

MY DHAKA

Shojon extends mental health care beyond class boundaries

RBR

Shojon, a Bangla word, when roughly translated means a dear one, or maybe a near one. With the promise to hold your hands in your darkest times – like a loved one, SHOJON is a mental health service, an initiative of the SAJIDA Foundation.

After the July uprising, this tele-counselling platform has changed its initial agenda from ensuring mental health care for poor and ultra-poor individuals for a nominal fee, to an expanded program with increased human resource capacity to help any individual, irrespective of class hierarchy, sustaining mental distress, particularly in the aftermath of the revolution. And that too, free of cost. Their service window is open till as late as 10:00pm.

“Shojon’s work frame has three tiers, with the first one being done by a lay counsellor, one who is empathetic and non-judgemental. Tier two is referred counselling sessions by professional counsellors, this service is currently free of cost. Then, if need be, tier three is their psychiatric service. The tier three service, however, is not free, but Shojon has partnered with organisations to provide this support at a minimum fee,” says Amena Akter, a lay counsellor of two and half years at Shojon.



“Initially, we charged Tk 200 for the service and depended on incoming calls mostly. However, with this new approach, we make more outgoing calls to reach the distressed. To address the national crisis of the need for mental health support, the organisation initially provided tele-counselling through its Shojon platform, reaching 500 individuals from a list provided by July Smrity Foundation (JSF) and Students Against Oppression (SAO),” she added.

“We almost reached out to 1,900 plus students and 500 of them needed tiers two or three support,” says Farjana Sharmin, head of programme, Mental Health, Sajida Foundation.

Using the insight from Shojon’s tele-

counselling support, it was found that many protesters and family members of the deceased had symptoms of trauma and grief, which signify the necessity for more structured and accessible mental health services. This realisation led SAJIDA Foundation to establish an in-person Trauma Counselling Centre, with the help of the Government of Bangladesh, to provide trauma-focused counselling support, particularly for those injured during the movement, bereaved families, and affected bystanders. The trauma counselling centre is planned to start in four locations across Bangladesh. However, it is presently operational at the Narayanganj 300 Bed Hospital and NITOR.

Many students who joined to bring in the change are now in hopeless

RUBBER PLANTATIONS 25 workers abducted in Bandarban

OUR CORRESPONDENT, *Bandarban*

At least 25 workers were abducted by unknown people from various rubber plantations in Lama’s Fasiakhali area in Bandarban yesterday, said locals and garden owners.

The incident took place in the Goyalmara area of Fasiakhali around 10:00am.

Md Shajahan, one of the plantation owners, said, “At least 12 of them are workers of my garden.” Talking to The Daily Star, he said the rest of the victims were kidnapped from other gardens.

Members of the army, police, BGB, and local representatives are coordinating the rescue efforts, which is challenging due to the area’s geographical challenges, the UNO added.

“Some unknown people called me by phone in the afternoon and demanded Tk 6 lakh in ransom for the release of my 12 workers,” said Shajahan.

He also said that unidentified people sent letters to all the rubber gardens in this area demanding ransom.

The workers are residents of Ramu and Eidgah in Cox’s Bazar district and Naikhongchhari in Bandarban district, said locals.

Lama Upazila Nirbahi Officer Moin Uddin confirmed the incident and said they are yet to identify the suspects.

Members of the army, police, BGB, and local representatives are coordinating the rescue efforts, which is challenging due to the area’s geographical challenges, the UNO added.

Contacted, Bandarban Superintendent of Police Md Shahidullah Kauser said he was on leave but is now on his way to Bandarban. The identities of the abductors remain unknown and joint forces are carrying out operations.

A member of Fasiakhali Union Parishad, wishing anonymity, told The Daily Star that a week ago, leaflets demanding Tk 50,000 in extortion from each rubber plantation were found hanging in the Lama Fasiakhali-Naikhongchhari border area.

Earlier on January 14, three workers were abducted and on February 1, seven lumberjacks were reportedly abducted from Bandarban’s Lama upazila, according to media reports.

The abducted individuals were later released after paying a ransom.

Maintain law and order with a firm hand DCs push to override local reps’ powers

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they face hassles, he said, urging the officials to solve the problem.

He then asked the officials why land registration was not done online even though a system was there to do so.

“Why isn’t it being implemented? Where is the problem?”

Prof Yunus said that he was hurt being termed the chief guest at the conference. “I don’t want to act like a guest. I want to work as a captain [of the team].”

FIGHT CORRUPTION

Addressing a programme hosted by Bangladesh Administrative Service Association at Bangladesh-China Friendship Centre last night, Prof Yunus said corruption was destroying Bangladesh.

“If we cannot get out of this, there will be no progress.”

There are vast potentials like the young demographic and natural resources, but corruption remains the biggest obstacle, he said.

Stating that Bangladesh’s ranking in terms of corruption was among the worst in the world, he said, “We lack integrity and discipline, which makes it impossible to achieve our goals.”

He urged the DCs to free the country of graft.

“We cannot establish ourselves

as a respectable nation unless we rid ourselves of corruption,” he said, adding that expanding online services could prevent corruption.

The international community wants to see the end of corruption in Bangladesh because it hinders trade and business relations.

Getting rid of corruption is not an impossible task, he said, citing examples of other countries.

Principal Secretary Siraz Uddin Mia, Dhaka DC Sharf Uddin Ahmed Chowdhury, Chattogram DC Farida Khanom, and Panchagarh DC Sabet Ali also spoke at the event.

The participants are set to make 353 proposals at 34 working sessions.

ESTABLISH NEW ECONOMIC ZONE

BSS reports, Prof Yunus stressed the need for establishing a new economic zone involving Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Bhutan.

“The process has begun. This process should be accelerated so that the economic zone could be established.”

Finance Adviser Dr Salehuddin Ahmed, Law Adviser Dr. Asif Nazrul, Information and Broadcasting Adviser Nahid Islam, Cabinet Secretary Dr Sheikh Abdur Rashid, and BASA President and LGRD Secretary Nazrul Islam also spoke at the event.

Prof Yunus said as a nation, Bangladesh has an immense potential due to its geographical location while two giant countries, India and China, are its neighbours.

He said China and India are progressing fast, and Bangladesh has the potential to advance along with the two neighbours.

Noting that if Bangladesh can utilise its marine potential, it will go fast economically, he said, “There is a huge scope to generate hydropower in the Himalaya and Nepal is keen to export its hydro electricity and we are ready to buy it.”

Prof Yunus observed that if Bangladesh gets an opportunity to use the Indian land, no one will be able to halt its progress.

He said if marine ports could be set up in the Bangladesh coastline, from Cumilla to Teknaf, Bangladesh’s economy will advance fast.

“If we can give the opportunity to the ships of the whole world to use these ports, who will stop us?”

Nepal and Bhutan are landlocked countries and the seven sisters of India have no seaports, he said, adding if the new economic zone could be established, all the neighbouring countries will be able to explore immense trade potential.

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They made the proposal at the three-day “DC Conference-2025,” which began in Dhaka yesterday .

Around 345 proposals from DCs of all 64 districts and divisional commissioners of eight divisions will be discussed at the conference, which is set to conclude tomorrow.

Shariatpur’s DC proposed appointing the UNO as the chairperson of the upazila-level family planning department’s recruitment committee, a post currently held by the upazila parishad chairman.

Rangamati and Pirojpur DCs, on the other hand, suggested handing over the chairmanship of the upazila disaster management committee to UNOs – another post presently held by upazila parishad chairmen.

Additionally, the Faridpur DC proposed placing the recruitment and transfer of upazila parishad employees under the authority of DCs.

Currently, the UNO serves as the head of the recruitment committee for these employees, while the upazila chairman issues the appointment letters.

Additionally, DCs have proposed various benefits for government employees at both the district and upazila levels.

The DCs of Rajshahi and Jashore suggested creating a position for cooks at the UNO’s residence. Notably, upazila chairmen do not have any such privilege.

The Mymensingh DC proposed constructing multi-storey buildings for government employees at the district and upazila levels, increasing housing loans for employees, raising the medical allowance for government staffers to Tk 5,000, and increasing the “educational

assistance allowance” for their children from Tk 500 to Tk 2,000.

Meanwhile, the Gopalganj DC proposed introducing mobile phone and internet allowances for field administration employees.

Madaripur’s DC suggested including circuit houses and DC offices under the Key Point Installation security category, particularly as DC offices in several districts were attacked during the July uprising.

Additionally, the DCs of Bandarban, Khagrachhari, and Rangamati proposed increasing the hill tracts allowance for government employees working in the three hilly districts.

A hill tracts allowance is an extra payment given to government employees who work in remote areas.

Meanwhile, Bandarban’s DC proposed placing the transfer and posting of additional deputy commissioners under the authority of divisional commissioners. Currently, this responsibility falls under the public administration ministry.

Pabna DC Mohammad Mofizul Islam proposed formulating a policy to regulate the fees charged for various purposes by government and private educational institutions within an academic year, as well as setting guidelines on how these collected fees should be spent.

In his proposal, he argued that this would “ensure financial transparency in educational institutions” by preventing arbitrary fee collection and ensuring a standardised fee structure.

Additionally, the policy would mandate specific guidelines for expenditure, ultimately benefiting students and parents.

The DC of Magura proposed introducing a transfer system

for teachers of private secondary schools, saying it would enhance professionalism and efficiency among teachers.

Additionally, the DCs of Satkhira, Mymensingh, Manikganj, Pabna, and Rangamati have put forward multiple proposals regarding the development of madrasa-based education.

DCs of Gopalganj and Joypurhat, along with Sylhet’s divisional commissioner, have proposed introducing a ration system for all levels of field administration employees.

They said that, like various law enforcement agencies, administrative staffers also work tirelessly to implement government decisions during times of crisis.

They further pointed out that while civilian employees of the Anti-Corruption Commission and the Department of Narcotics Control receive ration benefits, field administration employees do not.

The Joypurhat DC also proposed allocating risk allowances for district administration employees, while Satkhira’s DC suggested increasing allowances for additional responsibilities.

A “risk allowance” for administration employees would typically refer to financial compensation for those exposed to potential risks in their work.

Meanwhile, several DCs made various public welfare-related proposals, such as formulating a policy for e-rickshaws (easy bikes) operating nationwide, abolishing the railway’s quota for dependents, establishing Implementation Monitoring and Evaluation Division and ACC offices in all districts with adequate manpower, and expanding the scope of operations under mobile courts.

ACC sues Mazumder, 3 others

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Tk 781.31 crore worth of assets through bribery and corruption, which are inconsistent with his known sources of income. A case has been filed against him under Section 27(1) of the Anti-Corruption Commission Act, 2004, and Section 5(2) of the Prevention of Corruption Act, 1947.

In the three cases against ex-MP Shubid Ali Bhuiyan, his wife, Mahmuda Akhtar, and his son,

Mohammad Ali, have also been accused.

According to the case statement, Shubid was accused of acquiring illegal wealth worth Tk 6.59 crore. Additionally, suspicious transactions amounting to Tk 181.42 crore were found across his 22 bank accounts.

Mahmuda Akhtar was accused of acquiring illegal wealth worth Tk 1.83 crore. Additionally, suspicious transactions amounting to Tk 36.32 crore were found across her 12 bank

accounts.

Mohammad Ali, was accused of acquiring illegal wealth worth Tk 42.53 lakh. Additionally, suspicious transactions amounting to Tk 103.74 crore and \$10,328 (Tk 12.60 lakh) were found across his 25 bank accounts.

Responding to a reporter’s question, Akhtar said, “We are investigating a number of business entities. You will be notified when the inquiry is completed.”

Mazumder holds assets worth

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The BFIU has forwarded its findings to the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) and the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) for further action.

In response to the findings, the BFIU has ordered the freezing of Mazumder’s and his family’s bank accounts.

Mazumder was involved in trade-based money laundering amounting to Tk 16,000 crore, according to the BFIU.

Of the sum, Tk 4,717 crore was taken out from Exim Bank, where Mazumder was the chairman from 2007 to August 29 last year, through 18 shell companies.

Two of the firms – Flamingo Enterprise and Madina Dates & Nuts, which is owned by Mazumder’s son-in-law Mojamil Hussain – received substantial loans

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The BB has commissioned a forensic audit of Exim Bank by global accountancy firm Ernst & Young to assess the bank’s asset quality.

Mazumder, who was arrested in October last year in connection with a murder case during the July uprising, remains in jail.

Ranjan Chowdhury, vice-chairman of Nassa Group, has denied all allegations of money laundering and financial misconduct. He described the claims as baseless and lacking factual or legal merit.

“Nassa Group has always complied with BFIU regulations and provided requested information when required. There are no irregularities, no wrongdoing, and certainly no shell companies as alleged.”

Discord brewing

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Akhter is facing opposition from the faction belonging to former Chhatra Shakti leaders as he had a “personal rivalry” with Mahfuj since the inception of Chhatra Shakti, the sources added.

On the other hand, the former Shibir activists are trying to bring Zonaid, former president of Shibir’s Dhaka University unit and member of Jatiya Nagorik Committee’s executive body, into the second-in-command position of the new party.

The leftist faction wants Anik Roy, former general secretary of Chhatra Union’s central committee, in a key position.

“As the new political party aims to be inclusive, people with diverse opinions are part of it. Shibir wants its former leaders to take leadership roles. While the leftists initially wanted Akhter as a leader due to his long history of doing politics, they no longer support him,” a member of the Jatiya Nagorik

Committee told this newspaper.

The civic platform has held a series of meetings in the last few weeks over the issue, but could not reach a conclusion as of now.

Sources said the Shibir-led faction demanded Zonaid as the member secretary of the new political party and at least four posts out of the top 10 posts.

They even threatened to quit Jatiya Nagorik Committee and form another organisation if their demands were not met.

As they did not get a “positive signal” from other key policymakers, the faction boycotted a meeting of the platform’s central executive body at its office yesterday afternoon, the sources said.

Some student leaders were seen taking to social media on the issue.

“I joined the anti-fascist politics through Akhter Hossen. His love for the country and its people has always

inspired us. On the Dhaka University campus, he has always stood up against the terror of Chhatra League without any hesitation. As a conscious citizen, I stand by Akhter Hossen. Don’t conspire against anyone,” Abdul Hannan Masud, the chief organiser of Students Against Discrimination, wrote on Facebook.

Mirza Galib, former president of DU Chhatra Shibir, wrote on Facebook, “The Nagorik Committee should have worked to create a unified political platform involving all the youth associated with the uprising ... There should be proper participation of madrasa students and Shibir members ... But unfortunately, it seems that the Nagorik Committee is failing to create a democratic and inclusive environment.”

The Daily Star tried to reach Nasiruddin, Akhter, Zonaid and Sarjis several times, but they did not respond to phone calls and texts.