

Weavers not working on their handlooms as the sale of Tangail saris falls drastically in the district due to hartals and blockade.

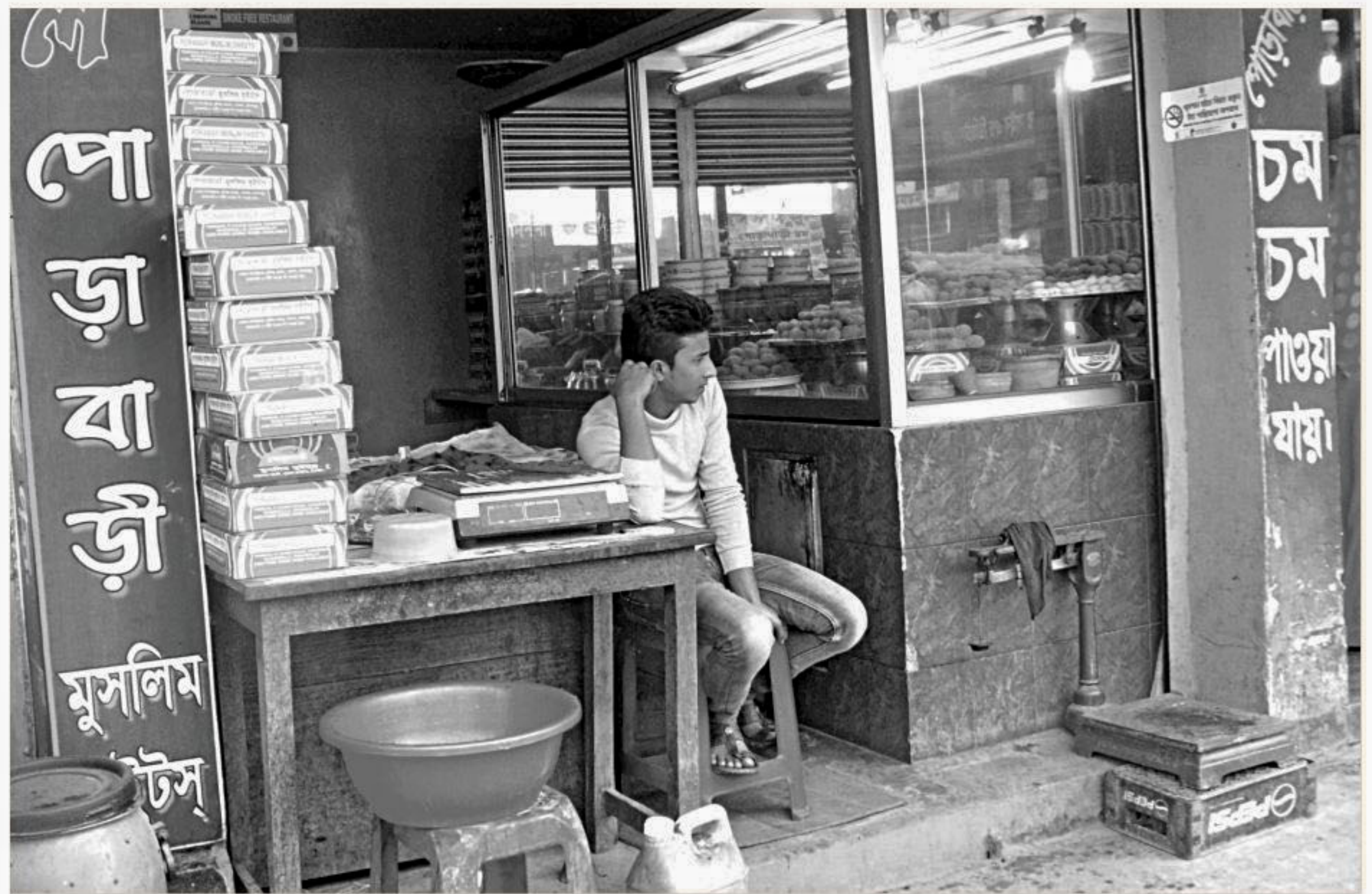


PHOTO: STAR

A shopkeeper, right, at a sweetmeat shop in Tangail sits idle as the political turmoil hits the sweetmeat industry hard.

Hartal, blockade

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their earnings have dropped drastically, he added.

The ongoing blockade and hartal have also put several thousand transport owners and workers in the district in severe hardship. The sector has been incurring a loss of around Tk 1.5 crore a day, claimed Tabibur Rahman Tabib, general secretary of district Transport Owners' Association.

Farmers in the district are badly affected due to the blockade as they cannot ship their produce to the capital or elsewhere in the country due to a rise in transportation cost. They are compelled to sell those at prices lower than their production cost, said Amir Ali, general secretary of Channel 1 agriculture award.

Around 300 rice mills in the district have been closed as millers are counting huge losses due to a sharp rise in shipment cost and drop in sales, said Amir Ali, general secretary of Tangail Rice Mill Owners' Association. Hundreds of workers have also become jobless as a result, he added.

"Earlier, it was possible to bring a truckload of rice from any northern district at a cost of Tk 12,000 to Tk 15,000, but transporters are now charging Tk 25,000 to Tk 30,000 in the wake of arson attacks on vehicles," he said.

Shop owners in the district are also badly affected. "I used to sell 30 motorcycles a month, but now it is not more than 10," said Habibur Rahman, owner of a motorcycle shop in the town.

Bleak future

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government officer.

Though frustration has overcome him as he is the sole breadwinner of the family, Bakar has not given up.

"I try to give him hopes saying my injuries are not very grievous, so he can continue his study properly," he said.

Since the blockade began, at least 83 people have died in violence across the country, while hundreds are writhing in pain in hospital.

People from different professions, socio-cultural groups and individuals joined the hunger strike to show their solidarity.

"We will soon create a united platform of different professional, cultural groups and other bodies to wage a huge movement against the current sabotage and terrorist activities," said Golam Kuddus, president of Sammilito Sangskritik Jote, addressing the programme which started at 11:00am and ended at 4:00pm.

"Politics is for the people. But burning people—what kind of politics is this?"

Kuddus said they wanted dialogue but it must be on how to stop sabotage, terrorism, and extortion, how to hold free, fair and acceptable elections, and how to make the country's economy stronger.

Speaking on the occasion, Vice Chancellor of Dhaka University Prof AAMS Arefin Siddique said the people who opposed the Liberation War in 1971 were carrying out the sabotage now.

They want to destroy the country, he added.

Water sharing

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the silt runs through the rivers each year accelerating river erosion.

About the protection of riverbanks, he said the government would take up some mega projects involving Tk 1.7 billion to protect the banks of the Jamuna River.

Referring to the proposed Ganges Barrage Project, Anisul Islam said about US\$4 billion is needed to implement the project, but the project cost will be recovered within seven years once the barrage is built.

Buet Vice Chancellor Prof Khaleda Ekram, among others, also spoke at the inaugural session.

After Gaza war losses, Islamic Jihad bounces back

AFP, Gaza City

In a tunnel dug deep underneath the besieged Gaza Strip, masked gunmen from Islamic Jihad ferry rockets and mortars back and forth, preparing for the next conflict with Israel.

Six months ago, the Palestinian militant group emerged battered and bruised from a 50-day conflict with Israel, where it fought alongside fellow Islamist movement Hamas, which controls Gaza.

Islamic Jihad's armed wing the Al-Quds Brigades lost 123 men, but fired 3,249 rockets at the Jewish state, it says, including Iranian-made Fajr 5 missiles which reached Tel Aviv and even northern Israel.

The conflict, where Israel tried to flush out Hamas and Islamic Jihad militants by bombarding the coastal enclave, killed nearly 2,200 Palestinians, mostly civilians, and 73 people on the Israeli side, mostly soldiers.

But the group says it is resurgent.

"We're at our highest level of alert to counter any attack. We're used to the occupation (Israel) breaking its ceasefires," senior commander Abu al-Bara told AFP from one of the group's tunnels.

"What doesn't kill us makes us stronger. We're gathering all our strength since it's a war that never ends. We're ready to go to another level against the Zionist occupation and carry out actions we've never done before," he said, without elaborating.

The war ended on August 26 with a fragile Hamas-Israel ceasefire brokered by Egypt.

In the meantime, Islamic Jihad has sought to replace its fallen comrades, and its manpower is estimated at between 10,000 and 15,000 fighters.

Hamas and Islamic Jihad refuse to specify the number of fighters, or rockets, they currently possess, but both were severely depleted by the Israeli assault, which included fierce ground combat.

27kg gold seized

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beyond the diplomat's official functions," said a senior official at the ministry.

Joint Commissioner of Customs Kazi Md Ziauddin said that top customs and security officials were on alert as they had information about a foreign diplomat smuggling gold.

After the plane landed, the diplomat was tracked down.

"We started following him as soon as he came out from the aircraft. We stopped him as he tried to go out of the airport through the green channel," he said.

According to another customs official, the diplomat when requested to allow scanning of his handbag he shouted: "I am a diplomat and you can not touch my bag."

The official said, "We requested him to allow scanning the luggage because we had specific information."

But the diplomat claimed there was no illegal item in his bag and he was carrying an electric device for the use of the embassy.

The customs and police officials brought the matter into the notice of the foreign ministry, which suggested carrying out the search if anything was suspicious.

The bag was opened in front of four

North Korean embassy officials who came to receive Young Nam, customs authorities said.

Joint Commissioner Ziauddin told reporters, "Of the recovered gold, 19 kg was in the form of bars and the rest in jewelries."

Contacted, Md Nojibur Rahman, chairman of National Board of Review, said this was a sort of crime which posed a serious threat to the national security and economy.

"We want the trial [for the smuggling] to take place under our local laws," he said.

Talking to The Daily Star, senior foreign ministry officials said smuggling of gold cannot be misinterpreted as a diplomatic privilege because it clearly is an abuse of a diplomat's inviolability and immunity.

Pyongyang will be informed soon and then further step will be taken.

Asked what could be the next step of the government, they said the host nation at any time and for any reason can declare a diplomatic staff persona non grata.

After the declaration, the state concerned must recall the person within a reasonable period of time. Otherwise, s/he might lose their diplomatic immunity.

Remembered forever

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Teachers have been given firearms training and are now able to carry weapons in class.

The Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa provincial government announced they would rename the schools late on Thursday.

Mushtaq Ghani told the BBC it was meant as a memorial to the victims, but also as a message to the militants that they cannot stop education.

"These children, teachers and other staff died because they wanted education, which the terrorists don't want them to have," he said.

At the same time, the central government said it would confer the highest civil award for bravery on all of the victims.

The government has paid 2m rupees (\$20,000; £13,000) to each bereaved family.

Salman Ahmed, whose son Aamish Salman was killed in the attack, told the BBC he did not know if his son had been included on the list.

"We heard that the government

planned to name schools after the martyred children, but no-one contacted us," he said.

"This is not going to bring back our children, but there's no harm either."

Ghani said the government intended to contact all of the victims' relatives and name a school in their honour.

Khalid Khan says a school in his village in Peshawar's southern suburbs has been named after his son.

"I went to this school as a child, Daud's cousins go to this school, so I feel proud that it now bears Daud's name," he told the BBC.

Tufail Khattak, whose son Sher Shah was killed in the attack, told the Express Tribune the move meant that "the martyred children will be remembered forever".

The BBC's M Ilyas Khan in Islamabad says the move is meant partly to pacify some parents who are still angry that they have not been told what security lapses led to the massacre, and whether any officials have been held responsible.

Series of blasts

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Munir Ahmed Siddiqui Bachchu, general secretary of Jessore town unit BNP, and BNP leader Salah Uddin Ahmed, councillor of Jessore municipality.

Shikder Akkas Ali, officer-in-charge of Kotwali Police Station, said nobody filed any complaints with the police station in this connection.

He, however, said they heard the sound of some crackers, which were exploded on the occasion of the Holi festival.

At a press conference in Jessore Press Club, Anwarul Kabir Nantu, acting editor of Jessore-based Bangla daily Loksamaj, expressed deep concern over the bomb attack on the house of Nargis, editor of the daily.

At least 30 crude bombs were hurled at the houses of several BNP leaders, he added.

On January 29, crude bombs were also thrown at the houses of Tariqul and Sabu.

Indian mob

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Nagaland's indigenous tribal groups have for years accused the growing population of Bengali-speaking Muslims from nearby Bangladesh of illegally settling on their land and eating into their resources.

Jamir said the situation was "very tense", but they were trying to "restore order", with hundreds of riot police personnel patrolling the streets.

An inquiry has also been opened into the prisoner's killing, Zeliang told AFP by telephone.

"The curfew will continue until the situation improves. We will do whatever possible to stop any escalation," he said.

The violence comes as India is in the midst of a raging controversy over a government order to ban the broadcast of a documentary about the December 2012 gang-rape of a young student.

The incident, which sparked outrage both within India and around the world, highlighted the frightening level of violence against women in the world's second most populous country.

Mars had more

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inhospitable desert planet that has been unable to support life, as it is now.

The lack of water on the planet has long been seen as a reason that Mars is uninhabited, but the planet may have been much more welcoming when it was young.

As recently as ten years ago, scientists thought that while Mars had some water it mostly came forth sporadically, and did not cover much of the planet.

But scientists have discovered that much more water than expected has been lost from Mars, changing the idea of what it would have been like.

"With Mars losing that much water, the planet was very likely wet for a longer period of time than was previously thought, suggesting it might have been habitable for longer," said Michael Mumma, a senior scientist at Goddard and an author of a paper on the findings, published in Science.

The researchers were able to estimate the amount of water lost using observations made by the Very Large Telescope at the European Southern Observatory.

That told scientists how much water — as well as a variation on water — was on Mars, which they could then compare with the amount of water in a Mars meteorite from 4.5 billion years ago.

They also mapped the amount of water over time, allowing them to work out how it changes over years and seasons.

EU must 'engage' with average Russians: Mogherini

AFP, Riga

The European Union must engage with average Russians, especially youth, to improve relations that are at their worst since the Cold War, the bloc's foreign policy chief said yesterday.

"We have to engage with the people of Russia starting from the young people...to encourage them to see the European Union with their own eyes and build contacts across Europe," Federica Mogherini said in the Latvian capital Riga.

"We cannot lose generations of young Russians," she said, speaking to parliamentarians from across the EU who are there to discuss common foreign, security and defence policy.

Tensions between the West and Russia spiralled to their worst since the end of the Cold War after Moscow annexed Ukraine's Crimean peninsula last year.

"The European Union has never and will never seek confrontation with Russia," Mogherini said, adding that it

was "not in the European Union DNA to seek confrontation".

Last year, the EU and US imposed sanctions primarily targeting senior officials in President Vladimir Putin's administration amid fighting between pro-Russian separatists and Ukrainian government forces in the eastern regions of Ukraine bordering Russia.

Mogherini was upbeat about the sputtering so-called Minsk II ceasefire between the warring sides that the EU and Russia brokered last month.

"So far the ceasefire has been starting -- not perfect -- with some violations still, and I discussed that with Ukrainian President (Petro) Poroshenko last night," Mogherini said.

"But for sure the trend is a positive one, even if not perfect at all and we know that very well," she said, adding that another wave of sanctions against Moscow was always an option should the ceasefire fail.

Whole day peaceful

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Around 15 lakh students are taking the examination under 10 education boards. They have been the worst victims of the ongoing political impasse as not a single exam was held as per schedule.

On top of the indefinite blockade, the BNP-led alliance has been enforcing hartals since February 1, excluding Fridays and Saturdays, compelling the education ministry to reschedule the SSC exams.

The students are scheduled to appear in the exams today as well.

The preliminary test of the 35th Bangladesh Civil Service (BCS) examinations under the Public Service Commission was also held yesterday.

Around 2.44 lakh candidates took the test held under new rules formu-

lated by the public administration ministry. The candidates took 200-mark multiple choice questions (MCQs) in two hours.

Earlier, the test used to be held in one hour with 100-mark questions.

ARSON ATTACKS AT NIGHT

A trucker suffered burns after suspected blockaders torched his cement-laden vehicle at Kotwali in Barisal city around 11:30pm.

The injured, whose identity could not be confirmed, was taken to Sher-e-Bangla Medical College Hospital in Barisal immediately, police said.

Meanwhile, alleged blockaders set fire to two buses parked at a workshop in Palsha area of Bogra Sadar around 9:45pm, said Mahbubuzzaman, station officer of Bogra fire service.

FBI team visits

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They have come to assist us, and are helping in the investigation."

Earlier, the FBI team had a meeting with top DB officials at the DB office on Mintoo Road.

Avijit's father Prof Ajay Roy, while talking to The Daily Star over the phone, expressed hope of fair investigation into the murder with the FBI assistance. But he also feared whether the FBI team would be given proper cooperation.

Avijit Roy was killed and his wife Rafida Ahmed Bonya seriously injured when unidentified criminals stabbed them near the TSC on Dhaka University campus on February 26.

Bonya went back to the US for better treatment.

Following the murder of Bangladesh-born US citizen Avijit, the United States, which strongly condemned the brutal killing of the writer, offered assistance in the investigation, and Bangladesh accepted the offer.

Law enforcement agencies had so far arrested Shafiur Rahman Farabi, who had repeatedly issued death threats to Avijit.

Farabi, who is now on a 10-day remand, confessed to threatening Avijit but denied his involvement in the murder.

The FBI team is yet to interrogate Farabi, detectives said.

Avijit murdered

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secular thinkers like Avijit on the other.

These incidents are on the rise because, they think, justice was not served and the masterminds not punished in earlier cases like that in the attack on Prof Humayun Azad, blasts at Ramna Batamul and at the rallies of the Communist Party of Bangladesh and Udichi.

Prof Dr Ajay Roy, father of slain writer Avijit Roy, was supposed to join the programme but he could not make it due to illness, it was said.

Freedom fighter Ziauddin Tareque Ali, trustee of the Liberation War Museum, recalled how Avijit helped to build houses for 40 families who had lost everything in attacks by BNP-Jamaat following the 2001 election.

Economist Prof MM Akash said it was unprecedented in Bangladesh that general people like farmers, drivers,

and students would be killed in the name of political movement.

Nazmul Haq Pradhan MP, Secretary General of Sammilito Samajik Andolon Dr Nur Mohammed Talukder, political and human right activists Jayanti Roy and Raju Rahman were among those who spoke.

The Andolon President Ajoy Roy chaired it, while its General Secretary Saleh Ahmed moderated it.

At the end of the human chain, the participants brought out a silent procession and visited the scene where Avijit was hacked to death on February 26 and paid floral tributes to the slain blogger.

They were carrying different placards, some of which read, "Avijits Don't Die" and "Stop Putting the Burden of Son's Coffin on the Shoulders of Father".