

MP AZIM MURDER 'Celesty was supposed to receive Azim at Kolkata flat'

Police team now in Nepal to quiz suspect Siam

MOHAMMAD JAMIL KHAN and RASHIDUL HASAN

Celesty Rahman, a friend of Aktaruzzaman, alleged mastermind of the murder of Jhenaidah-4 MP Anwarul Azim Anar, was responsible for receiving the lawmaker at a flat in Kolkata's New Town on May 13.

She was given the responsibility as part of the killing plan, said the Wari division of the Detective Branch of Dhaka Metropolitan Police in its second investigation report submitted to a Dhaka court on Friday. Celesty is now in DB custody.

Amanullah alias Shimul Bhuiyan, who was tasked with carrying out the killing mission, and his associate Foysal received Azim in Kolkata and took him to the flat at Sanjeva Gardens of New Town where he was killed on May 13, according to the investigators.

According to a police source, Aktaruzzaman was a friend and business partner of Azim.

"Aktaruzzaman had invited the lawmaker to a business meeting in the Kolkata flat over a video call, during which Celesty Rahman waved to the MP. Aktaruzzaman later returned to Bangladesh on May 10 without informing the lawmaker that he was leaving Kolkata," said the police source, citing the second investigation report.

Azim went to Kolkata on May 12 and spent the night at his friend's home. He went out the next day, saying he would visit a doctor.

On May 22, India and Bangladesh police said the MP was murdered at the New Town flat.

Investigators also said that they

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PHOTO: COLLECTED

Firefighters work to douse a blaze that gutted over 200 makeshift shelters built for Rohingya refugees as well as over 100 shops at Block D-3 of Camp 13 in Ukhiya upazila of Cox's Bazar yesterday afternoon. The camp saw another fire just like this last week.

Israel pounds Gaza defying US truce plan Netanyahu says there won't be any ceasefire until Hamas destroyed

AFP, Rafah

Israeli forces hammered Rafah in southern Gaza with tanks and artillery yesterday, hours after US President Joe Biden said Israel was offering a new roadmap towards a full ceasefire.

Shortly after Biden's announcement, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu insisted his country would still pursue the war until it had reached all its aims.

He reiterated that position yesterday, saying that "Israel's conditions for ending the war have not changed: the destruction of Hamas's military and governing capabilities, the freeing of all hostages and ensuring that Gaza no longer poses a threat to Israel".

Hamas, meanwhile, said it "views positively" the Israeli plan laid out by Biden.

In his first major address outlining a possible end to the nearly eight-month war, the US president said Israel's three-stage offer would begin with a six-week phase that would see Israeli forces withdraw from all populated areas of Gaza.

It would also see the "release of a number of hostages... in exchange for (the) release of hundreds of Palestinian prisoners".

Israel and the Palestinians would then negotiate for a lasting ceasefire — but the truce would continue so long as talks are ongoing, Biden said.

The US leader urged Hamas to accept the Israeli offer.

"It's time for this war to end, for the day after to begin," he said.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken called his counterparts from Jordan, Saudi

Arabia and Turkey on Friday to press the deal.

UN chief Antonio Guterres "strongly hopes" the latest development "will lead to an agreement by the parties for lasting peace", his spokesman Stephane Dujarric said.

German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock said the offer "provides a glimpse of hope and a possible path out of the war's deadlock", while EU chief Ursula von der Leyen welcomed a "balanced and realistic" approach to end the bloodshed.

Saudi Arabia stressed its "support for all efforts aimed at an immediate ceasefire" and the withdrawal of Israeli troops.

Indonesia, meanwhile, said it was ready to send "significant peacekeeping forces" and medical personnel to Gaza if a ceasefire is agreed.

Narrowest budget

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core by June 2025, a 21 percent increase compared to the current fiscal year's target.

A finance ministry official told The Daily Star that the Bangladesh Bank took several measures to increase foreign currency reserves, but the measures are not working.

"We are trying to accommodate those measures in the upcoming budget which might reduce the pressure on foreign currency reserves," he said.

The Annual Development Programme has incorporated the foreign loan and grants allocations at Tk 1,00,000 crore.

As a budgetary support, the government will get between \$3 billion and \$3.5 billion from the World Bank, Asian Development Bank and Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. After debt servicing, the net borrowing will stand at Tk 1 lakh crore.

The rest of the Tk 1,57,000 crore deficit will be met by borrowing.

Economist Ahsan H Mansur said the government has already tightened its monetary policy.

"There are many ways to reduce the expenditure. It will impact positively on the balance of payment," he said. "We should try to bring back the days when we had macroeconomic stability."

Supersized T20 WC

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West Indies, meanwhile, take on associate nation Papua New Guinea at the Providence in Guyana at 8:30pm Bangladesh time.

The T20 showpiece had previously grown from 12 to 16 teams since its 2007 inception and the format's unpredictable nature has seen many strong outfits humbled.

In the 2022 edition, South Africa, Sri Lanka and West Indies fell to Netherlands, Namibia and Scotland respectively, three blossoming sides capable of ruffling more feathers this time around despite operating with a fraction of the budget distributed by the ICC to Test-playing nations.

Despite beating eventual champions England during the group stage of the last World Cup, Ireland face an uphill Group A battle placed alongside India and Pakistan.

Afghanistan, whose talismanic captain Rashid Khan and predecessor Mohammad Nabi return from Indian Premier League duty, pose a constant white-ball threat and will fancy their chances of a top-two finish in Group C ahead of two-time victors West Indies.

Bangladesh are no longer pushovers but the T20 World Cup has not been a happy hunting ground and a 24% winning record suggests it will be difficult to advance past South Africa and Sri Lanka in Group D.

To have any hope of reaching the 'Super 8s', Oman would need to stun Australia or England in Group B.

Nepal, travelling without spinner Sandeep Lamichhane who was recently cleared of rape on appeal but has been unable to secure a visa to enter the US, and Papua New Guinea enter their second showing with minimal expectations but nothing to lose.

Mismanagement left over 3k workers

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He blamed both the countries for the suffering of the migrant workers.

Labour migration expert Prof CR Abrar said a traveller is not expected to go to the airport without a ticket.

The recruitment process of the Malaysia-bound workers had started much earlier and many went to the airport as part of the process, he told The Daily Star.

"The authorities should seriously look into the suffering of the migrant workers, find out those responsible and take stern action against them," said Abrar, also the executive director of Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit (RMMRU).

He said syndicates of some quarters had been active in labour migration from Bangladesh to Malaysia over the years.

Enquired about the matter, State Minister for Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment Shofiqur Rahman Choudhury yesterday said the government would look into Friday's incident and take action against those responsible.

Those who failed to go to Kuala Lumpur on Friday despite having valid travel documents will be given priority for jobs in Malaysia whenever the next opportunity is available, he told this newspaper over the phone.

In March, Malaysia announced the May 31 deadline to bring in foreign

workers from 14 countries, including Bangladesh.

Speaking at an event in Dhaka on Wednesday, Malaysian High Commissioner to Bangladesh Haznah Md Hashim said the deadline for workers' entry to Malaysia would not be extended and that this was in "the interest of the country's national security".

BRAC's Shariful said imposing a deadline on the entry of valid visa holders means creating opportunities for some other stakeholders to take undue advantage of the situation.

He said a person having a valid visa of a particular country should be able to enter that country without trouble.

Baira Secretary General Ali Haider Chowdhury yesterday said they were yet to have the final figure of workers who could not travel to Malaysia failing to get a flight.

"Our office was closed on the weekends [Friday and Saturday]. We will be able to get the final statistics on Sunday [today]," he told The Daily Star.

Malaysia has been an attractive job destination for low-paid Bangladeshi migrant workers over the years. They prefer the Southeast Asian country to some traditional markets in the Gulf due to many reasons, including higher wage.

According to the Bangladesh

Bureau of Statistics' "Labour Force Survey 2022", a Bangladeshi migrant worker earns Tk 28,822 a month in Malaysia on average compared to Tk 24,957 in Saudi Arabia.

However, the Bangladesh-Malaysia migration was marred by irregularities and exploitation, which had prompted Malaysia to shut its door on Bangladeshi workers on multiple occasions.

The country had suspended labour recruitment from Bangladesh in 2018 over allegations of irregularities. It resumed hiring Bangladeshi workers in 2022.

Data from the Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training shows that nearly 4.50 lakh Bangladeshis migrated to Malaysia between August 2022 and April 2024.

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

Jasiya Khatoun, director of Welfare Association for the Rights of Bangladeshi Emigrants Development Foundation, said Friday's incident at the Dhaka airport is proof of Bangladesh's poor migration management.

She blamed local recruiters and the government authorities concerned.

She said the government should step up its diplomatic efforts to address the challenges facing the migrant workers.

Azim 'taxed' every gold bar smuggled

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Belonging to a fisherman's family, Azim once traded fish in the Kaliganj Bazaar. His involvement in gold smuggling began after he finished his degree course at Jhenaidah's Government Mahtabuddin College in 1988.

A source in an intelligence agency told this newspaper that Azim first joined a biker gang that smuggled gold on their bikes.

Abul Kalam Azad, chairman of Barobazar union parishad, told The Daily Star, "Kaliganj upazila and its surrounding areas have long been a haven for gold smuggling for its proximity to the Indian border."

Regarding Azim's killing, he said that the lawmaker had a falling out with Aktaruzzaman over their business partnership, but did not elaborate on the kind of business they were in.

Azim joined the Awami League in 1995 and became the Kaliganj municipality mayor in 1996.

The post's influence corrupted his young mind, and he became involved in a variety of criminal activities, including the narcotics trade, claimed local sources.

In 2001, when the BNP government came to power, Azim went into hiding

in neighbouring India.

Between 2001 and 2008, at least 22 cases were filed against Azim, including a murder charge and a red notice.

But in 2009, he made a comeback as the Kaliganj upazila chairman. Later, he went on to become the lawmaker for Jhenaidah-4 in 2014 and for the next two consecutive terms.

Over the years, he managed to clear the charges brought against him in all 22 cases since he became the upazila chairman in 2009.

Azim's criminal persona was an open secret in the constituency, but none dared speak against him, for those who did were either attacked or even killed by hired goons at his command.

Several dozen people have become victims of his oppression, say locals.

The Daily Star managed to speak to the family of Ariful Islam, general secretary of a local ward unit Jubo League, who was killed in his home by political rivals on November 29, 2022.

"Some six to seven armed criminals broke into our home and stabbed my father to death in front of our eyes. These criminals worked for Azim. They killed my father as he was the

lawmaker's political rival," Tahsinur Rahman, son of Ariful, told The Daily Star yesterday.

On July 8, 2023, one Mehedi Hasan was killed over an internal feud with local drug addicts in Kaliganj upazila.

Two suspects, Akram and Saddam, were arrested over the incident and sent to jail. But later they managed to secure bail as they were followers of Azim, sources alleged.

This newspaper was not able to communicate with the victim's family as they moved away after the murder out of fear, said locals.

Contacted, Ashraf Alam, mayor of Kaliganj municipality, acknowledged the existence of the gold smuggling racket and claimed he and MP Azim took action against the racket.

Speaking on Azim's murder, Ashraf said it might have occurred over either business or political rivalry.

"The parliament is yet to declare his [Azim] seat vacant, but his rivals have already started campaigning for the post."

When this newspaper asked if the MP position was sought to take control of the smuggling racket, the mayor did not respond clearly.

Remal destroys 68 lakh trees

Says forest department

SOHRAB HOSSAIN, Patuakhali

Over 68 lakh trees covering around 27,300 hectares of forest land have been destroyed by Cyclone Remal in Patuakhali and Barguna, according to the Forest Department.

Apart from this, many trees and tree saplings in house yards, educational institutions, and plant nurseries were also damaged.

According to Patuakhali Coastal Forest Division, the financial loss is over Tk 11 crore — Tk 7.90 crore in Patuakhali and Tk 3.15 crore in Barguna.

"We have prepared a damage report and sent it to higher authorities seeking directives for further steps for reforestation," said Patuakhali Coastal Divisional Forest Officer Shafiqul Islam.

There are 91,000 hectares of forest land in Patuakhali and Barguna, including 36,136 hectares of reserve forest, he added.

According to locals, the forest served as a natural shield during the cyclone, protecting lives, homes, and other properties.

A resident of Barguna, Shafiqul Islam Khokon, said, "We are always protected from cyclones, floods, and other natural disasters by the Pathorghata reserved forests. To preserve our existence, the forest must be preserved."

Fisherman Tunu Mia of Patuakhali's Kuakata area said that the reserve forests there shield people from several types of destruction. "These forests save us, like a friend," he added.

Kalapara Forest Range Officer Monirul Haque said to counteract such damage, reforestation initiatives will be implemented.

"There was a large Chambol tree in our house yard. The tree was uprooted during the storm," said Deepali Rani, a resident of Rahmatpur area of Patuakhali Kalapara town.

"We had around 30 to 35 trees around our house. Almost all the trees have fallen during the storm," said Badal Matubbar, a resident of Salimpur village of Kalapara upazila.

Around 100,000 trees at different educational institutions have been damaged in Kalapara upazila only, said Kalapara Forest Range Officer Monirul Haque.

Immediate initiatives will be taken for reforestation, he said.

National organisation "Dhoritree Rokkhai Amra" Member Secretary Sharif Jamil said, "There is no alternative to planting more trees to protect the coast from natural disasters."

Controversial recruitment

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workers have migrated to Malaysia.

The Southeast Asian country suspended foreign workers recruitment on May 31. The Malaysian government's previous contract with Bestinet expired the same day.

On March 28, four UN experts wrote a letter to the Malaysia and Bangladesh governments, saying that criminal networks operate in the recruitment process of Bangladeshi workers who are deceived and obliged to pay exorbitant sums which pushes them into debt bondage.

Besides, the workers are recruited by companies that exist only on papers.

The UN experts said Bangladeshi migrants paid between \$4,500 to \$6,000 for recruitment fees, which is the highest in the world.

Many migrants find on arrival in Malaysia that they do not have a job as promised and are forced into overstaying their visa. Consequently, they risk arrest, detention, ill-treatment and deportation. Many become destitute and face an alarming humanitarian crisis, said the UN experts.

The situation requires urgent attention before it escalates further or before lives are further put at risk, they said.

According to Malaysiakini, the

Malaysian cabinet agreed to continue using Bestinet's service after reviewing a paper presented by the home ministry on May 29. However, the terms of the agreement with the company remains unclear.

The news portal wrote that it could not get comments from Home Minister Saifuddin Nasution Ismail and Bestinet President Aminul.

The Auditor-General's Report 2022 revealed that Bestinet's online system had many weaknesses that made it susceptible to manipulation, with instances of conflict of interest and breach of governance and control, reports Malaysiakini.

Malaysia's Public Accounts Committee recently investigated Bestinet, but its findings will only be tabled in parliament when the house convenes later in June, it said.

Last week, Channel News Asia (CNA) reported that the government was under pressure to renew the lease with the platform linked with trafficking allegations, despite the intentions of Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim's regime to overhaul the system.

Sources told CNA that Bestinet, a firm with strong ties to top politicians and a history of controversy, was pushing back against the government's migrant labour reform agenda.

Modi set for return

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victory without referring to the exit polls.

"I can say with confidence that the people of India have voted in record numbers to re-elect the NDA government," he said on X, without providing evidence of his claim.

"The opportunistic INDI Alliance failed to strike a chord with the voters. They are casteist, communal and corrupt."

Nationally, an exit poll from broadcaster CNN News18 forecasts Modi's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its coalition allies to win 355 seats.

Republic Bharat - P Marq exit poll gives BJP-led NDA 359 seats, India News-D Dynamics gave it 371 while Republic Bharat - Matrice said NDA is set to get any numbers between 353 and 368. News Nation gave BJP-led alliance between 342 to 378 seats and TV 5 Telugu exit poll projected 359 seats for NDA.

PMARQ exit poll predicts 154 seats for the opposition INDIA bloc and 30 for others. Republic TV Matrice put the seat numbers between 118 and 133, while India News D Dynamics poll gave 125 seats to the opposition. News Nation predicted 153-169 seats for INDIA bloc and NDTV India - Jan Ki Baat estimated 141-161 seats.

In West Bengal, TMC, which had lost a significant number of seats to BJP in 2019 and won 22 seats, may end up losing a few more in this year's elections if the exit poll predictions prove true, reports Reuters.

According to the Matrice exit poll, TMC will secure 16-20 seats, while Jan Ki Baat has predicted 16-18 seats for the party in West Bengal. PMARQ exit poll has predicted 22 seats for BJP and 20 for TMC.

In the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, BJP had won 18 of the total 42 seats in the

state.

In Andhra Pradesh, the NDA is expected to get 18 of the state's 25 seats, reports Reuters.

Karnataka is also expected to vote overwhelmingly for the BJP, despite its preference for the Congress at the state level. In Telangana too, the Congress may be unable to capitalise on its assembly poll victory. The BJP is likely to walk away with over half of the state's 17 seats.

The BJP is even expected to open its account in Tamil Nadu, with at least two seats, and in Kerala with one, exit polls predict.

In neighbouring Odisha, the BJP can do even better, winning 15 of the state's 21 seats and confining Naveen Patnaik's Biju Janata Dal — once the unquestioned choice of the people — to the margins.

The opposition dismissed the exit polls, and ahead of their publication had called them "prefixed". Most opposition parties accuse India's main news channels of being biased in favour of Modi, charges the channels deny. They also say exit polls in India are mostly unscientific.

"This is a government exit poll, this is Narendra Modi's exit poll," Supriya Shrinete, the Congress's social media head, told news agency ANI, in which Reuters has a minority stake.

"We have a sense of how many seats we are winning, it will not be one seat less than 259," she said.

Nearly one billion people were eligible to vote in the seven-phase election that began on April 19 and was held in scorching summer heat in many parts.

The Election Commission will count votes on June 4 and results are expected on the same day.

A victory for Modi, 73, will make him only the second prime minister after independence leader Jawaharlal Nehru to win three consecutive terms.