



Evacuees board buses with their belongings on top as Syrian rebels and their families were being evacuated from the town of Yalda on the outskirts of Damascus yesterday, under a negotiated withdrawal to secure the last opposition holdouts of the capital. The evacuees are heading to opposition-held parts of northern Syria.

PHOTO: AFP

UN gears up

FROM PAGE 1 shelter for an estimated 60,000 refugees currently residing in areas at high risk of landslides and flooding. Aid was also being moved by sea; this included additional tents, 170,000 tarpaulins sheets, and other basic items, he added. "By the end of May, UNHCR plans to equip all refugee families with shelter kits, which will include bamboo poles, ropes, shelter-grade tarpaulins, sandbags, and tools," the spokesperson said. He said UNHCR was also distributing 80,000 pre-monsoon kits and stockpiling 160,000 post-disaster response kits to be distributed to refugees. Another 30,000 post-disaster response kits are to be distributed to affected families of the host communities. Andrej informed that UNHCR had already positioned five hospital tents and emergency health kits in Cox's Bazar. Since the August 25, 2017 military crackdown by Myanmar military, more than 700,000 Rohingya refugees have fled to Bangladesh. According to Bangladesh government estimates, the total number of Rohingyas, including the new arrivals, currently living in Bangladesh is over 1.1 million. In efforts to shelter refugees and meet their basic needs, Bangladesh allocated thousands of acres of land. In addition, the Bangladesh government has recently allocated new land for the refugees. UNHCR, IOM and WFP engineers are working around the clock to flatten the new land to accommodate those at greatest risk. "Nonetheless, this work is going more slowly than initially anticipated due to the hilliness and instability of

the land. UNHCR hope to relocate some 5,000 people to the new land by the end of May," said the spokesperson. In the absence of more available and usable land, UNHCR has made temporary emergency relocation arrangements. An estimated 35,000 refugees can be hosted by other refugees living in safer areas; 34,000 refugees can be hosted in communal structures in refugee settlements; and 66,000 refugees can be hosted in tents or other emergency shelters within or adjacent to the current settlements. Meanwhile, in support of Bangladesh's intensive efforts to ready the refugee settlements for the monsoon rains, UNHCR is further strengthening its own emergency preparedness and response capacity. Refugees themselves are working with the UN agency on the preparedness efforts. Refugee community health workers have completed first aid and cyclone preparedness training. Some have been trained to be in search and rescue teams. UNHCR and partners are working closely with refugees to develop early warning systems and information campaigns for emergency situations. Six weeks ago (16 March) UNHCR and its partners launched the Joint Response Plan for the Rohingya Humanitarian Crisis seeking more than \$950 million in 2018 to meet the immediate needs of more than 880,000 Rohingya refugees and over 330,000 Bangladeshis in communities affected by the crisis. UNHCR's portion of this appeal amounts to more than \$180 million. As of May, only 16 per cent of the needed funds have been received.

Young girl's rape triggers more angry protests in India

REUTERS, New Delhi

Protests erupted in southern India over the rape of a nine-year-old girl, as anger over the failure of police to stem a series of sex attacks on children boiled over. Reported rape cases in India have climbed steadily over recent years to around 40,000 in 2016, or about 100 a day, with many more believed to go unreported. Child rape accounts for about 40 percent of the reported cases. A mob blocked highways on Thursday and sat on railway tracks near Guntur, in the state of Andhra Pradesh, demanding public punishment for a rickshaw puller accused of the attack. The crowd attacked the accused's house and thrashed his son, media said. Yesterday, the accused, said to be around 55, was found hanging in a wood and police said he had likely committed suicide. Several cases of sexual assault of children have come to light in recent weeks from different parts of the country, leading to an outpouring of anger. The government introduced the death penalty for the rape of girls younger than 12 last month after a particularly gruesome case of rape and murder of a Muslim girl in Jammu and Kashmir state.

Brick kiln

FROM PAGE 16 He also raised the matter at the monthly meeting of local authorities at the upazila as well, he told The Daily Star. Nurul Mohaimin Milton, general secretary of Environment Journalist Forum, Moulvibazar, said several schools in the upazila were affected by the activities of the kilns. Some schools that have neighbouring kilns are Begum Jebunesa Government Primary School in Jalalia, Longurpar Government Primary School, Kaliprosad High School and Sajedabari Kindergarten School. However, there are instances where the brick fields were set up before the schools. Musaddek Ahmed Manik, president of the brick kilns owners association in Kamalganj, said, "Some brick fields were set up a long time ago and are running their businesses legally." After suffering for long, residents of ten villages-- including Ballarpar, Longurpar, Bhandarigaon, Dholaipar and Jamirkun-- brought out a procession on January 28 and submitted an application to upazila authorities to demand relocation of the brick kilns. The UNO of Kamalganj has requested Deputy Commissioner of Moulvibazar Tofail Islam to cancel the licences of the kilns that disrupt school activities and pose a risk to students' health. In response, the office of the deputy commissioner has formed a committee to investigate the matter. Shaheda Akther, coordinator of Bangladesh Environmental Lawyers Association in Sylhet, said many people were setting up brick kilns illegally. The environment would be severely damaged as brick kilns had been established on farmlands, near human habitation or educational institutions, she added. However, Niaz Murshed Raju, owner of Jalalabad Brickfield that is right next to Kamalganj Girls High School, said, "We follow all necessary procedures to run the brick field legally."

Nobel Prize

FROM PAGE 16 long-standing ties to the Academy. Jean-Claude Arnault, the French husband of Academy member and poet Katarina Frostenson, has denied the allegations, but disagreements within the Academy on how to deal with the issue sowed deep discord among its 18 members. The Academy found itself split between the first woman permanent secretary Sara Danius and her supporters bidding for reform and another camp defending Frostenson and the Academy's old guard, prompting six members to quit in recent weeks. Danius resigned on April 13 after failing to receive enough support within the Academy. Frostenson was also among the six who resigned. "The active members of the Swedish Academy are of course fully aware that the present crisis of confidence places high demands on a long-term and robust work for change," Olsson said. Seen as bearers of high culture, the Academy, founded in 1786, is traditionally known for its integrity and discretion, with its meetings and decisions shrouded in secrecy. But the row has turned into a titillating public spectacle, with Academy members dealing ugly blows to each other in the media: Horace Engdahl called Danius "the worst" permanent secretary in the Academy's history. But there was broad public support in Sweden for Danius, with many donning her signature garment, in protest the following day. "The strong woman who tried to clean up the Swedish Academy was forced to leave. I'm speechless," Annie Loof, leader of the Swedish Centre party tweeted at the time.

WISE DECISION The last time the institution delayed a prize announcement was in 1949, when William Faulkner received the prize a year later, when Bertrand Russell was also honoured. "I think it's wise, this is the best decision they could make. They'll have a chance to restore (the Academy) this year and fill the empty seats, and come back with a strong Academy that can award the prize," Dagens Nyheter's literature critic Maria Schottenius told AFP. "This is a disaster for the Swedish Academy's reputation... (that) they didn't manage to handle this better," Jens Liljestrand of the Expressen newspaper told TT news agency. Technically, Academy members have been appointed for life and have not been able to resign, though they could leave their chairs "empty" by not participating in meetings and decisions. However, the Academy is currently down to 10 active members while its statutes stipulate that 12 are needed to elect new members. In order to ensure the venerable body's survival, the Academy's patron, Sweden's King Carl XVI Gustaf, announced Wednesday he had changed the statutes, making it possible for members to resign and be replaced. **CONFLICTS OF INTEREST** The Academy has cut all ties with Arnault's cultural centre Forum in Stockholm, which it had subsidised for years and which was a key meeting point for the country's cultural elite. The centre, owned by Arnault and Frostenson, showcased exhibitions, readings and performances by both prominent cultural figures, including Nobel literature laureates, as well as hopefuls. It is now closed. A report commissioned by the Academy revealed conflicts of interest, as well as the fact that Academy members had leaked Nobel winners' names. Prosecutors announced in mid-

March they had dropped parts of their investigation against Arnault -- concerning allegations of rape and assault between 2013 and 2015 -- due to lack of evidence. The rest of the investigation is still ongoing. Meanwhile, Sweden's Economic Crimes Bureau last week said it was investigating a case linked to the Academy, likely linked to the subsidies paid to Arnault. The scandal comes on the heels of heavy criticism the Academy received in some circles for awarding the 2016 prize to US singer-songwriter Bob Dylan. In 2017, it honoured British author Kazuo Ishiguro.

Gunmen kill six labourers in SW Pakistan: police

AFP, Quetta Unknown gunmen shot dead six labourers in a remote southwestern Pakistani town, officials said yesterday, in the latest bout of violence to rock the restive region. The murders took place overnight in Lajjey, about 170 kilometres (105 miles) southwest of Quetta, the capital of Balochistan province, where Islamist militants -- including the Taliban -- and ethnic Baloch separatists are active. "Unidentified gunmen shot dead six labourers and wounded another, who is in critical condition," local government official Hashim Ghilzai told AFP. The labourers, from eastern Punjab province, were working on a mobile tower and were sleeping in tents at the site when the gunmen attacked, Ghilzai said, adding that "it appeared to be an act of terror". Local security official Tariq-ur-Rehman confirmed the incident and casualties. No group has claimed responsibility for the killings, but Balochistan is home to a long-running ethnic Baloch insurgency aimed at seeking greater control over the province's abundant mineral resources. Separatist militants have previously targeted ethnic Punjabi and Sindhi labourers, who are largely considered outsiders in many parts of the province and viewed with deep suspicion.

Malaysian watchdogs allege flaws in voter lists

AFP, Kuala Lumpur Malaysian electoral watchdogs said yesterday there were major discrepancies in voter lists, including some two million people registered without addresses, warning the flaws could help the scandal-hit government at polls next week. Prime Minister Najib Razak is facing a tough test at the Wednesday vote due to a corruption scandal surrounding state fund 1MDB and a challenge from veteran ex-leader Mahathir Mohamad, 92. About 15 million Malaysians are registered to vote, and analysts have warned the poll could be the dirtiest in the country's history as Najib seeks to ensure his Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition extends its six-decade hold on power. Yap Swee Seng, executive director of electoral reform group Bersih, said there were 10 major irregularities in voter lists, claiming the flaws reflected the Election Commission's failure to ensure a clean and fair poll.

No joining

FROM PAGE 16 Party sources said the BNP will organise some programmes ahead of May 8 when the Supreme Court will hear two leave-to-appeal petitions filed by the Anti-Corruption Commission and the government. The petitions were filed challenging the HC order that granted bail to Khaleda in the Zia Orphanage Trust graft case. The programmes will be held to put pressure on the government. The fresh programmes will be announced soon. Addressing the meeting yesterday, BNP Vice-Chairman Mohammad Shahjahan said the party should take preparations so that it can react strongly to any probable denial of bail to Khaleda on May 8. He said any attempt by the Awami League to rig the Gazipur and Khulna city polls, slated for May 15, should be resisted. He proposed announcing the Ramadan as the month of BNP's organisational activities. Amanullah Aman, adviser to Khaleda, said it would be a great mistake if the party thought Khaleda would be freed through a legal process. He said it would not be possible to free Khaleda without waging a strong movement. The central BNP leaders should face voluntary imprisonment and the party should not take part in the next parliamentary polls without the chairperson, he added. BNP Vice-Chairman Enam Ahmed Chowdhury and Mir Mohammad Nasir Uddin said mass processions should be brought out in the divisional headquarters to put pressure on the government to free Khaleda. Khaleda landed in jail on February 8 after a Dhaka court had handed her five-year jail sentence for misappropriating a donation fund of the Zia Orphanage Trust. The Supreme Court on March 19 stayed until May 8 the High Court order that granted bail to Khaleda in the graft case.

RELATIVES MEET KHALEDA

Khaleda has expressed optimism that she will get justice from the Supreme Court on May 8, a relative of the former prime minister said quoting her. Yesterday, six relatives met the BNP chief at the old Dhaka Central Jail on Nazimuddin Road. Wishing to remain unnamed, the relative told The Daily Star that Khaleda expressed concern over the "current culture of repression". The BNP chief was not in good health, the relative said. "She has pain in her left arm and both legs. Her feet have swollen." Khaleda wants her daughter-in-law Dr Zubaida Rahman and personal physicians to decide on her treatment plan, said one of the relatives. The chairperson's elder sister Selima Islam, younger brother Shamim Iskander's son Aveek and daughter-in-law Zubaida's sister Shahina Khan Zaman were among the six relatives who met her at the jail for about one and a half hours from around 4:00pm. Lightning FROM PAGE 16 In Habiganj, Abul Kalam, 35, died in a lightning strike at Uttar Bhabanipur in Bahubal upazila around 12:30pm while he was working in his paddy field. Another farmer died in a similar incident in Morarabadi village of Baniachang upazila around 1:30pm. He was returning home from a paddy field.

PM's India tour

FROM PAGE 16 Hasina. It may take place on May 24 and the Indian prime minister, who is the chancellor of the university, might confer the honorary degree on Hasina. "We are expecting that it will be a two-day visit and the prime minister will attend both the programmes," said a PMO source, adding that details of the visit would be finalised soon. "She [Hasina] is coming to West Bengal and our prime minister may be there," said an official at the Ministry of External Affairs of India when reached by phone. The official, however, could not give the details of the programme schedule since those are yet to be fine-tuned. The Times of India yesterday reported that Hasina will be in India to open the Bangladesh Bhavan at Visva-Bharati, and Modi is expected to travel to Santiniketan to meet Hasina on May 25. The Bangladesh Bhavan, which includes a museum showcasing

Rabindranath Tagore's association with Bangladesh, the Liberation War of Bangladesh and Indo-Bangla relations, has been built with funding from the Bangladesh government. Quoting the official dealing with the visit of Hasina, our New Delhi correspondent reports that Hasina will go to Santiniketan on May 25 for the inauguration of The Bangladesh Bhavan. Asked about the possibility of a meeting between Hasina and West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee during the former's stay in Kolkata, the official said, "The day of the visit was confirmed by both sides only on Wednesday and details of her itinerary will now fall into place." Prior to Hasina's visit to Santiniketan, Modi will pay a two-day visit to Nepal on May 10 and 11, a little more than a month after Nepalese Prime Minister KP Oli had visited India for his first overseas foray since assuming office in February.

Yaba 'godfather,' sibling held

FROM PAGE 16 "Ashraf has become one of the godfathers in yaba syndicate and maintained strong ties with the Myanmarese yaba dealers," said ACMoinul. During primary interrogation, Ashraf admitted that he had already smuggled two or three consignments of yaba pills into Bangladesh from Myanmar through sea routes with the help of Rahim and La-mim. Police suspected that he had amassed huge wealth and properties illegally. Ashraf used to pay the Myanmar yaba syndicate via hundi, an illegal money transfer system, and sometimes on credit, AC Moinul said, adding that he also used to sell the yaba pills to different syndicates in Dhaka. The police official said they were trying to find the yaba syndicates in Chittagong and Dhaka. Ashraf returned to Bangladesh from Saudi Arabia in October last year and started the illegal business. He earlier went to Myanmar by air twice or thrice; had a meeting with La-mim and smuggled into yaba consignments with the help of a "third party", said Moinul. "On April 7, Ashraf again left Dhaka for Yangon in Myanmar by air and held a meeting with La-mim there," said AC Moinul, adding that during the meeting, Ashraf had a deal with the drug dealer and collected the 13 lakh yaba tablets. "Though Ashraf went to Yangon by air, he returned to Bangladesh by sea along with the yaba pills," said the police official. As the sea was rough, he delayed his sea voyage for days and finally left Myanmar border on April 30 by a trawler. After six hours of journey, the trawler with the yaba pills reached St Martin's Island, said the police official, quoting Ashraf. Ashraf then shifted the pills to a speedboat and started his journey to Chittagong. He brought the pills to Sitakunda on May 2, he added.

Uddin Ahmed told a press briefing. They were arrested along with 60,000 yaba tablets in Postogola area. As Imranul's ancestral home is in Teknaf, he used to bring yaba tablets from there, the DNC official added. Two other drug peddling suspects -- Shahidul and Irin -- were held from Old Dhaka with 20,000 yaba pills. In another incident, detectives in a raid seized 20,000 yaba pills and arrested three suspected drug peddlers -- Abdus Sattar, Nazrul Islam and Sagar -- in Satkhira town yesterday.

'Oxygen cocktails'

FROM PAGE 16 Respiratory infections in the capital have nearly tripled, with pneumonia being the leading cause of death in under five-year-olds, data from Unicef shows. For \$2, shopping centres are selling cans of oxygen called "Life is Air" with the promise of turning an ordinary glass of juice into an "oxygen cocktail". Many pharmacies are also stocking machines that turn juice frothy for as little as \$1 and are recommended by doctors for pregnant women. Some Mongolian residents are also turning to special teas in an effort to clean their lungs, with sales rising up to 30 percent when pollution peaks during winter. Baatar Chantsaldulam, CEO of "lung-tea" company Dr Baatar, told AFP: "First it takes all the toxins out of the blood, then it turns the toxins in the lung into mucus, and all the plants in tea helps boost the human immune system." Yet, Maria Neira, head of the WHO's public health department, said the only way to minimise the effects of pollution is to avoid exposure, adding there is no scientific evidence oxygen cocktails or lung teas have any benefit. Angry residents claim the Mongolian government is not doing enough to combat air pollution, arguing the public should not have to pay \$300 for at-home air purifiers. Tumor Mandakhjargal, from the non-profit organisation Parents Against Smog, said: "For the past 10 years, people have known that air pollution has reached dangerous levels. "However, policymakers only address the issue by talking about passing out clean stoves and clean coal."