

| SPOTLIGHT |

The man takes different names but introduces himself as an automobile trader to all. He lures people into buying vehicles at prices far lower than the market rate, citing special connections with the custom officials at Chittagong Port. But he never delivers the vehicles, simply disappearing with the money. The victims have no recourse except to file fraudulence cases, seeking police help to recover the money and take legal action against the culprit.

None perhaps, however, presumes the actual motives behind his con—funding militant activities. At least the law enforcers suspect so, and with good reason.

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To some, he may be Azam Khan while others know him as Azad Khan or Asad Khan. In his locality in Bhandarcourt village under Batiaghata upazila of Khulna district, people call him Biman. Originally from Chaltabonia village under Morrelganj upazila of Bagerhat, his father settled in Batiaghata many years ago.

The 30-year-old man has been conning people for many years and is now an accused in over a dozen fraudulence cases filed with different police stations in Dhaka, Pabna, Chittagong and Khulna. He has allegedly gobbled up USD 20 million from various persons. Yet he has remained outside the purview of the police.

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According to the police, the madrasa-educated Hadi from Kurigram was a factory worker and a dedicated member of the secret Facebook group "Islamic State: Dawla al Islamia", one of the numerous secret groups promoting militancy in Bangladesh. After his arrest, the police combed through the secret group using Hadi's account and found a vast network of IS followers. Azad's name also appeared in one of the numerous posts shared in the group. "Send text to *apa* [referring to Azad's sister, Maria Julie] for 'exercise' on *khelfat* in Savar. Our Azam alias Azad bhai will be there"—this is what was written in a message circulated by one

Asif Islam in the group two weeks before Hadi's arrest. The post was meant for a group of youth whom Azad had been training out of his sister's rented apartment at Islam Villa in Savar's Radio Colony area. To the intelligence agency handling the issue this was a clear clue.

In a bid to gather intelligence on Azad, some officials of the agency looked through the Call Detail Record (CDR) of his cell phone. They found someone calling him repeatedly. Suspecting the caller to be an extremist, they began to look for him and, in April, the officers found him. His name is Moklesur Rahman, a senior executive of a real estate company—they also found that he was not a militant but, in fact, a victim of Azad's fraudulence. Moklesur had been calling him to get back the money he paid to purchase a microbus.

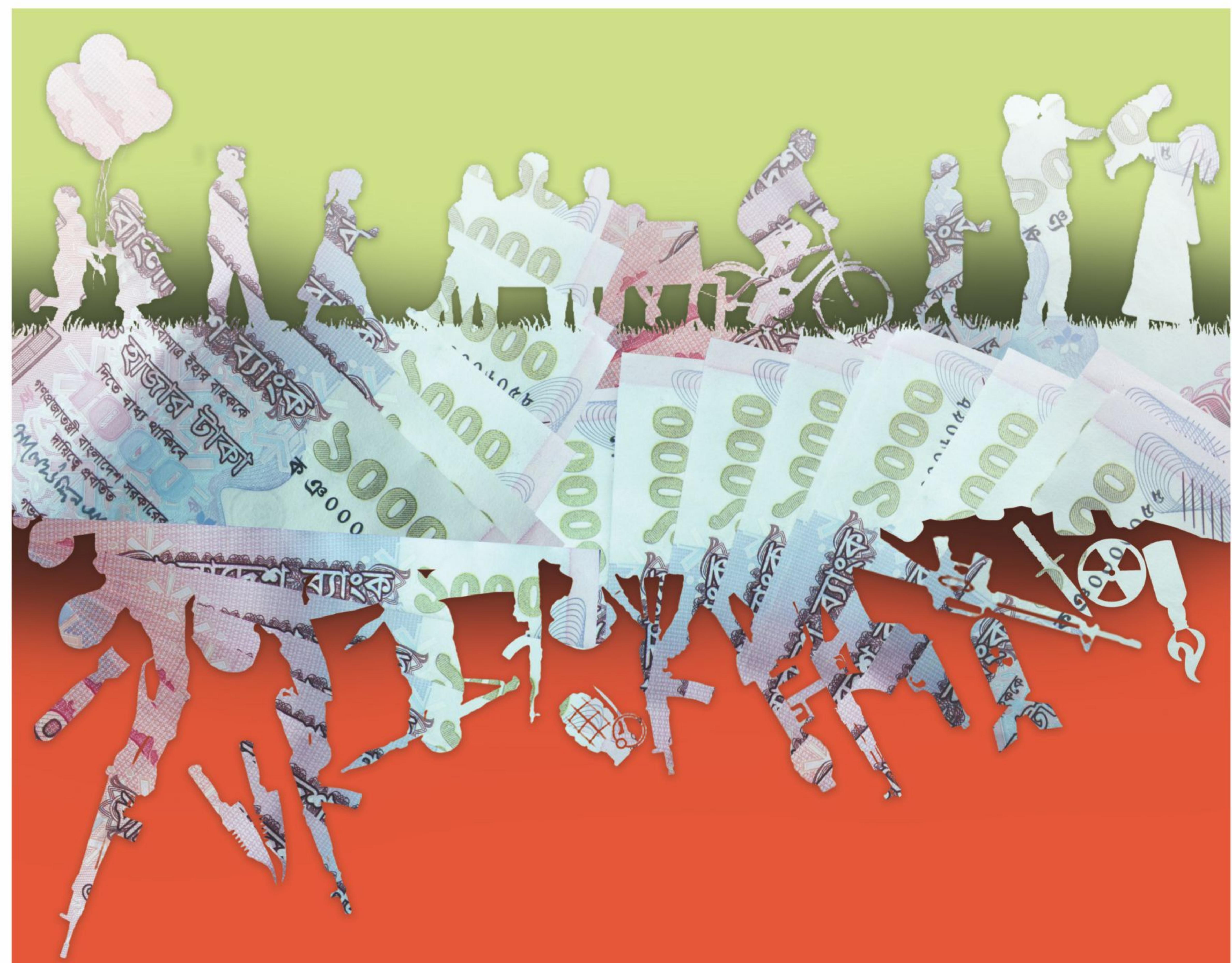


ILLUSTRATION: MANAN MORSHED

HOW A CON ARTIST FINANCES MILITANT ACTIVITIES

M ABUL KALAM AZAD

my car even after a few weeks. One day I asked him about it and he said the vehicle was on its way to Dhaka. But after a couple of days, he stopped coming back to the apartment. I used to call him to ask for the money, which he never returned," adds the victim.

Getting neither the car nor the money, Moklesur filed a fraudulence case with the city's Rupnagar Police Station on

August 7, 2016 and urged the police to arrest the culprit. The case was then transferred to the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) with Sub-Inspector Abdul Aziz as its investigating officer (IO). Officials of the intelligence agency met with Moklesur to ascertain Azad's clandestine radical networks—he confirmed that the latter had regular guests who used to visit him at night. "I saw women in burqas with full veils and men wearing long panjabis, who came in microbuses and left before

dawn after meeting Azad. I thought they were all pious people," Moklesur told this correspondent. He got a big shock however, when he went to inspect the empty apartment Azad Khan left behind—he found a travel bag stashed with religious and radical books.

Meanwhile, the intelligence agency officials, with the help of a cyber specialist, were able to trace Azad and came to learn that he was staying in Savar. A police team went there in March this year only to find he had escaped

much earlier—in November 2016. Azad left his two cars at the villa and the cops asked the landlord to ensure that no one removes the vehicles from the premises. Interestingly, soon enough, the vehicles disappeared from the premises. When this correspondent visited the Villa on May 5 of this year, the landlord, Md Kamrul Islam, had no problem recognising Azad from his photograph. "Azad stayed here for three months—September, October and November. I too found his movement mysterious," he piped. But when

landlord Kamrul was asked how the militant took away his vehicles despite the police's clear instructions to him to monitor the premises, he had no credible reply. "My guard allowed him to take the cars in my absence," he claimed. Once again, when asked to produce the guard for an interview to verify the statement, Kamrul declined the request, saying he had been fired just the day before.

Kamrul revealed another piece of information: Azad's sister and her husband, Md Nasir Uddin Khan, also mysteriously left the Villa on December

12, a month after Azad disappeared. Their activities too are very suspicious. "Nasir rented an apartment three years ago, identifying himself as a CNG trader but it never seemed like he was really in the business sector. He also submitted a fake NID while renting the apartment," Kamrul said, adding that the family hardly used any furniture and slept on the floor, which is a usual tactic militants follow so as to escape quickly.

In the meantime, it turns out that the police had the opportunity to arrest the hidden militant but he was allowed to go into hiding. Moklesur said he had arranged a negotiation meeting of the inspecting officer and Azad (who was then available over the phone) at CID's office but the officer neither arrested the culprit nor obtained the money back. "At

Azad that read, "Today's meeting at 5.30 pm in Mohammadpur."

After making these findings, the police intensified their search for the suspected militant, communicating with the Officer-in-Charge of Batiaghata Police Station, Mozammel Hoque. Some officials visited Batiaghata over the last six months to look for Azad, but to no avail.

"We all knew he is a cheat but from the Dhaka officers we learnt that he is also a militant who cheats people to finance radical activities," Mozammel told *The Daily Star*. He, along with some other investigators, informs that the culprit was frequently changing his contacts and locations to evade arrest. The last time investigators detected his location was in Mirsara of Chittagong



Azad Khan is now on the police Wanted list

one point in the negotiation, the IO and Azad talked in private, keeping me out of the conversation, after which Azad left and never turned up," said a frustrated Moklesur, suspecting a deal between the two. Aziz admitted holding the negotiation but denied getting any benefit out of it. Last August, Aziz was relieved of the case and another CID inspector, Shamsuddin, was assigned to investigate Moklesur's case.

some five months back. "He was with his brother-in-law Nasir," said an investigator, wishing anonymity.

In an attempt to trace Azad's most recent whereabouts, this correspondent collected his wife's phone number from Moklesur, the man who got cheated, and gave a call on Sunday.

"The last time I spoke to him was Ramadan last year," said the wife Fatema Lopa, a mother of two children, "I was never allowed to ask him about what he did for a living, so I do not know where he went or where he is now. I was also not allowed to go outside of the house."

On the positive side though, Azad Khan now has been put on the wanted list by the police. The Batiaghata OC Mozammel Haque had this update to give, "He has been sentenced in absentia on two of the many fraudulence cases filed against him."

Moklesur on the other hand, is frustrated that his case is not advancing, and his lost BDT 16 lakh is nowhere in sight. "Are they even trying to catch him?" he asked.

Investigators now believe there are many invisible militants like Azad who are financing terrorist activities without the knowledge of law enforcement agencies. The arrest of the undercover militant would help track many of them and their networks.

M Abul Kalam Azad is Chief Reporter at The Daily Star.