

Mostafa to work

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his Rangpur home yesterday.

Mostafa, a candidate backed by opposition JP, said the government could expel a mayor and appoint a pro-Awami League councillor as acting mayor. He also cited instances of this.

"But I'm not concerned about it. As long as I'm in the city corporation, I'll fight to ensure rights of the city corporation people."

Mostafa won the mayoral race in Thursday's RCC election, defeating AL and BNP contestants by a large margin. He bagged 1,60,489 votes, his nearest, AL candidate Sharfuddin Ahmed Jhantu, got 62,400 votes while BNP contender Kawsar Zaman Babla secured 35,136 votes.

He mentioned that development of city's communication system would be his first challenge.

Referring to a newspaper report, Mostafa said of the 11 city corporations, the highest tax was imposed in Rangpur and Rajshahi city corporations. "The tax should be reduced and I'll try my best to do so. I'll try to bring it down at a logical level."

Regarding taxes in city corporation areas, he said, "Taxes should be fixed, considering the income and opinions of the city people."

As the city corporation is a service-oriented organisation, it should not put any burden on its dwellers, he added.

Asked whether Rangpur was deprived of development for long just because JP candidates got elected, he said no government thought about the development of Rangpur after Ershad regime.

Rangpur has become a division and a city corporation in this incumbent government. But job opportunity has not been created yet. Many people think they were better when they were in the union parishad, he said.

He added that after the upgradation of Rangpur to a city corporation, different safety net programmes such as Vulnerable Group Feeding (VGF) had stopped.

About the reason behind his landslide victory, Mostafa claimed that he also got the votes of AL and BNP supporters.

He said he was expelled from the party and contested the polls as an independent candidate in the 2012 polls. Moshirur Rahman Ranga, a JP lawmaker from Rangpur and also the state minister for LGRD and cooperatives, had extended his support to Jhantu, who won that election.



Rangpur City Corporation mayor-elect Mostafizar Rahman Mostafa puts a garland on defeated AL candidate Sarfuddin Ahmed Jhantu at the Jhantu's home in Guptapara of the city yesterday.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

AL stunned by huge defeat

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Rouf Manik got 37,208 votes while BNP-backed Kawsar bagged only 21,235 votes.

Mostafa's win can be seen as a revenge for his defeat to Jhantu in the 2012 election held on non-partisan basis. Thursday's polls were held along the party line.

A number of local AL leaders told this newspaper that voters have a perception that Jhantu is "ill-mannered", and that there is a big distance between him and local party leaders.

They said they had anticipated that Jhantu would face defeat, but it was beyond their imagination that the margin would be so huge.

"Only Awami League leaders and workers voted for Jhantu. He did not even get the votes of the party supporters," Rezaul Karim Razu, general

secretary of Rangpur district AL, told this correspondent yesterday.

Asked whether the party unit's inactivity was the main reason behind the debacle, he said many party leaders worked for Jhantu due to pressure from the central leaders. But most of them did not do it spontaneously.

JP sources said that after the voting, party Chairman HM Ershad phoned AL General Secretary Obaidul Quader and expressed satisfaction over the polls.

Later, Quader told journalists that the AL suffered defeat in the election but democracy has won.

JP leaders said this result will give the party an edge in negotiation with its alliance partners in the upcoming national election.

"This election will impact national politics. It has proved once

again that Rangpur is still a stronghold of the Jatiya Party," newly elected mayor Mostafa told this correspondent yesterday.

Local BNP leaders said its candidate Kawsar got 14,000 more votes in Thursday's election compared to the last polls.

Seeking anonymity, a district BNP leader said party supporters could anticipate that they would not win the polls, and many of them voted for the JP candidate to ensure AL's defeat.

Speaking to journalists in Sylhet yesterday, Finance Minister AMA Muehith said he is confident that the outcome of the Rangpur polls will not have any impact on the upcoming national polls.

The polls results proved the neutrality of the election process, he added.

According to unofficial results,

AL-backed candidates won 16 posts of councillors, BNP-supported ones six and JP-backed candidates two.

Talking to this newspaper, Aftab Hossain, secretary of Sushasoner Jonno Nagorik (Sujan) in Rangpur, said, "The election result is an indication for the ruling party about how popular it is among the people, what its strategy should be, and what type of candidate it should pick for the next polls."

Tuhin Wadud, researcher, writer and a teacher of Begum Rokeya University in Rangpur, said, "Jhantu was the best choice for the Awami League. If the party leaders and activists had worked seriously, the party could have narrowed the gap. It seems local BNP and Jamaat-Islami leaders also voted for Mostafa to make sure that the Awami League candidate loses."

Pakistan absolves bloggers of blasphemy charges

AFP, Islamabad

Five Pakistani activists who made international headlines when they went missing earlier this year were cleared of blasphemy charges yesterday, a lawyer said, a hugely sensitive and potentially deadly issue in the conservative Muslim country.

The men, who used social media to stand against religious intolerance and at times criticised Pakistan's powerful military, vanished within days of each other in January, sparking fears of a state crackdown.

Four of them have since been released, with some accusing their captors of torture. No group claimed responsibility for their abduction, and Pakistan's government and military have denied involvement.

But during their disappearance, a virulent social media campaign to paint them as blasphemers began, triggering a flood of threats.

Blasphemy is a criminal offence in Pakistan and can carry the death penalty, though the state has never executed someone convicted of it.

But even mere accusations can spark mob lynchings and vigilante murders. Observers have said the allegations alone were enough to put the five activists' lives in danger.

Yesterday, the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) told the Islamabad High Court it could find no evidence against the five men.

"The FIA officials told the court it ... seems the five bloggers were not involved in blasphemy," Tariq Asad, one of the lawyers bringing the charge against the activists, told AFP.

"The judge remarked that no innocent person should be implicated in a false case of blasphemy," Asad said.

The campaign against the missing men spotlighted how extremist efforts to muzzle liberal voices using Pakistan's

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"It could've been me"

Myanmar reporters fear after Reuters arrests; rights activists say press freedom under attack

REUTERS, Yangon

Some human rights advocates say press freedom is under attack in Myanmar, even though decades of rule by a junta that tightly controlled the media has given way to a government led by Nobel peace laureate Aung San Suu Kyi.

Myanmar has detained at least 29 journalists in the 20 months since Suu Kyi came to power. While most have since been released on bail, the frequency of arrests - along with the detention last week of two Reuters reporters - has rekindled worries among some journalists trying to cover violence in Rakhine State.

"There are too many risks being added to journalists," said Sonny Swe, chief executive officer and co-founder of Yangon-based magazine Frontier. "I feel that we are not moving forward, but going back in time for freedom of press and speech."

As of December, there were five reporters, including the Reuters pair, behind bars.

Reporters Wa Lone and Kyaw Soe

Oo - who had worked on Reuters coverage of the crisis in Rakhine - were arrested on Dec. 12 in Yangon. The Ministry of Information said they had "illegally acquired information with the intention to share it with foreign media". They face up to 14 years in prison under the Official Secrets Act.

Myanmar authorities have said the case has nothing to do with press freedom.

"There are different views, based on where you stand... There's press freedom in Myanmar as long as you follow the rules and regulations," Kyaw Soe, director general of the Ministry of Information, told Reuters by phone on Thursday. He declined to comment further.

A vibrant domestic media has sprung up since the transition from military rule began in 2011 and pre-publication censorship was lifted in 2012.

Nevertheless, this year Myanmar was ranked 131 out of 180 nations for press freedom by Reporters Without Borders - in the bottom third, but ahead of seven countries in the region:

Cambodia, Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei, Laos and Vietnam.

"The authorities continue to exert pressure on the media and even intervene directly to get editorial policies changed," Reporters Without Borders said in a report this year.

Kyaw Zwa Moe, editor of Irawaddy's English edition, said in a commentary last week that Myanmar does have press freedom, "but with an invisible line".

"No one can know where that line is because it's unseen. When you touch or cross it, you're finished," he wrote.

PRESS FREEDOM, SOMETIMES Although she is Myanmar's de facto leader, Suu Kyi is forced to share power with the military, which runs security-related ministries and the police.

Suppression of the media has hardened, rights groups say, since October 2016, when Rohingya Muslim militants attacked security posts in Rakhine state, triggering a military crackdown that right groups say included killings, rape and arson.

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Modern-day

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comfortable in his presence, with the youngster happy to share some of his food with the visiting troupe.

The monkeys kept returning, day after day, to visit their young friend in Allapur, roughly 400 kilometres (250 miles) from the city of Bangalore, his uncle said.

"Since that day, the monkeys haven't missed a day. They come to the house around the same time," Reddy told AFP. "Even if he is sleeping, they first wake him up, and then sit with him for an hour or two."

The unusual relationship piqued local interest, and soon people began visiting the house to catch a glimpse of young Samarth tottering around the farm with 20 langurs in tow.

Thinking the monkeys must enjoy the company of children, another youngster was plonked next to Samarth but the langur pack became aggressive, Reddy said.

He said Samarth was now a local legend due to his "special bond" with the monkeys, whose sounds he mimics even though he cannot speak yet.

"Everyone thinks that he is special and they are communicating with each other, and can understand what is being said," Reddy said.

Mowgli was a character in "The Jungle Book", Rudyard Kipling's tales about a boy who grew up in the wild in India, and is often used as a shorthand for people who are able to bridge the human-animal divide.

'Gunfights'

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that some robbers put a barricade on the highway for committing a robbery, said Sabbirul Islam, officer-in-charge of Kushtia DB police.

Sensing the presence of law enforcers, the criminals opened fire. Police then returned fire, triggering the "gunfight", he said.

One of the robbers was hit by bullets during the "gunfight" and doctors declared him dead when he was taken to Kushtia General Hospital, the police official added.

Police claimed to have recovered three homemade guns, three bullets and several sharp weapons from the spot.

In Sylhet, another alleged robber was killed in a similar incident in Choripara village of Sylhet's Kanaighat upazila on Thursday night.

The victim is Habibur Rahman Habi, 45.

Around 9:30pm, a police team went to the village to arrest Habi, an accused in a robbery case, said Shamsul Alam Sarker, ASP of Sylhet police.

Sensing the presence of police, Habi fired bullets at the law enforcers and police retaliated, the police official said.

The ASP said Habi was shot dead during the "gunfight".

Mubashar back

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Yesterday was the first time he saw sunlight since his mysterious abduction on November 7 from the capital's Agargaon area, said Mubashar, who graduated from Dhaka University's mass communication and journalism department.

His disappearance triggered a firestorm of protest on social media. His teachers, colleagues, students and many common people formed human chains and other programmes, demanding his immediate return.

His father filed a general diary with Khilgaon Police Station the same day he went missing.

Since August 22, at least 12 people had gone missing from the capital alone. Five of them, including Mubashar, have since returned home while police later said to have arrested three others.

The fate of four others, including ex-ambassador Maroof Zaman, is not yet clear.

Meanwhile, Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan told reporters yesterday that they were questioning those who returned from captivity to unearth the motive behind their abductions.

Investigations are on to find out those still missing, he said. "I would say the missing people have returned as the law enforcers were active."

"THE ABDUCTION" Recalling the day of his abduction, Mubashar, who has done researches on political Islam, said he was heading towards his house on an Uber car after attending a UNDP programme at Agargaon.

Some plainclothes men stopped his car on Begum Rokeya Sarani and asked him to get down, saying the vehicle was a stolen one.

"Someone from behind rubbed some kind of ointment on my eyes as I was waiting for another vehicle. They then dragged me into a microbus. One of them held something on my face, and I fell unconscious."

Perhaps the next day, Mubashar, who has a daughter aged six, found himself in a room with his hands tied from behind. There was an old dirty mattress where he used to sleep.

There was another room next to his where he heard four to five people chatting on the first day.

Asked if the abductors spoke with him, he said, "Yes they did.... It was for money. Perhaps they did not get my family profile right."

At one stage, they demanded money, saying, "You work at many places."

They also asked him if he had any rich friends and family members, and took away the Tk 27,000 he had with him. He did not have his credit card

with him.

However, the kidnapers did not demand any particular amount or say when and how they wanted the money to be paid, in a striking similarity with the case of Utpal Das.

"Perhaps they talked to you [over the phone]," he said, pointing to his father, a retired government official.

"But I don't know what the discussion was... Everyone has some mystery in their life... But the problem is I could not see anything."

"If not a victim of kidnap, it's not possible for someone to realise how unreal the situation is," he said, his voice cracking. "Please pray for me. We're a normal family. Something akin to a cyclone has swept over us."

Both Mubashar and his family thanked all, including the media and the law enforcers, for their support.

However, after the eight-minute unscheduled briefing, the family did not talk to journalists who gathered in front of their house.

THE RETURN Before setting him free, the abductors made Mubashar lie on someone's lap inside a microbus that travelled for one hour or one and a half hours. There was an altercation among the kidnapers over something inside the vehicle.

The faces of the abductors were covered with towels while he himself was blindfolded.

"Go now. We will kill you if you look back," one abductor said.

On his way home in the CNG autorickshaw, he called his father from the driver's mobile phone, telling him that he was coming home.

Police yesterday spoke to him to take an account of his captivity.

In his reaction, his father said, "We think we have got a new life.... He is my only son."

Jahangir Kabir Khan, inspector (investigation) of Khilgaon Police Station, said Mubashar could not say who abducted him and where he was kept. But the family can still file an abduction case.

Two brothers

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Seven injured were admitted to Morrelganj Upazila Health Complex while five others were taken to Khulna Medical College Hospital in critical condition.

Bagerhat Superintendent of Police Pankaj Chandra Roy said he visited the spot around 6:20pm.

The arrestees are Shahidul Khan, 45, Mojibur Khan, 60, Wahab Khan, 65, Berek Khan, 62, Ibrahim Khan 27, Nur Islam, and Abu Hanif.

The bodies of the deceased were sent to Bagerhat Sadar Hospital morgue for autopsy.

Aid stuck in red tape

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Mora left at least eight people dead, scores missing, and thousands of people homeless in Cox's Bazar alone. Damage to crops was also extensive.

After receiving the relief materials from the Indian high commissioner, those were immediately stored inside the container. The container was sealed in presence of representatives of the district administration, Chittagong Port Authority, and the customs house, and kept at the port.

Deputy Commissioner Zillur Rahman of Chittagong on June 5 sent a letter to the director general of Department of Disaster Management (DDM) in Dhaka seeking instructions for having the relief materials released from port through a C&F agent and for the distribution of the goods.

The DDM on June 18 appointed C&F agent Shammi Agencies Ltd for the task.

The agent nearly three months later on October 12 asked the Commissioner of Chittagong Custom House for a registration number that is needed for submitting the bill of entry.

Kamrul Haque, assistant programmer of the customs house and assigned for supervising and releasing relief consignments, said the C&F agent asked for the registration but failed to provide minimum required documents, like bill of lading (B/L), content

of cartons or detailed product list.

Shammi Agencies proprietor Firoj Ahmed said they sought those documents from the DDM which failed to deliver. The DDM only gave them a list of the goods on a plain paper, which was not acceptable to the customs house, he said.

Kamrul said they usually release such consignments after getting a few documents, including a letter of announcement issued by the supplier of the cargo. Since relief materials were duty free, there was no need for value assessment.

"We followed the same procedure for releasing relief goods for the Rohingyas," he said.

Kamrul said now special permission is needed from National Board of Revenue (NBR) and the foreign ministry for releasing the goods.

DC Zillur Rahman told The Daily Star that they could not submit the documents required for releasing the relief items as the Indian Navy did not provide them any such papers.

"When we sought documents from the Indian Navy personnel they provided us a list of the relief goods on plain paper and we gave the list to the DDM," he added.

"I had no idea that receiving of relief goods without necessary documents from a donor would cause so much

hassle for us," he said.

Eftekharul Islam, director, relief, directorate of disaster management, told The Daily Star that he left no stones unturned to get the relief materials released from the Chittagong Port.

"I communicated with Chittagong customs authorities several times and even last month wrote to the NBR chairman to release the goods under special consideration. I also contacted the Indian high commission and the foreign ministry. But nothing worked," he said.

He said the NBR told him that they would not be able to help without the minimum documents required.

Officials at the Indian high commission told him that the Indian Navy officials at that time could not provide necessary documents as they were in a hurry and that it was difficult for them to come up with the documents now since many months have passed.

Eftekharul said now only the foreign ministry or higher authorities could intervene and have the goods released.

Asked, an official at the Indian High Commission in Dhaka yesterday said they were not aware that a container full of relief materials was stuck at the port.

While visiting the port recently, the container (number HJCU-2135604) was seen abandoned at an open space beside shed-4 of the port.