

Dip in icy water

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plunge beneath the water three times in an effort to purify their souls.

The celebrations are in accordance with Eastern Christian traditions that Epiphany is a commemoration of Jesus' baptism in the River Jordan.

In Western branches of the religion, the festival - which falls on January 19 - honours the visit of the Magi to Jesus as a newborn baby.

As they plunge into icy lakes and swimming pools around Eastern Europe, many of the devout Christians cross themselves and raise their arms in veneration.

One of the largest outdoor services in Eastern Europe takes place in central Moscow, where dozens of worshippers plunge into small paddling pools within sight of Red Square.

Temperatures hit as low as -17C during the festival in Moscow on Saturday night.

Another major event takes place in the Belarus capital Minsk, where the Drazdy Reservoir becomes the city's hub of Christian worship.



Joint forces personnel return from an operation to rescue a police team ambushed by Jamaat-Shibir men in Kadamtala and Khanabari villages of Sundarganj upazila in Gaibandha yesterday morning. Right, Straw heaps burned during the clashes between law enforcers and the party activists.

PHOTO: STAR



Razakars killed

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Khulna will attack our village. He formed the force in Bagerhat with Razzab Ali Fakir, Siraj Master, Hafizuddin, Ishaq and many others," he said.

"At that time, the looting began in Hindu dominated areas in Bagerhat and some people were also killed there," Dilip said.

On the May 13 morning, Razakars attempted to attack Ranjitpur but had retreated as the villagers were ready with sticks and locally made weapons to resist them. But Razakars attacked the village around 2:30pm, when some villagers went home to have lunch.

"When some of us were on guard, Yusuf Shaheb's force comprising Razzab Ali Fakir, Siraj Master, Hafizuddin, Ishaq entered our village crossing the nearby river and opened fire (on the villagers)," Dilip said, adding that sensing a sure defeat, they took shelter inside bushes.

"The armed men torched our houses and shot dead people who were trying to flee," the freedom fighter said.

When attackers left the place, they

came out of hiding and found the bodies of 60 to 65 people, mostly Hindus.

"Among the deceased, 24-25 people were from our village. My cousin Gobinda Das and brother-in-law Sanatan Das were also killed," said Dilip.

After the incident, Dilip along with his family left for India on the night of May 13. He took arms training there and later participated in the Liberation War.

Earlier in the day, Azab Uddin Mia, an assistant librarian of Bangla Academy library, testified as the 20th prosecution witness in the case.

Azab, as a seizure list witness, exhibited some copies of newspapers of 1971, which were collected by the investigation officer of the case from the library.

Yusuf's counsel Mizanul Islam completed Azab's cross-examination asking only one question.

Yusuf, a nayeb-e-ameer of Jamaat-e-Islami, is facing 13 charges for his alleged involvement in crimes against humanity and genocide committed in greater Khulna district in 1971.

Jamaat pounces

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A total of 32 cases were filed against 58,900 unnamed and 1,100 named Jamaat-Shibir activists in this connection.

Officer-in-Charge Mozammel Hossain of Sundarganj Police Station said their drives to arrest the accused would continue.

Search

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daughter worked as a helper at New Wave Bottoms on the 2nd Floor of Rana Plaza.

Activists and workers have complained that they didn't get any assistance from police in carrying out searches at the site. In fact, the law enforcers have barred them from entering the site since January 3, they said.

Rights activist Kallol Mostafa, who was involved in the searches, said 28 bones and a skull were found in a 30-40 minute search on January 3. They had to stop the search, as police asked them to immediately leave the site fenced with tin sheets on the front side.

Savar Upazila Nirbahi Officer Mohammad Kamrul Hasan Molla said the site is now off limits to people for security reasons.

Mohammad Mosheddowla Reza, assistant superintendent of police at Savar Model Police Station, said they had so far received 36 bones and a skull from rights activists and former workers, who carried out searches.

When contacted, Labour and Employment Secretary Mikail Shipar said, "We are aware about the discovery [of bones] as it has been reported in the media. We will see what we can do."

Maj Gen Chowdhury Hasan Sarwardy, chief of the rescue mission at Rana Plaza, dismissed the possibility of finding any human remains at the site.

He wondered how human bones could be found at the site that had been cleared around eight months back.

Govt wakes up after 5 years

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After a long gap of nearly 19 years, elections to upazila parishads were held on January 22, 2009, generating high expectations among people of the beginning of a landmark chapter in the history of the country's local government.

But it did not take much time for the authorities to upset the then growing expectations. The AL did not hesitate to take measures contrary to its pledges made in the run-up to the December 29, 2008 parliamentary election.

It had promised to decentralise power through strengthening upazila parishads and other local government bodies. It had promised to develop upazila headquarters as industrial growth centres and planned townships. The electoral pledges were made in light of the constitutional provisions relating to the local government system.

But a month after the upazila elections, the AL-led government amended the upazila parishad act, making MPs advisors to the upazila parishads in

their respective constituencies. This allowed MPs to meddle in the functions of the parishads. In fact, MPs kept controlling local development activities in a traditional way.

The saga subsequently kept unfolding as the government took a number of steps empowering local bureaucrats to perform the functions of parishads. In so doing, it saw different ministries form more than 80 committees to run development and other activities in the parishads. Elected chairmen were given the scope to head only a few committees on less important matters.

In contrast, upazila nirbahi officers (UNOs), the top government officials at the upazilas supposed to work as chief executive officers of the parishads, were given charge of most of the important committees, including even those departments that have been brought under the parishad's jurisdiction.

Therefore, upazila parishads, the most crucial local government body in terms of formation and functions, with

significant constitutional jurisdiction to run local administrations and implement plans for economic and social development, have been kept dysfunctional for the last five years.

This time around, the AL, as it approached the January 5 parliamentary election, promised to strengthen the upazila parishads. But bitter experience have discouraged many elected representatives to the upazila parishads from keeping faith in the AL's latest electoral pledges.

Over the past five years, many upazila chairmen and vice-chairmen were seen demanding that the government allow them to play their due role. But their demands were ignored.

This time, if the government does not change its ongoing strategy and take steps to strengthen the upazila parishads, holding mere elections will not yield any positive results in the local government system. The government may take some credit, though, by holding the polls in due time.

Violence flares

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a stage set up by protesters, leaving a small crater beside a vendor's stall. The second went off near a row of stall selling anti-government T-shirts, leaving bloody clothes and ripped white-and-blue tarpaulin scattered across the ground.

Protester Theerayuth Uthakapintanont said two vendors, who were selling merchandise to demonstrators, were hit by the second blast. The Erawan medical centre, which tracks casualties, said 28 people were wounded.

Such incidents have occurred nearly every day during the past week in Bangkok, including shootings at protest venues and bombings at the homes of leading supporters of the protesters.

It is unclear who is behind the unrest. But prolonged violence, even on a small scale, increases the chance that the Thai military will stage a coup. Such a scenario would benefit protesters, who have called on the army to take sides and do not have the numbers to bring down the government on their own.

Thailand's army has staged about a dozen coups since the end of absolute monarchy in 1932. The last coup, in 2006, toppled the then prime minister, Thaksin Shinawatra - Yingluck's brother - and prompted a societal schism that in broad terms pits the majority rural poor who back the Shinawatras against an urban-based elite supported by the army and royalists who see Yingluck's family as a

corrupt threat to the country's traditional power structures.

Yingluck's opponents - a minority that can no longer win at the polls - argue the Shinawatras are using their electoral majority to impose their will and subvert democracy. The crisis boiled over again late last year after the ruling party attempted to push through an amnesty bill that would have allowed Thaksin to return from self-imposed exile. He has lived overseas since 2008 to avoid a prison sentence for a corruption conviction.

Anxious about triggering military intervention, Yingluck has ordered police to go out of their way to avoid confrontations with protesters. The strategy is aimed at averting violence but it also has undermined rule of law and the government's authority, with police staying away from the scattered pockets of Bangkok controlled by demonstrators.

The protest movement has taken the law into its own hands. A protest leader, Issara Somchai, said demonstrators on Saturday detained two men allegedly found with small homemade explosives and handcuffs. Somchai yesterday said that the pair, suspected of planning violence, were still in the hands of protesters and were being "investigated".

"We are taking care of them. They are safe with us," said Somchai, adding that the men were also being protected from demonstrators who could seek revenge.

Dhaka to preen for T20

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The Local Government Division will implement the project which includes infrastructural development of about 23 km roads, electrification, street lighting, traffic signs and road markings of 23.5 km roads and beautification and decorative lighting of 20.5 km roads.

Earlier, the capital saw some cosmetic improvement during the ICC Cricket World Cup in 2011, where Bangladesh was a co-host.

Adorned with sparkling street lights, beautified cleaner roads, freshly painted buses and cars, colourful hoardings and vibrant wall paintings, Dhaka hosted the cricket extravaganza and won the hearts of cricket fans across the globe.

Emerging from the ECNEC meeting, Planning Minister AHM Mustafa Kamal said the meeting okayed a total of 13 projects involving Tk 7,735 crore.

Of the total cost, Tk 3,588 crore would come from the government while the remaining Tk 4,147 crore in project assistance, he added.

PM FOR QUICKER ADP IMPLEMENTATION

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, who chaired the ECNEC meeting, directed all ministries to take steps for speedy implementation of the Annual Development Programme (ADP) which was slowed down due to political turmoil in the last three months.

The premier said if necessary, the ECNEC meeting would be held twice a week, planning ministry officials told The Daily Star.

According to the planning ministry statistics, only 20 percent of the ADP has been implemented in the first five months of the current fiscal year, five percent lower than that of the same period of the previous fiscal.

The planning minister told reporters that the economy went through a crisis in the last three months.

Because of the crisis, the 7.2 GDP growth target may not be achieved, the minister observed.

He, however, said the average GDP growth had been more than 6 percent over the past four years

and the government would try to maintain that mark in the current fiscal year.

Mustafa Kamal also said though some foreign countries raised questions on the January 5 parliamentary elections, it would not have any negative impact on the inflow of foreign aid.

"DEVELOPMENT PARTNER, NOT DONOR"

According to a planning ministry official, the prime minister corrected a "mistake" committed by a secretary in the ECNEC meeting yesterday.

In the meeting, a secretary used the word "donor" to describe a foreign agency that would fund a project.

Sheikh Hasina then corrected him, saying he should have used "development partner" instead of "donor".

The premier argued that the government has to pay interests on foreign assistance. So, the agencies should be called development partners, not donors, the ministry official told The Daily Star, wishing anonymity.

102 upazilas go to polls Feb 19

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According to the polls schedule, the last date for filing an application for candidacy is January 25. The EC officials will scrutinise the applications on January 27, while the last date for withdrawing candidacy has been set on February 3.

Voters will exercise their franchise to elect one chairman and two vice-chairmen including one woman for each upazila parishad.

Announcing the schedule, Chief Election Commissioner Kazi Rakibuddin Ahmad said all necessary steps would be taken to hold the polls in a free and fair manner.

Asked if army would be deployed along with regular law-enforcement agencies to maintain law and order, he said: "Which security forces will be required cannot be said before the polls. We will hold law and order meetings a few days before the polls and take a decision accordingly."

He added the EC had kept law enforcers on high alert to ward off violence, especially attacks on minorities, before the tenth national election. "That is why the level of violence was less than we feared. Similarly, we will take necessary measures to maintain law and order."

POLLS IN 102 UPAZILAS			
Khagrachari: Sadar, Ramgarh, Mohalchhari, Matiranga, Panchhari, Manikchhari	Narail: Kalia	Jamalpur: Sadar, Sarishabari	Gopalganj: Kashiani, Maksudpur
Jhenidah: Sadar, Kaliganj, Kotchandpur, Shailakupa	Bhola: Lalmohon	Madaripur: Kalkini	Shariatpur: Vederaganj, Damudda, Jajira, Gosairhat
Magura: Sadar, Sreepur.	Manikganj: Shibalaya, Daulatpur, Singair, Saturaia	Sunamganj: Doarabazar, Dakkhin	Sunamganj: Chhatak
Gazipur: Kapasia	Rajbari: Sadar, Pangsha, Baliakandi	Moulavibazar: Kulaura	Habiganj: Madhabpur, Bahubal
Panchagar: Sadar, Debiganj, Boda, Atoari	Rangpur: Sadar, Gongachhara, Mithapukur, Taraganj, Pirgachha, Pirganj, Kawnia	Dinaipur: Kaharol, Khansama	Nilphamari: Dimla, Saidpur, Jaldhaka
Bogra: Sariakandi, Sherpur, Dhunat, Nandigram, Dupchachiya, Sonatala	Chapainababganj: Nachol	Narsingdi: Palash, Belabo	Sylhet: Biswanath, Zakiganj, Comaniganj, Golapganj, Goainghat, Jaintapur
Natore: Shingra	Sirajganj: Sadar, Raiganj, Ullapara, Kazipur	Chittagong: Hathazari, Mirsarai	Satkhira: Ashashuni
Meherpur: Sadar	Kushtia: Sadar, Bheramara	Rajshahi: Mohanpur	Khulna: Dhigolia, Koyra

cate exam timetable after consultation with the education ministry, they added.

The last election to 479 upazila parishads was held on January 22, 2009. The tenure of more than 100 parishads is set to expire in February.

Tenure of most of the rest is scheduled to expire in May, EC Secretariat officials said.

As per the electoral laws, polls to the upazila parishads are held within 180 days before their tenure expires.

In the last elections, the AL-backed

candidates won a landslide victory by bagging around 400 posts of chairmen. The ruling AL again focuses on the upazila elections to consolidate its power at local government levels.

The AL Working Committee at a meeting on Saturday decided that it would back 'a single candidate' in each upazila to ensure their victory.

At the meeting, AL chief and Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina asked the party leaders to work to strengthen the organisation saying the upazila polls would be more competitive than the national elections.

In contrast, BNP policymakers have yet to discuss at party forum the issue of extending support to grassroots leaders to fight the AL-backed candidates, a BNP standing committee member said.

However, a number of policymakers and many grassroots leaders are in favour of challenging the AL in the upazila polls to prove the ruling AL has 'lost' public support, said BNP insiders.

Speaking anonymously, the secretary-generals of two components of the BNP-led 18-party alliance yesterday said they had an informal discussion on asking grassroots leaders to contest the polls.

A secretary-general level meeting of the alliance was likely to be held soon to discuss the matter along with other political issues, Hamdullah Al Mehedi, secretary general of Bangladesh Labour Party, said.

Upazila parishad election was first held in 1985 and then in 1990. After a long break, the third election was held in 2009.

Biswa Ijtema begins Jan 24

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The first phase will start with religious sermons after Maghrib prayers on January 23 and conclude with Akheri Munajat (final prayers) on Sunday.

The preparations for smooth holding of the Ijtema have almost been completed with around 5,000 volunteers working round the clock to prepare the venue on 160 acres of land to accommodate the devotees.

"We have already completed 90 percent work of the Ijtema, and hope to complete the rest before the first phase starts," said one of the organisers of Biswa Ijtema.

He said devotees from 32 districts will take part in the first phase while devotees from the remaining districts in the second phase.

A large number of devotees from over 100 countries including China, USA, India, Pakistan, Malaysia, Japan, Singapore, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and UK are expected to participate in the congregation, he added.

Multi-tier security measures will be taken in and around the venue to avert any unpleasant incident.

A good number of security personnel from different agencies will be deployed to ensure smooth holding of the Ijtema, said Ismail Hossain, officer-in-charge of Tongi Police Station.

Nine observation towers are going to be set up at different points adjoining the ground to watch public movement while CCTVs will be installed at all the entrances to the venue, he said.

Besides, helicopters will hover above and pick-up vans will keep on patrolling,

Ismail added.

Fire brigade cars will be available on the venue. Medical services from Tongi General Hospital will be provided to the devotees while many private organisations will also set up free medical camps for them, he mentioned.

Bangladesh Railway and Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA) will arrange special train and bus services to transport the devotees to and from the Ijtema.

Twenty special trains will make special trips on all the six days of the Ijtema from different districts, including Sylhet, Mymensingh and Chittagong, said an official of Bangladesh Railway.

Around 300 buses will provide road transport services to the devotees from January 21 to February 3, said an official of BRTA.

Special measures have been taken to ensure uninterrupted electricity supply to the venue during the two phases of the congregation. The Public Health Engineering Department and the army have taken separate measures to ensure uninterrupted water supply for the devotees.

The devotees who will take part in the first phase of the Ijtema are of Dhaka, Gazipur, Sirajganj, Faridpur, Narsingdi, Kishoreganj, Rajbari, Shariatpur, Natore, Sherpur, Dinaipur, Habiganj, Rangpur, Lalmonirhat, Gaibandha, Joypurhat, Rajshahi, Sylhet, Chandpur, Feni, Chittagong, Bandarban, Khagrachhari, Rangamati, Bagerhat, Kushtia, Narail, Chuadanga, Jessore, Bhola, Barguna and Jhalakathi.