# Man shot dead during BGB's anti-smuggling drive in M'singh

**OUR CORRESPONDENT,** *Mymensingh*

A man shot dead when Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB) members fired "warning shots" during an anti-smuggling operation along the Haluaghat border in Mymensingh early yesterday, while a BGB member was assaulted by suspected smugglers.

The deceased, Ruman, 32, was of Betkuchi village in Haluaghat upazila, said Md Jalal Uddin, officer-in-charge (OC) of Haluaghat Police Station.

Based on a tip-off, a patrol team from Telikhali Border Outpost seized four cows in the Joljolia area around 5:45am, said Lt Col Md Nurul Azim Baizid, commanding officer of BGB-39 Mymensingh Battalion.

When the team was on their way back to the camp, a group of suspected smugglers armed with locally made weapons attacked them, he said.

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**Solar-powered streetlights installed by Dhaka South City Corporation to save electricity are becoming dysfunctional due to a lack of maintenance and supervision. Several solar panels and lights near the Officers' Club on Bailey Road in Dhaka have stopped working.**

PHOTO: **PALASH KHAN**

# Ex-army officers on 4-day remand in sedition case

**COURT CORRESPONDENT**

A Dhaka court yesterday placed two retired army officers on a four-day remand in a sedition case.

Dhaka Metropolitan Magistrate Didarul Alam passed the order after the Detective Branch (DB) of Dhaka Metropolitan Police produced Lt (retd) Kazi Gulshan Ara and Lt Col (retd) Debashish before the court with a seven-day remand prayer, said Additional Public Prosecutor Muhammad Shamsud Doha Sumon.

According to a forwarding report submitted to the court, the two accused and their associates had been collecting funds for anti-government activities and creating and disseminating violent and provocative digital content on various social media platforms.

Through platforms named "Unity Care" and "Public Parliament", formed by a group of retired army officers, the accused allegedly maintained contact with former army chief General (retd) Aziz Ahmed, a former home minister and fugitive senior leaders, and conspired to rehabilitate the Awami League, whose activities are currently banned, and commit organised crimes against the state, the report said.

The accused had also allegedly been trying to destabilise the country by creating content inciting violence and unrest through a page named "KalAjKal.com".

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# 253 women, girls raped in three months

## HRSS also reports political violence, custodial deaths, journo attacks during July-Sept

**STAFF CORRESPONDENT**

Violence against women and children remained a major human rights concern in Bangladesh during July-September, according to a quarterly report by rights body Human Rights Support Society (HRSS).

Released yesterday, the report, based on reports published in 16 national newspapers, HRSS-collected information and fact-finding reports, recorded 783 women and girls subjected to violence and 733 children subjected to abuse.

At least 253 women and girls were raped, including 154 minors. Forty-two were gang-raped, 12 were killed after being raped and one died by suicide. Another 220, including 103 children, faced sexual harassment.

Dowry-related violence left 13 women dead and 17 injured, while two others died by suicide. Domestic violence left 137 women dead and 68 injured, while 72 others died by suicide.

Of the 733 children, 189 died and 544 suffered physical or psychological abuse. The report did not specify the circumstances of their deaths.

Political violence left 17 people dead and 1,227 injured in 183 incidents, including 161 involving internal BNP conflicts or clashes with other political groups.

Internal BNP conflicts accounted for 69 incidents, leaving nine dead and at least 540 injured. Another 31 clashes between the BNP and Jamaat-e-Islami left one dead and 338 injured.

HRSS attributed the violence to political rivalry, internal party disputes, disputes over control of land and businesses, and extortion.

Mob violence and lynching left 54 people dead and 145 injured in 137 incidents linked to allegations of theft, robbery, religious insult, rape and attempted rape, as well as other disputes.

At least 37 people died in prisons, including 14 convicted prisoners and 23 awaiting trial. Six others died in law enforcement custody or allegedly due to torture.

The report also documented 88 incidents of assault or harassment involving 135 journalists. Of them, 63 were injured, 27 humiliated, 18 threatened and nine detained.

Law enforcers allegedly obstructed 18 meetings and rallies, leaving 128 people injured and eight detained.

Labour-related abuse left 71 workers dead and at least 260 injured in 251 incidents. Separately, 164 workers died in workplace accidents, which HRSS attributed to unsafe working conditions and inadequate protective equipment.

One domestic worker was murdered, three died under mysterious circumstances and three were subjected to abuse. All but two of the victims were children or adolescents.

Six attacks on minority communities left six people injured and involved attacks on or vandalism of two temples, five idols and four homes.

HRSS Executive Director Izazul Islam called for coordinated efforts by the state and society to strengthen the rule of law and urged the government to take effective measures to prevent violence against women and children, political and mob violence, attacks on journalists and minorities, unsafe working conditions, and deaths in custody and prisons.

**MONGLA PORT MODERNISATION**

# Bangladesh signs $335.78m Chinese loan

**STAFF CORRESPONDENT**

Bangladesh yesterday signed a $335.78 million loan agreement with China's Export-Import Bank to expand and modernise Mongla Port, including the construction of two container terminals equipped with modern machinery.

The loan agreement, worth RMB 2.404 billion or Tk 3,592.90 crore, was signed yesterday, according to a press release issued by the Economic Relations Division (ERD) of the Ministry of Finance.

Under the project, the Mongla Port Authority will construct two container terminals, a container yard, a container delivery yard and a cargo handling yard. The port will also undergo necessary modernisation.

The Chinese government has confirmed concessional financing for the project at an interest rate of 2%, according to the agreement.



FILE PHOTO

The loan will have a repayment period of 20 years, including a five-year grace period.

Alia Meher, joint secretary of the ERD, signed the agreement on behalf of the Bangladesh government, while Fengjun Tian, assistant general manager of China's EXIM Bank, signed on behalf of the Chinese side.

# Saudi conflict risks another economic blow

FROM PAGE 1

But the Iran-backed Houthis' attacks now are testing Salman's multitrillion-dollar drive to remake the Saudi economy.

If the strikes on vital Saudi infrastructure seen in recent days continue for long, it spells bad news for Bangladesh's migrant workers and the inflow of remittance, one of the two pillars of the economy.

It could reduce employment opportunities and eventually force migrant workers to return, said Hossain Zillur Rahman, executive chairman of the Power and Participation Research Centre.

Even then, scores of Bangladesh's migrant workers are in an agonising state of suspense after the kingdom's civil aviation authorities suspended flight operations from Riyadh's King Khalid International Airport until October 17 and are running Dammam's King Fahd International Airport at limited capacity.

Restrictions on flight operations at Saudi Arabian airports have affected 61 flights, including 22 direct and 39 transit services, impacting at least 8,381 passengers, according to the latest figures from the Civil Aviation Authority of Bangladesh.

For migrant workers who have strict deadlines to join work, a missed flight can be devastating by way of employment risk, visa validity and the cost of rearranging travel.

So far, remittance has not been impacted, but if the conflict prolongs, it can.

Shama Obaed Islam, state minister for foreign affairs, warned of possible consequences for remittance from the escalating Middle East conflict.

The government is exploring new overseas employment markets and opportunities for returning workers, she told the media yesterday.

The immediate priority should be the safety of Bangladeshis in the region, Zillur said.

Other than remittances, Saudi Arabia accounts for roughly 35 percent of Bangladesh's crude oil imports.

Two Bangladeshis were killed and 27 others injured after a missile strike on the Riyadh airport on Saturday. At least 13 people were killed and more than 300 others injured in the attack.

Of the wounded, 15 are undergoing treatment at hospitals, according to the Bangladesh Embassy in Riyadh.

Five were initially in critical condition, but four are now out of danger. Only Saffat Rahman, who arrived on an Umrah visa, remains critical, said the report signed by embassy Counsellor Muhammad Reza-e-Rabbi.

The remaining 12 injured workers were released after primary treatment.

The embassy said it is monitoring the situation and stands ready to provide emergency assistance.

It also urged Bangladeshis in Saudi Arabia to remain vigilant, avoid risky and crowded places, and comply with instructions from Saudi authorities.

The embassy also warned that collecting, sharing or publishing conflict-related photographs, videos and information on social media could constitute a punishable offence under the Saudi law, and advised expatriates against storing or exchanging such material on their phones.

Former ambassador M Humayun Kabir, also the president of the Bangladesh Enterprise Institute, called for balanced engagement with the parties involved, stressing that Bangladesh should protect its national interests without unnecessarily alienating important partners.

"The conflict has placed Bangladesh in a diplomatically difficult position," he said.

# UP polls in 5 phases, likely from Jan 21

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polls in the third week of January.

Asked whether the EC had discussed the election dates with the government, Election Commissioner Abul Fazal Md Sanaullah said the commission had met representatives of all government departments on September 17.

"After the meeting and completion of the desk work, we are announcing the election date," he said.

The commissioner said the polls would be held in five phases on January 21, February 4, April 29, May 13, and May 27.

Sanaullah said all five polling dates fall on Thursdays.

The EC will announce the election schedules around six weeks before the respective polling dates, he said while briefing the media.

The schedules may be announced 42 days before an election, but this could vary from 38 to 45 days, the commissioner said, adding that the number of phases had been reduced from seven to five due to time constraints.

The EC plans to hold the polls simultaneously across all districts, prioritising Sadar upazilas and union parishads whose terms have expired.

Bangladesh has 4,580 union parishads, and EC data shows that 3,975 of them will be eligible for elections by December.

Sanaullah said the EC had initially tried to hold the polls before January 21 but adjusted its plans following a request from the organisers of Biswa Ijtema concerning the date of Akheri Munajat (final prayers).

Responding to a question, he said the commission would hold a separate meeting with law enforcement agencies to discuss their preparedness for the local government elections.

"Their representatives were present at the meeting [on September 17]. At the time, we were informed that they would complete their training activities by November."

Regarding the deployment of army personnel during the local body polls, Sanaullah said similar concerns had been raised ahead of the national polls, which he described as among the most peaceful elections.

Expressing hope that the UP elections would be free of violence and calling for support from all relevant stakeholders, the commissioner said the EC sought to uphold the culture of good elections.

# Opposition marches to SC against polls chief

FROM PAGE 1

protesters over the weekend, including leaders of the 'Cockroach Janta Party' (CJP), as supporters of the youth movement sought to march in protest and were stopped by thousands of security personnel who locked down central Delhi.

Opposition parties yesterday marched to the top court to file a petition over the voter list revision after Chief Justice Surya Kant declined their request for a meeting. Kant said the issues were already before the court and discussing pending cases would violate judicial ethics and propriety, and suggested the opposition file a petition instead.

Hundreds of people, including opposition party members and left-wing student groups, marched to the court, while leaders travelled by bus.

While the INDIA bloc march to the top court, led by Congress leader Rahul Gandhi, was stopped on Bhagwan Das Road, Gandhi and other bloc leaders reached the court in the evening, where his legal team completed the formalities for filing a petition against the Election Commission over alleged voter deletions and irregularities in the Special Intensive Revision (SIR).

Cockroach Janta Party (CJP) leaders, including Saurav Das and Ashutosh Ranka, visited the Parliament Street Police Station yesterday to seek a date for a peaceful protest at Jantar Mantar against chief election commissioner. The CJP has also given the Delhi Police 24 hours to provide a date to hold a protest at Jantar Mantar.

Earlier, Delhi police announced that Jantar Mantar in the central business district was no longer designated as an official protest site and three new venues had been identified, according to an official order seen by Reuters.

Authorities closed six metro stations for 10 hours and restricted traffic along over 20 stretches in anticipation of the demonstration. Hundreds of security personnel in anti-riot gear were also deployed in central Delhi, with key roads barricaded and water cannons on standby.

The ruling BJP said the protests were the main opposition Congress party's attempt to seize power.

"By discrediting constitutional institutions, spreading chaos and riots on the streets, and attacking people in the name of politics, all it seeks is a return to power," Agriculture Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan told reporters.

Opposition parties allege Muslim voters and other minorities, who are unlikely to support the Hindu nationalist ruling party, are disproportionately affected by the deletions – charges both the poll panel and BJP reject.

"The fundamental values of this country are being assaulted, institutions are losing their independence...I am here to protest against this assault," said Anirudh Siyag, a PhD student who joined the protest.

# Debt burden grows for rural poor

FROM PAGE 1

The research finds that the share of households with two or more loans increased from 27 percent to 33 percent since 2010. It did not examine the reasons behind the growing debt burden.

According to the report, NGO microfinance institutions (MFIs) now account for three out of every four rural loans, making them the dominant source of credit in rural areas.

However, wider access to loans has coincided with a growing repayment burden, particularly among poorer households.

Despite an increase in the number of lenders, interest rates have remained largely unchanged over the past decade.

The effective interest rate on loans provided by MFIs stands at 27 percent, while banks charge around 10 percent interest and MFIs charge a flat rate of 15 percent. Moneylenders charge between 50 and 60 percent.

The BIDS research director said competition could not bring down the effective interest rates charged by MFIs.

"This is because there is a huge demand for credit at the current high rates," he said, adding that a push from the regulator, the Microcredit Regulatory Authority (MRA), was needed to cut borrowing costs.

Large and national-level NGOs are also better positioned to cut interest rates, he said.

The BIDS study also finds that agriculture's share of total rural borrowing fell from 25 percent to 16 percent, reflecting broader structural changes in the economy.

Agricultural loans are mainly used to buy fertiliser, seeds, and livestock and to meet cash expenses for land leasing, rather than to purchase agricultural machinery.

Farmers who rent land through cash payments and those who cultivate under sharecropping arrangements borrow the most. Access to bank loans, however, depends on land ownership.

Another study by IFPRI, presented at the workshop, finds that banks finance only 2-7 percent of machinery purchases.

Among combine harvester owners, just 5 percent used bank loans to buy their machines. Around 32 percent borrowed money from relatives, 27 percent from microfinance institutions or NGOs, and 8 percent from moneylenders.

The study says dealers remain the main source of machinery financing, covering an average of 57 percent of a combine harvester's net price, usually with repayment over 18 months. A signed blank cheque is often taken as security.

It says the costs of repairing machinery create further financial pressure. Over one-third of combine harvester owners borrow to cover repairs, mainly from relatives and moneylenders, and nearly half of those repair loans remain unpaid.

The report says about 64 percent of combine harvester owners' income comes between April and June, leaving them facing cash shortages during the remaining nine months of the year.

The researchers recommend machinery-backed loans, seasonal repayment schedules, and hire-purchase financing with terms of at least three years.

They also call for changes to agricultural credit rules that exclude machinery services provided on other people's land from recognised agricultural activity.

Another IFPRI study, conducted with WeGro, examined whether sharing business risks could encourage livestock investment.

Under the profit-sharing arrangement, WeGro financed cattle purchases and received one-third of the profit after sale, while farmers kept two-thirds. Farmers owed nothing to WeGro if there was no profit.

Agriculture Secretary Md Salim Khan, MRA Executive Vice-Chairman Prof Mohammed Helal Uddin, and Palli Karma-Sahayak Foundation Managing Director Md Fazlul Kader were present at the event, which was chaired by BIDS Director General Prof AK Enamul Haque.