

Tangail highway stops for 7 hours

30km-long gridlock causes sufferings

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Tangail

Hundreds of vehicles were stuck in a gridlock on Dhaka-Tangail highway for seven hours causing immense suffering to people.

The 30km-long-tailback was seen from Chandra Intersection in Gazipur to Baoikhola in Tangail. The moving traffic came to a complete halt around 4:00am.

The situation started to become normal around 11:00am, said passengers, transport workers and traffic police.

Increased number of vehicles going towards Dhaka since Friday night on a highway being worked on were the reasons for the chaos, said Shahadat Hossain Selim, traffic inspector in Mirzapur.

Madhab Sarkar of Kathalia village in Mirzapur got on a bus in Mirzapur to go to Dhaka around 8:00am. His bus covered only six kilometers in an hour and half. He

then gave up and went home, missing a day's work.

Vehicles took an additional three to four hours to pass the 55km stretch between Chandra and Elenga due to the congestion, said Shamol Saha, driver of a bus.

Officer-in-Charge Khalilur Rahman of Gorai Highway Police Station blamed reckless driving and drivers breaking traffic rules for the chaos.

Sajedul Islam, traffic inspector in Tangail, said the highway has a capacity to deal with 5,000 vehicles a day but it is dealing with around 10,000 vehicles.

The congestion and sufferings increase after holidays when pressure of vehicles heading for Dhaka goes up.

The work to upgrade the highway to a dual carriageway began on January 1, 2016. The expansion work is supposed to be complete in December.



The long queue of vehicles at Mirzapur on Dhaka-Tangail highway yesterday. The tailback lasted seven hours.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

2 hurt as building collapses on road

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Two people were injured when debris of a collapsing building fell on them in Lalbagh area of the capital last night.

For the last seven days, the three-storey building on Harnath Ghosh Road in Old Dhaka was being demolished, Deputy Assistant Director Abdul Halim of Fire Service and Civil Defence told The Daily Star after visiting the spot.

Around 10:00pm, the first floor of the building fell on the road after workers had finished demolishing the second floor, said Halim.

Rickshaw puller Sabuj Mia, 55, was rushed to Dhaka Medical College Hospital with injured legs while a taxi driver was given primary treatment at a local clinic, locals said.

The road was closed to traffic for about two hours.

Odisha files for rasagola patent

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

Odisha has finally applied for a Geographical Indication (GI) for its own version of a beloved sweetmeat called "Odishara Rasagola" (Rasagola of Odisha). This comes months after the state of West Bengal in India won the battle for the GI tag for Bengalis favourite dessert, the "rosogolla".

The GI tag for rosogolla generated a bitter battle between Odisha and West Bengal. As the people of Odisha were unhappy with the result, MSME Minister Prafulla Samal had announced that the state will file its application.

Odisha Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik had said "Odisha government is in the process of obtaining GI tag for Odishara Rasagola. It originated in Odisha and is offered at Jagannath Temple as part of religious rituals by people of Odisha since the 12th century."

Officials today said the state government has approached the GI Registry almost three months after West Bengal was awarded the GI tag for "Banglar Rosogolla".

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Another killed in Sylhet stone quarry

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Sylhet

A stone quarry worker was killed inside a pit in Lobhachhara area of Kanaighat upazila in Sylhet yesterday morning.

The dead was identified as Forman Ullah, 55, of Kailya village of Dakshin Sunamganj upazila in Sunamganj.

Officer-in-Charge Abdul Ahad of Kanaighat Police Station said Forman was working in a pit when a chunk of earth collapsed on him.

His body has been sent to Sylhet MAG Osmani Medical College Hospital morgue for autopsy, he added.

This is the 11th incident this year in which a stone quarry worker has been killed in the district.

INDIA: INFLUX REMARKS

Minister defends the army chief

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

Indian External Affairs Minister VK Singh has come out in defence of army chief Gen Bipin Rawat's controversial remarks on illegal immigration of people from Bangladesh to the country's northeastern region.

"See, we have a habit of politicising everything. Let the army chief say what he wants to. If you don't like it, you don't like it. That's it," Singh, a former army chief, told reporters in Mumbai on Friday evening on the sidelines of an event.

"Everything is being politicised these days," he said.

Referring to reports of increase in Muslim population in several districts of northeastern state of Assam, Gen Rawat had said the Badruddin Ajmal-

led All India United Democratic Front's growth has been faster than that of BJP in 1980s.

Addressing a seminar in New Delhi on Wednesday, Rawat also said a "planned" influx of people from Bangladesh into the northeast is taking place as part of "proxy warfare" by Pakistan with support from China with an aim to keep the area disturbed.

Badruddin Ajmal criticised the serving army chief for his "politically-driven comments" and said his responsibility was to lead the armed forces for the security of the nation and not to monitor the growth of a political party.

Meanwhile, The Hindu in its editorial yesterday termed Rawat's comments "unusual by any standards."

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PUNJAB NATIONAL BANK SCAM

Modi to go tough on swindlers

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

In his first public comments on the 1.77 billion dollar fraud that hit India's second-biggest public sector bank Punjab National Bank. On Friday, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi said that his government would take strict action against financial irregularities.

Modi also sought a tight surveillance system to guard against misuse of public funds and asked those entrusted with the task of monitoring to do their job with full diligence.

"I wish to make it clear...that this government will take stringent action against financial irregularities...The system will not accept irregular accumulation of public money. This is the basic mantra of New Economy — New Rule," Modi said while addressing the Global Business Summit organised by The Economic Times newspaper in New Delhi on Friday night.

Leakers now prepare

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cases the leakers asked those who were interested to get added in secret groups.

The Higher Secondary Certificate exam is scheduled to start on April 2.

Education Minister Nurul Islam Nahid on Friday said strict measures to prevent questions leaks would be taken during the upcoming HSC exams.

Almost all questions papers of this year's SSC exams had been leaked and shared on social media and messaging apps hours before the exams started, making it arguably the largest-ever reported SSC question leaking.

Contacted, Alimuzzaman, deputy commissioner of Dhaka Metropolitan Police's Cyber Crime Unit, said his team was trying to track the SSC question leakers down.

"We will keep monitoring during the upcoming HSC exams," he said.

As part of its effort to stop leakers, the ministry had shut down all coaching centres a week before the exams started and made it mandatory for SSC examinees to enter exam halls 30

minutes ahead of the exams.

The education minister even announced a reward of Tk 5 lakh for whoever would lead to the arrest of the leakers.

At one point, the government decided to virtually block all internet access for two and a half hours ahead of every exam. But it had to backtrack amid public outrage.

Arrests were made almost regularly and cases were filed, but the real culprits behind the leaks remained at large.

Terming question leaks a big challenge facing his ministry, the education minister on Friday said his officials were yet to dig deep and find the root cause.

The 11-member inter-ministerial committee formed to look into the allegations of SSC exam question paper leaks, has found only one paper to be "fully" identical to the leaked one and some others to be "partially" similar.

The committee will hold a meeting today and submit its findings and recommendations tomorrow.

A forgotten people

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are so stringent -- the returnees must show national registration cards or documents of residency, something impossible for the Rohingyas to present as they had to hastily flee in the face of killings and torching of houses -- that the chance of their return remains bleak. These are tricky conditions as most Rohingyas have no documentation at all.

Bangladesh Foreign Minister AH Mahmud Ali had rejected the deal on October 9 in a briefing for diplomats, saying the "criteria is not realistic". Only six weeks later, the government agreed to the deal. There is no deadline for the repatriation; it can go on forever.

There are now more than one million Rohingyas in Bangladesh. The deal stipulates that highest 300 will be repatriated a day, making completion of the repatriation a difficult arithmetic feat. Bangladesh has handed a list of 8,032 Rohingyas for repatriation in the first phase. A week has gone by, but nothing has been heard so far from across the border.

But the bigger question is: Where will these people return to, if the repatriation begins at all? As the latest Human Rights Watch report shows, the Rohingya villages which were burned have now been flattened with bulldozers. There is now not a single sign that any human habitation ever existed there.

Richard Weir, a Myanmar expert with the HRW, said, "There's no more landmark, there's no tree, there's no vegetation. Everything is wiped away."

And everything means everything -- their culture, their history, their mosques, the graveyards, their past -- so that these people literally become new settlers with no ties to the land.

So what will be their homes? Camps are being set up to house them. These camps will be no less than the Gestapo concentration camps.

After the 2012 communal violence, the Myanmar government had put more than 100,000 Rohingya and other ethnic people in camps in Sittew, which have become an "open-air prison" enclosed by barbed-wire barricades and manned by security forces.

No one can move in or out without permission. Illness is not treated and death comes cheap. Time magazine has headlined a story on these camps as "These Aren't Refugee Camps, They're Concentration Camps, and People Are Dying in Them".

About the plan for new camps to be set up for the returnees, rights activists and aid groups fear they will become the blueprint for the wider incarceration of the whole ethnic minority. The Rohingyas are to become the new Jews, the new Gypsies, the new communists of our time.

And in Bangladesh, things are already stretching at the seams. Housing and feeding one million foreigners is always a daunting task. Thanks to our army, the chaos is now under control, the refugees are properly biometrically registered and a system has been put in place.

But for now, the camps remain over-crowded, their conditions far below any kind of international standard for acceptable living. The major challenge now facing the situation is to arrange food in future.

The World Food Programme has said donors were gradually losing interest in providing food for the Rohingyas. It has already provided \$80 million in food aid and the UN agency is finding it hard to find more food. It needs \$20-25 million every month to feed them.

Risks of human trafficking, violence, spread of terrorism and environmental degradation are high. And nobody knows how these people will fare when the monsoon arrives in a few months and diseases spread.

Meantime, the UN after its earlier

attempts to pass a resolution on Rohingyas seems to have lost interest in the matter. UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres, who had made an unprecedented move since the 1989 Lebanon crisis to send a letter to the Security Council to discuss Myanmar, has fallen silent. He must have realised by now that no result can be achieved in the face of obstinate opposition of China and Russia.

On February 13, the UN discussed Myanmar when Bangladesh urged the UN Security Council to visit Rohingya camps in Bangladesh and Myanmar and see for themselves their plight.

The UN special envoy on sexual violence, Pramila Patten, had promised she would raise the issue of persecution of Rohingyas with the International Criminal Court.

"When I return to New York, I will brief and raise the issue with the prosecutor and president of the ICC whether [Myanmar's military] can be held responsible for these atrocities," she said in November last year after visiting some Rohingya camps.

She has probably forgotten that promise, or perhaps her effort yielded no result.

And so the call for ICC trial continues as the Fortify Rights has this month once again called on the ICC to investigate genocide in Myanmar. Fortify Rights and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum have documented Myanmar's massacres, mass gang-rapes and arson attacks against Rohingyas.

And Myanmar remains high and mighty with support from China in its approach towards the Rohingyas. Only recently in January, it has denied entry of a UN special rapporteur into Myanmar.

Its repatriation offers smack of greater vice with all the possibilities that the Rohingyas will be sucked into an unapproachable black hole of concentration camps where they will go into oblivion.

Cops swoop on BNP activists

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Until yesterday, no major untoward incident had happened.

After yesterday's incident, BNP leaders alleged that the government was launching attacks on their peaceful programmes to "provoke the party into creating a violent situation" in the country.

They said the party would bring out processions across the country on Monday protesting yesterday's police action.

Police officials said the BNP did not have permission for holding the programme and that they could not allow the protestors to "disrupt public life".

Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan said the government never obstructed any peaceful programme. Law enforcers take necessary steps if anyone causes people to suffer. "The area needed to be cleared to ease people's suffering," he told journalists in Comilla.

YESTERDAY'S INCIDENT

On February 22, the BNP announced the black flag programme protesting the denial of permission for its rally on Thursday demanding the release of Khaleda.

Party leaders and activists started gathering in front of their central office since morning. The programme was scheduled for 11:00am.

Around 10:30am, several hundred party activists with black flags sat down on the street in front of the office and

started chanting slogans. Police began charging truncheons as soon as the BNP activists sat there. They also used coloured water from the cannons.

BNP chairperson's adviser Ataur Rahman Dhali, organising secretary Fazlul Haq Milon and central leader Nilufer Chowdhury Moni were injured in police action and were taken to hospital. Two journalists were also hurt.

At one stage, BNP Secretary General Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir, and standing committee members Moudud Ahmed and Nazrul Islam Khan went inside the office.

DMP Motijheel Zone ADC Shibli Noman said, "Occupying a city street holding black flags is not a peaceful programme. They did not take any permission for arranging such a programme. We cannot allow programmes that disrupt public life."

Asked whether the same rule would be applicable for the ruling party or other political party, Deputy Commissioner of Motijheel Division Anwar Hossain, "I cannot say anything on this, only the officials concerned can comment on this."

BNP'S SAY
Fakhrul at an emergency press briefing blamed the government for "provoking the party to create a violent situation".

"The ministers of this illegal government are continuously making provocative statements to create a volatile situation in the country but we are very

carefully avoiding it," he said.

The BNP leader said they would carry on with peaceful programmes in the coming days despite the "provocations".

He said, "Why should the party have to take permission for every programme. Why did police launch an attack on BNP's peaceful movement? Why should we not be allowed to show black flags standing on the footpath?"

"It is our fundamental right," Fakhrul said.

Meanwhile, BNP Senior Joint Secretary General Ruhul Kabir Rizvi announced that the party would bring out processions across the country tomorrow protesting yesterday's attack.

He claimed that at least 320 leaders and activists, including several women activists, were injured in yesterday's police action and over 150 were arrested.

Meanwhile, a hearing on the closing arguments in the Zia Charitable Trust graft case is scheduled today at the Special Tribunal-2.

Khaleda is among the four accused in the case.

Jahangir Kabir, senior jail superintendent of Dhaka Central Jail, said Khaleda would not be produced before the court today.

The High Court is schedule today to hear the bail petition of Khaleda in the Zia Orphanage Trust graft case where she was sentenced to five years imprisonment.