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PLUS 4 PAGES JACKET ON PADMA BRIDGE SPECIAL

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Your Right to Know

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"If Africa is not properly supported, we will not be able to fight the pandemic."
 UN SECRETARY-GENERAL ANTONIO GUTERRES
 WARNS OF VACCINE NATIONALISM



"I am proud of what was done. A lot of things were said but in fact, there's nothing better than actions."
 PSG STRIKER KYLIAN MBAPPE AFTER HIS TEAM FOLLOWED ISTANBUL
 BASAKSEHIR OFF THE PITCH IN PROTEST OF A REFEREE'S RACIST SLUR



"Failure to address their [people] needs will cause a hunger pandemic which will dwarf the impact of Covid."
 WFP CHIEF DAVID BEASLEY WARNS OF STARVATION WORLDWIDE



Grit and glory

Marking a watershed, the last span of Padma bridge installed; the bridge likely to be open in June 2022

TUHIN SHUBHRA ADHIKARY and WASIM BIN HABIB

At precisely 12:02pm came the glorious moment. The final span of the Padma bridge was in its place and a giant step was made towards the realisation of a long-cherished dream.

As the colossal floating crane installed the 150-metre span on pillar-12 and -13, Bangladeshi engineers and officials on the crane were jubilant. They were prepared. They had two national flags with them.

The two sides of the river have been linked. And the elation is justified because the country had to overcome financial setbacks and engineering challenges to get past this major milestone and send a message to the world what it is capable of.

The Padma bridge project is being implemented with the country's own funds after the World Bank and other international lenders had cancelled financing over allegations of corruption, which were later found to be not true.

The first span was installed on September 30, 2017.

Now fully visible, the 6.15km Padma bridge is expected to be a game-changer for the economy. It will establish direct road communication between 21 south-western districts and the capital in 2022.

The double-decker steel and concrete bridge will have a dual carriageway on the top and a single broad-gauge rail line

within the steel structure.

"The bridge has become a reality because of the courageous leadership of the prime minister. This is a matter of pride for the whole nation. Today is an auspicious moment for us," Belayet Hossain, executive director of Bangladesh Bridge Authority, the executing agency of the bridge, told The Daily Star.

Once in service, the Tk 30,193-crore bridge will not only shorten travel time between Dhaka and the south-western districts, but also potentially unlock opportunities for over 30 million people living in that region.

It will facilitate regional trade and accelerate development, experts have said.

It is expected to boost the country's gross domestic product by 1.2 percent.

Soon after the installation of the 40th span last week, there was great enthusiasm among people and a feeling of festivity.

Even though the weather was foggy, the 41st and last span was taken near pillar-12 and -13 around 5:45pm on Wednesday. Members of the armed forces guarded the superstructure and the giant crane overnight.

Officials, engineers, and workers gathered near the pillars around 8:00am and completed some preliminary work. The final work for the installation of the span started at 9:40am, said Belayet Hossain, also the secretary to the Bridge Division.

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A gigantic floating crane finishes installing the last span, measuring 150 metres, on pillars 12 and 13 of the Padma bridge around noon yesterday. The entirety of the 6.15-km long bridge is now visible, bringing hopes of connecting the country's 21 south-western districts to the capital closer to fruition.

PHOTO: SK ENAMUL HAQ

Moments of joy for people on both sides

STAR REPORT

People on both banks of the Padma gathered yesterday morning to witness the auspicious event of the installation of the last span of the Padma bridge.

The dwellers of Shariatpur, Madaripur and Munshiganj reacted with joy as they think the bridge will contribute to overall development of the country's south-western districts.

Some came along with friends, some brought their children and family members and hired boats to see the event. People were even standing on the sandy islands in the river,

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PADMA BRIDGE

Bangladesh tells a story

MAHFUZ ANAM

Historian Yuval Noah Harari, of bestsellers "Sapiens" (2011) and "Homo Deus" (2016) fame, talks about the importance of stories in human history which have the power, he says, to transform the fortune of peoples -- turning groups to tribes, to communities, to nations and, to civilizations and make them achieve wonders.

For us, Bangladesh is such a story of that has made its people achieve wonders. To that extraordinary story a new and inspiring chapter has been added titled "Padma Bridge", whose unquestioned author is Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. It was Bangabandhu's "political will" that contributed so much to Bangladesh's birth.

Similarly, it is Sheikh Hasina's political will that lies at the core of the Padma Bridge becoming a reality. It was her single-minded determination to build it and the courage to overcome many of the vicissitudes that befell it on its way that were the key to the nation witnessing what it did yesterday -- the completion of physical structure of the bridge.

There must, of course, have been plans, counter plans, surveys, studies, detailed maps, meticulous drawings, countless reviews and endless calculations but behind it

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ANTI-SCULPTURE CAMPAIGN

Hefajat now wants to sit with govt

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Hefajat-e-Islam yesterday said it wants to hold dialogue with the government to settle the ongoing debate centring the installation of the sculpture of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

At a press conference in Dhaka Reporters Unity, the Qawmi-based madrasa organisation also said the alem community is trying to hold a meeting with Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina on this issue.

"We are appealing to the government to resolve the issue through discussion. We are also trying to hold discussions with Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina so that the ongoing problem

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TACKLING SECOND WAVE FALLOUT

Govt hints at fresh stimulus

REJAUL KARIM BYRON and PORIMOL PALMA

Officials hinted at a new stimulus package yesterday amid fears of a possible second wave of Covid-19 and the subsequent setback for the economy which has only slightly recovered from the impacts of shutdown.

Economists and businesses suggested this in a two-week-long series of dialogues on Stimulus Packages for Sustainable and Inclusive Recovery from Covid-19 Fallout in Bangladesh organised by the finance ministry.

"We are discussing the issue [of a new package] with businesses and economists. We will report the suggestions to the higher authorities. The decision will be made then," Senior Secretary Abdur Rouf Talukder of the finance ministry said yesterday.

"Due to the second wave, there is a risk of slow recovery. We are thinking of asking development partners for support," he said at the dialogue at Osmani Memorial Hall in the capital.

The government has so far announced 21 stimulus packages worth \$14.28 billion, which is 4.34 percent of the GDP.

The packages focused on job retention, demand restoration, supply chains and food supply protection, employment creation, rural economy revitalisation, and social security enhancement.

In the 3rd part of the dialogue on enhancing social security and ensuring food supply, Finance Secretary Talukder said Bangladesh economy has been hit hard since it is linked to the global economy through trade and investment.

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COVID-19 VACCINE

The first batch to be here in early January

Says health minister

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The first consignment of Oxford-Astrazeneca Covid-19 vaccine will reach the country by early January, said Health Minister Zahid Maleque.

He made the statement while addressing the inaugural ceremony of countrywide measles-rubella vaccination campaign as the chief guest. Some 3.4 crore children, aged between nine months and 10 years, would get measles-rubella vaccine through the campaign.

"We expect to get the vaccine by the beginning of the next month [January]. We have managed three crore shots of Oxford-Astrazeneca [Covid-19] vaccine through Inida's Serum Institute," the minister said.

Giving credit to Prime Minister Sheikh

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US concerned over relocation of Rohingyas to Bhasan Char

DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENT

The US has expressed concern about the relocation of 1,642 Rohingyas to Bhasan Char and plans to carry out further relocations.

"The United States concurs with the UN that any such relocations must be fully voluntary and based on informed consent without pressure or coercion. Bangladesh has stated that Rohingya refugees may return to camps on the mainland if they choose," Cale Brown, principal deputy spokesperson at the US Department of State, said in a statement yesterday.

The Bangladesh government says the housing facility in Bhasan Char has flood embankment, cyclone shelters, schools, hospitals, playground, livelihood options and a much safer place than that of the Cox's Bazar refugee camps where conflicts between locals and refugees and within refugee communities have increased.

Besides, there are risks of landslides, gender-based

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Cars parked haphazardly in front of Wasa Bhaban on the capital's Kazi Nazrul Islam Avenue, obstructing free flow of vehicles and causing an already bad traffic situation in the area to get worse. The photo was taken yesterday afternoon.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

KHALEDA, HEFAJAT CHIEF

Court dismisses defamation case

Cites insufficient grounds; another court refuses to accept case against Hefajat leader Mamunul under DSA

COURT CORRESPONDENT

A Dhaka court yesterday dismissed a defamation case filed against BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia, Hefajat-e-Islam Bangladesh chief Junayed Babunagari and four others over speaking against Bangabandhu's sculpture.

Dhaka Metropolitan Magistrate Satyabrata Sikder dismissed the case as he did not find sufficient grounds for taking cognisance of it, court sources said.

In another development, a Dhaka tribunal refused to accept a case filed against Hefajat Joint Secretary General Mamunul Haque under the Digital Security Act.

BNP Senior Vice-Chairman Tarique Rahman, Secretary General Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir, Hefajat leader Mamunul, and Islami Andolan Bangladesh Senior Nayebe-Amir Syed Muhammad Faizul Karim were also accused in the defamation case, filed by AB Siddique, president of Bangladesh Jananetri Parishad, a pro-Awami League platform, on Wednesday.

The metropolitan magistrate in his order yesterday said two more cases were earlier filed with the same court on the same charges.

According to the case statement, Mamunul, also the secretary general of Bangladesh Khelafat Majlish, and Faizul made defamatory remarks on November 13, and Babunagari on November 27.

The complainant did not mention in the case statement any charges against Khaleda, Tarique and Fakhrul even though they were accused.

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