

## US VISA POLICY Image of police won't be affected

Says IGP

UNB, Dhaka

Inspector General of Police (IGP) Chowdhury Abdulla Al-Mamun



yesterday said the US visa policy won't affect the image of the force.

He said this while talking to reporters after attending a seminar at Tourist Police headquarters in the capital's Paltan area.

On Friday, the US State Department said it was taking steps to impose visa restrictions on Bangladeshi individuals responsible for, or complicit in, undermining the democratic election process in Bangladesh.

These individuals include members of law enforcement agencies, the ruling party, and the political opposition.

Speaking about drives against illegal arms, the police chief said such drives will be conducted in due time. "However, we won't reveal our strategy at this moment."

Replying to a question about their role during the election, the IGP said the Election Commission (EC) will organise the election and the police will carry out their responsibility as entrusted by the EC during the election.

Responding to a question over the death of a lawyer, Bhuban Chandra Sheel, who was shot by stray bullets in the city's Tejgaon area, the IGP said, "The law and order situation is under control, and the law enforcers are taking steps through investigation after the incident. I want to assure you [people] that no one will be spared, no matter if he/she is a member of the law enforcement agencies. Legal action will be taken against the criminals."



Refugees load their cars as they leave the Red Cross registration center, in Goris, Armenia yesterday. The first group of Nagorno-Karabakh refugees since Azerbaijan's lightning assault against the separatist region entered Armenia on Sunday, an AFP team at the border said.

PHOTO: AFP

## AZERBAIJAN'S VICTORY OVER KARABAKH Thousands of ethnic Armenians flee enclave

REUTERS, Stepanakert Khankendi

Thousands of ethnic Armenians fled the breakaway region of Nagorno-Karabakh yesterday, queuing up for fuel and jamming the road to Armenia after their decades-old separatist state was defeated by Azerbaijan in a lightning military operation.

The leadership of the 120,000 Armenians who call Karabakh home told Reuters on Sunday that they did not want to live as part of Azerbaijan and that they would leave for Armenia because they feared persecution and ethnic cleansing.

In the Karabakh capital, known as Stepanakert by Armenia and Khankendi by Azerbaijan, crowds of people were loading belongings into buses and trucks as they left for Armenia.

Refugees who reached Armenia told Reuters they believed the history of their breakaway state was finished. "No one is going back - that's it," Anna Agopyan, who reached Goris, a border town in Armenia, told Reuters. "The topic of Karabakh is over now for good I think."

Srbuhi, a mother of three who reached Armenia, shed tears as she held her young daughter. "I left everything there," she said.

The Armenian government, making preparations for thousands of refugees, said that as of 1300 GMT yesterday, at least 6,650 people from Nagorno-Karabakh had crossed into Armenia.

The ethnic Armenian leadership said it would remain in place until all those who wanted to leave what they call Artsakh were able to go.

The Armenians of Karabakh, a territory

internationally recognised as part of Azerbaijan, were forced into a ceasefire last week after a 24-hour military operation by the much-larger Azerbaijani military.

The Azerbaijani victory alters the delicate balance of power in the South Caucasus region, a patchwork of ethnicities crisscrossed with oil and gas pipelines where Russia, the United States, Turkey and Iran are jostling for influence. Since the breakup of the Soviet Union, Armenia had relied on a security partnership with Russia, while Azerbaijan grew close to Turkey, with which it shares linguistic and cultural ties.

The US has said it was deeply concerned by Azerbaijan's military operation, which Baku launched on September 19 after what it said were terrorist attacks on its civilians by Karabakh fighters.

## At mercy of 'water lords'

FROM PAGE 1

then asked me to call him later, just like the prior days. Devastated and furious, I collected insecticide and drank it that afternoon," he recalled.

### A DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD

In the mid-1980s, the Barind region's groundwater level was just eight meters below the surface, and farmers relied on surface and rainwater for irrigation, according to a recent study by Water Resources Planning Organisation (WARPO), a government agency.

Things started changing in the 1990s when the Barind Multipurpose Development Authority (BMDA) introduced deep tubewells, enabling farmers to cultivate three crops annually and transforming the northwest into a thriving grain-producing hub.

Following the BMDA's lead, private individuals, including affluent farmers and businesspeople, began installing their own deep tubewells, contributing to the region's agricultural and industrial water supplies.

Although the BMDA stopped installation of any new deep tubewells in 2012 and shifted its focus to surface water sources, unregulated private tubewell operators continued to thrive, exerting a significant impact on the Barind's already dipping water levels.

The irony is while the Barind contributes to the nation's food security through bountiful rice harvests, it is the very success of these crops that exposes the region to a grave water crisis.

In 2021, the average depth of groundwater level was 18 metres in much of Rajshahi, Naogaon and Chapainawabganj, the three districts that are among the most affected by depleting groundwater levels, WARPO data show.

A recent estimate by BMDA shows around 70 percent of the Barind region's annual groundwater extraction, totaling 137,100 crore litres, is attributed to the private deep tubewells. At an estimated rate of 250 crore litre per day, this water could meet Dhaka city's water demand for one and a half years (548 days).

These private tubewell operators along with the ones appointed by BMDA have developed a system that is designed to exploit poor farmers using their influence and political link.

"It's the same vicious cycle no matter which party is in power. During the BNP-Jamaat regime, the operators were from the two parties. After the changeover in 2009, Awami League men and their associates now run the show," said Bimol Rajoar, president of Rajshahi chapter of Jatiya Adivasi Parishad.

BMDA Executive Director Abdur Rashid acknowledges this.

"Upon receiving complaints from farmers, we have terminated some operators. However, the problem seems to persist as they have political connections. We are looking into it," he said in a video interview.

### EXPLOITING A GOOD INITIATIVE

Given the region's water shortages, Barind farmers have been receiving irrigation water under BMDA management since its inception in 1992. For this, they have to pay a nominal charge, which is now Tk 85-125 per hour of irrigation.

In 2005, the Barind authorities introduced pre-paid metre system replacing the paper coupon system to save water and stop financial exploitation of farmers by private tubewell operators, according to BMDA website.

Currently, there are 16,000 government-run and 56,000 private-run irrigation deep tubewells covering 16 districts of Rajshahi and Rangpur divisions. More than half of the tubewells are in Rajshahi, Naogaon and Chapainawabganj, according to BMDA sources.

For the operations of the deep tubewells within a certain area,

farmers and ask them to enter into direct contracts with them at rates that are 6-28 times higher than the government-fixed rates. When farmers fail to pay, the water supply is delayed or even stopped, farmers said.

"When we go to ask for irrigation water against our prepaid cards, the operator delay our turn by hours, sometimes supplying the water late into the nights. We have to remain awake at night to get water," said Gopal Soren from Borsapara village.

Under BMDA's Irrigation Policy of 2008, cash transactions are prohibited, and it can lead to cancellation of dealership.

"Those who can pay more, get more. That's their entire business model," said Abu Bakar, a farmer of Bijaynagar village.

At least 40 farmers from Shankarpur and Mohor villages in Rajshahi's Tanore upazila told The Daily Star that to avoid harassment, they agreed to pay the operators Tk 1,500-3,500 per bigha so they get irrigation water on time.

"Farmers' groups never work as the group members are chosen by the operators," said Alamgir Hossain, a

of the operators who supplies water at a fixed rate that he himself has set. He is general secretary of Talondo union unit of Bangabandhu Sainik League.

BMDA executive director said they removed one operator last month for demanding Tk 3,000 from farmers for irrigation water.

"But sometimes our interventions do not make much difference due to political links of the operators," he said.

Last year, one operator took the matter all the way to the agriculture ministry after his termination, although the ministry later backed the BMDA's decision, he added.

### AKIN TO 'FEUDALISM'

The deepening water crisis in the region, exacerbated by climate change and excessive groundwater extraction, compounds the challenges faced by farmers.

In FY 2022-23 alone, the groundwater level fell by at least two feet, which is double the usual annual drop, said Prof Chowdhury Sarwar Jahan of Rajshahi University's geology and mining department.

Among the most affected areas are Nachol and Gomostapur upazilas in Chapainawabganj, Tanore and Godagari in Rajshahi, and Porsha, Sapahar, and Niamatpur upazilas in Naogaon.

"Even after five decades of independence, the water crisis connected to the operations of deep tubewells continue to facilitate the rise of feudalism in the Barind region, empowering the politically connected and perpetuating a system of inequality," said Prof Chowdhury.

Arif Ether, a programme coordinator of Centre for Capacity Building of Voluntary Organisation, a Rajshahi-based NGO, blamed lax monitoring by the authorities for parts of the crisis.

"The ethnic minority farmers suffer more because they are more vulnerable," he said.

Shamsul Wadud, additional director of the Department of Agricultural Extension in Rajshahi, said timely and adequate irrigation of paddy fields from March to early May is very crucial for good yield, and denying farmers water in these crucial months may spell disasters both for the yield and the growers.

A slogan on the back of the farmers' irrigation smart cards best captures the vitality of water in Barind region. The slogan reads: Barind is the land where life is written in water.

Santal farmers Abhinath Mardi and Robi Mardi have proven this with their lives, while Mukul Soren has had the lesson of his life.

"The irrigation tubewells are oil mines for the operators. But farmers like us who desperately need water suffer," said Mazed Ali, a farmer from Jogpur village.

## Who is to blame for Bhuban's death?

FROM PAGE 1

Dhaka Medical College Hospital, survived and was released after treatment. Bhuban, however, after being on life support at a city hospital for about a week, lost the fight for life.

From the news reports, we have come to know that just before leaving office that very night, Bhuban had made a video call to his wife and wanted to chat with his daughter.

But she had already fallen asleep. Who would have thought that this would be his last call to his family?

We can feel the tragedy of Bhuban's death when we see the grief-stricken faces of his wife, daughter, and other relatives who had gone through a week of agonising wait, hoping and praying that somehow he would survive.

We can commiserate with them because it could have been any one of us in that intensive care unit with a fatal bullet wound. It could be any one of us outside the ICU consumed by the paralysing fear of getting the bad news.

But why must our lives be so precarious? Why should we be at risk of getting shot or stabbed just because we stepped out on the

streets? Where were the police when criminals decided to carry out an assassination in such an important area of the city? Who is ultimately responsible for such deaths?

Perhaps it is our absurd level of compromising with the injustice that has resulted in yet another "unnatural death" as Bhuban's would be officially labelled.

Perhaps it is because our cries for help when we are attacked on the streets fall on deaf ears, sometimes even when law enforcers are nearby.

Our state is obligated to protect our right to life, as guaranteed by our constitution. And it is mainly through its law enforcement agencies that this obligation can be carried out.

While we expect them to identify the killers and bring them to justice, we also await a stronger presence of law enforcers on the streets during the night, especially in areas that have been identified as crime hotspots.

The authorities must take all measures to ensure minimal security for all city dwellers. We cannot accept any more such "unnatural deaths" as Bhuban's.

## Bhuban dies a week after being hit by stray bullet

FROM PAGE 1

Popular Medical College Hospital. Doctors declared him dead around noon yesterday, hospital sources said.

Bhuban's daughter Bhumika Chandra Shil cannot believe her father is no more. Tears rolled down her cheeks as she wailed and clung to her mother in the hospital.

Bhumika lived in Noakhali's Maizdi with her mother while Bhuban stayed in Dhaka for work.

On September 18, Bhuban made a video call to his wife before leaving home for office. He wanted to see Bhumika, but she was asleep.

"Why did he get killed in such a way?... We want justice," Jayshree Rani, a sister-in-law of Bhuban, said.

She said the family spent around Tk 7.5 lakh for Bhuban's treatment.

A day after the attack, Bhuban's wife filed a case with Tejgaon Industrial Police Station accusing 7-8 unidentified people.

Yesterday, police picked up a

suspect, Masum Billah alias Himel, 36, from Old Dhaka, said OC Mazharul Islam of the police station.

Police said seven to eight criminals on four motorcycles attacked Tariq Sayeed Mamun, 54, an accused in the Sohel Chowdhury murder case, near the BG Press area. They stabbed him in the neck and back. Bhuban happened to be there.

Mamun got out of jail on bail about three months ago. He had been behind bars for 26 years.

According to police and detectives, the attackers are loyal to top-listed criminal Sanjiddul Hassan Emon, who is now serving a 17-year jail sentence and is also an accused in the Sohel Chowdhury murder case.

Mamun was once Emon's partner in crime and they had a fall out after Mamun walked out of jail, said law enforcers.

Both Mamun and Bhuban were rushed to Dhaka Medical College Hospital. Mamun survived the attack.

## Thai police arrest 7 'Bangladeshis' for illegal entry

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Thailand police have reportedly arrested seven Bangladeshi men for entering the country illegally.

They posed themselves as Buddhist monks to evade immigration's radar and were nabbed in the southern province of Songkhla, reports The Pattaya News. Their ultimate destination was Malaysia, it added.

Songkhla immigration police, in collaboration with Hat Yai tourist police, arrested them on Saturday based on a tip-off.

They were charged with illegally entering the country, according to the report.

A 46-year-old man identified as Rupadh admitted to being the leader of the group.

Investigators determined that all seven men had entered Thailand illegally through a natural route from Myanmar after having started their journey from Bangladesh, according to The Pattaya News.

They were intending to travel to Narathiwat and subsequently planned to continue on to Malaysia.

During the search of their belongings, it was discovered that the men were in possession of all regular clothing and lacked any monk identification documents.

They were transferred to Hat Yai Police Station, where they will remain until they are deported to Bangladesh, the report says.

## Man gets death penalty for rape, murder

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Narayanngani

A Narayanngani court yesterday sentenced a man to death in a case filed over the rape and murder of a 6-year-old girl in Araihaazur upazila two years ago.

Judge Nazmul Haque Shyamal of the Women and Children Repression Prevention Tribunal announced the verdict in presence of the convict, Naimur Rahman alias Nayeem, 35, of Barguna's Latabaria area.

The convict was awarded an additional five years in jail for hiding the girl's body after the murder, said Public Prosecutor Rakibuddin Ahmed.

The convict was also fined Tk 20,000, he added.

According to the case statement, on September 23, 2021, Nayeem, who lived in a rented house next to the victim, abducted the girl and raped her in his place, before murdering her and hiding her body.

A day later, a case was filed with Araihaazur Police Station when her body was recovered wrapped in a quilt under the bed of the convict in his house.

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