

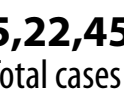
1,071  
New cases in 24hrs



5,22,453  
Total cases



7,781  
Deaths



4,66,801  
Recoveries



1,937,758  
Deaths



90,257,683  
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GLOBAL  
UPDATE



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FIGHTING CORRUPTION

# Media's role very important

HC says; asks Ekattor TV to place its arguments for allowing PK Halder on air

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The High Court yesterday observed that media and journalists have a very important role in eradicating all kinds of corruption.

The court and judges alone cannot do it, said the bench of Justice Md Nazrul Islam Talukder and Justice Ahmed Sohel.

The bench came up with the observation during hearing a petition filed by the Anti-Corruption Commission seeking necessary directives against the authorities of Ekattor TV for allowing Proshanta Kumar Halder, also known as PK Halder, to participate in a live talk show and broadcasting his interview.

PK Halder, former managing director of NRB Global Bank, is a fugitive accused in a money laundering case.

Yesterday, the HC also asked the authorities of Ekattor TV to place their statements explaining their role in broadcasting the interview of PK Halder, who fled the country after allegedly siphoning off around Tk 10,200 crore from some non-banking financial institutions, and in allowing him to participate in the live talk show on December 28 last year.

The authorities of the private TV channel have been ordered to place their explanations by themselves or through engaging lawyer before the HC bench on January 17.

The bench also fixed 12 noon on January 17 for further hearing on the issue.

Earlier in the day, the HC judges and lawyers watched the recorded report and talk show broadcast by Ekattor TV on PK Halder on the display screen as the authorities of the TV channel produced the video clips before the bench through its register office in line with its December 30 order.

During yesterday's hearing, ACC lawyer Khurshid Alam Khan prayed to the HC to issue a contempt of court rule against the authorities of Ekattor TV, saying that they had the audacity and high-handedness by permitting

fugitive accused PK Halder to take part in the live talk show.

By doing so, the Ekattor TV authorities have presented themselves parallel to the court, which is very much contemptuous, he argued.

Deputy Attorney General AKM Amin Uddin Manik told the HC that the court needs to hear the explanations from the Ekattor TV authorities.

Mosharraf Hossain, lawyer for Uzzal Kumar Nandi, an accomplice of PK Halder, told the HC bench that the Ekattor TV's report and talk show have not maligned the court.

Following the ACC's petition, the HC bench on December 30 directed the private television channel to submit video clips of the interview and conversations PK Halder had with the channel on December 28 to this court yesterday.

The court has observed that no accused or convicted of non-bailable and cognisable offences is entitled to make any comment or give interview before media.

"Our concrete and considered view is that the accused, the convict, the fugitive and convicted accused of non-bailable and cognisable offences who are wanted by the court are not entitled to make any comments or give interviews before TV channels, electronic media, print media, social media or any other media in respect to the case during its pendency for trial and investigation because it may create confusion, affect the merit of the case and also lower the image and sanctity of the judiciary and the investigating agency," the bench said.

In the full text of the order, the HC also restrained by an order of injunction the authorities of all media from participating, publishing, broadcasting any statement, comment, interview and conversation of anyone accused and convicted of non-bailable and cognisable offences in TV news and talk shows with regard to the cases pending before the court or investigating agency till further order.



Equipped with sticks, supporters of Awami League and BNP mayoral candidates for Sreepur municipality chase each other at Sreepur Bazar in Gazipur yesterday. The incident took place when the two candidates were campaigning. Several people, including the BNP mayoral candidate, were injured. PHOTO: COLLECTED

## BB probe reveals Tk 5,100cr scam

FROM PAGE 1

its electronic ledger -- "short-term loan repayment" and "long-term loan" -- without proper authorisation to disburse the loans to Uttara Group.

This is just one of the examples of its violation of the banking rules.

Irregularities involving Tk 5,100 crore were done by the board and management of UFIL in disbursement of loans and mobilisation of deposits, the BB found in its probe carried out between October 7 and November 25 last year.

Most of the amount was not even shown in the financial statement of the UFIL disclosed in 2019.

"The central bank is yet to detect the actual amount of money embezzled from the NBF as its management did not cooperate with the probe teams, ignoring the banking rules," the BB report said.

The lender even shut down the server of its IT system to prevent the investigators from gathering information, according to the report.

On December 1 last year, the central bank asked UFIL to give explanations for the irregularities.

In response, the UFIL sent two letters to the BB -- one on December 15 last year and the other on January 5, admitting that irregularities took place at the financial institution.

In the first letter, UFIL Managing Director SM Shamsul Arefin sought 30 working days to give the BB explanations for the irregularities.

Around three weeks later, he again wrote to the BB, and said, "No explanation is sufficient in response to the queries about the irregularities found by the central bank investigation and audit. We are offering you apology with folded hands and state that such types of mistakes will not recur in the future."

"We want your cooperation so that we can run our institution efficiently and smoothly."

The bulk of the loans was given to different concerns of Uttara Group. The majority of directors of the Group also hold directorship at UFIL.

The BB found that Mujibur Rahman, a director of UFIL and deputy managing director of different concerns of Uttara Group, is the key person behind the financial scam. UFIL Chairman Rashidul Hasan and its MD Shamsul Arefin have largely been involved in the scam, according to the report.

The lender also gave Tk 248.68 crore in the form of margin loan to its subsidiary company Uttara Finance and Capital Management.

The fund was supposed to be disbursed to clients to help them buy shares from the capital market, but UFIL failed to provide the BB with any document, raising questions whether the loans were used to do so.

LOAN DISBURSED SANS CREDIT APPLICATION

UFIL disbursed Tk 521 crore to a number of its directors to purchase shares from the stock market.

But the loans were given without credit applications and any discussions at the UFIL board meeting, which "jeopardised the interests of the depositors to a great extent", mentioned the report.

Typically, upon receipt of a credit proposal from an individual or a company, the branch manager of a lender has to verify whether the potential borrower has the capacity to repay the loan. The branch then submits the proposal to the credit committee.

If the fund is larger than the manager's approval limit set by the board, the proposal must be placed before the board of directors or the managing director.

But UFIL did not follow any of the procedures while giving money to the borrowers who happen to be its

directors, said the BB report.

Both the board and the UFIL management collectively perpetrated the irregularities consistently since 2013, it added.

QUESTION OVER TK 890CR

The UFIL, which has been operating since 1995, gave Tk 1,201 crore to different companies of its directors, but the management did it without UFIL board's approval.

Without proper authorisation, the UFIL management created two sections in its ledger -- advance and prepayment, and investment in shares -- to show the loan disbursements in its register.

The BB found that the UFIL showed only Tk 311 crore in its 2019 financial statement without explaining the whereabouts of the remaining Tk 890 crore.

Sources said some UFIL directors, who hold directorships of both UFIL and Uttara Motors, were found involved in the unethical practice.

Though the banking rules don't allow a non-bank financial institution like UFIL to make cash transactions, a large amount of funds was given to Rashidul in cash under the two unauthorised sections in the ledger, the report said.

"UFIL also did not show in its financial statement the funds disbursed to Rashidul," it said.

Contacted, Rashidul said he has been unwell for the last 10 months and has not attended the office during the period.

"I am unaware of the central bank report on UFIL... I am not in a position to comment," he mentioned.

FAKE TERM DEPOSITS

In August last year, the lender provided vouchers of term-deposit receipts (TDRs) to the tune of Tk 236 crore to Bluechip Securities Ltd. UFIL Director Mujibur is the managing director of Bluechip.

But the vouchers of TDRs were forged. In reality, the firm did not deposit any money with UFIL, said the report.

The BB inspection teams were unable to find out how many fake TDRs have so far been provided as the UFIL management declined to provide information.

Besides, the teams are yet to know whether BlueChip took loans from other non-bank financial institutions or any banks through such forged TDRs.

The UFIL will find itself in a precarious situation if BlueChip fails to repay the loan, the BB report pointed out.

EMBEZZLEMENT THRU' CALL MONEY MARKET

The UFIL also misused the funds it borrowed from the call money market. Though UFIL borrowed a total of Tk 397.59 crore from the market till December, 2019, it mentioned in its financial statement that the loan amount was Tk 16 crore.

The interbank call money market is a short-term money market, which allows banks and non-bank financial institutions, to borrow and lend money at interbank rates.

Such loans provided for a very short period, usually lasting no longer than a week, and often used to help banks and NBFIs meet reserve requirement.

"Mujibur used the funds for personal purposes in gross violation of the banking rules," the report said.

UFIL MD'S INVOLVEMENT

UFIL Managing Director Shamsul Arefin has been involved in siphoning off funds, eroding the interest of depositors and other stakeholders of the financial institution, according to the BB report.

He took Tk 24.22 crore from UFIL without approval from the management or the board. The amount was not mentioned in the

UFIL's financial statement, and he does not have any loan account with the lender, it mentioned.

He informed a BB inspection team that he had taken the funds from UFIL for his son's treatment and returned a good amount from time to time.

In its document, UFIL showed that Shamsul took Tk 6.24 crore from it as of December 2019.

Contacted, Shamsul told The Daily Star that UFIL failed to provide information to the BB audit team in time as he was diagnosed with Covid-19 in September, and Uttam Kumar Saha, the then chief financial officer of UFIL, died from the virus the same month.

"I have adjusted almost all the funds I had taken between 2004 and 2019 from UFIL."

The outstanding amount is now a maximum of Tk 58 lakh, he claimed. He, however, declined to comment on the forged TDRs and other relevant issues.

CONCEALMENT OF CREDIT, DEPOSIT

UFIL also concealed the actual amount of term deposits mobilised from its clients.

Its financial statement mentioned that the total amount of term deposits was Tk 1,877 crore as of December 2019. But the BB discovered that the actual amount was Tk 2,603.20 crore.

The undisclosed funds of the term deposits to the tune of Tk 726 crore was diverted to other sectors as part of its effort to help scammers plunder the money, said the probe report.

The lender also employed the same tactic in the calculation of the disbursed loans in its financial statement.

For instance, the total loan or lease given by UFIL was Tk 1,877 crore as per its financial balance sheet till December 2019. But the BB found that the actual amount was Tk 3,802 crore.

The inspection teams failed to detect the destination of the undisclosed loans of Tk 1,998 crore as the UFIL management refused to provide information.

Md Serajul Islam, spokesperson and an executive director of the BB, said the central bank is still carrying out investigation.

If proof of involvement of any UFIL official or board member in the scam is found, punitive measures will be taken, he said.

Asked what measures would be taken against the scammers, Md Shah Alam, another BB executive director responsible for monitoring and making policies for non-bank financial institutions, declined to comment.

WHAT UFIL, UTTARA SAY

Contacted, Matiur Rahman, vice president of UFIL and also MD of Uttara Group, claimed that the irregularities detected by the BB are "one-sided information".

"Such level of irregularities can never happen in a financial institution. My younger brother Mujibur has already paid back Tk 308 crore to adjust his previous loans in compliance with the central bank's instructions," he told The Daily Star.

Matiur also claimed that Uttara Group had not taken Tk 336 crore loans from the UFIL as mentioned by the BB in its report.

"This is not a loan. Uttara Motors received the amount from UFIL upon the maturity of its term deposits with the institution."

The BB should crosscheck its findings once again and UFIL will certainly follow all instructions from the banking regulator, he said.

Asked why UFIL offered apology to the BB, he said the lender would run into further trouble if it does not use such words.

The Daily Star contacted Uttara Group several times to communicate with Mujibur, but he did not respond.

## Bangladeshi human trafficker sentenced in US

DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENT

A Bangladeshi national was sentenced to 46 months in prison followed by three years of supervised release for his role in a scheme to smuggle Bangladeshis from Mexico into the USA.

The convict, Moktar Hossain, admitted that from March 2017 to August 2018, he trafficked Bangladeshi nationals to the US at the Texas border in exchange for payments.

Moktar operated out of Monterrey, Mexico, where he maintained a hotel that housed migrants on their way to the US. He paid drivers to transport them to the US border, and gave the migrants instructions on how to cross the Rio Grande River, said the US Embassy in a statement yesterday referring to US Department of Justice.

"The defendant was a key player in an organised smuggling network that operated for profit and preyed on Bangladeshi nationals who wanted to enter the United States illegally," said Acting Assistant Attorney General David P Burns of the US justice department's criminal division.

"This sentence serves as a clear deterrent to participants of such transnational criminal organisations who seek to undermine the security of our borders by illegally facilitating the travel of foreigners into the United States for financial gain."

"Border security and national security are one and the same," said Ryan K Patrick, US attorney for the Southern District of Texas.

"We must know who is coming into the country, and we cannot allow unfiltered access. My office continues to work with all our partners in executing this mission."

The investigation was conducted under the Extraterritorial Criminal Travel Strike Force (ECTF) programme, a joint partnership between the justice department's criminal division and HSI.

This case was prosecuted by Trial Attorneys James Hepburn and Erin Cox of the criminal division's human rights and special prosecutions section with assistance from the US Attorney's Office for the Southern District of Texas.

## Bangabandhu

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Jail in November 1975.

The ministry issued the notification to cancel the gazette as per the recommendation of the 70th meeting of the Jatiya Muktijoddha Council (Jamuka).

On November 19 last year, the council recommended to cancel the freedom fighter certificate of Mosleh Uddin at the meeting.

Earlier, a gazette of Mosleh Uddin as freedom fighter was issued in 2004, during the tenure of the BNP-Jamaat led four party alliance government.

On January 5, the ministry cancelled 52 freedom fighter certificates in total, in line with the National Freedom Fighters Council Act 2002.

The notification of cancellation of these gazettes is available on the ministry's website.

On June 7 last year, the government issued a notification cancelling the gazettes of 1,181 freedom fighters following the recommendation of the 66th meeting of the Jamuka.

## Unworthy

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Taposh's handling of DSCC funds was a violation of the local government act. Taposh told reporters at the Nagar Bhaban later in the day that Modhumoti Bank, which he owns, is like any other private bank receiving deposits from government institutions as per rules and regulations.

"There is corruption when someone takes bribes, gets commission and... embezzles government money. The allegation being brought is not an objective opinion," he said.

Khokon's claim that the DSCC has not been paying some of its employees for months is also baseless, he added.

Former mayor Khokon on Saturday said Taposh was receiving crores in profit from the DSCC money by investing in different organisations while different development projects stalled amid fund shortage.

## US, other Western nations express 'concern' at HK arrests

AFP, Washington

The US, Britain, Australia and Canada released a statement Saturday underscoring "serious concern" over the mass arrest of Hong Kong democracy figures under a new security law, part of a mounting crackdown by Beijing.

More than 1,000 police officers detained 53 prominent figures -- including a US citizen -- in dawn raids Wednesday on charges of "subversion," a new national security crime that carries up to life in prison.

## Govt may go for it despite

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might not be available in the country. "We are looking for potential sources of the syringe because it has to be certified by the World Health Organisation," a top officer said, wishing not to be named.

Director General Khurshid also admitted that injecting from a 0.3 ml syringe required considerable skills.

COVAX sent a letter to Bangladesh on January 6 asking whether the country would join the COVAX programme. It sent similar letters to 192 countries. Countries that showed interest will get the doses by the end of January or February.

The COVAX in its letter said that the free doses of Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine must be given to the frontline health workers and Bangladesh has agreed to

the condition.

The deadline for replying to the COVAX is on January 18. COVAX will review the responses and will inform its decision on January 19.

Officials here said if everything goes right, the vaccine is likely to arrive by March. But it will mostly be used in Dhaka city because the storage is not available outside the capital.

The World Health Organisation has listed the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine for emergency use only.

It said the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine met its safety requirements and its benefits outweighed any potential risks.

The vaccine has already been administered in several countries, including the United States, Canada, Qatar, Bahrain and Mexico.

## Experts call for effective

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in the market are manufactured from disastrous if not monitored."

He said the government should revive the food grain storage loan project to help farmers hold their produce till they get a good price.

Dr Quazi Shahabuddin, former director general of BIDS, said, "We see a major gap in available information. Also, we don't know how the government is planning to keep adequate reserves in the future and what their plans are against hoarders speculating the market?"

Farmers from Gaibandha, Pirojpur, Meherpur, Satkhira, Sunamganj, Sirajganj, Rangpur, Nilphamari and Kurigram joined the dialogue.

They said marginalised farmers are compelled to sell their produce immediately after harvest to repay their debts.

They urged the government to extend support so that they can store paddy for a couple of months to sell at a good price.

Dr Md Shahjahan Kabir, director general of Bangladesh Rice Research Institute (BRRI), said, "Considering reduced Aman harvest and high consumption, we estimated a 30-lakh tonne surplus by June 30 this year. There will be no food crisis as farmers will produce more Boro this season."

Dr Nazrul Islam, director general of Bangladesh Agricultural Research Institute (BARI), said, "We estimate a shortage of 14 lakh tonnes of rice by 2030. As agriculture now contributes only 15 percent to the GDP, it must be mechanised for greater production and rational use of labour in other sectors."

Dr Mirza Mofazzal Islam, director general of Bangladesh Institute of Nuclear Agriculture (BINA), said, "Coarse rice's demand is increasing as most medium-priced rice varieties

in the market are manufactured from coarse rice. To meet the demand, we should focus on more producing varieties."

AKM Khorshed Alam Khan, president of Auto Rice Mill Owners' Association, said, "The government said high yield, but we saw lesser produce available to purchase last year. We don't have any stock left and that's affecting the market price."

He also talked about an automatic syndicate that has emerged without planning as large corporations are purchasing and hoarding rice.

Md Shah Alam, president of Bangladesh Rice Exporters' Association, said, "The decision to import rice should have been taken days ago and the scope of importing should be open for all by reducing import duty to 20 percent."

Kazi Sazzad Zahir Chanda, general secretary of Bangladesh Krishak Samity, said, "To boost up reserves, government must build storage in all major paddy-harvesting unions."

Mohammad Emaz Uddin Pramantik, member of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Ministry of Agriculture, said, "The hoarders are responsible for the price hike of rice and the consumers are suffering. As the government is low on rice reserve, we're trying our best to regain enough stock soon to intervene in the market."

According to the Trading Corporation of Bangladesh (TCB), the retail price of coarse rice is around 46 percent higher compared to the corresponding price on last year, while the price of fine and medium rice also rose between seven and 20 percent.

The total reserve of rice is only 5.32 lakh tonnes as of January 6, just over half the reserve at the same time last year.

## Cuba to test Covid vaccine candidate in Iran

AFP, HAVANA

Cuba will test its most advanced Covid vaccine candidate, in Iran, the research center that developed it announced on Saturday.

State-run Finlay Vaccine Institute (IFV) and the Pasteur Institute of Iran signed an agreement in Havana that will see a Phase 3 clinical trial in Iran, to "move forward faster in immunization against Covid-19 in both countries," the IFV announced

on Twitter.

The news came on the heels of Iran's supreme leader on Friday banning the import of American and British-produced vaccines against Covid-19, saying they were "completely untrustworthy."

Ayatollah Ali Khamenei said in a tweet, accompanied by the hashtag #CoronaVaccine: "It's not unlikely they would want to contaminate other nations."

The Islamic republic has reported

more than 1.2 million cases of the novel coronavirus, which have caused over 56,000 deaths.

It has accused arch-enemy the United States of hampering its access to vaccines through a tough sanctions regime.