

GRAFT CASE Mirza Abbas indicted

COURT CORRESPONDENT

A Dhaka court yesterday framed charges against BNP standing committee member Mirza Abbas, former state minister and BNP leader Alamgir Kabir and a former government official in a case filed for causing Tk 16 crore losses to the state.

Bijon Kanti Sarker, former joint secretary of housing and public works ministry, has been indicted in the case.

Two other officials were acquitted of the charges. They are National Housing Authority Cashier Mansur Alam and Assistant Cashier Motiar Rahman.

Abbas, now on bail, pleaded not guilty after Judge Aminul Haque of the Special Judge Court-4 read out the charges to him. Charges were framed against Kabir and Bijon in absentia and arrest warrants were issued for them.

The court set January 1 next year to start the trial of the case.

On January 6 this year, Abbas, who stands accused in several other criminal cases, was sent to jail after his surrender before the same court in connection with the same case.

The case was filed with Shahbagh Police Station on March 6, 2014, on charges of allocating seven acres of land of Rajuk to a journalists' cooperative society at a rate lower than the actual value.

Abbas was the minister of housing and public works and Kabir was the state minister during the rule of the BNP-led coalition.

On February 16 last year, Hamidul Hassan, deputy director of the Anti-Corruption Commission and also investigation officer of the case, submitted the charge sheet against the five accused to the Chief Metropolitan Magistrate's Court of Dhaka, showing 17 people as prosecution witnesses.

Banker arrested for his 'role' in Tk 93 lakh scam

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Pabna

The Anti Corruption Commission yesterday arrested the alleged ring-leader of the Tk 93-lakh embezzlement racket of Agrani Bank Pakshey branch.

According to a case filed by the ACC on October 19 this year, the arrestee, Aminul Islam, an officer of the branch, embezzled Tk 93.05 lakh between the period of 1998 and 2004 with the help of five of his branch colleagues from a number of savings accounts maintained with the branch.

Golam Maula, assistant director of ACC in Pabna, said Aminul was arrested early yesterday from Naogaon by an ACC team after a tip-off.

The other five accused -- former branch managers Afsar Ali, Mosharaf Hossain and Kawsar Ali and officers Nurul Islam and Ramzan Ali -- were arrested by the ACC on Wednesday evening in different raids in Ishwardi and Pabna.

The ACC yesterday afternoon produced all the six arrestees before a Pabna court, with 10 days' remand prayer for Aminul. The court adjourned after sending all to jail custody without passing any order.



An Iraqi man walks on a street covered with smoke after oil pits were set on fire in Qayyarah area, some 60 kilometres off Mosul, during an operation by Iraqi forces against IS militants yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Mosul raises humanitarian alarm in war

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Al-Hawl, a few kilometres from the Iraqi border.

Around 6,000 Iraqi refugees have been in the camp for the last two years, but the population is expected to swell to as many as 30,000 people, according to an official with the local Kurdish administration responsible for the camp.

"There are between 2,000 and 3,000 people waiting at the border," he told AFP.

The process is slowed by the need to carefully vet the arrivals, he added. "There are security procedures to follow."

More than 200 kilometres of arid territory separate the Al-Hawl camp from Mosul, which has been controlled by IS since June 2014.

Refugees fleeing must travel most of that distance on foot, through territory mined by IS, which also fires on civilians as they escape in a bid to prevent them from leaving.

"We walked all night, in the middle of explosions and bombs. Bullets whistled over our heads until we got to the border," says Ibtissam Khadr, her face wrapped in a black veil.

"If Daesh [Islamic State] knew we were going to escape, they would have cut our throats," she adds, sitting with her children at the entrance of a tent.

"We got here thanks to Syrian smugglers. We were afraid of everything; the planes, Daesh. The fear didn't leave us for even a minute."

Meanwhile, elite Iraqi forces yesterday retook a town on the eastern edge of Mosul while Kurdish peshmerga opened a new front in the offensive to wrest back the jihadists' last bastion in Iraq.

Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi told an international meeting in Paris that the four-day-old offensive was "advancing faster than expected".

France and Iraq were co-chairing

the meeting on the future of Mosul, which observers have warned could raise even greater humanitarian challenges than the massive military operation to retake it.

The counter-terrorism service (CTS), Iraq's best-trained and most battle-seasoned force, retook full control of Bartalla, a town that lies less than 15 kilometres (nine miles) east of Mosul.

"I announce to the people of Bartalla and Mosul we have complete control over Bartalla," CTS commander Taleb Sheghati al-Kenani told reporters from the town.

"Its residents, its churches and all of its infrastructure are now under the control of CTS," he said of the small Christian town that IS seized when it swept across the Nineveh plain in August 2014.

Some 120,000 Iraqi Christians were forced to flee their homes at the time.

In some areas, the Iraqi advance was met by a trickle of civilians fleeing both the fighting and the jihadists who ruled them for two years.

POST-IS MOSUL

The Iraqi prime minister told the Paris meeting on Mosul's future that the operation to retake it was making progress.

"We are advancing faster than we had expected and planned," he said by video link.

French President Francois Hollande told the meeting that jihadists were already leaving for Raqqa, their stronghold in neighbouring Syria.

"We can't afford mistakes in the pursuit of the terrorists who are already leaving Mosul for Raqqa," Hollande said.

Mosul, Iraq's second city, was seized by IS in June 2014.

Its capture touched off an offensive that saw the jihadists conquer about a third of the country and declare a "caliphate" straddling Iraq and Syria.

DISPLACEMENT

The United Nations estimated some 2,00,000 people could be displaced in the first two weeks alone of the operation to retake Mosul.

But the operation is expected to last weeks or months, and the numbers of those fleeing the fighting and the jihadist group will likely increase significantly.

The UN and aid groups had already sounded the alarm about the massive wave of Iraqis expected to be displaced by the Mosul offensive.

The UN fears up to a million people still trapped inside Mosul could be forced to flee by the fighting, sparking a humanitarian emergency.

The UN's refugee agency said in a statement yesterday that so far around 1,900 people have been displaced from the Qayyarah and Hammam al-Alil areas and been given assistance.

"There are real fears that the offensive to retake Mosul could produce a human catastrophe resulting in one of the largest man-made displacement crises in recent years," William Spindler, spokesman for the United Nations' aid agency, said.

TWO-PRONGED OFFENSIVE

The Iraqi army and Kurdish Peshmerga forces began a two-pronged offensive against IS in Mosul, from the north-eastern Bashiqa region and through eastern Bartella villages.

Iraqi special forces joined yesterday's offensive in a pre-dawn advance on Bartella, encountering heavy fire from IS.

The elite forces were helped by US-led coalition air raids and heavy artillery.

Al Jazeera's Zeina Khodr, reported hearing the sound of heavy gunfire and artillery from the frontline near Bartella, as the offensive got under way.

"Earlier this morning, ISIL tried to send a suicide car bomber, but that was destroyed," Khodr said.

Al Jazeera's Hoda Abdel Hamid, reporting from the frontline near Bashiqa, said that the "intensive" northeastern offensive, led by the Kurdish Peshmerga, also marks a new entry point into the battle.

Just as the Peshmerga forces recaptured nine villages on the first day of the offensive, the goal of the northeastern push is to retake and secure surrounding areas in Bashiqa before awaiting support from Iraqi troops to prepare to enter Mosul city, Abdel Hamid added.

The offensive is the largest operation launched by Iraqi forces since the 2003 US-led invasion.

More than 100,000 troops are involved, while there are thought to be nearly 5,000 IS fighters in and around Mosul. It is expected to take weeks, if not months.

IS captured Mosul during a lightning advance across northern Iraq in 2014, and its leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi announced the formation of a self-styled caliphate from the pulpit of a Mosul mosque.

'IS DRONE'

At dawn, bulldozers flattened a path for forces in armoured vehicles to carve their way down towards Bashiqa.

As tanks and personnel carriers prepared to advance, a shadow glided above them and one peshmerga shouted "drone!"

Fighters opened fire at it with every weapon available, causing an almighty din and lighting up the dim morning sky, until it fell to the ground and the troops resumed their advance.

An AFP reporter in the village of Nawaran near Bashiqa saw the downed drone, a Raven RQ-11B model similar to a booby-trapped one that killed two Kurdish fighters and wounded two French soldiers a week ago.

Iraqi federal forces and the peshmerga have not divulged casualty figures in this offensive.

Ten days in a container

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he got into it and fell asleep as he was tired.

Meanwhile, the Bangladesh authorities got in touch with the Indian home ministry seeking information about the man.

"We got in touch with the Indian home ministry on the subject and we are looking forward to their feedback," Bangladesh Deputy High Commissioner Salauddin Noman Chowdhury told our New Delhi correspondent.

Venkat Rao said the man appeared to be a labourer and police did not suspect it to be a case of human trafficking. "We never came across such an instance before. It looks to be an accidental case."

Lt Col Abdul Gaffar, director (security) of Chittagong Port Authority, said they were aware of the incident and were investing it.

The empty container was sent from Chittagong Port on a vessel named MV Sinar Batan on October 7, said sources at the port.

The container, owned by Geneva-based Mediterranean Shipping Company, was booked by its Visakhapatnam-based local agent Samsara Shipping Company. The container was sent from a private inland container depot, QNS Container Services Limited.

It was kept at a jetty of New Mooring Container Terminal and loaded on the vessel, officials said.

Tanvir Hossain, chief operating



The photo of The Indian Express shows the man, who ended up in Andhra Pradesh's Visakhapatnam Port from the Chittagong port in a container, being treated at a hospital there.

officer of Saif Powertech, the berth operating firm of the jetty, said they were unaware of the incident.

Empty containers that come from private depots are checked at the port's entry gate and their doors are not sealed off during loading, he added.

He suspects the man in question passed into the container after it was loaded on the ship.

Nurul Qayyum Khan, chairman of QNS Container Services Limited, told The Daily Star they were still verifying if the container was sent from their

depot.

But he added it was almost impossible for anyone to get on an empty container and be shipped that way because the doors of empty containers are kept open and checked when they pass through the port gates to avert any such illegal entry.

Earlier in April 2011, two dock workers -- Al Amin and Deen Islam -- who reportedly got trapped in a container at Chittagong Port ended up in Singapore Port. After nine days, Islam was recovered alive but Amin died.

Govt should repeal

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The law, known as the Foreign Donations (Voluntary Activities) Regulation Bill 2016 (FDRB), came into effect on October 13, 2016, it added.

The law requires all foreign-funded NGOs to submit virtually all activities for approval to a bureau under the Prime Minister's Office, without clear criteria for grounds for rejection or a timeframe in which decisions should be rendered, HRW said.

Registration is similarly at the discretion of the bureau, and a last-minute addition to the law makes it an offense for NGOs to criticise the government, it added.

"The Foreign Donations Law is a shocking new initiative by a repressive government to make civil society toe the government line, or risk being arbitrarily shut down," said Brad Adams, Asia director at HRW.

"The government claims it is committed to freedom of expression and pluralism, but then passes a law that would make an authoritarian regime proud."

Human Rights Watch and Bangladeshi NGOs have long expressed concerns about earlier drafts of this law.

A new element added since the draft law was circulated in 2014 makes "inimical" or "derogatory" remarks against the constitution, the parliament and other governmental bodies an offense. These terms are

undefined, and could be used to limit any criticism of the government whatsoever, stated the release.

Any NGO found by the NGO Affairs bureau to have engaged in "inimical" or "derogatory" remarks can have its registration cancelled.

"Such a law clearly abrogates the rights of free expression which Bangladesh, both through its own constitution and through its obligations under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, is obligated to protect."

HRW said the law is part of a sustained attack on civil society, particularly human rights organisations and other critics of the government.

The law comes during a sustained campaign by the government against political, media, and civil society critics which has led to an effective clampdown on any dissent from within the country itself, it said.

"The Bangladeshi government should be trying to create a welcoming and encouraging legal environment for NGOs in a manner that accords with international best practices and does not interfere with fundamental rights," said Adams.

"Instead, it is treating NGOs like the enemy within. Requiring prior approval of projects, giving the state-wide discretion to deny projects and foreign funding, requiring approval for travel, and targeting critics are the hallmarks of an authoritarian state -- not a democracy."

Enjoy freedom

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The PM was addressing the foundation-laying ceremony of 31-storey "Bangabandhu Media Complex" on the Jatiya Press Club premises yesterday, which was the 62nd founding anniversary of the club.

Information Minister Hasanul Haq Inu, Prime Minister's Media Advisor Iqbal Sobhan Chowdhury, Editors' Council Chairman Golam Sarwar and General Secretary of the club Quamrul Islam Chowdhury addressed the function, among others.

Jatiya Press Club (JPC) President Muhammad Shafiqur Rahman chaired the function, while JPC Vice-President and President of Bangladesh Federal Union of Journalists (BFUJ) Monjurul Ahsan Bulbul conducted it.

Ministers, parliament members, political leaders, editors and senior journalists of the print and electronic media and senior government officials were present.

Earlier, Tagore exponent Perwana Chowdhury Banyan rendered two welcome songs -- Banglar Maati Banglar Jol and Baro Asha Kore Eshichi Go Kaachhe Deke Lao.

The PM said her government since 1996 has been extending support to the journalists, and declared the newspaper industry as a "service sector" and enacted 18 acts and rules for the welfare of the mass media and journalists.

"We have formed welfare trust act for the journalists and as well as the Information Commission Law and the Right to Information Law," she said.

Hasina said her government after assuming office in 1996 had opened television channels and radio stations in the private sector which created job opportunities and competitiveness.

"The people and performers involved in the sector are being benefited along with the journalists," she said.

The PM claimed that there is adequate freedom of the press in the country and criticised those who are spreading propaganda.

In this connection, she questioned that if there is no freedom of the press, how those who are speaking on the issue got the freedom of speech?

She said 750 daily newspapers are published in the country, while there are 24 TV channels in operation and 44 more channels have applied for licence. Besides, she said, there is a number of radio stations in the private sector.

Hasina said her party Bangladesh Awami League was founded through a long struggle and the support of the grassroots people, adding that the party went to power through the mandate of the people.

"But it is very unfortunate that we have to compete with some parties which are not born out of the people and soil. These parties were born in the cantonment and grabbed state power through coup, conspiracy, and killing and violating the constitution," she said.

The prime minister said it is unfortunate that such parties which usurped the state power ruled the country for long 21 years.

That is why the people of the country did not witness development and progress and their fate did not change, she said.

Reiterating her firm commitment to build Bangladesh as a proud nation, Hasina sought cooperation of the journalist community in this regard.

Pointing to the book "Bangabandhu's Unfinished Memoirs", the PM termed herself a member of the journalist community as Bangabandhu, her father, did journalism side by side with pursuing politics.

She also recalled chronological historic development of the Jatiya Press Club starting from 1954, saying Bangabandhu himself was involved in different parts of its history.

Terming terrorists "the enemy of mass media and democracy", Hasanul Haq Inu called upon the journalists of the country to unmask the face of patronisers of the terrorists for the sake of ensuring people's security.

Mentioning that the mass media and democracy are synonymous, the information minister said anti-democratic elements and terrorists are hatching conspiracies to halt the country's development.

AL to promote

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strengthening international relationships with the friendly countries than paying attention to party affairs over the last six years.

They said AL leaderships have been advised by "a few foreign friends" to strengthen the party ahead of the next elections.

In this connection the party would opt to elect a leader as general secretary who has strong connections with grassroots leaders and workers.

Contacted, AL Presidium Member Matia Chowdhury told The Daily Star that through this council the party would be made stronger. She said the party would elect a general secretary with whom AL President Sheikh Hasina would be comfortable to work with.