

Missing teen turned deadly militant

11-year manhunt for Soheli Mahfuz ends

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In 2003, Hasan Sheikh, a 19-year-old madrasa student of Sadipur Kablipara village of Kumarkhali in Kushtia, went missing.

The following year, his family came to know that he was staying somewhere in Pabna and had joined an organisation. They had no idea about the outfit.

Fast forward 14 years, Hasan is known as Soheli Mahfuz and is one of the top militants in the country. He specialises in explosives and is a key suspect in last year's Gulshan café attack. He is also the prime accused in the 2014 Burdwan blast case of West Bengal.

Soheli kept changing his identity and had managed to evade arrest until yesterday when he was caught in Chapainawabganj.

The name of Soheli Mahfuz and his aliases came up in police investigation

many times over the years. Several arrested militants mentioned him but the man managed to evade arrest.

The police had been looking for him for 11 years.

Soheli left his family months after joining Jagrata Muslim Janata of Bangladesh (JMB), a militant outfit that emerged in 2004 by launching a vigilante operation in Rajshahi, Naogaon and Natore under the leadership of infamous Siddiqui Islam Bangla Bhai, police said.

Soheli joined the month-long JMB operation in which Bangla Bhai and his cadres tortured 44 people to death terming them "evils of the society".

JMB later renamed itself to Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB).

The JMB name came to the fore after the group executed a series of blasts in 63 districts on August 17, 2005.

"He [Soheli] was studying for Dakhil (equivalent to class-X) at Darshapur

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After being stabbed by her stalker, a blood soaked Sonia lies on a gurney in a Brahmanbaria hospital yesterday.

PHOTO:
MASUK HRIDIOY

Stalker stabs college girl

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Brahmanbaria

A stalker stabbed a college girl, injuring her seriously, in Brahmanbaria yesterday afternoon after she refused his marriage proposal.

Suspect Tanvir had been harassing Sonia, a second year student of Chinair Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Honours College, for months, sources said.

Police said Tanvir has been on the run since the attack. They said they have been conducting raids to arrest him.

Sonia, of Shibpur in Nabinagar upazila, was stabbed on her face and hands and remains in serious condition. She has been moved to Dhaka Medical College Hospital (DMCH) from a Brahmanbaria hospital for better treatment.

According to Sonia, Tanvir of Peer Bari in Brahmanbaria municipality area had been harassing her for several months.

He called her Thursday night and repeated his proposal for marriage.

This time Sonia's family informed Tanvir's parents of the matter. They also sent his sister a recording of the conversation between Tanvir and Sonia.

Sonia said after attending college

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Flood hits the North

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According to the latest bulletin of FFWC, the Brahmaputra, Jamuna and Padma rivers were also showing a rising trend.

It also forecasted that the Jamuna might continue rising for the next 48 hours, while the Ganges-Padma rivers might continue rising for next 72 hours.

The Brahmaputra might remain steady in next 24 hours, while the Surma and the Kushiya might witness a decline in next 48 hours, said the bulletin issued at 9:00am yesterday.

Of the 90 monitoring stations, water was flowing over the danger level at eight points, said the bulletin. The water level rose at 49 points and dropped at 33 points, two points remained steady and six points remained unreported, it added.

Sazzad, however, said the water level at the bordering monitoring stations saw a declining trend in their latest observation.

The Jamuna was flowing above the danger level at Bahadurabad, Sariakandi, Kazipara and Sirajganj points, while the Kushiya, Surma and Kangsha were flowing above the danger mark at Amalshid, Sheola, Kanaighat and Jariajanail points, the bulletin said.

In Sirajganj, huge areas of Kazipur, Chowhali and Shahzadpur upazilas were flooded in last 24 hours due to a rise in water level in the Jamuna. The floods inundated more than 100 villages of 25 unions in three upazilas.

Hasan Imam, executive engineer of

the WDB, Sirajganj, said the floodwater submerged low-lying areas outside the embankment.

An around-70-metre-long stretch of the flood protection embankment in Chowhali upazila has meanwhile been eroded again. The Sirajganj town protection embankment has been kept on high alert to avoid damage.

The Jamuna was flowing one centimetre above the danger level on Friday, but the water level rose rapidly in last 24 hours. The Jamuna was flowing 15 centimetres above the danger level yesterday morning, Hasan added.

The water level may keep increasing for one week due to the heavy flow of water from the upstream, he said, adding that the Padma and the Teesta were overflowing, so there was no possibility of receding water level in the Jamuna immediately.

In Bogra, the low-lying areas of 15 villages in Shariakandi, Sonatola and Dhunat upazilas were inundated with the sudden rush of water. Around 5,000 people were marooned, upazila and WDB sources said.

Aush paddy on 1,060 hectares of land, crops on 1,900 hectares of land and 20 hectares of land for seedlings were inundated, the Department of Agricultural Extension sources said.

Mohammad Hossain, district primary education officer, said at least 15 primary schools in Shariakandi and four primary schools in Dhunat were closed.

Nur-e-Alam Siddiki, deputy commissioner of Bogra, said 70 tonnes of

rice was allocated for Shariakandi and Sonatola upazilas.

In Kurigram, the overall flood situation worsened as water levels in the Brahmaputra, Dudhkumar, Dharla and Teesta rivers increased in last 24 hours.

According to local sources, about 65,000 people of char and lowland areas in nine upazilas of the district were marooned due to floodwater.

Ayub Ali, chairman of Jatrapur Union Parishad under Kurigram Sadar, said around 9,000 people were marooned and were facing fuel and cattle food crisis.

Civil Surgeon Dr Aminul Islam said 88 medical teams were formed for emergency treatment of the affected people.

In Gaibandha, more than 3,000 people were marooned in remote char areas of Gaibandha Sadar, Fulchhari and Shaghata upazilas as water level in the Brahmaputra basin rose.

A vast tract of cropland went under water as the Brahmaputra was flowing 12 centimetres above the danger mark yesterday. The Teesta, the Ghagot and the Karotoa might cross the danger mark as the water level continued to increase, according to WDB officials.

At least 15 points along the flood control dyke in Fulchhari and Shaghata upazila have been marked vulnerable and might collapse any time.

People of Balashi Ghat in Fulchhari formed a human chain demanding immediate measures to

stop erosion and rehabilitate the flood victims.

In Jamalpur, flood situation worsened as the Jamuna swelled, with vast areas of low-lying land of 16 unions in Islampur, Dewanganj, Sharishabari and Melandah being affected by the flood. Around 40,000 people have been marooned, upazila administration officials said.

Of the affected unions, Kulkandi, Chinaduli, Belgachha, Sapdhari and Noarpara of Islampur upazila and Chukaibari and Hatibandha unions of Dewanganj have been hit badly.

Chairman of Chukaibari UP Selim Khan said around 5,000 people of his union were marooned and facing a shortage of drinking water and sanitation facilities.

Twenty-two primary schools and two high schools were declared closed due to the floods.

In Lalmonirhat, more than one lakh people living in the Teesta shoal areas were in fear as the water level was rising.

Most of the gates of India's Gajoldoba Barrage were kept open, resulting in a rise in water level downstream, said Mostafizur Rahman, executive engineer of WDB at Dalia.

Hatibandha upazila's Dawabari UP Chairman Rezzakul Islam said many char people started moving to safer places. If the Teesta water crossed the danger level, about 50 percent areas would be inundated, he added.

"Gajoldoba Barrage authorities will alert us if they faced a red alert situation. Then we will take an immediate step," Mostafizur said.

Bomb supplier

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accused in the 2014 Burdwan blast case, he had Rs 10 lakh bounty on his head.

On October 2, 2014, two suspected Indian terrorists were killed and another was injured in an explosion at a house in Khagragarh locality of Burdwan district of West Bengal. Indian investigators suspect the JMB was linked to the incident.

Soheli joined "Neo JMB", an offshoot of Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB), in January 2015. Later, he became a member of its Majlis-e-Shura because of his expertise in making explosives and organising militants, according to CITC officials.

"Neo JMB" is mainly a group of home-grown radicals joined by operatives of the old JMB. It was behind the Holey Artisan siege, police say.

CITC, a special unit tasked with investigating the case over the terror incident, failed to make a satisfactory headway even in a year. Officials earlier had said they were looking for three major suspects -- Soheli, "Neo JMB" fund collector Basharuzzan Chocolate and organiser Rashed Alias Rash.

"We will be able to submit the charge sheet in the Gulshan café attack at the end of this year if we can arrest the other two suspects," said Monir.

Indian police expressed eagerness to interrogate Soheli, he said.

Soheli was brought to Dhaka yesterday afternoon. Before he was taken inside the Detective Branch office, photographers took his photos but none was allowed to talk to him. He will be produced before the court today as police will seek a 10-day remand in the Gulshan attack case.

The three other arrestees are Jamal alias Mostofa, 34, son of Yeasin Ali of Chapainawabganj municipality area, Hafizur Rahman alias Hasan, 28, son of Afzal Hossain of Parbotipur village, and Jewel alias Ismail, 26, son of Eslam of Biswanathpur-Katiapra village, Chapainawabganj correspondent reported.

Jamal is one of the chief coordinators of "Neo JMB" in the district while Hafizur is an IT specialist. Jewel too is a trained militant, according to Chapainawabganj police.

Son of Rezaul Karim of Sadipur Kablipara, Soheli is also known as "Haakata" Soheli as he lost his right hand in a bomb explosion in 2004 in Baghmara of Rajshahi during a vigilante operation.

He used different aliases like Abdus Sabur, Shahadat, Nasrullah and Ripon to dodge law enforcement agencies. According to his family, his real name is Hasan Sheikh.

Hailing from Kushtia's Sadipur Kablipara village under Kumarkhali, he established militant networks both in Bangladesh and West Bengal in India.

He first married a girl in

Chapainawabganj and then another in Dinajpur. He was staying in India with both of his wives, now absconding. Interestingly, both of his fathers-in-law were members of JMB.

This is the first time he has been arrested since joining militancy.

According to police, Soheli was drawn to militancy by one of his cousins in 2003. The following year, he joined the JMB and took part in Bangla Bhai-led vigilante operations against communist extremists in the country's northwestern region.

Amid an anti-militancy drive and following arrests of top JMB leaders, he fled to India in 2006. "Later, they formed a West Bengal unit of JMB with some foreign leaders of the group and he was declared its ameer," said CITC boss Monir.

Soheli stayed in India till December 2014 and during his stay he spread militant activities. He came back to Bangladesh mainly at the request of "Neo JMB" leaders.

He is a distant relative of Nurul Islam Marzan, the suspected operational commander of the Gulshan café attack who was killed in a "shootout" in the capital's Mohammadpur area on January 6.

Soheli was present in the Majlis-e-Shura meeting where the café attack plan was chalked out, claimed Monirul, adding that police would interrogate the three other arrestees to know whether they had any involvement in the Gulshan terror incident.

Police said Soheli got training in making bombs and IEDs from Zahidul Islam alias "Boma" Mizan. Investigators have also found his links to the hideouts busted in the capital's Kalyanpur, Rajshahi and Chapainawabganj and recruitment of members and supply of explosives for those networks.

In another development, plainclothes policemen picked up Soheli's younger brother Aslam Sheikh from his village early yesterday, our Kushtia correspondent reported quoting family members.

"Four persons identifying themselves as police detained him after Fazr prayers," said one of Aslam's family members seeking anonymity.

Kushtia police denied arresting any-one named Aslam Sheikh.

Also yesterday, Deputy Inspector General of Police in Rajshahi claimed the militant networks of the region have been destroyed with the arrest of Soheli, our staff correspondent from Rajshahi reported.

"Police knew that Soheli visited India several times and managed to smuggle arms and explosives into Bangladesh," he told journalists at his office.

He said militant dens busted in Rajshahi, Natore and Chapainawabganj in the last three months were set up by Soheli's followers. "Soheli used to visit all those hideouts."

Mars on Earth

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donkeys, the Afar people mine rich salt from the ground to sell at local markets. It's remarkable they can work in such heat, over 50 degrees Celsius in the summer.

Despite the region's obvious potential for rich scientific research, until last year it had not been significantly studied. Felipe Gómez Gómez of the Centro de Astrobiología, Italy, led the first expedition last spring.

Gómez is part of team Curiosity at Nasa which is investigating the potential for life on Mars. Clearly, getting to Mars to explore planetary life has its difficulties -- although his team did successfully land a rover on the Red Planet on August 5, 2012. The next best option are environments on earth, like Danakil, that replicate similarly extreme conditions.

His team, researchers from the

University of Bologna and the International Research School of Planetary Science, traveled to Danakil to study extremophiles, resilient forms of microbes that can live in hostile environments. These tough bacteria point to the type of organisms that could exist on planets like Mars.

"For the past 20 years I have been working in the field studying the limits of life. We identified the Danakil Depression as a very extreme environment where the conditions in which life could exist would be amazing," Gómez explains.

The expedition provided fruitful scientific findings.

The scientists identified three different eco-systems and using an advanced biological method, which involves scanning samples for

genetic material, have detected several microorganisms within these.

The team took measurements of pH levels, temperature, humidity and oxygen concentrations from the copper-rich pools of water, and yellow sulfate and red iron oxide rock formations, and collected extensive samples of extremophiles and are studying their DNA to understand how they can live in these conditions.

"We learned that the life that exists does so within a thermodynamical process. This means that if liquid water exists it doesn't matter how extreme the conditions are - life can appear," Gómez says.

The scientists believe that the microorganisms are a group of prokaryotes -- single-celled organisms without nuclei inside their cells, whose DNA floats in their

liquid center -- which are able to survive in extreme conditions.

Gómez and his team are also looking for entirely new forms of bacteria. The research team, Gómez reveals, should be able to conclude these findings in the next couple of months.

If the Danakil Depression is a hostile environment, Mars is a whole other level of extremeness. Gómez admits the probability of life on the surface of Mars is very unlikely because of radiation levels and low water activity.

The research does, however, test and attempt to defy the parameters of what we currently know about the limits of life. Studying the extremophiles in the Danakil Depression teaches astrobiologists valuable lessons in how to recognize life in hostile areas.

It doesn't seem to be a case

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of days. However, Farhad's family expressed frustration and said that when the investigation was on, the IGP's statement might influence its outcome.

Law enforcement agencies found Farhad on a Dhaka bound bus of Hanif Paribahan at Noapara in Jessore around 11:30am on Monday, more than 18 hours after he had gone missing.

The next day while submitting his judicial statement, the writer and poet said several unidentified men had forced him into a microbus and blindfolded him minutes after he came out of his Adabor residence that day to buy medicines.

On Wednesday, leaders of Hefajat-e-Islam thanked the prime minister for the rescue of Farhad.

Hefajat Nayebe-e-Ameer

Mohibullah Babunagari and joint secretaries general Lokman Hakim, Mufti Faizullah and Moinuddin Ruhee in a joint statement said, "It is evidently praiseworthy that the PM has taken measures to rescue a citizen like Farhad Mazhar. The prompt action reflects the expectation of the people."

Farhad's wife Farida Akhter filed a case with Adabor Police Station in connection with the incident.

Investigators said the kidnapping case still remained a mystery encircled by confusions and questions.

They need to talk to Farhad to solve the puzzles but he is in hospital, said Golam Mostofa Rashel, additional deputy commissioner of the Detective Branch of police.

Investigators are now trying to collect CCTV footage to trace the

microbus. They say no cameras cover the place of occurrence mentioned by Farhad.

The writer has been receiving treatment at Birdem Hospital since Tuesday. A medical board of doctors checked his health yesterday.

His wife Farida held a press conference at their house an hour and a half before he was found in Jessore. She said she had received several calls from Farhad asking her to manage Tk 30-35 lakh as ransom. The last call was made at around 7:30pm.

Nazmus Sadat Shadi, a manager of Hanif Paribahan in Khulna, gave a contradicting statement before a magistrate.

He said Farhad had bought a ticket himself from the bus operator's Khulna counter around 4:00pm that day and he was alone at the time.

Coffee of Kuddus

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two-year-old crop for the first time began to grow fruit, which blackened as they ripened.

Abdul's family was unimpressed. Who'd ever heard of coffee being grown in Nilphamari?

"We forbade father to proceed," recalls his son Md Akram. "We told him all his efforts would be in vain but he didn't listen. He collected the mature fruit and used a wooden tool, a 'dheki' to break them open and bring out the beans."

"Of course there is no specialised machine to crush coffee here," says Abdul. "So I took the beans to a flour mill and ask them to grind it. I got 67 kilograms of coffee powder."

Despite the innovative refining process involved, Abdul's groundbreaking coffee is proving popular.

"The coffee produced in Kishoreganj upazila tastes really good and has a nice

aroma," says Siddiqur Rahman, who used to be the upazila nirbahi officer of Kishoreganj and now works as an additional deputy commissioner in Narail district.

"I tasted Abdul's coffee and found it better than the imported brands available in the market," says Sayed Hossain Shabul, president of a local citizens' committee.

Based on the favourable reviews of consumers, Abdul went to the Bangladesh Standards and Testing Institution in Rajshahi some months ago to apply for a licence for his coffee.

"They said it was not on their list, so I failed," he says. "However I did get recognition from the district civil surgeon's office which issued a licence under the Safe Food Act 2016, under the name 'The Bismillah Coffee'."

Eight ounces of coffee contains 135 milligrams of caffeine, explains Prof

Abdul Latif, head of the botany department at Nilphamari Government College.

"It's a popular drink that serves as an energy source. The plant is bushy, of medium height and evergreen. It yields bunches of small, marble-like green fruit which is then crushed to extract the coffee powder."

Abdul earned Tk 1.3 lakh from this year's coffee crop, selling it for Tk 2,000 per kilogram in Dhaka.

Now he wants to extend his plantation to cover thirty decimals. "If the government and private entrepreneurs get on board," Abdul says, "then coffee cultivation can be a profitable segment of our agricultural future."

In the meantime, the local community is already convinced. Several locals have decided to follow Abdul's lead, buying coffee saplings from his nursery at Tk 250 per piece.