

RAPE ON BUS Police finally record case

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

It took a minister's influence for the police to finally record a case against the bus driver who reportedly raped a passenger at the city's Mohakhali bus terminal early Wednesday.

But the victim's medical examination remains to be done, compromising forensic evidence against the suspect. The chances of getting evidence from the victim's body fades with every hour as experts say that the evidence should be collected within 24 hours of the incident.

Sub-Inspector Abu Bakar Siddique of Banani Police Station told The Daily Star about receiving the victim's statement yesterday afternoon.

"We will send her to Dhaka Medical College Hospital for medical examination tomorrow [Saturday]," said Siddique.

It would be three days after the incident if she is sent to the hospital today.

Law enforcers of Banani Police Station and Tejgaon Industrial Police Station had wasted time debating over in whose precinct the alleged crime had been committed.

The debate ensued after the traumatised 20-year-old victim told Tejgaon Industrial Police Station that

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Govt call

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Convention 107 for Indigenous People.

The Press Information Department (PID) on Thursday issued a release (reference No 2704) urging the media, experts, university teachers and civil society members to avoid the word, Adivasi, at discussions and talk-shows on International Day of the World's Indigenous People.

It also said the word is used while celebrating the UN's indigenous day in Bangladesh though as per the 15th amendment of the constitution indigenous (Adivasi) people "do not exist" in this country. The amendment rather incorporates the term, "small ethnic groups or tribes", it mentioned.

However, the press release was not found on the PID website yesterday.

The international indigenous people's day is observed on August 9 each year to promote and protect the rights of the world's indigenous people. This year's theme is "Bridging the gap: implementing the rights of indigenous peoples".

"The press notification shows how the government has taken a position against the indigenous people," said Sanjeeb Drong, the secretary general of Bangladesh Forum for Indigenous People.

"I think, it would make our marginalised indigenous people even more vulnerable."

Regarding the fifteenth amendment that says, "The State shall take steps to protect and develop the unique local culture and tradition of the tribes, minor races, ethnic sects and communities", Sanjeeb Drong said the constitution of a country dose not necessarily mention everything.

"My question is if a state has any right to change someone's identity," he said.

Earlier in 2011, the government sent secret letters to administration not to use the word "indigenous" in official papers though Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina herself used the term "Adivasi" in her goodwill message on the Indigenous Peoples Day in Bangladesh. The term was also found in the election manifesto of Awami League.



The mangled wreckage of the bus after it had a head-on collision with a truck on the Dhaka-Chittagong highway at Sitakunda. Four people died in the accident.

PHOTO: STAR

Road crashes ruin families

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These people, belonging to the 14-50 years age group, are either engaged in economic activities or are students.

The analysis was done based on the reports published in this newspaper in the last four and a half years since January 2010.

It shows at least 8,270 people died in road accidents during the period, meaning at least five people died every day. Of the five, about four were aged between 14 and 50.

During the same period, at least 21,886 people were injured in 5,674 accidents. Many of them later succumbed to their injuries while some others became permanently disabled.

According to police record, on average 3,000 people die each year in road accidents across the country. The World Bank and the World Health Organisation put the figure at 12,000 and 18,000, says a 2011 report of the Accident Research Institute (ARI) at Buat.

The Daily Star reports show highest 48 percent victims were aged between 14 and 35 while 25 percent were 36-50 years old. Fourteen percent victims were below 13 and 13 percent above 50.

In Bangladesh, an educated man usually joins the workforce between 18 and 30 years and reaches the peak of his career after 40. Those uneducated or less educated join the workforce a few years earlier.

Prof Shamsul Hoque of Buat said wage earners are more vulnerable to road accidents as they have to take the road most.

People of poor income group often travel on rooftops of buses and trucks, making themselves more vulnerable to accidents.

"And if the victim is the lone wage earner in the family, it exerts a severe impact on the family and even destroys it," added Prof Hoque, also former director of the ARI.

JULY-AUGUST DEADLIEST MONTHS

The rainy season always turns out to be

the deadliest, as the highest number of accidents happen in July and August. In each of these two months, the number of road crashes rises by 30 percent compared to those in February, March and April, according to The Daily Star findings.

During rain, visibility reduces significantly as the windshields of vehicles get blurred, heightening the possibility of accidents. Under safety rules, the speed of the vehicles during rain should be half the usual, said Prof Hoque.

"But drivers often violate the rules resulting in many accidents."

The number of non-motorised vehicles such as rickshaws and rickshaw-vans also increases during the rain. And more vehicles mean more accidents, he added.

Numerous potholes are developed on the road because of the downpour and the rain water remains stagnant in those potholes for days. This also increases the chances of accident.

All these may explain why so many people died during the Eid-ul-Fitr holidays, which fell in July-August over the last couple of years.

This year, at least 56 people were killed in road accidents during the three-day Eid holiday, according to our district correspondents. Last year, the number was 52.

There is no study, but experts think some 60 lakh people leave Dhaka ahead of Eid and then return after the holidays. An increased number of vehicles hit some major highways during the time to carry these people in and out of the capital.

As a result, the number of accidents rises by 2 to 2.5 times during Eid holidays compared to the normal time, said Prof Hoque.

DHAKA-CTG HIGHWAY: THE DEATH TRAP

Dhaka-Chittagong Highway is one of the most accident-prone highways in the country.

Between January 2010 and June 2014, at least 186 major accidents took place killing some 330 people, according to reports in this newspa-

per.

Most of the accident spots fall under five upazilas of Chittagong and Comilla, with the highest 54 crashes taking place in Sitakunda of the port city.

Dhaka-Sylhet and Dhaka-Aricha highways are also among the most accident-prone highways. Over the past four and a half years, 148 accidents on Dhaka-Sylhet Highway claimed 351 lives and 77 accidents on Dhaka-Aricha Highway took 117 lives, our findings show.

The other upazilas that witness most accidents are Mirsarai in Chittagong; Daudkandi, Chandina and Choddagram of Comilla; Sarail and Ashuganj of Brahmanbaria; Savar and Dhamrai of Dhaka; Shibpur and sadar upazila of Narsingdi; Trishal and Bhaluka of Mymensingh; Madhabpur in Habiganj and several upazilas of Manikganj and Gazipur.

About Dhaka-Chittagong Highway, Prof Hoque said around 25,000-30,000 vehicles ranging from slow moving non-motorised vehicles to fast moving big lorries and buses ply the highway daily. This is a major reason for frequent accidents on the highway.

"The government is expanding the narrow but the busiest highway into a four-lane one. But it will not help reduce the number of accidents if separate lanes are not made for fast and slow vehicles."

At least 10 bus drivers at Mohakhali Bus Terminal echoed his view. They said most accidents happen for two reasons -- when errant jaywalkers, coming out of the blue, try to cross the road and when drivers lose control while overtaking, particularly on a narrow lane.

According to Prof Hoque, unauthorised shops and bazaars on the highway also cause many accidents.

About Dhaka-Sylhet Highway, he said the roadside industries, whose workers and employees cross the road regularly, is a major reason for the accidents.

NO COMPENSATION, NO JUSTICE

Take the story of the three friends. The treatment of Habibur, who had sustained serious injuries, cost his family Tk 7,00,000. Much of the money was taken in loan from a bank and relatives.

But neither his family nor the families of his two dead friends received any compensation. They also did not get justice, as the driver was never caught.

Under the law, a driver faces up to seven years in jail or fine (not specified) or both for causing deaths by rash driving. But the law is rarely implemented.

NO EXACT DATA

It is not possible to give any concrete figure of deaths or injuries in accidents. In fact, there is no holistic government or private studies on road accidents and their affects.

According to the report of Nirapad Sarak Chai, which champions road safety, road accidents claimed more than 5,000 lives last year. Another 7,218 people were injured.

The report was based on newspaper reports.

The Daily Star reported only 1,721 deaths and 4,306 injuries in road crashes last year, which shows all the accidents are not reported in newspapers.

According to the 2011 ARI report, at least 3,000 people die and another 3,000 are injured in some 3,500 police-reported accidents every year.

This human cost apart, the financial cost of these accidents is also huge. According to a 2005 World Bank report, with the loss of these lives the country counts a loss of about 1 to 2 percent of the GDP due to road accidents.

That is at the national level. At the personal level, Khalid Saifullah's death has also shattered the dream of his younger brother Yasin Abdullah Zuha.

"I wanted to do a PhD and my brother had always encouraged me to pursue my dream. But that dream is now dead," he said by phone.

And he is just one of the many thousands.

13 more lives

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The accident occurred when a Dhaka-bound passenger bus, a Sylhet-bound microbus and a motorbike collided with each other.

The injured were admitted to Habiganj Sadar Hospital and Sylhet Osmani Medical College and Hospital, the police official said.

Meanwhile, two people were killed in two separate road accidents in Habiganj district yesterday.

In Lakhai, a man was crushed to death under the wheels of a truck in the morning when he was crossing the road, said Ali Farid Ahmed, officer-in-charge of Lakhai Police Station.

The victim is Dewan Ali, 30, of the same upazila.

Hours later in Nabiganj, a bus hit a CNG-driven three-wheeler auto-rickshaw, killing Sahidul Islam, a night guard in his 60s, said Liakat Ali, officer-in-charge of Nabiganj Police Station.

Our Chittagong correspondent reports, four people, including a woman, were killed and 10 others injured when a bus and a truck collided head-on on Dhaka-Chittagong highway at Sitakunda upazila yesterday morning.

Drivers of both the bus and the truck -- Abul Kashem, 30, and Obaidul Haque Pramanik, 32, respectively -- were killed on the spot.

The other two deceased passengers of the bus are Jarina Begum, 52, and Nazmul Hasan, 23.

Syed Zakir Hossain, officer-in-charge of Baro Aulia Highway Police Station, said the accident took place at around 6:25am as the truck, carrying corrugated iron sheets, tried to overtake another vehicle and hit the bus coming from the opposite direction.

"I suggested my wife to take a direct bus of a renowned company, but she chose to travel in this local bus as the fare was cheaper," said Abul Hossain, Jarina's husband.

Meanwhile, a driver of a pick-up van was killed at Khulshi area of the port city yesterday.

The deceased is Nasir, 25, of Comilla.

Nasir got injured when a vehicle hit his van at around 12:00am, said Nur Uddin, sub-inspector of Khulshi Police Station.

He was rushed to Chittagong Medical College Hospital where doctors declared him dead, said police.

180 Bangladeshis

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"After a month, my brother informed me that they had been held hostage at their workplace without enough food and water," added Javed.

Family members of the migrants could not confirm why their relatives were confined at the workplace.

The agency took Tk 4 lakh from each of the jobseekers. Though the recruiter had said the employer would pay project engineer Siddique \$1200 per month, he didn't receive a single penny as yet.

As a conflict erupted in Iraq in June between Sunni rebels and the Iraqi government forces, the company management left the project site, leaving the Bangladeshis confined there.

None of the Bangladeshis can contact the families at home as they don't have access to phone or internet, Javed said quoting his brother as saying.

Mother of another migrant Zaki Hossain of Jessore, Aklima Begum said her son wanted to return home, but he could not. "He asked me to do whatever is needed to rescue him from confinement," she added.

Aklima had borrowed a big amount from a local NGO to send her son abroad and now she has been left clueless about what to do.

Javed in the mean time contacted Rights Jessore to rescue his brother from confinement. The NGO last month communicated with the expatriates' welfare, foreign affairs and home ministries, and also the Bangladesh embassy in Baghdad to seek assistance in this regard.

Binoy Krishna Mallick, executive director of the rights platform, said they were yet to receive any response from the government authorities concerned.

Asked about the ordeal of the Bangladeshis in Iraq, Begum Shamsun Nahar, director general of Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training, said they didn't receive any complaint from any sources in this regard.

"Upon receiving a complaint, we'll investigate the matter and take measures accordingly," she told The Daily Star.

Despite repeated attempts, this newspaper could not reach the recruiting agency and the Bangladesh embassy in Baghdad over the phone.

Meanwhile, Rights Jessore held a press conference at Jessore Press Club yesterday to disclose the suffering of the confined expatriates before the media.

Over 20,000 Bangladeshis are now working in Iraq, according to the expatriates' welfare and overseas employment ministry.

No consolation for victim families

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"They [his parents] were inside the hull at the time of the accident. Minutes before the capsized I took my sister to the upper deck of the launch and jumped into river when it started to turn over," said Akram, a chauffeur by profession.

He now waits for the bodies of his parents at the Pachchar Government Primary School.

Of the 40 bodies recovered so far, the bodies of 35 passengers were taken to the school as of yesterday noon. The bodies of 24 victims were handed over to family members after identification. Eleven were buried unidentified. Five bodies would be kept at the school for the next 24 hours for identification.

The air of the school is heavy with the stench of five-day-old corpses and the sadness of family members. It was very difficult to identify the decomposing bodies. Family members of the victims were relying on the clothes on the bodies to identify their loved ones.

Nilufar Begum has been at the school for the last two days waiting for the body of her 16-year-old daughter Afroza, a student of Motijheel Ideal College in the capital.

Nilufar, her daughter and niece Ima were returning to their Munshiganj home after a visit to her sister's in Madaripur. Nilufar found Ima's body

on Thursday.

"I recognised Ima by her clothes," she said.

Mahmuda of Gopalganj identified her five-year-old daughter Merry the same way. She is waiting for the body of her son Anis, 3.

"Oh Allah, please help me get my son. I don't want anything else," cried Mahmuda.

Pinak-6, on its way to Mawa from Kawrakandi, was carrying more than 200 passengers against a capacity of 85. It sank in the choppy waters amid strong winds at Mawa around 11:00am on Monday.

The vessel is yet to be traced under water, frustrating the family members of the missing passengers.

At a press briefing at Mawa rest house yesterday, Shipping Minister Shajahan Khan said they had completed searching a vast area using modern technology and would continue to search for Pinak-6 in new areas.

"I am hopeful that the launch would be found," said the minister who lost three nieces in the accident.

Talking to The Daily Star, Shamsuddoha Khandakar, chairman of Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority, said they had carried out the search 10 kilometres downstream to locate the sunken launch.

"We held a meeting with the shipping minister and the heads of all agencies taking part in the salvage operation today [yesterday] and decided that we'll search five kilometres more downstream tomorrow [today]," he told The Daily Star.

Captain Nazrul Islam, head of the Navy team engaged in the rescue operation, said they were using state-of-the-art technologies like sonar side scanners, multi-beam echo sounder, sub-bottom propeller to locate the vessel.

Meanwhile, rescuers announced that they recovered a passenger named Sarwar alive near a char of Padma around 2:00pm yesterday. Different private television channels also broadcast the news which turned out to be a hoax.

Sarwar was taken to the information centre at Mawa first and then to Mawa police outpost.

Maniruzzaman Fakir, assistant superintendent of police of Munshiganj, said, "He [Sarwar] said that someone with a camera promised him money to say that he was rescued."

[Farhana Mirza from Munshiganj and Nityananda Halder from Madaripur also contributed to this report]

Against all odds

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coming here from Myanmar and their increasing presence is affecting our lives," said Menleng Mro.

Menleng Mro, president Cramadipara musical group, said Manusher Jonno Foundation (MJF), an NGO, has been helping them hold on to their indigenous ways of life.

The MJF first reached the village in 2010 through a local NGO named Humanitarian Foundation to help found "Rice Bank" to save the Mro families from severe food crisis between April and June, time for sowing seeds.

A granary of rice has been set up in the village and whenever a family faces food crisis, they borrow food grain from there and return it after the harvest, Mro said.

The MJF is also helping them get their traditional dresses called Longki for women and Longki-Ben for men.

With its support, the Mro community are also making their traditional musical instruments like Tomma, Klin-cha, Lang-Meng-Sa and Plung, which is made of bamboo and dried skin of gourds, Menleng said.

Changes have occurred in other aspects of life of the second largest indigenous community, following the Marmas, as well. Currently, over 28,000 Mros are living in Bandarban

alone, according to the district portal.

They no more pursue their traditional religion in which they would worship nature and celebrate cow-slaughtering festival. They now follow monotheist Crama religion, which was introduced by Menlay Mro, a Mro priest who disappeared in the forest in 1984, said Menleng.

These 750 Mro families were evicted from their ancestral villages to make way for a firing range in the areas for security forces.

"I was a student of Dhaka Notre Dame College back then. I came to my village on a vacation but found nobody in the village. Only some pigs were roaming around. I was totally lost. Later, in the evening I found my family members with other villagers hiding in the forest after being evicted," Singpart said as he recalled the fateful day of 2006.

Interestingly, the place where our village once stood is still empty. Nothing has been built there after our eviction," he said.

Against this backdrop, the International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples is being observed today. And indigenous Mro people of Bangladesh like Menleng and Singpart hope that they would get back their peaceful and harmonious way of life someday.