

Thai politician held over trafficking

THE NATION/ANN

Intensive effort by the authorities to tackle Rohingya labour trafficking continues as a 10-day timeframe designated by Prime Minister General Prayut Chan-o-cha to crack down on the illicit trade looms.

Police on Saturday arrested a local politician in Satun, Abu Ha-ura, over his alleged involvement in human trafficking, while two other suspects who are Abu's aides are among 49 wanted suspects.

Abu is among four politicians in custody, who also include the mayor and deputy mayor of Padang Besar municipality in Songkhla. The arrests of two other unnamed suspects means 15 people are being detained.

Abu, 54, a councillor with the provincial assembly representing Khuan Don district, has allegedly confessed to the crimes, after he was charged with human trafficking, abduction and restraint of others' freedom.

He underwent a re-enactment of his crimes at several locations in Khuan Don, where five Rohingya women took part by indicating the route they had been smuggled along between Khuan Don and Satun's Langu district.

Two police officers assigned to the Border Patrol and an area office have been suspended following allegations over their involvement with Rohingya labour trafficking, said deputy police chief General Aek Angsanant.

He also said he was seeking the permanent discharge of Padang Besar Mayor Bannajong Pongphol and his deputy, Prasit Lemleh, via the Songkhla provincial authority.

Aek said police had been working on the problem 24 hours a day since last week.

He said police seeking evidence to obtain court-approved warrants for 49 suspects in only seven days was a record. A few village heads were among the local politicians wanted under arrest warrants.

A body was found yesterday during an inspection of an abandoned Muslim cemetery in Sadao district in Songkhla, after six bodies had earlier been found in eight graves. DNA tests are under way to determine who they were.

More than 240 migrants were under government care at three locations in Songkhla's Rattaphum, Hat Yai and Sadao districts, including 180 found abandoned in the past few days by smugglers fearing detection.



A policeman attempts to kick a female demonstrator as she is cornered by cops who turn violent during a programme to lay siege to the headquarters of Dhaka Metropolitan Police yesterday. She is not spared the cops' brutality even after being knocked to the ground.

PHOTO: BANGLAR CHOKH



Protest met with police

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Rights, cultural and left activists and students have been agitating for punishment to the culprits behind the broad-daylight sexual harassment of women on Dhaka University campus during the Nababarsha celebration.

Bangladesh Chhatra Union, which has been at the forefront of the protests, organised the demonstration yesterday. It is pressing for a six-point demand, including punishment of the cops for neglecting duty.

Police haven't even named a suspect, let alone arresting any, though the place where the molestation took place was covered by 22 CCTV cameras.

Yesterday, as the demonstrators reached near the Officers' Club around 12:45pm marching in a procession from the TSC, their advance towards the DMP headquarters was obstructed by a human-wall of over a hundred policemen.

The protesters demanded DMP Commissioner Asaduzzaman Miah meet them there to talk about developments, if any, in the probe into the April 14 sexual assault.

The situation turned volatile around 1:00pm when a constable disconnected the loudspeaker used by the protesters. With this, the cops swung into action. Apart from baton-charging and beating, police used water cannon and fired teargas shells to disperse the protesters.

The agitators tried to fight back by hurling brickbats.

Of the five activists picked up, three were seen being slapped, kicked, scolded and clubbed while being dragged to police van. Cops kept torturing the detainees though a policeman, possibly an officer, was shouting for restraints.

BCU President Hasan Tarec put the number of injured at 34 at a press conference held at DU Madhur Canteen yesterday.

"Police attacked our peaceful protests without any provocation," said Tarec before calling for a daylong strike tomorrow at all educational institutions across the country.

DU chapter BCU President Liton Nandi, who first reported the April 14 mass molestation of women, said a

victim of the police clubbing eyesight being hit in the back of his head yesterday.

"We assured police of ending the demonstration if the DMP commissioner sees us and promises action against the culprits behind the Nababarsha incident," Nandi told journalists.

A 44-second-video shot by The Daily Star shows how violent the cops were while attacking the protesters. A policeman got his truncheon broken after using it to hit a youth in the head indiscriminately.

A cop was pushing a female demonstrator to the ground, as seen in another 3:42-minute-videoe posted on Facebook.

Abdul Baten, deputy commissioner of DMP Ramna division, told reporters that police used water canon and teargas canisters to disperse the mob as they were causing public sufferings by blocking the road.

Protesters were asked to free the road and send their representatives to the DMP headquarters to convey their demands but they ignored it, he said.

Technology makes media control impossible: Iran

AFP, Tehran

The Internet and the proliferation of satellite technology mean Iran can no longer control foreign news and television broadcasts, the country's culture minister said on Sunday, urging a new approach.

In remarks that signal the government's intention to open Iran up to the world, Ali Jannati told police commanders that new delivery systems ignore borders, making censorship measures redundant.

"In the past, through pressuring the media or guiding the information, we could direct public news and take control of it," state media quoted him as saying.

"But today the scene has changed dramatically. Controlling the media is no longer possible technically or geographically."

Although satellite television remains illegal, Iran is a technologically wired country with a youthful population, more than half of which is under the age of 30.

Mamata might

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energy, blue economy, disaster management, education, culture and fresh line of credit, sources said.

Dhaka would announce an exclusive economic zone for India and a deal for its set-up would be signed.

Ahead of Modi's visit, foreign ministry sources said, the two countries would begin high-level visits "soon" when ministers and top officials of the ministries of foreign, finance, commerce, home, water resources and shipping would finalise deals and agenda for the summit level meeting.

Diplomatic sources in Dhaka and New Delhi said several ministers and chief ministers of India's West Bengal,

Assam, Tripura and Meghalaya are likely to accompany Modi during the two-day visit.

Of them, Mamata, during the meeting with Modi, confirmed that she would come to Dhaka with him.

A source in New Delhi yesterday told The Daily Star that India had proposed June 6 and 7 for the visit and Dhaka accepted it.

However, another diplomatic source said instead of June 6 Modi may come to Dhaka a couple of days later if he wished to witness some portion of the Test between Bangladesh and India, starting from June 10. The match will be played in Fatullah, Narayanganj.

For farmers, but it's too late

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"This is already late. All the Boro paddy farmers would have benefited had the government made the decision earlier," said Bappy Saha, a rice miller from Netrokona.

He said many farmers incurred big losses as the market was flooded with low-price rice, imported mainly from India.

Farmers, especially those in the haor-region, have started harvesting Boro paddy in the third week of last month. But many of them failed to reap the benefit of their investment and labour, thanks to the growing imports by private sector. The price of imported rice is lower than that grown in the country.

Rice imports increased threefold to 13 lakh tonnes between July 1 and May 6 of the current fiscal year, compared with last year's, according to food ministry data.

Private traders found rice imports from India profitable in the absence of duty on its imports. As a result, imports continued to soar despite adequate production to meet the domestic demand.

After a record Boro production last year, Aus and Aman output also rose year-on-year.

Production of Aman, for example, rose by 1.28 percent to nearly 1.32 crore tonnes in the immediate past harvest season compared with the previous season.

Aman output is the second highest next to Boro that accounts for 55 percent of the annual rice production.

Because of growing local production and rising import, rice supply is increasing on the domestic market and many millers are finding it difficult to clear stocks of coarse and medium



Boro harvesting continues at Savar's Amin Bazar on Saturday.

PHOTO: SK ENAMUL HAQ

quality rice.

To remain in the competition, millers on several occasions urged the government to slap duty on rice imports to save growers and millers.

But the government continued to ignore this. Some top officials maintained that the imported low-quality rice was meant for cattle.

Things took a turn for the worse for millers and farmers after the Boro harvest began.

Rice prices fell below those of last

year due to soaring supply and prospects of a good Boro harvest this season.

Farmers have grown Boro paddy on more than 48 lakh hectares of land this season, said a senior official of the Department of Agricultural Extension (DAE).

DAE officials and a report of the Food and Agriculture Organisation forecast a high Boro yield.

"On several occasions, we urged the government to restrict rice imports. It

is good that the government has made the decision, even though it is late," Layek Ali, general secretary of Bangladesh Auto, Major and Husking Mills Association, told The Daily Star.

M Asaduzzaman, a fellow at Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies, said the government should have imposed duty on rice imports earlier to ensure a fair price for the growers.

"It is too late. The damage has already been done," he said.

Accused killed

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Detective Branch of police constable Sohel and Ansar member Monir Ahmed, who was accompanying the detectives, were also injured in yesterday's "shootout", police said.

Acting on a tip-off, police raided Paschim Sonarpara where a human trafficking gang was trying to take some Bangladesh jobseekers on a trawler around 2:00am to send them to Malaysia by sea illegally, according to Dewan Abul Hossain, officer-in-charge of Cox's Bazar DB police.

"Suddenly, the gang members started to spray bullets on police, which prompted the law enforcers to retaliate," said the OC.

At one stage, the criminals fled the scene, but police found Zafar dead on the spot. Later in the afternoon, the body was handed over to Zafar's relatives after an autopsy at Cox's Bazar Sadar Hospital morgue.

Detectives claimed that a homemade firearm and two bullets were recovered from the spot.

DB police filed three cases with Cox's Bazar Sadar Model Police Station, accusing unknown human traffickers, over the incident.

In another "gunfight" on Friday, three suspected human traffickers -- Dholu Hossain, Jahangir Alam and Zafar Alam -- were killed in Cox's Bazar's Teknaf upazila.

The incidents took place at a time when human trafficking issues were making headlines in the media outlets of South-East Asian countries following the discovery of a number of graves in abandoned camps in Thai jungles. The victims were believed to be the fortune seekers from Bangladesh and Myanmar.

Meanwhile, State Minister for

Home Affairs Asaduzzaman Khan Kamal, at a programme in the capital yesterday, said the government was updating the list of the human traffickers. Those found guilty would be punished, he warned.

At a press briefing at the foreign ministry, State Minister for Foreign Affairs Shahriar Alam yesterday said Bangladesh was working to verify the identities of the self-claimed Bangladeshis rescued from Thai jungles. Once the identities were verified, they would be repatriated, he said.

Meanwhile, Bangladesh Ambassador to Thailand Saida Muna Tasneem has assured Thai authorities of taking strict legal action against the human traffickers in Bangladesh, said a foreign ministry statement.

"The government of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina will take every action to strictly enforce legal measures against unscrupulous organised criminal groups which are trafficking young Bangladeshi people by sea to Malaysia via Thailand," she told Songkhla province Vice Governor Ekkrat Leesen.

Tasneem, who led a team from Bangladesh embassy in Bangkok to Songkhla province on May 7-8, visited Sadao district hospital where a Bangladeshi, Toton Saha of Narayanganj, is being treated after he was rescued.

She enquired about his identity and details of his experience of being trafficked to Thailand.

The team also visited the protection centre in Rattaphum district and interviewed 15 more self-claimed Bangladeshis, the statement added.

Ekkrat Leesen stressed on cooperation among the regional countries to tackle the transnational crime.

469 migrants rescued

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processing" which would include investigating their motives.

Darsa, a disaster management agency official who like many Indonesians goes by one name, told AFP the group had arrived near a beach in north Aceh district early Sunday and were told to swim to shore.

"One of the migrants who could speak Malay told me that their agent had told them they were in Malaysia, and to swim to shore," he said.

"Some of them did. But later they found out from fishermen that they were in Indonesia," he added.

According to the migrant, five boats had departed from Myanmar last week to escape the conflict in their country, Darsa said.

"He said the Muslims were beaten and had hot water poured on them and they just wanted to get out of Myanmar as soon as possible, to anywhere where they could seek refuge," he said.

Buddhist-majority Myanmar views its population of roughly 800,000 Rohingyas as illegal Bangladeshi immigrants, and they have been targeted in outbreaks of sectarian violence there in recent years, prompting many to flee.

Darsa said there were 83 women and 41 children on board. One of the women was pregnant and some of the children were aged under 10.

"There was little food and water on the boat. Some of them were not doing too well and needed medical attention," he said.

Thousands of Muslim Rohingyas have braved the dangerous sea crossing from Myanmar to southern Thailand and beyond in recent years.

Many hope to go on to mainly Muslim Malaysia but the migrants have often fallen prey to people-traffickers in Thailand.

The UN considers the Rohingyas to be one of the world's most persecuted minorities.

Govt to ensure welfare

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government had already been able to achieve food security and would continue its efforts to ensure nutrition security for people.

She vowed to reduce poverty by 10 percent in the next three years.

Referring to the mayhem carried out by the BNP-Jamaat alliance for 92 days since January this year, the PM said the poor had been the worst victims of the anarchy during the period.

In response, the UN resident coordinator said it was very unfortunate. "I think it is over now," he added.

The PM also mentioned that her government had given utmost importance to education to attain the vision 2021.

It has offered all kinds of scopes for the students, including free dis-

tribution of textbooks and fixed dates for holding exams, which are all goal-oriented steps.

But the BNP-Jamaat alliance has spoiled this trend, Hasina told the UN official.

The UN resident coordinator highly praised the socio-economic development of Bangladesh attained under Hasina's leadership.

The UN secretary general is very much optimistic about Bangladesh. He has a special sympathy for the country as he had started his diplomatic assignment from here, Watkins told the PM.

Ban Ki-moon also highly lauded the role of the Bangladeshi peacekeepers in the UN Peace Keeping Missions, he said.

Watkins also hoped that Bangladesh would be able to attain the vision 2021 well ahead of the stipulated time.

NSA asked Germany to spy on Siemens: report

AFP, Berlin

The US intelligence agency NSA asked its German partner service BND to spy on the European country's engineering and technology giant Siemens, a German newspaper reported yesterday.

In the latest report on a widening spying scandal, the newspaper said the US National Security Agency (NSA) suspected that Siemens was supplying communications technology to a Russian secret service, said the newspaper, citing unnamed US intelligence sources.

A Siemens spokesman said the German company was "not aware of any facts in the company's area of responsibility" that would support making it a target of such surveillance, reported the same newspaper, Bild am

Sonntag.

The newspaper also said it remained unclear whether the BND had in fact delivered any intelligence on Siemens to the NSA.

The "BND affair" -- in which the German service allegedly also spied on the Airbus Group, the French government and the European Commission for the NSA -- has rattled Chancellor Angela Merkel's government and angered some of Germany's European partners.

In response to the scandal, which is straining Merkel's ruling left-right coalition, the BND last week reportedly scaled back its cooperation with the NSA on communications intercepted at its listening post in Bad Aibling in the southern state of Bavaria.