CITY

People in Bhola yesterday took the streets, waving and hoisting Palestinian flags in solidarity with the people of Gaza. Various political and social organisations organised the "March for Palestine", protesting the ongoing Israeli atrocities. The photo was taken from Bhola Sadar upazila. PHOTO: **MONIR UDDIN ANIK**

KILLING OF SWARNA DAS

7 months on, fear still lingers at Lalarchak border

SHAHEEN MOLLAH, *back from Moulvibazar*

For the past seven months, farmers in Kulaura upazila of Moulvibazar have stayed away from their land near the Lalarchak border, fearing attacks allegedly by India's Border Security Force (BSF).

Panic still grips the local farming community and neighbouring villages following the death of 14-year-old Swarna Das, who was shot dead on September 1 last year.

"The farmers have stopped cultivating their land, leaving the fields abandoned out of fear of being shot by the BSF. Since Swarna's death, even locals and children no longer roam or play near the border," said Tajul Islam, a former member of Sharifpur union.

> **Swarna was holding my hand. We were inside Bangladeshi territory and heading towards the zero line. Suddenly, a bullet hit her in the back — while we were still within Bangladesh.**
>
> **SANJITA RANI DAS**
> Swarna's mother

During a recent visit to the area, this correspondent saw many fields near the border left overgrown and uncared for.

Lt Col ASM Zakaria, commanding officer of Border Guard Bangladesh (46-BGB Battalion), said, "We maintain strict security vigilance at the border. There is nothing to be afraid of.

Swarna, an eighth-grader at Nirod Bihari High School in Juri upazila, was reportedly shot and killed by BSF members while attempting to cross the border through Lalarchak.

Speaking at her home, Swarna's mother, Sanjita Rani Das, said she and her daughter were on their way to Tripura to visit her brother.

Girl raped on moving bus

Driver, helper held

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, *Ctg*

A 14-year-old girl was allegedly raped on a moving bus in Chattogram's Bahaddarhat area on Tuesday night.

Police yesterday arrested the bus driver and his assistant in connection with the incident.

The victim, a student, was travelling alone from Cox's Bazar to a relative's home in Chattogram city.

According to police, the incident took place between Tuesday evening and early yesterday.

Chandgaon Police Station Officer-in-Charge Aftab Uddin told The Daily Star that after all the passengers got off the bus, the driver, helper, and supervisor did not allow the girl to leave the bus. They took the bus to an isolated area near the Bahaddarhat flyover and raped her.

Around 4:00am yesterday, the perpetrators dropped her off near the Kaptai Road area. A police patrol team noticed her standing alone, and upon questioning, she disclosed the incident.

The girl was later admitted to Chittagong Medical College and Hospital.

Police said the bus supervisor, identified as Mobarak, remains at large. The victim's mother filed a case with the Chandgaon Police Station.

2 killed as vehicle falls into drain

OUR CORRESPONDENT, *Savar*

Two persons were killed and three others injured after a human haulier fell into a roadside drain in Ashulia yesterday.

The deceased are Badrul Alam and Hridoy Mia.

The incident occurred around 7:30pm in Jamgara area, said Kamal Hossain, inspector at Ashulia Police Station.

He said the vehicle fell into the rainwater-filled drain as the driver failed to notice it. The two were declared dead at a local hospital.

Sylhet lost 35,005 hectares of farmland in 5yrs

MINTU DESHWARA

Unchecked land filling in Sylhet division is putting the region's future of agriculture at grave risk, as farmlands are rapidly being converted into residential, commercial, and multi-storied structures.

Once known for producing Aus, Aman, and Rabi-season crops, these fertile lands are now dotted with concrete buildings and paved roads. The transformation is particularly noticeable along roadways, where construction continues unchecked, with little regard for long-term environmental consequences or the country's food security.

"Residential and commercial buildings are being built by filling up arable land, especially in areas known for producing three-season crops," said Bimol Chandra Shome, additional director of the Department of Agricultural Extension (DAE) in Sylhet.

Sadek Mia, a resident of Kamalganj, echoed him.

Md Manowar Hossain, upazila agriculture officer at Barlekha, said Bangladesh is losing agricultural land at a rate of around one percent per year. This, he warned, not only threatens food security but also disrupts natural habitats, including those critical for fish breeding.

He said about 10 percent of new constructions are taking place on roadside arable lands, with a significant portion of expatriate income being spent on building houses and commercial establishments.

Md Jalal Uddin, deputy director of the Department of Agricultural Extension in Moulvibazar, said, "Establishments are being built rapidly by filling in farmland. If this continues, food shortages are not unlikely."

Local farmer Siddiqur Rahman from Kamalganj said, "In the absence of policy enforcement, people are constructing buildings on farmland however they please."

Jasim Uddin, upazila agriculture

Ex-DGHS driver Malek, wife jailed in graft case

COURT CORRESPONDENT

Abdul Malek, a former driver of the Directorate General of Health Service (DGHS), and his wife Nargis Begum were yesterday sentenced to five and three years of imprisonment respectively, in a case filed over amassing wealth worth Tk 1.10 crore illegally.

Malek was sentenced to five years in jail for assisting his wife to acquire the wealth, while Nargis was given three years in jail for acquiring the wealth through illegal means.

Judge Md Jakaria Hossain of Dhaka Special Judge's Court-6 pronounced the verdict in the presence of the couple at the courtroom.

The judge also fined Malek Tk 20,000, in default of which he will have to serve five months more in jail.

On the other hand, Nargis was fined Tk 20,000, in default of which she will have to serve three months more in prison.

In the judgement, the judge said the prosecution was able to prove the charges brought against the couple undoubtedly and they were given the punishment for committing the offences.

The judge also ordered the authorities concerned to confiscate Tk 1,10,92,050 earned illegally by them.

Earlier, the prosecution and the defence completed their arguments, and the court recorded statements of 16 prosecution witnesses.