



Shama Jameela and her daughter Savannah Jameela Bonnell, left, pose with a photo, showing the war baby with her Canadian mother, published in *The Montreal Star*, a former Canadian newspaper. Mustafa Chowdhury, who wrote a book on war babies, including that of Shama, is sitting next to them. Inset: a rare photo of 21 war babies at Mother Teresa's Missionaries of Charity in the capital's Islampur in the second week of July 1972.

PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN/COLLECTED

## In search of her roots

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come to terms with the reality. Shama's mother was one of them.

"Pregnant women usually came after dark so that no one could recognise them. They wanted abortions but nuns gave them counselling for delivery, telling them that someone else might be willing to take the babies," said Sister Javier.

Mustafa Chowdhury, who wrote a book on war babies, including that of Shama, said her biological mother went to the Missionaries with an intention of abortion too.

"She agreed to deliver the baby after a few days of counselling. Eventually, Shama was born premature and underweight," said the Bangladesh origin Canadian who was accompanying Shama at the Missionaries.

The Sister Superior, working at the Missionaries since 1985, learnt from her seniors that most mothers did not want to even see their babies after birth. There were a few who wanted to take a look before leaving and never returned.

At the Missionaries, she was raised with dozens of other war children for two and a half months before a Canadian couple adopted her and took her to Montreal on July 19, 1972.

During the formal adoption in Montreal, the couple retained the name Molly that was given in Bangladesh, but changed the spelling to "Mollie" and added two more names, Shama and Jameela, because of their distinct meanings, in addition to the family's surname, Hartt, according to Mustafa's book, *Unconditional Love: Story of Adoption of 1971 War Babies*.

Shama, a Hindu name, means the flame of the candle and Jameela, a Muslim name, means beautiful. The couple believed naming of their child in such a manner would seem progressive that would offer their child a mutual identity.

Growing up, Shama gradually learnt about her past from her "parents" and had since been thinking about visiting her motherland. She along with her daughter came to Dhaka on December 22, in search of her roots, and visiting the Missionaries was perhaps the most thrilling yet

trying part of her weeklong stay.

"I came to know that there is a record book here where something is written about me. This is the only record from where I can get an idea about me and my biological mother," said an emotion-choked Shama.

But the existing rules of the Missionaries make it impossible for her to access those records, and Shama did not insist on it despite her strong desire to take a look at it.

During her university years, she did try to find out some information about her biological mother but heard there was no record.

"I think she [birth mother] was very brave for doing what she did," said Shama, who grew up in a big family.

"We were nine children; eight of us were adopted from different places. Three of us from different countries -- Bangladesh, Haiti and Vietnam -- and the rest are from Canada but with various backgrounds."

Shama, a successful teacher employed by Sir Wilfrid Laurier School Board, lives in Quebec with her 12-year-old daughter Savannah Jameela Bonnell, wished she could get honorary citizenship of Bangladesh.

Very little records are maintained at the Missionaries, like other such organisations, mostly about the babies -- date of birth and the weight.

"At that time and even today, there is no provision of keeping records about the mothers, their addresses or identities for the dignity of the mothers," said the sister, inviting Shama to the second floor to show her some of the abandoned babies.

There was music playing in one room. Some children were playing and singing as part of the Christmas celebrations. The children got new clothes, and some were sporting red Christmas caps.

In a room opposite to this, some newborns are kept. Some were being taken care of by women while some lay in cots. As Shama walked in, a lady was feeding a child some milk.

"We brought her after she was born in a city hospital last night," the lady said, smiling. Next to her was another newborn on the lap of another woman. Shama walked up to them to

have a close look.

"I am just like one of them," Shama said softly.

As one woman approached with a baby, Shama took the baby in her arms and held her gently. After a while, she put the baby in a cot, and silently walked around to see other abandoned newborns.

Visibly overwhelmed by the experience of her two-hour stay, in her own words, it was surreal and moving to be back and see the place where she was born.

"How different my life would have been, had I stayed here. I am very blessed to have had the opportunity to be adopted. I think it would have been a very different life," she said as she returned to the welcome room.

The most emotional part of the visit was yet to come. A lady with Christmas attire entered the room.

"Merry Christmas," the lady greets Shama, identifying herself as Rumi. Her smiling face changed dramatically when the sister told her that Shama too was born there, as a war baby.

There was an emotional sharing between the two. They talked, hugged and exchanged feelings. They became intimate in no time. "Meeting her is something very special," Shama said, fighting back tears.

Rumi was born at the Missionaries in 1980. Now a mother of two, she lives outside with her family but spends her day with the kids.

"We live in different countries but we are meeting at our birthplace. The only exception is that she lives far away and I am still staying here. I thank God for giving this gift, a sister, on this special day," Rumi broke down in tears, holding Shama.

Shama came bearing Christmas gifts and donations for the orphans at the Missionaries, and gave some of the gifts away herself. Her Canadian mother also sent some money for the charity, which along with her own contribution, Shama handed over to the Sister Superior.

"This is the most memorable day of my life," she told *The Daily Star* as she came out of the Missionaries. "I am going to Canada next week, but I wish to come back again sometime."

on the table and they return from school and eat it until I return and prepare the next meal at night for them. We have struck a balance to make it work," she added.

ABM Khurshid Alom, executive engineer of the Department of Roads and Highways in Kurigram, said battery run vehicles are not allowed to ply the highways and national roads; however, they are allowed on all regional and district roads.

The 32 year old said, "I haul passengers between Nageswari, Bhurungamari, Phulbari and Kurigram Sadar upazilas. I have saved up some money and will buy a pick-up van if I get some help from the government or non-government organisations. I will then have to apply for a driving licence."

"Women should not hesitate to take up driving as a profession. Critics will criticise, no matter what. We should ignore and move on," she said.

Mohammad Waznabi, Traffic Inspector of Kurigram district police, said, "I have observed Shapna hauling passengers on the roads. She is brave and does her job well. It is a positive message for the women in district."

## OIC finds organised campaign of ethnic cleansing of Rohingya

UNB, Dhaka

The OIC Independent Permanent Human Rights Commission yesterday said the situation of Rohingyas carries the hallmark of an organised campaign of ethnic cleansing, which is a crime against humanity under the international law and must be stopped by all means.

Based on the testimonies received from a wide range of Rohingya victims, the Commission expressed its dismay at the plight of Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar, who continue to suffer severe and institutionalised human rights violations at a mass scale.

It reminded the Myanmar authorities that no amount of dragging its feet would help them get away with the denial of fundamental rights of its Rohingya population.

Accordingly, the Commission called upon the government of Myanmar to take firm steps to immediately end the violence against Rohingya and bring the perpetrators of violence to justice; revise and replace all discriminatory policies and practices against its Rohingya population and ensure a sustainable and voluntary return of Rohingya refugees in safety, security, dignity and with ensured livelihood.

The Commission urged the Myanmar authority to ensure free and unfettered access to humanitarian aid agencies, accept UN and OIC fact finding missions for independent investigations into all alleged violations of international human rights law and implement the recommendations of the Kofi Annan Advisory Commission.

Persecuted based on their race, religion and origin, the Rohingya minority of Myanmar represents one of the worst examples of victims of ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity, it said.

These comments were made at the end of a three-day fact-finding visit to Rohingya camps in Cox's Bazar by the Commission.

During the visit, the delegation had the opportunity to meet and discuss in detail with the Rohingya refugees the sorry state of human rights situation faced by them in Myanmar.

The horrifying tales of human rights violations narrated by the Rohingya refugees, included systematic and systemic discrimination in denying all sorts of their civil, political, economic and social rights in addition to widespread and indiscriminate violence

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## Police obstruct BNP processions

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In Narayanganj, police charged batons on BNP activists when they held a rally. At least five BNP activists were injured in that incident in front of the Press Club there.

In Keraniganj, police used teargas shells and batons to foil a rally, injuring around 25 party activists. At one stage, police and BNP men chased each other. In response, police fired blank shots and arrested six party men.

In Khulna, police obstructed a BNP rally and beat up the party men, injuring at least 14 when the party brought out the rally in front of the party office around 11:00am.

In Mymensingh, police searched the houses of a number of BNP leaders. In Dinajpur, police did not allow the BNP leaders to get out of their party office.

The other places where BNP activists faced police obstructions include Barisal, Bandarban, Kishoreganj, Bhola, Rajshahi, Rangpur, Nilphamari, Pirojpur, Jamalpur, Joypurhat and Narsingdi.

The obstructions of the BNP rallies once again proved that the Awami League is a party that kills democracy,"

said BNP Senior Joint Secretary General Ruhul Kabir Rizvi, declaring today's protest programme at a press conference at the party's Nayapaltan headquarters.

Rizvi added that the government did not allow the BNP to hold the rally as part of its policy to hush up the "controversial" national elections held on January 5, 2014.

He slammed the government for denying them the permission to hold a rally when the ruling party was given permission to hold two rallies in the capital.

A huge number of law enforcers were deployed in and around the BNP's headquarters since morning.

Earlier on Thursday, Dhaka Metropolitan Police denied the BNP permission to hold the rally yesterday, the fourth anniversary of the 2014 parliamentary elections.

On Monday, the BNP said it would hold the rally at Suhrawardy Udyan and bring out black flag processions across the country to observe the day as "democracy killing day" to register its protest against the 10th national elections.

The AL marked the day as "victory

day for democracy" holding two rallies in Banani and on the Bangabandhu Avenue in addition to "gala" celebrations across the country.

The last parliamentary elections were held on January 5, 2014 amid controversy as the BNP and most other political parties boycotted the polls terming it "farical and one-sided". At least 153 lawmakers were elected uncontested in that election.

In 2015, on the first anniversary of the polls, violence erupted across the country centring rallies and counter rallies of the parties. The situation remained turbulent for weeks.

The BNP was also not granted permission to hold a rally then. Police kept BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia confined to her Gulshan office by blocking the streets with sand-laden trucks.

An angry Khaleda called for a countrywide nonstop blockade from January 6 in an attempt to topple the government. The blockade went on until the last week of March.

At least 95 people were killed and around 1,500 injured in arson attacks on public vehicles during the blockade.

## Teachers call off hunger strike

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Federation, which led the demonstration.

Golam Mahmudunnabi, president of the platform, said the teachers would now return home and start holding classes again from today.

Quoting the PM's secretary, Mahmudunnabi said, "The prime minister directed the education ministry to take effective measures to bring all recognised educational institutions under the Monthly Pay Order scheme. Then, we decided to call off the hunger strike."

"We hope that the assurance will be translated into action soon, considering sufferings of the teachers."

Although most of the demonstrating teachers became exhausted due to the long hunger strike, a smile spread across their faces as they heard about the PM's assurance.

The teachers started cheering as soon as they came to know that all of them are going to get the MPO facility.

They also thanked the PM for the move.

They also shared the news with their colleagues and family members outside Dhaka over mobile phone.

With a smiling face, most of them began to leave the Press Club area for their home after an hour of the announcement.

"I have lost my words to express my happiness at this moment. It is the biggest achievement in my life," said Kawsar Hossain, a school-teacher of Naogaon, who took part in the demonstration from the beginning.

Ashrafal Haque Lavlu, joint secretary of the teachers' platform, told the newspaper that they were waiting for the PM's assurance as Education Minister Nurul Islam Nahid's assurance had not been fulfilled. "The prime minister has finally fulfilled our expectation."

Over a hundred teachers from non-MPO schools, colleges, madrasas and

technical educational institutions first staged a sit-in protest in front of the Press Club and then went for a hunger strike unto death on Sunday to press home their demand.

According to leaders of the federation, the number of non-MPO education institutions is 5,242, where around 80,000 teachers are working without any pay, some for more than a decade.

The MPO is the government's share in the payroll of the non-government education institutions. Under the scheme, the government gives 100 percent basic to the teachers of non-government schools. The teachers also get a lump sum amount as other allowances from the MPO.

As per rules, an education institution first comes under the MPO facilities followed by its teachers getting included in the government payroll.



Teachers, who had been on a hunger strike demanding MPO benefits since December 31, rejoice in front of the capital's Jatiya Press Club after Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina assured them of fulfilling their demand.

PHOTO: STAR

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government project for the maintenance of rural roads over a span of 18 months.

She jumped at the opportunity as the project would pay Tk 200 a day, with payments being made every fortnight. However, Tk 50 a day would be pending and paid at the end of the 18-months as a form of forced savings for the beneficiaries.

From 9am to 2pm, her job entailed repairing the rural, mud roads of the union that were mostly affected by rain-water and maintaining the trees and greenery on the roadsides.

Fourteen months into her job, Bhitbarbandha Union Parishad Chairman Aminul Haque Khandakar informed the members of a monthly meeting that they will provide a battery-run auto-rickshaw to one woman.

No one stood up to claim the role of a driver, except Shapna.

The chairman arranged driving lessons for her and she was a quick learner.

Abul Kashem Sarker, chairman of Nageswari Upazila Parishad, handed over an auto-rickshaw worth Tk 180,000 to her; the parishad chipped in Tk 105,000 while Shapna had pay Tk

75,000, for which she used up all of her savings and took out a loan.

"The Parishad could have paid the full amount for the auto rickshaw, but we want the beneficiary to be emotionally invested, to grow accountability," said Sarker.

In November 2016, she first started hauling women and children passengers in her locality in the afternoons. She initially earned Tk 250 to Tk 350 a day, but after gaining experience, she would ride longer distances with both male and female passengers and earn Tk 500- Tk 600 a day.

Since the roads repair project ended in February, she rides from morning till night, earning Tk 800 to Tk 1,000 a day. She repaid the loan upon receiving payment for completion of the 18 month project.

"I have been driving the auto-rickshaw for almost a year now and my fate has changed. On some days, I have to hear lewd comments from men and many women discourage me, but I know that my job pays my bills," said Shapna.

"I wake early in the morning, cook for my children and send them off to school. I leave some more food covered