

'Plough festival' for saving land

MINTU DESHWARA, Moulvibazar

Workers of three tea estates in Habiganj's Chunarughat upazila yesterday observed a "plough festival" to mobilise support for their demonstration against the government move to set up a special economic zone (SEZ) in Chandpur Tea Estate.

Workers of Chandpur, Begumkhan and Jualbanga tea estates in the upazila gathered at Chandpur Tea Estate for a rally in the morning. They also observed a two-hour work abstention.

They sang patriotic and inspirational songs at the rally.

"We have been living here for generations. Neither the government nor the tea estate authorities informed us of anything about the economic zone," said Bhuttu Karmakar, an organiser of the programme.

"Many workers' family members don't have jobs. They live by growing crops on the spare land within the tea estate. Without this land, it would be impossible for them to survive," he added.

"There is a conspiracy to grab our ancestral land in the name of setting up a special economic zone."

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.

Talking to The Daily Star, rights activist Abul Hasan 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.

7-yr jail

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power like that of an officer-in-charge of a police station, he said.

A total of 4,391 acres of railway land across the country is currently under occupation of semi-government, autonomous, religious and educational institutions.

The government has been successful in recovering 132 acres of land since October last year, Railway Minister Mujibul Haque told parliament on April 24.

The cabinet adopted a condolence motion at the death of former state minister Mujibur Rahman Fakir MP.

At the meeting, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina sent back a proposal to hike allowances for the gallantry awarded freedom fighters from 60 percent to 150 percent. The PM said she was in favour of increasing the allowances of the general freedom fighters instead of the gallantry awarded ones as they are solvent, meeting sources told The Daily Star.



Workers of Chandpur Tea Estate in Habiganj's Chunarughat upazila pose for a photo. They brought ploughs and shovels to observe "plough festival" at the tea estate yesterday to protest a government move to set up a special economic zone there.

PHOTO: MINTU DESHWARA

Joy hits back at Khaleda's allegation

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The BNP chief said Rehman as a journalist had gathered the information. "But he neither disclosed the information nor written anything on it. You [people] couldn't have known about Tk 2,500 crore had he not been arrested."

The government arrested Rehman on "false charges" of his involvement in a plot to abduct and kill Joy, said Khaleda. "Now they're implicating Amar Desh [acting] editor Mahmudur Rahman in it."

She demanded the government release the two journalists and arrest Joy to grill him over the "laundered Tk 2,500 crore".

About Shafiq Rehman and Amar Desh acting editor Mahmudur Rahman's alleged involvement in

stealing FBI documents on his bank account, Joy wrote: "Your henchmen Mahmudur Rahman and Shafiq Rahman stole secret FBI documents listing all my bank accounts, but could not find it. The military regime of 1/11 who arrested my mother could not find it. Even the FBI could not find it."

"That's because I have never had anything close to \$300 million. I am not that rich. Khaleda Zia on other hand is a liar and a thief."

He also posted a Bengali version of the status.

KHALEDA AT MAY DAY RALLY

Khaleda accused the government of plundering public money in the name of development saying that the ruling Awami League siphoned off Tk 30,000

crore in the last seven years.

"The ruling party often talks about development...they've plundered more public money than what they spent on development. Now they're taking up mega projects in the name of development and looting a huge amount of money," she added.

Expressing fear of being arrested, she said: "I want to say they [government] might put me behind bars, but that's not a problem as you [people] will be with me as my brothers, sisters and friends."

Referring to the prime minister's recent complaint that the BNP has chosen the path of secret killings having failed to return to power, Khaleda said: "Where's the scope for returning

to power as there has been no such elections? We don't want to go to power through backdoor other than through polls."

About the recent killings of bloggers, writers, publishers and people of different faiths, Khaleda said these killings are being carried out with the government's patronage.

"Incidents of murders are taking place regularly, but nobody is being arrested and punished in connection with these incidents as the killers belong to the Awami League," she claimed.

She urged Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to hand over power to a neutral government for holding a national election.

Cautious, yet he could not survive



Bonya Rani Joardar, eldest daughter of slain tailor Nikhil Joardar, in tears at her home in Tangail's Gopalpur upazila. The photo was taken yesterday.

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This is why, Amal thinks the murder was pre-planned and committed after days of recce.

Nikhil's tailoring shop is on the edge of a local bazaar on Shuti Kalibari

Road of Dubai under Gopalpur upazila, a couple of kilometres away from the municipality.

His movement was limited, mostly between his shop and house.

Two to three assailants, who came

on a bike, took part in the killing on the roadside near his shop around 12:30pm on Saturday, leaving him dead on the spot, said police and locals.

He was hacked in the neck and head indiscriminately.

They left on the spot a bag containing two machetes, crude bomb-like objects and some clothes.

The motive is not yet clear, but the attack resembles the targeted killings of secular bloggers, writers and people of different faiths and ideologies over the last few years.

Hours after Nikhil's murder, global terror outfit Islamic State (IS) claimed responsibility for it, said US-based SITE Intelligence Group, which monitors terrorist activities globally.

Following the killing, police arrested three locals -- Alamnagar Madrasa Principal Aminul Islam, Jamaat leader Rafiqul Islam and BNP activist Jhantu Miah.

The suspects were taken on remand yesterday.

According to locals and police, the allegation of making "anti-religious" comment was brought against Nikhil in April 2012 and different events, including protest rallies, were held demanding his arrest. The protesters even vandalised his shop and house.

Aminul Islam, the madrasa principal, filed a case against Nikhil with Gopalpur Police Station.

Arrested on May 2, he was granted bail after several weeks in jail. He then went into hiding for a few days in fear of retribution.

Locals say Nikhil was otherwise known to be a good man in the area.

"He would appear first whenever his neighbours needed help," said Mohammad Wahab, an elderly man of Dubai.

Nikhil's elder daughter Bonya Rani said his father was a simple man and never interfered with anyone else's

business. "My father did not owe a penny to anyone."

Following an autopsy at Tangail Medical College morgue on Sunday, the body was taken to his village Dubai in the afternoon for funeral.

Several hundred people gathered to see him for one last time.

Aroti was fainting every now and then seeing Nikhil's body. She managed to say, "I will seek justice for my husband's killing from the Almighty."

ARRESTEES REMANDED

A Tangail court yesterday put the three detainees on six-day remand each in two cases.

Senior Judicial Magistrate Anjan Kanti Das passed the order after investigators produced the suspects before his court with a remand prayer.

They were placed on remand separately in the two cases, said Mahfujur Rehman Ghulam, officer-in-charge of Detective Branch (DB) of police in

Tangail.

During the hearing, defence lawyers sought bail for their clients but Judge Anjan rejected the prayer and granted the remand.

Gopalpur police detained the three a day after the killing from different places in Tangail. Later, they were shown arrested in the two cases.

On Saturday night, Nikhil's wife filed a murder case against three unidentified assailants and their patrons.

Sub-inspector Morshedul Alam of Gopalpur police filed another case under the Arms and Explosive Substances Act.

The cases were shifted to the Detective Branch in Tangail on Sunday night.

Meanwhile, the investigators yesterday sent the crude bomb-like objects to Shaheed Salahuddin Cantonment in Ghatail for examination by military experts, said OC Mahfujur.

Danger comes with restriction

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The poor state of freedom of press is always symptomatic of bad governance and fragile democracy in a country. Culture of secrecy always breeds rampant corruption in many levels of the statehood and its administration.

In the press freedom index, Somalia, North Korea, Afghanistan, Sudan and South Sudan scored poor. Somalia ranked 167, North Korea 179, Afghanistan 120, Sudan 174 and South Sudan ranked 140.

Predictably, it does not show any positive results for them. They have been labelled the five most corrupt countries in the world in the TI's index. People of these countries also suffer immensely due to the poor governance and corruption.

Former World Bank president James Wolfensohn often identified government corruption as the primary hindrance to development and an independent media sector as the number one tool to fight public corruption.

The situation in Bangladesh is not comfortable in any of the indexes. It ranked 144 in world press freedom index and 139 in TI index. The rankings tell of the poor state of governance and freedom of the press.

The RWB says, in Bangladesh, it is a bad idea to criticize the constitution or Islam, and the state religion. Journalists and bloggers who refuse to submit to censorship or to censor themselves on these subjects risk life imprisonment or the death penalty, it said in its latest index.

"Outspoken secularists are also targeted by Islamist militants. The media are nonetheless quite diverse and fairly outspoken on less sensitive

issues," said the watchdog, a France-based international non-profit, non-governmental organization.

The RWB promotes and defends freedom of information and freedom of the press. It has consultant status at the United Nations.

With high hopes for changes, World Press Freedom Day is being observed in Bangladesh today and elsewhere in the world at a time when press freedom is under tremendous pressure.

IMPORTANCE OF PRESS FREEDOM

Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights unequivocally states that everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.

It is said that journalists are among the greatest users of the right. But press freedom is not limited to the news media only.

"It is the freedom for any person to use their right to free expression to impart content, including creative content, to a wider public, by means of mass communication platform that encompass social media, for example," says a concept note of the UNESCO on this year's World Press Freedom Day.

"In this sense, each individual has a direct stake in press freedom."

Considering the importance of the freedom of the press, the UN declared May 3 as World Press Freedom Day in 1993 to promote freedom of the press and the day has been observed since then under the support of UNESCO.

On the eve of the day, the UN says ensuring freedom for the media

around the world is a priority. Independent, free and pluralistic media are central to good governance in democracies that are young and old.

"Free media can ensure transparency, accountability and the rule of law; promote participation in public and political discourse, and contribute to the fight against poverty," says the world body in a message posted on its website.

It also states that an independent media sector draws its power from the community it serves and in return empowers that community to be a full partner in the democratic process.

FREEDOM OF PRESS FOR SDG

The overarching theme of this year's observance is access to information and fundamental freedoms with a focus on: freedom of information and sustainable development, protecting press freedom from censorship and surveillance overreach and ensuring safety of journalists online and offline.

The link between press freedom and sustainable development is made for the first time this year, following the adoption in late 2015 of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for 2030, says UNESCO in a message posted on its website. The SDG "recognize the need to 'ensure public access to information and protect fundamental freedoms, in accordance with national legislation and international agreements.'"

The importance of free and independent media to inform the citizens of the world is crucial to the achievement of the SDGs, argues the Director-General of UNESCO, Irina Bokova, in her message for the Day.

"At this time of turbulence and

change across the world, including new challenges that require global cooperation and action, the need for quality information has never been so important—this requires a strong environment of press freedom and well-functioning systems to ensure the people's right to know," states Irina.

Press freedom and access to information, according to the UNESCO concept note, are essential to democracy and to sustainable development.

BANGLADESH PERSPECTIVE

Perhaps, Bangladesh is the lone country that should remain specially grateful to others to the spirit of free press for its birth.

A group of journalists staying in Dhaka on the night of March 25-26, 1971 broke the news of genocide carried out by the Pakistani occupation army to the world.

They had to face enormous difficulties and even risked their lives as they were forced to leave Dhaka at gunpoint by the Pakistan army.

US journalists kept reporting on the genocide informing the world as well as citizens of the USA. The US journalists also exposed the then US administration's support for Pakistan.

Through their reports, US citizens learnt of the military brutality in East Pakistan, and they protested the US strategy to support Pakistani military rulers and organised in support of the Bangalis.

Due to the role of the press, a strong public opinion was built across the world in favour of the Liberation War of Bangladesh.

The framers of the Bangladesh constitution recognised the importance of the free press by guaranteeing freedom

of the press in the constitution.

Bangladesh suffered terribly in the absence of a free press immediately after the brutal assassination of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and almost all of his family members on August 15, 1975.

The army as an institution was in no way involved in the assassination. But the killers of August 15 usurped the name of the entire armed forces to defend their heinous actions by launching pre-planned propaganda through state-run media—radio, television and newspapers. [At that time there was no free media except the nationalized ones.]

The media played a significant role in the ouster of the autocratic ruler HM Ershad and restoration of democracy and later, in ensuring people's voting rights by creating public awareness through reports, opinions and editorials. They kept focusing on social issues, people's safety and injustices against them.

After the restoration of democracy following the ouster of the autocratic regime in 1990, the country got a vibrant media which enjoyed greater freedom until 2006.

It was the newspaper that exposed a farcical investigation into the August 21, 2004 grenade attack on an Awami League rally aimed at assassinating Sheikh Hasina. The then BNP-led government cooked up a story framing a petty criminal Joj Mia for carrying out the heinous attack.

The media also exposed the criminal activities of the dreaded militant kingpin Bangla Bhai in northern parts of the country though the then BNP-led government's high ups continuously denied the existence of Bangla Bhai.

There are numerous examples the media has set in the past, yet, it has been facing visible and invisible pressures in recent times.

Things took different turn during the military backed caretaker government for two years from 2007. Media had faced restriction. Newspapers were forced by some officials of an intelligence agency to publish reports they supplied to the media. Due to absence of free atmosphere, newspapers were unable to verify independently the authenticity of the information supplied by the intelligence agency officials.

Bangladesh's poor ranking in the press freedom index reflects the intensity of the attacks on journalistic freedom and independence by governments, ideologies and private-sector interests during the last year.

The present situation in Bangladesh is paradoxical.

The media has seen a spurt of growth with a number of new private television channels, newspapers and online news portals having been launched.

At the same time, the government has moved to enact a broadcast law proposing a three-month jail term as highest punishment and Tk 5 lakh fine or both for violation of the law which appears as a fresh threat to the freedom of the press. [See a related write up in The Daily Star's op-ed page.]

The freedom of the press, according to Merriam-Webster dictionary, means the right of newspapers, magazines, etc. to report news without being controlled by the government.

The real spirit of the freedom of the press is however largely absent in Bangladesh.