

MAYOR HOUSE CONSTRUCTION Environment dept fines Ctg city corporation

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The Department of Environment yesterday fined Chittagong City Corporation authorities Tk five lakh for constructing concrete pillars on the Tigerpass hill in the port city's Lalkhan area to build a bungalow for the city Mayor without taking an environmental clearance certificate.

The punitive measures came after the CCC engineer-in-charge Anowar Hossain admitted of the offence during a hearing at the DoE's enforcement wing in the capital, says a press DoE release.

The CCC authorities appointed Messrs Yakub & Brothers on 16 July last year to build the mayor's residence.

The CCC took approval from the Chittagong Development Authorities (CDA) for constructing 25 pillars, each 12-feet-high, on the hill on November 1 this year but they didn't take the DoE clearance certificate.

A writ petition was filed then with the High Court seeking a ban on the construction work in 2013. The HC, however, settled the writ with a directive for the CCC to take the environmental certificate.

Later, Human Rights and Peace for Bangladesh, a non-governmental organisation, filed another writ with the HC seeking an immediate ban on the construction work this year.

The HC summoned director general of the DoE and director of DoE Chittagong and ordered them to take initiatives after inspecting the under-construction building.

The DoE then summoned the chief engineer of the CCC and the authorities of Messrs Yakub & Brothers to be present at the Dhaka office for a hearing yesterday.

The CCC engineer at the hearing admitted to the corporation's offence.

3 surrender

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armed police, Flemish-speaking VRT public television reported, while the fate of the fourth man was unclear and the situation was continuing.

Neighbours said the occupants of the apartment were "drug traffickers", but Belgian authorities would only confirm that they suspected it was an isolated incident with no terror links.

"There is no indication that this is linked to terrorism, the Islamic State or what is happening at the moment in Sydney," the Ghent prosecutor's office told AFP.

The Belgian siege happened at the same time as a lone gunman kept terrified staff and customers captive in a cafe in Australia's largest city, brandishing an Islamic flag.

Ghent's local prosecutor said that "four armed men" were involved and that one hostage was believed to have been taken but stressed that it appeared to be an isolated incident with no terror links.

A person in the building, which is divided into several flats, saw the armed men and was able to leave before calling the police to alert them, a police spokesman said.

10 hurt

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vice-president of Narayanganj Jubo League, the youth front of the ruling Awami League, and Amir Hossain, president of ward-10 unit of Chhatra League, the AL's student body, were locked in an altercation over establishing dominance in the area around 7:30pm.

At one stage, supporters of the two leaders, equipped with sticks and sharp weapons, attacked each others. Both the groups also exchanged bullets. Selim suffered bullet injuries.

Three of the injured, including Selim, were taken to Dhaka Medical College Hospital, while the others to Narayanganj 300-bed Hospital and other local hospitals.

Rafiqul Islam, inspector (investigation) of Siddhirganj Police Station, said a police team had visited the spot.

Yemeni's hand severed in Saudi for theft

AFP, Riyadh

Saudi authorities yesterday severed the hand of a Yemeni national convicted of repeated theft, under the strict rules of Islamic sharia law applied in the kingdom.

A court had ordered the amputation of Ibrahim Abdulrahman Hazbar's right hand after convicting him of a "series of thefts", the interior ministry said.

The punishment was carried out in the western city of Mecca, home to the holiest sites in Islam.

Rape, murder, apostasy, drug trafficking and armed robbery are all punishable by death in the ultra-conservative kingdom.

According to an AFP tally, 80 convicts have been executed in the country this year, despite international concerns over the number and judicial process.

British petition calls for Guantanamo detainee's release

AFP, London

British celebrities and MPs yesterday joined in a plea for the release from Guantanamo of a Saudi detainee with residency status in Britain who has been held for almost 13 years without charge.

The open letter in the Daily Mail newspaper, which comes after the release of a US Senate report into the torture of Al-Qaeda detainees, said that Shaker Aamer's continued detention was "shocking".

The 46-year-old's wife and four children live in London.

Pink Floyd co-founder Roger Waters, singer Sophie Ellis-Bextor and comedian Frankie Boyle were among the signatories, joined by some MPs from the ruling Conservative and opposition Labour parties.

"As we approach 2015, the 800th anniversary of Magna Carta, which introduced habeas corpus to the world, we call on (Prime Minister) David Cameron to urgently address the case," they wrote.

"Habeas corpus" is a form of legal redress against unlawful imprison-

ment and was a key point in the Magna Carta charter drawn up by King John of England in 1215 and often seen as the world's first constitution.

"The British government has a non-negotiable responsibility to secure the return of Mr Aamer, given his status as a legal British resident," the letter said.

The letter said that Aamer had twice been cleared for release by US authorities in 2007 and 2009 but that this had never gone ahead and that there may be plans to deport him to his native Saudi Arabia.

"From there Mr Aamer would be unable to talk about the torture and abuse he has witnessed and personally experienced during his long imprisonment," it said.

Aamer is alleged to have been a key Britain-based recruiter and financier for the Al-Qaeda militant network and allegedly worked for Osama Bin Laden in Afghanistan, according to US military documents.

He was captured in Tora Bora in northern Afghanistan in December 2001, transferred to Guantanamo in February 2002 and has been held there ever since.

Victory day today

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People across the country and the Bangladesh missions abroad will celebrate the Victory Day by paying homage to the martyrs for their supreme sacrifice for the long-cherished independence of the homeland.

On this day back in 1971, East Pakistan under the leadership of Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman won its emancipation and emerged as an independent state, Bangladesh.

General AAK Niazi, who commanded the Pakistan army, surrendered with 93,000 soldiers to the allied forces of freedom fighters and Indian army at Suhrawardy Udyan in Dhaka following a miserable defeat in the war that broke out in March.

Three million people sacrificed their lives for freedom while two lakh women fell victim to physical torture, including rape by the occupation forces and their local collaborators like Razakars, Al-Badar and Al-Shams.

The government and various political, social and cultural organisations have drawn up elaborate programmes, including discussion, rally, procession,

drama and Jatra (folk theatre), photo exhibition, painting competition and cultural function to mark the day.

President Abdul Hamid, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia in separate messages have greeted the nation on the auspicious occasion.

Today is a public holiday. The national flag will be hoisted atop all government, semi-government and other important establishments.

The day will be heralded by a 31-gun salute at dawn at the National Parade Ground.

The president and the prime minister will lay wreaths at the National Memorial in Savar at dawn, followed by other political, social and cultural organisations and individuals.

Special prayers will be offered at mosques, temples, churches and other religious institutions, seeking divine blessings for peace and progress of the country.

State-run Bangladesh Television and Bangladesh Betar along with private TV channels and radio stations will broadcast special programmes while the newspapers will bring out special supplements on the occasion.

No capacity to tackle

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the Khulna divisional commissioner to accelerate the process of the manual clean-up with the help of locals, which she described as very effective.

"There is no alternative to this," Abdullah Al Islam Jacob, deputy minister for forest and environment, told The Daily Star.

The remarks come at a time when plants in a vast part of the Sundarbans are already smeared with oil, and the aquatic resources are at grave risks.

Of the 3.58 lakh litres with which the vessel capsized, some 2.25 lakh litres oil spread initially over 50 to 60km stretch of the Shela and Pashur rivers.

"The danger is that the oil has spread over the rivers, canals and creeks across the Sundarbans," said noted environment expert A Atiq Rahman.

The oil in the creeks would have adverse impacts. As the breathing roots of the trees are covered by the oil, they will just die, he added.

Also, aquatic resources like dolphins, which have a sanctuary in the Sundarbans, and crabs are among the most vulnerable species and they will be affected the most, said Atiq, executive director of Bangladesh Centre for Advanced Studies.

According to him, the oil spread could have been controlled even by locally made containment booms and by using hyacinths.

Certain amount of the oil has been washed away in the sea with the tides, but the amount is paltry because the tide in winter is weak.

"The nature will now take its own course [to clean itself]," he added.

Jacob said the forest department yesterday deployed another 80 boats for the clean-up. On Saturday, the department had deployed 120 boats and 200 workers to collect the oil from the rivers using fishing nets, sponges and other manual means.

Until yesterday, some 50,000 litres of the oil has been collected, said officials at the Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority (BIWTA).

Jacob said they deployed three trawlers yesterday to wash the plants and collect the oil from the water.

"If we get good results, we will increase such trawlers. For now, there is no other option," he told The Daily Star.

The government will undertake its

next course of actions after a technical committee submits a detailed report by December 18.

Golam Sarwar, an official of Prantik Group, said he verbally proposed using containment booms to the BIWTA officials in Mongla on Thursday and placed a written proposal to the shipping ministry on Saturday.

According to the US Environment Protection Agency, containment booms are used to control the spread of oil to reduce the possibility of polluting shorelines and other resources.

It is also meant to concentrate oil in thicker surface layers, making recovery easier. In addition, booms may be used to divert and channel oil slicks along desired paths, making them easier to remove from the surface of the water.

BIWTA Chairman Shamsuddoha Khondokar, however, said containment booms might not be effective in this case because of the tides in the rivers.

The China Harbour, which is dredging Mongla-Ghasiakhali channel, had tried with its 3km-long pipe to restrict the oil, but failed, he added.

Atiq Rahman suggested management of the crisis by adapting a short, medium and a long-term action plan on the basis of detailed analysis of what happens to the ecosystems of the rivers and the forests due to the slick.

He also strongly recommended a permanent ban on plying of commercial vessels through the Shela river. 'OXYGEN LEVEL NORMAL'

The environment and forest ministry has claimed the level of dissolved oxygen in the Shela is normal.

"The level of dissolved oxygen was 6.9ml per litre on average in the Shela river today [yesterday] while the minimum requirement of oxygen for plants is 5ml per litre," said Anwar Hossain Mallick, director Khulna, Department of Environment.

They examined the water at 12 points, including Mrigamari and Jaymuni.

According to Mallick, the level of dissolved oxygen never dropped after the slick.

In a press release, the environment and forest ministry yesterday claimed the average level of dissolved oxygen was 6.5ml per litre at Banishanta, 6.5 at Dalmaria, 6.4 at Karamjal, 6.3 at Chandpai and 7 at Jaymunirgol.

Merkel warns Germans not to fall prey to anti-immigrant group

AFP, Berlin

German Chancellor Angela Merkel yesterday condemned a wave of protests against immigrants, asylum seekers and the "Islamisation" of the country and warned Germans not to be "exploited" by extremists.

Ahead of fresh marches planned later yesterday by the far-right populist "Patriotic Europeans against the Islamisation of the Occident" (PEGIDA) group, Merkel said a right to demonstrate did not extend to "rabble-rousing and defamation" against foreigners.

She told reporters that those taking part in the protests "should take care not to be exploited" by radical elements trying to harness fears of rising numbers of foreigners in Germany to drive an extremist movement.

PEGIDA started with a few hundred people in October in Dresden, in the former communist east, and swelled to a crowd of 10,000 last Monday. It has also spawned half a dozen smaller clone groups in other cities.

A poll for news website Zeit Online showed that nearly one in two Germans -- 49 percent -- sympathised with PEGIDA's stated concerns and 30 percent indicated they "fully" backed the protests' aims.

Almost three in four -- 73 percent - said they worried that "radical Islam" was gaining ground and 59 percent said Germany accepted too many asylum seekers.

Stolen baby

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selling the infant.

The detainees are members of a gang that steals babies from different hospitals and sells them from that house, said Rab, adding that the house belonged to Monowara, the ring leader of the gang.

One of the detainees, however, claimed that a woman gave birth to the baby at Monowara's house two weeks ago.

On information that a gang was attempting to sell a two-week-old baby, the elite force raided the house and found the baby, said Lt Col Khandaker Golam Sarwar, commanding officer of Rab-3.

The baby may have been stolen from a hospital soon after her birth. The identity of the baby was known after Monowara's arrest, said the CO at a press briefing at Dhaka the Medical College Hospital premises.

The detainees are Farida Khanam and Jahanara, special attendants (aya) at the DMCH, Ferdousi Begum, another wife of Monowara's husband, and Rozina alias Rozi.

Monowara had gone into hiding soon after the incident.

The gang was going to sell the baby in exchange of around Tk 70,000, said another Rab official, seeking anonymity.

Rab officials handed over the baby to the DMCH authorities for her treatment.

Ferdousi told The Daily Star after the briefing that Monowara had been involved in collecting and selling babies for a long time.

"There was a special room in Monowara's house where mothers interested to sell their babies used to give birth. Some special ayas at different city hospitals used to collect the babies," she said, adding that Rozina worked as a birth attendant there for Tk 4,000 per month.

Ban vessel

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permanent ban at the moment."

The issue has become a matter of grave concern after an oil tanker carrying 3.58 lakh litres of furnace oil sank in the river on December 9.

A temporary ban on vessels plying the river is on and the ban will be in place till a further notice, but environmentalists have been demanding a permanent ban.

In yesterday's press release, TIB Executive Director Iftekharuzzaman said the recent capsizing of the oil tanker showed how risky the water routes inside the Sundarbans could turn sometimes.

Plying motorised vehicles inside the forest violates the national and international rules and standards, he claimed, adding the people involved in permitting vessel operation inside the Sundarbans had to take the responsibility for its devastation.

Without government initiatives, the forest would not only lose its honour of being a world heritage site but also would face the threat of extinction soon, Iftekharuzzaman said.

"Otherwise, the government must take the responsibility for the pollution of the Sundarbans," he added.

Besides, the lack of manpower and modern equipment during such a "national disaster" reveals the government's terrible foresight, Iftekharuzzaman alleged.

Deadly end to Sydney siege

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Bomb squad members moved in to search for explosives, but none were found.

The operation began shortly after a police source named the gunman as Man Haron Monis, an Iranian refugee and self-styled sheikh facing multiple charges of sexual assault as well as being an accessory to murder.

He was also found guilty in 2012 of sending offensive and threatening letters to families of eight Australian soldiers killed in Afghanistan, as a protest against Australia's involvement in the conflict, according to local media reports.

A US security official said the US government was being advised by Australia that there was no sign at this stage that the gunman was connected to known terrorist organisations.

Although the hostage taker was known to the authorities, security experts said preventing attacks by people acting alone could be difficult.

"Today's crisis throws into sharp relief the dangers of lone wolf terrorism," said Cornell University law professor Jens David Ohlin, speaking in New York.

'ISLAMIC FLAG'

During the siege, hostages had been forced to display an Islamic flag, igniting fears of a jihadist attack.

Australia, a staunch ally of the United States and its escalating action against Islamic State in Syria and Iraq, has been on high alert for attacks by home-grown militants returning from fighting in the Middle East.

News footage showed hostages holding up a black and white flag displaying the Shahada, a testament to the faith of Muslims. The flag has been popular among Sunni Islamist militant groups such as Islamic State and al-Qaeda.

At least five hostages were released

or escaped yesterday, with terrified cafe workers and customers running into the arms of paramilitary police.

The incident forced the evacuation of nearby buildings and sent shockwaves around a country where many people were turning their attention to the Christmas holiday following earlier security scares.

The siege cafe is in Martin Place, a pedestrian strip popular with workers on a lunch break, which was revealed as a potential location for the thwarted beheading.

In the biggest security operation in Sydney since a bombing at the Hilton Hotel killed two people in 1978, major banks closed their offices in the central business district and people were told to avoid the area.

Muslim leaders urged calm. The Australian National Imams Council condemned "this criminal act unequivocally" in a joint statement with the Grand Mufti of Australia.

'ISOLATED FIGURE'

Iranian cleric Man Haron Monis is the man police believe was behind the siege at the Lindt Chocolate Cafe in Sydney's Martin Place, reports ABC, Australia's public broadcaster.

Monis, who was granted political asylum in Australia, was on bail for a string of violent offences, including being an accessory to the murder of his ex-wife.

He was also facing more than 40 sexual and indecent assault charges and had a conviction for sending offensive letters to families of deceased Australian soldiers.

His former lawyer, Manny Conditsis, described Monis as an isolated figure who he believed was probably acting alone.

"His ideology is just so strong and so powerful that it clouds his vision for common sense and objectiveness," he said.

Shajahan vs Sundarbans

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years — serving a significant natural purpose of forming the delta named Bangladesh.

But to ministers like Shajahan Khan, the hue and cry raised by environmentalists and others was just a farce. Shipping Minister Shajahan Khan while visiting the troubled Shela river on Saturday told the press that the oil slick would not harm the Sundarbans. He added that he had spoken to "foreign experts" who believed that there was nothing much to worry about.

The minister's assurance came alongside the government's move to salvage the situation by urging local villagers to collect the floating furnace oil from the water and sell it back to the government. The forest department itself has deployed around a hundred boats to collect the oil and till Sunday—in five days since the disaster—the authorities recovered around 18,000 litres of oil—which is insignificant.

Besides, the BIWTA had thought of using Propylene Glycol Ether—a chemical—to make the oil very dense, so that it can be easily netted. But experts and the environment department dismissed the idea as it would have further harmful effect.

According to the forest department assessment on Saturday, the oil slick has spread across an area of 350 square kilometres—affecting the forest and wildlife there. People have cited dead bodies of different animals including a dolphin. Alas, the government has declared the Sundarbans a dolphin sanctuary from 2011. It has around 6,000 Irrawaddy dolphins.

The deaths of wild animals or some trees in the Sundarbans seem insignificant to the shipping minister whose responsibilities include determining the inland water transport routes through the Sundarbans, which borders on Mongla—the second sea port of the country. For the last several years, Shajahan Khan's offices allowed plying of commercial vessels through the Shela and other rivers of the Sundarbans—because the actual route of Mongla-Ghasiakhali channel had lost navigability.

The Ghasiakhali channel was developed in 1974 as a shortcut to Mongla, bypassing the core forest. The route stretches through the Mongla river to Sannyasi to Morelganj to the Baleshwar river. It means: commer-

cially using this route has lesser risk of damaging the Sundarbans. When it became completely unusable, the government had allocated Tk 76 crore to restore the route—but the BIWTA sat on it.

After the disaster, the BIWTA has suspended movement of vessels through the Shela river and has said that it would complete the dredging of the old route within a few months. It took a disaster for the BIWTA to 'consider' the dredging while Minister Shajahan Khan could not care less about the performance of the BIWTA. Instead, on Sunday he announced that it would not be possible to stop commercial vessels from plying through the Sundarbans.

The outskirts of the Sundarbans have already become a target of land grabbers as well as industrialists. In addition to building a very large coal power plant, the government has plans to build an exclusive economic zone, while many private companies have erected signboards declaring upcoming industrial units to be set up there. Once the Rampal plant comes into operation, one can easily predict that the outskirts of the world heritage forest would become an industrial belt. This will bring in jobs and prosperity for the impoverished, disaster-prone region—and perhaps turn people back from the forest for their livelihood. But at the same time, it would increase the risk of a man-made disaster in the Sundarbans a hundred times more.

According to Dr Ainun Nishat, the country's leading hydrological expert, the government did not demonstrate any sense of urgency from the first day till yesterday to address the situation. He said the government could still declare the situation as an emergency and deploy the Navy to clean up the mess as soon as possible.

While nobody can predict when an accident would take place—one can stay prepared for such an incident. Through this oil slick, the whole nation saw the bankruptcy of the government in handling such a disaster. The minister's assurance of "no big damage" is just some hollow words and nobody is convinced by his blank assurance. Instead, the nation would feel better if he had the courage to take the responsibility of overseeing the health of the river routes inside the Sundarbans (and elsewhere) or bringing the BIWTC to the task.

Five Palestinians arrested in Israel for planned attacks

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel's internal security service said yesterday it has arrested five Palestinians for planning attacks including a suicide bombing in Tel Aviv.

The suspects from the West Bank were arrested in October and November and included a woman who planned to blow herself up in Israel's commercial capital, the Shin Bet said.

The announcement came after a series of deadly incidents in Jerusalem in November, where lone Palestinian attackers killed a number of Israelis.

It also came as Prime Minister

Benjamin Netanyahu seeks to resist a Palestinian ultimatum through the UN Security Council to end Israel's occupation, citing the spread of "Islamic terrorism" in the region.

The five Palestinians from the town of Atil, near Tulkarem in the northern West Bank, were also planning to blow up a military bus and kidnap an Israeli soldier, the Shin Bet said in a statement.

It added that there was a "high level of motivation among terrorist militants" after the Gaza war, which in July and August killed nearly 2,200 Palestinians, mostly civilians, and 73 on the Israeli side, most of them soldiers.