

SPOTLIGHT

# FACES IN THE FOIL

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On October 27, the Jatiya Sangsad passed the Narcotics Control Bill 2018 to replace the 30-year-old law from 1990. The new law has introduced the death sentence for people found to be in possession of over 200 grams of yaba, or 25 grams of heroin.

Visually, two Granny Smith apples would be about 200 grams. For dry powders like heroin, 25 grams is the equivalent of three tablespoons. And for possession of this amount of drugs,

amounts of narcotics."

Under this law, 20-year-old Rima\*, who has been dealing since she first arrived in Dhaka as a 10-year-old orphan, would be facing death.

She lives in a tiny makeshift shanty room on the Karwanbazaar rail-tracks with her two daughters, and when asked last week whether she knows about the new law, was completely aghast.

"Let them kill me. I am not living a life worth living anyway," she spits out. Dealing is the only life she has ever known.

"Both my parents passed away when I was little. I hopped on a train to Dhaka to join my brother who lived on the lines and drove a rickshaw van," narrates Rima

my own. Never wanted to actually. I'm still selling other dealers' stash for them. I only want to earn enough money to manage my court cases," says Rima.

And that is why she continues dealing till today, even though now she is old enough to work as a day labourer, and is married to a rickshaw-van driver. "I have 28 court cases against me. I have to pay lawyers, I have to bribe the police so that they do not arrest me, I have to bribe the court to delay my hearing, and I have to pay to get bond bail. It is a never-ending cycle." Others around her confided to *Star Weekend* that Rima also tried sex work but it was affecting her marriage so she switched back to dealing.

*"I was at school trying to learn what Madam was teaching me, but I was very hungry... so I stepped out and got a packet from a neighbour who said he'll give me Tk 20 for food if I sold the packet for him. I was a child so I did not know how to differentiate customers from cops, and I got caught," says Sabbir, who was first arrested for dealing at the age of six.*

when asked how she first came to deal.

"Unfortunately, my brother overdosed on heroin and died, leaving me truly alone. That was when a neighbour—I called her *khala*—handed me a small packet and asked me to bring back the money for her," she continues.

"I hated doing the job. I didn't like selling *dhandra*. But when I got very hungry I would give in to my *khala's* coaxing," says Rima.

And so, began a decade and more of dealing. Rima is still in the same position in the ladder as she was when she was 10 years ago—she is a part of the foot-fleet of a much larger drug kingpin.

"I never managed to have a business of

"If I pay Tk 500 to the police every time my hearing comes up, I don't need to go to court. They manage it somehow. If I fail to pay, the court issues an arrest warrant and I get picked up," she claims.

Rima was first arrested when she had barely stepped into her teen years. "The police's detective branch caught hold of me when I was selling to a customer. They took me to the holding room of the police station and beat me up badly with batons," she remembers.

"At one point I could not take the torture anymore so I started fighting back...and accidentally hit the forehead of a cop. His head started bleeding, and I knew I was in trouble," describes Rima. She was. The

offence put her away in a juvenile detention centre for a full year, before she was released on bail.

"I told the judge that I was being tortured and that it was an accident that happened in self-defense but it did not work."

Rima, with her 28 criminal cases, and no other way to earn the money needed to maintain them, is in the front-line of the drug dealers facing death penalty.

One of the biggest criticisms of the war on drugs carried out this year was that it mostly exterminated the foot fleet like Rima while the big fish stayed out of reach. The death toll of drug dealers from "crossfires" as it stands now is 414—none of whom were those building empires on drugs. The most iconic moment of this "cleansing" operation was when a Teknaf lawmaker and known drug godfather Abdur Rahman Bodi managed to leave the country to perform *umrah* in Saudi Arabia. Photos surfaced of the lawmaker in a skullcap, hands raised in prayer, or holding up imitations of the black and gold *gilaf* that covers the Holy Ka'aba.

And why would people like him be caught anyway—they don't live in the city slums that have been the primary target of the law enforcement's drives. When law enforcers stormed the Geneva Camp in May and jailed 77, they found not one big druglord. The police told the journalists that the big ones escaped before the raid. Another raid in the Geneva Camp in June yielded 51 small dealers but not one single druglord. Neither did they find any druglords during raids in slums in Jatrabari, Hazaribagh and Karwanbazaar. Hundreds of small dealers were arrested however. In each case the police claimed that the patrons "escaped".

To compare, in the rare occasion during the year when a big dealer was caught, it wasn't by raiding the slums. When yaba queen Farhana Akter Papia, who goes by the streetname Rajkumari was nabbed in June, the law enforcers had to actively go looking for her in the multiple apartments she owned around Shyamoli and Mohammadpur. They finally got her from an under-construction building in Lalbagh.

Papia, who traveled in personal SUVs, simply used the slums as rackets comprising cheaply-available infantry like Rima—or Rima's eight-year-old daughter Tithi\*. As we spoke, she trots up to ask her mother if they can have dinner.

At first her mother tries to distract her. "Go to the tap and take a bath. Make sure you scrub yourself well," she says. The little girl protests, "I'll do it in the morning I promise. Do we have dinner?"

"There isn't any," the mother answers flatly, "see if you can find any leftover rice at the restaurants."

We find out a day later that unable to find any dinner, Tithi had gone to bed hungry. Her mother had done the same probably.

Tithi's teacher Nilu is afraid that the



ILLUSTRATION: NAHFIA JAHAN MONNI

child will soon go down the same line. "I don't think she deals yet, but she is hungry so often I find her with her bottom lip lined with betel *gul* (tobacco)," says the teacher.

Nilu teaches at a church-run school for the Tokai Unnoyon Shongstha (Street Children Development Organisation) on the Karwanbazaar rail-tracks, and has seen her students drop out of school to deal for 13 years.

Sitting in the dilapidated classroom that looked more like a storeroom, she pointed to a youth sleeping on the floor. "This one is now an addict," she says. Dusty and unwashed, with a constellation of stars crudely tattooed on his bicep, the youth was almost camouflaged against the dirt floor.

"I have always been forced to turn a blind eye to their or their parents' drug addictions. I could never intervene when the children turned to dealing—it is one of the few rules I have to follow to be able to keep running this school," she says.

In return, the community gave her respect and never brought drugs into her classroom. "Except this one time, when I found a freshly dug up hole in the floor of my classroom and realised they were hiding drugs there," she laughs.

Her no-intervention policy also had to extend to the white-clothes policemen who continuously patrol these slums. It is easy to spot them—they hawkishly stalk unknown faces in the slum (like this correspondent), and everytime they appear all the dealers silently slip away.

The police routinely draw bribes from the adult dealers in exchange of keeping them safe, while preying on the little

children who are just getting into dealing, like Nilu's students.

"Sabbir\* here was six or seven years old when he was caught dealing by the white-clothes police. They beat him up so much...he was crying so loudly and I couldn't do anything. I had to ignore the sounds and continue teaching," says Nilu. Sabbir, now in his late teens, sits beside her with his eyes downcast, as she remembers the story.

He adds to her account, "I was at school trying to learn what Madam was teaching me, but I was very hungry...so I stepped out and got a packet from a neighbour who said he'll give me Tk 20 for food if I sold the packet for him."

"I was a child so I did not know how to differentiate customers from cops, and I got caught. I still remember the beating. It was a point of no return for me, and I seriously took up dealing after that."

Sabbir was not an orphan, but his parents had separated and his mother married a man who did not want the child. He lived with his grandmother on the rail-tracks, and the old woman made barely enough as a day-labourer to feed her grandson.

Sabbir himself is now a father to a one-year-old daughter, and he has sent her off to live with distant relatives in the village.

"It does not matter whether she has food or not in the village—at least she won't have drugs. I don't want her to become a dealer," he says.

\*The names of the interviewees have been changed to protect their identities.

*"At one point I could not take the torture anymore so I started fighting back... and accidentally hit the forehead of a cop. His head started bleeding, and I knew I was in trouble," describes Rima, who spent a year in jail for dealing when she was barely a teenager*



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the state can decide to end the life of a person. To put into perspective, in Vietnam, the amount of heroin that would warrant capital punishment is 1.3 pounds.

As reported by *The Daily Star*, the opposition parliamentarians "termed the bill cruel, and said it could not be accepted as people would be given a death sentence or life term just for carrying such small