

**BANGLADESH UPDATE**



**443**

New cases in 24hrs



**5,41,877**

Total cases



**8,314**

Deaths



**4,89,258**

Recoveries

**GLOBAL UPDATE**



**2,435,446**

Deaths



**110,254,660**

Total cases

## VERDICTS IN DIPAN, AVIJIT MURDER CASES Article 19 welcomes judgement

*Says DSA grants govt carte blanche to suppress critical voices*

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Article 19 yesterday sent a statement welcoming the judgement of the Bangladesh court against those involved in the atrocious 2015 murders of blogger Avijit Roy and Faisal Arefin Dipan, but pointed out that a new type of silencing is underway.

"These judgements came at a time when impunity for crimes against journalists is a too-familiar story in Bangladesh, where the majority of crimes go unpunished," said the British organisation which focuses on freedom of expression.

As a case in point, the statement pointed out that the delivery of the investigation report of the murders of journalists Sagar Sarwar and Meherun Rumi have now been delayed 76 times.

The statement quoted Faruq Faisal, the regional director of Bangladesh and South Asia for Article 19, as saying, "We agree with the remarks of the Anti-Terrorism Special Tribunal that the aim of these murders was to throttle freedom of expression and create an atmosphere of fear so that none can express their views. We expect that the government would take greater effort and ensure better security that aims to guarantee people's right to freedom of expression and information."

But the organisation pointed out that the police filing of charge sheets against journalists, bloggers, writers, cartoonists under Digital Security Act (DSA) cases

are causing grave concern.

"Police filed charge sheet against journalist Shafiqul Islam Kajol in a case under the DSA," said the statement.

Police also filed charge sheet against cartoonist Ahmed Kabir Kishore, writer Mushtaq Ahmed and Rashtrachinta Dhaka coordinator Didarul Bhuiyan in a case filed under the DSA in connection with posting comments on social media criticising the government, stated the organisation.

"Kishore and Mushtaq have been behind bars for nine months. Kishore and Mushtaq's bail petitions were rejected six times, according to their lawyers," said the press statement.

It pointed out how there is an active probe underway into these individuals as the Cyber Tribunal sought further investigation.

"Article 19 observed that journalists and media workers have consistently been victims of physical assault. In addition, the criminalisation of expression and legal harassment has increased," it said.

The organisation iterated that the DSA grants a carte blanche to the Bangladesh government to suppress any critical voices.

The statement concluded by saying that while the killers and attackers of journalists, bloggers and writers must be brought to justice, all journalists arrested under the Digital Security Act should also be released.

## With a little help

FROM PAGE 1

Institutions -- PLFS, ILFSL, FAS Finance, and Reliance Finance -- between 2009 and 2019.

The four institutions have been in dire straits since then, and one of those -- PLFS -- is now in the process of liquidation.

A number of banks are also facing difficulties in recovering their funds deposited with three of the financial institutions.

For instance, private lender Bangladesh Commerce Bank and state-run Janata Bank kept several hundred crores of taka with PLFS, FAS Finance and ILFS a few years ago.

The two banks requested Bangladesh Bank to intervene to help them get the money. But the BB is yet to act in this regard.

In his statement, Uzzal said, "I did not actually have the capacity to become the PLFS chairman. But Halder put me in the position so that he could control the institution to embezzle money."

Halder, who is now in Canada, was allegedly involved in embezzlement of around Tk 3,000 crore from PLFS.

Uzzal alleged that Halder persuaded Capt (ret) Moazzam Hossain, who served as PLFS chairman between 2013 and 2015, to leave the post by giving him Tk 12 crore in bribe.

"He [Moazzam] left the post and I assumed the position in 2015."

Uzzal started his career at Industrial and Infrastructure Development Finance Company Limited, a non-bank financial institution, in 2008.

He joined Golden Insurance as its chief financial officer in 2010.

Uzzal left the firm in 2013. He got close to Halder while working as a freelance consultant. Halder was managing director of Reliance Finance at that time.

Before his appointment as the PLFS chairman, Halder made Uzzal chairman of Northern Jute Manufacturing Company in 2013.

Northern Jute took a loan of Tk 38 crore from ILFSL in 2016. Of the amount, Tk 16.81 crore was used to adjust loans taken by two of Halder's non-existent companies -- Borno and Arabi Enterprise -- from Reliance Finance, according to Uzzal.

The rest of the fund was transferred to Northern Jute's account with Karwanbazar branch of Shahjalal Islami Bank. Later, the money was transferred to different accounts belonging to Halder and his associates, he mentioned.

"The loan was never repaid. Halder paid me Tk 5 lakh as monthly salary. I could not realise then that he would use me for loan forgery," Uzzal claimed.

The Anti-Corruption Commission arrested Uzzal on January 25. The following day, ACC Deputy Director Gulshan Anwar Prodhon filed five cases against 33 people, including Halder and Uzzal, for laundering over Tk 350 crore from ILFSL.

In his statement, Uzzal said that upon Halder's directive, he started disbursing funds in breach of the rules and regulations soon after his appointment as PLFS chairman.

For instance, he played a role in giving loans to Diya Shipping and MTB Marine -- two of Halder's non-existent companies.

"Later, I came to know that Diya Shipping existed only on paper and the money did not go to the accounts of Diya or MTB Marine," he said.

The funds were used to adjust loans taken by Halder's non-existent firms from FAS Finance.

Uzzal alleged that the PLFS board of directors, led by the then chairman Moazzam, had also been involved in the scams. The then board pocketed about Tk 111 crore by way of engineering PLFS' financial statements.

"To cover up the misdeed, a deputy governor and a general manager of the central bank and others were given Tk 1 crore a year between 2009 and 2015."

The total amount of bribe stood at Tk 6.5 crore, he said.

Contacted, Moazzam rejected the allegation of taking bribes from Halder.

"I did not take bribes. I sold my shares for Tk 15 crore. But I am yet to get Tk 6 crore of the amount. I have also served a legal notice to this end," he said.

Asked about bribes to BB officials to conceal anomalies during his tenure, he said, "The then MD, DMD and CFO [chief financial officer] of PLFS should be able to say about it. I was not involved in any such thing."

Moazzam also claimed that he had been trying to help bring Uzzal and Halder to book by giving information to different agencies. "That is why they are trying to tarnish my image," he added.

In his confessional statement, Uzzal alleged that Shah Alam, the then general manager of the Department of Financial Institutions and Markets (DFIM), a BB wing responsible for monitoring non-bank financial institutions, was involved in the scams.

Shah Alam, an executive director of the BB, was relieved of his duties at the DFIM and the Department of Banking Inspection-2, on February 4 over his alleged links with Halder.

Contacted yesterday, he said, "What Uzzal said about me in the statement is completely baseless..."

He claimed that Uzzal tried to protect himself by giving misleading information.

"Uzzal gave the confessional statement describing episodes that took place between 2009 and 2015. But I joined the department as general manager in September 2013."

A general manager cannot make a big decision alone as it involves all the officials concerned ranging from assistant director to the governor, he said.

## Turkey detains Russian IS suspect at Syria border

AFP, ISTANBUL

Turkish border guards have detained five Russians, including a woman suspected of being a member of the Islamic State group, and a Libyan who were attempting to cross from Syria, officials said yesterday.

It was not immediately clear whether all six were suspected of being members of the jihadist group.

"Our border guards stationed in Hatay's Narlica district (in southern Turkey) caught six people including one Libyan and five Russian nationals who were attempting to illegally cross into Turkey from Syria," the ministry tweeted in English.



**A rickshaw van carrying a load of overhanging steel pipes against the traffic on Dhaka-Chattogram highway in the capital's Jatrabari. The act is a violation of multiple traffic rules as it poses risks for all road users.**

PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

## Ministry shrugs off probe findings

FROM PAGE 1

It, however, continued freight train operations to ensure the supply of goods.

There are 25,000 staff in the agency.

PROBE FINDINGS

Headed by Joint Secretary Faizur Rahman Faruqi, the probe committee was formed following media reports on Covid-19 protective materials being procured for BR East Zone without a tender process and at higher prices from selected suppliers.

Shahidul Islam, joint director general (engineering), and Najmul Haque, deputy secretary of the ministry, were other members of the committee.

The probe report said following the demands of different BR departments, materials worth Tk 4.65 crore were purchased from several contractors.

The report held 21 officials of BR East Zone responsible for irregularities in the purchase process and recommended "the authorities take action against the persons involved".

It also read, "Allegations published in the newspapers are true and the matter of purchasing goods at higher prices is also proved."

It was possible to float one tender as all the demands came within two to three days, but there were separate tenders in small lots to avoid approval from the higher authority, said the report.

The chief controller of stores is authorised for calling tender of at highest, Tk 30 lakh, while for an ADG, Tk 50 lakh.

The report said "some materials" on demand letters were received from suppliers even before tenders were called.

The probe found that the price evaluation committee's certification that the products were procured "in line with the market prices" was irrational as the officials assigned to check this reported a higher cost for every material.

The report shows three officials -- Monjur, Sahadat Ali and Ruhul Quader -- approved the market prices while Sahadat, Ruhul and Belal Hossain Sarkar were among those who approved the tenders.

Other officials were involved in different phases of the procurement, the

report shows.

The probe also found three different offices of BR bought the same products at different rates.

For example, when the CCS office bought each KN95 mask at Tk 727, COS (east) office procured it at Tk 351, and CME (east) at Tk 250.

Similarly, when the CCS office purchased a jar of 1-litre Savlon at Tk 442, COS (east) office spent Tk 647, and CME (east) office Tk 750 on it, according to the report.

PROMOTED, THEY CONTINUE PROCUREMENT

Sahadat Ali was general manager (east) and Monjur-Ul-Alam additional director general (mechanical) of BR when the said procurement processes were carried out between March and July last year.

Sahadat was appointed ADG (operations) on December 6 last year.

The two were still in grade-3 while discharging duties of GM and ADG that fall under grade-2 as current charges.

The Superior Selection Board, on December 24, recommended promoting the duo to grade-2 and the railways ministry on December 27 issued a circular promoting Sahadat along with another official.

The ministry could not issue a circular regarding Monjur as he was yet to complete the stipulated three-year service in feeder post, a position from which a promotion is made.

It, however, sent a proposal to the president to condone the time limit so that he can be promoted to grade-2, said a BR official with knowledge of the promotion process. The decision is still pending.

The probe committee recommended excluding all 21 officials from the procurement process but this correspondent found documents showing four of them involved in the tender process even after submission of the report.

Ruhul Quader signed a document on January 17 this year "for selection and approval of qualified potential tenderer for the procurement of diesel electric multiple unit (DEMU) spare parts of Bangladesh Railway."

He also signed three other purchase-related documents between December

2 last year and January 20.

Of the 21 officials, documents show Belal Hossain Sarkar and two assistant controllers of stores were involved in tender processes. Belal, as the controller of stores of BR East Zone, signed a tender-related document on December 8.

The ministry, on December 29, suspended Belal after another probe committee found him involved in irregularities in railway purchases when he was controller of stores of the West Zone during the 2018-19 fiscal year.

This correspondent went to Monjur's office to take his comment on February 3. But he declined to meet this correspondent, let alone give a comment.

Sahadat Ali said he was not aware of the allegations.

"If the probe report contains my name and the authority seeks my reply, I will comply," he told The Daily Star at his Rail Bhaban office on February 10.

When this correspondent mentioned the allegations brought against him, he said, "I am not formally informed about it. So I will not talk about it."

The Daily Star tried to contact Ruhul Quader Azad over the phone but could not reach him, even after sending a text message.

Belal also could not be reached.

Contacted on February 3, Railways Minister Nurul Islam Sujan also admitted that no action was taken against the officials.

While apparently trying to trivialise the allegations, the minister said he sent the probe report to the director general of BR and would take the next step upon receiving the latter's opinion.

Talking to The Daily Star, International Bangladesh's Executive Director Iftekharuzzaman said this is an example of how institutionalised collusive corruption is in the Bangladesh Railway.

"Taking no action after submission of the probe committee report rather giving promotion, manifested how deeply corruption is entrenched in the railway," he told The Daily Star on February 8.

"In this given circumstance, the question may arise whether railway high-ups are involved in the collusion," he questioned.

responsibility? Will you?

You will then report that this is a failed ministry.

## Be careful

FROM PAGE 1

The hackers are infecting unsuspecting users' devices and collecting data and opening back doors.

The RAT is a unique type of malware programme that includes a back door for administrative control over the target computer. The RATs are usually downloaded invisibly with a user-requested programme.

The motive behind these hacking attempts is not purely financial, according to Cisco Talos Intelligence Group, one of the largest commercial threat intelligence gatherers in the world.

In an advisory issued by Warren Mercer, Chris Neal and Vitor Ventura, threat researchers at Cisco Talos, opined that threat actor's motives behind this campaign are merely to spread their botnets within Bangladesh and possibly to tweak for espionage rather than purely from breaching accounts for financial gains.

Researchers at Cisco Talos also added that this is a "serious threat" and can result in "significant data breach or heavy financial loss".

One of such malicious websites is corona-bd.com. Through this website, attackers are trying to allure the people interested in vaccination.

This phoney website (corona-bd.com/apply) is very much similar to the government's official website on Covid-19 vaccination programme.

Contacted, Tarique M Barkatullah, project director of BGD e-GOV CIRT, said the threat still persists.

"We are well aware of it and advised Bangladesh Bank, BTRC and all other relevant bodies to take appropriate measures in this regard."

As malware is spreading in Bangladeshi network, local offices and institutions need to be cautious about it, he added.

## Arrest warrants issued for Khaleda, Gayeshwar

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Bagerhat

A court in Narail issued arrest warrants for BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia and party standing committee member Gayeshwar Chandra Roy yesterday.

Narail Judicial Magistrate Amatul Morshedha issued the warrants in separate defamation cases filed by Sheikh Ashiq Billah in 2015 over comments Khaleda and Gayeshwar made separately on the number of Liberation War martyrs, Bangabandhu, and the Liberation War.

According to one of the cases, Khaleda, in her speech as the chief guest at a gathering of freedom fighters in Dhaka on December 21, 2015, made derogative remarks about Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and the number of martyrs in the war of independence.

Gayeshwar made derogative remarks about martyred intellectuals during a party meeting on December 25, 2015, said a case statement.

Billah of Jadavpur village in Kalia upazila filed the two cases with the Narail Sadar Amla Court on December 29, 2015.

At that time, the court directed the officer-in-charge of Narail Sadar Police Station to investigate and submit a report.

After getting the report, the court reviewed the allegations on January 18 this year and summoned the accused.

The court issued arrest warrants as they did not show up before the court yesterday.

## HC upholds

FROM PAGE 1

later, the 40kg bomb was recovered at Sheikh Lutfor Rahman Ideal College in Kotalipara, where Awami League President and the then leader of the opposition Sheikh Hasina was supposed to address the rally on July 22, 2000.

If the 76kg bomb blast, all human beings, including daughter of Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Sheikh Hasina, and everything else in the one square kilometer area, would have completely been damaged and an awful situation would be created, the HC bench of Justice Jahangir Hossain Selim and Justice Md Badruzzaman observed, citing a report from the army team, who tested the bombs.

The bench was delivering verdict on the death reference (lower court documents) and appeals in connection with the case for attempting to kill Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina.

The militant offenders had planned to kill Sheikh Hasina in order to hamper the democracy and development of the country, the HC judges said, adding that the militant activities must be banned.

The court also said the offenders cannot get any clemency for their offences.

With the observations, the HC yesterday confirmed the death penalty of 10 leaders and activists of Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami (Huji) for attempting to kill the prime minister by planting a 76kg bomb at Kotalipara in 2000.

The HC upheld the life imprisonment of one convict and 14 years' imprisonment of two convicts. It also acquitted one convict in the case.

The convicts, whose death sentences were confirmed by the HC yesterday, are: Wasim Akter alias Tarek, Rashed alias Abul Kalam, Yusuf Alias Moshab Morol, Sheikh Farid alias Maulana Shawkat Osman, Hafez Zahangir Alam Badar, Maulana Abu Bakar alias Hafez Selim Howlader, Hafez Maulana Yahia, Mufti Shafiqur Rahman, Mufti Abdul Hye and Maulana Abdur Rauf alias Abdur Razaque.

The HC upheld the life term imprisonment of Mehedi Hasan alias Abdur Wadud. It upheld the lower court verdict that sentenced Anisul Islam alias Anis and Mohibullah alias Mofizur Rahman to 14 years' imprisonment.

It, however, ordered the authorities concerned to release Mohibullah if he is not arrested in any other case as he has already served 14 years in jail.

The HC bench acquitted Sarwar Hossain Mia as the state has failed to prove the allegations against him.

The full text of the verdict was not yet released.

Deputy Attorney General Dr Md Bashir Ullah told The Daily Star that, among the 10 death-row convicts, Yusuf Alias Moshab Morol, Hafez Zahangir Alam Badar, Mufti Shafiqur Rahman and Mufti Abdul Hye are absconding.

He said death penalty of six other death-row convicts, who are now in condemned cells, can be executed if they don't file any appeal with the Appellate Division of the Supreme Court challenging the HC verdict.

They may file appeal in 30 days after receiving certified copy of the HC verdict, DAG Bashir Ullah added.

The Speedy Trial Tribunal-2 in Dhaka on August 20, 2017, awarded death sentences to 10 Huji leaders and activists for attempting to kill Sheikh Hasina by planting the 76kg bomb.

Besides, Mehedi Hasan alias Abdur Wadud was sentenced to life and Anisul Islam alias Anis, Mohibullah alias Mofizur Rahman and Sarwar Hossain Mia were handed 14 years in prison.

Huji leader Mufti Abdul Hannan was found guilty but was acquitted as he was executed on April 12, 2017, at Kashimpur High-Security Prison for killing three people and injuring former British high commissioner to Bangladesh and a dozen others in Sylhet.