

2 Ansar members found dead in bank's storeroom

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Narsingdi

Bodies of two Ansar members were recovered from the storeroom of the state-run Agrani Bank's Radhagani branch in Narsingdi's Raipura upazila yesterday afternoon.

The deceased — Ronju Mia Ronjon, 32, of Tangail, and Tauhidul Islam, 24, of Faridpur — were stationed at the bank branch as security guards, said Hasibul Hossain Shanto, general manager of the branch.

Ronju had been performing duties in the bank for the last one year while Tauhidul for the past six months, the manager said.

Hasibul said they came to the bank at 10:00am and called the two Ansar members to open the door.

Finding no response, they informed police about the matter.

Law enforcers rushed to the spot and recovered the bodies from the storeroom, used as a restroom for Ansar members, and sent the bodies to the Narsingdi Sadar Hospital morgue for autopsies.

"They might have died of food poisoning or from electrocution as no injury marks were found on their bodies," Satyajit Kumar Ghosh, assistant superintendent of police (Raipura circle), said.

Police said they were investigating the matter.

Former Iran president's son freed after 7yrs

AFP, Tehran

A son of former Iranian president Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani has been freed after serving more than seven years of a 10-year jail sentence for fraud, Iranian media reported yesterday.

Mehdi Hashemi, 53, left Tehran's Evin prison late Tuesday, his lawyer Vahid Abolmaali said, quoted by the ISNA news agency.

State prosecutors said his release was "conditional", ISNA reported.

Hashemi was convicted of fraud, embezzlement and undermining national security in August 2015, charges he had previously denounced as "politically motivated".



Firefighters work at the site where a helicopter crashed near a kindergarten in Brovary, outside the capital Kyiv, killing sixteen people, including Ukrainian interior minister and two children, yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Ukraine minister among 14 killed in helicopter crash

Probe launched; Putin says he has 'no doubt' Russia will win war

AFP, Brovary

Ukraine's interior minister and 13 others were killed in a helicopter crash near a kindergarten outside Kyiv yesterday, in a blow to the war-battered nation's government.

There was no immediate claim from Kyiv that Russian forces were involved in the tragedy, and authorities launched an investigation while crews were still working near the charred remains of the aircraft.

Officials initially said that 18 people died but have revised the toll down to 14 — including Interior Minister Denys Monastyrsky, other ministry officials and a child — as search operations ended.

The helicopter carrying Monastyrsky slammed down next to a kindergarten and a residential building in Brovary, a commuter town for the capital Kyiv

that was the scene of fierce fighting with Russian forces last year.

Twenty five people were wounded, emergency services said in their last update.

Amateur footage circulating on social media in the immediate aftermath captured cries and a large blaze.

"Today, a terrible tragedy occurred in Brovary, Kyiv region," Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said on social media. "The pain is unspeakable."

The town of Brovary is located some 20 kilometres (12 miles) northeast of Kyiv and was among urban hubs around the capital that Russian troops had tried to capture after invading Ukraine last year.

It was not immediately clear where the helicopter was going.

The presidency said it was headed to frontline regions, while Kyiv mayor Vitali

Klitschko said it was flying to a missile strike site in Dnipro.

The circumstances of the tragedy will be clarified in the next few days, Kyiv mayor Vitali Klitschko told AFP.

Monastyrsky, 42, a trained lawyer, had served as Ukraine's interior minister from July 2021.

He was a key member of Zelensky's party and was married with two children.

EU chief Charles Michel expressed dismay and offered condolences.

Aviation accidents are fairly common in Ukraine, where the use of ageing and sometimes Soviet-era infrastructure is still common.

Meanwhile, Russian President Vladimir Putin yesterday said he had "no doubt" Moscow would emerge victorious in Ukraine, despite military setbacks in the nearly year-long offensive.

Big hike in gas prices for power plants, industry

FROM PAGE 1

The highest Bangladesh paid for spot LNG cargo was in October 2021: \$36.95 per MMBtu.

Gas purchase from the spot market has been on pause since July last year due to a steep rise in prices for the Ukraine war, a development that triggered load-shedding and left industries starved of fuel.

Bangladesh last purchased its spot LNG cargo in June last year at \$24.25 per MMBtu.

The prices remain high in the spot market and hence the hike in tariff, according to a statement from the ministry.

"The ministry considered the stakeholders' demand and decided to import LNG from the spot market to provide them with the requisite supply of gas," it added.

The government has already started the procedure to import LNG from the spot market, according to Energy Secretary Md. Khairuzzaman Mozumder.

At present, Petrobangla is supplying about 2,700 million cubic feet per day (mmcf) against the demand of 3,800 mmcf, shows its daily gas supply data.

Spot purchase means about 300-

350 mmcf/d can be added, said a Petrobangla official on the condition of anonymity to speak candidly on the issue.

But an uninterrupted gas supply will not be possible, he added.

The squeeze on foreign exchange reserves means the spot purchase will not be able to meet the demands of the industries, said Mansur, also the chairman of Brac Bank.

As of January 11, foreign exchange reserves stood at \$32.5 billion, down from \$44.9 billion a year earlier, according to data from the Bangladesh Bank.

"The gas situation will worsen in the summer months," said Khondaker Golam Moazzem, research director of the Centre for Policy Dialogue.

In such a scenario, it is important to ramp up production in the old gas fields, he added.

In the absence of uninterrupted gas supply, the tariff hike will not sit well with industrialists, who agreed to pay more for gas on the condition that their industries get the fuel needed to run at full steam.

"The government has increased the gas prices but it has not clarified whether we will get uninterrupted

gas supply," said Mohammad Ali Khokon, president of the Bangladesh Textile Mills Association.

The textile sector's main raw material is gas, so the hike will double the production costs, he added.

"Industrialists do not want gas at subsidised rates — they want uninterrupted gas supply," said Abul Kasem Khan, a director of the Federation of Bangladesh Chamber of Commerce & Industry.

Otherwise, such a decision will only erode Bangladesh garment products' competitive advantage in the global market and make graduation from the least developed country bracket trickier, he added.

"The decision will raise the industries' production costs grossly," said AK Enamul Haque, dean of the faculty of business and economics at East West University.

The gas tariff hike coupled with the 5 percent electricity price increase last week means the ordinary people, who are already grappling with a cost of living crisis, are bound to be slapped with another bout of inflation.

Inflation averaged 8.76 percent in the first six months of the fiscal year, up from 5.7 percent a year earlier.

Govt curtails BERC's power as regulator

FROM PAGE 1

The arbitrary hike of gas and power prices came at a time when people are struggling to cope with inflation, food inflation, record fuel prices, elevated transportation costs, and the price increase of almost all commodities.

The cabinet on November 28 last year approved an amendment to the BERC Ordinance-2022 that empowers the government to set energy prices without having to wait for the commission's public hearings and decisions.

The summary of the draft amendment says adjusting power and gas prices following all rules was complex and time consuming.

After the cabinet okayed the amendment, then cabinet secretary Khandker Anwarul Islam told reporters, "The BERC can take up to 90 days to review and decide on tariffs and this is a long time. The amendment is being made so that the government can set the fuel price on an urgent basis...."

The government made the amendment in December when parliament was not in session. President Abdul Hamid issued an ordinance and it was placed in parliament recently.

The government used its new powers to increase the electricity price just four days after the BERC held a public hearing on six power distributors'

proposals to hike the price. Loads of questions were raised against the proposals during the hearing.

Some had suggested that the government reduces its subsidy burden by cutting unnecessary spending and ensuring transparency in supply, instead of burdening stressed consumers.

The commission had asked both sides to submit documents in their favour by January 15 but in the meantime, the government stepped in and the commission adjourned its process.

For hiking the gas prices, the government just declared the new rates.

Energy expert Prof M Shamsul Alam said the BERC was formed to protect consumers' rights and ensure a just and reasonable energy price for them.

"But the new provision has made BERC a defunct body," Shamsul told The Daily Star, adding that the government had earlier kept the full supply chain under wraps by forming the Quick Enhancement of Electricity and Energy Supply Act in 2010.

"Only in pricing there was some transparency, and now it is also going away," he lamented.

He said the BERC public hearing was a process in which people could question the price hike proposals and

could access information like business profits, expenditures, and government subsidies.

"If the government sets energy and electricity prices by itself, there will be no need to provide consumers with such data," he said, adding that it was a serious blow to transparency.

Shamsul also said the BERC process allowed irregularities and unnecessary expenditures to be identified but now the process is doomed.

"We had dreamt that such process will be implemented in other sectors and the BERC — formed to protect the rights of consumers, and investors and to make a competitive market — will be an exemplary organisation."

Economy and energy expert Prof AK Enamul Haque, dean of the Faculty of Business and Economics at East West University, said since its inception in 2003, the BERC could not act independently. There were hearings and the setting of prices but the BERC had to consult the government to fix prices as subsidies were involved.

"The commission could neither protect the consumers' rights nor fulfil the government's wishes properly. The BERC failed to play its role and that's why the people were not happy with it," he said.

"After the latest amendment, there will be no need for the BERC."

Never-ending cycle of controversies

FROM PAGE 1

A media article raised the allegation of plagiarism in a science textbook for class VII. Contents of the National Geography Educational website were translated into Bangla using Google Translate and used in the first chapter of the book, without mentioning the source.

Prof Muhammed Zafar Iqbal and Prof Haseena Khan on Tuesday admitted that the allegation was true. Contacted, Prof Zafar, also a renowned writer, said they had issued a statement on this.

"We have determined that the allegation is true after comparing the textbook's passages with the website's contents," reads the statement.

Even though they were not the writers of the parts in question, they were still responsible as the editors, it added.

Contacted, Prof Farhadul Islam, chairman of the NCTB, said, "Whatever the writers did was unethical. These books are experimental versions and we will look into them while preparing the final versions. However, the books need no corrections."

Mistakes were also found in three textbooks for the ninth and tenth grades.

Four mistakes were found in the book titled History of Bangladesh and World Civilization, three in Bangladesh and Global Studies, and two in Civics and Citizenship.

For example, in the history book, the starting date of the Pakistan army's genocide against the Bangalees was mentioned as March 26, 1971. But it should be the night of March 25, 1971.

On page 200 of this book, it was written that then Chief Justice Abu Sadat Mohammad Sayem administered the oath of office to Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman on January 12, 1972.

But the oath was administered by then President Justice Abu Sayeed Chowdhury.

On page 16, the "Rajabagh Police Lines" was mistakenly written as "Rajabagh Police Camp" and "Pilkhana EPR Headquarters" as "Pilkhana EPR Camp".

The NCTB has issued corrections and sent those to all schools.

Speaking at a programme in Chandpur on Tuesday night, Education Minister Dipu Moni said, "If there are errors in textbooks, they will be corrected."

Referring to social media posts on the errors, the minister said, "Many have raised questions about

the textbooks for class IX and X. But these textbooks are not new; they have been there since 2013. These could be inadvertent errors. However, corrections are being sent."

"If anyone finds errors in these books, let us know, and we'll correct those," she added.

PREVIOUS DEBATES

Earlier, in the new textbooks of 2013, there were some serious and embarrassing mistakes. Media reported that more than 200 errors — misinformation, wrong names of writers and mistakes in sentence making, were found in the Economics book for students of class IX and X.

Besides, some 52 errors were found in Islamic education books and 24 were found in Hindu education books. Some of the mistakes sparked countrywide criticism.

Moreover, almost 100 errors were identified in Chemistry, Mathematics and Higher Mathematics books in that curriculum.

NCTB Member (Curriculum) Prof Moshuazzaman said they had issued corrections back then.

In 2017, writings of famous authors were scrapped because they were either non-Muslim or the contents were disliked by Islamists, said a former NCTB member, who was involved with the process. He added the exclusions were done on instructions from "higher authorities".

The excluded contents include Humayun Azad's poem "Boi"; a philosophical song by Lalon Fakir; Sunil Gangopadhyay's poem "Shakota Dulchhey"; Rabindranath Tagore's poem "Bangladesher Hridoy", and Kazi Nazrul Islam's essay "Bangaleer Bangla".

"These contents were well accepted by all," Prof Serajul Islam said. "These writings didn't come out of the blue. They were in our tradition. Textbooks are developed based on tradition. There was no need to make the changes," he said.

"We have seen that such things were done during the Pakistan period. However, it is very unexpected that this is being done in Bangladesh."

Prof Moshuazzaman said they do not have any plan to reintroduce these contents right now.

"We made the change as it was required to ensure targeted learning outcomes set in the curriculum. We will be able to bring back the contents only if they are needed to achieve the targeted learning outcome," he added.

A top official of NCTB said many writers and editors take the work

3.5 lakh posts vacant at govt offices

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

There are 3.58 lakh vacant posts in various ministries, divisions and directorates of the government, State Minister for Public Administration Farhad Hossain said at parliament yesterday.

In response to a question of Awami League MP Kazim Uddin Ahmed, the junior minister said, according to the latest published statistics of civil officers and staffs-2021 book, published in June, 2022, from the ministry of public administration, there are 3,58,125 civil manpower vacancies.

Among them, 43,336 are of the first class, 40,561 of the second class, 1,51,548 of the third class and 1,22,680 vacant posts of the fourth class, he added.

Out of this, 1,929 have been appointed to the 40th BCS and 3,966 assistant surgeons have been appointed to the 42nd Special BCS (Health) cadres.

13 more infected with Covid

UNB, Dhaka

Bangladesh reported 13 more Covid-19 cases in the last 24 hours till yesterday morning.

With this, the country's total caseload rose to 2,037,399, according to the Directorate General of Health Services.

However, the official death toll from the disease remained unchanged at 29,441 as no new fatalities were reported.

The daily positivity rate rose to 0.53 percent from Tuesday's 0.42 percent as 2,458 samples were tested.

The mortality rate remained unchanged at 1.45 percent while the recovery rate rose to 97.68 percent.

Mild to moderate cold wave likely to continue

BSS, Dhaka

A mild to moderate cold wave is sweeping over Rangpur, Rajshahi and Mymensingh divisions and Moulvibazar district and it may continue, said Bangladesh Meteorological Department yesterday.

Moderate to thick fog may occur over the river basins and light to moderate fog may occur elsewhere over the country during midnight to morning, read a BMD bulletin.

Weather may remain dry with temporary partly cloudy sky over the country. However, night and day temperature may remain nearly unchanged over the country.

Country's maximum temperature on Tuesday was recorded 29.4 degrees Celsius at Sandwip, while the minimum temperature today was 6.2 degrees Celsius at Tetulia.

casually as they do not get enough money for this job.

He explained that a panel of five or six people writes a book for class VI to VIII and the total allocation for them is Tk 2.70 lakh per book. While the allocation for an editor or editors' panel is Tk 70,000 per book.

Asked about the training for writers and editors, Moshuazzaman said they hold a 5-day orientation and provide them with necessary guidelines.

He said they usually take action against NCTB officials if they are found involved with mistakes. "There is no scope for taking actions against writers and editors. If we find they work casually, we don't give them the job the next time."

Indian diamond heiress, 8, enters monkhood and loses fortune

AFP, Ahmedabad

An eight-year-old girl in India who stood to inherit a multi-million-dollar diamond fortune has instead been inducted as a nun to a strict religious order after renouncing worldly pleasures.

Devanshi Sanghvi was, until this week, an heiress to the Sanghvi and Sons jewellery business in the western city of Surat, known locally as "Diamond City" for its prominence in the global gem trade.

Her family are also members of the Jain faith, a small but ancient Indian religion that preaches non-violence, strict vegetarianism and love for all creatures great and small.

This week, she was feted in a four-day ceremony to herald her new vocation, which at one point saw her ride in a carriage pulled by an elephant, according to pictures shared on local media.

Yesterday, she arrived at a temple to trade her elaborate garments for a simple white cotton outfit, after having all her hair removed.

Sanghvi was known among members of Surat's Jain community for her piety even as a young child, according to a witness to yesterday's ceremony, who spoke to AFP on condition of anonymity.

"Devanshi has never watched television, movies or gone to malls and restaurants," they said, adding that the girl had been a regular presence at temple ceremonies.