

'Chander gari' kills 2 students in Fatikchhari

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, Ctg

Two female students were run over and killed by a speeding jeep in Chattogram's Fatikchhari upazila yesterday.

They were identified as Mishu Akter, 16, and Nisha Moni, 18 – SCC candidates of Haidchakia High School.

The accident occurred just a day after five brothers were killed in a road crash in Chakaria.

Rabiul Islam, officer-in-charge of Fatikchhari Police Station, said the incident took place on the Chattogram-Khagrachhari highway around 12:30pm, when a jeep, popularly known as "Chander gari", ran over the two girls, who were on their way back home after submitting assignments at school. They both died on the spot.

The bodies were handed over to their families, he added.

Locals and witnesses said the jeep was being chased by police and speeding towards Fatikchhari, adding that they intercepted the vehicle after the accident, but the driver managed to flee.

Lokman Hossain, a relative of Mishu, said, "We demand punishment of all those involved in the incident."

Shahadat Hossain, additional superintendent of Hathazari Circle police, said they were investigating whether there was any police involvement.



People crowded in front of a TCB truck in the Secretariat area jostle each other to buy daily essentials yesterday. As prices of the necessities continue to soar in the markets, more and more people are turning up near the trucks across the capital every day for affordability. This particular vehicle had to be removed from the area amid chaos from the buyers.

PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

Half a million died globally since Omicron's discovery

Says WHO, urges rich countries to pay up for Covid plan

AFP, Geneva

The World Health Organization lamented that half a million Covid-19 deaths had been recorded since the Omicron variant was discovered, calling the toll "beyond tragic".

The WHO's incident manager Abdi Mahamud said that 130 million cases and 500,000 deaths had been recorded globally since Omicron was declared a variant of concern in late November.

It has since rapidly overtaken Delta as the world's dominant Covid variant because it is more transmissible, though it appears to cause less severe illness.

"In the age of effective vaccines, half a million people dying, it's really something," Mahamud told a live interaction on the WHO's social media channels late on Tuesday.

"While everyone was saying Omicron is milder, (they) missed the point that half a million people have died since this was detected," he said. "It's beyond tragic."

Maria Van Kerkhove, the WHO's technical lead on Covid-19, said the sheer number of known Omicron cases was "astounding", while the true number would be much higher.

"It makes the previous peaks look almost flat," she said. "We're still in the middle of this pandemic," she said. "Many countries have not passed their peak of Omicron yet."

Van Kerkhove said she was extremely concerned that the numbers of deaths had increased for several weeks in a row. "This virus continues to be dangerous," she said.

In their weekly Covid-19 epidemiological update issued later Tuesday, the WHO said nearly 68,000 new deaths were reported last week – up seven percent compared to the previous week.

The global health body yesterday urged rich countries to pay their fair share of the money needed for its plan to conquer Covid-19 by contributing \$16 billion as a matter of urgency.

The WHO said the rapid cash injection into its Access to Covid Tools Accelerator could finish off Covid as a global health emergency this year.

The WHO-led ACT-A is aimed at developing, producing, procuring and distributing tools to tackle the pandemic: vaccines, tests, treatments and personal protective equipment.

ACT-A gave birth to the Covax facility, designed to ensure poorer countries could access eventual

vaccines, correctly predicting that richer nations would hog doses coming off the production lines.

ACT-A needed \$23.4 billion for its programme for the year October 2021-September 2022 but only \$800 million has been raised so far.

The scheme therefore wants \$16 billion up front from wealthy nations "to close the immediate financing gap", with the rest to be self-funded by middle-income countries.

WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said the rapid spread of the Omicron variant made it all the more urgent to ensure tests, treatments and vaccines are distributed equitably.

"If higher-income countries pay their fair share of the ACT-Accelerator costs, the partnership can support low- and middle-income countries to overcome low Covid-19 vaccination levels, weak testing, and medicine shortages," he said in a statement.

The WHO said the vast inequity was not only costing lives and hurting economies, it was also risking the emergence of new, more dangerous variants that could rob current tools of their effectiveness and set even highly-vaccinated populations back by many months.

Bangladeshi man shot dead in New York

AGENCIES

A 36-year-old Bangladeshi was shot right outside his Brooklyn home in New York early yesterday.

NYPD officials said Modassar Khandaker had just gotten out of his Honda CRV around 12:45am, when an unknown gunman walked up to him and shot him in the head.

It happened right in front of his home on Forbell Street, near Glenmore Avenue in the Cypress Hills section, reports CBS New York.

Responding officers found Modassar unconscious on the sidewalk with a gunshot wound.

He was taken to Jamaica Hospital, where he was pronounced dead.

A neighbour told ABC 7 New York the victim was from Bangladesh and had a wife and son.

No arrests had been made, as of yesterday morning.

The NYPD said an investigation was underway.

Khairul Islam Khukon, a community activist in the area, told Eyewitness News the shooting may have happened during an attempted carjacking.

They want it, they get it

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Krishibid Institution Bangladesh, a national professional organisation of agriculturists, also protested the directive. Its officials said the public administration ministry would have to take back the circular with the directive.

State Minister for Planning Shamsul Alam, however, does not see anything wrong with the directive. He argued that the DCs' involvement in the projects would ensure a better monitoring.

"The DCs are always associated with development activities in their respective areas. On the other hand, IMED does not have enough manpower in districts and upazilas to supervise such activities," he said.

He added that the DCs can monitor the work timely and properly as they stay at the sites of the projects. They can provide the ministry with adequate information on the exact status of the project implementation.

"I don't see any problem here. I think no organisation should be aggrieved at the government order," he told The Daily Star.

Asked, Senior Secretary KM Ali Azam at the public administration ministry, said, "This is not our decision. We have issued the circular at the IMED's request."

He said the circular was for an "interim period" until IMED establishes its office at every district. "The request came as a good number of projects are being implemented right now".

Every year, the government keeps aside huge funds for the Annual Development Programme (ADP) to implement different development projects.

ADP worth Tk 2,25,324 crore was approved for the ongoing fiscal year, for implementing around 1,500 projects.

However, poor implementation of projects, especially cost and time overrun, have become a major cause of concern lately, and the prime minister, on several occasions, has expressed discontent over the matter.

Different implementing agency like Roads and Highways Department, Bangladesh Railways, Public Works Department, and Local Government Engineering Department implement such projects.

The district administrations are also indirectly involved in the projects as land acquisition, a major component of any project, is handled by DC offices.

While asking the DCs to open the wing under an ADC, the public administration ministry in a letter also asked them to take help from other officials in monitoring and evaluating project works.

Officials of different project implementing agencies said the ministry took the decision "unilaterally" without consulting with any of them.

They said that as per the rules of business, the Cabinet Division is responsible for inter-ministry coordination and

thus the public ministry has issued the circular going beyond its jurisdiction.

There are many projects, especially of RHD and BR, spanning over different districts. The directive raises confusions regarding to whom project evaluation reports should be submitted.

In case of RHD, an executive engineer is mainly responsible for executing projects in the respective district. There are superintendent engineers and additional chief engineers to supervise their work.

Also, there is a separate division for monitoring work within RHD, and several committees in ministries concerned are also engaged here.

So, monitoring and evaluation by DCs is unnecessary because it will kill time and create ambiguity, the officials said.

They said said project involves many technical issues but DCs may not have such technical knowhow, which may create complexities over project implementation.

Currently, DC offices are involved in land acquisition, but delay in land acquisition is one of the main reasons behind delay in project implementation, they said.

They said the DCs should rather focus on preventing the delays in land acquisition.

In this give situation, the services and welfare committee of Institution of Engineers, Bangladesh at meeting on February 3 asked the government to cancel the circular. It also asked its members not to

provide any information to DCs.

IEB has more than 50,000 members and associate members.

Shahadat Hossain Shiblu, honorary general secretary of IEB, said an executive engineer at the district level is a fifth grade government employee like a DC.

But the committee will be led by an ADC, a lower rank official, which is embarrassing for an EE.

Talking to The Daily Star, KIB President Prof Shahidur Rashid Bhuiyan and General Secretary Khairul Alam Prince said they were against the circular and would continue protesting it.

Shahidur Rashid Bhuiyan, who is the vice-chancellor of Sher-e-Bangla Agricultural University, said, "This is not the right decision. Monitoring and evaluating development projects can't be done by a specific sector. We will protest against the decision in our own way."

Former election

commissioner Brigadier General (ret'd) M Sakawat Hossain said he received the invitation but is yet to decide whether to join the talks.

DU Professor Asif Nazrul said, "The cabinet division contacted me over the phone... While I see this [invitation] as a positive gesture, I am concerned about whether our suggestions will be taken into account."

Invited to join the talks scheduled for 11:00am on

Now water getting costlier

FROM PAGE 1

He said the price hike may come into effect from July 1 if the LGRD ministry approves it.

The bid to hike the water tariffs is likely to further exacerbate the situation after the 23 percent increase of diesel and kerosene prices that had a knock-on effect on transportation costs and consequent spiral of price of daily essentials.

Besides, the government is mulling raising the prices of electricity, gas and fertiliser – which could make vegetables and grains costlier – by March to bring subsidies down.

WATER COSTLIER

Dhaka Wasa has increased the water tariff twice in the last two years and 15 times in the last 13 years, despite failing to fulfil its pledge of providing safe drinking water to the vast majority of the capital's over two crore residents.

Wasa MD Taqsem said currently Wasa spends Tk 25 to produce one unit of

water and sells it for Tk 15.

He said they have been running many projects with foreign loans and need to pay a lot of money as repayment and as interest on the loans.

Plus, there was an instruction from the government high-ups to reduce the subsidy on water gradually, keeping water prices at tolerable levels, he said.

Contacted, Adil Mohammad Khan, former general secretary of Bangladesh Institute of Planners, said, "The price hike of water will put additional burden on the residents of Dhaka city, especially on the poor and lower middle-income people who are already over-burdened during this pandemic amid the price hike of essentials."

He said while many residents are not getting the benefit of the projects, they have to pay the additional money due to the project's cost. The government should look

into the necessity of those projects.

SM Nazer Hossain, vice president of Consumers Association of Bangladesh (CAB), said Wasa should have held a public hearing before proposing a price hike.

NO STOPPING EDIBLE OIL PRICE HIKE

Last Monday, the government increased per litre price of loose soybean oil by Tk 8. The daily essential now costs Tk 168 per litre in the retail market.

The government also fixed the price of five-litre bottles of soybean oil at Tk 795 and loose soybean at Tk 143 per litre.

On October 19 last year, it had fixed per litre soybean oil at Tk 160 and loose at Tk 136 while price of five-litre soybean oil bottles was Tk 760.

Traders are now fearing another hike centring the upcoming Ramadan, citing unstable international market prices of edible oil and increased transport

cost. They said the demand of edible oil increases from 1.5 lakh tonne to two lakh tonne a month during Ramadan.

Shahabuddin Alam, chairman of SA Group, said importers of Bangladesh mainly import Soybean oil from Argentina and Brazil.

"But due to the coronavirus pandemic production of oil has been reduced by 20 to 30 percent."

Biswajit Saha, director of City Group, said the import cost before the pandemic of each tonne of soybean oil was \$650 and palm oil was \$700 dollars.

"But the price of soybean has risen to \$1500 and palm oil to \$1470 respectively," he said. To rein in the price, he suggested the government temporarily withdraw 15 percent VAT at import level.

"The VAT withdrawal will help reduce the price by at least Tk 20 at retail level."

SC orders status quo on BFAA gen secy post

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The Supreme Court chamber judge yesterday stayed till February 13 a High Court order that halted an Appellate Board's decision cancelling the candidacy of actor Zayed Khan for general secretary of Bangladesh Film Artistes Association (BFAA) and declaring actress Nipun elected to the post uncontested.

Justice Obaidul Hassan, chamber judge of the SC's Appellate Division, also said a status quo will be maintained in holding the office of general secretary of the association. He said nobody can enter the office till further orders.

The chamber judge passed the order following a petition filed by Nipun challenging the HC order that stayed the Appellate Board's decision.

Justice Obaidul also sent the petition to the full bench of the Appellate Division for its hearing on February 13.

Nasir, wife indicted in 'adultery' case

COURT CORRESPONDENT

A Dhaka court yesterday framed charges against cricketer Nasir Hossain and his wife Tamima Sultana in a case filed over "adultery" and defamation.

The two, now on bail, pleaded not guilty and demanded justice after Dhaka's Additional Chief Metropolitan Magistrate Md Tofazzal Hossain read out the charges to them.

The magistrate also dismissed the petitions of the accused seeking exemption from the charges in the case.

The court fixed March 10 for starting trial of the case.

Beaten up by teacher, student lands in hospital

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Mymensingh

A madrasa student was undergoing treatment at a Sherpur hospital yesterday after being beaten up allegedly by a teacher for being absent from class.

Asiful Islam Bijoy, 15, a student of Noor Hera Noorani Talimul Quran Hafizia Madrasa in Purbo Kharia village in Sherpur's Sreebordi upazila, was absent from his class for a few days, said Biplob Kumar Biswas, OC of Sreebordi Police Station, quoting the victim's family.

As he returned to class on Monday, madrasa teacher Mohammad Amanullah allegedly beat him up with a cane, leaving him injured.

Asiful was admitted to Sherpur General Hospital on Monday night with injuries in his back and hands, said the OC.

Grandfather, grandson die from electrocution

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Lalmonirhat

A grandfather and his grandson died after being electrocuted while fishing in a pond near their home in Kurigram's Bhurungamari upazila on Tuesday afternoon, said police.

The dead – Emdadul Haque, 63, and his grandson Rakesh Islam, 8 – were residents of Satgopalpur village in the same upazila.