

## Prayers for café victims

'The way Faraaz died represents true spirit of Bangladesh, Islam'

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The kind of death Faraaz died in the Gulshan café attack a year ago represents the true spirit of Bangladesh and Islam, said leading businessman Latifur Rahman yesterday while remembering his grandson at a milad mahfil held at his Gulshan residence.

Similar milad mahfils were organised in 28 districts yesterday, seeking blessings for the departed soul of Faraaz and the other victims of the attack.

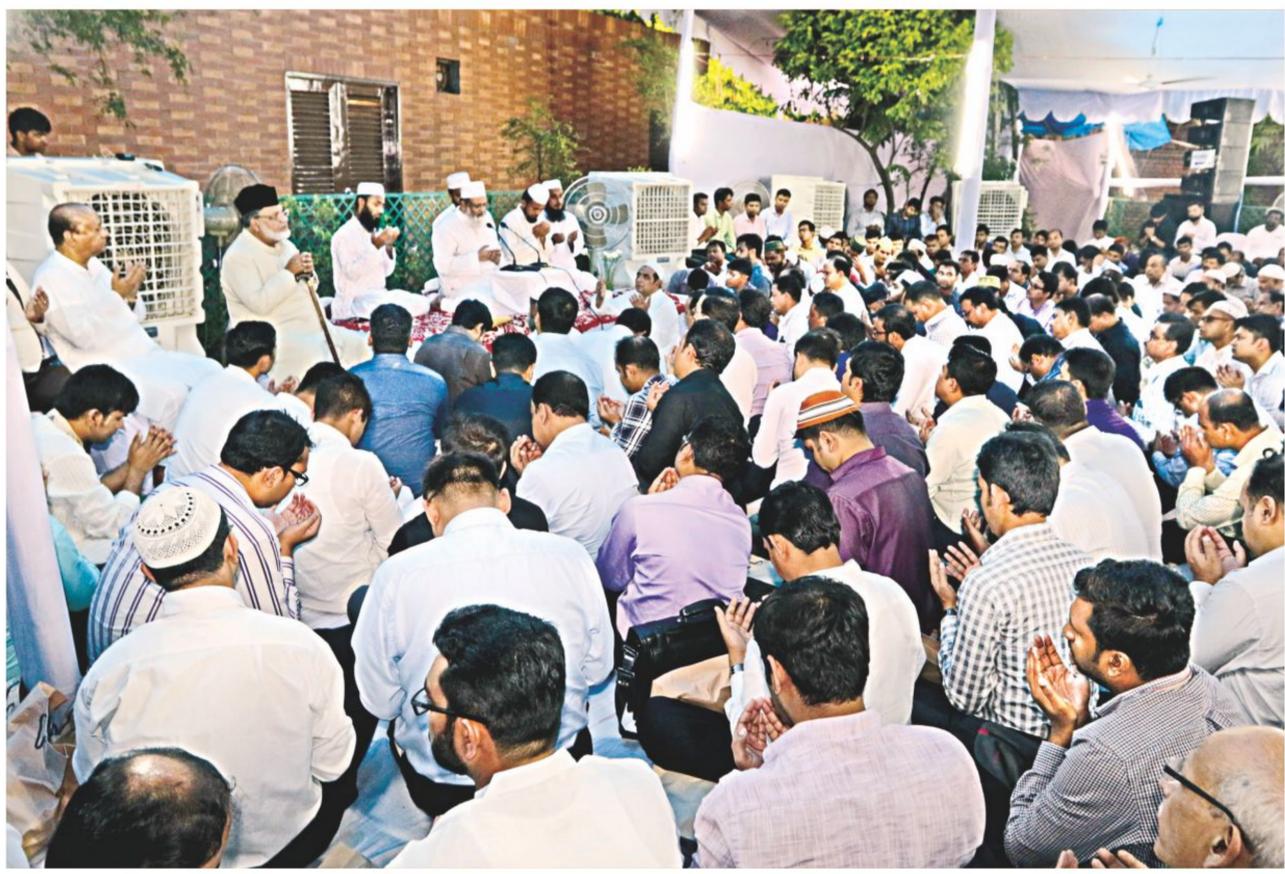
"The savage terrorist attack was a watershed for Bangladesh," Latifur said at the milad at his home. "We have to fight such mindless terrorism, as the menace is not going to disappear suddenly."

It is heartening that since the attack, the government has shown zero tolerance for terrorism, he said.

Faraaz Ayaaz Hossain sacrificed his life for his friends Abinta Kabir and Tarishi Jain during the Holy Artisan Bakery attack on 1 July last year in which 22 innocent people were killed.

According to some news reports, during the attack, the militants, who

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People offer munajat at a milad mahfil for Faraaz Ayaaz Hossain at the Gulshan home of his grandfather Transcom Group Chairman Latifur Rahman yesterday.

## Police better

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said CITC chief Monirul Islam.

Besides, commando teams have been formed in some districts which are vulnerable to extremism. They are being trained at the APBN Specialised Training Centre in Khagrachhari since February 12. Two teams of 20 members each have already completed training.

Top police officials said the Gulshan attack was an eye-opener for the law enforcers and they later learnt how to deal with radicals, their motives and movements more effectively.

The police department has drawn up a plan to form a new unit under the name "Police Anti-terrorism Unit". It will have a 592-strong manpower, with the headquarters in Dhaka. The home ministry has endorsed the plan and sent it to the finance ministry for final approval.

The CITC unit, which was set up four and a half months prior to the Gulshan attack, would work in coordination with the new unit, said officials.

The counterterrorism unit is better equipped now than a year ago to fight militancy. Since the Holy Artisan attack, it carried out 20 anti-militant operations across the country in which 59 suspected militants were either killed or committed suicide. Three cops and a firefighter also died during the raids.

Eight more militant suspects were killed during drives by the Rapid Action Battalion across the country, said officials at the police headquarters.

The CITC unit's operational and intelligence capacity increased after carrying out some anti-militant operations following the Gulshan attack, Monirul told The Daily Star.

"After conducting an operation, we got information about militant networks. We analysed the information and conducted the next two or three drives."

Currently, the CITC is the only specialised counterterrorism unit of police. It steps in to launch anti-militancy drives in many areas outside its jurisdiction. It needs special permission from the police headquarters to go for such raids.

Monirul said they took some programmes to build awareness among the law enforcers so that they can deal with special crimes alongside performing their regular duties.

The CITC is also conducting two researches -- "Content Analysis of So Called Jihad Literature" and "Triggering Causes of Radicalisation" -- with support from some Dhaka University teachers.

"People are now more aware of the militancy issue as they realised that law enforcers alone cannot fight the menace," the CITC chief said.

The unit's technological capacity improved over the months, said Monirul adding that it was going to set up a bomb database centre that would contain information about bombers and suppliers.

## Café attackers

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Inspector Humayun Kabir of the CITC unit, who is the investigation officer of the Gulshan café attack case, received the report, Sohail Mahmud, head of forensic medicine department at the DMC, told The Daily Star.

On July 6 last year, a team of four forensic specialists from the DMC conducted autopsies on the six bodies at the Combined Military Hospital in Dhaka.

"Of the five militants, two were killed in bomb explosions and three others by bullets," Sohail said, adding that the militants might have tried to commit suicide by exploding bombs.

Fingers and wrists of two militants were blown off in bomb or grenade explosions. The café chef was killed as he was hit by bullets, said Sohail.

The five militants are Nibras Islam, Rohan Imtiaz, Meer Saameh Mubasheer, Khairul Islam Payal and Shafiqul Islam Uzzal. The chef is Saiful Islam.

As nobody claimed their bodies, Anjuman Mufidul Islam, a charity organisation, buried those at Jurain graveyard on September 22 last year.

Asked about the delay in filing the report, Sohail said it took time as they had some other work. "We have to attend medical classes, exams, perform autopsies and prepare their reports too."

On July 1 last year, 20 hostages, mostly foreigners, were killed when a group of armed militants stormed the Holy Artisan Bakery.

Nine Italians, seven Japanese, two Bangladeshis, a Bangladeshi American and one Indian were among the dead.

Two policemen were also killed by the attackers during an anti-militancy drive.

On June 19 this year, the DMC forensic department handed over the autopsy report of 20 victims.

According to the report, 18 of the 20 victims were stabbed to death.

Two others -- a Bangladeshi and Japanese -- were killed with blows to their heads with heavy objects.

Sohail said the terrorists stabbed some of the bullet-hit persons indiscriminately to confirm their deaths.

A five-month pregnant Italian woman was among the foreign victims, he said.

## Remembered with love, tears

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Around six months after the attack, the café reopened a few blocks from its original location.

Samia Yasmeen Prema, sister-in-law of Nadia Benedetti, one of the dead Italians, broke down in tears at the site.

"Nadia always stood for the rights of the refugees in Italy. She also worked for the humanitarian cause in Bangladesh. We never imagined someone like her would become victim of such a heinous incident," said Samia.

"We want justice for Nadia." The place was swarmed with people of all ages, including three-and-a-half-year-old Nure Jannat who came with parents.

Noushin Nova, who studies in the US, recalled the sacrifice of Faraaz, one of the three Bangladeshis killed in the incident, saying he is a role model of friendship.

Twenty-year-old Faraaz Ayaaz

Hossain, a student at Emory University's Goizueta Business School in the US, was given the choice of walking free from the café.

But he refused to leave his friends -- Abinta, a Bangladesh-born US citizen and also a student at Emory University, and Tarishi, an Indian student of the University of California, -- with whom he had gone out to have dinner. He was brutally killed along with his friends.

Also yesterday, Masuda Begum was seen with a picture of her son, Zakir Hossain Shaon, 19, a restaurant staffer who was detained as a suspect on that night and died of wounds at Dhaka Medical College Hospital on July 8. She demanded justice for her son.

Shahriar Kabir, president of Ekattorer Ghatok Dalal Nirmul Committee, said, "The government has become successful in curbing militancy, but we all have to work

together to root out the menace from the country."

He demanded the government ban religion-based politics.

Cultural Affairs Minister Asaduzzaman Noor was there too. He said the Holy Artisan siege was a big blow to Bangalee's culture of secularism and coexistence.

Mukhlesur Rahman, additional inspector general of police, said fighting the terrorists instantly was a major challenge on that fateful night.

"But taking lessons from it, we have made an all-out effort so that Bangladesh is not branded as a terrorist country in international arena."

A ruling Awami League delegation led by General Secretary Obaidul Quader, BNP delegation led by Senior Joint Secretary General Ruhul Kabir Rizvi, Dhaka Metropolitan Police Commissioner Asaduzzaman Mia, Prof Badiul Alam Majumdar, secretary of Shushashoner Jonno Nagorik;

sculptor and freedom fighter Ferdousi Priyabhashini, educationist Dr Rasheda K Chowdhury, among others, paid tributes.

To mourn the victims, programmes were held at different places across the country.

From a rally at the Central Shaheed Minar in the capital, Sammilito Sangskritik Jote leaders urged the government not to compromise ever with the communal and radical forces.

Sachetan Rajshahi Basi, a citizen platform, organised a meeting in front of Rajshahi Government College Shaheed Minar in the afternoon. Speakers there called for a strong resistance against militancy.

People of Katigram village in Manikganj organised events in memory of assistant commissioner Rabiul Karim, one of the two police officials who died in the attack. They also placed wreaths at his grave.



Mother of Md Zakir Hossain Shaon in tears holding a framed photo of her son at the Holy Artisan Bakery yesterday. Shaon was an employee of the restaurant and he died of injuries in hospital about a week after the attack.

PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON

## A mother's quest for justice, answers

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

As people were paying tributes to those killed in last year's terrorist attack at Holy Artisan Bakery yesterday, Masuda Begum kept crying outside where the posh restaurant used to be and where her son Shaon, 19, was working on that fateful night.

Md Zakir Hossain Shaon, who worked at the kitchen of the restaurant, was detained by law enforcers on the night of July 1. He died of injuries at Dhaka Medical College Hospital a week later.

The mother demanded justice for Shaon, who she alleges, was killed by the law enforcers.

Shaon's parents, a brother and a sister arrived near the upscale eatery around 10:45am yesterday. They heard that people would go there to pay tribute.

"Police tortured my son to death. The administration killed my son. I want justice," the grieving mother said repeatedly as she held a framed photograph of her son.

When the family tried to pay tribute,

police did not let them do so.

Around 11:45am, the family attempted again, but a police officer of Gulshan division of Dhaka Metropolitan Police intercepted them at the gate, saying that the time to pay tribute was over. This correspondent saw this on the spot.

The officer then ordered his female colleagues to take the family away from there. As the family was taken away, several others were seen entering the premises to place floral wreaths.

As journalists started asking questions, police let the bereaved family on to the premises.

Talking to reporters, Masuda said "It has been a year. We still don't know what his fault was."

"Look here, my son looking like a prince. Why was he killed?" Masuda asked showing the framed photo.

Shaon's father Abdus Sattar told The Daily Star that they did not get anything except eight months' salary from the restaurant.

Sattar said, "Two days after the incident, I found my son unconscious

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## One killed in 'gunfight' in Khulna

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Khulna

An alleged robber was killed in a gunfight with police and members of this gang yesterday at Madrasa road of Chuknagar under Dumuria upazila of Khulna.

The dead man was identified as 35-year-old Rabiul alias Badsha, son of Jaffar Sheikh from village Malotia under Dumuria upazila of the district.

According to police, he was the leader of a band of robbers.

Sukumar Biswas, office-in-charge of Dumuria Police Station told The Daily Star that Rabiul was arrested on Friday.

He confessed to possessing illegal firearms and based on information extracted from him police raided the area in the early hours of Saturday.

Sensing the presence of law enforcers Rabiul's cohorts opened fire on

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## Big businesses appeased

FROM PAGE 1

This happened even though Muhith's cabinet colleagues collectively endorsed the move to implement the VAT law before he placed the proposal in parliament on June 1. The prime minister was in the loop too.

It was also a popular presumption that if the debate got too intense, the government might go for flat 12 percent VAT from the planned 15 percent.

Since the plan to implement the law fell flat on its face, the NBR is now in a situation where it is least prepared. It has to recalculate how to generate more revenue and compensate for the existing staggered VAT rates.

Muhith was the one who had on numerous occasions told the media and policy meetings that the government would go for the unified VAT rate from July 1 come what may. He had said it was already five years overdue since Bangladesh introduced

the VAT law in 2012.

Economists and experts reckon budgeting under pressure and putting the implementation of the new VAT law on hold until the next general elections was an unprecedented backtracking from such an advanced stage of implementation readiness.

Muhith had insisted time and again that the unified VAT rate would not pass on any cost burden on consumers and that there would be enough cushion against price hikes.

If the finance minister was right, the government's later argument of deferring it for 2 years to give the people relief does not hold water.

The successful pressure from big businesses came into play at a time when the NBR was all set to go for the unified VAT rate, pinning high hopes on generating not only greater amount of revenue but also taking forward the desired automation of the revenue collection system.

It has huge bearings on other

areas of revenue generation, said NBR officials.

The VAT-net expansion, the NBR hoped, would bring to the fold thousands of potential income taxable businesses, who had successfully avoided filing tax returns, the officials said, adding that it was a missed opportunity.

A flat 15 percent VAT instead of multiple rates would have paved the way for automation and many, otherwise low-profile and obscure, businesses would have come under the revenue radar.

The government's deferral move also came in breach of its commitment to the International Monetary Fund (IMF). In the second half of 2015, the government made a commitment to the IMF that it would enforce the new law in July 2017. The IMF Executive Board approved the last two instalments of \$1 billion Extended Credit Facility (ECF) based on the written commitment.

Of the two, the IMF kept one

instalment on hold for delay in implementation of the new VAT law. A further delay might put the finance ministry officials in an awkward position when they sit for negotiations in future.

At IMF's insistence, the government framed the 2012 VAT law but it re-fixed the deadline for enforcing the legislation twice. The last deadline was July 2017.

Zahid Hussain, lead economist at the World Bank Dhaka office, said, "It goes to show that reform, like cricket, is a game of huge uncertainties. In cricket the uncertainty is regarded as glorious, but in the case of policy reforms such uncertainties signify the massively underestimated power of entrenched interests in preserving the status quo."

Ahsan H Mansur, executive director of Policy Research Institute (PRI) of Bangladesh, fears the prospect of attaining increased revenue collection goal would reduce with the government sticking to the existing

VAT law.

However, the government plans to carry on with its VAT system automation scheme, a Tk 550 crore project mostly financed by the World Bank.

But it might take a couple of months to reconfigure the software to incorporate provisions for multiple rates of VAT instead of the flat rate, said revenue officials.

Amidst possible confusion and outcry over probable impact on product and service pricing in a post flat-VAT-rate scenario, independent think tanks and experts had suggested that the government go for 12 percent instead of 15 percent.

Muhith had then rejected the idea of any rate-reduction compromise.

What happened in the subsequent weeks after the budget announcement was a reminder of the fact that politics is a great craft of compromise but the skills of politicians are tested when big interest groups come into play.