



Bichanakandi, a popular tourist spot in Sylhet that used to be abuzz with people during rainy seasons, inset, now remains devoid of people as the pandemic has kept people indoors and forced their travel plans to be pushed back. The photo was taken on Friday. PHOTO: SHEIKH NASIR

Tourism in Sylhet hit hard

Sector incurring daily losses of Tk 2-3cr since March due to Covid-19: SCCI

DWOHA CHOWDHURY, Sylhet

Imagine small boats gliding through snaking waterways, canopied by lush foliage. Suddenly it starts raining over the freshwater swamp and nature embraces all with its serenity.

This is how monsoon is in Sylhet -- unpredictable yet stunning.

And to witness and appreciate such abundance of beauty in the form of waterfalls, swamps, lakes, tea gardens and countless other gifts of nature, thousands flock to Sylhet during this time of the season to relish the experience. The region's tourism sector also depends heavily on the season.

Like previous years, this year was supposed to be no different. But then the country was hit by Covid-19 pandemic.

As a result, when all the popular spots in Sylhet such as Ratargul, Lalakhal, Bichanakandi, Sreemangal and many others were supposed to be teeming with people, and it would have been almost impossible to manage rooms at hotels without prior booking, an eerie silence now hangs over the locations.

According to an estimation of Sylhet Chamber of Commerce and Industry (SCCI), the tourism

sector has been incurring a loss of Tk 2.5 to Tk 3 crore daily since March 26, after the nationwide shutdown came into effect due to the coronavirus pandemic.

"The sector includes hotels, restaurants, souvenir shops, transportations, boatmen, tourist guides, tour agencies and many



others. All are at a loss and in dire need of government support to overcome the situation," said SCCI president ATM Shoeb.

On June 21, after a meeting with SCCI, Sylhet Hotel and Guest House Owners Group declared

extended closure of all hotels and guest houses till the situation improves.

"It's impossible to continue businesses maintaining limited access and health protocol. The administration did not provide any detailed instruction on how we should do this," said the group's



president Sumat Nuri Juwel.

He said though the government declared stimulus packages, they were not being benefited as all the banks have set their own perimeters to sanction loans with special interest rates.

Nazim Kamran Chowdhury, owner of Nazimgarh Resorts in Sylhet, said, "Both my resorts have been closed since March and we are struggling to maintain and pay our staff. Getting the government stimulus is proving to be tough due to the non-cooperation of banks."

"Even if we do get a loan, how will we repay them soon? It's time the government consider subsidy for all involved in the sector."

Even though the restriction has been eased, people are still not visiting the spots like they used to due to the virus, and it will take time before things become normal, said business and hotel owners.

Quoting Airbnb (an online company that offers arrangement for lodging, primarily homestays, or tourism experiences) CEO Brian Chesky's latest interview with CNBC, Hasan Murshed, an independent tourism consultant, said, "It took 12 years to build Airbnb and now they lost almost everything in six weeks. We are also facing a similar situation in Sylhet."

"Even after the pandemic is over, people will be reluctant to travel. It will be hard for businesses to survive as everything is uncertain. We don't know what future awaits

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ECONOMIC ZONE IN MIRSAI OF CTG

BEZA eyes arable land despite PM's directive

MOSTAFA YOUSUF, Ctg

To boost food safety, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has been advocating for preserving arable land for a long time.

No exception was there when she inaugurated "Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Shilpa Nagar" in Chattogram in 2018 with a clear instruction of not acquiring any such land for the zone.

Despite the PM's instructions, the economic zone which is being built along the Bay of Bengal at Mirsarai upazila of Chattogram, led by Bangladesh Economic Zone Authority (BEZA), now wants additional 700 acres of arable land adjacent to it.

The premier inaugurated the economic zone on January 24 in 2018 through a video conference, where she specifically asked the officials not to take any arable land. When former minister Eng Mosharraf Hossain of Mirsarai constituency informed her that people in the area may want to give their land willingly for the zone, the premier repeatedly told the officials not to acquire land which plays a vital role in

safeguarding the nation's food security.

Despite such instructions, the economic zone has already acquired 30,000 acres of coastal forest and felled around five million trees in the process, as mentioned in the documents of the forest department and BEZA masterplan.

Meanwhile, the Land Acquisition branch of Chattogram District Administration on behalf of BEZA issued a letter asking farmers of Mogadia area -- adjacent to the economic zone -- to offer their land, which yields crops thrice a year, for the project.

The letter was issued on May 31, amid the Covid-19 pandemic. It also triggered protests among villagers of Mogadia, Mayani and Saherkhali where around 10,000 people are in risk of eviction due to the proposed land acquisition.

The Daily Star has footage of the video conference, copy of land acquisition letter, copies of documents of forest department about the tree felling and BEZA masterplan.

On June 30, around 10,000 people rallied in the area protesting the decision.

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Sahara Khatun laid to rest

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Former home minister and trusted aide of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, Sahara Khatun was laid to final rest at Banani graveyard in the capital yesterday, in the presence of Awami League leaders, activists, well-wishers and relatives.

Sahara Khatun, a presidium member of Awami League who was loyal to the party through thick and thin, was buried at 12pm yesterday.

Earlier, her first namaz-e-janaza was held at Baitul Sharif mosque near her residence in Agargaon at around 10am while the second one was held at Banani mosque.

Many AL leaders and activists including Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan Kamal, Railway Minister Nurul Islam Sujon,

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'Punish culprits who dug up baby's grave'

Demands Nirmul Committee

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Ekattorer Ghatok Dalal Nirmul Committee yesterday condemned the removal of the body of a baby belonging to Ahmadiyya community from a grave in Brahmanbaria, and demanded punishment of the culprits behind the incident.

In a press statement, the committee leaders urged the prime minister to take action against administrative failure and negligence to protect the Ahmadiyya and the country's other religious minority groups, and ensure that their due rights guaranteed by the constitution.

It further called upon the National Human Rights Commission to take a proactive role over in this regard.

In the statement, the committee's President Shahrir Kabir and its advisory council President Justice Mohammad Golam Rabbani said news reports on the Brahmanbaria incident made them "hurt, worried and agitated".

They said fundamentalists close to Jamaat-e-Islami were behind the incident. Instead of nabbing the perpetrators, local administration tried to hide the incident through arbitration, which was against the rule of law and in serious violation of human rights, it added.

On Thursday, some locals in Brahmanbaria Sadar upazila's Chatura village allegedly removed the baby's body from grave, and left it on the roadside. The baby's family alleged some locals did this since the family belongs to the Ahmadiyya community.

KILLED IN BROAD DAYLIGHT

Murder case filed against Cumilla ward councillor

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Cumilla

A murder case was filed over Friday's lynching of Akter Hossain in Cumilla, accusing 10 people including the city's ward-23 councillor Alamgir Hossain and his five brothers.

Rekha Begum, wife of the victim, filed the case with Cumilla Sadar South Police Station that night.

Komol Chandra Paul, investigation officer of the case, said, "We arrested Amir, Jahangir and Billal -- three brothers of Alamgir -- on Friday. The councillor is absconding. Police have been deployed to keep situation in the area under control."

Akter, a local businessman, was killed outside Changini Dakkhin para mosque after Juma prayers.

The victim's younger brother, and local Jubo League leader Alal Hossain said, "Cumilla city unit Jubo League joint convener and ward councillor Alamgir and his gang members attacked following

an altercation centring a kite flying festival, that was scheduled to be inaugurate by convener of Jubo League of Cumilla city unit. When Akter came to my help, he was attacked with sticks and rods."

Alal added, "Though Alamgir managed to confirm a top post at Jubo league city unit, he was not involved in local politics. He comes from a locally influential family."

Talking to this correspondent, several people in the area raised allegations of land-grabbing and extortion against Alamgir and his family members.

Neither the absconding councillor nor any of his family members could be reached for comments.

Contacted, Abdullah Al Mahmud, convener of city unit Jubo League, said the incident was not necessarily political. Asked if any action will be taken against Alamgir, he said, "It is not in my jurisdiction. The central committee [of Jubo League] will decide that."

FAMILY PLANNING REPORTING

Star journo among six awarded by DGFP

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Six journalists were awarded yesterday for their work highlighting issues related to family planning by the Directorate General of Family Planning (DGFP).

Nilima Jahan, a reporter of The Daily Star, was among the winners -- for reporting on family planning, maternal and child health, and sexual and reproductive health rights (SRHR) issues -- which was announced at the "World Population Day 2020" virtual celebration programme.

The other winners are Sajida Islam Parul of The Daily Samakal, Sharful Alam of ATN Bangla, Hasan Sohel of The Daily Inqilab, Razu Ahmed of GIV, and Synthia Kainath Nur of Bangladesh Post.

Health Minister Zahid Maleque congratulated the winners at the programme. Each winner will receive a certificate, crest and prize money of Tk 50,000.

In a separate category, four top employees and six organisations were selected for the award for their special

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Seven held with stolen motorbikes in Ctg

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, Ctg

Police arrested seven members of a motorbike theft gang in Chattogram yesterday, in possession with four stolen motorcycles.

The arrestees were identified as Nayon (22), Samir (28), Samrat (25), Badsha (22), Anik (21), Babu (45), and Assaduzzaman (30).

Police said they are professional thieves and involved in various crimes like mugging and robbery.

Noble Chakma, assistant commissioner (Kotwali zone) of Chattogram Metropolitan Police, said the seven were arrested from Kotwali area of the city and Jorarganj in Mirsarai upazila following tip-offs.

"They used to steal motorbikes from the city and later sell those villages in different upazilas," said the AC.

Inspector (investigation) Md Kamruzzaman of Kotwali Police Station told The Daily Star, "To steal motorbikes, they used master key or broke the locks. Then, they would sell those in remote areas with forged documents."

"We first arrested Nayon with a master key. Based on his information, we captured the others in Sitakunda and Mirsarai upazila and recovered the stolen bikes from Badsha's house," he added.

"Samrat is an accused in four cases filed with different police stations on various charges," he further said.

BYLC holds virtual entrepreneurship bootcamp

CITY DESK

Bangladesh Youth Leadership Center (BYLC), under its BYLC Ventures programme, organised a three-day-long virtual bootcamp that ended yesterday.

Around 50 teams participated in the long-training programme, the first-ever virtual bootcamp by BYLC. Participants were selected from over 400 applications for Cohort Two of BYLC's six-month long accelerator programme.

The bootcamp educated participants on various entrepreneurship-related topics in sessions hosted by various luminaries, said a press release.

In the opening speech, BYLC chairperson Akhter Matin Chaudhury said, "Hard work brings with it its own luck. If you work hard, things will come to you."

During his session, Ken Wilcox, emeritus chairman of Silicon Valley Bank, said, "As a leader, you must be the person that you want others to be," according to the press release.

While sharing insights on perseverance and grit, Kamal Quadir, CEO of bKash, said, "Startup founders need to have perseverance to follow through on their idea. Success in a startup is 1% idea and 99% execution."

The bootcamp also served as an assessment for the accelerator programme. From the 50 participants, a jury board will select 25 teams for the final selection round, where an investment committee will select the top 10, who will each receive USD 10,000 seed funding and join the accelerator programme, added the press release.

The bootcamp was supported by IKEA Foundation and the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands. Other partners included BetterStories Limited, LightCastle Partners, and Hatch Global.



Wearing an outfit as red as the Krishnachura bloom in her hand, a girl walks beside the lake at capital's Chandrima Udyan yesterday. Strolling barefoot in the pouring rain with freshly-picked flowers in her hand, the scene could be straight out of a movie, but the mask on her face is a reminder of the reality we live in. The photo was taken yesterday. PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON

JP ex-presidium member Khaled Akhtar dies

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Maj (retd) Khaled Akhtar, chairman of HM Ershad Trust and former presidium member of Jatiya Party, passed away yesterday after a battle with Covid-19. He died at around 6am at Dhaka CMH while undergoing treatment, Khandaker Deloar Jalali, JP chairman's deputy press secretary, told the media.

Khaled, also former personal secretary of JP founder HM Ershad, had been on life support for the last few days. He was diagnosed with dengue over a month back and then tested positive for coronavirus.

Khaled, also a nephew of Ershad, left behind his wife, three sons and a daughter to mourn his death. He joined JP after retiring from army in 1986. He had worked as Ershad's personal secretary first. Later, he was made JP treasurer and then its

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