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WITH TODAY'S ISSUE



'THE REVENANT' BAGS \$16M

The Oscar nominated film, starring DiCaprio, storms to top US box office

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MAGGIE AGAINST MADIBA

Margaret Thatcher's govt tried to prevent Nelson Mandela being honoured

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PRECIOUS TOPSOIL burnt for bricks

Farmers forced to sell it to kiln owners, resulting in loss of agricultural productivity

S DILIP ROY with PINAKI ROY

At least 500 bighas of prime farmland loses productivity in five upazilas of Lalmonirhat every year, as their topsoil is sold to feed around 40 local brick kilns.

Local farmers have alleged that they are often pressed to sell valuable topsoil.

"I was forced to sell topsoil of three bighas to a local kiln owner. Many others suffered a similar fate," said Kandura Mia, a farmer of Madaner Chak village in Lalmonirhat.

Brick kiln owners collect up to 18 inches of topsoil through forced sale, alleged farmer Ishaque Ali of the same village.

"We get around Tk 5,000 per bigha for the soil. It would take up to four years before the field can again have its normal crop yield."

But a farmer can grow up to three crops a year and can make much more money than what he gets from the sale of topsoil of each bigha of land, said Ishaque.

This is happening not only in Lalmonirhat, but also in many other parts of the country. Most of around 7,000 brick kilns across the country use topsoil to make bricks.

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Labourers taking out topsoil from farmland to make bricks at Madaner Chak village in Lalmonirhat Sadar upazila. Large-scale extraction of topsoil is causing cultivable land to lose fertility in five upazilas of the district. *Bottom*, soil piled up at a brick kiln, and a plot of land after its topsoil is removed. The photos were taken a few days ago.



PHOTO: S DILIP ROY



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Tk 1 crore or more in 1.14 lakh accounts

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

There are 1.14 lakh bank accounts in commercial banks having Tk 1 crore or more each as of December last year, Finance Minister AMA Muhith told parliament yesterday.

The number of such accounts was 1.8 lakh in 2014, 98,591 in 2013, 90,655 in 2012 and 78,150 in 2011, he added.

Replying to lawmakers' queries, he said four out of 56 commercial banks in the country incurred losses in 2015.

The four are Basic Bank, Bangladesh Krishi Bank, ICB Islami Bank and National Bank of Pakistan. They incurred losses of

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Khaleda sued for sedition

Court summons her after a lawyer files case over comments on number of Liberation War martyrs

COURT CORRESPONDENT

A Dhaka court yesterday summoned BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia to appear before it on March 3 in a sedition case filed for her remarks on the number of Liberation War martyrs.

Momtaz Uddin Ahmad Mehedi, a Supreme Court lawyer and member of the ruling Awami League's central committee, filed the case in the morning with approval from the home ministry.

In the case statement, he alleged that Khaleda at a programme on December 21 last year said, "There are controversies over exactly how many were martyred in the Liberation War. There are also many books and documents on the controversies".

Momtaz appealed to the court to issue an arrest warrant for the BNP chief.

Metropolitan Magistrate Rashed Talukder passed yesterday's order after recording the statement of Momtaz, a former secretary of the Supreme Court Bar Association. The magistrate also said he took cognizance of the sedition charge.

The BNP protested it, saying the case was nothing but a mockery.

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62kg gold seized in Dhaka, Ctg

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Customs officials and detectives seized around 61.7kg of gold in separate drives in Dhaka and Chittagong yesterday.

In Dhaka, customs officials seized 280 gold bars weighing around 32.7kg from a Malindo Air flight at Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport last night.

On information, a team of customs officials searched the aircraft that landed at the airport around 11:15pm from Malaysia, and recovered the gold, worth around Tk 16.5 crore, wrapped in black tape under passenger seats, Shahiduzzaman Sarker, assistant commissioner of customs, told The Daily Star.

Meanwhile, the detective branch of police in Chittagong recovered 250 gold bars weighing around 29kg from a market in the port city.

Acting on a tip-off, a DB team led by Chittagong DB's Additional Deputy Commissioner Babul Akter raided the fifth floor of Bahar Market in Reazuddin Bazar

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NEWS ANALYSIS

ELECTORAL LAWBREAKING BY MP

EC shows its helplessness

SHAKHAWAT LITON

If the complaints filed by the returning officer in the recent polls to Phulpur municipality are proven to be true then the acts by ruling Awami League MP Sharif Ahmed of Mymensing-2 would be considered unlawful and punishable as per the electoral laws.

The returning officer accused Sharif of intimidating him and also of violating the electoral code of conduct to influence the Phulpur municipality election held on December 30. Polls were also held that day to 233 municipalities countrywide.

The MP has also been accused of using his men to try to take over different polling stations and of forcing presiding officers to allow his men to stuff ballot boxes in favour of the AL nominated mayoral candidate in the polls.

Subrata Paul, also executive officer of the Phulpur upazila of Mymensing, filed the complaint to the district deputy commissioner the next day of the polls.

The DC forwarded his complaint to the cabinet division on January 6.

In his complaint, Paul, whose service was placed under

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Govt to carry out census on Rohingyas

Scheme to issue special ID for the illegals, prepare database

REZAUL KARIM

The government for the first time will begin a census of Rohingyas staying in Bangladesh illegally to give them special identity documents and prepare a database.

Ahead of the census, scheduled to begin in March, the government will launch a massive awareness campaign among the Rohingyas, the Myanmar Muslims, so that they enrol in the survey.

Foreign Secretary Md Shahidul Haque spelled out the plan at a briefing organised for the Western diplomats, UN and other donor agencies based in Bangladesh at the State Guesthouse Padma yesterday.

The identity documents

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What steps taken against air pollution?

HC asks govt to report on Dhaka, Gazipur, N'ganj cities

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The High Court yesterday demanded an explanation from the authorities concerned as to what steps had been taken to prevent air pollution in four city corporation areas, including Dhaka north and south.

A report has to be submitted by February 25 on the measures taken to remove dust, smoke and other deadly elements from air, which have been causing damage to public health in Dhaka North, Dhaka South, Gazipur and Narayanganj city corporations, it said.

The order came in response to a writ petition by Supreme Court lawyers Zulhas Uddin Ahmed and Md Mojibur Rahman.

The lawyers drew the court's attention to a World Bank report, according to which 15,000 people die and 65 lakh people's health is affected in Bangladesh every year due to air pollution.

In the petition submitted on January 17, they also said city corporation sweepers abruptly sweep roads between 7:00am

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Rickshaws and other vehicles ply a dusty road at Tejgaon in the capital. Road dust has become a major source of air pollution in dry season in the capital, as heavy construction work and digging of roads for installing utility ducts are done during this period, causing health hazards to city dwellers. The photo was taken yesterday noon.

PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON

Dusty streets in city pose health risks

HELEMUL ALAM

Dry weather, compounded by waning greenery and heavy construction work, has turned Dhaka's air seriously polluted.

Doctors say the high level of air pollution has increased number of patients with coughing and breathing problems in winter.

The capital city's air is thick with dust due to construction of residential buildings and a number of flyovers, and digging of roads for installing utility lines.

Locals in different city areas have said most of these "development works" are done without spraying any water to minimise dust.

"Although these problems are not serious in nature, prolonged exposure to dusty air may lead to lung cancer or interstitial lung disease (ILD)," Kazi S Bennoor, assistant professor of respiratory medicine at National Institute of Diseases of Chest and Hospital (NIDCH), tells The Daily Star.

ILD reduces the amount of oxygen in the body, and can cause death, he says.

"Both the toxic air and dust pollution can cause diseases like asthma, bronchitis, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, nasal allergy and rhinitis," he says, adding two more diseases, silicosis and asbestosis, have also increased recently.

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