

350
New cases in 24hrs



5,43,024
Total cases



8,342
Deaths



4,90,892
Recoveries



2,465,920
Deaths

111,360,920
Total cases

President, PM pay rich tributes to language heroes

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

President Abdul Hamid and Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina paid rich tributes to the Language Movement heroes in the first minute of the day.

On behalf of President Abdul Hamid, his military secretary Maj Gen SM Salahuddin Islam placed a floral wreath at the Central Shaheed Minar.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's military secretary Maj Gen Naquib Ahmed Chowdhury placed a floral wreath on behalf of her.

Senior Awami League leaders, including General Secretary Obaidul Quader, presidium members Matia Chowdhury and Lt Col (Rtd) Faruk Khan, Joint Secretary Hasan Mahmud, and Cultural Affairs Secretary Asim Kumar Ukil, also paid tributes on behalf of Sheikh Hasina as she is the president of the party.

Sergeant at Arms Commodore Miah Mohammad Nayeem Rahman placed a wreath on behalf of Speaker Dr Shirin Sharmin Chaudhury.

Also, chiefs of the armed forces, Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan, Foreign Minister AK Abdul Momen, Inspector General of Police Benazir Ahmed, Jatiya Party Chairman and leader of the opposition GE Quader,

Education Minister Dipu Moni, Bangladesh Ansar and Village Defense Party Director General Maj Gen Mizanur Rahman Shameem, Dhaka South City Corporation Mayor Sheikh Fazle Noor Taposh, ambassadors and high commissioners of different countries and chiefs of international agencies, members of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman Birth Centenary Celebration National Implementation Committee, members of Dhaka University Alumni Association, Attorney General AM Amin Uddin, wounded Freedom Fighters of Muktiyoddha Kalyan Trust, DU Vice-Chancellor Prof Akhtaruzzaman, and Dhaka Divisional Commissioner Khalilur Rahman on behalf of Cabinet Secretary Khandker Anwarul Islam placed floral wreaths.

Barefoot and wearing black badges, they placed the wreaths at Central Shaheed Minar stood in silence in remembrance of those who embraced martyrdom to make Bangla the state language in 1952 as the tune "Amar Bhaier Rokte Rangano Ekushey February" reverberated the air.

The day is observed worldwide as the International Mother Language Day. In 1999, the Unesco declared February 21 as the International Mother Language Day.



Military secretaries, on behalf of President Abdul Hamid and Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, place floral wreaths at the Central Shaheed Minar at zero hour to pay tribute to the heroes of Language Movement.

PHOTO: SK ENAMUL HAQ

Man sent to jail for rape of minor

STAR REPORT

A Joypurhat court yesterday sent a man to jail for his alleged involvement in the rape of a 10-year-old mentally challenged girl in the district.

The accused is Ruhul Amin alias Tutul, 26, of Rambhadrapur village in the district's Panchbibi upazila.

According to the case statement, Tutul raped the girl on Friday afternoon when she went outside of the home.

The accused took the girl to an isolated place, raped her, and fled the scene, the case statement added.

The victim's father filed a case with Panchbibi Police Station.

Polash Deb, officer-in-charge of Panchbibi Police Station, said police arrested Tutul on Friday night from a border area of Rambhadrapur village.

Later, he was produced before a district court that sent him to jail.

The victim was also sent to Joypurhat Modern Hospital for medical tests, he added.

Meanwhile, police detained two teenage boys in Barguna as they allegedly attempted to rape a 10-year-old girl on Wednesday afternoon in the district.

Drama over

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statement that party chief Sheikh Hasina permanently expel Quader Mirza and cancel his primary membership from the party.

Contacted, Khairul Anam said he earlier signed the statement but later withdrew the decision due to "unavoidable" reasons.

"The statement was issued mistakenly. Now, we are waiting for a decision from our party chief Sheikh Hasina on this matter," he said.

Mohammad Ekramul Karim Chowdhury could not be contacted over phone for his comment.

Quader Mirza termed the district AL committee illegal and said the committee does not have the jurisdiction to take such a decision.

Abdul Quader Mirza, younger brother of AL general secretary Obaidul Quader and elected mayor of Basurhat municipality under Companiganj upazila, has been serving as the vice president of the district unit and a member of executive committee of the upazila unit.

Mirza has lately been delivering speeches against some party men, claiming they were involved in misdeeds and corruption. His remarks have put the AL top brass in an awkward position.

Meanwhile, followers of Mirza yesterday again locked into clashes with police near Companiganj police station yesterday, a day after mayhem in the area.

After the clash, Mirza at a press conference at Rupali Chattar in Companiganj claimed that 15 of his followers were injured.

Earlier on Friday, at least one person died and 50 people were injured in clashes, nine with bullet injuries, between two AL factions over establishing supremacy in the upazila.

One group was led by Mirza and another group was led by Mizanur Rahman Badal, organising secretary of the upazila AL, also a follower of lawmakers Ekramul Karim Chowdhury and Nizam Uddin Hazari.

Immediately after the violence, Mirza called a strike in Companiganj upazila yesterday "protesting the attack on his men" and to press home his previous demands, including an end to corruption and misdeeds by AL men and the transfer of some government officials who were allegedly involved with graft.

In support of the strike, Mirza and his supporters brought out a procession around 7:00am yesterday. Many of his supporters were carrying sticks, said witnesses and police.

Marching on different streets of Basurhat municipality, the procession reached the police station gate. The agitators then tried to enter the police station, but police intercepted them, which triggered a clash, police sources said.

At one stage, police charged batons to disperse them.

Meanwhile, Mirza's rival group, led by Mizanur Rahman Badal, held a separate press conference at a local AL office in the upazila and demanded the expulsion of Mirza from the party and mayoral post.

In the press conference, Badal claimed that Mirza, who ran in Basurhat municipal poll with the party's symbol, won the election by "vote rigging".

JOURNO DEATH IN VIOLENCE
A local journalist, who was bullet-hit in clashes between the district AL two factions died at a Dhaka hospital yesterday night.

The dead, Borhan Uddin Muzakir, 30, correspondent of local online portal Barta Bazar and resident of Char Fakira union under Companiganj upazila, succumbed to his injuries while undergoing treatment at the ICU of Dhaka Medical College Hospital (DMCH) around 10:45pm, said Inspector Bacchu Mia, in-charge of DMCH Police Outpost.

Borhan was admitted on Friday night in with a bullet injury in the throat, said Dr Md Alauddin, resident surgeon at emergency department of DMCH.

Borhan was hit during the Friday clash between two groups of Noakhali AL.

He was initially rushed to Noakhali General Hospital and then referred to DMCH for better treatment as his condition deteriorated.

THE LAST OF THE KHARIA SPEAKERS

A language getting lost due to dominance of others and lack of interest from younger generation



Veronica and Christina are two of the less than 20 people who speak Kharia.

MINTU DESHWARA and PINAKI ROY

Since her husband Abraham Soreng died two years ago, 70-year-old Veronica Kerketa doesn't get the chance to talk in her mother tongue at home. None of her children or grandchildren speak the Kharia language.

In her village, under Bormachhara tea garden area of Moulvibazar's Sreemangal upazila, only one other person -- her younger sister, 65-year-old Christina Kerketa -- speaks Kharia.

"Except for the two of us, the nearest person who knows this language, Jaharlal Pandey Induar, lives three kilometres away from our village," said Veronica.

"I talk with my sister or sometimes talk with him in this language when we meet."

She added, "Nobody else from my own family speaks this language now. So, I need to talk in Sadri or Bangla with them."

The use of Sadri is largely prevalent across the various ethnic communities in the tea gardens.

"After our death, nobody will speak this language [Kharia]. I tried to teach the language to the younger people but they do not show interest and laugh at me when I speak in Kharia," said Veronica.

Jaharlal Pandey Induar, 65, of Sreemangal's Mangrabasti, said that as a tea workers' family, they are always under financial stress. "We do not have enough time to give for our own language."

He said, "I still can't speak Kharia fluently, as I have mostly used Sadri for a long time now."

Dayaram Kharia, 60, also from Mangrabasti, said 110 Kharia families live in the village.

"There is no one in our village who can speak our own language fluently -- there are only five people who know a few words of Kharia."

In Krishnanchura village of Habiganj's Chunarughat, of 41 Kharia families living in the village, only four old women can speak a few words in the language when they meet each other, said 45-year-old Manik Kharia.

Rajshahi University student Simon Kerketa, 23, from the Bormachhara area of Sreemangal upazila, said at least six members of his father's family still know Kharia. "But I myself can't speak the language," he said.

A DYING LANGUAGE

Mashrur Imtiaz, assistant professor in the department of linguistics at the University of Dhaka, who conducted a survey on the language in 2018, found less than 20 people in Sylhet speak Kharia.

"Only 10 to 12 people from their community know this language. And a few others know some Kharia words and some stories and rituals. But they cannot really make sentences or continue a conversation," he said.

"There is no written form of this language in Bangladesh. I wanted to work on their grammar but did not get adequate people who speak the language."

Kharia, a language belonging to the Munda branch of the Austro-Asiatic language family, is one of Bangladesh's endangered languages, he said.

George Abraham Grierson's "Linguistic Survey of India", published in 1928, described Kharia then as a "dying" language, noted Mashrur.

Kharia people, who live in various tea gardens in Sylhet, were enlisted in the government's updated list of 50 small ethnic communities, which was made in 2019.

Before this, they were not even recognised as a separate ethnic group in Bangladesh.

Pius Nanuar, a Kharia social activist, who conducted a study on the Kharia population in early 2020, told this correspondent they found around 5,700 Kharia people in 41 villages in Sylhet division.



"New generations do not talk in this language -- they hardly know one or two words. This language is going to be lost from our country very soon as only 12 people from the community can speak the language," he said.

Pius, who knows a little bit of Kharia, said he learned it from his grandmother when he was a school student in the '90s.

His grandmother used to take classes informally every evening, telling stories of Kharia heroes, myths, riddles, rhymes, singalongs, harvest stories, Karam (a harvest festival) and other festivals, hunting, and folk traditions.

"In our boyhood, a good number of Kharia children at least learnt a few Kharia words and came into connection with our Kharia roots and culture. But after her death, that effort was lost," he said.

In 2017, an initiative was taken to teach the language to the younger generation through a youth organisation called "Beer Telenga Kharia Language Learning Centre", Pius said.

But it was a failed effort to save the Kharia language and culture in his community.

"Kharias in Bangladesh do not have our own alphabet. Kharias in India too use Roman and Latin alphabets," Pius added.

According to the website

Omniglot, an encyclopedia of writing systems and languages, Kharia is spoken in the Simdega and Gumla districts of Jharkhand state, in the Surguja and Raigarh districts of Chhattisgarh, and in the Sundargarh district of Odisha in India.

There are about 256 speakers of Kharia in the Mechi and Kosi zones of Nepal along the border with India.

Kharia is written also with Devanagari, Odia and Bangla alphabets, according to the website.

NOT JUST A LANGUAGE LOST

The majority of Kharia people in Moulvibazar, Habiganj and Sylhet districts are descendants of people who were brought to the plantations from various parts of India by the British colonists around a century and a half ago, according to the Society for Environment and Human Development (SEHD).

In 2016, SEHD identified 658 Kharia households in 16 tea estates in Sylhet division.

Not just Kharia, even the more commonly spoken ethnic languages are in danger of disappearing.

Pranesh Goala, chairman of Kalighat Union Parishad in Sreemangal, said those who still speak Sadri also mix in Bangla and Hindi words while speaking.

AFM Zakaria, professor in the anthropology department of Shahjalal University of Science and Technology, told The Daily Star losing a language means closing the entrance to a civilisation, to a storehouse of cultural resources.

Sukra Kharia, 65, a younger brother of 70-year-old Gopia Kharia, a freedom fighter from Nalua tea garden in Habiganj's Chunarughat upazila, said as Bangladeshis, they are proud to be part of the country's history and culture.

At least six Kharia people participated in the Liberation War in 1971.

"But it is very sorrowful to say we are waiting to see the death of our own language," he said.

In the month of February, Pius Nanuar said, Kharia children pay homage to those who sacrificed their lives for the Bangla language but will never know how to speak the Kharia language, their own mother tongue.

Director General of the International Mother Language Institute Prof Dr Jinnat Imtiaz Ali told The Daily Star it is difficult to preserve a language spoken by less than 20,000 or 30,000 people.

"Finding the source of the language then becomes very difficult. We do not know then what exactly the oral form of the language was."

"However," he added, "we have formed a committee to compile the grammar in a dictionary to save endangered languages. We have started work."

Dying in silence

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Their preservation becomes even more difficult as there is no written form or alphabets of these languages. In the meantime, the number of speakers continue to decline and are no longer learnt or used by the next generation.

Experts said these endangered languages will soon be lost forever along with their linked culture and traditional knowledge, if proper measures are not taken.

Mashrur Imtiaz, assistant professor of linguistics at the University of Dhaka, said the population size of the communities who speak the 14 languages range from 1,000 to 40,000.

"In the case of Mundari, the total population is around 40,000 but from the linguistic aspect, the number of speakers is significantly less in reality," he said.

Currently, he added, less than 15 people talk fluently in the Kharia language.

Experts say when less than 5,000 people speak a language, that is an endangered language.

"People from the community will have to step forward if they want to save their language. Then, the government can help in the process," said Dr Mohammad Iltimas, deputy director of IMLI's publications and research planning wing.

Under the linguistic survey project of IMLI, Dr Mohammad Iltimas said researchers collected 300 words of each language and the Bangla and English meaning of these words. The researchers also worked on how to form sentences in these languages and anthropogenic origins of each language.

The research work will be published in Bangla and English and will be inaugurated by the Prime Minister, he said.

The date of this publication's launch has been up in the air for more than two years since the research was completed.

On the occasion of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's birth centenary, IMLI has translated and published his March 7 speech in five ethnic languages including Chakma, Marma, Garo, Sadri, and Kokborok, said Dr Iltimas.

The institute is also making a documentary on 10 ethnic communities introducing their language and culture, an IMLI official said.

However, Sourav Sikder, professor of the linguistic department at DU, believes only documentation is not enough to save endangered languages.

"Only documentation of a language won't save it. We need to make arrangements so that the communities get opportunities to practise their languages and they can read, write and speak their mother tongues."

He further said, "We need to ensure they get at least primary-level education in their own languages. But currently the government does not have any such initiative for these 14 languages."

In 2017, the government started publishing books starting from primary to class three in five different languages including Chakma, Marma, Kokborok, Garo, and Sadri.

The Chakma and Marma books are in their own script while the other three are in the Roman script. The Santal language was included in this project but later excluded as the community could not reach a consensus on which alphabet should be used in the book.

This project has so far seen mixed success with experts pointing to a lack of training for teachers to supplement the new books.

"Primary education in the mother tongue project was not very successful for different reasons," said Sourav Sikder.

He suggested the government form a language commission that would take effective measures to save endangered languages.

"The government should take measures to ensure all citizens of the country get the opportunity to learn and practise their mother tongues," he said, referring to the country's glorious history of fighting for the mother tongue.

LANGUAGE DIVERSITY

In 2019, the government enlisted 50 ethnic communities in the gazette

of "Small Ethnic Groups Cultural Institutes Act of 2010".

Aside from Bangla and Urdu, these small ethnic communities speak 39 languages as their mother tongue, IMLI's linguistic survey found.

These languages are Bawm, Chak, Chakma, Mandi (Garo), Hajong, Kole, Khasi, Kharia, Koch, Munda, Khyang, Khumi, Marma, Monipuri (Meitei), Monipuri (Bhisnupriya), Lusai, Mro, Ahmia, Kanpuri, Mahali, Kurukh, Malto, Kondo, Thar, Laleng (Patro), Pangkhua, Rakhaine, Santal, Soura, Madrazi, Telugu, Tangchangya, Kokborok, Nepali (Gurkha), Rengmitcha, Koda, Lingum, Uria, and Sadri.

Out of the 41 languages spoken in Bangladesh, only eight languages -- including Bangla, Chakma, Marma, Tangchangya, Rakhaine, Mro, Monipuri and Ahmia -- have their own alphabets, the linguistic survey found.

Though some other languages like Kokborok, Mandi, and Bwam do not also have their own alphabets, they use the Roman or Bangla script.

Subhashish Sinha, popular theatre director and a writer from a Monipuri (Bhisnupriya) community in Moulvibazar, said their alphabet has been lost.

"We now write Monipuri using the Bangla alphabet," he said.

Bawm, Chak, Chakma, Marma, Khumi, Mro, Rengmitcha, Pangkhua, Khyang, Lusai, Tangchangya, Kokborok, and Nepali (Gurkha) speakers mostly live in the Chhatogram Hill Tracts (CHT) and Cox's Bazar area in limited numbers.

Only a few Nepali speakers live in Bandarban, believed to have come to CHT with British soldiers during the colonial era, as well as in the tea gardens in Sylhet.

Youngrang Mro, a Mro writer, said a portion of the Mro community living in Krangsri Para of Alikadam upazila in Bandarban speak Rengmitcha.

"Now, only a few people still talk in the Rengmitcha language. Though they are [also] Mro people, we cannot understand their language. It is a different language," said Youngrang.

Tea garden workers in Sylhet speak multiple languages including Munda, Ahmia, Mahali, Kuruk, Kanpuri, Santal, Madrazi, Telugu, Uria, Kanpuri, Malto, Soura, Sadri, Gurkha, and Bhojpuri.

Other languages spoken in Sylhet are Khasi, Monipuri (Meitei), Monipuri (Bhisnupriya), and Laleng (Patro).

Mandi (Garo) and Hajong languages are spoken mainly in the greater Mymensingh region. Some Koch and Lingum speakers also live in this region.

Santal, Kole, Koda, and Munda people mostly live in northern Bangladesh and in the Sylhet area in limited numbers. Some of the Munda community live near the Sundarbans while river gypsies or the Bedia people speak Thar.

Rakhaine speakers live in Cox's Bazar and in Barguna, Barishal.

As per the "Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger" published by Unesco in 2010, there is a list of 2,500 endangered languages. Researchers predict the number will reach 3,000 by the end of this century.

A vital cog

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According to BDRCS officials, over 14,000 volunteers across the country are prepared to lend a hand, thanks to the cooperation of the Directorate General of Health Service (DGHS).

More of them will be engaged when the number of vaccination centres increases, they added.

"We cannot ensure all the logistics due to fund shortages. But the young volunteers are really committed," Imam Jafor Sikder, director of Youth and Volunteers at BDRCS, told The Daily Star.

BDRCS was constituted on March, 31, 1973.

Prof Nasima Sultana, additional director general (administration) at the DGHS, said, "The volunteers of the Red Crescent Society have been with us since the beginning of the pandemic. We are grateful and we appreciate their contributions."