

BANGLADESH UPDATE



2,198
New cases in 24hrs



4,69,423
Total cases



6,713
Deaths



3,85,786
Recoveries



1,491,289
Deaths



64,417,268
Total cases

Cuban leaders, artists, revive row over free speech

AFP, Havana

A promise of dialogue between the Cuban government and artists calling for greater freedom of expression seems to have stalled, after communist authorities blamed a protest on US interference.

Unprecedented discussions were expected to get underway this week between Culture Minister Alpidio Alonso and artist representatives, but no concrete meeting has been announced.

Commitment to talks was one of

the key agreements reached on Friday night after an extremely rare protest by about 300 artists outside the Culture Ministry building in Havana.

Permission for such protests is rarely given in Cuba.

Rarer still, the ministry agreed to receive a delegation of 30 of the artists.

Their demands included freedom of creation and expression, the right to openly disagree with state authorities and an end to repression and harassment of independent artists on the communist-run island.

Promise of protection

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"We have developed a protection system after analysing the weather models of the last 176 years," Commander Md Anowerul Kabir, deputy project director of Ashrayan-3 project (the official title of the Bhasan Char project), told The Daily Star on Monday.

Strong concrete pillars have been installed along the 2.5km long sea shore of the island to weaken strong currents as its first line of defence. This protection fence, called "Screen Break Water", would weaken sea waves by 75 percent, said officials.

Gravels of diameters one to two inches have been dumped beside the pillars. This would weaken the sea waves by another 25 percent, they added. Besides, geo bags have been dumped on the layer of gravels to make sure that the island is protected even better.

Commander Kabir said they adopted a scientific protection system and there was no scope for erosion of the shore.

A natural defence mechanism has also been used in the island by planting mangrove saplings. Around one lakh saplings were planted in the island last year. Steps have been taken to plant another 10 lakh saplings, said project officials.

A former forest department official, who has 25-year working experience in mangrove forests, is helping the project officials plant the saplings.

Construction of the main

embankment is going on around 100 feet away from the sea shore. The embankment will be 19ft high from the ground and 12km long around the new settlement.

"We will plant grass along both sides of the embankment to make it stronger," said Commander Kabir.

The entire island has also seen a mangrove afforestation initiative being implemented to protect it from cyclones and storm surge.

About possible waterlogging, Kabir said they have already built a modern drainage system in the island and there will be around 18 sluice gates in the embankment.

Seeking anonymity, a project official said they were planning to develop a dredging system in the island and they already wrote to the authorities concerned in this regard.

"We would dump the dredged up soil on the island which will create another layer of protection," said the official.

Each of the 120 cyclone shelters in the island are built on a plinth 12 feet above the ground. Each shelter can accommodate 1,000 people and 200 cattle.

Md Fakir, a cowboy who has been living in the island for nine years, said the island used to go under water during high tides.

"We did not see water entering the island in the last three years after the navy officials started the development work and built an embankment here," he added.

Earth-filling by 2

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the Bangladesh Economic Zone Act, 2010, after obtaining clearance certificates from the DoE and other authorities concerned, it said.

Noor Ali's firms can submit afresh applications to the BEZA for permission to establish an economic zone in Sonargaon in accordance with the law, it added.

The HC bench came up with the verdict following a writ petition filed by Bangladesh Environmental Lawyers Association (Bela) in 2014 challenging the activities of the UPDL and the SEC to set up a resort and an economic zone in Sonargaon.

The court kept the writ petition as continuing mandamus so that any aggrieved person can move a prayer before it for necessary orders on the issue in the future.

Earlier on November 24, the bench fixed December 2 for delivering verdict after the final hearing on the writ petition.

Talking to this newspaper, Bela's lawyer Syeda Rizwana Hasan said the UPDL and the SEC can no longer carry out their work in the six moujas.

Contacted, Ahsanul Karim, a counsel for Noor Ali, said he was not clear about the HC verdict.

The lawyer further said the court in its order mentioned that his client could apply afresh for permission to establish an economic zone in Sonargaon.

LEGAL BATTLE
Following the filing of the writ

petition by Bela on March 2, 2014, an HC bench had directed the UPDL to stop filling up of wetland and remove soil it had already dumped for setting up the resort.

The court had also issued a rule upon the company and the government authorities concerned, asking them to explain why the earth-filling should not be declared illegal and why they should not be directed to compensate the land owners.

The UPDL then filed a writ petition with the HC which on October 25, 2016, modified its 2014 order, allowing the company to go ahead with its project.

Bela on November 3, 2016, filed a petition with the SC which stayed the October 25 HC order and upheld the 2014 HC order. The apex court asked the HC to hear and dispose of its 2014 rule.

Later, Bela filed a contempt of court petition with the HC on January 16, 2017, as the UPDL started work in the moujas for establishing an economic zone in violation of the HC directives.

On August 14, 2018, Bela moved to the SC for necessary directives to stop land grabbing and earth filling in the six moujas.

The apex court then ordered Noor Ali to refrain from filling up farmland and wetland near the Meghna in the moujas. It also instructed the deputy commissioner of Narayanganj to take measures to stop filling up of land in those areas.

between February and June next year, said officials of the health directorate. **38 DIED, 2,198 INFECTED** Meanwhile, 38 people died with Covid-19 in the last 24 hours till 8:00am yesterday, according to a press release of the DGHS.

With this, the total number of deaths rose to 6,713 while the death rate stood at 1.43 percent.

Another 2,198 cases were recorded in the same 24 hours taking the total number of positive cases to 469,423, added the release.

Against a number of 15,972 tests conducted in those 24 hours throughout the country, the positivity rate was 13.76 percent, while the overall positivity rate stood at 16.74 percent.

In the previous day, the positivity rate was 14.79 percent.

At least a total of 2,562 Covid-19 patients have recovered in the same 24 hours.

With this, the total number of recoveries rose to 3,85,786 while the recovery rate stood at 82.18 percent.

Among the 38 dead yesterday, 25 were males.

One aged under ten years, one between 21 and 30 years, three between 31 and 40, four between 41 and 50, four between 51 and 60, and 25 above 60 years old, added the release.



A hawker sets up shop in Gulistan to sell repaired and refurbished feature and smart phones yesterday. He also sells parts for repairing broken phones. Despite the prices of entry-level phones dropping over the years, many still cannot afford those while some decide to keep their old ones going.

PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

All set with UN views put aside

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how the funding for the Rohingyas in Bhasan Char -- around 37 miles off the coast of Bay of Bengal -- under Noakhali's Hatiya upazila would be managed under the current arrangements.

They stressed that any relocation of the Rohingyas must be safe, dignified and voluntary.

A UN source said the UN Refugee Agency UNHCR had requested the government late last year to allow a technical team to the island, but it did yet not receive any response.

"We have no clue as to why the team was not allowed there," the source said.

The housing project, funded with public money, was taken after some 750,000 Rohingyas fled a brutal military campaign in Myanmar's Rakhine and took shelter in Cox's Bazar since August 2017. They joined some 300,000 other Rohingyas, who had fled previous waves of violence in Rakhine.

Destruction of forest and hills and risk of landslides in Cox's Bazar prompted the authorities to choose the temporary housing site on Bhasan Char. The project implemented by Bangladesh Navy has 120 cluster villages that are capable of accommodating one lakh Rohingyas.

Talking to this newspaper, government sources said the authorities were preparing to shift the first batch of around 2,500 Rohingyas to the island from Cox's Bazar camps in a couple of days.

They said around 66 tonnes of food and other necessary household items were taken to the island as of November 29.

The houses have been built four feet above the ground with concrete blocks. The entire housing site is protected by a 13-km-long flood embankment. There are also 120 cyclone shelters, which are planned to be used as schools, medical centres and community centres.

Officials also said there were large swathes of land that could be used for livestock and fish farming if the Rohingyas were relocated there. The

refugees in the Cox's Bazar camps have a very little work to do now.

However, UN and several international aid agencies have been opposing the relocation plan, saying Bhasan Char is an isolated island and there are risks of cyclones. At a point last year, the UN wanted to send an independent technical team to Bhasan Char. Accordingly, a request along with terms of reference was submitted to the government.

In a statement yesterday, the UN Refugee Agency said it had not been involved in preparations for the relocation or the identification of refugees and has limited information on the overall relocation exercise.

Since the government announced the Bhasan Char project, the UN has offered to engage in constructive consultations aimed at better understanding the relocation plan, the UN said, adding that it remains willing to continue dialogue in this regard.

The UN has consistently maintained that any relocations to Bhasan Char should be preceded by comprehensive technical protection assessments for review the safety, feasibility and sustainability of Bhasan Char as a place for refugees to live.

It said it also spoke of the framework for protection and the assistance and services they would be able to access on the island. The United Nations is prepared to proceed with the technical and protection assessments, if permitted by the government.

"These assessments would be the concrete next step in determining whether the UN can engage operationally with the government's Bhasan Char project.

"If so, further work would be needed in order to develop plans and budgets, in consultation with the government and national and international NGO partners, as well as with the international donors whose support makes the Rohingya humanitarian

response possible in Bangladesh."

Meanwhile, European Union Ambassador to Bangladesh Rensje Teerink said the underlying important issue was that a UN technical mission to Bhasan Char was pending.

"We always said let's first see what mission brings. If the mission says it is totally safe and sustainable for these people to be relocated, then we can look how we can support this process. At the moment, we feel it is a bit premature because the missions have not taken place on the Bhasan Char," she said at a talk hosted by the Diplomatic Correspondents Association of Bangladesh yesterday.

Asked about the relocation move by the government when the UN waits for a visit by its technical team for assessments, COAST Trust Executive Director Rezaul Karim Chowdhury said Bangladesh risks losing the reputation it earned by sheltering the Rohingyas and the good relationship with UN.

"Our government should engage in dialogue with the UN on Bhasan Char. The UN also should understand the challenges Bangladesh faces and facilitate the relocation. If necessary, more facilities can be added to what is there in Bhasan Char now," said Rezaul Karim.

It will be difficult to arrange food and other humanitarian needs of the 100,000 Rohingyas by the government itself if the international community is not involved in the process, he said.

"Can we manage it without the support of the international community support?" he asked.

This correspondent tried to contact Foreign Secretary Masud Bin Momen, State Minister for disaster management Md Enamur Rahman, the ministry's Secretary Md Mohsin and Refugee Relief and Repatriation Commissioner Shah Rezwana Hayat over phone for comments on why an UN team was still not allowed to visit Bhasan Char.

None of them, however, could be reached yesterday.

CHT still plagued by myriad ills

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Samiti (PCJSS Santu Larma faction), PCJSS (MN Larma faction), United People's Democratic Front (UPDF) and UPDF (democratic).

According to law enforcement officials and intelligence agencies, hundreds of armed youths working for the factions of the two main parties -- PCJSS and UPDF -- are responsible for crimes like killings, extortion and abduction in the three hilly districts of Rangamati, Khagrachhari and Bandarban.

An attack on a member of one group is met with retaliation from the rival faction with no one ever claiming responsibility, said locals and intelligence agencies.

This violence has put the lives of 16 lakh people of the CHT -- comprising 13,189sq km and home to 11 ethnic communities -- in danger.

Rangamati district Superintendent of Police (SP) Md Alamgir Kabir said the problem with prosecuting these crimes -- murder, abduction or extortion -- is that there are no witnesses.

"The conviction rate is hardly satisfactory because of the lack of

witnesses. They are always afraid to testify," he said.

He said the hilly terrain was a barrier since some of the witnesses would have to come forward from remote areas of Rangamati.

"Language barrier is another problem. But the main problem is fear of reprisal," he said, adding that locals are scared of saying anything on record about extortion and atrocities of the political cadres.

"On the surface the hill tracts would seem to be peaceful and you will never see extortion up front since everything is done through mobile money transactions," said a Chakma businessman at Shuvolong Bazar.

He said if anyone disclosed details of the transactions, they would surely face serious reprisals.

According to intelligence sources, the hill districts generate about Tk 300-400 crores in extortion yearly.

They said from January 2019 to September 2020, a total of 105 extortionists were arrested by law enforcement agencies and more than Tk 40 lakh was recovered.

"They change their methods

frequently, which makes it difficult to trace them. Now they carry out online transactions, which are even harder to trace. A cyber-crime unit of police is working here to monitor them," SP Kabir said.

Former state minister for Chittagong Hill Tracts Affairs Dipankar Talukdar said the four armed groups are basically the "extortionists".

"The negative attitude of the PCJSS are the barrier for implementation of the peace accord treaty. Armed groups have to surrender the illegal arms to smoothen the implementation of the peace accord," he told The Daily Star.

Contacted, Rangamati Deputy Commissioner (DC) AKM Mamunur Rashid said intra-party conflicts of the regional groups to establish supremacy is the reason for killings and extortion in the hilly areas.

This correspondent tried to contact PCJSS and UPDF for their comments but could not reach any of their members. An e-mail was sent to PCJSS, but there was no reply.

The peace accord was signed on December 2, 1997 between the PCJSS and the Bangladesh government.

ROHINGYA CRISIS

US to keep supporting Bangladesh

DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENT

The US would continuously support Bangladesh through humanitarian assistance and political engagement for a solution to the Rohingya crisis.

US Ambassador to Bangladesh Earl R Miller made the statement on Tuesday while attending a virtual view exchange meeting with the Editors' Council of Bangladesh.

According to a press release of the US embassy in Dhaka, the US also wants to ensure safe, voluntary, sustainable, and dignified repatriation of the refugees back to their home.

Some 750,000 Rohingyas fled brutal military crackdown in Myanmar's Rakhine State in 2017, but none of them returned saying the environment in Rakhine was not conducive.

The US donates the largest stake of humanitarian assistance to the Rohingyas and will continue to work with Bangladesh and the international community for a sustainable solution to the problem, Earl R Miller said.

He also said that his country is committed to working with Bangladesh to fight Covid-19 and expand trade and other areas of cooperation including clean energy and countering terrorism.

He highlighted the strength of US-Bangladesh relations and expressed confidence that this partnership will continue on its positive trajectory, deepening and expanding in 2021 as Bangladesh celebrates its 50th anniversary of independence.

Miller also paid tribute to Bangladeshi journalists and media outlets for their tireless efforts during the ongoing pandemic to ensure the public has accurate, life-saving information about coronavirus.

Amnesty slams Egypt 'execution spree'

AFP, Beirut

Amnesty International yesterday denounced a "horrifying execution spree" in Egypt, saying dozens of people had been put to death in the past two months.

The UK-based rights group said that "in October and November alone, the Egyptian authorities executed at least 57 men and women", adding that this was almost double the number for all of last year.

"The Egyptian authorities have embarked on a horrifying execution spree in recent months... in some cases following grossly unfair mass trials," Amnesty's regional research and advocacy director, Philip Luther, said in a statement.

Selim Proadhan

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illegal casino business, allegedly amassed the wealth from online casino business, say investigators.

Preferring to be unnamed, an ACC officer told The Daily Star that in his 2011-12 income tax return, Selim mentioned that he owns 40 percent share, worth about Tk 6.9 lakh, of Japan-Bangladesh Security Printing and Papers Ltd.

However, Japan-Bangladesh Security Printing and Papers in its 2011-12 income tax return mentioned that Selim's paid-up capital was Tk 69 lakh and his share money deposit was about Tk 23.55 crore.

"Selim concealed the information of Tk 23 crore in his tax returns," the source said.

Verifying the documents, it is also revealed that the Japan-Bangladesh Security Printing and Papers made Tk 29.33 lakh profit in 2010 and Tk 1.46 crore in 2011. But Selim mentioned that he took Tk 8 crore loan from it.

"It is completely baseless," the ACC official said, adding that Selim could not produce any documents against his claim of taking loans.

Selim disclosed Tk 11.31 crore investment in FDR, share market and saving certificates, but could not show the source of money.

The ACC also found Selim has illegal immovable properties worth about Tk 49.46 lakh and deposits of about Tk 9.84 lakh in different bank accounts.

"His illegal wealth could be about Tk 35.41 crore," he said.

In the probe, the ACC also found that Selim deposited Tk 5.49 crore with Bangkok Bank and United Overseas Bank (Thai) and withdrew Tk 5.58 crore.

Investigators have been able to trace two cash deposits worth about Tk 1.22 crore and four cash withdrawals worth about Tk 2.74 crore from Selim's four accounts with Siam Commercial Bank, United Overseas Bank and Bangkok Bank between October 7, 2013, and October 10, 2016.

On September 14, 2016, KT Corporation deposited about 3.15 crore with Selim's Global Trading and Property Ltd's account at United Overseas Bank as telecommunication consultancy fees.

Selim is the owner and shareholder of seven companies where he has investment of about Tk 10.04 crore.

Earlier, investigators detected that Selim spent Tk 46.41 lakh in the US in buying casino chips and other materials.

ACC Deputy Director Gulshan Anwar Proadhan was assigned to investigate the case.

Cabinet okays

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with the Serum Institute of India (SII) and Beximco Pharmaceuticals Ltd to collect three crore doses of the Oxford-AstraZeneca SARS-CoV-2, AZD1222 vaccine.

Earlier on Monday, Cabinet Secretary Khandker Anwarul Islam said that the approval from the Economic Affairs Committee is required as per section 76 of the Public Procurement Rules since it will be bought from a single source.

On the next day, Health Secretary Abdul Mannan said the country would receive the vaccine hopefully by February next year or earlier.

"We hope we will get corona vaccines very soon. Hopefully by the month of February [2021] or earlier... Until then, however, wearing a mask is the only way to live and prevent transmission," Abdul Mannan said while addressing as chief guest in a World AIDS Day 2020 event in Dhaka.

The finance ministry on November 16 initially allocated some Tk 735.77 crore for the Health Service Division to procure the Covid-19 vaccine.

Apart from the vaccine from SII, Bangladesh will buy 68 million doses from the Gavi under a global arrangement called COVAX. The first shipment of vaccine doses from Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, is likely to be delivered

Vaccination starts next week in UK

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Asked about the British approval of the Pfizer vaccine, the agency said: "EMA considers that the conditional marketing authorisation is the most appropriate regulatory mechanism for use in the current pandemic emergency."

The approval of a jab for use almost exactly a year since the coronavirus emerged in Wuhan, China, is a triumph for science, Pfizer boss Albert Bourla and his German biotechnology partner BioNTech.

Meanwhile, the World Health Organization said it had received data from Pfizer and BioNTech on the Covid-19 vaccine and was reviewing it for "possible listing for emergency use", a benchmark for countries to authorise national use.

President Vladimir Putin yesterday ordered Russian authorities to begin mass voluntary vaccinations against Covid-19 next week as Russia recorded 589 new daily deaths from the coronavirus.

Russia will have produced 2 million vaccine doses within the next few days, Putin said. Russia said last month that its Sputnik V jab was 92% effective

at protecting people from Covid-19 according to interim results.

'NO CORNERS CUT'

The US drugmaker said Britain's emergency use authorization marks a historic moment in the fight against Covid-19. Pfizer announced its vaccine breakthrough on November 9 with stage III clinical trial results.

"This authorization is a goal we have been working toward since we first declared that science will win, and we applaud the MHRA for their ability to conduct a careful assessment and take timely action to help protect the people of the UK," said CEO Bourla.

Britain's medicines regulator approved the vaccine in record time by doing a "rolling" concurrent analysis of data and the manufacturing process while Pfizer raced to conclude trials.

"No corners have been cut," MHRA chief June Raine said in a televised briefing from Downing Street, adding that the first data on the vaccine had been received in June and undergone a rigorous analysis to international standards. "Safety is our

watchword."

Health Secretary Matt Hancock said hospitals were ready to receive the shots and vaccination centres would be set up across the country, but he admitted distribution would be a challenge given storage at temperature typical of an Antarctic winter.

Pfizer has said the shots can be kept in thermal shipping boxes for up to 30 days. Afterwards, the vaccine can be kept at fridge temperatures for up to five days.

Other frontrunners in the vaccine race include US biotech firm Moderna, which has said its shot was 94% successful in late-stage clinical trials, and AstraZeneca, which said last month its Covid-19 shot was 70% effective in pivotal trials and could be up to 90% effective.

FREE TO ALL

Coronavirus vaccines will be optional and free to all citizens and residents of Kuwait, the Gulf state's prime minister said yesterday, in comments reported in al-Qabas newspaper. Prime Minister Sabah al-Khalid al-Sabah was speaking at a meeting of various ministers.