

AL, BNP men sued over arson

Firefighters say only a few posters were burnt near a campaign office of N'ganj-5 JP nominee Salim Osman

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Narayanganj

Some 90 people, including Awami League and BNP men, were accused in a case on Monday over "setting fire to an election camp" of Narayanganj-5 grand alliance candidate Salim Osman.

However, firefighters said only a few posters were burnt in the incident and locals doused the flames before they arrived at the scene.

Kamrul Islam, officer-in-charge of Narayanganj Model Police Station, said local resident Enamul Haque Riaz filed the case against 74 named and some 10 to 15 unnamed people in connection with the incident.

Most of the accused are the leaders and activists of Narayanganj BNP and the AL. District Gonoform President Delwar Hossain Chunnu, Bandar Thana AL organising secretaries Humayun Kabir Alin and Anwar Hossain, Jubo League leaders Motalib and Himel Khan, Bandar Thana

Chhatra League Senior Vice President Mia Babu, Kadamrasul Municipality Jubo League Vice President Masum and district Bangabandhu Foundation Information Secretary Rabbi were named in the case.

Many of the accused were seen forming a human shield around Narayanganj City Corporation Mayor Selina Hayat Ivy during an attack on her in the city's Chashara area on January 16.

"We have been made accused in the case as we are supporters of the mayor," said accused Himel.

Meanwhile, police arrested Gonoform leader Chunnu from his city house on Monday night, just around an hour after the case was filed.

Talking to The Daily Star, Narayanganj Fire Service Deputy Assistant Director Abdullah Al Arefin said only some posters near Selim Osman's election camp were burnt in the fire which was doused by locals before they arrived at the scene.

CHATTOGRAM-3 BNP candidate 'barred from campaigning'

MOSTAFA YOUSUF, back from Sandwip

Mostafa Kamal Pasha, the BNP candidate for Chattogram-3 (Sandwip), has not been able to campaign, allegedly due to police surveillance that has been deterring party men from visiting him.

Speaking to The Daily Star, he said, "No party activists, workers or well-wishers dare approach my home."

Pasha's home was found almost deserted when this correspondent visited the place on Monday.

The BNP candidate has been unable to campaign after his first rally, held adjacent to Sandwip Police Station, came under attack on December 13.

"Policemen and the Awami League candidate have created this situation for which I am confined at home

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Top leaders of Jatiya Oikyafront, led by Dr Kamal Hossain, walk out of a meeting with the chief election commissioner in protest of the latter's "discourteous behaviour". The photo was taken at Nirbachan Bhaban yesterday.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

Oikyafront walks out of CEC meet

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Even Election Commissioner Mahbub Talukdar twice said there was no level playing field. But the CEC never agreed on this and the discord between the two hogged the headlines as they publicly spoke against each other over the issue.

According to media reports, motorcades and campaigns of at least 45 candidates of Oikyafront and the BNP-led 20-party alliance have been attacked allegedly by AL men.

And over 1,050 people, mostly BNP men, have been injured in the electoral violence since campaigning began on December 10.

The BNP also alleges that its leaders and activists are being harassed and arrested throughout the country even while campaigning. The party has lodged a few dozen complaints with the EC.

FROM INSIDE THE MEETING
Yesterday's meeting began around noon.

Dr Kamal Hossain, who was leading the 10-member delegation, started briefing the CEC and other commis-

sioners at the beginning of the meeting.

He alleged that the opposition leaders and activists were being arrested, attacked and even their posters were being torn in different parts of the country, several meeting sources told The Daily Star.

The eminent jurist also said the opposition candidates came under attack by ruling party men and the role of police was questionable.

"You are the chief election commis-

sioner. Right now you are more powerful than the prime minister with regard to election," he said, according to multiple sources.

"I am begging you that please take steps to hold a free and fair election. Save the country and uphold democracy.

"I had the privilege to do politics with Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. I never saw such an election atmosphere in my life."

He also said some police officials were acting like "beasts".

The CEC told Dr Kamal, "You cannot label a force in such a way. Whatever police are doing are within

the legal framework. Who do you think you are?"

Other commissioners tried to calm him down.

Dr Kamal then said, "You are the judge. You are not a witness. You should investigate the incidents and take action. You should not take any side."

"If you don't take any action within a day or two, I may get killed. But don't you attend my namaz-e-janaza."

DEMANDS, COMPLAINTS

After this altercation, Oikyafront leaders demanded withdrawal of four police officials -- officers-in-charge of Muradnagar and Nangalkot police stations and Detective Branch of Dhaka and a sub-inspector of Keraniganj Police Station.

BNP leaders Mirza Fakhrul, Abdul Moyeen Khan and Mirza Abbas, Gonoform leaders Mostafa Mohsin Montu and Subrata Chowdhury shared their experiences.

They sought EC's intervention in ensuring a free and fair election and restraining the police from terrorising and intimidating the opposition can-

didates"

The leaders cited 88 cases of attacks on candidates by the AL "where no protection was provided by the police", the meeting sources said.

Gonoform leader Mostafa Mohsin Montu, a candidate of Jatiya Oikyafront for the December 30 polls, talked about police excesses and showed the CEC injury marks in his hands.

BNP leader Mirza Abbas said he has never gone to anyone with complaints before. "But now I came here with complaints. Please take some steps."

Abdul Moyeen Khan said, "I never say anything to anyone. I want to campaign as a gentleman. My men were beaten up before my eyes. I could not save them at this age."

Hearing all this, the CEC said, "The allegations against police are baseless. If there is any such incident, show me."

Then a member of the delegation said, "Let's go to any constituency and see for yourself."

The CEC then responded, "I am rejecting your allegations."

Dr Kamal right away stood up and

said, "I will not stay here anymore and will never come to you."

The delegation then left the conference room.

Three held

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elite force raided United Corporation around 2:00am yesterday and arrested Ali Haider.

Gleaning information from Haider, the Rab raided Amena Enterprise and detained the two others.

The Rab said they had hired the office at City Centre in Motijheel two months back. The three worked to help a political party under the guise of running a business for importing lubricants, it added.

The Rab DG said they would continue investigating the incident.

According to Rab, detaining the three was part of its attempt to foil an evil design to deteriorate law and order and titling the election in favour of a certain quarter.

The three were paraded before the media.



Abdul Awal, a first-time voter, talks to The Daily Star at a former enclave in Lalmonirhat's Bhitorkuti area on Monday. Local voters have been eagerly waiting to exercise their franchise on December 30.

PHOTO: STAR

A new kind of first-time voters

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territory through the implementation of Land Boundary Agreement (LBA) in 2015.

"It feels like a dream that my vote will be counted for selecting Bangladesh's government," said Awal, a resident of Bhitorkuti under Kulaghat union.

Awal recalled how he used to visit the polling centres to witness the festivity centring elections during his childhood. But he never disclosed his identity during those times. "This time I will walk to the centre proudly and be a part of the event."

Of the 59 former enclaves, which were Indian territory only a few years ago, two are in Kulaghat, two in Gotamari union, and the rest are in Jongra, Kuchlibari, Burimari, Srirampur, Jagatbari, and Bawra unions of Patgram upazila.

Of the 10,317 people living in these former enclaves, 6,500 have been registered as voters, according to the district election office.

During a visit to Kulaghat on Monday, this correspondent found most areas covered with posters of the Awami League. Posters of Jatiya Oikyafront were seen at a few places.

Jatiya Party Co-chairman GM

Quader is contesting from the Awami League-led 14-party grand alliance against Lalmonirhat BNP President Asadul Habib Dulu in Lalmonirhat-3, which includes Kulaghat union.

Both the candidates were trying to drum up support but they did not show up when the flood hit the area hard in 2014, said some of the locals.

"During the floods, no-one offered a single piece of bread but now they are coming to us seeking votes," said Ayub Ali, a resident of Banshpochai, Kulaghat.

Ayub, however, showed this correspondent the smart card, vulnerable group feeding (VGF) card, and fair price card that he received following the dissolution of the enclaves.

Pointing at the smart card, he said, "Look, the card says I am a Bangladeshi. I will cast my ballot using this card."

The 50-year-old said his relatives living in the mainland once used to call his family "enclave people" but now no-one dares to do so.

Following the implementation of the LBA on July 31, 2015, the government set up houses, gave electricity connections, distributed VGF cards, VGD (Vulnerable Group Development) cards, placed solar panels, con-

structed roads, tube-wells, toilets, established schools and clinics in some of the remote areas.

Many residents were unhappy as they did not have a candidate contesting with the electoral symbol "boat", the Awami League's symbol.

Shahrukh Khan, 55, said she was "finally freed from the curse of the enclaves" because of the initiative by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina.

Alluding to GM Quader, she said, "Nevertheless, I will vote for her [Hasina's] candidate, I will pick plough [election symbol of Jatiya Party]," said the resident of Bhitorkuti in Kulaghat.

Asadul Habib Dulu, president of Lalmonirhat BNP and Oikyafront nominee, pledged employment opportunities. Dulu said, "We will focus on education of the residents, including taking responsibility of meritorious but poor students."

In Lalmonirhat-1, Lalmonirhat Awami League President Motahar Hossain is running. The constituency has 55 former enclaves.

If elected, development of infrastructures would continue in the areas, said Motahar. The Awami League would set up schools, colleges, and create employment opportunities, he added.

sabotage and subversive activities. Local BNP leaders claimed those were false cases.

Former BNP state minister for home Lutfuzzaman Babar's son Labib Zaman was also accused in three such cases.

Incumbent Rebecca Momin, wife of Awami League's former food minister Abdul Momin; and Tahmina Zaman, wife of Babar, are running in the constituency that had elected their husbands. The other female candidate Joly Talukder of Communist Party of Bangladesh (CPB) is a well-known workers' leader.

Voters claimed that they were expecting a tough fight in the haor-based constituency, consisting of Mohanganj, Madan, and Khalajuri upazilas, that have been lagging behind in terms of development.

In the constituency about 30km away from Netrakona town, this correspondent saw vigorous electioneering by the ruling party men and hardly any campaign activity of the BNP.

The BNP's Mohanganj upazila office on Monday was found closed. Locals said the office had been closed for several days.

"There are problems," was all that Sujan Mia, a tea seller nearby, agreed to

say.

Some 100 metres away, the Awami League office was fully functional. SMA Ferdous, organising secretary of Mohanganj upazila AL, said their campaign was going well.

"Every day, Rebecca Momin is visiting people in different areas and asking for votes. Besides, our area-based camps are also working."

Another 23 kilometres away at Babar's house in Madan upazila, a few posters and banners of Tahmina Zaman were seen.

A marquee was set up and around 100 BNP leaders and activists were seen seated.

The BNP men said their electioneering has been on hold for the last seven days amid police harassment; they could only campaign in three unions.

"We are on the run. Almost all our leaders are accused and police are carrying out raids regularly," said Mustafizur Rahman Titu, a BNP leader. Around 65 of their activists have been arrested since campaigning began, he added.

Nurul Alam, president of Madan upazila BNP, claimed they were on a road-show on December 15 when police suddenly prevented their rally and attacked them in Kaitail union.

"But three cases were filed against us

the next day. Our leader's son Labib, who came from Dhaka only to take part in the campaign for his mother, was made the prime accused," said Alam.

According to the case statement, police fired 61 shots and one gas canister on that day.

Alam said police and DB raided Babar's house on the night of December 16. "Is this a level-playing field?"

Of the 15 cases, nine were filed with Madan Police Station. The Daily Star obtained copies of the nine. Noteworthy, the cases filed on December 18, 22, and 23 all have the same text but the names, places, times and dates have been changed.

Refuting allegations, Ramil Haque, officer-in-charge of Madan Police Station, said the cases were filed on valid grounds.

BNP men said they are confident of victory in the constituency, if a fair election is held. AL men said Rebecca's honesty and promises of development were their strengths.

The AL and BNP have fought hard for this seat since 1991. Babar won the race in 1991, while Momin won the next in 1996. Babar again won in 2001, while Momin's wife Rebecca won the polls in 2008. In 2014, Rebecca won uncontested.