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"When someone is killed by a car or hacked to death by robbers, people consider it as a criminal offence. Then why does a woman's character become relevant when she is raped and murdered?"
KHUSHI KABIR, COORDINATOR AT NIJERA KORI



"This is an emergency of the highest magnitude. ... In the next 13 days, this dangerous man can do further harm to our country."
US HOUSE SPEAKER NANCY PELOSI ON IMPEACHING TRUMP



"I read a lot of things and plenty of people said I was out of form so it was nice to come back into form, if that's what you want to call it."
AUSTRALIA BATSMAN STEVE SMITH AFTER SCORING 131 IN THE THIRD TEST AGAINST INDIA. PAGE 11



Activists demonstrate in front of Jatiya Press Club demanding justice for the schoolgirl who died due to excessive bleeding after she was raped on Thursday. Such demonstrations took place throughout the day in different parts of the capital yesterday. Amid widespread protests across the country, the government last year amended a law to include death penalty as a punishment for rape.

PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

Victim blaming MUST STOP

Say rights activists

NILIMA JAHAN

Whenever there is an incident of rape, most people tend to say that it was the girl or woman's fault, and question her character, social class, outfit, sexual experience, and lifestyle.

After the news of the rape and subsequent death of a 17-year-old O-level student was published Thursday night, many took to social media to blame the girl.

At a Dhaka court yesterday, 18-year-old Fardin Iftekhar Dihan confessed to his role in killing the girl after raping her. The doctor who did the postmortem also said excessive bleeding due to injuries from the rape led to her death.

Nevertheless, people on social media keep saying that it was consensual sex and should not be called rape. "The girl went on a date with her boyfriend... If the girl had any decency, she would have never gone to her boyfriend's flat before marriage," commented a Facebook user under the post of a news report about the incident.

A former teacher of the girl's school wrote, "The boy shouldn't be blamed alone. I am sure nothing must have

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RAPE, MURDER OF O-LEVEL STUDENT

Doctor confirms rape, finds injury marks

Autopsy conducted; father files case; accused gives confessional statement before court, sent to jail

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The female O-level student, pronounced dead on arrival at a private hospital in the capital on Thursday, was raped and she died due to hemorrhagic shock and excessive bleeding, a forensic expert at Dhaka Medical College said yesterday.

"We found injury marks both in her genital and rectum," Dr Sohel Mahmud, head of the forensic department at the DMC, told reporters after conducting the autopsy.

He said there were no wounds in other parts of the body.

Talking to The Daily Star last night, Dr Sohel said, "Of course, it's a rape... more than a rape, I would say. We have found evidence..."

On Thursday night, the girl's father, a businessman, filed a case with Kalabagan Police Station against Fardin Iftekhar



Fardin Iftekhar Dihan

Dihan -- an 18-year-old who has recently passed his A-level examinations -- over the rape and murder of his daughter.

A Dhaka court recorded Dihan's confessional statement yesterday and sent him to jail, said police.

Three of his friends, who were detained for questioning, have been released. They, however, will be kept under police watch, said police sources.

In the case statement, the girl's father said Dihan tricked his daughter, a student of an English-medium school in Dhanmondi, into going to his flat in Kalabagan's Dolphin Golly on Thursday and raped her when Dihan's family members were away.

The girl bled profusely and fainted. Dihan then took her to hospital to deflect blame, said the statement.

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MONEY LAUNDERING

Interpol issues red notice for PK Halder

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Interpol yesterday issued red notice against Proshanta Kumar Halder, also known as PK Halder, who allegedly laundered over Tk 10,000 crore of four non-banking financial institutions (NBFIs) abroad, following a request from Bangladesh Police.

Mohiul Islam, assistant inspector general of National Central Bureau (NCB) at police headquarters (PHQ), confirmed to The Daily Star.

He said they pointed out the probable location of PK Halder and sent documents related to the case filed by the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) to Interpol.

Other allegations that were brought against Halder were also sent to Interpol, he said, adding that The International Criminal Police Organization examined the documents and issued red notice.

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VACCINE ROLLOUT PLAN

Key issues still unresolved

Big challenges ahead for mass inoculation

MOHAMMAD AL MASUM MOLLA

The government has yet to resolve several key issues before rolling out the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine, expectedly from the second week of February.

The mobile app for registering people willing to be vaccinated and to create a database of people aged 60 and above, those with comorbidities has yet to be launched.

Besides, the health care authorities of the country have yet to decide whether people to be vaccinated should go through mandatory antibody tests so as to avoid wastage of the much-sought-after coronavirus vaccine.

The country has so far arranged for the delivery of 9.8 crore doses of the vaccine -- 3 crore from Serum Institute of India and 6.8 crore from the COVAX facility -- to inoculate 4.9 crore people, each to be administered two doses.

Frontline healthcare professionals along with people aged 60 and above and those with comorbidities like cancer, diabetes and hypertension will be vaccinated in the first phase, according to Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS) officials.

Meanwhile, the DGHS has been struggling to prepare a database for the elderly people. Besides, there is also no database of people with comorbidities.

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- DGHS struggling to create database of people aged 60 and above, and those with comorbidity
- No decision yet on mandatory antibody test to avoid wastage of vaccines
- Mobile app for registration of people for vaccination not ready yet

Man held over rape of third-grader in Feni

A CORRESPONDENT, Feni

Police arrested a 22-year-old man on charges of raping a 10-year-old girl in Daganbhuiyan upazila of the district on Thursday night.

Abdul Karim Hridoy, of Momarizpur area, was arrested soon after the girl's mother filed a case, police said.

Senior Judicial Magistrate Abdullah Khan sent him to jail yesterday after recording the third grader's statement, said Imtiaz Ahmed, officer-in-charge of Daganbhuiyan Police Station.

The officer added that Hridoy took the girl to a secluded orchard when she was returning home in the evening and raped her.

He fled as locals rushed to the scene after hearing the girl scream, the OC added.

Her mother filed the case soon afterwards, he said, adding that the girl was taken to a hospital.



- OXFORD VACCINES FROM INDIA**
- 3 crore doses for 1.5 crore people
- 50 lakh doses to arrive in each instalment
- Purchase cost \$5 per dose

- VACCINES FROM GAVI**
- 6.8 crore doses for 3.4 crore people
- Estimated cost \$1.6-2.0 per dose
- These vaccines will cover 20% of country's 17.28 crore population

- WHO WILL NOT GET VACCINES**
- Under-18 people (37% of the population)
- Pregnant mothers (About 50 lakh)

- ADMINISTERING THE VACCINES**
- People will have to register for vaccination through mobile app
- There will be 10,400 vaccination centres up to upazila level
- Each vaccination team can vaccinate 150 people a day
- 50 lakh people will be vaccinated in 12 days

COLD CHAIN

- DGHS will rent two cold storages of BADC for use as central store
- 714 freezers are in 64 districts. 193 more needed
- 1,679 freezers are in 493 upazilas. 294 more needed

VACCINE WASTE MANAGEMENT

Waste of vaccination programme will be put into biohazardous waste bags. Vials and syringes will be broken and burnt before disposing them of in burial pits.



16 more die from Covid, 785 infected

BSS, Dhaka

Bangladesh recorded 16 Covid-19 deaths and 785 fresh cases overnight.

The recovery count rose to 465,279 after another 833 patients were discharged from the hospitals during the period, a press release of the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS) read yesterday.

"Sixteen more Covid-19 patients died in the last 24 hours, increasing the death toll from the pandemic to 7,734," the release added.

It said the tally of infections has surged to 520,690 as 785 new cases were confirmed in the last 24 hours.

A total of 13,681 samples were tested at 181 authorised laboratories across the country during the time.

Of the total sample tests in the past 24 hours, 5.74 percent tested positive, while 15.63 percent cases were detected from the total tests conducted so far, the release added.

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With her right leg in a cast, 55-year-old Nurjahan Begum sitting on a gurney in front of Mugda General Hospital in the capital as she waits to get tested for coronavirus. She needs a surgery immediately, but doctors at another hospital told her that they would operate only after she tests negative. Even though testing at Mugda General Hospital begins at 9:00am, Nurjahan went there around 7:00am yesterday to avoid being stuck in a long queue.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

US CAPITOL RIOT

Calls for Trump's impeachment getting louder

Democrats say he must go; breaking 150-year-old tradition, Trump to skip Biden's inauguration

AGENCIES

Despite promises of smooth transition of power to Joe Biden, Congressional Democrats accused US President Donald Trump of inciting insurrection and weighed up impeaching him for a second time after supporters fired up by his false claims of election fraud stormed the US Capitol this week.

After two of his cabinet secretaries quit in protest following Wednesday's mayhem, an unusually tame Trump condemned rioters who rampaged in his name through a congressional session that certified Biden's victory, although he did not go so far as to congratulate or even say the name of his successor.

"This moment calls for healing and reconciliation," Trump said in a video released on Twitter after a temporary suspension, a jarring shift of tone a day after a rally in which he encouraged thousands of supporters to march on the Capitol.

Trump said "those who broke the law, you will pay." "A new administration will be inaugurated on January 20. My focus now turns to ensuring a smooth, orderly and seamless transition of power," he said.

However, yesterday, he said he would not attend his successor's swearing-in.

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Badhon on playing Muskan Zuberi in Srijit Mukherji's thriller adaptation

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT DESK

Dr Azmeri Haque
Badhon won the 2nd runner-up title at Lux Channel i Superstar 2006, before making her way into acting. She is also a non-practicing dentist.

The celebrated Bangladeshi artist will be playing the role of Muskan Zuberi in acclaimed Indian director Srijit Mukherji's first Hoichoi original series, "Robindronath Ekhane Kawkhono Khete Aashenni", based on Mohammad Nazim Uddin's Bangladeshi thriller novel of the same name. Other cast members include Anjan Dutt (Kharaj Khasnobis), Rahul Bose (Nirupam Chanda), Anirban Bhattacharya (Ato Ali) and Anirban Chakrabarti (OC Tapas Sikder).

This series is among Hoichoi's slate of 25 new originals, for their fourth year. In a recent video interview with *The Daily Star*, titled *A & E Talk with Elita*, Badhon shared her experience of working on the project and more.

Initially, Srijit Mukherji wanted to shoot this thriller adaptation in Bangladesh, with an entirely Bangladeshi cast. The director has said that he always wanted to cast Badhon in

the role of Muskan Zuberi. "I received a few Whatsapp messages from Srijit Mukherji at the beginning of the pandemic. He wanted to speak to me about the role. I was in self-isolation at the time, and I genuinely thought I was hallucinating!" explained Badhon. "I didn't believe it. I even ignored his texts, until producer Shahriar Shakil got me in contact with him."

Badhon read the novel right after speaking to Srijit Mukherji, and even started rehearsing scenes from the script. "Srijit Mukherji recorded the dialogues of my co-artists and sent me the recordings through Whatsapp, so that I could rehearse," she added.

However, the director's plans of working on the series with Bangladeshi actors were interrupted by the pandemic. As a result, he decided to move forward with the series in India, with an Indian cast. At the time, he wanted to cast Paoli Dam in the role, but that did not work out due to scheduling conflicts. Eventually, Srijit Mukherji went back to his first choice — Badhon.

With the assistance and cooperation of the High Commissions of Bangladesh and India, Badhon went to Kolkata in December 2020, to begin working on the project. The cast and crew are shooting with all the precautions, including Covid-19 testing, when needed.

"I am thankful to the author Mohammad Nazim Uddin for creating a wonderful, multifaceted character like Muskan Zuberi — every actor waits for a role like this," shared Badhon. "I am



PHOTO: STAR



Badhon in "Rabindranath Ekhane Kawkhono Khete Aashenni"

completely fascinated by her."

Badhon has been visiting the sets, even on days where she does not have any scenes to shoot, just to watch the others at work. "All the actors in the series are brilliant. Besides, working with the likes of Srijit Mukherji, Rahul Bose and Anirban Bhattacharya is the experience of a lifetime," she said. "Rahul Bose is incredibly humble. As a co-actor, he made me feel really comfortable on the sets. I don't have any direct scenes with Anjan Dutt, but there is a point in the climax of the story, where audiences will get to see me in the same frame as him, alongside all the other characters, which is exhilarating!"

Badhon also took up singing for the project, since the character of Muskan Zuberi, an ardent admirer of Rabindranath Tagore, is a good singer. "I am not a very musical person," shares Badhon. "But I learned singing for this role, right from the basics, for three months. Starting from *Sa Re Ga Ma Pa*, I learned to play a few, easy songs on the harmonium. I may not be good at singing still, but I wanted to get the body language and the essence of the character right. I will be lip syncing to another singer's voice in the series."

Moreover, Badhon is thankful to Hoichoi for giving her a platform to

explore her skills. "Our industry has plenty of talented and eager individuals who want to do good work, but we lack the production and the technical support," she said. "To that end, I appreciate Hoichoi's commitment to supporting young, promising artists."

In 2018, Badhon received the complete guardianship and general custody of her only daughter, after a hard-fought legal battle. She spoke about that day in her life, in an emotional moment during the interview. "It was raining heavily on the day of the final verdict, and I felt that Mother Nature was celebrating with me," shared a tearful Badhon.

She further said, "Sadly, women and girls in our society hardly get the opportunity to learn how to speak up for their rights. When girls who have gone through difficulties in their lives, come up to me and say that I give them the courage and confidence to fight for their rights, I feel an immense sense of accomplishment." She further added that motherhood gave her the strength to fight against all odds and stand firm on her beliefs.

On the work front, Badhon also wrapped up director Abdullal Muhammad Saad's forthcoming project. She described working with him as one of her biggest learning experiences.

Gazi Rakayet on his latest film, "The Grave"

SHAH ALAM SHAZLI

Renowned actor and director Gazi Rakayet started his career on stage, where he honed his craft as an actor. He won Bangladesh National Film Award for Best Director, Best Screenplay, Best Dialogue and Best Story for his debut directorial "Mrittika Maya" (2013) and the Best Supporting Actor award for his role in the film Anil "Bagchir Ekdin" (2015). His film, "Gor" (The Grave in English), was recently released, to much acclaim. It is said to be the first English feature film released in the country. The esteemed director talks to *The Daily Star* about his latest project.

What made you select the script for "Gor"?

I had made a tele-fiction with the same story a while back, and since then, I had dreamt of making a feature film with it. I had wanted to highlight our country to international audiences with the film, and the script was perfect for the cause.

Why did you decide to release the film in English?

Many of our films are earning praise internationally, after they are given proper subtitles in English. I thought that a film natively in English would be easier for audiences abroad to grasp. Some may think that it was for show-off, but in reality, it was necessary — so we shot in both English and Bengali. I believe that "Gor" will be appreciated in the international arena, because of this very reason.

Where did the film's shooting take place?

The shooting took place in my home village of Shinepukur in Dohar. We cleared space in a jungle situated there, and created the set there, overlooking a *char*. Uttam Guha was the art director for the film, and I must say, he did a brilliant job. We shot the film in October and November.

Tell us about acting in "Gor". Why did you cast yourself in that particular role?

That role was one of the most important ones in the film, and I will admit that there were many artists who could have played it. However, would they have given enough time to that role? Maybe they would, maybe they wouldn't. A lot of homework and consideration was needed for the role, so I decided to take matters into my own hands. Now, I am glad that I could give my all to the role.

How challenging was the film to complete?

It was doubly challenging to complete, as it was shot and dubbed in both English and Bangla. Moreover, it is a government granted film, so the expectations were also very high. We rehearsed for a week before the shooting even began.

The lack of planning can be the biggest roadblock to completing any film, so I would say that all filmmakers should extensively plan their work before getting into action.



PHOTO: STAR

Looking back at Shilpacharya Zainul Abedin's enduring legacy

In conversation with Mainul Abedin



(L) The Shilpacharya in his studio. (M) This sketch by Shilpacharya Zainul Abedin was recently auctioned to raise funds for Covid-19 relief. (R) Shilpacharya Zainul Abedin (R) with a young Mainul Abedin.

RASHEEK TABASSUM MONDIRA
Zainul Abedin is considered to be the founding father of Bangladeshi modern art. He was honoured with the title, Shilpacharya, which translates to 'the master of art'. He made undeniable contributions to art creation and education in Bangladesh. On his 106th birth anniversary (December 29, 2020), the Faculty of Fine Art building in University of Dhaka, was named Shilpacharya Zainul Bhavan, in honour of him. On the occasion, his youngest son, Engineer Mainul Abedin, shared anecdotes and memories of his father with *The Daily Star*.

"My father was a very busy person, always immersed in his art and institutional responsibilities," shares Mainul Abedin. "He used to take us out on boat rides. He liked scenic beauty, and brought it to life on his canvas frequently. We would often wake up

to ten to twelve new artworks by him in the morning, after an outing. It was astonishing!"

Zainul Abedin was awarded the Rockefeller Foundation Travelling Fellowship in 1956 and visited several countries across the globe at the time. "I was only four years old then and I had the rare opportunity to visit my father in New York, along with my mother. I still remember bits and pieces of the journey," shares Mainul Abedin. "I visited several countries, including Belgium, France and Italy among others, with my father, very early on in my life."

Shilpacharya Zainul Abedin was the founding principal of the Government Institute of Arts and Crafts in 1948. We now know this institution as the Faculty of Fine Art, University of Dhaka — our very own Charukola. He also founded Bangladesh Arts & Crafts Foundation in Sonargaon,



Narayanganj. He fought to uphold and preserve the rights of the rural craftsmen and their works, throughout his life.

According to his son, one of the greatest regrets of the maestro's life was not being able to accomplish all his envisioned goals related to arts



Shilpacharya Zainul Abedin

and crafts. "He had plans to create a 'Folk Village' on the premises of Bangladesh's Folk Art Museum, where local artisans and craftsmen from across the country could work and carry out research," says Mainul Abedin, reflecting on his father's hopes.



Mainul Abedin



PHOTOS: COURTESY OF MAINUL ABEDIN

"He envisioned a place where artisans could work on traditional creations with pottery, metal, silver and wood among many other mediums and forms of art. Though the museum was founded by his initiative in 1975, unfortunately, the 'Folk Village' concept never saw the light of day."

Shilpacharya Zainul Abedin immersed himself not only in artworks, but also in the art movement, education and preservation. More than sixty percent of the works in the Folk Art Museum were collected by the artist himself.

Mainul Abedin believes that there is a reflection of Shilpacharya Zainul Abedin in all works of art in present Bangladesh. "The artists of our country are very progressive and talented. I expect them to reflect our country's heritage and roots in all kinds of work," he says.

Mainul Abedin also reflects on the

lack of interest in the history and legacy of art among some students. "Several students come to study in Charukola, but many of them don't know about the contributions and works of the maestros in the field," he shares. "If they fail to know about the history of the art movement in Bangladesh, how can we expect the general public to know the true history?"

"People must know about the roots of their country and heritage," Kohinoor Abedin, daughter-in-law of Zainul Abedin, shares, joining the conversation. "It is the young generation's responsibility to uphold and protect the cultural aspects of our country, along with keeping up with the pace of the changing times."

"I salute Zainul Abedin, not just as my father, but also as the Shilpacharya. Now, I realise what a great man he was, in every aspect of life," concludes Mainul Abedin.

Covid-19 vaccine removes Bangladesh from its friendlist

MAHBUB ALAM MUNNA

Covid-19 has drawn all the attention since it broke out in China, or wherever the latest conspiracy places it. Since then, all the countries have been desperately looking for a vaccine, as was Bangladesh. But several fake IDs of vaccines left everyone confused and creating ample scope for catfishing.

But finally, Bangladesh found a Covid-19 vaccine profile with a seemingly real profile picture (Seemed to be real as its profile picture and other information were genuine) after months of searching and sent a friend request without further delays.

Yes! Then the Covid-19 vaccine accepted our friend request and all the healthy men clapped for the probable solution of this 'unhealthy' situation.

It can undoubtedly be said that Covid-19 vaccine was getting numerous friend requests from both known and unknown countries. Bangladesh was lucky as its request was accepted before the maximum limit was reached.

However, Bangladesh made sure to knock the profile on messenger and also sent a text message. No one likes random friend requests and Bangladesh had the courtesy to make an introduction first.

Then after several hours of chatting with Covid-19 vaccine, Bangladesh and Covid-19 vaccine reached an agreement that Bangladesh would get millions of doses of vaccine soon.

This most awaited news brought forth a celebration in the country. Public holidays were announced to celebrate the news. The day Covid-19 saw Bangladesh's message was announced as the 'Friendship Day' which is supposed to be celebrated every year. Politicians were delivering their TedTalks on 'how to select a true friend' on television.

Some were on the edge of developing a theory, named, 'A True Friend: Myth or Reality' based on their experience.

Unfortunately, everything didn't go well. To celebrate the public holidays, people gathered in huge numbers in various recreational and tourist spots. As a result, more people were infected and vaccine was in dire need. The spokesman of Bangladesh knocked Covid-19 in messenger again. But no reply came and the message wasn't seen either. While checking the ID of Covid-19 vaccine, Bangladesh discovered that its friend had suddenly removed it from his friendlist. Later, Bangladesh took several screenshots of the agreement with Covid-19 vaccine and posted those on 'Desperately Seeking Vaccine- DSV', an international group of unfortunate countries. But, no one gave a solution. Only a comment was made from a fake ID (Could be the Covid-19 vaccine's fake ID) mentioning that, "I heard that Covid-19 vaccine mistakenly accepted your friend request after reaching its friend-limit. It has more friends to send vaccine to. You don't have a chance as you are its 'accidental friend!'"

BACK FROM THE BEACH



ROOSTING DUCKS

Confused Americans still wondering if that was a coup or not

OSAMA RAHMAN

The United States of America, a former colony of the United Kingdom, may not yet be ready for democracy.

Another disputed election, as has been happening in the country since before the George Bush fiasco, has once again alerted international election observers of possible foul play.

"The voting happened peacefully. Many people came, they voted and they left," Kajalie Ahmed, an election observer from Bangladesh, had said earlier. Yesterday, however, she sang a different tune.

"I felt watched when I was observing their election. Everything was tightly controlled. Our tours were guided. We couldn't walk into any centre we wanted," she told this newspaper.

Adiba Abbas, head of the World Democratic Association, believes the problem lies in America's nature of being a societal basket case.

"This is a country fraught with many different problems. Everything for them is a race issue. And it is a very individualistic society, which celebrates individuals more than the collective. So democratic values will be hard to instil here," Adiba said.

Benyayoun Hussien, a political observer, said this uniquely American problem can have global repercussions. "This is a nuclear-armed country we are talking about. It is also the only country in the world to have used nuclear arms. Maybe they are already producing more such arms. Such a country cannot be allowed to run this way, without the world finally interfering," he said.

"They need to have more transparency," he added.

"Yes. The ducks have come home to roost. But it's our problem. It's a white problem," an unnamed netizen said on a popular forum the day after protestors,

if we can even call them that, stormed the US Capitol Building and stopped the congressional certification of the electoral vote.

Their thoughts were echoed by others who felt the same, once again showing how divisive the supposed strong democracy is. Questions, however, are still being raised about what yesterday was all about.

"We know coups. We have done it many times over. We annexed Texas, invaded California, brought about regime change in Iraq, Afghanistan, all over Africa and even Europe," Bob Barker, an American citizen with the right skin complexion to make a statement, told this newspaper.

"This wasn't a coup. This was us exercising our democratic right to congregate and protest," he added.

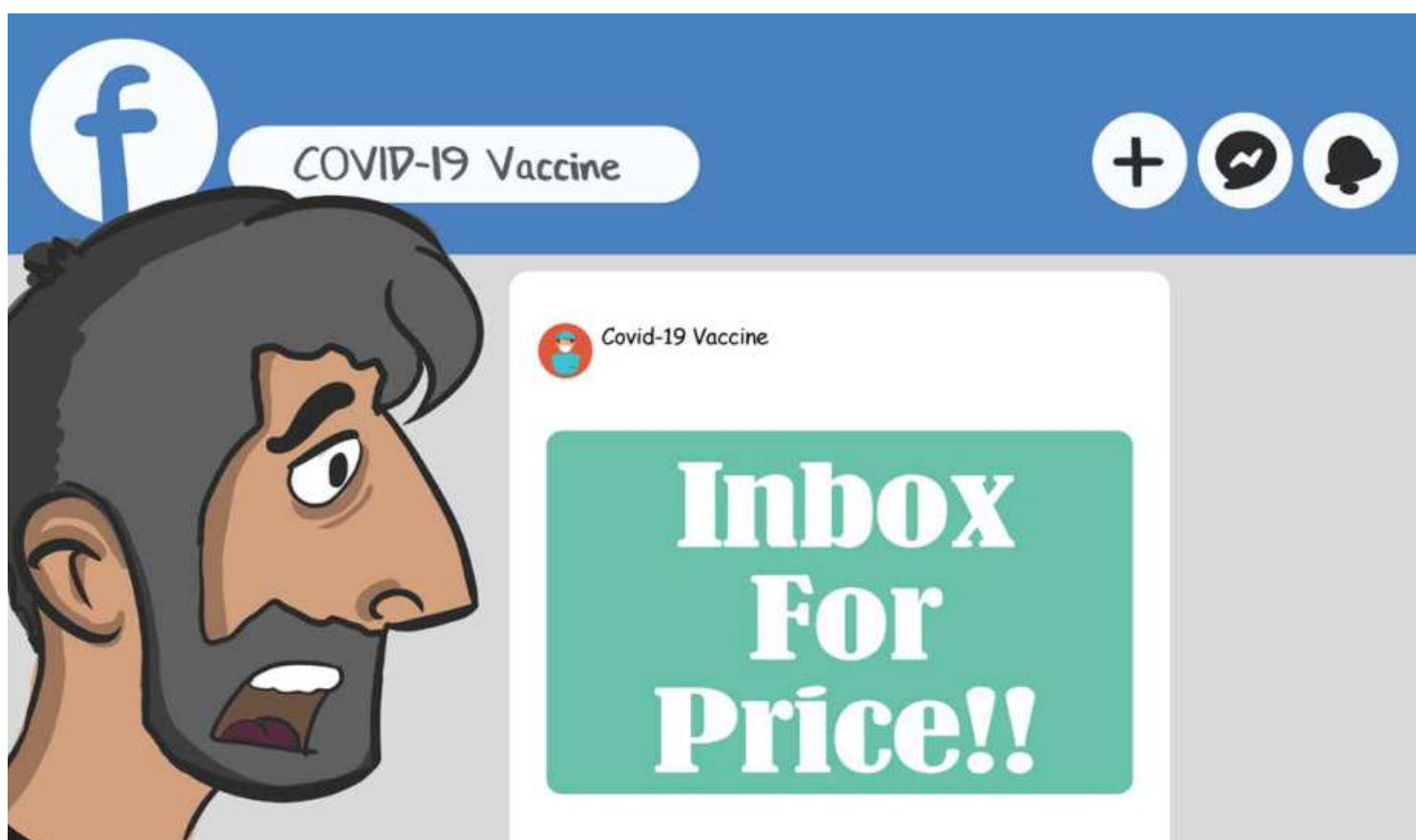
Those within the corridors of power also agreed with Bob's assessment. "This wasn't a coup. This was an attack on democracy, engineered by the Russians and the Chinese," a spokesman for The Whitest House, said.

Pointed out that not one of the protestors seemed to be Russian or Chinese, the spokesman retorted asking whether any of the Libyan supporters who overthrew Gaddafi looked American.

In certain sections, however, yesterday's events are still seen as an absolute coup attempt. "We are a first-world country. How can we behave like disgusting third world countries? Yuck. I want to throw up just thinking about that," Karen Armstrong, a progressive, said.

Meanwhile, heads of states are scheduled to meet in the upcoming week where they will decide whether the American elections were fair or not, regardless of how the voters feel.

"We need to give them some guidance. It is our responsibility as the world police," a spokesman for China said.



Facebook shop goes bankrupt by not using 'Apu, inbox for prices' policy

LUBNAN KHALEESI

A Facebook shop, which became a disruptor-in-chief by listing the prices on the image of their products, recently declared bankruptcy.

Sweet Surprises, which sold the most random assortment of products ever, took the Facebook marketplace by storm when it launched earlier this year. Instead of having to inbox them for their prices, their page bravely displayed the prices right on the photos of their products.

This was an unprecedented move in the Bangladeshi market, where Facebook pages religiously maintained the "inbox for prices, please" message or the more annoying automated "check inbox" replies to price queries.

"Things were going well initially. People applauded us and we got the Trend-Setter of the Year during last year's Good Business Awards. However, since the pandemic, things started to shift," Mehnaz Milon, owner of Sweet Surprises, said.

"People had so much free time on their hands that they started coming to the page and commenting on pictures, saying 'We can buy this for Tk 50' on products listed at Tk 500 or more. They all began to demonstrate this weird bargaining power-trip, which drove away customers," she said.

In time, Sweet Surprises' Facebook posts became the brewing grounds of one of Bangladesh's most talked-about price wars of the year. Other companies also got in on the action, talking up their pages on Sweet Surprises' posts.

Sweet Surprises, at the advice of a marketer, decided to brave the storm by continuing with their posts unchanged.

Amin Bari, head of social media of Sweet Surprises, admits the decision back-fired but stands by it. "We had tremendous engagement in the first few months. Thousands of comments, likes and shares. And you know engagement means sales, right?"

When pointed out that engagement did not really mean sales and it was usually people

tagging each other and saying "for you" or "buy me this", with no one really buying anything, Amin said that was the whole point of social media.

"Listen. Engagements are all we care about. That is basically my job. To drive up engagement. Everyone does it by not listing prices. Well, we wanted to do something different," he said.

While the exercise has failed, Mehnaz feels it is not over. "We plan on coming back next time. This time, not only will we not list prices, we will also not even show the product's picture. This way it will be a real surprise when people buy something. They won't even know what it is that they bought! We will take the market by storm," she said.

Whether that works or not remains to be seen. For now, there are high hopes for Sweet Surprises V2.

Lubnan Khaleesi cannot stop eating. And it's not even hunger anymore; just the thrill of tasting all kinds of food.



A Trump supporter sits in the office of House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, who was forced to evacuate, in what was NOT a coup.

PHOTO: AFP

Trial of brutal murder of Bangladeshi maid in KSA

Local and KSA authorities must ensure justice is served

RIGHTENING details have emerged of a female Bangladeshi domestic worker who was tortured and killed at her employer's house in Saudi Arabia. According to a report in *The Daily Star* published on Friday, Abiron Begum Ansar, a 40-year-old maid from Khulna who went to the kingdom in 2017, had to endure unspeakable horrors while cooped up in a Saudi household of eight members. According to her family, during her stay there, she was brutally tortured. Her employers would not give her food, and they would beat her, pour hot water on her body, and even put her head into a grill, they alleged. At one point, her family completely lost communication with her. After her lifeless body was flown back to Bangladesh on October 24, 2019—before being kept in a Saudi mortuary for seven months—family members who saw the corpse described it as “so horrible that we could not look at it”.

This could have been yet another case of torture-leading-to-death of a hapless migrant worker, a group that remains as inconspicuous in their life as in their death. But subsequent developments in Abiron's case offer hope that justice, however delayed, may not be denied. *The Daily Star* report mentions progress in the trial of the case in a Saudi court, a rare instance in the country. The three accused arrested in the murder case have been denied bail, and the court will hear their case on January 20. If the victim family's demand for Qisas (or retributive justice), which forms part of the law in Saudi Arabia, is honoured, it will serve as a deterrent for other exploitative employers and set a legal precedent for similar cases in the future. This is especially significant for Bangladesh, which had to see about 500 bodies of its female migrant workers flown back over the last five years, at least 200 of them from Saudi Arabia alone. The law must be evenly applied to all responsible for those deaths, and Bangladesh must do everything within its power to ensure that justice is served and the usual suspects for the migrants' misfortune—local agents, recruiting agencies and corrupt government officials—aren't let off the hook.

Abiron's case also brings renewed attention to the deeply exploitative global multi-billion-dollar migration industry, where migrants, especially domestic workers, are subjected to frequent abuse with few rights and little freedom. Domestic workers, mostly women, have to suffer a litany of exploitation at the hands of their employers including forced labour, beatings, sexual assault and underpayment. But their sufferings and deaths often remain unacknowledged. Given how this industry works, involving multiple stakeholders, the policy options for both labour-sending and labour-receiving countries may be limited. But each has a duty to do its own part, in curbing corruption and reducing sufferings. The Bangladesh government must work harder and collaborate with its partners and counterparts to give its large migrant workforce a fighting chance to live and work with dignity.

Sharp rise in motorcycle accidents in 2020

When will road accidents be brought under control?

DURING a recent press conference held at Jatiya Press Club, Nirapad Sarak Chai revealed that according to their findings, nearly 5,000 people were killed and 5,058 were injured in 4,092 different types of accidents last year, including rail and riverine incidents. Even though there was a steady decrease in the number of road crashes largely due to pandemic-induced restrictions on public transport, motorcycle accidents witnessed a hike in 2020 compared to the previous year.

Among all the vehicles responsible for accidents, the highest 1,127 were motorcycles while 698 were buses, 931 were trucks and 410 were cars and jeeps, and the rest are other types of vehicles. According to data from the Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA), 17.53 lakh motorcycle licences were issued against 30.32 lakh registered bikes, meaning 12.79 bikers must be riding without a licence, making our roads unsafe. The rate of bike accidents were 19 percent in 2019 and went up to 27 percent in 2020. According to Nirapad Sarak Chai, lack of proper monitoring and management; non-implementation of the Road Transport Act 2018 and the 111 recommendations given by a committee for reducing road crashes; unhealthy competition among drivers and lack of awareness among pedestrians are among the reasons behind the rise in road accidents.

Our history with road accidents is appalling to say the least, and calls for the immediate attention of all concerned authorities to make all-out efforts and properly implement the Road Transport Act 2018. Besides, swift initiatives should be taken to create mass awareness campaigns. The practice of wearing helmets (for motorcycle riders) and refraining from talking on mobile phones while on the roads, must be strictly monitored. The number of skilled drivers need to be increased, road dividers must be constructed wherever required and service roads need to be built along highways for slow-moving vehicles. Correcting the faults in road designs will also prove beneficial for road safety. Only if we make every effort necessary to bring back discipline on our roads, will we be able to put an end to the unnecessarily loss of life from accidents on our roads.

BLACK, WHITE AND GREY



ALI RIAZ

SINCE the atrocious attack on the Capitol by Donald Trump supporters on Wednesday, the Congress has formally certified the victory of Joe Biden, some Cabinet members of the Trump administration have resigned, and some are considering invoking the 25th Amendment of the US Constitution and removing Donald Trump from office. The highest ranking Democrat in the Senate, Chuck Schumer, has extended his support and Speaker Nancy Pelosi has threatened to start the impeachment process unless Trump is removed from office. A few Republican leaders have blasted Trump for his support of the failed insurrection, and the condemnations from home and abroad against these attacks have become louder. It is against this background that Trump has promised an “orderly transfer of power” to Joe Biden. In a taped video broadcast on Thursday evening, Trump effectively conceded and made a *volte face* about his support for those who ransacked the Capitol, saying “The demonstrators who infiltrated the Capitol have defiled the seat of American democracy.”

But questions remain as to whether the assault on democracy has ended, whether Trump's promise is an attempt to buy time and avoid the possibility of impeachment, and how much impact the attack will have on domestic politics and the United States' image around the world.

The violence incited by Trump will have an array of negative impacts on both domestic politics and America's international standing. The negative impacts on domestic politics are due to the fact that the attack was neither sporadic nor spontaneous, but a result of almost five years of deliberate undermining of democratic institutions. The physical attack was just one step from the rhetoric of Trump and his allies who incessantly denigrated the norms and institutions which are essential to democracy and responsible governance. Since his entrance to the political scene in 2015, Trump has imparted a siege mentality in his supporters, that they are being hounded by the deep state and that someone out there is hatching a conspiracy to take away their country from them. This, in conjunction with the call by Trump in Wednesday's rally to “Walk to the Capitol”, was the final act of unleashing a mob. When Trump, who promised to have a “wild” protest, told his loyal supporters that “you will never take back our country with weakness”; the message was not subtle, but rather very loud and

clear. The deep anger against democracy found its most potent symbol—the Capitol, the citadel of democratic power. By trampling the culture of tolerance and pursuing divisiveness, Trump had sowed the seeds of anti-democracy; the attack was the fruit of that poison tree. Rhetoric was engendering violence, although in limited scale, but on January 6 it revealed its full force.

This dangerous anti-democratic mindset has been reared by the Republican party for quite some time. The silent embracing of the birther movement, the rise of the Tea Party in 2010 and the increasing rightward movement of leaders are just a few examples of how it was mainstreamed. The party will be bound to be a part of American politics, thus the mindset is unlikely to disappear after this incident. There is hardly any indication

complicity.

In the past four years, violent White supremacist organisations have proliferated—Qanon and Proud Boys are cases in point. Members of the organisations are alleged to be at the forefront of Wednesday's mayhem. They have received Trump's unequivocal support as “patriots”. He called upon them to “stand by” and they did, until he said, “Let us walk to the Capitol”. He had enormous power and influence on them as the President, but whether they will remain loyal to him after his departure from the White House or find another person is an open question. Some of the Senators who objected to the election results might be vying for this job. Whether these organisations will increase violent acts in the future is unknown at this point. Trump is definitely departing



PHOTO: REUTERS

that the Republican party is ready to address the problem as a party. There are two reasons that the party will not shun the extremist ideology of which Trump is a product, and which he has succeeded in making the mainstay of the party. First, there are leaders who adhere to this ideology. It is their political creed. Second, the fear of losing in the next elections, or worse yet, being defeated in a primary against a Trump-backed challenger. The number of House members who had supported the two objections based on fictitious allegations of election fraud or their interpretations of the Constitution is testimony to both factors. In one instance, 121 House members supported it; in another, the number was higher—138. The politics of expediency triumphed over the interests of democratic norms and institutions. Since Wednesday, some Republicans have criticised Trump, but there was no acknowledgement of their

from the White House, but is unlikely to leave the political stage. His dark shadow will loom large over mainstream politics. Perhaps he will remain in person and continue to disrupt normalcy until he becomes a candidate in 2024. In between, the 2022 midterm will become the testing ground of his influence. However, the legacy of Trump will be violence, and aiding and abetting domestic terrorism.

This will be the biggest challenge of governance in the United States; as such, this will be a challenge for the Biden administration. How to address this deep schism will also be a challenge for the media and civil society. Unfortunately, some of the media's roles in the past four years have been deeply disturbing.

Trump's “America First” left the United States alone. US policies have alienated the country from the global community. Whether the US is a reliable ally has become a matter of concern for its allies.

The age bar complication in secondary admissions

What could be the proper solution?

MOHAMMAD DIDARE ALAM MUHSIN

EVENTUALLY, the matter seems to have been settled with the intervention of the High Court. The country's education system, already hit hard by the coronavirus crisis, has recently been plagued by complications regarding the date of birth of students applying for admission at the secondary level. Considering the risk of infection, the authorities decided to do away with admission tests for government primary and secondary school students, and instead make selections through lottery after receiving applications online. The deadline to apply for admission to secondary schools was December 15 to 27. As parents went to apply for their children, along with the often encountered slowness of the Internet and server issues, they had to contend with another problem—in many cases, applications for sixth grade admissions could not be processed because the date of birth specified in their birth certificates did not comply with the minimum age limit (at least 11 years) set by the authorities. As a result, many failed to submit applications within the stipulated deadline. There has been a lot of noise in the country about this.

Ultimately, the High Court stayed the order of the concerned authorities after a parent filed a writ petition, ordering that students below the age of 11 can also apply for admission in the sixth grade in government high schools. At the same time, considering the internet and server problems, it directed the concerned authorities to extend the deadline for submitting online applications by seven working days.

At any stage in this country—be it school, college or university—the admission process is like going into battle. In the case of children and adolescents, parents become the main participants in this war and go to great lengths to enrol their children into prestigious schools. The huge crowds,

the noise and the decorations during the admission season are really worth seeing. Many parents even hire one or more tutors or enrol their wards into a coaching centre to prepare them for admission tests. On the other hand, the school authorities not only have to organise this huge workload of student admissions, but also often have to accept the pressures of the requests of various influential quarters for the admission of students beyond the rules.

Apparently, one of the reasons for the parents' desperate attempts to enrol their children into a handful of reputed schools is the huge difference in quality between

the help of one or more private tutors. If these students were not concentrated in a few schools but were scattered more widely in different educational institutes, perhaps the picture at the end of the year would take on a slightly different form. However, parents are unlikely to be interested in listening to this. They will run after reputed schools. Moreover, companionship also has a special importance. The boys and girls with whom your children are growing up, socialising and competing with, certainly have an important role to play in the formation of their overall mindset and the development of their innate talents.

Although everyone is already familiar with the other problems of online applications, the birth date complication was a new addition here. It's not like these restrictions of the date of birth and age limit were not there before, but perhaps, this is the first time that these things are actually being monitored seriously.

these schools and others. However, many will question what exactly is meant by quality here. Of course, at the end of the year, when the results of various centrally conducted examinations come out, there are big celebrations for the success of students from these schools. However, the question remains, is this because of the high quality of teachers, teaching materials and teaching methods? Or is it because the most studious and brightest children go to these schools because of the reputation they enjoy? Maybe both factors have their roles here.

The reason behind these questions is also that a large number of students studying in these schools tend to seek

Over the past few years, the authorities have been organising admissions based on the results of Junior School Certificate (JSC)/Junior Dakhil Certificate (JDC) and Secondary School Certificate (SSC)/Dakhil examinations, instead of organising admission tests for ninth and 11th graders through an online application process. As a result, the tendency of the parents to engage in these unnecessary races has come down a lot. There were, however, some problems in launching the online system at first; for example, the inexperience of the applicants in this system, the inability of the server to take enough load, errors in published results, some miscreants using

Perhaps the most discussed topic in the global media since Wednesday was, does the US have the moral authority to claim to be the standard bearer of democracy and criticise others? The images broadcast to the world on Wednesday created more damage to the US' image than what was done in the past four years.

Undoubtedly, China and Russia, two countries which have been challenging the liberal democratic global order, will find arguments in favour of their model of governance. Authoritarian rulers will find excuses and try to justify their actions using these images. Restoring the standing of the US on the global stage, a promise Biden has made, will be a difficult task. In the realm of foreign policy, this is Trump's parting gift to Biden.

For the Western liberal world, the worrying lesson is, if it is possible in the US, it can happen anywhere. They are quite appropriately understanding that the attack was not only on a building; the very idea of democracy came under physical assault. This is happening in the wake of an ongoing global backsliding of democracy, pernicious polarisation, economic crisis and the global pandemic which has weakened trust in government.

Those who are questioning whether the United States can talk of democracy and insist on others to practice democracy, should take note that for the past four years, Americans have continued to engage in movements to preserve their democratic rights, that media have continued to unmask the authoritarian agenda of Trump, citizens have voted in a free and fair election and chosen their leaders, state-level administrations have withstood pressures from Trump and acted independently, the courts have thrown out at least 60 cases which were filed to delegitimise the elections, and Congress has ratified the will of the people. These are proof that institutions have weathered the crisis and can endure. The past four years have shown the fragility of democracy in the United States, but it is naive to write the obituary of democracy in the United States.

Besides, the crisis of democracy in the United States cannot be a justification for the absence of democracy in any country. The fundamental rights—from freedom of expression to vote freely—of citizens in any country cannot be contingent on whether the US is demanding it. Instead, it is imperative for the people of the respective country to restore it. Many of those who are lamenting the crisis in the United States are not doing it because they are disturbed to see democratic ideas trampled, but are rather trying to justify their support for authoritarianism.

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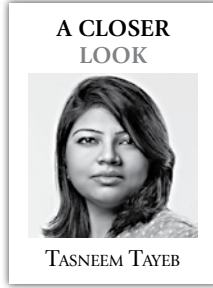
the roll numbers and other information of students to apply in advance, etc. However, the problems encountered were nothing unexpected while introducing a new system, and were gradually disappearing. It would be pertinent to mention here that although the system of admission tests for ninth and 11th grades has been abolished, schools across the country have been admitting students through lottery in the first grade and through written tests in the second to eighth grades. This year, for the first time, it has been decided that students in all grades, from first to ninth, will be selected for admission through lottery due to the pandemic.

Although everyone is already familiar with the other problems of online applications, the birth date complication was a new addition here. It's not like these restrictions of the date of birth and age limit were not there before, but perhaps, this is the first time that these things are actually being monitored seriously. Setting a minimum age for a student studying in a grade can be important for many reasons. There are specific age limits for entry and retirement in government services in the country. There are different age groups for participating in various domestic and international events and competitions. Specific age limits are also considered for obtaining various scholarships abroad, participating in employment and gaining immigration in some countries. However, what is being overlooked here is that if a child becomes fit to study in the first grade at a relatively young age, then there is a likelihood of them taking an affidavit and accepting a fake date of birth in order to increase their age. How acceptable is this in terms of ethics? Are we making them accustomed to unethical behaviours from a young age? The ultimate solution for this seems to be in taking strict measures to ensure that all births are registered at birth.

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QATAR DIPLOMATIC CRISIS

A warm embrace or just a photo op?



A CLOSER LOOK

AUDI Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman warmly embracing Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani of Qatar on January 5 at the Saudi Al Ula airport made for

a picture-perfect scene of brotherhood. The Qatari Emir was in Saudi Arabia to attend the 41st summit of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)—the first time since 2017, when four member states of the GCC: Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Egypt, imposed a blockade on Qatar after accusing it of supporting terrorism, among other allegations. The four countries placed 13 demands which they said Qatar must comply with for the air, land and sea blockade to be lifted.

Qatar not only denied the unsubstantiated allegations, but stood its ground. The country strengthened its ties with Iran and Turkey in the last three and a half years and has emerged from this crisis—the worst in the history of the GCC in the last couple of decades—stronger and more resilient.

According to Middle East and North Africa (MENA) analysts, this has put Qatar in an advantageous position. With strong ties with Iran and Turkey, Qatar is now in a position to heal some of the gaping wounds festering in the MENA region: Libya, Syria and Yemen. In all the three countries, major MENA players such as the Saudis, the Emiratis, Iran, Turkey, Egypt, Kuwait, Oman and Qatar, are divided in their support for rival factions.

While discussing the issue with TRT World, Dr Sanam Vakil, Deputy Director and Senior Research Fellow at Chatham House's Middle East and North Africa Programme, suggested that

to resolve the ongoing disputes in the Middle East, "regional investment and regional diplomacy" would be required and that by not having Qatar as a competitor, the GCC would have more to gain in the current situation.

However, the optimism for a more unified GCC should be measured. First of all, on the face of it all, the reconciliation seems imposed on the Saudis, UAE and Egypt by the Trump administration as a last ditch attempt to leave a Camp David style legacy at the end of Trump's tenure. The incumbent US president's son-in-law has taken a keen interest in the affairs of the Middle East in the last four years and has tried, and failed, on multiple occasions to make a mark of his own.

From a preposterous USD 50 billion plan for "a vision to empower the Palestinian people to build a prosperous and vibrant Palestinian society" disclosed at the Manama Workshop in 2019 that went nowhere, to coercing countries to "normalise" ties with Israel, Kushner has tried various means to push forward the Trump administration's agenda for a "Israel First" and Israel friendly Middle East policy, with the backing of the Saudi-UAE axis. Having failed at fully achieving this objecting—the Saudis are yet to normalise ties with Israel—the Trump administration needed to make one last face-saving attempt. With greater control over the Saudis

and the Emiratis, major players in the Qatar diplomatic crisis, resolving the GCC dispute was perhaps the most feasible.

In mid-November 2020, US National Security Adviser Robert O'Brien asserted that for the US, it was a "priority" to resolve the Qatar blockade issue, adding "I would like to see that get done before—if we end up leaving office—I'd like to see that get

soon simply because I don't think there has been any introspection"—the UAE had to ultimately comply with the US plan.

And Egypt sending its Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry, and not its head of state, to join the GCC summit, is a sign in itself that it is perhaps not fully in agreement with the lifting of the blockade on Qatar. The other participants at the summit were Saudi

Muslim Brotherhood and its support for Al Jazeera, whose coverage of El Sisi's misadventures has so irked Egypt that it has imprisoned the international news channel's senior journalist, Mahmud Hussein, for more than 1,400 days under inhumane circumstances and without charges or trial.

And the rifts created between the peoples of these nations, stoked by the arbitrary blockade in 2017 on Qatar, is unlikely to heal anytime soon. The people of Qatar have had to face dire challenges in the wake of the blockade. "It is infringing on the right to free expression, separating families, interrupting medical care—in one case forcing a child to miss a scheduled brain surgery, interrupting education, and stranding migrant workers without food or water," said Human Rights Watch in 2017, expressing concern over the situation in Qatar after the blockade was imposed.

If anything, mistrust and skepticism are likely to prevail—at least in the short to medium terms. And on all sides. After all, the Saudi Arabia, UAE, Bahrain and Egypt had previously, in February 2014, severed diplomatic ties with Qatar over the country's stance on the toppling of the Morsi government in 2013. And there is no guarantee that given the chance, the countries in the future won't resort to coercive tactics to subdue Qatar's growing influence in the region. Although this time, it would only be more difficult. And under the Biden administration, the relationship between the US and Saudi Arabia is likely to be more transactional in nature.

But given the intricate geopolitical mosaic of the puzzle that is MENA, and the vested interests of the US in the region, things are as transient in nature as it can get.

Tasneem Tayeb is a columnist for The Daily Star. Her Twitter handle is: @TayebTasneem



Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman welcomes Qatar's Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani in Al-Ula, Saudi Arabia, on January 5.

PHOTO: REUTERS

done in the next 70 days. And I think there's a possibility for it."

And in less than 70 days, Saudi Arabia, UAE and Egypt—staunch critics of Qatar—agreed to not only shake hands with the country but embrace it, at least superficially. Although initially the UAE seemed to question the possibility of lifting the Qatar blockade—the country's ambassador to the US, Yousef al-Otaiba, told Israel's Channel 12 after O'Brien's comment, "I don't think it gets resolved anytime

Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman; UAE Prime Minister and Emir of Dubai Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum; Emir of Qatar Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad; Emir of Kuwait Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah; Crown Prince of Bahrain Salman bin Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa; Oman's Deputy Prime Minister Fahd bin Mahmoud Al Said; and, GCC Secretary-General Abdullah bin Rashid Al Zayani.

If anything, Egypt is wary of Qatar's softer approach with regard to the

If anything, mistrust and skepticism are likely to prevail—at least in the short to medium terms. And on all sides.

COVID-19 AND SDG 11

Making cities liveable



SYED YUSUF SAADAT

WHEN a pestilence caused the deaths of more than half of the population of Milan in 1846, it was evident that

and uncontrollably. This means that one billion people living in slums and four billion people living in cities worldwide are at high risk of infection from the deadly coronavirus. Since Bangladesh has one of the highest proportions of the urban population living in slums in South Asia, it must remain especially vigilant to ensure that the coronavirus does not strike in the slum areas and spread like wildfire.

During the pandemic, as many people were forced to remain indoors for prolonged periods of time due to lockdowns, the importance of having green open spaces in cities resurfaced. Scientists recommend spending at least 120 minutes per week in nature to maintain good health and enhance wellbeing. Unfortunately, Dhaka has only 8.5 percent tree-covered land and only 0.0002 metres squared of green park

year, the urban slum population increased by 403,000 during the period 1991 and 2014.

The increase in the urban slum population is just the tip of the iceberg. The much bigger problem is the increase of the overall urban population in Bangladesh. The share of the population living in urban areas in Bangladesh increased from 22.43 percent of the total population in 1997 to 35.85 percent in 2017. Such persistent rural-urban migration is indicative of the existence of push-pull factors that are motivating people to move from the villages to the cities. The rural-urban wage differential, as well as the wage differential across different sectors of the economy, could be likely factors pulling workers to urban areas. Climate change has also pushed many people away from rural areas to the urban areas of Bangladesh.

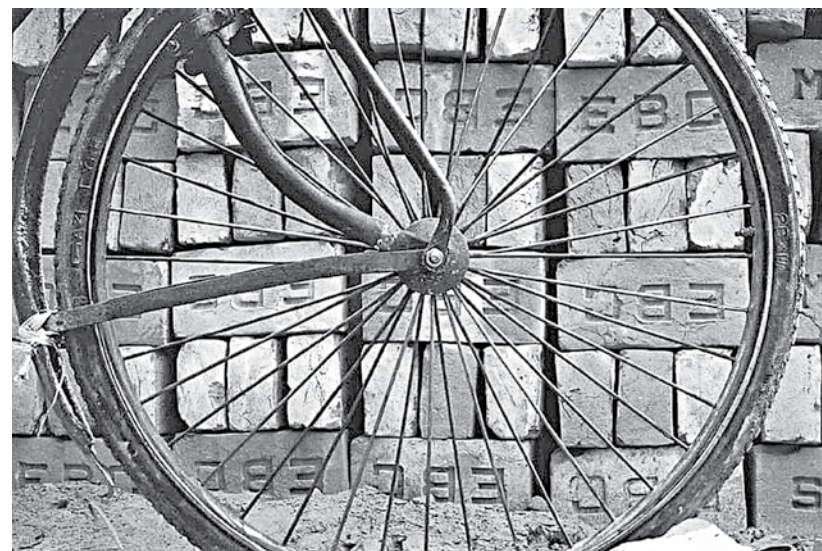


PHOTO: SYED YUSUF SAADAT

per capita, whereas ideally a city should have 20 percent tree-covered land and nine metres squared of green park per capita. Therefore, Covid-19 has reiterated the need for Bangladesh to implement SDG target 11.7, which calls upon countries to "provide universal access to safe, inclusive and accessible green and public spaces".

Bangladesh's performance on indicators under SDG 11 has been mixed. SDG target 11.1 calls upon countries to ensure access to adequate, safe and affordable housing for all and upgrade slums by 2030. In Bangladesh, the proportion of the urban population living in slums has fallen significantly from 87.3 percent in 1991 to 55.1 percent in 2014. This represents good progress as the proportion of the urban population living in slums decreased by 1.04 percent annually, on average, during the period of 1991 to 2014. Nevertheless, the total number of people living in urban slums increased from 19.99 million in 1991 to 29.27 million in 2014. This implies that on average, every

Ironically, increased urbanisation can itself become a cause behind further climate change, since urban inhabitants have a much larger material footprint compared to rural inhabitants.

Bangladesh faces a host of challenges pertinent to the implementation of SDG 11. Unrestrained urbanisation poses a risk for developing countries such as Bangladesh, which have low technical expertise, limited financial capacity and lacklustre infrastructural facilities to address the needs of the urban poor. Overpopulated cities such as Dhaka suffer from an array of problems, which include, but are not limited to, reduced access to goods and services, insufficient number of decent jobs, lack of affordable housing, water-logging, fire hazards, air and water pollution and traffic congestion.

In order to overcome the aforementioned challenges, a number of policy measures may be adopted. Dilapidated housing in rundown areas should be renovated in order to improve their

aesthetics and safety. Precautions should be taken to reduce the risk of fire accidents, by ensuring that all buildings have fire-fighting equipment and comply with international fire safety standards. In order to gradually improve urban air quality, metropolitan cities should be given targets, such as a fixed percentage of days with heavy air pollution that will be allowed per year, and these targets should be progressively made

more stringent every year. Urban green spaces in established cities like Dhaka and Chattogram should be protected from encroachment and burgeoning cities across the country should be designed with at least one-third of urban built-up areas reserved for green spaces. An integrated approach to urban and territorial planning that engages diverse multi-level stakeholders is necessary to design cities that are clean, compact,

energy efficient, environment friendly, socially cohesive, readily accessible, climate responsive and disaster resilient. These measures need to be implemented on a priority basis, so that Bangladesh's cities can bounce back from Covid-19 stronger and be guided towards the achievement of SDG 11 by 2030.

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Official notice from Bangladesh Police regarding a public procurement process. The notice includes details about the procurement of goods and services, the timeline, and the contact information for the procurement officer.

SDG target 11.1 calls upon countries to ensure access to adequate, safe and affordable housing for all and upgrade slums by 2030.

Although Leonardo da Vinci's ideal city was never actually built due to its prohibitively high costs, such cities could be instrumental in the global response to Covid-19 and in the implementation of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 11, which affirms the need to "make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable". Worldwide, more than 90 percent of Covid-19 cases have been detected in urban areas where the relatively higher population density makes it easy for the virus to spread quickly

POETRY

Beautiful tomorrow?

AHMAR MAHBOOB

In the desolation of today,
I hang on to the promises of tomorrow:
When life will be in harmony
And struggles gone.

I believe that things will change
And I will fly again over the rainbows
Looking down at forests and rivers
Spotting wildlife, as they enjoy their day.

Waiting for tomorrow, I watch
Videos about nature and read books
About wildlife; I imagine the future
And think of stuff to take along.

And, then, I remember, yesterday and today:
Where we pump more oil and burn more coal
Cut more forests and mine more gold.
And then, I wonder, how tomorrow will be.

How will tomorrow be, if today:
We kill each other and nature too;
We build more weapons and borders too?
Will tomorrow be beautiful, if today we neglect?

Ahmar Mahboob is a Linguist. Currently, he is Associate Professor at the Department of Linguistics at the University of Sydney.



ARTIST: RUBAB JAFRI

MUSINGS

The Twenty-Twenty-One

TOHON

Today, on the first day of 2021, I open the 71st chapter of my memoir written – not sure when – probably before time. I want to read what lies ahead. There are only a few more chapters left before I happily reach the final episode.

I have been reading it now for seventy years. I do remember most of the episodes; some in detail. I obviously do not know what I have forgotten. They lie in a dormant state. I would recollect it if something triggered it or someone – my only living sibling or a childhood friend – who was part of the episode reminded me of the event.

The memoir I am reading is one of the many – I do not remember how many. I read them long time ago and retain vague memories. One of the most vivid recollections is the rocky hills in a hot, dry, arid environment. Like a long lost mother, it evokes my deepest sentiments.

As I enter my 71st year, I am excited about the two new volumes that I now access. I can read only one page at a time each day. It is like how petals unfold, one by one, in their own time, to reveal the hidden flower.

Just as the morning sun reveals a



new day, each page unveils a new episode. But then the sun never sets, nor does it rise. It is always there glowing beyond the human eyes. For the sun, there is no such thing as night, day, year, or even millennium. And, there is neither past, present nor future. All that happens is that life

unfolds under its ever-glowing rays.

How I wish I could be a part of the sun and never to think about tomorrow!

Tohon is a short story writer for The Daily Star Literary Page. 'Life's Invisible Battles' is his recently published memoir.

REVIEWS

A Bangladeshi Babu Like No Other

REVIEWED BY FAKRUL ALAM

Numair Atif Choudhury, *Babu Bangladesh*. Harper Collins: Noida, Uttar Pradesh India, 2019.

Numair Atif Choudhury's *Babu Bangladesh* is a tour de force of a novel. Exuberant, extravagant, learned, zany, ingenious, whimsical, irreverent and provocative, this is a work of amazing merit. Though only 402 pages, it resembles somewhat bigger novels like *Tristram Shandy* and *Moby-Dick*, works of irrepressible imaginations that resort to what appears at times to be the fantastic but are books grounded in situations and people we can identify with. Salman Rushdie *Midnight's Children* will come to mind in this context as well.

Numair's "Babu" is the "Bangladeshi everyman" (How many of us Bangladeshis males are called thus even if we had other nicknames?). He resorts repeatedly to the magical realist mode since "there is little separating the fantastic from the quotidian in Bangladesh." Then too "Babu-truth" is "elusive." Obviously, Numair can be whimsical and his tone wacky. But there is method in the narrator's claim about "the Tecumseh" (read "Tamasha!") that is Babu, for wouldn't someone glancing at parts of Bangladesh's history from August 15, 1975 onwards find things at times to be quite bizarre?

The opening episodes of *Babu Bangladesh* tell us it is about Babu Abdul Majumder. Born in 1971, he apparently became famous from 2008 onwards only to disappear in 2021, heading, we are told, for "unknown skies" then. The narrator is a huge fan bent on reviving the reputation of this "spirited environmentalist." The novel, purportedly, is the result of 9 years of sifting through "rubble to retrieve what is Babu Bangladesh"; it's based supposedly on extensive research into history and gleanings of "Babu's secret writings." The narrator claims to have "chanced upon Babu's private diaries in 2025," almost "three years" into his "research on the book," a gift from a fishmonger admirer of Babu. And when did the narrator finish writing his book? Tellingly, the opening pages, a preface in all but name, signs off thus: "16 December 2028."

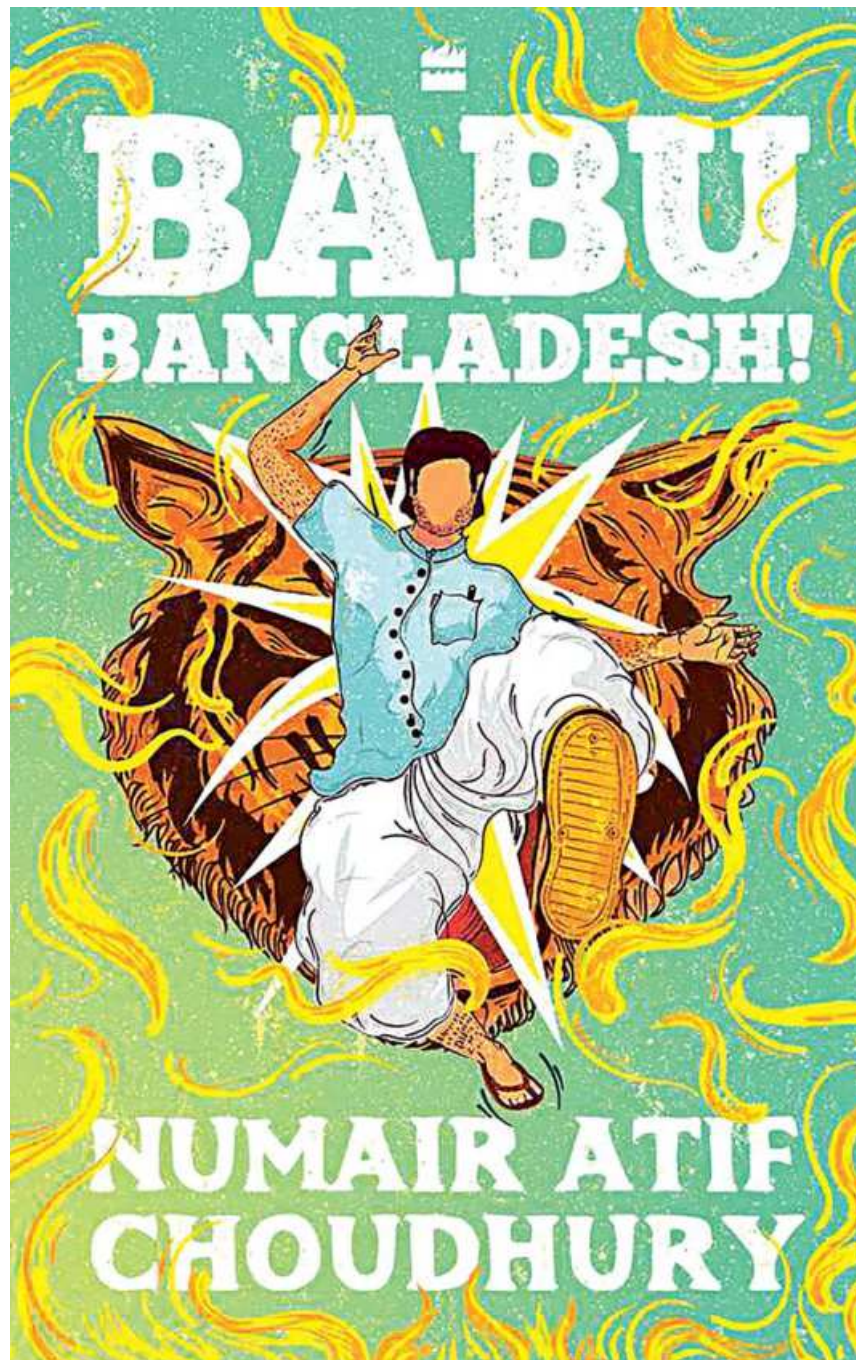
The first section of *Babu Bangladesh* tracks Babu's coming of age. Called "Building," it is framed by Louis Kahn's stunning parliamentary complex. In Numair's telling, Kahn's ambitious structure embodies the expectations of a liberated populace wanting to set the country on the route to greatness after December 16, 1971. But the next few parts of the book track his disillusioning descent into a world of "cloak-and-scimitar" politics, "nepotism," "bureaucratic greed," "embezzlement of funds" and, ultimately, environmental degradation.

Babu grew up though happily in his parental bungalow in Tangail, not far away from a forest that would soon be denuded. In no time at all, we are in a land of "warring...private armies...religious minorities...driven from their lands...largescale looting and fortunes stolen." It is a "dog-eat-dog" world for

the young boy, a world of assassinations, coups, counter-coups, and of dreams turning sour. Democracy, socialism and secularism evaporate as nationalism prove to be the one rallying cry to survive from the desecration of the other 3 of the "4 pillars" of the 1972 constitution. A few of the young turn to drugs; a handful like Babu take refuge in fantasies evoked by Kahn's masterpiece. The only salve for those nursing the wounds and traumas of post-independence Bangladesh seems to be through seeking divine clues for the future in Kahn's geometric marvel.

In 1994 Babu becomes a student of Dhaka University when it is "a bouquet of agitations." Here and elsewhere Numair (or his narrator, if one wants to excuse him) generalizes and exaggerates in depicting the extent of the malaise afflicting the university, symptomized for him only in its "session jams," dysfunctional student politics and inept administration. Indeed, he seems to have dyspeptic notions about the politics of the country at this stage, now that Islamist parties too had joined in the fray. Desperately and somewhat perversely, Babu joins the Jatiyo Samajtantric Dal (JSD) in 1994, seemingly because it was still dedicated to the 4 founding "pillars" of the constitution and was not marred by big party politics. But Babu is soon disillusioned by the party—it too is part of a world of "broken promises and deceptions." At one point we are told that terrorists are plotting to destroy Kahn's showpiece of democracy itself. The narrative resorts again and again thus to the fantastic and grotesque. The traumatized narrator at times strays into a moral wilderness that makes him wonder why he has been working at a "shameful book and washing national laundry in public" (119). Babu, however, is fortunate to have met an elderly "dowager" called Boro Ma at this point; she tells him unequivocally: "do not ever give up hope" (118). Still, at the end of the first part, he flees the capital to be away from the capitol edifice that had once inspired him so.

The second section of Numair Choudhury's book, titled "Tree," is inspired by the banyan tree outside the Arts Building of Dhaka University. It was, of course, the focalizing symbol of the student movement for Bangladesh till March 26, 1971—so much so that the Pakistani army felt that it had to destroy it during its murderous "Operation Searchlight" assault on the campus. In a novel conceived in the magic realist mode, Babu's parents had first met and then "cheered the hosting of the first Bangladesh flag in front of the perennial on 2 March." The narrator describes myths that had grown around the tree and makes up a few of his own, in the process registering his "Ogygian fascination with trees." Like *Tristram Shandy* and *Moby Dick*, the book is given to learned digressions; we thus have one on "Dendranthology." It then offers readers a five day-by-day



militaristic account of what happened after March 26, spicing history with tall tale-flavored passages. This part ends with the union of the parents underneath the tree; that, we are told, would lead to the birth of Babu Bangladesh nine months later!

The tone of *Babu Bangladesh*, however, darkens in its third section, titled "Snake." Here Babu enters politics after having left Dhaka in 1999, fearing Islamic extremist attacks. But at the outset he is cautioned against the perils of the route he has chosen; as a friend tells him—"There are too many Babus already; every division has a Babu politician." He stands for election from a constituency in Madhupur, part of Tangail. The location allows Numair to bring into focus his environmental concerns, for what was a lush-green forest sustaining the indige-

nous population as well as animal and plant life in an area that "teemed with a deciduous biodiversity" is now threatened by official or unofficial encroachments and illicit exploitation of nature's resources. In his new incarnation, Babu at first adopts fiery rhetoric as a populist standing up for those who were destroying the environment and marginalizing the first peoples of the land. He says he has plans "for a revamped national park and global tourism" that soon attract activists like "George Clooney, Gayatri Chakravarti Spivack, the Dalai Lama" and even Arundhati Roy! Unfortunately, he runs foul of the armed wings of the administration as well as government officials who have their own ideas about using the forest.

But then Babu himself changes, taking over parts of the land illegally and

renewing on his promises to the settlers, though he has nightmares about a snake asphyxiating him. He survives such traumatic moments only to put on the garbs of a conservationists, thereby winning applause and attention. But the section ends with the narrator torn between blaming Babu and defending him; could it be that he was more a "tool" of others than a "wielder"? Then again, he muses, "in the arsenic green of Bangladesh, who knows what shape truth will take?"

Section 5 of *Babu Bangladesh* takes us to the Bay of Bengal. We are there because Babu is now thriving as an independent member of parliament who has also been made Adviser of Environment and Forest by a Caretaker Government! The trajectory of this "Babu" is obviously as unpredictably predictable as before. Or as the narrator points out in the opening pages of this last section, "In its elements, this is a story that is as indecisive, capricious and shilly-shally as water." Babu now brings order out of chaos, becomes a celebrity among the "young jet set of Dhaka," enters into a relationship with an attractive woman, and works an "overnight" miracle in an island as he did in Madhupur. But "corruption and blood-letting" devastate the island as it did the forest once; it disappears unaccountably.

So does Babu, the narrator tells us at the beginning of Section 5, titled "Bird," sometime in November 2021, managing somehow to elude his "narrative frame." The three epigraphs of this section are telling, but for reasons of space here I can only quote the last one from Lalou, "O mind, you are a bird engaged! Of bamboo/is your cage made, but it too will one day crash." Somehow he has managed to transcend the "profane and mundane wrinkles of worldly attachments!" The Sufi tradition is invoked, an alternative to the fundamentalist shadow stalking the land.

Almost at the end, the narrator wonders "... Was Babu, still in his forties, truly ready to leave this world?" Uncannily, Numair Atif Choudhury himself left this world, aged forty-six, reportedly accidentally, having drowned in a lake in Japan while taking a walk along its banks. The inside back cover tells us that Numair died before completing the final draft. I felt when I finished *Babu Bangladesh* that he would have perhaps stretched the last two parts of the five-part novel a bit more if he had another go at it. Certainly, I would have enjoyed being with him for a longer time for his lively prose and imaginative exploration of our country's past, present and future. With *Babu Bangladesh* Numair aimed, clearly, to write a national comic epic of sorts in prose, albeit in English. It made me feel when I finished reading it—what a loss his death has been for Bangladeshi writing in the language!

Fakrul Alam is UGC Professor, Department of English, University of Dhaka.



আবাস বাংলাদেশ!





Aktaruzzaman Flyover
Chittagong

Principal Cement Brand



Fake NID for Tk 1.5 lakh

Nexus between EC men and brokers busted; 556 cases filed against such card holders

MOHAMMAD JAMIL KHAN

A syndicate of brokers and some dishonest staffers of the Election Commission had been forging national ID cards for years due to a lack of strict monitoring and loopholes in the system, found a police investigation.

The fake NID cards, each of which sold at Tk 1.2 lakh to Tk 1.5 lakh, were used in fraudulence related to bank loans and land, said people with the knowledge of this illegal business.

While issuing of a dual NID is a punishable offence, the syndicate keeps the name and photo same and changes the rest of the information.

This card is sold to a person who already has an authentic NID against that name and photo, and is used mostly in bank loan scams. In another kind of forgery, the photo is changed and such a card is used mostly for selling someone else's land.

The NID wing of EC has identified around 1,057 people who have received the cards for a second time for ill motives, said a high official of the wing, adding they already blocked the cards with the EC's legal wing filing around 556 cases against these card holders.

"We have sacked some 42 employees of

the NID wing for their involvement with the nexus," the official told this newspaper on December 23 last year, on condition of anonymity.

There are around 10 crore registered NID card holders in the country and around another 2.7 lakh fresh applications submitted since 2019 are under process, according to the NID wing.

THE SYNDICATE

The Detective Branch of police on September 5 last year arrested five people, including two EC employees, from the capital's Mirpur for their alleged involvement in providing forged NIDs.

The DB also recovered around 12 forged NID cards from their possession. In interrogation, the arrestees disclosed names of four others, including two more EC employees who worked in Lalmonirhat.

A high official of DB, requesting anonymity, said these syndicate members would make a deal of up to Tk 1.5 lakh for supplying a fake NID card.

For completing the process in the NID wing, an EC staffer would get Tk 30,000 to Tk 40,000 for each card, the official told the Daily Star on December 22.

Sometimes, the offer comes from

SEE PAGE 4 COL 2



The surface of this canal, surrounded by makeshift shops, in Deb Dholaikhal is completely obscured by garbage, polythene and weeds. Not only is the canal's current state an environmental hazard, its stagnant water has also become a breeding ground for mosquitoes, which is a health risk and nuisance for people living nearby. The photo was taken from Kajlarpar area in the capital's Jatrabari yesterday. PHOTO: PALASH KHAN

Let Bangladeshi workers return to Malaysia

Dhaka urges Kuala Lumpur

DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENT

Dhaka has requested Kuala Lumpur to allow the Bangladeshi migrants, who got stranded after coming here on leave due to the pandemic, to return to their workplaces in Malaysia.

It also sought to widen cooperation on trade and investment with the Southeast Asian country.

The calls were made when newly appointed Malaysian High Commissioner to Bangladesh Hazanah Md Hasim called on State Minister for Foreign Affairs Shahriar Alam at the foreign ministry on Thursday.

Malaysia is home to around a million Bangladeshis. The annual trade volume between the two countries is about \$2.4 billion with Bangladesh exporting products to Malaysia worth \$260 billion.

Shahriar congratulated the new Malaysian envoy on her appointment and said the two countries have huge opportunities to widen trade and investment. The potential areas of cooperation include sectors like science-technology, healthcare, education, trade, tourism, energy etc.

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BANGABANDHU'S NATION-BUILDING CHALLENGES

Election will be absolutely free: Bangabandhu

January 9, 1973

SHAMSUDDOZA SAJEN

BANGABANDHU VISITS NATORE

Prime Minister Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman today reiterates that elections set for March 7 would be absolutely free and fair. Pointing out that Bangladesh is a democratic country, he says there would be no interference in the elections. Addressing a public meeting at Natore, the prime minister says he would like to warn those who want to create disorder and foil elections. They would not gain anything by showing arms. The people of Bangladesh are capable of snatching those arms, he adds.

Bangabandhu regrets that some greedy elements are indulged in corruption even with regard to relief materials. He gives a fervent call for mass resistance against corruption and crimes.

PETRO-CHEMICAL COMPLEX IN THE FIRST FIVE-YEAR PLAN

The government is learnt to have been negotiating with the World Bank and other international financing agencies to finance the proposed petro-chemical complex at Ashuganj. The project is likely to be taken up in the first Five-Year Plan and the total cost of the project will be about Tk 250 crores. Before liberation, a scheme of Tk 100 crore was prepared by the World Bank for the project. The cost of the project has increased following the devaluation of the

SEE PAGE 4 COL 1



Mirza again claims his life under threat

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Noakhali

The younger brother of Awami League General Secretary Obaidul Quader has once again claimed that his life was under threat.

Addressing a street rally as part of mayoral polls campaign in Noakhali's Companiganj upazila yesterday, Abdul Quader Mirza alleged that his election posters were torn down by conspirators from Majidee of Noakhali and Feni.

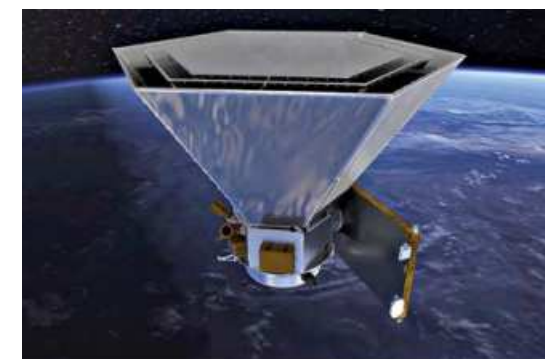
Mirza, who is the incumbent mayor of Basurhat municipality in Noakhali, is contesting the municipality polls, slated for January 16, for the mayoral post on the AL ticket.

He stirred up a debate in the political arena with some remarks recently.

At a rally on Wednesday, Mirza said he was receiving death threats

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Nasa's new telescope to unlock mysteries of Big Bang



INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

Nasa is bringing its latest space telescope one step closer to launch, the agency announced Tuesday.

The Spectro-Photometer for the History of the Universe, Epoch of Reionization and Ices Explorer (SPHEREx), has three main goals: its first aim is to look for evidence of the Big Bang and map the resulting pattern of galaxies that came from the expansion, which could give physicists more information about the formation of our universe.

Its second aim is to study faint glows left by all the galaxies in the universe in order to understand how the said galaxies were formed.

SEE PAGE 4 COL 2

MUMBAI ATTACKS

Pakistan jails militant leader

AFP, Lahore

A Pakistani court yesterday sentenced a militant leader accused of plotting the 2008 Mumbai attacks to five years in jail for terror financing.

Zaki-ur-Rehman Lakhvi, a senior figure in the banned militant organisation Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT), was arrested in the eastern city of Lahore on Saturday where he was running a medical dispensary.

The police counter-terrorism department in the Pakistani province of Punjab accused Lakhvi of using the dispensary to collect funds for militant activities.

The court order, seen by AFP, sentenced Lakhvi to "rigorous imprisonment for five years" on three separate counts involving terror funding.

"All the sentences shall run concurrently," it said.

LeT and Lakhvi are accused by India and the United States of plotting the four-day Mumbai assault in

SEE PAGE 4 COL 5

RMG worker stabbed to death in N'ganj

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Narayanganj

A readymade garment worker was stabbed to death allegedly by his brother-in-law at Nayabazar in Narayanganj Sadar upazila early yesterday.

The victim Sumon Miah, 26, of Kishoreganj, used to live with his sister and her husband at a rented house in Nayabazar, said police.

Sumon's sister Hosne Ara, also a witness of the incident, said Sumon criticised her husband Habibullah, 32, for taking drugs and not providing

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People campaigning for the Chattogram City Corporation elections, slated for January 27, while ignoring safety guidelines amid the coronavirus pandemic. Not only are they crowding together, many are not wearing masks or wearing them improperly. This photo was taken from the port city's Jail Road yesterday.

PHOTO: RAJIB RAIHAN

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COVID VACCINES Poorest nations can expect doses within weeks

Says WHO; Pfizer vaccine 'neutralises key mutation' in new strains

AGENCIES

The world's poorest countries can expect to start receiving their first Covid-19 vaccine doses between the end of January and mid-February, the World Health Organization said Thursday.

Vaccination is already under way in some of the world's wealthiest nations, including the United States, Britain, European Union countries and Canada.

Covax, the globally-pooled vaccine procurement and distribution effort, has struck agreements to secure two billion doses -- and the first of those will start rolling out within weeks, said the WHO's head of vaccines, Kate O'Brien.

Covax aims to secure vaccines for 20 percent of the population in each participating country by the end of the year, with funding covered for the 92 lower- and lower-middle income economies involved in the scheme.

It is led by the WHO, the Gavi vaccine alliance and the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations (CEPI).

Asked how quickly lower-income African nations would get vaccines, O'Brien told a WHO live social media event: "The facility has access to over two billion doses of vaccine."

"We will start to deliver those vaccines probably by the end of January, and, if not, certainly by early February and mid-February."

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PRAYER TIMING JANUARY 9

Fajr Zohr Asr Maghrib Esha
AZAN 5:30 12:45 4:00 5:30 7:00
JAMAAT 6:05 1:15 4:15 5:35 7:30

SOURCE: ISLAMIC FOUNDATION