

4 SAD leaders placed on 7-day remand

FROM PAGE 12
committee of SAD's combined private university unit, and SAD members Sakadoun Siam, 22, and Sadman Sadab, 21.

They were arrested at a flat on Road 83 in Gulshan.

The police had sought a 10-day remand for each after producing them before the court of Dhaka Additional Chief Metropolitan Magistrate Md Ziadur Rahman yesterday.

Amid tight security, the four arrestees were taken to the courtroom at 4:10pm. Upon seeing them, a group of lawyers began chanting slogans against them.

They shouted, "Extortionist! Extortionist!"

As the arrestees tried to cover their faces, several lawyers confronted them, saying, "Why are you hiding your face?"

One lawyer shouted, "You've sold out the spirit of the July movement for extortion!"

During the hearing, Additional Public Prosecutor Md Shamsuddoha Sumon said, "These are not ordinary criminals. Since August 5 of last year, this group has been making lists of homes belonging to Awami League leaders in Dhanmondi, Gulshan, and Banani and extorting money... We need to know who else is involved in these activities and in which locations."

Some people punched the arrestees when they were being taken

away from the court after the hearing around 4:35pm.

A 16-year-old SAD activist was arrested in the case and sent to the Children Development Centre in Gazipur by the Juvenile Court-8 of Dhaka, said a court staffer.

Siddique Abu Zafar, husband of ex-lawmaker Shammi Ahmed, filed the case with Gulshan Police Station, naming six leaders and members of SAD and accusing 10 to 12 unnamed persons.

The complainant alleged that on July 17, the accused, identifying themselves as members of SAD, went to their home and demanded Tk 50 lakh.

Since Shammi was not home, the demand was made to her husband.

"When I refused to pay, they labelled me an Awami League associate and kept pressuring me for the money. Eventually, I gave Tk 10 lakh to Abdur Razzak Riyad," he added.

Zafar also alleged that the group returned on July 19 and banged on the door, but left when he alerted the police.

"On July 26, Riyad and others came again. I was not home, but the security guard informed me. They demanded the remaining Tk 40 lakh and threatened to hand me over to the police if I did not comply. I called the police again, and five of them were arrested on the spot while another accused, Kazi Gourab, managed to flee," he added.

Russia starts direct flights to North Korea

AFP, Moscow

Russia yesterday began direct commercial flights to North Korea, in a further sign of closer ties with its Asian ally helping its offensive in Ukraine.

The first Moscow-Pyongyang flight, operated by Nordwind Airlines, was scheduled to take off at 1600 GMT and land in the North Korean capital some eight hours later, according to the carrier's website.

Nordwind Airlines -- a company that used to serve holiday destinations in Europe before the EU imposed a ban on Russian flights -- had tickets priced at 45,000 rubles (\$570).

Russia's state news agency TASS reported that the first flight going the other way, from Pyongyang to Moscow, would take place on Tuesday.

Russia's transport ministry said the route would be serviced once a month.

Russia and North Korea restored train links on June 17 after suspending them in 2020 during the Covid pandemic.

The two countries have been forging closer military bonds in recent years, with Pyongyang supplying troops and weapons for Russia to use in its military operations in Ukraine.

They signed a mutual defence pact last year, when Russian President Vladimir Putin visited North Korea.

Foreign debt

FROM PAGE 12
compounding concerns over its external financial position.

Bangladesh received 17 percent less in foreign loans year-on-year, amounting to \$8.56 billion in FY25, the lowest in four years.

Loan commitments by multilateral and bilateral lenders fell to \$8.32 billion in the last fiscal year, down 22 percent year-on-year from \$10.7 billion.

BNP's income

FROM PAGE 12
A delegation led by the party's Senior Joint Secretary General Ruhul Kabir Rizvi handed over the financial statement to EC Secretary Akhtar Ahmed at the commission's headquarters yesterday morning.

Speaking to reporters afterwards, Rizvi said that the BNP's total income last year stood at Tk 15,65,94,842, while its expenditure amounted to Tk 4,80,04,820 -- resulting in a surplus of Tk 10,85,90,019.

In comparison, the party's income in 2023 was Tk 1,10,80,151, with an expenditure of Tk 3,65,23,970.

For 2022, income was reported at Tk 5,92,04,632, and expenditure at Tk 3,88,33,803.

Under the Representation of the People Order (RPO), all registered political parties are required to submit audited financial reports of the previous calendar year to the EC by July each year.

This year, the EC issued letters to 50 registered political parties, excluding the Awami League as its registration is suspended, urging them to submit their audit reports.

Transport leaders

FROM PAGE 12

The announcement came within a week of the government launching a countrywide drive on July 20 against vehicles that have exceeded their economic lifespan. The campaign began about a month after the government set the economic lifespan of buses and minibuses at 20 years, and goods laden vehicles, such as trucks and lorries -- at 25 years.

According to BRTA data updated on July 16, a total of 39,169 buses and minibuses, and 41,140 trucks, lorries, and tankers have crossed their economic lifespan.

Saiful said the recent drives to remove vehicles aged 20-25 years have already triggered strikes in various districts, raising concerns of a complete transport shutdown. To address the issue, a joint meeting was held on July 20, where the transport leaders urged authorities to resolve the matter within 15 working days. After that time passed without a solution, they decided to enforce a three-day strike starting August 12.

He said the economic lifespan of commercial vehicles should be extended to 30 years. While supporting the government's aim of reducing environmental pollution, he argued that pollution is primarily caused by vehicles using substandard fuel and lubricants or failing to maintain them properly. Since all parts of a vehicle except the chassis, including the engine, are replaceable, any vehicle failing a fitness test or proven to cause pollution should be declared unfit, regardless of age.

Previously, expired vehicles were barred only from operating in metropolitan areas but were allowed in districts with valid BRTA fitness certificates. "This provision must be retained," he said.

He also demanded that BRTA suspend its ongoing crackdown on older vehicles until these issues are resolved.

Among their other demands is the amendment to sections 98 and 105 of the Road Transport Act 2018, along with several other recommended provisions.

ECNEC halts project revision

FROM PAGE 12

which declined to approve the hastily submitted revision proposal for the project.

"At this moment, no final decision has been made. For now, we're holding off," he said, adding that the investigation committee will include local and, if needed, foreign legal experts and urban transport specialists to review everything.

The project authority sought Tk 2,329 crore more and five additional years to complement the project aimed at building the country's first 20 km-long dedicated bus corridor between Airport and Gazipur to make communication between the two cities smooth and fast.

Formally known as the "Greater Dhaka Sustainable Urban Transport Project", it was approved in November 2012 and was originally planned to be completed by December 2016 at a cost of Tk 2,037.9 crore.

But the long delay was caused by issues relating to land acquisition, relocation of utility services, design changes, contractors running out of money, and the pandemic. Moreover, physical work was suspended twice.

As a result, the total project was revised thrice, taking its cost to Tk 4,268.3 crore, and the latest deadline was December 2024.

Once the dedicated rapid bus service comes into operation, it is supposed to allow people to reach Dhaka from Gazipur in 35-40 minutes, which can now take between one and a half hours and three hours.

Till June this year, the project saw 97.43 percent progress, according to

the progress report.

However, the project got a setback after miscreants damaged 22 escalators to be used for elevated stations on the route during last year's student movement in July.

After the political changeover in August last year, the adviser to the road transport and bridges ministry decided to reassess the project.

As per the assessment, the ministry proposed to extend the project deadline up to December 2029 and raise the cost to Tk 6,597.66 crore, which is Tk 2,329.33 crore more than the revised cost, the document shows.

Acquisition of more land for bus depots, additional civil works, hiring consultants for developing a bus operation model on the corridor, and some other issues are the reasons for the cost escalation, read the documents.

But, after the ECNEC meeting, the planning adviser said foreign experts who evaluated the project couldn't believe it. "They've seen similar systems in Jakarta and elsewhere but couldn't understand why the BRT lane was built down the centre of the road, blocking all east-west pedestrian and vehicular movement.

"Who designed this? Why wasn't it considered that BRT systems are meant for areas with fewer crossings and less foot traffic? This BRT has become a massive barrier, preventing people from crossing and increasing accident risks."

"Was a study done to assess the demand? We've decided to investigate who made the original designs and how the feasibility study was done. Such an unusual project demand assessment

would require asking: who will ride it? Even if there's demand from Uttara, major inconsistencies remain."

Regarding each station having escalators, Wahiduddin said, "In Bangladesh, these don't last long. Most public escalators stop working soon."

"The original project cost was about Tk 2,000 crore but now, completing everything will require around Tk 6,500 crore," he said, adding, "The project started in December 2012. If it takes another 4-5 years, it'll break the record for the longest-running mega project in Bangladesh."

"Around 3,000-4,000 crore has already been spent -- mostly from foreign loans. What do we do now? If we proceed and buy all the buses, how much more will it cost? The revised cost is about Tk 6,500 crores. Will the benefits be worth it?" he questioned.

Meanwhile, the adviser said they have problems with contractors and project directors.

"IMED is preparing a report. We want a full report. Why so many contractors fled. Proper investigations should be conducted to identify those responsible."

"How much money was wasted or embezzled? How accountable are the project directors and other officials?" he asked.

Contractors involved in projects worth Tk 890 crore under three state agencies -- Roads and Highways Department, Bangladesh Railway, and Local Government Engineering Department -- have fled, Kamal Uddin, secretary of Implementation Monitoring and Evaluation Division (IMED) told reporters.

US, EU make trade deal

FROM PAGE 12

"We have a trade deal between the two largest economies in the world, and it's a big deal. It's a huge deal. It will bring stability. It will bring predictability," she said.

The deal, which also includes \$600 billion of EU investments in the United States and significant EU purchases of US energy and military equipment, will indeed bring clarity for EU companies.

However, the baseline tariff of 15 percent will be seen by many in Europe as a poor outcome compared to the initial European ambition of a zero-for-zero tariff deal, although it is better than the threatened 30 percent rate.

The deal mirrors parts of the framework agreement the United States clinched with Japan last week.

"We are agreeing that the tariff... for automobiles and everything else will be a straight across tariff of 15 percent," Trump said. However, the 15 percent baseline rate would not apply to steel and aluminium, for which a 50 percent tariff would remain in place.

Trump, who is seeking to reorder the global economy and reduce decades-old US trade deficits, has so far reeled in agreements with Britain, Japan, Indonesia, and Vietnam, although his administration has failed to deliver on a promise of "90 deals in 90 days."

Dhaka plans to buy 25 Boeing

FROM PAGE 1

confirmed the Boeing purchase plan. He said he was hopeful a tariff rate could be fixed between 15 percent and 20 percent for Bangladesh's exports. This would place Bangladesh on par with countries such as Japan (15 percent) and Vietnam (20 percent).

Reducing the trade gap and lessening over-reliance on Chinese products, especially industrial raw materials like fabrics for garment manufacturing, yarn, accessories, and machinery, are major conditions for Bangladesh in the negotiations.

After the second round of negotiations, held on July 9-11, the Trump administration asked Bangladesh to clearly state what kinds of trade benefits the country can offer the US and demanded zero duty for a series of products.

BIMAN'S RESPONSE

"Biman is not aware of the purchase of 25 aircraft from Boeing," ABM Raoshan Kabir, Biman's General Manager of Public Relations, told The Daily Star.

Top officials at Biman said they only learned about the potential purchase of 25 aircraft from Boeing through media reports.

"It's very surprising that Biman's top officials were not informed about the purchase of 25 Boeing aircraft," a top official of Biman told The Daily Star, wishing to remain anonymous. "Even our techno-financial committee is not aware of it. How is it possible to sign

an agreement bypassing Biman?" the official questioned.

Biman's current fleet includes four Boeing 787-8s, two 787-9s, four 777-300ERs, and four 737-800s. It also operates five De Havilland Canada DHC-8s (Dash-8 Q400).

Biman Managing Director and CEO Shafiqur Rahman recently told the media that they have received proposals from both Boeing and Airbus.

"Our techno-financial team is working on those proposals, and we will decide on buying the planes that will benefit us," he said.

Considering aircraft type and model, the price of a Boeing aircraft can range from \$250 million to \$300 million.

Aviation expert Kazi Wahidul Alam said, "Aircraft should be purchased based on Biman's fleet plan and market demand analysis. In the past, we have seen aircraft bought under external pressure without understanding Biman's real needs, which increased the financial burden."

"Biman needs aircraft at the moment. But they have spent the last three to four years just conducting assessments and are yet to make a decision," he said.

"One day they say Boeing, another day Airbus. They are wasting time. A decision must be made quickly, and the price must also be competitive."

In 2023, during a visit by French President Emmanuel Macron, the then Awami League government committed to buying 10 new A350 planes from Airbus.

down to 33 from 34.

4 IN CRITICAL CONDITION

Total 34 injured survivors, including 28 children, remained admitted to the burn institute yesterday, Director Dr Nasir said.

Among them, four were in critical condition and receiving treatment at the Intensive Care Unit (ICU), while nine others were in the "severe" category.

Six of the admitted patients have burn injuries covering over 30 percent of their bodies, the director said.

"Each day, unit heads talk to the patients twice and provide psychological support," Dr Nasir said, adding that more patients are expected to be released in the coming days based on their recovery.