

Grand AL office now in Kushtia

STAR REPORT

The Awami League has got a grandiose party office in Kushtia with a lavish interior decoration, putting its central office to kind of shame.

The 9,860-square-foot office, which was opened Saturday and housed on Bangabandhu Market on NS Road in the town, has 18 rooms adorned with gorgeous furnishings. District AL president and general secretary have their separate rooms while the front organisations also have rooms. A total of 16 air-conditioners were installed in the office, built at the cost of around Tk 2.5 crore.

A mosaic of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and party Joint General Secretary Mahbubul Alam Hanif is at the entrance of the office.

There is also a large hall room in the office that would be rented out for commercial purposes. Internet facilities are available at the office while there is also a media cell. The office has separate prayer rooms for males and females, and a kitchen.

In contrast, the five-storied AL headquarters is quite shabby, outside and inside. The central office has around 50 rooms, of which three have air-conditioners -- one in Jubo League office, another in a hall room

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AL OFFICE, KUSHTIA

The gorgeous office of Kushtia district Awami League on the town's NS Road, top and bottom left. The office construction was allegedly funded with money from government relief and Food for Work programmes. The Kushtia office puts the AL central office in Dhaka, top right and bottom right, to shame. The photos were taken recently.



AL CENTRAL OFFICE, DHAKA

PHOTO: COURTESY



INSIDE AL OFFICE, KUSHTIA



INSIDE AL CENTRAL OFFICE, DHAKA



Hanif comes under fire

STAR REPORT

Awami League Joint General Secretary Mahbubul Alam Hanif came under fire from both his party high-ups and social media users following his remarks on Prof Abul Quasem Fazlul Huq, father of slain publisher Faisal Arefin Dipan.

Criticising the bereaved father for his stand that he wouldn't seek trial of his son's killers, Hanif on Sunday said Fazlul Huq perhaps believed in the political ideology of those who carried out the killing and had made such remarks because he didn't want the people of his party to stand trial.

Dipan, owner of Jagriti Prokashani, was hacked to death inside his office at Shabbagh in the capital on Saturday.

Hours after his comments, Hanif

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Rate of stunting

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group. It is produced by an independent expert group of 20 individuals together with 70 additional authors from around the globe.

The report, which had a global launch in New York recently, will be released officially at a programme in Dhaka today.

Speaking to the media at a pre-launch in the capital yesterday, Lawrence Haddad, one of the GNR lead authors and IFPRI senior research fellow, said stunting rate is coming down fast in Bangladesh but the pace can be even faster provided the country invests more on nutrition.

The civil society needs to exert pressure on the government to this end, said Haddad.

"If Ghana can reduce stunting to 19 percent, Bangladesh can do it as well. President Lula [da Silva] left a legacy in the fight against stunting in Brazil. Bangladesh can fight malnutrition too," hoped Haddad.

He praised Bangladesh's success in limiting open defecation below five percent while it is as high as over 40 percent in India.

It is to the credit of Bangladesh that it has been able to draw its development partners on board for investing in improving the nutrition level, he said.

Bangladesh needs to invest more to gather pace in the fight against malnutrition, as it is a densely populated country, and challenges are bigger here than in many other developing nations, said Haddad.

Bangladesh is on track in two of the eight indicators of nutrition situation -- under-5 stunting and overweight.

The six other nutrition indicators where Bangladesh's performance has not been impressive are -- wasting (underweight for height), anaemia in women, exclusive breast feeding, adult overweight, obesity and diabetes.

In Bangladesh, wasting remains high at 14 percent, far above the global target of five percent.

The report shows that when stunting and wasting are combined, "a minority of Bangladeshi under-5 children escape malnutrition."

"And bubbling under is the very real threat of growing levels of adult overweight and obesity, which although

still at a relatively low levels (26%), are increasing fast."

Haddad said 44 percent of women in Bangladesh are still anaemic, and their rice-centric dietary habit and deficiency of protein, vitamin and micronutrients have correlation with this high degree of anaemia.

He identified workplace incompatibility as a reason for Bangladesh's slide in terms of exclusive breastfeeding.

Exclusive breastfeeding refers to the percentage of children -- aged below six months -- who are fed only breast milk.

The rate was well over 60 percent in Bangladesh but has now fallen below 50 percent with the spread of urbanisation and the increase in women's participation in formal workforce, Haddad said.

Talking to The Daily Star, Prof Nazma Shaheen, who teaches nutrition and food science at Dhaka University, said it is a good thing that working mothers in public sector now enjoy six-month maternity leave, which give them the opportunity to breastfeed their babies.

She said it must be ensured that women working in the private sector also get this facility.

Dr Akhter Ahmed, IFPRI Chief of Party in Bangladesh, told this correspondent that malnutrition and childhood stunting in the country can be brought down further by incorporating nutrition education in different social safety net programmes (SSNPs).

An IFPRI study has found that mere transfer of food or cash under the SSNPs would not make much difference in terms of improving people's nutrition level unless these programmes were tagged with nutrition behaviour change communication (BCC).

Bangladesh spends \$2.5 billion (2.8 percent of its GDP) on SSNPs a year.

Dr Akhter praised the government's policy support, as Bangladesh has become the first country in the world to develop and release three zinc-enriched rice varieties, and also the first country in South Asia to fortify cooking oil with vitamin-A.

These would help improve the state of nutrition in the country, he hoped.

People in Bangladesh get from rice 71 percent of their calorie intake, 54 percent of protein intake and 40 percent of zinc intake.

Truth be damned

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investigators might be misdirected and the whole process might go the wrong way.

Our leaders are quick to cite examples of killings in other parts of the world to prove that it is not uncommon for whatever is happening here. But nowhere in the world do leaders, in power and outside, start pointing fingers from the word "go" and identify the perpetrators -- almost invariably belonging to the other side -- long before the investigation is complete, sometimes before it even starts. The fact is, except in a few cases, most of the investigations into the recent murders by extremists have seen no headway. The culture of finger pointing is corroding all credibility of our investigative process.

Except for making claims of progress, which in many cases prove to be inaccurate, there is nothing our ministers have done to create a sense of confidence among the people who are totally perplexed and passing their days in considerable anxiety.

As our leaders play the Blame Game, the fundamentals of Bangladesh as a state, Bengali as a culture and Bengalis as a people with a long tradition of multiculturalism and tolerance, are being chipped away by a group out to destroy the country created through our Liberation War.

As a freedom fighter, as a journalist and as a proud citizen of the country, I

have never considered that "free-thinking" will ever be deemed a "crime" by anybody in independent Bangladesh, however fanatical or extreme his thoughts might be. Yes, we had killing due to communalism, we even had freedom fighters massacred by the Pakistanis in 1971 just for wanting freedom for our homeland. Even then nobody was killed just for "free-thinking".

Our politicians are so blinded by their own narrow worldview that they fail to see the real meaning and the wider implications of these killings. If the ability to "think" distinguishes humans from all others animals, then it is that unique ability that is being destroyed. Anybody with the slightest notion of what our civilisation has been and what it is all about, must know that thought and creativity lies at the root of all achievements big or small. It has been the ability for thoughtful creativity that has been singularly responsible for all human achievements.

The rights to question, to differ, to dissent, to protest, are the foundational RIGHTS that civilisation stands on. The right to question was the key to all new inventions. The right to differ led to the building of new institutions, the right to dissent led to the establishment of individual and collective rights and the right to protest led to the creation of independent nations and states. All these rights

became possible only when the right to "think freely" was established as a philosophical concept. All great men of history, including all prophets of all religions, rose above others by "thinking" differently than the rest and led humanity towards greater advancements in every field.

If the ultimate slavery is that of the mind then it is such enslavement that these killers want for us. They are finding us "guilty" of exercising the very quality that makes human existence such a beautiful experience -- our capacity to be creative. This is an assault on everything that we have cherished and spent our whole life trying to achieve. And so they must be challenged and destroyed before they are able to destroy us.

The fundamental truth here is that religious doctrines have been horribly distorted to a point where death is prescribed for those who differ from that dogma. The obvious action here is to bring out the true meaning of religion and expose the distortions that are proving to be so lethal. This is the task that now lies before us.

For those of us who support the government, finding no faults within and blaming everything on the "other" and on conspirators both internal and external, may give us some sense of momentary satisfaction but that could very well be a pyrrhic victory at best. The danger is that it distracts us from looking into other

causes closer at home and where the real causes for the malaise may lie in wait.

And anybody who might find satisfaction at the obvious discomfiture in which the government now finds itself and blame it for everything that has gone wrong, will make the fatal mistake of considering the present threat to our way of life as trivial and suffer from the false belief that once power comes their way they will be able to fix things and drive extremism back. Things don't usually happen that way. Extremism, when allowed to grow beyond a point, becomes the many-headed monster that devours everything in its path, including those who might have cooled it once. The bell also tolls for thee.

If there ever was a moment to take a step back and reflect on where we are, what has brought us to this pass, what are the mistakes we made in the past, what wrong turns did we take and what has caused the sudden change of circumstances, that moment is now. The recent killings are not that of individuals but of ideals, of values, and of a way of life that embraces diversity and dissent. It is the way for which millions of martyrs laid down their lives.

Only looking the truth in the eyes will help us overcome this situation. We have to search for that truth together. Otherwise, the blame game will devour us all.

UN for probe

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publisher Faisal Arefin Dipan and the continued violence against the online community.

He said the killing must be condemned at all levels of political and religious leadership in order to prevent further attacks. "The perpetrators must also be brought to justice and the authorities need to provide immediate protection to citizens thought to be at risk," he said.

CPJ CONDEMNS ATTACK ON PUBLISHERS

The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) denounced two attacks in Dhaka

on Saturday that killed publisher Faisal Arefin Dipan and injured another publisher Ahmedur Rashid Chowdhury Tutul.

Their publishing houses -- Jagriti and Shuddhoswar -- published a number of books written by slain Bangladeshi-American blogger-writer Avijit Roy.

"The extreme violence against independent voices in Bangladesh has extended to those who give these voices a platform," said CPJ's Asia Programme Research Associate Sumit Galhotra, according to a CPJ news alert issued in New York on

November 2.

"We call on Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to take a clear, bold stance against the rising tide of extremism in the country and to bring the perpetrators behind these attacks to justice," he added.

On Saturday, two writers-bloggers Tareq Rahim and Ranadipam Basu were also injured in one of the attacks at Shuddhoswar's Lalmatia office.

Avijit, who was hacked to death in Dhaka in February, is one of four bloggers murdered in the country this year.

The killing of bloggers in Bangladesh propelled the country onto Global Impunity Index of CPJ.

Bangladesh ranked 12th on CPJ's 2015 Impunity Index published on October 8, which spotlights countries where journalists are murdered and their killers go unpunished.

A wave of violence against bloggers has landed Bangladesh back onto the index for the first time since 2011.

Dipan was stabbed to death at his office in the capital's Shabbagh Aziz Super Market on Saturday after unknown assailants critically injured Tutul the same day.

Deal with KL

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recruitment provisions of G2G Plus. The two sides agreed to sign a memorandum of understanding on the issue.

"We will place the draft of the final agreement before the cabinet. We are hopeful about signing the MoU by this month," added the secretary.

He said a worker would get a minimum monthly salary of MR 900 (Tk 17,000) plus overtime and free accommodation.

Currently, Bangladeshi workers go to Malaysia under the G2G system which was introduced in November 2012. Some 10,000 workers went to the Southeast Asian country since then, but all of them landed jobs in the plantation sector, according to Bangladesh Bureau of Manpower Employment and Training.

Officials at the expatriates welfare ministry said the recruitment has been slow over the years as Malaysia didn't open its job markets in construction and services sectors.

Another Malaysian delegation visited Dhaka in September to join the

sixth meeting of the Joint Working Committee on G2G. The team at that meeting placed the new G2G Plus system.

Under the new system, Malaysia will open its construction, manufacturing and services sectors for Bangladeshi workers, officials said.

According to media reports, the Malaysian authorities planned to appoint an outsourcing company to manage the recruitment of Bangladeshi workers.

However, Malaysian Deputy Prime Minister Ahmad Zahid Hamidi said their government didn't appoint any outsourcing company for this purpose, a Malaysian daily reported yesterday.

A Bangladeshi official who was present at yesterday's meeting said they didn't place the issues of salary, overtime, travel expenses and other costs in the meeting as those were already covered by the current G2G deal, she added.

The workers, she said, would have to pay for their one-way air fare.

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Md Maruf Hossain denied three bail pleas moved by the BNP leader saying he had no jurisdiction as the Supreme Court did not grant Fakhruil bail in the cases.

The court, however, directed the prison authorities to consider his physical condition and provide him with proper treatment.

On Monday, the SC ordered Fakhruil to surrender before a lower court concerned by yesterday after hearing three separate petitions filed by him seeking an extension of his order that granted him bail in the cases.

Complying, Fakhruil appeared before the court around 3:00pm yesterday and moved three separate petitions over the three arson and vandalism cases lodged with Paltan police in the capital on January 4, 5 and 6.

During yesterday's hearing, Fakhruil's lawyer Khandker Mahbub Hossain told the court that his client had been suffering from different ailments, and he would go abroad on November 24 for checkups. So, he should be given bail,

considering his illness.

On the other hand, Metropolitan Public Prosecutor Abdullah Abu opposed the defence pleas, saying the SC did not grant Fakhruil bail in the cases. So, the lower court had no jurisdiction to grant him bail.

Upset by the court's order, pro-BNP lawyers brought out a procession on the court premises and chanted slogans, demanding his immediate release.

Following three bail petitions filed by Fakhruil, the HC on June 21 gave him ad interim bail in the cases and also issued three separate rules upon the government to explain as to why he should not be released on regular bail in the cases.

On July 13, the SC granted a six-week bail to the BNP leader on medical grounds, clearing the way for his release from jail. The apex court also directed him to surrender before a lower court concerned after the six weeks.

On August 31, the SC extended the bail order for six more weeks. On October 6, it further extended till November 2 its bail order for Fakhruil on

medical grounds in the cases.

Of the three cases, the first one accuses Fakhruil and 28 others of vandalising and torching a bus at Gুলستان on January 4.

The second case alleged that Fakhruil and 49 other BNP leaders and activists brought out a procession and later set fire to a motorbike of a policeman at Fakirapool on January 5.

According to the third case statement, a BRTC bus was torched near Bangabandhu National Stadium in Paltan on January 6 by a group of BNP leaders and activists, including Fakhruil.

Except the three cases, Fakhruil, who stands accused in 89 cases, has got bail from the HC and lower courts in other cases.

The BNP leader was first sent to jail on May 16, 2012, after his surrender before another Dhaka court in connection with a case filed for torching a vehicle in front of the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) on April 29 that year.

BNP'S REACTION

BNP yesterday warned the government that people would hold it responsible if Fakhruil's physical condition was at risk due to his imprisonment.

"He [Fakhruil] has been suffering from different ailments, including blockage in carotid artery of his neck. He was supposed to go to Singapore for follow-up treatment on November 24," said BNP Spokesperson Asaduzzaman Ripon while addressing a briefing at the party's Nayapaltan central office last evening.

"We are very much concerned that a Dhaka court sent him [Fakhruil] to jail after he had surrendered before it, complying with the Supreme Court directive," the BNP spokesman added.

He said Fakhruil had "fainted" several times and also lost "16 kilogram weights" during his six months' stay in jail since January 6.

"The opposition party is an important institution in a democratic process. But the government has been engaged in destroying this institution," Ripon observed.