

# Celebration starts today

FROM PAGE 1

Relations Division (ERD), gave details of the programme. Muhith was present there.

Around 3,000 local and foreign guests have been invited to join the reception. They include UN officials, diplomats, representatives of development partners in Dhaka, civil society members, economists, politicians, and government high-ups, said an ERD official seeking anonymity.

A representative of the UN secretary general, and the administrator of the CDP will also speak there.

A documentary on development in Bangladesh will be screened at the function. Besides, memorial stamps, bank notes and photo albums will be unveiled there.

At 4:00pm, processions will be brought out from nine spots in the capital and will merge at the Bangabandhu National Stadium. Artists, players, eminent personalities and dignitaries will join the processions.

Wearing a special dress, a 500-member team of roller skaters will pass through different roads in the city.

A two-hour cultural function will be held at the stadium from 7:00pm. There will also be a seven-minute laser show and 12-minute firework display. The PM will attend the function which will be open to all.

Tomorrow, an international seminar will be held at Hotel Radisson Blue

at 10:00am. Presided over by the finance minister, the seminar will be attended by civil society members, economists, NGO workers and high officials of UN bodies.

The seminar will discuss the effects and the preparations Bangladesh should make before the country gets out of the LDC bloc.

At 4:00pm, a view-exchange meeting of experts will be held at the same venue.

In the evening, a cultural function and firework display will be held in the city's Hatirjheel.

Monowar said all government bodies and NGOs involved in development activities will take at least one of their services to people's doorsteps at district, upazila and union levels by March 25.

A wide range of programmes, including discussions, seminars, painting and photo exhibitions, boat races, football matches and cultural functions will be organised at district and upazila levels, he said.

Discussions on the country's achievement will be held at educational institutions and publicity campaigns will be carried out on the social media networks such as Facebook and twitter.

The capital as well as other parts of the country will be adorned with festoons, posters, banners and colourful flags.

Asked why the government has

taken such elaborate programmes when Bangladesh has just become eligible for the graduation, Muhith said, "My goodness ... How did you ask this question? I cannot understand you will ask such a question."

Referring to the country's poor condition after the Liberation War, he said, "We had to carry a stigma all over the world that we are poor. I had to bear this more than you."

Now the situation has drastically changed, he said.

This recognition from the UN is really a matter of great pride. "Won't we celebrate this?" asked Muhith.

The minister further said the celebration is not costing that much.

"We set off fireworks even at a normal function. It is our national character. We are a festival-loving nation."

At a meeting on March 15, the CDP, a United Nations panel, announced that Bangladesh became eligible to graduate to a developing country from a least developed one as it met all the three criteria for the first time for getting out of the LDC bloc.

The CDP will review Bangladesh's progress in 2021, and the country's official graduation from the LDC category will take place after a three-year transition period.

If the country maintains its position in all the three categories for the next six years, it will eventually graduate from the LDC bloc.

# Indian foreign secretary due next month

DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENT

Newly appointed Indian Foreign Secretary Vijay Keshav Gokhale is expected to pay Bangladesh a two-day visit in the second week of April to discuss bilateral issues, including the long-awaited Teesta water sharing deal, about which the New Delhi is trying to build consensus.



VK Gokhale

Indian diplomats said the visit would be a part of his familiarisation tour, but it will carry special significance as he will convey the message of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi ahead of Bangladesh's general elections this year.

Diplomatic sources in Dhaka told The Daily Star that the Indian foreign secretary would visit Bangladesh next month, but the dates had not been finalised.

"Yes, the Indian foreign secretary will visit Dhaka as part of the customary familiarisation trip in April," a senior official told our New Delhi correspondent.

During the two-day visit, Gokhale, who was appointed as India's top diplomat in January, would call on Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and Foreign Minister AH Mahmood Ali. A comprehensive bilateral meeting with his Bangladesh counterpart Md Shahidul Haque is also expected, the official added.

The Indian army chief's recent remarks over Bangladesh migrants in Assam, Rohingya repatriation and non-issuance of national identity cards to the Muslims in Assam would come up in the discussions.

Gokhale is also expected to enquire about Bangladesh's growing ties with China in recent months.

Before his visit, a delegation of the ruling Awami League, led by General Secretary Obaidul Quader, will visit India.

Asked about the exact dates of Gokhale's visit, the Indian official, who requested anonymity, said both sides were looking at April 8 to 10.

MURDER OF GARO WOMEN

Police and family members of the two Garo women murdered in the capital's Kalachandpur area on Tuesday suspect that a nephew of one of the victims and his three friends had killed them.

In the first information report filed with the Gulshan Police Station yesterday, one of the victim's husband Ashish Mankhin, said, "Sanjib Chiran [the nephew] killed my wife with a knife and strangled my mother-in-law with the help of three associates. It was a pre-planned murder."

But he did not mention why the suspect would have done such a thing.

Abu Bakkar Siddique, officer-in-charge of Gulshan Police station, said the motives could include family feud, property issues and sexual relations.

"We have some leads and are hoping to arrest Sanjib and his associates soon. They have gone into hiding," he added.

Police recovered the bodies of Sujata Chiran, 40, and her mother Besat Moni Chiran, 65, from their flat around 8:00pm on Tuesday.

Autopsies conducted at Dhaka Medical College (DMC) morgue found 14 stab marks on Sujata's back, chest and hands. Besat was strangled to death. Morgue employees said they would examine whether Sujata was raped.

The bodies were taken to their village in Mymensingh for burial after the autopsies.

Family members said Sujata had been living in the flat along with her mother, husband, two daughters and a granddaughter for the last two years.

The suspect Sanjib lived with the family about one-and-a-half years ago. He settled in Mymensingh after he got married, Sujata's brother-in-law Piom Mankhin told The Daily Star.

"We are suspecting that Sanjib might have murdered them to loot valuables from the flat. Some cash is missing," he said.

Sujata's daughter Mayabi Chiran was also of the same opinion.

Detectives said they were conducting a shadow investigation in the double murder.

"We are trying to arrest the suspects. More will be known after they are caught," Moshir Rahman, deputy commissioner (north) of Detective Branch of Dhaka Metropolitan Police told The Daily Star.

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# Relative now a key suspect

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

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# Democracy 'in danger'

FROM PAGE 1

The diplomats included representatives from the USA, Japan, European Union, Saudi Arabia, USAID, Switzerland, Spain, Australia, Turkey and the Netherlands.

A senior BNP leader, wishing not to be named, told The Daily Star that party Secretary General Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir presented a power point presentation before the diplomats. The meeting, starting at 4:00pm, was held at the party chairperson's Gulshan office. The statement was distributed among the diplomats later.

In his presentation, the BNP leader described about the party's "peaceful" programmes and how the government tried to stop them.

"Despite serious provocation by the ruling party leaders and the partisan law enforcement agencies, BNP firmly upholds its stance on holding peaceful and democratic programmes..." reads the statement.

The party said it firmly believed that the only way to come out of the present "political impasse" was to hold a free, fair, neutral, acceptable and participatory election under a neutral election-time government.

"We also believe that it is very much possible to find out an acceptable solution through constructive dialogues among the stakeholders concerned. And it is the party in power that is to take the initiative," the statement read.

It also said, "We would highly appreciate active and decisive role of

the international community in the restoration of democracy and ensuring justice in Bangladesh."

The BNP told the diplomats that the party had observed peaceful and systematic programmes since Khaleda was sent to jail.

It also informed them that the government "obstructed" all of their programmes. Showing photos published in different newspapers, the BNP leaders told the diplomats that the government was "pushing the party into the path of confrontation".

The diplomats wanted to know about the BNP's stance on the participation in the next parliamentary elections. In reply, the party leaders said they would join the polls if held under a non-partisan interim government.

This was the second time BNP leaders met diplomats since Khaleda was sent to jail in the Zia Orphanage Trust graft case on February 8.

On March 13, senior BNP leaders had a meeting with the representatives of around 15 countries at the same venue.

BNP standing committee members Khandaker Mosharraf Hossain, Moudud Ahmed, Abdul Moyeen Khan, Mirza Abbas, Amir Khasru Mahmud Chowdhury, vice chairman Abdul Awal Mintoo, advisers to the BNP chairperson Reaz Rahman, Sabihuddin Ahmed, Ismail Hossain Zabiullah, executive committee members Tabith Awal and Rumeen Farhana were present at yesterday's briefing.

# There is no quick fix

FROM PAGE 16

when repatriation of Rohingyas faces huge challenges due mainly to a conducive condition yet to be ensured in Rakhine.

More than 700,000 Rohingyas fled persecution in Myanmar and entered Bangladesh following a military crackdown on them in Rakhine since August 25 last year. Bangladesh and Myanmar signed a repatriation deal in late November to begin repatriation on January 23, but the process yes yet to begin.

The Chinese envoy said, "China understands the situation and pressure you face on this issue, respects your concerns and appreciates your effort to provide the homeless people with shelter and humanitarian aid despite all the difficulties of your own and external pressures."

He added the dialogue between Bangladesh and Myanmar made some positive progress as the two countries have signed a repatriation agreement, set up a joint working group and reached a consensus on specific arrangements on the repatriation.

Zuo claims China has been trying to persuade Myanmar to take more active steps regarding the Rakhine issue. He said his country is urging Myanmar to attach greater importance on and respond to the concerns of Bangladesh, address the first repatriation list handed over by the Bangladesh side as soon as possible and receive and settle it at an early date.

"As a neighbour to both Bangladesh and Myanmar, China is willing to play a constructive role in accelerating the repatriation process. China also hopes that Bangladesh and Myanmar main-

tain the current positive trend," said the ambassador, who arrived in February.

However, the UN Security Council could not take effective actions and resolve the crisis for objection by veto powers of China and Russia.

Responding to the upcoming parliamentary elections, Zuo said China expects a smooth general election in Bangladesh and that the country will have steady development.

Talking about China's development projects, he said a number of cooperation projects are being implemented in Bangladesh involving over \$10 billion under the joint efforts of the two governments as well as companies from the two sides.

He further said his country would continue to advance the high-level exchanges between the two sides in various ways, enhance communications between the parliaments, parties and government departments, and strengthen the political mutual trust.

The ambassador said China and Bangladesh are going to hold the 12th China-Bangladesh Diplomatic Consultation, 2nd dialogue on maritime cooperation, joint working group meeting on free trade agreement and 1st round of consular consultation, among many other important bilateral events.

Regarding Bangladesh's joining in the Road and Belt Initiative, he said it brought many concrete benefits and results for both the countries, adding, the momentum of cooperation between the two sides is going forward.

Bangladesh formally joined the Road and Belt Initiative during Chinese President Xi Jinping's visit to Dhaka in 2016.

# The thirsty land

FROM PAGE 16

queuing for water, trekking to distant water sources and coping with the effects of contaminated supplies is usual.

Prominent hydrologist from Rajshahi University, Professor Chowdhury Sarwar Jahan has been speaking about the potential for the government to declare some parts of the Barind region as 'water stressed' since at least 2016. "It's not a reason to panic," he says, "but it is a reality deserving government attention and counter-measures."

As a member of the government's groundwater taskforce, the professor is responsible for researching groundwater conditions and droughts. "The problem is exacerbated by climate change," he says. "It becomes acute due to excessive extraction."

Once, the region could expect around 2,500 millimetres of annual rainfall; in the five years up to 2017 annual rainfall did not exceed 1,400 millimetres. "Rainfall has decreased so much that irrigation is required even during the monsoon, for Aman paddy," says Professor Sarwar.

Changing water usage habits are also to blame. "Three decades ago Barind farmers harvested one crop per year," notes the executive director of the Barind Multipurpose Development Agency, Abdur Rashid. "Back then, groundwater was at most 70 feet below ground. Now farmers grow three crops annually, a production increase made possible by the installation of large numbers of wells since the 1990s. The issue of food security couldn't be ignored."

From the turn of this century farmers and businesspeople began installing deep tube wells on their own, alongside government projects. In recognition of falling groundwater levels caused by so much extraction, the agency in 2012 prohibited the installation of more wells and began to priori-

tise surface water for irrigation.

Yet, based on a recent report by the Bangladesh Agriculture Development Corporation into tube wells in the 16 northern districts, one official estimates that around 75 percent of the current annual total of 13,710 million cubic metres of groundwater extracted is done by unregulated private wells, with government-approved wells attributable for the rest.

"Groundwater levels are still in drastic decline," says Rashid.

The uppermost groundwater level recorded in Nachol upazila in February this year was 107 feet below the surface, which represents a fall of over 28 feet since 2005, when the area's groundwater was to be found at 78.8 feet underground.

"On hot summer days levels fall further still," Rashid says. "The level in some areas might be as deep as 130 feet below the surface, the result of five months of irrigation combined with year-round water use at brick kilns, power plants and for fish cultivation."

The scarcity hasn't gone unnoticed by Rajshahi's farmers. "Irrigation costs have doubled," says Soyebrur Rahman, a farmer from Idolpur village in Godagari. "Deep tube wells can't extract water like they used to. The amount of water a well could draw in half-an-hour now takes more than one hour to draw."

"For water scarcity 50 of my 200 bighas of land remained uncultivated last year," says another farmer, Abdur Rashid from Jumarpara village in Tanore upazila.

The problem has encouraged many farmers to move away from rice cultivation in favour of less irrigation-reliant crops like wheat, mustard and potatoes. Other farmers are transforming cropland into mango and guava orchards. Still others have been forced to leave their homes to pursue employment elsewhere.

# Justice at cost

FROM PAGE 1

case in 1986 against Kader and Mofiz, inhabitants of Hari Chandanpur village in Sharsha of Jessore.

On March 30, 1987, a Jessore court sentenced them to five years' imprisonment.

Kader and Mofiz served three years before getting bail. They then filed an appeal with the then High Court bench in Jessore and waited.

Their wait was long.

Yesterday, after 28 years the High Court declared that the two were innocent.

"I am happy," said Kader, now 55, over the phone from his village yesterday.

Unlike the father of two, Mofiz was not so lucky.

Mofiz passed away years ago knowing his name had not been cleared.

Kader yesterday said, "I felt relieved getting the notice from the High Court after so many years ..."

Amir Ali, a BDR lance nayek, filed the case with Sharsha Police Station in Jessore on August 27, 1986, lawyer Cumar Debul Dey, who moved the case for the duo's acquittal before the HC, told this paper.

Cumar said after the Jessore High Court was abolished in 1990 and case was sent to the HC in Dhaka and since then the case remained pending.

In November last year, the HC registrar's office sent a letter to the Supreme Court Legal Aid Committee, saying that Mofiz and Kader's lawyer Md Abdul Wahhab had passed away.

The committee took steps for the hearing of the appeal and engaged lawyer Cumar, Ripan Paul Sku, an official of the committee, told The Daily Star.

Ripan said Kader had gone to the committee office on November 30 last year following a HC notice to get legal aid from the committee.

Kader was under the impression that the case proceedings had been completed, Ripan added.

The HC bench of Justice Quazi Reza-ul Hoque held a hearing on the appeal on Tuesday and delivered the verdict yesterday, acquitting both. The case had been pending with the High Court for almost 28 years.

During Tuesday's hearing, Cumar told the HC that the prosecution had failed to prove that Kader and Mofiz illegally smuggled the cattle in from India.

# Hasina slams Khaleda

FROM PAGE 16

The premier said the top brass of the then caretaker government was comprised of Khaleda Zia's favourites. "Moeen Uddin, Iajuddin and Fakhruddin filed the case and she has been punished in that case."

The PM alleged that BNP did not obey the court, its verdict, laws and rules.

She said Khaleda, Tarique, Arafat and Saifur Rahman, a former finance minister, had whitened black money when the BNP was in power.

Hasina said the "money siphoned off by Tarique and Arafat" was seized in the USA and Singapore, and the government brought it back home.

About the quota system in government jobs, she said quota for freedom fighters, their children and grandchildren would be there.

The premier made the announcement at a time when a group of students and jobseekers have been agitating seeking reform of the quota system.

"We must have a special system in place for freedom fighters as we have achieved our independence because of their sacrifice."

She said no one should forget that

the country's people got long-cherished independence due to the sacrifice of freedom fighters. "We have to give due honour to them. We have arranged the quota system so that their children and grandchildren can get jobs."

The premier said if anyone is not found to fill a certain quota, then the system will be relaxed to fill in vacant posts with other brilliant students.

"Had the freedom fighters not sacrificed for independence, there would not have been any job for the people of this land."

Briefly describing various development projects taken by her government, Hasina urged all to cast their votes for AL in the next national election.

AL General Secretary Obaidul Kader, Housing and Public Works Minister Mosharraf Hossain, AL Publicity Secretary Hasan Mahmud, State Minister for Land Saifuzzaman Chowdhury and Chittagong city Mayor AJM Nasir Uddin addressed the programme, among others, with Chittagong South AL President Moslem Uddin Ahmed in the chair.

Earlier, the PM inaugurated and laid the foundation stones of 41 development projects.

# Four killed as train hits

FROM PAGE 1

Among the dead are driver Sumon Khan, 26, his nephew Md Sazib, 14, and Mohammad Hanif, 28, labour of the van.

The identity of the other victim, who died at Feni Sadar Hospital, could not be confirmed till last night, reports a correspondent from Feni.

The two injured were receiving treatment at Chittagong Medical College Hospital and Feni Sadar Hospital.

Talking to reporters at the Feni hospital, injured Anisur Rahman said the vehicle was carrying goods from the hospital from Dhaka.

Kazi Mostafizur Rahman, assistant executive engineer of Bangladesh Railway in Feni, said the accident occurred as gatekeeper Mohammad Rafique did not lower the barrier at the level crossing after the alarm rang.

Footage from a CCTV camera in the area showed that Rafique came out of his room after the accident had taken place.

The gatekeeper has been on the run since killed.

TWO KILLED IN RAJSHAHI

A man, aged about 40, was run over

by a train at Belpukur level crossing on the outskirts of Rajshahi city yesterday afternoon when he tried to save an elderly man from being killed under the train, but in vain.

The elderly man is Korban Ali Mondol, 75. The identity of the other victim could not be confirmed, said Rakibul Islam, officer-in-charge of Belpukur Police Station.

The accident occurred around 3:30pm when the Parbatipur-bound Barendra Express from Rajshahi was crossing the area.

While waiting at a roadside restaurant, the unidentified man noticed that Korban was walking towards the railway track, said Sohel R