

## PEN Int'l concerned at lawsuits against Mahfuz Anam

UNB, Dhaka

PEN International and PEN Bangladesh have voiced deep concern by reports that The Daily Star Editor Mahfuz Anam is currently facing lawsuits on charges of criminal defamation and sedition.

"By all means those defamed should have the right to seek redress through civil action, however defamation should never be criminalised and the state must ensure that Anam's rights are protected," said Salil Tripathi, chair of the Writers in Prison Committee of PEN International.

PEN International is a London-based worldwide association with a membership of prominent literary writers and editors.

The "arrest warrant" against Mahfuz Anam is a grossly disproportionate action against an editor of enormous integrity, Tripathi said, adding that Anam has a long record of respecting the rule of law and impartial journalism in difficult circumstances.

"For some time now, the press in Bangladesh has been under siege and the actions of government officials and politicians associated with the ruling party reveal a concerted attack on independent media."

PEN International holds that criminal defamation laws are pernicious and widely used by those in positions of power to silence critics, according to a statement posted on its official website.

"Such laws -- and the disproportionate penalties that they introduce -- have a chilling effect on writers and journalists who uncover corruption, malfeasance and abuse of power and who are conscious of the possibility of serving lengthy prison sentences and the possibility of being left with a criminal record."

The result is the stifling of reporting and public debate and difficulty in holding power to account, the statement added.

PEN called on the Bangladeshi authorities to repeal its criminal defamation legislation.

## Harassment

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advocate Sultana Kamal, Dr Sarwar Ali, Ziauddin Tariq Ali, Ayesha Khanam, Prof MM Akash and Abul Hasnat.

A total of 69 cases -- 54 defamation suits and 15 sedition pleas -- have so far been filed against Mahfuz Anam for the "reports against Sheikh Hasina" published during the 2007-2008 tenure of the last caretaker government.

The lawsuit spree began days after the Star editor at a talk show on February 3 made an introspective comment about a lapse in his editorial judgement in publishing a few reports, based on information given by the Task Force Interrogation Cell during the last caretaker government rule, without being able to verify those independently.

The eminent citizens said Mahfuz Anam, abiding by the rules and ethics of journalism, admitted the lapses in the reports published under "special circumstances", and it could have been an example of superior culture if the matter were settled through "this admission".

But the filing of defamation and sedition charges against him in one district after another has taken the matter to the extent of harassing him, which is tantamount to undermining democratic atmosphere and freedom of the press as well as citizen's freedom of expression.

"We are concerned that such a situation may create a scope for undemocratic and reactionary forces to carry on their evil acts," the statement read.

The eminent citizens said the government, mass media and the civil society would have to tackle the situation, taking more responsibility from their respective positions.

## Editors

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(as of yesterday afternoon), have been filed across the country against Anam, also publisher of The Daily Star.

"The meeting feels that such incidents go against freedom of the press. We expect that all cases against Mahfuz Anam will be withdrawn. The Editors' Council expects that good sense would prevail among all quarters in this regard," says the resolution.

In addition to Mahfuz Anam, the meeting was attended by Reaz Uddin Ahmed, editor, News Today; Moazzem Hossain, editor, The Financial Express; Matur Rahman Chowdhury, editor, Manabzamin; M Shamsur Rahman, editor, The Independent; Naim Nizam, editor, Bangladesh Pratidin; Matur Rahman, editor, Prothom Alo; Nurul Kabir, editor, New Age; Imdadul Haque Milon, editor, Kaler Kantho; Dewan Hanif Mahmud, editor, Banik Barta; A M M Bahauddin, editor, Inquilab; Shyamol Dutta, editor, Bhorer Kagoj; and Zafar Sobhan, editor, Dhaka Tribune.



Ninth grader Ayesha Khanam, 14, left, of Lohagora in Narail was set to be married yesterday. The Lohagora upazila nirbahi officer, centre, intervened and fined the families.

PHOTO: BANGLAR CHOKH

## Summons, not arrest warrant

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Mohsin, who introduced himself as an Awami League activist, brought the libel charge against Mahfuz Anam for "reports against Sheikh Hasina" published during the 2007-2008 tenure of the last caretaker government.

Meanwhile, 13 more cases were filed against Mahfuz Anam in nine districts yesterday.

So far 69 lawsuits have been lodged against the Star editor in 47 out of 64 districts since February 9.

Of the cases, 15 involve pleas for bringing sedition charges against him, while the rest are defamation suits.

The case spree began days after the Star editor at a talk show on February 3 made an introspective comment about a lapse in his editorial judgement in publishing a few reports, based on information given by the Task Force Interrogation Cell during the 2007-08 tenure of the last caretaker government, without being able to verify those independently.

On Tuesday, the Narayanganj court took into cognisance the defamation allegation under 500/501/502 provision of the Criminal Procedure Code (CrPC).

The Jatiya Sangsad, however, scrapped five years back the provision for directly issuing arrest warrants against journalists, writers and others for writing or saying anything defamatory. The amendment to the CrPC, passed by the JS on February 2, 2011, introduced a provision for issuing summons on them.

Talking to The Daily Star on Wednesday night about the arrest warrant, Law Minister Anisul Huq said,

"I have talked to the law officers in Narayanganj. I am saying this with responsibility that it won't be an arrest warrant, it would be a summons."

**MYMENSINGH**  
ABM Nuruzzaman Khokon, president of district Awami Swachchhasebak League unit, and Advocate Moazzem Hossain Babul, a member of district AL unit, filed two pleas with the Court of Senior Judicial Magistrate Ahsan Habib for bringing sedition charges against Mahfuz Anam.

The court directed the officer-in-charge of Kotwali Police Station to run a probe upon taking permission from the government.

Besides, Advocate Jasim Uddin Ahmed, assistant public prosecutor and assistant secretary of Mymensingh Bar Association, filed a defamation suit with the Court of Senior Judicial Magistrate Rafiqul Bari against the Star editor.

The court asked the OC of Gouripur Police Station to carry out an investigation and take necessary steps.

**CHITTAGONG**  
SM Al Mamun, president of Chittagong Jubo League unit (north), filed a complaint with the court of Metropolitan Magistrate Farid Alam, seeking to sue Mahfuz Anam for sedition.

The court ordered the OC of Kotwali Police Station to launch a probe after taking permission from the government.

Moreover, Prabir Paul, general secretary of Satkania unit Bangabandhu Parishad, lodged a libel case with the same court, claiming Tk 100 crore in compensation.

The court issued a summons, asking the Star editor to appear before it.

Besides, Md Giasuddin, general secretary of Chittagong district Bangladesh Chhatra League unit, filed another defamation suit with the Metropolitan Magistrate's court against Mahfuz Anam.

Metropolitan Magistrate Jhalak Roy didn't pass any order on the matter, said court sources.

**CHANDPUR**  
Habib Sheikh, a freedom fighter from Haimchar upazila, filed a libel suit with the court of Magistrate Nusrat Jahan Urmi against the Star editor, demanding compensation of Tk 10 crore.

The court directed the district information officer to investigate the matter and submit a report by March 31.

**RAJBARI**  
Advocate Ashrafur Hasan, former general secretary of Rajbari Government College BCL unit, lodged a defamation case with the Senior Judicial Magistrate's Court against Mahfuz Anam.

The complainant demanded Tk 5 crore in compensation.

After the hearing, the court ordered the district information officer to carry out a probe and submit a report in a month.

**JOYPURHAT**  
Mizanur Rahman Tito, office secretary of district AL unit, lodged a defamation suit with the Senior Judicial Magistrate's Court against Mahfuz Anam, claiming compensation of Tk 500 crore.

The court took the case into cognisance and fixed March 20 for hearing, said Public Prosecutor Nripendranath

Mondal.

**MANIKGANJ**  
Monoranjan Sheel Nokul, organising secretary of Shibalaya upazila AL unit, filed a libel case with the Senior Judicial Magistrate's Court against the Star editor, demanding Tk 200 crore in compensation.

The court ordered the OC of Manikganj Sadar Police Station to launch an investigation and take steps in this regard.

**GAIBANDHA**  
Ruhid Hasan Rintu, a member of Gaibandha Jubo League, filed a defamation suit with the Additional Chief Judicial Magistrate's Court against Mahfuz Anam, claiming compensation of Tk 10,000 crore.

The court summoned the Star editor to appear before it on March 24.

**COMILLA**  
Mohammed Al Amin, president of Meghna upazila BCL unit, filed a libel case with the Court of Senior Judicial Magistrate (cognisance) Shuvra Chakrabarty.

The court asked the district information officer to submit a report in this regard on March 28.

**GAZIPUR**  
Amanat Hossain Khan, education secretary of Gazipur district AL unit, lodged a defamation suit with the Senior Judicial Magistrate's Court against Mahfuz Anam, demanding Tk 5 crore in compensation.

The court issued a summons on the Star editor, asking him to appear before it on June 2.

## 18 years

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houses where victims of rape and sexual assault could find shelter and learn to be independent as they are ostracised by the society.

Rose-Anne Papavero, chief of the child protection section of Unicef, said the social service department under the social welfare ministry would soon launch a 24-hour Child Help Line to connect resource persons in every upazila to take action on child-related issues.

Moderated by BMRC Chairman Mahmud Hasan, lawmaker Md Habibe Millat, vice-chairman of BMRC, presented the keynote at the programme.

Talking to the Daily Star about the exception to the proposed law Executive Director of Manusher Jonno Foundation Shaheen Anam questioned, "If it is not in the law, how can it be put in the rules?"

"The most important consideration should be the well-being of girls in the long term. We have to think whether marrying off a girl with someone she has had a relationship with would bring long-term well-being for her or not," added the rights activist.

Sara Hossain, honorary executive director of Bangladesh Legal Aid Services Trust, said: "It's not clear how, if there is no discretion in the law itself, the exception could be permitted in the rules which have not been framed yet."

She also observed that there should be a consistency in defining a child in the laws of the land.

## Saudi executes three drug traffickers

AFP, Riyadh

Saudi Arabia yesterday executed one of its citizens and two Yemenis convicted of drug trafficking, bringing to 63 the number of people it has put to death this year.

Saudi national Daifallah al-Omrani was executed in the northern region of Tabuk after his conviction for smuggling amphetamines, the interior ministry said.

In a separate case, Yemeni citizens Ahmed Mubarak and Abdul Salam al-Jamali were executed in the southwestern city of Jazan near their homeland, the ministry said.

They were convicted of trying to smuggle hashish. Most people sentenced to death in Saudi Arabia are beheaded by a sword.

The kingdom executed 47 people in a single day on January 2 for "terrorism". In 2015 Saudi Arabia executed 153 people, mostly for drug trafficking or murder, according to an AFP count.

Amnesty International says the number of executions in Saudi Arabia last year was the highest for two decades.

The kingdom practises a strict Islamic legal code under which murder, drug trafficking, armed robbery, rape and apostasy are all punishable by death.

Rights experts have raised concerns about the fairness of trials in Saudi Arabia, which says the death penalty is a deterrent to crime.

## Trial begins

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Bank in May 2012.

In connivance with some bank officials, the little known Hall-Mark alone took Tk 2,686 crore in loans using forged documents.

The Hall-Mark bosses used forged inland bills, meaning the group opened letters of credit for purchase and sold them to the bank which paid Hall-Mark without verifying and documentation.

The central bank later handed the issue over to the Anti-Corruption Commission.

The ACC found that the branch gave Hall-Mark Tk 1,568.49 crore in loans between October 2011 and May 2012.

In October, 2012, the ACC filed 11 cases against 27 top officials of Sonali Bank and Hall-Mark Group in connection with misappropriating more than Tk 1,568 crore.

On August 4, 2013, Jasmine got bail after she pledged to pay back the amount in monthly installments of Tk 100 crore.

However, she did not pay any money and rather went to the High Court and appealed against the conditions of the bail.

The High Court cancelled the conditions attached to her bail.

On October 7, 2013, the Anti-Corruption Commission pressed charges against 25 people in 11 cases for swindling over Tk 2,600 crore of Sonali Bank. Two Sonali Bank officials died after they had been arrested and their names were dropped from the cases.

During investigation, Tanvir gave a confessional statement in which he said he had paid Tk 3 crore to Taslim Hasan, another accused in the scam, to bribe the Board of Directors of Sonali Bank.

However, the ACC found no involvement of the bank's board in the largest-ever loan scam in the country.

## 4 foreigners under scanner

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naming or arresting anyone], he said, adding that they were using technologies to identify the culprits.

Fraudsters were able to withdraw Tk 20.6 lakh by making duplicate cards with the data of 36 cards they captured by the skimming devices they set up in four ATMs in Dhaka last week, according to Bangladesh Bank (BB).

But the skimming devices attached to the four ATMs of three private banks stole data of 1,200 cards, which became vulnerable to frauds.

"We took prompt actions to deactivate those cards and issue new ones to customers," said Shubhankar Saha, executive director and spokesman of the BB, after a meeting with the heads of card divisions of all banks operating in the country.

"The banks will pay back the money to their customers who became victims of this forgery," he added.

Also, the BB has come up with a number of measures, including introduction of chip-based cards and a uniform limit per transaction per day for all banks.

"We have asked banks to issue chip-based debit cards as soon as possible to protect customers from frauds," said the central bank spokesman.

A few banks have already moved to EMV (Europay, MasterCard, and Visa) chip cards and PIN (personal identification number) issuance, but a large number of banks continue to issue magnetic stripe cards vulnerable to frauds, said Shubhankar.

EMV cards and PINs protect against both counterfeit (skimming) and lost

and stolen card fraud.

On setting a limit on ATM transaction, the central banker said he discussed the issue with heads of the banks' card divisions yesterday, but it would be finalised after further discussions. Presently, different banks have different limits, ranging from Tk 20,000 to Tk 100,000 per day.

Though the police are investigating possible involvement of banks' officials in the scam, the BB spokesman said they were yet to find that in their own investigation, which he said had been completed, but not made public.

Last week, four ATMs of three banks -- two of the Eastern Bank and one each of the United Commercial Bank and the City Bank -- were skimmed off by fraudsters, one apparently a foreigner.

The gang put skimming devices to

## Freedom fighters' age reduced to 13

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monthly allowances to martyred freedom fighters' families, distressed, and gallantry award-recipient freedom fighters from Bangladesh Muktiyoddha Kalyan Trust.

Currently, family members and freedom fighters who were with the uniformed forces -- Bangladesh Army, Border Guard Bangladesh, and Police -- collect monthly allowances from their respective forces offices.

The Muktiyoddha Kalyan Trust only distributes allowances to the families of civilian freedom fighters, that is, martyred, distressed, and gallantry award-recipients.

Sources in the Ministry of Liberation War Affairs said in

October last year, the council decided that those who were at least 15 years old on March 26, 1971, could apply for obtaining the freedom fighter status.

The decision was met with large-scale criticism as the minimum age at 15 excluded many prominent freedom fighters, like Taramon Bibi, Abu Salek Bir Pratik, Shahidul Islam Lal, and Jahiruddin Jalal (known as Bichchu Jalal during the war), who were below 15 when they fought the war.

Revising the decision to address this issue, the council in July last year decided that people who were 13 on March 26, 1971, would be able to apply for the status of freedom fighters.

A lot of people then asked the

council and the ministry for reducing the age limit, as their age was not correctly mentioned in their school certificates.

Following their requests, the issue was raised at yesterday's meeting.

Sources said the meeting divided the freedom fighter martyred into two categories -- martyrs killed in action and those martyred in mass killings carried out by the Pakistan army and their local collaborators.

Minister Mozammel told The Daily Star yesterday that the meeting decided that only the family members of martyrs killed in action could ask for monthly allowances.

Regarding the change in the war-time age of freedom fighters, he

explained that it was very likely that many had participated in the war after March 26, 1971. Besides, many freedom fighters had incorrect birthdays in their school certificates.

The meeting also discussed about the scrutiny of the nearly 1.36 lakh pending requests for getting listed as freedom fighters.

There are some 2.12 lakh freedom fighters already listed. The number was 1.98 lakh in the 2002 gazette published during the BNP-Jamaat rule.

At present, freedom fighters, their children, and grandchildren enjoy 30 percent quota in government jobs. In addition, freedom fighters' children and grandchildren get special quotas in public schools, colleges, and universities.