

## Sixteen more Biranganas given FF status

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Sixteen more Biranganas (war heroines) have been recognised as freedom fighters for their sacrifice in the country's Liberation War in 1971.

The Ministry of Liberation War Affairs issued a gazette in this regard on September 1.

With these 16, a total of 146 women have been honoured as freedom fighters in phases by the government.

The government for the first time in October last year recognised 41 Biranganas as freedom fighters.

The process of recognising Biranganas as freedom fighters began after a High Court order on January 27, 2014.

Once recognised, the Biranganas will receive the same benefits as the freedom fighters do -- a monthly allowance of Tk 10,000, special quotas in the government jobs and many more benefits for their children and grandchildren.

Around 200 applications from Biranganas are now under scrutiny of Jatiya Muktiyoddha Council, the central platform of freedom fighters. The government will give them the status of freedom fighters in phases once the scrutiny is done.

At least 1.62 lakh women were raped, and another 1.31 lakh Hindu women went missing during the Liberation War, according to the War Crimes Facts and Findings Committee led by Dr M Hassan. The Hindu women are believed to have been raped and killed in the Pakistani army camps.

The newly recognised freedom fighters are -- Late Tittho Bala of Thakurgaon, late Sabitri Chackraborty and Nistara Bibi of Satkhira, Sukuron Nesa of Chuadanga, Hafiza Bewya and Somla Bewya of Sherpur, Saptan Bawya of Gaibandha, Rashida Begum of



Arrested members of a counterfeit money gang are being taken before the media at the Rab-1 office in the capital's Uttara yesterday. **Top right**, officials put on display the seized fake currencies and materials to make those. **Bottom right**, notes are being examined with counterfeit money detector at Gabtoli cattle market.

PHOTO: PRABIR DAS/ANISUR RAHMAN



## Note fakers go into overdrive

FROM PAGE 1

"We have come to know about over 15 large counterfeit note gangs in the capital," said Lt Col Tuhin Mohammad Masud, commanding officer of Rab-1.

If caught by law enforcers, the gang members manage to get out of jails and resume their criminal activities, he said.

The Rapid Action Battalion (Rab) on Wednesday night busted a gang of five people, including two women, who Rab claimed had been involved in producing and distributing fake notes for several years.

They are Fatema Begum, 25, Rubina Begum, 24, Abdur Rashid, 56, Md Dulal, 30, and Sarwar Hossain, 23, said Rab

officials.

"The gang circulated about Tk 1 crore in fake notes and also had plans to distribute Tk 2 crore more ahead of Eid-ul-Azha," Masud told a press briefing at Rab-1 headquarters yesterday.

Acting on a tip-off, a Rab-1 team raided a house at Dakkhin Banasree in the city and detained Fatema and Rubina, said the Rab official.

Searching a room, they found fake notes of Tk 1,000 and Tk 500 worth Tk 78 lakh.

The Rab men also seized fake note-making equipment, including fibres, tracing papers, printing plates, laminating machines, printers and car-

tridges from the house.

After gleaning information from them, Rab detained Rashid, Dulal and Sarwar from Jurain area the same night, CO Masud said, adding that they also seized over Tk 23 lakh and printing plates and mobile phones from the trio.

According to Rab sources, Sarwar is a distributor who was caught with fake notes worth Tk 2 lakh.

During primary interrogation, Rashid admitted that he had been involved in fake note-making for over a decade.

He was a government bank official but was fired in 1997 and later spent two years in jail, said Rab official Masud.

After getting released from jail, he started a printing press in the capital's Katabon area.

In jail, he met one Nuruzzaman alias Guruzzaman, who is an expert in producing fake Indian currency. While running the printing press, he met Nuruzzaman again and the duo started making fake notes.

Initially, they produced fake Indian notes but gradually changed their business and started producing fake Bangladeshi notes.

Rubina and Fatema, both of whom are the wives of one Abdur Rahim, were detained by Rab earlier. Rahim is also involved in the illegal trade, said CO

Masud.

The women have been involved in producing fake notes, as it is comparatively less risky for them, he said.

The Rab official added that fake note-making gangs usually maintain multiple layers to continue their illegal trade in the market. Some get involved in producing while the others have the responsibility of distributing those in the market.

According to law enforcers, people belonging to lower income group are the main target of the fake note gangs.

During primary interrogation, the gang members admitted that they do this throughout the year but become more active during Eids, he said.

## JMB suspect held in Gaibandha

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Gaibandha

Police arrested a suspected member of banned militant outfit Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) in the district's Shaghata upazila early yesterday.

The arrestee is Farid Uddin, 45, son of late Sadek Ali of Paschim Raghobpur village in the upazila.

Law enforcers also recovered three bombs, explosives and bomb-making materials from his house.

Acting on a tip-off, a team of police arrested Farid from Bonarpara College Road area around 4:00am, said Mostafizur Rahman, officer-in-charge of Shaghata Police Station.

After gleaning information from him, police recovered three bombs, explosives, bomb circuit, a battery and detonators from the backyard of his house.

Farid got introduced with one Moksedul Islam, an alleged member of JMB, a few years ago and joined the group as a member, said the OC.

As police started crackdown on militants in Gaibandha, Moksedul handed over a bag full of bombs and other materials to Farid and left for Tangail with his wife Rozina Begum, OC Mostafizur added.

Police arrested Moksedul and his wife in Tangail a month ago for their alleged involvement in militant activities.

During interrogation, Moksedul divulged Farid's name and the bombs and other explosives in his possession. Being informed, Shaghata police started looking for Farid.

Farid was produced before a court yesterday. The court ordered to send him to jail, said the OC.

## It all begins with bribe

FROM PAGE 1

more than the government-managed hajjis for better services and are often let down by the agents.

There have been cases in which hajjis discovered that the flat in Makkah they paid for was not booked by the agent. Or they paid for a room in which two people could stay but the agent gave six people the same room.

Quite often people who paid for flats close to the Al-Masjid al-Haram discover their flats were on the edge of the holy city.

In cases, meals are delayed, like breakfast being served in the afternoon, and transport to Mina scheduled to arrive in the morning arriving in the evening.

There have been instances where hajjis have been left under the desert sun when they had paid for tents in Mina.

Dodgy hajj agents also take less money than the government-fixed rate only to cheat the poor, illiterate pilgrims from remote villages.

"As per Islam, pilgrims are the guests of Allah when they reach Saudi Arabia, and they hardly ever complain about the hassles and sufferings they endure due to unscrupulous hajj operators," said Anisur Rahman, who works as a photojournalist for a national daily and performed the pilgrimage in 2014.

"It's common that hajj guides of private hajj operators do not take proper care of hajjis in Makkah and Madina. People, especially senior citizens from remote areas, are often at a loss when they are placed among millions of pilgrims during hajj," Anisur said.

"Believe it or not, some hajj guides

intentionally snap communications with hajjis to avoid responsibilities. Hajjis often do not become angry with their guides as they think they are spending time and money to please Allah.

"The Saudi Arabian government bears all costs of treating hajjis who become sick. But guides often take money from the sick hajjis or from their relatives citing medical expenditures," Anisur explained.

Sharing his experience, he said his agent had promised hajjis that they would be provided quality food and accommodation in Saudi Arabia. "But in reality, we found six to seven people crammed into one room, instead of two people in one room as was promised. Breakfast was served in the afternoon with no plates or table."

"Instead of taking care of hajjis, many guides are more interested in making profits by arranging sacrificial animals for hajjis, a must ritual during hajj. In many cases, guides charge exuberantly for sacrificial animals," he said.

Bazul Haque Biswas, a retired official who ran the Ashkona Hajj Camp for more than a decade, said, "Unscrupulous private hajj operators gobble up Tk 25,000 to Tk 30,000 from each such pilgrims by arranging poor quality accommodation far away from the centre of Makkah and Madina, bad food and other services.

"Some of those victims of fraud do not even get to go to Saudi Arabia while others do not even realise they have been had until they reach Makkah and find that they have not got those promised services.

"Most of the people engaged in hajj operations try to extract money out of pilgrims, preying on their emotions

that they are performing hajj, an opportunity of a lifetime."

Hajj is the fifth pillar of Islam. Every able-bodied adult Muslim must undertake it at least once in their life if they can afford. Many Muslims save up for years for the pilgrimage as the cost of going to Saudi Arabia increases every year.

The humble hajjis usually endure all the pain and suffering inflicted on them by the agents and stay completely focused on their spiritual journey. They refuse to file complaints even though the government encourages them to do so.

"The hajj tour operators' misdeeds are under reported because people feel embarrassed to report it when they are making a pilgrimage. Hajjis like to think of it as an act of Allah when such things happen," Bazul said.

Only a few hajjis complain as their journey is spiritual and emotional, he added.

Mosque imams, madrasa teachers or moallems [hajj guides] usually pick religious people in their areas and try to convince them to go for hajj, Momtaz Uddin, a moalleem from Trishal said.

Momtaz has been collecting hajjis from Trishal for the last 12 years. He said a moalleem usually makes profits between Tk 10,000 to 15,000 for every hajj he brings in while a hajj operator makes Tk 20,000 or more.

A pilgrim needs to go through at least six stages to go to Saudi Arabia.

Several aspirant hajjis at city's Ashkona Hajj Camp told The Daily Star that they had to go through bitter experience from the very beginning. They had to bribe police Tk 500 to Tk 1,000 for a positive report.

"Hajjis are called the guest of Allah.

But I felt very disappointed and upset. It really does destroy your life to be honest when you start the pilgrimage by giving bribe to police and middlemen," said Shawkat Hossain, a hajj from Faridpur.

In the second stage, a hajj needs to pay Tk 30,000 for pre-registration. The hajj also has to pay Tk 2.75 lakh or more to complete the rest of the stages, including visa, ticket confirmation, accommodation, food and transport.

And there are problems in the government side of things as well.

"Getting hajj visas usually take long due to delay in issuing Demand Order that creates negative impact on the rest of the hajj procedure," said Hajj Agencies Association of Bangladesh (HAAB) President Ibrahim Bahar.

HAAB leaders also blame red tape in the religious affairs ministry and incompetence of government officials.

Ibrahim said in exchange for undue benefits, some hajj officials favour select hajj agencies.

Some agents took to the streets and even issued a 48-hour ultimatum to the government for removing Director (hajj operations) of Ashkona Hajj Camp Abu Saleh Mostafa.

According to them he is incompetent and corrupt.

Mostafa rejected the allegations and accused HAAB leaders for the delays in procedures.

"Due to HAAB members' negligence in buying tickets for intended hajjis, at least 15 hajj flights of Biman had to be cancelled," he said, adding, "It is also a common allegation against hajj operators that they do not deliver quality services as promised to hajjis."

Mostafa said every year the religious affairs ministry sends an administrative team to Saudi Arabia to oversee how hajjis are being treated by hajj agents.

"The administrative team takes proactive role to find faults in hajj agents," he claimed, adding that after holding hearings, the ministry takes punitive measures, including scrapping of agency licences.

WHO DID NOT MAKE IT

Jahirul Islam of Trishal lost all his money, over Tk 3 lakh, as the owner of Mawna Tours and Travels disappeared after taking his hajj money.

Like him, 69 other hajj aspirants from Trishal and different areas of Tangail gave Tk 1.79 crore in total to Momtaz Uddin and his friend Mohammad Hanif who had been working as moallems for the last 12 years.

The two, after haggling with several hajj agencies, selected Mawna Travels and Tours at Mawna of Gazipur Chourasta since it offered them the lowest fees for sending the 70 people for hajj. They gave the agent around Tk 1 crore for tickets, visas for hajjis and other expenses, like accommodation rent and food in Saudi Arabia.

After contacting agency owner Ali Asgar over the phone, Momtaz and Hanif visited the agency in Gazipur but found the office locked.

"The mobile phone [of Asgar] remains switched off all the time. Mawna Travels has taken the money of hajjis. I don't know how I will pay back the money," Momtaz told The Daily Star.

"The experience I had is very painful and it affected all my family members," Jahirul said, adding, "It's a thing you wait for and you feel that you are ready spiritually to go there and make your dream come true."

## Eid rush is on, so are hassles

FROM PAGE 1

Long tailbacks on Dhaka-Tangail, Dhaka-Chittagong and Dhaka-Sylhet highways and disruption of ferry services due to strong current in the Padma caused sufferings to the home-goers heading for different districts.

Around 60-65 lakh people leave the city to celebrate the Eid at their village homes. Of them, around 45 lakh travel by bus, about five lakh by train and around 12 lakh by launch, according to a rough estimate of transport operators and Bangladesh Passengers Welfare Association.

The number of city residents is 1.41 crore, shows Urban Area Report 2014 of Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics.

At Paturia ferry ghat, around 500 vehicles were waiting to cross the river in the afternoon. Thirteen of the 19 ferries are operating now.

Though all four ferry landing stations in Paturia were in operation, ferry

service was disrupted due to strong current, reports our Manikganj correspondent.

The situation forced many of the bus operators to arrange launches for their passengers to cross the river. The passengers then board another bus of the same company, said bus operators.

As in the past, most of the home-goers are travelling by road. But their trips are far from comfortable this time.

Visiting the bus terminals at Gabtoli and Mohakhali, The Daily Star correspondents found hundreds of holidaymakers waiting for buses since morning.

"As the departure time of our bus was 10:00am, we started for Gabtoli from home early, fearing traffic jam. It is already 12:00noon and the bus is yet to arrive," said Shakhawat Hossain, an employee of a private firm, who was going to Joypurhat

with his family.

Like him, more than a hundred passengers were waiting near Hanif Paribahan counter in Balurmath area of Gabtoli.

Passengers travelling to Chittagong, Feni, Comilla, Laxmipur and other adjacent districts suffered the most as buses were delayed by four to five hours since morning.

"I've been waiting for four hours here, but there is no sign of the bus," Arshad Chowdhury, a passenger, told this newspaper at Shyamoli Paribahan's counter in Arambagh around 1:00pm.

Dinesh Das, a staff of Shyamoli Paribahan, said many of their buses remained stranded on Dhaka-Chittagong highway for hours because of long tailbacks in Daudkandi area.

An employee of Ekota Paribahan that plies Dhaka-Bogra route said the bus, which was scheduled to reach at 8:00am, couldn't make it to the terminal till 11:30am.

WORRIES ON HIGHWAYS

On Dhaka-Chittagong highway, a 13-km long gridlock stretching from Meghna bridge to Daudkandi area was created since early morning due to excessive traffic flow, report our correspondents from Munshiganj and Comilla.

Satadal Das, a bus driver of Saudia Paribahan, said he left Chittagong around 12:00am. It took him five hours to reach Daudkandi where he remained stuck till 10:00am.

Till filing of this report at 7:00am, a 30-km long tailback was created from Meghna-Gomati bridge in Comilla to Kanchpur bridge in Narayanganj.

There was a 10-km long tailback from Signboard to Mugrapara in Narayanganj.

On Dhaka-Tangail highway, passengers had to endure immense sufferings as the vehicles were moving very slowly throughout the 64-km road from Chandra in Gazipur to Elega in Tangail the whole day, reports our

correspondent.

Every day, 15,000 to 20,000 vehicles use the narrow highway, considered the gateway to the North, to go to more than 20 northern districts, according to highway police and transport operators.

But the number of vehicles goes up to around 35,000 during Eid rush, they said.

On Dhaka-Sylhet highway, a five-km long traffic jam built up in Bhulta area of Narayanganj during the day. It, however, eased in the evening, reports a correspondent.

KAMALAPUR STATION

The picture of Kamalapur railway station was comparatively better as almost all the trains packed with passengers left the station on time.

However, Rajshahi Express got delayed for around one and half hours.

"The train was supposed to leave for Rajshahi at 11:30am. It's now 1:00 pm, and still there is no sign of the train," said an elderly man waiting at the

station with his son.

Most of the home-goers there expressed satisfaction over the train service.

Rabul Islam, a government official, who boarded Silk City Train to travel to Rajshahi, said "The train is packed with passengers, but I have got my seat and I am happy."

Following the problems at ferry ghats, the railway authorities took an initiative to attach more coaches to Khulna-bound passenger trains, said an official at the station.

Railway officials said 125 trains are making round trips a day.

Meanwhile, rush of passengers at Sadarghat launch terminal was yet to gain momentum. The operators were expecting a huge rush today.

"We have sufficient number of launches to handle the rush," said Badiuzzaman Badal, senior vice-chairman of Bangladesh Inland Waterways (Passenger Carriers) Association.