

RAJSHAHI RAID

Female arrestee knows several top militants

Claim police

ANWAR ALI, Rajshahi

Police yesterday claimed Sumaiya, arrested during the Godagari raid, knew some top militants who were acquainted with her father Sazzad Ali and visited his house in the last two months.

One of them was a supplier of grenades to Gulshan café attackers, police said.

The arrestee also told police during interrogation that her father got involved with banned militant outfit Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) when Shaykh Abdur Rahman was its chief. Sazzad also radicalised his family members.

Five suspected militants and a firefighter were killed during the police raid on Sazzad's newly built house in Benipur village of Godagari on Friday. The five are Sumaiya's parents Sazzad and Lutfunnesa Bely, brother Al Amin, sister Karima and madrasa student

Ashrafur.

The deceased firefighter is Abdul Matin.

Nisharul Arif, additional deputy inspector general (Rajshahi range) of police, said they showed Sumaiya 12 photographs of listed militants and she identified four of them, including Sohel Mahfuz, a former Majlis-e-Shura member of JMB.

Sohel of Kushtia later joined "Neo JMB" as an explosives expert. He was known as *Hatkata Sohel* for a cut mark in his left hand. He allegedly supplied grenades used in Gulshan café attack on July 1 last year, the official added.

Sohel was a distant relative of Nurul Islam Marzan, the suspected operational commander of the Gulshan café attack.

The additional DIG, however, refused to disclose the names of other militant suspects.

SEE PAGE 15 COL 5



Hazera Begum among the children she takes care of at "Shishuder Jonno Amra" in Adabar in the capital.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

Comedian sued over Facebook post on PM

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Natore

Abu Hena Rony, famed for his stand-up comedy on Indian reality TV programme *Mirakkel*, was sued for his Facebook post about Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina.

Hafizur Rahman Sabuj, joint secretary of Natore's Singra upazila unit of Jubo League, sued him under section 57 of the ICT Act on Thursday night.

Rony, who has over 1.37 lakh followers on Facebook, told this newspaper that his post on the social media on May 7 wasn't taken well by some people and he deleted it immediately.

He added that his only intention was to joke.

"I am sorry if I have hurt anybody," the comedian hailing from Singra told this correspondent.

The Jubo League leader Sabuj said he collected Rony's Facebook post and was of the opinion that a comedian "can't make such comments about the prime minister."

Sub-Inspector Kahiruzzam Rapon of Singra Police Station, who is investigating the case said, "We are collecting evidence."

HUNGER STRIKE AT JAPAN IMMIGRATION CENTRE

Bangladeshis among dozens of protesters

AFP, Tokyo

Some 20 foreigners, including two Bangladeshis, held at an immigration detention centre in Tokyo are on a rare hunger strike in an apparent bid for improved treatment, an official said Friday.

Activists, lawyers and migrants in Japan have complained for years about harsh treatment by some immigration officials and over conditions at detention centres.

"The detainees began refusing food provided by the centre from Tuesday evening and it is still continuing," Atsushi Sakai, a spokesman at the Tokyo Regional Immigration Bureau, told AFP.

It remains unclear exactly why the detainees are refusing food, Sato said, adding the bureau is investigating details, including their nationalities.

"We assume that they're on a hunger strike to complain about treatment at the centre and applications for provisional release," he said, saying this kind of protest action was rare.

A rights group called Provisional Release Association in Japan, wrote on its blog that the hunger strike participants were from 12 countries including China, Myanmar, and Bangladesh, and were aged between 25 and 55.

In March, two Bangladeshi asylum seekers were detained by Japanese authorities, who were tricked to work in radioactive contamination cleaning.

Currently about 580 people are being held at the immigration centre, Sakai said.

The bureau did not confirm whether asylum seekers were also in custody there but the Japan Association for Refugees, a Tokyo-based charity, said refugee status applicants were held at immigration centres.

Japan, one of the world's wealthiest countries, accepted just 28 refugees in 2016 -- one more than the previous year -- out of the 8,193 applications reviewed by the Immigration Bureau.

Officials defend the low number, saying applicants are mainly from

SEE PAGE 15 COL 6

Of a mother of 40 children

FROM PAGE 1

And as she slipped into adolescence, she was forced to live life of a sex worker.

But Hazera's human spirit never died. At 23, she said goodbye to her bitter past and embarked upon realising her dream of transforming lives of street children and children of sex workers.

She runs a child development centre in the capital's Adabar named "Shishuder Jonno Aamra", with her savings from work as a sex worker and later an employee of a development organisation and with support of individual donors.

Five of the children now reside in educational institutions while the rest stay at the home.

Hazera, whom the children call "amma", wants to ensure all that she didn't get in her childhood for them. They live in a homely environment in a rented four-room flat, eat, study, play and attend nearby schools.

"These kids are my family. I am embracing my motherhood with these children," says Hazera with a drop of tears sparkling at a corner of her eyes.

She came up with the idea of establishing the centre from her concerns over sex workers' children who, she says, have "no identity, no rights and no future." She also realises how vulnerable homeless children are to dif-

ferent vices, including the lure of easy money through sex.

Hazera established the centre in June 2010 and got it registered with the social welfare department two years later.

When people ask her about the motive behind running the centre, "I reply that I learnt from harsh reality. I don't want to see a girl child grow up at a brothel and a boy watch her mother taking money from a pimp."

As Hazera speaks to these correspondents, a boy called Rahat is coming to her again and again.

"Go baba. Play with the kids," Hazera says. Sounds of children squealing and giggling fill the house.

Coming back to her struggle, she says she came across a development organisation in 2008.

She then worked on HIV/AIDS issue with sex workers. Her work created an opportunity to travel several countries like the USA, Canada, India and Bangkok.

After establishing the shelter, she began gathering street children. Most of the children of the centre go to nearby schools to attain formal education. She also provides them with treatment.

Some of these children are reluctant to return to their parents, in fear that they will engage them in child labour.

"These children are more interested in going to school," Hazera says.

Though her love is equally shared among boys and girls, she expresses more concern for girls.

"The boys can do anything for a living when they are grown up, but what the girls would do.... When a girl becomes adolescent, I give extra care to her. Some of the girls' mothers, who are sex workers, come to take daughters back, but I firmly disagree [with them] because I know they will be put in a brothel."

In Hazera's centre, a boy can stay until he reaches grade 10. A girl can stay as long as she wants.

"Girls are the most vulnerable.... I want to ensure that they better understand their basic rights and values of human life."

Hazera is thankful to the kind-hearted people who support the centre by giving money, food or other necessary things.

With the world celebrating Mother's Day today, Hazera does cherish a dream: to establish a centre on a piece of land with all facilities. Children will get education there and decide what they want to become. In the end, the grown-ups will run the centre.

"I want these children to do something for the country one day and make everyone proud. People would cite their example. I would be the happiest mother ever that day," Hazera says with tears welling up in her eyes.

Govt goes for rice-fix

FROM PAGE 1

Since the unusually early floods struck the vast haor areas of Sunamganj, Habiganj, Sylhet, Moulvibazar, and Netrakona districts in late March, rice traders had a series of meetings with the government's food officials asking for the waiver of import duty.

The duty was imposed two years ago to stop private importers' flooding the country's market with cheaper rice from India when Bangladesh had already attained self-sustenance in rice and even exported some to Sri Lanka.

Talking to The Daily Star on Wednesday, Agriculture Minister Matia Chowdhury said, "We've decided to import some rice -- initially one lakh tonnes may be -- and if needed, more later."

"We lost crops this year because of climate change-induced early rainfall. There were incessant rainfall for six and half hours one day and for five hours another day. We experienced too much rainfall too early -- early by three weeks. Humid conditions and high temperatures all helped otherwise dormant fungi to become active causing crop loss."

Matia said, "It's not that we'll not get grains from blast-affected rice fields. May be we'll reap 40 maunds of rice instead of 70 maunds per acre from the affected fields."

She, however, offered no estimate of how much of a 19.1 million projected Boro would be lost due to the blast.

The import decision also came when rice stock in public granaries dropped to a six-year low, less than three lakh tonnes.

Director General of the food directorate Badrul Hasan told the media that the state agency also planned to import rice through government-to-government deals from producers such as Thailand, Vietnam and India as importing via tenders was a lengthy process.

The country's prominent plant pathologist, M Bahadur Meah, who teaches at Bangladesh Agricultural University, feared that the fungi attacks have already caused a huge crop loss in southern, central and lately in north-

ern districts.

Sher-e-Bangla Agricultural University's plant pathology professor Abu Noman Faruq Ahmed had seen firsthand the damage caused by rice blast in several districts in recent weeks.

Both Bahadur and Noman told The Daily Star that early rainfall, fluctuations in day and night time temperatures and humid conditions helped blast-causing fungi to become active. They found BRRI-28, one of the country's best-bred Boro rice variety, vulnerable to blast.

Immediate past director general of Bangladesh Rice Research Institute (BRRI) Jiban Krishna Biswas said, "Resurgence of rice blast in the form of neck blast is dominant this year. There was rain during the flowering stage of BRRI-28, BRRI-50, BRRI-61 and BRRI-63. None of these varieties are tolerant to the blast. It may be mentioned that BRRI-28 was recorded as moderately tolerant during the time of its release. But the rice blast has the ability to adapt. A blast-resistant variety may not be able to fight back infection from adapted fungi."

After the Department of Agricultural Extension (DAE) report that rice blights have been identified in as many as 19 districts this year, the government held a blast consultation workshop on Thursday involving national and international stakeholders.

Addressing the workshop, Matia Chowdhury thanked the media for spreading awareness about the fungi this year.

She said the Awami League assumed power in 1996 amidst a 4 million tonne food deficit but turned the country into rice self-sufficient in 1999. Despite inheriting a food-deficit country again in 2009, "we succeeded in achieving self-sufficiency."

The minister asked all relevant to try and develop varieties resistant to blast.

BRRI Plant Pathology Division chief MA Latif said work was underway to develop blast-resistant rice varieties. He said crop loss due to blast was under control as BRRI had warned a month ago about possible blast attack.

Essentials to be kept out of VAT net

FROM PAGE 1

for some items such as rod shouldn't rise because of the new VAT system.

"We are careful so that buyers are not affected," he said, referring to VAT exemption on life-saving drugs, agricultural products, poultry and livestock.

The list of the items would be made public during the budget presentation by Finance Minister AMA Muhiith on June 1, he mentioned.

Revenue officials said medical services and healthcare; newspaper printing, publication and distribution; and education are also exempted from VAT under the new law.

CAB President Ghulam Rahman said businesses would get rebate but the consumers' burden would get heavier.

"We are anxious... We don't want additional increase in VAT rate, which will push up our living costs," he noted.

Referring to the hike in prices of supply water and the government move to raise electricity prices, he asked, "Is it a right time to increase the burden on consumers?"

"We want to know that there will be no additional VAT on the essentials. It will give relief to low and middle income consumers."

Zakir Hossain, deputy project director of VAT Online Project, said dishonest traders may increase the prices of goods for "lack of morals", not because of introduction of the new VAT system.

NBR official Jahangir said consumer rights protection authorities should be alert so that unscrupulous traders cannot hike prices on the pretext of the uniform VAT.

He said the government framed the law to expand revenue base and tax net. Currently, consumers pay VAT but the actual amount of the paid VAT doesn't go to the state coffers.

"We want to make all aware that they should take receipts of their

purchases," the official added.

Sabbir Hasan Nasir, executive director of ACI Logistics that runs retail superstore chain Shwapno, alleged that a section of importers and distributors doesn't want to issue sales receipts, and this would make it difficult for them to claim rebate at various stages of the value chain.

He said there are distributors that are more interested in selling goods to small stores rather than big ones because small stores don't ask for sales receipts.

Sabbir also suggested implementing the new VAT law in phases.

Azharul Hoque Azad, president of Fashion Entrepreneurs Association of Bangladesh, said it would be difficult for local fashion houses to get receipts from weavers against purchases of fabrics.

"If we are to pay VAT, the burden will be on the shoulders of consumers," he added.

Khondaker Golam Moazzem, research director at the Centre for Policy Dialogue, "There will be inflationary impact though theoretically it appears there won't be any impact."

He also suggested keeping the VAT rate at 10 percent instead of 15 percent.

Mohammed Humayun Kabir, co-chairman of the FBCCI standing committee on budget and taxation, said some provisions of the law are positive for businesses.

He, however, said there has been a lack of confidence among businesses as their issues and concerns were not addressed in the law.

Humayun also said goods prices could rise temporarily, and there may be a "shockwave" even in revenue collection during the transition period.

Various local industries would face uneven competition for removal of supplementary duty on imported items, he added.

However, NBR member Jahangir said the government had taken mea-

sures to protect domestic industries.

Md Shahadat Hossain, member council and ex-vice president of ICAB, said all businesses would have to properly maintain books of account, which would be very difficult for smaller firms.

Md Zakir Hossain, general secretary of Bangladesh Supermarket Owners' Association (BSOA), said prices of goods would rise if businesses face difficulties in getting rebate.

Revenue officials, however, said the new law has been framed in a way that all businesses would come under the net gradually. Costs of doing business would rise unless firms don't claim input tax credit.

Anne Maria Hermans, co-founder and managing director of online real estate market portal Lamudi Bangladesh, said prices of apartments would rise for imposition of 15 percent VAT, and it would affect the demand.

Abdul Khalek, convener of FICCI's sub-committee on trade, tariff, taxation & company affairs, said the existing law is very discouraging for both local and foreign investors.

He said electricity prices should not go up as the distributing companies would be able to claim rebate under the new law.

Md Rezaul Hasan, project director of VAT Online Project, said the NBR aims to ensure that all transactions are recorded through automation.

Mahfuz Anam, editor and publisher of The Daily Star, suggested massive awareness campaign so that people know about the items that are exempted from VAT.

Consumers would be affected unless proactive measures are taken, he said.

Luthful Bari, president of Bangladesh Bicycle & Parts Manufacturers Association, said the NBR should arrange more training programmes for businesses.

Egypt

FROM PAGE 18

The funerary site, uncovered eight metres below ground in Minya, a province about 250km south of Cairo, contained limestone and clay sarcophagi, animal coffins, and papyrus inscribed with Demotic script.

The burial chamber was first detected last year by a team of Cairo University students using radar.

The mummies have not yet been dated but are believed to date to Egypt's Greco-Roman period, a roughly 600-year span that followed the country's conquest by Alexander the Great in 332 BC, according to Mohamed Hamza, a Cairo University archaeology dean in charge of the excavations.

Egypt is hoping recent discoveries will brighten its image abroad and revive interest among travellers that once flocked to its iconic pharaonic temples and pyramids but which have shunned the country since its 2011 political uprising.

"2017 has been a historic year for archaeological discoveries. It's as if it's a message from our ancestors who are lending us a hand to help bring tourists back," Antiquities Minister Khaled Al-Anani told a news conference announcing the find on Saturday.

Salah Al-Kholi, a Cairo University Egyptology professor who led the mission, said as many as 32 mummies may be in the chamber, including mummies of women, children and infants.

Archaeologists have excavated a slew of relics in recent months that include a nobleman's tomb from more than 3,000 years ago, 12 cemeteries that date back about 3,500 years, and a giant colossus believed to depict King Psammetich I, who ruled from 664 to 610 BC.

Tourism Minister Yehia Rashed said last month the new finds could boost tourist arrivals this year to about 10 million, an improvement from the 9.3 million visitors that came in 2015 but still far below the 14.7 million from 2010. No 2016 figure is yet available.

The tourism sector, a crucial source of hard currency, has struggled to regain ground amid a growing number of militant attacks, including two Islamic State church bombings last month.