

QUESTIONING CHARACTER

Amendment to the provision on rape victims placed to HC

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The government has prepared the draft of the amendment to a provision of the Evidence Act that allows questioning the character of rape victims in court.

During the hearing of a writ petition, Deputy Attorney General Samarendra Nath Biswas yesterday placed the draft copy before the High Court bench of Justice Farah Mahbub and Justice SM Maniruzzaman.

The bench fixed February 20 for hearing and passing an order.

On November 16, another HC bench wanted to know what steps the government has taken to repeal section 155(4) of the Evidence Act, 1872.

Section 155(4) of the act says, "When a man is prosecuted for rape or an attempt to ravish, it may be shown that the prosecutrix was of generally immoral character."

On November 14 last year, Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust, Ain o Salish Kendra and Nari Pakkho submitted the petition.

It's not rocket science Govt cancels foreign trip of 30 officials wishing to 'learn silo building'

MD ASADUZ ZAMAN

The Planning Commission has turned down a proposal for allocating Tk 2.70 crore for foreign trips of 30 officials for training on building food warehouses across the country under a project of the food ministry.

Slamming the proposal at a meeting of the Proposal Evaluation Committee (PEC) on Tuesday, the commission said the trips were "unnecessary" and technologies were already available in the country for construction of such warehouses.

The food ministry earlier sent a project proposal to the Executive Committee of the National Economic Council (Ecne) to build 196 food warehouses at a cost of Tk 693 crore.

Speaking to The Daily Star yesterday, Planning Commission member Begum Sharifa Khan said, "It's not rocket science. They should understand how the temperature is maintained in warehouses for preserving cereals."

Sharifa, who chaired the meeting, said they have directed the authorities to cut the proposals on foreign trips.

Currently, the country has six silos, 12 CSDs (Central Supply Depot) and 635 LSDs (Local Supply Depot) under the food department.



Visitors to Amar Ekushey Boi Mela resting on benches at the Suhrawardy Udyan yesterday. On the first day -- February 15 -- the book fair saw only a few visitors, but the number has been increasing over the last two days. Publishers hope the sale of books will rise with the fair gaining momentum.

PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

DIGITAL SECURITY ACT

Cases filed mostly out of political motivation

Speakers tell webinar; 9.25 percent complaints against journos

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Journalists and citizens from various walks of society were victimised the most by the Digital Security Act 2018 for voicing their opinions on digital platforms, speakers said at a webinar yesterday.

According to a study of the Centre for Governance Studies (CGS), who hosted the webinar, journalists were accused in 9.25 percent of all DSA cases from January 1, 2020, to January 30, 2022.

CGS Executive Director Zillur Rahman, who moderated the webinar, said the number of journalists arrested is disproportionately higher compared to the total number of arrestees.

The analysis also stated that most of the complaints were not filed by those affected directly and instead by politically motivated people.

The DSA has numerous issues, such as the punishment stipulated in the clauses being disproportionate to the crime and how no warrant is required to make arrests under the act, and is in need

of immediate reform, the speakers said.

CGS Chairman Monjur Ahmed Choudhury said Bangladesh's cyberspace is becoming a dangerous minefield, where people are wary of speaking their minds.

However, SM Rezaul Karim, minister of fisheries and livestock, opined the country needs such a law to prevent crimes occurring in the virtual world, adding the DSA is not making people fearful of posting their opinions online.

The minister stated that this act is the only one capable of deterring and punishing defamation on digital platforms and he himself was a victim of online harassment.

But he also agreed that the clauses being abused need to be investigated.

Shirin Akhter, lawmaker and the general secretary of Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal, said the DSA should not be abolished, but its loopholes need to be identified.

She said the cases have some non-bailable offences, which should be reformed.

"The DSA is not being used to

punish every government critic, and journalists should not be afraid of writing the truth."

Prof Asif Nazrul of Dhaka University said the act's clauses are essentially divided into two parts—one is more technical and protects against computer-related offences such as hacking, while the second and more controversial part are the clauses that punish "speech offences".

He said the clauses related to speech offence need to be re-examined as the wordings are too vague and broad, making them prone to misinterpretation.

Jyotirmoy Barua said most of the cases under the DSA are being filed by third parties, not the claimants. "However, this goes against the existing criminal law policy, where it is stated that defamation cases need to be filed by a claimant."

Zahirul Alam, Head of News of television channel NTV, and former DUCSU VP Nurul Haque Nur also spoke at the event titled "The Digital Security Act 2018: Who are the Real Victims?"

Ensure pension

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"Universal Pension Scheme" before the PM.

Finance Minister AHM Mustafa Kamal, Planning Minister MA Mannan, PM's Principal Secretary Ahmad Kaikaus, senior secretaries and secretaries concerned, among others, were present.

The PM gave directives to officials regarding the strategic paper prepared based on international experience, context of Bangladesh and its economic capacity, the release said.

Finance ministry sources said the World Bank provided financial assistance to conduct the preparatory

work on the scheme. A technical unit under the supervision of the Finance Division has been working now in this regard.

According to the strategic paper, a universal pension authority will be created, said sources.

The government plans to launch the scheme for workers and employees of the institutional sectors on a pilot basis initially, they added.

To implement the scheme, the government

will create a fund with contributions from the institutions concerned and respective beneficiaries.

Secondary schools

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The decision was taken following the recommendations of The National Technical Advisory Committee (NTAC) on Covid-19 and directives from Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, she said.

There are 1.28 crore students from grades six to 12. About 1.27 crore already have received the first vaccine dose and 34 lakh have received the second.

The minister added that the government also has plans to bring students aged below 12 under the vaccination campaign.

Once classes resume for 2022, SSC candidates will need to attend four classes

and students of grade 10 three classes a week. Students from grades eight and nine will attend three classes twice a week and sixth and seventh graders three classes once a week.

Educational institutions were shut from March 17, 2020, due to the Covid-19 pandemic and resumed partially on September 12 last year.

This was one of the longest school closures -- 543 days -- in the world.

Following a sharp rise in Covid transmission, the government again shut down all schools and colleges for two weeks from January 21. The closure was later extended till February 21.

Officials 'not involved'

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Committee of the ministry prepared a revision proposal, stating that the BWDB should keep the costs under Tk 415.88 crore. It also recommended an extension of one year, said project officials.

The revision proposal waits to be placed before the Executive Committee of the National Economic Council (Ecne) for approval, they also said.

In such a situation, the water resources

ministry issued an order on November 18 last year, saying Senior Secretary Kabir Bin Anwar of the ministry, his Personal Secretary SM Azharul Islam, and BWDB Superintendent Engineer for Sylhet Division Probrir Kumar Goshwami would travel to the UK and the USA on an "experience sharing visit".

They flew sometime before February 5 and have already returned. The secretary took his wife and son along. According to the order, the costs for the two's visit would be borne by the secretary.

Of the three officials, only Probrir was associated with the project, project officials told The Daily Star a couple of days ago. Probrir was one of the supervisors when he was the executive engineer of BWDB in Cox's Bazar. He was promoted last month and posted in Sylhet, they said.

Contacted, Probrir said, "It's true that the revision proposal is yet to get Ecne

approval, but the project evaluation committee [of the planning ministry] has already completed the evaluation. I was working in Cox's Bazar when the government order was issued. I was involved in all three phases of the project, including planning, design and execution."

Replying to a question, he said, "It's not like that I won't use the experience I gathered from the visit elsewhere."

Kabir Bin Anwar claimed he only visited the UK.

Talking over the phone last night, he said they went to Birmingham [City] University's water resources related department where they attended training sessions and classes, and visited labs to learn how to maintain water quality and build harbours.

"We also attended a programme at the Bangladesh high commission in the UK. There, we sought investments for the government's Delta Plan campaign," he said.

Asked about using the project funds for their visit, he said, "In government projects, funds are set aside for such tours for experience gathering."

When queried if they could use the funds of a project that is awaiting approval of its revision, he said, "It's an ongoing project, which has already been passed ... Look into the matter properly,"

Contacted for his comment over phone, Kabir's PSSM Azharul Islam

told these correspondents to meet him at his office on Sunday.

One of the project officials said sending three officials on the trip was nothing but a waste of public money. "What can a secretary, his PS, and a former executive engineer do for the project? Someone relevant should have been sent instead."

A planning ministry official, involved in the project evaluation, said, "Spending money from the funds of a project whose tenure has expired is against the financial disciplines."

State Minister for Planning Shamsul Alam said, "Rules vary from project to project. I need to go through the relevant papers before making any comments here."

THE PROJECT The project, titled "Rehabilitation of Polders 67/A, 67, 67/B and 68 on the Naf river for strengthening security along the Bangladesh-Myanmar border in Ukhiya and Teknaf, was initiated in 2018.

On January 23 that year, an Ecne meeting, chaired by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, approved the project at an estimated cost of Tk 141.65 crore and set June 2020 as the deadline. Later, the ministry extended the time till June last year, according to a gazette from the water resources ministry.

The gazette, signed by Md Siddiqur Rahman, senior assistant chief of

planning division under the ministry, said the time was extended on the condition that the work must be completed within that deadline.

But it did not happen.

On May 25 last year, project officials proposed the planning ministry raise the costs to Tk 636.24 crore.

A member of a ministry team, which visited the project site, said there is a Pakistan-era dyke, which needs reconstruction.

"The dyke was widen with the project funds. Now some sluice gates need to be installed. They haven't spent the entire money," he said.

He also said the time and the costs should increase as project officials have to build additional structures for completing the work.

According to the project evaluation committee's recommendation, the project should include bituminous carpeting on the dam, more sluice gates, and acquiring 18 hectares of additional land.

Cox's Bazar BWDB Executive Engineer Tanjir Saif Ahmed said they would submit a proposal soon seeking a time extension till June next year.

He could not say anything about the progress in the project.

Probrir Kumar Goshwami claimed that they had already completed constructing 35km of the dyke. Construction of the rest 16km saw nearly 60 percent progress, he claimed further.

PM to hand over Ekushey Padak on Sunday

BSS, Dhaka

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina will hand over the Ekushey Padak 2022 to 24 eminent persons on Sunday on the occasion of the Amar Ekushey and the International Mother Language Day.

Joining a programme at Osmani Memorial Auditorium virtually from the Gono Bhaban, the PM will hand over the award, the second highest civilian award in Bangladesh.

On February 3, the government announced the names of 24 eminent persons for the award for their outstanding contributions to respective fields.

This year, two persons won the award in Language Movement category, four in Liberation War, seven in Shilpakala (art, music and dance), two in social service, two in language and literature, four in research and one each in journalism, science and technology, and education.

Minor girl raped in Ctg

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, CTG

A sixth grader was raped allegedly by a youth in her house in Chattogram city Wednesday night.

Police were yet to arrest accused Dipu Das, 19.

The girl was sent to Chattogram Medical Hospital for tests, said police.

Following the incident, the victim's mother filed a case against Dipu with Pahartali Police Station.

According to the case statement, the accused entered the house in Uttar Kattoli area when the girl was sleeping around 9:00pm and raped her. As the girl started screaming, the accused fled.

Indian girl held for trespassing

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Thakurgaon

Police detained an Indian girl from Panchagarh's Tentulia yesterday for entering Bangladesh illegally.

Khushnaba, 17, from Uttar Dinajpur district of India's West Bengal, reached there after crossing the Mahananda river.

Quoting locals, Abu Sayem Mia, officer-in-charge of Tentulia Police Station, said the girl entered Bangladesh after developing a relationship with a Bangladeshi youth who was in India several years ago.

The OC added that they were trying to send the girl to India through Border Guard Bangladesh.

Road crash claims two lives in city

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Two people were killed after a vehicle hit a motorcycle near Dhaka airport early yesterday.

The victims are Rafiqul Islam Suman, 40, a ride-sharing biker, and his pillion rider Kajol Akhter, 35, a restaurant employee.

The two died on the spot after an unidentified vehicle hit the motorcycle around 3:00am, said Jewel Mia, sub-inspector of Airport Police Station.

Only 0.5pc

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and madrasas that are not covered under the government's MPO scheme.

Each beneficiary was supposed to get a one-time Tk 2,500 from the Tk 1,258 crore fund. On paper, the officials could disburse Tk 879.58 crore among 34 lakh people. But in reality, about 30 lakh received the money, said finance ministry officials.

In 2021, the government allocated Tk 830 crore for the same 30 lakh individuals. Tk 775 crore was spent from the funds.

INCENTIVES FOR

HEALTH WORKERS

In July 2020, the Health Services Division of health ministry launched a Tk 138 crore programme to provide two months' worth of basic salary to health workers who directly treat Covid patients. Tk 130 crore was spent as of November and the programme is still continuing.

Another Tk 750 crore was allocated for families of government officials dying with symptoms of Covid-19. At least Tk 91 crore had to be spent from this fund.

IGP cancels

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ministry issued the order sanctioning a nine-day visit to Germany anytime between February 2 and 28.

According to the order, the delegation would visit the European country to "participate in the Factory Acceptance Test [FAT]" relating to shipment of one lakh pieces of bedsheets with pillow covers (double).

The order drew criticism from different quarters. Earlier, AIG Kamruzzaman had said the delegation, led by the IGP, was to visit Germany to assess the dye to be used in the bedsheets and pillow covers which would be produced locally.

As per the tender specification, the local company has to use quality dye from a European country and a team will travel there to assess the quality of that dye, he said.

"Since it involves a huge amount of money, the IGP sir himself will visit Germany to assess the

quality," he told The Daily Star previously.

The PHQ release said in fact police are not buying bedsheets with pillow covers from Germany which does not produce and export bedsheets. It is rather a country of heavy industries.

Stating that the IGP has no reason for going to Germany to buy bedsheets and pillow covers, the release said as per the Public Procurement Rules a government procurement official cannot purchase or collect public goods like personal items visiting any market or country. There is a government procurement process in this regard, it said.

The statement said Bangladesh Police always purchase bedsheets and pillow covers made by local manufacturers through local tenders. This year too, the police have taken steps to buy bedsheets and pillow covers made in Bangladesh through local tenders.

Pakistan's military has stepped up operations along the Afghan border in recent weeks after a spate of militant attacks that has dashed any hope the frontier might see more peace and stability.