



Injured people of Saturday's twin blast near *Atia Mahal* in Shibbari of Sylhet city receiving treatment at Sylhet Osmani Medical College Hospital yesterday.

PHOTO: SHEIKH NASIR

Police probing dead, injured

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around an hour later, this time closer to Atia Mahal.

"These were definitely militant attacks. They were near a militant den. Our officers are investigating it. We will take action according to the findings," Rokonuddin added.

He, however, said the investigators were struggling to find leads as there were 1,000-1,500 villagers present near the spots.

"Since there were a lot of people, it will take time to find out how it happened and who was behind it. The place was crowded. People are just too curious. Our men were there. But it was really difficult for us with that many people around," he said.

Intelligence Wing chief of Rapid Action Battalion (Rab) Lt Col Abul Kalam Azad, who suffered serious injuries in one of the blasts, has been flown to Singapore for treatment.

An air ambulance departed with him around 8:00pm yesterday, according to Maj Roysul Azam, deputy director of Rab's Legal and Media Wing.

"He will be admitted to Mount Elizabeth Hospital," Mufti Mahmud Khan, director (media) of Rab, told

The Daily Star.

The six deceased have been identified as Monirul Islam, inspector (investigation) of Jalalabad Police Station, Sylhet; Chowdhury Md Abu Koyzor, court inspector in Sylhet; traders Shahidul Islam and Khadim Shah; and Bangladesh Chhatra League activists Jannatul Fahim and Wahidul Islam Opu.

INVESTIGATION
Police were trying to identify and trace a man in his mid-30s who registered at the hospital as Faruk Ahmed but went missing soon after, said an SMP inspector asking not to be named.

The inspector added that they were also gathering information on Shirin Miah, 30, who was admitted with splinters to his left leg.

Shirin told The Daily Star that he was a cook at a diner for bus drivers at Kadamtali Bus Stand in the city. He added that he was walking home after offering his prayers when he was injured by the blast and was brought to the hospital. He hails from Sunamganj.

One of the deceased Shahidul was an organiser of Tablighi Jamaat, said police officials and locals.

The inspector added that bodies of

four victims had been handed over to their families.

THE BLASTS

"While reporters were leaving after the press briefing [of Brig Gen Ahsan], the villagers must have thought that the raid was over and they in their hundreds thronged the area to see what was going on," said Rokonuddin.

Officer-in-Charge Shah Harunur Rashid of Dakshin Surma Police Station said after the first explosion, he was trying to handle the crowd.

He said, "It was dark. I noticed a yellow shopping bag on the road. My senior colleagues asked me to tell the people to steer clear. They called in their seniors, who arrived soon. "I was facing the crowd. They were closer to the bag and probably were inspecting it while I was a little bit away trying to shoo away the crowd. About five to six minutes later the second explosion rocked the area."

He had splinter injuries in his right leg.

The hospital said they had received 50 injured in the ongoing operation and 28 of them were still in hospital yesterday.

Graft rooted in compromise

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is committed to the job, there cannot be any irregularities and malpractice in the administration. ... It's impossible."

He was transferred quite often to different ministries and government agencies as he used to follow the rules and regulations strictly, he said. "If you see my bio-data, you'll find that my colleagues and I were transferred more often. The only reason was we would write 'we cannot do it as the law or the rule concerned does not permit'."

Compromise is the main reason for corruption in the government sector, the ACC chief observed.

To help check corruption, he said, the ACC had offered its assistance to the Cabinet Division in matters of recruitment of officials, tender floating and in large development projects.

"Lower-tier government officials are particularly problematic because people go to them for service. That is why the ACC is nabbing petty officials for corruption."

Speaking about the commission when he joined it, the ACC boss said there had been no discipline and accountability. No investigation officer met the deadlines.

"There was no accountability here [in the ACC]. Officials considered themselves as kings. No one would meet deadlines during investigation. Deadline is a big factor... Now, officials try to meet deadlines."

"There was no discipline as well. It was like a fish market. People used to come and go easily. Both accused and lobbyists used to visit the office frequently."

The chairman worked hard to change all these, restricted visitors' movement and secured the commis-

sion office with bio-metric entrance system.

"Internal discipline is needed ... We've to maintain secrecy for the sake of investigation," he said.

Iqbal said the ACC had been able to maintain a stable performance in the last one year. For example, he said, about 12,000 complaints were filed in 2015, and the ACC had served notices in almost every case.

Earlier, the accused were summoned to the office, a practice that he said used to make people feel scared.

"We stopped the practice. I ordered my officers to go to the accused. However, a person will have to come here for further clarification if needed."

Iqbal requested people, who had been harassed by any ACC official, to go to the commission for remedy.

"Making an arrest is not the issue. We summon suspects to hear their version. But when they don't come, even after a notice had been served, or remain at large, only then we arrest them."

The number of arrests, he said, had reduced as people were now going to the ACC to testify.

Asked why people accused of large-scale corruption were not being arrested, he said, "Until a person's involvement is found in investigation, we don't submit charge sheet."

Referring to the Basic Bank loan scam, he said the money was misappropriated at several steps. "It has become difficult to unearth the actual incident and find where the money has gone. You cannot implicate anyone based on assumption."

About the recent trend of corruption through online transactions, he said, "We've no expertise in cyber

Streambed in peril

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Rock lifters told The Daily Star that up to 1,800 maunds of hill-rocks are collected daily in Bandarban, in defiance of the law and particularly during the dry season when the rocks are most accessible. Primary buyers of these supplies include local municipalities and various government bodies including the local government and engineering department, the public works department, the Chittagong Hill Tracts development board and the department of roads and highways.

Sources say contractors pay hefty bribes to high officials within these departments to overlook the use of

illegal construction materials in various construction projects.

"I managed the district administration in order to extract hill rocks," says Shankor Das, one rock trader. "Many people extract hill rock because it's a profitable activity." Along with fellow trader Md Milon he says he is unaware of any adverse effect from rock extraction.

Divisional forest officer Kazi Kamal notes that many rock extractors in the district are ruling party members. He also says the forest department could not take immediate action to stop them due to manpower limitations.

"I have directed all upazila nirbahi

officers to take necessary action to prevent anybody from collecting hill rocks illegally," says Deputy Commissioner Dilip Kumar Banik. "A special inspection team has been formed in this regard."

Despite the deputy commissioner's assurances the on-the-ground situation is rather different. In numerous remote locations across Lama, Ruma and Thanchi upazilas, from the Ruma and Sona canals to Naikkhong, Konadi and Hailmara Jiris, stone lifting has damaged water resources. Many indigenous communities are increasingly facing the threat of eviction due to this environmental catastrophe.

Russia set to repay all Soviet Union's foreign debt

AFP, Moscow

A quarter of a century after the fall of the Soviet Union, Russia is finally set to pay off all the foreign debt it inherited from the vanished Communist empire.

Keen to establish a reputation of a reliable borrower -- despite Western financial sanctions over the Ukraine conflict -- Moscow announced last week it would pay off \$125.2 million in Soviet-era debt to Bosnia-Herzegovina within 45 days.

The payment "completes the settlement of the external public debt of the former USSR, which is a historic event," said Russia's deputy finance minister Sergei Storchak.

In February, Moscow paid \$60.6 million to Macedonia.

After the Soviet Union's collapse in 1991, Russia assumed responsibility for its foreign debt of some \$70 billion.

PAYING FOR PERESTROIKA
This was mostly contracted during the difficult perestroikaera from 1985 to 1991, a time of failed attempts to reform the USSR's dysfunctional political and economic system.

This commitment proved a painful burden in the 1990s as Russia faced catastrophic economic problems that culminated in a humiliating default on its foreign debt in 1998.

But in 2006 -- thanks to a steady influx of petrodollars since the early 2000s -- Russia was able to pay off its debts to 17 major creditor-countries in the so-called Paris Club.

A payment of more than \$20 billion -- or 95 percent of the value of all Soviet-era loans -- was made eight years after the 1998 default.

European

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They will also call on BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia and speak to the media prior to departing Dhaka on March 29.

Sources said the EP delegation during talks with the government and industry leaders is expected to urge bringing of other export-oriented sectors of the country under compliance and to ensure workplace safety and labour rights to avoid repetition of workplace accidents.

The delegation will also be checking out the state of political rights, freedom of expression, labour rights and overall human rights situation in Bangladesh.

During their meetings, the delegation will emphasise on the trade regime after the middle-income country status comes into effect when Bangladesh will not enjoy duty and quota free market access to the EU anymore.

Bangladesh has targeted 2021 to become a middle-income country.

Bangladesh as an LDC currently enjoys duty-free market access to European countries for all of its exports. But once it moves out of the LDC status, Bangladesh will enter value-added trade relations known as GSP-plus.

This would require Bangladesh to sign at least 27 core EU conventions, including democratic development, labour standards and environment standards.

Diplomatic sources said the preparations for the GSP-plus era should begin now as there is very little time left to make these changes.

Trade relations between Bangladesh and EU is important as 60 per cent of Bangladesh's exports are destined to the EU.

Man killed

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was near Bhatshala Railway Station, a team of detectives raided the area, said Mizanur Rahman, Brahmanbaria superintendent of police.

Drug dealers opened fire on the team prompting the police to retaliate, said the SP.

At one stage, Kausar got shot and was sent to Brahmanbaria Sadar Hospital where doctors declared him dead, the SP said, adding that two detectives were also injured.

However, Kausar's wife Rina Begum claimed that four policemen, including two in plainclothes, had picked up her husband from their home Saturday evening.

She claimed that the family had been looking for Kausar at Brahmanbaria Sadar Model Police Station and Detective Branch of police offices.

The Daily Star could not contact the DB officer-in-charge concerned.

Brahmanbaria Sadar Model Police Station OC Mainur Rahman said they knew nothing about the incident but they had heard about the body in the hospital.

He said they were investigating the matter.

Night guard

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Owner of Maksuma Jewellers claimed that gold ornaments worth over Tk 2 lakh had been stolen and a failed attempt made at opening a safe.

The victim's son Abdus Salam filed a case accusing unidentified people.

Pentagon enjoying greater leeway under Trump

AFP, Washington

The Pentagon under President Donald Trump is enjoying greater freedom to run its wars the way it wants -- and not constantly seek White House approval on important decisions.

Many in the military appreciate this increased autonomy, but critics charge it is raising civilian death rates, puts the lives of US troops at greater risk and leads to a lack of oversight of America's conflicts.

Nowhere has the shift been more visible than in the fight against the Islamic State group in northern Syria, where under Barack Obama even minor tweaks to US plans underwent exhaustive White House scrutiny.

Since Trump's inauguration, the Marine Corps has brought an artillery battery into Syria, and the Army has flowed in hundreds of Rangers, bringing the total number of US forces there to almost 1,000.

Commanders are weighing the possibility of deploying hundreds more, and the Pentagon this week announced it had provided artillery support and choppered local forces behind enemy lines in a bid to seize a strategic dam.

The greater leeway marks a departure for the National Security Council (NSC), which coordinates foreign and military policy and implements the president's national security agenda.

Under Obama, the NSC oversaw just about every aspect of America's wars in Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan, with then Pentagon chief Ash Carter was kept on a short leash.

Trump, conversely, has repeatedly deferred to his defense secretary, Jim Mattis, on military moves.

Mattis, a retired general, has delegated expanded authorities to his

battlefield commanders.

"Jim Mattis has been given the latitude to conduct military operations in the way he sees best," Pentagon spokesman Chris Sherwood said.

The United States is fighting IS in Iraq and Syria and the Taliban in Afghanistan "by, with and through" local forces backed by US and allied air power.

That overall strategy hasn't changed, but commanders now have greater discretion to move troops and equipment around.

Troop increases were especially sensitive for Obama, who campaigned on a promise to end America's Middle East wars and not put US boots on the ground.

Senator John McCain, who heads the Senate Armed Services Committee, was a frequent critic of what he calls NSC micromanagement.

The veteran lawmaker said he favors battlefield commanders getting greater latitude.

"We don't have to ask the 30-something-year-olds for permission to respond to an attack in Afghanistan," he said.

McCain's congressional counterpart Mac Thornberry described a visit he made to Afghanistan under Obama, when he overheard a call from an NSC staffer asking how much fuel was in the planes on the tarmac.

"The level of micromanagement was incredible, and of course by the time you work your way through the NSC process your target has moved," he said.

Trump has also faced criticism for his hands-off approach, especially after he approved a special operations raid in Yemen that went horribly wrong, leading to the death of a Navy SEAL, multiple civilians including children and a crashed helicopter.

Probe opens

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As combat continues, the Jadida incident highlights the complexity of fighting in west Mosul, where militants hide among families, using them as shields and putting at risk as many as half a million people still caught in Islamic State-held areas.

Thousands have already fled Mosul and coalition officials and Iraq's Shia-led government are wary of incidents that could alienate residents of the mainly Sunni city and fuel the kind of sectarian tensions that helped Islamic State's rise.

The US-led coalition backing Iraqi forces on Saturday said it carried out a strike on Islamic State militants and equipment in the area of the reported deaths, and was investigating. It did not give figures for any casualties or details of targets.

The Iraqi military command said witnesses had told troops that the building was booby-trapped and militants had forced residents inside basements to use them as shields. IS militants had also fired on troops from houses, it said.

"A team of military experts from field commanders checked the building where the media reported that the house was completely destroyed. All walls were booby-trapped and there is no hole that indicates an airstrike," it said.

"Sixty-one bodies were evacuated," the statement said.

A coalition air strike had hit the area at the time though there was no sign it

struck that building, it said.

The military casualty figure was lower than that given by local officials. A municipal official said on Saturday that 240 bodies had been pulled from the rubble. A local lawmaker and two witnesses say a coalition air strike may have targeted a large truck bomb, triggering a blast that collapsed buildings.

Chazwan al-Dawoodi, head of the local Nineveh governorate human rights council, said his team had made a field visit and that 173 people were killed after militants forced them into a bunker, and then opened fire on gunships to prompt an airstrike.

Iraqi forces have retaken the east of Mosul and half of the west, across the Tigris River that divides Iraq's second city. Thousands of people are fleeing each day to escape the fighting and increasingly difficult conditions.

Aid groups are scrambling to build more camps to cope with the surge.

The Iraqi Observatory for Human Rights said that since the campaign against western Mosul began on Feb 19, unconfirmed reports have said nearly 700 civilians have been killed by government and coalition air strikes or Islamic State action.

The militants have used car bombs, snipers and mortar fire to counter the offensive. They have also stationed themselves in homes belonging to Mosul residents, from which they fire at Iraqi troops, often drawing air or artillery strikes that have killed civilians.

13 day labourers killed

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them died later.

According to witnesses, the truck driver might be sleepy while driving. He didn't even brake after the truck hit the lorry, they said.

Quite a large number of people from the village in Damurhuda upazila travel everyday on such locally-made vehicles to different brick kilns or construction sites in adjacent Alamdanga upazila of the district to work as day labourers, said Zakaria Alam, chairman of Parkrishnapur Union Parishad of Damurhuda.

They leave the village in the morning and return together after work.

Yesterday's accident took place at Joyrampur village on Chuadanga-Darshana road around 7.45am. The lorry was rented by the labourers to go to a brick kiln at Munshiganj village in Alamdanga.

Officer-in-Charge of Damurhuda Police Station Abu Jihad Md Fakhrul Alam Khan on phone said the human haulier was carrying 13 more passengers than its capacity.

After the clash, the truck dragged the lorry around 100 yards away.

Local people rushed to the spot and took the injured to the hospital.

The deceased were identified as lorry driver Zaj Mia, 42, Belal Hossain, 17, Rafiqul, 45, Lal Mohammad, 45, Abdur Ali, 45, Billal Uddin, 42, Abu Bakkar, 55, Hujjat Ali alias Nandi, 50, Nazir Hossain, 60, Shanto, 23,

Hafizur, 34, Shafiqul, 25 and Aram Ali, 39.

Shanto's uncle Naziur Rahman said he left behind two children -- the son is four-year-old while the daughter is only two.

BCL leader shot

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Saturday. In a show of dominance, they started moving around the area on motorcycles, said police.

They were shot at near Takiabazar and Ripon was hit, they added.

Later, Selim's men attacked the programme, spoiled the food and vandalised chairs on the Osmania High School field, locals said.

Ripon was taken to Sonagazi Upazila Health Complex. As his condition worsened, he was shifted to Feni Sadar Hospital where doctors declared him dead.

Mohammad Parvez, president of Bagadana Swetchhasebak League, alleged that the attack led by Selim was unprovoked.

Selim is a "follower of Bagadana union Chairman AKHM Ishak", who denied that the conflict was over establishing dominance.

He said he was not aware of the attack on the programme.

Humayun Kabir, officer-in-charge of Sonagazi Police Station, said they detained three people, including Selim.