

BANGLADESH UPDATE



614
New cases in 24hrs



5,47,930
Total cases



8,428
Deaths



4,99,627
Recoveries



2,563,825
Deaths



115,495,301
Total cases

JUSTICE FOR MUSHTAQ

Prof Serajul, Dr Kamal express solidarity

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Putting Mushtaq Ahmed behind bars for his writing and letting his death happen in prison were terrible injustices, Prof Emeritus Serajul Islam Choudhury said yesterday.

"This cannot be accepted by any means; it should not be accepted," the educationist said in a written message read out at a protest rally.

The demonstration was organised under the banner "Nagorik Shomabesh" in front of the Jatiya Press Club demanding justice for Mushtaq.

Mushtaq, who was arrested in a case filed under the controversial Digital Security Act, died in Kashimpur jail of Gazipur on February 25.

Meanwhile, Gonoforum President Dr Kamal Hossain in another written message read out at the programme said freethinking, freedom of expression and freedom of press have been extremely curbed through the misuse of the DSA.

Prof Serajul and Dr Kamal did not attend the rally in person but expressed solidarity with the protesters.

In his message, Prof Serajul said when the DSA came into force, there were concerns from all quarters, except the government and its supporters, that the law would be misused and freedom of expression would be curbed further.

"Later, it was seen that the concerns were not unfounded. Cases were filed, people were arrested and harassed," he said.

The professor emeritus of Dhaka University said photojournalist Shaful Islam Kajol became a victim of enforced disappearance. When he was found in

a bordering area, he was detained and later shown arrested under the DSA.

He said Kajol was granted bail following protests at home and abroad. However, Mushtaq was not granted bail although he filed bail payers six times.

"Will this be unjust to say that Mushtaq is the first martyred due to the misuse of the Digital Security Act?" he asked.

He hoped Mushtaq's death would be the only such incident in the country.

Prof Serajul demanded a "speedy, transparent and orderly" probe into Mushtaq's death and immediate repeal of the DSA.

He said the writer's untimely death provides sufficient reasoning and proof why the act should be abolished.

Dr Kamal in his message said freedom of speech and freedom of press have been curbed severely.

The eminent jurist said despite repeated demands from rights groups and civil society platforms for amending the act's "repressive" clauses, the government did not take any step. Rather, the government began misusing the law even more, he alleged.

He said Mushtaq's death in prison custody was the extreme consequence of the misuse of the "black law".

"It is imperative to conduct a thorough probe into Mushtaq's death through an independent probe commission."

The veteran politician said it is quite necessary to amend the DSA's "repressive" clauses in line with recommendations made by the civil society members.



Heavily polluted water being dumped into the Surma river in Kalighat area of Sylhet city. The mindless dumping continues even after throwaway goods formed a plastic berg in the area, significantly reducing the water flow downstream. The photo was taken yesterday.

PHOTO: SHEIKH NASIR

Mighty shelter for thugs brothers

FROM PAGE 1

close to a top Awami League leader during the elections, CID investigators said.

The other accused are Khandaker Mosharraf's assistant personal secretary and former convener of Faridpur district Jubo League AHM Fuad, former Faridpur town Jubo League president Khandakar Nazmul Islam Levi, former general secretary of Faridpur town unit Jubo League Ashiqur Rahman Farhan, General Secretary of Faridpur District Swachhshabak League Fahad bin Wazed Fahim alias Fahim, former joint convener of Faridpur town Jubo League Kamrul Hasan David, district Jubo League joint convener Mohammad Ali Minar, and Faridpur town Jubo League joint convener Tariqul Islam alias Nasim.

Of them, Barkat, Rubel, Levi and Farhan are now in jail. Barkat was expelled from the AL after his arrest.

In the charge sheet, the CID said it found names of 42 other associates of Barkat and Rubel, and that investigation is still going on against them. One of them died.

"Once we get enough evidence to prove their link with the money laundering, we will submit a supplementary charge sheet," said a CID officer, wishing anonymity.

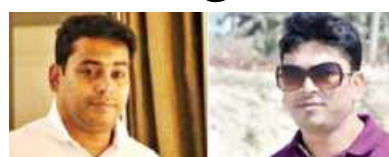
The charge sheet is 72 pages long with more than 4,500 pages of relevant documents attached to it, CID sources said. Our court correspondent adds: Babar was shown a fugitive accused in the charge sheet of the case.

Fuad, Fahim, David, Minar and Nasim were also shown as fugitives in the charge sheet.

The names of Babar and five others were included in it as Barkat, Rubel, Farhan and Levi named them in their professional statements to magistrates, court sources said.

Uttam Kumar Biswas, assistant superintendent of police of the CID and also the investigation officer (IO) in the case, submitted the charge sheet to the Chief Metropolitan Magistrate's Court of Dhaka.

The IO appealed to the court to exonerate 10 others, who were earlier arrested in connection with the case as they were not found to be involved in



Barkat

Rubel

the money laundering.

On October 8 last year, a Dhaka court ordered the authorities concerned to freeze 88 bank accounts of five of the accused, including Barkat and Rubel, in connection with the case.

On February 25, the same court ordered the authorities to confiscate 5,706 bighas of immovable properties, freeze 188 bank accounts and seize 55 vehicles of the brothers.

On June 7 last year, police arrested nine people, including Barkat and Rubel, from different areas of Faridpur town for their alleged involvement in the attack on the house of Subal Chandra in the town's Goalchamat area on May 16 last year.

SM Miraj Al Mahmud, a CID inspector, lodged the case with Kafurl Police Station against the two brothers under the money laundering act on June 26 the same year.

According to the case statement, they amassed huge amount of wealth after winning contracts from various government departments in the district through manipulation since 2010. They were allegedly involved in drug smuggling and land grabbing. The two became owners of around 23 buses, several trucks and private cars.

CID investigators said that before 2008, Barkat and Rubel had virtually no moveable and immovable properties. They joined AL in 2009 and worked for Khandaker Mosharraf during the national election.

After Mosharraf won and became minister, they gained his confidence, the probe report mentioned.

With Mohtesam and Fuad, they established a nexus, and through an illegal syndicate manipulated all tenders of roads and highways, public works, LGED ministry, health departments, BRTA, municipalities, zila parishads, Water Development Board and medical colleges. They also illegally

took commissions from various haats (markets), district land registrar's offices and extorted money in the transport sector.

With the illegally-earned money, they forced people to sell land at giveaway prices. Then they took loans of Tk 375 crore, overpricing plots of lands, investigators said.

Between 2017 and 2020, Barkat and Rubel got Tk 812-crore work orders for 475 projects from the LGED alone. Barkat and Rubel took Tk 204 crore loan against four business firms through 188 accounts in nine banks for paying security deposits for the works, the charge sheet mentioned.

Investigators said Zahidur Rahman alias Khokon Razakar, who is on death row for 1971 war crimes, is the maternal uncle of the brothers and Abul Kalam Azad alias Bachchu Rajakar is the husband of their maternal aunt.

The two brothers were accused in a case over the murder of Faridpur district AL publicity secretary Mohiuddin Khokon in 1994, investigators said. Yet they managed to join the AL, they said.

Contacted over phone last night, Khandaker Mosharraf Hossain questioned how his brother Babar could be made an accused when he did not sign any documents and was not involved in anything.

About the other accused, except for Barkat and Rubel, he said police will not be able to prove the charges against them as they are not involved in the crimes.

"They were neither given allotment of work nor did they implement the works."

Asked if Barkat and Rubel became influential after they came close to him during and after 2009, Mosharraf said, "Awami League got the Faridpur Sadar seat for the first time in 2009. Is it possible to win a seat if the number of supporters does not increase and people do not join the party?"

When his attention was drawn to Barkat and Rubel's two uncles who are war criminals, lawmaker Mosharraf asked, "Can't they get involved in AL politics if their uncles are razakars?"

Asked how the two brothers amassed such huge wealth, Mosharraf said he has no idea about it.

No amendment

FROM PAGE 1

They were obstructed by police in front of Hotel InterContinental in Shahbagh area.

They gave an ultimatum to the government for abolishing the DSA by March 26, otherwise they will go for tougher protests.

The demands came a day after the law minister said the government is taking measures to ensure that no one is arrested under the DSA before investigation.

Nagorik Oikya Convener Mahmudur Rahman Manna, Sushashoner Jonno Nagorik Secretary Badiul Alam Majumdar and photographer Shahidul Alam, among others, spoke at the rally.

Gonoforum President Dr Kamal Hossain and Dhaka University Professor Emeritus Serajul Islam Choudhury expressed solidarity with them. They, however, didn't attend the rally. Their written statements were read out there.

The speakers called for proper investigation into Mushtaq's death in custody and the highest punishment to those responsible.

Dr Zafrullah said he wanted to remind the prime minister of the famous words of her father Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman: "Keu Dabaye Rakhte Parba Na [No one can hold us down]."

"Kishore got bail today [yesterday]. It's a bit of relief. However, the court's take on the matter is not satisfactory. The court didn't give any directive to file a case against Rab, police and the government who have violated the constitution. It's court's jurisdiction," he noted.

Manna said, "Mushtaq, who had no ailments, died in custody. We want to know from the prime minister -- why would he die in custody?"

"Our law minister is saying that they would whiten the black parts of the Digital Security Act. I am saying -- come out of this hypocrisy."

Badiul Alam said, "Criminalisation of people's rights has taken place through this law [DSA]. This law is undermining civil rights. It is a betrayal of blood of our liberators."

"I want this law to be abolished."

Shahidul said the government has a lot of strength and power. Police and

the bureaucrats are at its disposal.

"But their main strength is that they are shameless. They want to stop people even from sneezing. The Digital Security Act is there because this government is oppressive. There is no alternative for the people but to take to the streets to demand its abolition," he said.

Syeda Rizwana Hasan, chief executive of Bangladesh Environmental Lawyers Association, said the DSA is against the spirit of independence. It must be repealed to ensure true freedom. New law needs to be enacted after taking opinions from experts on digital security.

Chief Coordinator of Gana Samhati Andolon Zonayed Saki said, "Why didn't Mushtaq Ahmed get bail? Constitutionally, the court is the last resort of people for seeking justice when the government turns autocratic. Your duty is to protect people's life and honour."

About the case against Mushtaq and cartoonist Kishore, he said, "It was Rab that filed the case against them? Why did Rab file it?"

"The prime minister must take the responsibility. We want to see who are behind the case against Mushtaq and Kishore."

Saki said they would besiege the PMO if the DSA is not abolished by March 26.

Former Ducus vice-president Nurul Haque Nur said most of the cases filed by the police under the DSA are baseless. Questioning police's role, he asked whether the police have become an affiliate organisation of the ruling party.

On May 6 last year, Rab arrested Mushtaq, 53, from his house in the capital for "spreading rumours and carrying out anti-government activities". He took to social media to write about the government's handling of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Sued under the DSA, he had been in Kashimpur High-Security Jail-3 in Gazipur since August 20 last year.

On February 25 evening, he lost consciousness and was taken to Shaheed Tajuddin Ahmad Medical College and Hospital where doctors declared him dead.

Security forces kill 38 protesters

FROM PAGE 1

Schranner Burgener said that in conversations with Myanmar's deputy military chief Soe Win, she had warned him that the military was likely to face strong measures from some countries and isolation in retaliation for the coup.

"The answer was: 'We are used to sanctions, and we survived,'" she told reporters in New York. "When I also warned they will go in an isolation, the answer was: 'We have to learn to walk with only few friends.'"

Western countries, including the United States, Britain, Canada and the European Union, have implemented or are considering targeted sanctions to squeeze the military and its business allies.

The 15-member UN Security Council has voiced concern over the state of emergency, but stopped short of condemning the coup last month because of opposition by Russia and China, who view the developments as internal affairs of Myanmar. Any action by the council beyond a statement is unlikely, diplomats say.

A spokesman for the ruling military council did not answer telephone calls seeking comment.

Ko Bo Kyi, joint secretary of the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners rights group, had said earlier the military killed at least 18. But the toll rose by the end of the day.

In the main city Yangon, witnesses said at least eight people were killed, one early in the day and seven others when security forces opened sustained fire in a neighbourhood in the north of the city in the early evening.

"I heard so much continuous firing. I lay down on the ground, they shot a lot," protester Kaung Pyae Sone Tun, 23, told Reuters.

A protest leader in the community, Htut Paing, said the hospital there had told him seven people had been killed. Hospital administrators were not available for comment.

After nightfall, Yangon residents lit candles and held prayers for the dead.

In the central town of Monywa, six people were killed, the Monywa Gazette reported. Others were killed in the second-biggest city Mandalay, the northern town of Hpakant and the central town of Myingyan.

Save the Children said in a statement four children were among the dead, including a 14-year-old boy who Radio Free Asia reported was shot dead by a soldier on a passing convoy of military trucks. The soldiers loaded his body onto a truck and left the scene, according to the report.

The violence took place a day after foreign ministers from Southeast Asian neighbours urged restraint but failed to unite behind a call for the release of Suu Kyi and the restoration of democracy.

Pope Francis said on Twitter: "Sad news of bloody clashes and loss of life...I appeal to the authorities involved that dialogue may prevail over repression."

The European Union said the shootings of unarmed civilians and medical workers were clear breaches of international law. It also said the military was stepping up repression of the media, with a growing number of journalists arrested and charged.

Kishore granted bail, after 10 long months

FROM PAGE 1

Kishore's brother Ahsan Kabir talked about the cartoonist's poor health. "I met my brother for the first time since his arrest when he was brought to court [on February 23]."

"Kishore had gone through so much torture that he was limping ... he told me that he was tortured, so much that his left ear drum was perforated and pus was coming out. His hearing was impaired."

"His eyesight got drastically reduced and he lost at least 10kg."

Speaking to this correspondent after the bail order yesterday, Ahsan said, "How can I be anything but happy ... our family will be together after so many months."

DAG Bappi said the state was yet to decide whether they would appeal against the HC order.

The same HC bench had previously granted bail to photojournalist Shaful Islam Kajol, who had been denied bail 13 times.

In the 10 months prior to Mushtaq's death and the bail order yesterday, sections of journalists, activists and common people campaigned to get the duo released from prison.

The first time their bail prayers got rejected was on May 17 last year, when a virtual court led by Judge Sadrir Yasir Ahsan Chowdhury scrapped the prayers because there was a pending remand application from the police, which needed to be settled.

The last rejection came on January 6 this year, at the courtroom of Metropolitan Magistrate KM Emrul Kayesh. He had also denied journalist

Kajol bail thrice.

Later, the police officially framed charges against Kishore, Mushtaq and Didarul Islam, an activist of Rashtrachinta, on charges of posting anti-state social media contents, spreading "confusing" cartoons about different ruling party leaders, and rumours about the pandemic.

Dhaka Cyber Tribunal on February 10 ordered the Counter Terrorism and Transnational Crime (CTTC) unit to further investigate charges against all 11 accused in the case.

'NO NEGLIGENCE OVER MUSHTAQ'S DEATH'

The jail authorities did not find any negligence over the death of writer Mushtaq in custody, Inspector General (IG) of Prisons Brig Gen Mominur Rahman Mamun told The Daily Star yesterday.

He said this citing a report submitted to him by a three-member probe committee, formed by the prisons authorities. The report was sent to the home ministry.

"If the home ministry finds anything else in its own probe, we will see their observations and take steps," he said.

Meanwhile, the committee, formed by the ministry, submitted its report to the ministry yesterday afternoon.

"We have submitted the report around 5:00pm today," Additional Secretary Tarun Kanti Sikder of the ministry, who led the five-member committee, told The Daily Star.

He, however, declined to reveal their findings, saying that the home minister would brief the media in this regard.

HT Imamno more

FROM PAGE 1

committee for the last national polls.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina expressed deep shock at his death.

Imam has been serving as the political adviser to the premier since 2014.

Born on January 15, 1939, he completed his undergraduate in economics at Rajshahi University

and graduated in economics at Dhaka University. He then obtained a postgraduate degree in development administration at London School of Economics.

In 1962, he joined the then Pakistan Civil Service. He served as the cabinet secretary to the Government of Bangladesh during the Liberation War.

Wife, son of municipality mayor killed in road crash

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Faridpur

Three people, including the wife and son of a newly-elected municipality mayor, were killed as a microbus and a bus collided head-on on the Dhaka-Khulna highway in Faridpur's Nagarkanda upazila last night.

Nimay Sarkar, who was elected mayor of the Nagarkanda municipality as an Awami League candidate in the February 14 polls, was also critically injured.

Omar Faruq, officer-in-charge of Bhanga Highway Police Station, said the accident happened in Kailar Mour area around 9:15pm.

He said the bus was heading towards Dhaka and the victims were travelling in the microbus going in the opposite direction.

Nimay's wife Shanchita Sarkar, 45, son Gourab Sarkar, 25, and one of their neighbours Kamal Hossain died on the spot.

Critically injured Nimay was first rushed to Bhanga Upazila Health Complex, from where he was shifted to Faridpur Medical College Hospital.

Later, he was taken to Dhaka in a helicopter for better treatment, added the OC.

SATCHHARI FOREST

BGB recovers 18 rocket shells

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Moulvibazar

Members of Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB) recovered 18 rocket shells during a drive at Satchhari forest in Chunarughat upazila of Habiganj.

The drive started Tuesday night and continued till 11:00am yesterday.

On information, the BGB members started an operation in the deep forest of Satchhari National Park on Tuesday evening.

Lt Col SNM Samiunnabi Chowdhury, captain of BGB 55th Battalion, told this correspondent that 18 rocket shells were recovered in the operation inside the forest.

"The ammunition was wrapped in polythene," he said.

Rapid Action Battalion has raided Satchhari area at different times between June 1, 2014, and February 24, 2019, and recovered large amounts of firearms, ammunition, and explosives.

Covax brings

FROM PAGE 1

Health Organization, the Vaccine Alliance Gavi, and Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations. The facility is working to ensure equitable access to Covid-19 vaccines to the low and middle-income countries.

With the 6.8 crore shots, roughly 20 percent of the population or 34 million people can be inoculated.

The Coalition on Tuesday published Covax's first round of allocations which would be updated by the end of the week to include tentative timelines for the supply of doses, split into February-March and April-May, according to the WHO website.

The allocation outlined the delivery of 237 million doses of the Oxford vaccine, manufactured by AstraZeneca and licensed and manufactured by Serum Institute of India, to 142 countries.

On December 7, the health directorate submitted Bangladesh's National Vaccine Deployment Plan to Gavi.

Bangladesh on July 7, last year, submitted an official Expression of Interest (EOI) to Gavi to get the vaccines from the Covax.

On September 18, Gavi announced that Bangladesh was eligible to get the vaccine.

The health minister yesterday said that the government will continue the first phase of Covid-19 vaccination until June or July.

Besides, the age restrictions will be lowered once more doses become available, he told reporters at his secretariat office.

Teachers and the students will soon be inoculated, he said.

According to the initially disclosed National Covid-19 Vaccine Deployment Plan, a total of 1.5 crore people, including frontline workers and people aged 55 and above, would be inoculated in the first phase.

On February 6, the government allowed people aged 40 and above to register for inoculation against Covid-19 after noticing that only a fraction of the people eligible for the shots responded to the campaign.

The government planned to inoculate 60 lakh people in the first month. The target was set to 70 lakh after two revisions.

The private sector will be allowed to import and sell Covid-19 vaccine in the domestic market, but the government will continue providing the vaccine to the people for free.

Foreign citizens will get the vaccine from the government if they are listed by the foreign ministry, the minister said.

Meanwhile, the total number of people vaccinated rose to 34,60,159 as new 1,18,654 people were inoculated across the country yesterday.

As of 5:30pm yesterday, 46,55,464 people registered on www.surokha.gov.bd to get the Covid-19 shots.

Bangladesh started a countrywide vaccination campaign on February 7 with a stock of 70 lakh shots. On February 22, the second shipment of 20 lakh doses of the purchased Oxford vaccines from Serum arrived here.