



DHAKA'S OFFICE CANTEENS where meals and memories are made

RBR

Our Dhanmondi office was a typical posh eighties two-storied house, with a manicured lawn and an annex building for the kitchen and other service quarters. When this beautiful home was rented to our office in the early nineties, our threadbare office canteen was situated at the far corner of the kitchen wing; serving only singaras and tea.

Our athletic teaboy used to carry a tray full of cups with steaming tea and hopped down the stairs as if he were an acrobat in the act. He loved showing off his skills, and we loved appreciating it.



However scruffy and small office canteens are, they are lifesavers, especially in areas with fewer restaurant options, as opposed to downtown districts, where restaurateurs have set



PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

up eating houses that are famous for their speciality all over the town.

The officegoers of this busy city chaff out their office lunch plans according to their preferences – options included home-cooked meals, restaurant food, or canteen food – or skipping it altogether. The subsidized office canteens, serving anywhere from 100 to 500 people, in big and small offices, come to the rescue for most. Many canteens take a monthly fee for a mid-morning snack, lunch, and seasonal fruit; others have a pay-first option for an array of choices. Offices have canteens under their administration wing to monitor and maintain quality and hygiene while preparing the meals. They hire professional cooks and chefs for their canteens.

The tea room on each floor is fun to watch though, with a motley collection of mugs and cups with funny and interesting quotes on them, and of course, their favourite tea and coffee blends. The smell of brewing coffee or tea is stimulating. Fancy additions are a French press, but the majority go for office coffee machines and stick to their preferred order of double latte or double tea bag milk tea.

While canteens serve lunch and mid-afternoon snacks in most Dhaka offices, it is the newspaper canteens that work till midnight. Thus, their snack menu is as diverse as the front page. Let's begin with the ever so-delicious egg paratha roll, the potato and vegetable croquette, puffed up aloo puri with tamarind chutney, fried chicken, and the absolute

favourite "loodles" (noodles) with slit green chili as a substitute for veggies. Special lunches of ilish polao, beef tehari, steamed bhetki in tomato puree, and the vegetable labra are to die for.

Imagine this scrumptious meal for a subsidised bill.

However, you cannot afford outside food every day, it's detrimental not only to your health, but your wallet as well. But many officegoers refuse to carry packed lunches; and having canteen food day in and day out can be taxing on your digestive health, especially when the leafy greens turn into an utter black, tasteless dread or when the fish smells, well fishy! And the beef is swimming in oil and some sort of black masala paste.

Then again, good and bad office canteens are still beloved. The long hours of hot political debates, the rantings about social attitude changes and personal woes over cups and cups of bad tea and fried food; lunches and tea breaks are the most favourite part of our working hours.

Needless to say, the canteens and tea rooms are owned by you. There is always a game on the television, and colleagues gather around it to cheer for their team. During football matches, even the canteen staffers put on their favourite jerseys and lay bets with the office people. There is a beautiful comradery. It is the only place in the office where you get to see people from all departments, hear their stories, share your meals, and sit with friends.

Hasina made accused in 3 more cases

Three ex-ministers also sued

STAR REPORT

Former prime minister Sheikh Hasina has been sued over three deaths and the partial loss of vision of a victim during the student-led mass uprising.

Former road transport and bridges minister and Awami League General Secretary Obaidul Quader is AL chief Hasina's co-accused in two murder cases filed in Kishoreganj and Munshiganj yesterday over the three deaths.

Hasina is now facing at least 84 cases – 70 on murder charges, eight on allegations of crimes against humanity and genocide, three for alleged abduction, and three on other charges.

In Kishoreganj, BNP activist Mafiur Rahman filed the case over the killings of two fellow party workers on August 4, said Sadar Model Police Station OC Md Golam Mostafa.

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'MURDER ATTEMPT' Bashundhara Group chairman, MD sued

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

A case has been filed against Bashundhara Group Chairman Ahmed Akbar Sobhan and Managing Director Sayem Sobhan Anvir on charges of attempted murder in Bogura during the student-led mass uprising.

The principal accused of the case is Abdul Kahar Akand, a former additional DIG of police who had investigated several high-profile cases such as the Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman murder case and the 2004 grenade attack case.

Akand had received the Awami League's nomination to contest in the last general election from Kishoreganj-2 but lost.

The other accused include the then MP Mohiddin Ahmed, Shibganj Upazila UNO, the local

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How UCB's Ronny acquired so much offshore assets

FROM PAGE 1 Westmark Tower in Central London, documents show.

Despite being a company specialising in "the buying and selling of real estate," Bitcom never purchased any other property as of 2024, with its tangible assets now valued at £1.8 million, company registration documents show.

The couple incorporated another UK firm, Ronny 42 Ltd, in August 2019. A hundred pounds was all the company was worth until it bought a £9.1 million property in the luxurious 17 Park Crescent in central London on October 1, 2020. Like Bitcom, Ronny 42 Ltd has not purchased any other property.

Similarly, AA Mandarin Ltd was formed with only £100 and had no income, but by July 2023, the company acquired a £2.8 million apartment on the sixth floor of the 5-star London hotel Mandarin Oriental Mayfair, lease documents show.

In addition to a string of homes in the UK, Ronny and Imrana list one property in Dubai's luxurious Palm Jumeirah, the upmarket fan-shaped artificial island off the Persian Gulf. The property address mentioned in lease documents leads straight to a flat in Dubai The Palm, which is described on its website as "one of the most exquisite hotels on The Palm, Dubai".

Neither the Ronny-Imrana couple nor ex-minister Javed appear to have any other viable businesses in the UK that could have been used to generate income. There is also no record that they took permission from Bangladesh Bank to move money abroad, which is mandatory. So, how did they acquire so much wealth in the UK?

British company registration documents state that Ronny and Imrana hold golden passports of Antigua and Barbuda, a Caribbean tax haven for the world's wealthy. It offers the golden passports for a \$230,000 donation to the National Development Fund or the purchase of real estate worth at least \$300,000.

In a 2020 interview

with Edgeprop Singapore, finance broker Masood Rashid described how one of his clients bought a property with a mortgage and used the steep interest earnings of the offshore cash deposit to pay the mortgage, and "still make a profit". He did not give any name.

"It's called arbitrage," Rashid, co-founder of Opes Financial Partners, explained and added that his specialisation is in "politically exposed person". The broker had arranged a £12 million property in London for Javed, The Daily Star was able to track via property documents and an announcement on LinkedIn by the broker.

Asked how he got the financing for his properties in the UK and how he was paying the multiple mortgages, Ronny said he obtained the mortgages as a UK citizen through "proper due diligence" in line with the country's law.

"I have been doing various business in the UK since 2001. I am able to service mortgages from these businesses," he said in a written response.

He also said his father, late Awami League leader Akhtaruzzaman Chowdhury Babu who once took over the UCB bank at gunpoint, had businesses in the UK since 1965. "As one of his successors, I have inherited some of them. From where I was able to put down the down payment," Ronny said.

MILKING UCB
Javed entered the British real estate sector a year after the Awami League returned to power in 2009, and his wealth accumulation there shot up after he became a member of Sheikh Hasina's 2019-2024 cabinet, company documents show.

He raised the number of his companies fourfold to eight in just three years. Ronny followed in his brother's footsteps, opening his first company in the UK in 2019 and expanding his and his wife's business to five firms.

This meteoric rise in offshore wealth came at a time when the political clout of Javed, and by association Ronny's, consolidated back home. It was apparent on the board

of UCB, where the family and their representatives had 10 out of 14 director's posts until mid-2024 and eight until the restructuring of the board by the central bank last Tuesday.

The Bangladesh Financial Intelligence Unit (BFIU) had earlier frozen the accounts of Javed and his wife Rukhmila after the fall of the Awami League government on August 5, but Ronny and Imrana have remained untouched.

Rukhmila was the chairperson of UCB's board of directors. After the BFIU had frozen both her assets and accounts, Javed's sister Roxana Zaman Choudhury was made the chairperson. Their siblings Ronny, Asifuzzaman Chowdhury, and Afroza Zaman were directors. Four other directors were their employees, either from Javed and Ronny's main family business, Aramit Group, or Ronny's business, Navana Pharmaceuticals, or companies opened by their children and business partners.

Highly placed sources inside UCB said that Javed used to sit in on the bank's board meetings although he was not a part of the bank in any way since he became a minister. With a board more like a family get-together, disguised and related party loans got easy approval.

After the BFIU's measure, 36 employees of UCB in a letter to the central bank accused Javed and Ronny of benefiting from disguised loans.

For example, Aramit's Officer Mohammed Forman Ullah Chowdhury, whose starting salary in 2017 was Tk 20,000, received a Tk 25 crore loan as the proprietor of Chattogram-based M/S Vision Trading in March 2020.

Mohammed Adnan Imam, a UK real estate businessman and director of NRBC Bank, secured UCB capital facilities worth at least Tk 1,516 crore for six companies owned by or directly connected to him, one nested in another, paper trail shows.

Of these companies, Adnan's AWR Developments (BD) Ltd and AWR Real Estate Ltd

were given Tk 617 crore by the bank, Genex Infosys Tk 426 crore, Bangla-UK Agro Products Ltd Tk 302 crore, Fulpur Agro City Tk 51 crore, and TSN Trade & Infrastructure Development Ltd Tk 120 crore, bank documents show.

Asked whether these were related party loans, Ronny said these were not related as they were public limited companies.

Sovereign Financing Ltd, one of the five companies owned by Ronny or his wife in the UK, was co-founded by Adnan in 2022. The company is completely dormant now.

Contacted, Adnan denied having any active business relationship with Ronny and receiving the related party loans.

However, Gilbert Street Estates Ltd, one of Ronny's five firms in the UK, is co-owned by Adnan's wives. The real estate company worth £10.52 million, or over Tk 165 crore, has a property on Gilbert Street in Mayfair, London, according to lease documents. One of Adnan's real estate companies and all of Ronny's UK companies are housed in that property, the documents show.

Sharif Abdullah, a former UCB vice-president who left the bank in October 2023, described how he was made to disburse large loans to companies not worth their salt, and how the funds were likely siphoned off.

"As a banker, we have to find out the actual beneficial owner of the account. For example, if a police officer's homemaker mother-in-law opens an account with Tk 10 crore with no supporting documents, it is pretty certain that the beneficial owner of the account is the police officer. It is as simple as that," said Sharif. "The siphoning of funds from loans was primarily executed through working capital facilities, such as time loans and overdrafts, rather than term loans."

Sharif said he was compelled to approve Tk 450 crore "unethical loans" benefiting Javed and Ronny for an agro farm which had a total valuation of Tk 7 crore at best. He also admitted to disbursing Tk 100 crore loans to a construction firm with fake work orders.

He said he had visited

a steel company with the capital machinery so worn out that they could be sold only as scrap. "Yet the capital machinery was valued at Tk 400 crore. Another company was seeking to acquire that firm, and we asked for Tk 300 crore on their behalf – we got Tk 250 crore. My refusal to approve this loan led to severe threats and intimidation," alleged Sharif, who now lives in Australia. "I faced unbelievably high pressure from the management to provide these clients with loans they are not fit for."

POLITICAL INFLUENCE
The sheer abuse of political privilege to bend the rules was clear as the day to regular employees of UCB. At least two sets of photos posted by his followers showed Javed holding political meetings inside the bank despite not being a part of it. The latest photos were from July 15, 2024.

Bank insiders identified the conference room where the meeting was held in a room right beside the boardroom at their Gulshan office.

"Normal employees are not allowed inside that space," said an employee of the bank, requesting anonymity.

Ronny used to drive around in a car with a flag stand, according to multiple photos, indicating his willingness to abuse the political privilege afforded to his brother.

The Daily Star confirmed that it was Ronny's car – a Bentley Flying Spur Hybrid.

A flag stand is only allowed for the senior most members of the government and the state, including the president, the prime minister, the Speaker and deputy Speaker, the chief justice, the chief whip, cabinet ministers and the leader of the official opposition. A member of the general public, even if he or she is a business magnate, is not allowed to use a flag stand.

Asked if he used a flag stand in his car, Ronny said: "As my brother was a land minister, once in a while we used to travel together, for which I had to keep the stand."

Where are our loved ones?

FROM PAGE 1

Twenty-two family members spoke at the human chain. Rights activists, politicians and lawyers expressed solidarity and demanded justice. Many held photographs of their missing loved ones.

Rina Alam, whose husband Noor Alam has been missing for more than nine years, said, "I want my husband back. If he is dead, I want to know for sure. I appeal to the chief adviser to do something to bring him back."

"Please tell us something; we can't go on waiting like this. Return my husband so that my children can call him baba."

Mikeel Changma, a leader of a regional group based in the hill tracts, who was released this month from detention after over five years, said, "I urge all writers, poets, intellectuals, and students to support our struggle."

"If we cannot ensure the punishment of Hasina and those involved [in running secret prisons] right now, this system will continue to exist," he added.

Supreme Court Lawyer Sara Hossain said, "Our higher courts remained silent on this issue. We have seen no intervention from the courts about this matter."

Sadika Sarkar Safa, aged less than 11, was holding a photo of her father Mahfuzur Rahman Sohel who went missing 10 years ago.

"I want my father back. This is my only request to the new government," she said.

Maruf Zaman, a former diplomat, who was in detention for over a year, described the harrowing details of the conditions at DGI Joint Interrogation Cell. "Hundreds of people have used fish bones to cut their hands and write their names and phone numbers with blood inside the rooms. There are hundreds of names inside each cell. Where are they?" he asked.

Mayer Daak coordinator Sanjida Islam Tulee demanded that the detained persons be released and information about them be made public.

Mayer Daak organised a photo exhibition and discussion at the National Museum yesterday evening.

Environment Adviser Rizwana Hasan said the interim government was genuinely willing to find every disappeared individual.

"We are not part of the government responsible for these enforced disappearances. We want to stand beside the families that endured grief and ensure that the perpetrators behind face justice," she said.

Supreme Court lawyer Jyotirmoy Barua said the previous government's actions made it evident that it was behind these disappearances. The previous administration repeatedly gave the excuse that there was no law to try those involved in enforced disappearance.

"We need a specific law. The president has the authority to pass laws through ordinances, which can later be approved by the elected government..." A special tribunal could define how this law should be formulated. Alternatively, the government could amend sections 363 and 364 of the CrPc to facilitate investigations into these cases," he said.

"Since Bangladesh is now a signatory [to the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance], the National Human Rights Commission can now independently investigate these cases. In addition, our commission [on enforced disappearance] can also investigate. Reports from both commissions can be sent to the International Criminal Court, because these are instances of crimes against humanity."

Fisheries ministry Adviser Farida Akhter spoke.

are no banking laws in the country that recognise depositors as owners," he said.

Titumir said the interest of depositors and small and medium enterprises, who are the backbone of the economy, must be reflected in the upcoming reforms in the banking sector for sustainable development.

He said there is no actual data on the exact amount of bad loans because no forensic audit was conducted.

Mamun Rashid, chairman of Financial Excellence Ltd, said the BB has calculated the bad loans amounting to Tk 1.82 lakh crore, but it has given an estimate of Tk 3.77 lakh crore as sourced loans to the International Monetary Fund.

The amount is about 20 percent of the total disbursed loans of the banks. The exact amount is likely to be much higher, he added.

About the money laundered out of Bangladesh, Mamun said there was information that "large sums were borrowed from banks in the morning, and the money sent abroad through hundi in the afternoon."

S Alam took over six banks, he said. But the banking rules state that more than 10 percent of a bank's shares cannot be given to any person or entity. It was irresponsible on the part of the central bank.

S Alam's ownership share in Islami Bank is about Tk 1,800 crore. As a single beneficiary, S Alam Group withdrew about Tk 50,000 crore from the bank when the bank had deposits of Tk 160,000 crore.

"Now the question from all quarters is, how did S Alam come into picture? Islami Bank's managing director and board members were taken to a five-star hotel where they were forced to resign and a new managing director was appointed overnight at supersonic speed. This was the S Alam method of becoming the owner of one bank after another."

Badiul Alam Majumdar, secretary of Shushashoner Jonno Nagorik (Shujan), said corruption in banking and other sectors is rooted in the petty politics of the country.

"To get out of this situation, reforms are needed in the political culture first," he added.

Mizanur Rahman, economist, columnist and an adjunct professor of Manarat International University, also spoke at the event moderated by journalist Monir Haider.