

PHENSIDYL Booming trade along border

M ABUL KALAM AZAD and DILIP ROY

They usually go there in groups, crossing the international border, unchallenged. Some 20 makeshift houses there, just along the zero line in India, sell phensidyl, an addictive cough syrup.

The houses are on the Dhorla river, opposite to Chauratari village under Moghalhat upazila, approximately nine kilometres west of Lalmonirhat town.

Every day, more than 100 people cross the Bangladesh border to take phensidyl, as the contraband drug is cheaper there than anywhere in Bangladesh.

Taking this advantage in an afternoon, two youths came there from Lalmonirhat town. They parked their motorbike at the edge of the village and walked to the Indian houses.

"What's the rate today?" one of them asked a woman.

"It's a bit higher today ... Tk 180 a bottle," she replied.

The youths had ordered two. While they were taking the drug another woman appeared and alerted them to the presence of Indian Border Security Force (BSF) in the locality. The youths soon got back to Bangladesh.

A few minutes later, BSF members came to the spot and crossed the river accompanied by some villagers. Locals say trespassing there is rampant.

Lalmonirhat has 22 pockets through which over 1 lakh bottles of phensidyl enter Bangladesh every day, say different agencies.

According to Nadu Islam, leader of a smuggling group in Boalmarchar area, about 500 groups are active in Lalmonirhat, each bringing in at least 3,000 bottles per day.

However, this is just the tip of the iceberg. With India, Bangladesh shares a 4,144-kilometre border, which is dotted with numerous smuggling routes. Hundreds of unauthorised factories in the Indian territory produce millions of bottles of phensidyl to smuggle to Bangladesh.

Although no statistics of phensidyl smuggling is available, countrywide recovery gives an idea of its enormous supply.

Every day, around 4,000 bottles are

recovered by the members of Border Guard Bangladesh, police, Rapid Action Battalion, coastguards and railway police.

The quantity is only 10 percent of the total drug trafficked, as per an international estimation.

According to the Department of Narcotics Control and Ahsania Mission, the country has a total of 5 million drug abusers, of whom 30 percent are phensidyl addicts.

Various NGOs dealing with the problem have put the estimated number at 1.2 crore, of whom 5 million consume phensidyl.

"We are now treating 250 patients; 150 of them are phensidyl abusers," said Asaduzzaman Jewel, a counsellor of one such NGO.

Most popular among drug abusers, phensidyl initially attracted the youths, but now people of different ages and profession are found addicted to it.

In the border areas, each bottle of phensidyl sells between Tk 150 and Tk 180, while in Dhaka, it is Tk 800 and Tk 1,200. Such high profit is the main reason behind the large scale trading in the country.

The drug comes in bottles, cans, pipes and even in polythene bags from India. Different modes of transport are used to bring them in.

From Moghalhat upazila, the smuggled bottles are supplied to Bogra, Pabna and Dhaka," said Samrat, a resident of Chauratari village.

Habibur Rahman, chairman of Moghalhat upazila parishad, said youths of solvent families, students and even teachers took phensidyl there. "We failed to stop the abuse, as the business is very lucrative."

Meanwhile, as crossing of border through Chauratari village increased alarmingly, BGB has beefed up vigilance there and captured some bikers, bringing down the menace to some extent.

"We will start using motorbikes to enhance patrol in border areas and check smuggling," said Lt Col Mahbubur Rahman, commanding officer of 15 BGB Battalion in Lalmonirhat.

He said people of all walks of life should cooperate in combating the drug abuse.

Still reeling from Jamaat shock

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"Tension gripped the whole marketplace after the evening prayers. People were saying that the situation might turn bad. So, we all shut our shops and went home. I came back around 8:30pm to check if everything was all right and saw fire everywhere. I tried to douse the flame in my store but one of my relatives pinned me back," said a virtually shaken Sayeed.

It was not just Sayeed. Everyone in the area seemed to have been gagged by fear as another terrifying incident shook the very nerves of the people. The atrocity was something none of them were even remotely familiar with.

Two days after the arson incidents at Kacharibazar and Beltali, eminent cultural personality and local Lawmaker Asaduzzaman Noor's motorcade came under attack at Tupamari village near Ramganj when he was returning to the district headquarters after visiting the arson-affected site.

Noor was unhurt but five people, including two from the same family, were killed and at least 50 injured, as hundreds of Jamaat-Shibir men armed with sharp weapons pounced on the motorcade.

In what seemed to be a clear-cut ambush in militant style, they had dug the road leading to

the district town at a point with bamboo groves on both sides, intercepted the motorcade, split it into two parts to strategically weaken Noor's people and then begun the mayhem.

So ferocious was the assault that Kamruzzaman Huda, a resident of Tupamari village, was still reeling from it.

"After seeing such brutality, I cannot eat properly. I feel sick. I just cannot adjust my mind to the fact that human beings are capable of such brutality," said the 35-year old who escaped the mayhem with minor injuries to his knees.

He said rumours were spread that Noor's people had set a Jamaat leader's house on fire and killed some villagers, in order to incite the villagers to attack the motorcade.

The stretch of the Ramganj-Mirganj road where the attack took place still bears visible burn marks, with uprooted trees lying haphazardly.

The typically crowded Ramganj bazaar where the road leads to was almost bereft of people even in broad daylight when this reporter went there on Wednesday.

"You will not find anyone on the road after sunset. People, especially activists of Awami League, are scared of sudden attacks," said Belal Haq Shah, uncle of the two brothers killed in the attack on Noor's motorcade.

Ershad sticks to his 'no'

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not joining the polls," Quader quoted the former military dictator as saying.

The JP chief's comment comes at a time when his party leaders have been repeatedly making contradictory statements over contesting the parliamentary polls while Ershad is "undergoing treatment" at the CMH.

Ershad has allegedly been "confined" to the CMH from December 12 after being "picked up" by the members of an intelligence group from his Baridhara residence. On December 13, Ershad sent a statement through his spokesperson Bobby Hajjaj that he was detained in the CMH.

Meanwhile, Kazi Zafar had the expulsion of Ershad from Jatiya Party approved in a special council of his faction of the party yesterday and got himself elected chief of the party.

However, GM Quader, in a press briefing at his Uttara residence yesterday, confirmed that it was Ershad who still was in command of the party.

"Our chairman is HM Ershad ... Since he could not say anything directly, Secretary General Ruhul Amin Hawlader and I have been informing you of his instructions. If anyone tells anything in his name, it will not be his statement," he said.

"We withdrew our nomination papers as we will not participate in the polls. But showing some technical reasons, it [EC] did not accept those ... Still, we are not contesting the polls," he asserted.

The former commerce minister of the grand alliance government also said he had resigned from the polls-time cabinet, stopped using flags at his house and on his vehicles and was enjoying no government facilities for a minister.

"Now it is the duty of the government to publish the gazette," said the JP leader.

KAZI ZAFAR ELECTED CHAIRMAN OF SPLINTER GROUP

Kazi Zafar Ahmed, an expelled presidium member of Jatiya Party, was elected chairman of a splinter group of the party by a special council of the faction yesterday at the Jatiya Press Club auditorium.

The new faction also expelled JP Chairman HM Ershad from the party and claimed itself to be the main Jatiya Party.

The council elected Golam Moshi the secretary general of the party.

This is the fourth time that the JP has been split since 1996.

However, it is among the Hindu community that tension runs at its palpable worst.

Anyada Prashad Roy whose tea stall at Beltali bazaar was vandalised on December 12, did not even come to clear the wreckage until Wednesday morning, five days after the arson.

"All our materials including tea cups were destroyed. We are scared. But this [shop] is the only source of our livelihood -- we cannot just leave it in this state," Anyada said while scrambling through the wreckage.

Tapan Kumar Roy, whose house at Laxmichap fell prey to Jamaat men's destruction spree that night, said the Hindus had become the target of attacks regardless of issues.

"It appears that we, the Hindus, cannot live in this country anymore," he said, standing next to the burnt stacks of recently harvested paddy in his front yard.

"You only see the burnt paddy but don't you see burns inside us?" he asked frantically.

His neighbour Dhirendranath Roy said the feeling of insecurity among the Hindus had multiplied after the attacks.

"We are afraid of filing cases in connection with Thursday's attack, as the attackers have threatened of revenge if we do so," said a villager, declining to share his name for fear of reprisal.

On November 28, Ershad expelled Zafar saying the latter issued statements against him [Ershad]. Within half an hour of receiving the expulsion order, Zafar issued a counter statement expelling Ershad from Jatiya Party and formed an interim committee.

"We will continue with our anti-government movements," said Kazi Zafar in his speech at the council.

Former president and Bikalpadhara President Badruddoza Chowdhury, Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal President ASM Abdur Rab, Krishak Sramik Janata League President Quader Siddique and BNP Standing Committee Member Mahbubur Rahman also spoke in the council.

Meanwhile, minutes before the beginning of the council, unidentified miscreants blasted four crude bombs -- two inside the auditorium and two on the press club premises -- leaving at least three people injured.

The leaders of the new JP faction blamed the government and Ershad's supporters for the blasts.

Shibli Noman, assistant commissioner of police of Ramna Zone, confirmed the blasts but claimed that miscreants threw the bomb from inside the press club.

COMPARATIVE RETAIL PRICES OF SELECTED ESSENTIAL COMMODITIES IN DHAKA CITY

	Karwan Bazar	New Market	Hatirpool Market	Mirpur-1 Market	Mirpur-11 Market	Mohammadpur Town Hall	Gulshan-1 DCC market	Gulshan-2 DCC market	Mohakhali DCC Market
Potato (New) - kg	22	25	30	24	20	25	25	25	20
Green Chilli -kg	35	50	60	40	40	60	50	50	50
Cauliflower- big size (1pc)	20	28	20	25	25	30	30	35	35
Tomato (Good quality)-kg	45	50	55	50	35	50	45	40	40
Local Onion-kg	90	95	90	95	90	100	100	95	95
Eggs- Farm (4 Pieces)	28	30	30	30	28	30	28	28	28
Nazirshail (good quality)-kg	55	56	55	56	55	56	55	55	56
Miniket (good quality)-kg	48	50	50	50	48	50	50	50	48
TOTAL	Tk 343	Tk 384	Tk 390	Tk 370	Tk 341	Tk 401	Tk 383	Tk 378	Tk 372

SOURCE: MARKET VISITS AND DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE MARKETING

Vegetable respite

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Karwan Bazar kitchen market on Wednesday. It was selling at Tk 60 at Mohammadpur Town Hall market, around 3 kilometres away from Karwan Bazar.

A kg of local onions cost Tk 90 at Mirpur-11 kitchen market, while the same was selling at Tk 95 at Mirpur-1.

"Customers often have to pay high due to such price gaps. It is one way of deceiving people," said Humayun Kabir Bhuiyan, general secretary of Consumers Association of Bangladesh.

Traders of the city's kitchen markets could charge any price they wanted as the government did not monitor the price difference at retail level, he said.

"Customers often come under fire when they bargain for lower price," added Bhuiyan.

Prices might vary from one market to

another as transportation and operation costs also vary from market to market, traders said.

"We always try to provide fresh quality products and do not tamper in weight. So, our prices, in some cases, are little bit higher," said a trader at Mohammadpur Town Hall market.

At least five other traders of the market claimed the same.

A small trader has to earn at least Tk 1,000 daily to maintain his livelihood, said Md Abdur Rahman, an executive member of Mohammadpur Town Hall City Corporation Kitchen Market Shop Owners' Association.

"Our prices may vary since our sale volume is not similar to Karwan Bazar's," he added.

Retail prices usually vary from market to market according to distance. But it should be at a reasonable level, said Zaid Bakht, research director of Bangladesh Institute of

Development Studies (BIDS).

"Currently, agricultural supply chain has been hit hard due to the series of blockades and hartals. It might be a reason behind the abnormal price variation at different markets," he observed.

Traders might have charged higher prices to neighbouring people as customers often failed to go to markets situated elsewhere amid political unrest, he added.

Prices of winter vegetables are on the decline at Karwan Bazar as an increased number of farmers are bringing vegetables to the wholesale hub amid the ongoing political agitations.

Radish was selling at Tk 10 a kg at Karwan Bazar, which was Tk 15 two weeks ago. A piece of big cauliflower cost Tk 20 at the same market, down from Tk 35-Tk 40 a few weeks

ago.

"Farmers in nearby districts have had a bumper yield of vegetables this year. So, in spite of risks, they are bringing their produce to the capital for better prices," said Lokman Hossain, general secretary of Karwan Bazar kitchen market wholesalers' association.

Vegetable farmers of Munshiganj, Tangail, Narsingdi and Manikganj, the adjacent districts of Dhaka, and Savar are providing around 30 percent of the total requirement of the market.

As the demand for vegetables generally remains low during shutdowns and blockades, this supply is enough for the Karwan Bazar market, Lokman added.

The southern and northern districts such as Chuadanga, Kushtia, Dinajpur, Nilphamari, Natore, Bogra and Mymensingh meet the rest of the demand, around 70 percent, on

An era passes with her

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husband. Yet everyone senses the tears that must have flowed when the eerie news came in of assassins murdering Tajuddin Ahmad, along with three other illustrious men of Mujibnagar, in the putative security of prison. As the years passed, after 3 November 1975, she brought up a family of three daughters and a son in near silence, in quiet dignity that is the hallmark of men and women of fortitude.

That was the stoic in Zohra Tajuddin. She would see her husband, already ensconced in history as the man who formed the first ever government composed of Bengalis and administered by Bengalis and which government presided over an arduous War of Liberation for Bengali liberty, done to death at the young age of fifty. She would survive him by decades, before passing into the ages days before rounding off eighty years of a life lived in great excitement and profound pain.

For Zohra Tajuddin, beyond

grief, it was the need to restore politics to its pedestal that mattered after 1975. It was this calling that called up the feisty in her. When tragedy caused by successive usurpers of authority threatened to rend a historically powerful Awami League asunder, it was her grit and determination that instilled new hope in party activists suddenly bereft of first-tier leadership. Her problem, as she moved to reassure the votaries of Awami League politics that all would be well, was in ensuring that the party did not fall apart in the aftermath of tragedy. There were the factions that cropped up within the party; there was a large section of the party leadership that had either associated itself with the murderous Moshtaque regime or, later, shed principles in favour of opportunism by linking up with the military dictatorship that kept the nation in its grip between November 1975 and May 1981. Those who did not desert the organization wallowed in despair.

In that dark phase of Bangladesh's history, Zohra

Tajuddin kept hope kindled in the Awami League, indeed among Bengalis across the spectrum, through her uncompromising belief that the party had to move out of despair into a fresh new spirit of bold enterprise. If the party could survive the repression let loose by Ayub Khan in the 1960s, if it did not flinch from its objectives in 1971, it could very well have a rebirth of glory. She kept the home fires burning, long enough for Sheikh Hasina to come home from exile in 1981 and take charge. And then she moved, or was moved, into the sidelines. To what extent the nation was deprived of committed, forward-looking, liberal leadership through her absence in the centre of things will be debated long and hard.

Any tribute to Syeda Zohra Tajuddin must recall the courage she demonstrated before the Pakistan occupation army once it became known that Tajuddin Ahmad had moved out of Dhaka in March 1971 and into exile. Her shock at discovering that a close family

acquaintance would not let her and her children take shelter in his home after the crackdown pushed her into uncertainty. She would not cave in to fate, though. A note reassured her that her husband was safe in Calcutta, to which place she moved with her children. She did not complain when Tajuddin Ahmad made it known that it was the country that came before the family, a promise he kept till victory arrived on a December day. On the day the assassins took Tajuddin Ahmad away to prison in August 1975, she asked him when he expected to be back. Perhaps never, he responded as he went down the stairs. He never returned home alive. It was his bullet-riddled, bayoneted corpse she next saw, before the earth closed in on him.

And now she joins him, in union which promises to approximate the life she shared with him, rather briefly, in the moments of mortality.

With her passing ends an era steeped in idealism and bold leadership. The nation salutes her.

Deployment of army

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Senior officials from law enforcement agencies were present at the meeting held at the National Economic Council auditorium.

Election Commissioner Shah Newaz told The Daily Star that five districts would not need army deployment, as all candidates there have already won uncontested.

The opposition alliance, which has been enforcing countrywide blockades since the announcement of the election schedule on November 25, has threatened to beef up its agitation to resist the polls. More than 120 people have been killed during this period.

The EC may face trouble transporting electoral material due to the blockade programme. Sources in yesterday's meeting said the EC officials and law enforcement agencies had unanimously agreed to transport those to polling centres under tight security.

A top level official of an enforcement agency suggested that the minority communities be given adequate security, as they might come under attacks ahead of the elections, said the sources.

Meanwhile, The CEC yesterday did not say anything about the number of troops to be deployed for the election.

"We have given a framework. The final figure will be determined on the basis of local law enforcement requirements and intelligence agency reports," he told reporters.

The number of personnel from different enforcement agencies including Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB), Coast Guard, Rapid Action Battalion (Rab) and Armed Police Battalion (APBn) to be deployed will be determined by the home ministry soon, he added.

The army has been deployed during polls since the country's first parliamentary election held in 1973. Since 2001 elections, the troops had been empowered with the sweeping authority to arrest anybody for violation of electoral laws within 400 yards of the polling stations.

The AL-led government in 2009 scrapped this provision. So, they will perform their duties in this election under magistrates.

CEC Rakibuddin said the EC has already kept the public administration affairs minister informed about the necessary number of executive magistrates.

The army was deployed for 12 days in 2008 polls, and 15 days in 2001.

The CEC, however, said the period of the army deployment might differ from place to place depending on the situation.

"Law and order across the country is improving," the CEC quoted superintendents of police present saying at the meeting.

He said the drive to recover illegal arms would be sped up. Officials of law enforcement agencies asserted that the situation would improve more.

Another meeting was later held among EC officials and returning officers on the voter turnout and how to increase it.

An irony of fate

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Railway Station.

Tajul, who was working on a nearby farmland, rushed to the scene and found his father's body lying on the tracks.

On November 27, noticing that miscreants had uprooted 60 feet of the rail tracks, Tajul and another farmer Anwar Hossain stopped the same train -- Meghna Intercity Express on Chandpur-Laksham road -- by waving a piece of red cloth and prevented a disaster from happening.

The duo was rewarded by the railway authorities for saving lives.

"I cannot believe my father should die this way," said a sobbing Tajul while talking to this correspondent.