

## RAKHINE CONFLICT UN contradicts Myanmar's death toll

SBS, Australia

The UN human rights office says it fears dozens of Rohingya civilians were killed in a military helicopter attack in Myanmar's Rakhine state last week, despite an official government death toll of six.

Rakhine state has been embroiled in conflict since 2017, when a series of attacks by Rohingya insurgents on police outposts triggered a military response that displaced more than 730,000 Rohingya civilians and killed about 10,000.

UN investigators have accused Myanmar military leaders of "genocidal intent."

"We are now receiving reports that the number may be much higher [than six]. We have unconfirmed reports that the number may be as high as 30," Ravina Shamdasani, spokesperson for the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) in Geneva, said

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## No headway

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a journalist's question, confirmed Umme Sultana alias Poppy was arrested yesterday. He added Shampa and Poppy is the same person, reported Prothom Alo.

She was picked up from Lokkipur in Sonagazi's Mangalkaneli union.

The madrasa student was set on fire allegedly for her refusal to withdraw a case filed on charges of sexual harassment against Siraj Ud Doula, principal of Sonagazi Islamia Senior Fazil Madrasa.

Sonagazi Police picked up Siraj on the same day as the case was filed, March 27.

### VICTIM UNDERGOES MINOR SURGERY

A minor operation had been conducted on the victim yesterday and dressing had been changed on her burns, said Dr Samanta Lal Sen, chief coordinator of National Institute of Burn and Plastic Surgery of the Dhaka Medical College Hospital (DMCH).

The brutal assault left her with 75 percent of her body burnt and she is currently on life support at the burn unit.

She also cannot be taken to Singapore as the five-hour long plane journey might be too much for her.

Singapore General Hospital doctors informed the matter to the burn unit doctors during a video conference at 9:00am yesterday, Sen told this newspaper yesterday.

The doctors in Singapore also suggested treatment methods for the 18-year old victim and the DMCH burn unit is already implementing those.

He also said a five-member team of doctors from Singapore were scheduled to visit Bangladesh on April 17, and would examine the girl.

During the video conference, Director of Sheikh Hasina National Burn and Plastic Surgery Institute Professor Dr Mohammad Abul Kalam said the teenager's condition had slightly improved but was still critical.

### 'POWERFUL' PRINCIPAL SHOWN ARRESTED

Meanwhile, Siraj Ud Doula, principal of Sonagazi Islamia Senior Fazil Madrasa, was shown arrested yesterday in an attempt-to-murder case filed by the victim's brother on Monday.

Four unidentified female madrasa students and their associates were also named in the case.

Police had detained eight people in connection with the case and sent four of them to court, which granted five day remand for each.

The seven, excluding Siraj, are Afsar Uddin, 33, an English lecturer; Ariful Islam, 22, an Alim examinee of the madrasa; madrasa night guard Md Mostofa, 38, and office staffers Amin, 50, Alauddin, 25, Saidul Islam, 21, and Jashim Uddin, 30.

Madrasa peon Nurul Amin, who was taken into police custody, told police that teachers and employees of the madrasa were held "hostage" by Siraj.

He said Siraj was a very powerful man and used to form madrasa management committees with people loyal to him.

He also had students who were loyal to him, Nurul said.

The principal was a Rokon -- an important field-level position in the Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami -- but he was expelled from the party in 2016. Afterwards, some influential Awami League leaders gave him shelter, according to some locals.

Locals also said Siraj was accused in three cases filed with Feni Sadar and Sonagazi police stations on charges of subversive activities and attacks on police.

He had been arrested earlier but was released on bail.



Members of outlawed underground parties arrive at a surrender programme at Pabna stadium yesterday. A total of 596 outlaws surrendered to Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan at the event. Many of them also laid down arms, inset.

PHOTO: STAR

## 596 outlaws surrender

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display, said police. Although 614 outlaws were supposed to surrender yesterday, some of them finally did not join the programme, said Md Rafikul Islam, superintendent of Pabna police.

Organised by the Pabna police administration, the event was held at Shaheed Aminuddin Stadium in the afternoon with SP Rafikul in the chair.

Inspector General of Police Mohammad Javed Patwary and local lawmakers Shamsur Rahman Sherif, Golam Faruk Khandaker Prince, advocate Samsul Haque Tuku, Mokbul Hossain, Ahmed Firoz Kabir and

Enamul Haque spoke on the occasion, welcoming the outlaws to normal life.

The home minister said those who surrendered would be rehabilitated by the government. He gave each of them a gift packet.

"The government is determined to rehabilitate those who surrendered so that they can live in the society with dignity. We want other criminals to follow them for the sake of a peaceful society and a peaceful country," the home boss added.

Speaking at the programme, Abdur Razzak alias Art Babu, regional leader of Purba Banglar Communist Party (ML-Lal Pataka faction), said, "When I was a

Rajshahi University student in early 90s, I chose the path of armed revolution for establishing socialism to end class discrimination. But things turned out to be different in reality. At one stage, we went on the wrong track."

Razzak said they surrendered with the hope of leading a normal life and thanked Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina for giving them the scope.

These underground ultra-left organisations are widely accused of killing, looting and robbing in the northern and southern regions. They are often locked in clash with one another.

Ratna Begum, wife of Lal Pataka

operative Iqbal Hossain, said as her husband was an outlaw, he went into hiding many days. In his absence, she and her children had to go to sleep hungry many times and the kids could not go to school.

Ratna said she did not want others to suffer like her and urged the remaining outlaws to return to normal life for the sake of their families.

IGP Javed Patwary said the government is giving the criminals a chance to return to normal life.

"We will monitor the activities of those who surrendered. But they will have to face trial in cases filed against them," he added.

## Hero fireman's final farewell

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member of his family," the minister said.

The firefighter succumbed to his injuries early Monday at the Singapore General Hospital, 11 days after fighting for his life since the fire.

The fire incident claimed 26 lives and injured around 100 people.

Asaduzzaman also said Soheli received proper treatment at Combined Military Hospital (CMH) and was later flown to Singapore upon the Prime Minister's directives.

Soheli's body arrived at Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport on Monday morning and was kept at CMH until being taken to the fire service headquarters yesterday.

After the namaz-e-janaza, Soheli's

colleagues escorted the ambulance to his ancestral home in Kishoreganj's Itna Upazila. His parents, family members and neighbours were seen breaking down in tears as the convoy reached at 5:30pm.

While mourning his death, his neighbours hailed him as a hero for his courageous efforts to save lives from the FR Tower fire, family members said.

Soheli was buried around 6:30pm after a second namaz-e-janaza at a local Madrasa premises.

He sustained critical injuries while rescuing trapped people using a hydraulic ladder.

As the ladder basket was overloaded with rescued people and there was not room left, Soheli took posi-

tion on the ladder steps, putting his life at risk. At one point, he got stuck in the ladder and his leg broke as the ladder folded. His stomach too was punctured.

He was rushed to CMH where he went under two surgeries and was put on life-support until he was flown to Singapore on April 5.

Soheli joined the fire service in 2015. With the money he earned, he used to support his family and bear the educational expenses of his brothers. Before that, he had taken up many an odd-job to support his family as his father Noor Islam, an ultra poor farmer, could not work due to ill-health.

Along with his parents, Soheli left behind four siblings -- younger broth-

ers Rubel, a student of Bangladesh Open University, Uzzal, a college student, and Delwar, a tenth grader, and his sister Selina Akter, a home-maker.

### Keep your families

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At the 2016 DC conference, the premier asked DCs to keep their family members with them at their official residences in the districts.

Minister Mannan said the PM directed authorities to construct government buildings with enough ventilation and fire-safety equipment.

She also directed to preserve ponds and water bodies and asked authorities not to acquire land unnecessarily.

## Airfare trouble for migrant workers

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The employer has threatened to cancel their visas if they don't arrive there by that time, he told The Daily Star at the Baira office in the capital yesterday.

"If I want to send them by Thursday, they will have to pay additional costs. But if they don't agree, I will have to incur losses," he said.

Several Middle East-bound workers spoke of their troubles to this correspondent.

Abdulla bin Saleh from Noakhali's Senbagh upazila said he has Saudi visa, but the recruiting agent is saying that there is a shortage of air tickets.

"I was supposed to fly a week back. But I am not sure when I can do so," the 24-year-old migrant worker said last night.

According to industry insiders, some 4,500 passengers used to fly to Middle Eastern countries by 45 flights from Dhaka every day before the four airlines suspended their operations. Now

the number has come down to around 4,000 due to flight shortage.

"In recent weeks, the number of Umrah pilgrims has gone up. Almost 30 percent passengers of our flights are now flying to Saudi Arabia for Umrah," said a high official of a private airline that operates flights from Bangladesh to Middle Eastern countries.

Baira's Member Welfare Secretary Kafil Uddin Majumder claimed that a section of travel agents are hiking the airfare, taking advantage of the flight shortage.

Emdad Ullah, executive vice-president of the Association of Travel Agents of Bangladesh (Atab), too said some travel agents are involved with "a syndicate" that is increasing the airfare.

"We have already written to the Prime Minister's Office about this," he told The Daily Star.

As the number of Umrah pilgrims is likely to go up in the month of

Ramadan, there is a fear that the airfare would increase further if the government does not intervene immediately, noted Emdad.

Bangladesh Biman could raise the number of flights to the Middle East, the major overseas labour market with some 50 lakh to 60 lakh Bangladeshis working in the region, he said.

The government could also allow foreign airlines to operate more flights to the Middle East as long as required, added the Atab executive vice-president.

Baira Secretary General Shameem said the demand for domestic workers goes up in the Middle East during Ramadan. If the jobseekers cannot be sent there timely, it will affect the overseas job sector from which Bangladesh earns around \$15 billion a year.

Of around 25,000 Bangladeshis flying abroad for jobs every day, some 2,000 are going to the Middle Eastern countries.

"We have written to both the civil aviation and the expatriates' welfare ministries, requesting them to address the situation. But we have not yet got any reply," he mentioned.

Contacted, Mohibul Haque, secretary at the civil aviation and tourism ministry, said there is no scope for any travel agents to artificially increase airfares.

"There is no scope for such monopoly. One must provide his or her name and passport's information to book a ticket ... Once a ticket is sold, it cannot be resold to others. Only dates and time can be changed," the secretary told The Daily Star over the phone.

In reply to a query, he said national flag carrier Biman has not increased its airfares.

He further said the civil aviation ministry has already permitted the Emirates to operate one more flight to Dubai from Dhaka every day.

The airline now operates three flights a day.

## US to be with Bangladesh in finding solution

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without any form of fear and persecution.

Secretary of State Michael R Pompeo said this when Foreign Minister AK Abdul Momen met him in Washington on Monday.

Pompeo lauded Bangladesh's generosity in continuing to host one million Rohingya refugees from Myanmar, and emphasised how they would work with the international community to increase support for the refugees and host communities, while addressing root causes and conditions in Myanmar, according to a press statement of the US Department of State.

"The secretary underscored that responsibility for resolution of the Rohingya refugee crisis rests with Burma [Myanmar], which must create the necessary conditions for voluntary

repatriation," said Morgan Ortagus, spokesperson for the state department.

The secretary also emphasised the importance of advancing good governance, transparency, and democratic values, as Bangladesh continues its emergence as a key partner in the Indo-Pacific.

They discussed increasing economic, security and counterterrorism cooperation between Dhaka and Washington. This was the first meeting between the two leaders since their assumption of office in respective governments.

In a press statement, Bangladesh Embassy in Washington DC said issues featuring in the meeting were: repatriation of the Rohingyas and creation of credible international pressure on Myanmar in that respect, deportation of Bangabandhu's killer Rashed Chowdhury from the US to Bangladesh, shared vision of a Free and Open Indo-

Pacific, US investments in Bangladesh, duty and quota free access of Bangladesh's garments products in the US market and US-Bangladesh partnership in multiple sectors.

During the meeting, Foreign Minister Momen said Bangladesh at its own expense developed the island, "Bhashanchar", into a livable place in which one lakh Rohingyas are planned to be relocated in coordination with UN agencies and different aid groups.

He sought US support to the creation of a safe zone in Rakhine State monitored by international human rights groups.

Regarding deportation of Rashed Chowdhury, the foreign minister pointed out that he is fleeing justice.

"This is essential to carry out a vital common agenda of both countries pertaining to counterterrorism and countering-violent extremism and

upholding the rule of law," he said.

Both leaders agreed that for greater prosperity in the Indo-Pacific region, vital energy and infrastructure projects need to be implemented on regional partnership basis. In that respect, leaders of the region need to work together on issues such as governance, accountability, the rule of law and maritime security, the statement said.

Momen sought more investment from the US in the oil and gas sector and the US's presence in the special economic zones.

He also sought US support to the candidature of Bangladesh in the upcoming election to the post of deputy director general of International Organization for Migration.

Later in the day, Momen held meetings with senior officials of the US State Department and Deputy National Security Adviser Charles

## Bus owners seek stay on HC order

File petition with apex court as deadline for paying Tk 50 lakh to Russell expires today

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Bangladesh Bus Owners Association yesterday filed a petition with the Supreme Court seeking stay on a High Court order that asked Green Line Paribahan to pay Tk 50 lakh to Russell Sarker as compensation.

Russell, 26-year-old car driver of a power company, lost his left leg from below the knee after a Green Line bus had ran over him in the capital on April 28 last year.

The association also prayed to the apex court to make it a party to a writ petition filed with the HC on May 13 last year, seeking necessary order on the authorities concerned to compensate Russell and stop reckless driving, writ petitioner's lawyer Khandaker

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## Blast in Yemen capital killed 14 children: UN

AFP, Sanaa

An explosion near two schools in the rebel-held Yemeni capital killed 14 children and wounded 16, the UN said yesterday, but the cause of the weekend blast remains unclear.

Most of the child casualties in the city's Saewan district were girls under the age of nine, according to statements by both the UN children's fund (Unicef) and the UN special envoy for Yemen.

Yemen's Huthi rebels have accused a Saudi-led military coalition backing the government of carrying out an air strike.

The coalition denied conducting any air raids on the capital on Sunday.

"A blast in Sanaa this week killed 14 children and critically injured 16. This is what Unicef was able to verify, with the actual number of children killed and injured likely to increase," said Unicef's Middle East and North Africa director, Geert Cappelaere.

"It was almost lunchtime and students were in class. The blast shattered the windows and unleashed a burst of shrapnel and broken glass into the classrooms."

The United Nations and international aid groups have called for an investigation into the Sunday explosion but have not apportioned blame.

The World Health Organization estimates nearly 10,000 Yemenis have been killed since 2015, when Saudi Arabia and its allies intervened to prevent the defeat of the government

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## Modi's alliance

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CVoter said in a statement. "Primarily, the BJP has been unable to sufficiently distinguish itself from Congress when it comes to making people feel the difference in terms of their livelihoods and economic interests.

"However, when it comes to controlling and responding on terror the same set of respondents do feel a clear and visible difference."

CVoter's poll is the most conservative, predicting 267 seats for the ruling group, while the Times Now-VMR's poll is the most bullish, with 279 seats.

The main opposition Congress and its allies are expected to more than double their seats to about 141 on average.

Pre-election opinion polls in India, with thousands of respondents, have proved unreliable several times in the past in a vast country of about 1.3 billion people, of whom about 900 million are eligible to vote.

Congress has accused the BJP of using retaliatory air strikes on Pakistan as a political tool and has instead highlighted job creation, tackling farm distress and empowerment of women, among its top priorities.

But the BJP has doubled down on national security issues, promising in its manifesto released on Monday to strip decades-old special rights from the people of Jammu and Kashmir.

Modi has said he will retain power with a bigger mandate than before, while Congress says its plan for annual handouts of 72,000 rupees (\$1,034) to the poorest families will help fuel its comeback.

The election will be held in seven phases and votes will be counted on May 23, with results likely to be clear the same day.

The first phase will cover 91 out of total of 543 constituencies. These 91 constituencies are spread across 20 states and federally-administered territories.