

India arrests hundreds over blatant cheating in Bihar school

BBC ONLINE

About 300 people have been arrested in the Indian state of Bihar, authorities say, after reports emerged of flagrant cheating in school exams.

Parents and friends of students were photographed climbing school walls to pass on answers.

Many of those arrested were parents. At least 750 students have been expelled.

An estimated 1.4m students are taking their school leaving exams in Bihar alone - tests seen as crucial for their chances of a successful career.

The authorities have clearly been embarrassed by the cheating, the BBC's Jill Mcivering says, with the episode prompting ridicule on social media.

Students were seen copying answers from smuggled-in note sheets, and police posted outside test centres were

even seen being bribed to look the other way.

On top of the arrests, in four centres further exams have been cancelled.

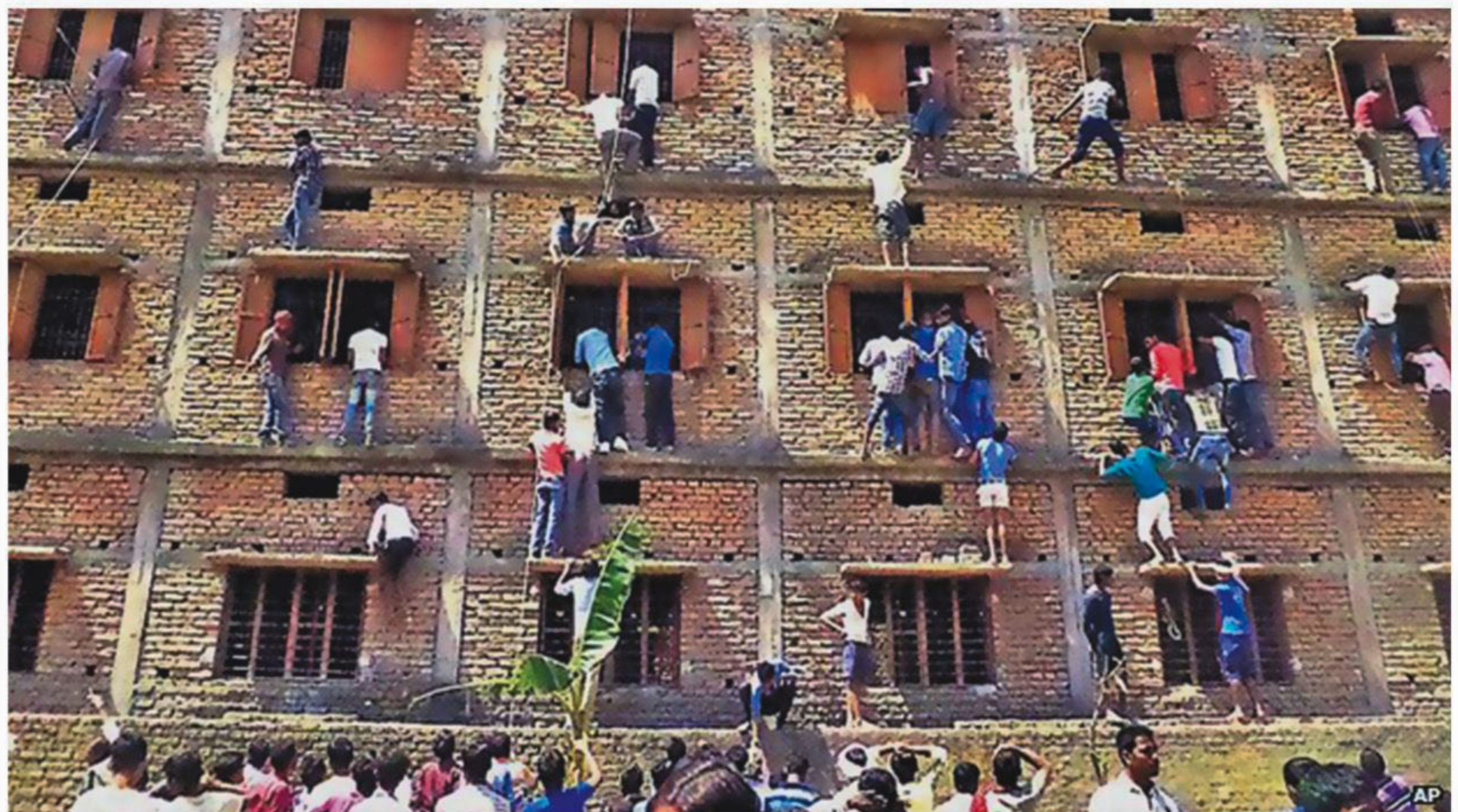
Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar condemned the cheating but said the images were not the "whole story" of his state.

He warned parents that helping their children cheat would only harm them in the long run.

State Education Minister PK Shahi said it would be difficult to conduct fair exams without help from parents, given the potential number of people involved.

"Three to four people helping a single student would mean that there is a total of six to seven million people helping students cheat," he said.

"Is it the responsibility of the government alone to manage such a huge number of people and to conduct a 100% free and fair examination?"



Parents and friends of students are photographed climbing a school to pass on answers examinees at a school in Bihar.

PHOTO: AP

Five arrested for counterfeiting currency in city

Tk 35 lakh fake notes seized

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Detectives have arrested five alleged members of a fake currency-making gang, including its chief, and seized fake notes worth Tk 35 lakh in the capital's Ramna.

The arrestees are Monir Khan, 24, the "ringleader", Yakub Fakir, 20, Rubel Gazi, 25, Shahabuddin, 32, and Nazmul Islam, 18.

A team of Detective Branch (DB) of police nabbed the five raiding the fourth floor of a building at Boro Moghbazar around 8:30pm on Friday, Sheikh Nazmul Alam, deputy commissioner (west) of Dhaka Metropolitan Police, told a press briefing at the DMP media centre yesterday.

The DB team also seized paper, four laptops, a desktop computer and three printers used for counterfeiting currencies along with partially printed notes worth Tk 50 lakh.

During preliminary interrogation, the alleged chief of the gang, Monir, confessed to have been involved in the illegal business for six to seven years, claimed Nazmul.

The arrestees, along with their other associates, were running the illegal trade after being divided into several groups. They would become more active during Eid and Puja celebrations as the demand for money increases then.

Detectives were trying to detain other members of the gang, added the DC.

45 killed in attacks as Syria Kurds marks new year

AFP, Beirut

The death toll from attacks on Kurdish new year celebrations in Syria has risen to 45, including five children, a monitor said yesterday, accusing the Islamic State group of responsibility.

"There are now 45 dead from last night's attacks in Hasakeh, as most of those who were in critical condition passed away," the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said, after reporting 33 killed Friday night.

Two explosions struck as members of Syria's Kurdish minority celebrated on the eve of Nowruz, the Kurdish new year, in the northeastern city of Hasakeh.

There was no immediate claim of responsibility on Friday, but Rami Abdel Rahman of the Britain-based Observatory told AFP the extremist IS group was behind the attacks.

According to him, the explosions were a few hundred metres (yards) apart from each other, with at least one of them caused by a suicide bomber inside a vehicle.

The Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) control Hasakeh city, but IS militants have launched attacks on towns nearby.

The jihadist offensive has sparked fierce clashes with Kurdish militia in the province, which is strategically located along Syria's borders with Iraq and Turkey.

UN chief Ban Ki-moon condemned the "heinous" attacks, while the commander of the Kurdish security forces, Joan Ibrahim, said "the crime that occurred today in Hasakeh will not pass without retribution."

Call for saving groundwater

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the World Water Day.

He warned against the dangers of increasing dependence on groundwater, and unplanned use of water resources of the country, crisscrossed by about 700 rivers and tributaries.

Pollution of surface water in cities and industrial zones is the main cause of dependence on groundwater. Even fields located near rivers are often irrigated using groundwater rather than river water, Anwar said.

"It is easier to set up a tube well rather than installing pipes [from rivers to the fields]. The pipes have to be removed during rainy seasons when the fields get inundated by flood water."

The over extraction of groundwater would lower its level and increase salinity in coastal areas, he said. When the groundwater level goes below the sea level, saline water flows inwards during tidal surge in rivers.

"In Dhaka the groundwater level is going down by 1 to 3 metre every year," Anwar said.

"In the 70s, a depth of 350-450 feet was enough for Wasa [Water Supply and Sewage Authority] to install tube wells. But the required depth is now 500-1,000 feet now," he said, adding the installation cost too has gone up.

Besides, the properties of the aquifer, the soil that holds the water, are being damaged. The soil might become compact and its capacity to hold water in future might be lost, he warned.

Many recent studies also show that fluctuation in groundwater level during dry and wet seasons is a factor in arsenic contamination of water.

SOLUTION?

"Now we have an act based on which laws can be made to control the use of groundwater for irrigation. For example license or permission to install irrigation pump must be obtained from government and deviations should be made punish-

able," Anwar Zahid said.

He suggested implementing projects to preserve surface water, such as the Ganges barrage in Rajbari, and rain water harvesting system.

The Ganges barrage, which implemented, will retain water of the trans-boundary river, known as the Padma in Bangladesh, during the rainy season for use over the rest of the year.

Although the idea of the barrage was proposed in the early 60s, the project is yet to be completed.

Besides, farmers should be made aware of misuse of water.

"About 3,500 litres of water is needed to produce one kg of rice, but farmers often use twice as much," he said.

The press conference was organised by the Department of Public Health Engineering, Policy Support Unit, United Nations Information Centre, Unicef, World Bank, Oxfam, Bangladesh Wash Alliance and NGO Forum for Public Health at Jatiya Press Club.

BNP waits

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Nazrul Islam Khan, another BNP standing committee member, too said they indeed were "thinking positively" about the city elections.

"But there are some divides inside the party as some think our candidates may not be able to run the campaigns with so many of our people in jail or on the run... We will have to address these issues before making the final move," he told The Daily Star, adding that the final announcement may come soon.

"We want to proceed with caution... because we fear the government might postpone the elections once we announce to back candidates. Therefore, we want to announce our decision at a time when it would be hard for the government to backtrack on the elections," said a Dhaka city BNP leader.

Even if it decides to support candidates in the elections, the BNP-led 20-party alliance will continue its ongoing blockade and hartals demanding an inclusive parliamentary election under a non-party administration soon, a number of BNP leaders said.

Earlier, BNP senior leaders had said

the party was not interested in contesting the elections as the sudden move to hold the long overdue polls seemed only an attempt by the government to divert people's attention from the opposition movement.

However, it started thinking differently after the EC announced the election schedules on March 18. The shift in the BNP's stance was largely due to pressures from the party grassroots, said another BNP leader, preferring anonymity.

The party thinks its candidates have all the chances to win the mayoral races as people have turned their faces from the ruling party because of "the government's gross misrule and recurrent incidents of abductions and forced disappearances," he added.

The BNP is now at the final stage of choosing "heavyweight candidates" for the three city polls, party insiders said.

Though city corporation elections are non-partisan in nature, candidates often get blessings from different political parties in their races. The Awami League has already endorsed two mayoral aspirants for the two Dhaka city corporations.



A pipe, inset, dumps untreated industrial waste into a canal that leads to the Shitalakkhya river in Narayanganj. The jet-black water of the canal, top, at Siddhirganj of Narayanganj. Today is World Water Day. The photos were taken recently.

PHOTO: STAR

Precious yet we pollute

FROM PAGE 1

Technology said river water is turning unsafe for drinking because of rampant release of untreated human waste and industrial effluents that contain heavy metals like chromium, cadmium, lead and mercury, and toxic chemicals.

More than 300 rivers in Bangladesh are polluted the same way, said Mujibur, who has worked extensively on environmental issues.

Such pollution makes river waters unsuitable for agriculture, fishing, household chores, and bathing. It also ruins the riverine ecological system and biodiversity.

The four rivers around the capital have become virtual dumping grounds for all kinds of solid, liquid and chemical waste, as hundreds of tanneries and textile factories are situated by these

water bodies, he observed.

Prof Dr Mohammad Ali, who has carried out the first liver transplant in the country, said excessive accumulation of heavy metals through regular consumption of contaminated food and water might damage brain, liver, kidney and the nerves.

Contaminated water could cause deadly hepatitis-A and E and typhoid, and eventually lead to liver failure, particularly in children and pregnant women, said Prof Ali, also founder secretary general of National Liver Foundation of Bangladesh.

According to the findings of WaterAid Bangladesh, more than 7,000 children under five die from diarrhoea while waterborne diseases cause nearly a quarter of total deaths a year in the country.

Taqsem A Khan, managing director

of Dhaka Water Supply and Sewerage Authority (Wasa), said, "Unfortunately, the rivers around Dhaka are so polluted that their water is almost impossible to treat."

Dhaka Wasa, which serves around 12.5 million people in a 360-square-kilometre area, uses water of only the Shitalakkhya at a pre-treatment and treatment plants at Sayedabad to meet 22 percent of the total demand for 230 crore litres of water. The rest is extracted from underground.

The groundwater table in Dhaka city depletes by around three metres a year with roughly 1.5 metres of annual recharge, according to an official estimate.

Taqsem said replenishment of the groundwater table is obstructed due to unplanned concrete coverage of the

surface, and destruction of wetlands, open space and rivers.

Rainwater, which is supposed to recharge the water table, runs off the concrete surface and merge with polluted water of rivers.

Mega projects, including Jasaldia (Mawa) and Gandhabpur (Narayanganj) water treatment plants, have been taken up to bring water from the Padma and the Meghna, from a distance of 33 km and 23 km to supply surface water to the city dwellers, said the Wasa boss.

He said only 20 percent of the population whom the Wasa serves is under sewer coverage.

Those beyond the coverage don't have septic tanks and release human waste directly into the environment through open and storm drains as well as rivers, he added.

Bobby Hajjaj

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decision to back its Dhaka city (north) unit General Secretary Bahauddin Ahmed Babul in the race.

At a press conference, Hajjaj, son of business tycoon Moosa Bin Shamsar, made the announcement at his Banani office.

Elections to Dhaka and Chittagong city corporations will be held on April 28.

"JP Chairman HM Ershad is like a father to me, and I will try to get his advice and suggestions. I hope his blessing is with me and will always be," he told a journalist.

"I am declaring myself an independent candidate for the upcoming Dhaka North City Corporation polls as it is a non-partisan election," he added.

"I was born in Dhaka. So, I want to take care of the capital," said Hajjaj.

Meanwhile, in a statement yesterday, Nagorik Oikya said its convener Mahmudur Rahman Manna, who is now behind bars in a sedition case, would contest for the mayoral post in Dhaka north, and its leaders and activists would work wholeheartedly to secure his victory.

Crowds welcome Pope in mafia country

AFP, Naples

Tens of thousands of people yesterday greeted Pope Francis as he headed deep into mafia territory, visiting jailbirds and the poor in Naples amid heightened security.

The pontiff arrived in the poor, crime-ridden Scampia area of the city in a popemobile and was immediately plunged into a crowd of children and young people, two of whom managed to pose for a selfie with the pontiff.

"Corruption stinks, corrupt society stinks," he told residents, adding that "we all have the potential to be corrupt and to slip into criminality".

Up to 800,000 people were expected to turn out throughout the day in the southern Italian city to greet the Argentine pontiff, who last year declared war on organised crime by "excommunicating" all mafiosi from the Catholic Church.

Security was tight for the visit: apart from risks posed by gangsters with a grudge, the pope has been threatened by the Islamic State group and trips outside the Vatican are considered prime opportunities for assassination attempts.