

SALUTING THE BRAVEHEARTS
36 days of JULY

PHOTO EXHIBITION
DECEMBER 1–7, 2024
Time: 10:00 AM–8:00 PM
Venue: The Daily Star Centre

STORYTELLING WEEK
Time: 3:00 PM–4:30 PM

MARGINALISED VOICES OF JULY REVOLUTION
Stories of struggle, sacrifice and hope from workers
THURSDAY, DECEMBER 5

WRITE TO PROTEST
Writers and poets on their experience
SATURDAY, DECEMBER 7



Unity among journos played crucial role

FROM PAGE 1
potential dangers, which showed a collective resilience and helped us navigate the situation.”

Qadaruddin Shishir, Fact Check editor at AFP, explained the difficulties in verifying information during the unrest and blackout.

“It wasn’t easy to determine the exact death toll. We contacted hospitals, on-duty doctors, and authorities, but after a few days, they stopped sharing data.”

Shishir also accused the then-government of attempting to downplay casualties. “They couldn’t entirely suppress the numbers, as we were able to present the real data through our own investigative processes.”

He also described how AFP’s office became a hub for local journalists during the blackout.

“We had alternative internet access, so reporters from other outlets came to our office to use our facilities. We even designated computers for them to send or publish stories.”

Shishir further said there was a surge of disinformation once the internet was restored. “The government circulated videos and images claiming Jamaat Shibir activists were attacking students, but in reality, they were old videos of attacks by pro-government groups. We debunked at least 50 such videos.”

Shamima Sultana, senior reporter at Channel 24, recounted how journalists adapted to the blackout. “We returned to old-school reporting – calling protesters for comments and

agencies. Despite these challenges, we found any and every alternative way to get the news out.”

Asked during the question-answer session about the trauma faced by



PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

Journalists and activists attend the fourth session -- “The Blackout Chronicles” – of The Daily Star’s storytelling week titled “36 Days of July: Saluting the Bravehearts” at The Daily Star Centre in the capital yesterday.

relying on text messages when calls failed.

“As broadcasting was disrupted due to internet blackout, we depended on cable connections, which were frequently cut by government

journalists, she said, “I was brutally beaten by a mob at Shahbagh the day before Hasina fled. That incident still haunts me. The trauma is still fresh.”

Saim Bin Mujib, multimedia journalist at The Daily Star, said,

Fundamental rights, religious freedom need to be respected

US state dept says about Bangladesh

STAR REPORT

The US has stressed the need for respect for religious and other fundamental freedoms, and basic human rights in Bangladesh amid alleged attacks on minorities.

“We are clear that there needs to be the respect of fundamental freedoms; there needs to be respect of religious freedom and basic human rights,” State Department Deputy Spokesperson Vedant Patel said while answering questions related to Bangladesh during a regular press briefing on Tuesday.

Two British MPs recently urged the UK government to engage with the Bangladesh government about the alleged violence against minorities. A journalist drew Patel’s attention to the issue and asked if the US would address this concern through diplomatic and policy measurement.

“So we are consistent with every government in which we have a relationship with ... Any kind of protests should be and need to be peaceful, and that any kind of crackdown – not even crackdown – that governments need to respect the rule of law, they need to respect basic human rights as part of that. And that’s something we’ll continue to emphasize,” Patel said.

Asked if the US would take steps regarding the arrest of former ISKCON leader Chinmoy Krishna Das Brahmachari in Bangladesh, Patel said he did not have the details surrounding that case.

“But again, we continue to stress and emphasize that even those who are in detention need to be afforded appropriate representation and need to be treated with basic fundamental freedoms and human rights,” he added.

US Congressman Brad Sherman on Tuesday also urged the interim government of Bangladesh to “demonstrate leadership” in stopping alleged violence against minorities.

“Bangladesh’s interim government has an absolute obligation to protect its Hindu minority and meaningfully address the protests of thousands of minority Hindus in outcry over the recent wave of attacks and harassment,” Sherman said in a statement.

“With the calls for an investigation from the Bangladesh Hindu Buddhist Christian Unity Council and the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Türk for killings and other rights violations during the violent unrest leading up to and after the fall of Bangladesh’s former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, the current administration must demonstrate leadership in eliminating acts of violence against the Hindu community,” he added.

Zahir: A lawyer who terrorised Habiganj

FROM PAGE 1

seat in the 2008 election. He was re-elected in 2014, 2018 and 2024, and became the president of the district Awami League in 2013.

According to the affidavit he submitted before the 2008 polls, his family’s total assets amounted to around Tk 83.4 lakh, including about Tk 73.7 lakh in properties owned by him and Tk 9.7 lakh by his wife Aleya Akhter. Their son Ifat Jamil had no property at that time. After 15 years, Zahir owns a six-storey house, multiple luxury cars, and over 600 bhoori of gold. The family’s total assets have increased to more than Tk 6.6 crore, according to the affidavit submitted before the 2024 polls. His income and assets have grown ninefold, while his wife’s income and assets have increased by 26.5 times, totalling Tk 2.52 crore. Their son now has assets worth Tk 2.5 crore.

The Anti-Corruption Commission has recently launched an investigation into allegations that Zahir amassed illegal wealth through the abuse of power. Early findings have revealed significant financial assets linked to him and his family, according to sources. Advocate Trilok Kanti Chowdhury Bijan, president of Susasoner Jonno Nagorik (Sujan) Habiganj unit, alleged that politicians like Zahir developed an inflated sense of invulnerability, leading them to terrorise the people over the years.

LAND GRABBING

Zahir constructed an opulent six-storey mansion estimated to be valued at several crores of taka. Allegations have surfaced that he encroached on both government and private properties, including a piece of land of the Habiganj High School and College quarters. His wife reportedly owns a significant portion of the land behind the educational institution, which includes a pond with an 18-decimal area.

Locals said Zahir also purchased 200 decimals of government land worth Tk 100 crore in the court area for his family members. They also alleged Zahir unethically used government plans for land acquisition to make millions of taka. Many were forced to sell their land to Zahir, who then sold it to the government for establishing Balla land port at four times the market price.

In 2012, Zahir was allocated two plots, 31 decimals each, in the BSCIC Industrial Estate of Habiganj, registered in his son, daughter, and younger brother’s names. One of these plots is listed under the name of Mukti Textile, with Zakaria Chowdhury and Zahir’s daughter Arifa Akter Mukti serving as managing partners.

Despite being allocated over a decade ago, these two industrial plots have remained undeveloped and vacant, which indicates Zahir might have planned to sell the land at higher prices. Bangladesh Small and Cottage Industries Corporation (BSCIC), the managing authority, however, took no action to cancel the allotments. BSCIC Chairman Ashraf Uddin Ahmed Khan, who has recently taken charge, said they would investigate the issue and take necessary steps.

Outside the BSCIC Industrial Estate, Zahir influences areas with over 50 factories in Shayestaganj and Madhabpur. Officials of these factories, who wished to remain anonymous, alleged they had to pay Zahir large sums as “commission” for land transactions. Thousands of workers operate in these industrial zones without trade unions, relying on Zahir for the settlement of various issues, allowing him to extract further “commissions.”

In addition to the industrial plot controversy, Zahir faces allegations of grabbing residential land. Locals alleged Zahir filled in a pond, which belonged to a Hindu family, next to Town Hall Road and built a five-storey house there, which he later sold. Zahir allegedly took advantage of a dispute between three brothers over the ownership of a three-storey house located on four decimals of land next to his property. The brothers – Farid Mia, Khwaja Mia, and Nizam Uddin – were migrants working in the Middle East. They were forced to sell the property, reportedly worth Tk 4 crore, for a fraction of its market value in March last year. Although the full payment was agreed upon, Zahir reportedly paid only Tk 1 crore, leaving Tk 26 lakh unpaid.

Another controversy involves a dispute over 300 acres of fallow land in Jalalabad Noagaon village of Sadar upazila. Zahir reportedly took possession of 101 acres of the land in 2011, promising to resolve a conflict between two groups of villagers. He then established a college named after him and his wife on this land.

MUFFLING THE MEDIA

To suppress unfavourable news, Zahir harassed journalists with legal cases under controversial sections of the Information and Communication Technology Act. In 2016, senior journalist Shoeb Chowdhury faced four cases under the ICT Act for a story suggesting that Zahir might not get the AL ticket in the 2018 polls. Shoeb was jailed for 84 days in 2017. “For the past 15 years, the people of Habiganj have been in a state of terror. Abu Zahir has imprisoned and harassed many journalists by

filing digital security cases against them, including me,” Shoeb said.

Zahir effectively controlled the journalism landscape in Habiganj by instilling fear with these cases, resulting in jail time for several journalists and attacks on their offices and homes.

As a life member of the Habiganj Press Club, Zahir also had a group of journalists loyal to him. Zahir and one of his aides filed two cases against Daily Amar Habiganj Editor Sushanta Dasgupta and three other journalists of the local newspaper. The next morning, Sushanta was arrested from the newspaper’s office in Habiganj town and was granted bail 23 days later. The cases stemmed from allegations made by Sayeduzzaman Zahir, general secretary of the press club, that the newspaper had published “false” news accusing Abu Zahir of corruption and irregularities.

FAMILY LEAGUE

Politicians opposing Zahir, including party members, faced intimidation. District BNP Joint Convener Advocate Nurul Islam said the Awami League’s reign of dictatorship was marked by repression and physical intimidation by leaders like Zahir. Even notable figures within the Awami League have been sidelined due to their dissenting views. Several prominent leaders, including former state minister Advocate Mahbub Ali and former woman MP Amatul Kibria Chowdhury Kaya, were excluded from the AL’s district committee in its 2019 council for opposing Zahir. However, some of those who were excluded were subsequently reinstated in the committee through central intervention.

While Zahir is the president of the Awami League’s Habiganj district unit, his family members and relatives control the committees of the organisations affiliated with the party. His wife Aleya serves as the general secretary of the district Mohila League and was elected chairman of the Zilla Parishad, while their son Jamil is a joint general secretary of Bangladesh Chhatra League’s Habiganj district unit despite living abroad for several years.

Zahir’s nephew Ataur Rahman is a former mayor of Habiganj Municipality. His other nephews Faizur Rahman and Saidur Rahman are the general secretary and former president of the district BCL, respectively. Zahir’s brother Badrul Alam serves as the joint general secretary of the district Jubo League.

during the July-August uprising.

While the government intends to bring her back, Hasan emphasised that the foreign ministry has not yet received any formal directive to initiate the extradition process.

“We will engage with Delhi and begin the formal process in accordance with the existing extradition treaty once we receive the necessary instructions,” he clarified in response to queries.

Regarding the review of existing agreements and memorandums of understanding between the two countries, Hasan said these fall under the jurisdiction of various ministries in Bangladesh.

“We tried to cover every angle – from students side to pro-government forces to law enforcers side – but almost everyone barred us from filming and there were fears of being attacked. The risks were extremely high.

“As the digital media team was reliant on the internet, the blackout posed an existential crisis for us. Yet, we persisted – we continued filming and editing videos daily, we archived them all and kept them ready for publishing as soon as the internet was restored.”

He further said, “This movement was also something new in many of our reporters’ careers. So, we had to come up with new ideas and ways to cover such incidents.”

Suravita Basak, country lead of feminist organisation Swayong, highlighted their campaign “All Eyes on Bangladesh”, through which they shared news and information about the July uprising on their social media platform.

While moderating the event, Naziba Basher, senior sub-editor at The Daily Star, answered a question regarding what change is expected in journalism after over 15 years of the press being gagged. “The state must take responsibility for protecting its journalists. But if we want real change in journalism, journalists must lead the way and commit to non-partisan reporting. It’s a matter of conscience.”

Let’s unite to protect nation’s sovereignty

FROM PAGE 1

“Our blood has not dried. The writings on the walls, which you see every day while coming and going, have not been erased; they are still raw and burning. That fire still burns within our hearts as well.”

Prof Yunus said, “It seems our freedom and independence are not sitting well with some people. Various efforts are being made to stall our progress. Since August 5, you’ve witnessed how it has been unfolding. “Now, they are trying again, in new ways. The situation we are currently facing is why this meeting has been called.”

Prof Yunus said, “The Bangladesh we are aiming to build is being overshadowed by a fabricated narrative. They are relentlessly outlining a different version of our country.”

He said it was not limited to just one country. It has spread to certain major global powers.

“Since our great uprising has displeased some, they want to erase it ... We must unite to prove their falsehood and establish the truth.

“We must tell the world that we are united... We have called you here to discuss how we can move forward collectively. There is no room for missteps in this process.”

Amid demonstrations in the capital and different districts over the attack on the Bangladesh Assistant High Commission in Agartala, Prof Yunus on Tuesday began a series of dialogues.

He met leaders of student organisations against discrimination on Tuesday evening and announced that he would hold talks with major political parties yesterday and religious groups today.

Delegations of several political parties, including the BNP and Jamaat-e-Islami, were present yesterday. The Awami League and the Jatiya Party were not invited.

Industry Adviser Adilur Rahman Khan, in his welcome speech at the dialogue, told the party leaders that the meeting was called to seek their opinions on three issues: the ongoing propaganda against Bangladesh in India and other parts of the world, the attack on the Bangladesh Assistant High Commission in Agartala, and the recent false allegations of attacks on minorities.

After the meeting, Law Adviser Prof Nazrul told reporters that consensus was established regarding anti-Bangladesh activities in India, the attack on the Bangladesh Assistant High Commission in Agartala, and India’s interference into Bangladesh’s internal affairs.

He said the parties advised the government to accelerate its efforts to counter the misinformation campaigns. If necessary, the government can seek the support of expatriates, friendly countries, and bring foreign media and journalists to Bangladesh.

The parties also recommended improving the government’s communication and legal capabilities and establishing a public relations cell.

Several parties proposed forming a minority commission to investigate alleged attacks on minorities and uncover the truth, Prof Nazrul added.

The leaders strongly condemned India’s economic and cultural aggression, its attempts to dominate Bangladesh, and its interference in Bangladesh’s internal matters.

“There is no room to see Bangladesh as a weak country ... We vow to uphold

1.5 lakh tonnes of rice will be imported from Myanmar, India

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The government is set to import rice from Myanmar and India as part of its efforts to bring down the high price of the staple, replenish stocks and ensure distribution under social safety net schemes.

Under the plan, 1 lakh tonne of white rice will be imported from Myanmar at \$515 per tonne and 50,000 tonnes of basmati boiled rice from India at \$467.7 per tonne.

The proposals were approved yesterday by the cabinet committee on public purchase chaired by Salehuddin Ahmed, finance adviser to the interim government.

Politics would not come in the way of trade and commercial dealings with India, Ahmed told the media after the meeting.

“We will import from those who give us items at competitive prices, in a speedy manner and with due quality – it can be India or any other country. We are talking with India, Myanmar and even with Vietnam,” he added.

Earlier, the government had allowed the import of 1 lakh tonnes of boiled rice from India under open tender.

SEE PAGE 6 COL 4