

PAYRA BRIDGE 10 injured as MP's relatives clash with toll plaza staffers

OUR CORRESPONDENT,
Patauakhali

At least 10 people were injured as Payra Bridge toll collectors and a local lawmaker's relatives clashed at the toll plaza in Patauakhali on Thursday.

The relatives of Kazi Kaniz Sultana Helen, a lawmaker from a reserved seat for women in parliament, were crossing the toll plaza after attending the marriage ceremony of her eldest son.

Asaduzzaman, manager of the toll collection company, said the toll collectors asked the motorcade to pay tolls.

Immediately, a man got off one of the cars and claimed that they were

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FACEBOOK COMMENT Public admin ministry scolds sr assist secy

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The public administration ministry has reprimanded Senior Assistant Secretary Sarwoer Alam as a minor punishment for making a comment on Facebook after not being promoted to deputy secretary.

The ministry issued a notification in this regard on April 21.

Sarwoer, a former Rab magistrate, had earned plaudits for leading drives of the elite force. An officer of the 27th BCS administration cadre, he is currently serving at the expatriates' welfare and overseas employment ministry.

In March last year, the government promoted 337 officials, mostly of the 27th Bangladesh Civil Service batch, to deputy secretary from senior assistant

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Protestors participate in an ongoing anti-government demonstration outside the President's Office in Colombo, Sri Lanka yesterday, following general strike called by trade unions demanding the resignation of President Gotabaya Rajapaksa over the country's crippling economic crisis.

PHOTO: AFP

Anti-govt strike grips Lanka

Police fire tear gas, water cannon at students; schools, businesses remain shut

AGENCIES

Police fired tear gas and water cannon at students trying to storm Sri Lanka's parliament yesterday as the country was brought to a halt by a trade union strike demanding the government step down.

Months of blackouts and acute shortages of food, fuel and pharmaceuticals have caused widespread suffering across the South Asian island nation of 22 million people.

Public anger has sparked sustained protests demanding the government's resignation over its mismanagement of the crisis, Sri Lanka's worst since independence in 1948.

Thousands of student protesters had been camped on the road leading to the legislature, which is on a man-made island on a lake in the capital Colombo, since Thursday.

Officers fired a barrage of tear gas followed by water cannon from two trucks, but the crowd quickly reassembled behind police barricades set up to block access to the parliament.

It was the second time police tried to disperse the crowd with tear gas, after an earlier unsuccessful attempt on Thursday afternoon.

Some hung their underwear on the barricades as an insult to the political leadership. Messages like "Gotta go home"

- a rallying cry from the protests - were scrawled on some of the underpants and vests.

Millions of workers stayed off the job yesterday in a strike organised by the country's trade union movement, with all but one scheduled train service cancelled.

Privately owned buses were off the roads while industrial workers demonstrated outside their factories and black flags were hung across the country in an expression of anger against the government, reports AFP.

Thousands of shops, schools and businesses were also closed.

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"We can pinpoint the policy blunders of the president that led to this very sorry state of our economy," said trade union leader Ravi Kumudesh. "He must go."

Private buses, which account for two-thirds of the country's fleet, were also off the road, Private Bus Operators Association chairman Gemunu Wijeratne said.

"We are not providing services today, but if groups of people want to join the anti-government protests within a radius

of 20 kilometres, we will give our buses free of charge," Wijeratne told reporters in Colombo.

President Gotabaya Rajapaksa has insisted he will not step down despite escalating demonstrations across the island, including a protest that has been camped outside his seafront office for nearly a month.

Opposition leader Sajith Premadasa told parliament yesterday the opposition wants to move a no-confidence motion against the president and the government next week.

Sri Lanka's economic crisis took hold after the coronavirus pandemic hammered income from tourism and remittances.

Unable to pay for fuel imports, utilities have imposed daily blackouts to ration electricity, while long lines of people snake around service stations for petrol and kerosene.

Hospitals are short of vital medicines and the government has appealed to citizens abroad for donations.

Healthcare workers also joined in yesterday's strike, though emergency services remained operational.

Last month Sri Lanka announced it was defaulting on its \$51 billion foreign debt, and Finance Minister Ali Sabry warned this week that the country will have to endure its unprecedented economic hardships for at least two more years.

Expatriate stabbed to death in Noakhali

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Noakhali

An expatriate in Saudi Arabia was stabbed to death allegedly by his cousins over harvesting mangoes from a tree in a disputed land in Noakhali's Senbagh on Thursday night.

The victim, Md Yusuf, 32, of Bishnapur village, recently returned home.

Yusuf became involved in an altercation with his cousins Sohel, Rubel and uncle Nurnabi over the matter. At one stage, Sohel and Rubel beat up and stabbed Yusuf, leaving him injured critically, said Iqbal Hossain Patowari, officer-in-charge of Senbagh Police Station.

He was taken to Noakhali 250-bed General Hospital where doctors declared him dead around 11:30pm, the OC added.

Police detained three people in connection with the incident.

Two land in jail over raping schoolgirl

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Jhenidah

A Jhenidah court yesterday sent two youths to jail over raping a seventh-grader in Shailakupa upazila.

The two are: Ariful Islam, 18, and Ratan Mondol, 25.

Quoting the victim's relatives, police said Ariful raped the girl at a park in Shailakupa on April 4 and captured the incident on phone. He then threatened that he would make the video clip viral.

When the girl went to the park again on the Eid day, Ariful and his cohort Reaz Uddin, 25, took her to a hut there and raped her. Park employee Ratan abetted them, police said.

On Thursday, victim's father filed a case with Shailakupa Police Station accusing the three.

Police then arrested Ariful and Ratan. Reaz, however, went into hiding.

Aminul Islam, OC of Shailakupa Police Station, said the victim was sent to Jhenidah Sadar Hospital for medical tests.

Three Rohingya 'criminals' held in Teknaf

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Cox's Bazar

Three alleged Rohingya criminals of a gang were arrested in a camp in Cox's Bazar's Teknaf on Thursday night.

The arrestees are: Salman Shah, 20, chief of the gang named after him, Mohammad Shafi, 19, and Mohammad Kashim, 20.

Tarikul Islam, captain of APBn-16, said a police team raided Noyapara Rohingya camp after getting information that some armed robbers were preparing to commit a robbery there. Police arrested the three and recovered a firearm and four bullets.

A case was filed with Teknaf Model Police Station in this regard.

Rail projects derailed

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during subsequent extensions - not a common phenomenon.

Usually, project costs go up in case of extensions, mainly due to price hikes of raw materials, addition of new components, and changes in the original design.

In the last one decade, the railway ministry saw a significant budget increase, becoming one of the five ministries or divisions that received highest development fund allocations.

But in terms of project implementation, the ministry is among the low performers. It could not achieve even the average ADP implementation rate twice in the last six fiscal years, shows the IMED report.

BR Director General Dharendra Nath Mazumder is on a foreign tour and is not available for comments.

Quamrul Ahsan, additional director general (infrastructure) of BR, who is now performing the regular duties of the DG, declined to comment.

DELAYED PROJECTS

Taken up in 2010, the construction of a rail track from Chattogram's Dobazari to Cox's Bazar is one of the long-awaited projects.

The initial cost for the 128km metre-gauge track was set at Tk 1,852 crore. Four years later in 2014, the project was converted into a dual-gauge track - a complete change of plan - for "better connectivity". The revised cost rose by 10 folds to Tk 18,034 crore.

More changes followed.

The first phase, aimed at building the track from Cox's Bazar's Ramu to Gundum near the Myanmar border, was shelved.

In 2016, the project's deadline was set for June 2022, which could not be met. Visiting the project site in September last year, Railways Minister Nurul Islam Sujan said the route would open for public in December 2022.

Late last year, the project authorities sought another extension up to June 2024, citing various problems including delay in land acquisition and work disruption due to the pandemic.

With 69 percent of the work done, project authorities now hope the construction will complete by June next year.

Other projects involving procurements for rail engines, coaches, and wagons as well as feasibility studies for new tracks are also behind schedule.

One project was taken up in March 2018 to carry out a feasibility study for building a rail line to connect the under-construction Bay Terminal in Chattogram's Patenga with the railway network.

The deadline for the Tk 4.53-crore project was initially set for March 2019, and later extended till June this year. The project authorities are now seeking another year to complete the study.

Other projects seeking time extensions for one to three years include: constructions of three new tracks from Faridpur to Magura, Chilahati to Chilahati

Border and Akhaura to Agartala; upgradation of level crossing gates of East Zone and West Zone; procurement of 20 locomotives and 150 carriages; feasibility studies for rail lines from Darshana to Meherpur and Sunamganj as well as for a workshop at Rajbari; and technical assistance for Dhaka-Chattogram-Cox's Bazar rail project's preparatory facility.

Transport expert Prof Hadiuzzaman said the BR lacks the capacity to deal with so many big projects. He also blamed poor feasibility studies and a lack of accountability of contractors and project officials for repeated delays and cost escalations.

"In most cases, feasibility studies are dictated by implementing agencies. As a result, many important aspects are ignored at the planning level, which creates problems during project implementation," said Prof Hadiuzzaman, also director of Buet's Accident Research Institute.

In a letter to the planning ministry early this year, the BR said it expected to complete two feasibility studies this fiscal year, including one for building of a track from Bhanga of Faridpur to Payra.

BR sources said three other projects are also likely to compete by June this year. They involve procurements of 250 passenger coaches, 10 locomotives, four relief cranes and one locomotive simulator; and construction of a rail line from Ishwardi to Rooppur Atomic Centre.

month, the agency said in a statement.

"The small decrease in the index is a welcome relief, particularly for low-income food-deficit countries, but still food prices remain close to their recent highs, reflecting persistent market tightness and posing a challenge to global food security for the most vulnerable," FAO chief economist Maximo Torero Cullen said.

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Huge rush at ferry terminals

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"Although there is huge pressure of vehicles on this highway, no traffic gridlock has been created," said Mosaddek Hossain, officer-in-charge of Bangabandhu Bridge West Police Station.

The traffic flow will keep intensifying over the next two days, he added.

"We hope movement of vehicles will remain smooth if it does not rain and there are no accidents," said Ataur Rahman, in-charge of Elega Highway Police in Tangail.

Passengers and transport operators expressed satisfaction over this year's traffic management system.

"In previous years, we

had to be stuck in gridlock for hours while travelling during the Eid holiday. But this year's journey was almost hassle-free," said Mahmudul Hasan, who was returning to Dhaka from his village home in Bogura.

Badal Miah, a truck driver heading towards Dhaka from Pabna, said, "We had to wait long to cross Bangabandhu Bridge in previous years. But this year, we did not face any trouble."

Many passengers however alleged that transport operators charged extra fare taking advantage of the excessive demand. There were many who were not even able to

get on public transport.

"I have not been able to board any bus despite waiting here for around two hours. I got the chance to board one or two, but the operators asked for Tk 400 instead of the normal fare of Tk 200," Abdul Quader, who was looking for a Dhaka-bound bus at Tangail's Elega bus stop area yesterday noon, told The Daily Star.

Sudden rain at noon added to the passengers' sufferings at different points on the Dhaka-Tangail highway.

[Our correspondents from Munshiganj and Tangail contributed to this report]

Astronaut crew returns to Earth after 6 months on ISS

AFP, Washington

NASA's Crew-3 mission returned home to Earth yesterday after six months aboard the International Space Station.

The SpaceX Dragon Endurance spacecraft with NASA astronauts Kayla Barron, Raja Chari and Tom Marshburn, as well as European Space Agency astronaut Matthias Maurer, undocked from the orbital laboratory a day earlier.

Their 23.5-hour journey back saw them splash down off the coast of Florida at 12:43 am (0443 GMT).