

Govt 'strongly considering' MPO for more institutions

Nahid tells parliament

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The government is "strongly considering" the inclusion of a number of educational institutions in the Monthly Payment Order scheme, Education Minister Nurul Islam Nahid said in parliament yesterday.

The minister made the statement in response to a private member's resolution placed by MA Maleque from Dhaka-20 in the House.

"The government has a plan to include a number of educational institutions in the MPO scheme as soon as possible," Nahid said.

The government has made the move as per the PM's directives and assurance from the finance minister, he added.

The PM on January 5 gave assurance of meeting the demands of the teachers of non-MPO educational institutions, who had gone on a hunger strike in front of the Jatiya

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Prof Anisuzzaman bestowed with Jagattarini Medal

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The University of Calcutta has awarded Jagattarini Medal to Prof Emeritus Anisuzzaman.

He, however, was not present when the award was announced during the university's convocation yesterday, says a press release.

The award was introduced after Jagattarini Devi, mother of Sir Ashutosh Mukherjee, a prolific Bengali educator, jurist, barrister and mathematician, in 1921.

Rabindranath Tagore was the first recipient of the award. Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay and Kazi Nazrul Islam also received the medal.

The university had conferred honorary "Sarojini Basu Award" on Prof Anisuzzaman in 2008 for his outstanding contribution to the research on Bangla language and literature.



3 Sundarbans

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when members of a notorious robber gang, locally known as "Suman Bahini", opened fire on a Rab team in Shukhpara Char around 8:40am.

The law enforcers recovered four firearms and 39 bullets from the spot. The bodies and arms would be handed over to Sharankhola Police Station. The bodies would then be shifted to Bagerhat Sadar Hospital morgue for autopsy, the official said.

Another alleged robber was killed in what naval police said was a gunfight in Sharankhola range on January 9.

The deceased, Farid, 38, was the second-in-command of a robber gang, locally known as "Chhoto Bahini", OC Kabirul said.

On receiving information about an abducted fisherman, a team of naval police went to the Sundarbans. Somehow sensing their presence, the members of the robber gang fired shots at them. The policemen fired in retaliation, triggering the gunfight.

After half an hour of the alleged "gunfight", the robbers fled, leaving Farid's body on the spot, he said.

The naval police also rescued six kidnapped fishermen from the area. They are -- Pratul Halder, 28, son of Nidod Halder of Khaserdanga village under Mongla upazila, Hafiz Hawladar, 25, son of Sattar Hawladar of Joymani village, Shah Abul Fakir, 28, son of Ismail Fakir of South Badhal village of Sharankhola upazila, Sumon Khan 20, son of Ismail Khan of Uttara Rajapur village, Sumon Akon, 28, son of Mofazzal Akon of the same village, and Israfil Palwan, son of Ruhul Palwan of Ratiarajapur of Sharankhola upazila, added the OC.

Removal

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stay on the HC directive regarding the removal of Mujibur would continue following the SC order.

Therefore, Bangladesh Bank's decision to remove Mujibur will be in force, he said, adding that the central bank had already removed him.

On December 6 last year, the BB removed Mujibur from the NRB Commercial Bank for his alleged involvement in a number of loan scandals involving around Tk 700 crore.

Following a writ petition filed by Mujibur, the HC on December 7 stayed the BB decision.

On January 7, the SC chamber judge stayed the HC order until yesterday.



From left, former director general of Bangla Academy Prof Anwar Hossain, Prime Minister's International Affairs Adviser Dr Gowher Rizvi, President Abdul Hamid, Maj Gen Mohammad Sarwar Hossain, former Dhaka University Prof Syed Manzoorul Islam and Bangla Academy Director General Prof Shamsuzzaman Khan pose with copies of "1971: Resistance, Resilience and Redemption", a book written by Maj Gen Sarwar, at its launching ceremony at the Bangabhaban yesterday.

PHOTO: STAR

Indians paying for free visa

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During an enquiry, the team also got information about the illegal practice from staffers of photocopy shops and tea stalls near the Kolkata mission.

The report said the Kolkata mission issued 85,071 Machine Readable Visas (MRVs) between January and November last year, meaning 8,507 visas were given to visa seekers every working day. But during its inspection, the team found that the number of visa seekers at the mission office was much lower than the number of visa issued.

People submitting visa forms at the Kolkata mission face problems for a lack of basic facilities such as toilets, drinking water and waiting rooms, and this tarnishes Bangladesh's image, it mentioned.

During its visit to the Kolkata mission on November 7, the team saw some visa seekers roaming around though the mission's visa counter was closed on that day due to malfunctioning of the central database.

Yet, a total of 159 visa applications were logged on that particular day, and 126 visas were issued. The following day, a total of 423 applications were logged in and 168 visas were issued, according to

the Directorate of Immigration and Passport of Bangladesh.

In its report, the team recommended outsourcing the visa issuance process to make it easier and hassle-free.

Contacted, Salahuddin Noman Chowdhury, director general (administration) of the foreign ministry, declined to comment on the matter.

Asked about the alleged irregularities at the Kolkata mission, Deputy High Commissioner Toufique Hasan said he was not aware of it.

Bangladeshi citizens do not need to pay while applying for Indian visas. But they have to pay Tk 600 as processing fee per application. The money goes to the outsourcing firm that processes visas.

ROW OVER OUTSOURCING
On September 16, 2013, Bangladesh High Commission in New Delhi recommended outsourcing the MRV service for removing hassles.

In a letter to the foreign ministry, the Delhi mission wrote, "The mission would request the headquarters to immediately outsource the visa service to a company selected by the competent authority of the government of Bangladesh so that the Machine

Readable Visa (MRV) can be introduced and run smoothly by this mission."

Later, the cabinet committee on purchase on November 4, 2015, suggested giving the task of issuing six lakh MRVs in three years to the Consortium of BLS International Services Ltd and Dohatech New Media against a processing fee of \$3.98 for each visa. The prime minister approved it on November 13, 2015.

The home ministry asked the Directorate of Immigration and Passport on December 7 that year to implement the purchase committee's suggestion.

But the foreign ministry on January 10 last year advised against going for outsourcing, citing reservations from the Bangladesh mission in Delhi. The ministry requested the Directorate of Immigration and Passport to reconsider the decision.

At a meeting with the home ministry team on November 8, officials of the Deputy High Commission in Kolkata conveyed to the team the Delhi mission's objection that outsourcing might hamper the security of the missions.

However, the team in its report suggested outsourcing for issuing MRVs, citing that the Indian High Commission in Dhaka already outsourced the task of issuing Indian visas.

Row between home and foreign ministries over the visa issue is not new.

The foreign ministry owes the home ministry Tk 3,786 crore that Bangladesh missions collected as passport and visa processing fees. The dues have accumulated over 16 years, and the home ministry has asked the finance ministry to make the foreign ministry pay up.

Moreover, the home ministry learnt that some Bangladeshi missions were renewing machine readable passports (MRP) by hand for \$200 each in violation of the passport issuance policy that says MRPs could only be reissued, not renewed.

The home ministry does not have a clue where the money taken for "the renewal" went. It recently sent a "working paper" to the finance secretary for holding a meeting with the foreign ministry to settle the dispute.

The Daily Star ran a report on the issue on June 18 last year.

Pre-paid food card for refugees, locals

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bring down rising food prices by reducing wastage.

Presently, the WFP provides 50 kgs of rice, nine kgs of lentils and yellow split peas, and four litres of vegetable oil per month for over one lakh households consisting of some seven lakh Rohingyas. It has also been running an e-voucher programme for 90,000 Rohingyas who arrived before the latest influx last year.

The plans come on the heels of a new study by WFP released on January 5 which says that the major concern is limited access to a well-diversified and balanced diet for the Rohingyas, 656,000 of who fled violence in Myanmar's Rakhine State since August 25 last year and joined around 300,000 other Rohingyas who had fled violence in the previous years to Cox's Bazar.

"Malnutrition level is alarming, especially among the women and children, but not uncontrollable," said Rehan, who came to Dhaka from the WFP headquarters in Rome on January

6 to assess the Rohingya crisis and decide the next course of action in regards to food and nutrition.

"We will do everything we can and nobody will die from starvation. As we move from the emergency phase, we will make efforts to stabilise the situation," said the UN official, a Bangladeshi by birth, who left for Rome on January 10.

The comments come at a time when there are concerns over rising food prices in Bangladesh and fears that the Rohingya crisis has adversely affected the food situation and contributed to a lowering of labour wages in Cox's Bazar and its adjacent districts.

Import of rice in the country stood at 22.59 lakh tonnes in July-December of the 2017-18 fiscal year, the highest since 1998-99. In Dhaka, retail prices of coarse and medium quality rice range between Tk 44 to Tk 56 a kg, according to the Trading Corporation of Bangladesh.

Rehan said during his visit to Cox's Bazar, locals raised concern over the

high food prices and low wages. It is important to ensure that local people don't suffer as the authorities respond to the Rohingya crisis, he said.

Rehan said the e-voucher programme is going to help in a big way in improving food and nutrition scenario as well as alleviate concerns of the locals about food prices in Cox's Bazar.

While operating the e-voucher programme, WFP will assess the local food production, market prices and level of inflation. Based on that, it will procure food either from local markets or from abroad, so that the local economy is not hampered.

"If we have funding and we buy too much, then the local population will suffer due to inflation," he said.

Presently, the food is purchased locally, but as the programme is extended, WFP would assess supply of each item it buys, level of inflation and the local economy on a quarterly basis before deciding whether to make purchases locally or from abroad, Rehan added.

The UN Food Agency will select who to procure food from, he said.

Asked about the funding, Rehan said WFP in Bangladesh has received 90 percent of the \$77 million it sought for the first six months until February.

For the next phase of March-December 2018, WFP would require \$240 million for 12 lakh people, including two lakh from the host community, in Cox's Bazar, said Christa Rader, country representative of WFP in Bangladesh.

She said WFP is also beginning a two-year cash grant programme for 40,000 poor female-headed households.

Each of the households would be provided with Tk 1,050 a month and once they have a business plan, each of them would be given a grant of Tk 15,000. Such programmes worked well in the past and are expected to work well this time too, she said.

"This is very important for maintaining a balance between the Rohingya refugees and the locals," Rader said.

'Emotional' robots

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humanlike by acquiring "emotional intelligence" and empathy.

Although this specialisation is still emerging, the notion of robotic empathy appeared to be a strong theme at the huge gathering of technology professionals in Las Vegas.

Honda, the Japanese auto giant, launched a new robotics program called Empower, Experience, Empathy including its new 3E-A18 robot which "shows compassion to humans with a variety of facial expressions," according to a statement.

Although empathy and emotional intelligence do not necessarily require a humanoid form, some robot makers have been working on form as well as function.

"We're been working very hard to have an emotional robot," said Jean-Michel Mourier of French-based Blue Frog Robotics, which makes the companion and social robot called Buddy, set to be released later this year.

"He has a complex brain," Mourier said at a CES event. "It will ask for a caress or it will get mad if you poke him in the eye."

Other robots such as Qihan Technology's Sanbot and SoftBank Robotics' Pepper, are being "human-

ized" by teaching them to read and react to people's emotional states.

Pepper is "capable of interpreting a smile, a frown, your tone of voice, as well as the lexical field you use and non-verbal language such as the angle of your head," according to SoftBank.

ROBOT IN HUMAN SHOES
Developing emotional intelligence in robots is a difficult task, melding the use of computer "vision" to interpret objects and people and creating software that can respond accordingly.

"Empathy is the goal: the robot is putting itself in the shoes of the human, and that's about as hard as it gets," said Patrick Moorhead, a technology analyst with Moor Insights & Strategy.

"It's not just about technology, it's about psychology and trust."

Moorhead said this technology is still in the early stages but holds promise in some areas, noting that there is strong interest in Japan amid a lack of caretakers for the elderly population.

"In some ways it can be a bit creepy if you're crying and the robot is trying to console you," he said.

As for Forpheus, Kersten said the robot's ability to help people improve their table tennis skills could have numerous applications for sports, businesses and more.

"You could sense how people are feeling, if they are attentive or in a good state to drive," he said.

Another key application could be in health care, he said: "In an elderly patient facility, you can determine if someone is in distress and needs help."

US envoy praises

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Sittwe. The army appointed a senior officer to investigate.

A statement from the military on Wednesday said its investigation had found that members of the security forces had killed the 10 and that action would be taken against them.

Marciel denounced the coordinated attacks by Rohingya militants that sparked the latest violence, but said the United States had information suggesting the response by Myanmar's military "involved a lot of human rights violations".

'GOOD FOR DEMOCRACY'
The US ambassador said he hoped the acknowledgment by the military that soldiers were involved in the killings at Inn Din would bring more openness and action against perpetrators of abuses.

"We hope it is followed up by more transparency and by holding those responsible accountable," said Marciel.

"I would stress this should be done, not as a favour to the international community but because it's good for the health of Myanmar's democracy."

The military said legal action would be taken against members of the security forces who violated their rules of engage-

SPECIALISED POLICE UNIT

TIB calls for formulating guidelines

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The Transparency International Bangladesh yesterday called for formulating a set of guidelines before a specialised police unit starts operation to combat cyber crimes in a few months.

Experts and stakeholders should be included in the process to formulate the guidelines, the TIB said in a press statement.

Taking lesson from the global experience is a must, it said.

TIB Executive Director Dr Iftekaruzzaman said they learnt from the media that the government took an initiative to form a specialised police unit, which will be equipped with modern software, to mine any remarks or postings in social media that are defamatory, offensive and can hurt religious sentiment.

Combating and preventing cyber crimes are a global problem and Bangladesh was no exception. So effective surveillance is crucial to control and prevent such crimes, he said.

However, there is a risk of violation

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Maulana Saad

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Road to protest his arrival. They also chanted slogans against him for what they claimed were his "controversial comments about the Koran and Sunnah" to audiences in India.

The seven-hour blockade since 9:00am paralysed the traffic system in the northern part of the capital, causing immense public suffering throughout Wednesday.

Contacted, Awami League's Religious Affairs Secretary Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah, who attended yesterday's meeting, said some of the statements by Saad created a commotion among Muslims as they were "contrary to the Islamic law".

"We had no other option but to make the decision [to keep Saad away from Ijtima] as 26,000 Qawmi madrasas and most Alems and Olemas took a stance against him," he told The Daily Star last night.

It is not clear who will conduct the Akheri Munajat or the final supplication in the absence of Saad, who offered the final prayers at the Ijtima in the last two years.

The home minister said top Tabligh scholars will make the decision.

Having failed to prevent his arrival in Dhaka, Hefajat leaders, who led the protest on Wednesday, announced a blockade of Kakrail mosque to prevent Saad from joining Biswa Ijtima, the largest Islamic congregation after Hajj.

Police had been guarding the mosque, considered the headquarters of Tabligh Jamaat's Bangladesh chapter, since his arrival.

Meanwhile, thousands of devotees from different districts of Bangladesh, and foreign countries have already gathered at the venue to join the first phase of Ijtima amid tight security. Presence of police and Rab members in and around the venue was visible.

The second phase will start on January 19 and end on January 21.

People from Dhaka district and abroad will be able to join in either phase.

Tabligh Jamaat has been organising Biswa Ijtima, also called the World Muslims' Congregation, every year since 1946.

In 2011, the organisers split the congregation into two phases to deal with overcrowding, ensure better management and security.