

BSF member held inside Bangladesh

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Sherpur

A team of Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB) yesterday held a man of Indian Border Security Force from Modhuti Eco Park in Nalitabari frontier of Sherpur district.

BGB members also recovered a 9mm pistol, 10 bullets, a cartridge, some Indian and Bangladeshi currencies and the possession of Dilip Kedar, 38, a havildar of 35 Battalion of BSF.

During preliminary interrogation, Dilip said that he is a member BSF intelligence wing, and visited Bangladesh on different occasions, said sources at Sixth BGB Battalion.

Acting on a tip-off, a BGB patrol team, led by Maj Nahiduzzaman, held Dilip, dressed in plainclothes, following his suspicious movement in the park at about 11:00am.

Contacted, Lt Col Abdul Khair, commander of Sixth BGB Battalion, confirmed the incident saying that they were interrogating the BSF jawan to find out the motive of his visit in Bangladesh.

MEGHNA GROUP

DoE to take steps against pollution

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The Department of Environment (DoE) is going to take action against Meghna Group of Industries on charge of polluting the river Meghna, said a DoE release yesterday.

The leading conglomerate was accused of polluting the river by releasing untreated chemical waste from an oil refinery.

A DoE enforcement team found United Edible Oils Ltd, a sister concern of the conglomerate, operational but the effluent treatment plant (ETP) was switched off on Thursday night.

The company officials could not explain as to why the ETP was switched off, he said.

Menon

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and Teesta river water sharing that it seems they are advisers to the Indian premier and Indian government," Menon took a swipe at the advisers.

Speaking on the thanksgiving motion on the president's speech, the Workers Party chief also said the foreign minister and other elected representatives are accountable to people. But the advisers (being unelected) who lead a good life are not accountable for their deeds, he added.

Ministers and ruling party lawmakers who took part in the discussion on the thanksgiving motion, however, praised the government for what they said was keeping the country on the right track.

Menon, a key leader in the ruling Awami League-led grand alliance, blasted the government for its failure to contain the price hike of essentials and deterioration of law and order and to stop crossfire and forced disappearance. He also criticised the government for high inflation and poor economic condition.

Pointing to the recent murder of journalist couple Sagar and Rumi, Menon said the government had created a "puzzle" centring the brutal killing, which was not acceptable.

He said the government has many success stories but at the same time it has failures in different sectors.

The left-leaning leader called upon the government to hold open talks on the country's economic condition so people can get a clear picture.

Menon, however, supported the prime minister's stance on the World Bank's allegations of corruption in the Padma bridge construction project.

"The World Bank has raised allegations of corruption in the Padma bridge project, but who will take its corruption account?" he questioned.

Female workers

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Lebanon and some from the United Arab Emirates and Oman -- continue to fly home following physical, psychological and sexual harassment. On return, they also complain of excessive workload, confinement to work places and lack of weekly days off.

Some two lakh Bangladeshi women, mostly poor and illiterate or with minimum education, are working in households and textile industries in the Middle Eastern countries.

"The memories of Lebanon are a nightmare," a returnee who hails from Singair in Manikganj told this correspondent while narrating how her employer had abused her sexually.

Another returnee said, "I was hired to work at one house, but forced to work at three. I just could not bear the workload. Besides the hard work, they cared little about my food."

At Singair, one woman who used to work as a domestic help in Oman was found to be mentally ill. She is now undergoing treatment.

There are also some cases of death at a young age, though there are the success stories of many others.

According to organisations working on migrants' rights, several hundred female workers have returned home following abuse in the last two years.

The names of the victims have been left out of this report to protect their privacy.

NO CELL PHONES

Two years ago, Expatriates Welfare and Overseas Employment Minister Khandker Mosharraf Hossain said female job seekers would be given mobile phones after they completed pre-migration training and SIM cards after they landed overseas.

Addressing a BBC Bangla Service dialogue on labour migration at Bangabandhu International Conference Centre on January 20, 2010, the minister said the workers' ability to instantly communicate with their relatives at home or the authorities concerned could help them overcome problems, if any, and cultural shocks.

He, however, did not clarify whether there would be any dedicated contact numbers with the authorities in Dhaka or Lebanon.

The assurance came in the wake of widespread allegations from returnee migrants that they did not get adequate cooperation from the Bangladesh missions when they found themselves in trouble.

Contacted recently, Khandker Mosharraf said, "I have approved a decision about it. I have to check why it is not being implemented."

Speaking in return for anonymity, a high official of the ministry, however, said the minister had expressed his willingness, but none followed it up.

Mosharraf said the female domestic workers were now given a three-week training course before they migrated. "It has helped reduce the abuse cases," he added.

There is, however, no way to verify his claim. Many do not report to the government for lack of awareness or trust, according to rights groups working with migrant workers.

Al Amin Nayan, a migrants' rights activist, said, "Non-implementation of the two crucial pledges reflects the government's lack of seriousness in protecting the migrants."

Sumaiya Islam, director of Bangladesh Female Migrant Workers' Association, said if the domestic workers abroad got cell phones, it would surely be of help. But, more importantly, the officials at the Bangladesh missions abroad needed to be worker-friendly.

The officials concerned should periodically contact the workers and their employers if needed, "to ensure their total welfare," she said.

NO EMBASSY

As Lebanon has become the major job market for female domestic workers since 2006, the government felt the necessity of a mission there a few months after it assumed office in January 2009.

Lebanon recruits nearly 60,000 Bangladeshi female workers annually. Those workers send home an estimated \$150 million in remittance.

Finance Minister AMA Muhith in August 2009 declared the opening of a mission in Beirut, but the matter is still "under process".

According to Nazrul Islam, director general of West Asia Desk at the foreign ministry, the public administration ministry had approved a proposal in this regard.

"Now we need the approval of the Finance Division. After that, we'll design an organogram and things will be done quickly," he said, without mentioning a timeframe.

Currently, an honorary consul general and a labour welfare officer are there to look after Bangladesh's labour issues. Recently, the labour attaché of Bangladesh in Jordan was given the authority to oversee the issues in Lebanon.

Sumaiya Islam said such an ad-hoc approach would not help the workers much.

"The government should immediately establish a regular embassy in Beirut. Above all, the authorities must ensure that the job seekers have the required skills and are aware of the norms of the country they are going to," she said.

TOO MANY BROKERS

There are 10 authorised recruiting agencies to deal with female domestic workers going abroad. They have agreements with their counterparts in Lebanon to maintain a transparent recruitment process, but it is in fact the manpower brokers who arrange the job visas.

On the other hand, the agencies on behalf of the job seekers mainly secure immigration clearances from the manpower bureau in Dhaka and usually do not know the employers, say officials of recruiting agencies and researchers.

"As most workers know only the brokers, they can't contact the recruiting agencies directly to solve the problems they face," says an agent who would not be named.

Things remain mostly in the grip of the brokers, he added.

Meanwhile, as the honorary consul general in Beirut is a Lebanese, he usually does not verify the job-related information before certifying the workers' job documents.

It is very likely that he endorses all the job documents since he gets more fees for attesting more documents, comments a recruiting agent.

Migrants' rights activist Anisur Rahman Khan said he had evidence that the honorary consul general found an allegation of physical and sexual abuse false. However, an independent probe by an NGO in Lebanon found the woman to have been abused. "Either the employer or the broker forced her to conceal the truth," Anisur said.

Eventually, she returned home. Several returnees said Bangladeshi brokers in Lebanon were battered and confined at the recruiting agency offices when they wanted to leave the employers' houses following abuse.

"My broker even asked me to go for prostitution," said a returnee in Singair of Manikganj, adding that she had paid over Tk 1 lakh while flying to Lebanon though the government-fixed rate is Tk 20,000.

"Recruiting agencies can help address these problems if workers or their relatives inform them. In most cases, it does not happen," observes a recruiting agent, requesting anonymity.

Recruit Biman's

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reinstated gradually, it said also ordering the authorities to directly reinstate seven officials, who did not receive any benefit from the government after their "retirement".

On June 5, 2006, Biman reduced its workforce by axing 1,877 staff under the VRS before the national flag carrier was made a public limited company in July next year.

The HC bench of Justice Farah Mahbub and Justice Abdur Rob gave the verdict after hearing the petitions jointly filed by 1,171 of the terminated employees.

Terminated officials had filed the petitions with the HC in 2008 and 2009 challenging the VRS under which the caretaker government had terminated them to cut expenses.

The petitioners claimed that the caretaker administration had no jurisdiction to terminate the officials as per the constitution.

The HC then issued separate rules upon the government to explain why the termination should not be declared illegal.

Deputy Attorney General Khondker Diliruzzaman said the government had also replied to the ruling.

Salaudin Dolon and Kamrul Huda appeared for the petitioners, while Junayed Ahmed Chowdhury represented Biman authorities.

Int'l agencies

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over the following six to seven years, he added. Now, the government is working to untangle the complicated issues of the CHT.

Both the signatories of the peace treaty-- the government and Parbatya Chattagram Jana Sanghati Samity-- have responsibilities to implement the accord. "Blaming each other won't work. We have to work together," Gowher noted.

He said there should be no doubt over the government's commitment to implementing the CHT peace treaty.

Though the process of implementing the treaty has so far been slow, "I'm really very optimistic," he said. "You all have already shown much patience.... Have patience for some more time. We'll implement it."

Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal President Hasanul Haque Inu at the meeting said the indigenous people had been suffering from a sense of insecurity and a lack of trust. The government should regain their trust by ensuring their security through the implementation of the treaty, he added.

Inu recommended formulating an act to establish the rights of indigenous people and also a national indigenous commission to deal with their issues.

He demanded looking into how many Bangalee settlers had owned land in the hilly areas after signing of the accord and making that public.

Prof Abul Barkat, president of Bangladesh Economic Association, said that in addition to constitutional recognition, indigenous people should be given social protection.

He suggested forming a land reform commission to resolve land disputes in the CHT.

Former justice Ghulam Rabbani chaired the discussion.

Reckless

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Police Station, told The Daily Star that a Gulistan bound bus of Bikolpo Auto Service hit Salam when he was crossing the road at around 5:30pm.

Patrol police rushed seriously injured Salam to the Dhaka Medical College Hospital (DMCH) where the doctor declared him dead.

An identity card and a mobile phone were found in Salam's possession. When contacted with the mobile phone, Farhadun Nesa, a neighbour of Salam, came to hospital and identified his body.

Farhadun Nesa said Salam hailed from Banskhali in Chittagong.

The bus driver and helper, however, managed to flee the scene leaving the bus near Mahanagar Natya Mancha after police and locals chased it, said police.

Stimulus offered

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20-percent quota in all initial public offerings (IPOs)-- government and private-- to be issued in 2012 and 2013.

On February 22, a government committee led by Investment Corporation of Bangladesh Managing Director Md Fayezuzzaman came up with various recommendations, including waiver of interests. In the view of the committee, adversely affected small investors are those who deposited Tk 10 lakh or less of their own money in beneficiary owners (BO) accounts and incurred losses.

Yesterday the finance minister held a meeting with market stakeholders, including the Securities and Exchange Commission, representatives of Bangladesh Bank, Bangladesh Association of Banks and Association of Bankers Bangladesh, Stock Exchanges, Investment Corporation of Bangladesh and other commercial banks.

After his announcement of the incentive package, the stock market shot up yesterday. The finance minister expressed the hope that

following the announcement the share market would stabilise as well.

Muhith said lenders, including merchant banks and brokerage houses, would bear the losses on account of the interest to be waived. The Bangladesh Bank will later decide on how some compensation can be made to the merchant banks and brokerage houses, he said.

The minister said merchant banks had sought some tax rebate but the government was yet to take any decision in this regard.

He said Tk 1 crore or more interest might be waived for some merchant banks while some others may get smaller benefits. He, however, did not mention the exact figure to be waived.

For small investors, capital will be transferred to a separate account after a deduction of the interest and will be rescheduled for payment in three years through quarterly instalments. A logical rate of interest (a maximum of 10 percent) will be charged on the capital.

The central bank will not include rescheduled loans of lenders concerned in the

limit of investment they can make in the share market.

The government has also decided that the merchant bank will allow the affected investors to conduct fresh transactions in their accounts.

The government in October last year announced a stimulus package for stock market investors to restore stability in the market. Accordingly, on November 27 it formed a seven-member special scheme committee to identify small investors who lost money, and to determine how much they lost.

The committee found that the number of adversely affected small BO accounts was 15.26 lakh. The amount of total interest on loans in such accounts was Tk 499 crore.

The committee came up with the data by analysing the losses incurred between January 2009 and November 2011.

A finance ministry official said the number of lenders whose interest would have to be waived would be around 400 and interest waiver at the rate of 50 percent would stand at about Tk 250 crore.

Flouting law is now 'law'

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Since September last year, at least 37 incidents have been reported in newspapers, where citizens, including students, took up sticks and brick chips to make their anger and frustration known to others.

Over the months, disturbances -- one in every five days -- left nearly a hundred vehicles damaged and more than a hundred people injured.

The outbursts centred on demands that ranged from something as petty as replacement of an out-of-order electricity transformer to the murder of a popular municipal mayor.

In the most recent example, students from two private universities -- Primeasia University and Southeast University -- were locked in street battles on Saturday over the alleged stalking of a female student. They fought with police who came to quell the violence.

What began as an exchange of harsh words turned into a rampage with 100 vehicles and 15 buildings being vandalised and 50 students and 10 policemen injured.

The law enforcers failed to arrest anyone from the spot.

On November 2, in a scene reminiscent of a Hollywood action movie, dozens of passengers jumped off a burning train in Narsingdi. Agitators torched the train during a riot that started as a protest against the murder of Narsingdi municipality mayor Lokman Hossain.

Two weeks earlier, hundreds of power loom workers, fed up with frequent load shedding, blocked the Dhaka-Gopaldi road and were up against police. With bamboo sticks and brick chips, they clashed, leaving over thirty injured and ten vehicles damaged.

On October 11, over 400 residents of Bajitpur upazila, Kishoreganj, put up a barricade on a highway, demanding electricity. The transformer in the area had been out of order for 32 days and complaints to the authorities saw little result.

Including the above four, dozens of riots and instances of street vandalism turned many roads and highways at times into virtual combat zones.

According to the experts, the majority of those people have restored to riots finding no other way to vent their frustration.

Peaceful protest is usually ignored in this country, said Prof Muzaffer Ahmad, an expert on social issues.

"Those who participate [in violence] realise that there is hardly any scope for them to get justice. So the vengeance comes out in another way," he said.

An act like smashing the car windows of taxpayers is not a cause of social breakdown, he said, but "it's a symptom of social breakdown".

On November 29, bus owners in Habiganj ran riot on the Dhaka-Sylhet highway, damaging the windows of ten

buses full of passengers.

They were angry at luxury bus services for wooing their passengers.

A witness said the agitators blocked the road with microbuses and smashed the windows of every bus that passed by.

The passengers, many of them women and children, shuffled towards the narrow spaces between the seats to avoid injuries.

With waves of protests sweeping across the globe over voting rights, labour disputes and discontent with economic trends, Bangladesh is hardly immune to them, the experts say.

They say social inequity and insecurity have created among the people "a sense of deprivation and frustration", which is being translated into disorder.

The Daily Star recently talked to a man who had participated in numerous demonstrations and political agitation in the 1980s in the campaign against the autocratic regime of HM Ershad.

"We used to have a go at cars as they were easy to find," he said, wishing not to be named on security grounds.

Now a journalist, he recounted how he and his fellow agitators used to spread out on the streets looking for cars to smash. "It's tremendously exhilarating."

Today, however, he insists that in a free country, the authorities have a duty not to be swayed by mob action.

"It can't be justified in a democracy where there are legitimate means of expression. Any government that has any fortitude at all has to show it's not influenced by violence."

Saifullah Tawhid, a private university student, participated in a road blockade in the capital, demanding punishment of a bus driver who ran over kindergarten student Hamim Sheikh in February last year.

He insists that taking to the streets was the "only way to send a message to the authorities".

The other side of the story -- the view of police -- is very different.

SM Shahjahan, a former inspector general of police and a former caretaker government adviser, shared with The Daily Star what he saw of civil disorder during his time as police chief.

Recalling how his officers were attacked with paving slabs, bricks and lumps of concrete, Shahjahan cannot condone the violence.

But he does understand the people's sense of "voicelessness and anger" that sparks off disturbances.

No matter how legitimate the reasons might be, violence on the streets is never a solution, he said.

While a rioter can end up in jail to serve two to ten years for street violence, very few actually get due punishment.

The reason, police say, is a lack of witness and complainants.

"Witnesses shy away from giving testimony. So police

often prepare final reports allowing persons concerned to go unpunished," Shahjahan said.

Tarana Halim, a ruling Awami League lawmaker and lawyer, has a solution: sue leaders of the organisations under whose banner the demonstrations take place.

Tarana, also a social worker, said the issue was very much on the political radar. She said a private member bill seeking legal provision to try the chiefs of organisations responsible for creating such anarchy is going to be placed in parliament.

The bill, if passed, could put an end to such irresponsible practice.

Prof Muzaffer Ahmad, however, feels that the change should come with a push towards an "equal and just society".

Otherwise, he believes, social inequality will continue to grow, and so will social disorder.

Housewife

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and Halim from their Bagbari residence following a complaint filed by the victim's father, Babul Miah, with Darussalam Police Station.

"Nilufa's in-laws have been demanding Tk 2 lakh from me for the last three months to repair their house," Babul Miah told The Daily Star adding that he was unable to pay this dowry.

On Saturday night, Hakim, Halim and their mother swooped on Nilufa. They beat her and repeatedly stamped on her abdomen leaving her critically injured.

They again beat her up yesterday morning.

Hakim contacted Babul Miah yesterday noon by phone and asked him to take his daughter back. On arrival at her daughter's house, Babul Miah found her bleeding in an unconscious state and rushed her to a private hospital.

She was later shifted to Dhaka Medical College Hospital when her condition deteriorated. Nilufa received injuries to her head, hospital sources said.

Babul Miah said he has had helped his son-in-law financially several times since Hakim got married to Nilufa 13 years ago. Only two years ago, Hakim took Tk 50 thousand from him.

"I couldn't meet his demand this time because of my worsening financial situation," the father said.

Quoting Nilufa's in-laws, ABM Asaduzzaman, a sub-inspector (SI) of Darussalam Police Station, said Nilufa received injuries during a family feud with her husband Hakim.

The in-laws, however, denied making any demand for dowry, the SI said adding that they are investigating the incident.

Babul Miah filed a case accusing Nilufa's in-laws last night.

No US base

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"It's a small team coming and going and what I read in newspaper about bases and all sorts of things, I think that was very creative. It has no bases," he said replying to a query.

Mozena's comments come two days after the BBC quoted US Pacific Commander Admiral Robert Willard as saying at a Congressional hearing, "We have currently special forces assist teams -- Pacific assist teams is the term -- laid down in Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Maldives, as well as India."

The Bangladeshi media published the report on Saturday.

The US ambassador yesterday visited different units of the DB, including the bomb disposal unit, Special Weapon and Tactics (Swat) and counter-terrorism unit, CTUC.

Earlier, he spoke at a meeting at the DB office where Dhaka Metropolitan Police Commissioner Benazir Ahmed, DB Joint Commissioner Maruf Hassan and commissioners Monirul Islam and Mahbubur Rahman were present.

Terming Bangladesh "a land of hope," Mozena said some people did not share the vision of a Golden Bangladesh and sought to destroy the Bangladesh of peace, tolerance, harmony and democracy.

"These people seek to impose their own values of hatred and intolerance on Bangladesh," he said, adding, "We call these people terrorists. These terrorists are the enemy of Bangladesh, of America and of every democracy in the world."

Over the past decade, the US has provided over \$19 million in assistance to train and equip Bangladesh police officers, he said.

Ctg urea

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The plant requires 47 million cubic feet (mcf) of gas per day which is supplied by the state-owned Karnaphuli Gas Distribution Company Limited (KGDCL), he said.

On February 24, this year, the plant suspended production for 24 hours due to the same reason.

"It would take at least 16 hours to resume production," the managing director said hoping to start production after the gas supply improves.

200 killed

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The main blasts were followed by a series of smaller ones. Hours after the main explosions, a plume of grey smoke still hung over the city, a Reuters witness in Kinshasa said.

Defence Minister Charles Zacharie Bowao dismissed any talk of a coup attempt or mutiny, and told state radio that the explosions had been caused by a fire in the arms depot in the Regiment Blinde base in the riverside Mpila neighbourhood.

Panic also spread to Kinshasa, across the Congo River which separates the former French colony from the larger Democratic Republic of Congo, where windows were shattered by the force of the blasts around 700 meters away.

Both