

BANGLADESH UPDATE



2,316
New cases in 24hrs



4,71,739
Total cases



6,748
Deaths



3,88,379
Recoveries



GLOBAL UPDATE



1,504,073
Deaths



65,093,104
Total cases

'Idols, sculptures forbidden in Islam'

Clerics, mostly Hefajat leaders, issue 'fatwa'; DUTA demands stern action against those opposing Bangabandhu's sculpture

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

A group of clerics, mostly leaders of the Hefajat-e Islam, has come up with a "fatwa" declaring building of idols or sculptures of any person or animal is forbidden in Islam.

They were speaking at a press conference organised under the banner of "Top-level Ulama Masayek of the country" at the capital's Dhaka Reporters Unity yesterday.

The organisers said the press conference was arranged to issue the "fatwa" for resolving "confusions" among people regarding sculptures and idols. They said the "fatwa" was signed by 95 muftis and maulanans.

While reading out a written statement, Mufti Enamul Haque said the government should take the responsibility of demolishing all the idols and sculptures in the country.

Speakers at the briefing said discussions and criticisms surfaced after the government had recently taken steps to build the sculpture of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in the city's Jurain area.

Debate is going on both in favour of and against the construction of the sculpture. Confusions are spreading regarding sculptures and idols, they said.

They also said many were commenting on the provisions of the Islamic law relevant to setting up of idols and sculptures. Giving such statements without being fully aware of the Sharia is a sign of irresponsibility and a matter of concern, they said.

Enamul Haque claimed that there was no difference between sculptures and idols of a person or any animal as they are prohibited in Sharia laws. Even if the purpose is not to worship, it is undoubtedly illegitimate and clearly haram and a severe sin, he said.

Hefajat and a few other Islamist organisations, including Bangladesh

Khelafat Majlish and Islami Andolon Bangladesh, have recently raised their voice against setting up of any sculpture in the country. They raised the voice after the government moved to build the sculpture of Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

Hefajat became vocal at different rallies on this issue after Junayed Babunagari became its amir following the demise of Shah Ahmed Shafi in September.

Most of those seated on stage yesterday belonged to Hefajat, a Qwami madrasa-based organisation in Chattogram. They included Hefajat Nayeb-e-Amirs Abdur Rob Yusuf, Abdur Hamid, Nurul Islam, Mahfuzul Haque, Mahfuzul Haque, Joint Secretary Jonayed Al Habib and adviser Maulana Abdul Kalam.

DUTA STATEMENT
Dhaka University Teachers' Association (Duta) yesterday issued a statement, demanding stern actions against those who are undermining Bangabandhu by opposing the establishment of his sculpture.

"We are witnessing with grave concern that a fanatic extremist group has been mocking and insulting the Father of the Nation in the name of opposing the construction of his sculpture, which is similar to sedition," reads the statement.

"We think that a group of people is using Islam as a tool to gain their political mileage and is trying to confuse the common people by spreading confusions over sculptures and idols.

"The people of Bangladesh are traditionally religious and respectful of different views and ways and that they cannot be misled in the name of religion," it added.

The teachers' body urged the patriotic people of the country to remain alert.



Member of a mobile court of Dhaka district administration signs a receipt after a youth was fined for not wearing mask in the capital's Zero Point area in Gulistan yesterday. The mobile court was operating to raise awareness on health rules to curb the spread of novel coronavirus.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

First batch off to Bhasan Char

FROM PAGE 1

Daily Star over the phone.

"No one has forced me to go to Bhasan Char. I am going voluntarily," he said.

An official involved in the relocation process told The Daily Star that the first convoy of 10 buses with Rohingyas left for Chattogram at 11:30am and the second convoy of another 10 buses left at 12:45pm. Later in the afternoon, 18 more buses left with some 500 other Rohingyas.

Lt Col Ashique Billah, director of the legal and media wing at Rab headquarters, said two battalions of Rab-7 and -15 have been deployed on the Cox's Bazar-Chattogram highway to ensure smooth relocation of Rohingyas to Bhasan Char.

Under heavy security, around 1,500 Rohingyas were taken to Chattogram by buses. From there, they were scheduled to be taken to Bhasan Char by 14 vessels. Noakhali Deputy Commissioner Khorshed Alam Khan said the Rohingyas are scheduled to arrive in Bhasan Char by 2:00pm today.

Officials said some 2,500 Rohingyas would be in the first batch.

An official concerned told our correspondent in Chattogram that the Rohingyas spent the night in the port city under the supervision of the Bangladesh Navy.

The Navy has prepared the Tk 3,100-crore housing project, funded with public money, after some 750,000 Rohingyas fled a brutal military campaign in Myanmar's Rakhine state and took shelter in Cox's Bazar in the months following August 2017. They joined some 300,000 other Rohingyas, who had fled previous waves of violence in Rakhine.

Violence between different groups of Rohingyas and drug trafficking has become a matter of concern, said a

rights activist working on refugees. Destruction of forests and hills and risk of landslides in Cox's Bazar prompted the authorities to choose the temporary housing site at Bhasan Char.

UN and rights groups have been questioning the idea of relocation to Bhasan Char, saying it is a low-lying isolated island and has risks of flooding, but at a point last year agreed to send a technical team to assess the condition and requested the government to allow the visit before relocation.

In a statement on Wednesday, the UN said it has limited information on the relocation exercise and has not been involved in the preparation process. It said it is ready for the visit by a technical team and for consultation with the government. The UN also said any relocation should be voluntary and all protection measures must be in place.

Officials involved in preparing the housing project said it has 120 cluster villages that are capable of accommodating one lakh Rohingyas and there are livelihood options including fishing and livestock rearing.

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

The government arranged a "go and see" visit by a group of Rohingyas in September this year. The visitors later told journalists that the facilities there were far better than those at the camps, but they felt that they wouldn't be able to see many of their relatives after moving there.

Representatives from at least 22 local NGOs also visited Bhasan Char last week. They lauded the project, but added that they were unsure how the critically ill people could be treated

there. "The relocation of Rohingyas to Bhasan Char is happening on a voluntary basis," Foreign Minister AK Abdul Momen told The Daily Star yesterday, trashing the rights groups' statements that some of the Rohingyas were coerced into going there.

Responding to the UN statement, he said a technical team may visit Bhasan Char at any favourable time.

"They should first go to Rakhine and see how prepared it is for Rohingya repatriation," Momen said, expressing frustration over the fact that not a single Rohingya returned to Myanmar in over three years.

Rohingyas refused to return to Rakhine despite two attempts in the last three years, saying there were no guarantee of citizenship, safety and basic rights in Rakhine although Myanmar had signed a MoU with UNDP and UN Refugee Agency for creating conditions for repatriation.

Rights groups said the situation in Rakhine has not improved, rather deteriorated amid increasing conflicts between Arakan Army and Myanmar Army in recent months, though Myanmar faces a genocide case at the International Court of Justice and the International Criminal Court has begun an investigation into the human rights violation of the Rohingyas.

Foreign Minister Momen said the actual pressure from the international community should be on Myanmar for creating conditions for repatriation, not on Bangladesh that has been bearing the brunt of the crisis for decades.

Rights activist Noor Khan Liton said, "Relocation to Bhasan Char without UN involvement brings the question: Who will feed them and manage them in Bhasan Char? Can the Bangladesh government alone do it? We don't have the answers."

Israel behind killing

FROM PAGE 1

blaming Israel for the assassination, the official said. But the US believes the Iranians have not yet retaliated for the killing of General Qassem Soleimani, the leader of Iran's elite military force and the country's second most powerful leader, and that is the area the US intelligence community is watching right now, the official said.

The US government expects possible Iranian retaliation around the January 3 anniversary of the Soleimani strike, but the official explained that Iran's options are constrained because President-elect Joe Biden's inauguration will be about two weeks after that date.

An Iranian move to take kinetic action against the US -- particularly killing Americans -- would make it harder for Biden to lift sanctions on Iran when he gets into office in order to jumpstart diplomacy, the official said. If Iran does not do anything, their retaliation threats would look hollow at home and by players in the region, the official said.

During a foreign policy speech last year, Biden said he would rejoin the 2015 Iran nuclear deal if Tehran starts complying with the pact, a move that advisers say will require close work with

allies and a near immediate start of new negotiations.

After the Trump administration left the pact and launched its maximum pressure campaign, Iran announced that it would no longer limit itself to the deal's restrictions.

On Tuesday, Iran's parliament overwhelmingly endorsed the outlines of a draft bill which aims to counteract sanctions imposed on its nuclear program and boost uranium enrichment, state run Press TV reported.

The draft bill outlines a Strategic Plan of Action requiring the country's Atomic Energy Organization of Iran to produce at least 120 kilograms of 20 percent enriched uranium annually and store it inside Iran within two months after the adoption of the law.

Two hundred and fifty-one out of the total 260 Iranian lawmakers present voted "yes" to the outlines of the draft bill.

Once approved, Iran could also disregard other restraints put on its nuclear program by the nuclear deal, which also required international inspectors to its nuclear facilities, ICANA, the official news agency, reported earlier.

Rights groups call

FROM PAGE 1

Destruction of forests and hills and risk of landslides in Cox's Bazar prompted the authorities to choose the temporary housing site on the island, which is around 37 miles off the coast of Bay of Bengal.

UN and aid agencies were opposing the relocation plan, saying the island was flood-prone and could get submerged during tidal surges. Bangladesh officials, however, said the houses have been built four feet above the ground with concrete blocks and the entire housing site is protected by a 13km-long flood embankment.

On Wednesday, the UN in a statement said it was still waiting for the government to allow its technical team to visit the island and assess the feasibility of the Bhasan Char project.

In a statement yesterday, Human Rights Watch said the Bangladesh government should commit to a transparent relocation process, fully informed consent of transferred refugees, freedom of movement on and off the island, and heed the UN call for a prior independent technical and protection assessment.

"The Bangladesh government is actively renegeing on its promise to the UN not to relocate any refugees to Bhasan Char island until humanitarian experts give a green light," said Brad Adams, Asia director of HRW, in the statement.

"If the government were genuinely confident in the habitability of the island, they would be transparent and not hastily circumvent UN technical assessments."

Though the government claims that any relocation will be voluntary, Human Rights Watch said it has recently spoke with 12 families who said their names were on the list for the relocation, but that they had not willingly volunteered

to relocate. Some refugees on the list have fled out of fear of forced relocation.

"Donor governments engaged in the Rohingya crisis response such as the US, UK, Japan, Australia, and Canada should take a clear stand against this rash move to relocate Rohingyas to Bhasan Char," Adams said.

"Decisions to move after the completion of technical assessments need to be voluntary and fully informed."

In the statement, the HRW also said some refugees said that they willingly volunteered to go to Bhasan Char because they were told by the majlis and CIC volunteers that they would be able to choose livelihood opportunities, such as fishing or farming, that they would have better access to health facilities, and that their children would get education.

Meanwhile, Amnesty International's South Asia Campaigner Saad Hammadi has said the relocation of so many Rohingyas refugees to a remote island, which is still off limits to everyone, including rights groups and journalists without prior permission, poses grave concerns about independent human rights monitoring.

"Bangladesh and other members of the international community have a critical role not only in protecting the rights of the Rohingya people but also in ensuring their full and meaningful participation in decisions that affect them," Amnesty International said.

Fortify Rights said articles 9 and 12 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to which Bangladesh is a state party, protects the rights to liberty and freedom of movement, respectively. These rights apply equally to refugees, who should never be detained solely on the basis of their immigration status, it added.

Two sent to jail for rape

STAR REPORT

Two local courts in Sirajganj and Gazipur yesterday sent two arrestees to jail over the rape of a schoolgirl and a woman respectively.

The accused in Sirajganj is Yusuf Ali, 18, a resident of Porjana village in Shahjadpur upazila. He landed in jail in a rape case filed by the girl's father.

Quoting the case statement, police said the girl, 14, was returning home from school in the same village on a day about a month ago. Yusuf, along with his two associates, intercepted the girl and forcibly took her to a nearby jungle where he raped her.

One of Yusuf's associates filmed the incident. Yusuf threatened the girl that he would release the footage on social media if she disclosed the matter.

Neither the girl nor her family filed any complaint with the police until Wednesday, said Shahed Mahamud Khan, officer-in-charge of Shahjadpur Police Station.

The accused again attempted to rape her in Porjana village on Wednesday. At one stage, locals caught Yusuf and later handed him to police. However, his two associates managed to flee.

At night, the victim's father filed the case with Shahjadpur Police Station accusing Yusuf and his two associates.

The two other accused are on the run.

The victim was sent to Sirajganj General Hospital for medical tests, said the OC.

In Gazipur, a woman filed a case with Gazipur Metropolitan Sadar Police Station yesterday accusing one Md Abu Hanif of raping her several times while promising to get her a job, said police.

The case was filed a day after the Rab detained Hanif in Rajendrapur.

Quoting the 23-year-old victim from Gazipur Sadar upazila, Rab officials said she became acquainted with Hanif about seven months ago.

Hanif, a mechanic at a motor garage in Gazipur city's Itahata area, developed a friendship with the woman. At one stage, the accused raped her.

He also warned the woman that he would not get her a job if she disclosed the matter.

The accused later raped her several times. The woman then realised that Hanif was abusing her on the false promise of a job.

The victim lodged a verbal complaint with Rab on Tuesday.

The following day, Rab detained Hanif in Gazipur. He was handed to police yesterday, said Rab Company Commander Abdullah Al Mamun.

Georgia official says Trump rhetoric fueling threats

AFP, Washington

A senior Republican official in the US state of Georgia said Wednesday that President Donald Trump's unfounded claims of election fraud were fueling threats against poll workers.

Georgia Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger was the second state official in as many days to urge Trump to tone down his rhetoric.

Trump has repeatedly alleged there was election fraud in Georgia but has presented no evidence to back up his claim, and a recount confirmed that President-elect Joe Biden won the southern state by some 10,000 votes.

Atrocities of 1971

FROM PAGE 1

called on her at the Gono Bhaban. Referring to the volumes of the book titled "Secret Documents of Intelligence Branch on Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman", Hasina said all can learn many historical facts from 1948 to 1971 from the books.

Noting that the book "Unfinished Memoirs" (Urdu version) written by Bangabandhu is one of the best sellers in Pakistan, she said it is also well read in Pakistan apart from other countries.

The PM extended greetings to her Pakistan counterpart Imran Khan when the envoy conveyed the premier's good wishes to her.

The high commissioner said the Pakistani PM advised them to learn about the development miracle of Bangladesh.

Mentioning that different bilateral and regional forums have remained inactive, he sought help from Hasina to activate foreign office consultations between the two countries.

The PM said there was no bar to continuing activities regularly.

Imran Ahmed said Pakistan wants to boost relations with Bangladesh without any obstruction.

Referring to Bangladesh's foreign policy "Friendship to all, malice to none", the PM said she believes in regional cooperation.

The Pakistan envoy lauded Hasina for her statesmanship in the global arena.

The PM welcomed the high commissioner and assured him of all cooperation.

PM's Principal Secretary Ahmad Kaikaus and Military Secretary Maj Gen Naqib Ahmed Chowdhury were present.

More stimulus to offset Covid shock

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Bangladesh Bank Governor Fazle Kabir said the government plans to expand the credit risk scheme to Tk 5,000 crore from Tk 2,000 crore. "The government and the World Bank will provide the money."

The government has so far rolled out 21 stimulus packages since March to absorb the economic shocks of the pandemic.

Of the packages, six involving Tk 34,458 crore were aimed at employment creation and revitalisation of the rural economy. But till November, Tk 13,053 crore or 37.88 percent of the amount was disbursed, according to finance ministry officials.

Top government officials at the discussion blamed "the huge number of target beneficiaries" and "non-cooperation of some banks" for the slow progress in implementation of the vital stimulus packages.

"There are some faults but broadly we have been successful in implementing the stimulus packages," said Planning Minister MA Mannan.

He asked the officials concerned to take steps so that all banks cooperate in the implementation of the packages.

"We spend money, but on many occasions, we do not get the desired return. We should spend money in such a way that we get the highest return."

"Spend money but spend it wisely," said the minister.

Finance Secretary Abdur Rouf Talukder made the key presentation detailing the status of the six stimulus packages for employment creation and revitalisation of the rural economy.

According to the Finance Division data, the Tk 3,200-crore package titled "Credit Expansion for Employment Creation Through 5 State-owned Financial Institutions" was aimed at supporting small-scale businesses with the core objective of employment generation. Till November, Tk 428 crore was disbursed under the scheme.

"We are now in talks with the ADB for additional financing for these five state-owned enterprises," said Rouf.

Another Tk 5,000-crore package titled "Agriculture Refinance Scheme" was rolled out for boosting food production and ensuring food security. Till November, 51 percent of the amount was given as loans to 105,427 farmers and agricultural farms.

Another package, "Refinance Scheme for Farmers and Small Traders", involving Tk 3,000 crore was announced to support low-income professionals and small and marginalised traders. But only 32 percent of the money was disbursed till November.

"The remaining amount will be disbursed soon," Rouf said.

Besides, the Tk 20,000-crore stimulus package titled "Working Capital Loan to SME and Cottage Industries" saw disbursement of 41 percent of the amount as loans.

"While disbursing loans, we are facing problems and non-cooperation from some banks," mentioned the finance secretary.

Finance Division data also shows no money was disbursed under the Tk 2,000-crore Credit Risk Sharing Scheme for the SME sector.

"The government has plans to expand this guarantee scheme further with the support of its development partners. We are also having discussions with the development partners to expand this facility," Rouf noted.

The government rolled out another stimulus package to provide Tk 2,500 as cash assistance to each of the 50 lakh households that are not covered by any social protection programme.

Rouf said they could not provide the assistance to all those households due to a number of problems.

"We could provide money to around 35 lakh households. We have a large database now. If there is a second wave of Covid, we will be able to instantly transfer money to these households."

Replying to a query, the secretary