

UPAZILA ELECTION EC summons state minister over polls code violation

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The Election Commission yesterday summoned State Minister for Disaster Management and Relief Mohibbur Rahman, saying he violated the electoral code of conduct by campaigning for multiple upazila polls candidates in Patuakhali's Rangabali.

In a letter sent by the EC, Mohibur was asked to appear before the commission on June 2 and offer an explanation in this matter.

In the letter, the EC said the state minister sought votes for the candidates running in the Rangabali upazila polls to be held on June 5.

According to the letter, Mohibbur sought votes for upazila chairman candidate Saiduzzaman Mamun, vice chairman candidate Roushan Mridha and candidate for vice chairman reserved for women Ferdousi Parveen while distributing relief aid among the flood-affected victims at Kodalia Ghat in Chhota Baishdia union and in Chalitabunia Bazar of Chalitabunia Union in Patuakhali's SEE PAGE 5 COL 1



Paddy soaked by floodwater is being dried in the sun on a road in Alirgaon village of Gowainghat upazila yesterday. The flash flood has left 6.43 lakh people marooned in eight upazilas of Sylhet. Story on page 12.

PHOTO: SHEIKH NASIR

Hasan Mahmud seeks OIC's continuous support for Rohingya repatriation

BSS, Dhaka

Foreign Minister Hasan Mahmud has sought continuous support from the member states of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) to ensure the safe and sustainable repatriation of nearly 1.3 million forcibly displaced Rohingyas from Bangladesh to Myanmar.

He made this appeal while briefing ambassadors from OIC member countries at the United Nations headquarters in New York on Thursday, a foreign ministry press release said yesterday.

During the briefing, Hasan praised the OIC for its leading role in international efforts to alleviate the plight of the Rohingyas and updated the envoys on the current situation of the Rohingyas sheltered in Bangladesh.

The foreign minister expressed deep concern over the increasing conflict in Myanmar's Rakhine state at the briefing held in the OIC conference room at the UN headquarters.

He laid emphasis on the need for the Rohingyas' full citizenship rights upon their return to Myanmar.

Ambassadors from OIC member states, including Saudi Arabia, Gambia, Pakistan, Malaysia, Turkey, Iran, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Algeria, Egypt, and Indonesia, expressed their gratitude to the Bangladesh foreign minister for the timely briefing.

A councillor and his illicit tobacco trade

FROM PAGE 1

Company filings at the Registrar of Joint Stock Companies and Firms (RJSC) show that as of December 2020, Liton and his brother Abdul Mannan Khokon hold all 20,000 shares worth Tk 100 each of Bijoy.

Before that, the two brothers held 60 percent of the shares and another company held 40 percent. The private investment company then transferred its share to the two brothers on December 10, 2020, although it is yet to be approved by the RJSC, documents show.

Under company law, transfer of share takes effect on the date of transfer, unless there are forgeries by the parties involved or incomplete documentation. However, the final completion of share transfer is subject to RJSC's approval, a company lawyer said.

Liton, also acting convener of a port city unit Awami League, owns 70 percent share in Tara International Tobacco, a partnership set up in March 2017 with a proposed initial capital of Tk 40 lakh. The rest 30 percent share of the company is held by Omar Faruk Siddiki, also from Chattogram, documents show.

THE TOBACCO RACKET

Analysing import and local purchase documents seized from Bijoy and Tara, CIC officials suspect both companies have been engaged in tax evasion through imports of raw materials for cigarette using non-existent and anonymous entities.

Tobacco Tax Policy 2021-2030 strictly prohibits imports of tobacco raw materials by any entity other than cigarette manufacturers.

In actuality, a number of trading companies have been importing various raw materials for cigarette, including the three essential components: acetate tow, unmanufactured tobacco, and cigarette paper.

Acetate tow is the soft, cotton-like material used to make cigarette filters.

NBR data show at least 5,906 tonnes of raw materials used for cigarette production, including these three key components, have been imported by 11 trading companies in the last two years since February 2022.

None of these traders are manufacturers, and at least four of them supplied their illegal imports to Bijoy and Tara, officials say.

The raw materials they imported are enough to produce at least 295 crore cigarette sticks, CIC officials tell The Daily Star, adding that the government lost at least Tk 1,500 crore in revenue from these cigarettes, as the companies did not pay any VAT and supplementary duty.

Most of these raw materials came from China, Malaysia, Germany, India, Hong Kong and Indonesia, documents show.

These companies are SB Traders, M/s Anik Enterprise, Rapid Marketing, Rapid Pack Limited, M/s Osman Trading, RH Traders, Saad International, Alam Traders, AK Enterprise, Star Impex and CR7 Trading.

CIC investigators say most of them are phantom companies, meaning they are being used as shell companies.

The Daily Star went to the physical address of three companies in Dhaka and Chattogram, but did not find them.

Between May 9 and May 21, a large quantity of equipment and raw materials used for cigarette production were seized from the warehouses of Rapid Pack Limited in Dhaka's Keraniganj and AK Enterprise in Chattogram.

Customs officials have since shut the warehouses of both companies. During the raid, CIC and customs officials found Rapid Pack Limited had cigarette manufacturing equipment, although it has no permission to make

them.

The CIC officials' raid on Bijoy and Tara was based on the analysis of the import, purchase and sales records of Rapid Pack and AK Enterprise.

Documents show both Rapid Pack and AK Enterprise supplied their imported raw materials to Bijoy and Tara, which is illegal as only direct manufacturers can import such items.

In the subsequent raid on Bijoy on May 21 by a joint team of CIC and port city customs intelligence, officials found documents related to its trade with Rapid Pack, Rapid Marketing, AK Enterprise and Alam Traders.

Currently, 7.56 tonnes of paper for cigarette packets inscribed with foreign brand "Oris" imported by AK Enterprise are being held by the Chattogram Customs. AK Enterprise falsely declared them as coated paper.

During interrogation, AK Enterprise owner AKM Ziauddin told customs officials that he imported

trading companies submitted their tax and VAT returns in the last two years, which is mandatory.

ILLEGAL MARKETING

In December last year, local businessmen from different regions sent multiple letters to NBR, saying two cigarette brands named "Express" by Bijoy and "Peacock" by Tara were being distributed in rural areas of Chattogram, Khagrachhari, Rangamati, Kurigram, Feni, Kushtia and Lalmonirhat with fake banderoles.

The letters, seen by this newspaper, said 10-stick packs of Express and Peacock cigarettes were being sold for Tk 15-25, much lower than the government-set retail price of Tk 45 for a 10-stick pack. Many of these packs had no banderoles, while others had fake banderoles.

Banderoles are the instrument used for controlling illicit tobacco trade and collecting tax revenue around the world. In Bangladesh, they are printed

Oris company raises any objections. The allegations of manufacturing Esse Lights, Oris and other slim cigarettes are baseless. I do not even have the equipment to make them," he said.

But CIC officials say the quality of the Oris paper seized at his factory and those used in some slim Oris cigarettes that they collected from the market is similar.

ILLICIT CIGARETTE TRADE IN BANGLADESH

Bangladesh is a fairly small player in illicit tobacco trade, but the trend is rising.

Globally, illicit tobacco trade is estimated at about 10 percent of the total market size.

Latest data on counterfeit cigarettes are not available, but a 2019 study by the World Bank Group shows Bangladesh's illicit cigarette trade in 2016-17 was roughly 2% of the total cigarettes sold in the market, or about 1.5 billion sticks.

It was 50 percent for Latvia, 38 percent for Pakistan, 36 percent for Malaysia and 17 percent for India that year.

In case of Bangladesh, the 2 percent illicit tobacco market share in 2016-17 was more than a three-fold growth from 2014-15, when the illicit tobacco market share was only 0.6%, the WB report said.

About 92% of this illicit trade is in cigarettes that escape the tax net. The remaining 8% of contraband cigarettes are divided between smuggling and counterfeit products. The country loses about \$100 million in revenue from the illicit cigarette trade annually, almost 4% of total tobacco revenues, the study found.

However, NBR officials say that currently 8-10 percent of the cigarettes available on the market are illegal.

And the racket involving Bijoy, Tara and some of the 11 trading companies under investigation controls a big chunk of this illegal tobacco market, they add.

Benazir

FROM PAGE 1

later travelled to Dubai.

The Daily Star could not independently verify the claims.

This correspondent called Benazir multiple times and sent him text messages, but he did not respond.

Contacted yesterday, Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan said, "We have no information that he left the country."

Awami League General Secretary Obaidul Quader also said he has no idea whether the former IGP had left the country.

Deputy Inspector General of Police (Immigration) Monirul Islam said, "Since Benazir is no longer the IGP, I do not have his immigration information."

After his retirement as the IGP in September 2022, Benazir and his family lived at a flat on the Rancon Icon Tower in Gulshan. On March 5, 2023, he purchased four apartments at House no. 1 on Road-130 in Gulshan-1.

One of the security guards of the 15-storey Rancon Icon Tower said, "I haven't seen any family members enter or leave the flat in quite a long time."

The ACC summoned Benazir for questioning on June 6, and his wife and three children on June 9. A source said Benazir and his family's lawyer might request more time from the ACC.

Benazir's lawyer, Shah Monjurul Hoque, said, "I don't have information about his whereabouts."

On April 18, the ACC launched an inquiry into the allegations that the former police chief amassed illegal wealth. A three-member committee is conducting the probe.

Before becoming the IGP, Benazir was the director general of Rab.

Hundreds flock to Dhaka airport

FROM PAGE 1

Kuala Lumpur, but there would be a stopover in the UAE.

"I will reach Malaysia on June 1. I am not sure whether they will let me work as I will miss the deadline," he said.

A special flight of Biman Bangladesh Airlines left for Kuala Lumpur with 271 passengers at 7:15pm yesterday. The flight was arranged at the instruction of the Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare, said Masud Khan, manager (public relations) at Biman.

Asked about the crowd of people, Group Capt Kamrul Islam, executive director of the airport, said additional flights were being arranged to handle the pressure.

In the last three days, 5,294 Bangladeshi migrant workers left for Malaysia in 30 scheduled and special flights of Biman, US Bangla,

Malaysian and Batik Air.

Besides, 179 migrant workers reached Kuala Lumpur on four transit flights, Kamrul said.

Biman earlier operated four special flights. The tickets sold for Tk 73,616 each.

Nearly 4.50 lakh Bangladeshi workers migrated to Malaysia between August 2022 and April this year, shows Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training data. The southeast Asian country reopened its labour market for Bangladesh in 2022 following a four-year suspension.

Last year, Malaysia was the second largest overseas job market for Bangladesh.

At an event in Dhaka on Wednesday, Malaysian High Commissioner to Bangladesh Haznah Md Hashim said the deadline will not be extended.

Over 1,250 edn institutions

FROM PAGE 1

At least 256 primary schools and 218 other educational institutions, including secondary schools, colleges, and madrasas, have been hit by the cyclone in Patuakhali, according to local education offices.

Repair of the educational institutions may cost Tk 20 crore, said officials at the district education office.

"We are preparing a list of the affected schools and will send it quickly to the higher authorities seeking funds for repair," said Molla Bakhtiar Rahman, Patuakhali district primary education officer.

In Pirojpur, 174 primary schools and 220 other educational institutions, including secondary schools, colleges, and madrasas, have been hit by Remal.

"The cyclone has damaged the tin roof of our madrasa," Martuja Billah, principal of Sapleza Nesaria Alim Madrasa in Mathbaria upazila, told The Daily Star.

"We are still collecting information about the damage. I think that the number of the affected schools may go up," said Idris Ali Azizi, the district

education officer.

Besides, at least 171 primary schools have been damaged by the cyclone in Khulna, Bagerhat, and Satkhira.

Of them, 67 schools are in Satkhira, 66 in Bagerhat, and 38 in Khulna, said Md Moslem Uddin, Khulna divisional deputy director at the Directorate of Primary Education.

As per an estimation, the damage may result in a loss of over Tk 2 crore, he added.

Mohammadpur Government Primary School in Khulna's Batiaghata upazila has 1,376 students. "We already have a shortage of classrooms. On top of that, a portion of tin roof of a classroom has been blown away," said Md Moniruzzaman, head teacher at the school.

Moslem Uddin said classes are being hampered at many affected schools.

In Jhalakathi, 50 primary schools, 95 secondary schools and colleges, as well as 75 madrasas have been damaged by the cyclone, according to local education offices.

[Our correspondents from Patuakhali, Pirojpur, and Khulna contributed to this report.]

Israel offers new Gaza ceasefire plan

FROM PAGE 12

change their minds.

"... I ask you to take a step back, think what will happen if this moment is lost," he said. "We can't lose this moment."

An earlier hostage proposal put forward earlier this year called for the release of sick, elderly and wounded hostages in Gaza in exchange for a six-week ceasefire that could be extended to allow for more humanitarian aid to be delivered into the enclave.

The proposed deal fell apart earlier this month after Israel refused to agree to a permanent end to the war as part of the negotiations and ramped up an assault on the city of Rafah in southern Gaza.

Hamas said on Thursday it had told mediators it would not take part in more negotiations during ongoing aggression but was ready for a "complete agreement," including an exchange of hostages and prisoners if Israel stopped the war.

Yesterday, the UN said that the humanitarian aid allowed into the Gaza Strip is not getting to civilians in need, as Israeli forces struck targets across the Gaza Strip, with witnesses reporting air raids around the southern city of Rafah.

"The aid that is getting in is not getting to the people, and that's a major problem," Jens Laerke, spokesman for the UN humanitarian

agency OCHA, told a media briefing in Geneva.

"We continue to insist that Israeli authorities' obligation under the law to facilitate delivery of aid does not stop at the border," said Laerke.

"We need that safe and unimpeded access to get to the drop-off point so we can pick it up and get it to people."

Meanwhile, Israeli forces have ended combat operations in the Jabalia area of north Gaza after destroying more than 10 kilometres of tunnels during days of intense fighting that included over 200 air strikes, the military said yesterday.

At the south end of Gaza, Israeli forces are pressing an offensive into Rafah. Tank-led Israeli troops aim to break up Hamas' fighting formations in the city on the border with Egypt.

At a news conference in Prague, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said the humanitarian situation remains dire in Gaza, especially in terms of distributing aid to civilians, citing combat operations in the south.

The health ministry in Hamas-run Gaza said yesterday that at least 36,284 people have been killed in the territory during more than seven months of offensive. The toll includes at least 60 deaths over the past 24 hours, a ministry statement said.