

Blockaders torch AL leader's house

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video message announcing an extension of the blockade till 5:00pm Thursday.

The opposition activists around 2:00pm attacked the residence of Golam Rabbani, the Awami League candidate for the 10th general election from Chapainawabganj-1 constituency.

The belongings on the first floor of the two-storey building in Pukhuria village of Shibganj upazila were burned down. The attackers also set fire to the neighbouring house of his elder brother Abu Bakkar and a car and two trucks there, locals said.

The clash ensued when Awami League men tried to resist attack.

Rubel, 25, son of Khalilur Rahman, lived just opposite to Rabbani's house. He got injured in a blast as he came out to see what was going on, locals say.

Doctors declared him dead after he was rushed to Shibganj Upazila Health Complex. Several splinters hit him in the chest, said Rabiul Islam, medical officer of the health complex.

Rabbani, who led a people's movement for electricity during the past BNP-Jamaat rule in 2001-06, and his brother were unhurt in the attack.

The administration imposed Section 144 in Shibganj municipal area and Kansat union.

Saifuzzaman Sujan, 30, joint secretary of Natore municipality Chhatra Dal, was killed and 10 people were injured in a gunfight between activists of the AL and BNP.

The BNP was enforcing a dawn-to-dusk hartal demanding the release of Ruhul Kuddus Talukder Dulu. Protesting the killing of Sujan, the main opposition party extended the hartal till 6:00pm Thursday.

Prior to the clash, the BNP men were marching towards Kanaikhali area, said the Nahid Hossain, superintendent of police in Natore. Police had barred the opposition men as Awami League activists had gathered there too.



Pickers torch the home of Kansat movement leader Golam Rabbani in Pukhuria of Chapainawabganj yesterday afternoon. A car burns in his elder brother's house, which too was burnt down by opposition activists.

PHOTO: STAR

The clash broke out around 11:00am after the BNP men moved forward in defiance of the police ban.

In Chittagong, auto-rickshaw driver Md Islam, 40, was speeding away when chased by pickets in Rangunia upazila last night. As his vehicle veered out of control and overturned, throwing him out, another auto-rickshaw hit him from behind.

Fatally injured Islam was taken to upazila health complex only to be declared dead around 11:00pm.

Yesterday morning, BNP-Jamaat activists fought pitched battles with police at Court Station Bazar in Rajshahi city, leaving at least 50 people, including a constable, injured.

A clash between BNP men and police near Chawk Bazar More in Bhola municipality area injured at least 52.

In Chittagong, five-year-old Sumaiya Akhter Sadia and five others were injured in bomb blasts and arson by the blockaders yesterday.

At least 50 others were hurt in clashes in Lalmonirhat, Dinajpur, Chandpur and Feni. The blockaders vandalised dozens of vehicles and exploded crude bombs in different districts, report our correspondents.

In Dhaka, a 14-year-old boy suffered serious splinter injuries as blockaders detonated crude bombs and set fire to the human haulier he was aboard in Jurain rail gate area around 1:30pm.

The right eye of a rickshaw-puller was badly hurt in an explosion near Joy Kali Temple.

Around 9:00pm yesterday, a bomb was thrown at the wall of Information Minister Hasanul Haq Inu's Darussalam residence.

Two buses were set on fire near Dhakeshwari temple and in Pallabi area yesterday. According to the fire service, at least 11 vehicles were burned across the country yesterday.

A pro-blockade activist, caught red-handed while setting fire to a bus on



Touchscreen-reliant kids

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And now, it seems, they are paying the price -- because when they arrive at nursery they are apparently struggling to pick up basic fine-motor skills such as holding pencils, pens and crayons.

Some nurseries in UK have installed interactive 'smartboards', digital cameras and touchscreen computers to try to expose children to gadgets at an early age.

One of the learning goals in the revised Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) is that 'children recognise that a range of technology is used in places such as homes and school'.

Under a section on Understanding the World, youngsters must also find out about and 'identify the uses of everyday technology and use ICT and programmable toys to support their learning'.

Some nurseries have prioritised ICT as a result and ploughed resources into improving their facilities.

Jeff Stanford from Asquith Day Nurseries in UK -- which has invested £4million in digital technology -- defended the move, saying: "It makes children comfortable and familiar with the technology and that is extremely useful when they start school."

But literacy expert Sue Palmer said: "I think what children really need up to the age of seven is real life in real space and real time, which means three-dimensional experiences.

"There is a real fear that too much engagement with this quick-fix technology is making it more difficult for some children to learn how to read and write."

A survey of 806 parents and early years staff carried out by website daynurseries.co.uk found that only 26 percent believed that being exposed to technology actually benefits children in nurseries.

Children suffer in silence

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Impatient at the delay, the kid asked his father repeatedly why she was not calling. "He burst into tears suddenly, saying blockaders must have bombed the auto-rickshaw and killed her," said his father Shamim.

Trying to calm his son, Shamim asked him what made him think so. "She would have called me by now had nothing like this happened to her," said Dhrubo, a nursery student.

Scores of children like him are giving way to panic after seeing images of blood and arson in the media day after day.

Not only are violent political programmes like hartals and blockades raising children's security concerns, but the programmes are also doing psychological damage to them.

Psychiatrists say frequent exposure to violent scenes can lead children to develop permanent anxiety and unwarranted fear, particularly when they are outdoors.

Psychiatrist Mekhala Sarkar, an assistant

professor of National Institute of Mental Health, said political instability gets easily transmitted into children's psychology, disrupting their mental development and behaviour.

Children who are mentally weaker than others can develop some psychological problems that may manifest themselves physically, such as difficulty in sleeping and disinterest in food or studies, she added.

Exposure to violence can cause some children, especially those from low-income families, to internalise the aggressive behaviours and copy them later in their lives.

Parents say they are anxious to let their children step out of home these days because of the aggravating political situation.

"Going outdoors on weekends is equally risky since we don't know what will happen when. Political parties hold programmes even on weekends, and no one knows which programme will turn violent," said Rehnema, a

mother from Kakrail.

She noted that children cannot do their jobs properly, be it study or play, as their freedom of movement is being restricted. "Staying indoors for days has bored my two children. They don't want to do anything."

Parents expressed anger about the use of children in the violence, saying that the politicians are teaching bad things to the youngsters in the name of activism.

"On television we often see youths throwing home-made bombs or bricks. The politicians are setting a bad example," said a father.

The psychiatrist mentioned that youngsters who are used in carrying out violence develop a conduct disorder, which is a manifestation of bad behaviour.

"These children, after doing something violent once, start feeling a sense of self-gratification and are encouraged to do more anti-social activities."

Japan for talks to end violence

DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENT

Japan has urged all political parties to engage in constructive dialogue to find a mutually acceptable solution for holding a free, fair and inclusive parliamentary election in the interest of Bangladesh.

Echoing concerns expressed by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay, Japanese Ambassador in Dhaka Shiro Sadoshima yesterday also urged the leaders of the parties to take all possible measures to end violence.

"Japan, as a long-time friend and important stakeholder of Bangladesh, strongly condemns any kind of violence and destructive activities that seriously affect people's life and development of Bangladesh," he said in a statement.

He also echoed the concern expressed by Navi Pillay on Sunday, saying, "We are also deeply grieved by ever increasing violence in Bangladesh."

Earlier, at a function at the Japanese embassy, the envoy hoped that there would be a peaceful and timely implementation of an 'all-inclusive' general election in Bangladesh.

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Truckers take to the street

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lie down in the middle of the street at Gulshan-2 intersection.

In a brief meeting at the Gulshan-2 intersection, transport workers said arson and vandalism were regular incidents during the blockade and hartal hours.

Drivers and helpers are dying every day due to arson attacks on their trucks and buses during the opposition's recent movement.

Blockade and hartal supporters have vandalised and set fire to several hundred vehicles, including trucks, buses, pick-ups and covered vans since November 26.

They also said the highways through Chittagong's Satkania and Sitakundu upazilas are most prone to arson and vandalism.

The transport workers did not face such life threatening situations in the past as they were facing now, they added.

Senior police officials of Gulshan zone requested the agitating workers to nominate two of their leaders to visit the opposition leader.

But they refused and left the venue chanting slogans against Khaleda Zia for instigating recent violent attacks on transport workers.

During their demo at the intersection, the

workers were carrying posters, banners and placards with slogans.

In their slogans, they blamed Khaleda Zia, also chief of the BNP-led 18-party alliance, for their continuous sufferings caused by the long-duration blockade.

It was alleged that Awami Sramik League, labour front of the Awami League, was behind the transport workers' initiative.

Earlier, security was beefed up near the opposition leader's residence following the workers' move. However, additional police forces deployed in the area were withdrawn later.

Rajuk to scrap deal with failed firm

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During a spot visit on November 27, The Daily Star found the project site almost deserted with heavy equipment like cranes and concrete mixture lying idle and most of the workers' shed empty. Those who were there, including a handful of security personnel, were passing relaxed time.

One of the workers said the construction work there had remained abandoned for quite some time. Workers had left the site after a short stay, as they were not being paid regularly.

Contacted, Rajuk Chairman Nurul Huda yesterday said they had already served the final notice for contract cancellation on Ena-Donga and Ena-DDJ and would issue the cancellation letter this week simultaneously with PWD.

The Rajuk authorities approved the draft letter for the contract cancellation on November 3.

"A fresh tender for the job will be floated the day the letter is served, but it would involve a 15 percent rise in the total cost," he said, adding

that they expected to complete the work in the next two years.

Rajuk officials said the individuals aspiring for flats at the housing scheme would have to bear the additional cost.

Meanwhile, another consortium of Hamid Real Estate, owned by former AL lawmaker Nasrul Hamid Bipu, and Building for Future Ltd, that was given the job of constructing 16 similar buildings, has so far completed 16 percent of the work.

It had also been issued a notice by Rajuk to expedite the work, said Nurul Huda earlier.

However, once cancelled, the Ena-Donga and Ena-DDJ consortium's bank guarantee deposit of around Tk 220 crore would be confiscated and the companies would be black-listed for further Rajuk works.

According to documents, Rajuk has so far paid Ena-Donga and Ena-DDJ around Tk 70 crore of the Tk 2,200-crore work in bills.

The Rajuk chairman said the bills had been

paid in accordance with the work progress of work as per the rules.

Officials of Rajuk said lawmakers Enamul and Bipu were members of the parliamentary standing committee on public works ministry at the time of obtaining the high-profile business contract with the government.

Though incompetent, the lawmakers' firms were appointed in the face of hectic lobbying by a powerful quarter, the officials said.

As to why Rajuk hired sitting lawmakers overlapping the law, Nurul Huda said the contractors in the bid documents had declared themselves as businessmen, not lawmakers.

Contacted, M Enamul Haque claimed that the law did not bar him from doing business with the government, as he had done it as a businessman.

On his failure to deliver, he blamed Rajuk's delay in handing over the project land, its internal roads, and removing overhead electric lines.

In response, the Rajuk chairman said Enamul's allegations were not true.

The other lawmaker, Bipu, could not be reached for his comments.

Meanwhile, noted Supreme Court lawyer Shahdeen Malik said as per the Representation of People Order, a sitting lawmaker cannot do business with the government.

"The lawmakers mentioned should have been stripped of their parliamentary status for flouting relevant law," he said, adding that the Speaker should have interacted with the Election Commission for actions.

As per the contract terms, a total of 79 apartment buildings, two of which are to be built by another local firm, will be constructed in Block-A of the three proposed blocks on an area of 215 acres under the Tk 3,000 crore project.

Rajuk had fixed the rate of per square-foot of the flats at Tk 3,500 and taken Tk 3 lakh as deposit from each of 6,500 applicants.

ATMs empty

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Banks and ATM operators said insecurity in carrying cash during blockades and strikes is the main reason for their failure to load the ATMs with cash.

"Carrying cash has become very difficult under these circumstances. No one wants to take a risk," said Kazi Saifuddin Munir, chief executive officer of Q-Cash, the largest ATM network operator in the country.

A consortium of 25 banks, Q-Cash has 2,800 ATMs across the country. It needs Tk 300 to 400 crore to load all its machines on a normal working day. If a team is tasked with loading 10 ATMs, the amount stands at Tk 3-4 crore per day.

"No bank or ATM operator wants to risk losing money as well as human lives," said Munir, adding that four of Q-Cash's ATMs were already vandalised this year.

Banks that have ATM operations have been facing the same problem since the BNP-led opposition alliance started enforcing frequent blockades and strikes recently, demanding a caretaker government to oversee the national elections.

With 2,450 ATM booths, Dutch-Bangla Bank has the highest number of them after Q-Cash. One-third of the bank's ATMs were cashless yesterday, according to the bank.

"Four vendors who carry and load our cash do not want to take any risk at the moment,"

said Abul Kashem Mohammad Shirin, deputy managing director of Dutch-Bangla Bank.

He said it takes two days to bring money from the central bank and have the vendors load the cash after sorting it out.

"We are yet to load many ATMs with cash that was due last Tuesday, when the latest blockade started," he said. However, booths that are close to the banks' branches have cash, he added.

ATM users, especially those who do not usually go to banks, have been greatly disadvantaged by the situation.

"I have tried four booths -- from Karwan Bazar to Farmgate -- yesterday, but got no

money in them. Now I have to go to the bank's branch to collect a chequebook, which takes several days," said Rafiqul Islam, a private executive in Karwan Bazar.

Insurance companies' refusal to cover this risk has made things even more critical, banks and ATM operators said.

The Q-Cash chief executive officer said attacks on ATM booths are a new phenomenon that started from the Hefajat-e-Islam's demonstrations in Motijheel on May 5.

The Hefajat activists vandalised and set fire to many ATMs in the area on that day. The ongoing movement has also seen ATMs come under attack.

When BNP and Jamaat formed an alliance before the 2001 elections, he could not secure the party ticket and contested the poll as an independent candidate.

He was expelled from BNP for his disobedience and joined JP afterwards.