

RANGPUR RESTIVE

Strike, violence over killing of AL leader

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Rangpur

Criminals killed a ward-level Awami League leader in the city yesterday, sparking violent protests by his supporters. The trouble saw transport workers enforce an indefinite strike in the division in the morning and postpone it in the afternoon.

Witnesses said Imran Hossain, 35, of the city's Khasbagh area was found lying unconscious on Rangpur-Kurigram highway at Satmatha intersection around 5:00am.

Locals sent him to Rangpur Medical College Hospital (RMCH) where doctors declared him dead. Imran was the joint secretary of ward-30 unit AL. He recently joined the AL from Rangpur city unit Jubo League.

Md Abdul Quader Jilani, officer in charge of Rangpur Kotwali Police Station, said Imran was stabbed to death on Monday night and his body was abandoned at Satmatha intersection.

Hearing about the murder, supporters of Imran attacked the house of MA Majid, general secretary of the Rangpur district unit Sarak Paribahan Sramik

Federation, in the same area around 7:00am, suspecting his involvement in the crime. The attackers ransacked the house and beat up Majid's parents.

Majid is also the labour affairs secretary of Rangpur city unit AL and the general secretary of the Rangpur divisional unit Sarak Paribahan Sramik Federation.

The agitators torched the branch office of the federation, three buses, three motorcycles and a battery-run auto-rickshaw in the area.

Majid complained the attackers vandalised the office of his nephew Ashraf Alam, joint convener of Rangpur city unit Jubo League.

Protesters also beat up Ehsanul Haque Sumon, videographer of Channel i, and damaged his camera while he was covering the incident, said witnesses.

Police charged baton on the troublemakers and fired six tear gas shells to quell the violent supporters of Imran, added the OC.

Around 10:00am, transport workers' federation announced an indefinite strike in eight districts of Rangpur

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The tamarisk grove (Jhau Bon) on Cox's Bazar beach, a popular tourist attraction, is being fast engulfed by the sea during high tide. The photo taken on Monday shows fallen tamarisk trees on the beach.

PHOTO: MOHAMMAD ALI JINNAH

60 lakh overseas jobs at stake

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government expedites the MRP issuance.

So far, about 1 crore locals have got MRPs with the government issuing 13,000 MRPs a day to meet the demand.

For all the expatriates to get new passport before the deadline, the government will need to print an additional 22,000 MRPs a day -- a mammoth task.

Senior home ministry officials said actions of IRIS Corporation Berhad -- the Malaysian company responsible for production of the new travel documents -- have been causing delays and disruptions in the issuance of MRP.

IRIS, whose job is to provide software and technical documentation and print passports, now controls the entire MRP system.

As the custodian, the home ministry was supposed to monitor the company's activities and ensure timely issuance of passports. But it did little, appearing to be content with a disaster waiting to happen.

There was no problem with MRP issuance in the first two years since it began in 2010. IRIS started making things difficult for the government after it lost an MRP expansion job to one of its competitors at home and another job in Malaysia, sources in the Department of Immigration and Passport (DIP) said.

Despite its contractual obligation to integrate software of others with its system free of cost, the Malaysian company is blocking the system with codes and shifting the blame onto its competitors.

Documents of the DIP and a probe, conducted by a firm the DIP had assigned, exposed this. But the home ministry is sitting on the report.

"This failure [integration] tells that there are validation logics [codes inside the software] in the application which is preventing the MRP from printing. It is confirmed by the authorities that such validation is not defined in any documentation," private company Secure Link Services (SELISE) says in its report after detecting the cause behind non-integration in May this year.

In the wake of the integration problems, DIP Director General Abdul Mabud himself engaged the company but did not make the report public as it revealed IRIS's questionable activities.

Lt Col Emran Ahmed Chowdhury, deputy project director of MRP project, sent a letter to IRIS on May 14 and described how the central system was blocked with validation rules.

On October 15, the MRP project management asked IRIS to provide Application Programming Interface (API) -- a set of rules for making software -- and relevant information to integrate any software with the company's software.

The day before, the DIP sent the project management another letter saying, "For not getting API and related information, MRP issuance from 33 centres in the country and from Malaysia has been delayed, causing harassments to the applicants."

"As per contract between the DIP and IRIS JV [joint venture with two other companies] for introduction of MRP and MRV in Bangladesh, IRIS JV

is supposed to provide API to any other company or organisation authorised by DIP for integration," reads another DIP letter, issued by its additional DG Rafiqul Islam on October 27.

It asked IRIS to provide all necessary API and documentation by October 30 for its system's integration with other companies' software.

Failure to do so would be considered non-cooperation and the DIP would be forced to take legal action as per contractual provisions, the letter warns.

It further mentions, "Service Provider could not integrate their software due to non-availability of API of the existing software supplied and installed by IRIS JV. As a result passport could not be printed."

DIP officials say IRIS did not provide the API, prolonging the MRP crisis.

Although the integration problem is going on for seven months, the DIP and the home ministry are yet to make any move against IRIS.

IRIS was able to take full control of the system it had established at Agargaon passport office by keeping a number of officials happy with fancy foreign trips and alleged kickbacks, DIP insiders say.

"Nobody knows how the central system works. Even for a minor issue or change in the system, the department depends on IRIS," said a DIP official.

A senior home ministry official, who is well aware of the situation, said, "The company can halt the system anytime, bringing a disaster to Bangladesh citizens."

Be it in Bangladesh, Malaysia or the

UAE, it sets the rules for issuing MRPs for Bangladeshi citizens, and its agreements with the government matter little. The role of the government officials is not regulative, it's rather supportive, DIP sources said.

In the UAE, IRIS got the MRP expansion job but then illegally employed a subcontractor. The sensitive data of remittance earners was being collected at phone/fax and photocopy shops.

In Malaysia, IRIS blocked its competitor's access to its system in Dhaka and forced the competitor to subcontract the Malaysian expansion job to a dummy company of IRIS.

The dummy company, BITARA Abadi, then entered the Bangladesh high commission infrastructure in Kuala Lumpur without authorisation to send and receive data, compromising state security, the Bangladesh high commissioner to Malaysia informed the foreign ministry in a letter.

In Oman, things could become just as difficult, as IRIS recently lost the contract to a joint venture of Indian BLS International Ltd and Bangladesh's Beximco Online and Dohatech.

In a letter on October 15, the DIP asked the consortium to take a consent letter from IRIS for integration.

"Conspiracy is there to prove the consortium failed and award the Oman job to IRIS, which was the second lowest bidder," a DIP official said, requesting anonymity.

Against this bleak backdrop, Bangladeshi expatriates holding old passports are deeply nervous. Once the deadline expires, they will find themselves in serious trouble.

"If I don't get my MRP before the deadline, I will have no choice but to go back home or get arrested," said Tuhin, who went to Malaysia with a non-machine readable passport.

Working at a shop in Penang, he is yet to recover the money he had spent to get to Malaysia. "I have to earn more, build a new home and start my own family. For all that, I need to keep working," an anxious Tuhin told The Daily Star over the telephone.

Like Tuhin's, the fate of around 5 lakh Bangladeshis in Malaysia hangs in the balance as only a few thousand have got the MRPs so far.

The government's estimate say there are 30 lakh expatriates in Saudi Arabia, 10 lakh in United Arab Emirates and 10 lakh in Oman, Qatar, Bahrain, Jordan, Lebanon and Libya.

IRIS has not been able to provide MRP to a single expatriate in Saudi Arabia since July 22 this year when it signed a contract with the government.

It provided only 928 passports to UAE expatriates in five months since its contract there took effect in June, say official records at the DIP.

When contacted in October, State Minister for Home Asaduzzaman Khan did not even want to hear about issues regarding IRIS. Many at the ministry said the minister was being ill advised by some high officials concerned.

Asaduzzaman accused Dataedge, a company that got the MRP expansion job beating IRIS, for creating all the trouble. He said nothing about the integration crisis and who was actually responsible for it.

In May, a meeting chaired by the

then senior home secretary Mustaq Ahmed decided to assign experts of Buet and Dhaka University to find the root cause of the integration problem. He was silent, as the home ministry did not implement its own decision.

Md Mozammel Haque Khan, senior secretary of the home ministry, said they were trying to resolve the MRP crisis but refused to make comments on IRIS activities.

"We have to fulfil the international requirement regarding MRP. But we are now facing stalemates at different levels," he told The Daily Star, adding, "If we fail to resolve the stalemates, I'm afraid many expats will not get MRPs in time."

MRP Project Director Brig Gen Masud Redwan said the issue of expatriates' passports was not his concern. "The DG deals with this issue," he told The Daily Star, claiming that there was no problem with integration.

Two other ministries concerned -- foreign and expatriates' welfare and overseas employment -- are also sitting idle.

Instead of facing any actions for its violations of contract, IRIS is getting MRP issuance job one after another. Apart from Malaysia and UAE, it has also got the job in Saudi Arabia.

The Daily Star, on September 13, 24, 28 and on October 25 sent emails to four IRIS officials -- Managing Director Dato Tan Say Jim, CEO Dato Hamdan, Senior Sales Manager Bahjat Aman, project director in Bangladesh Lee Soo Mei -- and requested them to clarify the issues in the UAE and Malaysia. None responded.

POST-JAN 5 POLLS

Decision to stall movement was wrong: Khaleda

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The BNP's decision to discontinue its movement after the January 5 polls was wrong, party Chairperson Khaleda Zia has said.

"It would have been better if the BNP had continued its movement ... The decision to take part in the 2008 parliamentary election under a caretaker government was also a wrong one," a BNP vice chairman told The Daily Star, quoting Khaleda.

The BNP chief made the remark at a views-exchange meeting with party leaders at her Gulshan office last night.

The meeting was attended by the party's vice chairmen, joint secretaries general and organising secretaries.

Khaleda asked the party leaders to be more cautious to avoid such mistakes in future.

Earlier, the BNP chairperson had said at different rallies that her party discontinued its movement after the one-sided January 5 polls to facilitate the holding of dialogues with the government for a free, fair and inclusive election.

The BNP leaders urged Khaleda to reorganise immediately all party committees, including that in Dhaka, to gear up the anti-government movement.

Party sources said Khaleda will sit with the standing committee members tomorrow, and also with the chiefs of components of the BNP-led alliance to decide the next course of action.

A contractor too mighty

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the country.

IRIS lost the Tk 136 crore job to Dataedge and Polish PWPW consortium.

It did not support integration of the consortium's software and system with the central system, rather kept the system locked with codes, internal documents of DIP and a report of an investigation into the integration problem showed in May.

The DIP had employed a company to probe the integration problem.

The Daily Star obtained a copy of the report which clearly said integration was not possible as the central system, which is operated by IRIS, was locked with code.

The DIP and the home ministry did not consider the above fact and asked Dataedge-PWPW to pay IRIS \$250,000 as fee for integration, which the IRIS was contractually obliged to do for free anyway, ministry sources said.

The fee payment agreement was signed in May in presence of State Minister for Home Asaduzzaman Khan, DG of DIP Abdul Mabud, Project Director of MRP Brig Gen Masud Rezwan and Additional Home Secretary Shafiqur Rahman, who has recently been transferred.

After the payment, the integration problem was solved with MRP printing.

But the story did not end there.

MESS IN MALAYSIA

IRIS lost another job to supply MRPs to expatriates in Malaysia to Dataedge-people consortium. It resorted to the same trick, block with codes the integration of six enrolment centres Dataedge-people had set up in Malaysia, and access to data of the expatriates at the central system in Agargaon.

The system was blocked after

Dataedge-people successfully sent data from Malaysia in the end of May and some MRPs got printed, according to several DIP letters, which The Daily Star has copies of.

More than 30,000 expatriates in Malaysia were enrolled by August but their new passports could not be printed due to the integration problem.

Dataedge-people had to subcontract the job to BITARA Abadi, a company of the IRIS CEO Dato Hamdan. He is the managing director of BITARA and has been using the identity, letterheads and email accounts of IRIS in official matters.

Sources in the DIP said the subcontract was given to BITARA, the dummy company of IRIS, on August 14 after IRIS was disqualified for the job.

But BITARA has not been able to send data using its own set up. It resorted to unauthorised access to the network of the Bangladesh high commission in Kuala Lumpur.

"On August, 28, 2014 two technical people from IRIS came to the High Commission evading our notice and worked on our servers in the name of maintenance but we did not allow them," the commission wrote to the foreign ministry on September 12.

The commission later found changes were made to its system so that the mission's code could be used remotely to send data to Agargaon office, says the letter, adding that the DG of DIP in a text message requested the commission to allow BITARA to send the data.

Earlier, the DIP did not allow Dataedge-people to use the mission's code to send data.

However, thousands of expats, who were enrolled for MRP months ago, are waiting for their new passports as

BITARA was very slow in sending data.

As per the sub-contract with Dataedge-people, BITARA is supposed to work in consultation with Dataedge-people. It kept Dataedge-people in the dark but directly communicated with the DG.

The Bangladesh mission fears its technical capabilities may suffer or the database of the mission could get damaged.

"We do not understand who will then take the responsibility if any 'unwanted' person manages a Bangladeshi passport through this unauthorised channel," says the letter, seeking immediate measures to solve the problem.

In an email on September 28, The Daily Star asked Dato Hamdan about it but he did not respond.

Secretary (Bilateral, Consular and Training)) of the Foreign Ministry Mustafa Kamal, who has received many complaints regarding malpractices of IRIS in Malaysia and the UAE, declined to comment.

State Minister for Foreign Affairs Shahriar Alam just said his ministry had asked the home ministry to expedite the MRP issuance process.

MESS IN UAE

IRIS went unpunished even after grossly violating its contract in the UAE by appointing an unauthorised company, Dipon Gulf Info Tech Consultancy LLC, on August 13 to collect data of expatriates and fees from them.

In the authorisation letter issued to Dipon, IRIS had mentioned that Dipon would arrange and operate mobile teams to collect data, develop and manage payment module and engage and manage typing centres so that Bangladeshi workers have easy access to the centres for a reasonable fee.

This triggered a widespread cheating of expatriates. Data was being collected at internet cafes, photocopy and fax shops and expatriates were being forced to pay more than the amount fixed in the contract, said embassy officials and expatriates.

The collectors are now charging 280 Dirham, instead of the 47 Dirham mentioned in the contract which applicants were supposed to pay directly to the high commission, say documents obtained by The Daily Star. The contractor or sub-contractor were supposed to a fee against each delivered MRP.

Bangladesh ambassador to the UAE in a letter on August 27 informed the foreign and home ministries of the matter. Expatriates also complained about paying more when housing and public works minister visited Abu Dhabi recently.

Expatriate Delwar Hossain was enrolled on August 23 from Maryal Typing and Photocopying shop at Al Ain Bazar, Dubai. Although 80 Dirham was mentioned in his receipt, he told The Daily Star that the collectors took 280 Dirham from him.

"The people in the shop were saying that Bangladesh had increased tax while taking the fees," he said over the phone.

When the Maryal Typing and Photocopying shop was called over the phone, a collector there admitted taking 280 Dirham against each MRP application.

The DIP, which is responsible for monitoring the job and taking action against such a major violation of contract, remained silent. However, referring to the ambassador's letter, the DG of DIP issued a letter asking IRIS to clarify the matter.

IRIS termed the giving of subcontract a "human mistake" by its

senior manager for international sales division Bahjat Aman. In response to the DIP's clarification, it apologised for the wrongdoing and the officials of the DIP and the home ministry accepted the response.

The DIP in the letter said the subcontract was a violation of clause 35 of the contract between IRIS and the government, but no action was taken against IRIS.

The DIP had nothing to say when IRIS claimed that it did not violate the contract and had no links with enrolment at photocopy and fax shops and taking money from applicants.

DG of DIP Abdul Mabud claimed of having no knowledge about the malpractices in the UAE.

The ex-police officer, who was appointed as DG for one-year contract in 2010 and then got extensions on his contract four times allegedly for having good connections with two high officials of the PMO, had nothing to say about the facts behind integration problem and IRIS's role in it.

Principal Secretary to the Prime Minister's Office Abdus Sobhan Sikder said the home ministry should know how to ensure issuance of MRPs to all expatriates within the ICAO deadline.

"The home ministry may seek the PMO's help to speed up the process since providing MRPs to all expatriates is a headache of the government," he told The Daily Star, adding that he had heard about the problems in Malaysia.

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