

Two ex-land officials jailed over graft

COURT CORRESPONDENT

A Dhaka court yesterday sentenced two former officials of land record and survey department to jail in a decade-old graft case.

The convicts are Ashraf Ali Howlader, former settlement officer, and Monirul Islam, former surveyor, of land office in Tejgaon.

Ashraf was given five years and fined Tk 50,000 while Monirul two years and fined Tk 30,000. Each would have to serve nine more months if they do not pay the fine.

Sheikh Hafizur Rahman, judge of Dhaka Special Judge Court-9, handed down the sentence in presence of Ashraf at the courtroom.

The punishment of fugitive Monirul will start from the day of his arrest or surrender, read the judgement.

Abdul Hakim and Nurunnabi Firoze, two more accused in the case,

SEE PAGE 6 COL 4



People gather outside a multi-storey apartment block damaged in recent shelling in the course of Russia-Ukraine conflict in Donetsk, Russian-controlled Ukraine, yesterday. PHOTO: REUTERS

Couple killed in road crash

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Jhenidah

A couple was killed when the battery-run rickshaw van they were on was rammed by a pickup truck in Jhenidah's Kaliganj upazila yesterday morning.

The dead are Sabdar Hossain, 48, and his wife Parvina Begum, 40, of Bishoykhali village in Jhenidah Sadar.

Officer-in-Charge of Kaliganj Police Station Abdur Rahim Molla said Sabdar and his family members fell on the road when the pickup van hit the rickshaw-van near Mobarakganj Sugar Mills around 6:00am.

Locals took them to Kaliganj Upazila Health Complex where Sabdar and his wife succumbed to their injuries, Ariful Islam, a duty doctor, said.

Besides, their daughter Sathi Khatun, 25, her son Arafat Hossain, 7, and van driver Abdul Karim were also admitted to the healthcare facilities.

AIR POLLUTION IN BANGLADESH It causes 20pc of premature deaths: WB

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Air pollution is responsible for about 20 percent of the total premature deaths in Bangladesh, says a World Bank report.

The report titled "Striving for Clean Air: Air Pollution and Public Health in South Asia" said that air pollution causes an estimated two million premature deaths in South Asia each year and inflicts significant economic costs.

Premature deaths are those that occur before the average age of death in a given population.

The report also said that South Asia is home to nine of the world's 10 cities with the worst air pollution, and Dhaka is one of them.

"Exposure to such extreme air pollution has impacts ranging from stunting and reduced cognitive development in children,

to respiratory infections and chronic and debilitating diseases. This drives up healthcare costs, lowers a country's productive capacity, and leads to lost days worked," said World Bank in a press release yesterday.

The study found that concentrations of fine particulate matter such as soot and small dust (PM2.5) in some of the region's most densely populated and poor areas are up to 20 times higher than WHO standard (5 µg/m3).

"Air pollution creates a serious threat to public health and has major consequences on economic growth," said Abdoulaye Seck, World Bank country director for Bangladesh and Bhutan.

"Evidence shows that with commitment, the right actions, and policies, it is possible to tackle air pollution. Bangladesh has

SEE PAGE 6 COL 5

Ukraine shoots down drones over Kyiv

AGENCIES

Ukraine yesterday said it had shot down a dozen Russian drones over the capital Kyiv, adding that there had been no casualties as a result of Moscow's latest aerial barrage.

Single-use drones were key to a series of attacks that Russia launched against Ukrainian infrastructure over the winter months, disrupting heat, water and electricity supplies to much of the population.

"In total, 12 enemy UAVs of this type were detected and destroyed by... air defence forces in the airspace of Kyiv," said the head of the city's military administration, Sergiy Popko. "There were no victims."

He said "a non-residential building caught fire due to falling UAV wreckage" and the fire had been extinguished.

Woman gets life imprisonment for killing husband

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Munshiganj

A Munshiganj court yesterday sentenced a woman to life imprisonment for killing her husband.

Kazi Abdul Hannan, judge of Munshiganj District and Sessions Judge Court, delivered the verdict.

The court also fined her Tk 50,000, in default of which she would serve another year in prison.

Neela Akhtar strangled her husband Nazir Hossain in the town's Matpara area on June 20, 2015, said court inspector Jamal Uddin.

Victim's brother Jahangir Hossain filed a case with Munshiganj Sadar Police Station the next day.

"Neela Akhtar had confessed her crime before the court. Based on evidence, the court sentenced her to life imprisonment," said Public Prosecutor Abdul Matin.

Seven lakh yaba pills seized

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Cox's Bazar

Bangladesh Coast Guard seized seven lakh yaba pills from an engine boat at the Bay near St Martin's Island at Teknaf in Cox's Bazar yesterday.

On information, a team of coast guard conducted a raid around 2:00am and seized the yaba pills in 10 sacks, said Lt Commander Abdur Rahman, communication officer of coast guard (east zone).

The boatmen jumped into the sea and swam in the Myanmar water, he said, adding legal proceedings were underway.

Fourth grader missing for a week

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, Ctg

A fourth grader girl of Chattogram's Pahartali area has been missing for the last seven days.

The victim's mother yesterday lodged a complaint with Women and Child Repression Prevention Tribunal-2 in this connection.

Taking the complaint into cognizance, the court ordered Mostafizur Rahman, officer-in-charge of Pahartali Police Station, to treat the complaint as FIR and investigate it.

Mohammad Rubel, a vegetable vendor, was made accused in the complaint.

Bangladesh Human Rights Foundation (BHRF) is providing legal support to the victim's mother in court.

"We already checked CCTV footage. We are investigating the incident," said the OC.

We invited BNP

FROM PAGE 1

government to hold another election depriving people of their voting rights".

The CEC said, "I want to inform all that the government has no relation with the letter. If there is any tactic, that was EC's ..."

"It was not sent in line with recommendations of the government. We feel hurt when it is said that we act obediently to the government. We did not do so; rather our thought was reflected, he said, adding, "It would be better if a party like the BNP could be brought to the election."

The EC is expecting BNP's response to their letter in writing, he said.

When asked what would be the agenda for discussion as the BNP is adamant about an election-time caretaker government, Habibul said: "They [BNP] might have told you that, but we are yet to receive any letter. If they join the discussion and set the agenda, then the commission will decide on that issue. I don't want to make any advance comment on it."

He added that the commission from the beginning is expecting a free, fair, participatory and effective competitive election. Political parties should take part in the polls for the sake of country's democracy as well democracy within the parties, he added.

The BNP skipped the talks organised in July last year regarding the next general election. The party also did not join another dialogue organised by the EC in June last year to discuss the use of EVMs.

Besides, the party did not join President Abdul Hamid's call on the formation of the EC last year.

BNP's RESPONSE

The BNP will not sit with the EC for any formal or informal talks.

It has decided not to reply to the EC even but will make its position clear holding a press conference, said party leaders.

The decision was made at the standing committee meeting, the highest policy making body of the BNP, last night, said party sources.

The sources said they believe the letter was sent following the government's instructions and it is a staged drama and the BNP does not want to take part in any such drama.

Wishing not to be named, a standing committee member told The Daily Star that the party will go for talks only if it is held on the caretaker government issue.

He added that leaders in the meeting said as the party is in movement for election under a caretaker government system and the EC does not have anything to say regarding this issue, there is no reason to hold talks with the EC.

Walls closing in on habitual defaulters

FROM PAGE 1

defaulter if he or she does not repay a loan taken in their name or their company's name despite having the means to pay it back.

In addition, any person will be treated as a habitual defaulter if he or she takes loans under the name of a non-existent company.

A borrower will also be defined as a wilful defaulter if he or she transfers any asset kept as mortgaged in banks to get loans without prior approval from the bank concerned.

Banks will inform the Bangladesh Bank about wilful loan defaulters and the central bank can issue a ban on their foreign travel, obtaining trade licence, and companies' registration to the joint stock and security exchange commission, Khan said.

Besides, they have to wait for five years after their name is removed from the list of wilful defaulters to become a director of a bank or financial institute.

If any director of a bank becomes a wilful loan defaulter, the central bank can declare his or her post vacant.

A provision was included to allow the BB to regularly inspect different

institutes and foundations run under the law.

Besides, every bank will have to form two separate bodies – identification and confirmation committees – to detect habitual defaulters, according to the proposed act.

BB will give instructions to banks to this end.

Also, each bank or the non-bank financial institution will have to send the list of habitual defaulters to the BB from time to time.

The persons, who are treated as habitual defaulters by the confirmation committee of banks, can appeal to the central bank within 30 days from the submission date of the list.

The BB will make the final decision on whether the aggrieved persons will be enlisted in the list of habitual defaulters.

As per the move, the central bank will send the list to the government agencies concerned, which will then impose restrictions on delinquent borrowers.

Banks will issue notices to habitual defaulters to repay their loans within two months.

If habitual defaulters fail to repay

the loans by then, banks will arrange an auction to sell off the mortgaged assets as per the Money Loan Court Act 2003.

In the proposed act, there is a provision for mergers and restructuring of banks.

"The addition of a wilful defaulter clause in the amended Banking Companies Act 2023 is a step in the right direction," said Zahid Hussain, a former lead economist of the WB's Dhaka office.

It signals the government's commitment to addressing this longstanding problem.

"Hopefully, it itself will have a deterrence effect. How this plays out in reality will depend on the details of implementation."

For instance, if the "wilful defaulters" can file writs before the courts to stay the BB's adjudication on their listing, the new clause may not have the intended effects, he said, adding that there is a need for transparency on how BB will make the adjudication.

"All these need to be clarified in the implementation rules. Otherwise, we will be back to square one," he added.

'Her home was under watch for two weeks'

FROM PAGE 1

said they wanted to see the house as they wanted to rent it, he said.

"It appeared odd," said Dulal, adding that he refused to let the men in.

After several days, Dulal and some locals approached them and asked why they were staying there. "They then told us they are the people of the government and that we ought not to disturb their work," he said.

On March 22, the day Sultana was picked up, Dulal noticed that the number of people in front of his house increased since dawn.

He, however, left home for work around 9:00am.

Around 9:20am, Sultana called Dulal's wife Kohinur Begum and told her that she was feeling embarrassed to go out alone for work amid the gathering of those people, he said quoting his wife.

Sultana eventually left around 9:30am with a local woman who accompanied her up to Janakalyanpara intersection, about 300 yards away from the house.

The unidentified men followed them, Dulal said quoting the local woman.

Sultana got on a rickshaw from Janakalyanpara intersection when more men showed up and followed

her rickshaw until she reached Muktir Mor from where she was taken into a white microbus, Dulal said quoting witnesses.

"Hearing about Sultana's phone call to my wife, I returned home around 10:00am and heard that she was detained," Dulal said.

He said they were clueless as to who detained her.

Dulal said locals identified at least three of the men, who stayed in front of his house at night, during Sultana's burial on Saturday. She was laid to rest in a graveyard near her home. Policemen and Rab members were present there.

This correspondent talked to at least five shop owners between Janakalyanpara intersection and Muktir Mor but none of them agreed to talk.

Sultana's colleagues at the Naogaon municipality-Chandipur union land office in Tinnatty area described her as a gentle, sincere, and punctual person.

"I have been here for eight months and I have never seen her miss a day at work," said Kazi Rafiul Alam, union assistant land officer.

He said Sultana was at work during office hours on March 19 as well.

In a case filed a day after her detention with Rajpara Police Station

in Rajshahi, she was accused of conning people in front of the office of the divisional commissioner in Rajshahi on March 19.

Momena Khatun, union sub-assistant land officer, said she got worried after not seeing Sultana at work on March 22.

"I never saw her absent, she was so punctual," said Momena.

Momena was at work from 10:30am that day and she repeatedly called Sultana to know where she was. Her calls were not picked up.

She even called Sultana's son to know where she was. Sultana's son around 1:30pm told Momena that Rab took her to the hospital.

Yesterday, none of Sultana's relatives picked up calls from this paper.

This correspondent was, however, able to arrange a meeting with Sultana's maternal uncle Nazmul Haque Montu.

Montu changed the location of the meeting twice before seeing this correspondent inside a parking garage in Naogaon town.

"Since her death, our family members and I are living in constant fear of being picked up by law enforcers," said Montu, who served 27 years as a municipality ward councillor.

Eight Bangladeshi

FROM PAGE 1

locate 18 injured Bangladeshis having treatment in different hospitals.

"We have sent a two-member team to the spot. They are talking to the migrant workers as well as the Saudi authorities to help the Bangladeshis," he added.

The foreign ministry released two phone numbers -- +966538643532 and +966553026814 -- that the family members concerned could call for information.

Md Arifuzzaman, secretary of the labour wing at the Jeddah consulate, said four migrants -- Gias Uddin from Comilla, Shefayet Ullah from Moheshkhali (Cox's Bazar), Nazmul Hasan and Rony from Jessore -- are missing.

Families of the deceased have urged the government to bring back the bodies as soon as possible.

Under what authority

FROM PAGE 1

It asked Attorney General AM Amin Uddin to submit the autopsy report of Sultana before it by April 5 and fixed the day for further hearing.

Earlier in the day, Supreme Court lawyer Manoj Kumar Bhowmick filed the petition as a public interest litigation, seeking the HC directive on the government to form a high-powered committee, led by a retired judge of this court, to probe the death of Sultana, who was an employee at Chandipur union land office in Naogaon.

On Monday, the lawyer placed a report run by The Daily Star on Sultana's death before the bench.

During yesterday's hearing, Manoj told the HC that Rab members picked up Sultana for her Facebook posts, though she was not accused in any relevant crime.

Besides, he mentioned that Rab has no authority to investigate any case filed under the Digital Security Act. Police have the authority to probe such cases, but Rab probed the case against Sultana under the DSA, which was filed 31 hours after she was detained.

Rab did not produce Sultana before a court in 24 hours of her detention, and all these acts are unlawful, he argued.

Opposing the petition, Attorney General Amin Uddin told the HC that it is absolutely incorrect that Sultana was in Rab custody for over 24 hours.

Placing some documents from the hospitals and the Rab office in Naogaon before the HC judges, he said Sultana was in the custody for a little

"I hope that my husband's body will be brought back soon," Khuki Begum, widow of Helal Uddin of Noakhali, told The Daily Star last night.

Helal has a three-year-old daughter. He left for Saudi Arabia 13 months ago.

Aunt of deceased Mamun Miah, 28, Taslima said, "Just six months ago, Mamun went to Saudi Arabia to seek his fortune. All is finished now."

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina expressed deep shock at the death of the 22 people.

In a condolence message, she prayed for the eternal peace of the departed souls and expressed deep sympathy to the bereaved families.

She instructed the foreign minister and mission officials to look into the treatment of the injured Bangladeshis.

Under what authority

over an hour as she was hospitalised after falling sick.

Some of her mobile phone conversations, which should not be disclosed in the open court, have been printed out after she was detained. She felt demoralised and mentally pressurised, thinking what would happen if her son, a university student, could know it, he argued.

The attorney general argued that Rab has the jurisdiction under the relevant law to conduct investigation into any case filed under the DSA.

The medical certificate issued by Rajshahi Medical College Hospital mentioned "irreversible cardio-respiratory failure due to intracerebral haemorrhage" as the cause of Sultana's death.

Pak rights commission rebukes feuding political parties

AFP, Lahore

Pakistan's human rights commission yesterday rebuked feuding political parties for undermining democracy as the world's fifth most populous country battles an economic crisis.

The fragile coalition government led by Shehbaz Sharif has been facing increasing pressure from opposition leader Imran Khan, Pakistan's most popular politician, ahead of elections due by October.