

Hold councils of all AL units

Hasina asks party leaders

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina yesterday directed the Awami League high-ups to complete the councils of its all grassroots units immediately to strengthen the party.

She gave the directive at an unscheduled meeting with the senior party leaders at her political office in Dhanmondi. The AL chief made a surprise visit there to learn about the party's organisational activities.

Briefing reporters after the meeting, AL General Secretary Syed Ashraful Islam said, "She inquired about how many grassroots councils have been completed so far and how many are still pending."

The PM instructed party leaders to hold central AL council in time after completing all grassroots councils. The last AL council was held on December 29, 2012 for a three year term.

About councils of Dhaka metropolitan units, Ashraf said they have split the city AL into two units and would announce the new committees soon.

The AL national committee will sit soon to approve the party budget, he added.

On the trial of war criminals, he said the verdicts in the war crimes cases will be executed in time. There shouldn't be any doubt over the execution of the verdicts, mentioned the AL leader.

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Wasfia named Adventurer of the Year

STAR REPORT

Bangladeshi mountaineer Wasfia Nazreen has been named an Adventurer of the Year 2014-15 by the National Geographic.



Wasfia Nazreen

The Washington-based magazine, also known as Nat Geo, announced this on its website yesterday.

A total of 10 people in as many categories have been named in the list with Wasfia earning the prestige in the activist category.

In her profile, the magazine hailed her commitment to empowering women and girls in Bangladesh.

She is the second Bangladeshi woman to conquer the Mount Everest. She set foot atop the world's highest peak on May 26, 2012.

She was the first Bangladeshi to summit Aconcagua, South America's highest peak; Denali, North America's highest peak; Mt Elbrus, Europe's highest mountain; and Vinson Massif, Antarctica's highest point.

In 2011, Wasfia, also a social-worker and writer, had taken up the challenge of scaling the highest mountains of each of the seven continents in celebration of 40 years of independence of Bangladesh and women progress. She has successfully completed the mission in six continents.

She now plans to summit the seventh -- Oceania's Carstensz Pyramid -- late this month, according to the magazine.

"Eighty percent of the people [in Bangladesh] haven't seen a mountain," Nazreen was quoted as saying by the magazine. "Going to every

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COMMUNITY COMBATS CRIMES

As law enforcers fail to ensure their security, they decide to go their own way. To fight crime rackets, Bhashantek slum dwellers guard the areas at night, divided into eight to ten groups, equipped with sticks, flashlights and whistles. Whenever a group finds something wrong, it blows whistle and makes phone calls to alert others. This is the story of "Lathi-Banshi Bahini".

PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN



United, they now choose to fight

FROM PAGE 1

One of the women was pregnant. The child she later gave birth to lived only four months. It all happened for six tolas of gold that too was alleged to have been stolen by a member of the family.

A case was filed accusing Mamun and his accomplices. But police never arrested him though he allegedly was moving about in broad daylight under the nose of the law enforcers.

Then on October 10, local youth Nasir Hossain was killed allegedly by Mamun and his cohorts for protesting verbal abuse of his cousin by some gang members.

Local police faced widespread criticisms following the incidents.

A day after Nasir's death, Dhaka Metropolitan Police suspended all the 19 personnel of Pashchim Bhashantek Police Outpost following allegations that they had been in collusion with the local goons. Both the officers-in-charge of Bhashantek Police Station were withdrawn.

But by then, the slum dwellers realised that they would have to do something for their own safety.

On October 14, they formed the night patrol teams.

HOW IT WORKS

According to locals, around 10,000 people live in nearly 4,000 shanties in Bahshantek divided into three zones.

The physically fit males of the families voluntarily sign up for the patrol teams and a person has to join the patrolling teams every third night.

"Whenever the members of a group find something suspicious, they blow whistle and inform other groups over the phone. Then someone makes an announcement through the loudspeaker in the mosque and seek others' help," said Farid Chairman, a community elder.

The Lathi-Banshi Bahini has already caught a drug peddler and seized around 100 bottles of Phensedyl. They also apprehended a couple of thieves and are hopeful to oust the drug rackets from the slum forever, he added.

Locals provide the volunteer guards with food, said Farid, who has been living in the slum for more than 25 years.

"Although small scale crimes were not uncommon in the slum, these crossed the limit in recent months largely due to police inaction.

"Before the formation of Lathi-Banshi Bahini, police would pay little attention to our complaints, but now they are praising the initiative," Farid added.

Police admitted the locals were doing better than the law enforcers in checking crimes.

"The situation in the slum has improved since the locals initiated the night patrols," said Abdul Kalam Azad, officer-in-charge of Bhashantek Police Station.

"The alleys inside the slum are like mazes. It's hard for us to track down criminals hiding somewhere along those mazes. But the dwellers know it all too well," he said.

Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan Kamal and Inspector General of Police Hassan Mahmud Khandker could not be reached for their comments on this as they were abroad.

SLUM DANGEROUS

The slum area is a safe haven for drug peddlers, and six to seven drug rackets including the one run by Mamun operate there, Nasir's brother Mosharrif Hossain told these correspondents during their visit to the slum recently.

They sell all kinds of drugs, including yaba and Phensedyl, and would go any length to run their business, he said.

"They even force school-going children to sell drugs. If a child refuses to obey their orders they would beat him and his family members, and sometimes would harass young girls in the family," he added.

The truth behind this was found in what 45-year-old Kashem Ali, father of two sons aged 14 and 11, said.

"Around a month back, I found out that my sons were involved in drug peddling. They were working for a gang led by Salam. I immediately sent the children to my village home in Noakhali.

"Enraged by this, Salam's gang attacked my house and vandalised it," Kashem said while patrolling the area with his group on Sunday night.

He also narrated the horror story of how his sons were brought into this business.

"At first, my sons refused to join Salam's gang. Then Salam's men tied them in sacks and dipped them in a small pond full of catfish inside the slum area. The crooks continued to torture my sons until they agreed," said Kashem with tearful eyes.

A 25-year-old resident of the slum said three days before the Eid-ul-Azha, Mamun summoned him through his cohort Kana Alam. After taking him to a nearby open place early in the morning, Mamun and Alam forcefully handed him two firearms and then took photos on a cell phone.

Then they threatened him to circulate the pho-

tos on the internet if he did not join their gang.

"I refused to yield to their threats. I would rather disclose the truth if I am arrested," said the courageous youth, who got married barely seven months back and now is dreaming of happy days ahead, to The Daily Star.

Nothing unpleasant happened to him in the aftermaths as the night patrol began soon after the Eid, keeping the thugs away. He now has joined the guards.

There's no way, however, to think that the crime rings sat idle after the community vigilance began.

Asma Begum of the slum said five men of Salam's group demanded Tk 50,000 in extortion from them on October 25 during the daytime when there's no patrol team at work.

When her husband, who lives on tutoring children inside the slum, told them of his incapability, the group locked him with his two children inside the house.

"They then asked me to arrange the money. I went to Farid Chairman and sought his help. Some 20 to 25 neighbours then chased them away and rescued my family," Asma told The Daily Star.

Apart from drug peddling and extortion, the goons also control the gangs of petty thieves and run the businesses of providing illegal connections of electricity and water supply to the shanties there, locals alleged.

"You would not be able to sleep in peace here. You would wake up with the sound of gunfire almost every morning," said Moktar Hossain, a grocer in his late 30s, who voluntarily joined the vigilance team, referring to the pre-patrol time.

"We sought police help every time a crime was committed here. But police did very little, if anything at all. Now we want peace here," said Moktar.

AFFECTED BUT HAPPY

The males of the families mainly earn their living by working as rickshaw pullers, day labourers, construction workers, waiters at restaurants and shopkeepers.

If they stay up all night for guarding the slum, they cannot go to work the following day, meaning no income for the day.

"If I guard the area on one night, I cannot pull my rickshaw the next day. Eventually, I lose Tk 300-350 a day," said Abdul Alim, 55, while walking down the narrow alleys inside the slum area on Sunday night.

"Nevertheless, I am happy. At least, my family can sleep peacefully at night," he said with a smile on his tired face.

New Biman MD joins Jan 1

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Kyle Haywood, a South-African-born British citizen, will join Biman Bangladesh Airlines on next year's January 1 as the managing director and chief executive officer, said officials of the national flag carrier.



Kyle Haywood

Haywood, current MD of South African budget carrier Fastjet, has already tendered his resignation after signing the final agreement with Biman couple of weeks ago, said sources.

The new Biman boss has also submitted a three-month prior-notice to the organisation he is currently working for, sources added.

"He [Haywood] has been appointed on a one-year contract which has provision of extension of his service," said a top Biman official, who preferred to remain anonymous.

Haywood is the second foreigner to become the MD and CEO of Biman after Kevin John Steele.

He has over 25 years' experience in the airline industry and served in traditional carriers such as British Airways and Etihad Airways, and low-cost carrier Air Arabia. He also served as the CEO of Air Uganda.

Biman has been without a full-time MD and CEO since Steele resigned on April 19. Steele had been appointed for

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Blanket factory gutted in city

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

A blanket factory on the Dhaka Central Jail premises in the capital's Chawkbazar area was gutted by a fire yesterday afternoon.

The fire broke out at the tin-shed, one-storey Kazla Woolen Mills Factory around 4:20pm. Eight fire fighting units doused the blaze over one hour, said Maj Mohammad Zihadul Islam, acting director general of Fire Service and Civil Defence.

"We don't know yet what caused the fire but an investigation is on. No one is reportedly injured by the fire," he said.

Though owned by the jail authority, the factory and the godown stand next to the northern boundary wall of the compound. Taking lease from the jail authorities, private entrepreneurs run the factory with their own labour.

Around 700 workers were working when the fire broke out. All of them came out safely, said factory sources.

"The fire might be caused by an electric short-circuit," said Waresat Hussain Belal, owner of the factory and also a parliament member.

The fire spread quickly as the woolen materials kept there were highly inflammable, he added.

There were enough fire safety measures but workers might not have used those as smoke engulfed the whole area immediately after the fire spread, claimed the owner.

However, talking to The Daily Star, several workers said the factory did not have an adequate number of fire extinguishers.

"We usually store water in drums. We use the water to extinguish fire, if any," they said.

The fire gutted more than two lakh blankets most of which were produced for the Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief, claimed Delwar Hossain, a factory official.

Hasan Ali, a factory worker, told The Daily Star that the cutting

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Myanmar profits off Rohingya exodus

FROM PAGE 1

Myanmar naval boats going so far as to escort asylum seekers out to larger human trafficking ships waiting at sea that are operated by transnational criminal networks.

"Myanmar authorities are not only making life so intolerable for Rohingya that they have to flee, they're also complicit in the process -- they're taking payments and profiting off their exodus," said Matthew Smith, director of Fortify Rights.

Rakhine state spokesman Win Myaing dismissed the allegations as "rumours," saying he has not "heard of anything happening like that." He said any naval boats approaching such vessels were likely aiming to help fishermen in need.

More than 100,000 Rohingya have fled Myanmar's western shores by boat since Buddhist-Muslim violence erupted in Rakhine state two years ago, according to estimates provided by experts tracking their movements.

Chris Lewa, director of the advocacy group Arakan Project, said increasing desperation is behind a huge surge since October 15, with an average of 900 people per day piling into cargo ships

parked offshore. In Rakhine state, an aggressive campaign by authorities over the last few months to register family members and officially categorize them as "Bengalis" -- implying they are illegal migrants from neighbouring Bangladesh -- has aggravated their situation.

The deepening crisis comes ahead of a visit by President Barack Obama to Myanmar next week for a regional summit, his second in two years. Obama, who has repeatedly pointed to democratic changes in Myanmar as a foreign policy bright spot, called President Thein Sein recently by telephone to express concerns about a reform process analysts say has been backsliding for months.

Myanmar, a predominantly Buddhist nation of 50 million that is still struggling to emerge from half a century of military rule, is home to an estimated 1.3 million Rohingya, and most are considered stateless. Though many of their families arrived from Bangladesh generations ago, almost all are denied citizenship by Myanmar as well as Bangladesh. In the last two and a half years, attacks by Buddhist mobs have left hundreds dead and 140,000

trapped in camps where they live without access to adequate health care, education or jobs.

Smith said authorities in Myanmar have been profiting off the Rohingya for decades, and extracting money from those departing was only one way. If Rohingya residents attempt to travel to neighbouring villages without permission from local authorities, they risk being arrested and forced to pay bribes for their freedom, he said. The restrictions are so intense that even those who repair their own houses -- which often crumble during the rainy season -- can be fined if they do so without permission.

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"It's draining them economically," Smith said. "This is one of the poorest communities in Asia, one of the most abused, and this whole process is taking the little resources that they

have left in exchange for even more abuse."

According to Fortify Rights, the brokers may collect sums averaging \$500 to \$600 per small boatload of asylum seekers, usually numbering between 50 and 100 people, and hand those payments to officials from Myanmar's police, navy and army. Police also have collected payments directly from passengers, the group said, adding that the Myanmar navy once demanded \$7,000 from a trafficking ship offshore to allow them to leave.

The small boats transport the Rohingya to larger ships further out at sea that can carry as many as 1,000 people. The Fortify Rights report said the vast majority of those fleeing are routinely deceived, finding themselves "in the custody of abusive human trafficking and smuggling gangs, who detain them in conditions of enslavement and exploitation nearly all endure or witness torture, deprivation of food and water, confinement in extremely close quarters and other abuses throughout their journeys."

The Associated Press has documented similar accounts in Rakhine state. The family member of one Rohingya broker -

since arrested on drug trafficking and other charges -- said his boat set off from a small creek inland and had to pass a police post on the way to the sea where an obligatory payment had to be made. The family member spoke in Myin Hlut town on condition of anonymity for fear of being arrested.

The family member also recounted navy ships escorting Rohingya asylum seekers out to sea, as well as chasing them to extract more bribes. In another instance documented by AP, a dozen Myanmar soldiers boarded a vessel filled with Rohingya in the Bay of Bengal, bound their hands and bludgeoned them with wooden planks and iron rods before finally extracting money and letting them go.

Smith said the reason Myanmar authorities were exploiting trafficking networks themselves was simple: they can make tremendous money doing it. "Assuming that just half the 100,000 who have fled in the last two years have been forced to pay \$2,000 each for passage to Malaysia, we're talking about a trade worth \$100 million, he said.

"That's why we see government complicity. There is a perverse and disturbing economic element to all of this."