

BANGLADESH UPDATE



327

New cases in 24hrs



5,43,351

Total cases



8,349

Deaths



4,91,367

Recoveries



GLOBAL UPDATE

2,475,289

Deaths



111,829,431

Total cases

ENFORCED DISAPPEARANCES

UN working group wants to visit Bangladesh

DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENT

The UN Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances wants to undertake a visit to Bangladesh in relation to two cases of enforced disappearances.

The cases of enforced disappearance are those of Ansar Ali, allegedly abducted on April 18, 2012, from Dhaka by armed men believed to be state agents, and Saidur Rahman Kazi, allegedly arrested from Jashore Municipality Park on April 5, 2017, by police personnel.

The UN Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances discussed the issues at its 123rd session in Geneva from 15 to 19 February, held to examine more than 600 cases in 36 countries, according to a statement of the Group.

The UN Working Group comprises five independent experts – Chair-Rapporteur Tae-Ung Baik (Republic of Korea), Vice-Chair Henrikas Mickevicius (Lithuania) and other members Aua Balde (Guinea-Bissau), Bernard Duhaime (Canada), and Luciano Hazan (Argentina).

The statement said the experts examined allegations regarding obstacles in the implementation of the Declaration on the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance, such as regressive legislation and practices, or systemic failures in addressing cases of enforced disappearances.

Issues such as disappearances perpetrated by non-state actors, as well

as enforced disappearances occurring in the context of transnational transfers, were also discussed.

The Working Group also discussed internal matters and future activities, including country visits planned for 2021 and 2022.

The statement said on September 1, 2020, the Working Group, jointly with other special procedure mechanisms, sent an allegation letter to Bangladesh concerning alleged threats against and acts of intimidation and legal prosecution of blogger Asaduzzaman Noor, and the ongoing harassment of his family members in Bangladesh.

The Working Group noted with concern that it has been raising similar reports regarding the situation of enforced disappearance in Bangladesh for several years, but was alarmed that it continues to receive cases, many of which relate to individuals linked to opposition political parties, and by the apparent impunity for the practice in the country.

"It also strongly regrets the lack of engagement with the Working Group. In this regard, the Working Group notes that it has not received replies to any outstanding cases this year and that only one case has ever been clarified since the Working Group transmitted the first case to the government in 1996."

The UN Working Group hopes to receive information on the outstanding cases as soon as possible, while reiterating its interest in undertaking a visit to Bangladesh, as expressed in several communications since 2013.



General Secretary of the All India Congress Committee (AICC) party for Uttar Pradesh, Priyanka Gandhi Vadra (top L), interacts with villagers and members of the fisherman community who were allegedly harassed by local police few weeks ago, at Baswar village on the outskirts of Allahabad, India yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

AVIAN FLU STRAIN

Russia detects first case in humans

Alerts WHO

AFP, Moscow

Russia said Saturday that its scientists had detected the world's first case of transmission of the H5N8 strain of avian flu from birds to humans and had alerted the World Health Organization.

In televised remarks, the head of Russia's health watchdog Rosпотребнадзор, Anna Popova, said scientists at the Vektor laboratory had isolated the strain's genetic material from seven workers at a poultry farm in southern Russia, where an outbreak was recorded among the birds in December.

The workers did not suffer any serious health consequences, she added. They are believed to have caught the virus from poultry on the farm.

"Information about the world's first case of transmission of the avian flu (H5N8) to humans has already

been sent to the World Health Organization," Popova said.

There are different subtypes of avian influenza viruses.

While the highly contagious strain H5N8 is lethal for birds, it had never before been reported to have spread to humans.

Popova praised "the important scientific discovery", saying "time will tell" if the virus can further mutate.

The discovery of these mutations when the virus has not still acquired an ability to transmit from human to human gives us all, the entire world, time to prepare for possible mutations and react in an adequate and timely fashion," Popova said.

The WHO confirmed on Saturday that it had been notified by Russia about the development.

"We are in discussion with national

authorities to gather more information and assess the public health impact of this event," a spokesperson said.

"If confirmed, this would be the first time H5N8 infects people."

WHO stressed that the Russian workers were "asymptomatic" and no onward human-to-human transmission had been reported.

People can get infected with avian and swine influenza viruses, such as bird flu subtypes A(H5N1) and A(H7N9) and swine flu subtypes such as A(H1N1).

According to the WHO, people usually get infected through direct contact with animals or contaminated environments, and there is no sustained transmission among humans.

H5N1 in people can cause severe illness and has a 60 percent mortality rate.

Where did the money go?

FROM PAGE 1

Plagued by the multiple financial scams, PLFS is now in the process of being liquidated.

People who were in the management of the leasing company between 2009 and 2015 showed on papers that the Tk 6.5 crore went into business development, namely to buy gifts for clients or to pat the valued clients.

Based on documents and vouchers, the accounting firm said it came to the assumption that the money was actually withdrawn illegally for board meeting purposes.

The Daily Star has a copy of the audit findings.

Contacted, M Moazzam Hossain, who was the chairman of the 11-member PLFS board between April 2013 and November 2015, said the audit report was completely wrong.

"There is a strong link between HodaVasi Chowdhury & Co and Uzzal [PLFS chairman who said the money was spent in bribes] as the latter was once an audit manager there," he said.

Sk Md Tarikul Islam, who led the audit, said that the report was based on evidence.

He added that he was not allowed to disclose any more information of a client.

According to the audit report, the former directors took the money and made vouchers of expenditure at 92 board meetings between 2009 and 2015.

Meanwhile, an investigation report by the central bank found that Moazzam was also involved in siphoning off Tk 123 crore from PLFS. That inspection was carried out in 2014.

The following year, the central bank removed five PLFS directors due to their alleged involvement in embezzling Tk 358 crore.

When his attention was drawn to

this, Moazzam said someone had framed him.

In his confessional statement, Uzzal said Proshanta Kumar Halder, better known as PK Halder, had persuaded Moazzam to quit as the chairman by giving him Tk 12 crore.

The Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) has been investigating Halder's involvement in siphoning off around Tk 10,000 crore from four financial institutions between 2009 and 2019.

Moazzam denied these allegations too.

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

Uzzal said in his statement that Shah Alam, then general manager of Bangladesh Bank's Department of Financial Institutions and Markets, took bribes from PLFS.

The deputy governor and Shah Alam helped scammers in exchange of Tk 6.5 crore, he said.

Shah Alam was relieved of his duties on February 4 over his possible links to PK Halder.

He said, "I did not take bribes. I joined the department as GM in September 2013. But the amount mentioned by Uzzal was spent between 2009 and 2015."

Md Serajul Islam, an executive director and spokesperson of the Bangladesh Bank, said a fact finding committee led by a deputy governor has been formed to look into the scam.

The committee will submit a report in three months after looking into the matter, he said.

"There is no scope to comment on the matter at this moment," Serajul said.

The central bank commenced liquidating PLFS in July 2019 after it informed the central bank that it would not be able to pay back the depositors.

Protection expected 3 weeks

FROM PAGE 1

The issue of how much and from when the vaccine will provide immunity surfaced after a vaccine recipient tested positive for Covid-19 seven days after receiving the first jab in Dhaka on February 10.

Fifty-seven-year-old SM Golam Kibria, in a Facebook status on February 19, wrote: "I have become infected on the sixth day... So do not [make the] mistake [of] thinking you are safe just by taking vaccines."

He also shared a copy of Covid-19 positive RT-PCR test result from the Institute of Epidemiology, Disease Control and Research (IEDCR). The IEDCR collected his samples on February 17.

According to the Oxford Covid-19 vaccine website, the efficacy is 76 percent between 22 days and 90 days after the first dose.

"After inoculation, the Oxford's Covid-19 vaccine takes time to produce antibodies. May be this person [Kibria] was exposed to the virus days earlier. It is normal," Prof Tahmina Shirin, director of the IEDCR, told The Daily Star on Friday.

"The person who gets vaccine doses is equally vulnerable to Covid-19 infections like the one who did not get it, until the creation of enough antibodies," she added.

"Irrespective of whether you are vaccinated or not, everyone should

wear masks and maintain physical distancing at least till the end of this year," said Tahmina.

Khondoker Mehedi Akram, senior researcher at the University of Sheffield, said the efficacy of the Oxford vaccine's first dose reaches its peak after 21 days.

"But before that, they are unprotected like those who are not vaccinated. They must remain careful during that period," he told The Daily Star yesterday.

On www.gavi.org, health experts also explained some other reasons why people should hold on to their masks.

No vaccine is 100 percent effective. They are usually slightly less effective in the real world compared to clinical trials. The effectiveness of Covid-19 vaccines also varies depending on how efficiently they are handled. It may not prevent one from spreading the virus, said experts.

Researchers are yet to figure out whether Covid-19 vaccines prevent transmission.

The preliminary evidence of a study suggested the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine could slow the transmission of the virus. But some epidemiologists said it was too early to say this, according to the Gavi.

They said people who have had one or two doses of the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine should not lower their guard in terms of physical distancing, wearing masks or hand hygiene.

Misused to muzzle dissent

FROM PAGE 1

The week before, Mushtaq and Kishore had been officially charged by the police under a DSA case filed last year.

In its entirety, the case is a collection of 10 social media posts, as per the first information report filed last year on May 6.

The links submitted as evidence lead to Facebook posts and political cartoons made before the pandemic, which mock the prevailing health system of the country, and re-shares of various news articles which provided commentary on the coronavirus outbreak.

Some of the links were posts made by a satirical Facebook page called "I am Bangladeshi" of which Mushtaq and Kishore were administrators.

These 10 links were submitted as evidence into a litany of charges -- including spreading propaganda against the Liberation War of Bangladesh, Father of the Nation, National Anthem and National Flag; tarnishing the image of the nation; spreading confusion; creating hostility, hatred or adversity among people; destroying communal harmony or creating unrest, disorder; threatening to deteriorate law and order.

For these 10 links -- and the subsequent charges -- the duo were denied bail a total of six times, according to their legal team.

The first time was on May 17 last year, when a virtual court by Judge Sadrir Yasir Ahsan Chowdhury rejected their bail prayer because there was a pending remand application from the cops.

The last rejection was on January 6 this year, at the courtroom of Metropolitan Magistrate KM Emrul Kayesh, who had also denied journalist Kajol bail thrice.

DSA CASES, ARRESTS UP IN 2020

Last year, as many as 457 people of all professions were prosecuted and arrested in 198 cases filed under the Digital Security Act, notes UK-based Article 19 in its annual report.

Of this figure, 75 were journalists, while others included teachers, students, folk musicians and cultural artists among others. Nearly half of the journalists prosecuted, 32, were arrested. Most of these arrests were made in the month of May.

Compare this figure to that of 2019 -- only 63 people in total were prosecuted that year.

"The misuse of the law to muzzle opposing voices, in the name of quashing rumours, was noticeable last year," said the organisation.

The statistics back it up -- data from Article 19 shows that 33 of the complainants either held posts in the ruling party Awami League and/or were parliamentarians, upazila parishad chairpersons or mayors. Eight of the cases were filed by law enforcers.

"The law is being misused by the law enforcers because the government and administration cannot tolerate criticism about themselves," said ZI Khan Panna, a Supreme Court lawyer and chairperson of Ain O Salish Kendra, who was representing Kishore and Mushtaq at the lower courts.

He suggested the government be

cautious so the provisions of the Digital Security Act cannot be misused.

On December 26 last year, the day after Kajol was released, a journalist from Pabna named KM Belal Hossain Shopon was arrested for sharing a photo on Facebook that was making the rounds on social media. Shopon is the editor of a periodical named Somooy Asomoy.

The post had a photo of a handwritten letter supposedly signed by one "Pushpo Rani" stating that she had been sexually abused by the councillor of Chatmohar municipality's ward-4. The photo was unverified, and Shopon said as much when sharing the content, adding that it should be investigated whether this is true or not.

Around seven hours after the post was shared by Shopon, he retracted the post, and shared a new announcement stating that he deleted his previous post because even after trying, he could not verify the authenticity of the letter being shared.

Seven hours of keeping up an unverified Facebook post left Shopon in jail for over a month.

Raj Ali, a pro-Awami League councillor candidate of Chatmohar municipality's ward-4, filed a case against him under DSA on December 25 last year. He charged Shopon under sections 25, 29 and 31 of the act.

The Detective Branch of police promptly moved to arrest Shopon from his house the very next day.

In addition to defamation, these charges include "creating enmity, hatred or hostility among different classes and communities of the society, destroying communal harmony, creating unrest and disorder, and deteriorating the law and order situation."

"I had even retracted my post because I did not know with certainty if this was true, but I never thought I'd have to go to jail over this. A certain section of society who I do not pander to, have used this as a tool to harass me," said Shopon.

Facebook has provided a fertile ground for journalists to get prosecuted. Gleaning from the cases mapped out by Article 19, as many as 31 cases were filed against journalists specifically for their Facebook activities -- which include wall posts, comments on posts, and things said during live videos.

But at least Shopon was released, even though he still faces charges.

Freelance journalist Jamal Mir from Barguna has been in prison since May 7 last year.

On April 7, 2020, he and a group of journalists and locals entered into what they claimed was the den of a sex-work and drug-peddling racket. A month later, Mir published that video on his personal YouTube channel and on a web TV channel.

A woman named Ruby, who was present at the location, filed a case under DSA against him alleging defamation -- since defamation is a criminal charge, Mir was arrested.

Since then, his bail was rejected a total of five times by different courts, his legal team informed The Daily Star.

Teens hawk drugs

FROM PAGE 1

pullers, who were seen buying those small packages from the girls, it was learnt that the packages contained yaba pills and marijuana leaves.

Not revealing the identity of a reporter, these correspondents then talked to two of the girls selling narcotics standing on the railway track. They said they sold one small pack of marijuana for Tk 100 and per piece of yaba for Tk 300.

Visiting the area between Tejgaon level crossing and Karwan Bazar wholesale fish market over the last week, over 100 such young girls were seen either standing on the railway track or beside it and selling the drugs packed inside the small white papers.

They hide the narcotics in their clothes and in special cloth bags tied around their waists. Although they sell both marijuana and yaba, there is greater demand for the latter.

On February 15, these correspondents visited the Kamarpotti area of Karwan Bazar, near the rail tracks, and spent around 90 minutes observing some seven to eight young girls busy selling the narcotics.

At one point, a youth aged around 25 ran towards the girls and whispered something to them.

Within a couple of seconds, the area was deserted as the girls ran off in different directions.

A couple of minutes later, a police van stopped at the place and two police personnel got out. After spending a few minutes there, they left.

Half an hour later, the girls returned to the spot, some alone and others in groups of two.

The Daily Star talked to a couple of rickshaw-puller, who bought the narcotics from the girls.

One said he bought a small packet of marijuana. "I bought the drugs from the area as it is easily available here."

When asked about police, the rickshaw-puller said sometimes people introducing them as police sources stopped him and tried to search him. "When I pay them Tk 200, they just allow me to go on my way. It happens once or twice a month."

Not just rickshaw-pullers, but students, traders and various service holders buy narcotics from the area while travelling on CNG-run auto-rickshaws, private cars and sometimes in minibuses, according to locals who witnessed the transactions.

They said some 30 people identifying themselves as police sources controlled the narcotics business in the area and collected money in the name of managing police.

Md Salauddin Mia, officer-in-charge of Tejgaon Police Station, admitted that yaba and marijuana are sold on the Karwan Bazar railway tracks and nearby areas.

"We often conducted drives and arrested narcotics traders, mostly women, from the area, but they managed to obtain bail within a couple of days and again got involved in the same activities," he said.

Asked about "police sources" aiding the narcotics business, OC Salauddin denied the allegation and told this newspaper yesterday that they did not conduct any drives after taking help from any source.

"We will definitely take action against people if we get any specific complaints."

For alleged involvement in helping and aiding narcotics dealers, the Tejgaon Division of Dhaka Metropolitan Police recommended departmental action against 17 police officials in July last year. As per the recommendation, the DMP suspended the officials.

Asked about the narcotics business continuing in the presence of police, Harun-ur-Rashid, deputy commissioner of Tejgaon Division Police, told The Daily Star yesterday that it is not possible to stop the business in a day.

"Our drive against narcotics is underway and we are taking action against the responsible ones," said the deputy commissioner.

2 students

FROM PAGE 1

neighbouring village around 8:00pm on Thursday.

While the two were talking in front of the house, some young men, including Pulak Mazumder, Akbar Hossain and Raihan Uddin, appeared and alleged that the girl and the boy were in a relationship and termed it "anti-social" activities.

The men then dragged the girl and boy into a room and beat them up while forcing them to be in a compromised state.

At one stage, they taped the duo and demanded Tk 50,000. As the victims refused, the suspects threatened to release the video.

The victims paid them Tk 10,000.

However, the men tried to sexually harass the girl again. When she began screaming, the suspects fled the scene, said the station.

On Saturday, she lodged a case with Sudharam Model Police Station in this regard.

Contacted, Fazlul Quader, inspector (investigation) of the station, confirmed the incident and said they were trying to arrest the accused.