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Your Right to Know

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"Bangladesh has become a developing country but the extreme inequality in the society not only questions this development, but also interrupts it."
WORKERS PARTY PRESIDENT RASHED KHAN MENON



"I am not going to resign. I did not do what has been alleged."
NEW YORK'S GOVERNOR ANDREW CUOMO FACING ALLEGATIONS OF SEXUAL HARASSMENT

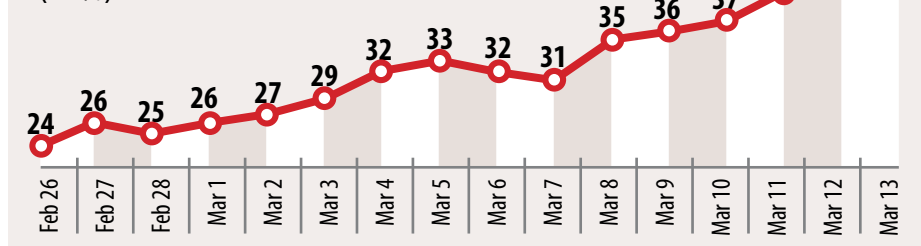


"You [Obaidul Quader] should be ashamed of seeing what is happening in your area in Noakhali's Basurhat ... I ask him to put his own house in order before criticising the BNP."
BNP SECRETARY GENERAL MIRZA FAKHRUL ISLAM ALAMGIR

Number of critical patients surging

Occupancy of Covid ICU beds jumps to 43pc from 28pc in one month

ICU BED OCCUPANCY RATE (IN %)



MOUDDUD AHMED SUJAN and ZYMA ISLAM

The number of patients at the intensive care units in hospitals, getting treatment for Covid-19, has been on the rise.

Experts said the recent rise in new cases could be linked to a new variant of the coronavirus and people flouting the health rules.

The percentage of occupied ICU beds jumped to 42.76 yesterday from 28.18 on February 13, according to surveillance data from the Directorate General of Health

Services (DGHS).

There are 566 ICU beds for Covid-19 patients in hospitals across the country. Of these, 281 are in 10 government and nine private hospitals in the capital.

On July 2 last year, the day when the highest, 4,019, number of people tested positive for the virus, 53.57 percent of the ICU beds were occupied.

"We noticed that the number of patients requiring critical care or intensive care has been rising in recent days," Farhana Wahab,

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INTERNATIONAL DAY OF ACTION FOR RIVERS



The Shoiljura, a canal of what looks like a stream of slurry, was re-excavated by the authorities to irrigate surrounding farms with water from the Sutang river in Habiganj. Thanks to industrial waste, it is now a hazard for the villagers nearby and the river.

PHOTO: MINTU DESHWARA

ESSENTIAL COMMODITIES

Prices spike a month ahead of Ramadan

MAHBUBUR RAHMAN KHAN and SHAHEEN MOLLAH

The soaring prices of daily essentials, including edible oil, onion and vegetables, have added to the woes of the people living on a fixed income.

Consumers and market analysts blamed unscrupulous businessmen for the price hike, alleging that they are manipulating the prices ahead of Ramadan beginning in the middle of next month.

Visiting kitchen markets in the capital's Shantinagar, Jatrabari, Shewrapara and Hatirpool areas yesterday, this newspaper found that the prices of essential commodities increased compared to a few weeks ago.

Yesterday, 5-litre bottled soyabean oil was sold for Tk 630 to Tk 650 at Shewrapara bus stop kitchen market, up from Tk 550 to Tk 560 in January.

Md Shafiq Ather Taslim, director of finance and operation at TK Group, one of the leading importers and processors of commodities, said the price of crude soyabean oil increased to \$1,190 a tonne in the international market recently against \$700 a tonne in August last year.

ITEMS	PRICE (KG)	PRICE (A MONTH AGO)
Rice (coarse)	Tk 50	Tk 48
Rice (fine)	Tk 65	Tk 58
Soyabean	Tk 135	Tk 125
Ginger	Tk 75	Tk 80
Garlic	Tk 70	Tk 125
Beef	Tk 570	Tk 550
Rui fish	Tk 250	Tk 240
Mutton	Tk 850	Tk 800

SOURCE: PRICES ARE AVERAGES OF 3 CITY MARKETS

He said the production cost of edible oil rose by around 40 percent because of the price spike in the international market.

Consumers are spending more on onion as the prices of the essential cooking ingredient have gone up. Traders blamed a dearth of supply for the rise in prices.

Yesterday, retailers at Hatirpool kitchen market sold onion for Tk 50 to Tk 60 a kg, up from Tk 25 to Tk 30 a month ago.

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Named heritage, yet ravaged

Syndicate continues extracting sand, earth from the Halda river

MOSTAFA YOUSUF, Ctg

An organised syndicate of sand and earth lifters has been wreaking havoc on the Halda river at the upstream in Fatikchhari upazila while the local administration turned a blind eye to the menace.

Halda, the lone natural breeding ground of carp-like fish in South Asia, was declared as Bangabandhu Fisheries Heritage on December 22 last year.

The government banned twelve types of activities in the river -- including fishing, sand lifting, water withdrawal, plying of mechanised boats, construction of dams, and dumping of any industrial or domestic waste.

Yet the syndicate, allegedly run by the son of the local union parishad member, keeps extracting sand and earth from the river at dozens of places in Paindong, Narayanhat, Suyabil, Sundarpur and Bhujpur unions, and in Nazirhat municipality.

Some key spots affected along the river include Pach Pukuria, Juguni Ghata, Fokira Chan, Akkulia, Azimpur Ghat, Kumbhar Para, Kuyarpara, Hapania, and Pilkhana.

A government project by the Water Development Board was also lifting sand from the riverbank, until intervention put a stop to it, said a local land official.

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UNPLANNED INDUSTRIALISATION

Curse on the Sutang

MINTU DESHWARA, back from Habiganj

With the goal of bringing fresh water from the Sutang river to irrigate surrounding villages, the authorities re-excavated the Shoiljura canal in Habiganj. Seven years later, the canal has become a means of hazard for nearby villagers and the river itself.

Pollution of the canal caused by a number of factories established on its banks is affecting at least 30 villages in Habiganj Sadar, Chunarughat and Lakhai upazilas. Korab, Lukra, Nurpur, and Rajiura villages in particular are facing the brunt, according to environmentalists.

The spiral 82-kilometre-long Sutang river, once host to a thriving fish population, is now too toxic for aquatic life and for irrigation because of the pollutants streaming in via the Shoiljura canal, said locals.

Rajiura Union Parishad Chairman Abul Kalam Babul said the Shoiljura canal was re-excavated in 2014 in order to provide irrigation in the area.

"We were supposed to get fresh water for irrigation, but we are getting contaminated water as various factories are dumping waste into this canal. The end result has been the pollution of the Sutang," he said.

Several demands raised by environmentalists and initiatives taken by local representatives to save the river have all failed and the pollution continues to rise, he added.

Yusuf Ali, a farmer from Alipur, which houses many of the factories polluting the canal, said water from the Sutang causes skin diseases and also damages the crops.

"But we are using it as we do not have any other choice," he added. Habiganj environmental activist Tofazzal Sohel said the industrial waste of various factories are flowing into the Sutang river through the Shoiljura canal.

"Unplanned and unregulated industrialisation in Habiganj's Madhabpur upazila turned this beautiful river into a stream of waste."

As the Sutang is connected with the Meghna, the industrial pollution is also ultimately impacting this major river, he added.

The Sutang flows from the hilly streams in the Tripura border on the Bangladesh side, according to the Habiganj Water Development Board.

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Plug leaks to the media

Ministry asks BR about Chinese G-to-G projects

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Bangladesh Railway has been asked to plug news leaks about projects being implemented under government-to-government initiative between Bangladesh and China.

Chinese embassy in Dhaka wrote about the issue to the Economic Relations Division which last month requested the Railways Ministry to take steps in this regard, according to sources familiar with the development.

The development and planning wing of the ministry on March 10 wrote to the director general of Bangladesh Railway (BR). Copies of the letter signed by a senior assistant secretary were sent to the project directors, they added.

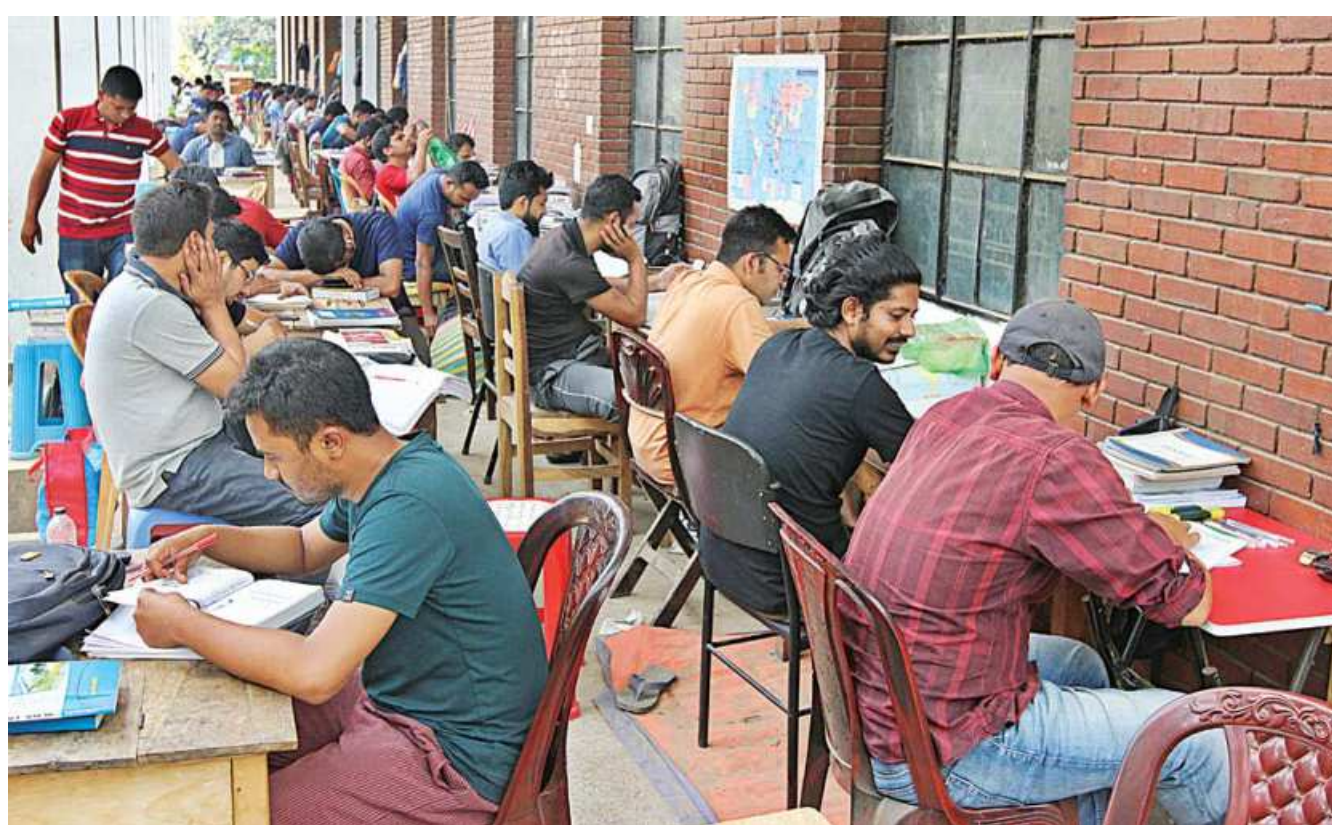
Two ministry officials confirmed about the letter.

This correspondent could not reach Pronab Kumar Ghosh, additional secretary (development and planning), and Salim Reza, secretary, over the phone. Text messages sent to them were also not replied to.

The ministry letter mentioned that an English daily last month reported on the long delay in signing of a loan from China for a project to turn Joydebpur-Ishwardi section into dual-gauge double lines. The report quoted a top BR official.

"Chinese embassy notified the Economic Relations Division about the matter. Chinese embassy in its letter

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Students, mostly those preparing for the public service recruitment tests, studying on the science faculty premises of Dhaka University. They are the ones who bought the desks and chairs as the university is yet to reopen. More photos on www.thedailystar.net

PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

HIGH-PROFILE VISITS IN MARCH

Dhaka to ink flurry of deals with neighbours

UNB, Dhaka

Foreign Minister AK Abdul Momen yesterday said many agreements and MoUs would be signed with a number of countries during the visits of their heads of state and government, including that of India, this month.

Many foreign leaders are expected to arrive in Dhaka marking the celebrations of 50 years of Bangladesh's independence and the birth centenary of Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

The minister said this while replying to a question from a reporter at the foreign ministry.

"The Teesta deal was signed 10 years ago, but it was not implemented. The most important thing is that the Indian prime minister, leader of the world's biggest democracy and our biggest neighbour, will visit Bangladesh. It's a matter of pleasure. Four other Southeast Asian leaders will also be here... It will be a big festival," he said.

Usually, discussions are held during the visits of heads of state or government, and secretary-level discussions are held with India every day on various critical issues, including water, commerce and border killing, said Momen in response to another question regarding the upcoming visits of the foreign leaders.

"During the meeting with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina might raise some issues which have already been discussed or settled so that those continue and get implemented."

Talking about Rohingya stranded in the Andaman Sea, the foreign minister said there was no logic that Bangladesh would bring them back as they were found 1,700 kms off Bangladesh's maritime territory and the ship in which they got stuck was a Thai vessel.

A 10-day special programme will kick off at the city's SEE PAGE 2 COL 1