

SUBARNACHAR GANG RAPE Another accused surrenders

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Noakhali

Another accused of the latest gang-rape in Noakhali's Subarnachar upazila surrendered before a court yesterday.

Ibrahim Khalil, officer-in-charge of Char Jabbar Police Station, said Ripon Hossain Helal, 23, an accused in a case filed over the rape of a mother of six, surrendered before the Cognisance Court of Judge Nobonita Guha.

Surrendering, Helal sought bail but the judge denied his plea and sent him to jail, the OC added.

Earlier, the prime accused in the case, Abul Kalam alias Bechu Majhi, 40, also surrendered before the same court. With the two, a total of seven accused in the case are now behind bars.

Meanwhile, a human chain was formed in Noakhali town yesterday demanding justice for the rape victim.

The 48-year-old woman was allegedly gang-raped on Sunday evening

SEE PAGE 17 COL 5

Helicopter attack kills 5 Rohingyas

Claim Myanmar villagers, lawmaker; 13 injured

REUTERS, Yangon

Villagers and a lawmaker in Myanmar's troubled Rakhine state said yesterday that a military helicopter attacked a group of Rohingya Muslims gathering bamboo, killing five and wounding 13, but a military spokesman declined to comment.

Major-General Tun Tun Nyi said the army would release "true news" about the alleged incident in time.

Myanmar's western Rakhine state came to global attention in 2017, when the army drove about 730,000 ethnic Rohingyas across the border into Bangladesh following attacks by Rohingya insurgents on police posts.

The United Nations has accused the army of cracking down on the Muslim minority with "genocidal intent".

More recently, the military has been fighting another armed group, the Arakan Army, which recruits mostly from the ethnic Rakhine Buddhist population.

The latest incident occurred in a valley in Buthidaung township, near a village that was home to Rohingya Muslim families.

"A military airstrike killed five people, including one of our villagers, at around 4:00 pm yesterday [Wednesday]," Zaw Kir

SEE PAGE 17 COL 6

Two killed

FROM PAGE 20

In Brahmanbaria's Sarail, AL activist Rukon Uddin, 25, died after being attacked with sharp weapons yesterday morning at Boroichhora village allegedly by the followers of local Upazila Chairman Rafiq Uddin, who won the recent polls as a rebel AL man.

Rukon was a supporter of defeated

AL chairman nominee Shafiqur Rahman. Locals alleged that he was attacked by Rafiq's supporters.

Zakir Hossain, sub-inspector of Anuail Police Outpost, told The Daily Star that Rukon was taken to Brahmanbaria Sadar Hospital where he was pronounced dead.

Police added that they were trying to arrest the suspects.

Reforms needed

FROM PAGE 1

26.38 percent year-on-year, according to Bangladesh Bank data.

At the same time, the practice of loan rescheduling and write-offs also increased, putting further stress on banks.

Last year, the central bank approved loan rescheduling of Tk 20,000 crore.

"Despite these wholesale approvals of loan rescheduling, default loans are increasing," the report said.

Last week, Finance Minister AHM Mustafa Kamal announced an easy loan rescheduling scheme for defaulters from May 1.

The defaulters will be able to reschedule their loans for 12 years by making 2 percent down payment of the total dues. At present, defaulters can reschedule their loans for at most 3 years by providing 10 to 15 percent down payment.

Speaking at the programme, Zahid Hussain, lead economist at the WB's Dhaka office, said frequent and wholesale rescheduling of bad loans is not sustainable for banks.

"We will end up killing the goose that lays the golden eggs. If the goose dies, then where will further rescheduling and fresh loans come from?" he noted.

In its report, the WB called for tightening regulation on loan rescheduling and stopping special rescheduling.

It also recommended ensuring true autonomy of the BB as the sole regulator of the financial sector and also full regulatory oversight on the state-owned banks.

The WB country director said another matter of worry for Bangladesh is that the domestic revenue mobilisation was well behind the target so far this year.

In the first six months of fiscal 2018-19, the revenue growth was only 6.4 percent higher than the corresponding period of the previous year -- the smallest in recent memory, the report mentioned.

About slow revenue growth, Zahid said, "How will development expenditure be increased for higher growth without increasing the revenue?"

The report also highlighted the pressure on the exchange rate, which can pose a macroeconomic risk.

"The foreign exchange reserves have been stagnant for a while, which was not the case before," Zahid said.

And yet, Bangladesh's growth outlook remains stable and strong, thanks to the stable macroeconomic front and export-oriented industry-led growth, according to the WB report.

Sound macroeconomic policies --

| COUNTRY | PROJECTED GROWTH |
|------------|------------------|
| Bangladesh | 7.3% |
| India | 7.5% |
| Bhutan | 7.6% |
| Rwanda | 7.8% |
| Ethiopia | 8.8% |

SOURCE: WORLD BANK

such as keeping the budget deficit below 5 percent of the GDP -- and resilient domestic demand have led to growth in manufacturing and construction industries on the supply side, it said.

On the demand side, growth is led by private consumption and exports.

After a modest performance last year, export earnings and remittances have bounced back, helping the rural economy to grow faster.

In addition, the country has substantially improved its electricity generation, and a bumper agricultural harvest has further stimulated growth, the WB pointed out.

However, sustaining the rapid economic growth will require significant reforms, including increasing the predictability of regulation.

Measures are needed to address several challenges, particularly in boosting private investment and diversifying exports.

The WB country director said reform initiatives are also required to continue Bangladesh's extraordinary trajectory of reducing extreme poverty, which fell from 31.5 percent in 2010 to 24.3 percent in 2017.

Despite strong progress, some of the drivers of poverty reduction appear to be weakening he mentioned.

"In this context, Bangladesh has shown remarkable generosity in sheltering and providing for the basic needs of nearly one million Rohingya in two of the poorest upazilas in Cox's Bazar," Saum said.

The WB report mentioned that Bangladesh will require huge investments in physical and human capital and also in innovation to become an upper middle-income country by 2031 and achieve high-income country status by 2041.

"Any reform effort requires a clear strategy, political champions supported by a capable reform team, and well-established consultation and coordination mechanisms to ensure a high level of coordination among all relevant stakeholders," it added.



A woman, her eyes brimming with tears, looks on at the devastation left by the fire in Khilgaon yesterday.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

Fire ravages 128 shops in Khilgaon

FROM PAGE 1

of the fire can be known after investigation," she said.

A fireman, Abu Musa, 35, who sustained minor injuries while trying to extinguish the fire, took primary treatment at Dhaka Medical College Hospital, the official added.

Abul Kalam Mollah, a clothes trader in the kitchen market, said the fire broke out in the market and spread to two other adjacent markets.

He said, "After being informed, I, along with my son Forhad, 22, quickly reached the spot and attempted to recover goods from my two shops, but I lost goods worth over Tk 20 lakh that I stored in the shops for sale ahead of Eid-ul-Fitr."

Hardware trader Mohammad Sanaullah said he rushed to his shop immediately after hearing about the fire. After reaching the spot, he found his goods burnt.

Mokshed Ali Sarder, general secretary of Khilgaon kitchen market traders union, said 92 out of 837 shops were gutted in their market and 36 more shops were destroyed in Pubali Shopping Centre and Khilgaon Uttara market.

When asked about the probable reason behind the fire, he suggested arson as there were some similar incidents in the capital in the last couple of days.

He demanded proper investigation by the police.

Shafiqul Islam, officer-in-charge of Shahjahanpur Police Station, said the fire seemed to have originated from a short circuit.

"We are yet to get any official complaint about any kind of criminal activity behind the fire, but we will investigate the incident," he said.

All the 128 shops were made of corrugated iron sheets.

The Gulshan-1 DNCC kitchen market fire happened just days after a fire in a Banani building claimed 26 lives.

A month before the Banani fire, a massive fire that ripped through several buildings in Old Dhaka's Chawkbazar killed 70 people.

Crazy pills spill via new routes

FROM PAGE 1

Sabrang, Jaliapara, Nazirapara, No-1 Sluice gate of the Naf river, Naitongpara and Jajimura. The one in Ukhia is Palong Khali.

Sometimes, the smugglers themselves cross the Naf river dodging the border guards and hand over consignments to yaba peddlers, who bring the pills further inside Teknaf and Ukhia.

Earlier, local fishermen used to smuggle in the pills through the river.

The change in plans came in the wake of a crackdown on drugs in recent months, which saw surrender and arrest of yaba godfathers and leaders, the sources said based on information gleaned from many of the arrestees.

Meanwhile, the law enforcers claim they have recently been able to stop yaba smuggling through 10 other border points in Teknaf and Ukhia. They said only those seven points were active and that they were working to seal them as well.

ABM Masud Hossain, superintendent of police in Cox's Bazar, claimed to have curbed 80 percent yaba smuggling through Teknaf, considered to be the gateway of the pills into Bangladesh.

He admitted that the tablets were still entering the country via other routes.

"We have got the names of some 636 people from the 102 top narcotics godfathers. We are verifying the information," Masud told The Daily Star recently.

He further said they had already learned about some new routes in Teknaf and begun taking actions.

According to police database, around 2.07 lakh yaba pills were recovered in Cox's Bazar since February 16, the day 102 godfathers and dealers in Cox's Bazar surrendered.

Border Guard Bangladesh, Rapid Action Battalion and Department of Narcotics Control (DNC) have recovered around 16 lakh yaba pills from the district over the period.

Since the surrender ceremony, at least 17 alleged drug dealers have been killed in "gunfights" in the district.

NEW ROUTES

The new routes include border points in Putkhali, Dhannokhola of Sharsha upazila, Jadavpur of Chaugachha upazila in Jashore; Wahedpur of Shibganj upazila in Chapainawabganj; Zakiganj in Sylhet; Madhyanagar and Tekerghat in Sunamganj; and Balla in Habiganj, said Rab and police sources.

Some consignments land in coastal

areas of Patuakhali and Barguna from Myanmar through the Bay of Bengal, they said.

Talking to The Daily Star recently, Lt Col Ahmed Yusuf Jamil, commanding officer of BGB Battalion-48, said, "Yaba tablets recovered at different border points in Sylhet were produced in Myanmar. Those came to Bangladesh through the Indian route."

In February alone, BGB Battalion-53 recovered 71,000 yaba tablets at Chapainawabganj border point, said sources there.

Shikdar Moshir Rahman, officer-in-charge of Shibganj Police station, echoed Lt Col Jamil's statement.

"We are on alert to stop such smuggling. We are trying to arrest all the smugglers," he said.

Contacted, Lt Col Selim Reza, commanding officer of BGB Battalion-49 in Jashore, also said yaba tablets were entering the district from India.

"We also have information yaba tablets are now being produced in India on a small scale," he said.

All brands of yaba mainly produced in Myanmar -- R7, WY and Champa -- are available at all those border points. But they cost more there, said local sources.

An R7 pill's retail price ranges from Tk 80 to Tk 100 each at Teknaf border, while it's between Tk 500 and Tk 600 at other points. One piece of WY is sold between Tk 50 to Tk 60 in Teknaf but it costs Tk 350 to Tk 400 at other border points, the sources said.

THE HUNDI LORDS

Police officials investigating narcotics cases said the 22 hundi lords took charge of the illegal trade after the surrender of the 102 narcos who used to control the yaba network in Cox's Bazar.

The officials said the smuggling would not end unless the hundi network was totally cut off.

On average, each of the hundi traders in Bangladesh maintains 50 to 80 personal accounts of the mobile payment service, said a top police official in the district.

They learnt these while interrogating two top Teknaf-based hundi traders Nur Mohammad, 40, of Nazir Para, and Nurul Amin, 35, of Jaliapara, the official said, requesting anonymity.

Nur and Nurul were arrested in Teknaf Zero Point area on March 21. The next day, they were killed in an alleged gunfight with police during a drive to recover arms and yaba.

Nur was also named in a home ministry list of yaba dealers. He was facing at least 10 cases, including for murder and attack on police and journalists. Nurul stood accused in three cases, including one for money laundering, said police.

Another police official, who interrogated the two, claimed that the two confessed that they were jointly handling 89 accounts of the mobile payment service. Recently, they had transferred Tk 80 lakh to hundi leaders abroad.

"These two hundi traders also admitted they have a syndicate which sends over Tk 100 crore abroad every month," the official said, wishing not to be named.

In line with the new model, the Myanmar-based suppliers take Tk 30 for each pill that successfully reaches Bangladesh territory dodging the border guards. If the consignment is caught, the local traders get a refund, said investigators.

Asked, Cox's Bazar SP Masud said that yaba dealers were laundering a huge amount of money out of the country with the help of hundi traders.

"We have got trace of around 22 top hundi dealers who are now controlling this business," he said, adding that they were making efforts to destroy the network.

Law enforcers did not give the names of the dealers for the sake of investigation.

NEW FACES IN THE SHOW

The drug dealers involved in the new strategy prefer new faces as the old ones are already under police radar. People with no history in yaba business are being recruited as carriers, said police.

But the number would not be too high, they claimed.

Most of the old faces are either in hiding or have started yaba trade individually, said sources in the law enforcement agencies, adding that the district police have prepared a list of 636 people who emerged as such traders after the surrender of 102 yaba godfathers and dealers.

DNC Assistant Director Soumen Chandra said although yaba smuggling in Teknaf suffered a setback after the surrender, the number of retail sellers had gone up in recent months.

"We have already intensified our drives. We are taking action against those sellers," he added.

[Our correspondents in Sylhet, Benapole and Chapainawabganj contributed to this report.]



Tangled cables obstruct CCTV surveillance of Sylhet city's Chauhatta point. The Sylhet City Corporation had installed CCTV cameras in some key areas of the city to boost security, but poor maintenance of the devices is making the system less effective. The photo was taken on Sunday.

PHOTO: STAR

Ripped off by a syndicate

FROM PAGE 1

(marketing and sales) and Shafiqul Islam, deputy general manager (commercial) of Biman, were among those involved. They have been made officers on special duty (OSD), a post deemed a punishment) on April 2 after Biman Board intervened.

The ministry on March 24 held a meeting on corruption and irregularities in ticket selling. Top Biman officials concerned, including Ashraf, were present at the meeting held at the ministry.

In the meeting, Ashraf was accused of being involved in the irregularities and he denied it, at first. After evidence against him was produced, he argued that they blocked ticket sales to ensure VIPs were able to get tickets to destinations in the Middle East, said a top official of the ministry who was present in the meeting.

State Minister for Civil Aviation Mahbub Ali and the civil aviation secretary in the meeting said Ashraf had no authority to block ticket sales.

The Daily Star could not reach Ashraf and Shafiq for comments. Their phones were found switched off.

Secretary Mohibul said the ministry sent the resolution of the meeting to the Biman Board. The board then asked Biman to make Ashraf and Shafiq OSDs.

Keeping all Biman tickets open to online sale and special apps to sell tickets were also recommended in the resolution.

The Biman Board during its meeting in Balaka on April 2 also formed a three-member probe body to further investigate the ticket scam.

"The body was asked to identify all members of the syndicate -- Biman employees and officials and travel agents -- and take necessary actions

against them.

The ministry's probe found that all tickets of Dhaka-Kuala Lumpur flights between December 25 and December 31 last year were blocked online but they were sold by one travel agency. The agency then paid Biman officials in the syndicate, sources involved in the probe said.

Biman spread its wings in 1972. In the past, irregularities and corruption plagued the national flag carrier and it incurred heavy losses.

The army-backed caretaker government in 2007 turned Biman into a public company.

Last year, Biman lost around Tk 201.47 crore but in the previous three years, it made profits.

Biman serves 15 international and seven domestic destinations with its fleet of 13 aircraft. Seven of the planes are on lease.