

SPOTLIGHT

THE WEEK IN TURMOIL

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PHOTO: STAR FILE

When unidentified criminals brutally murdered Professor Rezaul Karim Siddiquee in the Shalbagan area of Rajshahi city on April 23, 2016, people all over the country were outraged and felt terrorised. A lover of music, a sitar player and believer in humanity – one cannot understand as to why the Professor had become a target.

"If you are really a powerful prime minister, trace the real killers immediately and ensure exemplary punishment for them. I want to see justice for the murder before I die," said Husne Ara, wife of the slain teacher, to the Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, according to the Daily Star reports. "My husband was an intellectual. The intellectuals have always been the targets of attacks, but they are too weak to stand up against evil forces. We've reached a stage where getting justice for any crime is very difficult. I am afraid I will not get justice. What was the crime of my husband? Who will ensure justice for his murder at a time when many other important murder cases like that of Sagor-Runi's remain unresolved?" she questioned.

The family members of Professor Rezaul Karim Siddiquee are now making sure that the professor is not portrayed to be an atheist, as his killers had made it seem to be. He clearly loved God and nature. He had set up a music school, a mosque and a madrasa at his village home. A humble and a polite man, this English professor at Rajshahi University was would occasionally organise musical get-togethers at his home and his village.

"You see, our people believe in a culture, which has been going on for generations together," says Khushi Kabir, Coordinator, Nijera Kori, and human right's activist. "In the villages, we still have the traditional programmes, music, dances, the jatras, the fairs, and so on. People sing, do theatre and celebrate in their own ways. When we were young, it was normal for one child to take singing lessons, while another would take tabla lessons. It's part of our identity."

Just three days later, news came in of the brutal murder of Rustam Ali, who was gunned down in broad daylight by unidentified criminals on a bike. What made it worse and all the more frightening was that Rustam Ali was a Jail Guard, and he was gunned down in broad day light just yards away from the gate of the country's largest high-security prison in Kashimpur, Gazipur. He died on spot.

A few hours later, on the very same day, people in the capital went through the shock of their lives when USAID official, 35-year-old Xulhaz Mannan, who had earlier worked as a protocol officer for former US ambassador Dan Mozena for a long time, and his friend 26-year-old Mahub Tonoy, a private university student were hacked to death. The Political Process Analyst, Xulhaz was also the editor of the first LGBT magazine, Roopbaan.

Xulhaz and Tonoy were killed at Xulhaz's residence in Kalbagan, where his mother Sakhina Begum was present, along with the house help in the kitchen.



Tonoy

Xulhaz Mannan

Rustam Ali

Professor Rezaul Karim Siddiquee

Outpourings of grief and condolences came from all over the world for the admirable Xulhaz, who was very popular in Dhaka and elsewhere. People from all walks of life, working in different fields took to social media to express themselves and write farewell messages to the LGBT activist. Many even expressed their anger and fear. "Who is next?" was the recurring question seen trending on social media.

The very next day, the Bangladesh unit of Al-Qaeda in the Indian Sub-Continent, Ansar Al Islam, allegedly claimed responsibility of murdering Xulhaz and Tonoy in Kalabagan.

According to the Daily Star report, in a Tweet from an account 'Ansar Al Islam,' the suspected militant group spread two separate messages, one in Bangla and the



BEYOND DHAKA

Last week in Chittagong, unidentified men hacked and shot dead two youths in Rangunia upazila in the early hours. 30-year-old Abul Kashem and 25-year-old Manjur Hossain, the deceased were suspected to have been involved in a scuffle over occupation of a piece of hilly land in the upazila -- which just might be the reason behind the killings, according to the police. According to locals and Kashem's family members, some 10 to 11 people armed with sharp weapons and firearms swooped on them while they were sitting outside their houses around midnight.

Around the same time in Kushtia, unidentified criminals hacked one brother to death and severely injured another at Fakirabad village in Bheramara upazila. Of them, 65-year-old Mojibur Rahman, a retired headmaster of a primary school, died on spot. His younger brother Mizanur Rahman was taken to the Rajshahi Medical College Hospital in a critical state, according to the police and family members. Nur Islam Khondkar, officer-in-charge of Bheramara Police Station said a group of seven to eight criminals swooped on the siblings soon after they came out of a local mosque after Isha prayers around 8:45pm. The criminals hacked them indiscriminately with sharp weapons and left.

In Brahmanbaria, a retired army sepoy, 40-year-old Bahar Mia, was stabbed to death allegedly over a dispute regarding money in the town, last week. Police arrested one Mamun of the same upazila in connection with the killing. Bahar had lent Mamun Tk 50,000 about a year ago, according to the locals. They met at 10 pm that night and after a few minutes of talking, they got into a fight over the lent money. At one stage, Mamun stabbed Bahar's throat with a knife, according to Mainur Rahman, officer-in-charge of Brahmanbaria Sadar Police Station. Bahar died on spot.

other in English, claiming the responsibility. The group also claimed responsibility of previous killings of secular activists including those of Niladri Chattopadhyay last year and Nazim Uddin Samad this month – both in Dhaka.

"These murders are signals being sent to society telling us not to question the culprits," says Kabir. "Do not try and be a Bangali, they say. Even if you are not involved in anything controversial, you will not be exempted. You might be the next victim – is the message that we all get."

What enraged the people further was when the Home Minister stated that the murders were isolated incidents and people were generally safe in the country. Asaduzzaman Khan Kamal was faced with questions from reporters after the murder of the jail guard at his office last week. When asked if panic had spread among the people, he said that such killings are

not happening in the country. "These are occasional incidents and those who have been involved in militancy for a long time, or some of them, are attempting these," he said. He also added that there was no reason for the situation to worsen.

"The representatives of the government say things that show how irresponsible the authorities are," says Kabir. "Of course, many representatives claim that the press has misquoted them. In that case, where are the rejoinders? I see no rejoinders online or on paper from the government's side, which is why I am bound to believe what I read on print or online and I presume the press is right."

"How can these attacks be isolated incidents? Clearly one kind of people are being targeted – not only bloggers and writers, but people who think in their own ways. I am still shocked at the death of Professor Rezaul Karim Siddiquee He

never got into any kind of political debates. And he was also a believer. Him getting killed simply because of his love for music is ridiculous! The plan is to create fear in the minds of the people so that no protests of any kind can take place. And the sad part is, the government does not want to take any responsibility."

The country is gripped with fear and terror, and sadly, this is simply because the authorities choose to ignore the reality or because they are in a state of denial. "I believe that the government is in a state of denial which is passively encouraging these acts," says Khushi Kabir. "Or the authorities are in a state of fear. What's worse is that this is giving out a 'go ahead' signal to the perpetrators. If you see your child in the house misbehaving and you don't do anything about it – you're actually allowing the misbehaviour to go on!"



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