

They sing songs to save land

MINTU DESHWARA, Habiganj

Tea garden workers in the district's Chandpur Tea Estate yesterday turned to music to mobilise support for their demonstration against the setting up of a Special Economic Zone (SEZ) there.

Workers from Chandpur, Begumkhan and Jualbhang tea estates in Chunarughat upazila gathered at Chandpur Tea Estate for a rally in the morning. They also stayed away from work for two hours for the sixth straight day.

Members of Pratik Theatre, a cultural platform of workers, sang patriotic and inspirational numbers, including *Je matir buke ghumiye ache lokkho mukti mana, O lo jhingful ghontata kolijai mare bari, and Ki sunabo cha sramiker gan*, at the rally.

Political parties and rights activists warned that the government's decision to build the SEZ on hundreds of acres of arable land would threaten the livelihood of thousands of workers and their families. Chandpur Tea Estate has some 16,000 workers, including 1,664 permanent ones.

Workers also formed a human chain there under the banner of Chandpur Bhumi Rakkhya Committee.

Speaking at the rally, President of Pratik Theatre Sunil Biswas said the

establishment of the economic zone would lead to eviction of thousands of workers.

The decision of building the SEZ would push many workers towards death, said Nripen Paul, member secretary of Chandpur Bhumi Rakkhya Committee. The workers were not even consulted with on the issue, he added.

Talking to The Daily Star, rights activist Kallol Mustafa said foreign investment was being invited there to "exploit cheap labour".

He also claimed that the government authorities were not following international labour laws in implementing the proposed project.

On Wednesday, eleven eminent citizens of the country called upon the government to hold open consultations with tea workers before setting up the economic zone on 511 acres of agricultural land at Chandpur Tea Estate.

In a statement, they said they were deeply concerned that a government authority is trying to hurriedly implement the decision to establish the economic zone.

Of the estate's 3,951 acres of land, 951 acres were arable land, which had been cultivated by tea workers of the area for the last 150 years, said the signatories.



For the sixth day, workers of several tea estates gather at Chandpur Tea Garden in Chunarughat of Habiganj protesting plans for a special economic zone. The SEZ is planned on a land they have been using for rice farming for nearly a century and a half.

PHOTO: MINTU DESHWARA

JMB regroups without watch

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were being harassed by Sunni Muslims, Khatme Nabuwat, Ahle Hadith Andolon Bangladesh, and Jamaat-e-Islami men. But they were never attacked by any militant outfit before.

"Whoever is involved [in Friday's attack], it is part of a bigger plan and we don't think any local is involved," Salauddin added.

Saiful Islam, president of Ahmadiyya Muslim Jamaat at Sayedpur Chakpara and Bagmara, said they had had disputes with local Ahle Hadith men, particularly with the followers of Asadullah Al Galib's Ahle Hadith Andolon Bangladesh (Ahab) and Jamaat-e-Islami over ideologies.

"But those disputes were never so hostile to trigger a suicide bomb attack," he said.

Friday's attack on the Ahmadiyya mosque that claimed the life of the suicide bomber and injured three

Ahmadiyya Muslims sparked fresh panic in the upazila.

In Bagmara, executed militant kingpin Siddikul Islam Bangla Bhai emerged in April 2004 with vigilante operations of his banned outfit Jagrata Muslim Janata Bangladesh (JMB) that later merged with another executed militant kingpin Shaekh Abdur Rahman's Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB).

JMB and JMB killed at least 22 people and maimed hundred others in their four-month-long activity in Bagmara of Rajshahi, Atrai of Naogaon, and Naldanga of Natore until June of 2004, according to The Daily Star reports.

Mohammad Manik, a victim of torture by JMB men, said, "We informed the police many times that the local militants were holding secret meetings at local mosques. They were regrouping and outsiders were joining

them, but the police never paid heed."

"Rather, they [police] sometimes asked us why we're so interested in the militants," alleged Manik, who is also the organising secretary of Jhikra union unit of Awami League.

Wishing anonymity, another torture victim said, "We saw hundreds of firearms at the hands of JMB and JMB militants who enjoyed the support of the state during the BNP-Jamaat rule. Where did the weapons go? We saw those men roaming openly around the villages."

Widow of a victim killed by JMB men at Sarkutia said JMB militants threatened them that if the BNP-Jamaat comes to power again, they would have to face dire consequences.

This correspondent managed to talk to a former JMB operative whose relatives were in high positions in the outfit. He claimed that the JMB had become more powerful than ever as

some other religious fanatics have joined them.

He also claimed that the JMB had a team of experts in information technology.

Talking to The Daily Star, Rajshahi Additional Deputy Inspector General Abdullah Al Mahmud, who served as the district's superintendent of police in post-JMB period, said he would look into whether there was any police negligence.

He said the police now gathered accounts of all minority groups in northern districts. "We developed regular contacts with the group leaders and continuously alerting them about attacks," he said.

"But it is difficult to ensure door-to-door security," he said, adding that the police had asked the minority groups to develop a security network of their own and call the police whenever necessary.

It's suicide bombing

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Three devotees were wounded in the attack. The injured -- Moyer Uddin Talukdar, 50, his brother Shaheb Ali Talukdar, 35, and Nayan, 11 -- were admitted to Rajshahi Medical College Hospital (RMCH).

The bomber, yet to be identified, was wearing an explosives vest and his left wrist was blown off and chest badly damaged in the blast, said Dr Enamul Haque, who performed the autopsy.

"We also found numerous splinters inside his abdomen and other parts of this body," said the lecturer of forensic department at the RMCH.

"It is clear that he was carrying the bomb on his left hand when it detonated," he added.

The autopsy findings were corroborated by Abdullah Al Mahmud, additional deputy inspector general of Rajshahi range police.

He said the bomb vest, worn underneath the attacker's T-shirt, had electric circuits, switches, batteries and wires attached to it.

"Signs are clearly there that it was a suicide attack. But we need some more time to be fully sure about that," he told The Daily Star.

Police suspect the bomber had an accomplice with him during the attack. The other man was "a bit aged" and was wearing jeans and jacket and fled the scene after the blast, said Motiar Rahman, officer-in-charge of Bagmara Police Station.

The Criminal Investigation Department, the Police Bureau of Investigation, the Detective Branch of police and the Rapid Action Battalion were investigating the attack.

In recent months, two foreigners have been killed, two Christian clergymen including an Italian priest attacked and injured, and a Shia Muslim gathering, two Hindu temples and at least one mosque of Bangladesh Navy have come under bomb attacks.

The JMB, which started its militant activities in Bagmara in 2004, might have been behind Friday's attack, said OC Motiar. "But we are yet to ascertain it."

However, SITE Intelligence Group, which monitors terror activities globally, says that the IS took credit for the attack.

In a communique distributed on Twitter and Telegram yesterday, the group identified the bomber as Abu al-Fida' al-Benghali, and said he detonated his explosives belt at a "temple"



Police and reporters surround the body of the suicide bomber at the Ahmadiyya mosque in Bagmara, Rajshahi, on Friday.

PHOTO: STAR

of the "polytheist Qadiani sect", a derogatory term for Ahmadiyyas.

HOW IT HAPPENED

Injured Shaheb Ali knew pretty much all the fellow Ahmadiyyas in Sayedpur Chalkpara village, some 55km from Rajshahi city.

Before the prayers began, he spotted an unknown face inside the mosque.

"When I asked him who he was, he identified himself as a student of Rajshahi Polytechnic Institute. He also said he was originally from Mohonpur upazila [of Rajshahi]", Shaheb Ali told this correspondent at the RMCH.

"The youth sat in the second row of the devotees and I asked him to fill a blank space beside me in the first row." "During the second rakat of the prayer, I saw him bringing out something from his pocket. The bomb exploded right then and I fell unconscious."

There were some 70 people, including 30 women, offering their prayers in three rows at the time of the blast, said Shaheb Ali.

WHAT POLICE HAVE DONE SO FAR

Police yesterday filed a case against the two unknown assailants in connection with the incident.

As of yesterday evening, police have collected forensic evidence from the spot and took court's permission to send the blood sample, nails and finger print of the bomber to the CID lab in Dhaka for tests to identify the bomber.

"We will send them to Dhaka

tomorrow (today)," the Bagmara OC said last night.

However, the police did not go to Rajshahi Polytechnic Institute to check whether the suicide attacker indeed was a student of the institute.

"We came to know through the media that he was a student of ours," Ali Akbar Khan, vice-principal of the institute, said when contacted.

"We also heard that detectives would come with photos and other details to identify the dead. We waited till [yesterday] afternoon with all the student records but none came," he added.

Leaders of the Ahmadiyya community there, meanwhile, claimed the law enforcers picked up three of their members after the incident.

Two of them were released yesterday afternoon but they were yet to know the whereabouts of Hafez Abu Sayeed, who was from Bakshibazar in Dhaka and had been staying at the mosque for last one month for teaching the religious scriptures to Ahmadiyya children.

However, Bagmara OC Motiar said they did not arrest anyone but picked up some people to collect information about the attack.

THEY WERE ALERTED BEFOREHAND

Saiful Islam, president of Ahmadiyya Muslim Community in Bagmara and imam of the mosque, said police had earlier warned them several times about possible attacks.

The central unit of Ahmadiyya

Muslim Jamaat too had asked them for ensuring security of the mosque during prayers.

"So, we employed a guard at the mosque. Moyer Uddin Talukdar, who was injured in the attack, was the security guard. It was his duty to inquire about any unknown person at the mosque," Saiful added.

Moyer Uddin said had noticed two unfamiliar youths inside the mosque.

"But I didn't inquire about their identities as I saw them speaking to the others inside the mosque. I thought they must have come with someone from our community."

UNSAFE, AFRAID

"The overall violent situation, including attacks on the establishments belonging to different religious minorities, is alarming," said Ahmad Tabshir Choudhury, external affairs and public relations secretary of Ahmadiyya Muslim Jamaat, Bangladesh.

There are around one lakh Ahmadiyyas in the country and the number of their mosques is 175, according to him.

"We have many mosques in remote areas. It is not possible for us to arrange adequate security for all of those on our own," he said, adding that they were seeking the local administrations' help in this.

A FREQUENT TARGET

The Ahmadiyyas in Bangladesh have been subjected to religious persecution for over two decades.

The first major attack came on them in October 1992 when Jamaat-e-Islami men stormed the Bakshibazar head office of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Jamaat and vandalised it, said Abdul Awwal, missionary-in-charge of the organisation.

The worst attack was carried out in October 1999 when a time-bomb was detonated inside an Ahmadiyya mosque in Khulna.

"Seven people were killed and scores others injured in the attack," he said.

Between 2003 and 2006, Khatme Nabuwat men either carried out or attempted 36 attacks on the Ahmadiyyas in different districts, he said.

"In January 2004, the then BNP-led government banned all publication of our organisation."

Three attacks on the Ahmadiyyas took place in Tangail in 2010.

"But Friday's incident is the biggest in recent time," Awwal added.

YEAR FULL OF ATTACKS

FROM PAGE 1

The year 2015 saw a sudden rise in killings and attacks on individuals, different religious groups, freethinkers, secular bloggers and book publishers. At least five bloggers and publishers were killed by suspected Islamist militants while eight others were killed in several attacks on different religious sects.

Attacks were carried out on Hindu and Christian religious groups while different Muslim sects like the Shia, and the Ahmadiyya in addition to the Bahai communities, also came under the deadly attacks allegedly by religious fanatics. Muslims who believed in Sufism and revered mazars and shrines also faced the wrath of fanatics.

Text messages started to come in carrying ominous messages. Eminent personalities, bloggers, religious personalities continuously got death threats in SMSs and by other means while alleged militants killed eight people during a bank robbery. The country was also rocked by the killing of two foreign nationals, something completely new in Bangladesh, and then there were the killings of two policemen at different check posts.

ATTACKS CONTINUE

DECEMBER 25

At least one person was killed and three others were injured in a bomb attack at a mosque of Ahmadiyya Muslim community during Juma prayer in Bagmara upazila of Rajshahi.

DECEMBER 18

Explosion at a mosque inside Bangladesh Navy's Issa Khan Base in Chittagong after Juma prayers, left five to six people injured.

DECEMBER 10

Unidentified gunmen hurled a crude bomb inside a Hindu temple (ISKCON Temple) in Bahuchi village in Kaharol upazila in Dinajpur and opened fire at its entrance, injuring two people.

DECEMBER 5

At least six people were injured next to the 18th century Kantaji Mandir in Kaharol upazila of Dinajpur when a bomb went off amidst spectators of a jatra (folk theatre) show, during a month-long Hindu festival known as raasburnima mela.

NOVEMBER 30

Birendranath Roy, president of the ISKCON Temple in Chirirbandar Upazila in Dinajpur was shot and injured by an unknown gang at Ranirbandar area.

NOVEMBER 27

Armed assailants stormed a Shia mosque in Shibganj upazila of Bogra and opened fire on praying people, killing the muezzin of the mosque-- Moazzem Hossain-- and injuring three others.

NOVEMBER 18

An Italian doctor and pastor at a Dinajpur church-- Piero Parolari-- was injured in a gun attack by unknown assailants in Dinajpur town.

NOVEMBER 12

Unidentified criminals hacked Md Hasnayan, a khadem of a mazar at Hatikhana in Saidpur municipality area in Nilphamari.

NOVEMBER 10

A man attacked a member of military police with a sharp weapon at a check post of Dhaka Cantonment in the capital's Kachukhet area.

NOVEMBER 10

Unidentified criminals hacked to death a mazar khadem-- Rahamat Ali-- in Choita intersection area under Kaunia upazila in Rangpur.

NOVEMBER 11

A prison guard of Faridpur district jail, Asaduzzaman, was attacked with a razor in Faridpur while on official duty.

NOVEMBER 08

Miscreants shot and injured Ruhul Amin, director of Bahai Centre, Rangpur, and employee of Rangpur Medical College Hospital, at the Ideal intersection in Rangpur city on his way to his office.

NOVEMBER 4

Unknown assailants hacked to death a police constable Mukul Hossain and critically injured his colleague Nur-e-Alam at a check post on Dhaka-Tangail highway in Ashulia, a outskirts of Dhaka city.

OCTOBER 31

In a synchronised attack on publishers of slain secularist writer-blogger Avijit Roy,

unknown assailants hacked to death Faisal Arefin Dipan of Jagriti Prokashani and critically injured Shuddhoswar's Ahmedur Rashid Tutul. Two other bloggers-- Ranadipam Basu and Tareque Rahim--also came under machete attacks at the Lalmatia office of Shuddhoswar.

OCTOBER 24

Two men were killed and scores were injured in bomb attack on gathered people in front of the Hussaini Dalan, a Shia centre in old Dhaka the day before Ashura.

OCTOBER 22

Assistant sub-inspector of police Ibrahim Mollah was stabbed to death by a youth at a check point at the capital's Gabtoli when a police team was searching the young man's bag.

OCTOBER 5

A church pastor-- Luke Sarkar--survived an attempt on his life when three unidentified youths slashed his throat at his house in Ishwardi upazila of Pabna.

OCTOBER 5

PDB Ex-chairman Muhammad Khazir Khan, who ran a Khankah Sharif, was murdered at his Madhya Badda house in Dhaka.

OCTOBER 3

Japanese national Hoshi Kunio was shot dead by unidentified assailants when he was going to his farm at Alutari in Kaunia upazila in Rangpur.

SEPTEMBER 28

Italian national Cesare Tavella was shot dead by armed criminals in the capital's Gulshan diplomatic zone.

SEPTEMBER 4

A pir--Rahamat Ullah, popularly known as Lyangta Fakir and his assistant-- Khadem Abdul Kader --were brutally murdered by an assailant inside his shrine in Bangla Bazar area of Chittagong city.

AUGUST 7

Blogger and Gonojagoron Mancha activist Niladri Chattopadhyay Niloy was hacked to death inside his Goran house in the capital in broad daylight.

MAY 12

Blogger Ananta Bijoy Das, known for advocating science and secularism, was viciously hacked to death by a group of masked men at Subit Bazar in Sylhet city.

APRIL 2

Alleged militants shot seven people dead and injured at least 25 others in Bangladesh Commerce Bank Ltd in Ashulia on the outskirts of the capital before escaping with Tk 35 lakh.

A mob captured and beat one of the robbers to death and an injured died later of his wounds.

MARCH 30

Blogger and online activist Oyasiquar Rahman Babu was hacked to death in broad daylight by three cleaver-wielding youths in the capital's Tejgaon Industrial area.

FEBRUARY 26

Writer and blogger Avijit Roy was hacked to death and his wife Rafida Ahmed Banna was badly injured on Dhaka University campus after the couple came out of the Ekushey Boi Mela.