

KSA happy over arrest of Khalaf killers

UNB, Dhaka

Saudi Arabia yesterday expressed satisfaction over the arrest of the killers of its embassy official Khalaf Al Ali.

Abdullah Nasser Al Bussairy, Saudi ambassador in Dhaka, conveyed his government's satisfaction to Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina during a meeting at the latter's official residence in the capital.

Khalaf, 45, an official with the consular section of the

Saudi embassy in Dhaka, was shot dead near his house in the wee hours of March 6 this year.

Police recently arrested four persons -- Al Amin, Saiful Islam Mamun, Rafiqul Islam Khokon and Akbar Ali Lahu -- in connection with the killing.

Al Amin confessed to his involvement in the killing before a Dhaka metropolitan magistrate.

Briefing reporters after the meeting, Abul Kalam Azad,

press secretary to the premier, said Hasina and Bussairy also discussed various issues of bilateral interests.

The premier expressed satisfaction at the existing fraternal relations between the two countries, and hoped that their ties would be strengthened further in future.

Bussairy thanked the premier for extending all-out support to him in discharging his professional duties during his tenure in Bangladesh.

Move to amend GB ordinance

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government documents and the statements of public officials. "The sixth five-year plan says that microcredit played an important role in the socio-economic development of the country. But government officials claim that it had no role in the development of the country."

During her tenure as prime minister between 1996 and 2001, Sheikh Hasina also praised the role of microcredit at the global level, he noted.

The former cabinet secretary expressed bafflement over why the government was so much concerned about microcredit now.

He said Grameen Bank (GB) was not in a bad shape in terms of economics. He thought the interest rates charged by the microlender were much lower than those of the state-run banks.

"For example, although data from Bangladesh Krishi Bank shows that it charges only 10 percent interest rates, if we calculate the money and time people need to spend to get the loans, then we will find that Grameen Bank's interest rates are much lower," he mentioned.

Expressing concern over the government's move, borrower members of the bank said the proposed amendment would enable the government-appointed chairman to choose the managing director of the bank.

"We will decide the appointment of the managing director for our bank, as we own nearly 97 percent shares of the bank," said Rozina Begum, a borrower member of the GB.

She urged the government to refrain from amending the ordinance as it would deprive its real owners of their role in managing the institution.

"I am deeply shocked and saddened by the government's initiative to amend the ordinance," said Asif Nazrul, a professor of law at Dhaka University.

He called on the president not to sign the amendment for the betterment of poor women and overall development of the country.

Salma Khan, a former ambassador and women rights activist, said the GB had played an important role in women's empowerment. It had especially given them a voice in decision-making, she noted.

She warned that if the government controlled the bank, it would disrupt women's empowerment and make the future of its 83 lakh members uncertain.

The national executive committee of "Grameen Bank Rokkha o Durjon Protirodh Kendra" hosted the seminar, chaired by its president M Munir-Uz-Zaman.

Meanwhile, three noted educationists yesterday urged the government to change its attitude and action regarding the Grameen Bank for the sake of the country and especially for its 83 lakh members.

In a joint statement, Prof Emeritus Dr Alamgir Mohammad Sirajuddin, Prof Mohammad Fazle Hossain and Prof Muhammad Sikander Khan said, "We are worried and sorry about the circumstances surrounding the Grameen Bank and its founder Dr Muhammad Yunus."

Both Prof Sirajuddin and Prof Hossain are former vice-chancellors of Chittagong University, while Prof Sikander is a former project director of the proposed Rangamati University.

"Through microcredit and other services, the Grameen Bank is the source of poverty alleviation and economic, social and political empowerment of a large number of women in the country. Encouraged by its activities, similar organisations have been set up in many other countries around the world," read the statement.

They said the GB is a specialised institution and its members are the owners.

The government is curbing the legal rights of the 83 lakh poor women owners of the bank, which is not acceptable.

The government, complained the trio, is trying to turn the bank into a public organisation and politicise it by bringing in changes to the

Grameen Bank Ordinance, 1983.

The nation demands that the government not change the ordinance in the interest of continuing the independence and success of the GB. They requested the government to protect the rights of the poor and stop the move to turn the bank into a public institution.

Businessman

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witnesses as saying that around 6:30pm the victim on a rickshaw was shouting for help and saying he had been robbed.

He fell on the ground before the witnesses could reach him; his hands were bleeding profusely.

They rushed him to Dhaka Medical College Hospital where doctors declared him dead around 8:30pm. Hospital sources said Ratan sustained several stab injuries in his hands.

Victim's nephew SM Emdadul Haq Bhuiyan, a resident of Azimpur, told reporters at Dhaka Medical College morgue that Ratan used to come to Nayabazar in the city often to buy materials for his factory.

Ratan's brother Abu Kalam Chowdhury filed a murder case in this connection with Shahbagh Police Station.

BODY FOUND AT PALLABI

Abdus Kuddus, 35, lived at the under-construction building without the owners' consent and by bribing its security guards.

Sub-Inspector Abed Ali of Pallabi Police Station said the victim had some injury marks on his body. Police went to the building after a tip-off from a security guard.

Victim's brother Kabir Shahriar said a male voice called on the mobile phone of the victim's wife, who lives at Bhandaria in Pirojpur, and gave her the address of the building. The person told her that Kuddus' body was in a room.

The SI said they had found the mobile phone number of the unidentified caller switched off.

4 Ansar men accused of mugging

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Four Ansar members allegedly snatched money and mobile phone from a man sleeping at Ramna Park in the capital yesterday.

Md Shahidul Islam told reporters that some four Ansar members beat him up when he resisted their order to leave the bench he was sleeping on.

The incident took place around 2:00pm when the victim, Shahidul, a cook at the Officers' Club in Ramna, was asleep on a park bench.

After the beating, they snatched Tk 8,000 and the mobile phone from his possession, he claimed.

Hearing his screams, some came forward and rescued him. They locked in a heated argument with the Ansar men which led to a scuffle.

Later, a police team came and took Shahidul and the Ansar men to Ramna Police Station.

Contacted, Officer-in-Charge Shah Alam of the station said they made the detention to bring the situation under control.

The OC said an employee of Ramna Officers' Club was asleep on a park bench. A team of four Ansar men, deployed at the park, requested him not to sleep there. At a stage, they engaged in a brawl.

Shah Alam, however, claimed that the employee had lied in public to put the Ansar men in danger. Shahidul screamed saying he was being robbed.

Locals in a large number rushed there which created the untoward situation. A police team led by Sub-Inspector Nazmul Islam rescued the Ansar men and Shahidul, said Shah Alam.

He said the incident was a misunderstanding. No case was filed in this connection.

Hajj pilgrims

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haji agencies.

The pilgrims have already deposited money with these agencies, which were black-listed for different irregularities including housing the pilgrims in unauthorised homes and breaching government agreements, Hajj Officer Bazul Haque Biswas told The Daily Star yesterday.

The firms are Colombia Travels International, First Bangladesh Travel Agency, Islamia Overseas Ltd, Air Matco International, Hollywood Tours and Travels, Air Peace Travels, Shah Daud Travels, New Imam, Sayem Tours and Travels, Bab-e-Madina Travels and Tours, Mostafa Travels and World Link Tours and Travels.

Officials in the religious affairs ministry said soon after the Saudi Arabian government informed them about the ban, the ministry asked those firms to appeal with the Saudi authorities, if they had any arguments in their favour.

The pilgrims will be able to perform hajj only if the Saudi government recommend sending them under an alternative system, mentioned the officials.

"Considering the prayers from the hajj agencies, the Saudi government might give its final decision on August 20," MA Rashid Shah Samrat, general secretary of Hajj Agencies Association of Bangladesh, told this newspaper.

The government should continue diplomatic efforts to convince the Saudi government so that the pilgrims can perform hajj after getting registered with other agencies, he added.

Over 1.12 lakh Bangladeshis will perform hajj this year under public and private arrangements. The cost of a private hajj package will be over Tk 3.3 lakh.

Last year 15 Bangladeshis hajj agencies were black-listed on charges of being involved in similar irregularities.



A farmer shows a dry, cracked paddy field in Jamtola area of Chapainawabganj on Wednesday. Inadequate rains over the last few weeks have raised apprehensions about a setback in Aman cultivation.

PHOTO: STAR

BNP toys with two proposals

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BNP each would nominate five people each who have no political affiliation.

In both cases, a former chief justice acceptable to both camps would be leading the caretaker government meeting.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina recently proposed a "small government" which would have BNP representatives as well to supervise the election.

The BNP has rejected the idea outright. The party demands the restoration of the caretaker government system.

The Awami League spearheaded the abolition of the caretaker government system in parliament last year following a court ruling in this regard.

BNP insiders said their chairperson Khaleda Zia might unveil ideas after Eid to mount pressure on the government to amend the constitution again and restore the non-party caretaker government system.

"The prime minister and some senior ministers frequently ask for our proposal on the caretaker government. We are working on it and hopefully a proposal will be made public soon," said a senior BNP leader

asking not to be named.

BNP standing committee member Lt Gen (retd) Mahbubur Rahman said they discussed the prime minister's small-cabinet proposal at their committee meeting.

"But we rejected her idea and reiterated our stance that a non-party neutral caretaker government system was a must for holding a credible election," he said.

Standing committee meeting sources, however, said the BNP policymakers also discussed their own thoughts on a possible caretaker government system.

They were of the view that the abolished caretaker government system had too many flaws and it could do with a few tweaks to make it more effective and fault free.

A military backed caretaker government, which came to power in January 2007, following political unrest, remained in office for two years claiming that there was no fixed tenure for an interim government.

Top BNP policymakers believe that nominating advisers for the caretaker government was a big challenge.

According to them, the nominations have created problems in the past. They think having all the advisers from former justices is the safer way to go.

In 2006, the then chief adviser President Iajuddin Ahmed had appointed some advisers to a caretaker government but the Awami League had rejected those appointments, branding them BNP men.

BNP policymakers believe that if keeping the judiciary men out of the caretaker government was acceptable to all, then the Awami League and BNP could appoint five people each to form the 10-member advisory council of the government.

"The BNP and Awami League can nominate five neutral persons for the advisory council, if the Awami League high up agree to it," said a member of the BNP standing committee.

But the BNP chairperson said that the proposal would be finalised after further discussions, standing committee meeting sources said, adding that everything would depend on the attitude of the ruling Awami League government.

Global food prices

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March, was triggered by untimely rains in Brazil, the world's largest sugar exporter. Poor rains in Australia also contributed, the FAO said.

A drought-like situation in some states of India, one of the world's largest food producers and consumers, may dent the production prospects of grains, sugarcane, pulses and oil seeds and cotton this season.

A piece of good news is that international rice prices remain mostly unchanged, as do dairy prices. The FAO's meat price index also fell.

The UN body closely monitors global food prices, as the cost of food is of constant concern for the poor. Hikes in recent years have led to riots in some countries.

Meanwhile, as a food-importing country, Bangladesh is alarmed by the looming crisis.

Making things gloomier is the lack of enough rain threatening a setback in domestic production of Aman rice this year.

Food Minister Abdur Razzaque said, "We are worried at the below-normal rainfall at home this year."

He added that his ministry had sought weather projections and relevant data from the meteorological office and the Water Development Board (WDB) to assess the situation.

The minister was talking to The Daily Star on Tuesday, hours after the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) issued a statement warning that the most severe and extensive drought in the US since the 1950s was adversely affecting production of maize and soybeans, driving up prices of agricultural products.

Considering the gravity of the situation, the Washington-based food

policy think-tank asked for a halt to biofuel production from maize.

According to the Economic Research Service of the US Department of Agriculture, about 40 percent of maize and soybean, and 44 percent of livestock are produced in areas experiencing severe drought.

The IFPRI statement read, "Prices of maize and soybeans have already started to rise rapidly and could increase further depending on the degree of severity and extent of the drought. In the past two months alone, US export prices for maize and soybean increased by 30 and 19 percent respectively, with prices of both crops reaching record highs."

Abdur Razzaque said that in a little over a month, Bangladesh's import price for wheat rose from \$280 to \$335 a tonne.

"We'll be seriously affected if US drought situation pushes further, particularly in the prices of soybean oil and poultry feed (prepared from de-oiled soybean meal)."

Bangladesh is the 7th largest importer of soybean oil, and along with Brazil and India, the US is also a source country for its edible oil supplies, Razzaque added.

The food minister said if the pattern of less-than-normal rainfall persisted, it would have a negative bearing on the rain-fed Aman, now in the fields.

Met office figures show -- except for Chittagong and Rangpur -- all divisions in the country experienced less than average rainfall last month. Rainfall in Rajshahi was 33 percent less than the average, in Sylhet 31 percent, Dhaka 22 percent, Barisal 21 percent and in Khulna 6 percent less.

Farmers in the country's rice-rich northern region are

awaiting a good shower so that they don't require any supplementary irrigation for the Aman production.

Arifuzzaman Bhuiyan, a sub-divisional engineer at the WDB Flood Forecasting and Warning Centre, told this correspondent that the country experienced less than normal rainfall both in June and July.

Explaining the weather charts from the Met office, Arifuzzaman said there was no prospect of a good rainfall in the first half of this month either. He, however, pinned high hopes on the prospect of a downpour in the later part of the month.

No hope

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which has been organised to mark the second "National Energy Security Day" at the headquarters of Petrobangla in the capital.

Providing new connections to households has remained suspended for more than three years due to shortage of gas.

The government earlier said it would resume giving new connections when gas production exceeds 2,200 million cubic feet a day (mmcfd) benchmark.

On June 30 this year, the gas production peaked 2,239 mmcfd and now averages 2,201 mmcfd, with a demand exceeding more than 2,500 mmcfd, according to the government statistics.

Gas supply to fertiliser factories has remained suspended for several months as the government diverted gas supply to power plants to increase power generation in a bid to meet the additional power demand during irrigation season and Ramadan.

Rail link

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around 4:30am when the vehicle was passing a level crossing in Fouljdarhat.

The engine and two coaches of the train had derailed due to the impact, the PRO said, adding that the collision had left the trucker and the loco master, his assistant and a guard of the train injured. The trucker was given treatment at Chittagong Medical College Hospital while the train staffs received first aid at Chittagong Railway Hospital.

Two relief trains from Chittagong and Laksham railway stations had reached the accident spot around 6:00am to clear the track, said AAShamsul Alam, manager of Chittagong railway station.

The railway authorities yesterday formed a four-member committee to investigate the accident and asked it to submit its report within seven days. The committee is headed by Sushil Kumar Halder, Chittagong divisional signal and telecommunication officer of Bangladesh Railway (BR).

Meanwhile, BR Divisional Train Controller Abu Bakar Siddique said guard of the derailed train Abdul Hoque Majumder had told him that the gate at the level crossing was open and the gateman was not there when the accident occurred.

PASSENGERS' SUFFERING More than 4,000 passengers had to suffer at the Chittagong railway station waiting for the rail communication to resume.

During a visit to the station, passengers of six trains that were supposed to leave the port city were seen worrying about when they would reach their destinations.

The trains that were scheduled to leave Chittagong Station in the morning were: Subarna Express, Mahanagar Provati, Paharika Express, Chattala Express, Sagarika Express and Karnaphuli Express.

The railway authorities, however, cancelled the trip of Chandpur-bound Mahanagar Provati, which was scheduled to leave Chittagong station at 8:15am. The decision came as a shocker for the passengers of the cancelled train.

Azad Abdus Sobhan, who had been waiting at the station with his wife and two children since 6:30am, became hugely disappointed with the decision as his hope to reunite with his family in Brahmanbaria for Eid had been plunged into uncertainty.

Md Belal Hossain, a student of Chittagong Commerce College, came to the station to take the first train, Subarna Express, to the capital to sit for a job examination there. "I have been waiting here since 6:00am," he said with a worried look.

Four other Chittagong-bound trains carrying more than 2,000 passengers remained stranded at different stations in Chittagong and Feni. The Turna Nishita from Dhaka and the Udayan Express from Sylhet were stranded at Sitakunda station while the Chittagong Mail from the capital was halted at Chinki Astana station and Meghna Express from Chandpur at Fazilpur station in Feni.

Meanwhile, the five-day sale of advance tickets for inter-city trains ahead of Eid-ul-Fitr ended yesterday. All the tickets of Dhaka-bound trains were sold out by 12:15pm.

Extortion yes

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Communications Minister Obaidul Quader, Shipping Minister Shahjahan Khan, State Minister for Home Shamsul Hoque Tuku and Inspector General of Police Hassan Mahmood Khandker were present at the discussion.

The deputy commissioners and superintendents of police of Dhaka and its adjoining districts and representatives of Rab and Highway Police were also invited to the meet, which was called to find ways of ensuring that people went on Eid holidays without any hassle.

The debate ensued soon after Deputy Inspector General of Police (Dhaka Range) Asaduzzaman Mia claimed that no extortion was going on on the highways.

The transport leaders present sharply reacted to his comment.

"Tk 50 to Tk 200 is being extorted from buses and trucks at different places," said Khairul Alam Molla, general secretary of Sayedabad Bus Owners Association.

He referred to Independent Television reports that showed extortion in broad daylight.

Shamsul Islam Tuku intercepted Molla and wanted to know the names of those involved in the offence. The DIG also asked transport leaders to mention some extortion-prone areas.

The transport leaders, including Dudu Mia, senior

vice-president of Bangladesh Sarak Paribahan Federation, provided examples of Shimrail and Kanchpur points in Narayanganj.

The DIG said a city corporation toll had been collected from a bus stand near Shimrail but no extortion took place there.

But the leaders said transport workers regularly paid both the municipality toll and money to local extortionists. "Narayanganj police knows well about the extortion there," one of them told the meeting.

At this point, Narayanganj SP Nazmul Hossain said although extortion had taken place there in the past, it had now stopped.

In response, the transport leaders requested the SP not to hide the "truth".

Tuku intervened again. This time he admitted to being informed about extortion in some places. He said the law enforcement agencies, along with transport associations would solve the problem.

But the DIG was not convinced yet. He challenged the transport leaders and asked for evidence.

The secretary general of Bangladesh Sarak Paribahan Samity, Khandaker Enayetullah, known as one of the most influential transport leaders, said everybody knew the extortionists but nobody wanted to reveal their names.

Referring to extortion in Narayanganj, he said the

extortionists had been listed as criminals by both the police and Rab.

He said a councillor and his men stopped vehicles on the highway to collect tolls, frequently causing traffic congestion. The same councillor also engaged in extortion at Kanchpur.

Shipping Minister Shahjahan Khan said there was nothing new about extortion. It had been going on all over the country for a long time.

Shahjahan, who is also the top boss of transport owners and workers, said the SP of Narayanganj knew very well as to who were involved in extortion.

Communications Minister Obaidul Quader said the menace would be checked through the collective effort of the police and the transport associations.

Later, he told journalists that those involved in extortion were very influential, but he did not want to mention their names.

"Extortionists carry out their crimes under the shelter of some influential persons. They also have muscle power," he said, adding that DCs and SPs have been asked to take action against the extortionists without considering who they are.

Shahjahan Khan earlier on a number of occasions had said extortion would not stop unless a system of giving "service charge" to the toll collectors was introduced.