



A traffickers' boat, left, which Thai police seized on January 30. Two fishermen, right, getting their nets ready for fishing at Bang Ben Bay. They told The Daily Star that several boats with migrants arrive there every year and ask for directions. The photos were taken on May 27 in Thailand's Ranong province.



PHOTO: SHAMIM ASHRAF

Top human trafficker arrested

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Cox's Bazar

Police arrested a top leader of an organised human trafficking gang at a residential hotel in Chittagong city early yesterday.

The arrestee is Shamsul Alam Sohag, 35, son of Islam Mia of Paschim Sonachhari village in Cox's Bazar's Ukhia upazila.

According to locals, the village is being used as a transit point for sending people to foreign countries illegally through sea.

Acting on a tip-off, a Chittagong Metropolitan Police team raided the hotel around 2:00am and nabbed Sohag, who is also the general secretary of Jaliapalong union unit of Jubo Dal, the BNP's youth wing.

Dewan Abul Hossain, inspector of Cox's Bazar Detective Branch (DB) of police, said Sohag was handed over to the Chittagong Criminal Investigation Department. Sohag was being interrogated.

Jahirul Islam, officer-in-charge of Ukhia Police Station, said Sohag stood accused in several cases with Ukhia, Ramu and Teknaf police stations under the Human Trafficking Deterrence and Suppression Act, 2012.

The arrestee was one of the human trafficking racket kingpins. He went into hiding as the law enforcers were conducting a special drive in the district against the listed human traffickers, the police official added.

Beauty belies dark trade

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taking sea voyages in small boats was noticed well after the 2004 Asian Tsunami, a Thai official in Ranong said, seeking not to be named.

"Even though Thailand was not the migrants' final destination, the traffickers wanted to save money by transporting people in Thailand first on their way to Malaysia due to cost of gas. They would later move them overland to Malaysia where the Rohingyas wanted to seek jobs," Colonel Suthipong Zhongpakdi, the deputy commander of Internal Security Operations Command in Ranong, told this correspondent during a visit in the last week of May.

The 2012 riots in Myanmar's Rakhine state turned the low-key smuggling into an exodus of homeless Rohingya Muslims, making the people smugglers hungrier for money.

And the brisk money later led to expansion of the smuggling syndicate into Bangladesh, where there was already an active network of labour brokers, and introduction of forced trafficking of people to extort ransom, said experts.

INACTIVITY TO STOP, CONNIVANCE WITH TRAFFICKING

According to local fishermen in Ranong, officials have full knowledge of what has been going on for years.

"They usually came in the late hours in small groups. They were frequently seen during the past few

years," an employee of Laem Son National Park, who did not want to be named, said through a translator.

The traffickers in some boats would ask the fishermen about the location of their destinations. Expressing ignorance, some fishermen would then inform local police, he added.

"But the police did not show any interest to arrest them because it would add to the burden of the existing refugee crisis."

Police would wait to see the smuggled people pass through the border into Malaysia and let it be their problem, he added.

The discovery of a mass grave in Thailand's Songkhla province on May 1 revealed to the world the extent of inhumane torture the smuggled boatpeople had undergone.

"Interviews with officials and others make it clear that these brutal networks, with the complicity of government officials in Burma, Bangladesh, Thailand, and Malaysia, profit from the desperation and misery of some of the world's most persecuted and neglected people," Brad Adams, Asia director of Human Rights Watch, said in a statement on May 27.

The Thai authorities, who have been under tremendous pressure to raise their poor rank in stopping human trafficking, however, had to act and issue arrest warrants against 89 people, who included officials too, after Malaysia beefed up security at its border recently.

After the discovery of mass graves and trafficking camps, international media have written about the involvement of a whole range of people – which include officials, businessmen, law enforcers and politicians – in it.

Talking about this, the deputy commander of Ranong's Internal Security Operations Command said: "We know some officers are involved. The officials found guilty will definitely face punishment for their crimes ... but those who could not be charged for lack of solid evidence, will be sent to military camps for an attitude adjustment."

As of Friday, 55 of those facing arrest warrants were in custody in Thailand.

While the involvement of some local politicians did not surprise many, the link of Lieutenant General Manas Kongpaen, senior adviser to the Thai army, came as a real surprise to many. Facing multiple charges including human trafficking, detention and ransom in connection with the Southeast Asia human trafficking disaster, he has surrendered, marking the first arrest of a military official since the investigation started last month.

The total value of assets belonging to suspects alleged to be involved in human trafficking has reached Bt109 million, according to Thai Anti Money-Laundering Office.

All assets of some other suspects -- Pajuban Anghotphan, Natthaphat Saengthong, Charnnarong

Phromenut and Hard Thodthing -- have also been confiscated.

Meanwhile, after the discovery of mass graves of migrants in Bukit Wang Burma area in northern Malaysia on May 24, the country's Home Minister Ahmad Zahid Hamidi insisted that Malaysians are involved in the clandestine business for long.

The camps have been there for a while, "maybe even five-years", he said, expressing shock about the clandestine activities.

Six routes discovered along the Malaysia-Thailand border are believed to be human trafficking and goods-smuggling "rat" trails, Malaysia's The Star newspaper reported.

Nor Mahizan Kasim, chairman of the Kampung Syed Omar Village Development and Security Committee, said the syndicates had used the routes for more than 10 years.

MOST GUARDS ON BOATS ARE 'MYANMAR CITIZENS'

Though many Bangladeshi brokers are learnt to be involved in the trafficking syndicate, Myanmar and Thai nationals play the key role in transporting the victims in most cases, this correspondent learnt.

Three Bangladeshi, now detained at the Immigration Detention Centre in Ranong since May 26, said the guards on the boats that took them to Thai coasts were all "Arakanese".

"They understand and can speak Bangla though they are not

Bangladeshi," said Nur Alam, an 18-year-old from Shariatpur Upazila who was rescued from a camp in Thailand's Padang Besar area in December 2013.

After they landed at the jungle camp, another Arakanese broker named Islamail gave him a mobile phone to talk with his family members back home and ask them to hand over Tk 2 lakh ransom money to one broker named Farukh in Teknaf.

"While handing over the money at a Rohingya camp in Cox's Bazar, my family learnt that Farukh is the brother of Ismail," he said.

Talking about the operation of trafficking boats, Thai officials told The Daily Star that they seized three modified fishing boats that were used to transport the Rohingyas and Bangladeshi to Thailand. Two of them belonged to Thai nationals while one to a Burmese man.

Souka, the Myanmar captain of a boat seized at Sinhai island in Pakan sub-district of Ranong on January 30 this year, told police that Thai national Channarong Klomklao hired him for transporting the smuggled people to Thai coasts.

Seven crew of the boat, who were also from Myanmar, were sent back to their country.

Meanwhile, the 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.

India 'creating instability'

Pak army chief accuses

PTI, Islamabad

In a veiled attack on India, Pakistan army chief General Raheel Sharif accused it of "creating instability" through ceasefire violations and supporting militancy in different areas of the country yesterday.

"The entire world endorses our security concerns. Ceasefire violations, blood-letting in Balochistan, Federally Administered Tribal Areas and Karachi manifest enemy's hostile intent," he said, without explicitly naming India.

"Pakistan has shown a willingness to cooperate with other nations for peace, but not at the expense of our national interests, sovereign rights and national pride," he said while addressing the Naval Academy passing out parade.

The army chief's remarks come three days after he said that "none should dare cast an evil eye on Pakistan". Pakistan was "ready to pay any price to protect our nationhood, safeguard interest, be it Kashmir, development of

new ports or exploitation of natural resources", the army in a statement quoted him as saying.

Sharif said that China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) had an enormous potential for transforming the lives of region's people.

He said Pakistan was "acutely aware of enemy campaigns and will defeat designs against it (CPEC)".

He said the CPEC with Gwadar Port as its catalyst will be built and developed as one of most strategic deep sea port in the region "at any cost whatsoever".

The army chief also said that the entire nation has expressed its resolve to eliminate the menace of terrorism.

The 'Operation Zarb-e-Azb' was delivering decisive results and terrorists were resorting to desperate actions as mark of their defeat.

He said the battle versus terrorism will not be won by armed forces alone and it was encouraging to see that the entire nation was pursuing this national effort with great sense of purpose.

Fakhrul taken to hospital

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

BNP acting secretary general Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir was admitted to a city hospital yesterday complying with a recent High Court order.

Around 2:00pm, Fakhrul was taken to Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University (BSMMU) from Kashimpur jail by an ambulance. He was admitted to the hospital's prison ward, Sayrul Kabir Khan, a staff of BNP chairperson's media wing, told The Daily Star.

On June 9, an HC bench directed the jail authorities to immediately admit Fakhrul, who is facing around 79 cases, to the BSMMU following a writ petition by his wife.

On May 5, the jail authorities had sent the BNP leader to the hospital following doctors' advice as he has been suffering from various ailments.

The hospital subsequently formed a six-member medical board to treat Fakhrul. But he was sent back to Kashimpur jail in Gazipur the same day as the board found the BNP leader was in a 'stable' condition.

Later, Fakhrul's wife Rahat Ara Begum filed the writ petition with the HC seeking its directives on the prison authorities to admit her husband to BSMMU or Birdem hospital for proper treatment.

MP's son sent to jail

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Using his clout, the accused would try to meddle in the investigation process as well, added the SI, also the investigating officer of the case filed with Ramna police on April 15.

After a four-day remand, investigators produced him before the court of Metropolitan Magistrate Asaduzzaman Nur yesterday, pleading that he be kept in jail as long as the investigation is on.

Granting the prayer, the magistrate ordered sending him to jail.

Meanwhile, State Minister for Home Affairs Asaduzzaman Khan Kamal told BBC Bangla Service yesterday, "We are yet to clearly know who had committed the crime."

"The investigation is on ... once the probe report is out we would know for sure when, how and where it happened."

Asked why the police delayed in disclosing the matter of Bakhtiar being involved in the killing, Kamal said, "Police did not try to protect anyone or cover up the incident. It just took them time to

figure out what had actually happened."

"The prime minister does not let anyone off the hook. Instant steps are being taken on allegations. It does not matter whether they are sons of ministers, MPs or relatives of ministers," he went on to say.

Bakhtiar fired his licensed pistol four to five times killing CNG-run auto-rickshaw driver Yakub Shikder and rickshaw-puller Abdul Hakim, in New Eskaton early April 14, detectives said.

He is involved with Jubo League, the youth front of the ruling Awami League. His lawmaker mother Pinu Khan is general secretary of Mahila Awami League.

Bakhtiar's three friends, who too are members of Dhaka city Jubo League, were with him at the time of the shooting, an investigator said.

Asked why they did not seek further remand, a DB official said they had already gleaned information they required regarding the killing and that they needed time to scrutinise the information.

"We would seek fresh remand when required," said the DB official, wishing not to be named.

Court sources said defence lawyer Kazi Nozibullah Hiru pleaded for his client's bail and also that medical treatment be provided to his client.

The court fixed June 16 for hearing the bail petition and ordered the jail authorities to provide him with medical treatment as per the jail code.

Bakhtiar, who was arrested on May 31, told investigators that he had gone to a local bar in the evening of April 13 and a party at Sonargaon Hotel later that night.

Returning drunk from Sonargaon around 1:30am, he was "feeling suffocated inside his car" stuck in a traffic jam near Dilu Road, investigators quoted him as saying. Lowering the glass of his car window, he fired four to five times, Bakhtiar told DB officials.

An investigator said they have sent Bakhtiar's pistol to the CID for ballistic test three to four days ago and expect a report in two weeks.

Dhaka for fair deal

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solution for the shared rivers.

She has conveyed this message to her Indian counterpart Narendra Modi during the latter's recent Dhaka visit.

According to a government high official, who attended the delegation-level talks between the two countries on June 6, Hasina raised the water sharing issue "very boldly and diplomatically" and told Modi that the bilateral ties could reach new heights if this particular issue was resolved.

The PM told Modi that Bangladesh expects India to settle the water sharing issues in a spirit of accommodation. She also laid emphasis on a comprehensive and coordinated management of the common rivers, the official told The Daily Star on Thursday.

In response, Modi termed water sharing a "humanitarian issue", indicating that he does not want to fight with the neighbours over this, which is a good message for Bangladesh, the official said.

According to diplomatic sources, Hasina urged the Indian premier for an early conclusion of the interim deal on the Teesta water sharing as agreed on by both the countries during Modi's predecessor Manmohan Singh's Dhaka visit in September 2011.

In the draft agreement, the water sharing ratio was kept blank but there was an "understanding" of keeping it 50-50, according to government sources.

"This means if you take 40 percent, we will take 40 percent, and the rest

will be kept for navigability. Now that means equal sharing," said a high official of the water resources ministry.

In the joint declaration titled "Notun Projonmo-Nayi Disha" on June 7, the last day of Modi's two-day Dhaka visit, the prime ministers noted that technical-level discussions were being held on various aspects relating to sharing of waters of the Manu, the Muhuri, the Khowai, the Gumti, the Dharla and the Dudhkumar rivers.

The PMs asked the officials concerned to take expeditious action to conclude the water sharing arrangements.

Modi said that deliberations were underway involving all stakeholders for the quickest possible conclusion of the interim deal on water sharing of the Teesta and the Feni rivers.