

UK launches global fund to help end 'period poverty'

THOMSON REUTERS FOUNDATION, London

Britain yesterday launched a global "period poverty" fund and taskforce to help all women and girls access sanitary products by 2050 and to tackle the stigma around menstruation.

It is estimated that half of all women and girls in poor countries are forced to use rags, cloths, grass and paper during their periods since many can't afford to buy sanitary products, the UK government said.

A survey by the children's charity Plan International found that 10 per cent of girls in Britain alone have been unable to afford sanitary products.

The government pledged to give 2 million pounds (\$2.64 million) to organisations working to end period poverty globally, and has also earmarked 250,000 pounds to create a taskforce of government departments, charities and private enterprises to tackle the issue.

"Empowerment starts when you are young. Girls should be able to focus on their education and their future without being worried about or embarrassed by their periods," said Penny Mordaunt, Minister for Women and Equalities, in a statement.

Menstruation is still taboo in many countries. In Nepal, the centuries-old Hindu practice of "chhaupadi", where women are banished from their homes during their periods, has led to four deaths since the start of the year.

In Britain, about one in four young women aged 11-21 feel embarrassed to talk about their periods, according to girls charity Girl Guiding UK.

Coding consortium Unicode, which distributes emojis across mobile devices, said it will include a period emoji - a drop of blood - this month after Plan campaigned for one to help people talk openly about menstruation.

"This is a global issue. Without education, women and girls around the world won't be able to take the steps to reach their true potential," said Mordaunt, who is also Britain's International Development minister.

Globally, about 288 million women are on their period each day, yet one in three don't have access to a toilet to use during menstruation, according to the charity WaterAid. The United Nations estimates that due to a lack of facilities, one in 10 girls in Africa will miss school during their period and will eventually drop out of school as a result.

Final millions bathe at Kumbh megafestival

AFP, Allahabad

India's Kumbh Mela religious megafestival wrapped up yesterday with some 10 million pilgrims expected to take a final holy plunge, taking the final tally towards 250 million, officials said.

"We expect at least 10 million today because it is both the last day and Mahashivratri," one of the biggest Hindu holy days, government official Prabhat Shukla told AFP.

"Around 220 million people have visited the Kumbh as per our last calculations. The final tally will only be updated after the end of the festival but it could be around 250 million," Shukla added.

The 48-day festival in the northern city of Allahabad, recently renamed Prayagraj after the region's ancient Hindu name by the state's Hindu nationalist government, began in February.

Hindus believe bathing at the meeting point of the Ganges, the Yamuna and the mythical Saraswati at the festival -- home to a vast tent city bigger than Manhattan -- brings salvation.

According to Hindu mythology, gods and demons fought a war over a sacred pitcher, or Kumbh, containing the nectar of immortality. Drops fell at four locations -- one being Allahabad.

The pilgrims including thousands of Naga Sadhus -- a devout, fierce and famously nude sect of followers of the Hindu god Shiva -- rise at dawn for prayers at the Kumbh Mela before immersing themselves in the holy waters.

This year's festival was the Ardh (half) Kumbh Mela, which denotes the completion of the six-year half cycle of the even bigger and grander Maha (great) Kumbh festival, held every 12 years.

Authorities have spent about \$40 million on an operation to block some drains and make sure others undergo cleaning so that waste water pouring into the rivers does not threaten the pilgrims.

More than 30,000 police were on duty to manage the huge crowds and prevent deadly stampedes seen at previous gatherings.

Special skimmer boats collected waste from the surface of the rivers and more than 40,000 temporary toilets have been installed.

Myanmar police seize massive haul of meth pills

AFP, Yangon

Myanmar authorities seized more than 10 million meth pills worth \$13.3 million over the weekend, police said yesterday, another massive haul in a country widely believed to be the world's largest methamphetamine producer.

High-grade crystal meth -- or 'ice' -- is smuggled out of Myanmar via sophisticated networks to lucrative developed markets as far away as Japan, South Korea and Australia.

Lower-quality pills, cut with caffeine and known in the region as "yaba" or "crazy medicine", are pumped out to feed the voracious domestic market as well as large drug-addicted communities in nearby Thailand and Bangladesh.

Two different busts took place in the west of the country at the weekend, state-run media said yesterday, one in Magway region and one in Maungdaw in Rakhine state.

"It's the biggest drugs seizure this

year in the country and the biggest ever in Maungdaw region in Rakhine State," police colonel Win Ko Ko told AFP.

The pills were likely destined for Bangladesh, where they have become an easy source of income for the Rohingya Muslim refugees who have poured across the border since a 2017 military crackdown.

Most of the drug production, however, takes place on the other side of Myanmar, in conflict-ridden eastern Shan state.

Much of the state lies outside of central control with a complex web of rebel ethnic armed groups and militias wielding power and linking up with trafficking networks.

Opium farming is also rife, and Myanmar remains the world's second largest producer of the drug after Afghanistan.

The poppy-covered hills also provide an ideal location for illicit meth labs, with a largely unchecked supply of precursor chemicals flooding-in from China.

Indonesia's Aceh whips unmarried couples after hotel raid

AFP, Banda Aceh

Six couples were publicly whipped in Indonesia's conservative Aceh province yesterday for relations outside marriage, with at least two women unable to walk after the painful punishment.

Flogging is common for a range of offences in the region at the tip of Sumatra island, including gambling, drinking alcohol, and having gay sex.

It is the only province in the world's biggest Muslim-majority country that imposes Islamic law.

The twelve people whipped yesterday were arrested late last year during a raid on a hotel in the province's capital Banda Aceh.

Four people were each flogged

seven times after being found with a member of the opposite sex who was- n't a relation.

The others -- who were caught in more compromising positions -- received between 17-25 strokes for having intimate relations outside of marriage, an official said.

All 12 also served several months in prison before the public punishment.

Some women cried out in pain as a masked sharia officer lashed them, and at least two had to be carried from the scene by sharia officers.

Dozens of spectators and journalists watched quietly. Some winced occasionally after the blows, while others used smartphones and tablets to film the spectacle.

Huji now raising funds

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Apart from reorganising itself, the Huji uses the looted money for collecting arms and ammunition, fighting legal battles in courts for its leaders and supporting the families of Huji men now in jail, according to detectives.

Mohammad Ujjal, who was handed capital punishment in the August 21 grenade attack cases, had planned the whole process at Kashimpur Central Jail. His fellow militants were supposed to free him by ambushing a prison van on his way to a court from the jail or attacking the prison, DB officials said.

Detectives were investigating how a convict on death row communicated with his fellow militants.

Although this is the first time the Huji's involvement in such robberies coming to surface, collection of fund by militants through robbery is nothing new. The Special Branch of police, which keeps an eye on the activities in prisons, had tracked down the militants and the robbery gang several months ago and shared its intelligence with detectives which led to the arrests of the 12 people on Sunday night.

Earlier, Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB), another banned militant outfit, adopted a similar strategy for collecting fund. It tried to legitimise robbery saying that sin would be forgiven if a percentage of the looted money was spent for the "welfare of Islam", law enforcers said.

Nazmul Hashan, assistant commissioner (Demra Zone) of DB, who led Sunday's drive, said the gang had committed most of the major robberies that had taken place across the country in the last one and a half years.

"The gang members are technically sound. They destroy their mobile phones and SIMs after committing a robbery to avoid arrest," he told The Daily Star.

According to DB officials, the arrestees admitted that they had looted Tk 76 lakh from the office of a multinational company in the capital's Malibagh around seven months ago.

A robbery attempt at the Mymensingh office of another multinational company was foiled by police on January 13. A cop was injured when the robbers opened fire at law enforcers to flee.

The two Huji men arrested on Sunday are Hafiz alias Khalid alias Ibrahim, and Mamunur Rashid alias Bachchu Molla. Detectives said Hafiz, a former madrasa student, is the son-in-law of Abdur Rahamn, another Huji leader and close aide to Ujjal.

Apart from supplying arms to other

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generation -- solar, wind, hydro and nuclear -- by 2020, China might just have the financial firepower.

The state-owned China Aerospace Science and Technology Corporation hopes to be operating a commercially viable solar space station by 2050, according to a recent report in the country's official newspaper Science and Technology Daily.

Energy could be beamed to Earth via microwaves or lasers. But Pang Zhihao, a researcher at the China Academy of Space Technology, warned that the hazards potentially posed to humans, plants and animals by that process must be examined.

While an endless source of renewable energy is the holy grail in tackling climate change, some fear that lasers produced at an SSP could potentially be weaponised to give Beijing a lethal military instrument.

China was late to the space race -- it didn't send its first satellite into orbit until 1970 -- but its program has seriously matured in the past few years, hitting milestones including a manned spaceflight and the landing of a rover on the far side of the moon, a historic first.

But under President Xi Jinping, it has invested billions in building up its space program, while aggressively asserting its influence back on Earth, pursuing the "great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation."

Shahidul Alam

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controversial section 57 of the Information Communication and Technology (ICT) Act.

The petition said that the case was filed against him "in violation of his fundamental rights and by abusing of the process", his lawyer Sara Hossain texted The Daily Star yesterday.

Without elaboration, she said there were procedural errors in filing of the case.

The HC may hear the petition next week, the lawyer added.

On August 5 last year, Shahidul, also the founder of Drik Gallery and Pathshala South Asian Media Institute, was picked up from his Dhanmondi home during a wide-spread demonstration for safe roads.

Police lodged the case against the 63-year-old under section 57 of the ICT Act and produced him before a Dhaka court the following day.

The arrest was made after Shahidul, also a social activist, gave an interview to Al Jazeera English where he criticised the government's role amid the protests.

Shahidul was then placed on a seven-day remand. Police charged him with "spreading propaganda and false information against the government".

His arrest and imprisonment sparked outrage and condemnation at home and abroad.

Shahidul obtained permanent bail from the HC on November 15. He was released from Dhaka Central Jail on November 20.

16 injured

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Nurul Islam, inspector (investigation) of Ukhia Police Station, however, said the protestors attacked police first and police baton charged in self-defense.

Cox's Bazar Additional Superintendent of Police Nihad Adnan Tayan said legal action would be taken against the attackers.

Taskforce

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house and factory in three days or have their electricity line cut too.

Mahmud Ashik Kabir, assistant inspector of the Department of Explosives, said some of the materials used in the factory were inflammable. Since the factory had already started relocating, it was given some time.

"Storing or using such substances at factories in a residential area is banned," he added.

Mahbubur Rahman, deputy general manager of Roxy Paints, said their production had been suspended without gas and water.

He added that it would take at least six months for a big company like his to relocate.

Commodore Zahid said utility lines of the warehouses and factories would remain disconnected until they move out of Hazaribagh.

Another team of officials led by Brig Gen Sharif Ahmed, chief health officer of the DSCC, disconnected utility lines of eight warehouses on Haronath Ghosh Road and Nanda Kumar Datta Lane for keeping plastic raw materials and chemicals.

Owners of four warehouses and factories managed to remove their plastic materials immediately and faced no action.

Mohammad Sohel, one of the owners who removed the flammable goods, said, he had been running the factories since the country's independence.

"We are one of the pioneers of making plastic products from scrapped goods. We want to move the factory, but we need time."

Two other teams of the taskforce disconnected utility connections to 13 warehouses in Tantibazar.

Caab suspends

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findings of the probe body formed by the civil aviation ministry to investigate the hijack bid of BG-147.

"The deadline for submitting the probe report has been extended for seven more working days," Mohibul also said.

According to the new deadline, the probe body is scheduled to submit its report by March 14.

On February 25, Civil Aviation and Tourism Ministry formed a five-member probe committee headed by the ministry's Additional Secretary Md Mokabbir Hossain to investigate the incident.

The probe body couldn't take statements of all the parties involved in the incident, Mohibul said, adding that they have extended the deadline upon request made by the committee.

For example, the person who was supposed to check the body of Palash Ahmed, the alleged hijacker, did not ask him to deposit his waist belt while he was crossing the checkpoint, said a top official of the civil aviation ministry involved in the investigation process.

The Boeing 737-800 aircraft of Biman Bangladesh Airlines made a "force landing" at Chattogram's Shah Amanat International Airport on February 24 evening after Palash, a passenger on the flight, attempted to hijack the plane.

He was killed later in an eight-minute operation by the members of the army's para-commando unit.

Quader stable

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and development) of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University, accompanied him, said AL sources.

The air ambulance landed in Singapore at 8:00pm (Bangladesh time), they added.

Earlier, renowned Indian cardiologist Dr Devi Shetty examined Quader at BSMMU where the AL leader had been undergoing treatment since Sunday morning and fighting for life with blockages in three coronary arteries.

"After assessing different prospects, Dr Devi Shetty opined that this is the optimum time to shift... It would be relatively more risky to shift him if he develops further complications," said BSMMU Vice Chancellor Prof Kanak Kanti Barua.

Prof Kanak was briefing reporters at the hospital on the Indian cardiologist's observation. "After getting Dr Shetty's opinion, we informed the matter to the honourable prime minister. Then she asked us to shift him."

Dr Shetty was informed about every detail of the minister's illness. He also learnt about all the medical steps taken for Quader, added Prof Kanak.

Dr Shetty landed at Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport around 12:45pm after Sheikh Hasina requested the BSMMU authorities to bring the famous cardiologist to examine Quader.

Prof Kanak said the minister's condition had been "completely stable" since yesterday morning. "But he is not out of danger," he added.

"It was not possible to send him to Singapore [on Sunday] because of his condition. But doctors of Mount Elizabeth Hospital today [Monday] said they are now more confident

about his safe transportation to Singapore."

Syed Ali Ahsan, chairman of cardiology department at BSMMU, at the briefing said Quader's high blood sugar, electrolyte imbalance and several other problems have come down to normal range.

"He is also moving and giving signals to remove ventilation. It seems he is doing well," Ahsan said. "Considering all these aspects, it can be said that his condition is now stable and improving."

Asked what Dr Shetty told them about the treatment of Quader, Kanak said, "Dr Shetty said whatever has been done here [at BSMMU] by your cardiac team was an excellent job.

"Dr Shetty told Mrs Quader that your husband is lucky as this was an excellent team and took excellent measures.

"He [Dr Shetty] also told Mrs Quader that nothing better could have been done even in Europe and America than what they have done here in treating Quader.

Dr Devi also told the BSMMU doctors that different complications might arise later as Quader has chronic lung disease, apart from diabetes and blood pressure problem.

Prof Kanak said Quader's blood has also developed infection.

Earlier on Sunday, a three-member medical team from the Mount Elizabeth Hospital reached Dhaka by an air ambulance and examined Quader.

Quader was admitted to the CCU of BSMMU on Sunday morning following his breathing complications. Doctors found three blockages in his coronary artery through an angiogram.

Suddenly so dear to them

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secretary contender, claimed that they took charge of the student organisation last year with a commitment to change DU's political atmosphere and work for all students, irrespective of their political identity.

"If we win, we will fulfill our commitment and no general student will face any trouble. We will try to address the seat crisis in the dormitories and ensure good food there," he said.

However, some of the candidates accused each others of coming up with "nothing but eyewash to deceive voters".

Nurul Haq Nur, vice-president contender from the Parishad, said, "Some student bodies have changed their behaviour and are pretending to be friendly to the voters."

Talking to The Daily Star, he said, "Since the last 10 years, Chhatra league has been torturing students inside 'guest rooms' [of dormitories] and forcing them to join their political programmes.

"This culture will not change even after the election. They are doing this [making promises] only to get votes."

DU Vice-Chancellor Prof Md Akhtaruazzaman yesterday said the university authorities were determined to hold a participatory and acceptable Ducus election.

"No one will be able to foil the election. If anyone tries to do anything illegal, the university authorities will take instant actions," he told a briefing on the Ducus polls at Nabab Nawab Ali Chowdhury Senate Bhaban of the university.

Students, especially those staying at halls, are often forced into taking part in political processions and rallies by student leaders. Many newcomers have to join such programmes for getting seats in the dormitories.

The illegal practice was in place during the BNP's tenure in the past. At that time, students faced such oppres-

sion at the hands of leaders of JCD and Islami Chhatra Shibir, student body of BNP's partner Jamaat-e-Islami.

It did not change after the AL came to power in 2009.

BCL used the hall guest rooms for various malpractices, including torturing students, said DU sources.

Many students alleged that they could not attend classes on many occasions as they were forced to join AL processions on the campus.

DU sources said the hall unit BCL leaders forced over 200 students to leave different dormitories in the last three years for what they said were "remaining absent from AL programmes and expressing different views".

The so-called "guest-room culture" faced a huge controversy after a first year marketing student, Hafijur Mollah, died on February 2 in 2016. His friends and family alleged that he was tortured at the guest room of Salimullah Hall and died after suffering from pneumonia and typhoid.

A total of 13 student bodies, including Progotishil Chhatra Jote and Samrajjobad Birodhi Chhatra Oikya, protested the incident.

As the campaign gets momentum, students have called for steps to ensure an effective Ducus and hall unions for stopping such malpractices.

Seeking anonymity, a first year student of sociology department, said many candidates who had tortured students inside dormitories were seeking votes. "I think they have now understood that no will vote for them if they can't ensure student rights."

Of the 234 posts in 18 hall unions, 37 candidates have already been elected uncontested. They have been elected to the posts of 26 secretariats, eight general members, and three assistant general secretaries. Most of the leaders are from the BCL panel.

Pak breaks 2-day lull

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ACTION AGAINST MILITANTS

Pakistan plans to take action against militant groups operating on its soil, Information Minister Fawad Chaudhry said yesterday.

Chaudhry said the decision to act was taken at a meeting of the National Security Committee before the suicide bombing, claimed by Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM), in Kashmir.

"A full-fledged strategy is now in place," Chaudhry told Reuters. "We have different strategies for different groups, but the main aim is that we have to enforce the writ of the state. We have to demilitarise if there are groups (on our soil)."

Pakistan's English-language Dawn newspaper said a source briefed journalists that a crackdown against militant groups was imminent.

"The action would soon be visible as things progress," Dawn cited the source as saying. It did not identify the source or say whether it was from the military or government.

In September 2017, Reuters reported that Pakistan's military had decided to de-radicalise armed militant groups and try to get them involved in politics.

That strategy was criticised by civil society groups and the previous civil-

ian government after the emergence of a new party linked to Hafiz Saeed, the alleged mastermind of the 2008 Mumbai attacks that killed 166 people. Saeed denied a role in the attack but the new party was later banned.

AIRSPACE FULLY REOPENED

Pakistan fully reopened its airspace yesterday, authorities said, days after it closed its skies to all air travel, leaving thousands stranded worldwide.

The decision to close the airspace came last Wednesday after a rare aerial dogfight between India and Pakistan over the disputed territory of Kashmir ignited fears of an all-out conflict.

"All airports across Pakistan are operational and airspace reopened," a spokeswoman for the Civil Aviation Authority told AFP yesterday, adding the process had been completed by 1:00 pm (0800 GMT).

The closure disrupted major routes between Europe and South Asia, with mounting frustration from passengers stranded at international airports.

It also delayed attempts to search for a British and an Italian climber who went missing on Nanga Parbat, Pakistan's "killer mountain" and the ninth highest peak in the world, as rescue teams were forced to wait for permission to send up a helicopter.