

'Robber' killed

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recovered from the spot after the "shootout" was over.

A few firearms and sharp weapons were also recovered from the spot, the OC added.

Later, the body was sent to Chattogram Medical College Hospital morgue for autopsy.

On July 16, a group of robbers killed truck driver Abdur Rahman after failing to loot his cow laden truck at Bridge-4 on Bayezid-Foujderhat Link Road area.

Later, a relative of the driver filed a case with Sitakunda Police Station making Kajol the prime accused.

So far, the law enforcers have arrested eight persons in connection with the case and four of them gave confessional statements where they mentioned that Kajol shot the driver, police said.

Jubo League

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All five cases against Bashirur were filed in Dhaka, said police.

Contacted, lawmaker Shimul said he did not know Bashirur was an absconding accused.

Yahya speaks

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Within less than two hours after his arrival, Gromyko and Indian Foreign Minister Swaran Singh started official talks. Problems arising out of the Bangladesh movement and Pakistan's attitude cropped up during their 65-minute talk.

US DONATION FOR RELIEF WORK IN EAST PAKISTAN

The US Secretary of State William P Rogers met for four hours with Secretary General Thant to discuss ways the United States and the United Nations could cooperate in aiding the millions of East Pakistanis left destitute by cyclone and war.

Both sides in the talks stressed that they felt that humanitarian efforts must take priority over politics. Earlier, Thant had warned the member states that he saw a grave threat to peace in the tensions along the Pakistani-Indian frontier.

Rogers presented Thant with a check for \$1 million, which a United States spokesman described as "the first million". The spokesman said another million would follow and that both contributions were to be used to finance United Nations efforts to aid the destitute and hungry in East Pakistan.

KABARI SENTENCED BY PAK AUTHORITIES

Leading Bangladesh actress Kabari was tried in absentia and sentenced 14 years' rigorous imprisonment by the Pakistani Martial Law Authorities. They also confiscated all her properties in Bangladesh.

Shamsuddoza Sajen is a journalist and researcher. He can be contacted at sajen1986@gmail.com

India okays J&J's

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so far, but barely eight percent of the population has had two shots.

Johnson and Johnson's vaccine is the fifth to be approved after Oxford-AstraZeneca's Covishield, the home developed Covaxin, Russia's Sputnik V, and the US-made Moderna jab.

India remains the second worst-hit nation after the United States, with more than 32 million confirmed cases and 427,000 deaths. Because of under-reporting experts say the real toll is much higher.

Meanwhile, Australia saw a record daily number of new coronavirus cases this year yesterday, with the country's most populous states of New South Wales, Victoria and Queensland recording a total of 361 cases of the highly infectious Delta variant.

With about 15 million people in the three states, or 60% of Australia's population, under a strict lockdown, the country also reported five coronavirus-related deaths, one of the highest this year.

With just over 36,000 COVID-19 cases and 937 deaths, Australia has avoided the high caseloads of other developed countries, but its vaccination figures are among the lowest, with only 20% of people aged over 16 fully vaccinated.

The coronavirus pandemic has killed at least 4,275,868 people worldwide since the virus first emerged in late 2019, according to an AFP compilation of official data.

The pandemic is accelerating almost everywhere, most markedly in the US and Canada which saw a jump of 44 percent in average daily cases over the past week. Cases increased by 20 percent in Oceania, 11 percent in the Middle East, six percent in Asia, three percent in Europe and one percent in Africa.

This week the only region that did not record an uptick in cases was Latin America and the Caribbean, which saw daily infections decline by 13 percent over the previous week.

The average number of new daily cases globally increased by six percent over the week to 612,000, according to an AFP tally.

The pandemic has continued to gain ground since mid-June largely due to the highly contagious Delta variant now dominant in many countries.



Coronavirus skeptics protest after a death of a protestor during a demonstration last week in Berlin, Germany, yesterday. Protesters took to the streets across Germany for the fourth weekend in a row against a new coronavirus health rules despite rising cases. PHOTO: REUTERS

4 lives lost to bloody rivalry

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While police were probing the incidents, two others were killed in Shouldi village under the same union on April 20. This time the victims were two AL activists -- Siddiqur Rahman and Abdus Sattar Dhali.

A district police official, earlier involved in the probe, said these two killings were also plotted by Ruma's family "just to divert attention".

Four separate cases were filed with Mehendiganj Police Station over the killings.

The Daily Star, on a four-day visit to the upazila late last month, tried to dig deep into the rivalry, which started in 2018 after the passing away of Ruma's husband Altaf Sarder alias Altu Sarder, also a former AL-backed chairman of Ulania Union Parishad.

Milon, a member of Ulania union AL, took over most of the fishery ghat toll collections earlier controlled by Altaf, and secured the party ticket to contest the election.

Altaf's son Tareq Sardar, who had taken the helm of his father's group, started campaigning for his mother Ruma, contesting as an independent candidate.

On December 4 last year, a clash between the two groups left at least 33 people injured and three days later, four AL men came under machete attacks, according to local sources.

The next day, 19 houses were demolished, two shops vandalised, and 20 people hurt in another clash, leading to postponement of the polls.

But the feud was far from over. On the night of April 10, Sarder family's hitmen Jamal and Jashim

forced Saiful to Kaliganj Bazaar canal. Saiful's stepmother Kohinur was also present there, police sources said.

About seven to eight men killed Saiful by drowning him in the canal, took the body to a nearby forest and made some cuts all over it with a sharp weapon, a high official of district police told this newspaper.

The body was then dumped in a vegetable field and the announcement from the mosque's loudspeaker came, leading to a clash and the killing of Saied.

Police said Saiful's stepmother Kohinur filed a case on April 13 against 44 people, including Milon Chowdhury, while Kazi Abdul Alim Chowdhury, a cousin of Saied, filed a case against 39 including Tareq Sarder.

Police say Kohinur's initial statement was "confusing" and she also went into hiding after filing the case.

Later detained and interrogated, Kohinur admitted that she was involved in her stepson's murder for personal gains, according to a high official of Barisal district police.

Kohinur, then shown arrested in the very case she herself filed, gave a confessional statement.

Md Mominuddin, the then investigation officer of the case, now an inspector of Ujirpur Police Station, said the Sarder family was involved in the killings of Saiful and Saied.

"Kohinur admitted her involvement in Saiful's murder. She also mentioned that the Sarder family was behind it," he added.

Mominuddin further said Tareq Sarder and his cadres Jashim, Miraz,

Jamal, Kamal and Chunnu were accused in different cases filed with Bhola and Mehendiganj police stations.

Based on Kohinur's information, police arrested Jakir and Miraj last month and all three are now in jail.

"We have arrested three including Saiful's stepmother. We found involvement of around 18 people," Shajahan Hossain, additional superintendent of Barisal police, told The Daily Star.

He said the cases have been transferred to the Police Bureau of Investigation (PBI) and the probe is on.

Contacted, Tareq Sarder trashed the allegations and said, "It is a conspiracy against me and my family. If a fair investigation is done, the truth will come out."

This newspaper tried to reach Ruma but Tareq said his mother was sick and not in a position to talk to the media.

This newspaper failed to contact Saiful's wife Khadiza Begum as she, along with her two kids, have been missing since the incident.

A month back, Khadiza gave her statement under Section 164 and claimed the Sarder family offered her Tk 10 lakh and a job at the union parishad office to make a deal in exchange of her silence, said police.

KILLINGS, AGAIN Around 10:00AM on April 20, AL supporters -- Siddique and Sattar -- were killed in an attack at a wedding party in Shouldi village of Ulania.

Besides police officials, at least ten locals of the village confirmed to this newspaper that the killings were

plotted by the Sarder group.

Abul Kalam, officer-in-charge of Mehendiganj Police Station, said they arrested nine people after the incident. Three of the arrestees -- Sohel, Sohag and Joynal -- also gave confessional statements to the court, he said.

"The cases are now under investigation by the PBI," he added.

Sources say the three in their confessional statements mentioned Sarder family's links with the killings.

Humayun Kabir, special superintendent of PBI, told The Daily Star a few days back, "We have received the dockets of four murder cases. We need some time to say something on the matter."

Talking to The Daily Star, Milon Chowdhury said, "The Sarder family killed their men and then tried to put the blame on us -- which came out in the police investigation and arrestees' confessions."

Asked about his rivalry with Ruma over the fishery ghat toll collections, he said the Sarder family resorted to criminal activities to ensure their control over the ghat business.

Local sources said there are at least 50 fishery ghats in Mehendiganj and over Tk 100 crore is collected as "commission" from these ghats every year.

Contacted, Talukder Mohammad Younus, general secretary of Barisal district AL, said it was the flow of illegal money that led to such fierce rivalry and the murders.

"It has embarrassed the party. We have informed the central committee about the situation and requested action," he told The Daily Star.

Remains

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Identities of six victims, who were burnt alive being trapped on the third floor of the building with its only exit locked, were yet to be confirmed through DNA profiling. The bodies will be handed to family members following the confirmation, CID Inspector Ataur Rahman, investigation officer of the case filed over the incident, told The Daily Star.

Officials and representatives from Criminal Investigation Department, deputy commissioner of Narayanganj and Narayanganj police, among others, were present during the handover of the bodies.

"The identification of the six other victims through DNA tests is under process," Ataur said while talking to this newspaper.

The deceased whose bodies were handed over yesterday are: Mahmuda Akhtar, Santa Moni, both 13; Mahbubur Rahman, 28; Kompa Rani Barman, 14; Zihad Rana, Rahima Akhtar, Mina Khatun, Md Noman Amena Akhtar, Rabeya Akhtar, Rahima, Akash Mia, Nazmul Hossain, Swapan Mia, Shefali Rani Sarkar, Amrita Begum, Md Shamim, Selina Akhtar, Taslima Akhtar, Fakima Akhtar and Md Hossain.

A CID official said family members of the deceased won't be able to unwrap the bodies since they were in a bad shape.

Families of each of the dead were given Tk 25,000 for funeral costs by the Narayanganj deputy commissioner's magistrate's office.

While receiving the body of Santa Moni, her mother Shimu Akhtar said Santa had taken a job in the factory just two days before the fire incident.

"It is not an accident. It is a cold blooded murder. We want punishment of the killers," she said.

"She was a class four student of a madrasa in the same area. As the madrasa was closed for a long time due to the pandemic, we told her to work in the factory," Shimu said and broke into tears.

28,000-yr-old

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The Siberian Simba, nicknamed Sparta, was one of two baby cave lions -- extinct big cats that used to roam widely across the northern hemisphere -- found in 2017 and 2018 by mammoth tusk hunters on the banks of the Semyuelyakh River in Russia's Far East.

Initially, it was thought the two cubs were siblings, as they were found just 15 meters (49 feet) apart, but a new study found that they differ in age by around 15,000 years. Boris, as the second cub is known, is 43,448 years old, according to radio carbon dating.

"Sparta is probably the best preserved Ice Age animal ever found, and is more or less undamaged apart from the fur being a bit ruffled. She even had the whiskers preserved. Boris is a bit more damaged, but still pretty good," said Love Dalen, a professor of evolutionary genetics at the Centre for Palaeogenetics in Stockholm, Sweden, and an author of a new study on the cubs.

Both cubs were just 1 or 2 months old when they perished, the study said. It's not clear how they died, but Dalen and the research team -- which includes Russian and Japanese scientists -- said there were no signs of them being killed by a predator.

Computed tomography scans showed skull damage, dislocation of ribs, and other distortions in their skeletons.

Hundreds

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set to continue, with strong winds and temperatures of up to 38 degrees C (100 F) forecast in some regions yesterday.

This year's fires have been far more destructive than in previous years.

In the last 10 days, 56,655 hectares (140,000 acres) have been burnt in Greece, according to the European Forest Fire Information System. The average number of hectares burnt over the same period between 2008 and 2020 was 1,700 hectares.

"When this nightmarish summer ends we will reverse the damage as soon as possible," Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis pledged on Saturday.

In Perfkofyto, in the north of Athens, pensioner Tasos Tsilivikios struggled to contain his tears.

"This is a horrible disaster," he told AFP.

"I'm really afraid that maybe only our great-grand children will have the chance to walk again in these areas."

Greece and Turkey have been fighting devastating fires for more than a week as the region suffers its worst heatwave in decades. Officials and experts have linked such intense weather events to climate change.

So far, they have killed two people in Greece and eight in Turkey, with dozens more hospitalised there during 10 days of the blazes.

A UN draft report seen by AFP labelled the Mediterranean region a "climate change hotspot", warning that heatwaves, droughts and fires would become more fierce in the future, supercharged by rising temperatures.

But the weather gave Turkey some respite yesterday. Officials in the Turkish coastal city of Antalya said the blazes were under control in the southwestern province after rainfall there.

Poor deprived as graft rules

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when work opportunities are thin and food falls short in rural homes.

The correspondent recently visited at least 56 such project sites in Natore Sadar upazila and found multiple evidence of corruption and irregularities.

A project initiated to convert a piece of land into a playground at Chandpur village in Kafuria union, with Tk 3.28 lakh allocated, was supposed to employ poor people for the work.

But the project authorities simply brought soil from elsewhere in trucks and dumped it to fill up the site. No poor were able to get work there, said locals and the contractor.

Locals also alleged that the site the project authorities filled up was a pond, though the project guidelines strictly prohibit the filling up of any wetland.

Ananda Biswas, a local who is also a member of the project implementation committee, said, "There was an old pond here. But we are now filling it up to create a playground for children."

Palash Baroi, president of the project implementation committee, said 100 trucks of soil were required to fill it up. "We have already dumped 70 truckloads of soil and the remaining 30 truckloads will be dumped later."

Palash said a man named Tusher, who was nominated by the UNO and project implementation officer, has got the contract to complete the project.

Contacted, Tusher claimed that he

had done everything as per these two officials' directives.

Natore Sadar's UNO Jahangir Alam, however, said he doesn't know any Tusher and that Palash Baroi was mistaken.

Soil trader Abdul Gaffar, who supplied the soil for this project, said, "I have sold each truck of soil at Tk 1,200. They [the project authorities] asked me to provide 100 trucks of soil."

As per Gaffar's estimate, the soil he supplied cost Tk 1.20 lakh against the project's allocation of Tk 3.28 lakh.

Another project undertaken to repair a graveyard at Chandrakola Purbopara village in Tebaria union was allocated a total of Tk 2.60 lakh for implementation, according to the project documents.

"But the committee's president told us that only Tk 1 lakh has been allocated for it. He provided us with 7,000 bricks, which might have cost around Tk 70,000," said villager Moksled Ali.

"We don't know how the rest of the money was spent," said Moksled, who is the president of the graveyard management committee.

Contacted, the project implementation committee's president, Anwar Hossain, however, said the graveyard's repairs were still going on.

"More money will be given there, if necessary," he said.

In another project, undertaken at a cost of Tk 5 lakh to repair a road at Pashchim Haguria village in

Dighapatia union, local labourers were overlooked and heavy machinery was brought in.

The president of the project implementation committee and a member of the local union parishad, Nadiuzzaman Mridha, said the road was repaired by using an excavator.

Around Tk 1.5 lakh was spent on this project, said Mridha, who added that everything was done following the instructions of Dighapatia UP Chairman Khandaker Omar Sharif Chauhan.

A similar picture was observed in another project to repair an earthen road at Sutradhapa in Dighapatia union.

A project initiated to restore a canal at Ward 9 in Dighapatia union was supposed to be completed by June 30. But the work only started on July 1.

Interestingly, the Natore Sadar upazila's project implementation officer sent a report to the higher authorities claiming that the project works had been fully completed by June 30, according to documents seen by this correspondent.

Around Tk 5.81 lakh was allocated for the project and poor people were supposed to be employed for the work. But the project authorities used an excavator instead.

Local people alleged that a maximum Tk 1 lakh might have been spent for the project.

Contacted, Dighapatia Union Parishad Chairman Khandaker Omar Sharif Chauhan admitted that some corruption took place in a few

2nd provincial capital falls to Taliban

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who only returned to Afghanistan this week from medical treatment in Turkey, but is currently in Kabul.

Aides said he was meeting with President Ashraf Ghani yesterday in an attempt to persuade the country's leader to fly in reinforcements.

"We have demanded the

government deploys at least 500 commandos so we could work to retake the city," said his party's spokesman, Ehsan Niro.

The Taliban have taken control of vast tracts of rural Afghanistan since early May when they launched a series of offensives to coincide with the start of the final withdrawal of foreign

troops.

Afghan government forces largely abandoned the countryside to the insurgents, but are now scrambling to defend a string of cities.

The war has also returned to the capital, with a senior government information official shot dead in the street Friday, three days after the

defence minister survived a brazen assassination attempt involving a car bomb and Taliban hit squad.

Qader Malia, deputy governor of Jawzjan province, told AFP Sheberghan had "unfortunately fallen", but interior ministry spokesman Marwais Stanikzai insisted the insurgents held only parts of the city.