than males in both urban and rural areas.

During the balloting, BNP candidate Khaled Hossain Mahbub demanded cancellation of election at eight centres, alleging attacks on his agents by AL activists.

Later, he withdrew all his agents and submitted applications to the presiding officers, urging them to cancel the voting.

Mirza Ghalib, presiding officer at Basudevpur High School centre, said there had not been any situation to warrant cancellation of voting.

Rab to kill

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(Rab) for extra-judicial killings, UNB reports.

"Do you believe that the UK has trained this force to kill our own people? Certainly not. Rab has been trained to protect citizens," she said responding to a query from a student in the UK.

She was taking questions after delivering a statement on Global Peace at the Main Chamber Hall of the Oxford Union at Frewin Court yesterday.

Meanwhile, Amnesty International in a press release yesterday said Rab must stop extrajudicial killings.

The press release also called on the British government to raise concerns before Sheikh Hasina about reports of torture, extrajudicial executions, and excessive use of force by Rab.

More than 600 people are thought to have been killed by Rab personnel since 2004 when the battalion was created, it said, adding, WikiLeaks sources have recently alleged that the UK police have been training Rab.

Abbas Faiz, Amnesty International's Bangladesh researcher, said, "Suggestions that these deaths in custody are just unrelated random incidents, as opposed to targeted executions, are simply not credible. The chance of this same fate befalling so many apprehended individuals defies belief and contradicts eye-witness testimony. These deaths amount to extrajudicial executions."

Hasina, however, said whenever allegations of extrajudicial killings were raised, the government investigated those and took action. "We believe in human rights."

Asked if Islam will remain in the constitution as state religion, she said secularism does not mean absence of religion.

Hasina said a parliamentary committee is working to amend the constitution in light of a High Court verdict.

On confrontational politics, the premier said her government has ensured all facilities to opposition leader Khaleda Zia and her party since assuming office in 2009.

Unfortunately, Hasina said, BNP is not joining parliament. "I hope the opposition will return to the House."

Replying to a query on government's relation with Pakistan, she said, "At present, we are enjoying good relations with Pakistan."

Hasina also said India contributed significantly during Bangladesh's Liberation War in 1971.

"True that we have some problems with India such as sharing waters of the common rivers but we're working together to find solutions," she said.



Pro-BNP lawyers head for a press conference at the Supreme Court Bar Association building yesterday morning after boycotting the chief justice's court.

PHOTO: STAR

Acid thrown

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of Dhaka Medical College Hospital.

Her brother-in-law Labu along with three others waylaid her at Kurarghat around 9:30pm when she was coming back home from a tailoring shop at Kamrangirchar, she told The Daily Star at the hospital.

Labu asked her to sign on a blank paper to be used for her divorce but when she denied signing, Labu poured acid on her, she added.

Hearing her scream, people from neighbourhoods rushed to the place and took her to the hospital.

The attackers, however, fled the scene after the incident. Later police arrested Labu and his ally Nasir from Shahidnagar area yesterday morning.

"My husband and in-laws often tortured me for Tk 1 lakh as dowry and about 15 days ago I had an abortion because of their torture," complained Beauty.

Amid such oppression, she came to his father's house and started working at the tailoring shop four days back.

Stop sale

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Chemical Works Ltd and IndoTetra of Indobangla Pharma.

In response to a writ petition, the HC bench of Justice Imman Ali and Justice Sheikh Hassan Arif also asked the government to take appropriate actions against the companies for the production of low-quality medicine.

The HC bench passed the order after government officials submitted a laboratory test report of 48 drugs.

On November 3 last year, the bench had ordered the government to collect and test samples of all the medicines available in 20 specific areas under 10 police stations and submit a report within five weeks.

In the report the government said the authorities collected samples of 174 medicines from the mentioned areas but could only manage to test 48 items due to shortage of lab equipment.

Full report of the test would be submitted in "near future", it said.

The court yesterday also directed the inspector general of police and the director general (DG) of Rapid Action Battalion to extend necessary assistance to the health secretary and the DG of the Directorate of Drug Administration (DDA) in complying with its directives.

The government was given four weeks to submit the full report.

Human Rights and Peace for Bangladesh, a non-government organisation, filed a public interest litigation on November 2 last year following newspaper reports on drug adulteration and the victims of it.

Manzill Murshid appeared for the petitioner, while Deputy Attorney General Motahar Hossain Saju, and Awasfur Rahman Bulu argued for the government.

CJ's courtroom

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The SC issued a circular as well, asking all concerned to refrain from holding demonstrations on court premises that could hamper normal activities of courts, warning that appropriate legal actions will be taken if such activities take place.

Meanwhile, ruling Awami League backed lawyers also held a meeting yesterday on SCBA premises protesting the court-boycott of pro-BNP lawyers, and demanding that the association's president apologise to the chief justice.

Attorney General Mahbubey Alam alleged, by creating chaos in front of the chief justice's court the pro-BNP lawyers violated the HC verdict which in 2005 had put restrictions on demonstrations on SC premises.

Around 50 pro-BNP lawyers led by SCBA President Khandker Mahbub Hossain and Secretary Bodruddoza Badal gathered near the door of the chief justice's courtroom at 9:00am.

There they staged the sit-in chanting slogans in support of the demonstration, and demanding resignation of Chief Justice Khairul Haque.

The three-member bench of the Appellate Division headed by the chief justice began its proceedings around 9:20am, when few hundred lawyers

including some senior counsels were present.

The court solicited opinions from senior lawyers Mahmudul Islam, M Amir-Ul Islam and Abdul Baset Majumder regarding what it should do under the circumstances.

The lawyers said their demonstrating colleagues could have settled their grievances over reconstitution of the benches, if they had any, by discussing the matter with the chief justice.

During the demonstration, which ended at 10:00am, the agitating lawyers obstructed a few of their colleagues' entry to the courtroom and hurled expletives at them.

After the sit-in, Khandker Mahbub Hossain told reporters that they will take tougher programmes in the near future if they are provoked.

The chief justice's remarks are provoking and contemptuous, he said.

Attorney General Mahbubey Alam at a media briefing in his office said a faction of SCBA created chaos on the court premises to serve a certain quarter's purpose.

The quarter is unhappy with the chief justice, as he delivered verdicts in the cases relating to the fifth amendment of the constitution, declaration of independence, Bangabandhu killing, and BNP

Chairperson Khaleda Zia's previous residence in Dhaka Cantonment.

AL backed lawyers organised the meeting at the South Hall of SCBA in the afternoon, saying if the SCBA president does not apologise to the chief justice, they will not join the annual lunch which will be hosted by the association on February 3.

M Amir-Ul Islam, Rokanuddin Mahmud, Abdul Baset Majumder, Yusuf Hossain Humayun, and Munsurul Huq Chowdhury, among others, addressed the meeting.

SC Registrar M Ashrafur Islam signed the circular in which the SC authorities called upon all concerned to refrain from holding any programme throughout the country that obstructs normal functioning of courts.

The highest court of the country is seeking sincere cooperation from all concerned in upholding the dignity and image of courts, it said.

AL unit president

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councillor post in the upcoming Dhaka City Corporation (DCC) polls and campaigning in their areas, locals and police sources said.

A row over securing party backing in the election might have triggered the gun attacks, they added.

Microcredit's mega feat

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political and non-political critics' claims that the initiative, championed by Nobel Laureate Muhammad Yunus, has failed to deliver and pull people out of poverty in a country where about 40 percent of 16 crore people live on less than a dollar each day.

The report of the Microcredit Summit Campaign closely reflects the findings of official country-level research in Bangladesh with the national Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES) that estimated 1.062 crore Bangladeshis languishing under the poverty line between 1990 and 2005.

Zohir said their estimate seems quite in line with the national level findings.

He said the study however made no attempt to establish causality between microcredit and poverty alleviation. Instead, it simply estimated the change in the status of microcredit-client households during the time -- before and after any family member received the first loan.

"While the survey for Bangladesh was not designed to assign causality, it is very significant that the number of successful micro-finance clients closely links to the national data on poverty reduction," said Sam Daley-Harris, director of Microcredit Summit Campaign, in a statement of the organisation.

"The majority of poverty cases in Bangladesh is in rural areas and so are the majority of micro-finance clients," he said.

The survey report came at a time when the microcredit sector is under pressure in Bangladesh, its origin, and the rest of the world.

In Bangladesh, politicians, particularly of the ruling party, and many economists and experts censured micro-finance practices, with the prime minister accusing micro-lenders of "sucking blood of the poor".

In India, micro-lenders are now struggling to survive after a crackdown in the state of Andhra Pradesh, where the authorities accused the lenders of seeking hyper-profit from the poor through high interest rates and coercive debt collection tactics.

There are quite a few people who believe that micro-finance has lost its way," said Alex Counts, president of Grameen Foundation, adding, "This survey on Bangladesh reminds

us that even in the most difficult circumstances, major progress can be made."

He said Bangladesh is not the "bottomless basket" as it was termed 35 years ago by the then US secretary of state Henry Kissinger. It is instead a teacher to the rest of the world with its civil society leading the way, he added.

The survey was conducted at 72 villages under 36 districts in four divisions between February and August 2009. It included a large number of clients of Brac and Grameen Bank.

Of the households surveyed, 94 percent were in non-metropolitan areas and six percent in metropolitan slums.

The study said in some years a large percentage of clients came out of poverty, but in years coinciding with the floods in 1998 and food and fuel crisis in 2008 many households, including those which were not as poor when they joined microcredit, slid below the \$1.25 earning threshold.

Sajjad Zohir said timing is also important. "People taking loans in the early and mid 90s have moved up the ladder than those who received loans after the floods. We have even found negative growth after the flood."

The economist said people should consider the contribution of micro-financiers in education, health and insurance sectors rather than seeing them as lender agencies.

He, however, said there are room for improvement. "The microcredit organisations cannot continue the way they are operating, or else there will be a decline in its progress. They must be allowed to mobilise funds on their own rather than depending on bank loans at high interest rates," Zohir told The Daily Star yesterday.

Launched in 1997, the Microcredit Summit Campaign committed to creating the will to eliminate poverty. In 2007 surpassed its original goal of reaching 10 crore poorest families with credit for self-employment and other financial and business services.

In Bangladesh, about 1,200 micro-lenders, including government institutions, banks and charities, have around Tk 15,000 crore in outstanding loans to some 3 crore borrowers.

Biswa Ijtema

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of Allah. It will conclude on Sunday.

For the first time this year, the Ijtema is being held in two phases. Traditionally, it used to be a three-day single-phase gathering held since 1967.

The first phase was held from January 21 to 23.

Devotees from 33 of the country's 64 districts joined the first phase while devotees from rest of the districts will join the second phase.

Tens of thousands of devotees with winter clothes and cooking apparatus from across the country have gathered at the Ijtema venue some 20km north of the capital.

The number of devotees is expected to rise to join the Akheri Munajat -- the concluding prayer -- on Sunday.

President Zillur Rahman, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, BNP chief Khaleda Zia, ministers and political leaders joined the concluding prayers of the first phase.

A three-tier security is in place to ensure peaceful holding of the event. Around one thousand members of intelligence will keep vigil in and around the venue.

Dhaka Wasa and Tongi Wasa have set up 13 tube-wells to ensure availability of pure drinking water.

Thirty-seven makeshift health centres, special medical teams, and nine ambulances of Tongi Hospital will be on standby for the Ijtema.

Upgrading

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offenses hours of traffic jam.

Accidents are also quite frequent on the motorway. Once it is upgraded, it will reduce travel time and be safer, said the officials.

The government had earlier decided to implement the project with public funds on the premise that private-public partnership (PPP) would take more time to complete the project.

It will be the second national expressway after the Dhaka-Chittagong highway to be upgraded to dual carriageway. The work for upgrading the Dhaka-Chittagong highway is already underway.

The task of upgrading the Joydevpur-Mymensingh highway will be done in four phases. Thirteen kilometres of the highway from Joydevpur to Rajendrapur will be upgraded for Tk 126.22 crore in the first phase, 17 kilometres from Rajendrapur to Mawna for Tk 203.47 crore in the second phase, 30 kilometres from Mawna to Raimoni for Tk 283.89 crore in the third phase and 27 kilometres from Raimoni to Mymensingh for Tk 266.25 crore in the final phase.

Three firms have been selected for the work.

The RHD also signed a Tk 25-crore contract with US-Bangladesh joint venture firm Lewis Berger Group and BCL for consultation on the project.

Communications Minister Syed Abul Hossain said the government plans to upgrade the country's crucial but narrow highways into dual carriageways considering the rise in number of vehicles and road accidents.

He warned the firms that if they fail to complete the project in time, their performance guarantee money will be forfeited.

According to a survey of the RHD in 2006, the average daily traffic on the road is about 30,000. The RHD officials however say the number is much higher now.

"The single carriageway is unable to take the load of an increasing traffic," the minister said.

Factory fined

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Dyeing Mills in the city's Bayezid Bostami area, said a press release.

During the drive the DoE team found the factory was running its production though its effluent treatment plant (ETP) was out of order.

The factory was discharging its waste into an adjoining canal leading to the Karnaphuli.

The team collected sample of liquid waste and found only 3.2 percent liquefied oxygen there which is harmful for the environment and biodiversity.

They directed the factory authority to set up an ETP to treat liquid waste effectively within three months.

Otherwise, gas, water and power supply lines of the unit would be snapped, warned the team.