

Apan's 495kg gold to end up in BB

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Customs Intelligence decided to confiscate around 495kg of gold of Apan Jewellers as it failed to show valid documents for the gold.

The gold would be deposited to the Bangladesh Bank. "Five teams will seize the gold at five outlets tomorrow [today] as they [Apan Jewellers] could not show any valid document even though they were given time thrice," said Moinul Khan, director General of Customs Intelligence and Investigation Directorate, last night.

The CIID officials held 498kg of gold and some diamonds from five outlets in Gulshan, Uttara, Mouchak and Shimanto Square on May 14 and 15. The authorities kept the ornaments at the respective outlets, in accordance with the rules, and asked the shop authorities to bring the documents to the CIID office.

There was no transparency regarding the gold worth around Tk 250 crore, said an official concerned.

The CIID officials recently handed over 2.3kgs of the gold to customers of Apan Jewellers. They had given the ornaments to Apan Jewellers to have repairs done.

The CIID official in May went for the crackdown amid allegation by one of the Banani rape victims that the prime accused Ahmed Shafat, son of one of the owners of Apan Jewellers, bragged about being a gold smuggler.

Shafat and the four other accused also boasted about their wealth and said police would not touch them when the two girls warned that they would go to the law enforcers,

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CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT ... A woman amid her burnt home in Tintila tries to salvage whatever small things she can. The destroyed structures inside Tintila Banbhar. Army personnel stand guard in Tintila. Deputy commissioner and superintendent of police of Rangamati visiting the affected homes.

PHOTO: PRABIR DAS/ANVIL CHAKMA

Govt profiting

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sector, power sector and agriculture.

The Centre for Policy Dialogue said a 10-percent cut in the petroleum price would lead to a rise in both the gross domestic product (GDP) and private investments by about 0.3 percent. And inflation would come down by 0.2 percentage points, said the think-tank in January this year.

Export, on the other hand, may increase by 0.4 percent. Households are likely to experience a 0.6 percent rise in consumption on average, and income of firms may go up by the same margin.

Consumption of households in rural areas is expected to increase by 0.7 percent, the think-tank added.

Finance Minister AMA Muhith in the post-budget briefing on Friday said he could not say anything regarding the fuel prices at that point.

He, however, hinted that gas prices would go up next year.

The government has been planning to start importing liquefied natural gas (LNG) from the next year. Once imported LNG is added to the pipeline, gas prices would have to be adjusted to the prices on the international market.

The petroleum price in the international market has remained low for a while, but consumers don't see any such adjustment.

Despite petroleum price cuts in April last year, the BPC made a profit of Tk 27.75 by selling a litre of octane, Tk 23.50 per litre of petrol, Tk 15.75 a litre of diesel and Tk 16.75 a litre of kerosene.

The government did not want to lower the prices further so that the BPC could repay loans and recover from losses it incurred between fiscal 1999-2000 and 2014-15.

The petroleum price recently rose slightly in the international market but the BPC is still making profits, a finance ministry official said.

Now that the state-run organisation has admitted having paid all the bank loans and that it is making profits, pressure mounted on the government to reduce the fuel prices.

The government provided Tk 44,000 crore in subsidies to the BPC between fiscal 2006-07 and 2014-15, but the BPC has not yet returned the money to the finance division though it is making profits, said the finance ministry official.

He said the tax payers' money was given to the BPC as subsidy.

Sources said the finance ministry repeatedly recommended lowering the fuel prices, but the energy ministry was reluctant to go ahead with the price cuts reasoning that the prices already started to increase in the international market.

The finance ministry prepared a detailed analysis of the economic impact of oil price cuts and shared it with the energy ministry.

On average, the BPC imports 50 lakh tonnes of petroleum products a year. Of those, 64 percent is diesel, 17 percent furnace oil and 5 percent kerosene. The rest are octane, petrol and other products.

Of the fuel imports, 46 percent is used in the transport sector, 26 percent in power sector and 17 percent in agriculture.

It's planned

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He alleged that a woman who had taken shelter in his house was burnt to death as she couldn't move out.

Police, however, rejected the claim.

Following the death of a local Jubo League man, several hundred people from different Bangalee-dominated unions brought out a procession carrying the body and attacked indigenous community houses in Tintila, Manikjhor and Baittapara villages on Friday morning.

Police on Thursday recovered the body beside the Khagrachhari-Dighinala road at Charmile in Khagrachhari.

According to indigenous leaders, around 1,500 people of some 250 families left homes and took shelter in deep forest after the Bangalee settlers wreaked mayhem.

Witnesses said local Awami League leader Saiful Islam, Jubo League leader Jewel and an AL-backed union parishad member led the procession from where the attack was carried out.

The Daily Star couldn't contact the trio for comments.

A case over the attack mentioned the names of Saiful and Jewel. Sub-Inspector Dulal Hossain of Longadu Police Station filed it yesterday against 15 named and 300/400 unnamed persons.

Babul Das, organising secretary of the upazila unit AL, admitted that Jewel is involved with local Jubo League. But he denied Saiful's involvement with the AL.

Several indigenous people said that sensing the possibility of such an attack, they had urged law enforcers to take precautions.

"They [law enforcers] repeatedly assured us of security but failed to ensure that," Kulin Mitra said.

A day after the arson, indigenous people of the three villages were still in panic. Hundreds of them were yet to return to the areas yesterday.

During a visit yesterday, our correspondents found only 20 to 30 persons in Tintila village, home to 1,500 to

2,000 people.

Indigenous people claimed that over 200 homes and shops were looted, vandalised and burned. An official of Longadu upazila parishad, however, put the figure at 110.

In the affected areas yesterday morning, it was seen that many houses and shops were razed to the ground. Smoke was still hovering over the burnt tin roofs.

Just at the entrance to the Tintila village, two tin-shed shops, owned by Harin Chakma and Sohel Chakma, were found completely destroyed. No indigenous people were seen in the area.

A witness said around 15 to 20 people, mostly teenagers, looted and torched the shops.

"Seeing the rowdy settlers rushing aggressively, I fled the shop and went into hiding in a nearby jungle," said Sohel. He could only save his life and the clothes he wore. Everything else in his house and shop were looted or torched.

Walking around a hundred yards along the road in Bottola area, another house was seen in a similar condition. Locals said it was the house of Punyadhan Chakma. He too fled to the jungle after Bangalee settlers from the procession attacked his house.

Seventy-year-old Nandi Bala Chakma and her husband Buddha Kumar Chakma returned home around noon yesterday and were looking for if there was anything that was not damaged.

"The administration assured us that nothing untoward would happen. Then why did it happen to us? They had virtually killed us by destroying everything we had," she said.

"Seeing two rowdy Bangalee settlers wielding sharp weapons, we ran to the jungle. We were there till 4:00pm when police and other Chakma people came and rescued us," she added.

Buddha Bikash Chakma of Tintila village said it was all planned. "If not, why had they bought petrol with them in the procession?"

Another victim, Sadhan Karbari from Battay Para, said the settlers looted valuables and took those away by Mahendra pickups. "It proves that they came to loot and attack us and drive us out of the areas."

Maini Union Parishad Chairman Abdul Berek Sarkar too said the settlers brought many bottles of fuel with them and attacked indigenous people's houses.

Wishing anonymity, a number of locals in the upazila told this newspaper that the attack was carried out to grab indigenous people's land.

Meanwhile, different organisations, including International Chittagong Hill Tracts Commission and Bangladesh Adibasi Forum, expressed deep concern over the arson attacks.

In a letter addressed to Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan, the commission said it was "deeply shocked".

The commission also demanded the government ensure safety of the victim families and compensate them immediately.

Tahir spins SA

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foxed by a Tahir googly and was out leg before wicket without scoring.

Upul Tharanga -- captain for the day after Angelo Mathews failed a late fitness test on a calf muscle injury -- too fell for the googly when he hit one straight to the deep cover fielder. He top scored with 57 runs.

Sri Lanka never recovered after that and were shot out for 203 runs with still 8.3 overs remaining.

There could be more trouble for the Sri Lankans after they took four hours and seven minutes to finish their overs during the South African innings.

ICC rules stipulate that teams should finish their 50 overs within three-and-a-half hours.

Sri Lankan players face heavy fines and a possible suspension for Tharanga for the next two games of the tournament.

Opener Niroshan Dickwella had given them a blistering start smashing 41 off 33 balls.

The opener added 69 runs in 50 deliveries and they were 87 for one at the end of ten overs whereas South Africa were 32 for none at the same stage.

The middle order failed to capitalize after a good start and they have to win their remaining two games against India and Pakistan to have any hopes of a semi-final berth.

Sri Lanka were excellent against South Africa's seamers, but the introduction of Tahir derailed their innings. After being put into bat in overcast conditions, Amla consolidated for South Africa with his 25th ODI hundred and the fifth against Sri Lanka.

He added 145 runs with Francois du Plessis, who contributed with 75 runs off 70 deliveries with six fours.

Amla was run out by a direct hit from Tharanga for a fine 103 that came off 115 deliveries with five fours and two sixes.

J.P. Duminy gave some impetus to the South African innings smashing 38 off 20 deliveries with five fours and a six.

Tears for taxpayers

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You may moan and groan under the grind of the widespread imposition of VAT and all other kinds of taxation jugglery that will Hoover away your hard-earned money, but isn't that for a good cause -- to help our "entrepreneurs" fatten effortlessly?

Even this passing financial year, our taxpayers had paid a similar Tk 2,000 crore for this "recapitalisation". The corruption riddled state-owned banks -- BASIC, Sonali and Rupali -- could get their books cleaned with the money so that more marauders can come and loot them next year. After all, there has to be money in the bank tills to be robbed.

Since the Awami League came to power in 2009, our Samaritan taxpayers have paid Tk 14,505 crore, which is more than the amount for the Padma bridge mainframe, to the banks for their so-called recapitalisation all of which has been siphoned off by the bigwigs.

While the government has been so generous about the shady businessmen, it has fallen short of caring for the banks. Instead of reforming the banking system so that such ill efforts cannot take place, the government has been following laissez-faire capitalism approach.

It has conveniently forgotten its two-year-old promise to set up a commission to assess the activities of the banks.

And now even the bankers are fearful of the situation as reflected in a recent meeting with the Bangladesh Bank authorities where a number of managing directors have complained that borrowers are taking loans and then setting up second homes abroad with the money. The Global Financial Integrity has reported that only in 2014, Tk 72,872 crore has been laundered out of Bangladesh. In the last 10 years, one and a half times the proposed budget have been laundered this way.

More and more loans are becoming defaulted. In the last one year, Tk 11,000 crore turned bad which the banks will probably never be able to recover. Banks' recovery rate is only around 5 percent, which means out of every one hundred taka becoming default loans, the banks can recover only about Tk 5.

We can all recall how reluctant the government had been in catching the big bank scammers like the Bismillah Group, the Hallmark or the infamous former chairman of Basic Bank Abdul Hye Bachhu. That Bachhu was ruining Basic Bank, once a sound financial institution, was in everybody's knowledge. Only the government refused to act.

But why should it act if all the misdeeds can be financed from the pockets of you and I? And you and I act like lambs who do not protest, who do not clamour about things wrong and bad. So we suffer.

Savers to keep off banks

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The organisation claims the government always consults with the business leaders, but their proposals are not considered in the budget.

The observation came at a discussion on "Budget 2017-18: Instant Views of Business Community" held at La Vita Hall of Lakeshore Hotel in the city yesterday.

In his proposed budget for fiscal 2017-18, Finance Minister AMA Muhith prescribed a 60 percent hike of excise duty on account balance between Tk 1 lakh and Tk 10 lakh -- a move that will leave some savers with even negative returns from their deposits.

The move drew huge criticism as the duty surged at the time when average interest rates on deposits came down at five percent and are mostly three to four percent.

"The increased excise duty on the bank accounts is unwarranted and is

against the concept of financial inclusion," Kabir observed.

She urged the government to revise the decision saying that such duty would discourage savings.

Ahsan H Mansur, executive director of the Policy Research Institute (PRI), termed the move a "secret attack" saying the increased excise duty would hurt the government's image.

He suggested that the government should not collect the tax at all.

He said the excise duty was imposed in 1991 and was supposed to be withdrawn then but continued anyhow. But now it was the time to reconsider such duty, he added.

However, he highly appreciated the government for introducing the new VAT law saying this is the only significant economic reform.

"It is a courageous decision the government has taken even before the elec-

tion," he noted.

Mohammed Farashuddin, former governor of Bangladesh Bank, said the increased excise duty had already drawn huge criticism and the government should withdraw it immediately.

He said the cost of doing business was very high, but the issue did not get attention in the budget.

Money is being laundered through mobile banking and the business community should give a proposal to the government as to how the issue can be resolved, he observed.

MAMannan, state minister for Ministry of Finance, said the government gave some relief from excise duty in the new budget as it was on accounts with balance of Tk 20,000 but in the proposed budget accounts up to Tk 1 lakh was exempted.

He assured that the increased excise duty would be reconsidered as it was heavily opposed by the people.

However, Muhith in his post-budget press conference denied reconsidering the increased excise duty saying the people who keep Tk 1 lakh or more are rich.

"It is very difficult to give a definition of the rich. But I know the people who keep Tk 1 lakh or more into their bank accounts are capable of bearing the expenditure of the excise duty," Muhith said at a post-budget press conference in the capital's Osmani Memorial Auditorium on Friday.

In the post-budget discussion the business leaders expressed their disappointment over the proposed budget.

All the business associations tabled their demands before the government, but those were hardly given any heed, said Kabir.

The MCCI is disappointed that no reform measures have been proposed for the much expected bond market, which could serve as a new source of borrow-

ing for the government and the private sector.

There was no provision in the budget to bring discipline in the financial sector and the state-owned enterprises which was also disappointing, she said.

Syed Nasim Manzur, former president of MCCI, said job creation has declined, educated unemployment is the highest in Bangladesh compared to India and Pakistan, and investment situation is quite serious.

Amid this situation the proposed budget did not reflect the suggestions made by the business community, he said.

Zaidi Sattar, chairman of PRI, agreed that this was an "election budget" but it was useful to remind that all budgets formulated under the democratic system have an eye on elections.

He criticised the government for remaining silent on addressing the serious lack of governance in the banking sector.