ALIF MURDER

2 more suspects detained

OUR CORRESPONDENT, *Netrokona*

Detectives early yesterday detained two more suspects in connection with the murder of journalist Lutfuzzaman Fakir, also known as Alif Fakir, in Netrokona's Durgapur upazila.

They are Imran Islam alias Imon, 24, of Moktarpara in Durgapur municipality, and Md Sabbir Ahmed, 25, of Teribazar in the same upazila.

The Detective Branch (DB) of Netrokona district police detained the two during a raid in the Dhanpur Bazar area of Sunamganj's Bishwambharpur upazila, said Netrokona Superintendent of Police Md Tarikul Islam.

He said the two were also accused in a case filed over an attack on Alif last year.

"Preliminary investigation suggests that they are associates of Tajul Islam, the prime suspect in the murder case. We suspect their involvement in the killing," the SP said.

With this, the number of people held in connection with the murder has risen to four.



Devotees take part in a procession during the final day of the three-day Kheturi Mahotsav, a centuries-old Vaishnav festival, at Premtoli in Godagari, Rajshahi, yesterday. The festival, held at the historic site associated with saint Narottam Das, draws devotees from home and abroad. PHOTO: AZAHAR UDDIN

Addl DIG Abdullah Al Jahir suspended over DJ party

85 held during DB raid at his Purbachal residence; of them, 21 secure bail from a Dhaka court

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Additional Deputy Inspector General of Police Abdullah Al Jahir has been suspended over allegations of hosting a drinks and DJ party at his house in the Police Housing Residential Area in Dhaka's Purbachal.

The Public Security Division issued a notification in this regard yesterday, signed by Senior Secretary Manzur Morshed Chowdhury.

He has been attached to the Police Special Training School (PSTS) in Rangamati's Betbunia.

Citing the Government Servants (Discipline and Appeal) Rules, 2018, the ministry ordered Al Jahir's suspension with effect from October 25. He will receive a subsistence allowance during the suspension period in accordance with the rules.

According to the notification, a team of the Detective Branch (DB) of the Dhaka Metropolitan Police's Uttara division raided Al Jahir's residence on October 19.

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US midterm early voting hits record 48 million

AGENCIES

A record 47.9 million Americans have already voted in next week's US midterm elections, with participation surging in key battleground states and registered Democrats outpacing Republicans, figures showed Friday.

The University of Florida's Election Lab had recorded 47,922,669 early votes nationwide by midday, surpassing the previous midterm record of 45.9 million cast ahead of Election Day in 2022.

The surge is especially pronounced in states with fiercely contested Senate races that could determine control of the chamber during the final two years of President Donald Trump's presidency.

In states that record voters' party affiliation, registered Democrats have accounted for a substantially larger share of early ballots than Republicans.

Election Lab figures showed Democrats making up around 44 percent of early voters in those states, compared with 31 percent for Republicans and 25 percent for unaffiliated or minor-party voters.

University of Florida political scientist Michael McDonald, who oversees the Election Lab, has pointed to rising participation among Black and Hispanic voters in states that report racial and ethnic data, with particularly strong turnout in heavily Hispanic communities along the Texas-Mexico border.

But experts warn against interpreting the figures as a prediction of the election outcome.

A voter's party registration does not reveal which candidates they supported, and tens of millions more Americans are expected to cast ballots on Tuesday.

In recent elections Republicans have tended to turn out in greater numbers on Election Day, potentially narrowing or reversing the Democrats' early advantage.

And higher early participation does not necessarily translate into higher overall turnout, since some voters may simply be casting ballots sooner than in previous elections.

Bangladesh sets reform targets for EU, UN to watch

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said the extension should be understood as an "exceptional time-bound" measure that must be "accompanied by concrete, measurable domestic actions, effective monitoring and continued engagement."

"A system in which countries remain in the category for prolonged periods, despite meeting the criteria, risks weakening the credibility of the framework," an EU delegate said at the assembly.

The EU also concurred with the view of the UN Committee for Development Policy that "domestic political transitions do not constitute grounds" for extending preparatory periods, though it said Bangladesh's recent political transition may merit an exception.

The finance ministry official said the finance and commerce ministers had sternly cautioned officials at a recent core group meeting. In the first phase, five ministries and departments must submit monthly progress reports, the official said.

The 2026-2029 roadmap aims to ensure a smooth, sustainable and permanent graduation and to make the economy competitive, production-oriented and institutionally strong by 2029. It places special emphasis on economic stability and restoring discipline in the banking sector, according to the document.

The roadmap aims to raise real GDP growth to 7 percent by 2029, from 4.14 percent in 2026, and to cut inflation to 6 percent from 9.16 percent over three years.

It targets raising foreign exchange reserves to cover six months of imports, from four months now, and lifting the tax-to-GDP ratio to at least 10 percent from below 7 percent. The investment-to-GDP ratio is targeted to rise to 32 percent from 27.93 percent.

The plan aims to cut non-performing loans to below 20 percent of total loans by 2029, from more than 30 percent now.

It calls for a new framework for managing distressed assets, regular stress tests of banks and comprehensive asset-quality reviews. Wilful defaulters will be identified and penalised, and single-borrower exposure limits will be strictly enforced.

AREA	2026 BASELINE	2029 TARGET
Real GDP growth	4.14%	7%
Inflation	9.16%	6%
Tax-to-GDP ratio	<7%	≥10%
NPL Ratio	30%	<20%
Non-RMG export share	~19%	≥25%
Average container dwell time	9.44 days	3-4 days
Private Sector Credit Growth	4.98%	>10%
Share of renewable energy	2.3%	16%

SOURCE: BBS, BB, FD, SREDA

The roadmap sets out yearly actions to improve the business environment, raise the industry's contribution to the economy and increase non-garment exports.

A national task force will monitor implementation of reforms to make doing business easier. The government plans to launch an integrated one-stop service, guarantee business start-up licences within 14 days, scrap unnecessary licences and introduce an investment aftercare mechanism.

New entrepreneurs and investors will need fewer documents and certificates, and online company registration will continue. Rules for faster profit repatriation will be framed, licence validity will be extended to five years, and a digital common application platform will be introduced for all approvals and renewals.

Customs, ports, bonded warehouses, banks and trade bodies will be fully integrated into the National Single Window system, bringing 39 ministries and departments under its coverage. All of these measures are to be completed by June, the end of the current fiscal year.

To improve trade facilitation and logistics, the government plans by June 2028 to develop an integrated industrial and logistics corridor, implement the WTO Trade Facilitation Agreement and put the National Logistics Policy 2025 into effect.

To protect investors, dedicated commercial courts, intellectual property courts and alternative dispute resolution mechanisms will be made operational to resolve investment, commercial and intellectual property disputes quickly.

To raise industrial productivity, the plan includes a technology modernisation fund, automation incentives and productivity programmes for small and medium enterprises.

The National Productivity Master Plan (2021-2030) will be updated and fully implemented, and will include women-led enterprises and other non-mainstream entrepreneurs.

To reduce reliance on ready-made garments, which account for more than 80 percent of exports, the roadmap promises policy support and incentives for high-potential sectors including pharmaceuticals, information technology, leather, jute, light engineering, shipbuilding and agro-processing.

A time-bound industrial energy security action plan aims to ensure uninterrupted gas and electricity supply to export-oriented factories, while the share of renewable energy is to rise to 16 percent by 2029.

Container dwell time at ports is to be cut to three to four days from 9.44 days, alongside broader improvements to port and transport connectivity.

As a result of these steps, private sector credit growth is expected to rise above 10 percent, from 4.98 percent.

A three-year, year-by-year plan for revenue collection calls for full end-to-end tax automation and bringing new taxpayers in 16 categories into the tax net. It also calls for a risk-based audit framework, using an Automated Risk Management System or Post-Clearance Audit, to end arbitrary audit selection.

VAT compliance will be strengthened, and unnecessary tax exemptions will be brought down to a rational level.

The Finance Division, Bangladesh Bank and other regulators will jointly implement the reforms.

Only half the students pass

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"We must identify the gaps, reassess the situation and take necessary measures -- that is our responsibility," he said, adding that special examinations for students who failed one or two subjects will be held within two months.

Expressing concern over the results, he said a re-evaluation would help determine whether there were any errors in the published results.

Applications for re-scrutiny of answer scripts will be accepted online from November 1 to 7.

He also stressed the need for greater transparency in future examinations.

"The prime minister wants students to be assessed properly so that no one is unfairly marked down," he added.

In an unprecedented downturn, the pass rates fell across all nine general education boards this year, with more than half the candidates failing in five of them.

By comparison, only the Cumilla Board had a pass rate below 50 percent last year.

Dhaka Board recorded the highest pass rate at 61.80 percent, although it was down from 64.62 percent last year.

Barishal had the lowest pass rate at 44.84 percent, followed closely by Jashore (44.92 percent), Rajshahi (45.06 percent), Dinajpur (45.98 percent) and Cumilla (48.04 percent).

The pass rates in Chattogram, Mymensingh and Sylhet stood at 52.07 percent, 51.44 percent and 50.90 percent respectively.

Barishal saw the steepest decline, with its pass rate dropping 17.73 percentage points from last year's 62.57 percent. Rajshahi's pass rate fell by 14.34 percentage points, while Dinajpur recorded a decline of 11.51 points.

Irregular class attendance, inadequate classroom teaching, dependence on private coaching and students' excessive use of mobile phones are possible reasons for the results debacle, said Sharif Morshed Reza, controller of examinations of Barishal Education Board.

Teacher shortages were particularly acute in some areas of Bhola, where government teachers are reluctant to stay.

Humanities students had the lowest pass rate among the three major groups at 42.17 percent, compared with 73.12 percent for science and 50.77 percent for business studies.

ICT pass rates fell across all nine general boards, while English results deteriorated in six. Jashore saw a particularly sharp fall in ICT, where the ICT pass rate dropped to 67.84 percent from 88.63 percent last year.

English results also deteriorated in six boards. In Barishal, English pass rate dropped to 54.08 percent from 75.16 percent last year.

Rajshahi's English pass rate fell to 56.01 percent from 68.82 percent, while Dinajpur recorded 56.05 percent pass rate, down from 64.47 percent.

Poor performance in English was the main reason behind the board's low pass rate, while ICT results were also unsatisfactory, said Md Abdul Matin, secretary of the Board of Intermediate and Secondary Education, Jashore.

"The standard of English teaching in educational institutions is far from satisfactory. Teachers of other subjects often teach English despite lacking adequate proficiency in the language," he told The Daily Star.

Matin also cited the introduction of identical question papers across the nine general boards, stricter examination monitoring through CCTV cameras and improved answer-script evaluation as factors influencing this year's results.

Milon said teacher-training programmes have been undertaken to address weaknesses in English.

Girls outperformed boys in pass rates for the sixth straight year, with 55.45 percent passing compared with 47.14 percent of boys. Boys, however, accounted for 50.5 percent of GPA-5 achievers.

The poor results reflected several interconnected problems, including learning losses during the Covid-19 pandemic, subsequent disruptions to education and persistent teacher shortages, said Rasheda K Chowdhury, executive director of the Campaign for Popular Education (CAMPE).

She also raised concerns about inequalities between rural and urban students and between children from affluent and low-income families, saying access to educational resources continued to influence academic performance.

The sharp decline in pass rates required a thorough investigation rather than conclusions based on assumptions, said Siddiqur Rahman, former director of Dhaka University's Institute of Education and Research.

He pointed to teacher shortages for the results debacle.

"In many institutions, ICT is taught by teachers of other subjects. Most of the teaching is theoretical, with very little practical work. Simply memorising theory is not enough to learn ICT."

He urged the government to examine why students continued to struggle in English and Humanities.

An analysis of Bangladesh Bureau of Educational Information and Statistics (BANBEIS) data suggests this is the worst outcome since 2004, when the pass rate was 47.73 percent and a majority of the candidates failed.

For the next two decades, the country moved in the opposite direction, with the pass rates hitting 93.21 percent in 2021, when the Covid-19 pandemic forced major adjustments to the examination system.

Students sat tests in shorter syllabuses and fewer subjects with reduced marks. In 2020, no public examinations were held due to the pandemic, and students were evaluated based on previous academic records.

This year, of the 1,240,798 students who appeared in the examinations under 11 education boards; 646,685 passed while 594,113 failed.

RMG workers

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Mirpur area closed for the day after the protests began.

Mohsina Begum, 45, protesting at Mirpur-11.5, told The Daily Star that in her 18 years working in the sector, her purchasing power had never fallen so sharply.

"I leave home at 7:30am and return after 8:00pm. Including overtime, I earn around Tk 18,000-20,000 a month. Of that, Tk 8,000 goes straight to house rent. It is impossible to get through the month with the remaining Tk 10,000-12,000," she said, demanding either lower prices of essentials or higher wages.

Another worker, requesting anonymity, said factory owners asked them around noon to resume work as wage discussions were ongoing with foreign buyers, the BGMEA, and government officials. "But what good are verbal assurances? We will continue our protest until a wage hike is officially announced."

Protesters also demanded worker representation on the wage board.

In the afternoon, some agitated workers on Kalshi Road struck vehicles with sticks, though no casualties or major damage were reported. Around 3:30pm, protesters vandalised a side gate and shattered windows at Wear Mag Limited in Kalshi, a security guard said, requesting anonymity.

The blockade caused immense suffering to commuters across Mirpur, forcing buses to take detours and many passengers to walk.

"Given the severe gridlock, I got off the bus. Now I have to walk at least half a kilometre to Mirpur-11 before I can take a rickshaw," said commuter Abdur Rahim in Senpara Parbata, carrying his child in one arm and a bag in the other.

Meanwhile, in Ashulia, at least 30 garment factories in and around Kathgara declared a holiday yesterday amid protests for similar wage demands.

Unrest began in the morning when Naim Knitwear workers stopped work and marched out, allegedly pelting bricks at nearby factories and triggering chases and counter-chases with police.

Syed Faysal Islam, additional superintendent of police (SP) of Ashulia Industrial Police-1, said brickbats injured at least 10 industrial police personnel in total.

A local labour leader, requesting anonymity, told The Daily Star that police baton charges and teargas injured several workers.

Around noon, industrial police also recovered three crude-bomb-like objects from the road outside a Nassa Group factory in Nishchintapur and informed the Anti-Terrorism Unit (ATU).

The demonstrations halted traffic at various times between 11:00am and 3:00pm on the Abdullahpur-Baipail and Zirabo-Bishmile roads.

In Gazipur, RMG workers abstained from work and blocked the Dhaka-Tangail highway at Kaliakoir's Chandra Palli Bidyut area in the afternoon, creating long tailbacks on both sides. As nearby factories declared afternoon holidays, their workers also joined the blockade, said Nawjor Highway Police Outpost Inspector Abdul Karim.

Gazipur Industrial Police SP Amjad Hossain told The Daily Star that sporadic protests across 10 to 12 factories in the district triggered severe congestion on the highway, forcing 18 to 20 factories in Kaliakoir to close for the day.

Clashes erupted in the afternoon when law enforcers tried to disperse the protesters, who set fires on the highway and hurled brickbats. Police fired sound grenades to control the situation, said Gazipur Industrial Police Additional SP Mohammad Khalilur Rahman, adding around 7:30pm that traffic remained suspended as agitated workers still occupied the highway.

Khairul Mamun, legal affairs secretary of the Bangladesh Garments and Sweaters Workers Trade Union Centre, said the labour minister's unfulfilled promise to form a wage board by October fuelled the unrest.

New RMG wage board today

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With steps being taken to address both demands, there was no justification for vandalism or factory closures, he said, warning that such actions could harm the garment industry.

The minister alleged that outsiders were instigating workers at some factories and urged the media to use video footage to distinguish workers from those participating in the agitation.

He said discussions had also covered payment of workers' salaries by the seventh of every month.

However, factory closures could disrupt production and supply chains, delaying shipments and payments from buyers, which could ultimately affect workers' wages, he warned.

He urged owners, workers and other stakeholders to act responsibly to maintain stability in the sector.

Welcoming the move, BGMEA Vice-president Md Rezwan Selim, who oversees labour issues, said, "We want the wage board to be formed and the salaries of garment workers to be reviewed because we want their wages to increase."

Nazma Akter, president of Sommilito Garments Sramik Federation, urged the government to form the wage board immediately to recommend a new pay structure.

She said workers' living costs had risen significantly due to high inflation, with increases in house rent, transport costs, gas bills and other expenses.

The latest minimum wage for garment workers was fixed in 2023 and took effect on December 1 that year, raising the monthly minimum from Tk 8,000 to Tk 12,500.

The wage structure is due for review this December, as the amended labour law requires wages across sectors to be reviewed every three years to account for inflation.