

# Ijtema begins today

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Biswa Ijtema, one of the biggest congregations of Muslims, is going to start today.

A large number of devotees from home and abroad have gathered on the bank of the Turag river at Tongi to attend the four-day long congregation.

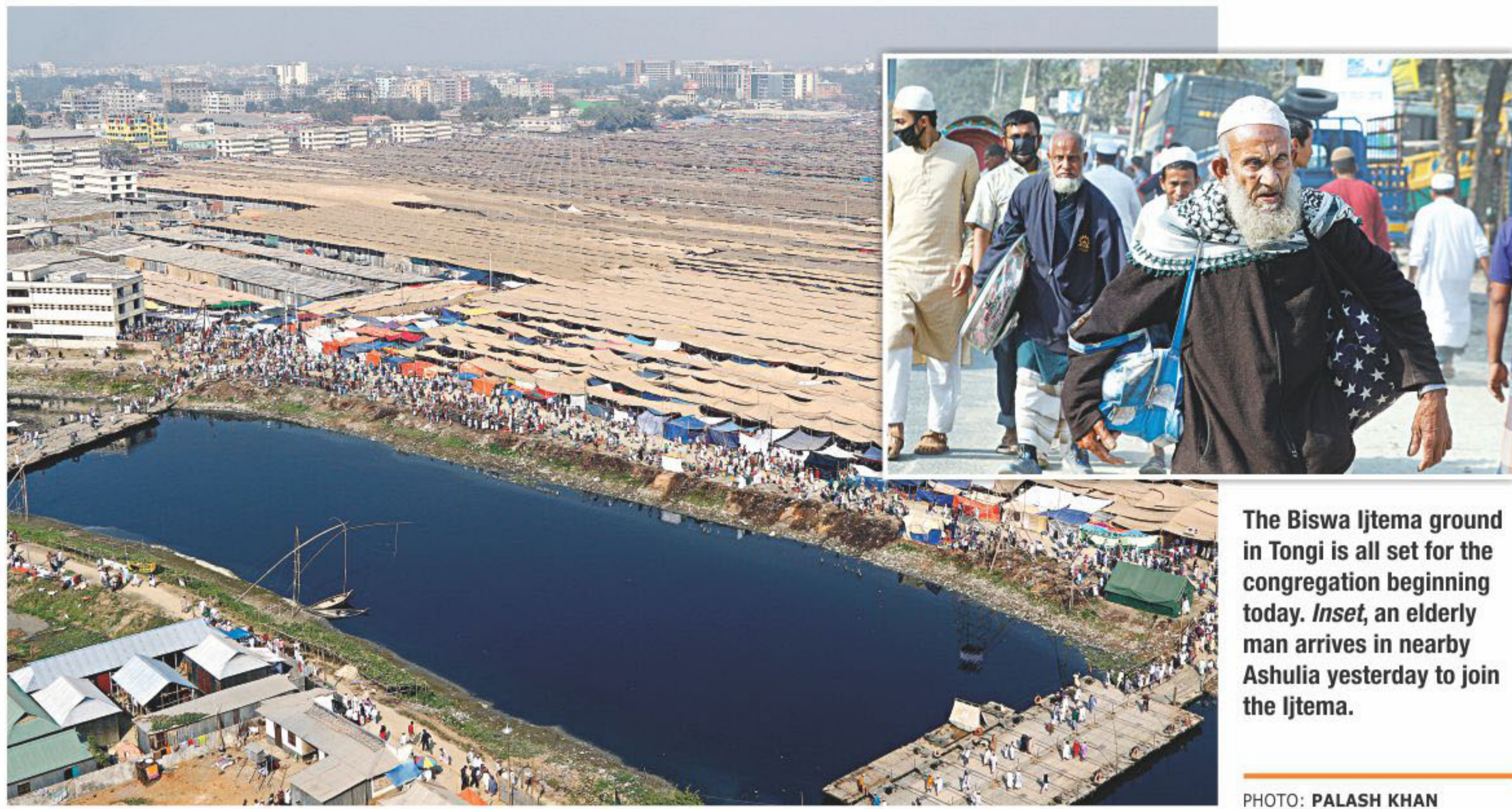
Having been held in two phases since 2011, this year's Ijtema will have a single phase, with two separate Akheri Munajat (final prayers) supposed to be conducted by the leaders of two feuding Tabligh Jamaat factions.

Maulana Zubair Hassan, who leads one of the factions, will administer the first two days of the Ijtema, and conduct the Jummah prayers and Akheri Munajat on Friday and Saturday respectively.

Syed Wasiful Islam, who leads the other group that follows Indian preacher Maulana Saad Kandhalvi, will supervise the last two days, including the Akheri Munajat.

Hefajat-e Islam chief Shah Ahmed Shafi is

SEE PAGE 17 COL 4



The Biswa Ijtema ground in Tongi is all set for the congregation beginning today. Inset, an elderly man arrives in nearby Ashulia yesterday to join the Ijtema.

PHOTO: PALASH KHAN

## 3 KILLED IN BGB FIRING Petition seeks compensation for families

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

A writ petition filed with the High Court yesterday sought its directive upon the government to compensate the family members of those killed and injured in a clash between locals and Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB) members in Thakurgaon.

Three people were killed and at least 16 others suffered bullet wounds on Tuesday as a BGB patrol team opened fire following a scuffle with locals during seizing of several smuggled cattle.

The petition submitted by Supreme Court lawyer Tonoy Kumer Saha also challenged the legality of BGB's operation at the scene on the day of the incident.

The BGB members' action was "illegal" as their duty was to protect the

SEE PAGE 17 COL 4

## Hit by trains, 2 killed in city

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Two men were killed after being hit by trains in two separate incidents in Dhaka's Shewra area yesterday.

The dead are Arafat, 47, employee of a garment factory, and an yet to be identified elderly man, aged around 70.

Sub-Inspector Nazrul Islam, in-charge of Airport Railway Police Outpost, said Arafat was walking along the rail tracks while talking over phone around 9:30am.

He did not pay attention to train whistle before Mymensingh-bound Mahua Express hit him, the police official said quoting witnesses.

Another dead could not be identified. His body was recovered around 8:30am, the SI added.

The bodies were sent to Dhaka Medical College Hospital morgue for autopsies.

## 56 candidates of 20-party challenge nat'l polls results

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Fifty-six candidates from the BNP-led 20-party alliance, all defeated in the December 30 polls, yesterday filed one petition each with the High Court challenging the legality of the election.

The petitions cited irregularities during the polls and appealed for cancelling the results in their constituencies. They also demanded the court's direction to the Election Commission for fresh polls in their constituencies.

With yesterday's 56, a total of 74 defeated candidates filed such petitions so far, said court sources.

Some of these petitions pointed out cases where dead people were shown as voters in the polls, which is a clear evidence of a farcical election.

The HC is yet to set any date for hearing of the petitions.

The candidates include Subrata Chowdhury of Dhaka-6, Mafizul Islam Khan Kamal of Manikganj-3, Maj Gen (ret'd) Amsa Amin of Kurigram-2, Abdul Momen

SEE PAGE 17 COL 4

## Upazila polls lost its 'grace'

Says Mahub Talukdar

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Election Commissioner Mahub Talukdar yesterday said the upcoming upazila parishad election has lost its grace as it is not participatory.

The primary achievement of an election is to make it participatory. But this upazila election is not participatory, he said.

"There can never be a one-party democracy. Democracy does not bloom without multiple parties. That is why participatory elections are a top priority," the election commissioner said while briefing returning and assistant returning officers of the second phase upazila election at the Nirbachon Bhaban.

While the ruling Awami League is nominating its candidates for the election, the BNP and many left and Islamist parties have decided not to participate.

The first phase of the five-phase upazila polls will be held in 87 upazilas on March 10, while 124 upazilas will go to polls in the second phase on March 18.

Meanwhile, the Election Commission yesterday announced the third phase upazila polls schedule, setting March 24 as the voting day.

People will judge whether an

SEE PAGE 7 COL 1

## Where death lies in wait

FROM PAGE 1

Kazi Saifun Newaz, assistant professor at ARI, said most of the fatalities occurred as trains ran over people at unprotected level crossing and tracks.

Terming unprotected level crossing "very risky for the entire rail sector", he said the government could install special siren systems at level crossing without gatemen and suggested the need for evicting structures beside level crossings so approaching trains can be spotted from a distance.

### UNMANNED, UNAUTHORISED

Authorities blamed illegal construction of rail gates and inadequate manpower for the rise in rail-related accidents.

According to BR's database prepared in August last year, only 466 gates among 1,412 level crossings have gatekeepers while 946 gates have no designated man. Among 434 gates in Railway's East Zone, 245 have gatemen while only 221 out of 978 gates in West Zone have gatemen.

Of the 1,085 unauthorised level crossings, 811 are in East Zone while 274 in West Zone, the database shows.

There are 85 level crossings in between Joydebpur and Narayanganj - a 50km-long stretch on one of the busiest sections in the country -- of which 43 are unauthorised, railway sources said.

At least nine government bodies were involved in constructing illegal level crossings, with Local Government Engineering Department (LGED) having constructed the highest of 452 gates.

The acts are blatant violations of the law, which so far remains only on paper.

Section 128 of The Railways Act-1890 says, "If a person, by any unlawful act or by any willful omission or neglect, endangers or causes to be endangered the safety of any person travelling or being upon any railway, or obstructs or causes to be obstructed or attempts to obstruct any rolling-stock upon any railway, he shall be punished with imprisonment for a term which may extend to two years."

In February 2013, BR sent letters to different organisations for meeting about the illegal level crossings, rail-

LEVEL CROSSING INFO	
CATEGORY	NUMBER
Total legal level crossings	1412
Total manned level crossings	466
Total unmanned level crossings	946
Total illegal level crossings	1085

SOURCE: BANGLADESH RAILWAY

ILLEGAL LEVEL CROSSING	
NAME	NUMBER
LGED	452
Union councils	363
Municipalities	79
City Corporations	34
District councils	13
RHD	11
Chattogram Port Authority	3
Benapole Land Port Authority	1
Joypurhat Sugar Mill Authority	1
Private	3
Others	92
Unnamed constructors	33
<b>Total</b>	<b>1085</b>

SOURCE: BANGLADESH RAILWAY

NUMBER OF RAIL FATALITIES			
YEAR	INCIDENTS	DEATH	INJURY
2018	235	244	228
2017	211	229	156
2016 (Mar to Dec)	56	69	46

SOURCE: ACCIDENT RESEARCH INSTITUTE, BUET

way sources said.

But, as they did not get expected response, railway authorities decided to file case against the responsible persons, they said.

Meanwhile, the shortage of staffers continues to plague the sector. Talking to this newspaper on February 4, Qazi Md Rafiqul Alam, director general of BR, admitted to having a shortage of gatemen.

"We have already taken the initiative to recruit gatemen and once recruited, they will be posted at level crossing where traffic movement is relatively high," he said.

"We will post gatemen in those level crossings gradually," he said.

He admitted that maximum deaths in took place at level crossing. "So we have taken the initiative."

West zone has already started the process of recruiting process 190 "temporary" gatekeepers while East zone for 221 gatekeepers and the process is expected to be completed within three months, officials said.

### GOVT BODIES DEIFY LAW

Asked about the unauthorised level crossings, Rail DG Rafiqul said, "They do it forcefully."

"We have held several meetings with LGED and RHD officials in this regard. But they did not pay heed to our words," he said adding, "We even filed General Dairi (GD) against responsible executive engineers."

"We can do nothing but lodge GD," he said.

He could say nothing further about the GDs. Another top official of the railways, requesting anonymity, said that the cases never progressed and it was difficult to know their status.

Railway authorities even sent letters to the offices involved in the illegal constructions, stressing on section 128 of The Railways Act-1890.

"If they [those organisations] had approached us for constructing level crossing, we could have done it," Rafiqul said.

In that case, the railway authority would evaluate the necessity of the level crossings. Once approved, the bodies which needed the crossings would have to pay the money for developing the level crossing and salaries of gatemen for 10 years in advance, he said.

"For these reasons, I think, they do not take permission," he added.

Contacted, Khalilur Rahman, additional chief engineer (implementation) of LGED, admitted that several meetings were held with BR authorities over the issues but remained unresolved for one issue -- who will recruit and pay the gatemen for those level crossings.

"Executive Engineers are supposed to take approval (from BR) before constructing level crossing [in his or her designated areas]."

"However, there may be some unauthorised level crossings but the number may not be as high as mentioned [in the Railway data]," he told The Daily Star on February 14.

He, however, said "Construction of level crossing without approval is not desirable."

## Building the 'infrastructure'

FROM PAGE 1

that crucial public debate that can only take place where freedom of thought and expression is an inalienable right, not in theory, but in practice.

One of my lessons of 28 years of leading The Daily Star, the last 25 of it as its editor and publisher, is that as a polity we have not been able to properly understand the crucial importance of "freedom of thought and expression" and the consequent role and function of dissent in society, where journalism plays the role of a watchdog on a daily basis.

We have been stuck in the mindset that to criticise is to oppose, to disagree is to undermine, and to do both in public is to act as an enemy. And hence as journalism's primary role is to present all sides to every story, especially the side that challenges or debunks the official version, we are often looked upon as the "enemy".

This outlook has created a wall of suspicion and antagonism between the independent media and the government. This misunderstanding -- some of it deliberate and unthinking and most of it knee-jerk -- has unfortunately resulted in a dysfunctional relationship between the government and the independent press. This in turn has resulted in the adoption of several laws in recent past aimed at harnessing the press and

preventing it from playing the role that it was precisely meant to, which in my view, is suicidal. In reality, a harnessed media inevitably results in diminished democracy.

On the occasion of the 28th anniversary of this paper, I could not have a greater wish than to plead for the restoration of that space that permits journalism to flourish in all its aspects and not just be cheerleaders.

This I do so in full awareness that what Bangladesh needs today is a robust media that can publish and broadcast all sides of a story without the constant fear of falling on the wrong side of unjust "laws".

As Bangladesh moves ahead and the world looks upon us with incredulity and as we move up the ladder of development, we need to build not only the roads and bridges on the land, we also need to develop the "infrastructure of the mind".

The most critical ingredient of developing the mind is the capacity for critical thinking whose soul is "questioning". Only by asking the critical questions can we get the most urgently needed answers. While philosophers, scientists, social reformers raised questions that changed our civilisations, independent journalism raises questions that bring to light the everyday plights and distortions that help the judiciary to dispense justice, parliament to make appropriate laws and the

government to ensure good governance.

As The Daily Star embarks on its journey into the future we face some daunting and some very exciting challenges. The daunting ones concern the future of print media and the exciting ones are in the realm of the digital. The global trend has been the decline of the circulation of newspapers. With the spread of the internet, more and more readers and viewers are receiving their news from online. However, the good news is that till now countering the global trends, print media in South Asia has not only held steady, as in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Pakistan, it has actually seen a rise in Indian newspaper circulation.

Just as "Digital Bangladesh" is an emerging reality so is the coming of the digital media and we in The Daily Star are taking the necessary steps so that we can serve our readers better and in multi-platforms -- print, online, multimedia and mobile.

Howsoever the realities of the future changes, one thing will remain constant. Print media, in all its multi-platform versions, will only survive if we have readership. Thus serving our readers better will be, as it has been, the main focus of The Daily Star. This we re-pledge, while profusely thanking our readers for patronising us for nearly three decades. Thank you.

## Love will keep us alive

FROM PAGE 1

Around a million children worldwide need palliative care every year but less than one percent actually get it. This lacking is a growing concern, one that is highlighted again on the International Childhood Cancer Day today.

The journey of ASHIC Palliative Care Unit had begun in May 2006 with the concept, unique at the time in the country, of providing care to terminally ill pediatric cancer patients.

"It was the first such facility in Asia Pacific," says Nujhat Sohani Nonda, programme coordinator of ASHIC.

The centre has provided care to around 994 patients, including 448 palliative patients, since its inception. Last month, 36 children were admitted.

Four doctors, six nurses and other staffers provide services at the nine-bed facility round the clock in shifts.

ASHIC (A Shelter for Helpless Ill Children) Foundation has been running the unit in the capital's Dhanmondi since 2010 with the help of a few local donors. Before that, the unit had been operated with funds from Union for International Cancer Control (UICC), non-governmental organisation that exists to help the global health community accelerate the fight against cancer, and Sanofi Aventis, a global pharmaceutical company from 2006.

The place is like a home away from home. When pain and suffering become persistent companions of children, ASHIC staffers here play with them, give them food that they like, let them play on swings even when undergoing chemotherapy, trying to provide a cushion against all odds.

It is not only the children who get support. Parents, who are emotionally drained and are constantly looking for ways to arrange money for the never-ending treatment, also benefit from ASHIC. It gives them a place to stay, provides counseling, and bears the treatment cost of needy patients so that they can complete the cycles of chemotherapy and other medical procedures.

The bond with the family lingers even after the child's death, says Kamrunnahar Lovely, project manager.

If a child dies at the palliative home, ASHIC even arranges the last journey to the family's home.

**A PLACE LIKE HOME**  
ASHIC was founded in 1994 by Salma Choudhury, who had lost her three-year-old son to cancer. The incident

motivated her to pursue the initiative. "I suffered a lot at that time and I know other mothers in my position suffer the same. I like to help with that," she told The Daily Star over phone.

"I am happy to see children surviving cancer," she said.

ASHIC first began with a shelter at Banglamotor built to accommodate around 20 people. It houses pediatric cancer patients and their families, who stay during the month-long treatment almost for free; they only have to pay a nominal amount of Tk 100 for meals for each person a day.

ASHIC helps bereaved families cope with their grief and cherish the beautiful memories of the ones lost.

Meanwhile, Salma looks forward to set up similar shelters in Cumilla, Barisal and Khulna so that children with cancer don't always have to travel long distances.

On February 6, six-year-old Nehad, from Bhola, greets two guests at the door of the Banglamotor shelter with a smile; Nehad has acute lymphoblastic leukemia, a type of cancer of blood and bone marrow. Four other children wheel their try-cycles to join Nehad.

Walking past the play area, four-year-old Saymon is seen separating tangerine pieces with his tiny fingers, sucking the juice out of them and then leaving the rest into a bowl on his bed. He is a leukemia patient too.

Soon mothers of patients, staffers and a supervisor engage in chit-chat. The mother of a recent arrival sighs and says, "May Allah ensure that no poor suffer from cancer."

Mamunur Rahman, in-charge in absence of the supervisor, tries to lighten up the mood, saying "See I am a survivor. I am having a normal life."

Mamunur, 22, has been getting support from the foundation since his father died a decade ago, leaving him to fight the cancer on his own. It is now five years that his cancer went into remission.

The mother, though, remains unconvinced at his words.

"My husband said he couldn't bear the cost any longer after my son relapsed."

"Don't worry. Things will be fine," Mamunur replies, offering out a branch of hope.

For many parents like this, the journey ahead remains a dark one. Fortunately, ASHIC will be there for them throughout, holding up the last ray of light to illuminate the road ahead.

## 36 Indian troops killed

FROM PAGE 20

"It was a large convoy and about 2,500 personnel were travelling in multiple vehicles. Some shots were also fired at the convoy," CRPF DG RR Bhatnagar told PTI.

The convoy started from Jammu around 3:30 am and was supposed to reach Srinagar before sunset, officials said.

The number of personnel travelling back to the Valley was high as there was no movement on the highway for the last two to three days because of bad weather and other administrative reasons, they said.

Usually, about 1,000 personnel are part of a convoy but this time it was a total of 2,547 personnel. A road opening party was deployed and the convoy had armoured counter-terror vehicles, officials said.

Forensic and bomb analysis teams are on the spot. The bus that was the focus of the attack belongs to the 76th battalion of the force and had 39 personnel on board, officials said.

CRPF inspector general (Operations) in the Kashmir Valley Zulfiqar Hasan described it as a "vehicle-bound attack" and said Jammu and Kashmir Police has taken up the investigation.

Pakistan-based Jaish-e-Mohammed Islamist group had claimed responsibility for the attack.

### 'SURGICAL STRIKES'

Yesterday's attack was the deadliest on Indian forces in its part of Kashmir since September 2016 when 19 soldiers were killed in a brazen pre-dawn raid by militants on the Uri army camp.

India blamed militants in Pakistan for that attack, the biggest in 14 years, and responded by carrying out strikes across the heavily-militarised Line of Control, the de-facto border dividing the nuclear-armed nations.

### Bagerhat BNP

FROM PAGE 20

Chandra Roy, superintendent of police in Bagerhat, adding that they fled the scene immediately after the attack.

Locals rushed him to Khulna Medical College Hospital where duty doctors pronounced him dead, the SP said, adding that the situation of the area was under control and extra forces were deployed.

"No one has been arrested in this connection and police are yet to find any clue to the murder," he also said.

The type of the bomb could not be confirmed, however, the eyewitnesses said it was a locally made crude bomb.

Talking to The Daily Star, President of Rampal upazila BNP Hafizur Rahman Tuhin demanded immediate arrest of the attackers.