

AUG 21 GRENADE ATTACK

Cries for justice on for 13 years

COURT CORRESPONDENT

On this day 13 years ago, a grisly grenade attack left 24 Awami League leaders and activists dead. AL chief Sheikh Hasina narrowly escaped the attack carried out on her rally in the afternoon of August 21, 2004.

But the state has not yet been able to provide justice to the victims, alive or dead.

The counsels involved in the high-profile case have hinted that the court might deliver the verdict at the end of this year.

The Speedy Trial Tribunal-1 has already completed recording statements of 225 prosecution witnesses including the complainant of the case.

Asked, the chief state counsel in the case, Syed Rezaur Rahman, said the court might need three more months to complete the proceedings before announcing the verdict.

He added the court was recording statements of the defence witnesses.

After completion of the self-defence statements, the court would start hearing arguments from both the prosecution and the defence next month, he said.

"It may continue for next three months and then the cases will be ready for pronouncement of judgement," said Rezaur.

Talking to The Daily Star recently, TM Akbar, lawyer for former state minister for home affairs Lutfozzaman Babar and several other accused, said the judgement would be given this year.

However, delivery of the verdict would lead to further legal processes, he observed.

Once convicted, the accused would have the opportunity to challenge the verdict in the High Court and then in the Appellate Division in phases.

After the appeals are dissolved, an accused may still file a review petition with the Appellate Division. It would require more time for disposal of the pleas.

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AUGUST 21 BLACK DAY

2004 [BNP-Led Alliance in Power]

August 21

At 5:22pm: Banned militant outfit Huji carries out the grenade attack on an Awami League rally in Dhaka, killing 24 people and injuring 300 more. Sheikh Hasina narrowly escapes assassination. Attackers leave the spot safely, reportedly with the help of the administration and the law enforcement agencies. Hasina blames the BNP-led government for the attack and asks it to quit. AL activists hold angry protests.

August 22

Shock waves run through the AL. Party activists stage protests and clash with police in the capital. Police file a case with Motijheel Police Station in connection with the grenade attack and investigate for a day only. The government forms a one-member judicial inquiry commission led by a High Court judge.

August 23

Police and BNP men attack AL protest processions. US President George W Bush expresses shock at the grenade attack. US Secretary of State Colin Powell phones Hasina and PM Khaleda Zia to convey the message. He describes the attackers as enemies of the people. The US, the UK, Pakistan and India offer help to probe the carnage. Khaleda shelve her plan to visit Hasina amid protests. The Detective Branch (DB) of police takes charge of investigation but fails to begin its work.

August 24

The AL and its allies enforce two-day countrywide hartal protesting the attack, crippling the country. Rail links collapse.

August 25

Several foreign missions in Dhaka express dissatisfaction over the government's poor performance in identifying the criminals involved in the 10-truck arms haul and bomb attacks in different parts of the country.

August 26

The government announces that it will seek Interpol's help to investigate the carnage. The CID takes over the investigation.

August 29

Interpol experts arrive in Dhaka, scan carnage scene and collect information from local investigators.

September 1

FBI agents arrive to probe the grenade attack.

September 5

US State Department's counter-terrorism coordinator Joseph Cofer Black arrives and meets Khaleda and Hasina.

October 2

The judicial inquiry commission claims in its report to have identified the perpetrators of the carnage, but its head Justice Joydul Abedin declines to disclose their identities, hinting at the involvement of foreign forces apart from the local ones.

Note: A few months later, senior CID officials make up farcical Jaj Mia story and detain him and 20 more petty criminals. Jaj Mia and two others are forced to give statements confessing their involvement in carrying out the grenade attack. Their real identities are later revealed by the media. The ludicrous nature of the investigation is exposed by the end of 2004. Yet the CID does not go for further investigation. Rather, it keeps wasting time by proceeding with the farcical investigation through 2005 and 2006. The CID officials prepare for submitting the charge sheet on the basis of their so-called investigation.

2007 [Caretaker Government Regime]

July 31

A new CID official is given the charge for fresh investigation into the carnage.

2008 June 11

The CID submits charge sheet accusing 22, including Huji leader Mufti Hannan and former deputy minister of the BNP-led government Abdus Salam Pintu. The charge sheet hints at the involvement of some government and security high-ups in the plot.

October 29

Court frames charges against the 22 accused (and begins trial the following month).

2009 [AL-led alliance in power]

June 22

Prosecution files a petition with the court for further investigation to identify the suppliers of Argos grenades and sources of financing.

August 3

Court orders further investigation.

August 12

A new CID official is assigned for conducting further investigation (and he continues the task for about 23 months).

SEE PAGE 11 COL 2

Flood victims to get food support

FROM PAGE 1

Shelter Centre marking the distribution of relief materials among the flood victims of the region.

Hasina yesterday visited Dinajpur and Kurigram to see for herself the condition of the flood victims of the two northern districts.

The PM distributed relief goods among the flood-hit people now in Dinajpur Zila School shelter under Dinajpur Sadar and Teghara High School shelter under Birol upazila of the northern district.

Mentioning that the government has been providing rice at Tk 10 a kg among 50 lakh families, she said relief materials would reach all the flood-affected people. "Please trust us in this regard."

Hasina said the government started importing food grains from abroad, and there was an adequate stock of food in Bangladesh.

She said the government would rehabilitate flood-affected families who lost their homes. "No one will remain homeless in the country, while the government will ensure food for all."

The PM said it was her responsibility to ensure houses for every citizen, and the government of Awami League was working to provide homeless people with houses on khas land.

She said steps had also been taken to again provide books to the students who lost those in the flood.

Pointing to a possible outbreak of various waterborne diseases after floodwater recedes, Hasina asked the health ministry and the officials concerned to remain alert about it and work in a coordinated manner so that such situation could not arise.

She said the organisations concerned, including LGRD and LGED, had been directed to take necessary measures to reconstruct damaged houses, roads and other infrastructures.

About relief distribution activities, the PM said various government agencies, Ansar, VDP members and leaders and workers of AL, were working to this end, keeping in mind the needs of the respective areas.

Hasina told the rally that her gov-



Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina embraces a woman while handing over relief materials among people affected by the flood at Dinajpur Zila School yesterday.

PHOTO: KONGKON KARMAKER

ernment had taken every step to lessen the sufferings of the people as well as loss of property.

Termining Bangladesh a disaster-prone country, Hasina urged people to rely on her government, saying it was her responsibility to stand beside the people of Bangladesh as long as she was alive.

Hasina also went to Teghara High School shelter in Birol upazila and distributed relief materials among the flood-affected people.

After the flood, Hasina said her government would give collateral-free loan for sharecroppers in the future, while it would provide support to the people who lost their houses in river-bankerosion.

In Kurigram, the PM said the government had taken all the necessary steps so that people do not suffer during any natural disaster.

"The Awami League government is your government. As long as the Awami League is in power, people

won't face any unnecessary problem," she said while addressing the flood-hit people at a rally at Panga Rani Kakki Priya School and College ground.

The rally was held prior to the distribution of relief materials among the flood victims by the PM.

Food Minister Qamrul Islam, Relief and Disaster Management Minister Mofazzal Hossain Chowdhury Maya and AL Organising Secretary BM Mozammel, MP, among others, addressed the rally.

Rail link with north, southwest snapped

FROM PAGE 1

Talking to The Daily Star around 12:45pm yesterday, Amjad Hossain, director general of Bangladesh Railway, said they were hopeful that the train services will resume by tomorrow (today) morning.

Visiting the spot, Railway Minister Mazibul Hoque said full workforce along with proper resources have been deployed to restore the rail network.

The onrush of floodwaters washed away around 30-foot stretch beneath the southern approach to the rail bridge No 98 on the Pungli, a tributary of the Jamuna, leaving only some rails and wooden sleepers and creating a 20-foot-deep crater.

The spot is about 15km east of Bangabandhu Bridge.

The incident occurred some time after Sundarban Express, a Dhaka-bound intercity train from Khulna, crossed the bridge around 5:00am, witnesses said.

Some fishermen were the first to notice it and they ran to locals who came to offer Fazr prayers at a local mosque.

The locals along with two night guards of a local market stopped Nilsagar Express right at the north end of the bridge around 5:45am by raising a red flag, saving the train from a fatal accident, they added.

The train, bound for Dhaka from Nilphamari, was carrying around 2,000 passengers, including a number of hajj pilgrims. They got on buses or hired cars to reach their destination by road.

Two other Dhaka-bound trains -- Ekata Express from Dinajpur and Rangpur Express -- stopped at Bangabandhu Bridge West Railway Station and Bangabandhu Bridge East Railway Station. Dhumketu Express, from Dhaka to Rajshahi, got stuck at

Joydebpur Railway Station, official sources said.

A relief train from Joydebpur rushed to the spot around 10:00am and started the repair, said Ramjan Ali, chief engineer of Bangladesh Railway (Westzone).

"Now we are dumping sand bags to check further damage and then we will carry out piling works for closing the channel with fencing," he said.

Asim Kumar Talukder, railway's divisional general manager (Pakshi zone), said the repair is being hampered due to strong currents.

"We hope we will be able to restore the rail link by tomorrow [today] morning temporarily, but it will take at least three days to complete the repair," he said.

Deputy Commissioner of Tangail Khan Mohammad Nurul Amin, Superintendent of Police Mahbub Alam and Shajahan Siraj, executive engineer of Water Development Board in Tangail, extended supports for the repair work.

REASONS

Abu Sayeed, a sub-assistant engineer of WDB in Tangail, blamed it mainly on flooding and unplanned sand lifting from the river Pungli.

"The diversion of water flow due to a nearby broken bailey bridge and an under-construction bridge under the Joydebpur-Elonga four-lane highway project near the rail bridge was another reason," he added.

Some influential people with political clouts have allegedly been lifting sand from the river illegally by using dredgers. Locals complained to the administration on several occasions.

The railway authority filed a case against some people for lifting sand under the rail bridge last year and the key accused was arrested. The illegal

activities resumed after he got bail, said Abdur Rashid, an assistant engineer of Bangladesh Railway (Joydebpurzone).

The Daily Star ran a story about it on August 16.

The DC, however, claimed that the local administration conducted mobile court drives and burnt dredgers on several occasions. Announcements through loud speakers were made to stop sand lifting from the river, he added.

Both the rail minister and the DC said they will investigate the matter.

SUFFERINGS OF PEOPLE

The train services to Rajshahi, Khulna, Dinajpur, Rangpur, Lalmonirhat, Sirajganj and Chapainawabganj were cancelled yesterday, thus affecting passengers of more than a dozen districts connected to the network.

Nurun Nahar, along with her elderly grandmother, came to Kamalapur Railway Station at 6:10am to catch Sundarbans Express to go to Khulna. At the station, they came to know about the cancellation.

When a correspondent of the newspaper talked to her at 2:20pm, she was waiting for her maternal uncle to take them back.

Rumi Khatun, who underwent a surgery at Dhaka Medical College Hospital, came to the station along with her mother around 2:00pm to go to Sirajganj.

"How will we go home now?" she said, baffled, after knowing the development.

Floods already damaged rail tracks at some points in northern region.

FLOOD SITUATION

Meanwhile, the Flood Forecasting and Warning Centre (FFWC) said all the rivers, except for the Padma, were showing a falling trend.

Its flood bulletin said the Jamuna

and the Surma will show a falling trend in the next 72 hours, meaning the flood situation in northern and north-eastern regions will continue to improve over the next three days.

However, the water level of the Ganges will continue to rise for two more days.

Low-lying areas of several districts including Manikganj, Munshiganj, Faridpur and Madaripur along the Padma in the central part of the country remained inundated.

Our Munshiganj correspondent reports that villages in Lauhajang upazila were submerged by knee to waist-deep water.

Furthermore, strong currents in the Padma have been hampering ferry services on the Paturia-Daulatdia route for the last seven days.

Hundreds of vehicles have been stuck in Paturia of Manikganj and Daulatdia of Rajbari -- the two ends of the main river route between the capital Dhaka and the south and south-western districts.

Of the 16 ferries available, four to five have to be repaired in the floating workshop at Paturia terminal, our correspondent reports, quoting Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Corporation (BIWTC) office sources.

Our Rajshahi correspondent reports, some 2,000 families of 15 char areas of Chawkrajapur union in Bagha upazila of Rajshahi have been marooned for the last one week as the Padma continued to swell yesterday worsening the flood situation.

Although the upazila administration distributed some relief on Saturday, most of the affected people were still struggling without receiving any help, said Azizul Azam, chairman of Chawkrajapur union.

[With inputs from Dhaka office]

Ride to death, return to life

FROM PAGE 1

would turn into a horrific and bloody one.

"I've never seen a war in my life. But what I saw on the August 21 afternoon was a bloody carnage. I'll not forget it as long as I live," Jahangir told The Daily Star, recounting the gruesome grenade attack on the AL rally 13 years ago.

Moments before the attack, the scene on the AL central office premises was totally different, he said.

Jahangir, who reached the venue by a jeep, was waiting beside Hasina's bullet-proof sport utility vehicle (SUV), parked a few yards from a makeshift podium on a truck.

Defying the scorching heat and humidity, a large number of party

leaders and activists were listening to Hasina's speech with senior leaders and security personnel around her on the truck.

Around 5:15pm, she ended her speech and was about to step down from the podium. But two photojournalists requested her to wait there for a while for their taking snaps.

Within moments, Jahangir saw a black object flying towards the truck.

"At first, I thought it was a bird... It hit the ground with a loud bang and plumes of smoke blanketed the area," he said.

"In no time, grenades rained down on the venue. Loud explosions, smoke, chaos and screams were all around," said the 48-year-old man, who has been with Hasina for the last 27 years.

Senior AL leaders and Hasina's security personnel formed a human shield around her. Among them were former Dhaka city mayor Mohammad Hanif, Hasina's personal security team member Abdullah Al Mamun, her cousin Nazib Ahmed and the then Dhaka City AL general secretary Mofazzal Hossain Chowdhury Maya.

They tried to escort Hasina to her SUV. But as they took a few steps towards the SUV, another grenade went off near the truck, said Jahangir.

"I heard Apa [Hasina] recite doa aloud... Frightened, people were running for cover."



Jahangir Alam

the injured to hospitals by rickshaws and motorbikes.

"Blood was all over the body of Ada chacha, who used to sell tea near the gate of Awami League office," said Jahangir.

"Only yards away, Ivy chachi [the then AL women's affairs secretary Ivy Rahman] was lying motionless in a pool of blood..."

Those encircling Hasina finally managed to get down from the truck and take her to the SUV. She got into the vehicle. Without sparing a moment, the driver, Abdul Matin, sped towards Sudha Sadan.

Jahangir couldn't find the vehicle by which he arrived at the venue. But there was a police vehicle nearby. Luckily, the car was unlocked and the key was inside. He then boarded the vehicle, switched on the engine and followed Hasina's SUV to Sudha Sadan.

With bated breath, Hasina's younger sister Sheikh Rehana was waiting there. As she arrived at the house, Rehana ran towards her crying and hugged her, said Jahangir.

"Then I noticed blood on Apa's sari.

She was in a state of shock. We asked her whether she was hurt but she didn't reply," Jahangir mentioned.

"After a while, Apa asked us to go back immediately to the scene of the carnage to help the injured."

Jahangir went back there, and till 3:00am, he shuttled between hospitals where the wounded were being treated.

"Rehana Apa called me on the phone repeatedly, and Apa [Hasina] inquired about the party men," he said.

Jahangir thinks it was sheer luck that he survived the gruesome attack.

He said he had seen death up close within the two hours -- his journey to Bangabandhu Avenue and return to Sudha Sadan.