



A bus after the pile-ups on Bangabandhu Bridge on the Jamuna river. Dense fog, coupled with reckless driving, caused six accidents on and near the bridge yesterday morning.

PHOTO: MIRZA SHAKIL

Crazy driving

FROM PAGE 1

Sohel Rana, 35, and Ruhul Amin, 26.

Land Minister Shamsur Rahman Sherif's son Sharif Rana, 41, was in the microbus. He was suffering from a heart disease and was going to Dhaka for treatment.

Slightly injured Rana was taken to Tangail Medical College Hospital around 11:30am but doctors declared him dead on arrival. He reportedly died of cardiac arrest.

After the first pile-up, the two north lanes of the bridge were closed and a contraflow (lane reversal) was set up on the south lanes to keep operational the bridge that connects Dhaka to the north.

An ambulance heading towards Sirajganj had then rear ended a truck on the bridge.

The second pile-up happened around 9:45am just a few yards away from the first pile-up. A bus heading for Dhaka slammed into a timber-laden truck ahead of it at speed and then several more vehicles piled on to them.

A bus passenger, aged around 40, died on the spot and 10 others were injured.

On information, rescuers from Bangladesh Bridge Authorities, Bangabandhu Cantonment, Fire Service and Civil Defence from Sirajganj and police from Bangabandhu Bridge East Police Station went to the spots, rescued the injured people, and took them to Tangail Medical College Hospital and Sirajganj Sadar Hospital.

Monira Sultana, additional deputy commissioner of Tangail, who supervised the rescue operations on the bridge yesterday, told The Daily Star that dense fog was the main reason behind the series of accidents.

"Reckless driving and lack of fog lamps on several vehicles were also to blame," she said.

A huge tailback formed on both sides of the bridge after the two pile-ups as the bridge had to be closed.

Police and army men removed the wreckage and cleared the bridge for vehicular movements around 11:30am.

Meanwhile, a pickup truck of Bangabandhu Bridge West Police Station, which was going to the accident spots with rescuers, collided with a pickup truck of the fire brigade, also carrying rescuers, on the west end approach road of the bridge around 9:30am, reports our correspondent in Pabna.

At least six people, including a policeman and two fire fighters, were injured, police said.

Four reporters travelling on two motorbikes from the west end were injured when they were going to the accident spots. They had lost control of their bikes and rammed a stationary truck on the bridge, said Sirajganj-based journalist Shukanta Sen.

The injured were Rifat Rahman, 35, reporter of Masranga TV channel, Rinku Kundu, reporter of Somoy Television, and their camerapersons Nazmul and Ashraf.

They were admitted to Sirajganj General Hospital.

A few kilometres east of the bridge at Boilla near Tangail town, motorbike rider Anwar Hossain, 35, was run over by an

earth laden truck around 11:00am.

MINISTER'S SON

Hirok Hasanur Rahman Sharif Rana, 41, was the fourth son of the land minister. He was going to a private hospital in Dhaka with his wife Naznin Akter Shima.

Mohammad Akhtaruzzaman, officer-in-charge of Bangabandhu Bridge East Police Station, said in the first pile-up, in which Rana's vehicle was involved, Rana received minor injuries. He had gotten out of the vehicle and had looked around for a bit standing on the bridge, the OC claimed.

He then went to the nearby Elenga Resort and rested there for sometime but he started feeling sick.

Rana was rushed to the Tangail Medical College Hospital where doctors declared him dead on arrival, the OC added.

His body was taken to his home in Ishwardi in the afternoon.

Sharif Russel, elder brother of Rana, said Rana had lost his only daughter a few months ago.

Land Minister Shamsur Rahman Sherif said, "I am so unlucky that I have to carry the body of my son..."

Road crashes

FROM PAGE 1

was prepared on the basis of news published in 10 national and six local dailies.

"As many as 6,581 road crashes were reported in the newspapers [But] around 40 percent of the total accidents don't get media coverage at all, according to our assessment," said Mozammel Hoque Chowdhury, secretary general of the non-government platform.

Of the accidents, 56 percent took place on the highways, 23 percent in urban areas and 21 percent in rural area, the report says.

Around 60 percent of the victims, who were killed in urban areas, were pedestrians.

It also claims that around 3 lakh unfit vehicles and 10 lakh locally made three-wheelers like Nasiman, Kariman, Bhatbhati and easy-bikes, all illegal, were mainly responsible for the road accidents.

Overtaking, exceeding speed limits, overloading, disregarding traffic rules, engineering faults in road constructions, reckless driving, using head-phones while driving and consuming drugs before driving were also held responsible for the accidents.

The association also came up with a set of recommendations to curb road accidents.

The suggestions include utilising the media for raising public awareness about traffic rules, removing makeshift kitchen markets and shops located close to highways, providing professional training to drivers, and strengthening law enforcement to stop unfit vehicles from plying the roads and highways.

The report also recommends that separate lanes be constructed for slow-moving vehicles on highways and trauma centres be set up near highways to provide immediate care to accident victims.

Losers saw him as trump card

FROM PAGE 1

the Liberation War in 1971.

His physical presence in newborn Bangladesh, on the other hand, was desperately needed for order and unity in the war-torn land.

People were eagerly waiting for the return of Mujib kept in a solitary confinement in West Pakistan after his arrest following the military crackdown on unarmed Bangalis on the night of March 25.

Pakistan President General Yahya Khan had wanted to use Bangabandhu as a trump card to reach a political settlement foreseeing imminent defeat in the war he had unleashed on unarmed Bangalis in 1971.

He had sketched a scenario for a political settlement through promulgation of a constitution in middle of December, convening the National Assembly on December 27 and transfer of power "several weeks" later.

In conversations with the US ambassador in Pakistan in October and early November of 1971, Yahya had told the diplomat about his contemplations, according to declassified documents of the US Department of State.

On November 15, 1971 Pakistan Foreign Secretary Sultan Khan had met Henry Kissinger, assistant to President Richard Nixon, at Washington and discussed about the political settlement.

He said there had been considerable interest in how to launch a political process which in some way involved Mujibur Rahman within the constraints limiting President Yahya.

Kissinger said he personally felt that Mujib would "be devoured by the process" in Calcutta if he were released. But as of now, he is perceived by many to be central to a solution, he said, according to a declassified memorandum of the meeting.

The US administration was willing to assist Yahya to have a political settlement. It also focused on Mujib to achieve the goals.

On October 30 the Department of State sent a telegram to Ambassador Farland asking him to elicit response from General Yahya on some crucial issues. This move was taken keeping the focus on Indira Gandhi's coming visit to the USA on November 4.

"Over all objective of your talk [with Yahya] is elicit maximum Pakistani package which can be used during talks with Mrs. Gandhi here in urging India restrain and reciprocal de-escalation," said the declassified telegram.

The US government also advised General Yahya not to allow publication of the full proceedings of Bangabandhu's trial by a military court in Pakistan.

"We understand sensitivities and only note that, right or wrong, he [Mujib] seems to have become major symbol so at minimum it would seem necessary to success any political process to avoid any step such as publishing full transcript Mujib trial which would inflame Bengali opinion," read the telegram.

Whether Yahya can use Mujib as "trump card" as he put it at some point we must leave entirely to his judgment, said the telegram.

Yahya was desperate to punish Mujib labeling him an enemy of Pakistan. The prospect of an imminent defeat helped change his mind to seek a political process with Mujib in it.

British writer and historian Robert Payne writes in his book Massacre that

in July Yahya said his generals were putting pressure on him for holding trial of Mujib in military tribunal and to sentence him to death. "I am agreed with them and the trial will begin soon," Payne writes.

Yahya announced in a televised address to the nation on August 3 that Mujib would be tried.

A day before, a press note issued by the office of the chief martial law administrator announced Mujib had waged war against Pakistan and he would be tried in a military court.

The same day, on August 2, Yahya formed a military court that began trial of Mujib from August 11. The court on December 4 delivered the verdict convicting Mujib of all the charges and sentenced him to death.

Execution of the military court's verdict was subject to the approval of the chief martial law administrator, an office occupied by General Yahya himself along with the presidency.

Yahya did not get much time to use Mujib as the trump card as the situation went from bad to worse fast for his regime.

Immediately after the humiliating defeat of Pakistani army in East Pakistan, Yahya had to relinquish power to Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, who had conspired with the army to carry out the genocide, making him the president and chief martial law administrator.

Bhutto and top army generals, who deposed Yahya in a coup, now went ahead with the same plan to use Bangabandhu as a trump card to save their faces and power.

At a meeting with US Ambassador Farland, Bhutto said his key supporters had warned that the release of Mujib at that time would be tantamount to his decreeing his own imprisonment.

He anticipated that Mujib might be exchanged for the thousands of Pakistani prisoners India held following the surrender in East Pakistan, Farland informed the Department of State in a telegram on December 20.

"Bhutto has said that Mujib will be released from prison soon and put under some form of house arrest," said Henry Kissinger in a memorandum on December 22 to President Nixon.

"This is, of course, only a gesture but it could be important for setting the tone for the dialogue that must soon ensue with the Indians and Bangla Desh leaders involving Mujib's release and the fate of the POWs and other West Pakistani in Indian custody," writes Kissinger.

Almost at every meeting with General Yahya since May 1971, Farland raised the issue of Mujib. The reason was clear. Mujib was on trial for sedition that carried death penalty.

The world leaders were also concerned for Mujib's fate in Pakistani prison.

As people across the world expressed their solidarity with the Bangladeshi people and their struggle for independence in 1971, the world media strongly demanded the release of Bangabandhu.

There was tremendous pressure on Bhutto from the army to bring the POWs back. Bhutto knew it was not possible without the unconditional release of Mujib.

After the birth of Bangladesh, even China, Pakistan's staunchest supporters during the war, wanted the release of Bangabandhu. The other superpower, Soviet Union also was for the unconditional release of Mujib.

Bhutto did not have much of an option and he moved to ensure unconditional release of Bangabandhu.

The consulate general of US embassy in Karachi met Bhutto on January 3 and discussed the release of Bangabandhu.

In a telegram to the Department of State on the meeting, the consulate general writes Bhutto said he "planned to announce today unconditional release of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman."

Bhutto also said he planned to make the announcement in a public rally in Karachi.

Time magazine (January 17, 1972), under the headline "Mujib's road from prison to power," also described how the pressure was mounting at home on Bhutto as well. It wrote: "To some Western observers, the scene stirred thoughts of Pontius Pilate deciding the fate of Jesus and Barabbas. 'Do you want Mujib freed?' shouted Bhutto at the rally of more than 100,000 supporters in Karachi."

The crowd roared its assent, as audiences often do when subjected to Bhutto's powerful oratory. Bowing his head, the president answered: "You have relieved me of a great burden."

On January 8, 1972, Mujib was released. Bhutto saw him off at Rawalpindi airport.

Bangabandhu left Rawalpindi airport for London to return to his people in independent Bangladesh.

Immediately after the liberation, Bangabandhu's presence in the country was desperately needed to unite his people and to lead the country.

The US Bureau of Intelligence and Research that reads 'intelligence note' for U.S. diplomacy highlighted the need for Mujib's return to his country on the day after the liberation of Bangladesh.

"In the absence of Sheikh Mujib and under the pressure of a civil war, a number of divisions appeared within the Awami League and the Bangla Desh cabinet, notably that between the then Prime Minister Tajuddin Ahmed and Foreign Minister Mushtaque Ahmed factions."

It said the struggle for Bangladesh, however, kept the party united and the differences hidden.

"Under the more intense strains of setting up a new government, the factions could split, weakening the overall influence of the Awami League. The return of Sheikh Mujib, however, would be enough to reduce the friction and reunite the factions, at least for the short term," reads the intelligence note.

Mujib's presence was urgent for many other reasons. Pakistani forces were still in Dhaka and Pakistan trained armed collaborators were still active. The government had yet to establish a firm control over the administration. Return of Indian troops from Bangladesh was also another major concern.

Mujib returned to his people on January 10 after nine months of imprisonment to receive an unprecedented welcome from a vast euphoric crowd.

"There were happy faces all around. Those who had passed through nine long months of the most horrible genocide of human history, smiled for the first time today. They have got back their beloved leader among them, they now feel confident of their future," says a report of The Statesman of India on the day of Mujib's return.

His return to his people meant the jewel in the crown is only for Bangalis.

BNP blasts AL for 'plotting 20-party split'

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The BNP yesterday lambasted the ruling Awami League for what it said was its "conspiracy" to split the 20-party opposition alliance.

It made the allegation two days after a faction of Islami Oikya Jote, led by Abdul Latif Nezami, announced that they cut their 17-year ties with the BNP-led combine.

Without mentioning IOJ's split, BNP acting secretary general Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir yesterday said the ruling party was trying to split political parties and alliances.

"An old party like Awami League that had fought for democracy for long and had a role in achieving the country's independence, has become politically bankrupt and now it is conspiring to split the opposition platform," he said, addressing the triennial council of Bangladesh Labour Party, a component of the opposition alliance, at Institution of Engineers, Bangladesh in the capital.

Former vice-chancellor of Dhaka University Prof Emajuddin Ahmed inaugurated the programme. Over 150 delegates of the party's 44 district and city units joined the council of the Labour Party established in 1974 under the leadership of Moulana Abdul Matin.

At the programme, Fakhrul alleged that opposition parties were not being able to carry out political activities for lack of democratic space. "There's no political atmosphere anywhere. We can't hold any meeting, rally. We're not even allowed to gather in our offices and hold meetings there."

The BNP leader accused the government of destroying the country's electoral system to remain in power.

People's voting rights will be violated in the upcoming union parishad elections, he observed. "We have to forge a national unity and unite the country's people without further delay. We need to do everything, including waging a movement, to restore our rights."

Fakhrul also accused the media of practising one-eyed policy.

"We wonder at the media trying only to find out faults of the BNP and opposition... we don't see it raising voice against those who have destroyed democracy and snatched people's rights," he said.

Get ready to go to jail

BJP tells Arvind Kejriwal

PTI, New Delhi

Lashing out at Delhi chief minister Arvind Kejriwal over his fresh attack on the Modi government, BJP on Friday accused him of taking one unconstitutional step after another and asked him to be "ready to go to jail" in the defamation case filed by finance minister Arun Jaitley.

The Kejriwal government has been a "complete failure" and the chief minister has been resorting to levelling politically motivated charges against BJP leaders to "hide" its failures and "protect" his principal secretary who is facing corruption charges, the party alleged.

Up to an uphill

FROM PAGE 1

Prof Jamilur Reza Choudhury, chairman of the panel of experts on Padma bridge, said the bridge was one of the most challenging engineering ventures in the world.

"Perhaps there is no such river training for any other bridges around the world," he said.

The combined flow of the Ganges and the Brahmaputra passes through the Padma on way to the Bay of Bengal, making it the world's second most enormous water flow. Every second, 140,000 cubic metre of water passes through the river. "We have to ensure a smooth flow of this huge volume of water under the bridge."

The riverbed is very soft and it can dissolve any time, Jamilur said. "Our estimate is that today's soil may go down below 47 metres next year from the existing riverbed. Besides, saturated soil starts behaving like liquid during earthquakes. So, we have added another 15 metres to that 47 metres."

He said the world's longest bridge stretching 38km was built in China, but it was on shallow water.

The Jiaozhou Bay bridge in China took only \$1.5 billion to build, half the cost of Padma bridge, which is one-sixth in size compared to the Chinese bridge.

"But we have to dig 120 metres which is equivalent to the height of a 40-storey building. Nowhere in the world has a bridge been built going that deep," Jamilur said.

The pile driving machine, from Germany, has been specially made for the project. "River training is a major challenge. So, latest technology is being used."

Sagufia Yasmin Emily, a lawmaker from Munshiganj, said there was river erosion during the last rainy season. Sand sacks worth crores of taka were thrown into the river to stop erosion in the first two attempts. But it did not stop. It stopped only in the third attempt.

Building the "dream bridge" with domestic funds was first thought to be

the key challenge. Even ministers and party leaders did not think it possible, said Obaidul Quader.

Then there was the issues of land acquisition and rehabilitation of the people. "We could not start the construction if the people from the river banks did not let go of their ancestral land. We are grateful to them," the minister added.

Talking about the construction of a rail track to connect the capital with the bridge, he said it would be difficult to complete the job in time. "We will rather be able to construct a rail track from Bhanga [in Faridpur] leading to the bridge and open it together with the bridge."

The army will start upgrading Dhaka-Mawa and Janjira-Bhanga roads into four-lane ones in a week, he added.

Khan Mahmud Amanat, a professor of civil engineering at Buet, said more local experts should be engaged at the field level, but it was not happening.

"As the maintenance of the bridge will have to be done by them [local experts], they should participate in the work closely so they can use this experience in other bridge projects," he added.

In response, Prof Jamilur said the government tried to ensure the presence of a large number of Bangladeshi engineers who were making decisions on behalf of the government. In the past, foreign experts used to do the job.

"Technology transfer is happening. Management capability is developing," he said, adding, the international panel of seven experts for the bridge included a Bangladeshi.

In his presentation, Prof AFM Saiful Amin of civil engineering at Buet said construction of the bridge would be a challenge for the country as it would be the largest in terms of length and span -- 6.15km and 150 meters respectively.

Mahfuz Anam, editor and publisher of The Daily Star, thanked the participants of the roundtable.