

DIGITAL SECURITY ACT Activist held for 'hurting religious sentiment'

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Moulvibazar

Police yesterday arrested Pritom Das, a leader of Rashtra Sangskar Andolan, a left-leaning organisation, in a case filed under the Digital Security Act for "hurting religious sentiment".

He was held from Bhanugach area in Moulvibazar's Sreemangal upazila around 7:30pm, said Humayun Kabir, inspector (investigation) of Sreemangal Police Station.

Syed Hasibuddin Hossain, head of media wing of Rashtra Sangskar Andolan, said Pritom is a member of the central coordination committee of the organisation, a component of "Gonotantro Mancha", a newly formed alliance of seven organisations.

Inspector Humayun said Mahbub Alam Bhuiyan, a resident of Sreemangal, lodged the case on September 4, accusing Pritom of hurting religious sentiment and undermining the country's sovereignty by a Facebook post.

Locals said Mahbub is an activist of Bangladesh Chhatra League.

However, Masudur Rahman Masud, immediate past president of BCL's Sreemangal upazila unit, said Mahbub was not a BCL activist.

Meanwhile, Rashtra Sangskar Andolan last night said the arrest was made to create communal unrest in Sreemangal.

The organisation will hold a press conference in Dhaka today, said a statement.

The organisation also alleged that some BCL men attacked their activists on August 27 in Sreemangal when they were holding a human chain expressing solidarity with tea estate workers' demand for pay hike. Masud denied the allegation.



Fishermen on boats go fishing in the rivers of the Sundarbans. The authorities granted permission for fishing inside the mangrove forest since September 1 after a three-month ban from June 1 to August 31. The forest department imposed the restriction to facilitate breeding of fish. The photo was taken recently in the Bhola river of the Sundarbans' Sharankhola range. PHOTO: HABIBUR RAHMAN

BATTLE ON EASTERN FRONT

Ukraine forces bear down on Russian supply lines

Shelling kills eight, injures 17 in Bakhmut

AGENCIES

Swiftly advancing Ukrainian troops were bearing down on the main railway supplying Russian forces in the east yesterday, after the collapse of a section of Russia's front line caused the most dramatic shift in the war's momentum since its early weeks.

In a video address, President Volodymyr Zelensky said Ukrainian troops had "liberated dozens of settlements" and reclaimed more than 1,000 square km of territory in the east and south in the past week.

Zelensky posted a video in which Ukrainian soldiers said they had captured the eastern town of Balakliia, which lies along a stretch of front stretching south of Kharkiv, Ukraine's second largest city.

The Ukrainian military said it had advanced nearly 50 km through that front after an assault that appeared to take the Russians by surprise.

That would make it by far the fastest advance by either side in the war since Russia was forced to abandon its disastrous assault on the capital Kyiv in March.

Moscow has so far offered no

official response to the reports of the breakthrough on the Kharkiv front.

Ukraine has yet to allow independent journalists into the area to confirm the extent of its advances. But Ukrainian news websites have shown pictures of troops cheering from the top of armoured vehicles as they roar past street signs bearing the names of previously Russian-held towns, and Russian forces surrendering on the side of the road.

Russian attacks on the eastern Ukraine city of Bakhmut killed eight people and left 17 injured, the regional governor said yesterday.

Key suspects get clean chit

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submission, however, denied that his officers took bribes from any suspects to give them a clean chit.

Irked by the "flawed" investigation, a Dhaka court on September 1 ordered the CID to further probe the case and resubmit the charge sheet in full compliance with the law.

The court order came after the prosecution filed for further investigation. The prosecution argued that investigators excluded six names unlawfully, even though two of them had admitted to their involvement with the syndicate before magistrates.

"An investigating agency has no mandate to drop names of the accused who made confessional statements. Neither can they exclude the names that came up in more than one confessional statements by other accused," the prosecution filing reads.

The prosecution also alleged that the CID did not follow the due process of the law to submit the charge sheet. For example, the charge sheet cites no specific information or evidence as to where and how the money was laundered, a prosecution lawyer said after the September 1 hearing on charge framing.

On multiple occasions, the charge sheet mentions the same piece of land as evidence of land ownership of different accused.

THE SIX EXCLUDED

The CID pressed charges against 10 among the 52 people named in confessional statements of the accused as fellow syndicate members or associates.

Over the last three months, The Daily Star went through the case documents, the confessional statements and intelligence reports, and spoke with dozens of locals to track down the properties of some of these syndicate members.

The newspaper found at least six of them made financial gains through the manipulation of tenders worth thousands of crores of taka during the tenure of Mosharraf, yet they were not named in the charge sheet.

These six are local AL leader Billal Hossain, Kanaipur Union Chairman Belayet Hossain, Gopalpur Union Chairman Shahidul Islam Majnu, former Faridpur BCL general secretary Saiful Islam Jibon, former Faridpur BCL president Nishan Mahmud Shamim, and Siddiqur Rahman Sheikh, known as one of the syndicate kingpins.

The Daily Star has seen a seven-page report of an intelligence agency detailing the wealth some of them have amassed over the last several years.

According to the report, Billal owns at least two buildings, 70 bighas of land, one brick kiln and four shops in two markets in the district town. He also has two flats in Dhaka's Dhanmondi and Mohammadpur. He could not be reached for comments.

Belayet owns a duplex in Harokandi area, one flat at Moitree Tower, eight shops and 15 decimals of land in the district town. He also owns 47 bighas of land in Faridpur, a microbus and a flat in Dhaka's Mohammadpur, the report said.

Belayet refuted that he made any money illegally.

Majnu owns a three-storey building in Faridpur town, four shops, a share in a brickfield and 8.5 bighas of land that he amassed between 2012 and 2019. He could not be contacted for comments.

Jibon has a major share in the seven-storey Ma o Shishu hospital in the district town and two shops in Faridpur New Market. He also has three acres of land beside Bhanga highway, two houses and 45 decimals of land in the town and a flat in Dhaka's Mirpur, according to the intelligence report.

He could not be reached for comments and locals said he went into hiding recently.

The Daily Star visited some of these properties and spoke with dozens of locals, who independently confirmed that they belong to the syndicate members.

Billal Hossain was an assistant of Babar two decades ago. He quickly gained the confidence of Babar, who started controlling the district's tender business after his brother Khandaker Mosharraf became a minister.

Billal went on to become an AL leader of Kotwali thana unit and a member of the syndicate.

His involvement with the syndicate came up in the confessional statements of three accused. Documents show that after his arrest, Billal himself confessed to winning three contracts.

He could not be reached for comments. Mizanur Rahman, a member of his office staff, said he does not use a mobile phone at the moment.

Nishan also could not be contacted by this newspaper.

The Daily Star investigation found he used to lead attacks against rivals as per the instructions of the syndicate bosses. He also confessed to having received money from some of the bosses.

Siddique was arrested in an extortion case unrelated to the money laundering case in December last year, when he admitted to his involvement with the syndicate, sources said.

After his release on bail about one and a half months back, he told The Daily Star that the allegations against him were not true and that all his assets were declared in his tax file.

None of the six is in jail or under arrest.

THE CASE AND 'CONFESSION'

The CID filed the case with Kaurul Police Station in June 2020 against Faridpur AL leader Sajjad Hossain Barkat and his brother Intiaz Hasan Rubel over laundering Tk 2,000 crore amassed through tender manipulation, drug smuggling, land grabbing and extortion.

Babar, Barkat, Rubel and several other local AL and BCL leaders were arrested in the case.

Barkat, Rubel, Billal, Nishan, Khandaker Nazmul Islam Levi, former president of Faridpur town Jubo League, and Ashiqur Rahman Farhan, general secretary of Faridpur town unit Jubo League, made confessional statements before magistrates.

After about nine months of investigation, the then Investigation Officer Uttam Kumar Biswas, an assistant superintendent of police of CID, submitted the charge sheet against 10 people in March last year.

They are Barkat, Rubel, Babar, Khandaker Mosharraf's former APS AHM Fuad, Levi, Farhan, General Secretary of Faridpur District Swechhasebak League Fahad bin Wazed alias Fahim, former joint convener of Faridpur town Jubo League Kamrul Hasan David, district Jubo League Joint Convener Mohammad Ali Minar, and Faridpur town Jubo League Joint Convener Tariqul Islam alias Nasim.

In his confessional statement, Barkat told the magistrate that after Khandaker Mosharraf became a minister in 2008, Babar and Siddiqur Rahman Sheikh started controlling tenders of Tepakhola cattle market, C&B Ghat and Faridpur Medical College.

After Mosharraf became minister again in 2014, Fuad, Babar and Billal started controlling tenders of almost all government offices, Tepakhola cattle market, C&B Ghat and the Medical College Hospital.

"I won contracts of LGED one after another through Babar Chacha (uncle) and Billal. I used to give them 5 to 10 percent cuts," reads the statement.

Barkat disclosed the names of 35 persons including Jibon, Belayet and Majnu as members and associates of the syndicate, led by Siddique.

Billal in his statement admitted to his involvement with the syndicate and said he won three tenders, giving

Siddique two percent commission for each.

Rubel's statement was largely identical to those of Barkat and Billal. According to his claim in the confessional statement, he gave Siddique Tk 1 crore in cuts after he won contracts for the construction of two mosques.

Rubel also said he won several contracts from LGED, and he gave five to seven percent commission to Siddique, Billal, Babar, Majnu, Belayet, and several others.

Levy and Farhan also named Siddique as the leader of the syndicate, which allegedly threatened any potential bidders from participating in the tender.

'INSUFFICIENT' EVIDENCE

While submitting the charge sheet, CID official Uttam Kumar Biswas told the court that a supplementary charge sheet will be placed if any new evidence emerged against any other suspects.

Uttam is now posted in Rab. Since his transfer to the elite force soon after he submitted the charge sheet, CID authorities did not appoint a new investigating officer.

He declined to comment on why he cleared the six.

"We have submitted the charge sheet against 10 people as we found sufficient evidence against them," said former CID chief Mahbubur Rahman.

Asked how they are investigating without an IO, he said CID's Anti-Money Laundering unit was handling it.

Mahbubur, who retired last month, dismissed the allegations that CID officials were bought off to clear some names.

"The CID official who supervised the investigation is an honest officer, and there is no question of taking bribes," he said.

[Our Faridpur Correspondent Suzit Kumar Das contributed to this report]

25 injured

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Of the injured, two activists were admitted to Durgapur Upazila Health Complex while others were given first aid.

Emdadul Haque Millat, president of CPB Mymensingh, condemned the attack and demanded immediate arrest of the attackers.

Chandan Biswas, president of Kalamkanda AL, said he knew nothing about the attack.

CPB later announced that it will demonstrate against attack across the country today.

One more dies from Covid

UNB, Dhaka

Bangladesh reported one more Covid-linked death and 278 cases in 24 hours till yesterday morning.

With the new numbers, the country's total fatalities rose to 29,331 and caseload to 2,014,355, according to the Directorate General of Health Services.

The daily case test positivity rate rose to 8.34 percent from Thursday's 7.40 percent as 3,334 samples were tested. The deceased was a man from Dhaka division.

The mortality rate remained unchanged at 1.46 percent while the recovery rate at 97.22 percent.

In August, the country reported 32 Covid-linked deaths and 6,689 cases.

Bangladesh registered its highest daily caseload of 16,230 on July 28 last year and daily fatalities of 264 on August 10 the same year.

Mobile banking agent killed in Joypurhat

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Dinajpur

Police recovered the body of a mobile banking and account refilling agent from a paddy field in Akkelpur, Joypurhat yesterday.

It seemed that Ashraf Islam, 30, died of blunt trauma to his head and other parts of his body and he bled profusely before dying, said Abu Bakkar Siddique, officer-in-charge of Akkelpur Police Station.

He was returning home from his shop near Tilakpur railway station when he was attacked, he added, quoting family members.

The motive behind the murder is unclear, he added.

Dozens killed in 'Islamic State attack' in Mali

AFP, Bamako

Dozens of civilians were killed this week in a northern Malian town attacked by jihadists affiliated with the Islamic State group, a local elected official and the leader of an armed group told AFP yesterday.

It was the first time the town of Talataye, about 150 kilometres (90 miles) from the city of Gao, has been attacked on such a scale by the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS).

On Tuesday, the jihadists fought a fierce battle with rivals from the Al-Qaeda-affiliated Support Group for Islam and Muslims (GSIM) and other armed groups, including the Tuareg-dominated Movement for the Salvation of Azawad (MSA), various people familiar with the events told AFP.

Bangladesh observing

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and grief at the death of Queen Elizabeth II.

She wrote a letter on Thursday to convey condolences to her UK counterpart Elizabeth Truss, said a PMO press release yesterday.

"I, on behalf of the Government and the people of Bangladesh, and on my behalf, convey to you the most profound shock and grief, and through you, our heartfelt condolences and sympathies to the people of the United Kingdom at the sudden passing away of Her Majesty The Queen Elizabeth The Second," the PM wrote.

She mentioned that Her Majesty

the Queen was not only the pillar and strength of the 2.5 billion Commonwealth people but also an epitome of grace, dignity, wisdom, and service.

Hasina said that Her Majesty's most passionate message of felicitation extended to the people of Bangladesh on the Golden Jubilee of the country's independence shall be carried forward while nourishing the relations between the two Commonwealth nations.

"With her saddest demise, the people of Bangladesh and I, personally, have not only lost a most trusted friend but also a true guardian," she added.

'More than a monarch'

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In a subsequent message, he wrote, "Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II embodied the British nation's continuity and unity for over 70 years. I remember her as a friend of France, a kind-hearted queen who has left a lasting impression on her country and her century."

Russian President Vladimir Putin extended his condolences to King Charles III for the "irreparable loss" of his mother, saying the Queen had "rightfully enjoyed the love and respect of her subjects, as well as authority on the world stage".

President Xi Jinping of China expressed his "sincere sympathies to the British government and people" in a statement released through state media.

Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, called the Queen "a constant presence in our lives" and said his compatriots would always "remember and cherish Her Majesty's wisdom, compassion, and warmth". Narendra Modi, the prime minister of India, said she would be remembered as "a stalwart of our times" who had "personified dignity and decency in public life". Other world leaders offered their sympathies and shared their memories.

Church bells tolled across the UK yesterday and cannon fire rang out across all four corners of the country and beyond as King Charles III and the royal family began observing a mourning period for the queen that will last until seven days after her state funeral, royal officials said.

Ordinary people in Britain and around the globe also paid their own respects to the late queen. In Washington, the US flag was lowered to half-staff to mark the passing of a monarch.

In Berlin, flowers and candles were laid outside the British Embassy, while in Venice "God Save the Queen", the British national anthem, was played outside the Italian city's Festival Buildings.

In Paris, the Eiffel Tower went dark at the stroke of midnight in a tribute to the Queen, reports Reuters.

In Brazil, the giant statue of Christ the Redeemer overlooking Rio de Janeiro was lit up in the red, blue and white of the United Kingdom's flag, while Australia announced plans to illuminate the sails of the Sydney Opera House.

And in New Zealand, members of the armed forces performed a ceremonial Maori haka at the War Memorial in Auckland to pay tribute to the Queen, while people in Auckland expressed their sorrow.

"You knew the news was going to come but when it does come it's still a bit of a shock," said Auckland resident Nicki Reeves. "She's been in everyone's lives for so many years now."

Algeria expels 800 migrants back to Niger

AFP, Niamey

More than 800 migrants expelled this week by Algeria have reached the northern Niger town of Agadez, local authorities told AFP.

"In all we have 847 people, including 40 women and 74 unaccompanied children," Agadez municipal authority said late Thursday.

The child protection ministry has taken care of the minors, it said.