

HATE SPEECH IN MYANMAR

Facebook says sorry to rights groups

AFP, Yangon Facebook yesterday apologised to Myanmar civil society groups who took issue with Mark Zuckerberg's defence of the platform's record on curbing hate speech roiling the country.

Facebook has been battered by allegations that posts on its site have helped fuel communal bloodshed in Myanmar, a mainly Buddhist country accused of waging an ethnic cleansing campaign against Rohingya Muslims.

On Thursday six Myanmar organisations published an open letter criticising an interview Zuckerberg gave with news site Vox this week. In it he cited examples of both Myanmar Buddhists and Muslims spreading "sensational" messages on Facebook Messenger that warned of imminent violence from the other community.

harm. Now, in that case, our systems detect that that's going on. We stop those messages from going through," Zuckerberg was quoted as saying.

In their letter the six local tech and human rights organisations said they were "surprised" to hear Zuckerberg "praise the effectiveness" of Facebook's systems in Myanmar.

"It took over four days from when the messages started circulating for the escalation to reach you," said the groups, who had flagged the worrying content to Facebook.

"Far from being stopped, they spread in an unprecedented way, reaching country-wide and causing widespread fear and at least three violent incidents in the process."

When reached for a comment yesterday, a Facebook spokesperson conceded the company was too slow in responding to reports about the incendiary messages.

SEE PAGE 12 COL 1



This picture taken on Thursday shows two women, part of a group of five Rohingyas rescued by Indonesian fishermen after they were stranded at sea for almost three weeks, in Banda Aceh. The group of two men, aged 28 and 33, a 20-year-old woman, a 15-year-old girl and an eight-year old boy were spotted on April 2 in a small boat in waters off southern Thailand and Myanmar, 325 kilometres from Aceh province in Indonesia.

PHOTO: AFP

MIGRANT TRAGEDY Five stranded Rohingyas rescued, several dead

AFP, Banda Aceh

Five Rohingyas stranded at sea for almost three weeks have been rescued by Indonesian fishermen but several others died during the harrowing ordeal, officials said yesterday, with the UN refugee agency saying it was "alarmed" at the deaths.

News of the rescue comes several days after the arrival in Malaysia of another boat carrying dozens of members of the persecuted Muslim minority from Myanmar.

The group of two men, aged 28 and 33, a 20-year-old woman, a 15-year-old girl and an eight-year old boy were spotted Monday in a small boat off the coast of southern Thailand and Myanmar, some 325 kilometres (176 miles) from Aceh province in Muslim-majority Indonesia.

The fishermen took them back to... SEE PAGE 12 COL 4

BEAUTY RAPE, MURDER Two suspects confess crime

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Moulvibazar

Two suspects in the Beauty rape and murder case yesterday confessed before a Habiganj court that they were involved in the crime.

Main accused Babul Mia admitted his involvement in the rape before the Senior Judicial Magistrate's Court under section 164, said police.

Beauty's relative Moyna Mia, another suspect, told the same court that he was involved in the killing.

In his statement, Moyna said how the murder took place and who were involved in it.

Police detained Moyna on Wednesday acting on Babul's statement during his five-day remand.

The court also recorded the statement of Beauty's grandmother Fatema Begum.

Rabiul Islam, additional superintendent of Habiganj police (Sadar circle), said Superintendent of Police Bidhan Tripura would brief journalists on the statements of the suspects at 4:00pm today.

Beauty, 16, of Brahmondora village in Shayestaganj upazila, went missing on March 16 and police found her body the next day.

On March 18, her father Sayed Ali filed the case against two people with names, including Babul, and several

SEE PAGE 12 COL 3

Inhuman

FROM PAGE 16

left him and went to her father's house last year over a family feud. Since then, Habibur gave her an "indecent proposal" several times.

Anwara alleged that she informed her husband and mother-in-law about the incident, but they did not take any action. "Instead, they beat me up being angry at me."

Following the incident, she left the family and went to her grandfather's house in Ashashuni upazila in October last year. She came back home after her in-laws promised her that such incident would not happen again.

Around 8:00am yesterday, when Mostafizur, Habibur and their mother Zayera Khatun were having their meals together, Habibur blamed Anwara for everything.

At one stage, Habibur started beating her up. She took shelter in the kitchen and closed the door. But Habibur broke into the kitchen and dragged her outside.

Her husband, Habibur and their mother then tied her to a tree and beat her up with iron rods, bamboo sticks and brooms mercilessly, Anwara said.

On information, Sub-Inspector Achintya Kumar Bhowmick of Brahmarajpur police outpost went to the spot and rescued Anwara around 10:00am.

Akhtaruzzaman, a physician at Sathkira Sadar Hospital, said there were injury marks on different parts of the victim's body.

Anwara's grandfather Moktar Mallik demanded punishment of the torturers.

Contacted, Zayera claimed that Anwara often had altercations with her and Habibur over trifling matters.

Yesterday, she threatened to kill herself over such an incident. As a result, they tied her to a mango tree, she added.

Habibur and Mostafizur have a workshop to repair buses and trucks near the bus terminal in Sathkira town.

A case will be filed in this connection, said Shariful Islam, inspector (investigation) of Sathkira Sadar Police Station.

Treatment cost too high to bear

FROM PAGE 1

With the disease spreading again, Hasna started going to NICRH around a year ago.

"I need to stay here alone. I don't have that money to rent a room. My husband also can't leave his work and stay here with me all the time. My family runs with his income," she said yesterday, on the eve of World Health Day today.

This year, the observance of the day focuses on universal health coverage (UHC), which is defined as ensuring that all have access to quality healthcare services, but do not suffer financial hardship while paying for those.

Hasna's case is rather an epitome of how thousands of patients, who are suffering from various chronic diseases, including cancer, heart and respiratory diseases, turn from poor to poorer because of high health costs in the country.

Health experts say such chronic diseases have a direct link to financial hardship of households, especially when out of pocket (OOP) health expenditure is high. OOP health expenditure relates to the portion of health expenditure that people privately spend for health reasons.

According to the Bangladesh National Health Accounts 1997-2015, OOP health expenditure in Bangladesh is 67 percent of the total medical costs. WHO said this percentage of OOP is the highest in South and Southeast Asian region, followed by India with 62 percent,

while the global average is 32 percent.

A study by icddr found the OOP health expenditure pushes four to five million people into poverty every year.

While Bangladesh has earned global accolades for improving its health indicators, mostly for reducing maternal and child deaths over the years, the cases of chronic or non-communicable diseases (NCDs) are increasing every year.

A 2015 report of the WHO says NCDs, including heart ailments, cancers and respiratory complications, soared by seven percentage points from the 2008 figures to 59 percent in 2012.

The report said of the 8.86 lakh deaths that occurred in the country in 2012, 17 percent were caused by cardiovascular diseases, 10 percent by cancers, 11 percent by chronic respiratory diseases, three percent by diabetes, 18 percent by other NCDs and nine percent by injuries.

No latest data on the issue is available. Dr Habibullah Talukder Ruskin, associate professor at the NICRH, said every year 1.22 lakh people have cancer in Bangladesh.

Citing a medical research, he said 75 percent of the cancer patients either die or face financial catastrophe within a year of diagnosis in the Southeast Asian countries.

"The scenario would be similar in Bangladesh," he said.

Prof Syed Masud Ahmed, director at the Centre of Excellence for UHC at Brac University, said almost half the OOP is

spent on medicines and medical products.

"So, prices of medicine and medical products like rings for heart have to be cut down," he said.

Again, the private sector is almost unregulated though more than 60 percent households seek healthcare from private healthcare facilities, he added.

Transparency International Bangladesh in a research early this year said private hospitals and diagnostic centres have turned into "excessive profit-seeking businesses". These facilities have established a "commission-based marketing mechanism" where everyone -- from physicians to receptionists -- benefits from the widespread malpractice, it says.

However, in most of the cases, the patients, despite paying excessive fees, do not get proper healthcare services in return.

Prof Syed Masud Ahmed said while the private sector needs to be regulated strictly, accountability for the public health facilities also needs to be ensured.

"Hospitals, you can say, give curative measures. But, the authorities also should focus on preventive aspects," he said.

Water and air pollution, contamination in food and life style are basic aspects that need to be improved to prevent major diseases like cancer, respiratory, heart, diabetes and kidney diseases, Prof Masud added.

Tough race

FROM PAGE 1

popularity ahead of the parliamentary polls, scheduled to be held in December.

The party wants to boost the morale of its leaders and activists by winning the two mayoral polls as it thinks that victories in Khulna and Gazipur will have a positive impact on the party as Rajshahi, Sylhet and Barisal will go to city polls in around two months.

The Khulna city AL in an extended meeting recently proposed the name of Talukder Abdul Khaleque, city AL president, as the party's mayoral candidate.

But at the end of the meeting, Khaleque, an incumbent MP and a former city mayor, announced that he was not interested in contesting the election. He was defeated by BNP-backed candidate Moniruzzaman Moni in the 2013 city polls.

"Since people of Khulna did not want me in the last election, I have decided not to stand in the upcoming polls," said a meeting source quoting Khaleque as saying.

Talking to The Daily Star, a close aide of Khaleque said the lawmaker from Bagerhat-3 would have to step down as an MP before running in the city election.

If Khaleque is defeated in the city polls, he will no more be a public representative, the aide said, adding that is the main reason for his unwillingness to contest the mayoral election.

AL sources said if Khaleque sticks by his decision, then the party's ticket might go to Sheikh Salauddin Jewel, cousin of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. Jewel has been conducting campaigns for the last few months.

"Khaleque is the most popular leader who has the potential to come out victorious," said a Khulna city AL leader, wishing not to be named.

In Gazipur, several AL leaders, including city AL President Azmat Ullah Khan, Vice-President and former acting city mayor Asadur Rahman Kiron, General Secretary Jahangir Alam, city Jubo League

Convener Kamrul Ahsan Sarkar Russell and its Joint Convener Saiful Islam are eager to join the mayoral race.

Of them, Azmat Ullah and Jahangir enjoy huge popularity among voters and are hopeful of winning the party ticket. In the last city polls in 2013, Azmat Ullah was backed by the AL while Jahangir contested the election as a party rebel.

An AL central leader said picking one of them for mayor is very difficult for the party.

Sources in Gazipur AL said the party has several factions in the district as there is a rift between district AL President and Liberation War Affairs Minister AKM Mozammel Huq and Rahamat Ali MP (Gazipur-3) while the relations between Azmat Ullah and Jahangir is also not good.

Elections to the four city corporations on June 15, 2013 saw AL-backed candidates being defeated by BNP favourites. Things didn't change for the ruling party in Gazipur city polls on July 6 either as the BNP-backed mayor aspirant won the mayoral race.

In December last year, the AL candidate defeated by the Jatiya Party candidate in the Rangpur city polls while the AL nominee lost to the BNP candidate in Comilla city polls on March 30 last year.

Contacted, AL Presidium Member Lt Col (ret'd) Faruk Khan said the party would not tolerate any rebel candidates in Khulna and Gazipur city polls.

"We want to win the elections as it is a very crucial time for us. We want to give a positive message to the nation ahead of the national polls by ensuring wins in the two cities."

About the candidate selection process, Faruk said the AL would consider the names recommended by its grassroots units before picking the nominees. "We already have conducted several surveys on the popularity of the probable candidates and their contributions to the party. Considering all these aspects, we will nominate the best candidates," he added.

BNP may pick

FROM PAGE 1

Talukder Abdul Khaleque by over 60,000 votes in Khulna city election in June 2013.

Election to the two city corporations are scheduled for May 15, and the deadline for submitting nomination papers is April 12.

Election officials will scrutinise the documents on April 15-16, and the candidates will be able to withdraw their candidacy till April 23, according to the election schedule.

"The current mayors are likely to get the party ticket as they tried their best to work for people despite government repression," said a senior BNP leader, seeking anonymity.

Ten mayoral aspirants for the two city polls submitted nomination forms to the party's Nayapaltan office. The deadline for submitting nomination papers expired yesterday.

The party's nomination board will interview the aspirants tomorrow evening at the party chairperson's Gulshan office, and draw up a shortlist.

The BNP has taken part in all the local government polls held during the tenures of the AL-led government since 2008.

The party is willing to contest the upcoming city polls as well to prove its popularity. But it is concerned whether the Election Commission will play a neutral role in holding the polls, said party insiders.

After getting elected, Mannan could work as Gazipur mayor only for a couple of years. He was suspended twice and also accused in more than 30 cases.

"I am physically and mentally prepared for contesting the polls. If the party gives me nomination, I will contest it," said 70-year-old Mannan, who has been suffering from various diseases for the last couple of years.

Party insiders said Mannan is not



Bachchu, who is doing asphalt work for 20 years, blamed the high thickness of the "wearing course" (the upper layer of a bituminous road) and excessive bitumen for the ruts.

"The thickness of the wearing course on the highway is higher than that on other roads. For this additional bitumen, the surface may be failing to hold the bottom layer," he said.

Also, the bitumen grade for the highway was 60-70, which cannot stand overloading.

Alam said 60-70 grade bitumen was standard for the country. "But experts approved the specification and we followed it."

Asked if the grade was appropriate for the Dhaka-Chittagong highway, he insisted that it was a standard practice in Bangladesh and worldwide and it could not be changed.

But a senior official of the road ministry said, "During the expansion work, they could have checked if the standard was appropriate because we all know overloaded vehicles ply the road."

There must have been an alternative, he added.

Locals and drivers, who are critical about the quality of the work, blame the authorities for their failure to check overloading.

HAZARDOUS DRIVING As a result of the damage, driving on

the highway is difficult and dangerous. "I struggle to control my vehicle when I drive at high speed and change lanes," said Dulu Mia, a trucker.

Fazar Ali, who has been driving different modes of transports for 38 years, has a similar experience. "The road is so uneven at some points that I struggle to remain in my seat."

Often, frequent road crashes claimed lives on the narrow but the busiest highway and so its expansion was badly needed both for faster communications and saving lives. Tailbacks were a daily phenomenon on the road, hampering export and import through Chittagong Port.

The project was initiated during the BNP-led government in September 2006. It was finalised in 2010, a year after the Awami League took office.

But it turned out to be the most talked-about project after the Padma bridge because of the government's inability to supervise the project.

Construction works never got momentum for various reasons. As a result, a three-year project took six years and the cost more than doubled.

The biggest weakness of the project was the government's giving in to the demand of Sino-Hydro for additional fund.

Reza Construction Ltd and Taher Brothers Ltd were the two other contractors.