

2 opposition MPs lambast govt over graft

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Two opposition lawmakers came down heavily on the government yesterday in parliament for its failure to curb corruption.

Bangladesh has set a textbook example of plundering, BNP lawmaker Rumeen Farhana said while taking part in the discussion on thanksgiving motion on the president's speech.

"It has become normal that a pillow is being purchased at Tk 6,000, a vegetable cutter widely known as boti at Tk 10,000, a fork at Tk 1,000... a waste bin costs Tk 2.50 lakh, a medical book Tk 85,000, curtains Tk 37 lakh, and a telephone Tk 15 lakh," she said.

The president in parliament spoke about infrastructural development in details, "but I say this [infrastructure development] is a big source of looting", she told the House.

The lawmaker claimed the construction of one kilometre of a four-lane highway costs Tk 28 crore in Europe, Tk 10 crore in India, and Tk 13 crore in China on an average.

But in Bangladesh, the construction cost per kilometre of a four-lane highway is Tk 60 crore, she said, adding that even the per kilometre cost of the Dhaka-Mawa-Bhanga highway is Tk 200 crore.

Rumeen claimed that the cost of per kilometre bridge is Tk 500 to Tk 700 crore in India, Malaysia and Brunei but expenditure on per kilometre of the Padma bridge was Tk 5,000 crore. She blasted the government

for what she said was "failure to tackle the Covid-19 situation" and alleged that its corruption related to testing facilities, mask, PPE, oxygen distribution and others had made things complicated.

"Bangladesh is the only country where Covid-19 certificates were put on sale."

The BNP lawmaker claimed Bangladesh is paying about 47 percent higher to buy Covid vaccines as the government did not sign any contract with the Serum Institute of India directly.

'FAILURE OF BANGLADESH BANK' Jatiya Party lawmaker Mujibul Haque said the banking sector is witnessing huge corruption due to the "failure of Bangladesh Bank" and lack of proper monitoring from the authorities.

"PK Halder is an example. He embezzled Tk 3500 crore, Hallmark siphoned off hundreds of crores of money while total defaulted loan stands between Tk 1 to 1.15 lakh crore. What is Bangladesh Bank doing? Does anyone see what Bangladesh Bank is doing?"

He also said, "Hundreds of crores of taka of different banks and financial institutions is being looted due to the failure of Bangladesh Bank. Nobody is checking these. We need to curb all these and if we fail to do so, the economy will be destroyed."

While taking part in discussion on the thanksgiving motion, he also said bureaucrats are the most corrupt in the country although people always point the finger at politicians.



British Prime Minister Boris Johnson meets staff and patients at Barnet FC's ground, The Hive, which is being used as a coronavirus vaccination centre, in north London, Britain yesterday. PHOTO: REUTERS

Borders tightened around the world

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from official figures. On Sunday, France started demanding a negative PCR test for arrivals by sea and air from European Union neighbors.

Sweden said it would prohibit entry from neighbouring Norway for three weeks, after cases of the more infectious British strain were detected in Oslo.

And in Israel, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said the country was "closing the skies hermetically, except for rare exceptions" to both arrivals and departures for a week.

FURY IN THE NETHERLANDS But government action to curtail the virus' spread still faces stiff opposition from some citizens.

Protests against a coronavirus curfew in the Netherlands degenerated into clashes with police and looting in cities across the country Sunday night, a day after a Covid-19 testing centre was set on fire in the northern village of Urk.

Police used water cannon and dogs in Amsterdam, public television NOS reported, after hundreds gathered to protest the 9:00 pm-4:30 am curfew, set to last until February 10.

At least 30 people were arrested in Eindhoven, where mayor John

Jorritsma told reporters that if the country continued "down this path, then I think we are heading for civil war".

And in Thailand, the country's largest seafood market, forced to shut after a coronavirus outbreak late last year, got a deep clean yesterday as authorities mull when to reopen it.

VACCINATION CHALLENGES Scientists say the only way out of the pandemic is large-scale vaccinations, but the roll-out has stuttered in many places.

Egypt began its programme, with a doctor and a nurse getting the Chinese-made Sinopharm jab. Health Minister Hala Zayed said Cairo had inked deals for vaccine shipments from British, Chinese and Russian firms, for a total of around 100 million doses -- enough for about half of Egypt's population.

Australia's medical regulator formally approved the Pfizer vaccine, with the first doses expected to be administered in late February, Prime Minister Scott Morrison said.

The European Union urged AstraZeneca yesterday to find ways to swiftly deliver vaccines after the company announced a large cut in supplies of its Covid-19 shot to the bloc, as news emerged the drugmaker

also faced supply problems elsewhere.

In a sign of the EU's frustration - after Pfizer also announced supply delays earlier in January - a senior EU official told Reuters the bloc would in the coming days require pharmaceutical companies to register Covid-19 vaccine exports.

AstraZeneca, which developed its shot with Oxford University, told the EU yesterday it could not meet agreed supply targets up to the end of March, with an EU official involved in the talks telling Reuters that meant a 60% cut to 31 million doses.

Australia's Health Minister Greg Hunt told reporters AstraZeneca had advised the country it had experienced "a significant supply shock", which would cut supplies in March below what was agreed.

Meanwhile, US biotechnology firm Moderna yesterday said lab studies showed its vaccine would remain protective against variants of the coronavirus first identified in the United Kingdom and South Africa.

But out of caution, the company will test adding a second booster of its vaccine -- to make three shots in total -- and has begun preclinical studies on a booster specifically for the South African variant.

Probe lingers, locomotives

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due to the company's delay in giving a reply. The metre-gauge diesel electric locomotives -- bought under a project worth around Tk 300 crore -- arrived at the workshop after they were unloaded at the Chattogram port in September last year.

Later in its report, a commissioning committee said the technical specifications of three capital components -- alternators, compressors and traction motors -- of the supplied locomotives did not match the specifications mentioned in the agreement, showed railway documents obtained by The Daily Star.

Under such circumstances, the project authorities halted payment for the locomotives.

PROBE SAGA The railways minister, at a meeting on October 13 over the project, asked to form a committee. But the ministry issued a circular about forming the committee with its Joint Secretary Faizur Rahman Faruqui on November 24 last year.

The committee could not start work till mid-December as it was yet to get one independent member from Buet's mechanical engineering department.

The work of the committee could not progress much as it did not get reply from the Hyundai Rotem Company even after writing several times, citing Christmas and New Year leaves, a probe committee member said.

In the meantime, Project Director Nur Ahmed Hossain wrote to railways ministry's Secretary Salim Reza asking to reconstitute the committee, excluding Additional Director General (Rolling Stock) Monjur-Ul-Alam Chowdhury as its member.

In the January 12 letter, the PD said Monjur is not only the project

coordinator but also controlling officer. Besides, he and BR's Director General Md Shamsuzzaman have been making moves to clear 65 percent of the remaining payment of the HRC even before the completion of the probe, reads the letter.

Md Shamsuzzaman earlier refuted the allegation. This correspondent could not reach Monjur over phone even after several attempts.

In this given situation, the ministry on January 19 reconstituted the committee excluding two members -- Faizur Rahman Faruqui and Monjur -- of the previous committee.

Md Farukuzzaman, additional secretary (law and land), will lead the committee now, while joint director general (mechanical) of the BR was added to the committee. Buet teacher Muhammed Mahbubur Razaque will remain its member, according to the circular.

But, JDC (mechanical), as director (mechanical) of the BR, was the convener of a technical sub-committee, which recommended hiring CCIC Singapore Pvt Ltd as the pre-shipment inspector for BR's foreign purchases, sources said.

The CCIC allegedly violated the contract with the BR by not doing a proper pre-shipment inspection for the 10 locomotives. Project Director Nur Ahmed Hossain in November wrote the authorities concerned to take action against it.

Contacted, Prof Mahbubur Razaque said they have made some progress and came to know that the HRC has sent their reply.

"But no meeting was held after committee was reconstituted," he told The Daily Star yesterday. He, however, said it is possible to complete probe within 15 working days.

Poor suffer in widening

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of people living in poverty back to pre-crisis levels, Oxfam said. Meanwhile, the collective wealth of the world's billionaires rose \$3.9 trillion between March and December 2020 to reach \$11.95 trillion, the report calculated.

The 10 richest men - a list led by Bezos and Musk which also includes LVMH luxury group's CEO Bernard Arnault, Microsoft's Bill Gates and Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg - saw their net worth increase by \$540 billion in the same period, Oxfam said.

That sum would be enough to prevent anyone from falling into poverty as a result of the pandemic and pay for a vaccine for everyone on earth, researchers calculated.

The pandemic marks a "pivotal" point which has exposed economic disparities and built support for "transformative" policies, Oxfam said, calling for higher taxes on wealth

and corporations alongside stronger protections for workers.

A temporary tax on excess profits made by the 32 global corporations that have profited the most during the pandemic could have raised \$104 billion in 2020, Oxfam said.

International cooperation would be key to implementing many changes, said Jayati Ghosh, an economics professor at the University of Massachusetts Amherst who was among the economists polled by Oxfam for the report.

The administration of new US President Joe Biden will spur "more willingness" for joint action on issues including a crackdown on tax havens and a bailout for developing nations, she told the Thomson Reuters Foundation by phone.

"There are some very, very big hurdles, but there are many things that can be done very quickly," she added.

Ekushey book fair to begin

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A Bangla Academy official yesterday said Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina agreed on the inauguration date.

Meanwhile, Bangla Academy Literary Award 2020 was announced yesterday at a press conference in the Bangla Academy.

DG Habibullah announced the names of 10 award winners. The awardees are: Dhaka University Pro-Vice Chancellor Prof Muhammad

Samad in poetry, Imtiaz Shamim in fiction, Begum Akhtar Kamal in essay/research, Suresh Ranjan Basak in translation, Rabiul Alam in drama, Anjir Liton in children's literature, Sahida Begum in Liberation War research, Ferdousi Majumdar in memoirs/travelogue, Aparaish Bandhopaddhaya in science fiction and Muhammad Habibullah Pathan in folklore.

Each awardee will get Tk 3 lakh and a crest, said the DG.

BNP finds it hard to get polling agents

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AL mayor nominee Rezaul Karim Chowdhury and his BNP counterpart Shahadat Hossain spent the days of the campaign going from one area to another with their supporters.

On the last day of the campaign, the AL nominee emphasised that an AL man should continue to hold the office and complete unfinished development works.

Shahadat Hossain said voting for him was necessary to restore democracy and people's right to vote and ensure a corruption free Chattogram City Corporation.

BNP leaders last night said AL cadres were intimidating their activists. BNP standing committee member Amir Khashru Mahmud Chowdhury, chief election coordinator for the polls, told The Daily Star that law enforcers were arresting their activists and leaders en masse.

BNP nominee Shahadat said many BNP leaders and activists were staying away from home fearing harassment. "Police and the ruling party men

are going to the BNP supporters' residence and intimidating them, asking them to leave the area and telling them to return to their homes after the election," added Shahadat.

Before the last day's campaign, Shahadat at a press conference demanded immediate release of 69 leaders and activists arrested in a week. "Otherwise, all BNP supported councillor candidates will stage a sit-in programme in front of the returning officer Hasanzaman's office," he vowed.

He claimed that the BNP men were arrested in 10 false and fabricated cases against over 1,000 BNP activists.

Shahadat also said police arrested at least 20 BNP men on Sunday night at their homes.

He also demanded immediate withdrawal of officer-in-charge of Kotwali Police Station Nizam Uddin for acting in favour of the AL camp.

He added that he submitted 40 complaints to the returning officer about incidents of irregularities committed by AL men.

ACC files five more cases

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examined the proposal and its assistant vice president Al Mamun Sohel forwarded it.

The company's Head of Business Nahida Runai recommended sanctioning the loan. To put up the loan proposal before the board meeting, approval of then ILFSL MD was needed and Rashedul gave the nod, reads the FIR.

On October 25, 2015, the loan was sanctioned as per the approval of ILFSL directors Nasim Anowar, Basudev Banarjee, MA Hashem and Mizanur Rahman.

Similarly, Amitav applied to ILFSL for a working capital and business expansion loan of Tk 31 crore on June 2, 2016. The loan was sanctioned at the 191th board meeting on June 11 that year.

Another Tk 5 crore was sanctioned on March 30, 2017 and Tk 36.81 crore on December 24, 2018.

Of the sanctioned amount of Tk 101 crore, about Tk 70.82 crore was disbursed, the ACC enquiry found.

According to the FIR, Halder helped Anan Chemicals avail the loans. Halder, now staying in Toronto, is the director of P&L Hal Holding Inc, a Canadian corporation, according to Canadian media reports.

He came to the limelight during the anti-casino drives in the country in 2019. The ACC had launched an investigation into the involvement of 43 people, including Halder, in the illegal casino business.

The graft watchdog on January 8 last year filed a case against Halder over amassing wealth worth Tk 275 crore illegally.

Several enquiries into embezzlement of crores of taka of four NBFIs by Halder are pending with the ACC.

Sanjida Khatun, Col Zahir picked

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She has won many prestigious awards in both Bangladesh and India such as Deshikottoma title in 2012 from Visva-Bharati University and Rabindra Award in 2010, Bangla Academy Literary Award in 1998, Ekushey Padak in 1991 and Kabi Jasimuddin Award.

Col Quazi Sajjadi Ali was in the artillery corps of the Pakistan army posted in Sialkot when he declared his allegiance to Bangladesh and joined the Liberation War after escaping from Pakistan in August 1971.

Zahir, 70, organised the second

artillery force in Sector 4 in Sylhet region.

The Indian government had given six 105mm artillery to the Mukti Bahini and with that a field artillery battery group was formed for the freedom fighters. Zahir was the co-captain of the group, which assisted the Mukti Bahini's Z Force in greater Sylhet region with artillery fire support in various battles.

In 2013, Zahir was awarded the Bangladesh Independence Day Award -- the highest civilian award -- for his contribution to the Liberation War.

He is considered instrumental in persuading the Bangladesh government to recognise the Indian soldiers killed in the Bangladesh Liberation War. He also founded Shuddhoi Muktijoddho to provide recognition to indigenous war veterans of the Bangladesh Liberation War.

The Padma Shri awards are presented in different categories to winners by India's president in March or April every year.

These awards are always announced on the night before India's Republic Day every year.

Robot 'jellyfish'

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The experts decided to exploit the aspects of organisms like squid, jellyfish and octopus for a new tool in underwater exploration, said Francesco Giorgio-Serchi of the University of Edinburgh.

"They are quite unique in that their lack of supportive skeletal structure does not prevent them from outstanding feats of swimming," he said.

The robot, which constitutes a rubber head and eight tentacles, was created by a 3D printer and uses small but powerful water jets to propel itself based on a system of resonance.

The robot is the "first submersible to demonstrate the benefits of using resonance", the researchers said.

Its self-propulsion system centres on a piston which strikes at the junction of the head and the tentacles. When the piston hits at the ideal frequency -- one which sets off the natural resonance of the components -- the robot is able to generate large jets of water with very little energy.

Because of this technology, the jellyfish robot can propel itself in a way that is "ten to 50 times more efficient than typical small underwater vehicles powered by propellers".

This increased efficiency, combined with the additional benefits of the robot's soft, flexible exterior would make it ideal for operating near sensitive environments such as coral reefs, archaeological sites or even in waters crowded with swimmers," the statement said.

Because of these qualities the robot could replace divers in tasks too delicate for underwater vehicles such as the application of restorative substances to damaged corals.

While the new technology has been tested in tanks it yet to be used in real conditions in the ocean.

The University of Southampton wants to use the concept to assemble "a fully manoeuvrable and autonomous underwater vehicle capable of sensing and navigating its environment".

3rd batch goes

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Rohingyas was relocated to Bhasan Char on December 4. Over 1,800 others were relocated on December 29.

Most of the relocated refugees told reporters that living quarters on the island were way better than the congested makeshift shanties in Cox's Bazar refugee camps.

They also said they chose to move there.

Bangladesh Navy has undertaken a Tk 3,100 crore project titled the Ashrayan-3 Project on Bhasan Char for the refugees.

"More Rohingyas are becoming interested in moving to Bhasan Char for a better future. Those who arrived earlier communicated with the people in Cox's Bazar camps and maybe they are convincing others to move to Bhasan Char," Project Director Commodore Abdullah Al Mamun Chowdhury told The Daily Star yesterday.

He added that preparations have been taken for the arrival of Rohingyas.

Besides congested living conditions, frequent fights between rival gangs had made the lives of refugees even more difficult in Cox's Bazar.

After the arrival of the first and second batch of Rohingyas, many of the Rohingyas started believing that they could live a better life with greater access to healthcare, education and work.

In the Cox's Bazar camps, a family of 6-8 people live together within a 400-square foot space.

On Bhasan Char the buildings have electricity, solar panels, biogas plants, and mobile networks.

The houses have been built four feet above the ground with concrete blocks. Each building will house 16 families of four in its 16 rooms, providing more than the UN stipulated 37 square feet per person, project officials said.

The United Nations and other development partners, however, expressed concerns and demanded independent assessments of the project before the relocation.

The UN and rights groups have been questioning the relocation plan, saying the island was prone to floods and could be submerged during high tides.

Curtailed SSC

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Speaking virtually at a programme, organised at National Academy for Educational Management, she also said candidates of this year's SSC and HSC exams would not get an "auto pass".

The minister on Sunday told parliament that the 10th and 12th graders would have to attend classes in person every day while other secondary school and college students might have to visit their classrooms once a week when their educational institutions would reopen.

She said the government would bring 10th and 12th graders back to schools and colleges for the sake of their studies ahead of the SSC and HSC exams.

On December 29 last year, Dipu Moni told a press conference that classes for SSC candidates would be held from February to April and for HSC students from February to May.

She said the government was planning to hold the SSC exams in June and the HSC exams in July or August if there was no surge in new Covid-19 cases.

Usually, the SSC exams start on February 1 and the HSC on April 1 every year.