

SWADHINATA PADAK Abrar to be awarded posthumously

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Abrar Fahad, a student of Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology who was brutally murdered in 2019 by members of Chhatra League, will be awarded the Swadhinata Padak 2024, Bangladesh's highest civilian honour.

The recognition honours his courage in standing against injustice and his enduring influence on the nation's fight for justice and freedom of thought and expression.

The news was shared yesterday on a Facebook post by Youth and Sports Adviser Asif Mahmud Shojib Bhuyain.

In his post, Asif wrote, "A symbol of courage to stand against injustice and an image of free thinking -- Abrar Fahad. The nation will not forget you, Abrar."

Abrar's murder sparked nationwide outrage. His death became a symbol of resistance against oppression.

The Swadhinata Padak is awarded annually by the Bangladesh government to individuals and institutions for outstanding contributions to various fields.



As people rush home to break their fast, the roads become heavily congested, creating long tailbacks. The photo was taken on Kazi Nazrul Islam Avenue in the capital yesterday afternoon.

PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

ZIA CHARITABLE GRAFT CASE SC upholds acquittal of Khaleda

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The Appellate Division of the Supreme Court yesterday upheld the High Court verdict acquitting BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia and two others in the Zia Charitable Trust corruption case.

A three-member bench of the Appellate Division, led by Justice Md Ashfaqu Islam, dismissed the leave-to-appeal petitions filed by the state and the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) challenging the High Court judgement.

With this order, Khaleda stands acquitted in both the Zia Orphanage Trust and Zia Charitable Trust cases, in which she had previously been convicted and sentenced, Advocate Maksud Ullah, a lawyer for Khaleda Zia, told The Daily Star.

He added that Khaleda is on bail in other cases against her.

Pro-BNP lawyers, including Barrister AM Mahbub Uddin Khokon, Barrister Md Bodruddoza Badal, Advocate Aminul Islam, and Barrister Md Ruhul Quddus Kazal, represented Khaleda Zia, while Additional Attorney General Aneek R Haque and Advocate Ashif Hassan appeared for the state and ACC, respectively, during the hearing.

On November 27 last year, the High Court acquitted Khaleda in the Zia Charitable Trust

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Caught between tide and torture

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"We tried to explain that our nets had drifted due to the tide, but they wouldn't listen," Mahmudul said.

He was among the 29 fishermen released by the AA on February 27.

Over the past few months, there has been a noticeable increase in fishermen being abducted by AA. The situation worsened after the fishing ban in the Naf was lifted. The abductions are primarily occurring in three areas of Cox's Bazar: Ukhiya, Naikhongdia Pook Khali, and Whykong.

Sharing his ordeal with this correspondent, Mahmudul said he and his crew were taken to a rebel-controlled camp on the Myanmar border and placed under strict surveillance. For the next 48 hours, they were confined to a cramped room with no basic amenities.

"We were only given a bucket to urinate in, with no other facilities. They only took us to the washroom upon request and then locked us back in the small room.

"Hours after we were taken, a high-ranking Arakan Army officer interrogated us in fluent Bangla about the deployment of our security forces at the border. They asked about the number of personnel stationed there."

He added, "They hit me when I refused to answer. But we remained silent and did not disclose much information."

Two days later, Mahmudul and his fellow captives were transferred to a prison camp in the hilly areas, where they were held for the next 15 days. "We were only given a handful of rice and boiled banana stalks. Sometimes, they gave us lentils, which were rotten or infested with insects. Even the water was contaminated with insects or floating cigarette ends."

According to Mahmudul, at least six other Bangladeshi fishermen were detained in the same camp.

"We begged them to let us contact our families just once so they wouldn't think we were dead. But they refused."

Though he was eventually released, his boat remained in the

AA's custody. "I invested Tk 2 lakh in this new fishing boat, with a loan of Tk 1.65 lakh. We already struggle to repay our debts, and then we have to face such dangers at sea."

According to intelligence sources, at least 23 fishermen with their boats were taken by the AA in the last month from the Naikongdia Pook Khali point, which is just three kilometers away from Shah Porir Dwip.

RANSOM THROUGH MF'S

Md Shofiullah, another fisherman with two decades of experience, told this newspaper, "We're hearing that two or three fishermen are taken by the AA almost every other day. They wait for the slightest mistake -- if our boat enters their territory even by an inch, they detain us."

He claimed that in most cases, the AA collects a ransom of Tk 1-1.5 lakh for each fisherman's release. "They [AA] had Bangladeshi SIM cards and used them to send videos and pictures of torture to family members, demanding ransom. The money was collected through various Mobile Financial Services, which we believe are operated by a group of Bangladeshis and Rohingyas on this side of the border."

He alleged that this group maintains contact with members of the AA and their families.

According to Abdur Rahim, a 21-year-old fisherman who was also held captive for 17 days, some Bangla-speaking AA members mentioned that their families live in Cox's Bazar and Teknaf.

"We also heard that Tk 35 lakh was taken from some fishermen's families via mobile banking, with the transactions carried out secretly."

Many fishermen believe the ransom money goes to the AA members' families.

HOW THEY WERE RESCUED

Once the families of abducted fishermen provided relevant information to the Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB), the border force communicated with the AA and secured their release. BGB Teknaf Battalion (BGB-2) played a key role in

these efforts.

Lt Col Ashiqur Rahman, commanding officer of the battalion, told The Daily Star, "The AA takes our fishermen whenever they find a boat entering their territory... I believe the AA members on border duty want to prove they are active and seek recognition. The good news is that the AA responds whenever we reach out to them. It may have taken some time, but we managed to bring back the captive fishermen."

Regarding ransom payments through MF'S, he said no such information had been confirmed yet. "We have learned that they [AA] demand a sum from the fishermen, which they call a 'penalty' for entering their territory."

Asked about the fishermen being interrogated regarding BGB positions, Lt Col Ashiqur acknowledged "some challenges" at the border. "We are working to overcome these by using different strategies. Our personnel remain vigilant and maintain round-the-clock surveillance to secure the border in coordination with other relevant stakeholders."

He further noted that the incidents began after the Naf River was reopened for fishing. "We need to develop new strategies, including educating fishermen to prevent further occurrences."

On February 13, the government lifted the longstanding ban on fishing in the Naf after seven years and nine months.

Permission to fish in the Naf is subject to several conditions, including a restriction on fishing hours from 8:00am to 4:00pm, the requirement for fishermen to show their identity cards at five designated BGB posts before departure, and compliance with BGB checks upon return.

Only registered fishermen, as per a list provided by the fisheries department, are allowed to fish in the Naf.

The permission is temporary and will be reviewed after three months based on the border situation.

Job losses shock development workers

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NGOs, have long provided employment to thousands and supported critical development initiatives across the country.

Although there is no official data on how many people have lost or may lose their jobs due to the USAID fund cuts, people in the sector estimate the number is between 30,000 and 40,000.

According to diplomatic sources, USAID annually provides between \$300 and \$400 million to Bangladesh in the areas of health, nutrition, agriculture, livelihood, labour rights, prevention of human trafficking, and democratic development.

However, immediately after the inauguration of Donald Trump as US president on January 20, he ordered suspension of USAID funding and activities funded by the agency globally, except for emergency food supplies including that for the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh.

All the American personnel of the USAID office in Bangladesh too have been sent on administrative leave. A section of the personnel are working to send papers to the USAID office in Washington DC.

Some 10,000 contracts between the USAID and NGOs were terminated on February 25 globally, as the Trump administration decided to eliminate more than 90 percent of foreign aid contracts and cut some \$60 billion in funding.

Saiful, who has been working for an education project, said they had thought that Trump would cancel projects related to climate change, gender equality and immunisation as

his policy does not promote these.

"We were preparing the response to the USAID questions on whether our project is aligned to the current US policy and explain the justification of the project, but received the termination letter before we could send the response..." he said.

Another development professional, who was also working for a project related to inclusive finance, said frustration and uncertainty have gripped NGO workers in Bangladesh.

It is going to be a challenging time for them, with the USAID terminating projects and the European countries prioritising security funding amid the Trump administration's less interest in supporting Ukraine's war against Russia.

An official of a health-related project said, "Imagine what happens to the poor people benefiting from the projects related to medial support like vaccination."

Noting the termination of more than 1,000 employees by icddr,b following the US decision, he said USAID has also been supporting projects for some essential medicines and birth control materials, which the for-profit companies do not produce.

Many poor people benefit from livelihood and income generation-related projects, and they will find themselves in trouble all, the official said.

Nazma Akter, executive director at Awaz Foundation, said her organisation had been implementing two US-funded projects, which have been terminated, leaving more than two dozen employees jobless.

"We were working to promote workers' rights, supporting labour-

related cases. The US government has always been speaking high on labour rights, but now it has stopped supporting this. It only means that the employers have more opportunities to exploit workers," she told The Daily Star.

Contacted, NGO Affairs Bureau Director General Anwar Hossain said he has already discussed the issue with a forum of the NGOs that implement USAID-funded projects.

"Joblessness of a significant number of people is indeed a matter of concern. We are asking the NGOs to absorb the jobless people in other projects -- as much as they can do," he told The Daily Star.

Anwar said the bureau was preparing a brief on the impact of the termination of USAID-funded projects for the government.

Several development professionals said the government needs to have a fresh look into how the NGO activities can be implemented.

A health professional said, "The government itself should implement many of the work that NGOs now do with foreign funding, like providing essential birth control materials or immunisation."

Abu Eusuf, professor of development studies at the Dhaka University, said project-based activities are not often sustainable. "The US decision of terminating funding should be an opportunity for the Bangladesh authorities to learn anew and make themselves self dependent."

"We should prioritise creation of jobs, promotion of business and skill building of our youths for both local and global labour markets," he said.

Zika cluster detected in Mohakhal

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the true burden of the disease in Bangladesh," said the article by icddr,b scientists on the study's findings.

All five patients lived within a one-kilometre radius, and all of them were from the Mohakhali area, said Shafiul Alam, a scientist who was the principal investigator of the project.

They had no history of international travel in the past two years, indicating that the infection occurred locally, he told The Daily Star yesterday.

The patients all got tested within a month, suggesting they were part of the same chain of transmission.

One of the five cases was also infected with dengue virus, marking the first recorded instance of Zika-dengue coinfection in Bangladesh, said the article, which was published on the icddr,b website yesterday.

Both dengue and Zika are vector-borne diseases transmitted by Aedes mosquitoes. Coinfection by both diseases can cause more complexities, Alam said.

Zika virus was first detected in Bangladesh in 2016 after testing samples collected in 2014.

To further understand the virus, the icddr,b scientists carried out

whole genome sequencing of samples from three of the cases at the health research organisation's genome centre.

A comparative analysis found that the Bangladeshi Zika strains belong to the Asian lineage, which has been linked to microcephaly and other neurological disorders.

Experts believe that Bangladeshi migrant workers returning from Zika-affected countries in Southeast Asia could be a possible route for the virus to spread within and beyond their communities in Bangladesh.

"Zika cases are mostly overlooked," he said, adding that the Zika virus infection is likely underdiagnosed and underreported for two reasons.

Firstly, about 80 percent of infected individuals do not develop noticeable symptoms. Secondly, when symptoms such as headache, fever, and muscle pain do appear, they resemble those of dengue and chikungunya, leading to misdiagnosis.

Subsequently, icddr,b emphasised the need for routine Zika virus testing for travellers arriving from Zika-affected regions, enhanced diagnostic capacity, and systematic national surveillance to prevent future outbreaks.

Woman suicide bomber targets Pakistan troops Kills one soldier

AFP, Quetta

A woman suicide bomber targeted a convoy of Pakistani paramilitary troops in the restive southwestern province of Balochistan yesterday, killing at least one soldier and injuring four others, officials said.

"At least one Frontier Corps (FC) soldier was killed, and four others were injured when a female suicide bomber targeted an FC convoy in Kalat district," a senior administration official Bilal Shabbir told AFP.

Habib Babai, a local police official, also confirmed the toll to AFP.

No group has claimed the attack.

The Baloch Liberation Army (BLA) is the most active group in the region and often carries out deadly attacks against security forces or Pakistanis from other provinces.

Women suicide bombers are rare in Pakistan. However, the BLA has previously carried out attacks with women militants.

Three Chinese academics and their Pakistani driver were killed when a woman suicide bomber detonated her device as they were driving into the University of Confucius Institute in April 2022 in Karachi, in the south.

Father cried for help

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for safety but found the door locked. All four appeared to have died from smoke inhalation," Monir said.

The fire broke out on the first floor of the six-storey building around 12:30pm, said Talha Bin Jashim, an official of the fire service's media wing. Two fire engines from Baridhara Fire Station could bring the blaze under control by 1:00pm.

The fire originated in a beauty parlour, Golden Tulip Lounge, located on the first floor. An air conditioner, which was being repaired at the time, was the likely source of the fire, Monir added.

Among the dead was Miron Jamaddar, 55, from Bhandaria in Pirojpur. His son, Monim, was preparing to leave for Saudi Arabia today. Another deceased was Ishrafal, 40, who worked at a travel agency in the Narda area.

"I was supposed to fly tomorrow evening," Monim told The Daily Star at Dhaka Medical College Hospital, where the bodies were sent for autopsies.

"My father and uncle came from our village this [yesterday] morning and checked into Room 402 of the Saudia Residential Hotel."

Monim, who came to Dhaka two days ago and was in Rampura, went to the hotel upon hearing of his father's arrival. When he reached the scene, he saw that smoke was billowing out of the ground floor. Panicked, he called his father.

"He answered, crying," Monim said. "I told him to go to the roof. That was the last time we spoke."

Talking to this newspaper, Hiron Talukdar, Miron's brother-in-law, "After checking into the hotel, we went out for breakfast. He returned to the hotel while I was behind. Then I saw the fire and ran downstairs. The entire building was filled with smoke."

The identities of two other victims, aged between 30 and 40, could not be known immediately, police said.

During a visit, The Daily Star learnt that the six-storey building is owned by one Jahirul Islam Majumder. The ground floor housed three shops, the first floor the beauty parlour, and the hotel occupied the third to the sixth floors.

The parlour was burnt. The ground floor was partly affected.

Locals said people, mostly those travelling to foreign countries and their family members, used to stay in the hotel.

Jahirul and hotel owner Anik could not be reached for comments, as their phones were found switched off.

Obaidur Rahman, proprietor of a furniture shop located on the ground floor, said people could not leave the building as the staircase was engulfed in smoke.

Mokhesur Rahman, inspector (investigation) of Gulshan Police Station, said that when they reached the scene, they neither saw the beauty parlour employees nor anyone from the hotel.

Kazi Nazmuzamman, assistant director of the fire service (Dhaka zone), said, "As the hotel was filled with smoke, the victims tried to go to the roof. But its door was locked."

Asked about the building's compliance with regulations and fire safety measures, he said that it was not built according to Rajuk guidelines.

"The building had no fire safety plan or firefighting system. The staircase was narrow, and the windows were small and closed. If those windows had been opened, the smoke could have escaped outside."

Contacted, the parlour owner, Sadia Afrin, who lives in Rajshahi, told this newspaper that her parlour, which has been closed for a long time, was opened yesterday to hand over its ownership to a buyer.

She added that three staffers of the parlour escaped the building without any injury.

White House 'making plans to ease sanctions'

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for lifting sanctions on select entities and individuals, including some Russian oligarchs, according to the sources.

So-called options papers are often drafted by officials working on sanctions, but the White House's specific request for one in recent days underscores Trump and his advisers' willingness to ease Russian sanctions as part of a potential deal with Moscow.

It was not immediately clear what Washington could specifically seek in return for any sanctions relief.

The White House, the State Department, the Treasury Department and the Russian embassy in Washington did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

'PEACE PLAN'

Britain yesterday said that several proposals had been made for a truce in the fighting between Ukraine and Russia after France floated a plan for a one-month pause leading to peace talks, but US President Donald Trump suggested his patience was running out.

European countries, led by Britain and France, are rallying around Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and trying to hatch a peace plan that includes Kyiv after last week's Oval Office rupture between Zelenskyy and Trump.

"There are clearly a number of options on the table," Prime Minister Keir Starmer's spokesman said.

France, Britain and potentially other European countries have offered to send troops to Ukraine in the event of a ceasefire - something Moscow has already rejected - but say they would want support from the U.S., or a "backstop".

Trump has reversed US policy by opening talks with Moscow over the head of Ukraine and without consulting its other Western allies. On Friday, he publicly harangued Zelenskyy to fall in line or see the U.S. cut off crucial military aid.