

Nothing found in massive raid

More than 300 houses in Rajshahi searched for militants

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, Rajshahi

A large team of Rajshahi Metropolitan Police conducted a block raid on some 350 houses in the city's Haragram Purbopara yesterday on suspicion of militant activities.

The raid ended around 7:00pm without any arrests being made and explosives seized.

Ite Khayer Alam, assistant commissioner of Rajshahi Metropolitan Police (RMP), said the raid was part of their regular anti-militancy drives in the city.

Law enforcers looked through every house in the area, especially those rented out to tenants, he said, adding that they conducted the raid based on tenants' information provided to local police stations by the house owners.

Police said a joint team of Counter-Terrorism and Transnational Crime

unit (CTTC) and Special Weapon and Tactics (SWAT) reached the area around 9:30am and stayed there for about an hour.

Another team of Rapid Action Battalion were also present in the area for an hour, said witnesses.

Cops barred journalists from entering the area and gave some local residents limited access to the area. Law enforcers asked people to stay indoors and not to come out unless there was urgency.

Police set up check posts at every entry points in the area which was virtually made off-limits to outsiders.

Plainclothes policemen kept a close watch on the area since 11:00pm on Tuesday. Around 9:30am yesterday, a large number of cops cordoned off the area.

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Cops conducting a block raid in Rajshahi city's Haragram Purbopara area yesterday. Law enforcers said they launched the raid as part of their regular anti-militancy drives.

PHOTO: STAR

CHILD MARRIAGE ACT Spl provision may prove disastrous

Says NHRC chairman

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The provision of Child Marriage Restraint Act 2017 allowing underage marriage in "special circumstances" may give rise to an increase in child marriages in the country, said National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) Chairman Kazi Reazul Hoque yesterday.

The government must formulate strict rules to prevent misuse of the section-19 of the law to protect child rights. If rules fail to discourage child marriages, the act has to be amended by omitting the special provision, the NHRC chief said.

He was speaking at a conference on "Regional Action Plan to Combat Child Marriage" jointly organised by NHRC and National Action and Coordinating Group (NACG) of South Asia Initiative to End Violence Against Children (SAIEVAC) at Cirdap auditorium in the capital.

"We submitted a draft copy of the act to the government after discussions with civil society representatives. There

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Le Pen drops party role

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maverick father Jean-Marie, the former FN leader, and in the election campaign has put neither her party's name nor its trademark flame logo on her posters.

She has repeatedly said the policy platform on which she has stood is hers and not reflective of the FN.

"Tonight, I am no longer the president of the National Front. I am the presidential candidate," Le Pen said on French public television news on Monday.

Le Pen had previously attempted to clean up the party's racist and anti-Semitic image as she tried to appeal to voters on both the left and the right.

Final results from the French presi-

dential election's first round showed that Macron got nearly one million more votes than Le Pen. Macron collected 8.66 million votes, or 24.01 percent, while Le Pen garnered 7.68 million votes, or 21.30 percent, according to the official final count published by the Interior Ministry.

For Le Pen, it is the best result ever achieved by her FN party in a French presidential election.

Conservative candidate Francois Fillon got 20.01 percent, and left-wing candidate Jean-Luc Melancon, 19.58 percent of the vote. The other seven candidates were far behind.

The final round of voting for the

French Presidency will take place on 7 May, and Macron is currently thought to be the favourite.

Opening the battle for second-round votes, Le Pen highlighted the continuing threat of Islamist militancy, which has claimed more than 230 lives in France since 2015, saying the 39-year-old Macron was "to say the least, weak" on the issue.

She also said she wanted to talk to sovereigntist Nicolas Dupont-Aignan, who won nearly five percent of the first-round vote and has not said which side he would take in the next.

"His platform is extremely close to ours. Patriots should come together to

fight those who promote unbridled globalisation," she said.

Le Pen has promised to suspend the EU's open-border agreement on France's frontiers and expel foreigners who are on the watch lists of intelligence services.

Macron's internal security programme calls for 10,000 more police officers, and 15,000 new prison places, and he has recruited a number of security experts to his entourage.

However, opinion polls over the course of the campaign have consistently found voters were more concerned about the economy and the trustworthiness of politicians.

'Personal flying machine' on sale

FROM PAGE 16

The video showed the single-seat aircraft -- with two pontoons and a spider web-like platform -- taking off from a lake at an undisclosed location and hovering above the water, where it is meant to be used.

The craft, propelled by eight rotors, takes off and lands vertically, like a helicopter. It is said to weigh about 220 pounds (100 kilograms) and fly at speeds up to 25 miles per hour (40 kph) and can hover at 15 feet (4.5 meters) high.

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The company describes the Flyer as

"a new, all-electric aircraft," which is "safe, tested and legal to operate in the United States in uncongested areas" under US federal regulations for ultralight aircraft. No pilot's license is required, and two hours' training is said to be all that is needed.

The website offered few details about the company, but several reports in recent months have said Page has poured millions of dollars into Kitty Hawk and another electric car startup.

Kitty Hawk president Sebastian

Thrun, a Stanford University computer science professor who has been called the father of Google's self-driving car, tweeted: "Changing the future of personal transportation. Join us @kittyhawkcorp to get information about #theFlyer prototype."

The company announced it was offering three-year "memberships" for \$100 to be placed on a waiting list and to get a discount on the price of the new transporter. The price is to be announced later this year.

Leanne Goh made ANN chairperson

ASIA NEWS NETWORK, Bangkok

The Star's Editor-in-Chief Leanne Goh of Malaysia has been appointed the Asia News Network chairperson for the period 2017/2018.

The appointment was made by the Executive Board of ANN, an alliance of 22 media from 21 countries, over the weekend.

Goh succeeds Zaffar Abbas, editor of Dawn from Pakistan. She serves as an ANN Executive Board member and recently, received a lifetime achievement award in recognition of her leadership in media editorship and journalistic excellence from the World Chinese Economic Summit.

"I am honoured to be appointed by my ANN colleagues to chair the board which is pursuing a number of regional media initiatives in the coming years," Goh said.

"At a time when the West is getting more inward looking, this regional network of media groups is vital to reflect the dynamism and growth in this part of the world.

"We need to work together more closely than ever on our common ground, tell our stories from an insider perspective and hold sway at a time when fake news and unprofessional journalism are taking root," she added.

The ANN Executive Board convened for an annual meeting in Bangkok last week in collaboration with Konrad Adenauer Stiftung Media Programme Asia. The meeting was highlighted by a roundtable discussion with former Asean secretary-general, Surin Pisuwan, on the fast changing Asia's security and economic landscapes.

Surin called on Asean to strengthen its global leadership in order not to be left on the sideline of dictation by major global powers.

At the ANN annual meeting, the

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Machineries lay damaged at Jamuna Automatic Rice Mill in Dinajpur's Gopalganj area. A boiler explosion at the mill on April 19 left 13 people, including a woman, killed. Fourteen injured workers were undergoing treatment at M Abdur Rahim Medical College Hospital (previously Dinajpur Medical College Hospital) and Rangpur Medical College Hospital.

FILE PHOTO

Fatal negligence

FROM PAGE 1

To make matters worse, the boilers are operated by people who get no official training.

A boiler is a closed tank in which water is heated. The main function of it is to generate steam for space heating, sterilisation, drying, humidification and power generation.

Boilers were used in the garments industry, auto-rice mills, power plants, paper mills, sugar mills, jute mills, pharmaceutical factories, sea-food processing industry, high-ended hotels, tannery industry and edible oil industry.

And the government's lack of inspection capabilities of this widely used equipment is evident in the string of fatal accidents.

At least 17 lives were lost in three incidents of boiler blasts this year. Thirteen of them died in a single incident in Dinajpur.

The Office of the Chief Inspector of Boilers, a government agency under the industries ministry, comprises one chief inspector, three deputy chief inspectors and only six inspectors -- three in Dhaka, two in Chittagong and the other one for Khulna, Rajshahi and Rangpur

regions.

Chief Inspector Mohammad Abdul Mannan told The Daily Star yesterday that, "Physically inspecting all the boilers is impossible. It takes a day to inspect a boiler properly. We have asked the industries ministry for more manpower."

He said apart from the manpower crisis, there was a lack of training institutions for boiler operators.

Usually a boiler lasts 30 years but it largely depends on how it is handled. Mishandling could result in damage to the boiler, significant reduction of its lifespan, and explosion.

The reasons for explosions of boilers include faulty pressure relief valves that releases extra steam pressure, drop of water level below, operational errors, and if the pressure parts of the boils became weak, said officials.

An explosion could bring down the building it is housed in.

Officials said due to the lack of training of boiler operators, they often mishandle the equipment. Most operators learn the operations on the job.

Chief Inspector Mannan said if all boilers were authorised through proper

inspection and were well managed by trained operators, the risk factors would largely diminish.

About illegal boilers, he said, "It is not possible for us to identify the illegal boilers as we cannot even inspect all the registered ones."

He said the organogram of the office of chief inspector of boilers was prepared in 2010 after an eight-year exercise. But against a sanctioned post number of 30, there were only 21 staffers.

AKM Monjur Morshed, associate professor of Department of Mechanical Engineering at the Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (Buet), said the quality of boilers in Bangladesh was good as most of them were from renowned brands.

"But the problem is, there is a serious lack of efficient and skilled boiler operators in the country. Secondly, there is a serious lack of inspection of boilers," he said.

Morshed said there is no institution to build efficient and skilled manpower in this sector.

Anwarul Islam represents the Dinajpur chamber of commerce. He said, "Most mills in the district do not have skilled boiler operators."

Big blow to Boro

FROM PAGE 1

relevant government departments, we sent out messages to farmers to spray anti-blast fungicides," said Bahadur, who teaches plant pathology at the Bangladesh Agricultural University (BAU) in Mymensingh.

He feared a substantial crop loss this year because of the rice neck blast. He recommended that the government provides farmers with subsidised fungicides as many poor farmers can ill afford the high fungicide prices.

Blast is caused by the fungus Magnaporthe oryzae and can affect all above ground parts of rice plant; leaf, collar, node, neck, parts of panicle, and sometime leaf sheath.

Seeking to redress blast, the agriculture ministry is going to hold a consultative workshop involving all relevant departments and representatives from the international community early next week.

The production loss in Boro came at a time when public granaries were having one of the lowest stocks of food grains in six years.

Total food grain stocks stood at 5.46 lakh tonnes, the lowest since fiscal 2009-10, shows data from the food ministry. The failure to reach the government's food grains procurement target and increased food distribution brought down the rice stock to 3.59 lakh tonnes only.

A newly released United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) report also noted that Bangladesh's rice stock in the public food distribution system got nearly halved compared to last year's stock of this time.

USDA said, the government distributed 1.1 million tonnes of rice to the poor through various programmes from July last year till this March 16, which was a rise by 56 percent year on year.

Against the backdrop of the situation, market sources fear that the government would ill-afford going for any large-scale relief and OMS (Open Market Sale) operations for flashflood victims in the vast haor regions, unless it made quick strides in replenishing the granaries.

And this development comes at a time when importers and rice millers are pressing the food ministry to take steps to reduce import tariff to ensure adequate domestic supplies, but the government believes domestic supplies

It's up to CJ to decide

Says law minister about statue at SC

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The chief justice is the sole authority to make the decision about removing or keeping the statue of Greek Goddess Themis on the Supreme Court premises, Law Minister Anisul Huq has said.

"The Supreme Court premises are under the jurisdiction of the chief justice. We [the government] were not informed when the statue was installed. He [the chief justice] has to make the decision about removing or keeping it there. So far I have learnt, there are some differences of opinion about the necessity of the statue," he said.

The law minister was talking to reporters after attending an inauguration of a training of judicial officials at the Judicial Administration Training Institute (JATI) in the capital yesterday.

Anisul said the paramount consideration should be that the sanctity of the SC premises is not tarnished in any manner.

The statue was built as the symbol of justice on the SC premises in December last year.

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of rice in the wholesale market are still sufficient.

Besides, the food ministry also plans to go for a 1.5 million tonnes of rice and paddy procurement drive from next month.

To stop fall in rice prices and protect the domestic market from cheap rice imports from India, the government last year slapped a 25 percent import tariff, which is still in force with millers and importers pressing the government to reduce the tax.

The government, however, has apparently a better plan up its sleeve -- it wants to expand high yielding varieties and African drought-tolerant Nerica variety in coming Aus rice season by distributing seed and fertilizer and by subsidising irrigation to over 200,000 small and marginal farmers.

Officials say this would help recoup, to some extent, the loss of Boro, which according to USDA, have gone up to a three-year high.

USDA stated that the wholesale and retail prices of rice in March were Tk 36 and Tk 38 per kilogram, which is 38 and 28 percent higher than they were last year.

It notes that despite good harvest of the Aman season rice (which is marketed in December), prices of milled rice in 2016-17 soared to a three-year high. Some sources claim the leading rice traders are sitting on stocks to create an artificial shortage and thus push up prices, said USDA, adding that "Since the private sector provides no official records of grain stocks, this claim is not easily confirmed or disputed."

INDIA MAOIST ATTACK

Villagers used as shields: survivor

AFP, Raipur

Maoist rebels who killed 25 paramilitary troops in an ambush in central India used local villagers as human shields, a survivor said yesterday.

Sher Mohammad, a paramilitary soldier injured in Monday's attack in Sukma district of Chhattisgarh state, said around 300 fighters attacked the troops as they provided security for the construction of a new road opposed by the Maoists.