



Children of jute mill workers holding placards on the fourth day of the workers' fast-into-death yesterday. The photo was taken near Platinum Jute Mills gate where the workers have been demonstrating for regular pay and implementation of wage board awards.

PHOTO: DIPANKAR ROY

20 jute mill workers taken to hospital

FROM PAGE 16 met Sumaiya Parvin and her elder sister Robina, students of class IV and VII at the school. Their father Mizanur Rahman is a worker of Platinum Jute Mills. "My father cannot maintain our four-member family smoothly due to poverty. How would he bear our educational expenses?" she said. Sumaiya said her father was trying to send them to their village in Gopalganj's Moksdepur upazila within a month as he was struggling to meet basic household costs. Sahana Sharmin, president of Platinum Jute Mills Employees Union, said the deputy commissioner of

Khulna had asked them to sit in a meeting with him on Tuesday night, but they didn't agree. "State Minister [for labour and employment] Monnujan Sufian had taken the workers' movement to the wrong path by requesting the workers to refrain from carrying out the movement. Now we don't have trust in any such requests," she said. Sahana said many workers fell sick in the last four days as they had to stay on roads round the clock amid the cold weather. Meanwhile, sources at the Khulna deputy commissioner's office said Bangladesh Jute Mills Corporation (BJMC) has called a meeting for today

at its office in the capital to discuss the workers' demands. Worker leaders said they were invited to the meeting by the BJMC, but they were yet to make a decision in this regard. Hamid, convener of Sangram Parishad, said they would attend the meeting if the workers granted them permission. Around 31,000 workers had gone on work abstention and observed fast-into-death from December 10 to December 13. Production at nine mills came to a halt due to the demonstration. However, Carpeting Jute Mills in Jashore was operating at partial

production. Later, workers postponed their protest until December 17 upon assurances from State Minister Monnujan of fulfilling their demands. On December 27, the Sangram Parishad leaders announced that they would resume their movement as their demands were not met. The demands include cancellation of public-private ownership initiative, allocation of necessary fund for the jute sector, insurance for families of deceased workers, ensuring payment of provident fund and gratuity accumulation for retired workers and regularisation of jobs of temporary workers.

US calls on China to release jailed Pastor Wang Yi

AFP, Washington The United States called on China on Tuesday to release Pastor Wang Yi, the leader of an unofficial Protestant church who was sentenced to nine years in prison. "I am alarmed that Pastor Wang Yi, leader of Chengdu's Early Rain house church, was tried in secret and sentenced to nine years in prison on trumped-up charges," Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said on Twitter. "Beijing must release him and end its intensifying repression of Christians and members of all other religious groups," Pompeo said. State Department spokeswoman Morgan Ortugas described Wang's arrest as "yet another example of Beijing's intensification of repression of Chinese Christians and members of other religious groups." Ortugas called for his "immediate and unconditional release."

30,000 wait

FROM PAGE 16 Immigration Department Director General Khairul Dzaimie Daud. "Indonesians, Bangladeshis and Myanmar nationals were among the highest number of illegal immigrants who registered under the programme..." he told reporters after leading an operation in Puchong, according to the report.

The Malaysian government offered the amnesty programme, which started on August 1, as part of its measures to reduce the number of illegal immigrants in the country, according to media reports. Khairul Dzaimie said during the implementation of B4G, the Malaysian Immigration Department had received numerous complaints about the existence of "touts or agents" claiming to act as middlemen to speed up the process of the programme registration.

Following this, five individuals, both local and foreigners, detained for questioning, were believed to be such middlemen, he said. "They were found to be carrying out such activities [as middlemen] at the immigration offices in Putrajaya and Kuala Lumpur," he added.

Ex-UZ chair

FROM PAGE 16 Meanwhile, bus service from Bandarban to other parts of the country remained suspended for around two hours as transport workers' protested arrest of Kuddus, who was once the president of Bandarban Bus Owners and Sramik Oikkyo Parisad. Zumlian Amlai, chairperson (Bangladesh chapter) of the Parbatya Chattogram Forest and Land Rights Protection, said other kiln owners should also be brought under such exemplary punishment.

11 hurt as cops

FROM PAGE 16 (JCD) for interrogation. Chhatra Dal leaders said several hundred JCD men gathered in Khokon Park area since 10:00am to go to the BNP office on Nawabbari Road to organise a rally, marking the 41st founding anniversary of the pro-BNP student front. Sanatan Chakraborty, additional superintendent of Bogura police, said some 50-60 Chhatra Dal men walked on the Shaheed Minar with their shoes on around 12:30pm. As the law enforcers asked them not to walk there wearing shoes, only some of them complied. But the others were angered at this. They carried out the attack, leaving five cops, including Sanatan, injured. Sanatan, ASI Ashrafal, constables Sifat, and Mamun took primary treatment at Bogura Police Lines Hospital. Other injured Parvez was admitted to Bogura Shaheed Ziaur Rahman Medical College Hospital with a head injury. Speaking to this newspaper, Bogura JCD General Secretary Nure Alam Rigan said they went to the police superintendent's office three days ago

to seek permission for holding a rally at the Titu Auditorium on the occasion of the student front's founding anniversary. But the SP asked them to organise the event at the BNP office. Yesterday, the JCD men gathered in Khokon Park area to go to the party office, around 100 yards off the park. Local BNP lawmakers GM Siraj and Mosharraf Hossain were also present. At one stage, police started using batons on the Chhatra Dal men alleging that they walked on the Shaheed Minar wearing shoes. "Police beat up Chhatra Dal leaders and activists, leaving many of them wounded. Six of them are now undergoing treatment at different clinics in the town," Rigan added. He claimed that police picked up over 20 JCD men. GM Siraj MP said a few Chhatra Dal men might have walked on the Shaheed Minar wearing shoes. "We said sorry to the police for any such incident. But despite that the law enforcers beat up Chhatra Dal men." Bogura Sadar OC SM Badiuzzaman said they would file a case against the JCD men over attacking police and obstructing them from carrying out their duties.

China launches

FROM PAGE 16 designed to rival and eventually replace the US-developed Global Positioning System (GPS). "The Jing-Zhang High-speed Railway has realised the missions of smart construction, smart equipment and smart operation, and made the history of the global smart railway," Li Hongxia, a senior engineer at China Railway Engineering Design and Consulting Group, told Technology Daily. Li regarded the completion of the line a milestone in the country's rail history.

designed to rival and eventually replace the US-developed Global Positioning System (GPS). "The Jing-Zhang High-speed Railway has realised the missions of smart construction, smart equipment and smart operation, and made the history of the global smart railway," Li Hongxia, a senior engineer at China Railway Engineering Design and Consulting Group, told Technology Daily. Li regarded the completion of the line a milestone in the country's rail history.

Unblock mobile network

FROM PAGE 1 According to the email sent to the operators yesterday, by Md Sohail Rana, a deputy director of BTRC's spectrum management division, they have now withdrawn the instruction completely. "In this connection, please reinstate operations of the BTSs [Base Trans-Receiver Stations] near the Bangladesh-India border sites immediately," the email read. "As per the BTRC directive, we have already started reactivating the BTSs located along the border areas. The reactivation process will take a while to complete since a lot of BTSs are involved here. We thank the affected customers for being patient with us," Shahed Alam, chief corporate and regulatory officer of Robi Axiata Ltd, told The Daily Star. Due to the previous decision, about one crore subscribers in 32

districts, near the borders with India and Myanmar, were affected. A BTRC official said they faced many complaints from different citizens and at the same time government high-ups expressed frustrations in this regard. On Sunday, when the network-blocking decision was made, Telecom Minister Mustafa Jabbar told The Daily Star that this was not their decision and they just followed the instruction. He, however, said the decision was made following a consensus of three to four ministries, and the foreign ministry was leading the efforts in this regard. "The security of the state is the government's first priority and that's why it made this decision," Jabbar said without elaborating. Contacted yesterday evening, Jabbar said the government made the decisions banking on a request by intelligence agencies.

Let's get Brexit done and end division in 2020

Johnson tells Britons REUTERS, London Prime Minister Boris Johnson said he would bring his divided nation back together next year when Britain leaves the European Union, telling Britons they were set for a "fantastic year and a remarkable decade." Fresh from winning a large parliamentary majority in an election just over two weeks ago, Johnson said in a New Year's message that his first job was to ensure Brexit was delivered, more than three years after Britain voted to leave the EU, and then to heal the wounds the vote had opened. "As we say goodbye to 2019, we can also turn the page on the division, rancour and uncertainty which has dominated public life and held us back for far too long," he said. "Now we have a new parliament, elected by the people to deliver the people's priorities, which will finally respect the referendum and deliver Brexit. So we'll get Brexit done before the end of this month," he added. Johnson has already won initial approval for his EU divorce deal and the final stages of ratification will begin when lawmakers return after Christmas in time for a Jan. 31 exit. He will then begin talks on forging a new trading relationship with the bloc, having said those negotiations would not be extended beyond the end of 2020. With an eye on voters in northern and central England who broke their long tradition of backing the opposition Labour Party to support him in the election, Johnson also said the state-run NHS health service would be his top priority while vowing that extra funding for education and infrastructure would be spread "more fairly".

US-Iran tensions won't derail rallies

Say Iraq anti-govt protesters

AFP, Diwaniyah

For months, their rallying cry has been "We want our country!" Now, Iraq's anti-government demonstrators insist they won't let the dramatic escalation between the United States and Iran steal their thunder.

The youth-dominated demonstrations have rocked Baghdad and Iraq's Shia-majority south since early October in outrage over government graft, a lack of jobs and the political influence of neighbouring Iran.

They have long been wary of political factions trying to coopt their movement and are now digging in their heels even further, saying their cause will not be derailed by a looming proxy war between Washington and Iran.

Tensions have escalated since a volley of rockets killed an American contractor in Iraq last week.

This prompted the US to respond days later with air strikes that killed more than two dozen pro-Iran fighters of Iraq's Hashed al-Shaabi military network.

On Tuesday, pro-Tehran demonstrators attempted to storm the US embassy in Baghdad, just across the river Tigris from the main anti-government protest camp in Tahrir Square.

"Some sides are trying to drag the protests in other directions," said Alaa Sattar, a demonstrator in Tahrir.

"But the position of the protests in Tahrir has been very clear since October 1: Iraq should not be an arena for score-settling or US-Iranian conflicts," he told AFP.

Demonstrators would stay in the streets, Sattar pledged, until early parliamentary elections produce a government "loyal only to Iraq".

Baghdad has close political and military ties to both Tehran and Washington, but those two powers have been at loggerheads since the US

withdrew from a landmark nuclear deal with Iran in 2018.

Iraq has feared that a proxy war between its two allies could play out on its soil, destabilising a country only just getting back on its feet after years of unrest and a devastating fight against the Islamic State group.

Following IS's defeat in 2017, Iraqis hoped to see their economy recover, services improve and to have more jobs for youth.

But with little improvement two years on, many have taken to the streets, pointing the finger at an entrenched elite they say is corrupt, inept and beholden to Iran.

When the protests were met with violence, demonstrators accused pro-Tehran factions in the Hashed of trying to crush their movement and intimidate activists.

The Hashed, meanwhile, has cast the rallies as a plot by the US and other powers to bring "chaos" to Iraq.

This tug-of-war over Iraq should add more fuel to the fire of the protests, said Husaam al-Kaabi, a demonstrator in Iraq's shrine city of Najaf.

"What protesters want is a change in the political situation, which regional and international factions rule right now," he told AFP.

"This is the main reason we went out into the streets -- so that the Iraqi government is the decision-maker," Kaabi added.

He suspected outside powers of trying to "exploit" the anti-government protests for their own political gains, adding slyly, "We know what they are trying to do."

In Diwaniyah, another protest hotspot, 57-year-old Ali Mahdi said the demonstrators would not veer away from their central demands.

"Protesters can see what's happening in this proxy war between Iran and the US on Iraqi soil. Iraq does not have a horse in this race," said Mahdi.

Forest dept scraps plan

FROM PAGE 16 Mohammed Shafiq Alam Chowdhury, chief forest conservator of the department, said they had already instructed the tree felling to be stopped when they came to know about the move.

"But we will still probe as you have raised the matter," he told The Daily Star yesterday. Local forest department officials earlier said the plan to cut the trees was made under the social forestry programme. But after media reports and local protests, they started saying the trees were marked for counting.

The department undertakes social forestry programmes across the country, involving locals in planting quick growing trees which are cut down after a certain period. The proceeds are shared between the government and the participants.

The common trees planted under these programmes include non-native timber trees like Acacia, which are fast-growing and sold for wood.

Anisur Rahman, assistant conservator of forest of the wildlife management and nature conservation circle in Moulvibazar, made a visit to the area recently and submitted a report to the forest department's central office.

On Monday, local forest department officials were told that the decision to cut the trees had been cancelled, he said yesterday.

"A meeting will be held with the participants who planted the timber trees before they are cut down," he said.

"And no fruit trees will be felled." "In this meeting," he added, "we also hope to decide that the Chautali beat will not be used for social forestry programmes in the future."

WHY SOCIAL FORESTRY HERE? Lawachhara National Park is a reserved forest, well known for being home to primates including globally threatened species such as the Northern Pig-tailed Macaque,

Phayre's Leaf Monkey, Capped Langur, and the Western Hoolock Gibbon.

The Chautali beat, adjacent to the park, is spread over a 32-hectare land. Most of the plants here are around 100-year-old and these plants provide the daily diet of rare wild animals, said Saju Marchiang, a forest guide.

"We have seen rare animals feeding off fruit trees in Chautali beat and returning to Lawachhara. Cutting down these fruit-bearing trees will threaten their survival."

Jabed Bhuiyan, joint convener of the Lawachhara Bon O Jib Boichitro Rokkha Andolon, said the number of large trees in the forest has decreased because of illegal logging and other human activities.

"Due to deforestation, sources of food for wildlife -- various fruits, leaves and flowers -- have dwindled, pushing many species to the brink of extinction. Now the forest department appears to be doing the same by marking trees to be cut down."

"Why is social forestry being undertaken in a natural forest?" he asked.

Wildlife lover Biswajit Bhattacharjee Bapon, also member of a local wildlife conservation organisation, said trees like Acacia were not fit for this protected forest.

He also asked, "Why were the fruit trees marked?"

Abdul Karim Kim, executive member of Bangladesh Poribesh Andolon (BAPA), said the Lawachhara forest was a precious asset of Bangladesh and should be protected by legal measures and proper management.

"Good laws are there but these are only facilitating more corruption instead of being properly implemented," he said.

"The government should have considered the biodiversity of the rainforest before making such plans to cut these trees."

2 Indian soldiers killed

FROM PAGE 16 of suspension.

It has been decided to restore internet connectivity to all government hospitals with effect from midnight of December 31 besides fully restoring SMS on mobile phones," Jammu and Kashmir administration spokesman Rohit Kansal told reporters in Jammu, the winter capital.

Kansal said the administration in Kashmir is facilitating students, contractors, tour operators, government officials through various internet touch points.

"Nearly 900 such touch points and special counters are functional throughout Kashmir in districts, prominent tourist places and hotels, and about 6 lakh people have taken advantage of these touch points," the

spokesman said.

In response to a question on release of detained politicians, including three former chief ministers, Kansal said that "any release or detention, preventive or otherwise, is a decision that is being taken by local law enforcing agencies based on its assessment of the local law and order situation."

Five political leaders, who had been under preventive detention since August 5 were freed on Monday last but former chief ministers Farooq Abdullah, Omar Abdullah and Mehbooba Mufti are still under detention.

Kashmir has been split between India and Pakistan since the end of British colonial rule in 1947. The archrivals have fought two of their three wars over the territory.