

Love for orchid

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common species are becoming extinct day by day due to deforestation. That is why, I have taken the initiative to preserve the species," Sathowai told this paper recently when this correspondent visited his home.

The varieties in his yard include Dendrobium Lindley, Dendrobium Crepidatum, Dendrobium Pierardi, Dendrobium Fimbriatum, Aridies Odorata, and Foxtail orchid.

Sathowai was seen watering a plethora of yellow, white and pink orchids shining in the yard. "I started collecting orchids around five years ago. I have visited many remote hilly areas in search of rare species."

Hilly orchids bloom between February and April although some species blossom round the year, according to Sathowai. "My fascination for orchids grew a few years ago. I promised myself that I will preserve some of the nearly extinct species. Whenever I hear about a new species growing somewhere, I rush to the spot to collect it."

Sathowai told this paper that alongside deforestation, tourists are also responsible for many orchid species becoming extinct in the area. "With the help of brokers, tourists take away orchids in bulk. So it is our responsibility to protect the domestic resource."

"The plants need to be watered twice a day in summer and once a day in winter. So it is important to touch the base first to see if it is dry or not," said Sathowai.

Sathowai has created a Facebook page -- "Hill Orchid Society" -- to raise awareness on the necessity of preserving hilly orchids.

Many youths are following his path. Vashiu Chowdhury from Khagrachhari and Anuriddho Khisa from Rangamati are some of them.

Talking to this newspaper, the two praised Sathowai for his initiative.

Talking to The Daily Star, Munshi Rashid Ahmad, chief scientific officer at Hill Agricultural Research Station, Khagrachhari, said, "I appreciate the initiative. I will take necessary measures to preserve hilly orchids." An orchid storage centre would be built at the research station in this connection, he added.

Mother helps

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Shahadat, a resident of Hill View area, died at a hospital half an hour later.

Mizanur Rahman, additional deputy commissioner of Chattogram Metropolitan Police, said what Fatema did was extraordinarily responsible. "If every mother of the society acts like her, crime will be reduced significantly."

Shahadat's father Abdul Halim filed a case with Bayazid Police Station.

500 stranded

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Bangladeshis live in Libya while some 5,000 of them live in Tripoli and its suburbs.

Following the recent attacks on Tripoli, an instruction has been issued that if Bangladeshis in Libya want to return, the Embassy would repatriate them free of cost, Ashraful said.

"So far some 12 Bangladeshis wished to go home. We are processing their repatriation," he further said, adding that most of the expatriates did not want to return home as they spent hefty sums to go to Libya.

Labour recruitment from Bangladesh has been stopped in Libya since 2014 because of the consequences of the civil war in the country that started in 2011.

Some 36,000 Bangladeshis were repatriated from Libya after the Libyan crisis began. Almost similar number of Bangladeshis chose to stay back, said Ashraful.

There have been numerous cases of Bangladeshis being kidnapped in Libya and then held hostage for ransom. The kidnapping gangs involving Libyans and Bangladeshis collect ransom before setting them free, survivors told The Daily Star earlier.

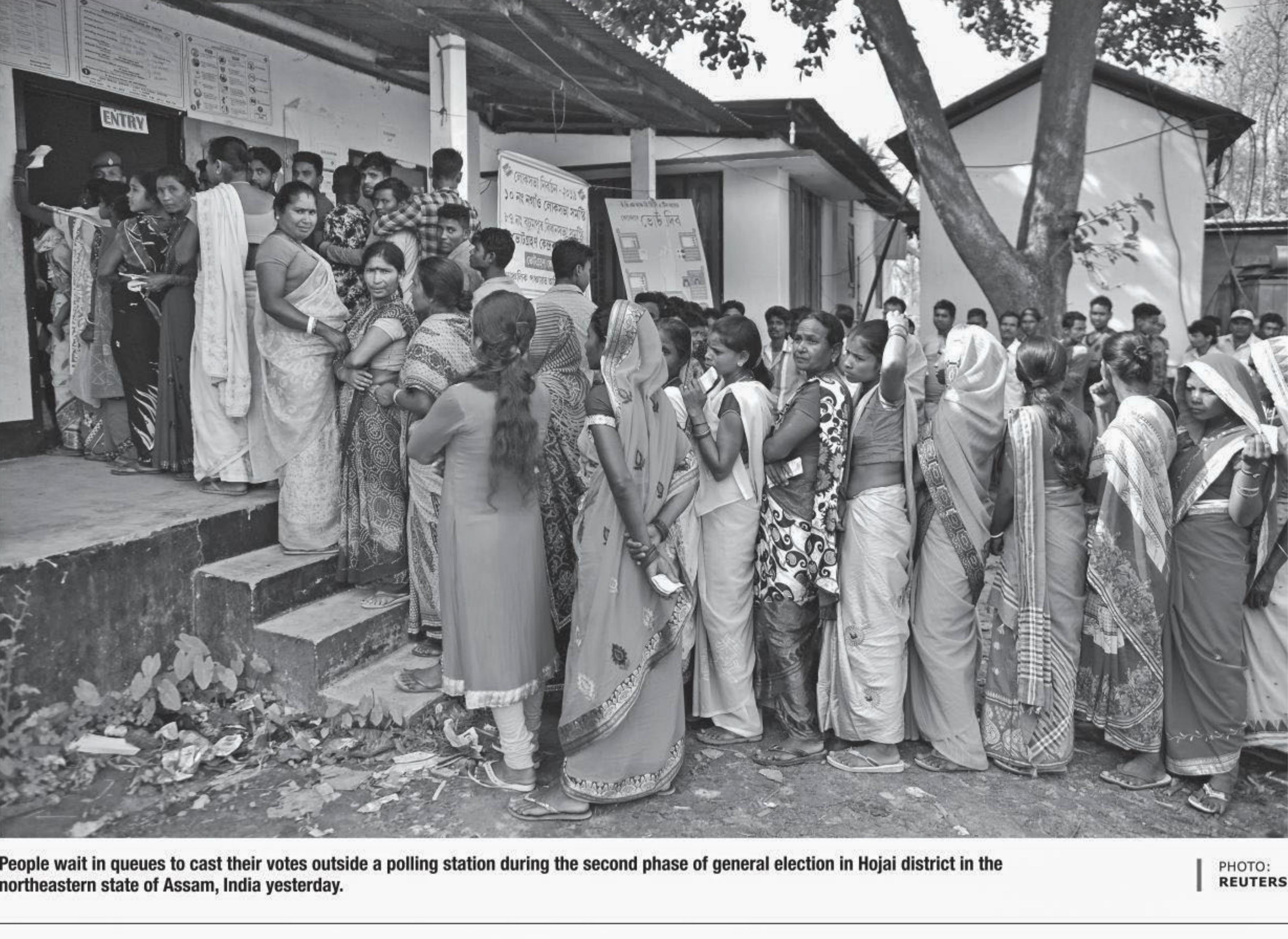
Asked, Ashraful said such cases were still happening in the country. "Once notified, we try to rescue and save them."

Bangladesh, with support from the International Organization for Migration, arranged voluntary repatriation of over 600 Bangladeshis last year.

Most foreign missions in Tripoli have already been withdrawn since the civil war started. Only a few missions, mostly African ones, are yet operational, according to embassy officials.

UN-backed Libyan Prime Minister Fayez Al-Sarraj said hundreds of thousands of refugees could flee the fighting caused by Khalifa Haftar's attempt to seize Tripoli.

"We are facing a war of aggression that will spread its cancer throughout the Mediterranean, Italy and Europe," said Sarraj, who has been the prime minister of Libya since 2016, reported The Guardian on April 15.



People wait in queues to cast their votes outside a polling station during the second phase of general election in Hojai district in the northeastern state of Assam, India yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Brown Crake in Bangladesh

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photographer at heart.

Saud found a Brown Crake -- a bird whose presence was last reported in Bangladesh by an English Captain named Robert Tytler in 1854. There has been no definite record from Bangladesh after Tytler's note more than 150 ago.

To see this rare Brown Crake, I got on a train to Rajshahi during a not-so-cold February night with birding mates Prince and Ratul. The train reached Rajshahi early in the morning where Saud waited for us. Along with him, we took another train to Chapainawabganj and then a local vehicle to Babudang -- where the bird was spotted.

I have always liked the countryside in north Bengal, as the landscape is never monotonous. The farmers here cultivate wheat, sesame, sugarcane and various kinds of vegetables; the landscape is vibrant and offers a variety of habitats for wildlife.

Many ground-dwelling species such hare, button quail and quail are still doing well in this region, although at the national level they have disappeared from many other parts of Bangladesh.

Babudang is basically an open space surrounded by cultivated land and villages. The small hillocks of Babudang support patches of trees and the rest of the area is either scrubland dotted with small bamboo stands or agricultural lands.

Even though there is little natural vegetation or unconverted land, the area holds some unique species of birds including Savanna Nightjars and Indian Nightjars. It is the only place where these two birds can still be found in Bangladesh.

By the time we reached Babudang, the sun was scorching and we realised that we were too late to see the crake. The bird usually only comes out in the open during the early hours of morning to take advantage of lesser

disturbances and cooler temperatures. We waited a while beside a narrow, shallow creek that runs through Babudang. Saud assured us that he knew another site where he had seen one of three crakes.

We changed location, this time on top of a hillock, so that we could see any movement on both sides of the creek. Hours passed and there was no sign of the crake, but the wait was pleasant.

There was a Palash tree on the other side of the creek, showing its beauty off to the world, as if it set its bright orange flowers on fire. Chestnut-tailed Starlings, Purple Sunbirds, Blue-throated Barbets and various other birds flocked onto the tree and took part in the festival of colours, which usually remains unnoticed by mankind.

During midday, we noticed a bird resembling a water hen (Dahuk -- a common bird in Bangladesh) around 500 meters from our position. I

looked through my binoculars and revelled in my first sight of a new bird. It was the Brown Crake!

We walked a little closer to the creek and hid so that the bird would not see us when it came down to feed. We watched the bird in close proximity, observed its behaviour for an hour, took photographs and left it undisturbed.

This bird was probably widely distributed throughout Bangladesh once, but like many other species, it is now gone from much of its historical range.

Brown Crakes and several other birds in that area should be considered as "nationally threatened species" and in order to protect them and preserve this unique habitat, we must find a way to ensure the long-term conservation of Babudang.

The writer is a Conservation Biologist, currently working on threatened species' conservation and research in Bangladesh and abroad.

Report outlines likely Trump obstruction

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Trump has long described Mueller's inquiry as a "witch hunt."

The report stated that when Jeff Sessions, Barr's predecessor as attorney general, told Trump in May 2017 that a special counsel was being appointed by the Justice Department to look into allegations that the Republican's campaign colluded with Russia, Trump slumped back in his chair and said, "Oh my god. This is terrible. This is the end of my presidency. I'm f*****."

Some Democrats in the House of Representatives have spoken of launching impeachment proceedings against Trump in Congress but top Democrats have been notably cautious. Any such effort would be unlikely to be successful because Trump fellow Republicans controls the Senate, which would decide the president's fate.

The inquiry laid bare what the special counsel and US intelligence agencies have described as a Russian campaign of hacking and propaganda to sow discord in the United States, designate 2016 Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton and boost Trump, the Kremlin's preferred candidate. Russia has denied election interference.

In analyzing whether Trump obstructed justice, Mueller looked at a series of actions by Trump, including his attempts to remove Mueller and limit the scope of his probe and efforts to prevent the public from knowing about a June, 2016 meeting at Trump Tower in New York between senior campaign officials and Russians.

In June 2017, Trump directed White House counsel Don McGahn to tell the then-acting attorney general that Mueller had conflicts of interest and must be removed, the report said.

It also said there was "substantial evidence" that Trump fired James Comey as FBI director in 2017 due to his "unwillingness to publicly state that the president was not personally under investigation."

Mueller cited "some evidence" suggesting Trump knew about former national security adviser Michael Flynn's controversial calls with the Russian ambassador to the United States before Trump took office, but evidence was "inconclusive" and could not be used to establish intent to obstruct.

The report said Trump directed former campaign manager Corey Lewandowski to ask former Attorney

General Jeff Sessions to say the Russia investigation was "very unfair."

Before the report's release, Barr gave a news conference at the Justice Department as he sought to shape the narrative on the document's findings.

One of a handful of people to have seen the report before its release, Barr emphasized, as he had said last month, that Mueller did not conclude there was collusion between Trump's campaign and Moscow.

"President Trump faced an unprecedented situation. As he entered into office and sought to perform his responsibilities as president, federal agents and prosecutors were scrutinizing his conduct before and after taking office and the conduct of some of his associates," Barr said.

Barr seemed to offer cover for Trump's actions by saying the report acknowledges that "there is substantial evidence to show that the president was frustrated and angered by a sincere belief that the investigation was undermining his presidency, propelled by his political opponents, and fueled by illegal leaks."

Mueller's team did not issue a

subpoena to force Trump to give an interview to the special counsel because it would have created a "substantial delay" at a late stage in the investigation, the report said.

It said Mueller accepted the longstanding Justice Department view that a sitting president cannot be indicted on criminal charges, while still recognizing that a president can be criminally investigated.

The report also cited Mueller's repeated efforts to convince Sessions to resume oversight of the probe after he had recused himself because of his own prior contacts with Russia's ambassador to the United States.

Mueller said evidence he collected indicates that Trump intended to encourage his former campaign chairman, Paul Manafort, not to cooperate with the investigation and that the evidence supports the idea that Trump wanted Manafort to believe that he could receive a presidential pardon.

The report said the special counsel's team determined there was a "reasonable argument" that the president's son, Donald Trump Jr., violated campaign finance laws, but did not believe they could obtain a conviction.

Violence mars 2nd phase of India polls

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threatens India's secular foundations.

"Communal polarisation is the biggest issue for me," said Rakesh Mehta who voted in the technology hub of Bengaluru, which is the capital of Karnataka. "And the growing intolerance in the country is what worries me the most."

Yet it may be tough for the BJP to repeat its 2014 feat of sweeping victories in six northern states that delivered 70 percent of all its seats, helping to clinch a landslide majority, said academic Neelanjan Sircar.

"You can never expect you'll do that again," added Sircar, a political science professor at Ashoka University near the capital, New Delhi. "Those seats that you lose, you'll have to make up somewhere."

The BJP will be looking to make gains in Karnataka, he added.

Congress, which is focusing on

concerns about growing joblessness and farmers' distress, is staking its chances on a promise of generous handouts to India's poorest families.

Police fired teargas to disperse stone-throwers in Srinagar, the Himalayan region's main city, where thousands of troops had been deployed to guard the vote, although turnout was just 5 percent by 1:00 pm.

"There has been stone pelting

by protesters in at least 40 places," said a senior police officer who sought anonymity because he is not authorised to speak to the media.

A female poll worker was gunned down in the eastern state of Odisha by suspected Maoist rebels hours before voting started, media reported.

Police in the West Bengal constituency of Darjeeling also fired tear gas at protesters who complained they had not been allowed to vote, said the top district official, Arvind Kumar Mina.

"They had blocked a highway and had to be dispersed," he added.

In the neighbouring constituency of Raiganj, unidentified people attacked the car of the communist candidate at a voting station he visited to check accusations of voting malpractice, the party said.

Electrification could shed light on how supersized predators and prey evolved over millions of years around the end of the Paleogene epoch -- the period where mammals grew from tiny rodents into many diverse species.

rigging and intimidating supporters.

The election panel has banned campaigning for a few days by a firebrand Hindu ascetic from the BJP, who governs northern Uttar Pradesh, over his anti-Muslim comments.

Giant ancient lion

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Ohio University.

An artist's impression of the creature shows a giant big-cat-like hunter with stripes fur and enormous fangs.

The team behind the study, published in the Journal of Vertebrate Paleontology, said Simbakubwa lived in what is modern-day Kenya around 23 million years ago, a key period in the evolution of carnivorous mammals.

They said the discovery could shed light on how supersized predators and prey evolved over millions of years around the end of the Paleogene epoch -- the period where mammals grew from tiny rodents into many diverse species.

Nigeria's court finds top judge guilty of graft

AFP, Abuja

An ethics court yesterday found Nigeria's former chief justice guilty of corruption and banned him from office for 10 years in a case the opposition said was politically motivated.

Walter Onnoghen was suspended from his post as the country's top judge by President Muhammadu Buhari just weeks before elections in February, prompting outrage and claims Buhari was trying to manipulate the judiciary.

A request to remove the chief justice normally has to be approved with a two-thirds majority of the Senate, but the head of state did not follow that process.

Onnoghen was tried for allegedly failing to divulge cash in five foreign bank accounts in contravention of rules governing the declaration of assets by public officials.

"The defendant has clearly contravened the Code of Conduct for Public Officers, and he is hereby convicted," said Danladi Umar, chairman of the country's ethics court, the Code of Conduct Tribunal, which rules on cases involving public officials.

"The defendant is hereby banned from holding office for 10 years," Umar added.

Poppies bloom in Afghanistan as drought eases

AFP, Lashkar Gah

A vast field of towering white poppies sways gently in the breeze, silky petals sometimes tumbling to the ground, a visible marker of the resilience of Afghanistan's lucrative opium trade.

The sight of a seemingly endless expanse of opium-producing flowers is common across rural Afghanistan, but this farm is in the centre of government-controlled Lashkar Gah city -- the capital of Helmand province.

In a field AFP visited this month, workers were scoring grooves into the plants' bulbous seed pods from which the raw, milky-white opium oozes.

"We know it is harmful but we have no other way to earn money, this is the only income for us," labourer Mohammad Ghous told AFP.

Afghanistan is the world's top grower of opium, and the crop accounts for hundreds of thousands of jobs.

Farmers grow poppies with impunity, as both Taliban and government officials often profit from the lucrative trade.

No info

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Khaleda might get released on parole in a couple of weeks and she would probably leave for London.

Quoting party insiders, recent media reports said Khaleda, who has been in jail for over 14 months, might leave for London any day before April 30, which is also the deadline for taking oath as MPs.

Six BNP leaders have been elected in the December 30 general election.

BNP Secretary General Fakhrul Islam Alamgir on April 15 told this newspaper that speculation about the BNP chairperson's parole "is all gossip. I do not know anything about parole."

Khaleda has been in jail since a special court awarded her five years in prison in the Zia Orphanage Trust graft case.

The High Court later extended her jail term to 1