

## CHARGED UNDER ANTI-TERROR LAWS Indian journo walks free after 2 years in jail

AFP, New Delhi

An Indian journalist held in custody for more than two years without trial walked free yesterday after being granted bail in a money laundering case.

Siddique Kappan was arrested in October 2020 in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh, where he had travelled to report on a high-profile gang rape case.

He and three others were accused of belonging to an Islamist fundamentalist group and eventually charged with conspiracy to incite violence under anti-terror laws.

Kappan has maintained his innocence and says that he had only travelled from his home state of Kerala to do his duties as a journalist. He was bailed in the case in September last year but remained behind bars for months longer because of a separate money laundering case against him.

"I will continue my fight against draconian laws. They kept me in jail even after I got bail," he told NDTV news network after his release from jail in the city of Lucknow.

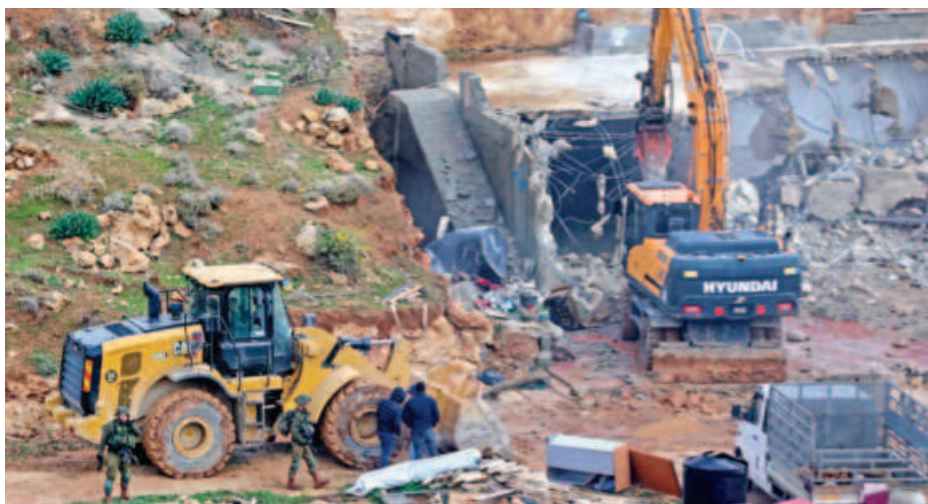


PHOTO: AFP

**Israeli bulldozers demolish a Palestinian owned house, built without a permit from the Israeli authorities in the occupied West Bank village of Duma yesterday.**

## PAKISTAN MOSQUE BLAST Bomber 'was in police uniform'

AFP, Peshawar

The suicide bomber who killed more than 80 police officers at a mosque inside a sensitive compound earlier this week entered wearing a uniform and helmet, a provincial police chief said yesterday.

Hundreds of police were attending afternoon prayers inside what should have been a tightly controlled police headquarters in the northwest city of Peshawar on Monday when the blast

erupted, causing a wall to collapse and crush officers.

"Those on duty didn't check him because he was in a police uniform... It was a security lapse," Moazzam Jah Ansari, the head of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa provincial police force, said.

The suspect is shown in CCTV images arriving at the gates on a motorcycle before walking through a security checkpoint and asking officers where the mosque was located.

## MYANMAR EMERGENCY EXTENSION Move to prolong 'illegitimate rule': US

AFP, Washington

The United States on Wednesday denounced the Myanmar junta's extension of a state of emergency, saying it prolonged suffering two years after a coup toppled an elected government.

"The United States strongly opposes the Burma military regime's decision to extend the state of emergency, prolonging the military's illegitimate rule and the suffering it inflicts upon the country," State Department spokesman Ned Price said, using Myanmar's former name.

The junta on the coup anniversary said it was extending the emergency by six months, pushing back the date for elections under the constitution. Price said the United States was determined to work with other countries to "deny the regime international credibility."

He also denounced the junta's version of "so-called elections, which will exacerbate violence and instability and will not be representative of the country's people." US earlier announced sanctions against Myanmar's energy sector leadership as part of efforts to pressure junta further.

## Australia to remove UK monarch from banknotes

AFP, Sydney

Australia will remove the British monarch from its banknotes, replacing the late Queen Elizabeth II's image on its \$5 note with a design honouring Indigenous culture, the central bank said yesterday. The decision to leave her successor King Charles III off the \$5 note means no monarch would remain on Australia's paper currency. The Reserve Bank of Australia (RBA) said it would consult Indigenous people on a new design that "honours the culture and history of the First Australians". Queen Elizabeth's death on September 8 last year was marked

by public mourning in Australia, but some Indigenous groups also protested against the destructive impact of colonial Britain, calling for the abolition of the monarchy. Australia is a constitutional monarchy, a democracy with King Charles III as its head of state.

A referendum proposing a switch to a republic was narrowly defeated in 1999. The central bank said its decision was supported by the centre-left Labor government of Prime Minister Anthony Albanese. The new banknote would take "a number of years" to be designed and printed, it said, with the existing \$5 note remaining legal tender even after new design is in people's hands.



# Graft is his middle name

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He was expelled from the AL on November 19, 2021, after a video clip went viral. In the video, he was seen making derogatory remarks about Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and expressing doubts about the number of martyrs in the Liberation War.

Seven days after his expulsion from the party, he was suspended as mayor on November 25.

The ministry at that time cited allegations of land grabbing and abuse of power and public money as reasons for the suspension.

Zahangir was sworn in as GCC mayor on July 27, 2018.

According to section 13 (I) of the City Corporation Act, 2009, a mayor can indeed be unseated for those offences.

Later, the ministry formed a three-member probe committee, led by its Additional Secretary Mustaqim Billah Farooqui.

Meanwhile, Zahangir getting party amnesty has had his followers upbeat. They now expect him to retrieve his mayoral reins, party insiders said.

But LGRD and Cooperatives Minister Md Tazul Islam said a decision regarding his suspension depends on the report of the ministry's probe committee.

"After getting the probe report, we will analyse it and then make a decision," Tazul told The Daily Star at his ministry on Monday.

The Daily Star approached LGRD probe panel chief Additional Secretary Farooqui to know about the status of investigation, but he would not make any comment.

Mohammad Johirul Islam, a member of the committee, told The Daily Star that the probe body was yet to turn in the report.

"We requested Gazipur City Corporation to furnish us with different documents, and the corporation obliged. Now we are analysing those documents. We will complete the report soon," he added.

Meanwhile, the Anti-Corruption Commission is also probing graft allegations against Zahangir.

### GARBAGE GRAFT

The GCC has spent Tk 12.43 crore for garbage removal in fiscal 2018-2019, 2019-2020 and 2020-2021.

Of the amount, Tk 3.44 crore was spent for 2018-2019, Tk 3.67 crore for 2019-2020 and Tk 5.31 crore for 2020-2021.

But the government rules and regulations were not followed in paying the bills. More than Tk 10 lakh was paid through vouchers, going against the rules, said the report.

According to rules, a maximum of Tk 25,000 can be paid through voucher.

It was shown on papers that a tender was floated for drains cleanup in eight areas, and bills were duly paid. But in reality, no tender was invited, no committee formed and no tender paper collected. All this is tantamount to embezzlement, according to the GCC enquiry report.

Moreover, no drains were cleaned in those areacsthough bills were paid, it said. Councillors of those wards also questioned what they said was phantom spending.

### DARLING FIRMS

There are around 1,200 construction firms listed with the GCC, but only 16 implemented development projects worth Tk 128.71 crore in the three fiscal years.

The licences of all firms, except 23 including the 16, were not renewed, which, according to the report, was "motivated".

The report said that most of those who won the contracts were new firms, and 23 firms, including those 16, either got fresh licences or had their licences renewed even though the GCC did not issue any circular for fresh enlistment or renewal of firms in the three fiscal years.

Those 23 firms were given the work orders in secret, and the owners of those firms are very close to Zahangir, reads the report.

### PAYMENT MADE, ZERO WORK

The report narrates an interesting way of embezzling public money through different small development works like sand filling, earth filling and widening of roads.

For instance, MS-ME (JV), owned by one Ruhul Amin, got a Tk 9.78 crore contract for sand and earth filling and road widening – the stretch from Nayan's shop to Tapu member's house close to the Tongi-Kaliganj Road and from Bogartey Bridge on Joy Bangla Road to Meghdhubi bypass.

The company won the contract on April 26, 2021, as a lone bidder and received partial payment of Tk 3.07 crore in two cheques dated May 4, 2021, and August 21, 2021.

But after visiting the site on May 24, 2022, the investigation committee found zero progress in the development work despite a 31 percent payment being made.

In another case, Chowdhury Amin (JV) got a contract for widening four narrow roads near Tongi and Dhaka bypass.

Chowdhury was the second bidder with an offer of Tk 9.46 crore against the lowest bidder M/S Zaman Traders and Confidence infrastructure LTD (JV) offering Tk 9.38 crore.

But Zahangir directed the officials concerned to order NOA (notification of award) to the second bidder, bypassing the recommendation of the tender evaluation committee to award the work to the lowest bidder.

Chowdhury Amin (JV) also received partial payment of Tk 3.36 crore despite zero physical progress as of May 24, 2022, the report said.

The enquiry also found that a number of firms were paid only three days after the issuance of work orders. A few were paid their bills even before the sites were handed over to them.

It found firms received payments showing the same work several times, adding that bills were submitted multiple times after the same tube well was repaired several times. The same was done with water pipeline repair.

The GCC implemented some projects under the Request for Qualifications (RFQ) fund and paid bills of Tk 3.51 crore on December, 26, 2018, and April 2, 2019.

The spending was much higher than the maximum allocation of Tk 60 lakh annually under RFQ, and all the projects were implemented by only five firms, the report said.

### HAAT-BAZAAR

The GCC investigation report found that Tk 12.35 crore was the leasing value of 104 permanent haat-bazaars (open marketplaces) under the GCC for three fiscal years (2018-2019, 2019-2020 and 2020-2021), but the corporation only managed to collect Tk 6.44 crore.

The leasing value of a temporary haat-bazaar was Tk 1.80 crore for the same period, but the corporation got only Tk 56 lakh.

According to a 1959 ordinance, the city corporation was supposed to hand over the haat-bazaar to a lessee on the first day of the Bangla calendar only after receiving the contract money.

But in the last three years, the haat-bazaars were handed out to the lessees without receiving the full contract money. It has never been paid by the lessees and the GCC incurred a huge loss along the way.

Besides, the leasing value for both permanent and temporary haats for the last three fiscal years was shown far below the average price.

In many cases, as part of widespread irregularities, temporary haat-bazaars were shown as low-valued khas haat-bazaars. Even the money collected from khas haat-bazaars was not deposited in the GCC coffers.

For instance, on July 16, 17 and 19 of 2021, the then GCC executive officer of area-1 MD Soharab Hossain collected around Tk 1.01 crore under his signature from a temporary cattle market in Tongi.

He deposited only Tk 54.42 lakh to the GCC account through different memos but has yet to deposit the rest Tk 45.57 lakh to date, according to the report.

According to a policy, the employees of the corporation are responsible for collecting the leasing money from the khas haat-bazars.

But the report found that instead of city corporation officials, the mayor's personal assistant collected the lease money, and that money was never deposited in the GCC coffer.

### BANGABANDHU BIRTH CENTENARY

The GCC spent Tk 2.11 crore from the city corporation fund for celebrating Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's birth centenary from 2020 to 2021.

But the corporation's internal enquiry found that no such programmes were held on the date mentioned in the voucher.

For example, documents show that an event was held on Rajbari ground on March 17, the birth anniversary of Bangabandhu, and payments were made from the corporation account for the celebration.

But no such event took place as there were government restrictions on outdoor events on account of Covid pandemic.

The report also read that to celebrate the birth centenary, a Tk 46 lakh cheque was issued for the then GCC secretary Mostafizur Rahman and another cheque worth Tk 45 lakh for the then chief revenue officer Rezaul Bari.

But two GCC workers on muster roll, Nazmul Islam and Soaliman, cashed those cheques respectively

using their personal mobile phone numbers.

Later, Rezaul Bari informed the GCC that he was not aware about the cheque issued in his name.

### BISHWA LJTEMA

A total of Tk 9.4 crore was allocated for the Bishwa Ljtema for fiscal 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 – Tk 3.74 crore for 2019-2020 and Tk 5.65 crore for 2020-2021.

Of the money, Tk 9.17 crore was spent on five sectors for the Ljtema, one of the biggest Muslim congregations, held in Tongi, an area under the GCC.

Of the sums, Tk 1.5 crore was spent on buying sacks, Tk 1.34 crore for repairing tube wells, Tk 5 crore for sand filling, Tk 24.33 lakh for hospitality and Tk 1.08 crore for purchasing LED lights.

But the GCC enquiry didn't find any voucher for purchasing (hessian) sacks.

The sand-filling done cost much less than what was allocated in the budget; LED lights were set up only on the road from Kamarpara Bridge to Station Road; and no LED bulbs were found on other roads.

### FINANCIAL ANOMALIES

For 2018-19, 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 fiscal years, the GCC estimated the development cost at around Tk 400 crore, and of it, Tk 136 crore was paid out.

The GCC enquiry finds some interesting anomalies in the spending.

The bills were paid showing 80 percent to 100 percent progress, but no work was done in those projects, reads the report.

For instance, Ms Shiuli Enterprise, who won the contract for cleaning the drains in GCC area-8 (Kashimpur), was paid Tk 1.79 crore.

But not a single broom was bought or used for the work, said the report.

The GCC ex-mayor has widened streets by forcefully acquiring private land and without informing the district administration.

In the name of widening streets in 57 wards of the GCC, the mayor allocated a financial grant of Tk 72.37 crore for the victims from the revenue budget illegitimately. No committee was formed and no evaluation was done for spending the money.

The money was disbursed based only on applications from claimants.

There was a widespread mismatch between approval of grants and the applications.

Grants were approved based on assumption and there was nepotism in the disbursement, reads the report.

There is no provision to transfer money from the development fund to the revenue fund. However, the city corporation transferred Tk 100 crore from the development fund to the revenue fund in the three fiscal years.

The provision made it mandatory that the unexpended money will have to be deposited in the government treasury, but the probe body didn't find any trace of the unused money as the fund was transferred from the development fund to the revenue fund, the report said.

In 2021, the GCC gave a grant

of Tk 1.11 crore to 31 persons and establishments outside its area, which is a violation of the rule.

Moreover, cheques were issued without the signature of the applicants while a single institution got a grant four times in a single year worth Tk 7.5 lakh.

### ALLEGATIONS KEEP SURFACING

According to GCC sources, the city corporation spent around Tk 83 lakh in 2020 for the installation of a lift and an air conditioner at the Gazipur Nagar Bhaban.

But no lift or air conditioner bought with that money was physically found.

In fiscal 2020-2021, Zahangir issued two cheques – one Tk 25 lakh and another Tk 26.19 lakh – to a company named – ATM identity, for feeding the destitute on the occasion of the National Mourning Day on August 15.

Eight separate cheques, worth Tk 35 lakh, were also issued to eight GCC councillors at the same time for the same purpose, according to officials.

But the GCC in another investigation found no signatures from the recipients in the city corporation registers against these issued cheques.

For this reason, the city corporation recently sent letters to the eight councillors and the company against which these cheques were issued and asked them to submit the expense voucher details.

But no one responded till February 1, said a highly placed source in the GCC.

### BEGINNING THE INVESTIGATION

On June 15, 2022, Mohammad Johirul Islam, deputy secretary of the Local Government Division (LGD), also a member of the ministry probe body, sent a letter to Zahangir for explanations about the corruption allegations raised against him by one Abdus Sattar Mollah through the National Human Rights Commission.

LGD in the letter says, "The complaint termed you [Zahangir] as a corrupt person laundering money abroad, and master maker of different irregularities."

The corruption and irregularities include embezzling Tk 42 crore through fake tenders, crores by appointing 500 traffic assistants under muster roll, and Tk 13.50 crore through fake bill vouchers over Bishwa Ljtema.

On June 29, 2022, the LGD in another letter, signed by Deputy Secretary Johirul Islam, asked Zahangir to submit explanations regarding the corruption allegations by July 20 of that year.

### ACC INVESTIGATION

Upon the complaints of financial irregularities against Zahangir, the ACC launched an investigation into the matter.

Its Deputy Director Ali Akbar is at the helm of the probe team.

On September 1, 2022, Md Ali Akbar, ACC deputy director, asked Zahangir to submit all information regarding his bank accounts and statements by September 11 that year.

The ACC asked Zahangir to submit information for an investigation into a complaint about embezzling of crores of taka of different development projects and transactions through

fake bank accounts, the letter reads.

The same day, Ali Akbar also sent a letter to the chief executive officer of the GCC to send records and information on sand filling, installing light bulbs, and spraying mosquito repellent in the Bishwa Ljtema field, collecting revenue from haat-bazaars operated by the GCC, and tender invitation details of 2018-19.

The Daily Star obtained copies of these letters.

Contacted, Ali Akbar said they were enquiring a number of corruption allegations against the ex-Gazipur mayor and collecting supporting documents.

Asked about the progress, he said, "We are now scrutinising every finding and hopeful that we might be able to bring charges against the irregularities."

### 'I'M A VICTIM OF FRAUD'

Zahangir Alam, however, refuted all the allegations against him and termed those baseless and fabricated.

"I'm a victim of fraud. Someone opened a bank account using my identity and claimed I have embezzled Tk 2.6 crore. But the reality is ... I did not go to the bank even," he told The Daily Star.

Regarding other allegations, he said, "A councillor, who is holding the mayor post for the last 14 months violating the rules, has forged some city corporation documents and is trying to publish those in different media. He is even spending money for this."

Zahangir also shifted the blame onto some city corporation officials for tender manipulation and irregularities in road construction.

"If I am corrupt, then the chief executive officer, engineer, and magistrate have got to be corrupt. But no one raised any question against them," he claimed.

The mayor is not supposed to understand a road's work progress, and it is the job of an engineer, he said, adding, "But no engineers were transferred, or their salaries deducted so far."

Zahangir questioned the legality of the ministry forming a probe body, saying if any complaints or allegations are levelled against the city corporation, then it should come to the city corporation first for investigation. "If the city corporation doesn't address the complaints, then the ministry can order a probe," he added.

"No one has even checked the background of the complainants," Zahangir said.

He further claimed, "I was suspended, but on which grounds? The action was taken against me without conducting any investigation."

"I was suspended from the Awami League and then immediately after from the mayoral post."

Asked about his expectation to get the mayor post back, Zahangir replied, "I have got the assurance from the government, and the minister also told me that it will be given back to me."

Contacted, Ashadur Rahman Kiran, acting GCC mayor, said Zahangir's claim is totally baseless. "Gazipur City Corporation only supplied documents."