

Maulana Saad loyalists to hold gathering in city on December 7

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The Tablighi Jamaat faction loyal to Maulana Mohammed Saad yesterday announced that they would hold a large gathering on December 7.

Before the announcement, thousands of followers of the faction assembled at the capital's Kakrail Mosque and its adjacent areas as per its scheduled programme.

As they started to throng the area since morning, with many coming from outside Dhaka, additional police personnel were deployed there to avert any untoward situation. They attended a brief sermon followed by Juma prayers.

From the sermon, some instructions were also given to the followers, they added.

Witnesses said the gathering extended from Kakrail intersection to Matsya Bhaban intersection.

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Followers of the Tablighi Jamaat faction loyal to Maulana Mohammed Saad Kandhalvi gather in and around the Kakrail Mosque in the capital yesterday as per its scheduled programme. The photo was taken before the Juma prayers.

PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

Robbers stab 82-year-old to death at Dhaka home

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around 2:30am on the first floor of a six-storey building in Dhanmondi-15. The area falls under Hazaribagh Police Station.

Mohammad Saiful Islam, officer-in-charge of Hazaribagh Police Station, told The Daily Star, "The apartment had a large balcony without any grills for protection. Rashid was offering [Tahajjut] prayers inside his room with the balcony door open, and through which a group of armed robbers broke into the house in the middle of the night.

"As they tried to snatch a gold chain, Rashid tried to stop them, resulting in the criminals stabbing him."

The police said CCTV footage showed there were at least three robbers.

"We are investigating

the incident and trying to arrest the attackers."

The other tenants of the building found Rashid critically injured and took him to Dhaka Medical College Hospital, where doctors declared him dead around 3:45am, said Inspector Md Faruk, in charge of the police outpost at the hospital.

Saidur Rahman Badhan, one of the tenants, said he woke up to loud cries during the night, and upon reaching Rashid's room, he found the house owner lying unconscious in a pool of blood while his wife was helplessly trying to get a response from his motionless body.

The couple used to visit the country in September and depart for the UK in December every year, he said.

Cybergangs breaking into NBR server at will

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phone. Ideally, the server cannot be accessed without that OTP, a crucial part of the system's multi-factor authentication to defend against security threats.

But Zakaria did not receive any OTP during the period, according to NBR's system-generated OTP report obtained by The Daily Star.

But consider this: the ASYCUDA user ID and password are device specific and IP-specific, meaning even the authorised users cannot access the system from any other device or using any other IP (internet protocol). In this case, Zakaria's account was taken over from Bhandaria upazila of Pirojpur district using a different device and a different IP, device tracking record shows.

Customs officials eventually halted the release of the illegal cigarettes imported in the name of battery company Hamko, but the security breach has raised alarm among customs and NBR officials.

They described it as a "serious national security threat" because such unauthorised access at will means anyone is able to import or export any types and numbers of goods evading the customs process.

On October 22, NBR authorities formed a seven-member committee to get to the bottom of the intrusion.

In its written response to the customs investigators, Hamko denied any involvement with the import. It said someone must have used the company's name to bring in the shipment.

The Daily Star could not contact the company for comment.

Mohammad Azhar Uddin, founder of TICON System Limited that specialises in IT security, said when a server can be accessed through an unauthorised IP, it is obvious that the server is compromised.

"The system not generating OTPs at a particular time primarily indicates involvement of insiders. But what actually happened or is happening in this case cannot be determined unless the server is audited. Servers usually leave a footprint of all activities. The sooner it is audited, the easier it will be to track down any suspicious activities," he told The Daily Star.

Customs' primary investigation, led by Chattogram Custom House Commissioner Mohammad Faizur Rahman, has established involvement of four people, including the prime suspect who penetrated the NBR server from Bhandaria using mobile internet.

The man is Sheikh Shezan, 23, from Narail district. He has been arrested several times in the last few years over alleged theft of public data from government servers, including the NID server and land ministry web portal. Every time, he came out of prison on bail within months.

He could not be reached for comment as all the 10

mobile numbers registered with his NID were found switched off.

When he penetrated the NBR server from Bhandaria using Zakaria's ID and password, he used mobile internet of a private operator.

The Daily Star is not naming the operator because it has no part in the intrusion, but the operator confirmed to the customs authorities that the specific phone number used at the time was registered under Shezan's name and NID number. This newspaper has the confirmation letter.

NOT AN ISOLATED INCIDENT

Data from Chattogram Customs House and Customs Intelligence show cybercriminals breached the NBR server to release at least 48 imported consignments and showed fake exports to launder money through at least 3,000 consignments from January 2019 to September 2024.

The import value of the 48 consignments was only Tk 9.58 crore. Of the 48 shipments, 12 were seized

consignments carried cigarette and liquor worth Tk 124 crore (nearly 100 times), documents show.

The declared value of the export items was Tk 1,218 crore, none of which entered Bangladesh, customs data show.

The Daily Star has seen 21 probe reports in relation to these security breaches. None of the investigations was able to track down the gang.

However, those investigations found that the gangs used IDs and passwords of at least 27 customs officials to complete the import and

Port, and the gang managed to smuggle it out of the port on June 2 before the port authorities could intercept it. As a result, the content in that container could not be known, the customs investigation report said.

Customs documents show the consignment was imported in the name of Inox Industries, located in Mongla EPZ.

In its written response to the customs authorities, Inox Industries denied any involvement, and said they may have been a victim of identity theft. We could not contact the company for comment.

The other shipment, containing nearly 12 lakh litres of liquor worth about Tk 14 crore, was intercepted by customs officials on September 4.

In this case, the gang entered Sonia's office room late at night on January 14 and accessed the server from her computer three times from 2:06am to 2:17am and one more time at 9:14pm. She was not in the office in those hours and she did not receive

illicit goods," Anisur Rahman Sinha, managing director of Supreme Smart Wear Ltd, told The Daily Star.

'THE SYSTEM HAS FLAWS'

Several IT officials at the Custom House said the system has been designed in such a way that no one can access the server from unassigned devices and IPs, which are tied to each other. Also, no one is able to access the system without the auto-generated OTPs.

"Sadly, what we see here is that these security layers get relaxed at certain hours when the cybergang needs it," said an IT official, who spoke on condition of anonymity citing ongoing investigations.

NBR Programmer Golam Sarwar controls the server and generates user IDs for all officials. He also determines the access limit according to the position of the officials.

He declined to comment about how someone could access the server from unassigned devices and why the system stopped sending OTPs at some particular hours.

A senior customs official said they detected many instances of unauthorised access and security breach of the server in the past as well, but this is for the first time they have been able to gather evidence against at least four people, including Shezan.

This is also for the first time that customs officials have detected intrusion of the ASYCUDA with a device and an IP that have not been officially authorised.

"However, we still do not know the ultimate beneficiaries of these shipments," the official said. Developed by the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), ASYCUDA is a customs management system and is now used in nearly 100 countries, mostly in Africa and Asia. The system is meant to help governments improve supply chain efficiency, reduce corruption, and increase public revenues.

Bangladesh started using the system in 1994 to manage import-export operations through online on a small scale. In 2013, it was launched in all custom houses in the country.

The two-layer security system was introduced in 2022 to make sure the system is protected against security threats.

Contacted, NBR Member (customs policy) Hossain Ahmed said, "Before 2022, there was no option for OTP and no specific IPs for specific devices. We then added these two layers. Cybergangs still being able to penetrate the server bypassing the security layers indicates that the system has flaws that are unknown to us," he said.

"We invested around Tk 300 crore to secure our server in the last few years, but our import-export data remain still insecure. The new NBR chairman has taken the matter seriously and instructed us to identify the real culprits even if they are our officials."

any OTPs at the time, the customs investigation has found.

"Those in charge of security of the building at that time can tell who entered my office in those hours and used my computer," Sonia told The Daily Star.

The container came from China in the name of Supreme Smart Wear Ltd, a garment exporter, in the guise of fabrics.

The company denied any involvement with the import, and said some gangs may have used its name.

"I'm not sure how the products were imported under the name of my company, which was not even in operation at the time. I believe some NBR officials are a part of the cybergang and they release

\$1.1b loan likely by December

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Initially, the ADB had intended to offer this loan to support Bangladesh's preparations for graduation from the Least Developed Country category.

However, the interim government is considering delaying the graduation from LDC by a few more years, Finance Adviser Salehuddin Ahmed indicated a few days back.

On November 11, Salehuddin told journalists that Bangladesh might require additional time to finalise its decision on the 2026 LDC graduation target.

So, the ADB is now providing the loan under the new programme to support the interim government's reform initiatives.

According to the finance ministry officials, the government must fulfil several reform conditions under this loan programme.

The conditions mostly focus on fiscal management and enhanced revenue mobilisation.

Among the conditions, the government has to strengthen tax compliance and reform the VAT system, mostly through automation.

Different measures must also be taken to increase non-tax revenue.

Other conditions include making the existing e-TDS (Electronic Tax Deducted at Source) system more effective, regularly evaluating the performance of state-owned enterprises, and taking steps to improve the services provided by the Bangladesh Investment Development Authority.

The World Bank is

providing the budget support under the Second Green and Climate Resilient Development Credit programme.

This loan is being provided in three phases, with the first phase disbursed in March last year.

The programme includes several climate-related conditions, many of which, according to the finance ministry officials, have already been fulfilled.

Development partners, including the World Bank, consider Bangladesh highly vulnerable to the adverse impacts of climate change.

To mitigate climate risks, the World Bank has imposed several conditions, such as increasing specific budget allocations to address climate-related risks.

According to a 2023 World Bank report, Bangladesh's climate-related budget allocation is only 7.5 percent of the total national outlay.

Besides increasing this allocation, as per a condition under the loan programme, Bangladesh will need to ensure proper utilisation and monitoring of the funds to check that they are used appropriately.

The WB report also thinks that environmental pollution and the depletion of natural resources in Bangladesh are largely the results of poor environmental governance.

To address these issues, the World Bank has imposed conditions to mitigate adverse impacts on the environment by implementing strict regulatory measures.

The interim government, which inherited high inflation and dwindling

foreign currency reserves upon taking power, sought budget support from multilateral and bilateral development partners to stabilise the economy and bolster the dollar reserves.

Traditionally, development partners provide project-based loans, which are disbursed in phases contingent on project implementation progress.

In contrast, budget support loans are programme-based and conditional, disbursed immediately after approval, which relieves pressure from the foreign currency reserves.

Thomas Helbling, deputy director for the Asia Pacific Department of the IMF, was recently asked whether it is right for the interim government to seek budgetary support from development partners and what effects it may have on the economy.

Economic unrest and subsequent disruptions also caused disruptions on the balance of payments side, particularly for external financing, he said at a press conference in Tokyo on November 1.

"So, the budget loans provide some breathing space. They also provide the interim government with an opportunity to formulate policy reforms and gain time."

A top official of the Bangladesh Bank said they were taking the government's move to seek budget support as a positive one.

He hoped that they would get more budget support from different development partners in the coming months of the current fiscal year.

Businesses should be allowed

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the economic zone was a wrong plan because it is not very useful at present and is a burden for the country.

"If a project does not work after implementation, then it cannot be called development - rather, it is a waste of money. Taking up development projects only for the name and fame will not benefit the people or contribute to economic development."

The interim government should listen to the people by talking to every stakeholder so they can understand the needs and take action accordingly.

"In our country, no government involves the people in public hearings or decision-making. As a result, the governments do not understand the needs of the people. We should learn from the mistakes of the past and prioritise the future."

During the last government's tenure, a one-stop service was introduced to facilitate business.

"But it is not really of any use - it just exists only on paper."

Haque said he had to pay a bribe of Tk 5 to 15 lakh every year to the chairman of Narayanjanj Union Parishad to renew a trade licence.

"How can I do business easily? In no place that I have set up factories have I found a gentleman who has helped investors to do business safely?"

No government has simplified business-related documents including trade licence renewal.

"This government is not doing it and I don't know if any government will do it in the future."

During the tenure of the previous government, the development trend was shown on paper.

"But in reality, things did not improve much. The concerned officials had prepared those statistics on the instructions of the government. That is why even though the economy has shown growth, the number of educated unemployed has increased because there has been no real growth."

If there were real growth and sustainable development, then there would be no educated

unemployment in the country, he said.

"Banks and other institutions have not experienced such a difficult situation as they are going through right now in 53 years of Bangladesh's history."

Three years ago, the interest rate was 9 percent; now it has reached 15 to 16 percent in real terms.

"So how is it really possible to make a profit by investing with such high-interest loans?"

Exemplary punishment should be given to those who took loans from banks in the name of business and smuggled money abroad without doing business.

"Then loan defaults will decrease and the possibility of money laundering will decrease."

If the businessmen want to do business, they may default on loans for the time being due to natural calamities, political unrest or any financially uneven change in geopolitics.

"It has to be seen whether they have defaulted on their debts or have defaulted on their own volition and trafficked the country's money abroad."

Device tracking record of the server penetration from Bhandaria upazila, in Barishal division. The IP belongs to a private telecom operator, and is designated to Shezan.

and their declared value was Tk 1.26 crore. But upon inspections, customs officials found that the



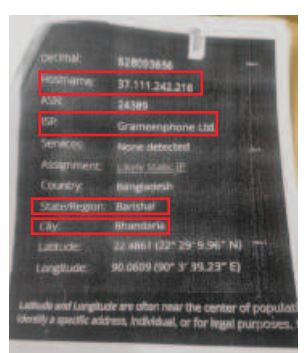
Shezan

Sl	User ID	User Fullname	Log In Time	Log Out Time	IP Address
47	mohammad.zakaria	MOHAMMAD ZAKARIA	5/5/2024 3:45	5/5/2024 3:48	114.130.186.92
48	mohammad.zakaria	MOHAMMAD ZAKARIA	5/5/2024 3:14	5/5/2024 3:36	114.130.186.92
49	mohammad.zakaria	MOHAMMAD ZAKARIA	5/5/2024 2:40	5/5/2024 2:51	114.130.186.92
50	mohammad.zakaria	MOHAMMAD ZAKARIA	5/5/2024 2:07	5/5/2024 2:08	114.130.186.92
51	mohammad.zakaria	MOHAMMAD ZAKARIA	1/5/2024 8:57	1/5/2024 9:11	37.111.194.106
52	mohammad.zakaria	MOHAMMAD ZAKARIA	1/5/2024 8:54	1/5/2024 8:57	37.111.194.106
53	mohammad.zakaria	MOHAMMAD ZAKARIA	21/05/2024 00:00	21/05/2024 00:18	37.111.242.216
54	mohammad.zakaria	MOHAMMAD ZAKARIA	20/05/2024 23:33	20/05/2024 23:55	37.111.242.216

Shezan accessed the NBR server using Zakaria's ID on the night of May 20, when Zakaria was in India for treatment. The last IP ending with 216 does not belong to any NBR-authorized device assigned to Zakaria.

Mobile	Message	Status	Type	Operator	Activity On
01716625482	Dear mohammad.zakaria, your OTP is 71760 for ASYCUDA. It expires in 5 minutes. Do not share it with anyone	Sent	NBR-OTP	grameenphone	2024-05-21 14:51:40
01716625482	Dear mohammad.zakaria, your OTP is H13JOB for ASYCUDA. It expires in 5 minutes. Do not share it with anyone	Sent	NBR-OTP	grameenphone	2024-05-21 11:34:27
01716625482	Dear mohammad.zakaria, your OTP is QD813Z for ASYCUDA. It expires in 5 minutes. Do not share it with anyone	Sent	NBR-OTP	grameenphone	2024-05-20 13:08:32
01716625482	Dear mohammad.zakaria, your OTP is I602R for ASYCUDA. It expires in 5 minutes. Do not share it with anyone	Sent	NBR-OTP	grameenphone	2024-05-20 12:56:59
01716625482	Dear mohammad.zakaria, your OTP is GCJA1W for ASYCUDA. It expires in 5 minutes. Do not share it with anyone	Sent	NBR-OTP	grameenphone	2024-05-20 12:06:55
01716625482	Dear mohammad.zakaria, your OTP is 2YQ6FE for ASYCUDA. It expires in 5 minutes. Do not share it with anyone	Sent	NBR-OTP	grameenphone	2024-05-19 13:23:25

The NBR server did not generate any OTP in those hours as seen in this system-generated OTP records from NBR.



export process. In some cases, security credentials of transferred, retired or even dead officials were used to access server known as ASYCUDA World System.

These are unrelated to the May 20 penetration by Shezan.

AN ORGANISED GANG

Between January and May this year, cyber criminals penetrated the NBR server at least 114 times using the IDs and passwords of Zakaria and Sonia Sarkar Liza, a revenue officer of Chattogram Custom House, to complete customs procedures for the release of two separate shipments.

Not all of these are linked to Shezan but, again, neither Zakaria nor Sonia received any OTPs in any of these 114 cases.

One of these shipments had arrived in Chattogram