

Jasod Chhatra League leader stabbed to death

A CORRESPONDENT, Kushtia

A local leader of Jasod Chhatra League was stabbed to death by criminals over previous political enmity in Kushtia's Bheramara upazila on Friday night, said police.

The deceased was identified as Nayeef Ahmed Tushar, 24, joint secretary of Mokarimpur union unit Jasod Chhatra League, a pro-Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal (JSD) student body.

Quoting witnesses, police said Tushar, along with some of his friends, was sitting at a tea stall at Golapnagar Bazar on Friday evening.

At that time, some 17-18 people came to the spot riding on motorbikes, attacked Tushar, and stabbed him indiscriminately, said Palash Kanti Nath, additional superintendent of police in Kushtia.

Locals rescued him and took him to the hospital Rajshahi Medical College Hospital where he succumbed to his injuries around 10:00pm, he said.

The killing might have taken place over a previous political rivalry, said Mohosin Al Murad, also an additional superintendent of police in Kushtia.



People unload medical aid from a truck, near Kamal Adwan Hospital in the northern Gaza Strip, amid Israel's Gaza offensive yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

NOAB declares 6-day holiday for newspapers

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The Newspaper Owners' Association of Bangladesh yesterday announced a six day holiday from April 9 in observance of Eid-ul-Fitr and Pahela Baishakh.

Therefore, no newspapers will be published on April 10, 11, 12, 13, 14 and 15, says a statement signed by NOAB President AK Azad.

Eid this year will be either on April 10 or 11, depending on moon sighting.

Pahela Baishakh, the Bangla new year, will be celebrated on April 14.

Blast kills 7 children in southern Syria

AFP, Damascus

Seven children were killed in southern Syria's Daraa province yesterday when an "explosive device" detonated, state media reported.

"Seven children" were killed "and two other people were injured, one of them a woman, when an explosive device planted by terrorists" went off in the city of Sanamayn, state news agency SANA reported, quoting a police source.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights war monitor gave a different toll, saying that "eight children of different ages were killed and another was wounded" in the blast.

The Britain-based monitor said militias were accused of planting the device in order to target an unidentified person in the area.

Govt to go tough on KNF

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KNF members were backed by armed groups from across the border.

Road Transport Minister Obaidul Quader said he did not believe Kuki-Chin received backing from groups in neighbouring countries.

"Who would back such a small group? They might have done this out of grievances," he told reporters at the secretariat around 11:30am.

"I don't know whether they have any connection in Mizoram. But there are many Bawm people there. We don't think anyone from across the border would back this separatist and terrorist group."

In Chattogram around 12:00pm, Foreign Minister Hasan Mahmud said, "KNF is robbing banks and carrying out other terrorist activities with the help of terrorists from a neighbouring country."

He said there was information that firearms of terrorists of a neighbouring

country were in possession of KNF members.

"The government is determined to eliminate them."

On April 2 night, a group of armed men broke into the Ruma upazila parishad office and snatched the firearms of security personnel before robbing Sonali Bank and abducting its manager. In less than 16 hours after that incident, groups of armed men robbed Sonali Bank and Krishi Bank in Thanchi, looting Tk 17.45 lakh.

Then on Thursday night, gunfights took place between police and an armed group that attacked Thanchi Police Station. Law enforcers say the attack and the three bank robberies were carried out by the KNF.

BANDARBAN STILL IN SHOCK Residents of Ruma and Thanchi were still reeling from shock yesterday. Large numbers of armed security personnel were patrolling the mostly empty streets. Shops were open, but people

did not leave their homes if they could help it.

In Ruma Bazar, Sukumar Mallik, owner of a clothing store, said, "What just happened here is unprecedented. It will be a while before normalcy returns to this area."

In the morning, Home Minister Asaduzzaman visited Ruma and said it would be investigated whether there was negligence on the part of officials during the robbery at Sonali Bank.

"We never imagined there would be such a volatile situation in Ruma... We will address this firmly. The law breakers will not be tolerated any longer."

The minister then travelled to Bandarban Circuit House and held a two-hour closed door meeting with the state minister for CHT affairs, home secretary, inspector general of police, special branch chief, Chattogram divisional commissioner, and top bosses of BGB, Ansar-VDP, DGF, and Bandarban administration.

KNF gets arms, support from other side of border

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He said KNF is reportedly trained by the Kachin Independent Army. He suggested tasking the Bangladesh Army with countering insurgency, as police and Rab are not trained enough on this.

Commander Khandaker Al Moin, director of Rab's legal and media wing, said they were yet to have any confirmed information about bank robberies and snatching of firearms by KNF on April 2-3 as they were yet to arrest any member of the armed group.

He, however, observed that there might be two motives behind KNF's criminal activities – firstly, to collect funds, arms and ammo, and secondly, to show its supporters and rival groups in the hill tracts that it is a strong-armed group in the hills.

Meanwhile, KNF's media and intelligence wing chief, named Colonel Solomon, on the group's verified Facebook page on Friday said they launched the recent attacks as the peace committee violated the terms of the agreement signed between KNF and the committee.

WHO ARE KNF?

In early 2022, the name of the new armed group – KNF – came to light. It was learned that some people from the Bawm ethnic community in Bandarban formed the group.

The group came to the fore after it opened a Facebook page and demanded a separate state comprising nine upazilas of Bandarban and Rangamati.

The upazilas are Baghaichhari, Barkal, Jurachhari, and Bilaichhari of Rangamati, and Rowangchhari, Ruma, Thanchi, Lama, and Alikadam of Bandarban.

They claim that they represent six ethnic communities – Bawm, Pankhova, Lusai, Khyang, Mro, and Khumi.

The KNF, in several statements circulated on social media at the time, said that they had formed an armed group called the Kuki-Chin National Army (KNA).

They also claimed that more than 100 members of their military wing migrated to Myanmar's Kachin

province for guerrilla training three years ago.

A trained group returned to Bangladesh in 2021, and its members went into hiding in 2022.

Nathan Bawm of Aden Para of Bandarban's Ruma upazila is the head of this organisation.

A graduate of the Department of Fine Arts at Dhaka University, Nathan Bawm founded a non-governmental organisation called Kuki-Chin National Development Organisation (KNDO) in his area in 2008. In 2019, the name was changed to KNF, sources in the Bawm community said.

In October 2022, KNF grabbed media attention after law enforcers came up with mindboggling information that the group was providing combat training and operational tactics to the members of the newly emerged militant group Jama'atul Ansar Fil Hindal Sharqiya at KNF training camps in CHT.

The militant group's plan was to establish a caliphate in Bangladesh through armed struggle and, if necessary, carry out attacks on key installations and important personalities, said officials of Rab, which successfully launched crackdowns on the militant group and KNF.

To reach their goals, the group recruited young men from at least 19 districts, took them to the hills, and made them go through rigorous combat training provided by the KNF. Jama'atul Ansar has 55 members trained in the use of firearms including assault rifles, officials said.

In the wake of such information, law enforcement agencies launched a series of operations in which dozens of militants and around 20 KNF members were arrested with firearms. Many of those KNF members are still behind bars.

According to media reports, five members of joint forces, including a DGF official, were killed during the operations last year. Several KNF members were also killed.

A peace establishment committee was formed on May 29 last year, with Bandarban Hill District Council

Chairman Kyaw Swe Hla as its convener, to bring the KNF members back to normal life.

KNF held several meetings, both online and in-person, with the committee. Two memorandum of understandings were also signed in the two rounds of meetings held on November 5 and March 5 last year. The KNF had promised to stop all kinds of criminal activities, including extortion, kidnapping, and looting.

But breaking the promise, armed members of KNF stormed Sonali and Krishi banks in Ruma and Thanchi last week and kidnapped banker Nezam Uddin. The armed group looted 14 firearms from the police and Ansar personnel.

KNF also launched a gun attack on a police outpost in Thanchi on Thursday night. Police and KNF members traded around 700 bullets during the hour-long fight starting at 8:30pm.

Besides, they created terror in the area by extorting, looting, and torturing innocent people at different times.

M Sakhawat Hossain said, "Peace talks with armed groups only serve to strengthen those organisations."

"Peace talks with such groups mean you are giving them recognition. This gives them the opportunity to recruit more members. It also gives the hint that the government is giving importance to them," he told The Daily Star.

Last year, KNF attacked ordinary people, construction workers, and a Buddhist temple during a Prabarana programme. It also clashed with another armed group in the hills, UPDF Ganotantrik, and even tried to blow up a bridge. At least 12 people were killed and five wounded in the attacks and clashes.

According to leaders of the Bawm community, KNF initially had 300 armed members. During a joint operation by security forces last year, many village youths fled to the forest. Many of them later joined the KNF, willingly or unwillingly. Now the group may have about 700 members.

Ex-chairman, family pocketed Tk 187cr

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by Bangladesh Securities and Exchange Commission.

But four family member directors – Noor-E-Hafza, Fauzia Quamrun Tania, S Sobhan Chowdhury and S Mohammad Danial – were given shares worth Tk 9.16 crore at face value without realising the share price.

On the same day, on June 14, 2018, three other directors – Maya Rani Roy, A Rajeb Samdani and Hoda Ali Selim – received shares, also without having to pay the share price, but at double the face value. They are not his family members.

According to the audit report, Quddus got 6.25 lakh shares from his wife Fazlutun Nessa, 26.8 lakh shares from his son Mostafa Quamrus Sobhan and daughter Fauzia Quamrun Tania, 3 lakh shares from Sobhan's wife S Sobhan Chowdhury and 12 lakh shares from his son-in-law Danial.

Later, Quddus handed over 14.8 lakh shares to one of his daughters, 2.3 lakh shares to his wife and 6.5 lakh shares to his son and daughter-in-law.

Through this, seven members of the same family created opportunities for irregularities by establishing family authority in the company board, according to the audit report.

Currently, Sonali Life has 20 directors, seven of whom are family members. It has 7.88 lakh policyholders at the moment, with a paid-up capital of Tk 47 crore. Last year, the company earned Tk 832 crore in premium.

The audit report said Sonali Life is being run by some directors in violation of financial laws and regulations, creating scopes for embezzlement of large money and causing loss to insurers and policyholders.

For example, from July-December 2023, Tk 18 crore was illegally paid from the company's account to the account of Quddus's personal business, Dragon Sweater, without board's approval, which is illegal.

Also, between 2021 and 2023, the insurance company borrowed Tk

CORRUPTION AT SONALI LIFE

Directors given shares with company money	Tk 9.16cr
Company owned by Quddus given land, building	Tk 141.56cr
Purchase of sweater, etc. of his company	Tk 7.85cr
Salary for family member directors	Tk 2.24cr
Additional dividend to family member directors	Tk 1.60cr
Illegal purchase of luxury car	Tk 1.70cr
Foreign travel, treatment, education	Tk 1.54cr
Illegal commission from group insurance policy	Tk 9 lakh
Loan adjustment, grant, purchase of AC, cow	Tk 8.26cr
Giving to Dragon IT in the name of office rent	Tk 11.94cr
Payment of utility bill of Imperial Building	Tk 1.72cr
Tax payment for Dragon Sweater	Tk 13.75 lakh

195.42 crore from Social Islami Bank Limited, South Bangla Agriculture Bank and First Security Islami Bank for business purposes. Of the sum, Tk 83.99 crore was deposited in the bank account of a company owned by Quddus after several transfers to different accounts.

The audit report termed it "fraud, money laundering and embezzlement".

The audit also found that on an average, Tk 22 crore a year or about Tk 2 crore a month was spent as petty cash and many one-time large transactions were made with cash checks which are completely illegal and are often used as a means of money laundering.

Almost all signatories, including the company's senior executives, are family members, and so they did not raise any flag.

There are other corrupt practices in the company, but they were not reflected in this report as its scope of work was limited only to the claims at hand, the report said, noting that a detailed audit is necessary to get a

complete picture of the company's ills. "Incomplete information storage or concealment of information, opaque accounting procedures and absence of internal control system have created an environment conducive for embezzlement of the company money," the report said.

Contacted, Quddus said the findings of the audit report were "travesty of the truth" and that he will write to the regulator clarifying his position soon. "We are preparing for that."

"The company was doing well after former CEO Rashid Bin Aman joined the company. Then for some reason he hatched a long-term plan for a 'hostile takeover' of the company. We have proof of this," he said.

Established in 2013, Sonali Life has 204 branches with 26,693 agents across the country. It settled 99.9 percent of its total claims in 2020, 99.92 percent in 2021 and 99.98 percent in 2022. In 2023, the company settled almost all its claims worth Tk 122.26 crore, according to IDRA data.

Energy ministry seeks dollars, unpaid subsidy

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During the meeting power and energy ministry officials said about \$2 billion is needed this fiscal year to clear the dues and also for working capital.

Of the \$2 billion, \$1 billion will go towards clearing dues of India's Adani Power and Chevron, which is producing gas from Bibiyana, the major gas field in Bangladesh. PDB owes Adani \$700 million and Chevron \$300 million.

The rest of the amount will be used to pay the bills of fuel oils, liquefied natural gas and coal for power generation.

All has verbally agreed to disburse about Tk 1,500 crore as cash support immediately as a temporary solution,

according to ministry officials informed with the contents of the meeting.

Besides, the finance minister said they will issue another Tk 7,000 crore in bonds soon to pay the power sector dues. The rest of the amount will be disbursed later as arrears, they added.

"Usually, the finance division pays the maximum of the allocated subsidies as arrears after the fiscal year, which puts the power division under pressure," said a top power division official wishing anonymity.

When the payment stops for a while due to any crisis like a dollar shortage, the figure piles up, he added.

Earlier in a briefing, Hamid said

that uninterrupted power supply will depend on the disbursement of adequate dollars this year.

The Bangladesh Bank is supplying a limited amount of dollars to maintain its foreign exchange reserves according to International Monetary Fund conditions.

Bangladesh needed to maintain at least \$19.27 billion in net foreign reserves at the end of March and \$20.11 billion at the end of June to authorise the disbursement of the next tranche of the \$4.7 billion loan from the Washington-based multilateral lender.

As of April 3, gross foreign exchange reserves stood at \$19.65 billion, according to data from the BB.

underground. However, gas cylinders were found stored along the staircase – the building's only entry and exit point.

"This not only created an obstacle during the evacuation but also leaks in the cylinders cause the fire to spread faster."

Although firefighters found a

"Building regulations mandate secure storage of gas cylinders, either in designated cabinets or underground. However, gas cylinders were found stored along the staircase – the building's only entry and exit point."
LT COL TAJUL ISLAM

water reservoir in the building's basement, designed to provide water for firefighting, the investigation committee discovered that there was not enough water in the reservoir.

The report concluded that the building was constructed in violation of the rules and not in accordance

with the plan that Rajuk approved.

Lt Col Tajul Islam said the fire incident could have been avoided if the owner had followed the rules.

In their investigation reports, both the fire service and Rajuk blamed the building owners for the fire that claimed 46 lives.

The Criminal Investigation Department (CID) is now investigating the case. Following the incident, six people were arrested, but the building owners are still at large.

Anisur Rahman, special superintendent of police at the CID Dhaka Metro South Unit, told The Daily Star yesterday, "We're yet to trace the whereabouts of the building owners, but our efforts are on to arrest all those responsible."

"This case is very serious and delicate. As such, we're gathering evidence from all stakeholders and carefully examining each party's role."

"We also don't want anyone to be wrongly accused or harassed. We understand that this tragic fire has caused significant loss and suffering for many people. It may take some time, but we are trying to complete the investigation as soon as possible."