

Bribery nexus

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Chittagong Divisional Coordinator SK Bari, and a private contractor for the railway department who did not want to be named.

The nexus also used to take bribe from private contractors in exchange for work contracts, they added.

Mridha quite often used to openly brag that the railway minister was behind him, Bari said adding that the syndicate even took money from the children of railway employees who were seeking jobs in the department.

Bari and the private contractor said many job applicants, who qualified for interviews after written tests, did not get the interviews because they could not pay bribes.

They also alleged that the railway department published advertisements for recruitment to more than 3,200 posts in 38 categories in October and November 2010. Tests of the applicants in many categories were completed by April last year

and the deadline for completing the recruitment was August last year, but the deadline was extended to give the jobseekers time to arrange bribe money.

Bari said on May 19 last year there was a robbery in Mridha's bungalow that he shared with some of his colleagues. Additional Chief Engineer SM Liakat Ali of the department, who used to share the bungalow with Mridha, filed a case with Kotwali Police Station after the incident. In the case statement he mentioned that about Tk 2 lakh and other valuables including a laptop and some mobile phone sets were looted.

But Assistant Commissioner of Police Mahmud of Kotwali Zone said yesterday that five robbers who had been arrested by police weeks after the robbery later confessed to looting over Tk 12 lakh from the bungalow.

More than 100 workers and employees of Bangladesh Railway East Zone held a rally yesterday morning under the banner

of Railway Sramik Karmachari Sangram Parishad at the Carriage and Wagon Repair Workshop in Pahartali demanding termination of Yusuf Ali Mridha from the job.

The demonstration was arranged after Mridha along with 3 others were caught in a car in Dhaka on Monday night with Tk 70 lakh in their possession.

Later the demonstrators brought out a march in front of the Central Railway Building.

Speakers at the rally demanded proper investigation of the allegations against Mridha and his associates, and demanded their punishment if proven guilty.

Parishad's Chittagong Divisional Coordinator SK Bari, and conveners Shahabuddin Ahmad and Nizam Uddin spoke at the rally among others.

Mridha could not be reached for comments as he did not receive phone calls despite repeated attempts over the last two days.

Students demonstrate in Kahaloo Station area of Bogra, demanding justice for the killing of Naimul Islam Naim, a 13-year-old boy who was kidnapped on his way to school on April 5 and strangled to death. Inset, the house where Naim was killed is burnt down by locals.

PHOTO: STAR



Corruption conundrum

FROM PAGE 1
Omar Faruq Talukder, accompanied by Railway East Zone General Manager Yusuf Ali Mridha and Security Commandant Enamul Haq, was going by his Noah microbus to Suranjit's Jigatola residence with Tk 70 lakh.

But all went wrong when driver Ali Azam claimed Tk 5 lakh as his share.

Refused by the other three, he pulled over to the Pilkhana BGB headquarters and shouted at guards, saying there was a huge amount of illegal money in the microbus, police sources said.

The BGB detained them and the next morning freed all but the driver, Enamul Haq told this correspondent on Wednesday.

The driver, a resident of Dhaka Udyan at Mohammadpur, could not be traced till last night. Police and intelligence sources could not say anything about his location.

But BGB Director General Maj Gen Anwar Hossain Tuesday noon claimed they had released all of the four.

Faruq, a political appointee and a close aide to Suranjit, has been out of trace since his release.

During a visit yesterday, this correspondent found Omar Faruq's fourth-floor flat at Pisciculture Housing Society of Mohammadpur, Dhaka locked from outside.

The man bought the 1,100 square-foot flat of house-84 on road-3 around six months ago.

Security guards at the building said Faruq left his house in a rickshaw Tuesday noon. About 15 to 20 minutes later, an unidentified person drove the Noah microbus away from the building.

After a while, his wife and their three-year-old daughter left in a rickshaw. None of the family returned till last night.

The Daily Star repeatedly tried to contact him over his two mobile phones since Tuesday, but both were found switched off.

Any communication with Mridha was not possible either. This correspondent visited the GM's residence at Railway Officers' Quarter in the capital's Shajahanpur on Wednesday. A domestic help opened the door and said neither Mridha nor his wife was home.

"It is a sad incident," Mahbubul Alam Hanif, the ruling Awami League's joint general secretary, told the press yesterday. "The matter is under investigation... on its completion, we will talk about it in details. If the allegation proves to be true, then law will take its own course."

Suranjit, a veteran AL leader, has a long colourful political career, he added. "We cannot accept such graft allegations against a person with such a profile."

"Awami League itself will also investigate the matter if the people doubt the probe committees' findings," Hanif said and dismissed forming any judicial committee as demanded by the main opposition BNP, saying this was an administrative affair.

Responding to questions, he further said in the developed world resignation of a minister in such circum-

stances is hailed while in a country like Bangladesh it is taken negatively.

RECRUITMENT BUSINESS
A section of ministry officials, ruling party men and Rail Sramik League members have been out to make money through appointment business since the government six months ago decided to recruit 7,500 people to Bangladesh Railway.

The authorities already hired about 3,000 persons who bribed the people in power and with connections, BR officials alleged.

In the railwaygate controversy, according to ministry sources, Omar Faruq and Mridha are the key figures. The Tk 70 lakh seized Monday night was collected from jobseekers in the railway east zone.

While Mridha holds the authority to form recruitment committees and finally approve appointments, Faruq got a quota of several hundred posts so that he could get bucks directly, apart from taking commission as a middleman.

Railway officials said Mridha was very desperate to grab the post of railway's director general. "He managed to establish good relations with the railway minister through the APS," said a senior official, requesting anonymity.

As an officer, Mridha's integrity was questioned by many. His activities also as chief engineer (east) triggered controversy. "Since he became GM last year, the number of allegations against him increased," said the official, adding Mridha used to carry out his illegal activities in league with other officials.

Also, the pro-AL Rail Sramik League managed to control the 30 percent quota reserved for the dependents of railway employees.

"Recently, the Sramik League leaders met the rail minister and top railway officials and demanded this 30 percent quota be filled with persons recommended by them."

"Their demand was accepted as they are backed by some influential Awami League leaders, including a couple of ministers. It is now an open secret," said another top railway official, wishing anonymity, yesterday.

"The Railway Sramik League leaders recommended names of hundreds allegedly after taking bribes. They have already amassed huge money. They drive expensive cars. They have also flats in Dhaka."

Railway Sramik League President Humayun Kabir dismissed the allegation, saying they recommend dependents of the railway staff for jobs but did not take bribes.

The 30 percent quota reserved for the successors of freedom fighters is another option of making money. The candidates first paid money for demand order (DO) letters to get job. This DO is an unofficial recommendation letter.

Ministers and lawmakers from different districts also sent DO letters to the railway minister. But most of the letters were not entertained. Rather, the railway ministry began to recruit those who

were recommended by APS Faruq and GM Mridha, alleged many in the railway.

Several ministers requested Suranjit to place a list of people who qualified in the written exam and then go for recruitment. But he paid no heed to the minister's suggestion.

Talking to The Daily Star, some other ministers said they knew that the railway minister was recruiting people of his choice without any examination.

"We also requested him [Suranjit] that if the list is prepared and placed online, then we can recommend some people for job from our constituencies," a senior minister said, preferring not to be named.

The Daily Star talked to two victims of the recruitment trade.

Mohammad Farid, an applicant for junior auditor, qualified in the written test held on October 9 last year.

Over the mobile phone, Farid, an honours final year student of MM College in Jessore, alleged that when he had gone to the Central Railway Building (CRB) in Chittagong in February this year to see the written test result, a staff in the office of Nazrul Islam, additional financial adviser and chief accounts officer, demanded Tk 5 lakh from him.

The staff told me that otherwise I would not get the viva card."

"I then talked to my family members in Magura. They informed me that they could manage only Tk 2 lakh. But that staff didn't agree," said Farid.

Another applicant for the same post is Abdul Kadir, who did not qualify in the written test.

He applied to Nazrul Islam to see his answer sheet since his written test was satisfactory.

"But the official refused my application," Kadir said, adding that when he was coming out of the office, a staff demanded Tk 6 lakh to ensure the job.

Our staff correspondent from Chittagong adds, seven advertisements were published in October and November 2010 to hire over 3,200 people in the railway's east zone in 38 categories, including junior auditor, office assistant, trade apprentice and assistant station master.

Recruitment process of around 700 posts in 10 categories, including office assistant and assistant station master, later stopped after filing of cases by a number of applicants, said Senior Welfare Officer Golam Kibria.

Recruitment in 18 categories was completed by August last year, he added.

It is alleged that a section of railway officials and staff took bribe ranging from Tk 2.5 lakh to Tk 6 lakh from the applicants, assuring them of the job.

Many applicants who qualified in the written tests did not get admit cards for viva as they failed to pay bribe demanded by the staff.

Additional FA & CAO Nazrul Islam, who was the convener of the recruitment committee, could not be reached for his comment despite repeated attempts over the mobile phone.

formed a three-member committee to investigate the alleged corruption in the recruitment.

"The three-member committee headed by Deputy Director Mohammad Abu Sayeed has been asked to investigate the entire recruitment process and the source of the money that was seized on Monday," ACC boss Ghulam Rahman told The Daily Star last night.

In a meeting, the anti-graft watchdog also asked the committee to investigate the source of wealth of the trio -- Omar Faruq, Yusuf Ali Mridha and Enamul Haq.

The committee will also examine whether Suranjit was involved in Monday's scandal.

Sengupta

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"He [Soumen] withdrew around Tk 50,000 a month in salaries from Agni Systems," a director of the firm told The Daily Star, wishing anonymity.

According to Suranjit's wealth statement submitted to the Election Commission before the 2008 election, his annual income amounted to Tk 7 lakh, whose sources were house rent, fisheries and farm land.

Suranjit became railway minister in December last year. Before that he was the chief of the parliamentary standing committee on law, justice and parliamentary affairs ministry.

A seven-time parliamentarian, he is currently under fire following the recovery of Tk 70 lakh from the microbus of his Assistant Personal Secretary Omar Faruq Talukder on Monday night.

BGB members seized the money and detained Faruq, his driver Ali Azam, Railway General Manager (East) Yusuf Ali Mridha and railway's security officer Enamul Haq after the driver drove the microbus into BGB's Pilkhana headquarters in the capital.

At one stage, Azam started shouting that there were stashes of illegal money in the vehicle, prompting the BGB men to detain them and seize the money.

A number of intelligence officials told The Daily Star on Wednesday that the microbus was actually on its way to Suranjit's Jigatola residence, a claim refuted by the minister.

The minister came to the spotlight again yesterday after Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (BTRC) awarded his son's company, Sengupta Telecommunication Limited, an interconnection exchange licence.

BTRC Chairman Zia Ahmed said Soumen himself collected the licence and that all the due process was followed in awarding the licence. Of the 22 licences awarded, 21 were handed over yesterday, he added.

A telecom expert said setting up a telecommunication company requires an investment of Tk 30 crore at least.

Despite repeated attempts, Soumen could not be reached for comments on the source of the money he paid in licence fees.

Angry protest

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a case accusing 10 people Tuesday.

Anwar Hossain, investigation officer (IO) of the case, said accused Shahadat Hossain gave confessional statement in front of a magistrate Wednesday afternoon. In the statement, Shahadat said some locals including Zakaria were directly involved in the killing.

Yesterday, people in their hundreds, including students and teachers of schools, local politicians, and businessmen joined the rally at the upazila headquarters around 11:00am demanding punishment of the Naim killers. Local traders also kept their businesses closed from morning until 3:00pm protesting the murder.

The rally was organised by Naim's school.

After the rally a mob torched the shop and house of Zakaria while hundreds watched the incident.

Earlier, the speakers at the rally demanded arrest of all the accused by April 18.

The accused include Shahadat Hossain, 19, Md Zakaria, 25, Md Zamal, 32, Md Dalim, 20, Md Shakil, 19, Md Anisar Rahman, 48, Md Abdul Mannan, 55, and owner of the brick kiln Md Arif, 20, Abdul Matin and Jahangir Hossain.

Detective Branch (DB) of police arrested Md Arif, Md Shakil and Jahangir Hossain Wednesday while Shahadat Hossain and Abdul Mannan were arrested on Tuesday.

According to the first information report, Anisar is the mastermind behind the killing. However, IO Anwar said Zakaria and two of his accomplices were the masterminds.

"In the preliminary investigation, we came to know that Zakaria planned to kidnap some school boy in the area to get ransom," said Anwar Hossain on Wednesday.

EC to warn

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from returning officers, we will warn the aspirant candidates that if any signs of advance electioneering are found, it will have a negative impact on them when their applications for candidacy will be scrutinised." Election Commissioner Mohammad Shahnewaz told journalists yesterday at his office.

A number of mayoral and councillor aspirants in DCC North and DCC South have failed to remove their posters, banners and billboards within the deadline set by the EC.

The EC gave the deadline after announcing on Monday the schedule for May 24 DCC polls.

And it sent a letter to the police administration on Wednesday seeking assistance in taking actions in cases of electioneering in violation of the electoral code of conduct.

Taking police help, Joint Secretary to the EC Secretariat Jesmin Tuli and two returning officers yesterday visited different areas of the city to see the situation. They informed the EC that many of the intending candidates were yet to remove their illegal campaign materials.

"We did not give a number of councillor hopefuls application forms for candidacy, and asked them to remove first their illegal electioneering materials," Mihir Sarwar Morshed, returning officer of DCC North, told journalists yesterday at his office.

I will quit, if graft proved

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Some people were after him as he has been trying to revive the long-neglected-for railway sector, he said in a press briefing at Rail Bhaban yesterday.

The seizure of money from his assistant personal secretary and the railway general manager on Monday may be part of a conspiracy against him, the minister said. Those, who take advantage of the underdeveloped railway sector for their own benefits, do not want to see it flourish, according to Suranjit.

He, however, clearly said he would resign if his involvement in the incident could be proved. "Accepting a post or leaving it has been a very simple matter in my long career in politics. I will not stay for a moment if any such situation arises."

The drama centring on the railway minister began Monday night when the driver of Suranjit's assistant personal secretary Omar Faruq Talukder pulled over Faruq's microbus at the entrance of the Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB) headquarters in the capital and shouted out there was bribe money stashed in the microbus. Faruq, Railway's General Manager (East) Yusuf Ali Mridha and Dhaka Divisional Commandant Enamul Haq were inside the vehicle at that time.

Enamul Haq, one of the four who were detained by BGB personnel with Tk 70 lakh, on Wednesday said they were heading to the railway minister's residence at the time of the incident, around 11:30pm.

Suranjit's version of that night contradicts this. In the press briefing, he said his APS, Faruq, stays in Mohammadpur where they were heading for. "There is no question of coming to my house since I usually go to bed by 10:00pm," he

insisted.

On the way, the minister said, they might have had an argument and ended up entering the BGB headquarters.

He also denied the allegation that he had helped the three [excluding the driver] get released from the BGB custody. "As a minister I can't inquire about their personal life," he said.

Asked about the sources and ownership of the money, he said he had not been in touch with his APS since the seizure of the money. "You can ask the BGB personnel about the money since it has been with them," he said.

About the conspiracy, he said contractors and corrupt employees of the railway sector had stood against him when he had taken up various development projects to revive the railway and free it from corruption.

Suranjit, who took the charge of the newly-created railway ministry in December last year, said, "Corruption was there for a long time. I got a ministry which was formed, splitting the controversial communications ministry."

People, who are beneficiaries of the sorry state of the railway, have plotted to derail his efforts to make the railway profitable. "It is very difficult for a minister alone to fight against the influential quarter."

"Now I am in the dock," Suranjit said. "I will accept whatever findings come out in the investigation [into Monday's incident]."

He said he is a politician for 55 years but became a minister only three months ago. "I have never longed for money or power. Rather, I have always been vocal against corruption."

The minister said he has been in politics not to make wealth but serve people. "I have stayed at my Jigatola house even after becoming a minister."

presidium member Kazi Zafarullah with finalising the councillor candidates to be backed by AL.

The insiders add there might be one female mayoral candidate backed by the ruling party. In that case, Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal leader Shirin Akhter might be considered by the AL high command for DCC-North, while Jatiya Party leader Kazi Firoz Rashid might be picked for DCC-South.

There are a number of AL leaders who intend to contest the mayoral polls including Mahmudur Rahmananna, Akhtaruzzaman, Mofazzal Hossain Chowdhury Maya, Hazi Mohammad Selim and Sayeed Khokon.

"We have taken the city corporation polls with utmost importance and directed all the thana unit

leaders in the capital to select one candidate who is honest, competent and acceptable in each council," AL Joint General Secretary Mahbubul Alam Hanif said at a press briefing after the meeting.

He said all the lawmakers of the city would assist the thana unit leaders in finalising the single candidate.

Talking to The Daily Star, Zafarullah said the list of councillors would be finalised after the prime minister's arrival from Turkey tomorrow.

"We want single candidate in all the DCC councils at any cost to ensure victory of the party-backed candidates," he added.

On the mayoral candidates, he said they would be selected later in consultation with the grassroots of the city unit.