

School or police outpost?

Same building houses students, cops

TAREK MAHMUD, Ctg

It is a three-storey primary school. On top of the building a national flag and a flag of the Chittagong Metropolitan Police (CMP) flutter together.

On one corner of the building a signboard reads Peyari Mohan Sen Registered Primary School, North Kattali. In the other corner, another signboard announces the building as the North Kattali Police Outpost.

The coexistence of a primary school and a police outpost under the same roof is a rare thing and exposes the helplessness of the police department in finding a place for its operation.

The law enforcers have taken over half of the first floor and the entire second floor for their office and dormitories for at least 19 police personnel. The school children are crammed in a total of six classrooms on the whole ground floor and one half of the first floor.

The school was established through private initiative in 1995-96. Since January 1 this year, it has been a government primary school.

Teachers and students have mixed feelings about the strange coexistence. Some say they feel secure at the presence of the police on the school compound while others say they are scared to see police action, such as bringing in criminals into the compound in handcuffs.

The headmistress of the school, Beauty Das, said that before the police set up the outpost here school furniture had been stolen regularly. No such things happen now, she said.

"But I have to admit that my students are growing up in an unusual environment, and most importantly we are really short of space with 500 students in the school. So the outpost should be moved from here," added the headmistress.

Sub-inspector (SI) Sanat Kanti Das, in-charge of North Kattali Police Outpost, said, "We are under a police station. We wanted to move from here but we have not been able to find any proper land till now."



Originally, it is the Peyari Mohan Sen Registered Primary School building at Uttar Kattali in Chittagong. But for the last five years, the school is housing a police outpost that has occupied half of the school's space. While this is seriously hampering academic activities, the police officials are facing difficulties in doing their job.

Govt mulls tough law on hartal

Says home minister

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, Ctg

The government is mulling over formulating a new law regarding hartal that will force any political party to pay for the damage done in the shutdown enforced by them.

Home Minister Md. Mostofa Kamal, chairman and managing director of Meghna Group of Industries, one of the biggest conglomerates in Bangladesh with an annual turnover of \$1.5 billion.

Meghna Group is unwilling to take out loans of Tk 200 crore sanctioned by a state-owned bank due to the present business climate.

Energypac, a leading player in power sector, and Ifad Group, a vehicle and commodity trader, have also refrained from availing themselves of sanctioned bank loans.

Not only them, almost all businesses -- from large to small -- have been cautious about making new investments.

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Business slows down

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Chowdhury, chairman of East Coast Group that is involved in shipping, power, banking and lubricant businesses.

Chowdhury said political

turmoil is nothing new in Bangladesh, and businesses know that there would be turmoil once in every five years centring the national election.

But they were not ready for such a jump in bank interest rates.

Banks are charging 16-17 percent interest rates for big clients, and even higher for small ones. Handling charges and other fees add to the interest burden.

In addition to bank interests, a business has to spend on salaries of its staff, utility and office management costs.

"What we do with high-interest loans amid the growing political uncertainties?" asked Iftekhar Ahmed Tipu, chairman of Ifad Group.

Tipu claimed he had never defaulted on bank loans, and

wished not to do it ever. He is not willing to take bank loans at this moment considering the unfavourable business climate.

"You have to make profits between 28 and 30 percent, which seems impossible, to pay the banks and survive," said Tipu.

Humayun Rashid, managing director of Energypac, also voiced similar concerns.

Though the company invested heavily in power sector in the last few years, it has not recently taken any new project.

"Project costs are soaring. Banks now charge 16.5 percent, which goes up to 18 percent if payments are overdue. So, we are not taking new loans," said Rashid.

Kamal of Meghna Group said entrepreneurs must be given facilities, otherwise they wouldn't feel encouraged to make new investments.

Chowdhury of East Coast Group demands the central

bank's intervention to ease the interest burden on investors.

"The central bank should hold talks with all stakeholders to reduce the bank interest rates and create a business-friendly environment," said Chowdhury.

SK Sur Chowdhury, deputy governor of Bangladesh Bank, is also concerned about high bank interest rates.

"If banks have enough loanable funds, the rate will automatically go down." Latest reports show that interest rates have already fallen by 1-1.5 percent, he said.

However, the BB deputy governor said private sector credit went down because of tightening of policies and monitoring by the central bank, not for high interest rates.

"Our banks were aggressive in lending. Now they cannot play games with loans, especially with the non-funded ones," he said.

EC sees no need

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The CEC said members of law enforcement agencies, like police and Rapid Action Battalion, were enough to handle the elections scheduled for June 15. Border Guard Bangladesh personnel would also be deployed later.

Ruling Awami League-led alliance backed mayoral aspirants claimed that the law and order in the electoral areas was better than any previous times.

Talking to The Daily Star, major aspirants of the four city corporations -- Rajshahi, Khulna, Barisal and Sylhet -- came up with contradictory observations about law and order in their areas.

The opposition alliance backed candidates alleged that local police were harassing their supporters and that it would be a problem for them if the harassment persisted.

"The law and order situation is not satisfactory in

Kulna. Police know the whereabouts of every criminal but do not arrest them," said Moniruzzaman Moni, opposition-backed candidate in Khulna City Corporation election.

He claimed that locals want a drive against criminals but the police were uninterested.

He said if an atmosphere congenial to polls were not created, people would not go to the polling centres to cast votes.

He believed the army could be of help in this regard.

His rival Awami League-backed alliance backed candidate and former mayor of the city Talukdar Abdul Khaleq disagrees. Khaleq claimed that law and order was normal and there was no need for the army.

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"The army must be deployed three days prior to the election and should remain there for holding a free and fair election," said Mosaddek.

Former mayor of Rajshahi city AHM Khairuzzaman Liton, a ruling party backed candidate, said police and Rab were enough to maintain law and order.

The two other opposition

backed mayor candidates in Barisal and Sylhet city corporations, Ashan Habib Kamal and Ariful Haque Chowdhury, also alleged that police were harassing their workers and demanded army deployment to maintain law and order.

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