

Protesters under attack

STAFF CORRESPONDENT
A human chain of Jatiyatabadi Samajik Sangskritik Sangstha (Jasas) formed to protest the recent attacks on BNP chief Khaleda Zia's motorcade was foiled yesterday allegedly by activists of Projonmo League, a pro-Awami League organisation. Jasas, BNP's cultural wing, had organised the programme in front of the Jatiya Press Club also to raise voice against the sexual assault on women during Pahela Baishakh celebrations on Dhaka University campus. Khaleda Enam Munna, general secretary of Jasas' city (south) unit, alleged that some 30 to 40 people, led by Projonmo League President Fatema Jaman Sathi, "attacked" the programme participants around 11:50am.



A man, left, wearing a bandana with "Bangladesh Muktiyoddha Projanma League" written on it attacks a demonstration of Tomrao Manush at Jatiya Press Club yesterday protesting the assault on women at Dhaka University on Pahela Baishakh. Wearing the same bandanas, a woman and a man attack, right, the peaceful demonstration of pro-BNP Jatiyatabadi Sangskritik Jote at the same place. The Jote was protesting the recent assaults on BNP chief Khaleda Zia's motorcade.

PHOTO: STAR

They snatched away the banner and assaulted some of the Jasas activists, he said.

Later, the Jasas activists fled the scene.

Munna further alleged that they did not get any help from the police personnel standing nearby.

"Police remained silent during the entire incident. So, we left the place immediately and took shelter inside the press club," he claimed.

Sub-Inspector Moinal Islam of Shahbagh Police Station denied the allegation and claimed that they had tried to calm both the groups during the "chaos".

Fatema Jaman Sathi could not be reached for her comments.

Khaleda's motorcade was attacked twice in the capital when she was campaigning for BNP-blessed candidates for the forthcoming city polls.

One killed in Rangamati gunfight

A CORRESPONDENT, Rangamati

An indigenous man was killed in a gunfight between security forces and criminals in the district's Baghaichhari upazila yesterday.

The dead is Ramesh Chakma alias Supreme, 32, of Golkomachhara village in the upazila.

Police and army said the criminals were members of the United People's Democratic Front (UPDF), a political organisation based in Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT). However, the UPDF denied the allegation.

Lt Col Ali Haider Siddiqui, commander of Baghaichhari zone of Bangladesh Army, said some 10-12 armed members of the UPDF opened fire on an army patrol team at Agujjehhari around 12:45pm.

The army members also returned fire, triggering the gunfight that continued till 2:00pm. The criminals fled the spot when another army troop, led by Captain Ferdous Hossain Bhuiyan, joined the patrol team.

Later, the army members found Ramesh dead on the spot. A loaded submachine gun (SMG) was recovered from there. None of the army personnel was injured in the incident, Haider said.

The army officer said two mobile phone sets and a bag containing documents belonging to the UPDF were also recovered from the spot. Anwar Hossain, officer-in-charge of Sajek Police Station, said they received the body of Ramesh.

However, Niran Chakma, press and information secretary of the UPDF, claimed that they had nothing to do with the armed criminals.

Motorbikes in vegetables container!

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, Ctg

Customs officials yesterday seized nine motorcycles in a reefer container at Chittagong Port as those were brought under the declaration of importing vegetables.

S Rahman Enterprise of Chittagong in February imported the reefer container, used for transporting perishable goods, from China, showing declaration of importing over 12 tonnes of onion and cabbage. But the company did not take the delivery of the consignment from the port, customs officials said.

On completion of the 30-day expiry of delivery, the Chittagong Port Authority (CPA) handed over the container to Chittagong Customs House for auction recently, said Assistant Commissioner of Chittagong Customs House Parvez Al Zaman.

The customs officials found nine motorcycles, 10 tonnes of green Chinese onion and 510 kilograms of cabbage from the container during physical examination yesterday afternoon.

The bikes were sent to the CPA for the next course of action while the vegetables were sold at an auction, said AC Parvez.

Pledges just hollow

FROM PAGE 1

Dhaka south -- have pledged a faster completion of the metro rail, the elevated expressway, the circular waterway and the shuttle train service projects to fix traffic jams in the city.

Khokon's list of promises also includes ensuring pollution and encroachment free Buriganga River, safe drinking water, a dedicated power plant for the city and uninterrupted supplies of gas and electricity.

All these promised areas fall under different implementing authorities. Power plants are the responsibility of the power and energy ministry, while the Dhaka district administration and the Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority (BIWTA) take care of the rivers. The BIWTA is also responsible for circular waterways.

Sayed Khokon has also promised to control land use for housing and ensure construction of earthquake-resistant high-rise buildings, though the Rajdhani Unnayan Kartripakkha (Rajuk) looks after these under the Town Improvement Act, the Detailed Area Plan (DAP) and the Bangladesh National Building Code.

Asked why he made such promises then, he said his political clout would work for him.

"I will try to get those done using my political influence," said Khokon, son of former Dhaka mayor Mohammad Hanif.

Anisul Huq also thinks that his political connections will help him. He said he would try to coordinate with other organisations with prime minister's backing.

Tabitha Awal, the BNP-backed mayor aspirant for Dhaka north, has pledged a Tongi-Kamalapur commuter train to help solve the traffic mess of the city.

A train service, however, is subject to the plan, decision and resource of the communications ministry.

Experts say there is hardly any precedent of a political government delegating its power to a local government entity like the city corporation.

Some other pledges Tabitha has made include rearrangement of city bus routes, introduction of mass transport service exclusively for women, increase double-decker and modern buses in the city, and making circular waterway functional around the capital.

However, road transport is under the communications ministry, the Bangladesh Road Transport Authority and the Bangladesh Road Transport Corporation. The much-hyped circular waterway has been meaningless for many years due to a dozen low-height bridges built by various government authorities.

Mayors do not have any authority over these fields and they will not be able to deliver anything beyond their mandate, said Tofail Ahmed, a renowned local government expert.

One fundamental weakness of such pledges is that political parties do not own those as their agenda, though the mayoral candidates enjoy some political support during elections, he said.

"Then how can these commitments be translated into actions?" he asked.

Water, electricity and gas supplies are some basic civic services, but other government agencies are mandated to do the job, not the city corporations, said Ahmed.

The city mayors, however, can do advocacy with the government to expedite those, he added.

The CPB-backed contender for the North Abdullah Al Kafi has pledged relocation of factories and industries

away from the city and recovery of city canals filled up by grabbers and turned into roads and box culverts by the city corporation itself.

While relocation of factories is a political decision requiring inter-ministerial action, canal reclamation is the job of the district administration and the Wasa, said experts.

Election pledges made by Bahauddin Babul, mayor hopeful for the North and Saifuddin Ahmed Milon, a contender for the South, include making Dhaka city free of traffic congestion, ensuring uninterrupted utility services like supplies of gas, electricity and water and eviction of the Turag and the Buriganga grabbers.

The reality is city corporations have nothing to do with these services. Titas Gas company, DPDC, Desco and Wasa look after these utility services.

Junaid Abdur Rahman Saki, another aspirant for the North, has pledged that he would take measures to reclaim flood plains, wetlands and Dhaka rivers illegally occupied by powerful grabbers, though that is not the job of a city corporation. Rajuk is mandated to do this.

Most of the aspirants have pledged to resolve the city's water-logging problem. But it is a mandate of Dhaka Wasa. It now stands as a Herculean task with most of the conservable wetlands, water retention ponds and water bodies around the city filled up by developers of illegal private housing schemes, said urban experts.

But such election pledges are nothing new, said Prof Zarina Rahman Khan, a local government researcher, who teaches public administration at Dhaka University.

"The mayor candidates thought that talking about these issues would make them popular," she added.

BANGLADESHI PRODUCTS IN INDONESIA

Hasina seeks duty, quota-free access

UNB, Jakarta

Highlighting the quality of Bangladeshi goods, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina yesterday sought duty and quota-free access for 129 products to Indonesian market.

She made the proposal during a meeting with Indonesian President Joko Widodo on the sidelines of the Asian African Summit 2015.

In response to Hasina's request, the Indonesia side assured that they would examine the issue, Foreign Secretary Shahidul Haque said.

A joint statement was issued after the meeting. Bangladesh ambassador to Indonesia and a DG of Indonesia's foreign ministry signed the statement.

Shahidul Haque and PM's Press Secretary AKM Shameem Chowdhuri briefed the reporters about the outcome of the meet.

The two countries have decided to strengthen collaboration in the fields of UN peacekeeping mission, agriculture and agro-based products, tourism, science and ICT, RMG, cultural exchange, energy and mineral resources, including power and coal.

Hasina sought the Indonesian government's support in capacity building for extracting maritime resources, enhancing the capacity in shipbuilding and boosting connectivity.

She also laid emphasis on boosting trade and commerce between the two countries.

In this connection, the Indonesian president stressed the need for holding a foreign minister-level Joint Commission meeting on a regular basis.

He also sought Bangladesh government support for his candidature at the UN Security Council non-permanent seat for 2019-20 session.

During the meeting, Hasina invited Widodo to visit Bangladesh at a convenient time.

In the joint statement, the two countries expressed concerns over terrorism and violent extremism and agreed to work together to this end.

Decisions have been taken to finalise MoUs on agriculture cooperation, science and technology, power and cultural exchange, according to the statement.

Besides, there will be foreign office consultations between the two countries.

Meanwhile, Hasina had meetings with Iranian President Hassan Rouhani, Palestine Prime Minister Rami Hamdallah and Nepalese Prime Minister Sushil Koirala.

Later, she visited Indonesian Product Exhibition at Jakarta Convention Centre.

The PM left Jakarta for home yesterday evening, ending her three-day official visit.

Tower Hamlets mayor barred from office

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Lutfur Rahman, the Mayor of Tower Hamlets, has been found guilty of "corrupt practice" regarding his election.



Lutfur Rahman

The independent left-wing politician was accused of electoral fraud by four voters who launched a legal challenge against him under the Representation of the People Act.

Election Commissioner Richard Mawrey, who was sitting as a judge in the Royal Courts of Justice, said Mr Rahman had "driven a coach and horses" through local authority law.

He said Mr Rahman should be barred from office and his election re-run.

Reporters present in the court said there were audible gasps in the room when the judgment was read out.

The commissioner said it was "inevitable" that Mr Rahman would denounce the judgment as being based

on racism and xenophobia.

He ordered the mayor to pay £250,000 costs.

Mr Rahman has run the London borough of Tower Hamlets since 2008 when he was the leader of Tower Hamlets Borough Council.

He was first elected as the borough's directly elected Mayor of 2010, when the post was created, and was re-elected at the 2014 local election.

Labour mayor candidate and London Assembly politician John Biggs said in a statement after the ruling:

"Today's ruling ... is a victory for honest politics. By setting out to break the rules and going to extraordinary lengths to win last May's mayoral election, Lutfur Rahman and his allies robbed the people of Tower Hamlets of the free and fair mayoral election they deserved and betrayed everyone in our community who trusted and voted for him."

A dismal record

FROM PAGE 1

The scheme helps reduce the problem of adverse selection, as it gives blanket coverage to those in the group, regardless of their risk factor.

At the time of the fatal event, a maximum 20 workers from each factory were entitled to come under the group insurance coverage -- and their names were chosen at random.

Accordingly, families of 100 workers of the five factories housed in the ill-fated building got the insurance money.

Similarly, beneficiaries of only 20 workers killed in the 2012 Tazreen Fashions fire got the insurance benefits, although a total of 112 workers died.

This begs the question: why were all workers not included in the scheme?

BGMEA believes that covering all workers under the group scheme would be very costly for the factory owners.

"We will have to pay much higher premiums than what we are giving now. Moreover, insurance companies will get rich overnight if we bring

all 44 lakh workers under the coverage," BGMEA President Atiqul Islam said.

He, however, said the association is thinking of ways to include more workers into the insurance scheme.

Shefaque Ahmed, chairman of Insurance Development and Regulatory Authority, said world over all workers of a factory are included in the group insurance scheme.

Furthermore, the premium rate is much lower for accidental insurance than that of other life insurance schemes, he added.

The garment sector's apex body made group insurance mandatory for its members in 2005. A factory without the scheme would be shorn off documents, including UID for exports.

BGMEA has set five slabs for giving premiums to insurance companies based on the number of factory workers.

A factory that has 1-500 workers pays Tk 26,000 as annual premium, which goes up Tk 43,000 for a factory with 501-1,000 workers, Tk

97,000 for 1,001-2,500 workers, Tk 142,000 for 2,501-5,000 workers and Tk 225,000 for 5,001 plus workers.

From fiscal 2014-15, the quota for workers under the scheme was extended to 25 and the benefit amount raised to Tk 2 lakh.

If an accident occurs in a factory and whatever the casualty is, only 25 workers will get insurance coverage.

If a worker dies or becomes disabled even outside the factory, he/she is entitled to the insurance facility.

So far, around 2,500 of the 4,000 active members of BGMEA have introduced the scheme for their workers.

Around 25 lakh workers are employed in the 2,500 factories, according to BGMEA.

"The premium a factory owner gives to insure their workers is very little compared to their income. So, the benefit is very small," said Wajedul Islam, a labour leader.

Islam said the insurance benefit should be at least Tk 5 lakh for each worker instead of current Tk 2 lakh.

Brow-raising deployment

FROM PAGE 1

The troops will move out as striking force only if the returning officers call them, the EC said.

A number of mayor aspirants in Dhaka and Chittagong have been demanding army deployment for a free and fair election.

In response, the EC on April 21 asked the government to deploy army for four days alongside the regular law enforcement agencies.

Explaining the commission's decision, Chief Election Commissioner Kazi Rabiuddin Ahmad told reporters yesterday that since the cantonments were located at the hearts of the cities, troops would be able to move easily to the trouble spots.

He did not take any question from

journalists.

Earlier in the day, Election Commissioner Shah Nawaz told newsmen that there was no need for the army to patrol the streets as there would be adequate law enforcers on duty.

"Police, Rab and members of other law enforcement agencies will be deployed at different places. We have kept army as a reserve force," he said.

"Since the cantonments are adjacent to the city corporation areas, we asked them [the army] to be there and remain prepared. Our magistrates will also be with them. Whenever the returning officers will feel their need, they will carry out their duties as a striking force," he added.

The nature of such "army deployment" has drawn huge criticisms.

Former election commissioner Brig Gen (retd) Shakhawat Hossain said this could not be termed as deployment.

"Either you deploy army properly or you don't," he told this correspondent.

M Hafizuddin Khan, ex-adviser to a caretaker government, said, "The Election Commission has deceived us all."

The main objective of army deployment is to bring a sense of relief and security among voters, but the EC's decision would not benefit voters, he added.

When his attention was drawn to voters' insecurity, Shah Nawaz said people would feel relieved when they would see law enforcers on the streets in large numbers.

Asked if the EC backed away from its previous decision over army deployment, he answered in the negative. "We've just explained where and how the troops will be."

The BNP and Adarsha Dhaka Andolan, a pro-BNP professionals' platform campaigning for candidates backed by the party, also criticised the EC for the decision.

In a statement, platform convener Prof Emajuddin Ahmad and member secretary Shawkat Mahmud described the move as an "unprecedented drama and mockery."

"The decision of the Election Commission is questionable and conspiratorial," the statement said.

BNP Standing Committee Member Hannan Shah said the commission's decision over army

deployment was nothing but a "jugglery".

If any untoward incident happens in Kamrangirchar or Dholaiakhal, it would take the troops an hour to reach the spot, and by that time the troublemakers will flee the scene, he said.

At a press conference at the residence of BNP-blessed mayor candidate Mirza Abbas, he said, "There will be a battle of ballot in Dhaka city. So it is not possible to hold free and fair polls by keeping the army inside the cantonment."

He claimed the government came to know through intelligence that the ruling party-backed candidates would suffer heavy defeats, and that's why it was conspiring to keep the BNP from the election.