

Release 2 young film students

Demand teachers, students, filmmakers at a rally

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Noted filmmakers and Stamford University students and teachers yesterday called for action to release Shahedul Islam Sifat and Shipra Debnath from jail.

The two students of film and media studies at Stamford, who were travelling with Major (retired) Sinha Md Rashed Khan, got arrested after the latter was shot dead allegedly by police in Teknaf on July 31.

At a rally in the capital's Shabbagh yesterday, National Film Award winning-director Giasuddin Selim said, "We know the police of our country. If they want, they can make anyone fall into a trap. Please stop this culture."

He added that he knows the two students and they do not deserve to be in jail.

"To the leaders who run our country, stop extrajudicial killings now. This is not a police state. This is a democratic and modern Bangladesh."

He added that Shipra had worked with him as a script supervisor in his film, Paap-Punno.

"The young filmmaker has a dream to make movies. She left studying engineering at Buet to make films."

Ex-Major Sinha, who used to make travel videos for his YouTube channel, went to Cox's Bazar for filming with Stamford students Shipra, Sifat and Tahsin Rifat Nur.

Police charged Sifat with killing Sinha and possessing drugs and Shipra with possessing drugs and handed Rifat to his parents' custody.

Shakira Parvin, assistant professor at Stamford's film and media studies department, said she and her fellow teachers were worried about the young filmmakers' future.

"They are well-mannered and good students. Sifat is a quiet boy... and Shipra worked on many renowned productions. Their family members and friends knew what they were doing in Cox's Bazar."

Shipra's brother Suvojit Debnath told The Daily Star that his sister was framed in the case.

"They are trying to create a story with which they can hide their misdeeds. This is their most-known technique, framing people with drugs," he said.

Sifat's uncle Masum Billah, a producer at Sangsad Television, said they appealed for Sifat's bail at a Cox's Bazar court on Thursday, but he was sent to jail.

Masum termed the police cases "fictional".

"Police wrote in the FIR that Sinha was killed by their guns and bullets. But they charged Sifat. How is that possible? It is self-contradictory."

Directors Mostofa Sarwar Farooki and Dipankar Dipon, Wahid Ibn Reza, and actress Jaya Ahsan also demanded release of the young filmmakers.



People on a boat and a tube raft navigate flood waters in Uttar Medinimandal village of Munshiganj's Louhajang upazila. Flooding has marooned several thousand people and submerged large areas of farm land in the area. The photo was taken on Thursday.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

Virus fears echoed in booters' reports

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close observation for any symptoms of coronavirus.

Seven more footballers are scheduled to take the Covid-19 test at BSMMU today.

On July 16, the National Teams Committee (NTC) decided to have a 14-day pre-preparation camp in August for the national players.

BFF announced the 36-member preliminary squad on July 26 and the available players, in groups, started to report on August 5.

The first batch, comprising 12 players with the exception of Bishwanath Gosh (who tested positive in the first test and did not turn up) reported to national team manager Satyajit Das Rupu on Wednesday and the 11 other players, furnished with negative test reports, underwent their second test on the same day at the BSMMU. Three footballers -- Suman Reza, Nazmul Islam and MS Bablu -- tested positive within only two days of the negative result.

On Thursday, 12 more footballers, of whom 10 had negative reports and two failed to undergo the coronavirus test prior to reporting, took the Covid-19 test and seven tested positive.

According to information from the team management, of the 10 positive cases, three footballers -- Sushantha Tripura, Mohammad Ibrahim and Anisur Rahman Zico -- from Cox's Bazar took their first Covid-19 test at Cox's Bazar General Hospital and Chakoria Hospital.

Goalkeeper Shahidul Alam Sohel and Sohel Rana underwent tests at Imperial Hospital in Chattogram and Anwar Khan Modern Hospital in Dhanmondi respectively while Tutul Hossain Badsha from Dinajpur and Rabiul Hasan of Tangail did not turn up with test reports.

Suman Reza was tested at Sheikh Hasina Medical Hospital in Tangail, while MS Bablu and Nazmul Islam had their tests at Evercare Hospital in Dhaka.

The reversal in results is a microcosm of the plight the country faces with the virus -- except one or two cases, players from regions of high infection have been found infected, and the false negatives add to the atmosphere of fear.

It was not possible to ascertain where the eight players and the coach -- who were revealed to be infected last night -- had undertaken their original tests before reporting to the camp.

"20-30% MAY BE FALSE NEGATIVES"

Asked about the reversals in results, BSMMU Assistant Professor and BFF medical committee Deputy Chairman Dr Ali Emran said, "First, we have to be clear about negative and positive results, which is done by RT-PCR and efficiency of RT-PCR is almost hundred percent.

"Some 20 to 30 percent of Covid-19 negative reports may prove to be false negatives, which means reports coming back negative may not really be negative.

"Coming to positive results, if anyone tests positive, then there is no doubt about it except when that person recovers and again tests positive due to having the dead particle of virus in his or her body.

"There is no doubt about the authenticity of Covid-19 tests at BSMMU. Besides, BSMMU is giving it the highest priority because of the national football team," said Emran, who is also a member of the Asian Football Confederation (AFC) medical committee.

'NO WAY TO STOP, MUST GO FORWARD'

These developments also forced the National Teams Committee Chairman and BFF Vice President Kazi Nabil Ahmed to reconsider plans for the national team's preparation camp.

"We are on course to play the World Cup Qualifiers because we don't have any option to avoid it. We are thinking of making those players, who have already tested positive but have no symptoms, take a second test within a week to see whether there are any false positive reports," said Nabil, hinting that they may test players at a private hospital this time following the first test done at a government hospital.

"If some players test negative, then we will keep them under observation before taking them to the national camp and the positives ones will be released for home quarantine," said Nabil. "If more players test positive in the second tests, we will call new players to the national team and they will also undergo the tests."

Head coach Jamie Day is perhaps a bit worried about the increasing rate of infection among national players but he is still scheduled to arrive in Dhaka on August 16 before taking over the team from the local coaches on August 23.

"He is certainly worried about the Covid-19 reports of the players but we don't have any option to stop, because we have to go forward," said Nabil.

With the increasing rate of infection among players, there has also been a fear of the impact of staging the qualifying match against Afghanistan on time.

BFF general secretary Abu Nayeem Shohag said, "We must hold the qualifiers maintaining the AFC protocol and we are hopeful of maintaining all protocols to hold the match on time."

"For now, we are not thinking much of any impact on the match due to the players' positive results because they are all asymptomatic and may get negative results in their second test. However, we will certainly think about it if we get any instruction from AFC or FIFA," said Shohag.

Saudi Arabia seeks to tame powerful cyber armies

AFP, Riyadh

Online armies of self-styled Saudi patriots riding a wave of state-led nationalism attack critics and what they call "traitors" of the kingdom -- but their growing clout has left the government uneasy.

Their rise has coincided with the ascent of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, who has overseen Saudi Arabia's shift from austere religion towards hyper-nationalism as he pursues an ambitious transformation of the petro-state.

Trolls distorting political discourse are common in many countries, but Saudi Arabia's so-called cyber "flies" -- feisty defenders of state policy who often choose pictures of Saudi rulers as their avatar image -- are an increasingly powerful force.

Their posts frequently tag Saudi security agencies, and their collective roar often leads to detentions, sackings and harassment.

These "phantom accounts" were long thought to be linked to the government, arising as part of a policy driven by former royal court advisor Saud al-Qahtani.

Qahtani, sacked over the October 2018 murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi, earned nicknames such as "Mr Hashtag" and "lord of the flies" for managing an electronic army to defend the kingdom.

But a rare debate on state television in June sought to distance them from the government.

Beirut explosion

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Last year, protestors took to the streets in Lebanon against the then ruling party for years of mismanagement in the country's economy. With many businesses closing since then, thousands of Bangladeshis and other nationals lost jobs.

The situation worsened with the Covid-19 lockdown being enforced since March this year.

Tuesday's explosion added insult to the injury of Lebanon, home to some 150,000 Bangladeshis. The damage caused by the explosion is estimated to be up to \$15 billion, Lebanon government officials told the media.

"I don't know what I will do now. It's a panicky situation in Lebanon," Mahin, who hails from Brahmanbaria's Kasba upazila, told this correspondent over phone yesterday.

Before the pandemic, officials of the Bangladesh embassy in Beirut estimated that some 30,000 Bangladeshis were undocumented. The situation has worsened by now, they said.

Ripon Khan, another Bangladeshi expatriate in Beirut, said he used to work as a security guard at a school, but he has been jobless for six months now.

"Since then I have been bringing money from home. How long can I survive like this?" he said.

There are many Bangladeshis who neither have jobs nor can bring money from home. Even those who are working can save little amount because of the high price of US dollars and daily essentials.

Ripon said Lira has become so cheap against dollar that his monthly

salary would have been equivalent to about \$100 now, down from \$400 a year ago.

Many Bangladeshis don't get full salaries now, he added.

"The Beirut explosion has caused more troubles. For many months, I was expecting that the situation would improve. But now I want to return home," said Ripon, who hails from Brahmanbaria.

Abdullah Al Mamun, head of chancery at the Bangladesh embassy in Beirut, admitted that there is joblessness among many migrants and the high price of US dollar has worsened the situation.

"The Bangladesh government had sought funding from the International Organisation for Migration a few months back for repatriation of undocumented Bangladeshis from Lebanon. But the move has seen no progress," he said.

Many of the undocumented Bangladeshi migrants are now managing money to buy tickets to return home. Nearly 8,000 have registered with the Bangladesh embassy so far for returning home, said Mamun.

Some 200 have already returned home, he said, adding that some 15,000 more may return home in the coming months.

Shakirul Islam, chairman of Ovbashi Karmi Unnayan Programme, said they know a lot of Bangladeshis in Lebanon, including women domestic workers, passing days in hardship without jobs.

"The government should actively work to repatriate them from abroad," he said.

GK Shamim has

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A Rab team on September 20 last year arrested Shamim and his seven bodyguards over extortion and tender manipulation.

Rab raided his house and office in the capital's Niketon in the morning and seized eight firearms, a large stash of ammunition, around Tk 1.8 crore in cash, \$ 9,000 and 752 Singaporean currency, and some bottles of foreign liquor.

His bodyguards are Delwar Hossain, Murad Hossain, Zahidul Islam, Shahidul Islam, Kamal Hossain, Samsad Hossain and Aminul Islam.

The chargesheet mentioned that Shamim's transaction with different local banks was over Tk 6,058.51 crore between 2009 and 2019. Most of the transactions took place in 2018 and 2019.

Of the amount, over Tk 3,042.83

crore was credited and the rest was debited.

Sayed said the Tk 337.30 crore in fixed deposit accounts was frozen with court orders while the taka and dollars seized from him in cash were deposited to the government exchequer. Besides, his two houses and around 52 khatas of land were confiscated.

The chargesheet also mentioned that between 2009 and 2019, Shamim's firm GKB and Company got work orders for 154 projects. Before Shamim's arrest, he completed 61 projects and received around Tk 743.77 crore in payment. The work of the 93 other projects worth Tk 4,810.49 crore have yet to be completed.

Shamim is now being treated at the prison cell at Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University Hospital.

No case, probe in most cases

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Court lawyer who dealt with many cases involving human rights violations, said every person has the right to justice and extrajudicial killings provides for no trial or even investigation.

He claimed more than 160 people fell victims of extrajudicial killings in Teknaf after OC Pradeep Kumar Das took charge of Teknaf police station, but no one except some rights activists had raised any questions about those murders.

"But the killing of a retired army major has triggered this huge discussion. It looks odd," he said.

"This is actually called selective justice. Law is supposed to eliminate discrimination but here law is being used to create discrimination," he said.

He also said different quarters have long been demanding formation of an independent commission to inquire into each and every incident of extrajudicial killings or at least judicial inquiry into such incidents, but to no avail.

Law enforcement agencies have no such internal mechanism to deal with the matters independently. Besides, departmental proceedings fall short of expectations to address the issues effectively. Maintaining neutrality remains a major concern till date, he added.

Talking on Akramul's killing, prominent rights activist Nur Khan Liton said it was a much-discussed issue, but no neutral probe was visible and anyone involved has not been brought to book.

He said whenever any such incident happens, it gets huge media attention and the public becomes outraged, prompting the authorities to take some immediate steps to calm the situation. But no visible step was taken to stop extrajudicial killing altogether.

Rather, in many cases, members of law enforcement agencies, involved in such incidents, were awarded, he said.

"Although law enforcers claim that investigation is carried out after each and every incident, we never saw any neutral investigation ... As per the constitution, everybody is equal before the law. But in reality, the way the state responds when an important person becomes the victim is different from when it happens to a common citizen.

"It seems those who are governing

the state are not following the constitutional directives in this regard."

Nur Khan also said, "One thing should be settled first: Whether such incidents can go on years after years without the directives or silent approval from the high-ups. Head of the agencies can't avoid responsibility for such incidents."

Asked about trial and justice in other extra-judicial killings, Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan said, "I have no knowledge [about such incidents]. Besides, no army person got killed this way ever before."

He asked this correspondent to give an example of any extra-judicial case. Being informed about Akramul's incident, he said perhaps there was an investigation into the incident.

But when this correspondent informed him about the family's versions about investigation, the minister said, "Then I cannot say without seeing the documents."

Hiker's dream

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e-Bangla Nagar Police Station, told The Daily Star.

He said the victim died probably when she was being taken to the hospital.

The body was kept at the hospital morgue, he said in the afternoon, adding that they were yet to trace the microbus and detain its driver.

Reshma's brother-in-law Moniruzzaman said they filed a case with the police station over the incident.

Reshma did her basic mountaineering course from Nehru Institute of Mountaineering in India's Uttarakhand. She scaled the Keokradong peak in Bandarban in 2016, said her family members.

She also scaled the Stok Kangri (6,153 metres), the highest mountain in the Stok Range of the Himalayas in the Ladakh region of north India, last year. Besides, she used to run marathons and cycle, they said.

One of Reshma's friends, Sakhawat Hossain, said she was a member of the Bishwa Sahitya Kendra's study circle.

"She was dreaming she would go up the Everest one day and was preparing for it. But with her, that dream is gone too," Sakhawat added.

Bangladesh sees no drop in Covid infection rate

It still hovers around 20pc; cases cross 250,000-mark

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Many Asian countries have seen a drop in coronavirus infection rate in the last couple of months but in Bangladesh's case it remained over 20 percent.

Since May 24 the country has seen a fluctuation in the number of daily Covid-19 tests, but the infection rate has persistently remained over 20 percent which means one out of each five tests came out positive each day.

In terms of total Covid-19 cases, Bangladesh ranks fifth in Asia, according to worldometer.info.

The first four countries are India, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. The infection rate in the countries are 9.35 percent, 10.25 percent, 2.52 percent and 4.8 percent respectively on Thursday.

On the same day, the infection rate was 23.43 percent in Bangladesh.

Meanwhile, Bangladesh has crossed the 2.5 lakh grim milestone with 2,851 new cases in 24 hours between Thursday and Friday morning.

According to Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS), the total number of Covid-19 cases reached 252,502 in the country.

A total of 12,699 samples were tested in 84 labs across the country in the 24 hours and 22.45 percent of the tests resulted positive, said Dr Nasima Sultana, additional director general (administration) of DGHS.

However, comparing the data of Thursday of the 49 Asian countries, it is found that Bangladesh was second after Oman in terms of infection rate.

Oman lags far behind Bangladesh in terms of daily new case.

On Thursday, Oman had 427 new case whereas Bangladesh reported 2,977 cases, according to worldometer.info.

According to the WHO, Bangladesh is the top 15 countries in the world for its huge population infected with Covid-19.

Besides other countries of different regions in the world, Bangladesh crossed Turkey and Qatar in the last couple of months.

The infection rates in Turkey and Qatar are now 2.1 percent and 9.8 percent respectively.

Yesterday at the briefing, Dr Nasima said that a total of 27 died from coronavirus infections in the said 24 hours.

With this, the death toll due to Covid-19 in the country reached 3,333 and the death rate now stands at 1.32 percent of total COVID-19 cases.

Meanwhile, 1,760 Covid-19 patients have recovered in those 24 hours.

The total number of recoveries stands at 145,584 and the recovery rate at 57.66 percent.

A total of 815 people were put on isolation in those 24 hours, the DGHS official added during the briefing.

Among the dead, 24 were male and three were female. Four of aged between 41 and 50, six between 51 and 60, 12 between 61 and 70, four between 71 and 80, and one was between 81 and 90.

Malaysian ex-FM

charged in graft case

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Malaysia's ex-finance minister, now a key opposition figure, was charged with corruption yesterday over a \$1.5 billion construction project, the latest government critic to be targeted since a scandal-plagued party returned to power.

Lim Guan Eng is the highest-profile figure yet to face a criminal probe in a sweeping crackdown on dissent launched by the new administration, and says the case against him is politically motivated.

A crowd of journalists and supporters, including fellow MPs, were waiting for him as he arrived at a Kuala Lumpur court yesterday morning, following his arrest by anti-graft officials the previous evening.

Air India

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said dozens of passengers were taken to hospital and that there were at least 20 critically injured.

Dozens of ambulances were being rushed to the scene, reports said.

Air India Express said in a statement that there was "no fire reported at the time of landing."

It said there were 174 passengers, 10 infants, two pilots and five cabin crew on board the aircraft.

"As per the initial reports, rescue operations are on and passengers are being taken to hospital for medical care," it said.

An emergency services official, speaking on condition of anonymity, told AFP: "Rescue operations are on but the rains are making it difficult."

Television pictures showed emergency services personnel working in the dark and spraying the wreckage with water.

Kerala has been battered by heavy rains in recent days.

News18 reported that there was a problem with the aircraft's landing gear, citing unnamed sources.