

Easter bombers were on Sri Lanka payroll

Top Muslim leader tells probe committee

AFP, Colombo

The Islamic extremists behind Sri Lanka's deadly Easter bombings received funding from state intelligence services, a top Muslim leader told a parliamentary investigation.

The comments by Azath Salley, who quit last week as governor of Western Province, added to evidence of massive security failings before the April 21 attacks that killed 258 people.

The bombings were led by Zahran Hashim, a radical who broke from the Sri Lanka Thowheeth Jama'ath (SLJT) to form an extremist group, the National Thowheeth Jama'ath (NTJ).

Salley told the Parliamentary Select Committee (PSC) that he repeatedly told President Maithripala Sirisena to take action against the group.

"The defence ministry paid the Thowheeth Jama'ath. The police worked closely with the Thowheeth Jama'ath," Salley said, according to a transcript of his remarks.

Salley said the former government of Mahinda Rajapakse in office until 2015 funded Thowheeth Jama'ath through military intelligence, a practice continued by the new administration.

Salley said that the funding was to spy on other groups.

Salley also said that a week before the attacks, he met with top defence officials to warn them about the

activities of Islamic radicals and impending dangers.

"If the police had taken action on the information I provided at the time, we would have been able to avoid this disaster," he said.

The PSC has already heard from several top defence and police officials that the authorities failed to implement an effective security plan even after receiving precise warnings of an impending attack.

Sirisena sacked his national intelligence chief Sisira Mendis after he told the PSC that the attacks could have been averted.

Mendis also said the president had failed to hold regular security meetings to assess the threat from Islamic radicals.

His defence secretary and police chief have suggested that the president, who is also defence minister, did not follow proper protocols in dealing with intelligence warnings about the bombings.

64 Bangladeshis

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main departure point for African migrants hoping to reach Europe by paying human traffickers, though numbers have dropped due to an Italian-led effort to disrupt smuggling networks and support the Libyan coastguard.

At least 65 migrants drowned last month when their boat capsized in the Mediterranean Sea off the Tunisian coast after they had left Libya hoping to reach Europe.

In the first four months of this year, 164 people are known to have died on the route, a smaller number but a higher death rate than in previous years, with one dying for every three who reach European shores, the UN refugee agency UNHCR said.

How realistic are the proposals?

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was 75 percent. For this reason, only a few newspapers could implement the 8th Wage Board. In this situation, the 9th (2019) Wage Board committee has submitted an unrealistic proposal, which includes an 85 percent salary hike. Implementation of this is not possible in any way. The few newspapers which implemented the wage board in the past will not be able to implement it now. The Newspaper Owners' Association of Bangladesh (Noab) also opines that the award proposal of the 9th Wage Board is not realistic.

All over the world, the number of printed copies of newspaper is decreasing. In our country, print media circulation/market has been shrinking at an about 8-10 percent rate. Income from private advertisement has reduced at an annual rate of 20 percent. Such trend continues in 2019 as well. Apart from this, at present print media has to compete against television, online portal, social media and other different media. A large portion of the advertisement market is under the control of social media, online portals, Facebook and Google. On the other hand, the rate of government advertisement is very low. Even then, 15 newspapers have a due payment of about Tk 85 crore in advertisement bill, which they are to receive from the government. Besides, government advertisements have been decreasing at an annual rate of 10 percent. Apart from this, 26 percent is taken as landed cost, which includes import duty and VAT for newspapers' main raw material—newsprint. Perhaps, newspaper is the only product for which the production cost is three times the sale price. Due to reduction in advertisement income, it is becoming impossible to run the industry after overcoming such deficit.

In such a situation, implementation of the unrealistic proposal of the 9th Wage Board will lead the newspaper houses to extinction. Notably, among the 42 government-recognised industries, salary-allowance and benefits of no other industry is like that of the newspaper wage board.

In the last two newspaper wage boards, the salary hike was 165 percent. In the last two government pay scales, the salary hike was 161 percent. In the last two wage boards for the RMG sector, the salary hike was 70 percent.

This means, salary hike in newspaper wage board is the highest. De-spite this, the 9th Newspaper Wage Board Committee has proposed the below unrealistic salary hike:

Grade	Minimum gross (present)	Minimum gross (proposed)
1	67,645	1,16,095
2	51,980	90,095
3	38,073	67,112
4	25,420	44,962
5	22,595	39,889
6	20,231	35,670

At present, gross salary for the lowest grade (grade 6: peon, guard, gardener) under the 8th Newspaper Wage Board is Tk 20,231. Whereas, for a similar job, the gross salary for the lowest grade (grade-20) in the present government pay scale is Tk 15,350. It means, the salary for the lowest grade in the newspaper wage board is Tk 5,000 more than that of the

government pay scale. And apart from the exception, in private companies, gross salary for the lowest grade is not more than Tk 10-12 thousand on average. In such a situation, the proposal of Tk 35,670 in salary for the lowest grade (grade-6) has been made under the 9th Wage Board. Noab thinks it is completely unrealistic in Bangladesh's perspective.

As per the 8th Newspaper Wage Board, a reporter obtaining a bachelors or master's degree joins in grade-3 at a salary of Tk 38,073. Whereas, under the present government salary scale, the most meritorious student joins as a civil cadre in grade-9 at an initial salary of Tk 35,600. And a university teacher initially joins in grade-8 and receives a gross salary of Tk 37,150. This means, a reporter here, as per the newspaper wage board, has been getting Tk 2,473 more than that of a government first-class gazetted officer. And apart from the exception, in private companies, the gross salary at a similar level is no more than Tk 25-30 thousand on average. In such a situation, the initial salary of a grade-3 reporter has been proposed at Tk 67,112 in the 9th Newspaper Wage Board. Providing such a salary is impossible for any newspaper house.

The government announces the wage board for journalists working in the newspaper industry. And newspaper houses have to bear this wage board's expenditure by increasing their own income. In this case, no special assistance and donation is provided from the government's end. Noteworthy, neither is there any benefit. At present, in the competitive market and digital media era, newspaper houses cannot increase their income at will.

According to the BBS and the Bangladesh Bank, the inflation rate has risen to 36.34 percent since the implementation of the 8th Wage Board. During this period, if one yearly increment as per the 8th Wage Board is taken into consideration, the salary has increased by about 28.8 percent. In reality, the amount of salary increase is much higher. To retain or motivate skilled workers, excessive salary is often given. Therefore, Noab opines, it is not possible to increase the salary more than 10-12 percent in the 9th Wage Board.

Besides, there are some matters and benefits in the 9th Wage Board which cannot possibly be fulfilled by an ailing newspaper industry. For example:

- There are 6 grades in the wage board. The government's national salary scale has 20 grades. Most of the private organisations, including banks and insurance companies, have between 18 and 22 grades. Due to the lesser number of grades in the wage board of newspapers, it becomes difficult to operate the organisation.

- According to section 2 (10) of the Bangladesh Labour Act, there is a provision of one gratuity for each year. In other industries, there is not more than one gratuity each year. Many organisations do not even follow the provision of the Act, whereas the provision of two gratuities in the wage board is an impractical financial pressure.

- According to the Income Tax Ordinance 1984, individuals should pay their income taxes. But under the wage board, newspapers pay the income taxes of journalists and other

officials and employees. Workers of other organisations including government ones submit their income taxes individually. There should not be a law that doesn't apply to all.

- In the 9th Wage Board, house rent is fixed at 65 percent. But according to section 33(A) of the Income Tax Ordinance, 1984, 50 percent of the house rent is tax-free. The rest 15 percent increases the amount of individual tax.

- In the newspaper wage board, there is a provision for granting one month's salary and one month's recreation leave every three years. The benefit is not available in any other government recognised industry.

- Besides, there are some marginal benefits that are not realistic and nobody implement these. These should be eliminated from the wage board. For example: duty allowance, entertainment allowance, technical allowance, eye-risk allowance, chemical poisoning allowance, outfit allowance, dress and wash allowance etc.

- Although the newspaper is an industry, its corporate tax is 35 percent.

- Although the newspaper industry is listed in the schedule-2 (exemption) of the Vat Act 1991, it has to pay 15 percent VAT.

- According to 53(k) of the VAT Act, 1991, about 4 percent TDS/AIT are being given on the income from newspaper advertisement. Besides, 5 percent TDS are being paid at source of import of raw materials. Overall, 9 percent TDS are being paid. But many newspaper organisations do not even make 9 percent in profit.

Although Noab members participated in the 7th and 8th wage boards actively, their past experiences are not good. In all wage boards, the above issues were brought up by the Noab. But the wage boards were announced almost unilaterally without discussing the issues. The Noab had expected that this time, the activities of the wage board would at least be held through discussions during the formulation of the 9th Wage Board. But so far, the experience over the 9th Wage Board has been no different.

Wage board has been limited to wage-allowance as no opinion of owners are considered. It is weakening the industry day by day. Failing to cope with the unrealistic financial pressure, the organisations would downsize, not implement or partially implement the wage board, and on the whole, chances are being created that the organisations would be at the brink of closure.

According to the latest (June 3, 2019) audit report of the Department of Films and Publications, of the country's 684 (Dhaka-346 + local-338) newspapers, 158 (about 23 percent; Dhaka-109 + local-49) have implemented the 8th Wage Board. But there is no similarity between the report and reality. To Noab's knowledge, only a handful of newspapers fully implement wage board award.

So, before issuing a gazette on the 9th Wage Board, it is necessary to have discussions with both owners and journalists and announce an acceptable and realistic award based on consensus. Wellbeing of workers of an industry depends on the wellbeing of the industry.

Tarique asks

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committee members Khandakar Mosharrar Hossain, Jamiruddin Sircar, Abdul Moyeen Khan, Amir Khosru Mahmud Chowdhury and senior BNP leader Syed Moazzem Hossain Alal are in the shadow parliamentary committee, sources said.

"We will be in parliament, and following the parliamentary rules and procedures, we will raise our voices on important issues but we will not do anything that hampers the atmosphere..." said a BNP lawmaker, wishing anonymity.

Five BNP lawmakers and two Oikyafront lawmakers were elected in the last parliamentary polls on December 30, which the BNP leaders had termed a "farical election".

The party had repeatedly said that it will not join parliament. However, in the final day of oath taking, BNP lawmakers, except Fakhru, took oath.

The last time BNP lawmakers joined the parliamentary budget session was in 2013 when the budget was placed on June 7.

The party had boycotted the 2014 election, which was why it did not have representation in the parliament.

On the very first day of this parliamentary budget session, BNP MP Rumeen Farhana (Reserved Seat-50) lambasted the government saying the parliament was "constituted through a faulty election" and that it was an "illegal parliament". The remarks created a stir during the session.

Nine injured

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the hospital Superintendent Dr Mohammad Khalil Ullah said.

All three buildings of the hospital are in risky conditions, but patients continue to receive treatment there due to a lack of alternative space, hospital sources said.

Upon request of the district Deputy Commissioner Tonoy Das, the hospital authorities have sealed off the affected building and relocated their patients to another one.

A similar incident occurred last year when a part of the ceiling of another building of the hospital had collapsed, injuring two nurses.

Bangladesh

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on resource availability, livelihood, security and migration, the report said.

It added that in Dhaka's slums, 81 percent of migrants cited a climate-related cause as a main reason for their move. High levels of resource scarcity and strained public resources contributed to violence in these slums, with climate refugees intensifying already present social stresses.

"Future rises in sea levels are projected to affect around 18 million people in Bangladesh and result in a 16 percent loss of land, displacing many coastal citizens and putting the country under high migration pressure."

According to the latest report, global peacefulness improved very slightly in the 2019 GPI with the average country score rising by 0.09 percent.

It said peacefulness improved in 86 countries while it deteriorated in 76 others.

Iceland remains the most peaceful country in the world, a position it has held since 2008. It is joined at the top of the index by New Zealand, Austria, Portugal and Denmark.

Meanwhile, Bhutan recorded the largest improvement of any country in the top 20, rising 43 places in the last 12 years.

Afghanistan replaced Syria as the least peaceful country, with the latter becoming the second least peaceful. South Sudan, Yemen and Iraq comprise the remaining five least peaceful countries.

25,526 killed

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Quader said they usually occur due to lack of awareness among road users.

Unskilled drivers, tendency to violate law, lack of implementation of law, unfit vehicles, tendency to overtake and overload vehicles are some of the main causes, he added.

Not all are fully clean

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would now have to be cautious so that such public perception does not exist.

Rafiqul had demanded that Speaker Shirin Sharmin Chaudhury expunge some words from the question of Jatiya Party MP Rowshan Ara Mannan (Reserved Seat-47).

Opposing his demand, the PM said there was nothing wrong with Rowshan's question. She said, "The MP [Rowshan] mentioned that there was a public perception and she didn't say that they were certainly involved in corruption."

"So, there is no need to expunge those words because it is not totally false," said the prime minister.

She said her government has a special plan to reduce corruption to zero level by strengthening the ACC, raising public awareness, and using modern information technologies.

There is no need to form a separate agency with manpower from different elite forces as the ACC gets cooperation from all government agencies whenever it asks for it, Hasina said.

The ACC is an independent and autonomous body, she said, adding that the commission explores and investigates corruption allegation neutrally. That is why ministry staffers' and officials' inclination to indulge in corruption is gradually reducing, said the prime minister.

Responding to a supplementary question from Rowshan, Hasina said it was essential to socially resist the people involved in sexual harassment of girls

in educational institutions. She said it was not possible to deal with the sexual harassment problem only through enforcement of law and order.

She urged the public representatives to form committees in every area, comprising guardians, teachers, representatives of religious institutions, and distinguished personalities, to prevent sexual harassment.

She said all injustice could be eliminated if the public representatives worked together with all the people of their localities.

Hasina said she does not spare her own party men involved in offences related to sexual harassment.

In an oblique reference to the transfer of Manjur Mohammad Shahriar, deputy director (Dhaka division) of the Directorate of National Consumer Rights Protection (DNCRP), Hasina said it was not acceptable to her that an officer was transferred for his drive against some big business institutions during Ramadan.

"I'm also asking today that he [Shahriar] be reinstated to the same post," she said.

In response to a question from Jatiya Party lawmaker Rustum Ali Faraji of Pirojpur-3 constituency, the prime minister said her government has taken various measures to ensure fair prices of paddy for farmers.

She said the government has already increased import duty to discourage rice imports of the staple and decided to export surplus.

People eating

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"Not only are plastics polluting our oceans and waterways and killing marine life, it's in all of us," said Marco Lambertini, director general of WWF International, which commissioned the new report.

"If we don't want it in our bodies, we need to stop the millions of tons of plastic that continue leaking into Nature every year."

In the last two decades, the world has produced as much plastic as during the rest of history, and the industry is set to grow by four percent a year until 2025, according to a new report by Grand View Research.

More than 75 percent of all plastics winds up as waste.

A third of that — some 100 million tonnes — is dumped or leaches into Nature, polluting land, rivers and the sea.

On current trends, the ocean will contain one metric tonne of plastic for every three metric tonnes of fish by 2025, according to The New Plastics Economy report, published by the Ellen MacArthur Foundation.

Plastic particles have recently been found inside fish in the deepest recesses of the ocean, and blanketing the most pristine snows in the Pyrenees mountains between France and Spain.

HK protests turn violent

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This time police appeared determined not to let protesters hold any ground while the young demonstrators responded in kind, hurling projectiles including metal poles, bottles and bricks.

Tear gas sent the crowds scattering, but riot police continued to fight cat and mouse battles with their opponents into the evening, pushing them down towards the city's commercial centre and bringing it to a standstill.

Authorities said 22 people were injured, with wounded police and protesters seen being carried away.

Hong Kong has been convulsed by political unrest in recent years as fears surge that Beijing is trying to stamp on the city's unique freedoms and culture.

But yesterday's violence was an unprecedented escalation of the conflict.

"In terms of the level of violence, today has been the most serious since the 1997 handover," political analyst Dixon Sing told AFP, citing the sustained use of tear gas, rubber bullets and bean bag rounds, as well as the willingness of protesters to take on the police.

"Today's events reflect a huge gap in the confidence Hong Kong people have towards the government. They increasingly believe the Hong Kong government are a bunch of puppets serving the interests of Beijing," he added.

The proposed law would allow Hong Kong to send suspects to other jurisdictions around the world — including China.

Hong Kong's leaders say it is needed to plug loopholes and to stop the city being a sanctuary for fugitives. They say safeguards are in place to ensure that political critics of Beijing will not be targeted.

But it is deeply unpopular, with fears people will become entangled in the mainland's opaque courts, leaving them vulnerable to a justice system seen as acting at the behest of the Chinese Communist Party.

Opposition to the bill has united an unusually wide cross-section of the city in recent weeks, from influential businessmen and lawyers, to religious groups, student unions and workers.

On Sunday record crowds of around one million marched against the law.

That rally, however, failed to move pro-Beijing Lam, who has rejected

calls to withdraw the bill and vowed to fast track it through the legislature.

"The protest today took place solely because Carrie Lam ignored the voice of 1.03 million people, and refused to withdraw the Extradition Bill," the Civil Human Rights Front protest group said late yesterday, accusing the police of being overly aggressive and halting people's ability to protest.


Police chief Stephen Lo defended his officers, saying they had shown restraint until "mobsters" tried to storm parliament.

But Amnesty International said police "took advantage of the violent acts of a small minority as a pretext to use excessive force against the vast majority of peaceful protesters."

Hong Kong's stock market sank nearly 1.8 percent yesterday in the city-wide turmoil while the parliament cancelled the scheduled debate. But authorities are determined to have the law on the books as soon as possible.

Protesters have vowed to keep hitting the streets until the bill is shelved.

"The only responsible thing to do now is for Carrie Lam to withdraw the evil bill, or at least to shelve it in order to solve the crisis," said pro-democracy lawmaker Fernando Cheung.



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