



Some youths cleaning a memorial to Askir Mir, a Liberation War martyr, in Moulvibazar's Kulaura upazila yesterday. Members of the Facebook group "Kulaura Problem and Prospect" take part in different social welfare activities in the area.

PHOTO: MINTU DESHWARA

ATROCITIES AGAINST ROHINGYAS Myanmar draws condemnation at the Hague

DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENT

Myanmar faced strong international pressure and condemnation in the International Criminal Court (ICC) at The Hague where 123 state parties gathered for their 17th Assembly of State Parties.

Although the Assembly is scheduled to continue for over a week, the State Parties made their position on Myanmar and the Rohingya refugee crisis on the inaugural day, Wednesday.

The European Union, on behalf of its 28 member states, went on to demand United Nation's Security Council's referral of Myanmar to the ICC, according to a diplomatic source in the Hague.

State parties like Austria, France, Sweden, and Liechtenstein expressed grave concerns over the crimes committed against the Rohingyas and encouraged concerned states to cooperate with the ICC to ensure accountability of the perpetrators for the alleged deportation of the Rohingyas from Myanmar to Bangladesh.

Myanmar, for the first time, made an application to the ICC requesting participation in the ICC assembly despite not being a signatory to the Rome Statute. Myanmar's presence is seen as an outcome of growing international pressure against the country.

Hasina hopes

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166 million population from 47 percent. She has pledged 100 percent access by the middle of next year.

The country's first nuclear plant is being built in Pabna's Rooppur.

The PM said the facility's two reactors, with output capacity totalling 2,400 megawatts, "will start producing electricity in 2024".

She added that Bangladesh's rapid economic expansion will pick up further momentum to hit 10 percent annual growth over the next three years, and will shed its "least developed country" status from 2024.

The PM said growth is projected to accelerate to 8.25 percent this fiscal year and would continue to increase.

"If elected, I can assure you that the programme we have undertaken will get us up to 10 percent by 2021."

Hasina said Bangladesh could become Asia's fastest growing economy through a range of policies. One example she gave was the country's attempt to coax foreign companies to set up in a new network of 100 special economic zones. Currently 11 of the zones are now functioning and 79 are under construction.

On the influx of some 800,000 Rohingya refugees from Myanmar into Bangladesh since 2016, Hasina brushed aside concerns that the situation would become an election issue.

She said Bangladeshis felt solidarity with the Rohingyas after their own experiences in the independence war with Pakistan in 1971, when an estimated 10 million fled into neighbouring India.

"We have done our part," she added. "We gave them shelter, we are providing them food, healthcare and taking care of children and taking care of women."

Hasina repeated assurances that no refugee would be forced to return to Myanmar but called on other countries and multinational organisations to help resolve the issue. It is now the international community's turn to figure out "how to make Myanmar take back their people to their own country," she said.

Countries losing

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West Africa in particular has the highest prevalence of marriage before age 15, and of the top 20 countries with the highest rates of child marriage in the world, 18 are in Africa.

Yvette Kathurima Muhia, from the Girls Not Brides organisation of more than 1,000 civil society groups working on the issue, said governments and communities need to work together.

Twenty-four countries have launched national strategies to end the practice since the African Union began a campaign to stop child marriage by 2023.

But she said more needed to be done, particularly to keep girls in school by providing free meals, sanitary items and transport.

"Then the families feel they can send the girls to school, where they have support and incentives rather than if they were at home," she added.

ROOTED IN POVERTY

The causes of child marriage are complex and include traditional beliefs, climate change and conflict. But poverty is an underlying factor.

The UN last month said that the drought in western Afghanistan, which has displaced more than 250,000 people, has worsened an already dire humanitarian situation, compelling some families to sell their daughters to pay off debt or buy food.

2nd freshwater

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main channel of the river.

This was the second freshwater crocodile seen in a river in the last 50 years as it was believed to be extinct from the country's rivers for a century, the forest department said.

Locals said the huge crocodile was seen in the water near the river bank a week ago. While some villagers made attempts to kill the animal out of fear, others protested.

Jamal Hossain, a resident of Komorpur village, said, "I saw the animal a week ago when I went to fish in the river. I panicked and ran away to inform the villagers. They tried to kill it but I stopped them."

The fear of the crocodile has stopped locals from going to the river. They have demanded that the animal be rescued from the spot and relocated but forest department officials have refused to do so for the sake of the reptile's safety.

About six to seven feet long, a part of the crocodile's face can sometimes be seen above the water. It eats fish in the river or foxes that roam near the banks, locals said.

Speaking to The Daily Star, Md Mahabubur Rahman, divisional forest officer in Pabna, said that forest department and wild life department officials visited the spot and together took the decision to let the crocodile stay where it was.

"This is a big crocodile and the lagoon near the river is safe for the

Boy overturns

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throwing snowballs were breaking the law.

"The children of Severance want an opportunity to have a snowball fight like the rest of the world," Dane told the trustees. "Kids want to have snowball fights without breaking the law. Kids want to have a voice in our town."

His arguments won over the board, which unanimously voted to tweak the ordinance to allow snowball fights.

After the vote, the town mayor offered Dane his first snowball to throw legally.

The boy said his little brother would be his first target and that he would avoid breaking windows.

At least 161 children between the ages of just one month and 16 were sold between July and October, according to Unicef.

Kathurima Muhia, head of Africa engagement at Girls Not Brides, conceded that the AU's 2023 target to eradicate the practice was "not going to happen", describing progress so far as "slow-moving".

As well as addressing policies and legal reforms, social norms must change in communities too, she added.

At the same time, people need to understand that there are no cultural or religious reasons to marry off young girls, she said.

In September, the marriage of a 15-year-old Malaysian girl to a 44-year-old man sparked anger, two months after a girl aged just 11 was married off to a 41-year-old.

But child marriage is not just an issue in the developing world: in June last year, the US state of New York overhauled legislation that allowed children as young as 14 to get married.

UPHILL BATTLE

Despite growing awareness of the practice, as policy makers met in Ghana a 17-year-old girl in South Sudan was auctioned for marriage on Facebook, causing international outrage.

animal. The crocodile takes shelter in the deepest portion of the water body about one kilometre away from the locality. There is also enough food for it in the spot," Mahabub said.

Asked about why the crocodile may have come to this spot, the forest officer said it was possibly for the sake of food and safe shelter.

"We do not have any freshwater crocodile in our river system. Another freshwater crocodile was seen a few years ago in the Madhumati river. This one has probably come to Bangladesh from India through Padma river," said Zahidul Karim, a wildlife conservationist.

Zahidul added he would hold talks with the local authorities concerned so that the animal is not harmed until the lagoon is connected to the river's main channel again and it can leave on its own.

Man shot

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The Daily Star that he tried to warn the officials that the gun was loaded.

He added that as soon as he told them about the loaded gun the trigger was pulled. "I could see Ashiq lying on the ground holding his feet. He was bleeding profusely," he said.

Executive Magistrate Iqbal Hasan, who led a team examining the gun, said the officials asked Suza if the gun was unloaded "but he could not answer properly".

The shotgun is owned by local lawmaker Kazi Abdul Wadud Dara, he said.

Ashiq, the injured man, went there to renew the licence of his father's gun, said Abdullah Al Mahmud, upazila nirbahi officer of Puthia.

He was waiting while the officials were examining the shotgun.

Rafiqul Islam, an employee of Rajshahi Deputy Commissioners' Office, pulled the trigger of the shotgun aiming at the floor, the UNO said.

A general diary was filed over the negligent discharge of a firearm, said Shakiluddin Ahmed, officer in charge of Puthia police station.

Iqbal Hasan, also a member of the examiners' team, said, "It was unintentional. People usually provide an unloaded gun during inspections but the lawmaker's one was loaded."

Sonali in a fix

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asking permission to sell the mortgaged properties. The money loan courts delivered verdicts in 15 cases, all in favour of the Sonali Bank.

In 2013, the Sonali Bank classified Hall-Mark's loans as bad loan and published a series of tenders inviting buyers. But the company challenged the tenders with the High Court, which stayed the move.

However, the HC later dismissed the petitions, and delivered a verdict in Sonali Bank's favour. Since then the bank had been floating tenders to sell the properties, only to find no one is interested to buy them.

The bank published its last auction notice in October last year in three Bangla dailies -- Nayadiganta, Janakantha and Jajaidin.

Sonali Bank Managing Director Md Obayed Ullah Al Masud told The Daily Star that they failed to sell the properties despite repeated attempts.

"We are now thinking about setting up an economic zone on the Hall-Mark's land. If needed, we will provide investors with working capital for the zone. But the final decision will be made by the bank board," he said.

The Hall-Mark story left central bankers, commercial bankers and the government high-ups astonished given the degree of irregularities.

In 2012, the central bank found that the company took Tk 2,964 crore in loans from the then Ruposhi Bangla Hotel branch between 2010 and May 2012 using forged documents.

The little-known group started business in 2006, when it bought just 36 decimals of land from Janata Housing at Hemayetpur. It set up its first factory, Hall-Mark Fashion, there in 2007, the year it started banking with Sonali Bank's Ruposhi Bangla Hotel branch.

In 2008, the group set up Bobby Fashion, Wall-Mart Fashion, Hall-Mark Style, Bobby Denim and Hall-Mark Design Wear with Sonali Bank loans.

There were no new factories built in the next two years. But in 2011, the company suddenly got hold of a source of money and set up 27 factories that year.

The money came from Sonali Bank in the form of short-term loans for 120 days, a gross violation of banking rules.

A number of Sonali Bank officials, including its deputy managing directors, were suspended for their alleged involvement in the scam and are now facing court cases.

Hall-Mark Group Managing Director Tanvir Mahmud and Chairman Jasmine Islam are now in jail.

CO2 emissions

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Even a 2C ceiling above pre-industrial levels may not be enough to avoid catastrophic impacts, the UN's climate science panel concluded in a landmark report in October.

A single degree of warming to date has seen a rise in deadly heatwaves, droughts, floods, and superstorms made worse by rising seas.

"Emissions will continue to rise, rhetoric is increasing but ambition is not -- we are completely off course," said co-author Glen Peters, research director at the Centre for International Climate and Environmental Research in Oslo.

"While there has been positive progress on clean energy and electric vehicles, this is currently too small to impact the onward march of fossil fuels."

Graft well accepted

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He also highlighted the role of evidence-based investigative journalism in checking corruption.

"Civilization cannot flourish without freedom of expression. Censorship never works. So, it is better not to impose it," Rizvi added.

TIB Chairperson Sultana Kamal termed the Digital Security Act as a stumbling block to evidence collection for investigative journalism.

"If the voice of mass media is controlled, its scope for educating people decreases," she said, adding that if the authorities harass journalists while collecting evidence, the society would be harmed.

The Digital Security Act has provisions allowing police to arrest anyone without a court warrant. Provisions like this can be abused.

Journalist Abul Momen said the intellectuals were very outspoken in the 60s and 70s. They didn't play a passive role.

"We want to see children grow up to be good citizens with values and honesty. But, the current education system does not prepare them that way. It focuses on examinations and grades."

"We need to change this for the sake of the progress of democracy and human rights," Momen said.

Daily Prothom Alo Feature Editor Shumona Sharmin said investigative journalism is a key tool to sustain the society that has almost accepted cor-

ruption as the norm.

"To change the tide, the citizens need to utilise the tool that is investigative journalism," she said.

TIB Executive Director Iftekharuzzaman said the Digital Security Act created a sense of insecurity among all people. It would require major amendment for the sake of journalism that can help reduce corruption.

DBC Editor Zayadul Ahsan said politicians have now become reliant on bureaucrats. Taking this advantage, the bureaucrats incorporate laws that provide them with privileges and do not uphold peoples' rights.

Journalist Reaz Ahmad said if it is implemented in its current form, the act will be abusive. He suggested framing its rules in a way that protects journalists from harassment.

TIB conferred Investigative Journalism Awards 2018 to six journalists and two video documentary makers.

The awardees are Muhammad Nuruzzaman of Daily Probaha, Khulna; Rajib Nur and Zahidur Rahman of Daily Samakal; Anowar Hossain of Daily Prothom Alo; Utpal Mirza of Maasranga Television; Mufti Parvez Nadir Reza of Ekattor Television; two documentaries by Investigation 360 of Jamuna Television and Talaash of Independent Television. TIB Director Sheikh Manzur-e-Alam also spoke at the ceremony.

He wanted to be 'Boss'

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Over the last two years, they were involved in at least 24 muggings, said Sheikh Alamin, PBI sub-inspector. He, however, could not say how much money they had taken.

The PBI arrested Rana and one of his cohorts Nazmul Hossain, 24, and six others on November 19 at Victoria Park in the capital and recovered four motorcycles, three walkie-talkies, a pair of handcuffs, and two fake pistols.

Rana and Nazmul made confessional statements before a court the next day.

Arrestee Delwar Hossain, 50, is a former secretary of Sramik League Bangshal unit, while Bulbul Ahmed, 32, and Asaduzzaman, 35, are Sramik League activists. The others in jail are Sohag Khandaker, 31, Javed Ahamed, 37, and Harun alias Hira, 32, according to investigators.

The PBI was able to track down the gang after victim Mustafizur Rahman on October 25 filed a case with Tejgaon Industrial Police Station.

According to his complaint, Rana and his gang members identified themselves as detectives and picked up Mustafiz and his friend from a bus labeling them yaba dealers in Norda area of Dhaka.

Mustafiz had Tk 13 lakh on him then, said PBI officials.

The gang let the friend go and took

Mustafiz to an isolated place in Tejgaon and tried to take his money. But Mustafiz was not to give it up without a fight. He cried for help and locals came rushing in to his rescue.

They even managed to capture one of the gang members.

Gleaning information from the gang member, a PBI team arrested the rest, including gang boss Rana.

PBI sub-inspector Alamin, also the investigation officer of the case, said Rana's sources were in business zones of the capital -- Tantibazar, Shakhariabazar, Islampur and Bangshal.

At least 150 employees of shops and businesses worked for the gang, the PBI official said.

The sources tipped the gang off about people carrying big amount of cash or gold, said Alamin.

"For each successful robbery, the sources got 40 percent of the booty."

After Rana took over, the gang started sharing resources, including arms, and coordinated their robbery attempts, he said.

"Some [gang members] are also connected to Sramik League, Jubo League activities," he said.

Alamin further said they learnt about another key person in the gang and they were looking for him.

The Daily Star could not talk to the arrestees since they are in jail. This correspondent went to Rana's home to talk to his family members but nobody was home.

US measure for holding

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definitive statement about the brutal murder of an American resident -- Mr Khashoggi -- who has three American citizen children," Graham said in a statement accompanying Wednesday's resolution.

The resolution, which also calls for a peace deal to end Saudi's military bombing operation, is non-binding. However, if it is passed it would underscore the difference between many members of the US foreign policy establishment and Donald Trump. It would also force Trump to decide whether or not to veto the measure.

Trump has repeatedly sought to defend the crown prince, denying reports that the CIA had concluded he was behind October's killing of the 59-year-old journalist at the Saudi consulate in Istanbul.

Last month, the president issued a statement saying the US would remain a steadfast ally of Saudi Arabia, even though the prince "may or may not" have been behind the killing that triggered global outrage.

"I'm not going to tell a country...that has helped me keep oil prices down...I'm not going to destroy our economy by being foolish with Saudi Arabia," said Trump.

After emerging from a private briefing with CIA Director Gina Haspel, Graham of South Carolina, said a person would have to be "willfully blind not to come to the conclusion this was orchestrated and organised by people under the command of Mohammed bin Salman".

The Hill said the Senate is bracing for a chaotic floor fight over the Saudi-led campaign in Yemen and Khashoggi's murder.

Senators voted to kick a resolution to the full Senate last week that

would require Trump to withdraw troops in or "affecting" Yemen within 30 days unless they are fighting al Qaeda.

The resolution also calls on the Saudi government to negotiate with representatives of the Houthis movement and agree to a political resolution and end the country's humanitarian crisis. The bombing campaign -- supported by a number of Gulf nations as well as the US and UK -- has resulted in a massive humanitarian catastrophe.

Senator Bob Menendez, the top Democrat on the foreign relations committee, and who supports ending US support for Saudi Arabia's bombing of Yemen, said his views had only solidified after attending the briefing on Capitol Hill.

Senator Bob Corker, the Republican chairman of the committee, shook his head to say "no", when asked if he thought Ms Haspel's briefing had changed any minds.

"I have zero question in my mind that the Crown Prince MBS ordered the killing, monitored the killing, knew exactly what was happening," said Corker. "Planned it in advanced. If he was in front of a jury he would be convicted in 30 minutes. Guilty."

Saudi Arabia has denied the crown prince's involvement. Last month, the nation's public prosecutor charged 11 people over the murder, and seeking the death penalty for five of them. The Saudi public prosecutor has blamed a "rogue" operation aimed at bringing Khashoggi back to the Riyadh for the killing. Investigations are continuing into another 10.

The US Treasury Department has sanctioned 17 Saudis who it says "targeted" Khashoggi.