

The traffic jam on Kazi Nazrul Islam Avenue near Shahbagh yesterday afternoon. An Awami League rally at Suhrawardy Udyan and the numerous processions from across the capital that went there caused gridlocks even on the weekend.



PHOTO: STAR

Ivy accuses Shamim Osman

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Toki. People in their hundreds joined the programme, organised by Santrash Nirmul Toki Mancha.

Tanvir Mohammad Toki, an A-level student and son of former president of Narayanganj Sangskritik Jote Rafiur Rabbi, was found dead on the bank of the Shitalakkhya on March 8, two days after he went missing.

"Toki was murdered at

the office of Azmeri Osman on the directives of Shamim Osman. So we demand death sentence for Shamim and his nephew," said Ivy.

The Osman family not only threw Toki's body into the river, she complained adding, they also dumped the bodies of Ashik, Chanchal and Bhulu Saha into the river.

Shamim, said the mayor, shows sympathy to the Hindu community, but his men had damaged several

idols at different temples during the city corporation polls and killed thread trader Bhulu Saha at the torture cell.

She also alleged that drug trading continued in Narayanganj under the patronisation of Nasim Osman and his son to destroy the youths.

"Shamim Osman always uses the name of the prime minister and her family members. But he is a coward as he cannot come out of his

house without his armed cadres," she noted.

Rafiur Rabbi, convenor of Santrash Nirmul Toki Mancha, said according to arrestee Liton's confessional statement, Bhramor, Liton, Kalam Sikdar, Rajib, Simanto and Opu Khan were involved in Toki murder.

Among them, Bhramor, Rajib, Liton and Opu are known as close aides of Azmeri, while Kalam Sikdar is one of the business part-

ners of Shamim Osman, mentioned Rabbi.

"We came to know from different sources that the Osman family has laundered around Tk10,000 crore abroad.... We have heard that Shamim and Azmeri have been trying to flee the country," he added.

The Daily Star tried to reach Shamim Osman over the phone for his comment on the allegations against him, but to no avail.

Work on action plan

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"Regaining the GSP status in December review is very unlikely as the government's activities towards the US action plan are still sluggish," said AKM Nasim, senior legal counsellor of Solidarity Centre, a US-based rights group in Bangladesh.

People in the industries sector said the progress made so far by different ministries and departments was not enough to convince the United States Trade Representative to give Bangladesh its GSP status back during its review.

Nasim claimed that the labour law amendment, which was passed in parliament on July 15, was not acceptable to many as the workers' rights were undermined in the new law.

Moreover, the restructuring of the laws for the Export Processing Zones (EPZs) had also not made much headway, Nasim said, adding that the full freedom of workers to join unions had

not been ensured.

The government was yet to create a publicly available database of all readymade garment factories which would mention if a factory was compliant with regulations regarding labour, fire and building.

However, the rules for trade union registrations had been relaxed, cases against two labour leaders were withdrawn, and the labour leader Aminul Islam murder case was shifted to the Criminal Investigation Department for probe.

But the Ministry of Labour and Employment is yet to employ 200 factory inspectors, a basic requirement for regaining the GSP.

Commerce Minister GM Quader said only two months have gone after the suspension of the benefit was decided. "We are trying to make progress under the US action plan. I am hopeful Bangladesh will regain the GSP in the December review. We have four

months in our hand to deal with the matter," he said.

To expedite the activities of the action plan, the high-powered ministerial committee on ready-made garment would review the progresses made by the government in a meeting on September 1, Quader told The Daily Star over the phone.

An official of the commerce ministry said little progress in improving workers' working conditions and labour rights might affect the GSP status in the European Union (EU) as well.

The official requesting not to be named said the EU was also monitoring the progress as it signed a Compact Agreement in Geneva on July 8, involving the Bangladesh government, the EU and the International Labour Organisation.

The agreement is about improving labour rights and their working conditions.

Major gold haul

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gold bars recovered might have been left by any of nearly 150 passengers of the flight."

Asked what steps the

airways has taken to check smuggling, he said it was the job of the civil aviation authorities.

On July 24, as many as 1,065 gold bars weighing

around 116kg were recovered at Shahjalal airport. On August 20, an Indian national was arrested at the airport along with 65 gold bars weighing about 8kg.

Defence purchase on govt priority

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country's defence purchase worth Tk 7,400 during the current government.

During the time, the army got 44 tanks, three armed recovery vehicles (ARV) and two weapon-locating radars from China while 184 three-tonne capacity Japanese lorries, 275 armed personnel carriers (APC), 15 ARV ambulances and 113 tank destroyer equipment (ATGW) from Russia. It also got two helicopters from France and 18 self-propelled guns from Serbia, according to the sources.

Given the importance of maritime boundary, the government has put the highest importance on equipping the navy with new frigates, patrol ships, warships, missiles and maritime aircraft in the last four and a half years.

Two frigates, two new small warships, two large patrol ships and five patrol craft were procured from China. Two radars and fire control systems and 50 missiles (C-704) were also bought from China.

In addition, two Italy-

made maritime helicopters and five MK-2 missiles, two German-made maritime aircraft and three ships made by the UK were added to the navy force.

The navy is also hoping to be equipped with two submarines by 2016. The government is in talks with China and the US in this regard. Estimated cost of a China-made submarine is Tk 4,000 crore while a US-made one may cost double the sum.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina inaugurated three warships in Chittagong on Thursday.

A move is underway to acquire land in Pekua upazila (near Kutubdia channel) of Cox's Bazar to establish a submarine harbour.

Six navy personnel are now in Golcuk, Turkey, for training on operation of submarine. Five more will be sent once they return, said sources in the navy.

There was no purchase for the air force in fiscal year 2009-10 but the following three years saw a huge purchase from China and Russia. These include 16 F-7

BG1 planes from China and three MI-171SH helicopters from Russia.

The air force also got SHORAD, an air defence system, overhauling facilities for F-7 planes, PL-9C missiles for F-7 plane, four air defence radars and overhauling of MIG-29 planes during the time.

Justifying expenditure on defence hardware, former army chief Maj Gen (ret'd) Mahburur Rahman said, "Considering our geopolitical, geostrategic, geo-economical and geographical context, the purchase was very much important to strengthen our armed forces."

He said Bangladesh's neighbours India, Myanmar and China have multiplied their military might.

"We have the Bay of Bengal. If we want to establish our rights and authorities on the water territory and its resources, we have no alternative but to strengthen the army, navy and air force," said Mahburur, a standing committee member of the BNP.

He termed "very much logical" the move to buy

submarines for the navy. "We of course need submarines."

Former chief of army staff Lt Gen (ret'd) Harun-Ar Rashid has said Bangladesh armed forces operate not only in the country. They also work with militaries of other countries in the UN Peacekeeping Mission.

"So our armed forces must be modernised so they can remain in the race with other countries' armed forces," he said.

Asked how he looked at such huge defence budget, the former army chief said the issue of modernising the armed forces had not got due priority in the past. "It has got due attention from the government this time. Everybody should take it positively."

Harun, however, added that education, health and housing should get priority over the armed forces in terms of the budgetary allocation.

Both the former army chiefs said they believed defence allocation in Bangladesh was the lowest in the sub-continent.

A former navy chief said

strengthening the navy became very important given the fact that Bangladesh now had more maritime area than its land area.

"A good navy equipped with air, marine and submarine equipment is a must to ensure a good economy. It is more so because 99 percent imports of the country come through the sea," he said.

The navy is on duty round the clock to check piracy, provide security to trade and oil and gas exploration. Strengthening the navy also means it will be able to play a stronger role in the UN Peacekeeping Mission, he added.

DEAL WITH RUSSIA
On January 15, Dhaka and Moscow signed a \$1 billion (around Tk 8,000 crore) deal under which Bangladesh will procure military arms and equipment from Russia.

They include armoured vehicles and infantry weapons, air defence systems, training aircraft, anti-tank missiles and Mi-17 transport helicopters.

RIA Novosti, one of the largest news agencies in

Russia, reported that details of the deal were unknown but Russian military analyst Igor Korotchenko said Bangladesh was likely to buy about 80 to 100 Russia-made BTR-80 amphibious armoured personnel carriers (APCs) and some missile defence systems.

DEAL WITH BELARUS
Bangladesh signed seven deals with Belarus during Hasina's visit to the East European country last month. A deal on military and technological cooperation was also signed during the visit but it was kept entirely secret.

Like many past deals, the government disclosed nothing about the defence pact.

However, bits and pieces of defence purchase became public through various speeches of the prime minister, who on February 27 offered some details in this regard in her speech in parliament.

Hasina said her government had moved to purchase two submarines and a coast guard cutter for the navy.

"Moves are on to purchase two submarines from

a friendly country," she said without naming the country. But she said the coast guard cutter will be bought from the US.

In her scripted answer, the premier said her government had already bought missiles and torpedoes for destroying ship and depth charges, rocket launchers, canons, radars and other weapons for the navy.

She said two new army commands and an infantry division, two air defence brigades and more than one armoured, artillery and engineering battalion and other supportive units will be added to the army to strengthen the force as part of implementing the force's goal-2030.

The goal will be implemented in four phases in light of the defence policy formulated by the Bangabandhu-led government in 1974.

Besides, Hasina said, the government had moved to purchase fourth generation MBT-2000 tanks, multi-launcher rocket system, weapon-locating radar, automatic grenade

launcher, anti-tank weapon, non-guided anti-tank weapon and anti-tank guided missiles for the army.

She also mentioned that a process was underway to purchase modern euro-copter, light fixed-wing aircraft and armoured and anti-air weapons for the army.

To modernise the air force under the goal-2030, she added, her government had moved to buy air defence radars, fighter planes and air-to-air missiles.

On June 13 last year, Planning Minister AK Khandker, who is in charge of the House committee on the defence ministry, told parliament that the government had moved to purchase two off-the-shelf frigates, two large patrol craft, two maritime patrol aircraft and five patrol craft for the navy.

The government allocated Tk 14,458 crore for defence in the budget for fiscal year 2013-14, the second highest after education, which got Tk 25,114 crore.

US makes case for Syria

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a United Nations mandate, and without help from Washington's closest ally, Britain where lawmakers blocked action.

"This is the indiscriminate, inconceivable horror of chemical weapons. This is what (President Bashar al-Assad did to his own people," Kerry said.

The White House report said the judgment on the attack was based on "multiple" streams of intelligence including witness reports, satellite data and signals intercepts.

"The United States government assesses with high confidence that the Syrian government carried out a chemical weapons attack in the Damascus suburbs on August 21, 2013," the report said.

"We further assess that the regime used a nerve agent in the attack."

The unclassified assessment, which omitted sourcing and raw intelligence to protect US espionage assets, also debunked the theory, advanced notably by Russia, that opposition forces could be to blame.

The report said Washington had intercepted the communications of a senior Syrian official, who was intimately familiar with the operation, soon after rockets started raining down on

civilians.

Kerry said the US government had repeatedly assessed the intelligence in the report, to avoid the kind of fiasco that erupted over botched covert material used to justify the Iraq war.

"We will not repeat that moment," he said.

And he argued that the world could not ignore the use of some of its most pernicious weaponry on some of its most vulnerable people.

A window for US action was opening with the expected departure of UN inspectors from Syria today.

Obama is expected to leave on a trip to Sweden and Russia for the G20 summit on Tuesday, and military action would be unlikely to take place with him overseas.

Earlier, France gave its backing to the US plans after British lawmakers voted against any involvement in military action against Damascus and other close allies including Germany, Canada said they would not sign up.

The White House has signalled that Obama, guided by the "best interests" of the United States, was ready to go it alone on Syria.

But Russia, Syria's most

powerful ally, questioned US intelligence on the August 21 gas attacks and warned against any military strikes without UN backing.

Meanwhile, Syria's Foreign Minister Walid Muallem reportedly told the UN chief that Damascus would reject any "partial" conclusions about the attack before full analyses are undertaken.

The military buildup was continuing in the region, with US warships armed with scores of cruise missiles converging on the eastern Mediterranean.

In Damascus the mood was heavy with fear and security forces were making preparations for possible air bombardments, pulling soldiers back from potential targets.

And an opinion poll released yesterday showed half of all Americans believe Obama should not intervene, and Italian Foreign Minister Emma Bonino said military strikes risked escalating the conflict into a "global conflagration".

More than 100,000 people have died since the conflict erupted in March 2011 and two million are refugees, half of them children, according to the United Nations.

Little headway

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used two professional killers - Tarek and Chanchal - to carry out the murder," Niloy Khan Milky, cousin of the deceased, told The Daily Star.

Tipu and Arif have not been suspended from the party, let alone being arrested," he added.

Footage of the camera at the shopping mall's entrance showed that a man wearing a white Punjabi and an Islamic prayer cap shooting at Milky from a close range.

Two other men were also seen helping the killer.

Hours after the murder, members of Rapid Action Battalion (Rab) arrested Jahid Siddique Tarek. They claimed that Tarek was the man in white Punjabi and cap.

But Tarek and one of his alleged cohorts were killed in a "shootout", when unidentified criminals attacked Rab members on their way to Gulshan Police Station to hand Tarek over to the police on July 31.

Later, Rab took over the case from Gulshan police with permission from the home ministry.

So far Rab arrested eight people including Chanchal's driver, Jahangir Mondol, and Fahima Islam Lopa, wife of Milky's close associate Sagar. Lopa had confessed to helping the killers.

At the Motijheel AGB

colony, where Milky grew up and carried out his political activities, this correspondent yesterday saw posters on walls demanding a fair investigation of the murder.

Some of the posters illustrated that Tipu, Arif, Chanchal and Sohail were the killers.

Talking to The Daily Star, locals demanded that Milky's murder should be investigated without any political interference.

Some Jubo League activists in the AGB colony said Tipu, Arif and Milky wanted to contest for ward councillor post in the local body polls.

"When Tipu and Arif found that Milky had more support among voters in the area, they felt threatened and joined hands," said Niloy.

He also said "Milky had opposed Tipu, who uses his political influence to arrange admission for students in Motijheel Ideal School in exchange for money."

Contacted, Kismat Hayat, commanding officer of Rab-1, said two-thirds of the investigation of the case had been completed.

"We have arrested eight accused and are trying to arrest the others. Photos of the other accused were sent to different posts of border forces to prevent their escape," he said.

Law enforcers were keeping an eye on other suspects, he added.