



PHOTO: STAR

Workers replacing a few damaged sleepers on the Monu Railway Bridge in Kulaura upazila of Moulvibazar yesterday. The Daily Star ran a report titled "Flirting with danger" Wednesday on the poor state of the bridge. Story on page 13.

Obama set for pardon frenzy as he leaves office

AFP, Washington

A Rastafarian prophet, a former Taliban captive and thousands of minor drug traffickers have one thing in common: Their names have been submitted to President Barack Obama for clemency before he leaves office in two weeks. Some US presidents have used this regal power of leniency in a pointed way near the end of their term in office.

On the last day of his term in 2001, Democratic president Bill Clinton granted pardon in a highly controversial move to late fugitive trader Marc Rich, whose ex-wife had been a major donor to Democrats.

Sixteen years later, Obama is fielding pressure from all sides to grant unlikely pardons or commutations of sentences to people whose supporters say have been unjustly sentenced or sought out by the justice system.

Among them is Bowe Bergdahl, a US Army sergeant held captive for five years by the Taliban before his release in a prisoner swap, who is due to be court-martialed for desertion.

Leonard Peltier, a Native American activist convicted for the 1975 deaths of two FBI agents in what his supporters say was a setup, is also hoping to enjoy Obama's good graces.

Then there's Edward Snowden, who made the shattering revelation in 2013 of a global communications and internet surveillance system set up by the United States.

The 33-year-old, a refugee in Russia, is backed by numerous celebrities like actress Susan Sarandon and singer Peter Gabriel, as well as Amnesty International and the American Civil Liberties Union.

If Obama fails to pardon Snowden, his supporters say he may face the death penalty under the incoming administration of Republican Donald Trump, who has called him a "terrible traitor."

In another leak case, Chelsea Manning is serving a 35-year sentence in solitary confinement for handing 700,000 sensitive military and diplomatic documents to WikiLeaks, some of them classified.

Activists say her sentence is excessive and point to the psychological frailty of the transgender soldier who has already made two suicide attempts.

Even though the White House has

dismissed a possible pardon for Snowden and Manning, their supporters are still hoping for a final magnanimous gesture from a president about to leave the constraints of his high office on January 20.

But both cases present unique challenges: Snowden has yet to be sentenced and merely faces espionage charges in the US, while Manning has an appeal pending before military court.

The US Constitution allows a president to pardon "offenses against the United States" and commute -- either shorten or end -- federal sentences.

Obama has so far granted 148 pardons since taking office in 2009 -- fewer than his predecessors, who also served two terms, George W. Bush (189) and Bill Clinton (396).

But he has surpassed any other president in the number of commutations, 1,176.

Most of those who benefited from the president's clemency were minor drug dealers no longer considered a threat.

Obama has promised to use his clemency powers to help serve penal justice, rather than to grant special favors.

"I don't think we will see high-profile names on the list of President Obama's final clemency grants," Mark Osler of the University of St. Thomas told AFP.

"It is most likely they will be the types of cases he has previously commuted: nonviolent narcotics offenders."

He noted that last-minute clemency is a recent phenomenon.

"Up until President Clinton, they usually spread them out over their full term. Hopefully, in the future presidents will return to that practice, which seems less prone to abuse," Osler said.

Presidents can theoretically pardon people before they are even sentenced.

In 1868, president Andrew Johnson granted a "full pardon and amnesty" to Confederates of the 11 southern states who unsuccessfully fought the Civil War to succeed from the union.

Citing this precedent, some have urged Obama to preventively pardon defeated Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton over her use of a private email server while serving as secretary of state in light of Trump's

threats to have her prosecuted.

Obama could also be tempted to grant amnesty to his onetime "favorite general," James Cartwright, who lied to the FBI about his discussions with journalists about Iran's nuclear program.

Some pardon requests can be far-fetched, such as one for the late Marcus Garvey, a Jamaican political leader who backed Pan-Africanism and helped inspire the Rastafarian movement.

Supporters are seeking a posthumous pardon for Garvey, who died in 1940. He was convicted of mail fraud in the United States and later deported back to Jamaica. Some Rastafarian followers consider him to be a prophet.

4 Bangladeshi

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One of the Pakistani nationals was sentenced to jail for espionage while the others for violating visa rules under Foreigners' Act, Prakash said.

"There is no illegal detention in any case and they would be deported after completing formalities and necessary approvals from the government of India," Additional Director General of Jails Sudhakar Jauhari said.

According to Superintendent of Alwar Jail Surendra Singh, the inmates include nationals of Cameroon, Sri Lanka and Iran.

Consensus

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The need for a non-partisan, elected and accountable election-time government, ASM Abdur Rob told reporters after the hour-long meeting from 4:00pm.

The government plays a vital role in holding the election, he added.

For this reason, he said, the JSD delegation proposed to form a two-chamber parliament [with upper and lower house] instead of the existing system of parliament during the polls.

The JSD also proposed that the upper house of the parliament to be comprised of 200 members who would be elected representatives from different professions. They would include non-resident Bangladeshis, representatives selected by the president, freedom fighters, and women.

Fog disrupts

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Paturia-Daulatdia route was suspended for seven hours from 1:30am yesterday.

Passengers, especially children and elderly people, suffered a lot in the cold and due to a lack of toilet facilities and food, reports our Manikganj correspondent.

Around 350 vehicles, including buses, were seen lined up at Paturia in Manikganj and 300 vehicles at Daulatdia ferry terminal in Rajbari.

The ferry service resumed around 8:45am.

Vehicle movement on the Bangabandhu Bridge was suspended for two hours from 5:30am yesterday, which caused long queues of vehicles on both ends of the bridge, reports our Tangail correspondent, quoting police.

In the early morning of January 2, a truck helper was killed and five others were injured in a five-vehicle pile-up on the bridge due to poor visibility.

Meanwhile, a Saudi Arabia-bound and a Kuwait-bound flight of Biman, scheduled for yesterday morning, were delayed for 24 hours due to dense fog, Biman officials told The Daily Star.

3 BODIES RECOVERED IN PADMA
Police and divers of fire service yesterday recovered bodies of two youths and a woman who went missing after a head-on collision between two speedboats in poor visibility on Shimulia-Kawrakandi route Friday morning.

Identities of the dead could not be known as of filing of this report at 9:00pm yesterday.

Search for four other missing people, including two women, was on, police said.

TEMPERATURE LIKELY TO FALL
The Meteorology department has forecast a drop in temperature in the country from January 12.

Winter has been rather warm, especially in the capital, in December and in the first week of January.

The lowest temperatures in parts of Rangpur and Rajshahi divisions and Jessore and Chuadanga might range between 10 and 6 degree Celsius then, which hovered between 12 and 8 degree Celsius in the areas yesterday.

"A mild cold wave will sweep over these areas from January 12," Omar Faruk, a meteorologist at the Bangladesh Meteorological Department, told The Daily Star by phone yesterday.

Such cold waves would surely have its effect on the capital that might experience mercury going down by a degree. The maximum temperature in Dhaka yesterday was 26.6 degree Celsius and the minimum was 14 degree Celsius, according to Met office.

Yesterday, the lowest temperature of 8.1 degree Celsius was recorded in Tentulia of Panchagarh, while the highest temperature was 28 degree Celsius in Teknaf of Cox's Bazar.

Savar couple

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around 4:00am.

The officer-in-charge of Savar Model Police Station said they sent the bodies to Dhaka Medical College for autopsies and that a probe was on.

Locals alleged that there were many illegal gas line connections in Savar that resulted in several fire incidents.

Contracted, Siddekur Rahman, manager of Titas Gas Transmission and Distribution Company Ltd, Savar office, refused to make any comment before probing into the incident.

Changing of the guard

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by local sponsors, many of whom were known to be linked with the Jamaat-e-Islami, according to the officials.

Among the local sponsors, the Ibn Sina Trust, which is believed to have connections with the Jamaat, owned 2.24 percent stakes.

State-run Investment Corporation of Bangladesh had 2.36 percent shares.

Foreign sponsors had majority of the shares with 52.16 percent stakes in the bank, according to bank data.

The remaining 30 percent shares were held by general investors -- both local and foreign.

Bank officials said the stakes of the new companies would cross 14 percent once the shareholding position is updated.

The companies include Platinum Endeavours Limited, Paradise International Limited, BLU International Limited, ABC Ventures Limited, Grand Business Limited, and Excel Dyeing and Printing Limited. They held 12.06 percent local stakes in the bank till November last year.

Another new company, Armada Spinning Mills Limited, which bought more than 2 percent shares at the bank, had its representative Arastoo Khan appointed as a director of the bank in December last year.

Arastoo, a former bureaucrat, was elected chairman of the bank at Thursday's board meeting.

These new companies started buying shares in Islami Bank in 2012 and secured a strong position in it last year.

Bank officials said the companies allegedly have links with Chittagong-based business giant S Alam Group.

However, S Alam Group Chairman Saiful Alam refuted the claims.

"I have nothing to do with the changes happening at the Islami Bank," he told The Daily Star yesterday.

The bank board on Thursday decided to appoint Md Abdul Hamid Miah, former managing director of the Union Bank, as its managing director. The appointment is subject to approval from the central bank.

Union Bank Chairman Shahidul Alam is a director of S Alam Group and brother of Saiful Alam.

The board also decided that Zahidul Quddus Mohammad Habibullah, company secretary of First Security Islami Bank, would be appointed company secretary of the Islami Bank.

Saiful Alam is the chairman of First Security Islami Bank.

Abu Reza Mohammad Yeahia, existing company secretary of the bank, has been promoted to the post of deputy managing director. Besides, three others were promoted to deputy managing directors and six to executive vice presidents.

Islami Bank officials said most of its foreign sponsors are from Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. Islamic Development Bank held 7.5 percent shares in the bank till November last year.

Though the foreign sponsors have two or three representatives in the board, they don't engage in day-to-day banking operations. They only participate in board meetings. It is the local shareholders who control the bank, said the officials.

Abunaser Md Abdus Zaher, who was selected as Islami Bank chairman in May 2013 for three years, was a representative of a local sponsor and was also a member of the Jamaat's Central Executive Council. He left the country when the government initiated the process of trying the 1971 war criminals.

Later, Mustafa Anwar, who was representing the Ibn Sina Trust, had been selected as the bank's chairman. He has been replaced by Arastoo Khan.

The bank's new board is comprised of 16 members. Seven of them come from the new companies, seven are independent directors and one each is from Saudi Arabia and the Islamic Development Bank.

Following the latest changes, the local sponsors now don't have any representative in the bank board.

Changes have also been made in the Islami Bank Foundation.

Syed Monjurul Islam, a former secretary, has been elected chairman of the Foundation, while Shamim Mohammad Afzal, director general of Islamic Foundation Bangladesh and director of Islami Bank, has been elected its vice chairman.

On different occasions, the government said the Islami Bank should rid itself of Jamaat's control.

In 2015, the finance minister requested the foreign ministry to take initiatives to free the bank from Jamaat's control. He also suggested that the ministry take help of the Bangladesh ambassador to Saudi Arabia.

Later, the foreign minister wrote to the finance minister, mentioning that the ambassador had talked to foreign sponsors who gave assurance of providing help on the matter.

"The Saudi investors in IBBL appeared positive about the above-mentioned subject, which could be considered as the expression of their solidarity and trust towards the government's policy on Jamaat. As the subject is very sensitive, it has to be dealt with proper care, so it does not create any negative attitude among related parties, particularly the foreign investors, about our initiative," the letter read.

Santal children

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for the Santals as their population is about 8 lakh. Santals are the biggest indigenous community in the country, after the Chakmas.

But the books could not be published due to a strong division between the Santal leaders over the use of the alphabet, he added.

Citing his research, Kamal said some 55 percent of the Santals have converted to Christianity over the years. Most of them are in the favour of using the Roman alphabet for writing. The others prefer the Bangla alphabet.

Due to this division, the Santal leaders even turned down a government proposal for publishing the books in both alphabets during a ministerial meeting in 2013, he said.

"The Santal leaders are fighting but it is the children who are suffering."

Luke Tudu, 12, is a class-IV student at Borsapara Gono Pathshala near Rajshahi city. The school is meant for the students from the indigenous communities.

Tudu's mother Shefali Soren told this correspondent that her son took years to complete his pre-primary schooling as he faced difficulties in understanding his book.

Most of the 60 Santal students at the school had faced the same situation, said Gopal Hembrom, a teacher there.

Gopal, however, said he himself feels uncomfortable in using both the Bangla and Roman alphabets. "Bangla

language lacks letters for all of the Santali's phonemes while the Roman alphabet sounds foreigner to me."

He said he heard about the Santali alphabet called Ol Chiki, which had been in use in some Indian educational institutions. "Many Santals like me are interested in the alphabet."

Rabindranath Soren, president of the Jatiya Adivasi Parishad, said the Santal pre-primary children, who are already struggling to adapt to the mainstream books in Bangla, would be benefitted if they are exposed to the Bangla alphabet earlier. "We can also have a version of the book with the Ol Chiki alphabet."

Jogendranath Soren, president of the Adivasi Mukti Morcha, an alliance of 17 plain-land indigenous organisations, said Roman scripts are no Roman since those were "accepted" as Santali alphabets some 154 years ago.

Contacted, Fazle Hossain Badsha, a lawmaker from Rajshahi, said the government's mother tongue-based multilingual education programme would be meaningless without pre-primary books in Santali language as Santals are the biggest plain land indigenous community in the country.

"Language is a matter of choice. Books should be printed in both scripts. It is the Santal students who will make the choice," said Badsha, who is also the president of the Parliamentary Caucus on Indigenous People of Bangladesh.

EC won't look

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League mainly participated in the polls. The BNP and the main opposition Jatiya Party refrained from taking part.

Only the elected representatives of different local government bodies voted to elect a chairman, 15 general members and 5 women members in reserved seats in each district council, according to the District Council (Amendment) Act-2016.

Before and after the election, allegations were raised against many candidates of using black money and muscle power to influence voters. Even, ruling AL lawmakers and AL-backed chairman aspirants brought similar allegations against their rivals, according to media reports.

For example, AL-backed chairman candidate in Rajshahi, who was defeated by his party's rebel candidate, claimed, "I have lost to money. It is a

political defeat to the influence of money."

Ruling AL lawmaker of Rajshahi-5 constituency Abdul Wadud alleged that some grassroots leaders and activists of AL worked for the rebel candidate for money.

AL-sponsored chairman candidates Syed Ayub Ali in Narail and Shah Alam in Pirojpur also made similar allegation against some local party men.

Seeking anonymity, a voter of Natore alleged that a member candidate gave him Tk 20,000 to cast his vote in his favour.

Of the 64 districts, elections were not held in three hill districts -- Bandarban, Rangamati and Khagrachari. Besides, polls to the chairman post were not held in Kushtia and Bogra.

In the polls, AL-backed chairman candidates won in 46 districts, AL

dissidents in 11, a JP leader in one and an independent candidate in the rest.

Police arrest

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be held today.

He said more suspects would be arrested soon.

The IO said police had sent to Dhaka four bullet shells and two projectiles recovered from the guest room of the lawmaker for tests.

Earlier, police had picked up 27 people after the gruesome murder and of them 21 were shown arrested in the case.

Union units of AL and its front organisations continued their agitations at different places in the district, demanding arrest of the killers.

Liton was shot inside his Masterpara home by armed assailants on December 31. He died at Rangpur Medical College Hospital that evening.