

Second phase of Biswa Ijtema underway

STAR REPORT

Prayers and sermons marked the first day of Biswa Ijtema, one of the largest congregations of the Muslims, as it began on the Turag in Tongi yesterday morning.

Thousands of devotees from home and abroad are taking part in the second phase of the congregation this year. The banks of the Turag, around 20-km off the capital, turned into a human sea as they assembled for Juma prayers conducted by Hafej Mohammad Jobayer, the imam of Kakrail Mosque.

This year's first phase of the Ijtema concluded with the Akheri Munajat (final prayers) on January 14, while the second and final phase will end tomorrow.

Visiting the Ijtema ground yesterday, Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan said they have ensured all kinds of security arrangements.

Talking to journalists at Shaheed Ahsanullah Master Stadium in Gazipur, the minister said more than 4,000 foreign devotees were taking part in the Ijtema.

The Tablighi Jamaat has been organising the annual programme

since 1946.

The three-day congregation will see delivery of sermons on fundamental matters of Tabligh, prayers for spiritual adulation, exaltation and welfare of the Muslim Ummah, recitation from the holy Quran and Hadith.

As the Ijtema committee last year decided to hold the event in four phases in two years, devotees of 32 districts attended the Ijtema in two phases last year and those from other districts are taking part in the congregation this year.

Among the districts participating in the final phase are Dhaka, Jamalpur, Faridpur, Kurigram, Sunamganj, Comilla, Feni, Rajshahi, Thakurgaon, Pirojpur, Khulna, Chuadanga and Jhenidah.

Thousands of volunteers are working round the clock to ensure smooth management of the event. A good number of law enforcers have been deployed at the venue.

Observation towers and CCTV cameras have been installed to keep the venue under surveillance. Besides, special measures have been taken to ensure uninterrupted power supply.



Devotees offer Juma prayers at the Biswa Ijtema ground on the Turag on the first day of the second phase of the religious congregation yesterday.

PHOTO: PALASH KHAN

Mugger stabs college student to death

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Mymensingh

A mugger stabbed a college student to death at Bolashpur of Mymensingh town on Thursday night.

The victim, Ibrahim Khalil, 22, of Moulana Jamal Uddin of Rouha Madhyapara village in Gafargaon upazila, was a second-year student of Islamic history and culture department at Government Ananda Mohan College.

Quoting locals, Khandaker Shaker Ahmed, officer-in-charge (investigation) of Kotwali Police Station, said around 11:30pm, the mugger waylaid Ibrahim when he was walking to a CNG-run auto-rickshaw stand in Shambhuganj bridge area to reach his

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COLD SPELL

4 more killed by open fire

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Dinajpur

Four more people, including three women, who had suffered burn injuries while warming themselves by the fire during the recent cold spell, died at Rangpur Medical College Hospital yesterday.

Nineteen people, 18 of them women, died from their burns at RRMCH in the last 14 days.

The four deceased are Gita Rani, 27, of Dinajpur's Birganj, Mokbul Hossain, 62, of Dinajpur's Nawabganj, Rumki Begum, 27, of Lalmonirhat's Patgram, and Afroza Bawa, 75, of Nilphamari Sadar.

Around 55 patients, including the four, were admitted to burn and plastic surgery unit at RMCH. They

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Forests, hills in peril: UN

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threatens the global biodiversity and causes degradation of natural and critical habitats, a few remaining in Bangladesh," said the report.

"As the influx continues, its effects on biodiversity may become irreversible if not properly managed."

Evaluating the environmental impact of the Rohingya influx, the UN body submitted the report to the environment ministry last month. Based on the ratings of the impact -- critical, severe, medium and low -- a total of 28 key risks were identified and assessed.

The Daily Star obtained a copy of the report, which also came up with recommendations for mitigating significant physical impacts of the influx.

The report stressed the need for a detailed environmental assessment and an extensive long-term monitoring programme to confirm and quantitatively define the results of the rapid assessment study which include the environmental loss and damage from the influx.

The environment and forests ministry received the report and sent its copies to the ministries of foreign, home, planning, LGRD, health, disaster management and relief; the Prime Minister's Office and the cabinet division.

"On receiving their opinion, we all will meet to discuss the issue," Abdullah Al Mohsin Chowdhury, acting secretary at the environment ministry, told The Daily Star on January 15.

Asked about the possible decision, he said, "We will make the decision after receiving opinion from all."

More than 655,000 Rohingyas have fled across the border to Bangladesh since Myanmar military began an offensive following reported guerrilla attacks on security posts and an army camp in that country on August 25 last year.

With horrific accounts of rape, extrajudicial killing and arson, Rohingyas took shelters at makeshift camps in Ukhaia and Teknaf upazilas in Cox's Bazar, creating a humanitarian crisis in Bangladesh's top tourist destination.

FOREST LAND

According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) assessment, the Rohingya influx has "influenced" some 26,600 hectares of the total 60,000 hectares of the forest land in Cox's Bazar.

Establishment of large makeshift camps in Kutupalong, Balukhali, and other areas has made a "substantial direct impact" on the available forest resources in Ukhaia range, which is the worst affected area.

Of the 1,485 hectares of the encroached forest lands under Ukhaia, Whykong and Teknaf ranges, 700 hectares were plantation area, according to the assessment, which says over 1,500 participants in the social forestry plantation have already lost their benefit as almost all the plantation have been cleared up for the Rohingya settlement.

Besides, the report says, the collection of fuel wood from forests within the 10 kilometres zone around the camps will sustain fuel supply for approximately a year. But the whole forest land of 26,000 hectares will be degraded and converted into shrub dominated areas with low biomass and productivity.

If the fuel wood collection continues, it will also put substantial impact on the proposed Inani National Park and potentially on Himchhari National Park.

"Therefore, the influx currently causes and will continue to cause a critical impact on forest land in the Teknaf and Ukhaia ranges. This is an adverse impact high in magnitude and large geographical area, long-term, or irreversible if not properly mitigated."

"It will likely give rise to significant social conflict between host communities and Rohingyas over the use of the forest resources."

The UN body gave several recommendations to mitigate the impact. Those recommendations include controlling access to fuel from forests, supporting fuel wood substitution actions through coordination of various aid agencies, setting up tree plantations

and reforestation in Cox's Bazar.

GROUND WATER

The UNDP report identified ground water depletion and contamination as one of the critical impacts of the Rohingya influx.

It said Teknaf coastal zone has descending ground water and the demand for the water has increased manifold after the influx began.

"Thousands of shallow tube wells have been installed in the influx areas, which are very close to each other, particularly in Kutupalong and Balukhali camps, to meet huge demand, resulting in exhaustive withdrawal of water from the shallow aquifer."

"As a result, some of the wells have gone dry in the meantime. Apprehensions are there that the shallow aquifer could be exhausted within next several months."

The water sector service providers are looking for deep wells but there is no certainty yet about its availability as, according to the geological features, it's all rock underneath in the deeper aquifer region, according to the UNDP assessment.

Besides, thousands of latrines without proper soak pit have been installed very close to the water points.

"Now, leakage, seepage and overflow from these facilities are being reported, which are making the ground water contaminated," it said.

The report also said results of ground water samples from different Rohingya camps for E-coli test by Red Cross provided alarming picture as 70 percent of the samples were observed to be heavily polluted.

Mentionable, the influx area does not have much surface water excepting small streams.

The study recommended hydrogeological and geophysical investigation to identify potential water aquifer; protection of all water sources from pollution; and development of water treatment facilities and piped water supply network to mitigate the water issue.

RISK OF LAND SLIDE

Due to the indiscriminate hill cutting to provide shelters to the Rohingyas, the terrain of the hills has lost their natural setting while the vegetation cover has also gone, the UNDP report said.

"The top soil and other loose soils have now become very susceptible to be carried away during rains or even in stormy winds," it said.

During field visits, the study teams noticed that about 50 percent of the hills have been completely denuded in the influx area. Erosion also hit many areas.

"The hills in some places have been so mercilessly cut that land slide may happen any time," the report said. The study team identified land slide as a severe impact of the influx.

WILDLIFE AND OTHERS

The report says the makeshift camps cause significant impact on the wildlife, especially on the elephants who suffer habitat loss and fragmentation.

During the field visits, it was observed that some Rohingya camps were constructed just on the corridors of elephants and "hence an elephant-human conflict is obvious."

"If [the problem is] not mitigated... the elephants will be locally extinct from this area," the report said.

ROHINGYAS BEEN AFFECTED TOO

The current situation is taking a toll on the Rohingyas, especially the women and the girls.

It is disproportionately affecting women, girls and the most vulnerable and marginalised Rohingyas groups, the UNDP report says.

The overcrowding and decreasing privacy at all the Rohingya sites increases safety and security risks, particularly for women and girls. Women and girls, especially from female or child headed households, are particularly vulnerable to violence and abuse while collecting firewood from the forest, it said.

Sanitation, indoor air quality and solid waste management -- these are among the other major risks to human health in the camps, the report added.

Putin

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traditional knee-high felt boots as priests chanted and waved an incense lamp, in footage shown on state television.

Asked by a journalist: "Is it cold?" Putin braved it out: "No, it's great."

Then wearing just swimming trunks, he lowered himself into a hole cut in the ice, puffing slightly and crossing himself, a crucifix hanging around his neck. He then held his nose and immersed himself fully.

It was the first time the 65-year-old, who regularly poses barechested on wilderness expeditions, publicly took part in the ritual.

However, his spokesman Dmitry Peskov said that Putin "has been plunging into an ice hole for a number of years now," quoted by TASS state news agency.

Putin's latest macho exploit comes as he bids for a fourth Kremlin term in March polls.

Amid a chill in relations with Washington, it was an opportunity for the strongman to show off his fitness as US counterpart Donald Trump faces questions over his waistline.

The Russian Orthodox Church does not require believers to go through the gruelling experience, which is more of a popular tradition.

Participants are supposed to immerse themselves three times -- in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit -- to remember the baptism of Jesus in the River Jordan.

To mark the occasion, Orthodox priests also go out to bless rivers and reservoirs and even seas such as the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea. Orthodox Christians believe the water temporarily becomes purified and has healing qualities.

In some areas with extreme temperatures -- parts of Siberia dropped to minus 68 degrees Celsius (minus 90 Fahrenheit) -- local authorities banned the icy plunges.

In Norilsk, a Siberian city beyond the Arctic Circle, local authorities on Thursday banned bathing "to avoid frostbite and emergency situations" as temperatures in some areas hit minus 52 Celsius and strong winds whipped up a blizzard.

Rohingya leaders

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Buddhist Myanmar unless the demands were met.

The petition, which has still to be finalised, demanded the Myanmar government publicly announce it is giving Rohingyas long-denied citizenship and inclusion on a list of the country's recognised ethnic groups. It asks that land once occupied by the refugees be returned to them and their homes, mosques and schools rebuilt.

It wants the military held accountable for alleged killings, looting and rape, and the release from jails of "innocent Rohingyas" picked up in counter-insurgency operations.

It also wants Myanmar to stop listing people with their photographs as "terrorists" in state media and on government Facebook pages.

Myanmar state newspapers this week issued a supplement listing the names and photos of alleged members of the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), whose attacks on security posts on Aug 25 triggered a sweeping counter-insurgency operation.

The United Nations has described the Myanmar military operations in the northern part of Rakhine as a classic case of ethnic cleansing.

The military says it has only conducted legitimate operations and denies there have been cases of sexual assault.

But the military said last week soldiers had killed 10 captured

Muslim "terrorists" during insurgent attacks at the beginning of September, after Buddhist villagers had forced the captured men into a grave the villagers had dug.

It was a rare acknowledgment of wrongdoing by the Myanmar military during its operations in the western state of Rakhine.

ARSA said in a statement last week the 10 Rohingyas in the mass grave were "innocent civilians" and not members of their group.

CHALLENGES AHEAD The Rohingyas elders Reuters spoke to said they were still finalising their list of demands before showing it to Bangladesh authorities and to aid agencies administering the camps.

They said the 40 village leaders they discussed the petition with represent the interests of all Rohingyas at the camp, but that could not be independently verified and aid agencies were unable to comment pending formal issuance of the petition.

Bangladesh and Myanmar this week agreed to complete the return of the refugees over the next two years, with the process due to begin on Tuesday.

But even as preparations get underway for the repatriation, Rohingyas Muslims continue to pour into Bangladesh.

More than 100 Rohingyas have crossed into Bangladesh from Myanmar since Wednesday and scores more were waiting to cross the

Naf river that forms the border, newly arrived refugees in Bangladesh told Reuters.

The new arrivals said they fled Myanmar because of military operations in their village of Sein Yin Pyin, and gave accounts of young men being rounded up and of discovering dead bodies in a pond and a forest.

They said they fled out of hunger, after hiding in their homes for days, unable to go to work in the fields and forests that provided their livelihood.

Myanmar Police Colonel Myo Thu Soe, spokesman for the military-controlled Home Affairs Ministry, told Reuters on Thursday "there's no clearance operation going on in the villages".

But, he added, "security forces are still trying to take control of the area" in northern Rakhine. He declined to elaborate.

Rights groups and the UN say any repatriations must be voluntary.

Phil Robertson, deputy Asia director at Human Rights Watch, told Reuters in an email authorities cannot deal with the Rohingyas refugees "as if they are an inert mass of people who will go where and when they are told".

The repatriation deal does not cover over 200,000 other Rohingya refugees living in Bangladesh prior to October 2016, who had been driven out of Myanmar during previous episodes of ethnic violence and military operations.

World order strained but not broken

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"It's the unpredictability," he argued.

"It's not a minor thing if you're running a global security system based on credibility. But, so far, he hasn't done much damage to the international order."

CLIMATE: THE 'WITHDRAWAL DOCTRINE'

It was on climate change that Trump came closest to disappointing the entire world.

He left the door open, just a crack, to return to the Paris Accord -- under which 190 countries agreed measures to limit global warming -- but only if America gets a looser deal.

Still, Trump's move remains symbolic of what observers now call the "withdrawal doctrine," under which the US president ceded his country's leadership or even membership in several multilateral projects.

IRAN: AMERICA ALONE

For America's allies, for former Obama officials and for a good chunk of the Washington foreign policy establishment, the 2015 Iran nuclear deal is a landmark of modern diplomacy.

For Trump, it is the "worst deal ever negotiated."

Under the accord, Iran gave up or placed under UN inspection much of its nuclear program -- lengthening the "breakout" time it would take to quickly develop an atomic weapon.

Many in Washington -- and in France, Saudi Arabia and Israel -- agree it was a mistake to leave Iran's ballistic missiles and regional interference out of the deal.

Hawkish voices in lobby groups and

Congress encouraged him to "decertify" the deal, but his own top advisers persuaded him not to reimpose sanctions and torpedo it altogether.

NEXT YEAR IN JERUSALEM?

Another Trump campaign promise that sent shivers through the world's foreign ministries was his boast that he would move the US embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem.

Many expected him to abandon the idea once he was in office and aware of the likely furious reaction in foreign capitals to a move that could kill hopes of Israeli-Palestinian peace.

In fact, to general consternation, Trump went ahead and ordered Tillerson's State Department to start looking out for land on which to build a new mission in the divided city.

After a few days of protest, reaction in the Arab world was relatively muted, but US-Palestinian relations have plunged to new depths and a renewed peace process appears unlikely.

NORTH KOREA: ROCKET MAN VS DOTARD

Trump's approach to Kim Jong-Un's isolated North Korean regime has also proved hair-raising, even as Pyongyang has demonstrated a more impressive nuclear arsenal.

The new president was warned by Obama as he arrived in the Oval Office about Kim's quest, now apparently complete, to build missiles capable of hitting the United States.

Despite Trump's declared antipathy towards multilateralism at the 2017 UN General Assembly, his diplomats man-

aged to build international support for UN sanctions against the North.

Trump's apparently warm golfing relations with China's Xi Jinping helped soothe the great power rivalry, and Tillerson now hopes to force Kim to negotiate disarmament.

But here again, Trump's unpredictable and highly-personalized outbursts have kept the world on edge.

Overblown and violent rhetoric is perhaps the only domain in which North Korea can rival the United States, but Trump nevertheless chose it as his battlefield.

But with Trump branding Kim "Little Rocket Man" and Kim responding to the "mentally deranged dotard," Tillerson has worked on keeping the sanctions coalition together.

Key player China is still on board, even if the US accuses Russia of trying to undermine sanctions, and South Korea has tentatively reopened direct talks with its northern foe.

MEXICO: BACKS AGAINST THE WALL The most famous, and most derided, promise of Trump's 2016 presidential campaign was for a "big beautiful wall" across America's southern border that Mexico would pay for.

At home, the remaining controversy about the project is mainly about how to fund it and whether a fence across part of the border is the same as a wall along the length of it.

But beyond the literal wall, the issue stands as a proxy for a broader crisis: Trump is convinced that America gets a bad deal from North America's NAFTA trade pact.