

Notorious robber

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Invariably, it is the Hindus who fall victims to such heinous crimes as they are believed to be in a weak social position and do not protest, he rued.

Nimai Mistri said a gang of masked criminals broke open the door of his house on September 14 midnight and two of the gang held him on the bed.

"Please forgive me. I can't tell you more. The criminals are publicly known and they will just kill me if I name them. I've to survive with my wife and daughter," he mentioned.

Judhishtir Roy of Jujkhola village left for India along with his young daughter soon after she was raped and did not return yet, said other villagers. The daughter was to take the SSC exams this year.

"In fact, at least 100 incidents of rape have occurred in the area over the past couple of months, but the victims suppressed the incidents fearing social disgrace," said a witness, who testified in a rape case.

After being violated, some of the victims left the village to stay in Pirojpur town.

Judhishtir's family member Porimol Roy and two brothers from Gabtola village, Bhabotosh Mistri and Shailen Mistri, left for India to avoid the extortion racket of Ashraf, complained villagers.

Krishna Haldar, whose house in Gabtola was plundered and set afire on December 5 midnight, said, "Criminals ruined me as I have sent my wife to my in-laws' house for security."

His nine-year-old daughter Ripa Haldar said, "Four masked men broke into our house,

beat up my father and looked for my mother."

Shikdermallik union has a population of around 16,000 people. Among them, 6,000 are Hindu voters and 5,000 Muslims.

Gazi Nuruzzaman Babul, president of Pirojpur district BNP, said his party did not use Ashraf Ali for political end.

"But he [Ashraf] might have worked for Jamaat-Shibir, who have been committing crimes protesting the war crimes trial," he mentioned, adding that police are well aware of the repression of religious minorities.

Sayedee Foundation, named after convicted war criminal Jamaat leader Delawar Hossain Sayedee, operates a technical madrasa at the union. Many believe that it is the den of local Jamaat-Shibir thugs, said Babul.

Criminals on December 13 last year burnt down the house of Bidhan Chandra Mistri at South Gabtola village. Bidhan is a union-level Awami League leader and retired founder headmaster of South Gabtola High School.

"We've never before seen such incidents of robbery, rape, extortion and arson that we are facing recently during hartals and blockades," said Bidhan. Majority of the Hindus lived here with the Muslims in traditional harmony.

Criminals twice robbed the house of Kiran Chandra Mirbar, a Hindu priest in Jujkhola, he mentioned.

Abdur Razzaq, officer-in-charge of Pirojpur Sadar Police Station, said the "crimes arose out of the internal feuds of the local Hindus" and the incidents have no connection with politics.

He, however, later admitted that Ashraf Ali Sheikh was accused in half a dozen criminal



Krishna Haldar and his family standing before their home burnt to the ground at Gabtola Shikdermallik union in Pirojpur. Robbers, allegedly blessed by 18-party alliance men, torched their home during a blockade on December 5.

PHOTO: TAWFIQUE ALI

cases with the police station.

SM Akhtaruzzaman, superintendent of police (SP) in Pirojpur, said, "Ashraf is a criminal listed with the police. We've heard of rape and arson allegations against him."

"Despite all our attempts, police and Rapid Action Battalion have not yet been able to arrest Ashraf as he doesn't stay in the area," he added. It's very difficult for police to raid the villages in Shikdermallik union as those are

surrounded by wetlands and paddy fields, with the main road to the union tattered, mentioned the SP. Police deployed at a local camp have been patrolling the area, said the official.

US asked to withdraw

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York for visa fraud and making false statements relating to the employment of her domestic servant.

She flew home following a deal in which she was granted full diplomatic immunity, something not offered to consular officials. The US request to India to waive her diplomatic immunity had been refused following which she was asked to leave the US.

The charges against 39-year-old Khobragade would remain and she would have to face trial, if she returned to the US without diplomatic immunity, US attorney Preet Bharara said in a letter to district judge Shira Scheindlin.

India had reacted with outrage after Khobragade was arrested on December 12 in front of her children's school and then allegedly subjected to a cavity search while in custody.

India said Khobragade's arrest breached norms and it retaliated by removing security barriers outside the US Embassy in New Delhi first placed after the September 11, 2001, attacks and reducing perks for US diplomats. US Energy Secretary Ernest

Moniz postponed a visit to India which was due next week, reports our New Delhi correspondent.

In the indictment, the grand jury said Khobragade had contracted to pay her servant 30,000 rupees (\$573) a month -- in line with wages in India which is well below the US minimum wage.

The indictment said Khobragade had then drafted a fake contract, which the servant presented in her visa interview at the US Embassy in New Delhi.

On the visa form, Khobragade allegedly stated she would guarantee the servant's working conditions, including providing the minimum wage and restricting her work to 40 hours a week.

The indictment also accused Khobragade of forcing the servant to work for long hours, initially seven days a week, before she was given off part of Sunday.

It also accused Khobragade of intimidating. It said she and her family had called the servant's husband in India and tried to pressure the servant against filing complaints.

Cut ties with Jamaat

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associate with a party like the Jamaat.

"It appears to us that for the last few months, whatever the Jamaat did in the name of demonstration, they have resorted to terrorism," said a European diplomat who has met Khaleda Zia after the January 5 election. He requested anonymity.

"Whatever the Jamaat did, they did it to protect the war criminals. Their acts were not political but terrorism," he said, adding that this sentiment was conveyed to Khaleda.

But they do not think that banning the Jamaat at this moment is a good idea.

"Banning Jamaat right now can put them under some other fold. It's better to isolate the party so that it dare not resort to extremism or terrorism with help from other political forces," said the European diplomat.

They also have strong reservations about Tarique Rahman and his recent video speeches. They told Khaleda Zia that his speeches would not help the BNP resume a dialogue with the ruling Awami League but would rather make the situation more complex.

"It seems that he [Tarique] is making provocations -- which are not helpful to initiate a dialogue with the government," said another

European ambassador while referring to Tarique's YouTube speeches.

The diplomats emphatically told Khaleda that violence was not an acceptable element of the political process and the opposition should completely stop any sort of violence during the political programmes.

Regarding the Jamaat, Khaleda told one ambassador that she needed to discuss the matter with her party leaders first. But the government had arrested most of them and she was also not allowed to contact any party leaders.

About Tarique, she simply listened but gave no clear reply.

In addition, the foreign diplomats conveyed the message to the ruling party that the government should immediately free Khaleda Zia from her current "confinement" and release the senior leaders of the BNP to engage them in a meaningful dialogue.

They said the opposition leader was apparently under "house arrest" as she was not being allowed to go out and meet anybody, except for foreign envoys.

"She is completely disconnected and not able to know what is happening outside," said an

envoy who met Khaleda last week.

He termed the government action "unacceptable" because the government cannot curb political space in such a way.

Most ambassadors and high commissioners in Dhaka have decided to meet Khaleda Zia regularly apparently to mount pressure on the government to create adequate political space for the opposition, he added.

Another European ambassador said the European Union will come up with a concrete statement about the 10th parliamentary election as well as the situation in Bangladesh and might call for reconciliation between the ruling and opposition parties through fresh elections which will be "inclusive, peaceful and credible".

If the EU calls go unheeded, the EU may gradually go for imposing various restrictions and limit diplomatic engagements with the government.

He said most European envoys in Dhaka have already sent their reports to their countries and also EU headquarters in Brussels on elections in Bangladesh.

The reports highlight the extremely poor turnout that has not reflected voters' will and

Another beating

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electorate of 92m (out of more than 150m people), only a minority turned out. The government says just under 40% voted in contested seats; others think much less. It does not give Sheikh Hasina's Awami League, which has ruled since 2009, much of a basis for another term.

Many polling stations saw almost no voters, then suspiciously large numbers of ballots cast late in the day. Of the 300 constituencies, just over half, 153, had no contest at all, since only AL candidates or allies registered. In the capital voting took place in just nine of 20 seats.

The main opposition BNP and a host of smaller parties refused a contest they said would be unfair unless supervised by a caretaker government of the kind seen in the previous four elections. But Sheikh Hasina scrapped the constitutional provision for that in 2011.

BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia, long a bitter rival to the prime minister, remains under what amounts to house arrest. Ershad, a former dictator who leads the third-biggest party, Jatiya, has been locked up in an army hospital since he belatedly joined the poll boycott. A fourth party, Jamaat-e-Islami, an Islamist and thuggish outfit, was banned from the polls for being too religious. On January 7, police arrested yet more opposition figures, including a close adviser to Khaleda Zia as he left a meeting with journalists. Thousands of activists have been detained.

Political intimidation is officially explained away as an effort to stop the violence that has persisted since the AL claimed victory. On polling day alone, over 20 people were shot by police, or beaten or burned to death as rival goons from the BNP and the League clashed and as opposition thugs petrol-bombed buses, apparently to discourage voting. In some cases

violent attacks appeared staged especially for television and other cameras.

In all, it is an ugly start to what is bound to be another bloody year. In 2013, 500 or so people were killed in political clashes, one of the most violent years since independence. The government, with some cause, blames the BNP and, especially, its Islamist allies. Since the election, pro-Jamaat hoodlums have reportedly attacked minority Hindu families in rural areas.

Yet the League also bears responsibility for the unrest. A flawed war-crimes trial, in which leading opposition figures have been sentenced to hang for what they did in the independence war of 1971, has greatly raised tensions. The trials and executions will go on for months.

It is less clear how long Sheikh Hasina believes she can brazen things out. That, a close adviser concedes, is "the trillion-dollar question". He expects another year or more before new elections. Several factors favour her as she prepares to be sworn in at the end of the month. Not least, the BNP is in disarray, its leaders either uninspiring or locked up. Its recourse to months of crippling strikes and street protests, in association with Jamaat, was desperate and did not go down well with most Bangladeshis.

Foreigners will press for a new vote, but not firmly. Western countries all refused to send observers to the recent polls. On January 6, American, British and other governments lamented the violence and the flawed election in equal measure. Yet none has gone so far as to say that Sheikh Hasina's victory, and thus her government, is illegitimate. Outsiders could threaten to cut aid or trade benefits (especially valuable duty-free access for clothes to the EU). But they will be wary of undermining laudable anti-poverty efforts.

So Sheikh Hasina probably thinks she can hold on. If she is seen to offer negotiations with Khaleda Zia, that may be enough to buy her time. Official proposals for future elections are likely to include all-party caretaker administrations and a revamped election commission. But agreement on these would take months and may never be reached. Meanwhile the government will press the BNP hard to break ties with Jamaat.

Sheikh Hasina enjoys a degree of political cover. The biggest neighbour, India, did send observers to the polls, and praised her for holding them at all. Despite earlier Indian efforts to look even-handed, among Bangladeshis the perception is growing that India heavily favours Sheikh Hasina over her rivals. It is certainly eager to see Jamaat and other Islamists weakened.

At home, the Bangladeshi army is unlikely to repeat its futile effort in 2007 to banish both the atrocious begums, Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina, from politics altogether. The army made a mess of its attempt at governing, in 2007-08. Sheikh Hasina also benefits from having sweetened the armed forces with lucrative UN peacekeeping duties and promises of Russian weapons and Chinese submarines that should encourage them to remain in their barracks in the coming months.

Much depends on what sort of leadership the opposition can offer—in particular, whether it can turn its popular refusal to take part in a flawed election into a wider protest calling for new and fair polls. Once, when Khaleda Zia was asked whether she believed Sheikh Hasina would step down after an election, she called her a "despot" who thinks she will "never have to relinquish power". But even if all goes well, that prediction is likely to take months to be proven wrong.

PM talks tough

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This was the first public rally of the AL after winning a brute majority in the virtually one-sided January 5 parliamentary elections boycotted by the BNP-led 18-party opposition alliance.

A huge number of people from the capital and adjacent areas attended the rally marking Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's homecoming day.

Exuding confidence throughout her speech, Hasina, also the president of the AL, urged BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia to sit for talks to resolve the political crisis. She also asked her to stop calling hartals and blockades, and "killing people and destroying properties".

"If you [Khaleda] want to say something, first shun violence and stop killing people by enforcing programmes through Laden-style video messages," she said.

"You [Khaleda] won't gain anything from this like you could not prevent the election by enforcing hartals and resorting to anarchic activities," the prime minister said.

Describing Khaleda Zia's decision to boycott the election "as a mistake", she said, "Why should people suffer for your mistakes?"

In a rather teasing tone, she also said Khaleda should be thanked for not taking part in the polls as people got an opportunity to avoid a stigma by not having to vote for the Jamaat and war criminals allied with her party.

The prime minister reiterated that the war crimes trials would continue and the

verdicts would be executed, come what may.

Thanking the countrymen for casting votes in the January 5 elections defying threats and intimidation by the opposition, the prime minister urged them to resist any bid to create anarchy and chaos.

Highlighting successes of her present government, she said her new government would take the country forward by implementing the party's electoral pledges.

The new government to be sworn in on Sunday would introduce pre-primary schooling in the country, a new addition to the country's education system, and books would be distributed free of cost among the children, she said.

Referring to the AL's election promises, Hasina said universities would be set up in every district to facilitate higher education for students.

AL General Secretary Syed Ashrafur Islam, senior party leaders Amir Hossain Amu, Tofail Ahmed, Suranjit Sengupta, Matia Chowdhury, Abdul Latif Siddique, Mohammad Nasim, Mahbul Alam Hanif and Mofazzal Hossain Chowdhury Maya also spoke at the rally chaired by Syeda Sajeda Chowdhury.

NO REACTION FROM BNP YET

Following the prime minister's speech, The Daily Star tried to contact BNP leaders over the telephone for their reactions but could not reach anyone. With most of the top BNP leaders behind bars, Khaleda Zia might come up with formal reactions today, said BNP sources.

Int'l trade fair from today

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jointly organising the mega event that will continue till February 10 at Sher-e-Bangla Nagar.

The government will deploy members of Border Guard Bangladesh along with different law enforcement agencies to ensure fool-proof security of the fair, organisers said.

The trade fair will remain open from 10:00am to 10:00pm daily. Entry fee has been fixed at Tk 30 for adults and Tk 20 for children.

Commerce Secretary Mahbub Ahmed yesterday briefed newsmen on the event at the temporary office of the EPB on the 12.5 lakh square feet fair site.

The preparations for the exhibition, which stepped into its 19th year, have already been completed, he said.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina is scheduled to inaugurate the fair at Bangabandhu International Conference Centre at 11:00 am.

Businesses got orders worth Tk 157 crore at the last year's DITE, Ahmed said.

"We hope the amount will be bigger this year," he said, adding that around one lakh people are expected to visit the fair daily.

Of the 471 stalls and pavilions at the fair premises, 28 have been allotted to the companies from 12 foreign countries, said Shubhashish Bose, vice-chairman of EPB.

There were 497 stalls and pavilions last year.

The participating countries include India, China, Malaysia, the UAE, Singapore, Thailand, the USA and Turkey.

Replying to a question whether Pakistan is participating in the fair, Bose said, "Since the trade fair has no link with politics, Pakistani companies will take part in the show like those of other countries."

Earlier activists of Gonojagoron Mancha, an anti-war criminal platform, demanded the

government sever trade relations with Pakistan unless the country apologises for its National Assembly resolution criticising war criminal Abdul Quader Mollah's execution.

A six-member delegation led by its spokesperson Imran H Sarker also met with the commerce secretary and placed their demand for not allocating any stall to Pakistani companies in the DITE.

EPB has also taken an initiative to facilitate online shopping of products to be showcased at the fair, organisers said.

Customers from home and abroad will be able to buy products online through debit or credit cards, bank drafts and mobile payment service.

The major items that will be showcased in the fair include machinery, carpets, cosmetics and beauty products; electronic, jute, leather and sports goods; sanitary products, toys, ceramics, fabrics, processed foods, furniture and handicrafts.

Painter Elephant

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Noppakhao, also known as Peter, has churned out dozens of works of art over the years, with some fetching as much as \$700.

Noppakhao -- which stands for the 'nine colours of the gemstones' -- began painting eight years ago as part of the Asian Elephant Art & Conservation Project (AEACP) in Ayutthaya province, nearly 50 miles north of Bangkok.

According to the organisation's website, the 11-year-old bull 'exhibits a wonderful sense of dexterity and control with the paintbrush' to draw landscapes and floral designs.

Most of his paintings are produced on elephant dung paper.

Funds from the sale of his works, some of which come with a price tag of up to \$700, go towards conservation projects and training the caretakers.

The AEACP says: "We strive to give as many elephants as we can a happy, healthy, enriched existence."

"Money raised by the AEACP is used to provide captive elephants with better food, improved shelter and proper veterinary care."

In the past, elephant painting has led to accusations that the animals are harshly treated in efforts to train them.

But the AEACP says: "It does not tolerate any abuse of the elephants either while painting or in everyday interaction."