



Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal organises a human chain near the city's Jatiya Press Club yesterday, protesting the recent killings of Rajshahi University Prof Rezaul Karim Siddique, USAID staff Xulhaz Mannan, his friend Mahub Rabbi Tonoy and Jagannath University student Nazim Uddin Samad. Information Minister Hasanul Haq Inu, also the leader of the party, 6th from left, was present.

PHOTO: STAR

Ensure poor prisoners have legal aid

PM to law minister

UNB, Dhaka

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina yesterday asked the law minister to take special measures for collecting information about the poor prisoners unnecessarily languishing in jails and make arrangement for their release.

"There are many poor and helpless prisoners in jails and they've been languishing there for years in various cases though they don't exactly know what their offences are, or don't have the financial capacity to have legal aid," she said.

Hasina was addressing the inaugural function of the National Legal Aid Services Day 2016 at the Institution of Engineers, Bangladesh in the city. The day is observed on April 28 every year.

Reaffirming that her government's aim is to protect the basic rights of poor people, the PM said her government has

taken steps to ensure legal aid services at the grassroots level. "Many poor people languish in jail and they don't know how to get legal aid and how to get their cases settled," she bemoaned.

Hasina said the National Legal Aid Service Organisation could extend their support to those staying in jails without any specific charges. "These people do not need to stay in jails without any reason or without specific charges."

She said the aim of her government is to ensure the rule of law as well as protect poor people from injustice and deprivation and ensure their rights.

The PM also inaugurated the national helpline call centre of the national legal aid service through talking to a female official over the phone. The legal aid seekers could avail themselves of free services from the helpline round the clock dialling 16430 or sending SMS.

Stand against violent acts of extremists

European Parliament delegation urges all

DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENT

The European Parliament delegation for South Asia has called on the government, political parties and civil society members to stand together against the acts of violent extremists in Bangladesh.

Jean Lambert, chair of the delegation, also encouraged peaceful student demonstration against the violence, said a statement issued in Brussels on Wednesday.

The statement came following the killings of LGBT activist Xulhaz Mannan and his friend Mahub Rabbi Tonoy on Monday.

The perpetrators of the recent murders must be swiftly brought to

justice, Lambert said.

"In this regard the EP Delegation calls on the Government to ensure the respect of democratic principles, such as already expressed in the recent EP Resolution (2015) on freedom of expression in Bangladesh," she added.

The delegation expressed deep concern and condemnation of the ongoing killings in Bangladesh.

"Since February last year, militants have killed several secular or atheists writers and members of religious minority groups.

Only this month there are in addition to Monday's killings the murder of a law student and an English language professor," the statement read.

Two FBI

FROM PAGE 20

said a source in DB.

The DB investigators told the FBI officials that they have already sent some samples to the DNA laboratory at Criminal Investigation Department.

Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan said he was not aware of whether the FBI made any written proposal for helping the DB in the investigation.

"If they want to extend support, we'll welcome them," he told The Daily Star.

US Secretary of State John Kerry in a press statement on April 25 said, "We offer our full support to the government of Bangladesh as they investigate these murders and bring the perpetrators to justice."

Xulhaz Mannan, a USAID staff and also editor of the country's only known LGBT magazine Roopbaan, and his friend Khandaker Mahub Rabbi Tonoy were killed inside the former's Kalabagan flat on Monday afternoon.

Xulhaz was a former protocol officer of ex-US ambassador to Bangladesh Dan Mozena.

Two cases were filed with Kalabagan Police Station on Monday night in connection with the killings.

"As Xulhaz was a former staff of the US embassy, the country is concerned about whether he was killed for his affiliation with the embassy," said a DB investigator on condition of anonymity.

The DB does not think that Xulhaz was killed for his previous link to the US embassy. Rather, he might have been killed for being a gay rights activist, added the investigator.

The detectives are yet to make any arrest in connection with the double murder.

Dhaka Metropolitan Police Commissioner Asaduzzaman Mia had earlier said they seized a mobile phone left by one of the killers. Kalabagan police, however, said there was no mobile phone on the seizure list.

Muhith defends

FROM PAGE 20

products and services. For example, they provide 15 percent VAT on food items, 7.5 percent on the English medium schools' tuition fees and 5 percent on garment and jewellery products.

If the VAT plan is finally passed in parliament in June, customers might have to pay the rate in the next fiscal year, which starts on July 1.

Muhith said the government plans to keep the 15 percent rate in the upcoming year and move for different VAT rates towards the end of the tenure of the current government.

He suggested the businesses improve the accounting system to ease the pressure of VAT.

"You will not be really bothered by VAT. It will help the businesses to do their own planning," the minister added.

The 15 percent VAT has been framed at the prescription of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) as a condition to avail the lender's \$1 billion in extended credit facility. In October 2014, the IMF even deferred the release of the sixth instalment of the loan after the government failed to lay out a fresh roadmap for implementing the new VAT law.

The government had earlier committed to the IMF that the new VAT law would come into effect in July 2015, but due to the opposition from influential ministers and the business community, the government had pushed it back to July 2016. The existing VAT law was introduced in 1991 and has gone through many changes on an ad-hoc basis.

However, a number of business leaders opposed the uniform VAT rate at the 37th consultative meeting organised jointly by the FBCCI and the

National Board of Revenue (NBR) yesterday.

"Small and medium enterprises will not support the abolition of package VAT," said FBCCI Director Abu Motaleb. His comments were met with claps from the business leaders who represented different chambers and trade bodies across the country.

Motaleb also said one quarter would launch a movement if the package VAT was withdrawn.

Sheikh Masadul Alam Masud, chairman of the Bangladesh Auto Rolling and Steel Mills Association, said, "We are worried about the VAT. If 15 percent VAT is enforced, the prices of steel products will go up 15 percent straight."

According to a proposal of a joint committee of the NBR and the FBCCI, all businesses that sell products and services at fixed rate will pay 2 percent VAT, and those don't sell at fixed rate will pay VAT at 15 percent rate.

Before the meeting, Muhith also sat with the commerce minister and senior business leaders of the FBCCI at the commerce ministry and talked about the new VAT law.

The finance minister would organise a separate discussion on the new VAT law later, said NBR Chairman Md Nojibur Rahman and FBCCI First Vice President Md Shafiqul Islam.

VAT rates vary from countries to countries. It is 4.8 percent to 21 percent in the European Union, 16-17 percent in Pakistan, 12.5-15 percent in India, 10 percent in Malaysia, 17 percent in China and 20 percent in Vietnam.

VAT is a huge source of income for Bangladesh.

Of the government's tax revenues, 37 percent will come from VAT in the current fiscal year.

Homebound

FROM PAGE 1

stopping at Chatmohar."

Afsar got down for a paan or betel leaf, but saw the train starting to move almost immediately," said Mojibar Rahman, assistant sub-inspector (ASI) Government Railway Police of Sirajganj.

"He tried to get back on but missed his step and went under ...," said the ASI adding that Afsar died on the spot around 10:00am.

"He spent his entire life maintaining the security of Bangladesh Railway. When it was time for him to leave his duty permanently and spend happy and relaxed days with his family, the train took away his life," said Afsar's brother-in-law Nazrul Islam.

"Afsar went on LPR [leave preparatory to retirement] a year ago. He went on retirement last month," said Abu Hena, chief inspector of Railway Nirapotta Bahini, Ishwardi station.

He said his colleagues, who had arranged a farewell for him only days ago, were stunned by his death.

Afsar Ali was buried at his village yesterday afternoon.

Wife Sajeda Begum, who was with him on the train, was inconsolable.

Afsar had asked her if she needed anything before getting down from the train. "I told him not to go. But he insisted and went away forever," Sajeda said over telephone.

Kerry calls PM

FROM PAGE 1

very hard to this end and they've got some clues. We hope we'll be able to arrest the killers and thus put them behind bars."

Xulhaz Mannan, a USAID staff and also editor of the country's only known LGBT magazine Roopbaan, and his friend Mahub Rabbi Tonoy were hacked to death inside the former's Kalabagan flat on Monday afternoon.

Reiterating that her government condemns any kind of killing, Hasina said one of the two victims of Kalabagan killings was a close relative of a former foreign minister of Bangladesh.

She also said, "All the members of our family except me and my sister became victims of murder and today is the birthday of my younger brother Sheikh Jamal who was assassinated along with other family members on August 15, 1975."

In this connection, the PM mentioned that two of the Bangabandhu killers still remain in the USA, and urged Kerry to take steps for sending them back to Bangladesh.

She said Bangladesh has mutual cooperation on counterterrorism with many countries, including the USA, and under such cooperation, the FBI came to Bangladesh.

"I hope such cooperation on counterterrorism will continue in the coming days and information will be shared."

Kerry said he would send US Assistant Secretary of State for South Asia and Central Asian Affairs Nisa Desai Biswal to Bangladesh to further bolster the cooperation on counterterrorism.

Hasina alleged that those who had killed and burned people to death in 2015 are patronising these killers and they are moving with a soft target strategy by launching attacks on imams, priests and padres. All these killings are being carried out in cold blood, she said.

She also strongly condemned the recent killings of eight members of a family in Ohio and requested the US secretary of state to arrest the killers of a Bangladeshi couple who were murdered in San Jose of California.

'Special alert'

FROM PAGE 20

yesterday issued a "special alert" for the forest officials in the Chandpai range to tackle the entry of unwanted people in the area.

It also suspended all the issued passes.

Zahir Uddin Ahmed, conservator of forest in Khulna region, said the special alert was issued following the repeated incidents of fire.

He said the entry of fishermen, lumberjacks, honey collectors and people to the Chandpai range had also been restricted.

The restriction would remain in force until further notice, he added.

Zahir also said a letter was sent to the fire service department, asking it to keep a unit ready at the Dhansagar forest station until it rains.

"We suspect that it is an act of sabotage by a group of influential people who are trying to keep their control over the forest," he said.

Two cases were filed against some local influential people following the fires on April 13 and 18.

"The accused set the forest on fire again," Zahir claimed, adding that they had requested police to arrest the accused.

Saidul Islam, divisional forest officer of the Sundarbans' East Zone, said smoke could still be seen at places and the fire service and forest officials were spraying water.

The fire service and forest officials found it difficult to douse the fire completely because of the heat wave and strong winds, he said.

A six-member committee has been formed by the environment and forest ministry to investigate the fires

27 killed as air strikes

FROM PAGE 20

worst refugee crisis, allowed for the rise of Islamic State and drawn in regional and major powers but the negotiations have all but failed and a truce to allow them to take place has collapsed.

Winding up the Geneva talks, de Mistura said he aimed to resume them in May, but gave no date.

A Syrian military source said government planes had not been in areas where air raids were reported. Syria's army denied reports that the Syrian air force targeted the hospital.

The Russian defence ministry, whose air strikes have swung the war in favour of President Bashar al-Assad, could not immediately be reached for comment.

The British-based Observatory said 31 people were killed as a result of air strikes on several areas of opposition-held Aleppo yesterday. In addition, it said at least 27 people were killed in the air strike on the hospital that was struck late on Wednesday. Rescue workers put the toll higher.

In government-held areas, rebel mortar shelling killed at least 14 people, the Observatory and Syria's state news agency SANA reported.

The bombed al-Quds hospital was supported by international medical charity Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF), which said it was destroyed after being hit by a direct air strike that killed at least three doctors.

"This devastating attack has destroyed a vital hospital in Aleppo, and the main referral centre for paediatric care in the area," said Muskilda Zancada, MSF head of mission, Syria. "Where is the outrage among those with the power and obligation to stop

this carnage?"

Peace talks, which have been deeply divided on the future of Assad, looked to be over last week when the opposition walked out, saying the Syrian government was stalling for time to advance on the ground and calling for implementation of a U.N. resolution requiring full humanitarian access to besieged areas.

De Mistura voiced deep concern at the truce unravelling in Aleppo and at least three other places, but also said he saw some narrowing of positions between the government and opposition visions of political transition.

"Hence my appeal for a US-Russian urgent initiative at the highest level, because the legacy of both President Obama and President Putin is linked to the success of what has been a unique initiative," de Mistura told a news conference.

They should "be able to revitalise what they have created and which is still alive but barely".

The United States and Russia must convene a ministerial meeting of major and regional powers who compose the International Syria Support Group (ISSG), he said.

Giving a chilling statistic about the backdrop of violence against which the talks played out, de Mistura said that in the past 48 hours there had been an average of one Syrian civilian killed every 25 minutes and one wounded every 13 minutes.

Meanwhile, the US-led military coalition targeted Islamic State in Iraq and Syria with 22 strikes on Wednesday in its latest daily attack on the militant group, the coalition leading the operations said.

Top court

FROM PAGE 1

"The chief justice could have assigned other judges to write the verdicts and orders if he did not like my writings," he said.

"Litigants will suffer if the cases are heard again," he said, adding that of the 161 cases that were pending with him, around 80 percent were orders and 20 percent judgments.

Khurshid Alam Khan, an SC lawyer and editor of Dhaka Law Reports, said that the CJ could recall cases for rehearing as the orders and judgments were not signed by any judges, including Justice Manik.

Manik just submitted the drafts of orders and judgments of the cases, he said.

However, Khurshid added the litigants of the cases would suffer as they would have to wait for further hearing and disposal of the cases.

Street children demand

FROM PAGE 3

and ward-8 of Dhaka South City Corporation (Bangladesh Bank Colony, Sonali Bank Colony, RK Mission Road, Gopibagh, Kamapur, Motijheel, and Bangladesh Railway Barrack).

According to a study of the government, conducted in Kamapur area, 74 percent of street children want to be rehabilitated, but the rest do not, said Abul.

Of them, 70 percent take drugs, 77.14 percent do not have access to any sanitation facility, and 83 percent manage their own food, he said.

State Minister for Women and Children Affairs Meher Afroze Chumki said rehabilitation through shelter homes was not a solution; families must be protected as well.

She said the government would have

to find the reasons why families did not want to keep their children with them or why they want to marry their children off at an early age.

Nasima Begum, secretary to the women and children affairs ministry, who chaired the meeting, said it was not possible for the government alone to reduce the number of street children.

Government, non-government organisations, and all others have to chip in, she added.

Among others, Director General of Department of Social Services Gazi Mohammad Nurul Kabir, Deputy Inspector General (Railway Range) of Bangladesh Police SM Ruhul Amin, and Additional Director General of Department of Narcotics Control Md Amir Hossain spoke.

Bicycle library for Afghan kids

FROM PAGE 20

months ago. I talked about it to friends in literary circles, who donated money and got some of their friends abroad to donate as well. I started alone with 200 storybooks for kids, and started riding to remote villages throughout Bamian province. Soon, I recruited more volunteers -- now there are 20 of us, and we have a collection of about 6,000 books." Most of these books are imported from Iran.

Hosseini revealed that he chose to use bicycles for his mobile library project for a number of reasons. Many of volunteers simply cannot afford cars and most of the villages in his province are only accessible by bike. But there was also a symbolic meaning to his choice. "The Taliban used bicycles in their bomb attacks -- so I wanted to replace violence with culture," he said, speaking to The Observers.

Saber loads his cycle with books every weekend and rides to remote villages, most of which don't even have schools. "Many of those children are old enough for the third or fourth grade," he told

Business Insider. "But in fact, they have not learned to read or write at all. This should not be happening." He keeps track of all the books he has left behind, so that he can bring new ones for the kids the next time around.

"We work as a sort of library -- every week, we bring kids new books and take back the old ones to distribute to children in other villages. Some of the adults have even taken to borrowing our more advanced books. At first, I chose very simple books, but now most of the older kids are able to read more serious books -- for example, we've got simplified versions of books by Victor Hugo, Jack London, Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, Samad Behranghi, and Ferdowsi."

Hosseini does more than just distribute books to children -- he also stops to talk to them about topics such as peace, tolerance, and why they should stay away from drugs. "One time, I talked to children in a village about guns, using the slogan 'say no to guns and yes to books,'" he recalled. "The next time I went to their village, the kids had gathered up all of

their plastic toy guns and handed them over to me -- but they had one condition: they wanted their village to be the first in the next round of book deliveries so they could get first pick. It was the most joyful moment of my life!"

Sadly, Hosseini is forced to work with a limited budget and cannot always afford to get the kinds of books that the children request -- mainly comics about Batman that they've seen on TV. There are other dangers associated with his work too -- he sometimes receives phone threats warning him to only distribute religious books or face dire consequences. His wife, also a teacher, has not been spared either -- a student once warned her that some of his relatives in the Taliban were planning to kill her.

"Despite these difficulties," we want to keep going," Hosseini said. "These kids live such stressful lives -- they live in a society that is full of death and violence, and they often face violence from their parents at home, too. So we want to keep delivering a bit of joy and calm in their lives through books."