



Kuldeep Nayar honoured with Padma Bhushan

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

Kuldeep Nayar, a doyen of Indian journalism and a fearless champion of media freedom, has been posthumously honoured with the Indian government's third highest civilian honour -- the Padma Bhushan.

The honour is a fitting tribute to Nayar, a regular columnist for The Daily Star for long, whose perceptive analysis and comments on a range of issues earned him respect amongst readers, especially after he was imprisoned during the Emergency imposed by the then government of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in 1976-77.

The honour was announced by the Indian government on Friday night, on the eve of India's Republic Day. Nayar, also known for his

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Big relief by June

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Congestions, especially during Eid holidays and weekends, often make travellers' life hell on this highway.

But things are likely to be different during the coming Eid-ul-Fitr holiday as three four-lane bridges parallel to the existing ones and an overpass would be opened to traffic by June, officials say.

All of them are being built by Japanese firms and they are spending Tk 1,000 crore less than what was estimated.

The construction of the new Kanchpur bridge on the Shitalakkhya is over and Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina might open it early next month, officials add.

The work of the new Meghna bridge is expected to be completed by April and the new Gumti bridge by June. The overpass on the east end of Kanchpur bridge is likely to be finished by March.

"We expect to open all three bridges before the Eid. We hope people will enjoy a pleasant trip to their near and dear ones," said Abu Saleh Md Nuruzzaman, project director of the three bridges.

When all major infrastructure projects are facing delays and cost escalations, the bridges are expected to be completed ahead of time and costing less than what was thought to be Tk 8,487 crore in the development project proforma (DPP), officials said.

Under the project, the existing

Kanchpur, Meghna and Gumti bridges would also be refurbished, they added.

The four-lane Dhaka-Chattogram highway, touted as the economic lifeline of the country, was formally opened in July 2016 amid high hopes that it would boost trade and make road communications smoother between the capital and the port city.

But the reality is quite the opposite.

People heading for Chattogram face gridlocks near Kanchpur bridge, as the highway abruptly narrows down to four-lane road from eight right before the bridge. The 7.2km road from Jatrabari to Kanchpur is eight-lane.

Metres down from the bridge, there is a junction where traffic from Sylhet joins the highway to head for the capital and some vehicles from Chattogram take a right turn towards Sylhet, halting traffic moving towards the port city.

Just 20km ahead, traffic stops at the toll plaza for single-carriageway Meghna and Gumti bridges. Standstill traffic at the bridges is all too common.

The work on around 400-metre new Kanchpur bridge was completed in December at a cost of Tk 950 crore, Nuruzzaman said.

After its inauguration, they would start restoration work on the old bridge. The new bridge is two metres wider than the old one, he added.

On Tuesday, this correspondent found the approach roads to the new Kanchpur bridge was kept blocked

while work on the overpass was going on in full swing.

Several police personnel were guarding the bridges and an official involved in the construction said they handed over the bridge to the authorities on January 4.

"Now, we are just looking after the bridge before the prime minister inaugurates it."

About the overpass at the intersection near the bridge, Nuruzzaman said the girders, built off site, would be laid on the pillars soon. "We are hopeful of completing the work by March."

Once completed, traffic on Dhaka-Chattogram highway would use the overpass, he said.

He further said 84 percent work on the 930-metre Meghna bridge was done.

This correspondent found workers busy with work on the surface of the Meghna bridge. Besides, the work on the approach roads was also continuing.

Asphalt on about 700 metres has already been laid, said Nuruzzaman.

About 81 percent of the work on the new 1,410-metre Gumti bridge was done, he said.

The project director mentioned that the refurbishment of old Kanchpur bridge is expected to be completed before June and that of the other two may take some more time.

"However, the refurbishment of the other two bridges would not be any problem as two new four-lane bridges will be capable of taking pressure of

the traffic."

RARE INSTANCE

As per the contract, the Japanese firms started work in January 2016 but progress was halted for around four months after the Holey Artisan attack in July 2016.

The four contractors are Obayshi Corporation, Shimizu Corporation, JFE Engineer Corporation, and IHI Infra Systems Company Ltd.

The deadline was December 2019 and all work would be complete, including restoration of the old bridges, within the deadline, said Nuruzzaman.

After the feasibility study, the cost was estimated at Tk 8,487 crore, of which Japan International Cooperation Agency (Jica) was supposed to provide Tk 6,430 crore.

"The cost of the project will be Tk 1,000 crore less than what was estimated," he added.

Prof Moazzem Hossain, a former director at the Accident Research Institute (ARI) of Buet, said building bridges maintaining deadline and spending less than what was estimated were definitely a rare example. "This is very positive."

Talking to The Daily Star, he said the Japanese firms involved in the project are good at their work. "If good contractors are chosen, then you can get the job done on time because 95 percent of the work depends on the contractors."

Two sisters hurt as chemical hurled at them

Hunt on for culprits

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Moultribazar

Two sisters suffered burns as unidentified criminals threw flammable chemicals at them while they were asleep at their home in Habiganj's Madhabpur upazila early Friday.

The victims are Habiba Akhter, 20, and Ayesha Akhter, 10, daughters of Eklash Mia of Purba Baghasura village in Madhabpur.

Locals said Habiba, a college student, and her fifth-grader sister went to sleep after dinner on Thursday night. The assailants broke the window grill in the early hours of Friday, threw flammable substance on them and fled.

The victims were rushed to Sadar Adhunik Hospital from where they were shifted to Sylhet MAG Osmani Medical College Hospital.

Habiba's face and her sister's hand and other parts of the body were burned in the attack.

Residential Medical Officer of Adhunik Hospital Dr Saifur Rahman Sohag said he was not sure if the substance was acid, but it was flammable. He added that 80 percent of Habiba's face was burned.

Her uncle Kader Mia said she was married to Mominul Mia, 26, son of Saheb Ali of Sayek village, Nasiragar, Brahmanbaria over a year ago. Since she chose to live with her parents, the marriage ended in divorce four months ago, he said, adding, Mominul might have done it out of anger.

Chandan Kumar Chakraborty, officer-in-charge of Madhabpur Police Station, said they had visited the spot and were trying to arrest the criminals.

PM invites

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the Gono Bhaban 75 political parties and alliances with whom she had sat for dialogue before the parliamentary election.

The Gonoforum, a component of the Oikyafront, in an impromptu reaction said there was no question of accepting the invitation as the PM had not set any agenda for the programme.

"There is no agenda in the invitation letter. We do not want to attend the programme for tea only and exchange greetings after a farcical national election [on December 30], Gonoforum Executive President Subrata Chowdhury said.

However, Oikyafront spokesperson Mirza Fakhru Islam Alamgir told The Daily Star that he was yet to receive any invitation.

"We will take a decision regarding the PM's invitation following a meeting of top Oikyafront leaders," he added.

PM'S CALL MERE RHETORIC: FAKHRUL

Terming Hasina's call for national unity mere political rhetoric, BNP Secretary General Mirza Fakhru Islam Alamgir yesterday urged the nation to forge unity and demanded a fresh election under a caretaker government.

He said the PM's address to the nation was a manifestation of her "guilty conscience", as she tried to justify her party's victory and the Oikyafront's defeat in the national polls.

"I think she delivered such a speech out of a sense of guilt. It seems to me [that] she perhaps realised what they did [in the election] was not right," Fakhru told reporters at the BNP's Nayapalton central office in Dhaka.

About the PM's call for a national unity, Fakhru said there was no reason for people to accept it as they had seen the PM fail to live up to the promises she had made during talks with the Oikyafront before the election.

"She assured us that no new arrests would be made, no fresh case would be filed and a level-playing field would be ensured. But she couldn't live up to any of her promises. So, now her call for the national unity is nothing but rhetoric."

In a televised address to the nation on Friday evening, Hasina stressed the need for national unity to take the country forward and urged the elected members of parliament from the opposition to take oath and join parliament.

The PM addressed the nation following the formation of her new government on January 7, after securing a landslide victory in the December 30 election.

Taking to reporters, Fakhru said the election had badly affected the nation as people had lost their confidence in the election process, the Election Commission and the state.

The BNP leader said they were demanding a re-election under a neutral government, scraping the December-30 polls as people did not endorse it.

"We want a fresh election to be held so that people can give their verdict through it."

He said their party's elected MPs would neither go to parliament nor take oath as they had already rejected the election results.

4 of a family die as boat capsizes in Buriganga

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The fire service yesterday recovered bodies of four members of a family who went missing after a boat capsized in the Buriganga on Friday night.

The dead were Motiur Rahman, 55, his wife Rozina Begum, 42, and his sister-in-law Momtaz Begum, 50, and Abid, five-year-old son of the couple.

Debashish Bardhan, deputy director of Fire Service and Civil Defence in Dhaka, told The Daily Star last night that they recovered three bodies early yesterday and body of the child was found in the evening near Lalkuti Ghat.

Shah Jaman, officer-in-charge of South Keraniganj Police Station, said the boat carrying the four sank in the river after being hit by a launch, MV-Manik, around 10:30pm on Friday.

'Drug dealer' killed in 'gunfight'

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Kushtia

An alleged drug peddler was killed in a "gunfight" with police in Kushtia town early yesterday.

The dead was identified as Hobibor Rahman alias Hobi alias Hubba, 50.

Hobi was a close aide of the district's two top drug dealers, Hamidul and Rashidul, who were also killed in separate "gunfights", claimed Nasir Uddin, officer-in-charge of Kushtia Model Police Station.

Acting on a tip-off, police raided the district's Milpara area around 3:30am to arrest a group of drug dealers. Sensing police presence, the criminals opened fire on the law enforcers, forcing them to retaliate, the OC claimed.

At one stage of the gunfight,

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Schoolgirl

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Hasan, 22, a resident of the area and a guard of the central jail in Dhaka's Keraniganj and his two accomplices -- Siam, 20, and Nizamuddin, 22.

The accused were yet to be arrested, said Md Abdul Haque, officer-in-charge of Rupganj Police Station.

He added that they were in the process of informing the central jail authorities about the incident.

Elsewhere, a 25-year woman was allegedly raped by her neighbour Chandu, 35, at Ghagra Dhakkhin Para village in Jhenaigati upazila of Sherpur on Friday noon.

According to the victim, Chandu had been harassing her for some time and had often made indecent advances towards her, which she rebuffed.

On Friday, when the victim's husband was not home, Chandu got inside the house and raped her. He then fled from the scene, said the case statement filed by the victim.

Police were trying to arrest the accused, said Md Abdul Quader, inspector (investigation) of Jhenaigati.



Construction materials left on a patch of the footpath on Tejgaon Truck Stand road have made it impossible to walk on. Locals said the materials have been there for nearly a month. The picture was taken yesterday.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

High hazard yet little safety

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"Maybe Hashem could have been saved had it not been that late."

Like them, many workers suffered in the past as the tannery hub has no medical facilities.

Accidents are common at the estate where workers have to handle hazardous chemicals, often with little to no safety gear. If injured, they have to be taken to hospitals outside the estate and any delay on the way can be fatal.

To save the capital's lifeline -- the Buriganga -- majority of the tanneries have been relocated to the estate in Savar from Hazaribagh.

In the last couple of years, most of the 155 tanneries were shifted to the estate on 200 acres of land in Horindhara near the Dhaleshwari river.

As of December 31, 119 factories were in operation with nearly 20,000 workers, said tannery owners.

However, the project, under which the factories were moved, did not include any hospital for the workers.

"Our work is extremely risky. Six months ago, two workers died after they fell into a chemical tank," said another worker, wishing not to be named. "They should have treated right away. Unfortunately, that did not happen," he said.

During a visit to different factories at the estate recently, this correspondent saw workers immersing rawhides in salt solutions and then soaking them in different chemicals.

Some of the labourers were barefooted and without gloves.

And although they work in such risky conditions, they are not properly compensated for injuries at work.

"The owners gave Tk 100,000 to Hashem's family and each of us got only Tk 25,000," said Sumon, one of the four injured in the October 3 incident.

"We did not get any money after that," said the worker, who had to stay at the DMCH for several days before being released.

Babul Hossain lost his right wrist in

an accident at another factory in March 2017. He said he had to spend Tk 50,000 for treatment.

"At that time, my owner had promised to give me some money. But now, he does not even pick up any calls," he said.

This correspondent could not contact the factory owners for comments.

According to the labour law, if any worker becomes disabled due to injuries at work, he is entitled to Tk 250,000 in compensation from the employer.

According to media reports, six workers died and 30 suffered injuries in accidents at the tannery estate since the beginning of 2017, when the authorities started shifting the factories there.

There is no government data on this. Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishments, the designated government body, said they don't have "enough manpower" to keep records.

"There are many problems in the tanneries... It is difficult for us to monitor the estate with limited manpower. We have plans to go for recruitments soon," said Zakir Hossain, deputy inspector general at the DIFE.

Contacted, Mohiuddin Mahin, president of the Bangladesh Finished Leather, Leather & Footwear Exporters Association (BFLFEA), refused to provide any data on the matter. He asked this correspondent to approach the Tannery Workers' Union instead.

The union's president, Abul Kalam Azad, said, "We have representatives in only 30 factories. Sometimes we cannot keep track of all accidents."

According to a recent study by Bangladesh Occupational Safety, Health and Environment Foundation (Oshe Bangladesh), around 1.29 lakh workers are employed at the leather industry.

Most of the workers at the estate work on a daily basis, said Shakhawat Ullah, general secretary of the tanners' association.

Besides, a large number of workers

have to travel from different areas, as the new estate has no housing facilities for them.

While inaugurating the estate on November 6 last year, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina urged the owners and authorities concerned to arrange housing facilities for tannery workers without any delay.

A memorandum of understanding (MoU) between the Tannery Workers Union and Bangladesh Tanners' Association stresses on creating housing and medical facilities and ensuring better wages, including provident fund, for the workers. BFLFEA is a signatory of the MoU.

At present, a worker is entitled to a minimum of Tk 12,381 a month while a skilled worker can draw up to Tk 23,000, as per the MoU renewed in May last year.

Besides, a project official said the authorities were yet to keep fire extinguishers at the factories. A fire station is supposed to be set up inside the area before this June, when the project to relocate the tanneries would end.

Talking to The Daily Star, several tannery owners said Bangladesh Small and Cottage Industries Corporation would build necessary facilities for the workers soon.

Contacted, Khandaker Aminuzzaman, general manager (planning) of the BSCIC, said they had already sought Tk 1,500 crore from the government to build hospitals, schools and other facilities at the estate.

According to the Oshe's study, some 93 percent workers did not get any training. 61 percent of them frequently suffer from 20 kinds of health problems, including skin burns, body pain and itching, allergy, fever, ulcer, respiratory problems, blurred vision and headaches.

Oshe conducted the study on 105 workers, each having at least eight years' of work experience in the sector.

Sarmin Sultana, lead researcher of