

Senior engr assaulted for anti-govt leaflets

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Engineer M Inamul Haque, former director general of the River Research Institute, was assaulted by an unidentified person while he was distributing leaflets in the capital's Shahbagh yesterday.

The unidentified person also hurled abuse towards Inamul, who was distributing leaflets in support of a half-day hartal called by his party Sharbajan Biplobi Dal on Tuesday demanding free and fair polls after the government is unseated.

A video clip of the incident has gone viral on social media.

Inamul and his fellow activists were distributing leaflets behind a banner in front of the National Museum around 4:00pm.

He said at one point, seven to eight people approached him, one of them talked to him and then left the area.

Later, when he was giving an interview to a journalist, those people returned and one of them suddenly

SEE PAGE 6 COL 4



Smoke rises from apartment buildings damaged from missile strikes, as Russia's attack on Ukraine continues, during intense shelling on Christmas Day at the frontline in Bakhmut, Ukraine, yesterday. Story on page 12.

PHOTO: REUTERS

180 Rohingyas feared dead UN refugee agency says their 'unseaworthy' boat probably sank

AGENCIES

At least 180 ethnic Rohingyas stranded at sea for weeks after leaving Bangladesh in November are feared dead, as their rickety boat is thought to have sunk this month, Reuters quoted the United Nations refugee agency (UNHCR) as saying.

Citing unconfirmed reports, the agency said the "unseaworthy" boat probably sank after it went missing in the sea.

"Relatives have lost contact," the UNHCR wrote on Twitter on Saturday. "Those last in touch presume all are dead."

More than 1 million Rohingyas refugees from Myanmar are living in crowded camps in Muslim-majority Bangladesh, including tens of thousands who fled Myanmar after its military conducted a deadly crackdown in 2017.

In Myanmar, most Rohingyas are denied citizenship and are seen as interlopers, illegal immigrants from South Asia.

In Bangladesh, however, they have

SEE PAGE 6 COL 1

TALIBAN BAN ON WOMEN NGO STAFF 3 foreign NGOs stop work in Afghanistan

Germany seeks 'clear global reaction' as int'l condemnation grows

AFP, Kabul

Three foreign aid groups yesterday announced they were suspending their operations in Afghanistan after the country's Taliban rulers ordered all NGOs to stop women staff from working.

Their announcement prompted warnings from a top UN official in Afghanistan and from NGOs that humanitarian aid would be hard hit.

"We cannot effectively reach children, women and men in desperate need in Afghanistan without our female staff," Save the Children, the Norwegian Refugee Council and CARE said in a joint statement.

"Whilst we gain clarity on this announcement, we are suspending our programmes, demanding that men and women can equally continue our lifesaving assistance in Afghanistan."

Saturday's order issued by the ministry of economy drew swift international condemnation.

The ban is the latest blow against

women's rights.

Less than a week ago, the hardline Islamists also barred women from attending universities, prompting global outrage and protests in some Afghan cities.

The ministry threatened to suspend the operating licences of aid organisations that failed to stop women from working.

It said it had received "serious complaints" that women working in NGOs were not observing a proper Islamic dress code, a charge also used by authorities to justify banning university education.

But the UN chief's deputy special representative for Afghanistan, Ramiz Alakbarov, told AFP that the ban will impede aid delivery to millions of people and also have a "devastating" impact on the country's dilapidated economy.

"It will be very difficult to continue and deliver humanitarian assistance in an independent and fair way because women's participation is very important," Alakbarov said.

"We are going to discuss this matter with the authorities... We will insist on

reversal of the ban."

Germany's Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock yesterday also called for a "clear reaction from the international community".

At a meeting of humanitarian officials yesterday, there was no decision over whether all NGOs would suspend operations, according to Alakbarov, who added that more discussions would be held.

Afghanistan's economic crisis has worsened since the Taliban seized power, which led to Washington freezing billions of dollars of assets and foreign donors cutting aid.

Dozens of organisations work across remote areas of Afghanistan and many employ women, with several warning the ban will stymie their activities.

"Some NGOs have up to 2,000 women employees, and in most of the cases they are the only breadwinners for their families," Alakbarov said.

Shabana, 24, told AFP she was the only

SEE PAGE 6 COL 4

3 die on Jashore roads

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Benapole

Three people were killed in two road crashes at Bahadurpur and Chachra in Jashore district town yesterday.

Kotwali police said Khokon, 35, of Jashore's Kazipara area, and Arman Hossain, 36, of Uposhahor area, died after a car carrying them hit a roadside tree in Bahadurpur while trying to avoid a collision with a motorbike around 8:00pm.

Another person was injured.

Locals rushed the three to Jashore General Hospital where on-duty doctors declared Khokon and Arman dead.

In another accident, Shimul Hossain, 34, of Post Office para, was critically injured when a vehicle hit his motorcycle in Chachra area around 9:00pm.

He was declared dead after being taken to the hospital.

Ali Ahmed Hashmi, senior assistant superintendent of Jashore highway police, confirmed the road accidents.

Tajul Islam, officer-in-charge of Kotwali Police Station, said they would hand over the bodies to the victims' families after legal procedures.

13 'robbers' held after 'gunfight'

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Cumilla

Thirteen robbers were arrested following a "gunfight" in Chandpur on Saturday evening, said police.

On information, a team of river police raided Uttar Matlab upazila's Ekhlaspur area, said Moniruzzaman, in-charge of Mohonpur River Police Outpost.

Sensing their presence, a group of robbers opened fire, forcing them to retaliate, he added.

One of the robbers, Salauddin, was injured and undergoing treatment at hospital, the police official said.

"Fifty-nine mobile phones, 10 machetes, two guns, four knives, one crowbar, four cartridges and six crude bombs were recovered from their procession," he said.

One crushed by train

UNB, Sylhet

An unidentified man was killed in a train accident in Sylhet yesterday.

Locals found his disfigured body at Shibbari rail crossing in South Surma area, said SM Kamal Hossain, officer-in-charge of Sylhet Railway Police Station.

Police recovered the body and sent it to morgue for autopsy, he added.

He might have been hit by Dhaka-bound Kalni Express, the policeman suspected.

Twitter restores suicide prevention feature

REUTERS, New York

Twitter Inc has restored a feature that promotes suicide prevention hotlines and other safety resources to users looking up certain content, after coming under pressure from some users and consumer safety groups over its removal.

GCC ex-mayor embezzled Tk 2.6cr

FROM PAGE 1

The pay orders were issued by Fin-Bangla Apparels for Tk 50 lakh, Ispahani Foods for Tk 40.25 lakh, Honeywell Garments for Tk 17.55 lakh and GMS Composite Knitting Industries for Tk 67.44 lakh and Tk 85 lakh.

However, disgraced mayor Jahangir deposited the pay orders to the fake GCC account and withdrew the money along with two accomplices named Polo Chakma and Md Shahidul, said the letter.

The account was closed on March 3 this year, the letter said.

Fin-Bangla Apparels Assistant General Manager (AGM) Saiful Alam said the mayor demanded Tk 50 lakh in advance holding taxes when his company applied for a licence renewal in 2020.

"So, we handed him a pay order for Tk 50 lakh at his office in February 2020," Saiful Alam said, adding that the mayor promised that he would provide a receipt and issued a renewed trade licence.

Honeywell Garments AGM Md Nuruzzaman said he applied to the GCC mayor for a deduction in outstanding holding taxes amounting

to around Tk 35 lakh for a period of six years ending in FY 2019-2020.

The tax was due because the factory had been closed for those six years, he explained.

"After the mayor offered a 50 percent deduction on the outstanding holding tax, we issued a pay order for Tk 17.55 lakh to him," Nuruzzaman said.

He said a representative of the firm took the pay order to the mayor's home and received a holding tax payment receipt.

Golam Rabbani, an executive of Ispahani Foods, said his company issued a pay order for Tk 45.25 lakh to the mayor on February 13, 2020, for the approval of a factory plan.

"Later, on February 19, I collected the receipt after handing over the pay order to the mayor," he added.

In a letter to the GCC, GMS Composite Knitting Industries said it paid additional money on top of the annual holding tax to support the revenue section of the city corporation.

They issued two pay orders to the mayor after his assurances that it would be adjusted with the following year's holding tax.

Acting GCC mayor Asadur Rahman Kiron said the aforesaid firms wrote to him about the pay orders.

Contacted, ex-mayor Jahangir claimed a vested group opened the account using his name and identity and withdrew the funds to frame him.

He added that he neither visited the bank nor signed any papers. "The account holder's signature is not mine."

Premier Bank's head of operations, Javed Husain, said the then-manager of the branch concerned informed them that he had gone to the then-mayor's office to have the account opened.

"He opened the account after the mayor assured him that all required documents, including GCC resolutions, would be provided," Javed claimed.

The Anti Corruption Commission is investigating the matter and has recently interrogated the branch manager and three other bank officers, he said.

The ACC is investigating complaints of irregularities involving Tk 7,800 crore against Jahangir, who was suspended on November 25 last year on charges of corruption and irregularities.

Mujibur Rahman on Dhanmondi-32.

This correspondent contacted four leaders of the new AL committee, but none of them agreed to comment.

A joint general secretary, wishing anonymity, said only Sheikh Hasina can clear the confusion. It will be cleared after the presidium meeting, he added.

The AL is holding the first meeting of the newly elected presidium, the highest policy-making body of the party, at the Gono Bhaban today at 9:00pm. The 28 members of the central committee will be elected there.

Sources said several new faces, mostly former student leaders and immediate past leaders of the AL's associated organisations, would be inducted in the AL's apex body members.

Accepted AL

FROM PAGE 1

to consider that I'm getting older," she said while exchanging greetings with party leaders and activists at the Gono Bhaban after being elected AL president for the 10th time.

Hasina said confidence and trust of the masses are AL's biggest strength. "We only believe in the power of the people."

"You must strengthen the party giving highest priority to this. This is my request to you," she told party men.

She stressed the need for establishing AL offices in every district and upazila. "The central AL will help the local units if they are unable to set up their offices."

The PM again put emphasis on utilising every inch of arable land in the country to increase production to avert any unwanted situation.

She mentioned that due to the Covid-19 pandemic, Russia-Ukraine war, and sanctions, economic recession has gripped the whole world. "Many rich countries have already declared to be in recession. Bangladesh must not get trapped in that situation. If we can produce extra food, we can export those in many countries mitigating our own demands."

Hasina emphasised the importance of making the party strong by recruiting new members.

"We will form eight new teams for the eight divisions. Their responsibilities will be to look after the recruitment of the new members," she said.

Hasina said the AL is the only organisation that emerged from this land and its people while the BNP and the Jatiya Party came from the pockets of military rulers who grabbed state powers illegally, violating the constitution.

"They don't have any responsibility towards the people whereas we have the duties to improve the people's fate. Each and every leader and activist of Awami League has responsibilities in this regard," she said.

Guards up as new Omicron

FROM PAGE 1

said Mohammad Shahidullah, president of NTAC, in the briefing.

People's response to taking booster jabs was not good at all, he said.

Asked whether there will be any travel restrictions for incoming passengers from countries with the latest spike, Kabir said: "It's a decision that will come from the government higher-ups."

Bangladesh has been reporting a "steady decline" in Covid-19 cases, with no death reported since December 18 except for one fatality yesterday.

The number of new cases has remained below 10 and the positivity rate is near zero in the previous three days until yesterday.

Experts warned the new variant may cause a fresh surge in cases at any time.

If someone is experiencing such symptoms, they should go for a test immediately as early detection and isolation are extremely crucial to preventing the disease from spreading, said Mushtuq Hussain, consultant at the Institute of Epidemiology, Disease Control and Research (IEDCR).

Stressing on ensuring health and safety rules at the hospitals, he said: "People will go to the hospitals when they will fall sick. Therefore, it is urgent to control virus infection at the hospital."

HOSPITALS AND PORTS ON ALERT
The health directorate already instructed all hospitals in the country to prepare Covid-19 isolation wards, Kabir said.

"The DNCC Covid-19 Hospital has also been kept ready to receive patients."

As of yesterday, around 99.7 percent of the hospital beds out of 12,860 for Covid patients were vacant. Only 17 out of 1,186 ICU beds for Covid-19 patients were occupied.

A notice was sent to all the ports in 14 districts on Saturday asking the authorities to ensure rigorous screening of all incoming passengers.

"The screening process has to be strengthened for the suspected international passengers from China, India, Japan, South Korea, the US, France, Brazil, Germany and other countries so that this virus cannot enter the country through them," it said.

It also asked the officials to arrange a rapid antigen test for those passengers with Covid-19 symptoms.

The DGHS has instructed them to keep the digital thermal scanner and hand-held infrared thermometer operational.

In addition to this, the DGHS has also instructed the IEDCR to conduct genome sequencing of the infected patients' samples to track the new variant.

Campaign ends

FROM PAGE 1

Yesterday morning, Dalia and her followers campaigned in Hanumantola and Mostafizar in Alamnagar. They travelled to different neighbourhoods asking constituents to vote until late last night.

"Many voters are not familiar with the EVMs. We are not sure whether misuse of technology can lead to irregularities," Mostafizar told reporters on the campaign trail.

Around 3,500 EVMs and enough technical assistants are here to hold the elections fairly, the RO said.

27 injured in Cairo stadium collapse

AFP, CAIRO

At least 27 people were injured on Saturday when part of a sports stadium south of Cairo collapsed during a basketball match, Egypt's health ministry said.

Ministry spokesman Hossam Abdel Ghaffar said "27 people were injured, some with fractures and bleeding," adding that "most were non-life-threatening injuries".