

Man called out of his home and then murdered

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Cox's Bazar

A man was killed after being called out from his home allegedly by one of his neighbours in Chakaria upazila of Cox's Bazar on Saturday night.

The deceased was identified as Mohammad Mujib, 45, of the Kasaipara area.

Police suspect that the killer tried to cover up the killing as an incident of robbery.

Quoting family members and locals, police said Mujib had a longstanding rivalry with Mohammad Arif, 28.

On Saturday evening, Arif called Mujib from his home offering to have iftar together. The two went to Shah Omar Mazar.

On their way back around 8:30pm, Mujib was allegedly tied up and strangled to death on a road near Sebakhola Dumchita pond. His body was then dumped in a nearby tobacco field.

The killer staged a drama of robbery to cover up the killing, said Mohammad Monir Hossain, officer-in-charge (OC) of Chakaria Police Station.

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Saudi Ambassador Abdullah Zafer H bin Abiyah pays a courtesy call on Prime Minister Tarique Rahman at the Secretariat's Cabinet Division yesterday.

PHOTO: PTD

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Students, staff allege sexual abuse by headmaster

MONG SING HAI MARMA, Bandarban

Multiple complaints of sexual abuse against the headmaster of Bandarban Government High School have been filed with the district's deputy commissioner.

Victims – including both students and staff – allege that he exploited his position of authority to prey on vulnerable members of the institution.

Confirming the complaints, Bandarban DC Shamim Ara Rini said she received a written complaint signed by two students and their guardians on February 10, accusing the headmaster, Md Sirajul Islam, of sexual abuse.

The complainants alleged that Sirajul sexually assaulted them by threatening to fail them in examinations, the DC told The Daily Star at her office on February 16.

She also said that some temporary staff of the institution alleged that the headmaster sexually abused them, promising to make their jobs permanent.

The DC yesterday said a three-member committee, headed by Senior Assistant Commissioner (Revenue) Foyzur Rahman, was formed to investigate the matter on February 10.

"If the allegations are proven, this would constitute a grave offence for a teacher, and appropriate legal action will be taken," she said.

Fresh push made for deal

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Without elaborating on the issues discussed, the official, who preferred to remain anonymous, said the main objective of the meeting was to apprise the prime minister of the latest developments in the deal process with the Japanese consortium and the overall status of the terminal.

Finance and Planning Minister Amir Khosru Mahmud Chowdhury; Civil Aviation and Tourism Minister Afroza Khanam; State Minister M Rashiduzzaman Millat; CAAB Chairman Air Vice Marshal Md Mostafa Mahmud Siddique; Bangladesh Investment Development Authority Executive Chairman Chowdhury Ashik Mahmud Bin Harun; and Civil Aviation and Tourism Secretary Nasreen Jahan, among others, were present at the meeting.

Civil aviation ministry sources said the meeting discussed the progress of the terminal and how it could be made operational at the earliest possible time.

Following the meeting, the finance minister declined to comment, saying it was a closed door meeting.

Civil Aviation Minister Afroza Khanam, however, told reporters, "It would not be possible to say [right now] exactly when the third terminal will be ready for operation."

"There will be further discussions and technical assessments to determine how the process can be expedited. Work is underway, but we cannot give a definite date right now," she said, adding that the prime minister has taken initiatives in this regard.

Asked, BIDA Executive Chairman Ashik Chowdhury said, "Today's [yesterday's] was just a briefing. The PM has given some directives. Our goal is to get the third terminal up and running as early as possible.... No specific timeline has been set."

In 2017, the then Awami League government took up the Third Terminal

construction project, and work began on December 28, 2019, with an estimated cost of around Tk 21,398 crore.

The government contributed Tk 5,000 crore to the project, with the remainder funded through loans from the Japan International Cooperation Agency.

The "soft inauguration" of the Third Terminal took place under deposed prime minister Sheikh Hasina on October 7, 2023.

At the time, CAAB said several times that full operations would begin in 2024. However, that did not happen.

Despite repeated efforts by the interim government later, the terminal is yet to open.

CAAB sources said the delay was mainly due to failure to reach decisions on ground handling and other operational issues, as well as technical flaws in work inside the terminal building.

A CAAB official said that with the BNP-led new government assuming office on February 17, fresh hopes have emerged for the opening of the terminal.

In early January, then civil aviation adviser Sk Bashir Uddin said the interim government made every effort, including negotiations with the Japanese vice minister, but those attempts were unsuccessful.

Negotiations between CAAB and the Japanese consortium on the mandatory operation and maintenance agreement failed to reach a consensus, another CAAB official said.

The consortium includes Japan Airport Terminal Company, Sumitomo Corporation, Sojitz, and Narita International Airport Corporation.

Officials involved in the process told The Daily Star that the ministry and the Japanese consortium could not finalise the modalities for running the terminal, causing the delay. They could not reach

consensus on the terms and conditions of the agreement, sources at CAAB and the ministry said.

"The government considered the consortium's revenue-sharing proposal too high," a CAAB official said, adding that several meetings were held late last year without any conclusive outcome.

CAAB Chairman Mostafa Mahmood said about 99 percent of construction work on the terminal has been completed.

In September 2023, the Public-Private Partnership Authority signed a deal with the International Finance Corporation for transaction advisory services for the terminal's operation and maintenance.

The AL government had decided in principle to operate the terminal under a public private partnership with the Japanese consortium.

Under the interim government's plan, Biman Bangladesh Airlines was to manage passenger and cargo handling for two years under the consortium's supervision, while CAAB would oversee data security.

Officials said that even after signing the agreement, opening the terminal would require at least six months to recruit and train manpower.

Besides, the standard operating procedure for the terminal is yet to be formulated, they added.

The terminal spans 542,000 square metres and will require around 6,000 personnel to operate in four shifts, including about 4,000 security staff.

Business leaders have repeatedly called for the terminal's swift opening, especially after India suspended third-country transshipment on April 8 last year, creating challenges for Bangladesh garment exporters.

Air transshipment through India had gained popularity due to lower costs and faster services compared to Dhaka airport, which has long struggled with inefficiency and mismanagement.

Home boss hints at police top brass shakeup

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"Some changes will certainly come; give it a little time," he told reporters outside the Prime Minister's Office at the Secretariat, declining to elaborate on what form those changes might take or which posts could be affected.

His remarks come amid mounting speculation over appointments to key positions in the police hierarchy following the formation of the BNP-led government.

Talk of a major reshuffle has centred on the force's two most powerful offices

– the inspector general of police (IGP) and the commissioner of the Dhaka Metropolitan Police (DMP).

Incumbent IGP Baharul Alam and DMP Commissioner Sheikh Md Sazzat Ali were appointed on November 20, 2024, during the interim government's tenure on two-year contractual terms. The chief of the Special Branch was also appointed on contract.

Their appointments, made after retirement, had triggered discontent among sections of the force.

According to Police Headquarters sources, after the 13th national election

on February 12, Baharul conveyed his intention to resign at an internal meeting and later submitted a letter to the home ministry. The ministry did not accept it and asked him to continue for the time being.

Meanwhile, several senior officers have begun lobbying for the top posts. Police sources say the names of at least five senior officials are being discussed for the IGP position, while three are being considered for DMP commissioner. No formal decision has yet been announced.

Govt faces \$30b debt servicing bill

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The IMF noted that all public debt indicators are on a more prominent upward trend than in the previous analysis, reflecting higher borrowing costs and slower economic growth.

While tax reforms may slightly lower the debt service-to-revenue ratio by fiscal year 2026-27, extreme scenarios, such as a major natural disaster, could see it surge to over 110 percent of the GDP by 2030.

"This underscores the importance of raising the revenue to GDP ratio to reduce growing domestic debt vulnerabilities," the IMF said.

Bangladesh's tax-to-GDP ratio currently remains below 7 percent, limiting its ability to manage debt. Addressing this, Finance Minister Amir Khosru Mahmud Chowdhury has announced that the BNP government aims to raise this ratio to 8 percent in the upcoming budget.

The IMF warned that heavy reliance on domestic borrowing, particularly from banks, could "crowd out" private businesses, which means less money is available for the private sector, and strain the financial system's

capacity to absorb government debt, potentially pushing up borrowing costs.

Furthermore, if the government relies on the central bank to support insolvent banks, it risks losing control over short-term interest rates. This could trigger currency devaluation and inflation, creating a harmful economic cycle that would further undermine debt sustainability.

Overall risks to Bangladesh's debt-servicing capacity are "notable and rising", the IMF said. Delayed reforms in the banking sector or slow progress in boosting revenues – currently projected to reach only 12.2 percent of the GDP gradually – could weigh on economic activity in both the near and medium term.

To mitigate these risks, the report stressed the need to diversify the investor base for government securities, noting that authorities are already working on reforms, including to the primary dealer system.

A primary dealer system is an institutional arrangement where a select group of financial intermediaries, typically banks or large investment

firms, are authorised to trade directly with the government to support the issuance and distribution of securities.

The IMF report also said that a liability management framework is essential to address increasing rollover risks.

Former finance adviser Salehuddin Ahmed, in a note to his successor, acknowledged that Bangladesh's debt risk has been downgraded from low to moderate.

While the debt level is still considered tolerable by IMF benchmarks, he emphasised that caution is essential.

He noted that loan repayments are outpacing export earnings and government revenue.

The note advised strengthening revenue collection and avoiding high-interest, non-concessional loans whenever possible.

The recently dissolved interim government had also acknowledged these challenges in its response to the IMF. It recognised that low revenues, rising costs, and banking sector vulnerabilities pose urgent hurdles to meeting the country's growing financial requirements.

PM sets strict punctuality tone at Secretariat

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On his first day, he noticed several ministers arriving late. The following day, he had attendance checked across ministries and found that a number of ministers and state ministers were not maintaining office hours.

By the third day, he personally asked about which officials had yet to arrive at the Secretariat and expressed displeasure over their tardiness. Tarique, who has himself attended the office on time and worked through the weekend, reminded colleagues at a meeting yesterday of the importance of punctuality and urged cabinet members and senior officials to ensure timely attendance and strict adherence to office hours.

Seeking anonymity, a state minister said, "While Prime Minister Tarique Rahman has been maintaining office hours properly, some ministers and state ministers have reportedly overlooked it. The prime minister is firm on the issue of punctuality and discipline."

"The prime minister has made it clear that the practice of arriving late, as may have been tolerated in the past, will not be accepted under his leadership. He has instructed

all concerned to adhere to fixed office hours and ensure regular attendance," he told this newspaper.

Tarique has formed a 49-member cabinet, including 25 ministers and 24 state ministers. During Ramadan, office hours for public institutions have been fixed from 9:00am to 3:30pm.

The prime minister has also been monitoring appointments of private secretaries, viewing them as indicators of how ministers intend to run their offices.

During yesterday's meeting, he emphasised the need for efficiency, transparency and accountability in the functioning of his office.

He noted that public expectations are high following the national election and that the government must set the standard for governance.

"He wants the ministry to function in a disciplined and result-oriented manner. Election pledges and other public welfare-related work must be prioritised," a senior official at the secretariat said, requesting anonymity as he was not authorised to speak to the media.

Another officer said, "The prime minister has set a clear message: competence, responsibility and transparency will be central to the functioning of his office as the new

administration moves to implement its policy priorities."

The prime minister wants experienced individuals with a clean image to avoid controversy and accelerate development activities, sources said.

Tarique is also making a note of which officials performed their duties properly and with responsibility, sources added.

The premier has directed senior officials to monitor progress regularly and submit performance updates.

Yesterday, the prime minister held meetings with the foreign minister, Saudi Arabia's ambassador, and senior cabinet members. He also chaired a session on the third terminal of Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport.

In the final meeting of the day, a programme titled "Building a Healthy Bangladesh" was discussed.

The government plans to appoint one lakh new health workers, 80 percent of them women, for door-to-door screening of common diseases, in line with the BNP's health sector election pledges.

Officials discussed how to implement the programme effectively so that the public can benefit properly, said sources.

Trade deal chains Dhaka to US tech orbit

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with the US.

"We have no interest in keeping the moratorium on customs duties on electronic transmissions," he said, adding that other developing countries want to lift the moratorium to unlock a revenue stream, and Bangladesh should do the same.

Under the agreement, Bangladesh has pledged not to introduce a digital services tax that "discriminates against US companies." That may effectively protect US tech companies from local taxation on sales revenue generated from Bangladeshi users, limiting a future revenue source for the government.

Traditional international tax laws dictate that a company only pays corporate income tax in a country if it has a "physical presence" there, like a factory or a headquarters.

Today, big tech companies (often based in the US or Europe) can generate millions of dollars in revenue from users in a developing country without ever opening a local office. Digital service tax allows governments to bypass the physical presence rule and tax the gross revenue a company makes directly from local users.

Developing nations argue that

their citizens are the ones generating value for these platforms – Netflix, for example – through their data, attention, and content use.

Experts say the digital trade provisions in the deal could undermine Bangladesh's freedom in future digital policy and increase its reliance on US technology.

Abdur Razaque, chairman of Research and Policy Integration for Development, said the deal was the outcome of a power-based negotiation.

"It has been imposed on us," he said.

Signed on February 9, the agreement on reciprocal trade, as it is known, sets binding rules on taxation, data governance and digital trade. The commitments Bangladesh has made may curb its ability to shape its own digital economy as the sector expands.

The deal also bars Bangladesh from enforcing data localisation, which means authorities cannot force foreign firms to store or process personal and commercial data of Bangladeshi citizens within the country. Instead, the agreement guarantees unrestricted cross-border data flows, reducing Dhaka's control over a growing pool of digital and

commercial data.

Attention is also focused on enforcement provisions within the agreement that allow Washington to withdraw trade benefits and reimpose punitive tariffs if Bangladesh enters into digital trade arrangements with other countries, deemed detrimental to US interests.

Mostafa Abid Khan, a former member of the Bangladesh Trade and Tariff Commission, said the agreement refers to the possible restoration of President Donald Trump's executive order issued on April 2, 2025, which had imposed a 37 percent tariff on Bangladesh exports to the US.

Although the original executive order is no longer in force, experts say, the inclusion of these restrictive provisions in the signed agreement signals continuing leverage.

The provisions could also determine Bangladesh's future technology choices. If Bangladesh turns to lower-cost telecom equipment from Chinese suppliers, for example, it may trigger US trade penalties and affect key export sectors such as garments.

"There is no other option but to review the agreement with the US," Mostafa said.

Iran willing to dilute uranium stockpile

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Tehran universities, prompting fresh clashes in the street.

The universities were reopening after being closed due to fear of protests. At Sharif University, the students chanted "Javed Shah", "Until the mullah is shrouded, this homeland will not become a homeland" and "Death to the dictator."

The Sharif University president urged the students to stop, warning that the authorities would force classes back online, reports The Guardian.

Iranians had reprised their protest slogans earlier this week to mark the 40th day since thousands of people were killed as a wave of demonstrations was peaking on January 8 and 9.

Meanwhile, Trump's special envoy Steve Witkoff said the US is curious as to why Iran has not yet "capitulated" and agreed to curb its nuclear programme.

"I don't want to use the word

'frustrated,' because he understands he has plenty of alternatives, but he's curious as to why they haven't...I don't want to use the word 'capitulated,' but why they haven't capitulated," Witkoff said in an interview on Fox News on Saturday.

"Why, under this pressure, with the amount of seapower and naval power over there, why haven't they come to us and said, 'We profess we don't want a weapon, so here's what we're prepared to do?' And yet it's sort of hard to get them to that place."

As Trump pushed the US to the brink of war with Iran, his aides urge him to focus more on voters' economic worries, highlighting the political risks of military escalation ahead of this year's midterm elections.

A senior White House official said that despite Trump's bellicose rhetoric there was still no "unified support" within the administration to go ahead with an attack on Iran.

Iran has a stockpile of uranium enriched to 60 percent, close to weapons grade, but is willing to down-blend the purity to 20 percent or below.

Iran's Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi is also claiming that there has been no US demand to abandon the right to enrich inside Iran. The focus is instead on the purity of the enrichment and the number of centrifuges to be permitted.

There had been discussion of the stockpile being sent to Russia, and for Iran's domestic enrichment programme to be linked in with an overseas consortium, but Iranian sources are insisting the concept of a consortium has not been raised.

Iranian media close to the government quoted an Iranian diplomat as saying: "We emphasised this position during the negotiations that nuclear materials will not leave the country."