

Extremists 'linked'

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the country's minority Buddhists.

Locals, politicians and law enforcers suspected militants and Rohingyas of instigating the violence.

Ramu Upazila Chairman Sohel Sarwar said insurgents from the Rakhine state of Myanmar, Rohingyas -- the Myanmar ethnic group who often intrude into Bangladesh -- and anti-liberation forces might have had a hand in the attacks.

Locals said the rioters blamed the spread of the photo on a local Buddhist, identified as Uttam Kumar Barua, son of Supto Barua of Baruaupara at Ramu.

Ashutosh Barua, a government official of the upazila, told The Daily Star that 25-year-old Uttam worked as an assistant deed writer in Ramu upazila.

Some media reports have quoted a minister as saying the youth was an employee of Bangladesh Small and Cottage Industries Corporation (BSCIC). The Daily Star was yet to verify it.

Uttam claimed someone had tagged him in the photo on the social network site. Soon after the violence broke out, his Facebook account was closed and police escorted him and his mother Madhu Barua to safety, said SP Selim.

Abdur Rahim, manager of Diamond Restaurant at Kolatoli in Cox's Bazar, told a correspondent of The Daily Star yesterday afternoon that many in his neighbourhood had received the anti-Islam picture over their mobile phones through Bluetooth.

He too got it from a Rohingya man, whose name he couldn't say.

Issuing a press release yesterday, Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission said on its request, the Facebook authority had removed the derogatory photo of the holy Quran.

The BTRC also said it would continue efforts to get anti-Islam elements removed from social network sites and it urged all to refrain from posting and circulating anti-religious posts, messages and pictures.

Yesterday morning, the Cox's Bazar district administration imposed Section 144 in Ramu.

Members of the armed forces and strong contingents of law enforcers were deployed to contain the situation, with government ministers rushing to the spot.

In the capital, addressing a press briefing, Information Minister Hasanul Haque Inu alleged that communal forces had been involved in the Ramu violence.

"We have information that identified communal forces of Ramu and Cox's Bazar were present during the violence. The government will find them and ensure stern punishment."

HOW VIOLENCE FLARED UP
Police and witnesses said after the spread of the news about the Facebook photo, hundreds of people thronged Choumuhani area of Ramu and staged angry demonstration around 10:00pm Saturday.

Police from Ramu upazila tried to cordon off the area but were soon outnumbered and pushed back.

Nojibul Islam, officer-in-charge of Ramu Police Station, said several thousand people on trucks from Gorjonia, Rashidnagar, Jhiltonga, Eidgaon, Kochhopia and Rajarkul areas of the upazila swarmed into Choumuhani.

Around midnight, chanting slogans Naraye Takbir Allahu Akbar, they started ravaging and setting Buddhist temples and houses afire, he added.

Riot police and Rab arrived around 11:00pm, but by then hundreds of people had set fire to Buddhist households in Baruaupara.

Around 12:30am, a mob burned down a 250-year-old Buddhist temple on Cheranghata road, Borokang Buddha Bihar and Kendriyo Shima Bihar. An angry mob also vandalised Baruaupara Buddhist temple at Srikul of Ramu.

Buddhist people started to flee their homes as the fire services failed to reach the spot amid increasing violence around 10:00am.

With the help of police, the fire services managed to douse the blaze around 2:30am but the temples and the houses had already been gutted by then.

Praganando Bhikkhu, resident director of the 250-year-old Shima Bihar, said some 80 to 90 people wearing red bandanas on the forehead spread gun powder and petrol and torched the temple late last night. The monks tried to douse the blaze but the miscreants obstructed them.

Around 3:30am, the BGB, Rab and police managed to quell the violence and bring the situation under control with the help of local influential people, including lawmaker Lutfur Rahman and Ramu Upazila Parishad Chairman Sohel Sarwar.

Since yesterday morning army, BGB, Rab and police have been guarding all the 27 Buddhist monasteries and temples in Ramu.

However, police were unable to confirm the number of injured persons as most

Buddhist people have been in hiding since Saturday night.

The damaged temples include Progga Mitra Bihar, Uttar Mithachari Bimurta Bhabona Kendra, Ukhia Ghona Jobjoba Bihar, Srikul Maitree Bihar, Srikul Natun Bihar, Lal Ching Bihar, Sada Ching Bihar, Mahaya Bihar and Ramu Kendrya Shima Rajbon Bihar at Merongloa area.

Biplob Barua, a victim of the incident, said the demonstrators had burnt his house with gunpowder.

UKHIA
Upazila Nirbahi Officer Jahirul Islam told The Daily Star that some 500 demonstrators had burnt a temple named Pashchim Ratna Sudarshan Buddha Bihar in Kotbari area around 7:30pm yesterday.

He said he had heard a gunshot but could not confirm its source.

The mob left the scene after police rushed there and opened blank fire to disperse them.

Meanwhile, some people attacked Balukia Kalachand Bijoyanta Bibekaram Bihar around 7:00am, locals said. But the UNO could not confirm it.

PATIYA
Some miscreants in Patiya yesterday morning vandalised the Hindu temple Kolagaon Nabarun Sangha Durga Mandir and Buddhist monasteries Kolagaon Sarbojanin Ratnangkur Buddha Bihar and Lakhera Avoy Bihar.

Upazila Chairman Md Idris said the mob had demolished the idols.

Police arrested 26 persons in connection with the incidents, said OC Aminur Rashid of Patiya Police Station. Most of the arrestees are workers of the Western Marine Shipyard, he said.

Patiya police said the workers had joined a local gang.

Reached over phone, Western Marine Chairman Saiful Islam denied the allegation. He said some 10 to 12 workers who took part in the vandalism were not employees of Western Marine; they worked for the company's sub-contractor.

"However, we'll identify them and hand them over to the law enforcers."

TEKNAF
Local sources said some thousand people went to Hoyangton union to destroy a Buddhist temple around 7:30pm. But they failed as police and BGB members opened blank fire to disperse them. Police also baton-charged the mob, injuring at least 10.

The unruly people attacked the Buddha neighbourhood and set five houses on fire.



A senior citizen casts her vote at the Dardaria Govt Primary School polling centre in Kapasia of Gazipur. The constituency went to by-polls yesterday.

Rimi wins

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The voter turnout was 43.32 percent against 92 percent at the last parliamentary polls held in December 2008.

The maiden by-polls, considered as an "acid test" for the incumbent Election Commission constituted in February this year to prove its neutrality was marked by lack of voters' enthusiasm.

The AL has claimed the by-polls have been held in a free, fair and credible manner and ruled out independent candidate Afsaruddin Ahmad Khan's allegation that the election had been "stage-managed".

The ruling party's Joint General Secretary Mahbul Alam Hanif told The Daily Star Afsaruddin, sensing his "sure debacle", made the comment just before the end of voting.

Earlier yesterday, Kapasia people opined that traditional voting enthusiasm was absent in all the 102 vote centres owing mainly to the polls boycott by the main opposition BNP. The brief one-year tenure remaining for the government and divisions in the ruling party also caused the low turnout, they added.

Heavy downpour for over an hour in the midst of the eight-hour-long non-stop voting also affected enthusiasm and festivity among the over 2.1 lakh voters of the constituency, which fell vacant following the resignation of AL MP Tanjim Ahmad Sohel Taj from parliament on July 7.

The two other candidates officially rejected the by-polls ten to fifteen minutes before the voting process ended.

Afsaruddin, brother of the country's first premier Tajuddin Ahmad, alleged that ruling party cadres, especially Bangladesh Chhatra League activists, wearing police uniforms threatened his voters and polling agents not to come to vote centres. He, however, could not give the names of the agents who were resisted or how they were resisted.

The CPB-backed candidate alleged that ruling party men showed "muscle power" and were engaged in vote rigging in over 25 vote centres. Badal mentioned the names of a dozen areas where those 25 vote centres were situated. However, he could not specify the names of any vote centres where his supporters were barred from casting votes.

Rimi claimed the by-election was held in a free, fair and peaceful manner.

There were reports of a few instances of vote rigging and intimidation of a few polling agents of Afsaruddin.

The Daily Star correspondent visited and monitored 16 vote centres situated in seven out of 11 unions in the constituency.

BCL men

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Moreover, he added, at least 30 relatives of the VC and pro-VC got recruited in different posts. "But the VC told us he had appointed BCL men to the posts."

Kushtia police rushed to the campus but it was only after the request of Bangabandhu Parishad's leaders that the BCL men lifted the blockade.

Asked about the recruitment of his daughter as a lecturer, the VC said the recruitment committee had selected her and the syndicate approved the selection.

"I tried to sit with the BCL leaders but they demanded at least 200 jobs for themselves. How can I meet this demand?" the VC told this correspondent.

Australian aid worker 'free to leave Libya'

AEP, Sydney

Australia yesterday said it had secured free passage from Libya for an aid worker stopped from leaving the country reportedly over a sexual assault probe involving a Libyan official.

Australian national Alexandra Bean, an employee of the International Organisation for Migration, had her passport confiscated and was blocked from leaving Libya after being questioned by police.

According to her family Bean had refused to sign a statement in Arabic after her police interview, reportedly linked to a sexual assault investigation involving a senior health official.

Bean has been described as a witness in the case and Australian officials have stressed that she has done nothing wrong.

Foreign Minister Bob Carr had earlier urged Libya to allow her to leave the country and said diplomats had been able to secure permission from the Libyan government for her to depart.

"Her passport has been given to her, and our staff will be with her until she boards the plane," Carr told Australian television, adding that Bean was now waiting for a flight home.

"So that's a happy outcome, and I thank the government of Libya."

ACC to launch

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The committee yesterday sought a copy of the investigation report on the controversial scandal submitted by the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC).

The ACC chairman said its team would interrogate the people who had been mentioned in the SEC report. However, it would not follow the report submitted by Krishi Bank Chairman Ibrahim Khaled.

The anti-graft organisation filed four cases yesterday with Dhanmondi Police Station, accusing Nasrin Kadri, operation manager of Arab Bangladesh Bank's Motijhel Corporate branch, and Chowdhury Hafez Rahman, former junior officer of the bank's Dhanmondi branch, of embezzling money.

Bangladeshi

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Yesterday, Abdul Hannan, 25, son of Tofzul Mia of Shibganj upazila, fell victim to the BSF torture.

A BSF patrol team of Doulatpur camp under 20 Mالدah of Paschimbaniga in India held Hannan at Shingnagar border around 4:15am as he was entering Indian territory to receive a consignment of cattle, said Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB) personnel.

Then, the BSF members dumped him on zero line along the border around 6:15am.

Local people rescued injured Hannan from the zero line and rushed him to Shibganj Health Complex.

Major Abu Nayem, operation officer of 9 BGB Battalion, said Hannan was discharged from the hospital in the afternoon. However, he died from the injuries as he was on his way home around 4:30pm.

Ramu attack designed to foil war crimes trial

Reacts AL; other political parties also condemn

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The ruling Awami League and other political parties yesterday said the attacks on temples and houses of religious minorities by fundamental forces in different parts of the country were aimed at protecting the war criminals now facing trial.

They urged the people to build up united resistance against the communal forces, and demanded immediate arrest and exemplary punishment of the culprits responsible for the attacks.

Members of civil society also condemned the attack.

The main opposition BNP, however, did not give any formal reaction to the attacks on religious minorities till the filing of this report last night.

Rahman Kajal, a BNP lawmaker from Cox's Bazar-3 (Ramu), held the AL and its associated bodies responsible for the attack on Buddhist temples and houses.

AL General Secretary Syed Ashraf Islam, in a press statement, said "The conspiratorial attacks and planned violence are aimed at saving the war criminals who belong to the Jamaat-e-Islami and BNP."

"They are resorting to violence in the country as in the past, curbing constitutional rights of the religious minorities, destroying long-standing social harmony and social and political stability in the country."

The identified anti-liberation war criminals were trying to give their last death bite to save them from

the ongoing trial, said Ashraf, also the LGRD and cooperatives minister.

Condemning the communal attacks, different political and social organisations demanded that the government take initiatives to restore the temples and compensate the victim families.

The parties and organisations include Workers' Party of Bangladesh, Communist Party of Bangladesh, Bangladesher Samajtantrik Dal, Bangladesh Hindu-Buddha-Christian Oikkyo Parishad, Ain O Salish Kendra, Mahila Parishad, Gonosanghati Andolon, Bangladesh Jatiya Hindu Mohajote.

M Hafizuddin Khan, former adviser to a caretaker government, said the government must hand down exemplary punishment to the culprits whoever they might be, after conducting a fair probe.

Talking to The Daily Star, Akbar Ali Khan said the government must take urgent steps to curb further violence to ensure long standing communal harmony among different religious people in the country.

Sultana Kamal, another former adviser to a caretaker government, questioned the role of the police and intelligence agencies saying, "If they had detected the possibility of the attacks earlier, they could have prevented the incidents."

Bipradash Barua, a litterateur, also strongly condemned the attack on Buddhist temples and houses.

Tight security

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officials were discharging their duties with utmost sincerity and dutifulness.

A sub-inspector at a polling centre was seen asking a polling agent to hand him her cell phone though it was switched off during voting time.

"Give me your mobile phone. You are not allowed to carry it inside the polling centre," said SI Sumon Kumar Aditya to Sharmin, a polling agent of ruling Awami League-backed candidate Simeen Hussain Rimi.

The SI, who was in charge of Kapasia Model Government Primary School vote centre, took the mobile phone and passed it on to an assistant presiding officer at the centre.

The SI of Kosba Police Station did the same to two other polling agents of Rimi and her arch-rival Afsaruddin Ahmad.

He asked all the three polling agents to collect their phones from the three assistant presiding officers after voting ended at 4:00pm.

Except for some stray incidents and some irregularities in and outside a few polling centres, some 3,500 members of different law enforcement agencies did their best, like SI Suman Aditya, to maintain a congenial election atmosphere.

The voters expressed their satisfaction after casting votes at the polling centres.

After visiting two polling centres in Kapasia sadar areas at 10:00am, Returning Officer Mihir Sarwar Morshed commented that voter turnout in the two centres had been very low.

"Our main task is to hold the polls in a free, fair and peaceful manner. And the voters' main task is to cast their votes in time," he said during his visit to Kapasia Model Government Primary School centre.

While declaring the polls schedule in Gazipur-4, the EC Chief Kazi Rakiuddin had said the

election body would take this election as a test to prove its neutrality and sincerity.

Khaleda

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She urged all to ensure religious harmony everywhere in the country.

The former premier requested all to protect the lives, properties and worship places of people of minority communities.

"Bangladesh is a country of religious harmony. Those who want to destroy this tradition are the enemy of Bangladesh. They don't believe in religion. A religious person cannot take the way of terrorism," she said, urging people to resist such heinous "conspiracy".

"I demand that the government, law enforcement agencies and the administration bring back peace and normalcy, dealing with the criminals with a strong hand," she said in the statement signed by her press secretary Maruf Kamal Khan Sohel.

She thanked her party's local unit leaders, workers and the local lawmaker for their efforts to contain the situation.

"I think such an incident could not have taken place had the administration and law enforcement agencies taken necessary steps in time," Khaleda said.

She claimed, "We have been informed that the ruling party leaders and workers led the mob responsible for the incidents. That was why law enforcers could not take action in time."

The BNP chief said she believed the government encouraged such activities only to divert public attention from their failure.

"Baseless, objectionable and intentional statements of ministers and ruling party leaders against opposition leaders made it clear. Such statements will hamper the fair investigation of this incident."

A night of joy turns

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Purnima (full moon) yesterday morning. Many of its inhabitants were busy doing last minute shopping on Saturday night, just hours before the festival of offering honey to Bhikkhus (Buddhist monks) in local temples.

Little did they know that their happy occasion would turn into a nightmare. Overnight, the festive mood turned into one of the bitterest experiences of their lifetime.

Many of their age-old temples were burnt to ashes by some fanatic groups of people within hours around Saturday midnight.

A 40-year-old college teacher of Sridhon Para at Ramu was returning home from Cox's Bazar that night. Around 9:15pm, he got a phone call from his wife who told him that she was listening to sounds of slogans outside their home with demonstrators hurling abuse against Buddhists.

"I was very surprised because such things never happened at Ramu," he told The Daily Star over the phone, requesting repeatedly not to be named fearing attack.

He received a few more calls from his friends before reaching Ramu around 9:45pm, when he saw a public gathering at Choumohni circle.

"I went to a fruit shop, bought some grapes and apples for Madhu Purnima," he said, adding, "We've honey

at home. We prepare food and offer it before the statue of God Buddha and distribute honey among the Bhikkhus at the temple on this occasion."

The teacher said the Buddhist community in other places celebrated the occasion on Saturday. But at Ramu it was to be on Sunday, according to the calendar followed there.

At the fruit shot, he learnt from the vendor that a photo, insulting Islam, posted on a Facebook account belonging to a Buddhist youth had triggered the agitation.

"I felt very bad to hear that. We condemn any such thing. We have always had communal harmony at Ramu. So I was thinking of doing something to uphold this friendly ambience in our area."

Himself a Buddhist, the teacher spent some time talking to friends about the issue and then went to a friend's home nearby to know a little more about what was happening.

A little later, the agitated people brought out more processions and were chanting slogans such as Naraye Takbir Allahu Akbar.

Fearing attack, the teacher did not come out of his friend's house to go home where his wife, a four-year-old boy and his mother were up through the "scariest night" yet of their lives.

He himself spent a sleepless night at his friend's form where he saw a flame engulfing a temple on Buddha

Mandir road.

"I saw the flame of fire in the area for a long time," he said, "I left my friend's house around 3:30am [Sunday] and went home."

The rest of the fearful night seemed to never end for the family. And when it ended without anything bad happening to him or his family, the teacher went out around 6:00am yesterday to see firsthand what had actually happened.

He found four Buddhist temples on the Buddha Mandir road burnt to the ground.

"Those temples are 100 to 400 years old with very rare aesthetic wooden art work," said the teacher, sobbing at one stage fearing further attack.

"At one point, I went to a 300-year-old Ramu Shima Bihar temple at my own village Marangroa, where we were supposed to go to celebrate Madhu Purnima this [Sunday] morning with my wife, child and mother."

"But I found that the temple had been reduced to ashes," he said, adding that the monks fled the area at night fearing for their lives.

Distressed and panicked by the nightmarish night, the teacher, who opened a Facebook account about a year ago, closed it yesterday.

For who knows who tags or posts him with what photo and when? He does not want to be a part of any such violence.