

TANGENTS  
BY IHTISHAM KABIR

RATITES

On a grey morning three years ago in northern Queensland, Australia, I boarded a microbus with several other birders. After exiting the highway we drove a long, winding road through the rainforest. It ended at a two-story country house. This was Cassowary House, a dedicated birdwatchers' lodge for observing rare birds such as the Cassowary and Victoria's Riflebird.

We were led to a long balcony on the second floor. The dense, lush forest lay in front of us. As we watched, various birds flew in to eat at bird feeders. Then something on the ground caught our eye. A plump black bird with a blue head and a red wattles wandered in and out of the forest. It was round and stocky, about five feet tall and weighing well over a hundred pounds, with a large growth, called a casque, on its head. Its body was covered with long black hair but no feathers. Its feet had three plump toes; the inner toe had a long, sharp claw.

The unusual bird is called the Cassowary. It can run at thirty miles per hour on its long legs, but it cannot fly. It belongs to a bird group known as ratites - large, terrestrial birds found in many parts of the globe. Having weak flight and wing muscles, ratites are flightless. Their breastbones are flat and lack a keel where flight muscles of normal birds attach to. Their feathers are unsuitable for flying.

The largest living ratite is the Ostrich which lives in open plains of Africa. It can reach nine feet in height and can exceed three hundred pounds. Despite its bulk it can run at thirty five miles per hour. The Ostrich is also farmed for feathers and meat.

Found in the grasslands of South America, the Rhea is another member of the ratite group. At less than six feet tall and weighing up to eighty eight pounds, it is smaller



Clockwise from top left: Elephant Bird egg in Madagascar, Ostrich in Kenya, Cassowary in Australia and Rhea in Brazil

PHOTO: IHTISHAM KABIR

than the Ostrich. I have seen them both from afar; they look strikingly similar as they wander through open fields and grasslands.

The Emu of Australia is another large ratite at six feet and one hundred pounds. The smallest ratite is the Kiwi of New Zealand which is about a foot tall.

Several ratites have become extinct. Most remarkable was the Elephant Bird of Madagascar, the largest bird ever. It stood nine feet tall, weighed over a ton, and was alive until about a thousand years ago. In a museum in southern Madagascar I saw its reconstructed egg, over two feet tall.

Another extinct ratite is the Moa of New Zealand. It reached twelve feet and weighed five hundred pounds. It became extinct during the 1400s, a century or two after humans landed in New Zealand. With it went the large Haast's Eagle - twice the size of a Harpy Eagle - whose primary diet was the Moa.

How did these flightless birds come to be? Scientists once thought that ratites had descended from a common ancestor in the supercontinent Gondwana. However, there is now evidence to suggest that different species evolved into flightless birds independent of one another. The story of these similar birds is indeed mysterious.

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Woman, daughter tortured by lenders

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Gazipur

Alleged moneylenders tortured a mother and her teenage daughter after tying them against a tree in Gazipur's Kaliakair on Thursday, although the family agreed to repay the loan on a stipulated time.

The mother, Momtaz Begum, filed a case against eight persons with Kaliakair Police Station. Police arrested the mastermind Sabuj, said OC Monwar Hossain of Kaliakair police.

Momtaz, a widowed single mother, works at a garments factory. She borrowed money from some locals including Gafur and Monir.

She failed to repay it within the initial deadline and was given a month's extension after a mediation done through UP member Ibrahim Shikder. Momtaz said there was still time left for repayment.

Informed by locals, police rescued them, said the OC. Shikder also said he rushed to the victims' house once he found out about the incident.

Another feather in Kumudini's cap

Philanthropic org to lay foundation of cancer research institute in Narayanganj tomorrow

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Kumudini Welfare Trust, one of the most prestigious philanthropic organisations in Bangladesh, is set to lay the foundation stone for Kumudini International Institute of Medical Sciences and Cancer Research (KIIMS CaRe) on Sunday, at a ceremony to be held at Kumudini Complex, Narayanganj.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina is expected to unveil the foundation stone plaque of KIIMS CaRe virtually on the day, said a statement from the trust. KIIMS CaRe will be established in Narayanganj on its own land.

The institute will have a 300-bed general hospital, a 50-bed cancer hospital, cancer research centre, nursing institute and medical technology institute including a women's medical college. It is expected that, after setup, by 2030, KIIMS CaRe will be able to serve more than 3.5 million patients.

Kumudini Welfare Trust of Bengal (BD) Limited comprehends the need for rapid establishment of more hospitals, particularly specialised cancer hospitals, and health workforce development institutes, for example nursing college and medical technologist institutes, said commander (retired) Rizaul Karim, general manager (admin and ops) of the trust.

In line with the philosophy of the trust's founder Ranada Prasad Shaha, poor people will be served with high quality treatment, including cancer treatment, at a low cost at

KIIMS CaRe.

Renowned international medical universities, competent doctors and medical experts will provide lectures there to train the health workforce, as well as render services at the hospital.

"In brief, KIIMS CaRe will be a one-stop place for low-cost, high-quality healthcare service provision and health workforce development, thereby becoming a complementary force beside the government's efforts," he said.

Treatment of cancer is very costly for middle- and low-income people. There are examples of families becoming extremely poor due to the high cost of treatment of cancer.

Kumudini Welfare Trust of Bengal has been serving humanity for more than 88 years now. The trust mainly concentrates on health, education, and women's empowerment.

During his lifetime, R P Shaha had set up the free Kumudini Hospital at Mirzapur, Tangail in 1944; educational institutions Bharateswari Homes for girls in 1938; Debendra College in 1942; Kumudini Girls College in 1943, and other institutions.

RP Saha and his son were abducted from their home in Narayanganj by the Pakistan Army and their collaborators on May 1971 and since then, they have been listed missing.



PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

The illegal "market" occupying Dhaka's AGB Colony Bazaar Road's footpath has now spilled over to the road in front, adding to the already existing traffic woe of the area. This photo was taken yesterday.

AIR QUALITY INDEX

Dhaka world's second most polluted city

UNB, Dhaka

The densely populated capital of Bangladesh continues to rank high in the list of cities with the worst air quality.

Yesterday, Dhaka was second in the list. Delhi in neighbouring India was first, while third and fourth spots were grabbed by Lahore in Pakistan and Beijing in China, respectively.

Dhaka's air quality index (AQI) at 9am read 312, which is considered "hazardous".

An AQI between 201 and 300 is considered "poor", while 301-400 is hazardous, posing serious health risks to city residents.

AQI, an index for reporting daily air quality, is used by government agencies to inform people how clean or polluted the air of a certain city is, and what associated health effects might be a concern for them.

In Bangladesh, the overall air quality index is based on five criteria of pollutants: particulate matter (PM10 and PM2.5), nitrogen dioxide (NO2), carbon monoxide (CO), sulphur dioxide (SO2) and ozone (O3).

Bangladesh has a subtropical monsoon climate characterised by wide seasonal variations in rainfall, high temperatures and humidity. Generally, Dhaka's air starts getting fresh when monsoon rains begin in mid-June.

The air remains mostly acceptable from June to October.

In February last year, Bangladesh's Environment, Forests and Climate Change Minister Md Shahab Uddin admitted that air pollution levels in the capital "has reached an extreme level".

"This is mainly due to uncontrolled discharge of dust from construction projects, and smoke from vehicles and brick kilns," he told the news agency.

"Brick kilns are responsible for 58 percent air pollution in the capital. Plans have been taken to shut [traditional] kilns currently in operation," he added.

We are planning to stop burning bricks at all kilns by 2025 and use block bricks to construct buildings under government projects," the minister said.

Besides, on January 31, the High Court (HC) directed authorities concerned to shut down all illegal brick kilns by February 18.

Ctg BNP to hold outdoor rally today after 8 years

ARUN BIKASH DEY, Ctg

For the last eight years, political activities of BNP in Chattogram and adjacent districts joined it, according to party sources.

Between 2012 and 2020, BNP organised rallies in the port city where party central leaders -- including Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir, Khondokar Mosharraf Hossain and Ameer Khasru Mahmud Chowdhury -- were present as chief guests.

But all those rallies were held at Nasiman Bhaban.

Thousands from Chattogram and adjacent districts joined it, according to party sources.

The party, however, is going to hold an outdoor rally today in the city, protesting "irregularities" in January 27 Chattogram City Corporation elections.

Awami League mayoral candidate Rezaul Karim Chowdhury won by a landslide in the polls, marked by violence, low voter turnout and the capture of scores of polling centres by ruling party men, defeating BNP's Shahadat Hossain.

So, BNP decided to hold the rally to protest election irregularities and mount pressure on the government to hold the polls in a neutral and credible manner, according to party leaders.

BNP city unit president Dr Shahadat Hossain said they had applied for holding the programme at Outer Stadium but police permitted them for Nur Ahmed Road, in front of the party's city unit office.

He said BNP standing committee member Ameer Khasru Mahmud Chowdhury will be present as chief guest.

Abul Hashem Bakkar, general secretary of the city unit of BNP, said, "We want to let people know how the polls was manipulated by the government as well as the administration."

Asked about their failure to hold outdoor rallies in the last eight years, Hashem Bakkar said, "We wanted to do so but police did not permit us."

Echoing him, BNP city unit vice president Abu Sufian said whenever they applied for holding such programmes, they were refused by the authorities concerned.

In 2012, the party last successfully held a big public rally at the city's Polo Ground, where BNP chairperson Khaleida Zia spoke

as the chief guest.

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PHOTO: RAJIB RAIHAN

For the last eight years, BNP's political activities have been limited to this office premises in the port city's Kazir Dewri area.

"Actually the government fears such a large public gathering. So, it continues to stop us from bringing out processions. In addition, police charge batons, arrest our leaders and activists from such programmes," alleged Shahadat.

"Holding a rally is our democratic right," he said. "If the ruling Awami League can hold a rally, why can't we do so?" he said.

"I hope the government would be wise enough to maintain democratic norms," he added.



PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

A little girl sits on her father's lap on a rickshaw, eyes fixated on a red rose as bright as her cardigan. Flower shops are teeming with petals of all colours and kinds as February, a month of many occasions such as Pahela Falgun, Valentine's Day and Int'l Mother Language Day, progresses. This photo was taken yesterday at Shahbagh.

ADMISSION FRAUD

DU to expel 7 students

UNB, Dhaka

Dhaka University authorities have recommended expulsion of seven students for their alleged involvement in admission test forgery and digital fraudulence.

DU's Disciplinary Council has also recommended suspension of 147 other students of the university, and its affiliated colleges and institutions, in connection with the same offense.

The decision was taken at a meeting on Thursday evening. The programme was chaired by Vice-Chancellor Prof Akhtaruzzaman, said Proctor AKM Golam Rabbani.

However, the final approval has to come from the syndicate at its next meeting, the proctor added.

According to the allegations, the students were enrolled in the university through fraudulent means in the academic sessions from 2013-14 to 2016-17. Earlier, two of them were served show cause notices to explain their stand.

Meanwhile, the council has barred three teachers from evaluating examination papers for the next three years in the wake of allegations of "inappropriate" checking against them.

Earlier in August 2019, DU authorities suspended 69 students for adopting unfair means during admission tests.

EU for lasting solution to Rohingya crisis

UNB, Dhaka

President of the European Council Charles Michel has reaffirmed European Union's continued support to Bangladesh for a lasting and peaceful solution to the Rohingya crisis.

He said this when Ambassador Mahbub Hassan Saleh, the newly-appointed Head of Mission of Bangladesh to the EU, met him to present his Letters of Credence in Brussels on Thursday.

Ambassador Saleh stressed the need for Myanmar authorities taking credible measures to generate confidence among the forcibly-displaced Rohingyas, temporarily sheltered in Bangladesh, for their safe, dignified and sustainable return to the Rakhine State.

President Michel recalled his previous meetings with Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, including the last one held in Madrid in December 2019.

Ambassador Saleh also conveyed the greetings of the president and the prime minister of Bangladesh to the president of the European Council.

The European Council president acknowledged Bangladesh's

preoccupation with climate change, and noted the current presidency of the Climate Vulnerable Forum (CVF).

Saleh suggested establishing a dedicated bilateral platform between Bangladesh and the EU for exchanging views and working more closely to address the challenges of climate change.

He also suggested holding a CVF-EU leaders' meeting, during the lead-up to UNFCCC COP-26 in the UK later this year.

Michel responded positively to these suggestions.

The Bangladesh ambassador also underscored the need for expanding the scope of Bangladesh-European Union partnership.

He also conveyed Bangladesh prime minister's invitation to the European Council president to visit the country at his earliest convenience.

The meeting took place following the existing health regulations in Belgium.

The ambassador was accompanied by Md Safiul Azam, counsellor (commerce) and Kaniz Fatema, first secretary (political) of the mission.