

New life for Portugal's oldest forest

AFP, Lisbon

Around 3,000 volunteers on Sunday began an ambitious reforestation project in Portugal's oldest forest, ravaged by last year's devastating wild fires.

Some 67,500 pine trees were planted in the Leiria forest, in central Portugal, which was almost entirely burned to ashes during a series of fires in October.

"We lost 80 percent of the Leiria pine forest in the fires, a great task is waiting for us: the reforestation will require the planting of about 22 million trees," said Cidalia Ferreira, the mayor of Marinha Grande where part of the 800-year-old wood is located.

Volunteers were supported by military, police and fire personnel in the government-led initiative.

Zia makes

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broadcast from Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendra in Kalurghat, north of Chittagong city.

"This is Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendra. I, Major Ziaur Rahman, at the directive of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, hereby declare that the independent People's Republic of Bangladesh has been established.... In the name of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, I call upon all Bangalees to rise against the attack by the West Pakistan army. We shall fight to the last to free our motherland. By the grace of Allah, victory will be ours. Joy Bangla."

In the morning, curfew was lifted temporarily and the foreign journalists staying at Hotel Intercontinental were taken away to the airport amid tight security. In a special aircraft, they were forced to leave Dhaka.

However, staying out of the sight of military, two of them managed to stay back in Dhaka. They were Simon Dring of the Daily Telegraph and AFP photographer Michelle.

Throughout the city, remnants of many lifeless bodies were seen scattered -- a stark reminder of the atrocities by the Pakistan military.

On the other side of the Buriganga river in Jinjira, freedom fighters continued to gather. As soon as the curfew was lifted, groups of people left Dhaka city for safer places.

Shaheed Minar was blown up by the army with demolition charges.

Archer Blood, the American consular general in Dhaka, sent copies of a telegram to different American consulate offices and embassies around the world expressing extreme horror at the systematic killing.

During a debate in Lok Sabha, Indian prime minister Indira Gandhi talked about the political situation in East Pakistan. She also discussed the issue in Rajya Sabha.

Source: Liberation War Museum and Bangladesh Genocide Archive

No help

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"We also provided study materials like books and uniform to 276 students," he added.

The MP said some low income people settled in this locality some 30 years ago and they let them stay as the place is owned by his family members.

"[After the fire] we gave them shelter in a reconstructed building, provided them meals and gave them permission to build their house," he added.

Locals said they are struggling to rebuild their houses as they don't have the money. Some have borrowed money or taken loans at high interest rates to build their homes.

Take the example of Selim Bepari, who had three rooms and a grocery shop in the slum-- all of which were gutted in the March 12 fire. He recently took a loan of Tk 30,000 at 10 percent interest rate and borrowed Tk 70,000 to build his houses.

Several hundred houses which were built on a wooden deck over water are costlier to build.

Marzina Begum, 50, who was a tenant of a room in such a house, said she is now living in her relatives' home as her house-owner hasn't assured her of rebuilding the house.

"The cost would be three times higher to build a house on water than on land. My house-owner doesn't have enough money," she said, adding that she is not sure whether she could come back to the slum again.

Meanwhile the three-member probe committee headed by fire service Deputy Director Debashish Bardhan, which was formed to investigate the incident, is supposed to submit the report today.

"The fire originated from an electric short circuit and around 4000 rooms were burned in the fire," Debashish said, adding that they have also given some recommendations on how to avoid such incidents in the future.

Russian mall fire kills 64

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The Kremlin published a statement, saying Putin "expressed his deep condolences to the relatives and loved ones of those who died."

Russia's Investigative Committee, which handles major crimes, said it was trying to bring in the mall's owner for questioning and wanted to detain a security guard who had turned off the fire alarm system after learning of the blaze.

"Serious violations (of the law) took place when the mall was being built and when it was functioning. The fire exits were blocked," Svetlana Petrenko, a spokeswoman for the committee, said in a statement.

She said investigators, who have opened a criminal investigation into the blaze, were looking into other possible violations. Four people have already been detained, including the owners and lessees of outlets inside the mall.

Emergency services said they had extinguished the fire, but later said it had reignited in places, and that rescuers were struggling to recover bodies beneath smouldering rubble.

It was unclear if any people were still unaccounted for. Veronika Skortsova, the health minister, said from the scene that 11 people were in hospital, including an 11-year-old boy who was in a serious condition. Russian media said the boy had leapt from a window and that both his parents had been killed.

An unofficial list of those missing circulating on Russian media included more than 20 children, some as young as five. Mobile phone messages sent from one of those on the list, 13-year-old Maria Moroz, and published by Russian media, said:

"We are burning. I love you all. This is perhaps farewell."

PUBLICANGER
Alexander Lillevyali told online newspaper Meduza that he and his wife Olga had lost all three of their daughters, two of them aged 11 and one aged five, in the blaze.

He was cited as saying he had

BNP

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its standing committee members, placed the wreaths at the memorial. Fakhrul was also with them.

The BNP leaders also stood in solemn silence there for a while as a mark of respect to the Liberation War martyrs.

They then went to Ziaur Rahman's grave and offered munajat seeking salvation of Zia's departed soul.

It is unfortunate that the Independence Day has been celebrated while "Mother of Democracy" Khaleda is in jail, Fakhrul said.

Party's standing committee members Khandaker Mosharraf Hossain, Moudud Ahmed, Abdul Moyeen Khan, Nazrul Islam Khan, Mirza Abbas and Amir Khasru Mahmud Chowdhury, Vice-chairmen Abdullah Al Noman, Wahiduddin Shahjahan and AZM Zahid were present at both places.

In the morning, the BNP hoisted national and party flags atop its Nayapalton central office and all other offices.

The party and its associate bodies have planned different programmes, including holding discussions and bringing out processions, to mark the Independence Day.

Malaysia seeks 10-yr jail

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government is seeking to intensify a clampdown before a general election, which must be called by August but is widely expected sooner.

Opposition MP Charles Santiago said the bill was "a powerful weapon for the government to silence dissent in the country".

"It is timed for the elections and to silence discussions on 1MDB," he told AFP.

The bill, which described fake news as a "global concern", includes a maximum 10 years in jail or fine of up to 500,000 ringgit (\$130,000) for anyone guilty of creating or disseminating what authorities deem to be fake news.

It said anyone -- including foreigners -- who breaks the law outside the country by publishing fake news can face punishment in Malaysia, as long as what is published concerns Malaysia or a Malaysian citizen.

Fahmi Fadzil, spokesman for the opposition People's Justice Party, said it suggested the government was seeking to target foreign media, which have led the coverage of 1MDB.

Phil Robertson, Asia deputy director for Human Rights Watch, accused the Malaysian government of employing "Trump-style scare tactics to grant itself powers to arbitrarily determine what people can say about Malaysia in the world".

Amnesty International said the bill was "nothing but a blatant attempt to shield the government from peaceful criticism".

It was no coincidence that it had been tabled with general elections just around the corner, said Amnesty's regional director James Gomez in a statement.

TAKING AIM AT FAKE NEWS

dropped off his daughters at the cinema and that one of them had phoned later to say the auditorium was filling with smoke and that they couldn't get out because the doors were locked.

He described how he had led rescuers up the stairs, but that they had been ordered to go elsewhere and that rescuers, citing rules, had refused to give him a respiratory mask.

"My daughters were left to burn because of their bloody rules," Lillevyali told Meduza.

Anna Kuznetsova, Russia's children's rights commissioner, said the fire had been caused by incompetence and that similar shopping centres across Russia should be urgently checked.

Witnesses told Russian media the fire alarm and sprinklers had failed to function and that many people had found themselves trapped because exit doors were locked.

Video footage from inside the mall after the fire broke out showed a group of people in a smoke-filled staircase trying to smash a fire exit door, which was jammed.

Four accused

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police team arrested Rajon Khan, 26, Nais Khan, 24, Sohel Mallick, 22, and Sahed Mallick, 19, from a room near a fish enclosure in the nearby Kamalprotop village.

When the cops were raiding the area to arrest the accused, the announcement was made from the mosque, triggering the attack on law enforcers.

Police yesterday filed a case with Lohagora Police Station in connection with the incident.

Shafiqul Islam, OC of the police station, said a drive was underway to arrest the accused.

Mount Etna

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directly observed.

However, studies of extinct volcanoes suggest this phenomenon can lead to "devastating" collapse of their downslope sides, resulting in landslides.

Dr Murray, who has studied Mount Etna for nearly 40 years, has worked with his team to produce lab simulations of how such activity takes place.

They concluded that despite its instability, any threat posed by the volcano's downward trajectory will likely not arise for thousands of years.

A more pressing concern could be the disruptive effect the sliding activity will have on the monitoring of future volcanic eruptions.

Mount Etna was first recorded erupting in 1500 BC, and since then it has erupted around 200 times, with a burst of activity in recent decades.

The last such event came in 2017, when several tourists and a BBC crew were injured after being "pelted with boiling rocks and steam".

Researchers will need to account for their new measurements when conducting eruption forecasting for Mount Etna, as the deformation caused by a lava bulge in the mountain could be impacted by its downward movement.

The study, carried out by Dr Murray and his collaborators over the course of 11 years, was published in the journal Bulletin of Volcanology.

Over 40,000

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moment without confirming their tickets.

This year, the final registration of the pilgrims under government management started from March 1 while the registration process under private hajj management began on March 6.

The religious affairs ministry so far extended the deadline for registration thrice. The first deadline ended on March 18 with registration of only 43,000 done.

The second deadline expired on March 22 with the completion of registration of around 64,000 pilgrims, said the religious affairs ministry.

The ministry later extended the deadline to April 1.

Contacted, Md Anisur Rahman, secretary-in-charge of the religious affairs ministry, told this newspaper that mainly due to "passport-related complexities", they didn't get satisfactory response from hajj aspirants in the registration process.

"Many didn't get their passports in time, which is a precondition for the registration," he said, hoping that the problem will be resolved soon.

If any hajj aspirant fails to complete the registration process by the deadline, the ministry will seek registration from the second list of pilgrims to complete the quota of 1,27,198.

In that case, Anisur Rahman said, those who will miss the April 1 deadline will not be able to perform hajj this year.

"We may extend the deadline by another two to three days for those from the second list."

HAAB Secretary General Taslim said apart from the issues of passport, pilgrims themselves are also responsible for the lukewarm response in the registration process.

"Every hajj aspirant will have to pay at least Tk 1.38 lakh for the registration. But a section of pilgrims sometimes dilly-dally in paying the total money at one go," he said.

The aspirants will have to pay the rest Tk 1.94 lakh [lowest amount for hajj package] within April 15.

About the passport-related problems, Taslim said, "Many pilgrims have complained to us that they didn't get their passports even after one or two months of the schedule date of delivery."

Jubo League

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He added that Mohiuddin was rushed to Chittagong Medical College Hospital where doctors pronounced him dead.

Harun-Ur-Rashid Hazari, deputy commissioner (Bandar) of Chittagong Metropolitan Police, said, "The animosity started after Mohiuddin, who was once loyal to Hazi Iqbal, left the group."

"Mohiuddin wrote on Facebook criticising Iqbal several times. Iqbal's supporters had attacked him over the posts before."

The officer added that police recorded witness' accounts and the suspects had gone into hiding.

Party insiders and family members said Mohiuddin used to run a phone-fax shop and also traded construction materials.

Jubo League's Chittagong unit convener Farid Mahmud said Mohiuddin was attacked by the same group a few days ago. "Over the last few days, Mohiuddin slammed Hazi Iqbal on Facebook and fought with him on the social media."

Moinul Hossain, officer-in-charge of Bandar Police Station, said a man was detained in connection with the incident.

Hazi Iqbal could not be reached for comments as his phone was switched off.

Muggers kill

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point, he fainted.

The attackers fled.

The injured was rushed to Sylhet MAG Osmani Medical College Hospital where doctors declared him dead, said the OC.

Jyotirmoy Sarkar, assistant commissioner (South Surma area) of Sylhet Metropolitan Police (SMP), said based on witnesses' accounts they suspected that it was a case of mugging.

After completing his Master's from Sust, Mahid started working at Banglalink and later moved to an IT company. He was on his way to Dhaka to attend a job interview, said Mahid's uncle ATM Hasan Jebul, organising secretary of Sylhet Awami League.

"Mahid was always an active voice and on March 5, he spoke at the rally in the capital's Shahbagh, protesting the brutal attack on Professor Muhammed Zafar Iqbal. He was also an organiser of Mabhoi Abritti Sangshad in Sust. It is hard to believe that he was murdered," Aparup Das Ayon, a student of the university, said.

Doctors carried out an autopsy on Mahid's body which would be kept at the hospital morgue until his siblings return from England, Jebul said.

Abdul Wahab Miah, additional deputy commissioner of SMP, said they were raiding different places to arrest the killers.

Each victim

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The 76-seater Bombardier had 71 people, including four crew members, on board when it crashed in a football pitch near Kathmandu's Tribhuvan International Airport on March 12.

Fifty people were killed and the rest were injured. Of those killed, 27 are Bangladeshis (including all four crew members), 22 Nepalese and one is a Chinese citizen.

In case of such accidents, international carriers go by two conventions - Warsaw Convention and Montreal Convention.

Both Bangladesh and Nepal are signatories of the Warsaw Convention only.

In 1955, the Warsaw Convention was amended to limit airlines' liability and the compensation for each passenger was set at \$46,955 (2.5 lakh francs) or about Tk 38 lakh.

However, the US-Bangla took insurance coverage of highest \$2 lakh or about Tk 1.6 crore for each passenger and \$50,000 for each crew member.

Families of those who died are likely to get the maximum amount, said Shibli Rubayat Ul Islam, chairman of Sadharan Bima Corporation, another insurer of US-Bangla.

Under no circumstances, the US-Bangla can pay less than \$46,955 (about Tk 38 lakh) to the families of victims.

The compensation for those injured will be determined during the damage assessment and the maximum limit for them is Tk 38 lakh, officials said.

Had Bangladesh ratified the Montreal Convention, victims could have claimed up to \$1.5 lakh from airlines in addition to the sum insured against them by the company.

In 1999, this convention was modified to protect passengers' right, setting the minimum compensation limit at \$75,000 even if an accident occurred as a result of "willful neglect" of the carrier.

The sum is about \$28,000 more than the maximum limit under Warsaw Convention.

Under the Warsaw Convention, the

air carrier is not liable for passengers' damage if it can prove that it took all necessary measures to avoid the accident.

Bangladesh signed the Montreal Convention in May 1999 but did not ratify it.

The Daily Star spoke to four top officials of the relevant authorities to know why, but they all were in the dark.

The officials include Abul Hasnat Md Ziaul Haque, additional secretary of the ministry of civil aviation and tourism; Rajin Ahmed, head of the legal cell of the civil aviation authority; and Imran Asif, chief executive of the US-Bangla Airlines.

However, Rajin said the ratification process was nearly complete and that they would soon send the file for the cabinet's approval.

Among the South Asian countries, India, Pakistan, and the Maldives are signatories to the Montreal Convention.

US-Bangla took insurance coverage of \$107 million through two local insurance companies -- Sena Kalyan Insurance Company and Sadharan Bima Corporation.

Of the total amount, \$7 million coverage is for aircraft and \$100 million for passengers' liabilities.

Of the liability portion, about 1 percent is shared between Sena Kalyan and Sadharan Bima while the rest are reinsured with foreign insurance companies.

The foreign insurers include Halifax, a subsidiary of global insurance giant Lloyds, and General Insurance Corporation of India, said Shafiqul Shamim, managing director of Sena Kalyan insurance.

Meanwhile, Sadharan Bima already received an assessment report on the destroyed aircraft from the surveyor.

The report recommended paying US-Bangla the full coverage of \$ 7 million, said Shibli, the Sadharan Bima chairman.

"We will hand over the compensation for the aircraft to the company soon," he added.

Pledge to build

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Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina led the nation in singing the national anthem at a rally of children and juveniles at Bangabandhu National Stadium in the capital.

Earlier, she hoisted the national flag before a huge audience comprised of cabinet members, students of different educational institutions and their parents. She inaugurated the rally by releasing balloons and pigeons.

The PM distributed prizes among the winners of nationwide school competitions held between January 20 and March 15 on correctly singing the national anthem.

Under an initiative of the Prime Minister's Office and supervision of the Cabinet Division, the competitions were held at every educational institution across the country. Around 63 lakh students of primary, secondary, higher secondary and madrasa levels took part in the competitions, reports BSS.

Yesterday, people from all walks of life poured onto the streets to join different programmes to celebrate the day and pay tributes to the martyrs of the 1971 Liberation War. They emphasised on working together for the economic prosperity of the country.

The anthem was also sung at the foreign missions of Bangladesh at 8:00am of their local time.

This year's celebration had another dimension. The country recently became eligible to graduate to a developing country from a least developed one.

"Although we have progressed a lot in the last four decades, we have to work together for economic prosperity and ending discrimination," said Alamgir Hossain, a resident of Gazipur.

The 45-year-old, along with his wife and son, visited the National Memorial in Savar to pay respect to the martyrs.

"We have achieved our independence at the cost of many lives. So we must work to fulfil their dreams of a country free from poverty," he added.

Thousands of people thronged the memorial on the outskirts of the capital from dawn to dusk yesterday. The vast area swarmed with people of all ages and many of them wore colourful bandanas displaying patriotic slogans.

President Abdul Hamid and Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina paid tributes to the Liberation War martyrs by placing wreaths at the altar of the memorial early in the morning.

After placing wreaths, they stood in solemn silence for some time as a mark of profound respect to the memories of the martyred freedom fighters.

A smartly turned-out contingent

drawn from Bangladesh Army, Navy and Air Force presented a state salute on the occasion, while the bugles played the last post.

After returning from the National Memorial, the prime minister, flanked by senior party leaders, paid homage to Father of the National Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman by placing a wreath at his portrait in front of the Bangabandhu Memorial Museum at Dhanmondi in the capital.

Hasina also released a commemorative postage stamp, a first-day cover and a data card marking the Independence and National Day. She also greeted all freedom fighters of the country on the day.

President Abdul Hamid hosted a reception at the Bangabhaban.

The day was a public holiday. The national flag was hoisted atop government buildings, offices of corporate bodies, leading business houses and homes to mark the day.

Important buildings and establishments as well as city streets and islands were illuminated with the light of red and green -- the colour of the national flag.

Ruling Awami League and different other political parties as well as socio-cultural and professional organisations organised elaborate programmes.

The day was also celebrated at all divisional cities, district towns, upazilas, and municipalities.

The state-owned Bangladesh Betar and Bangladesh Television as well as private television channels broadcast special programmes and newspapers brought out special supplements, highlighting the significance of the day.

Special prayers were offered at religious centres across the country for the eternal peace of the martyrs and seeking divine blessings for the country's prosperity.

Improved diets were served to the inmates of hospitals, jails, old homes and other public institutions marking the day.

Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB) and Indian Border Security Force (BSF) exchanged greetings and sweetmeat at the Hili border of Dinajpur.

Meanwhile, Liberation War Museum and Ovhijaatari, a platform of travel enthusiasts, organised a procession from Central Shaheed Minar to National Memorial in Savar, honouring the war martyrs.

The 36km march started from Shaheed Minar at 6:00am, went to historic places including Jagannath Hall Killing Field and Rayerbazar Killing Field, and ended at the National Martyrs' Memorial in Savar.

[Our Savar correspondent contributed to this report]