

BANGLADESH UPDATE



1,739
New cases in 24hrs



7,63,682
Total cases



11,688
Deaths



6,91,162
Recoveries



3,222,818
Deaths



154,008,161
Total cases

COLLEGE GIRL'S DEATH

Lawyer asks govt to verify phone convo

Serves legal notice

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

A Supreme Court lawyer yesterday served a legal notice on the government, asking it to verify through forensic tests the authenticity of an alleged conversation between the college student found dead in a Gulshan flat and Bashundhara Group Managing Director Sayem Sobhan Anvir.

In the notice, the SC lawyer, Yeadia Zaman, also sought legal action against Sobhan if the tests found the conversation to be authentic.

Yeadia made the home secretary the respondent. The notice was sent to him by post.

The 21-year-old woman was found dead in the flat on April 26. Later her sister filed a case with Gulshan Police Station accusing Anvir of instigating the

victim to die by suicide.

In the conversations, which have gone viral after the incident, Anvir is allegedly heard verbally abusing the victim. Such language is disrespectful for any female, the lawyer mentioned in the notice.

The lawyer also mentioned in the notice that police already have the conversation in their possession.

Talking to The Daily Star, the SC lawyer said she would wait for the home secretary to take appropriate action. If she does not get a response from the secretary soon, she said she would serve another notice asking the government about the progress in the matter, she said.

"I will take appropriate legal steps if the home secretary does not act in line with the legal notice," she added.



Volunteers of Swachhchasebak League struggle to maintain a crowd as they distribute rice, lentil and other grocery items among locals in the capital's Jatrabari intersection area yesterday. Physical distancing, crucial to curb the spread of Covid-19, was not followed there at all.

PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

26 die as speedboat

FROM PAGE 1

Contacted, Madaripur Deputy Commissioner (DC) Rahima Khatun said the speedboat was carrying passengers, violating the restriction imposed by the government to curb the spread of Covid-19.

The accident occurred due to poor visibility on the river in the morning. Furthermore, the driver was not skilled enough, the DC told The Daily Star.

PROBE BODY

Hours after the incident, Madaripur district administration formed a six-member committee -- with Deputy Director of Local Government Division Azharul Islam as its convener -- to investigate the accident, said DC Rahima Khatun.

The committee, which also includes magistrates, representatives of naval police and fire service, has been asked to submit the probe report within three working days.

The family of each victim will receive Tk 20,000 assistance for funeral arrangements, the DC said.

Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority (BIWTA), a government body under the Ministry of Shipping, is responsible for development, maintenance and control of water transport and waterways in the country.

Contacted, BIWTA Assistant Director Md Shahadat Hossain, who is assigned to ensure marine safety and traffic management at Shimulia terminal, yesterday said his department does not monitor speedboat operations on the Shimulia-Banglabazar route due to a lack of manpower.

The naval police and Coast Guard monitor it, he said.

Contacted, Lt Ashmadul Islam, commander of Coast Guard's Pagla station in Narayanganj, said they are only responsible for ensuring safety measures like wearing of life-jackets and controlling overloading. The BIWTA is responsible for the overall services.

Sirajul Kabir, in-charge of naval police at Mawa of Munshiganj, said law enforcers are supposed to ensure safety and security; but BIWTA is responsible for controlling operations of vessels.

UNREGISTERED BOATS AND UNSKILLED DRIVERS

Around 400 speedboats are being operated daily on this route. But these speedboats do not have any registration or fitness certificates from the government.

Contacted, BIWTA Chairman Commodore Golam Sadek said all the speedboats are unregistered. Recently, 28 speedboat operators have applied for registration.

If anyone wants to run a business, he or she just has to negotiate with the terminal's leaseholder, said sources at

the terminal.

Perhaps most alarming is that the speedboat drivers do not have any institutional training or license.

They move up the ladder from a driver's assistant to becoming the actual driver after a few days of gathering experience, said Ashraf Hossain, the leaseholder of the speedboat terminal in Shimulia.

Contacted, BIWTA official Md Shahdat Hossain admitted the fact and added that the speedboat which capsized yesterday, owned by one Chandu Mia, is not registered and its driver Md Shah Alam has no license.

"We have already asked law enforcement agencies to take action against them," he added.

Leaseholder Ashraf Hossain said the process of registering speedboats was initiated a few years ago, but the initiative did not see any progress due to a lack of cooperation from speedboat owners and workers.

ILLEGAL SERVICE

Multiple government officials are now saying the speedboat services on this river route are illegal, although speedboats have been plying the route for the last few years.

"Operation of speedboats are totally illegal. But we don't know how these are being operated. We can inform you after investigation. We will talk to our higher authorities to stop these speedboat services," said DC Rahima Khatun.

Md Abdul Arek, superintendent of naval police in Faridpur Region, who visited the spot, said, "Speedboats are illegal during normal times. Furthermore, operations of such transports are very much illegal during lockdown. We will investigate the matter to know how and why these transports were being operated," the police officer told journalists.

The driver of the speedboat has been arrested and is now undergoing treatment under police custody.

LACK OF SAFETY MEASURE

As per the rules, all passengers of speedboats are bound to wear life-jackets but most do not follow the rules, said locals and speedboat operators.

About overloading, locals said capacity of carrying passengers varies according to the size of speedboats.

About the speedboat that capsized yesterday, Lt Ashmadul Islam, commander of Coast Guard's Pagla station in Narayanganj, said the speedboat had a capacity of carrying 28 passengers.

But it is assumed that the driver took some 30 to 35 passengers. Of them, some wore life-jackets while most of the passengers did not wear it, he added.

Mamata relegates Left to footnote

FROM PAGE 1

where minorities are a decisive factor contributed to the Mamata-led landslide victory of the TMC.

The TMC made a clean sweep in all the 16 seats in Kolkata, 10 out of 11 seats in Birbhum, 30 of 33 seats in North 24-parganas and 28 out of 31 seats in South 24-parganas, and all 32 seats in Purba Bardwan and Howrah.

Voting in these districts were held in the last three of the eight phases of the assembly polls. It happened as the second wave of Covid-19 exploded in India.

The TMC not only won at its strongholds but also in the areas where the BJP had done well in 2019 Lok Sabha elections, including the former Maoist hotbed of Jangalmahal.

Another important factor that went in favour of the TMC was that it managed to snatch almost all the seats that were considered traditional Congress bastions like Malda, South Dinajpur and Murshidabad.

The Congress and Left parties had together won 77 seats in 2016 and almost all of those went to the TMC this time.

The Muslim and non-Muslim votes that had in the past gone to Congress and Left also went en bloc to the TMC.

The Muslims have been backing the TMC since 2011 when the party came to power for the first time. But the way

Muslims rallied behind Mamata this time was something never seen before.

In the 141 constituencies with significant Muslim presence, the TMC bagged 120, BJP bagged 20 and Abbas Siddiqui's Indian Secular Front one.

A senior CPI(M) leader told The Daily Star wishing anonymity that the Congress and the Left did not stand a chance in the election in Bengal and it was a conscious decision to facilitate the transfer of the votes to the TMC in order to prevent a BJP win in Bengal.

None of the top Left leaders came to Bengal to campaign even for a day. But they were busy electioneering in Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Assam.

Congress star campaigners Rahul Gandhi addressed just one meeting in Bengal while his sister gave the state a total miss. But the siblings had extensively campaigned in Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Assam.

The Congress, which ruled Bengal for 30 years, got only 3 percent of the votes, while the CPI(M), that ruled WB for 34 years, got less than 5 percent.

However, CM Pinarayi Vijayan, the Communist party stalwart, created electoral history by returning to power.

Besides, the young candidates of the CPIM, who created a lot of media hype, including Meenakshi Mukherjee, Aishi Ghosh and Dipshita Dhar, failed to make their mark.

Tk 29cr goes to 15 fake owners

FROM PAGE 1

This is just the tip of the iceberg of a massive forgery that took place in the acquisition of one acre or 100 decimals of land to build a Police Bureau of Intelligence (PBI) office in Kolatoli Bypass Road area, adjacent to the Chattogram-Cox's Bazar highway.

On a visit to the land in question on March 25, this correspondent saw walls have been built with a signboard saying the land had been acquired for PBI. A tin-roofed shanty was also seen inside the walls.

An administrative building, barracks, and other structures are set to be built on the land, according to PBI documents.

An investigation by the Anti-Corruption Commission found a syndicate in collaboration with land officials embezzled around Tk 29.29 crore of public money against 80 decimals of land through fake papers, keeping the real landowners in the dark, according to ACC documents.

The government had disbursed around Tk 31.13 crore for the acquisition, as per the documents seen by The Daily Star.

An ACC official with knowledge of the forgery told The Daily Star that only one person had withdrawn the money using genuine documents while 15 others used fake powers of attorney and other illegal means to siphon off the public money.

In the acquisition of the 100 decimals of land, standard government procedure was also not followed, the ACC document said.

For instance, Nizam did not receive any notice of acquisition from the local land office but one Nurul Haque, allegedly a member of the syndicate, got the notice on January 23, 2019. The Daily Star obtained a copy of this notice.

As per the Land Acquisition Act-2017, the land acquisition officer led by the additional deputy commissioner (revenue), along with the upazila nirbahi officer and assistant commissioner (land) from the area concerned, must make a field visit to the land chosen for acquisition. They then hang a notice in the land area that it has been selected for acquisition.

If no reservation arises from anyone regarding the acquisition, the land acquisition officer then proceeds to issue a notice to the landowner by Section-06 of the Land Acquisition Act and prepare a field book by Section-07, which will assess the compensation of land, trees and structures on it. The office then pays the owner.

SYNDICATE FORGED LAND DOCUMENTS

At a press conference on December 6 last year, eight victims of this illegal land acquisition alleged that a syndicate led by Md Edris CIP, Nurul Haque, and Belayet Hossein took control of PBI's land acquisition process.

The syndicate not only faked documents to grab the land but also threatened the genuine landowners to not raise their voice against the illegal acquisition.

Nurul Alam, while reading out a written statement on behalf of all the victims, alleged that the land acquisition officer did not take any action against the syndicate despite several appeals and cases regarding the fake documents.

Documents obtained by The Daily Star show the home ministry gave administrative approval for land acquisition for the PBI office in Cox's Bazar on October 1, 2018.

The district administration started the land acquisition process in January 2019, selecting plot numbers 20307, 20306, 17050, and 20163 to acquire 100 decimals of land under Jhlongia mouza of Cox's Bazar Sadar.

Among these four, plot 20307 is the largest with 75 decimals of land with the other three plots making up the rest of the land.

The 10-member syndicate hatched a conspiracy centring around these four plots.

Led by Edris CIP and Nurul Haque, the syndicate included the numbers of these government acquired plots in their claim on 54 decimals of land they actually bought through four powers of attorney in two phases in 2018 and 2019 from Chandrima Abasik area, which is half a kilometre away from the plots acquired for PBI, according to documents from land acquisition office.

The land acquisition office treated these fake owners as real on this basis throughout the whole process, despite several appeals by the genuine landowners.

The land acquisition office disbursed payment to one Nezamul Haque for 18 decimals of land against plot number 20306 -- however, the khatyan (record of rights) and land trace map shows only seven decimals of land in that plot.

Nezamul received Tk 5.25 crore from the land acquisition office on March 25, 2020 -- just one day ahead of the countrywide shutdown began due to the coronavirus pandemic.

Edris CIP's wife Jinnat Rehana withdrew money twice using one sale deed (number 1020) -- first as the payment for 4.41 decimals of land and then the payment for nine decimals of land.

Though she only possessed 10 decimals of land based on the fake sale deed, she received payment for 13.41 decimals in March 2020 to the tune of around Tk 3.5 crore in four cheques.

MONEY RELEASED IN RECORD TIME Documents obtained by The Daily Star revealed that initially, the then land acquisition officer Azit Deb in his payment assessment -- a thorough assessment of the land documents before paying the money -- held back payment on October 9, 2019 citing 10 cases regarding 80 decimals of the land intended for the PBI office were pending with the Joint Session Judge's Court in Cox's Bazar.

As per the law, the money cannot be released until the disposal of cases relating to the intended land.

The payment assessment, a copy of which The Daily Star obtained, further said the land deed that claimed ownership over the 80 decimals was for land in Chandrima Abasik area -- out of the area selected for acquisition.

As Azit Deb had held back payment, Nurul Haque posing as plaintiff submitted a fake memorandum of agreement to new land acquisition officer Shamim Hossain on November 10, 2019 saying that the disputing parties had agreed to take back the cases from court and thereby urged the land acquisition office to release the money.

The land acquisition officer led by Ashraf Afsar, former additional deputy commissioner (revenue), and land acquisition officer Shamim Hossain accepted the fake memorandum of agreement and released the money though Nurul Haque was not a plaintiff in any of the cases that were filed relating to the disputed land.

In his review report on December 1, 2019, Shamim Hossain, while overturning Azit Deb's reservation regarding the payment assessment, said that the matter relating to the reservation and cases were resolved through investigation and recommended that the payment process be facilitated.

As the Cox's Bazar district administration reshuffled work distribution in the land acquisition office on March 24, 2020, the file relating to the PBI land acquisition was then handed over from group 3 to group 1.

"It takes at least one week to transfer the files from one group to another. But group 3 transferred the files immediately and group 1 released 17 cheques worth Tk 17 crore to 14 people the very next day," an ACC official investigating the forgery told The Daily Star, adding that such quick disbursement was a first in the history of land acquisition payments.

The official said as lockdown was looming, the syndicate anticipated that the office would delay the payment and they got the cheques released as fast as they could.

The ACC filed a case on March 10 last year after arresting two middlemen and one surveyor with Tk 96 lakh in their possession, linked to the land acquisition forgery.

DC-LED PROBE BODY INCLUDED ONE OF THE ACCUSED

Nurul Alam, one of the victims who lost two decimals of land in the PBI acquisition, filed a case seeking court intervention on August 10, 2020 accusing 14 people including Ashraf Afsar, former additional deputy commissioner (revenue), and land acquisition officers Shamim Hossain and Abu Hasnat Md Shahidul Haque.

The court in its order on the

following day asked the Cox's Bazar deputy commissioner to investigate the matter regarding the allegation raised by Nurul Alam and submit a report within 30 working days.

However, the then DC of Cox's Bazar formed an investigation committee on May 17, 2020 including one of the accused, Ashraf Afsar.

The committee, in its investigation, not surprisingly found nothing wrong in the land acquisition process and submitted its report to the court.

Nurul Alam, who underwent a surgery recently, was unable to talk in detail about the matter. He only told The Daily Star that the case he filed with the court has not seen much progress.

However, an official of Chattogram ACC integrated office-02, who is looking into the forgery case, said an investigation committee with an accused among them couldn't be expected to investigate the matter thoroughly. The committee did not look into the allegations raised by the people deprived of their compensation, he added.

He said that they have got evidence that the syndicate led by Edris CIP, Belayet Hossein, and Nurul Haque resorted to forgery at every stage of the land acquisition process.

Six fraudsters -- Edris CIP, Nurul Haque, Nasir Uddin, Tipu Sultan, Golam Mousa, and Shamimur Rahman -- signed a registered agreement on June 18, 2019 delineating who would bear the bribery costs and everyone's share of the loot after receiving payment from the land acquisition office.

The Daily Star obtained a copy of the agreement, which divided the fraudster into two parties -- Edris CIP alone was the first party and the rest five formed the second party in the agreement.

As per the agreement, the six agreed to open a joint bank account. The second party could only withdraw Tk 1 crore as per the agreement while Edris was entitled to the rest of the money as he was bearing all costs relating to the illegal land acquisition.

PBI ROLE? The land in question was chosen by PBI and approved by the district land acquisition committee in 2017, based on which the home ministry gave administrative nod for this the next year.

Md Moniruzzaman, the then additional police super of Cox's Bazar PBI, told The Daily Star on April 26 that as an expectant agency they had no major role to play in land acquisition. "It was done by the land acquisition office of Cox's Bazar district administration."

Asked why an expectant agency would choose a disputed land, he said he was in charge of Cox's Bazar PBI till March 25, 2018 and the process was about to begin during his term.

"So we did not know then who owned what amount of land, it is up to the land acquisition office to verify everything," said Moniruzzaman, now posted in Khagrachhari.

PRESENT STATUS OF THE ACCUSED

Both Edris CIP and Nurul Haque were recently arrested by the ACC.

Nezamul Haque, one of the accused who withdrew Tk 5.25 crore against 18 decimals of land while owning only seven decimals of land on paper, claimed to The Daily Star that documents proving his ownership of 18 decimals of land were publicly available.

However, a search of the e-mutation website of the Cox's Bazar land office revealed that the khatyan number 7545 against the land belonging to Nezamul was found suspended.

Another accused Belayet Hossein did not respond to multiple phone calls.

Asked how the money was released to fake owners of land despite dozens of cases pending with the court, land acquisition officer Shamim Hossain told The Daily Star that he wasn't authorised to make any comment without permission from his supervisors.

Ashraf Afsar, former additional deputy commissioner (revenue) of Cox's Bazar, now transferred to the Ministry of Science and Technology, told The Daily Star that he could recollect one incident when one cheque was pending due to some complications. After forming a three-member committee, they released the cheque later.

"Apart from this, everything was done following due procedure," he claimed.

65 more die of Covid, 1,739 get infected

UNB, Dhaka

Bangladesh reported that 65 more people died from Covid-19 in 24 hours ending at 8:00am yesterday, raising the death toll to 11,644.

The health authorities recorded 1,739 new infections after examining 13,431 samples, according to data available at corona.gov.bd.

A handout from the Directorate General of Health Services put the number of tests at 19,431, including antigen tests.

Bangladesh has so far tested 55,18,410 samples, according to the DGHS.

There has been a steady decline in the number of tests since April 28 when 28,206 samples were tested. With a fall in tests, the number of new cases too went down gradually from April 26 (3,306) to May 2 (1,359) before a slightly upward curve.

Yesterday's daily infection rate slipped to 8.95 percent from Sunday's 9.6 percent, but the mortality rate remained static at 1.52 percent.

Bangladesh has recorded less than 70 virus-related deaths since Friday. The death toll soared to over 100 during April 16-19 and on April 25, but since then the daily fatalities have been falling gradually.

With the latest figure, 7,63,682 cases have been recorded in the country so far, the DGHS said in the handout. This puts Bangladesh at 33rd in the list of countries with highest cases, according to Johns Hopkins University tally.

The number of recoveries now stands at 6,91,162, including 3,834 new one. So far, 90.50 percent patients have recovered.

Bangladesh reported its first coronavirus cases on March 8 last year, and the first death on March 18 that year.

Covid-19 claimed 2,404 lives in April alone, the deadliest month for the country since the outbreak of the pandemic last year.

Of all coronavirus-related deaths reported until the end of last month, April alone recorded 20.99 percent fatalities.

In the last month, 147,837 new cases were officially registered, according to DGHS.

In Bangladesh, 568 coronavirus-related deaths were reported in January, 281 in February and 638 in March.

Dhaka division remains the worst-hit region, registering most of the deaths -- 6,784 or 58.26 percent.

Thirty-two of the 65 deaths reported yesterday are from Dhaka division and 17 from Chattogram division.

Khaleda

FROM PAGE 1

Covid-19 test result on April 24.

Her doctor had said she needed to stay at the hospital for a few days as her medical tests had been due for more than a year and a half.

Khaleda is receiving treatment under cardiologist Shahabuddin Talukdar.

The BNP chief has been suffering from arthritis, diabetes and eye problems. She first tested Covid-19 positive on April 11.

Speaking at a press briefing yesterday, Zahid told journalists that Khaleda developed breathing difficulties early in the morning.

"Doctors soon examined her and the medical board decided to shift her to CCU," he said.

A 10-member medical board is looking after the treatment of the BNP chairperson.

The physician said Khaleda's treatment was going on properly. "We on behalf of Khaleda Zia request all to pray for her quick recovery."

Asked if the former PM was suffering from breathing problems due to Covid-19 infection, Zahid said, "One can develop breathing problems anytime. She was moved to the CCU after consultations with doctors."

Meanwhile, BNP Secretary General Mirza Fakhru Islam Alamgir called Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan Kamal yesterday evening to inform him about the condition of Khaleda.

Asked if Khaleda's family sought permission to take her abroad for treatment, Fakhru told The Daily Star that it was not the case.

Amid the coronavirus outbreak, the government on March 25 last year freed Khaleda from jail for six months through an executive order suspending her jail sentences in two graft cases.

She was released from the prison cell at Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University the same day. Since then, Khaleda had been staying at her Gulshan residence.

The government extended her release period for six months on August 27 last year. It was extended for another six months on March 15 this year.

On February 8, 2018, the BNP chief was sent to Old Dhaka Central Jail after a court sentenced her to five years' imprisonment in the Zia Orphanage Trust corruption case. The High Court later doubled her sentence.

Khaleda was found guilty in another graft case the same year. Her party, however, claims both the cases are politically motivated.