

Tiger footage spurs hope for Thai big cat population

AFP, Bangkok

A male tiger noses the bloodied carcass of its latest kill in a Thai national park, extraordinary footage conservationists are hailing as a rare spot of good news for the endangered big cats.

The species has teetered on the brink of extinction across the Mekong region due to deforestation and demand for its striking pelts and body parts in traditional medicine.

But a pocket of forest split between Thailand and Myanmar -- known as the Dawna Tenasserim -- has become a holdout for the big cat.

Sightings of wild tigers are rare, but Thailand remains "one of the last strongholds" for them in Southeast Asia, WWF said Monday.

Camera traps placed in Thailand's Mae Wong National Park in western Kamphaeng Phet province captured in late December a tiger circling a dead wild gaur, known to be the world's largest bovine.

"Even for tigers, killing a gaur is not an easy task," WWF-Thailand's Rungnapa Phoonjampa said, explaining the existence of large forest prey is a good sign for the health and survival of the area's tigers.

WWF has been tracking the tiger -- named "MKM8" -- since 2014.

Over the course of two weeks, the tiger returned to the gaur to feed.

Thousands face uncertainty as Philippine volcano spews lava

AFP, Tanauan

Taal volcano in the Philippines could spew lava and ash for weeks, authorities warned yesterday, leaving tens of thousands in limbo after they fled their homes fearing a massive eruption.

The crater of the volcano exploded to life with towering clouds of ash and jets of red-hot lava on Sunday, forcing those living around the mountain south of Manila to rush to safety.

Many people abandoned livestock and pets as well as homes full of belongings after authorities sounded an alert warning that an "explosive eruption" could come imminently.

"We left everything apart from what we're wearing," said Robert Cadiz, a 47-year-old fisherman among some 30,000 who took refuge in shelters. "We were terrified."

Gerald Asoche, 30, who left with his four young children and a few possessions, has missed work to stay with them as the volcano belches out lava and earthquakes tied to the eruption rattle the region.

"I am hoping this won't go on too long because I will lose my job if I can't report to work immediately," Asoche, a house painter, told AFP at an evacuation centre.

"I can't leave them... family first," he said as he cradled one of his children.

Taal is one of the most active volcanoes in a nation hit periodically by eruptions and earthquakes due to its location on the Pacific "Ring of Fire" -- a zone of intense seismic activity.

The Taal eruption has been putting on a stunning and terrifying display, with lightning crackling through its ash cloud in a poorly understood phenomenon that has been attributed to static electricity.

Renato Solidum, head of the Philippines' seismological agency, said Taal's previous eruptions have lasted months so it was impossible to predict an end to the current activity.

However, he said the alert warning of a potentially catastrophic "explosive eruption" may remain in place for weeks, depending on developments.

"We have a protocol of waiting for several days, sometimes two weeks, to make sure that indeed... volcano activity has essentially stopped," he told AFP.

Unusual circular

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clause no.6 with a new one, which said any person could enter the hospitals upon permission from the authority.

Other clauses, such as introducing entry passes for visitors in every public hospital and maintaining register books for visitors, allowing a maximum of two attendants for each patient and making sure all staffers carry ID cards visibly, have been kept the same.

The Daily Star contacted the health minister and the secretary of the health services division over phone. None of them received the calls.

Earlier, Transparency International Bangladesh (TIIB) also issued a press release criticising the government's move.

Dr Iftekharuzzaman, executive director of TIIB, termed the move to be against the government's zero tolerance policy for corruption.

The organisation also demanded withdrawal of the circular.



Lebanese anti-government protesters raise cut-outs of the revolution fist as they block the main highway of Jal el-Dib area, on the northern outskirts of Lebanon's capital Beirut, during a demonstration yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

HC bins writ seeking city polls delay

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The education ministry on December 2 last year fixed January 29 as a public holiday for Saraswati Puja and nobody, including the writ petitioner, raised any objection against the decision back then.

Besides, the Election Commission (EC) has taken all preparations for holding the elections on January 30, it added.

Under the circumstances, there is no scope for shifting the date, said the court.

Writ petitioner Ashoke Kumar Ghosh told The Daily Star that he would move an appeal before the Appellate Division of the Supreme Court challenging the HC order.

He said he was aggrieved with the HC's order as the court did not take some of his arguments into account while passing the order.

Earlier in the day, Ashoke told the court that the EC had hurt the religious sentiment of the Hindu community and violated the constitution by fixing January 30 for holding the two Dhaka

city polls as the Saraswati Puja will be observed on the same day.

Rana Dasgupta, general secretary of Bangladesh Hindu-Buddha-Christian Oikya Parishad, told the court that Hindu community's fundamental right to freedom of religion will be damaged if the DCC elections are held on the day of Saraswati Puja.

"We did not expect this kind of verdict. It has shocked us," Rana said, adding that they would determine their next course of action after getting the verdict of the Appellate Division.

"... We think that a quarter is working within the government as well as the EC and trying to curb the constitutional rights of the minorities. It seems that EC is not capable enough to understand the religious sensitivities," he added.

Contacted, Election Commission Senior Secretary Md Alamgir said that they would go ahead with the election date on January 30.

Meanwhile, DSCC BNP mayoral candidate Ishraque Hossain yesterday said the EC should seriously consider

the issue of voting day coinciding with the Saraswati Puja.

CONCERNS

Demands for deferring the date of city polls have been getting louder in the last couple of days.

Students of Dhaka University blocked the busy Shahbag intersection for nearly two hours demanding deferral of the city polls. They issued an 18-hour ultimatum to meet their demand.

Bangladesh Hindu-Buddha-Christian-Oikya Parishad leaders on Monday put forward the demand at a meeting with Chief Election Commissioner KM Nurul Huda.

On Sunday, Bangladesh Chhatra Oikya Parishad formed a human chain on the DU campus, and a group of DU's Jagannath Hall students held a meeting with Election Commissioner Mahubul Talukdar in this regard.

On Friday, DSCC Returning Officer Abdul Baten forwarded a letter to the EC. The letter was sent by Jagannath Hall Provost Mihir Lal Saha requesting a change in the voting date.

BNP MPs walk out

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But the AL has formed two coordination committees, led by its two senior lawmakers, for the January 30 polls to Dhaka north and south city corporations, he said.

In reply, AL's Tofail Ahmed, also the party coordinator for the Dhaka north city polls, said the BNP never recognise an election as free and fair until its candidate win it.

As per the Election Commission's electoral code of conduct, lawmakers are not allowed to get involved in the electioneering for the candidates of local government polls, he added.

Terming the rule ridiculous, Tofail said those enjoying government benefits cannot take part in the election campaigns as per the code of conduct.

But the lawmakers were not such a kind of beneficiaries, he said.

Another ruling party lawmaker Amir Hossain Amu, also the AL coordinator for the Dhaka south city polls, criticised Harun for raising the issue in the Jatiya Sangsad.

He said making an election controversial was in the tradition of the BNP. "Even before the announcement of the Dhaka city polls schedule, they were alleging that the elections would not be free and fair."

At this stage, Harun along with other BNP lawmakers Zahidur Rahman, Mosharof Hosen, Aminul Islam, and

Rain offers Australian bushfire hope

AFP, Sydney

Hopes of containing Australia's months-long bushfire crisis rose yesterday with heavy rain forecast, but toxic smoke in Melbourne disrupted warm-up events for the year's first tennis Grand Slam.

Cool weather over recent days had already given some respite for exhausted firefighters spread out across vast swathes of the country, allowing some of the biggest blazes to be brought under control.

Optimism was further boosted yesterday with heavy rain forecast for some of the hotspots in the most populated eastern states of New South Wales and Victoria.

"It's some pretty good news," New South Wales Rural Fire Service commissioner Shane Fitzsimmons said.

"We've been talking about it for months now, that January might see the first fall of decent rain, and that looks like what's coming along over the next few days."

The rain was set to begin across eastern Australia today and last through the weekend, according to government meteorologist Sarah Scully.

"Hopefully some of this heavy rainfall will fall over some of the fire sites and help control or even extinguish some of those fires," Scully said.

Robi pays Tk 27.6cr

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on until February 29," Haque told The Daily Star yesterday evening.

Following a High Court order, the second largest mobile operator has paid their first instalment to pave the way for it to avoid a raft of restrictions and thus, rejuvenate business growth.

On January 5, the HC issued the order to Robi to pay Tk 138 crore in five instalments against the BTRC's claim of Tk 867.23 crore and to pay the first instalment by January 31. They will have to pay every instalment by the last date of each month.

From the beginning, Robi called the claim "unfounded", saying the commission did not properly follow audit rules.

Yesterday, Robi said that honouring the ad-interim ruling of the HC, it has made the deposit of the first instalment to the BTRC.

"Considering that our customers are suffering, we have decided to make this deposit well ahead of the stipulated time for making the first instalment," Shahed Alam, chief

corporate and regulatory officer at Robi, told The Daily Star in a statement yesterday.

Robi said it believes that this shows it is a compliant company that operates following the rules and regulations of the country.

However, the operator still claims that the audit report is devoid of rationality. Therefore, it is determined to exhaust the legal recourse available and hope that it will be able to reclaim the deposit it is making in due course, Alam said.

"Furthermore, our shareholders may independently explore other legal options available to them to seek justice in this regard. While we honour the High Court ruling, it is undeniable that the manner in which the entire process has been handled has severely eroded our shareholders' confidence," the statement also mentioned.

In order to realise the BTRC's claimed amount, the regulator had put pressure on Robi by cutting 15 percent of their internet bandwidth usage in the first week of July, and

stopping issuance of any approval on packages and services and network equipment import.

Later, the BTRC also served them notices, threatening to revoke their licences.

Robi had filed an appeal with a lower court in Dhaka seeking an injunction against the realisation of the money by the BTRC, but the court turned down the petition. In September, it filed a writ with the HC, challenging the BTRC move.

Robi has about 4.87 crore active connections as of November 2019.

Following an audit in 2016, the commission claimed the money from Robi accumulated for unpaid revenue shares, taxes and late fees since its inception in 1997 to December 2014.

Earlier on November 24, the Supreme Court asked Grameenphone to pay Tk 2,000 crore out of the Tk 12,579 crore claimed by the commission.

However, the operator was yet to make their decision on paying the sum.

'Living robots' built using frog cells

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has been able to create "completely biological machines from the ground up", the team behind the discovery write in a new paper.

That could allow them to dispatch medicine around a patient's body or clean up pollution from the oceans, for instance. They can also heal themselves if they are damaged, the scientists say.

"These are novel living machines," says Joshua Bongard, the University of

Vermont expert who co-led the new research. "They're neither a traditional robot nor a known species of animal. It's a new class of artifact: a living, programmable organism."

The new creatures were designed using a supercomputer and then built by biologists. They could now be used for a variety of different purposes, those behind the creation say.

"We can imagine many useful applications of these living robots that other machines can't do like

searching out nasty compounds or radioactive contamination, gathering microplastic in the oceans, travelling in arteries to scrape out plaque," said co-leader Michael Levin who directs the Center for Regenerative and Developmental Biology at Tufts University, where the xenobots were actually created.

The team described the major breakthrough in a paper published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences.

69 killed, many missing

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"I have asked the National Disaster Management Authority, the military and all our federal ministers to immediately provide all humanitarian assistance on an emergency footing to the affected people in AJK," Pakistan's Prime Minister Imran Khan tweeted.

A senior Indian police official said five soldiers were among the 10 killed near the border between India and Pakistan.

The area is one of the world's most militarily tense frontiers, where the

neighbouring armies have confronted each other over disputed territory for decades. Kashmir has been divided between India and Pakistan since their independence in 1947.

In 2012, an avalanche engulfed a Pakistani army battalion headquarters near the Indian border, killing at least 124 soldiers and 11 civilians.

Meanwhile in western Pakistan, heavy snowfall in southwestern Balochistan destroyed several houses in the mountainous region, killing 17 people.

The disaster management authority

declared an emergency in seven districts of the mineral-rich province and sought the army's help for relief and rescue operations.

Key highways connecting Pakistan and Afghanistan were blocked due to heavy snow, forcing officials to suspend transportation of essential goods into Afghanistan.

Severe cold and heavy snow led to the death of 39 people in six provinces of Afghanistan in the past two weeks said Tamim Azimi, a spokesman for Afghanistan's Natural Disaster Management Authority in Kabul.

Hillocks razed

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postponed and the extension of the playground was halted.

"I have stopped all the works connected to hill cutting right after knowing about it. I will take action," he said.

Asked how someone could cut hillocks on his campus premises avoiding his glance, he kept mum.

Meanwhile, Shaikat Ara Koli, assistant director of DoE in Cumilla, confirmed the Daily Star that they received no letter or notification regarding the hill cutting on the university campus.

On top of that, he said, "We have served a notice to the university authorities for cutting hills without any having permission."

The DoE in Cumilla did not take any unlawful decision going against the environment act, he added.

A responsible official of the university, seeking anonymity, said two local contractors named Azad and

Zakir took the projects of extending the central playground to organise the convocation and establishing a dormitory building respectively.

Besides, visiting the campus on Friday, this correspondent found people working on the construction site of the dormitory. A drain was also found near the playground which was recently made.

Talking to The Daily Star, some of the students alleged that hillocks were dredged with excavators on the campus premises to level the ground.

"It [dredging and hillocks cutting] will create imbalance among the particles of environment," said Sajib Banik, student of Department of Anthropology.

Seeking anonymity, a teacher of the institution said the university authorities must obey the laws of the country.

The authorities must proceed for such projects with proper planning, he added.

Strengthen ties

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one has to give additional money for going abroad.

Hasina said once Bangladesh had to take loans from donors, but the country has come out of that situation. "So, they [the donors] are now our development partners."

About the ongoing drive against terrorism and militancy in Bangladesh, the PM said the country curbed the menace with its own mechanism. She said the drive would go on.

The PM said Bangladesh has added new aircraft to the Biman fleet as the country's economy has become stronger, thanks to the contributions made by the expatriates, particularly those staying in the Middle East.

Talking about the celebrations of Mujib Borsho (from March 17, 2020 to March 26, 2021), Hasina said many programmes have been drawn up in this regard.

She asked the envoys to take up

programmes to observe the Mujib Borsho abroad and contact the foreign governments to this end.

The PM said a book titled "Amar Dekha Naya Chin" (The New China as I Saw), authored by Bangabandhu, was going to be published.

The nine envoys who joined the conference are Golam Moshfi (Saudi Arabia), Muhammad Imran (United Arab Emirates), Maj Gen (ret'd) KM Mominur Rahman (Bahrain), AFM Gousal Azam Sarker (Iran), AMM Forhad (Iraq), SM Abul Kalam (Kuwait), Abdul Motaleb Sarker (Lebanon), Md Golam Sarwar (Oman) and Ashud Ahmed (Qatar).

Foreign Minister AK Abdul Momen, Expatriates Welfare and Overseas Employment Minister Imran Ahmad, State Minister for Power, Energy and Mineral Resources Nasrul Hamid, State Minister for Foreign Affairs Shahriar Alam and Foreign Secretary Masud Bin Momen were present.