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Sundarbans tolls taken by robbers

Gangs reign supreme amid lax law enforcement

PINAKI ROY

As increased soil salinity in the Aila-hit southwest coastal area has destroyed agriculture and shrimp farming, a large number of people there have relied for their livelihood on the Sundarbans.

But some new robber gangs will allow them into the forest only after extracting tolls. Those unable or unwilling to pay the tolls would be kidnapped by the crooks and must pay ransoms to survive, said locals.

River robbers have put pressure on the mangrove forest as people are looking for extra resources from it to cover the tolls or ransoms, locally known as "dacoit expenses". Poaching and illegal logging have shot up in the forest due to the robbers' activities.

At least four new robber groups -- Jahangir bahini, Alim bahini, Khoka Babu Bahini and Rabiul Bahini -- emerged in Gabura and Munshiganj unions of Shyamnagar, Satkhira after cyclone Aila hit the area in 2009, locals told this correspondent on his recent visit there.

As the local administration has no control over a big part of the forest, the bandit gangs of 40 to 50 members each have developed strong networks of contacts across the area for collecting information, mainly over the phone.

The thugs even designate their men as "cashier", "accountant", "agent", or "money collectors". They dominate part of the forest near the Burigoalini forest beat office and, like the government, issues "forest permits" to local residents.

Be it honey collectors, fishermen, crab catchers, loggers and poachers in the forest, they must have to pay tolls to bandits through bKash and other electronic cash transfer platforms at a fixed rate for collecting pass codes, generally a serial number of a two-taka, five-taka or ten-taka note.

Some locals said anyone entering the forest without paying tolls to the thugs would face dire consequences.

"I had to pay Tk 40,500 as tolls to three robber groups led by Alim, Rabiul and Khoka Babu at Tk 13,500 for each of them before going to collect honey," said the leader of a honey collector team from Gabura, seeking anonymity.

This rate is fixed by head count. Each person on a boat has to pay a toll of Tk 1,500.

Talking to this newspaper at Chawk Bera Ghat of Gabura, he showed three notes of different denominations from as many robber gangs -- a



A honey collector shows a Tk 5 note while talking to The Daily Star at Gabura, Satkhira, recently. This is no ordinary note. Signed by the cashier of a robber gang, it is the "permit" to enter the Sundarbans and collect honey.

PHOTO: PINAKI ROY



Lebanon envoy called back

DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENT

The government has called back Bangladesh Ambassador to Lebanon AFM Gousal Azam Sarker over his "mismanagement" in running the embassy and "misconduct".

The foreign ministry, in a letter to the Bangladesh envoy in Beirut on July 17, asked him to return to Dhaka by July 20 and report to the ministry immediately, said an official source yesterday.

Diplomatic sources in Dhaka and the Bangladesh embassy in Beirut said the foreign ministry sent its Director General Nazrul Islam on July 16 to take over charge of the embassy.

Diplomatic sources said

Imam caught with gold bars at airport

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

This time an imam of a mosque of the Civil Aviation Authority of Bangladesh (Caab) was arrested for smuggling in around 1.8 kilograms of gold at Shahjalal International Airport yesterday.

Airport Armed Police Battalion (APBn) members arrested Aslam Sheikh, 32, imam of the Airport Civil Aviation Tower mosque, with 18 gold bars and US \$18,240 around 5:30am.

Although police had earlier arrested a number of people including some Caab staffs for their link to smuggling of gold over the last one year, this is the first time an imam was nabbed for such offence.



Aslam went to Egypt five days ago using a tourist visa and landed in Dhaka in a Turkish Airlines flight around 4:45am, said Alamgir Hossain, senior assistant commissioner of the APBn.

The APBn members then challenged him when he was trying to come out through Gate 3 of departure terminal instead of the arrival ones, added Alamgir.

They found the gold bars worth about Tk 75 lakh and the US dollars equivalent to Tk 14.6 lakh hidden inside the shorts under Aslam's trousers.

During primary interrogation, Aslam

Cancer hospital someday soon

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Gazipur

Family members, colleagues, followers, and well wishers paid their respects to famed author-filmmaker Humayun Ahmed at his grave on his second death anniversary at Nuhash Palli here yesterday.

They paid homage to the litterateur, considered to be one of the most popular of his time, through prayers, attending a milad mahfil and an iftar in the evening.

Seventy members of Himu Family, a platform named after the widely popular fictional character created by Humayun, joined the events there.



NEWS ANALYSIS

JUDGES' IMPEACHMENT

Can prisoners of parties do that?

SHAKHAWAT LITON

An institution willing to hold other independent organs accountable for their functions must enjoy unqualified independence. This means a subversive body can in no way hold an independent institution accountable.

The government's sudden move to restore the Jatiya Sangsad's authority to impeach Supreme Court judges on grounds of misconduct has triggered the crucial question of whether MPs who constitute parliament enjoy unqualified independence to hold judges accountable.

To arrive at an answer, let us discuss the constitutional provision relating to how much independence SC judges and MPs enjoy in the exercise of their functions.

Independence of the judiciary is one of the basic pillars of the constitution. Accordingly, Article 94 (4) of the constitution declares that the chief justice and other judges of the Supreme Court shall be independent in the exercise of their judicial functions.



Relatives of Palestinians, who medics said were killed overnight by Israeli shelling, mourn at a funeral in Khan Younis in the southern Gaza Strip yesterday. More on page 8, 16

PHOTO: REUTERS

MH17 CRASH

Rebels destroying evidence: Ukraine

Europeans give Putin 'last chance'

AGENCIES

Ukraine accused Russia and pro-Moscow rebels yesterday of destroying evidence to cover up their guilt in the shooting down of a Malaysian airliner that has accelerated a showdown between the Kremlin and Western powers.

Earlier in the morning, the Ukrainian government accused pro-Russian rebels of removing 38 bodies from the scene and destroying evidence, which the rebels deny.

In a statement, the government claimed rebels had taken bodies of passengers to a morgue in the rebel-held city, and accused them of attempting to transport the plane's wreckage to Russia, reports The Independent.

As militants kept international monitors away from wreckage and scores of bodies festering for a third day, Russian President Vladimir Putin urged the rebels to cooperate and insisted that a UN-mandated investigation must not leap to conclusions. Moscow denies involvement and has pointed a finger at Kiev's military.

The Dutch government, whose citizens made up more than half the 298 aboard MH17 from Amsterdam, said it was "furious" at the manhandling of corpses strewn for miles over open country and asked Ukraine's president for help to bring "our people" home.

After US President Barack Obama said the loss of the Kuala Lumpur-bound flight showed it was time to end the conflict, Germany called it Moscow's last chance to cooperate.

European powers seemed to swing behind Washington's belief Russia's separatist allies were to blame. That might



Big blow for Aids battle

THE TELEGRAPH, London

Joep Lange, the virologist, who was killed in the Malaysian Airlines crash in eastern Ukraine aged 59, was a pioneer in the field of HIV/Aids since the days when the epidemic was first identified in the early 1980s; in recent years he was at the forefront of the campaign to improve access to anti-retroviral drugs in poor countries.

Lange was instrumental in the development of techniques of clinical care of HIV-infected patients from as early as 1982, when the disease, then spreading

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