

ROKEYA PADAK Ruvana, Kalpana, Nabila, Ritu Porna to get it this year

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The government has decided to award four women the Rokeya Padak in recognition of their significant contributions in their respective fields.

Ruvana Rakib has been selected in the category of women's education (research), Kalpana Akter in women's rights (labour rights), Nabila Idris in human rights, and Ritu Porna Chakma in women's awakening (sports), the Cabinet Division confirmed yesterday.

The award-giving ceremony will be held at the capital's Osmani Memorial Auditorium tomorrow. The laureates will be honoured at the event, which will be chaired by Sharmin Murshid, the women and children affairs adviser.

Chief Adviser Prof Muhammad Yunus will attend as the chief guest.

The Rokeya Padak is named after Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, a pioneer of Bengali women's education and a social reformer for ensuring equal rights for women and men.



Election commissioners, led by their chief AMM Nasir Uddin, meet Chief Adviser Prof Muhammad Yunus at Jamuna yesterday to brief him about preparations for the upcoming election and referendum.

PHOTO: PTD

DIG faces inquiry over obscene messages to junior colleague

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The home ministry has launched a departmental inquiry against Deputy Inspector General Mohammad Abu Sufian over allegations of sending an obscene video clip and disturbing messages to a junior female colleague through his Facebook Messenger.

Signed by the ministry's senior secretary, a show-cause notice was issued to the DIG on November 24, asking him to submit a written explanation in 10 working days as to why he should not be dismissed from service and handed down a penalty for the alleged misconduct. It added that he could provide his answer within the stipulated time or opt for a personal hearing for self-defence.

Contacted by The Daily Star yesterday, Inspector General of Police Baharul Alam confirmed that the allegations were currently being investigated by the home ministry.

Following the initiation of the inquiry, Sufian was transferred from his post as commissioner of Rajshahi Metropolitan Police to the Police Headquarters.



Abu Sufian

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‘People saw what they did in 1971’

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were respected political figures, and we should not speak ill of those who are no longer alive.

“What we can say is that they stayed in the BNP government until the very last day, showing their full confidence in Begum Khaleda Zia’s fight against corruption.”

He said the allegations of corruption during the BNP rule were raised, but now, with a more independent judiciary, no charges against them have been proven.

“All those were only propaganda. So, the conclusion remains – only BNP has been able to pull Bangladesh away from corruption in the past, and only BNP will be able to do it again.”

Tarique pointed out that he has been saying since August 5 last year that the days ahead would not be easy.

“More difficult times are awaiting us. Different conspiracies are being hatched from different directions. Only the people can stop these plots, and BNP, together with the people, can resist them.”

BNP Secretary General Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir inaugurated

the programme in the morning with BNP Senior Joint Secretary General Ruhul Kabir Rizvi in the chair.

FOCUS ON 8 SECTORS

BNP yesterday outlined an eight-sector plan it says it will implement if voted to power, covering family welfare, agriculture, health, education, sports, environment, religious affairs, and employment.

The pledges were highlighted at a six-hour training session where more than 1,000 Chhatra Dal leaders and activists were briefed on how to present the commitments to voters.

Under its Family Card, BNP plans to provide Tk 2,000 2,500 monthly assistance or essential food items to 50 lakh women.

For farmers, the proposed Farmer Card would ensure fair prices for fertiliser, seeds, and pesticides, along with incentives, easy-term loans, and insurance.

BNP’s health sector plan promises one lakh new health workers – 80 percent of them women – for door-to-door screening of common diseases.

It pledges round-the-clock free medicine through primary health centres, affordable treatment for

major illnesses, expanded maternal care at upazila hospitals, and year-round mosquito control initiatives.

In education, the party plans to provide tablet computers to teachers, set up multimedia classrooms, introduce a “Learning with Happiness” curriculum at Class Six, and make technical education compulsory.

Arabic, Japanese, and Korean would be offered as third languages, alongside mid-day meals and improved toilet facilities.

The party also pledges compulsory technical education from Class Four and sports villages in all 64 districts.

Its environment plan includes re-excavating 20,000km of canals and rivers and planting 25 crore trees.

BNP also promises monthly honorariums and festival allowances for imams, khatibs, and muezzins, along with support for other religious institutions.

On employment, the party plans to provide free internet at educational institutions and short-term training for foreign languages and skills development.

EC all set for polls, referendum in Feb

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the nation with the finest election in its history.”

SCHEDULE THIS WEEK

Election Commissioner Brig Gen (ret’d) Abul Fazal Md Sanaullah told reporters after the meeting at the EC, “We will announce the schedule [for national polls and referendum] this week.”

Asked whether BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia’s illness could delay the announcement, he said, “Political parties have expressed both support and opposition to such views. These are political statements. The EC is proceeding according to its own judgment, in line with its earlier commitment and the government’s plan.”

EC officials noted that election day is typically before or after a weekend, either Sunday or Thursday.

February 13 and 14 are weekends, and the last three national elections were all held on Sundays.

EXTENDED VOTING HOURS

With two ballots to be cast, time management has become a key concern. Voting will now run from 7:30am to 4:30pm, extending polling by an hour, with half an hour added to morning and afternoon sessions. Election day will be a public holiday.

Where space allows, additional booths will be set up.

A mock vote on November 29 showed that casting two ballots took a voter 3 minutes 52 seconds on average, about two minutes for those who did not read the ballot, and 7–8 minutes for those who did.

The EC has finalised plans for 42,761 polling centres and 2,44,739 booths. Each centre will serve about 3,000 voters, with one booth for every 600 male or 500 female voters. With eight hours of polling, each voter will have 48–58 seconds inside the booth.

BALLOT PAPERS

The EC decided that all election materials, including ballot papers, will reach polling stations the day before voting.

Asked whether this could revive

allegations of overnight ballot-stuffing, Sanaullah said, “The EC is confident that such events will not occur this time. The commission aims to restore public confidence and will remain vigilant to ensure the process is free from disruption.”

During the January 7, 2024 polls, ballots were delivered to 93 percent of centres on election morning, except remote areas. Traditionally, ballots were dispatched the previous day, a practice questioned after 2018 when opposition parties alleged ballot box stuffing before dawn.

Ballot printing for expatriate voters begins today, with dispatch starting tomorrow. These overseas ballots will not feature candidate names, only party and independent symbols, allowing voters to select their choice once nominations are finalised.

For the referendum campaign, the EC will support the government’s programmes. To make the referendum question easily visible, a large-size sample ballot will be displayed before the voter queue at every polling centre, Sanaullah added.

PRESIDING, RETURNING OFFICERS

The EC has prepared lists of presiding, assistant presiding, and polling officers, drawing from government, semi-government, autonomous and semi-autonomous bodies, and state-owned banks.

“Private bank officials will remain on reserve and engaged only if necessary,” Sanaullah said.

On returning officers, he said the meeting did not finalise appointments. Traditionally, deputy commissioners serve as ROs in the 64 districts and divisional commissioners in Dhaka and Chattogram. BNP has proposed appointing EC officials instead, and some EC staff have echoed the call.

“Usually, deputy commissioners serve as returning officers. Other proposals are under consideration. The EC is reviewing these, and a decision will be announced in due course,” Sanaullah said.

Asked about demands to bar the Jatiya Party and 14-party alliance partners from contesting, he replied, “The commission’s stance is that those permitted by law will be able to take part in the polls. The law specifies who can and cannot contest.”

On whether an adviser in the interim government may run, he said, “You will see in due time. It is probably not possible.”

The commission has already published the final voter list, completed delimitation of the 300 constituencies, approved registration for two new political parties with two more pending, and launched a mobile app for expatriate voter registration.

Meanwhile, the government has amended the Representation of the People Order, updated the electoral code of conduct, and nearly completed major reshuffles in field administration and the police.

Shibpur: A leftist fortress

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Shibpur Pilot High School. After the horror of the night that followed, central Chhatra Union leaders fled Dhaka for Shibpur, with Kazi Jafar, Menon, Rono among them.

Filmmaker Zahir Raihan also took shelter in Shibpur on his way to India. His car was used by the freedom fighters before he crossed the border through Joshar Bazar.

On March 27, on Mannan Bhuiyan’s orders and under the leadership of Mannan Khan, students and youth began weapons training on the high school grounds with rifles.

“The training was led by Majnu Mridha and Haris Mollah of the Bengal Regiment,” Mannan Khan, now 81, told this newspaper. “Towards the end of April, I went to India with 30–35 freedom fighters to collect weapons and for higher training.”

In the first week of May, Pakistani forces struck Shibpur, raiding the homes of farmer leaders Rob Khan and Rafiq Dakat in Chakradha. Freedom fighters led by Majnu Mridha ambushed them near Bandhaidhya Bridge.

Freedom fighter Abdul Latif, 78, remembered, “As soon as the military reached the bridge, we attacked together. Some soldiers were injured. Even after we pulled back, they kept firing until morning.”

After the clash, the force set up headquarters at Abdul Khalek’s house in Bilsharan and opened a training camp at Ashrafpur School. Weapons came in through many channels. After the Demra Panchdona battle, Bangalee soldiers retreated, leaving a cache behind.

Freedom fighter Tofazzal Hossain, 75, recalled, “Naval Siraj collected the weapons, which reached us through Majnu Mridha and Mannan Khan.” New camps sprang up across Shibpur.

Shibpur’s name travelled far. Students from across the country arrived for training while Joshar Bazar and the nearby Arial Khan river became a lifeline for refugees and freedom fighters heading to India, hence it earned the name “Second Agartala”.

“We set up a camp at Damodar Doctor’s house near Joshar Bazar to ease their journey,” said freedom fighter Chan Mia, 72.

In late May, early June, and mid-June, three groups of fighters went to India for training. Leftist leaders from both sides of the border formed a committee in Kolkata. Through close contact with the Communist Party of India, the Shibpur fighters gathered

public opinion and funds for the war.

By the last week of June, the force had opened 14 camps mostly for training. These included Ashrafpur School, Ningaon High School, Bilsharan Khalek’s house, Kamrab High School and Joshar Damu Doctor’s house.

Shibpur fighters fought at least 20 battles. To halt Pakistani troops on August 11, fighters and villagers led by Majnu Mridha destroyed the Putia Bridge. Expecting retaliation, they lay in ambush.



Putia Bridge

Freedom fighter Nurul Alam Molla said, “Around 11:00am, six trucks approached. From the riverbank, the guerrillas opened fire. Thirty Pakistani soldiers, including a captain, were killed; young freedom fighter Fazlu embraced martyrdom.”

The Pakistanis then erected a permanent camp at Putia, aided by some local peace committee members.

In September, the guerrillas executed some local robbers for collaboration. “Later that month, several Pakistani soldiers died in a mine explosion at Ghasirdia,” Mannan Khan said.

As Pakistani numbers swelled, the force prepared a two-pronged ambush. One group led by Mannan Khan took position at Shaspur intersection. Another under Majnu Mridha near Chandardia bridge. But information given by Razakars to the Pakistani forces turned the tide.

Pakistanis attacked Majnu’s group from behind. A firefight followed. “A Pakistani truck overturned after its driver was shot, killing four soldiers. The battle raged for two hours as reinforcements arrived. Freedom fighters Abdul Motalib Manik and Idris were martyred,” said freedom fighter Noim Uddin, 70.

When ammunition dwindled, the fighters retreated. Freedom fighter

Nazrul was captured and then released on November 19, the eve of Eid.

One of the force’s most striking operations was the Bharaterkandi Bridge battle. The Pakistanis had dug bunkers on both sides of the vital bridge.

One mid-November day, 12 fighters under Majnu Mridha split into two units and struck from both flanks.

Freedom fighter Nurul Alam Molla, 78, recalled, “Four Pakistani soldiers fell instantly. As the Pakistanis retaliated, a fierce battle ensued for



Mannan Bhuiyan



Mannan Khan

half an hour. The Pakistanis finally couldn’t keep up the resistance. They fled, leaving six dead. Then we blew up the bridge.”

By late November, the Pakistanis began thinning out of Shibpur. Sensing the shift, the guerrillas adopted a psychological tactic.

“We fired two rounds of blank shots at 9:00pm and again at dawn,” said Mannan Khan. “It terrified them through the night.”

At month’s end, fighters led by Majnu Mridha and Mannan Khan liberated Shibpur.

On December 6, they marched to reclaim Narsingdi. The final battle unfolded at the T&T camp on December 11.

After one and a half days of combat, the Pakistanis fled toward Dhaka before dawn on December 13.

Narsingdi was free!

Mannan Bhuiyan died on July 28, 2010 at the age of 67.

300 companies ask BB

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Through a total of 43 meetings, the committee took initiatives to dispose of approximately 900 applications out of 1,516 from 300 groups, according to the BB report.

On September 16, the BB also issued a unified special loan rescheduling policy to maintain economic growth and for borrowers who had defaulted due to circumstances beyond their control.

The special rescheduling policy was issued to ensure equal opportunities for all affected borrowers, particularly those who generate investment and employment, and to provide policy support to genuinely distressed borrowers to maintain balanced and inclusive economic activities, said a

senior official of the central bank.

The central bank yesterday held an emergency meeting with the Association of Bankers, Bangladesh (ABB) aiming to reduce the high amount of bad loans.

As of September, defaulted loans in the banking sector hit a record Tk 6.44 lakh crore, or nearly 36 percent of total disbursed loans – the highest bad-loan ratio since 2000.

At the meeting, the central bank governor instructed banks to reduce the high volume of bad loans by using the BB’s special loan rescheduling policy by December this year, said a chief executive of a private commercial bank seeking anonymity.

Bankers, however, fear this approach might encourage a culture of non-payment and weaken

banking discipline, especially as it includes long-term defaulters linked to political patronage.

According to them, the scale of relief highlights the depth of the banking sector’s troubles.

As of June, more than Tk 4.07 lakh crore in bad loans are stuck in 222,341 cases filed by banks to recover those loans, according to the BB report.

The backlog of cases persists mainly because the pace of disposing of old cases has slowed while the number of new cases continues to rise.

Between April and June, 11,944 cases were disposed of, from which banks recovered only Tk 2,910 crore. During the quarter, 14,652 new cases involving Tk 96,904 crore were filed.

Khaleda undergoes several tests

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ready, the highest priority is proper medical care, safety, and security for Begum Khaleda Zia.”

The former premier was admitted to Evercare Hospital on November 23 on the advice of her medical board after being diagnosed with infections affecting her heart and lungs.

She is also suffering from pneumonia and is currently receiving treatment in the hospital’s Coronary Care Unit (CCU).

Khaleda, 80, has long been battling multiple health complications, including liver cirrhosis, arthritis, diabetes, and issues affecting her kidneys, lungs, heart, and eyes.

Meanwhile, BNP Secretary

General Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir expressed hope that the party chief would recover with “divine blessings”.

“People all over the country are praying for her, regardless of their political affiliation. We have faith in Allah, and we believe that with the prayers of so many people for her recovery, Allah will surely respond to them,” he said this while speaking at a programme in the capital yesterday.

He added that highly reputed national and international doctors are providing Khaleda with treatment.

“None of us can feel happy at this moment. We are heavy-hearted because our great leader,

the guardian of Bangladesh, now called the guardian of democracy of Bangladesh, is critically ill and receiving treatment.”

Fakhrul said all necessary measures are being taken for her treatment, and BNP acting chairman and her eldest son Tarique Rahman is monitoring.

Yesterday, special prayers were offered for her swift recovery in different parts of the country.

BNP leaders and activists continued to gather outside Evercare Hospital yesterday to enquire about Khaleda’s health, despite repeated instructions from the party not to crowd the hospital premises.