

'Planner' of Ashulia bank heist held

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Police yesterday claimed to have arrested the mastermind behind the gruesome Ashulia bank heist.

Producing Mahfuzul Islam Shamim alias Suman, an alleged operative of banned militant outfit Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT), before the media, police claimed he was the one to have planned and executed the April 21 heist that left at least nine people dead.

Superintendent of Police Habibur Rahman of Dhaka said Shamim, arrested at a relative's residence at Madhya Badda in the city around 1:00am, leads a small ABT group and was earlier involved with another banned militant outfit -- Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB).

He had trained his group members before carrying out the robbery at the Ashulia's Kathgora branch of Bangladesh Commerce Bank.

Shamim was also involved in the prison van ambush in Mymensingh's Trishal in February last year, the SP claimed. JMB top leaders Salahuddin Ahmed alias Salehin, Zahidul Islam



Suman

alias "Boma" Mizan and Rakib Hasan Russell -- all death row convicts -- were snatched away from police that day.

"Suman detached himself from the JMB following a leadership row with Salahuddin a few days after the Trishal ambush," Habibur told reporters at a briefing at the DMP media centre.

The arrestee, who hails from Jamalpur, managed to escape a police drive at a militant training camp in Bogra in August, 2013.

He also said Al-Amin Hossain, one of the total 11 arrestees in the heist case, had confessed that Shamim was involved in killing a Bkash agent at Boardbazar in Gazipur and mugging Tk 5 lakh from him on March 10.

The militants robbed the bank to collect fund for the organisation, SP Habibur said.

Shamim used a firearm during the robbery, but the police official said they were yet to recover it.

Asked whether these arrestees were found to have any link to the recent killings of secular bloggers, the SP replied in the negative.

SURVEY ON BOATPEOPLE

Corrupt Thai officials blamed for crisis

THE NATION/ANN

While the authorities say human trafficking is the major cause of the migrant crisis, a new survey conducted in migrant communities in Ranong points the finger at corrupt officials.

Nearly 80 per cent of respondents in the migrant communities in the southern province who were sampled in the survey, conducted by Thai researchers for a community happiness group, said the involvement of state officials in trafficking was the biggest obstacle hindering a solution being found.

Another 42.7 per cent suggested that laws and regulations are other factors that make the issue more complicated and difficult to solve.

A Rohingya migrant, Sanina, said illegal migrants had to pay state officials monthly to avoid arrest. Many of them paid "brokers", who claimed they could obtain documents showing that they were allowed to live and work in Thailand, he said.

Thailand relaxed its laws and regulations by granting permission to millions of migrants from Myanmar, Laos and Cambodia to live and work here temporarily. Migrants who are qualified to live and work here must go through a national verification process.

Rohingya who take boat journeys on the Indian Ocean will not be able to apply for work permits because Myanmar has refused to recognise them as national citizens.

Bangladeshi boat people are also barred from obtaining work permits.

According to Sanina, who has lived in Thailand for 20 years, the only way for Rohingya to survive in Thailand is to purchase a Thai ID card.

A provincial official in Ranong who requested anonymity said it was possible for Rohingya to get an ID card but it was more difficult these days after a major scandal over the sale of cards broke

years ago. A lot of officials were subsequently discharged from their positions and punished, he said.

The authorities now have a very strict process in place when issuing ID cards, he said.

Colonel Suthipong Zhongpakdi, deputy commander of the Internal Security Operations Command in Ranong, admitted that the involvement of officials in human trafficking had been clearly seen as police had issued arrest warrants for many officials.

"The officials found guilty will definitely face punishment for their crimes, and the officials considered to be involved in human trafficking, but who could not be charged for the lack of solid evidence, will be sent to military camps for an attitude adjustment," Suthipong said.

Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Tanasak Patimapragom admitted last week when Thailand hosted a special meeting on irregular migrant movement on the India Ocean that high-ranking officials were involved in human trafficking.

But the four-star general, a former supreme commander, said no military officers were involved.

Thailand began to crackdown on human trafficking syndicates when the country was last year downgraded by the United States to the lowest tier in its annual Trafficking in Persons report.

The authorities have issued arrest warrants for 81 suspects believed to be involved in trafficking rings. Of those, 51 suspects have been arrested.

The syndicates have strong connections in Thailand, Myanmar and Malaysia.

Myanmar authorities earlier held a 53 year-old Thai national who allegedly owned a boat recently found by the Myanmar navy crammed with more than 200 migrants.



FROM LEFT ... Tariq Wazed Akash, Shadman Sakib Siam and Rakibul Haq Prince, the organisers of the unmanned boat race. PHOTO COURTESY: RAKIBUL HAQ PRINCE

Unmanned boats

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will be possible to trace sunken launches, like Pinak-6," said Akash.

Prince said, "Developing the device has been our long-cherished dream and to fulfill it, we have already built a system called capsizing alert system."

The software developer claimed that once the device was ready, it would warn vessel crews when those reached "vulnerable points."

The system through which sunken vessels would be located is called "post-capsizing detection system."

He said to locate sunken vessels ultrasonic sound-based electronic chip in a fiber box would be installed under the deck. The rescuers would know about the vessel's whereabouts through the device.

The device which is also called Fish

Finder is the modified version of sonar, an acronym for sound navigation and ranging, a technique used in submarines, said Prince.

The project in which the students were working was funded by Higher Education Quality Enhancement Project (HEQEP) of the ministry of education.

Prince said they wanted the boat competition get affiliated with regular international events, the way the BD Math Olympiad got connected with the International Math Olympiad.

Hailing such initiative, Prof Masud Karim of the NAME said, "We are amazed by the idea of unmanned boat race, the brainchild of Prince, Akash and Siam."

To get more dynamic outputs from students, they launched a project for developing the devices, he added.



The land subsidence near Sonargaon intersection got worse yesterday evening with more structures sinking into a gaping hole that got even bigger. One side of the Panthapath had to be closed to traffic for a few hours. About 25 feet long chunk of land sank into the foundation ditch for the under construction National Bank Twin Tower, as the remaining shore piling collapsed around 8:00pm.

PHOTO: PALASH KHAN

Has BNP forgotten its anti-India past?

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of his government on August 15, 1975.

The bloody changeover brought back the politics of Pakistan era, when for a quarter century since the partition of India, the people were conditioned by the then Pakistan's propaganda showing India as their number one enemy.

As the anti-Indian politics returned to dominate Bangladesh's politics, the military and strategic friendship treaty between Bangladesh and India signed by Mujib and Indira was portrayed as "a treaty of slavery." The BNP continued to label the treaty as against the interest of Bangladesh until the deal expired in 1997.

When the Awami League assumed state powers after 21 years in 1996, it could not dare to move to renew the Indira-Mujib treaty. Fighting strong propaganda, the AL, in the run up to the 1996 general election, was compelled to promise that it would not renew the treaty if it were voted to power.

But the treaty was immensely significant for the newborn Bangladesh. Political scientist Chowdhury M Shamim, a teacher of political science at California State University, Fullerton, in his article "The Bangladesh-India Friendship Treaty" has examined the importance of the treaty. He writes many countries were withholding recognition of Bangladesh because of the presence of Indian troops in its land.

The immediate circumstance, he says, that led to the signing of the treaty was the need to withdraw the

bulk of the Indian armed forces from Bangladesh. Prime Minister Sheikh Mujib thus became aware of the necessity for the withdrawal of Indian forces from Bangladesh, he asserts.

He says: "The military and strategic 'friendship' between the two countries envisaged in the Bangladesh-India treaty of 1972 evaporated in the post 1975 era and the trend continued during Ziaur Rahman regime and Ershad era."

The trend, however, continued even after the AL returned to power in 1996. The Ganges Water Sharing Treaty signed with India in 1996 and the Chittagong Hill Tracts Peace Accord signed in 1997 with Parbatya Chattogram Janasanghati Samity were considered two major achievements by the then Hasina-led government.

The BNP under the leadership of Khaleda Zia continued its anti-Indian politics and opposed both treaties. They termed the Ganges water sharing treaty as a "deal of slavery." They also claimed that the CHT areas had become a part of India after the signing of the peace accord. The party had also agitated on the street against the peace accord.

The BNP had threatened to cancel these two treaties if the party returned to power. However, it refrained from doing so after assuming the state power in 2001 general elections.

All through its history the party has also opposed closer trade and communications connectivity with India which was a manifestation of its anti-Indian politics.

Eminent political scientist Professor Rounaq Jahan in her recent

book "Political Parties in Bangladesh" says these political stands were inspired by the BNP's traditional anti-Indian posture which was one of its foundational positions under Zia.

In a major demonstration of anti-Indian politics, BNP chief Khaleda Zia had refused to have a courtesy call on Indian President Pranab Mukherjee when he was visiting Dhaka in March 2013.

At that time, Congress, which has historically good relations with the AL, was in power. The BNP blamed the Congress-led government for giving "undue support" to the Hasina-led government in Bangladesh.

When Congress was voted out of power and BJP leader Narendra Modi was sworn in as the Indian premier, many BNP leaders were happy expecting a change in the Indian policy on Bangladesh.

Narendra Modi's steps to resolve long pending bilateral issues between India and Bangladesh and to boost relationship between the two countries, have already generated high hopes that the relationship between the two nations is set to reach a new height.

Now the BNP seems to have changed its traditional tune. It has started preparing to meet Modi in efforts to build good relations with India.

The prevailing political situation has made Modi a fortunate Indian leader. After Indira Gandhi's visit to Dhaka in 1972, he is set to be the first Indian premier who is drawing huge

attention and generating high hopes ahead of his visit. The traditional anti-Indian politics seems to have died down as well!

Mexican Nobel laureate Octavio Paz and the then prime minister of Canada Pierre Trudeau had once suggested that the nearness of their countries to the USA was a blessing and a curse.

Political scientist Professor Ahrar Ahmad of Black Hills State University in South Dakota says Bangladesh's relationship with India has a similar complexity. Citing Paz and Trudeau in an article in the book "Political Culture in Bangladesh" on Bangladesh-India relationship, he says, on the one hand, there is closeness to a great and glorious civilisation that Bangladesh can also claim as its own heritage; there are economic complementarities that both countries can explore to mutual advantage; there are bonds of fraternity and gratitude for India's considerable help in Bangladesh's struggle for independence.

On the other hand, he says, there are anxieties stemming from the unequal powers of the two states; there is cynicism about India's motives in helping Bangladesh in 1971.

The anti-Indian politics has long shown the nearness to India as a curse for Bangladesh.

Now, it depends on our leaders whether they will take the country forward benefitting from our nearness to India seeing it as a blessing or engage in the same old politics portraying closeness to India as a curse.

Mass awareness teams unaware

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Each of the 5,000 committees has 19 to 29 members while MPs and upazila chairmen were made advisers.

According to a 2012 gazette notification, each committee was supposed to meet every month to discuss ways to create public awareness about human trafficking and to take measures to disrupt the smuggling rings.

But not a single meeting has been held, said sources in the home ministry.

"There is no human trafficking prevention committee in my district," said Mohammad Ali Hossain, deputy commissioner of Cox's Bazar, a major human trafficking route from Bangladesh.

The DCs of Natore, Kurigram, Jhenidah and Patuakhali are also in the dark.

"I know there is no committee called human trafficking prevention committee. But you are saying there is.... I have never heard about it," said Natore DC Mashiur Rahman.

"What are you saying? I have been in the service for long. I have never heard that such an important committee exists," insisted Shafiqul Islam, deputy commissioner of Jhenidah.

Chairmen of Chowfaldhandi union parishad of Cox's Bazar Sadar upazila, Kachchhopia union of Ramu upazila and Ratnapalong union of Ukhia upazila were surprised to learn about the committees.

The fact is they are supposed to be chiefs of the committees in their unions. Likewise, Sirajganj-2 lawmaker Habibe Millat and Sirajganj-3 lawmaker MM Amzad, expressed their ignorance.

Millat added he even once asked the DC and the UNO of his area to inform him about his role in various district

committees. "But none of them told me about the human trafficking prevention committee."

The sole official who could confirm the existence of the committee is Sandwip Kumar Sarker, UNO of Shailokupa upazila of Jhenidah.

"This committee was formed more than two years ago. But no meeting has been held yet," he said.

SHIFTING THE BLAME

Yesterday, this newspaper called the then home minister Muhiuddin Khan Alamgir, whose office was responsible for informing the committee members about their roles and activities.

Muhiuddin, who left office in September 2013, claimed his office issued a circular to all the district administrations, upazila parishads and union parishads in this regard.

Asked why then nobody knew about the committees, he said he could not answer that. He also claimed to have verbally instructed the DCs of some "vulnerable" districts to take steps to fight human trafficking.

By "vulnerable" districts he meant the areas where and through which most human trafficking take place.

Abu Hena Md Rahmatul Muneem, an additional secretary of the home ministry, said, "It seems the committees are not working."

But he added the ministry took initiatives to make the committees functional as there was no alternative way to prevent people smuggling. Already, the ministry has instructed all the DCs to keep the human trafficking issue on their monthly meeting agenda.

NPA EXPIRED

Tenure of the 2012-14 NPA for prevention of human trafficking expired in

December last year.

The government has prepared the new NPA for 2015-17 outlining various measures to be implemented to fight human trafficking.

It is likely to be launched next month, sources in the home ministry said.

[Our correspondents in Cox's Bazar, Natore, Jhenidah, Kurigram and Patuakhali contributed to this report].

3 die inhaling septic tank gas

OUR CORRESPONDENT, N'gani

Three people including a child were killed when they inhaled toxic gas of a septic tank at Sadipur Nanaki Madhyapara area of Sonargaon upazila in Narayanganj yesterday afternoon.

The deceased were identified as Sabbir, 8, Osman Gani, and Shahjalal, 36.

Officer-in-Charge SM Manjur Kader of Sonargaon Police Station said Sabbir accidentally fell into the tank of an under construction building while trying to pluck mangoes around 2:00pm.

Osman, who is Sabbir's uncle, and Shahjalal and two others rushed to the spot to save the child. But they fell into the tank too when a portion of the tank's top collapsed.

The three died in the tank inhaling toxic gas, he said, adding that the other two who had gone to rescue Sabbir were injured.

Following information, police went to the spot and recovered the bodies and sent the injured to hospital.

Myanmar denies

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carrying 727 migrants.

A naval officer, who declined to be named because he was not authorised to speak to the media, said the boat had been found drifting at sea with no fuel or anchor, and was taking on water.

"Their water pump was broken. If we hadn't found them, they may have died," the officer said.

The government initially labelled the migrants "Bengalis" - a term used to refer to both stateless Rohingya Muslims and Bangladeshis - but officials later said they believed most of those on board were from Bangladesh.

Myanmar has come under harsh criticism for its treatment of Rohingya, more than 100,000 have fled persecution and poverty in Rakhine State in 2012.

More than 4,000 Rohingya and Bangladeshis have landed in rickety boats throughout Southeast Asia in the last month following a crackdown on human trafficking in Thailand.

Myanmar's sensitivity over the migrant crisis was evident by the way its navy responded to the arrival of the journalists' boat.

At one stage, a sailor leaned over the rail of a navy boat to point his rifle at the approaching journalists. Reporters from Reuters and other foreign media were questioned and made to delete pictures and videos before they were ordered to return.

Myanmar officials have given little information on what it intends to do with the migrants.

Government spokesman Ye Htut said: "They are still on the boat. We are providing them with the necessary humanitarian assistance."

Officials have said the boat would possibly be taken to Rakhine State, in the country's west, or to neighbouring Bangladesh.