

No trace of Akash yet

Police deny he is in their custody

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Thakurgaon

Family members of Akash, who has allegedly been missing since early Saturday, yesterday said they were still clueless about the whereabouts of him. Anju Parvin, wife of Akash, claimed at a press conference on Sunday that her husband was arrested on Thursday and picked up away from Thakurgaon Police Station on early Saturday. She told the press conference that Akash, 33, and his brother-in-law Hamidur Rahman, 25, went to Thakurgaon town to appear before a court for the hearing of a drugs case on Thursday.

The two were arrested from different location of the city within hours after the hearing, she said, adding that Akash's younger brother Jahedul Islam visited them at the police station on Friday. Meanwhile, Akash's nine-year-old son Atik told The Daily Star that his uncle Hamidur, informed him that some policemen took his father away by folding eyes with black clothes from the custody.

Atik went to the police station with his sister Alo to meet their father on Saturday.

Anju alleged that three policemen of Thakurgaon Police Station -- SI Anisur Rahman, SI Bhushan Chandra Barman and Constable Toslim -- had picked up the duo, however, Officer-in-Charge of the police station Ashikur Rahman strongly denied the claim.

The OC said he had a discussion with the three policemen and they rejected their involvement in the arrest of Akash.

The OC said, "Akash was accused in several cases filed with Pirganj and Haripur police stations and might be plotting a drama with some ill motives."

However, he admitted that Hamidur was arrested with 10 bottles of Phensedyl from Baliadangi area on Saturday morning, not on Thursday, what Anju claimed.

'Drug peddler' killed in 'shootout'

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Kushia

An alleged drug peddler was killed in what police said was a gunfight between two gangs of drug traders at Kazipur village in Gangni upazila of Meherpur early yesterday.

The deceased was identified as Shahjahan Ali Saju, 35, son of Bazlur Rahman of Kazipur village.

He was a listed drug trader in the district and an accused in around seven cases filed with Gangni and Mujibnagar police stations, said Harendranath Sarker, officer-in-charge of Gangni police.

On information that two groups of drug traders were engaged in a gun-fight at Kazipur, a bordering village of Meherpur, a team from Pirtola police outpost led by Sub-Inspector Ajoy Das raided the area around 3:30am, the OC said.

Sensing the presence of the law enforcers, the criminals escaped from the scene, he added.

The police searched the area and recovered Saju's body with a shutter gun, three bullets and two kgs of marijuana, the OC claimed.

Contacted, Saju's father denied talking about his son with this correspondent.

According to OC Harendranath, Saju was earlier arrested twice for his involvement in drug dealing.

The body was sent to Meherpur General Hospital for an autopsy.



Weapon-wielding men, who belong to a faction of Awami League, clash in Basail upazila in Tangail yesterday. The clash between a group loyal to the AL nominee and those supporting an independent candidate left at least 15 people injured.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

One killed as AL factions clash

FROM PAGE 16

the elder brother of AL rebel chairman contender Biplob Kumar Sarker.

Locals and police said followers of Zakir were campaigning in Bahagli Chairman Para village around 8:00pm. At that time, supporters of AL rebel candidate Biplob were also campaigning there.

As both the groups came face to face, they hurled provocative words at each other. At one stage, they were locked in a clash. Tapan, who was leading the campaign for Babul, was critically injured during the clash.

He was rushed to local upazila health complex where doctors declared him dead.

Contacted, Mesbahul Hasan Chowdhury, upazila health and family planning officer, said the victim was

brought dead to the hospital. The reason for his death could be known after an autopsy.

Harun-ur-Rashid, officer-in-charge of Kishoreganj Police Station, said the body was sent to Nilphamari 100-bed Hospital for an autopsy.

In Tangail, at least 15 people were injured in a clash between supporters of AL chairman nominee Motiar Rahman Gaus and party rebel chairman candidate Kazi Alid Islam for Basail Upazila Parishad yesterday.

Both the groups were locked in a fight in the upazila town when Motiar and Alid were going to submit their nomination papers to the returning officer around 11:00am, said SM Tuhin Ali, OC of Basail Police Station.

On information, police rushed to the spot and brought the situation under control. Additional policemen were deployed to avoid further untoward incident, he said.

The injured were admitted to Basail Upazila Health Complex and Tangail General Hospital.

Gaus and Alid blamed each other for the incident.

In another incident, at least seven people were wounded and 12 motor-bikes were vandalised when followers of AL chairman candidate for Mathbaria Upazila Parishad in Pirojpur allegedly attacked the office of party rebel candidate.

The AL rebel candidate, Riaz Uddin, alleged that supporters of party candidate Hossain Mosharrar Saku attacked his office in the upazila town around

1:30pm.

Contacted, Shawkat Anwar Islam, OC of Mathbaria Police Station, said on information, police rushed to the spot and brought the situation under control. Additional law enforcers had been deployed in the area to avoid further violence.

Mosharrar could not be reached for comments.

The upazila polls will be held in five phases.

The Election Commission has already announced the polls schedules of four phases. The first phase will be held on March 10, the second on March 18, the third on March 24 and the fourth on March 31.

Our correspondents in Nilphamari, Tangail and Pirojpur contributed to the report.

Suspended in name, 'blacklisted' for life

FROM PAGE 1

be issued and the workers should get seven days to respond to it. A probe committee with equal representation from workers and employers should be formed.

If the allegation is proven to be true, only then can the employer take disciplinary action.

In the case of AL-Ghousia, however, the workers did not receive any such letter, not even one informing them of the suspension order.

The employer just put up the list of workers saying they were temporarily suspended. Furthermore, the law also requires the employer to give suspension allowance, but this too might have been overlooked.

Workers say they have not received a severance allowance or their due salaries.

On a visit to AL-Ghousia Textiles on February 12, this correspondent saw the list pasted on the wall below the factory's nameplate.

Md Azmal Hossain, the factory's human resource manager, said the list was placed there to keep the workers from entering. When asked if such a practice was legal and whether the allegations against the workers were proven, he refused to comment.

The list was later taken down.

The moves though are nothing new. Since December 2016, when garment workers first took to the streets to demand a new wage board with a minimum monthly pay of Tk 16,000, the pattern has repeated itself.

Facing severe criticism by rights groups at home and abroad, Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association held a press conference in February 2017 to caution factory owners against hanging such lists with names and photos and termed the practice illegal.

This time about 400 workers lost their jobs in December and January in Ashulia's eight garment units in which employees were active in forming unions, said Babul Akter, president of Bangladesh Garment and Industrial Workers' Federation.

In most cases, a list of workers who were suspended or terminated was hung outside the units, said Laboni.

IndustryALL Bangladesh Council, a national coordinating body of IndustryALL Global Union, which works to ensure better working environment and trade union rights, says more than 11,600 garment workers lost their jobs from over 100 factories following the recent wave of protests.

Commerce Minister Tipu Munshi

did not respond despite repeated calls and text messages over the last two weeks.

WORKERS' LEGAL WOES CONTINUE

Following announcement of the new wage board with Tk 8,000 as minimum pay, which is half of the amount initially pressed for, workers discovered that they were relegated to lower grades just to match their earlier wages.

As they stopped working on January 11 in protest, AL-Ghousia management said they would resolve the matter in two days.

However, on January 15, management was still silent.

Workers at AL-Ghousia Textiles again stopped working and communicated their concerns to their supervisors. After the workers returned from their lunch break, they found the factory gates closed.

A notice hung outside the gate, declaring an indefinite shutdown.

Later, workers were baffled to see cases filed against them for alleged looting, violence and arrests, said workers who gathered at the federation office in the middle of February to discuss legal remedies.

The factory resumed operations four days after being shut down.

One of three arrestees over the cases was Abu Bakar*, who said he was targeted for having close ties with union leaders. The federation helped him get release on bail from the High Court for four weeks, starting February 4.

"In the meantime, police forces are informed and asked not to arrest or harass them in any manner," the court said in its release order.

Babul, president of the garments federation, said that their four-week bail period expired on Sunday.

They got bail from the lower court, which will remain effective until police submit a charge sheet.

At the federation's office, the suspended or terminated workers seem to be more concerned about getting jobs in future.

IndustryALL says, "The biometric data linked to their employment records are used to identify workers and deny employment based on their involvement in trade union activities and protests."

Laboni said the federation had come across incidents in Ashulia that indicate that apart from displaying workers' lists publicly, the companies share data within the network of apparel manufacturers.

*Names have been changed to protect privacy of the individuals.

Let Mainul go to Bangkok for checkup

HC asks govt

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The High Court yesterday directed the government to allow Barrister Mainul Hosein, an adviser to a former caretaker government, to go to Bangkok for checkup.

It also issued a rule asking the government to explain in four weeks why barring Mainul at the Dhaka airport on February 23 from leaving for Bangkok should not be declared illegal.

The HC bench of Justice Tariq ul Hakim and Justice Md Shohrowardi came up with the order and rule following a writ petition filed by Mainul Hosein.

In the petition, he sought court order for allowing him to go to Bangkok on March 9, saying he would return following the checkup.

Bangabandhu

FROM PAGE 1

operated themselves as per Bangabandhu's directives.

People from all walks of life came together at the residence of the Awami League chief, on Dhanmondi Road-32, which had by then become the centre of political influence.

The instructions given by the AL on a regular basis were voiced by Tajuddin Ahmed, the party's general secretary. There was no way out of this crisis for the Pakistan government but accepting Bangladesh as an independent country.

On March 5, 1971, Dhaka city was further aggravated when, on the fifth day of hartal, curfew was imposed in Rangpur. Elsewhere, security forces and army resorted to gunfire in Chattogram (then Chittagong), Rajshahi, Khulna and Tongi.

In Tongi, four labourers were killed and 25 were injured.

In the evening, the government announced that soldiers had returned to the barracks.

That night, Bangabandhu completely denied a news broadcasted on a foreign radio that "Sheikh Mujib is willing to share power with Bhutto", terming the news "ill motivated and Bhutto's imagination."

Air Marshal (Retd) Asghar Khan reached Dhaka from Karachi in the evening to hold a meeting with Bangabandhu. In Rawalpindi's Presidential Palace, Pakistan People's Party Chairman Zulfikar Ali Bhutto spoke to President Yahya for more than five hours.

After the meeting, People's Party spokesperson said that the reaction and response of the AL to the suspension of the National Committee meeting was utterly baseless and had no validity.

Even then, most West Pakistan political quarters stressed on fast transfer of power to the AL to prevent any political division. There was, however, no sign whatsoever from the regime of making that happen.

Instead, Yahya Khan was clear about what should be done -- provide necessary force, buy time for preparations, and then strike hard at the appropriate moment.

To make that happen, Gen Tikka Khan arrived in Dhaka on this very day, 48 years ago, to be sworn in as the Governor of East Pakistan.

On the other hand, Tofail Ahmed, a key leader of 11-Point Movement, urged Dhaka Betar to directly transmit the speech to be delivered by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman at the March 7 rally on the Race Course ground (now Suhrawardy Udyan).

What the speech would be, the countrymen knew not. But a vast majority of Bangalees expected Bangabandhu to declare independence.

[Sources: websites of Liberation War Museum, Bangladesh Genocide

The island of illegal arms

FROM PAGE 1

Iqbal Hossain, additional police superintendent of Cox's Bazar, told this newspaper they have information that this type of guns are made in hill areas of Moheshkhali and Chattogram.

"We are trying to specify the source."

THE FACTORIES

There are no permanent structures for arms manufacturing in Moheshkhali. Criminal gangs set up the makeshift factories with bamboo, grass and leaf inside dense forests, sources say.

They need coal, drill machines, screws and wood cutting tools for making guns. As they have no power connections and avoid generators because of noise, they usually cut the metals in workshops set up in the locality.

There are at least 30 such workshops on the island.

During a visit to a workshop in Upazila Bazar around 10:45am on February 18, one of these correspondents met a person who introduced himself as the chief technician.

"Give us any design and I will make it for you," he said.

The correspondent then asked him to cut two feet steel pipe and clean it clearly from inside. The technician

asked Tk 100 for the pipe and Tk 350 for the work.

Asked why the cost is so high, the man said this is the rate and he is working on a monthly salary. "The owner pays me Tk 20,000, Tk 15,000 for the second man and Tk 8,000 for another associate."

Sources said once the gang members get their items delivered from these workshops, they can make guns in their factories. But they are not able to manufacture bullets.

"The gangs buy bullets mostly from the insurgent groups of hill areas," one of the sources said.

Asked about durability of these guns, a senior police official working with an arms recovery group said, "If anyone uses 12 gauge shotgun bullets, these guns will last long. Besides, these firearms when not in use have to be wrapped in poly bags."

Very poor quality metals are used for making these guns and that's why they have a short lifespan, he said.

THE SIX GANGS

At least six organised gangs are now operating several gun factories on the island, law enforcement sources said.

The gang members are involved in extortion and land grabbing apart from the arms manufacturing, accord-

ing to three different sources having close links to them.

Ayub Ali, 45, of Huanok union is the chief of one group that is active in the area for the last 14 years. He took over after his uncle Junab Ali died five years back, said local sources.

Ayub is wanted in at least 10 cases, including for robbery and illegal arms. One of his sons and a son-in-law were killed in a "gunfight" with law enforcers several years back, the sources added.

Locals said the most notorious gang in Moheshkhali is Kodalia Bahini, active since 2001 with their main dens set up in Puichora. It has around 40 to 50 cadres and a person named Jinnat Ali is at the helm.

A top Chhatra Shibir cadre named Akter Hamid is the founder of this gang. He also worked as a security guard of war criminal and Jamaat leader Ghulam Azam.

Ten years back, when Hamid went into hiding, a large number of his gang members left and formed Ferdous Bahini.

The Daily Star could not collect any details of Ferdous Bahini.

Jalal Bahini, which is the third largest, is leading the arms factories in Gorakghata hill area, some three kilo-

metres from Moheshkhali main road.

Jalal Ahmed, 45, is the leader of the gang, which has 30 to 40 armed cadres. They can do anything for money.

Three siblings -- Enamul Karim, Akter Hamid and Md Shahjahan -- used to lead Enam Bahini that has 20 to 30 cadres, sources said.

Now Enam alone steers the group as Akter disappeared several years back and Shahjahan was arrested by police three months ago with 13 firearms.

The sixth gang is run by Mahmudullah and his nephew Arifullah along with a person named Salauddin. It also operates a local liquor factory.

Two sons of Moheshkhali upazila AL Vice President Md Forkan -- Didarul Alamgir -- were allegedly murdered by this group.

According to sources, these groups usually set up their makeshift factories in Kerontoli area of Huanok; Puichora and Adharghona near Kalagazirpara; Nonachori and Varitoli in the middle of east side hill areas of Boro and Chhoto Moheshkhali, and Kolmadia and Tunikata in Chhoto Moheshkhali.

Local sources say the summer and winter -- the seasons of salt and shrimp farming -- see a rise in the demand for these illegal firearms. Owners and

workers depend on guns for protecting salt fields and shrimp enclosures from dacoits.

THE BEGINNING

Locals and law enforcement sources said these gangs came into being mostly in 2001.

Local political leaders gave birth to these gangs to use them in grabbing sand fields, betel leaf orchards and forest land, and now a section of law enforcers are backing them, they added.

Ashek Ullah Rafique, lawmaker from Cox's Bazar-2, told The Daily Star that several gangs now active on the island were formed by different vested quarters for establishing supremacy.

Asked about involvement of political parties, the lawmaker said he became enemy of a number of people when he tried to take action.

Mohammad Hossain Ibrahim, a former chairman of Moheshkhali upazila, told The Daily Star that locals have long been held hostage to these gangs.

If the law enforcers and political parties want, it is possible to crush these groups within a week, he claimed.

Talking with this newspaper, Tareq Bin Osman Sharif, chairman of

Kalarmarchhora union, said he often needs to stay out of his home for continuous threat from the armed cadres as he is against them.

'SITUATION IMPROVED'

Rejecting the allegation that law enforcers backing the criminal groups, Ratan Kumar Dash Gupto, assistant superintendent of police of Moheshkhali circle, said they are taking action against all the gangs regularly.

"Due to continuous police drive and vigilance, the arms makers no longer have strongholds in dense forests like in the past," he added.

Contacted, Provash Chandra Dhor, officer-in-charge of Moheshkhali Police Station, told The Daily Star that the "situation improved" after the surrender of 43 robbers and pirates in Moheshkhali in October last year.

"We are conducting drives almost every day and the gang leaders either went into hiding or got arrested," he said.

Md Mehedi Hasan, company commander of Rab-7 Cox's Bazar camp, said they have kept a close watch on activities of these gangs but there are no permanent factory structures.

"We often conduct drives and have success and things are better now," he added.