

OMS programme

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Akmol Hosain, chairman of Jagannathpur upazila, said all of the OMS dealers in eight unions of the upazila belonged to the local Awami League and pro-AL youth body Jubo League.

Mohammad Masum Billah, UNO of the same upazila, said there were 60 applicants seeking dealership. "The committee nominated eight of them through scrutiny. If there is any complaint, there will be a thorough investigation."

Chairman of Sunamganj district council Nurul Huda justified appointing dealers based on political affiliation, saying, "It is not a new practice. All ruling parties [the party in power at a given time] do the same."

Faruque Mahmud Chowdhury, president of Shushasoner Jonno Nagarik, Sylhet chapter, told this correspondent that flood-affected people became more vulnerable amid the misuse of power.

Government officials can play a vital role in stopping the corruption, he added.

Complaints have been filed of irregularities also in preparing the list for VGF and cash assistance programmes in Derai upazila.

Victims in Chondipur filed a complaint against the mayor of Derai municipality.

Supporters of the mayor on May 4 attacked Foyez Uddin, who had complained against him, on his way home in upazila town.

The 50-year-old, of Chondipur village, was seriously injured and has been receiving treatment at Sylhet MAG Osmani Medical College Hospital.

Miadhon Mia, councillor of ward no-1, said the list of victims made at first was changed by the municipal mayor.

However, Mayor Mosharraf Mia refuted the allegations.

Regarding the attack, he said some people had tried to obstruct government's relief distribution.

"BCL-Jubo League men went to inquire about the matter. They didn't beat up anyone."

Towhiduzzaman, UNO of Derai upazila, admitted to receiving written complaints of irregularities in making the VGF list.

"Necessary action will be taken after investigation," he said.

Breastfeeding

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"family friendly" parliament in the wake of what has been described as a "baby boom" among politicians.

Under previous rules, children were technically banned.

"In 2003 Kirstie Marshall, a Victorian MP, was ejected from state parliament for breastfeeding her 11-day old baby girl," Waters added.

"Sometimes it's difficult not to get disheartened by the sexism women still face in the workplace. But sometimes it pays to look back and see how far we have come."

Breastfeeding in public has become a hot topic in many countries, and female lawmakers have been criticised for taking their babies to parliamentary sessions.

Last year, a politician in Iceland spoke in parliament while breastfeeding her baby daughter, and infants are allowed in the European and Spanish parliaments.

Labour frontbencher Katy Gallagher said the moment deserved to be acknowledged.

"Women have been doing it in parliaments around the world... It is great to see it is able to occur now in the Senate," she told Sky News.

"Women are going to continue to have babies and if they want to do their job and be at work and look after their baby... the reality is we are going to have to accommodate that."

Waters has changed her Facebook profile to an image of herself breastfeeding in parliament, attracting dozens of mostly positive comments.

"Thank you for sharing this beautiful picture and helping to normalize breastfeeding in our society!" one user wrote.

Another added: "yessss, you are such a legend. thanks for being such a strong, groundbreaking woman."

'Humiliated'

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The victim's mother filed a case with Chawk Bazar Police Station for provoking "suicide" on Tuesday. The same day, police arrested Babul, marriage registrar Jahangir Alam, neighbour Maksuda, and one Sahajahan -- an employee of the factory the boy worked, who were present at the wedding.

Ibrahim Khan, deputy commissioner of Dhaka Metropolitan Police of Lalbagh division, said, "Neither the girl nor the boy agreed to get married. But the accused got them married forcibly."

Chawk Bazar police said the accused were produced before the court yesterday and the court sent them to jail.

The autopsy was conducted yesterday evening and the body was buried at Azimpur graveyard last night, confirmed Ayub Ali.

Trump defends firing

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"If the administration truly had objections to the way director Comey handled the Clinton investigation, they would have had them the minute the president got into office. But he didn't fire director Comey then. The question is why did it happen last night?" Schumer said on the Senate floor yesterday.

"We know director Comey was leading an investigation in whether the Trump campaign colluded with the Russians, a serious offense. Were those investigations getting too close to home for the president?"

He called for a briefing on Comey's firing before the full Senate.

CNN reported on Tuesday night that federal prosecutors had issued grand jury subpoenas to former Trump national security adviser Michael Flynn, seeking business records, as part of the probe into Russian interference in the election.

Comey's deputy, Andrew McCabe, took over as acting FBI director while the White House searches for a new permanent director.

"James Comey will be replaced by someone who will do a far better job, bringing back the spirit and prestige of the FBI," Trump tweeted.

CRIED LIKE A BABY
Richard Blumenthal, a Democrat who sits on the Armed Services Committee, said the reasons the Trump administration gave for firing Comey were "laughable."

He joined other Democrats in call-

ing for an independent counsel and special prosecutor to look into the allegations of Russian election meddling.

"What we have now is really a looming constitutional crisis that is deadly serious because there is an investigation ongoing... and ultimately there may be subpoenas to the president of the United States," Blumenthal told CNN.

Trump then turned on Blumenthal, saying he should be the one to be investigated over "one of the greatest military frauds in US history" due to past controversial statements he made about his own military service during the Vietnam War.

"Watching Senator Richard Blumenthal speak of Comey is a joke. 'Richie' devised one of the greatest military frauds in U.S. history," Trump wrote. "For years, as a pol in Connecticut, Blumenthal would talk of his great bravery and conquests in Vietnam - except he was never there. When caught, he cried like a baby and begged for forgiveness...and now he is judge & jury. He should be the one who is investigated for his acts."

The president also labeled as "fake news" reports that his former advisor Roger Stone -- who is under FBI scrutiny for its Russian election interference probe -- was among those who recommended firing Comey.

He also retweeted a link from the conservative-leaning Drudge Report website about "10 scandals" during Comey's tenure.

BCL leader arrested on rape charge

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Jhenaidah

Police yesterday arrested three people including the Kotchandpur upazila unit Chhatra League president in the upazila headquarters on charge of rape.

Earlier in the morning, two anonymous girls filed a rape case against five people including Sheikh Shahin, 25, son of Fazlur Rahman of Station Para and president of Kotchandpur unit Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL), student body of ruling Awami League.

The other arrestees are Juba League activists Razu Ahmed, 24, son of Harej Ali, and Krishna Kumar, 23, son of Juba League ward unit president Sreekanto Kumar of Bajembamundia village.

Officer-in-Charge of Kotchandpur police Biplob Kumar Saha said the victims were waiting at the bus station to go to Dhaka. The BCL leader and his friends Razu, Krishna, Sabuj and Ajgar Ali allegedly dragged them to a mango orchard and raped them there on May 06.

Some locals tried to bury the incident by sealing a mutual agreement, but the victims were determined to go for legal action.

One of the victims' uncle said the girls were under police custody and sent to Jhenaidah Sadar Hospital for medical test.

Contacted, Jhenaidah district BCL President Shakil Ahmed said Shahin would be expelled from the party if found guilty.

India sees

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equator has already started, and the Indian Ocean Dipole phenomenon - which counters the impact of an El Nino - will have an incremental positive effect on the Indian monsoon, Ramesh said.

Pre-monsoon showers have already hit certain dry areas in the southern part of the country, he said, bringing much needed relief to farmers ahead of the start of the four-month monsoon season beginning June.

India defines average, or normal, rainfall as between 96 percent and 104 percent of the 50-year average.

Bangladesh, a lower riparian country, experiences flash floods every year due to heavy monsoon rainfall in India. The floods snap road communication, erode embankments and destroy crops.

In 2016, Bangladesh has suffered from the most devastating flood in the last ten years.

More than three million people have been affected in at least sixteen districts of the country by the surging waters of Jamuna and Teesta rivers-- the two main distributors of Brahmaputra River that flows in India and Bangladesh. More than 15,000 homes have been washed away by devastating river erosions, according to a report published in Star Weekend Magazine of The Daily Star.

NEW PREDICTION MODEL
Jettisoning a statistical method introduced under British colonial rule in the 1920s, the India Meteorology Department has for the first time relied on the so-called dynamic model to improve the accuracy of one of the world's most vital weather forecasts.

The new system, based on a US model tweaked for India, requires large computing power to generate three-dimensional models to help predict how the monsoon is likely to develop.

Three hurt

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programme. They carried out the attack even before it began, he said.

Three Unmesh activists, including its general secretary, were injured.

The activists of BCL, pro-Awami League student body, then burnt down the effigy of Rabbi, also father of slain schoolboy Tanvir Mohammad Toki, terming him an atheist. Later, they declared him "unwanted" at the Shaheed Minar.

It is believed that the local BCL is not happy with Rabby as he has been accusing some local influential AL men of murdering his son.

On Monday, Rabbi made the same allegation after taking part in a candlelight vigil on the Shaheed Minar premises. Narayanganj Sangskritik Jote organised the programme marking the 50th month of the killing.

Angry, the BCL activists organised a procession and rally in the city, where the effigy was burnt.

Contacted, Sharfuddin, additional superintendent of police in the district, said, some "unruly boys" carried out the vandalism on the Unmesh programme.

On information, police went to the spot and brought the situation under control.

Besides, the BCL activists were also asked to leave the place, he added.

VAT rate may be cut

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There have been concerns among businesses over the uniform 15 percent VAT rate. They fear that if the VAT rate was implemented, living costs would rise.

Framed at the prescription of the International Monetary Fund, the new law envisages a flat 15 percent value-added tax, replacing the existing disparate VAT rates.

The government is going to frame the new legislation two and a half decades after the introduction of the VAT, which accounted for 35 percent of NBR's annual revenue collection of Tk 1,55,518 crore in the fiscal 2015-16.

The new law, which will be implemented through automation, is expected to bring transparency and accountability in VAT administration and raise revenue collection through increased compliance.

Businesses, particularly the FBCCI, however, said it would be tough for many small and medium enterprises to comply with the law and collect 15 percent VAT from consumers.

The apex trade body for the last two years has been demanding multiple VAT rates and increased protection for domestic industries and small and medium enterprises. Some economists also said the rate was high and recommended lowering it.

Muhith was unwilling to reduce the VAT rate from 15 percent under the new law. At a meeting of IMF in Washington last month, he said 15 percent VAT would be imposed, and a revision might be considered two years into the implementation of the law.

A finance ministry official said a decision on the changes in the VAT rate would be made in a couple of days when Muhith meets Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina.

Stringent measures would be taken to stop VAT evasion to recoup the reve-

nue loss stemming from the probable amendment. The government would provide 10,000 Electronic Cash Registers (ECRs) to retailers at the purchase price to ensure that VAT paid by consumers goes to the exchequer, said finance ministry officials.

During his stay in Washington last month, Muhith told The Daily Star that relaxation would be given in three specific points.

Under the new law, the VAT-exempted annual turnover might be increased to Tk 35 lakh or more from the present Tk 30 lakh. Businesses, registering turnovers from Tk 30 lakh to Tk 80 lakh a year, now pay a 3 percent turnover tax. Here, the upper threshold of Tk 80 lakh might be increased to somewhere between Tk 1 crore and Tk 1.20 crore, said officials of the ministry and the NBR.

There would be a big change in supplementary duty. All supplementary duty would be withdrawn except the one for protecting local industries.

The number of products that will face supplementary duty in imports is likely to rise from 170 to nearly 500. The step would be taken to please entrepreneurs and protect domestic industries from stiff competition from imported products.

The government also plans to expand the list of VAT-exempted items to ease the burden on consumers.

A list of VAT exempted products and services are being prepared by the NBR. VAT might not be imposed on edible oil and iron rods, said a senior official.

Officials said the new law waives VAT on basic food, life-saving drugs, agricultural products, medical services and healthcare; newspaper printing, publication and distribution; and education.

The number of goods and services to remain free from VAT may rise to 1,200 in the new law, said officials.

Victim hands cops

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detected even after a month," said Kamoda Prasad Saha, head of forensic medicine at Comilla Medical College.

A five-member medical board at Dhaka Medical College examined the girls for evidence of rape on Sunday.

Police were yet to arrest any of the five accused till last night.

Women Support and Investigation Division of Dhaka Metropolitan Police (DMP) Inspector Ismot Ara Ame, who is investigating the case, told The Daily Star that several teams of the law enforcers were trying to arrest the accused.

In another development, DMP Commissioner Asaduzzaman Miah, in a statement, said police found the victim's allegations to be true in primary investigation before the case was registered.

Invited to Shafat's birthday party on March 28, the two girls went to the Banani hotel around 9:00pm. After midnight, Shafat and Nayem raped the girls in two rooms, alleges the girl who filed the case.

Besides Shafat and Nayem, Shafat's driver Billal was accused of filming the rape and his unnamed bodyguard was accused of assisting them. Another young man Shadman Sakif was also accused of assisting.

SHAFAT'S EX-WIFE REVEALS HIS LIFESTYLE

Faria Mahbub Piyasha, a former TV presenter, who was recently divorced by prime suspect of the case Ahmed Shafat, said she often heard from her friends that her husband and Nayem, another accused of the case, were yaba addicts and frequented a Banani hotel to do drugs.

"My well-wishers kept warning me about his addiction after I married him," she told this correspondent.

Once the case started being reported in the media, Shafat's father Dilder Ahmed Selim, one of the owners of Apan Jewellers, told journalists that Piyasha stage-managed the whole incident to blackmail his son.

Piyasha filed a general diary with Bhatara Police Station on Sunday expressing concern over her safety.

Shafat and Piyasha were married on January 1, 2015. She said Shafat's father did not take their marriage well.

Piyasha said she was present when Shadman Sakif, also an accused in the double rape case, introduced the girls to Shafat at a programme in a Gulshan hotel on March 7.

She received a legal notice for divorce from Shafat the next day.

Piyasha was mentioned in the case statement as a cousin of one of the victims. Talking to The Daily Star, the victim, however, said she contacted Piyasha for her help in filing the case.

NAYEM ASHRAF, A CHEAT ALL ALONG

Banani police said the real name of Nayem is Hasan Mohammad Halim, son of one Amjad Hossain, a resident of Gandail village in Sirajganj's Kazipur Upazila.

Our Pabna correspondent reports quoting locals and police that Nayem used to rob people by going under the pseudonym and claiming to be a son of Gandail Union Parishad Chairman Ashraf Alam.

Contacted, the union parishad chairman said Halim cheated many women and embarrassed him by the false claim that he was his son.

"He tricked a girl in Bogra into in a

relationship a couple of years ago by showing her

Kazipur mayor's house and claiming that it belonged to him. After the truth came out, Halim was beaten up by locals of Kazipur. Halim went to Dhaka after that incident," Ashraf said.

A police officer called Ashraf from the capital last year and told him that Nayem abducted the daughter of an industrialist.

His criminal activities started with leaking question paper when he was a SSC student at a local school, the chairman said, adding that he married a girl who divorced him after knowing that he was a cheat.

An official of Gulshan police said they had information that Halim ran an event management firm, Emakers Media and Entertainment, in the capital and used it as a means to hobnob with female students and introduce them to sons of rich people.

People who knew him said Halim also used the name Nayem Ashraf on social media and often uploaded photos with influential people, including MPs, police officials and celebrities to show off.

PROTEST OVER BANANI RAPE

Police's failure to nab the accused reveals a culture of impunity prevailing in the country, rights activists, writers, academics and bloggers said at a rally in the capital yesterday.

Police is not arresting them as they are sons of influential and well-off families, they told the rally in front of the National Museum and demanded their exemplary punishment.

The protestors threatened to march towards Banani Police Station from Shahbagh intersection if police fail to nab the culprits within 72 hours.

Ain o Salish Kendra Executive Director Sheeba Hafiza, rights activist Khushi Kabir, publisher Robin Ahsan, DU teacher Sutapa Bhattacharya, Hill Women's Federation President Nirupama Chakma and filmmaker Amitabh Reza Chowdhury, among others, spoke at the rally.

Meanwhile, students from different educational institutions announced that a rally will be held on Dhaka University campus today.

State

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Sangha, presided over the discussion.

Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission Principal Swami Dhruveshananda, Principal of Notre Dame College Benjamin Costa and Awami League leader Nur-E-Alam Lelin also took part in the discussion.

New Zealand to axe blasphemy laws

AFP, Wellington

New Zealand plans to scrap the crime of blasphemy after calls from across the political spectrum for reform in response to an Irish investigation into British comic Stephen Fry.

David Seymour, leader of ACT, a minor opposition party, who has instigated the move, said lawmakers of all stripes wanted to end what they saw as an archaic curb on freedom of speech.