

Schoolgirl in hospital for week after rape

OUR CORRESPONDENT, B'baria

A ninth grade schoolgirl remains hospitalised for a week after she was allegedly raped by a middle-aged local man in Brahmanbaria's Bijoynagar upazila.

The 16-year-old girl's father filed a case on Saturday with the Bijoynagar Police Station against one Mannor Ali, 45. The case also accused two unnamed others.

According to the case statement, the ninth grader was returning home from one of her relatives' houses on the evening of June 8. On her way, Mannor and two others abducted her to a nearby house.

Mannor, with the help of two others, raped her there. At one stage, the girl managed to scream, hearing which locals rushed there and rescued her, added the case statement.

A day later, the girl was admitted to the Brahmanbaria Sadar Hospital.

On June 10, the victim's father filed a police complaint that was later registered as a case, said Sohidul Islam, officer-in-charge (OC) of

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Patients suffering from various illnesses crowd the outpatient department seeking treatment at Shaheed Suhrawardy Medical College and Hospital. The photo was taken yesterday morning.

PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

2 years lost, life shattered

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The second interim report of the Commission of Inquiry on Enforced Disappearances narrates the chilling tale of a teenage boy, and the story of how they found him.

Witnesses told the commission about a young boy, who exhibited clear signs of severe psychological distress when he was held at Rab's Taskforce Interrogation Cell. He was picked up in 2019.

"According to multiple accounts, he would cry constantly, and the guards would reportedly respond by escalating the physical abuse," says the report, which was submitted to the Chief Advisor's Office on June 6.

The commission interviewed a survivor who claimed that he had seen the same boy in the psychiatric ward of Kashimpur prison, with his nails removed. Another survivor met the same boy while being transported from jail to court. The boy had no food during the court visit, and the survivor shared his meal with him.

But luck struck when a victim shared that he had both seen the boy in prison where they served time together, and then later again at a bicycle repair shop.

It was that victim who went and located the boy and brought him to the commission.

"He had endured two years in secret detention, two more in prison, and ongoing mental health challenges as

a result of sustained abuse," reads the commission report, which contains the cases of 10 minors who had been victims of enforced disappearance. In addition, multiple victims have reported to the commission that their nails were pulled out with pliers.

The commission found that the boy was psychologically unwell and his father impoverished.

The father told the commission how he found his son at a police station almost two years after he was picked up.

"I saw him from a distance, spoke, and went closer. He recognised me and smiled, but didn't say anything else. I asked, 'Where did your nails go? Show me your hands, your feet.'

The teenager was taken to jail twice, once to Kashimpur, another time to Keraniganj.

The father tried to apply for bail but because he was a poor man, and could not manage the expenses. It took him one and a half years to process the paperwork.

The father said his son was not like this.

"He used to study. Now he just laughs by himself, foams at the mouth when spoken to, and can't speak properly. Not like before. I took him to a doctor. They prescribed medicine, but he doesn't take it. He says his body shakes, he falls asleep. He throws the medicine away," said the man.

But in spite of all this, the man is just happy to have his son back. His wife has passed away, and the child is all he has left.

"Everyone says, 'what has happened has happened, now just eat and live'. But I know how many things I had to swallow to reach this point. Now I don't even go to the lawyer anymore, because I don't have money."

field, after an Israeli strike caused a fire there on Saturday.

South Pars, off Iran's southern Bushehr province, is the source of most of the gas produced in Iran.

With Israel saying its operation could last weeks, and Netanyahu urging Iran's people to rise up against their Islamic clerical rulers, fears have grown of a regional conflagration dragging in outside powers.

UK is sending more RAF jets to the Middle East amid intense fighting between Israel and Iran, the prime minister said.

Sir Keir Starmer said the military aircraft, including Typhoons and air-to-air refuelers, were being sent "for contingency support across the region".

Iran has warned the UK, France and America that were they to support Israel, their ships and bases in the region would be regarded as legitimate targets.

Ukraine receives another 1,200 bodies from Russia

AFP, Kyiv

It also reported the arrest of two people in Alborz province accused of belonging to Israel's Mossad intelligence agency.

Israel's military said several sites were hit by the latest Iranian missile barrage yesterday, with firefighters reporting a residential building struck on the country's Mediterranean coast.

Early yesterday, air raid sirens blared in Jerusalem and Haifa, sending around a million people into bomb shelters.

Explosions echoed through Tel Aviv and Jerusalem as missiles streaked across the skies, and interceptor rockets were deployed.

The Iran-aligned Houthis, who control most of Yemen, said they had launched ballistic missiles towards Jaffa near Tel Aviv, the first time an ally of Iran has reportedly joined the fray.

At one time, Iran could have expected military support from proxy forces in Gaza, Lebanon and Iraq.

However, 20 months of war against Israel had targeted the Houthis' chief of staff overnight.

Israeli authorities said at least 10 people had been killed overnight, including three children, and more than 140 injured, by missiles that had hit homes in northern and central Israel.

In the Arab town of Tamra in northern Israel, four women were killed, including a mother and her two daughters.

At least six people were killed by an Iranian missile that hit a cluster of residential buildings, including multi-storey apartments in the town of Bat Yam.

In all, at least 13 people in Israel have been killed and more than 350 others injured since Iran launched its retaliatory attacks.

In the first apparent attack on Iran's energy infrastructure, Tasnim said Iran had partially suspended production at South Pars, the world's biggest gas

Another 1,200 bodies which the Russian side claims belong to Ukrainian citizens, including military personnel, were returned to Ukraine, Kyiv's headquarters for the treatment of prisoners of war wrote on social media.

"In total, 4,812 bodies have been returned this week," Ukrainian Defence Minister Rustom Umerov said on Facebook.

"I am grateful to everyone involved in this humanitarian mission," he said.

Ukraine has not said whether it has transferred any bodies to the Russian side.

Bad loans hit record Tk 420,355cr

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"Besides, there are some internal uncertainties, and amid this situation, who will invest here? The outlook is not good now," he added.

As of March, defaulted loans at state-run banks stood at Tk 146,407 crore, which was 46 percent of their total disbursed loans. Bad loans at private banks stood at Tk 264,195 crore, or 20.16 percent of their disbursed loans, central bank data showed.

Besides, defaulted loans at foreign banks stood at Tk 3,239 crore, which was 4.83 percent of their disbursed loans.

The specialised banks' defaulted

loans stood at Tk 6,494 crore, or 14.47 percent of their total outstanding loans, as per BB data.

The banking sector also faced a provisioning shortfall of Tk 170,666 crore. Provisioning is required against the bad loans.

Bad loans have increased sharply in some Shariah-based banks controlled by the controversial business conglomerate S Alam Group and in some other banks where Awami League-affiliated businesses had influence, said central bank officials.

Some large borrowers, including S Alam Group and Beximco Group, defaulted heavily after the Awami

League's fall, pushing the total to an unprecedented level.

Bad loans may have increased largely due to the change in the definition of classified loans, said Mustafa K Mujeri, Executive Director of the Institute for Inclusive Finance and Development.

"We heard that the definition of classified loans was changed in line with international standards, which pushed up the bad loans. We do not know whether the current loans became defaulted or the loans disbursed under the previous government defaulted."

He went on to urge the interim government to take strict action to arrest the high amount of bad loans.

Anti-terror law abused most

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law were actually victims of enforced disappearance and how the law was used for repression.

"The Anti-Terrorism Act, 2009 stands out as the most frequently invoked law, with 198 victims facing charges under it, far more than any other legislation," said the report, based on analysis of the cases against 309 victims who were picked up by various state forces long before they were produced before courts.

"The Explosive Substances Act and the Arms Act follow, with 51 and 43 victims respectively."

Nine victims were also booked under the Information and Communication Technology Act and its successor, the Digital Security Act, and eight victims were booked under the Special Powers Act.

"The over-reliance on broad national security and criminal statutes, such as the Anti-Terrorism Act, suggests a pattern of systemic criminalisation, often without regard for individualised evidence," said the report.

Terrorism must be countered—but not like this, stated the five-member Commission formed in August last year.

The Commission acquired nationwide data from Anti-Terrorism Tribunals and found that the conviction rate was incredibly low, suggesting there was little or no evidence.

"Of the 794 resolved cases from 2017 to 2024, only 52 resulted in convictions, yielding a conviction rate of just 7 percent. This means the vast majority of the accused (93 percent) were acquitted, despite the free hand law enforcers had in manufacturing these cases, raising serious questions about the evidentiary standards used to initiate such prosecutions," stated the report.

It also found that the filing of these cases ebbed and flowed with the political climate.

"If indeed anti-terror laws were used agnostic of the political climate, we would not expect to see any relation between political events and case inflows. And yet, surges in case inflows align with periods of heightened political unrest and subsequent law enforcement crackdown."

The year 2018 saw the most significant spike in the filing of these cases, coinciding with the general election when the opposition parties were particularly repressed, the Commission found.

"Interviews with multiple police officials suggest that increased mobilisation efforts by the BNP and Jamaat-e-Islami in 2022 contributed to sustained filings of cases that year," said the Commission, noting that the cases filed in 2021 reflected the AL government's response to mass protests against Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Bangladesh.

In contrast, opposition activity

in 2023 shifted toward more direct street confrontations which, according to senior police officers, were less frequently pursued under anti-terrorism charges," it said, adding that this corresponded with a decrease in new cases that year.

In 2024, the filing of new cases dropped even more after the general elections because of a decline in political activities by the opposition.

The Commission interviewed multiple police officers who revealed that there are set scripts for these cases. "When a new case needs to be filed, these scripts are reused with minimal changes -- often underdeveloped, copy-pasted, and lightly edited to fit the individual."

Instead of pursuing justice, the system appears to have allowed these cases to linger until they risked embarrassing the judiciary, said the report. "If these anti-terrorism cases were solely about arbitrating the available evidence, we would not expect to see any particular pattern in case resolutions beyond random variation. And yet, there is a revealing pattern in the timing of case outflows."

The Commission found that the judiciary's performance was dependent on how many cases were left pending for more than five years -- and so the cases which were nearing the five-year mark were found to be quickly disposed of in bulk, with most being acquitted.

"The largest spike in case disposals occurred in 2022, exactly five years after the 2018 surge. This correlation suggests that the judicial system is expediting resolutions to avoid the appearance of backlog, particularly for cases approaching the five-year threshold," said the report.

The commission members also spoke to judges who confirmed that they are expected to prioritise cases reaching five years.

"The artificial nature of these resolution spikes, coupled with an abysmally low conviction rates, implies that many of these cases lacked prosecutorial merit from the outset," said the report.

The Commission delved into the first information reports filed by the police, and the confessional statements given by the victims of enforced disappearance to reveal a pattern of coercion and fabrication.

The victims, who were taken out of their enforced disappearance and handed over to the courts, were told that unless they agreed to sign a Section 164 confessional statement as dictated by their captors, they would face severe consequences, like repeated torture, death, a continuation of the disappearance or harm to their family members, the report said.

The victims often found little solace with the magistrates, who ignored obvious signs of coercion and torture, according to the report.

The report cited the experience of

a 19-year-old who was kept in a secret prison for over a month by the police's Counter Terrorism and Transnational Crime Unit in 2020.

"They made me rehearse the format all night beforehand, 'You will say this and this.' In the morning, they made me rehearse again, 'You will go to court, whatever they ask, you will say exactly this to the magistrate.' I told the magistrate, 'Sir, I want to speak with you privately...' When I told the magistrate, 'Sir, I didn't do these things. They beat me and forced me to say all this,' the magistrate said, 'Alright, I'll look into it.' But still, he wrote it down against me," the victim told the Commission.

A 20-year-old man who was forcibly disappeared for a year by DFI and Rab in 2016 told the magistrate that he was kept in enforced disappearance, according to the report.

The magistrate then asked the police whether it was true. The police answered by saying, "If they were disappeared, then why are their moustaches trimmed? Why are they wearing clean clothes?"

In reality, the victim was cleaned and shaved the day before to be brought in front of the media. The court granted the police three days of remand, the report said.

In another case, a 19-year-old who was disappeared by the CTTC in 2017 told the Commission that he wanted to speak privately with the magistrate, but he was asked to talk in front of the very people who had kept him illegally for weeks.

The Commission also found that many individuals were subjected to enforced disappearance for expressing their views online and were later accused of posing threats to national security.

A young man, 22, secretly held by the police for over a month for writing about the Road Safety Movement, and prosecuted under the ICT Act, stated the report.

All of the eight victims of enforced disappearance who were charged under the DSA were abducted by Rab and the police and held illegally for up to two weeks before being produced at court.

Another 38-year-old who was forcibly disappeared by the CTTC in 2015 was electrocuted in his genitals for writing about the BDR massacre.

"As soon as they gave electric shock to my genitals, I lost consciousness right there. I don't know how long I was lying down. After a while I started hearing voices in my ear, they were saying, 'He's alive, he's alive...' After having me stand up, they said, 'Hang him'. They said, 'Don't you understand? You wrote about the Pilkhana massacre,' the victim told the Commission.

In addition to the torture and illegal detention, victims then shouldered the additional burden of legal expenditure. On average, the families paid Tk 7 lakh each.

CONVICTION FOR GRAFT Ex-president Sarkozy stripped of France's top honour

AFP, Paris

Former French President Nicolas Sarkozy has been stripped of his Legion of Honour -- the country's highest distinction -- following a conviction for graft, according to a decree published yesterday.

The right-winger has been beset by legal problems since he was defeated in the 2012 presidential election after serving one five-year term.

Sarkozy, 70, had been wearing an electronic ankle tag until last month after France's highest appeals court upheld his conviction last December of trying to illegally secure favours from a judge.

According to the code of the Legion of Honour, France's top state award, any person definitively sentenced to a term in prison equal to or greater than one year is excluded from the order.

But French President Emmanuel Macron had argued against such a move in April, saying that scandal plagued Sarkozy had been elected and it was "very important that former presidents are respected".

Despite his legal problems, Sarkozy remains an influential figure on the right and is known to regularly socialise with the head of state.