

'Demeaning Islam' Imam, 2 others sent to jail

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Lalmonirhat

An imam (religious leader) of a mosque and two others in Lalmonirhat's Patgram upazila were sent to jail yesterday in a case filed over "demeaning Islam". The imam, Hafez Harunur Rashid, 50, of Choudhobari Jame Mosque, accompanied a group of people allegedly to remove inscriptions on the mosque's walls that bore Allah and Prophet's (PBUH) names, police said quoting locals. A case was filed against five people, including the imam, over the incident by Shahidul Islam, sub-inspector of Patgram Police Station, on April 27.

On Sunday, Imam Harun, Dulu Miah, president of the mosque managing committee, and his son Shafiqul Islam were arrested at Taluk Khutamura in Aditmari upazila. Earlier, police arrested Abdur Rahman and Hanif Ali in the upazila in connection with the incident. Lalmonirhat Senior Judicial Magistrate Mehedi Hasan Mondol sent the imam and two others to jail after they were produced before the court yesterday, the SI said.

ZUMA GRAFT CHARGES S African prosecutor to appeal ruling

AFP, Pretoria

South African state prosecutors said yesterday they would appeal against a court ruling that President Jacob Zuma should face almost 800 corruption charges, setting up a legal battle that could threaten his hold on power. The charges, relating to a multi-billion dollar arms deal, were dropped in 2009, clearing the way for Zuma to be elected president just weeks later.

At the time, state prosecutors justified dropping the charges by saying that tapped phone calls between officials in then-president Thabo Mbeki's administration showed political interference in the case.

But the Pretoria High Court court last month dismissed the decision to discontinue the charges against Zuma as "irrational" and said it should be reviewed by the National Prosecuting Authority (NPA).

"I have decided to apply for leave to appeal against the judgement of the full bench of the Pretoria High Court," Shaun Abrahams, director of the NPA, told a press conference yesterday.

Zuma has endured months of criticism and growing calls for him to step down after a series of corruption scandals amid falling economic growth and record unemployment.

Pressure on the president would increase if some or all of the 783 charges -- which relate to alleged corruption, racketeering, fraud and money laundering -- were reinstated.

Obama lifts

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the conflict ended in 1973.

US STAR ASCENDANT

China, which remains under its own US arms embargo since the 1989 Tiananmen crackdown, officially welcomed the decision to lift the embargo on Vietnam -- calling such measures "a product of the Cold War". "It should never have existed," foreign ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying told reporters.

While it is by far the country's largest trade partner, a deep distrust of China historically runs through Vietnam. In contrast America has rarely, if ever, been so popular among ordinary Vietnamese.

A poll last year by the Pew Research Centre found 78 percent of Vietnamese have a favourable view of the United States, the third highest in Asia after the Philippines and South Korea.

The approval rate was even higher among young people in a nation where the median age is around 29. Like most Vietnamese, 25-year-old Doan Quang Vinh from Hanoi was born long after the war.

HUMAN RIGHTS

Until now Vietnam's dismal human rights record has weighed against a full rollback of the arms embargo. The one-party state still ruthlessly cracks down on protests, jails dissidents, bans trade unions and controls local media.

In a muted reference to its parlous rights situation, Obama said Washington still had differences with Vietnam on human rights but "modest progress" had been made. That sentiment jarred with some of the country's long-persecuted dissidents.

"They (Vietnam) have not changed anything in terms of basic core values when it comes to human rights," blogger Huynh Ngoc Chenh told AFP, while noting he was glad the embargo was lifted.

Human Rights Watch said Obama had "jettisoned what remained of US leverage to improve human rights in Vietnam".

Govt to keep watch

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The meeting also decided to confiscate the moveable properties and bank account savings of six banned militant outfits and people involved with those.

The home ministry asked the Police Headquarters to provide it with details about the properties of the militant outfits.

The six militant outfits are Ansarullah Bangla Team, Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami (Huji), Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB), Jagrata Muslim Janata of Bangladesh, Shahadat-e Al-Hikma and Hizb-ut-Tahrir.

The meeting asked the law enforcement and intelligence agencies to step up vigilance to check militant activities and stop target killings.

Representatives from the police informed the meeting that they were going to prepare a dress code for private security guards, keeping a provision for uniform dress for all private security guards.

The police made the move as the uniform of some private security guards were almost similar to those of army and Border Guard Bangladesh men.

Briefing reporters after the meeting, Amu said the law enforcement agencies didn't find any IS link to the recent target killings in the country.

They found that the JMB was directly involved in 25 out of 37 incidents of killings and attempted murders, Ansarullah in eight and other militant outfits in four, the minister added.

He said the law enforces have found the motives in 31 cases and submitted charge sheets in four. A case has been under trial and the judgment in another has been delivered.

Police arrested 146 suspects in connection with the 37 incidents and recorded confessional statements of 49, Amu stated.

Enquired about the probe into the murder of Sohagi Jahan Tonu, he said the first autopsy report was incorrect. DNA tests found evidence of rape and thus the investigation was taking time.

The government will take necessary action after proper investigation, said the minister.

Tonu, a second year student of

history at Comilla Victoria College, was found dead in a bush inside Comilla Cantonment on 20 March.

About the recent humiliation of a school headmaster in Narayanganj, he said there was no evidence that Shyamal Kanti Bhakta made derogatory remarks about religion.

LGRD Minister Khandaker Mosharraf Hossain, Information Minister Hasanul Haq Inu, Expatriates Welfare Minister Nurul Islam, Water Resources Minister Anisul Islam Mahmud, Law Minister Anisul Huq, Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan, Senior Home Secretary Mozammel Haque Khan and high officials of the law enforcement agencies were present at the meeting.

MISTAKING ROAD FOR RUNWAY

Indian pilots grounded

AFP, Mumbai

An Indian airline has grounded two pilots for attempting to land their plane on a road which they mistook for a runway, the airline and reports said yesterday.

The IndiGo flight from Ahmedabad in Gujarat state to Jaipur in Rajasthan was close to touching down until the pilots were alerted by a "too low terrain" warning in the cockpit, IndiGo said in a statement.

"The captain in command immediately took a precautionary measure and carried a go-around. The aircraft landed safely on subsequent approach," added the statement.

The incident, the latest to highlight safety concerns in India's rapidly expanding aviation sector, happened on February 27 but has only just come to light in Indian media.

The Hindustan Times quoted an aviation official as saying the plane was at an altitude of around 900 feet and 90 seconds away from landing on a road running parallel to the runway.

IndiGo said the pilots were made aware of their mistake by an enhanced ground proximity warning system, which alerts the cockpit if the plane is in danger of flying into the ground or hitting something.

Hasina won't join

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"The high commissioner has booked a flight to Kolkata on the morning of May 27 to participate in the swearing-in," the spokesman for the high commission told The Daily Star's New Delhi correspondent.

Diplomatic sources said among the international participants, Bhutan's PM Tshering Tobgay confirmed that he would join the oath-taking programme.

Among others on the guest list are Indian President Pranab Mukherjee, Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Congress President Sonia Gandhi, ministers and leaders of different political parties, according to Indian media reports.

Hasina telephoned Mamata and greeted her on her election to the chief minister of West Bengal in May 2011, but this time Hasina did not call her or send any letter of felicitations on her second election victory.

However, Foreign Minister AH Mahmood Ali has conveyed the heartfelt congratulations to the ruling Trinamool Congress on the consecutive second victory in the recently held West Bengal Bidhan Sabha elections.

"This is an apt recognition of your pro-poor and pro-development policies, and your dedication to the betterment of the people of West Bengal," he said in a message to the West Bengal chief minister on May 19.

As the relationship expands in depth and dimension, the foreign minister said, "We're confident that during your upcoming term, we would be able to further strengthen our relations."

Bangladesh Deputy High Commissioner in Kolkata Zokey Ahad also greeted Mamata through an SMS in her mobile and Mamata also replied, said diplomatic sources.

In 2011, Hasina sent flower bouquets in advance and sent two of her advisers and foreign minister to Mamata.

SC judgment

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subsequent remand respectively were not consistent with the fundamental rights guaranteed by the constitution. The HC asked the government to amend the relevant sections of the CrPC within six months from the date of the ruling.

The court also made it mandatory for a police officer to produce a person before the magistrate within 24 hours of arrest.

It said a person arrested under section 54 cannot be placed on police remand for interrogation without any nod of the metropolitan sessions judge or the district and sessions judge.

The HC verdict came upon a writ petition filed as public interest litigation (PIL) by human rights groups and individuals following the tragic death in police custody of Shamim Reza Rubel, a student of Independent University, on July 23, 1998.

On November 29 that year, the writ petition was jointly filed by BLAST, Ain o Salish Kendra, Sammilita Samajik Andolan, Sabita Rani Chakroborty, Syed Anwarul Haq, Sultanuzzaman Khan, Ummun Naser and Prof Maniruzzaman Hyat Mamud.

The government had filed the appeal with the SC on August 2 in 2003 against the HC verdict.

Bus fare cut

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while Ena Paribahan Tk 470 on Dhaka-Sylhet route.

But the government fixed fares are Tk 246 for the distance between Gabtoli and Jamalpur and Tk 358 between Gabtoli and Sylhet.

Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA) responsible for implementing the new fares says that it was not solely responsible.

"It is not possible for us to remain standby round the clock at each bus terminals to check overcharging. So, we need their (passengers and owners) cooperation," said Bijoy Bhushan Paul, director (enforcement) of BRTA.

Road Transport and Highways Division Secretary MAN Siddique said they were trying to implement the reduced fares.

Bangladesh Bus-Truck Owners Association (BBTOA) Chairman Faruk Talukder Sohel said the association had instructed all bus companies to follow the new fare chart.

In the past, whenever the government increased fuel prices, bus operators were desperate to hike fares and pressurised the government to implement the hiked fares within the shortest possible time.

But the scenario is different this time. One month after the fuel price cuts, passengers are still paying the previous fares.

The government cut fuel prices on April 24. More than a week later, the ministry announced reduction of fares by 3 paisa per kilometer of inter-district buses, and said the new fares were to be implemented from May 15.

Road Transport and Bridges Minister Obaidul Quader the following day said the new rate, according to which one is to pay Tk 1.42 instead of Tk 1.45 for travelling one kilometer, would be implemented from May 20.

Break this cycle

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secretary Mizanur Rahman accompanied the minister.

Heads of mission of the UK, Denmark, Sweden, France, Italy, Germany, Spain and the Netherlands attended the meeting. Most of them expressed grave concern over the security situation here and systematic assaults on minorities, secular bloggers, intellectuals and foreigners.

In response, the foreign minister briefed them on the actions taken and the progress achieved by the government in maintaining law and order and ensuring public safety in the aftermath of the killings.

During the initial investigation, it appeared that the Jamaat-e-Islami and Jamaat affiliated outfits like Jamaatul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB), Ansar Al Islam, Ansarullah Bangla Team, Harkatul Jihad al Islami (Huji-B), Hizb ut-Tahrir Bangladesh, and newly emerged Al Mujahid were involved in the killings, the minister said.

He added that it was unfortunate the BNP was giving shelter and support to them.

The overall law and order situation in the country is stable and peaceful, Mahmood Ali claimed.

The EU Heads of Mission expressed their conviction that there must be an effective and comprehensive response to militancy, which would include promoting democratic accountability, freedom of expression, vibrant media, tolerance and the empowerment of civil society.

They offered to strengthen their partnership and cooperation with Bangladesh to combat terrorism, of which Europe is also a target.

The EU diplomats also reiterated their opposition to the death penalty in all cases and under any circumstances.

The foreign minister recalled the European Parliament's resolution on Bangladesh in January 2014, saying, "...believes that in the interest of Bangladesh's future, parties having a democratic reputation need to develop a culture of mutual respect; urges the BNP to unequivocally distance itself from Jamaat-e-Islami and Hefazat-e-Islam."

Mahmood said he was disappointed that the BNP had not dissociated itself from those parties, according to a foreign ministry press release.

He said some vested groups were out to destabilise the country through targeted, pre-mediated and clandestine killings tarnishing the image of Bangladesh and to discredit the government both at home and abroad.

The foreign minister reiterated the government's "zero tolerance" to terrorism and violent extremism and firm commitment to containing violence and ensuring protection and safety of all.

Tracing back similar killings in history, he said in 1971 Jamaat and its various killing outfits, including Al Badar, Razakar and Al-Shams collaborated with the Pakistan Army in killing innocents in the then East Pakistan.

He termed baseless a statement by the Pakistan advisor for foreign affairs that Bangladesh has been conducting the trial of war crimes, violating the tripartite agreement between Bangladesh, India and Pakistan.

The agreement referred only to 19 prisoners of war who had been taken into custody for heinous crimes, including crime against humanity, the foreign minister explained.

Fire at Thai school

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Photographs on the school's Facebook page showed firefighters struggling to douse the flames as they tore through the building.

Thai media showed a fire truck spraying water onto the blaze as the upper storey was consumed by the fire.

Thailand is home to a patchwork of hill tribes who mainly live in the remote northern area bordering Laos and Myanmar.

Many are descendants of refugees from Myanmar or China and exist within subsistence farming communities with their own distinctive dialects and rituals.

They mostly live beyond the reach of state resources, meaning hill tribe children suffer at school as well as in their health and development.

Poverty means adults are easy prey for drug gangs who pay them to smuggle narcotics -- including heroin and amphetamines -- across the zone, known as the "Golden Triangle".

Thai security forces frequently engage in deadly gunbattles with hill tribe drug mules in the region.

That link engenders prejudice among many Thais and hill tribes are often portrayed negatively in the media. Chiang Rai town and the surrounding hills are popular with foreign tourists for hiking and adventure sports.

Visitors can go on tours to see the isolated tribes, although the practice of taking posed photographs at villages has come in for criticism.

Thailand has poor health and safety standards and accidents are common across the kingdom.

Scribbling poetry

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local publisher Ethos Books.

The poems in his book, Me Migrant, were further refined in English by local poet Cyril Wong, based on translations from Bangla that Mukul had paid a lecturer back in Bangladesh \$500 -- or half his monthly salary -- to do.

It was launched on May 1. Through his poems, Mukul hopes to convey the perspective of the foreign worker and also to keep hold of what is dear to himself.

"For a long time, I have lived in another country. Hard work made me forget my feelings. It was a way to remember my family, my friends," he said.

In one poem, he rages against unfair bosses, writing: "I want to stand against them... I want to be king of the poor."

In another, he yearns for his mother, evoking the "unending solitude" of the "stranded immigrant".

Mukul, who hails from the village of Panbari in Bangladesh, has been writing poetry since the age of 12 and has two books published in his home country.

The second youngest of nine children, he dreamt of being a writer or singer. But his parents, who are farmers, said they could not afford to send him to university in Bangladesh and that he would have to go abroad to pursue his dreams.

The first attempt to send him to work in Singapore in 2008 cost them \$10,000, which the family raised by selling their land. But the firm he was to work for went bankrupt and his work permit was cancelled before he could recoup the money.

His father told him: "Don't worry. Even if I need to sell my blood, I will make your dream come true."

That resolve would be sorely tested, as more attempts to send Mukul overseas failed.

One attempt in 2009, which cost his mother her last gold necklace, went awry at the airport. His ticket was cancelled because the work permit had been inexplicably revoked. By then, the agent that had acquired it for him was nowhere to be found.

"I felt like I was rubbish," Mukul said. "I spent a lot of time crying in my room, not able to show my face, because people would say, 'Why did you take money to go to Singapore and bring nothing back?'"

In 2010, he finally made it to Singapore and started work at a construction site. But he was unprepared for the physical toil of carrying heavy metal rods, painting walls and building scaffolding under the hot sun.

"I was a college student in my home country. On the fourth day, I fainted

because it was so hot."

He could not sleep in the crowded dormitory, which smelled of rubbish and sometimes of vomit. Nor could he stomach the meals at his worksite. "The food was smelly and the rice dry," he said.

He tried to channel his misery into his writing. As he could not keep a notebook on site, he scribbled on cement bags with a constantly vanishing supply of pens and copied the words into his cellphone when he had the chance.

Slowly, Mukul grew to like Singapore, especially after he began to write poems for local monthly Bangla paper Banglar Kantha and attend local literary events.

It was at one such poetry reading last year that he met Mr Wong, a Singapore Literature Prize winner, with whom he struck up a friendship over soft drinks at a coffee shop.

Wong said: "Mukul's central quality in his writing is his honesty, which can seem both impassioned and quietly introspective at the same time in his poems."

Mukul approached Ethos Book publisher Fong Hoe Fang last year. Fong said he was struck by the "universality" of Mukul's thoughts on loneliness, missing home and being invisible in a different land. "I am reminded of some Singapore pioneers who came from China and built a new Singapore, yet never lost their culture and love for the country of their birth and the memories there."

Fong, who founded Ethos Books in 1997, does not know of any other books by foreign workers published locally.

Mukul hopes his poetry can challenge the sometimes negative perceptions Singaporeans have of foreign workers, especially in the wake of the arrests of Bangladeshi nationals for suspected terrorist activities. Last month, eight radicalised Bangladeshi workers were detained for setting up an Islamic State of Bangladesh cell here.

Besides writing, Mukul volunteers weekly as a translator at the non-profit HealthServe clinic at his former dormitory in Mandai, even though he has moved to Sembawang and it takes him an hour to get there after work.

He first went to the clinic nine months ago while suffering from indigestion and was moved by the work done there by community doctors. "I think that if I help many people, maybe God will help me too."

Mukul, who is now working on a book of short stories, dreams of carving a niche for foreign workers in the Singapore literary scene.

"I cannot say my father is an engineer or a lawyer or a pilot. But I want him to be able to say one day, 'My son is a famous writer'."