

BANGLADESH UPDATE



1,000
New cases in 24hrs



15,45,800
Total cases



27,277
Deaths



15,04,709
Recoveries



GLOBAL UPDATE



4,718,150
Deaths



230,105,042
Total cases

Locals confine cops after fisherman 'tortured to death'

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Patuakhali

A fisherman was beaten to death allegedly by policemen in Patuakhali's Kalapara upazila yesterday.

The victim Sujun Hawladar, 30, son of Abdus Sattar of Baliaali village, was chased and tortured by policemen before his death, alleged locals.

A severe tension was prevailing in the area.

According to locals, members of Banatibazar Naval Police Outpost, led by Assistant Sub-inspector Mamun, chased Sujun's fishing trawler on the Ramnabad river.

Four of the five fishermen on the trawler managed to escape but Sujun was held and tortured, they said, adding that at one point Sujun fell unconscious on the net of his trawler.

As the news of Sujun's death spread, hundreds of agitated locals, including fishermen, went to the spot and confined the policemen.

The victim's relatives rushed him to Kalapara Upazila Health Complex where

on-duty doctors declared him dead.

Meanwhile, after six hours of confinement, additional police force was deployed in the area and the team headed by ASI Mamun was rescued on promises of justice for Sujun.

ABM Humayun Kabir, chairman of Baliaali union, said 20 to 25 policemen from Kalapara and Mahipur police stations went to the spot, assured justice for Sujun, and rescued the confined policemen.

Sub-inspector Shahidul Islam, in-charge of the Banatibazar Naval Police Outpost, said he was on leave when the incident happened.

Asked, ASI Mamun denied the allegations and said the raided Sujun's trawler as he used the current net for fishing.

"He was already lying on the net when we went there," he said.

Khandaker Mostafizur Rahman, officer-in-charge of Kalapara Police Station, said the reason behind Sujun's death would be identified once the autopsy report is done.



Vehicles line up at a CNG filling station in the capital's Moghbazar around 1:00pm yesterday. The CNG filling stations in the city are seeing long lines of vehicles as they would remain closed from 6:00pm to 10:00pm every day in line with a government order to increase supply of gas to power stations.

PHOTO: STAR

Enhance diplomatic efforts

BNP grassroots ask high-ups

MOHAMMAD AL-MASUM MOLLA

A section of BNP's grassroots said the party should improve diplomatic efforts and bring all democratic forces under a single platform to hold the next election under a non-partisan interim government.

They also said the unity of the party should be cemented under the leadership of party's acting chairman Tarique Rahman.

The party's Dhaka and Faridpur districts leaders said this to BNP high-ups during a meeting at the party chairperson's Gulshan office yesterday.

The party is holding a series of closed-door meetings to learn what the grassroots activists think should be their strategy ahead of the next parliamentary polls.

In the first day of the second round of meetings, 126 party's executive committee leaders were invited but 48

leaders were absent.

Party's top leaders expressed anger over this, said meeting sources. A total of 28 leaders spoke in the meeting.

All participants opined for waging movement demanding election under a non-partisan interim government but stressed on restoring party discipline before launching any movement.

They also said it wouldn't be possible to topple the government without a united movement.

After the meeting, party's Secretary General Mirza Fakhruddin Islam Alamgir told Journalists that they held the meeting to devise the strategy of restoring democracy in the country.

In 2018, the party held its last executive committee meeting at Le Meridien hotel just four days before Khaleda landed in jail.

No executive committee meeting has been held since.

Rogue IPTVs on the prowl

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Legally, IPTVs cannot broadcast news. The National Online Mass Media Policy 2017 (amended in 2020) outright states that IPTVs can only broadcast other sorts of entertainment or information-based programmes.

However, by tuning into the channels for a few weeks, one would realise that most of the IPTVs and online channels are clearly violating this rule.

"News" makes up a sizable portion of the contents of many of these IPTVs with several having full-fledged news segments complete with newscasters, studios and correspondents carrying boom mics.

HOW ARE THEY RUN?

"Correspondent business" is the main revenue model for a majority of these channels, confirmed multiple owners of IPTVs, all of whom vehemently insisted that they are not a part of this. They also requested anonymity, fearing reprisal from their colleagues.

So, what is "correspondent business"? It is the practice of using an organisation's correspondents to gather sponsored news and advertisements -- but all done under the desk -- from which correspondents receive a cut.

But it can go the other way as well -- correspondents receive money from a party to get a news item aired and pay the editor for the coverage.

All these organisations run on a workforce of two-three people including an editor, but employ freelance correspondents often down to the upazila level. They are armed with business cards and press cards, but since there is no contract, they work on an as-needed basis. There is no way to know the exact number of these "journalists" active for over 600 channels known to be in operation. However, in a conservative guesstimate, the number would be several thousands.

At authorised mainstream organisations, sponsored contents come with a tagline such as "done in partnership with", "sponsored by", or "powered by", or are published outside the regular news platforms, in the form of supplements. This is to maintain transparency.

The management of IPTVs this correspondent spoke to said they do not pay their correspondents any salaries, so it is up to the correspondents to earn their keep.

"I used to have correspondents but I don't anymore since the information ministry has said we cannot broadcast news. I don't have any revenue coming in, so I cannot pay my correspondents," said Jamal Uddin Zaman, a retired military officer who now runs AlifTV.

"All the correspondents worked for me as volunteers. If they came to me and asked me if they could air a news piece, I gave them space," said Zaman.

He was speaking out of his Mirpur office, in a building with bare cement walls, whose stairs are still under construction. The rest of the five-storey structure is rented out to low-income tenants.

AlifTV's office also doubles as an ad studio and production house. "I have one producer, one director who works both as a cameraperson and an editor. My two news presenters have full-time jobs and work here voluntarily. One works in a bank," he said.

Asked about his revenue model, Zaman said, "I get all my earnings by making dramas and ads." He pulled out a bunch of leaflets to prove his point.

Ubaydullah Rumi, AlifTV's Mymensingh district's Ishwarganj upazila correspondent, explained why he continues to work for free for the organisation. "It is because I am still learning. I was told I will get some honorarium, but I have not received any yet. If I wanted to join an organisation as a correspondent, I would have needed to pay them, but I didn't need to pay AlifTV."

For most IPTVs, promotional PR content accounts for the bulk of news programming.

For example, there seems to be a lot of coverage on the personal achievements of political candidates and party members -- small events like distribution of blankets or distribution of rice under the government's Vulnerable Group Feeding (VGF) scheme.

"I am Haji Md Moktar Hossain, Taranagar union chairman candidate. We had no roads before. I built two roads..." Hossain dived on for 12 entire minutes about his initiatives in the area, in a video published by an online television on September 7, 2021.

The television's business card was among those found at the Gabtoli hotel's reception desk, but we are refraining from naming the television channel to protect the source who gave us the card.

The channel has nearly 56,000 subscribers on YouTube, and has an office on Hatkhola Road in Tikatuli. It is full of videos similar to that of Moktar's -- lengthy personal interviews that can only be categorised as self-marketing.

Similarly, most of AlifTV's Ubaydullah Rumi's bylines are PR coverage of events or activities organised by local representatives, like the farewell ceremony for the UNO, or food and fish-fry distribution.

"I do positive news to inspire people to do positive activities," Ubaydullah claimed.

Voluntary correspondents and a lack of transparency about sponsored content leaves space for conflict of interest, opined Robaet Ferdous, an associate professor of Mass Communications and Journalism at Dhaka University.

For example, when JATV ran a three-minute report on June 23, 2021, about a local school's headmaster in Mirzapur union of Birampur upazila of Dinajpur, the school cried foul.

The headmaster, Abdul Motaleb Babu Master, had taken Tk 450 from the students as registration fees, said the report. The headmaster claimed those were session fees that accumulated during the time of the pandemic.

The report interviewed several locals who said that was extortion in the name of registration fees. One of the interviewees included a guardian who said he was told by the headmaster, "If you cannot pay the school fees and keep your daughter in school then you should marry her off to someone who can."

The headmaster, however, kept insisting to the television on camera that the money is for session fees, and that he was being framed by a group with whom he is currently in conflict over a plot of land.

This hyper-local issue about a disagreement between guardians and teachers was covered by a reporter of the television who travelled from Dhaka, confirmed the television's editor Kibria Chowdhury.

Following the airing of the piece, the local union parishad chairman, Faruk Azam, hosted a press conference, accusing the journalist of having an ulterior motive. "None of the local journalists knew this reporter. The local reporters did not cover this. This journalist from Dhaka was paid off," he said.

Kibria Chowdhury countered the allegation. "We maintained everything. I spoke to the headmaster himself. I spoke to everyone in the locality. I sent a reporter to the locality for this news because local correspondents often do not have the capacity to cover news like this," he said. When asked about whether the office bore the travel costs, he declined to comment.

The whole debacle about IPTVs first came to the spotlight when a businesswoman named Helena Jahangir was arrested, and one of the charges brought against her was that she was operating Joyjatra TV as an extortionist outfit.

The Rapid Action Battalion (Rab) found upon interrogation that in 50 districts, Helena appointed representatives from whom she collected Tk 50,000 to Tk 1 lakh each at a time, and Tk 10,000 to Tk 20,000 monthly.

The investigators said Helena also collected Tk 10,000 to Tk 20,000 from different upazila representatives at a time and monthly charges ranging between Tk 2,000 and Tk 3,000.

High officials in the police said they have often received complaints of extortion by these media platforms, but Jahangir Alam, an additional secretary at the home ministry, said taking action against any unlicensed media

organisations was not necessarily in their jurisdiction.

A SILENT DIGITAL REVOLUTION

IPTVs are all unlicensed. To their credit, many had applied for licences after the information ministry invited them to get registered, but the ministry has been sitting idle for the last four years.

The deputy secretary (TV-2) of the information ministry, Ruzia Sultana, said that right now around 600 applications for IPTVs are pending with the ministry.

The National Online Mass Media Policy 2017 clearly states that no media can operate without a licence from the relevant body. All of the organisations this correspondent spoke to said they have applied for registration and have been waiting between several months to several years for a decision.

Both JATV and AlifTV claim to have applied for a licence to operate.

Information Minister Hasan Mahmud said on Tuesday that the ministry has already taken many initiatives, including giving registrations to IPTVs, to bring discipline to the unregulated sector.

However, before the information ministry could take a decision about the licences, BTRC closed down 59 internet protocol televisions (IPTVs) on Sunday for not possessing valid licences to operate.

This was done without the knowledge or consultation of the information ministry, confirmed several ministry officials. In addition, the information minister also pointed fingers at BTRC.

Mahmud said his ministry only gives registration to the IPTVs, but they get domain allocation from the BTRC. "The question is how they got the domain allocation. I think one has to be very careful from now on before allocating a domain."

But even inviting IPTVs to get registered in 2016 was too little too late.

The first IPTV was established in as early as 2011, claimed Emrul Kayser, general secretary of IPTV Owners' Association. "I bought the domain Bangla21TV, and then later on, we launched JagoBD," he said. JagoBD is one of the most well-known platforms for streaming television channels at the moment.

"Our national television was the first satellite channel to adopt the internet protocol technology in 2014, and stream their content online," he claimed. Since then all satellite channels have started internet streaming services.

In addition, in the last one decade, the number of IPTVs has exploded from one to over 600.

It would be unfair to assume without sufficient evidence that extortion is the revenue model for all unlicensed media. The underbelly of the media world, internet televisions cater to audiences that traditional media skips out on -- and with that comes new business.

Emrul Kayser, for example, runs Times24TV by providing technological and media support to programmes by the Bangladeshi diaspora.

"We gave the Federation of Bangladeshi associations in North America the technical support to run their virtual convention last time," explained Kayser. FOBANA's annual convention is year-after-year, the biggest Bangladeshi gathering in the US.

"Most of my programmes target the diaspora, so I don't have any correspondents or reporters," he explained. The TV, which has been in operation since 2014, airs shows with titles like "Australia Times".

Kayser is a broadcast engineer by training and education, and has been working with this technology since 2011. People like Helena and Jamal turn to tech experts like Kayser to set up these online TVs.

There are less than a dozen professionals in the market who can set up IPTVs professionally and provide server space and streaming services, said industry insiders.

Nazmul Hasan, who goes by the moniker IPTV Techmaster, has a fascinating video titled "Launch an IPTV for Tk 20,000".

"You need a PC with good configuration and a good internet connection," he explained.

"Then there are a few types of software that you need to install. These

Positivity rate lowest in over 6 months

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The Covid-19 positivity rate has gone down to 4.69 percent -- the lowest in the past six and half months.

Earlier on March 7, the positivity rate was 4.30 percent.

After the second wave of the pandemic began in the country from the second week of March, the positivity rate continued rising and reached its first peak at 23 percent on April 16.

It then went down to 7 percent in the middle of May.

From early August, the transmission of the virus started declining steadily.

In the past 24-hours till 8:00am yesterday, the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS) reported 1,562 new Covid-19 cases after testing 33,327 samples countrywide.

With this, the total number of confirmed cases reached 15,45,800.

In the same period, 26 Covid-19 patients died in the country -- the lowest in four months, raising the total number deaths rose to 27,277, which is 1.76 percent of all confirmed cases.

Healthcare workers'

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arrange a re-test.

A source in the probe body said the committee was asked to submit its report within five days of its formation.

The jurisdiction of the committee was to examine whether the appointment process was right, whether there was any inconsistency in the answer scripts, and to identify those involved, if there were any.

Sharmin Akhter Jahan, then deputy secretary and also a member of the appointment committee, and Dr Abul Hashem, deputy director (administration) of the health directorate, had written to then Health Service Division secretary Abdul Mannan about the anomalies in the written test.

They said most of the candidates who secured abnormally high number in the written test could not do as well in the viva-voce.

The two alleged that Tk 15-20 lakh was taken as bribe from each of a group of the candidates for confirming they

pass the written exam.

As the country's understaffed health sector had been struggling to provide healthcare to Covid patients, the health ministry took the initiative to appoint a large number of staffers.

Last year, the ministry also appointed 203 technicians on an emergency basis without any examination in accordance with an order issued by the president.

Iftokharuzaman, executive director of Transparency International Bangladesh (TI), yesterday said, "This cancellation of the appointment process proves that the report on anomalies was right. So the Prothom Alo should be thanked."

"However, the cancellation of the appointment process is not enough. Actions have to be taken against officials involved in the anomalies. Besides, the Anti-Corruption Commission should look into the matter," he said.

He also suggested making the investigation report public for the sake of public interest.

1 feud, 2 strikes, same demands

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accidents, solving driving licence-related complexities, withdrawing the "additional" advance income tax and allowing them to update their vehicles' documents without having to pay any fine amid the Covid-19 pandemic.

This faction is backed by Shajahan Khan-led Bangladesh Road Transport Workers Federation and Moshirur Rahman Ranga-led Bangladesh Road Transport Owner Association.

On August 28, its rival group, made up of Bangladesh Covered-Van Truck Prime Mover Goods Transport Owners Association and Bangladesh Truck Drivers Workers Federation, called a 72-hour work abstention from yesterday to press home their 15-point demand. Their demands include withdrawing "additional" income tax, giving "heavy licences" to those driving heavy vehicles directly (currently, a driver has to get light licence and then licence for medium vehicles to get one for heavy vehicles), and changes in the Road Transport Act-2018.

LONG-STANDING FEUD EXPOSED AGAIN

The Bangladesh Road Transport Workers' Federation, an umbrella organisation of more than 200 unions of road transport workers across the country, has had a strong grip over the workers' unions for a long time.

On the other hand, the owners' association is one of the two major platforms of transport owners across the country, with its strong hold over transport owners in the capital.

Both the federation and the association have members from the associations of passengers and goods-laden vehicles, and these organisations often represent the sector in negotiations with the government.

But a section of leaders -- from both owners' and workers' bodies -- of goods-laden vehicles have been trying to form a separate platform, sources said.

This section is led by Mokbul Ahmed, president of the Bangladesh Covered-Van Truck Prime Mover Goods Transport Owners Association, and Talukder Mohammed Monir, president of a truckers' union based at Dhaka's

Tejgaon.

The division surfaced after the Road Transport Act-2018 was passed at the Jatiya Sangsad in September 2018.

In October 2018, Bangladesh Truck, Covered-van Goods Transport Owners-Workers Unity Council, led by Mokbul Ahmed as its convener, had called a 48-hour strike demanding changes in the act.

Tajul Islam, president of Bangladesh Inter-District Truck Drivers Union and a vice president of the federation, was the member-secretary of the Unity Council, and Monir was joint convener.

At that time, leaders of the federation and the association did not want to go for any protests; rather they wanted to go for negotiations with the government for bringing changes in the act.

In November 2019, when the government was starting to implement the act, the Mokbul-led faction called a separate strike against the law.

The feud once again came to the fore last month when the two factions called strikes on separate dates to press home the same demands.

Tajul later left the Mokbul-led faction and became member-secretary of the other one that called a strike on September 27 and 28.

Osman Ali, general secretary of the federation, alleged the platform led by Mokbul is actually working for the government.

"They called the strike after we announced our work abstention to foil our programme," he told The Daily Star last night.

He added that Monir was involved with the federation earlier but his membership was suspended due to his allegiance with the transport agency's organisation.

Mokbul said that when the federation and the association continued their absolute sway over both the passenger and goods-laden vehicles' associations, they began working to form a separate platform for the unions of goods-laden vehicles.

He said they have called the strike to press home their demands, and if their demands are met the other faction would not have to enforce their strike.

Rassel placed on

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on completion of a three-day remand in another case filed with Gulshan Police Station.

Dhaka's Additional Chief Metropolitan Magistrate Md Hasibul Haque passed the orders after Investigation Officer Nazmul Huda, also a sub-inspector of Dhanmondi Police Station, produced the couple before it with a seven-day remand prayer for each, said Tapash Kumar Pal, the additional public prosecutor.

The defence, however, submitted a petition seeking bail along with the cancellation of the remand prayer.

On September 17, Kamrul Islam Chokdar, a vendor of Evely, filed a case with Dhanmondi Police Station against the couple and 10 other employees of Evely over unpaid dues against goods supplied.

The 10 others accused are Evely vice-president Akash, manager Zahedul Islam Himoy, senior key accounts manager Tanvir Alam, senior executive commercial Jawadul Haque Chowdhury, head of accounts Selim Reza, accounts manager Jubair Al Mahmud and its four staffs -- Sohel, Akibur Rahman Turja, Rezowan and Sakib Rahman.

Police are yet to arrest them at the time of filing the report.

On September 16, the Rapid Action Battalion of the police arrested the couple during a raid at their flat in the capital's Mohammadpur after a customer filed a case with Gulshan Police Station over embezzlement of Tk 3.1 lakh.

HUMAN CHAIN DEMANDING RELEASE OF RASSEL, SHAMIMA

Around 100 customers and sellers yesterday formed a human chain in front of the Chief Metropolitan Magistrate's Court of Dhaka demanding the immediate release of Rassel and Shamima.

The human chain was jointly organised under the banner of the Bangladesh E-commerce Merchant Association and Bangladesh E-commerce Welfare Association.

The protestors then carried various placards in favour of the release of the couple.

Sakib Hasan, a customer, said that many people gave Evely a lot of money for products or sold products to it.

They would not get back their money or the products if the top bosses of the company stay behind bars.

"The couple should be released for the great welfare of the sellers and customers soon," he added.