



The Daily Star



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"I firmly believe that during this unprecedented hour of global Covid-19 pandemic, platforms like Saarc have huge prospect to reunite the member states to address collectively the challenges emanating from Covid-19 pandemic."
FOREIGN MINISTER AK ABDUL MOMEN

"I think January is going to be terrible because you're going to have the Thanksgiving surge super-imposed upon the Christmas surge."
TOP US INFECTIOUS DISEASE EXPERT DR ANTHONY FAUCI

"I don't think we envision any countries creating a mandate for vaccination."
DIRECTOR OF THE WHO'S IMMUNISATION DEPARTMENT KATE O'BRIEN

INTERNATIONAL ANTI-CORRUPTION DAY

ACC roar fades as cases pile up

Anti-graft focus keeps shifting with issues popping up one after another

MAHBUBUR RAHMAN KHAN
On the very first day of this year, the Anti-Corruption Commission declared that it will hunt down those who had amassed wealth illegally through casino businesses. "We will keep on chasing the corrupt people. Big or small -- no one will be spared," said ACC Chairman Iqbal Mahmood at a programme on January 1 while talking about the anti-graft watchdog's stance against the illegal business. After the Rapid Action Battalion busted casino dens in the city last year, some prompt action by the ACC, like freezing accounts and issuing foreign travel ban against some lawmakers, created hope among many. But the investigation lost pace gradually. Soon after the Covid-19 hit the country in early March, scams in relief distribution, health safety equipment procurement and irregularities in healthcare facilities popped up, and the ACC shifted its focus. "Whenever a new issue arises, we are directed to dive in to deal with the matter.

At the end of the day, we cannot make much progress in the cases. As a result, enquiries and investigation get piled up on our desks," said a deputy director of the ACC, preferring to be unnamed. "People's expectation of ACC is never met," added the official. With such frustrations, the country will be observing International Anti-Corruption Day today. This year's theme is "Recover with Integrity", with focuses on Covid-19 recovery through corruption mitigation. It emphasises that inclusive Covid-19 recovery can only be achieved with integrity, according to a United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) press release to mark the occasion. **PENDING CASINO DRIVE ENQUIRIES** When the anti-casino drive was launched, names of several big shots, including some ruling party lawmakers, surfaced. The ACC took prompt measures to initiate enquiry, seized their bank accounts and issued embargo on their travel abroad. Lawmakers Nurunnabi Chowdhury SEE PAGE 2 COL 3



INCREASE IN PROJECT COST, TIME EXTENSIONS

Put an end to this

Says an annoyed PM at Ecneec meet
STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina yesterday expressed dissatisfaction over frequent time extension and rise in costs of government projects and directed the officials concerned to immediately put an end to such practices. She asked all concerned to complete the projects on time, shunning tendencies to revise projects and raise their costs. The premier also ordered the officials to find out the reasons behind the delay in implementation of many of the projects. She gave the directives while chairing the weekly meeting of the Executive Committee of the National Economic Council (Ecneec). Over the last few months, scores of project proposals for raising costs and extending deadline for completion were approved at Ecneec meetings. Some of the projects saw their deadline extended for four or five times. The prime minister last year asked all concerned to ensure timely completion of projects. Planning Minister MA Mannan also echoed her call. The PM yesterday voiced her dissatisfaction while approving the proposals for extending time and raising the costs of two projects under the agriculture ministry and the road transport and bridges ministry, Planning Commission Member Shamsul Alam told reporters after the virtual meeting.



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Uncertainty over EPI

26,000 health assistants go on strike over pay hike

MOUDDUD AHMED SUJAN
Uncertainty looms large over the expanded programme on immunisation (EPI) under the health directorate and possibly Covid-19 vaccination as around 26,000 field-level health assistants are on strike since November 26 demanding better pay. Representatives of Bangladesh Health Assistant Association (BHAA) said they would continue their demonstration until the authorities assure them of an amicable solution to their demand for pay-scale upgrade. Due to the BHAA's strike, the measles-rubella vaccination campaign for children scheduled for December 6 had to be pushed to December 12. Besides, routine vaccinations for at least 10 diseases, including TB, polio and diphtheria, have remained suspended across the country due to the strike. The upcoming Covid-19 vaccination could be hampered if things stay as they are, sources said.

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HEFAJAT-E ISLAM

Politicking in the garb of religion

RASHIDUL HASAN
Hefajat-e Islam is now more than a political party with a strategic disclaimer of having no political agenda. The recent leadership and their activities only proved that they are working just like a political party, observed political analysts about Hefajat, which made the headlines for the last few days by inciting hate against sculptures, including the ones of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. "Basically, they are a political party but in a very strategic way they are working in disguise of a non-political organisation," said Dr Tareque Shamsur Rahman. "They are using religion in a very strategic way to gain their political goal," he told The Daily Star. At least one-third of Hefajat leaders, who last month seized control of the new committee of the Qawmi madrasa-based organisation, have direct links with Islamist political parties that took part in elections alone or under the platform of the BNP-Jamaat alliance. The inclusion of leaders of Jamiyat-a-Ulamaye Islam, a component of the 20-party alliance led by the BNP, is the prime example. Thirty-four of its leaders made it to the 151-member new committee of Hefajat. Jamiyat is registered with the Election Commission as a political party. In fact, this is for the first time Hefajat made the general secretary of Jamiyat its secretary general, although there was an understanding that any active political leader would not be able to get top posts in Hefajat, said its leaders.

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BANGABANDHU SCULPTURE

Punish the culprits

HC asks authorities to take action against those involved

STAFF CORRESPONDENT
The High Court yesterday directed the government authorities concerned to take appropriate legal and punitive actions against those involved in damaging the sculpture of Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. The court also asked the director general of Bangladesh Islamic Foundation and the khatib of Baitul Mukarram national mosque to take necessary steps to build awareness among the people through print and electronic media and other means that monuments, statues, portraits, and murals of Father of the Nation are symbol of the country's independence, history, heritage and glory and that those are not contradictory to the religion. Besides, the HC issued a rule asking the authorities to explain in four weeks why they should not be directed to prosecute the perpetrators of the damage to

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Truck-pickup collision kills 5 in Tangail

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Tangail
Five people were killed and another was injured early yesterday as a truck collided head-on with a pick-up on the Dhaka-Tangail highway in Gharinda Bypass area in the district. The accident occurred around 4:30am when the driver of the Dhaka-bound truck lost control over the vehicle and it hit the pick-up coming from the opposite direction, Sub-Inspector Mohammad Ziaul Haque of Elenka Highway Police Outpost told this newspaper. Four labourers, who were in the pick-up loaded with printing machines, and the helper of the vegetable-laden truck died on the spot. Another labourer was injured. The truck driver escaped. The dead are truck helper Bulbul Mia, 40, from Rajshahi, and labourers Babul Mia, 32, Abdus Sobhan, 34, Nazrul Islam, 35, and Riyad Mia, 30. Upon information, members of Fire Service and Civil Defence rushed

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WHEN NEWSIES RISK BEING NEWS ... Television journalists run across rail lines as a train approaches with its lights on in fog near Moghbazar Level Crossing around 4:00pm yesterday. While collecting news, many reporters forget about keeping themselves safe.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

UK starts Covid vaccine drive

Grandmother, 90, gets first jab; millions of Californians face lockdown amid surging US cases



AGENCIES

Britain became the first Western country to start a mass coronavirus vaccine campaign with a pensioner receiving the initial jab yesterday as across the Atlantic millions of Californians went into lockdown to stop surging US infections. The UK's rollout of the Pfizer-BioNTech jab -- the first country to start using the approved inoculations -- is one of several vaccines bringing hope for an end to the pandemic that has killed more than 1.5 million people worldwide and ravaged economies since first emerging in China late last year. British pensioner Margaret Keenan, 90, said she felt "privileged" to be given the injection, the first of millions expected to be administered over the coming months in one of the world's worst-hit countries. RELATED STORY ON PAGE 12 SEE PAGE 2 COL 3