8,668

Deaths



#### Bss, Dhaka

Bangladesh is now one of the brightest examples of religious harmony and peace, Dr Yousef bin Ahmed Al-Othaimeen, secretary general of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), said yesterday.

He said this in a video message played at the function of the fourth day of the 10-day special programme marking the birth centenary of Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and the golden jubilee of the country's independence.

The OIC secretary-general said Bangladesh is always maintaining a strong partnership with the OIC for further peace, prosperity and development in the Muslim world.

He said it is his privilege to deliver this message on the occasion of the birth centenary of Bangabandhu and the golden jubilee of the independence of Bangladesh. In 1971, Bangladesh became an independent nation under the visionary guidelines of the great leader Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Al-Othaimeen said.

In 1974, he said, Bangabandhu decided to join the newly created country as a member of the OIC. Since then, Bangladesh has been actively participating in and meaningfully contributing to the activities of the organisation, he said.

The Father of the Nation attended the second summit of OIC in 1974 with the aim of pioneering the historian Dr Syed Anwar Hossain will relations between Bangladesh and the take part in a discussion on the theme.

Islamic world and it was a historically important moment for joint Islamic actions and promoting peace and harmony among Muslim nations, he said.

Al-Othaimeen said the Father of the Nation of Bangladesh dedicated his life to fighting discrimination and inequality aiming to build "Golden Bangla".

He said Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, the daughter of Bangabandhu, is continuing the fight against discrimination and inequality and working tirelessly to realise her father's vision "Golden Bangla".

A recorded video message of French Senator and President of the Inter-Parliamentary Friendship Group for South East Asia Madame Jacqueline Deromedi was also played at the function, moderated by State Minister for Information and Communication Technology Zunaid Ahmed Palak.

The nation will celebrate the fifth day of the 10-day programme of the Birth Centenary of Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and golden jubilee of independence with the theme 'Dhongsostupe Jiboner Gan'.

Information and Broadcasting Minister Dr Hasan Mahmud will deliver the welcome speech and moderate the function, said a press release.

Road Transport and Bridges Minister Obaidul Quader and



**5,20,718** Recoveries

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina handing her Sri Lankan counterpart Mahinda Rajapaksa a souvenir of Mujib Borsho at her office yesterday.

# Agree on improving connectivity FROM PAGE 1 Use led a deleration comprising the besigned at the earliest possible time. recognised

He led a delegation comprising the minister of education, state minister for regional cooperation, state minister of money and capital market and state enterprise reforms, state minister of batik, handloom fabric and local apparel products, and state minister of rural housing and construction and building material industries, secretary to the prime minister, foreign secretary, and senior government officials of Sri Lanka.

Both the countries signed a new memorandum on cooperation for strengthening youth development, and renewed five other MoUs on agriculture, vocational education, training of nurses, research, and training on foreign affairs, and cultural exchange.

Sri Lanka exported goods worth \$133 million to Bangladesh in 2018. Sri Lankan imported from Bangladesh goods valued at \$37 million in 2019.

Some 30,000 Sri Lankans work in Bangladesh in merchandising and mid-level management in the garment sectors.

Sri Lanka's direct investment in Bangladesh is around \$400 million.

Experts and officials said that trade between the two countries could be a lot more if connectivity could be improved.

'Sri Lanka and the Maldives both have demands for food and vegetables that we grow. If there are coastal shipping arrangements, we can easily transport the commodities to Colombo and Male," Momen said.

Briefing reporters, PM's Press Secretary Ihsanul Karim said Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina opined that the bilateral trade was far less than its potential. She said a joint feasibility study for a free trade agreement (FTA) was required.

recognised standards. Both sides also agreed to diversify the basket of tradable goods and look for innovative ways to add fresh impetus to trade and commercial relations.

The two leaders agreed to establish a Joint Consultative Commission for Comprehensive Cooperation to be headed by the foreign ministers of the two countries.

In a joint communique, the prime ministers reiterated the importance of the voluntary, safe, speedy, dignified and sustainable return of Rohingyas to their homeland.

"Sri Lanka wanted to learn the latest arrangement and said they will support us," Momen said.

Hasina and Rajapaksa also pledged to work together to counteract challenges of terrorism and violent extremism in both countries, the region and beyond.

Sri Lankan Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksha invited Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to visit Sri Lanka next year to celebrate the Golden Jubilee of diplomatic relations between the two countries.

He praised Bangladesh's digital transformation and its performance and said they would be happy to get Bangladesh's experiences in agriculture, health, and education issues for mutual benefits.

Rajapaksha sought more attention to tariff preference and said his country would invest more in the private sector.

He sought measures to make easier the repatriation of profits and praised the concept of blue economy of Bangladesh. He said that Sri Lanka was ready to share its experiences in this regard.

State Minister for Foreign Affairs Shahriar Alam, Foreign Secretary Masud Bin Momen and Secretary of facilitating greater private sector of non-tariff barriers and simplification (East) Mashfee Binte Shams were participation, she said an FTA should and harmonisation of mutually present at the press conference.

# US and China spar over racism at United Nations

### **REUTERS**, New York

**2,717,475** Deaths **123,218,300** Total cases

The US ambassador to the United Nations, who is Black, clashed with her Chinese counterpart on Friday when she described her own experience with racism as a challenge, but said for millions of people in countries like China and Myanmar it was deadly.

During a UN General Assembly meeting to mark the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, US Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield said: "Racism was and continues to be a daily challenge wherever we are. And for millions, it's more than a challenge. It's deadly.

"Like in Burma, where Rohingya and others have been oppressed, abused, and killed in staggering numbers. Or in China, where the government has committed genocide and crimes against humanity against Uighurs and members of other ethnic and religious minority groups in Xinjiang," she said, referring to the region in northwest China.

China's deputy UN Ambassador Dai Bing responded that Thomas-Greenfield had "in an exceptional case admitted to her country's ignoble human rights record, but that does not give her country the license to get on a high horse and tell other countries vhat to do.'

The conflict underscored tensions between the world's two biggest economic powers a day after Washington and Beijing had their first high-level meeting since Joe Biden became U.S. president in January.

"If the US truly cared about human rights, they should address the deepseated problems of racial discrimination, social injustice and police brutality, on their own soil," Dai told the 193-member General Assembly.

## Key suspect

FROM PAGE 1

after a mob of Hefajat-e-Islam supporters attacked Noagaon village over a Facebook post criticising a Hefajat leader's statement. The attackers vandalised and looted about

90 Hindu houses. Khaled-uz-Zaman, special

superintendent of PBI in Sylhet, yesterday said they traced Shahidul with the help of technology and arrested him during a special drive in Ghorabhui village.

The arrestee was later handed over to Shalla Police Station, the SP said.

Shahidul, a resident of Nachni village adjacent to Noagaon, is locally known as a leader of Jubo League, the ruling Awami League's youth front. Jubo League, however, claimed that he was not a leader of the organisation.

Khairul Huda Chapal, convener of Sunamganj district Jubo League, said there were no committee of the platform in Derai upazila and its unions and Shahidul was not a leader of the organisation. "He might have claimed himself to be a Jubo League leader, but that doesn't make him a leader.'

Protesters pose no security Sri Lankan counterpart Mahinda

Narendra Modi is scheduled to visit Bangladesh on March 26 to attend the twin celebrations of Mujib Borsho and the golden jubilee of Bangladesh's independence.

FROM PAGE 1

Rajapaksa yesterday.

He will also visit Bangabandhu Memorial in Tungipara, Matua community in Kashiani, and a temple in Satkhira on March 27 before holding a bilateral meeting with Hasina.

Several hundred people have demonstrated last Friday to denounce the upcoming visit of the Indian Prime Minister.

The protesters said Modi and his party BJP oppressed Muslims in India.

They also criticised the border killings. India says such casualties happen when Bangladeshis are involved in cross-border smuggling and attempt to cross the border illegally.

Asked about it, Momen said

but also for attending Mujib Borsho and the country's golden jubilee of independence, which is very special and a historic event for Bangladesh.

"I will request those, who are expressing various opinions...if they love Bangladesh, if they are the people for the country's independence and respect Bangabandhu as the Father of the Nation, they must cooperate to respect the state guests," he said.

Shahriar Alam said when the BJP came to power last time, BNP had tried to complain that BJP might not have good relations with the Awami League it was in power.

"As those complaints did not have a ground, they later changed their position. This is a double standard of such political parties. We will request such parties to refrain from such behaviorus for the sake of national interest."

As a reporter asked about the government observations about the Bangladesh is a democratic country media reporting that Modi's visit to where people have the right to express Orakandi, where Modi will meet Matua community, has a political connotation in the upcoming elections in West Bengal, Momen said it was not the government's concern at all. We are happy that Modi is going out of the capital. Bangladesh's countryside beautiful. It can be a tourist destination in the future," he said. Asked if the rise in the number of Covid-19 infections would in any way hamper the visit of Narendra Modi, he said the government is maintaining health rules in organising the programme. So, there will be no problem in this regard. However, he said that people should follow health rules, wear masks when going out. Infection is rising because people are touring to different parts of the country and most of them are not following health rules.

Momen said Sri Lanka has agreed to sign a Preferential Trade Agreement before signing the FTA. Hasina said that Sri Lanka has investment in the power sector of Bangladesh. "We encourage Sri Lankan investors to invest more in our special economic zones, and industrial and high-tech parks," she was quoted as

saying. She said Bangladesh would encourage the Sri Lankan business community to increasingly utilise the opportunities of value addition in Bangladesh's agriculture sector. Bangladesh would be happy to share its experience in agriculture, particularly in rice farming and fresh water fisheries, reports UNB. "We would like to obtain technical knowbow form Sri Lanka in coastal

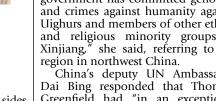
knowhow from Sri Lanka in coastal, aquaculture, marine culture, and deepsea fishing," she was quoted as saying.

"Sri Lanka may benefit immensely by importing our world-class pharmaceutical products and medical devices in greater quantities," Hasina said adding that this would require the simplification of Sri Lankan

registration procedures. Hasina also said Sri Lanka could utilise Bangladesh's expertise in the field of ICT. She said Bangladesh would be happy to share with Sri Lanka its long experience in emergency response, disaster management, climate adaptation and mitigation.

According to a joint communique, the two leaders agreed to work for signing an MoU on cooperation in tourism involving tour operators. Bangladesh proposed signing of an MoU on Coastal Cruise Shipping for Tourism between the two countries.

Both sides agreed to undertake measures for trade facilitation, PHOTO: PID



their opinion and that the government is not worried about it.

"We will ensure full security to our guests," Momen said at the Foreign Service Academy.

He said only a small amount of people, who are complaining, have no teeth.

Awami League is a party having a strong peoples' base and they all support the visit of the Indian Prime Minister, he added.

"We are not concerned over fundamentalists' surge. We know how to tackle them. They mostly speak to the media, in front of the National Press Club. They lost their ground," Momen said.

State Minister for Foreign Affairs Shahriar Alam said the five world leaders, including Narendra Modi, are coming not only for bilateral issues

# A farmer, far from internet

#### FROM PAGE 1

that he had indeed filed five cases against Abu and his family members with Bajitpur Police Station around seven years ago. He claimed that the farmer's family had also lodged retaliatory cases.

"But the cases filed from both sides were withdrawn following a local arbitration," Mizan added.

Contacted, Katiadi Police Station Sub-inspector Tofael Ahmed, also the investigation officer of the DSA case, said they were investigating the allegations very carefully.

Replying to a question, he said Abu does not use any digital devices and he has no presence on any digital platform.

If the allegation that Abu badmouthed Mizan's father is proved, he might be sued in another case through proper investigation, said the investigation officer.

Talking on the issue, Barrister Jyotirmoy Barua, a Supreme Court lawyer who dealt with several DSA cases, said there was no scope for prosecuting anyone who has not authored the digital content to begin with. "This is harassment, and it's a misconception of the law," he said.

Meanwhile, two more cases were filed in Thakurgaon under the DSA over the last two days.

Two people were arrested. Both of them are still in school, and one is a minor.

On Thursday, an 18-year-old high-school student was arrested for sharing a caricature of the prime

minister. The case was initiated by OC Tanvirul Islam of Thakurgaon Sadar Police Station.

Sub-inspector of the police station Sajedul Islam Sarkar, who filed the case, said the student of a vocational institute shared a caricature of the prime minister on his Facebook "story". "Our OC saw the photo and thought that this can be considered disrespectful. So, he asked us to take action.

Facebook stories only last for 24 hours

Barrister Jyotirmoy criticised the filing of the case, saying that only the aggrieved party can file a case. "If this is a case of defamation, then the person being defamed needs to file the case. The aggrieved person in this case could be the prime minister," he said.

Yesterday, a 17-year-old student of class-XII was arrested in Thakurgaon for sharing a video clip criticising Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Bangladesh.

"The student studies at Eco Pathshala and College, and lives in a dormitory. We received the video clip from a source and it is already gaining some traction, so we promptly moved to arrest the student. When we went to raid his dormitory around 5:00pm, he went to the bathroom and deleted the clip," said OC Tanvirul.

The student was arrested later.

The video clip was doctored and edited by the student himself, claimed the OC, adding that the content was aimed at "inciting hatred against Modi".

Emphasising on the importance including identification and removal

# Pandemic pushed them below the line

FROM PAGE 1 Last month, a study by think-tank South Asian Network on Economic Modelling (SANEM) found that the poverty rate has doubled in two years.

The organisation interviewed 5,577 households countrywide last year, and found that 42 percent were below the poverty line. When the same group had been interviewed in 2018, the poverty rate was then 21.6 percent.

The poverty rate has not been this high in the last 15 years, data from the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics shows. In 2005, the poverty rate was 40 percent, a little less than what it was in 2020.

The poverty line cutoff used by SANEM for Dhaka's urban population was those with less than Tk 3,295 per capita monthly expenditure.

Alarmingly, among the households who became the "new poor" -- 51.2 percent were from the service sector.

"The people employed in the urban service sectors, in particular, were badly hit. A majority of the jobs in the urban service sector are informal and there is little job security in these engagements," said Dr Selim Raihan, executive director of SANEM and a professor at Dhaka University's economics department.

SANEM's data shows that of those from the service sector who went crashing through the poverty line, smallbusiness owners comprised the largest proportion -- 28.76 percent -- with the second largest chunk being drivers, who made up 19.73 percent of service-sector workers who lost their jobs.

This includes Abdus Sobhan who had a readymade clothes store in Mohakhali's Sattola slum

Before the pandemic, he led a good life -- he made Tk 25,000 every month in profits, lived with his wife and teenage daughter in a room in the slum that cost Tk 3,600 a month, and bought beef a few times a month because it is his daughter's favourite.

In the Sattola slum, a family that could regularly afford a protein upwards of Tk 600 per kilogramme is a family that is doing well.

From earning Tk 25,000 a month, Sobhan's three-member family is now down to an income of Tk 3,000-Tk 4,000 per month, bringing them below the poverty line.

Sobhan's downfall was steep -- from eating beef one month to officially being poor.

"I have given up my room, sent my family to the village, and moved into a shared mess. Whatever I earn goes into

food and lodging at the mess. I couldn't even send Tk 2,000 to my family in the last six months," said Sobhan.

"Initially I had been paying the store rent by selling the shop's things, but that too is finished. Now I have over four months in rent left."

To add salt to the wound, prior to the pandemic, he had accumulated Tk 1 lakh in loans.

"My future is dark. Nobody is loaning me money to buy capital. I can't get any more loans because I have no collateral to offer," Sobhan wept.

Of the new poor, day labourers made up 5.87 percent, rickshaw-pullers 4.67 percent, mechanics and delivery men 4.07 percent, tea sellers 3.77 percent, autorickshaw drivers 3.16 percent, and barbers comprised 2.26 percent.

Prior to the pandemic, Bashu Chandra Shil was the proud proprietor of Bhashantek Apurbo Gent's Parlor for the last seven years.

Each month, he counted Tk 35,000 in earnings and rented a small flat for Tk 12,000 per month for his wife and two children. His shop rent was Tk 5,000 a month.

During the shutdown last year, his barber's shop was completely closed. "Nobody wanted to get their hair cut for fear of coronavirus," said Shil, "but I had loans I needed to pay back and my lender was after me.

He had loaned Tk 50,000 at a 15 percent interest rate from the Bhashantek slum chairman's son, who is the local loan shark.

"I had not even been able to pay the rent for seven to eight months. In October, I was earning as little as Tk 50 a day," said Shil. This amounts to as little as Tk 1,500 a month to support his family of four.

Shil left Bhashantek slum in October last year. He is now working as a staff in a salon in a nearby satellite town and stays in a shared room, while his wife and kids took refuge in the village.

As the economy reopens, his daily earnings have risen to around Tk 200, but from being a successful proprietor, he nosedived to being a daily-rated employee.

#### SMALL BUSINESSES LEFT TO LANGUISH

Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) recently calculated an economic indicator called the "purchasing indicator called the "purchasing manager's index" (PMI), used to compare the performance of businesses across a time period.

They took into account new orders,

output, business activities, employment, backlog of works and stocks of purchases to calculate the performance of small, medium and large industries separately. Senior Research Fellow Towfiqul Islam Khan presented CPD's findings on February 15.

"No sign of recovery of micro and small-scale enterprises is discernible even almost one year after the pandemic had first struck in Bangladesh," he said.

'Production may have increased but private and public investment has not.

The researchers pointed out what the residents of the slum are saying -- that the poor unemployed have not received adequate support.

The small businesses, despite [the fact] that they are among the most affected sectors, haven't been adequately covered in the government's stimulus packages," said Dr Raihan of SANEM.

The larger fraction of the stimulus package announced for the SMEs by the government remained unutilised as most of the small businesses are outside of the formal banking process and there was no alternative mechanism for them.

Back at the slums -- while these indices may mean nothing to their residents, they sure do feel it in their bones

Thirty-nine-year-old Lipi Begum used to work as a cleaner for a real estate company. Her job was to scrub apartments following construction, and make them presentable for buyers. She also used to be a caretaker for some of their under-construction projects.

Last year, she lost this stable job which used to bring in Tk 9,000 a month. A single mom, Lipi lives with her mother and ninth-grader daughter in Mirpur's Chalantika slum.

Her daughter Khadija Akhter dropped out of school and got a job at a small clothing shop on January 1, but has not yet received a penny for her work.

Three years back, Lipi had taken loans worth Tk 2.5 lakh to erect six houses in the slum, and start her own tenancy business. With the money she was making from the rent, she managed to pay back Tk 1 lakh, but then a massive fire gutted the shanties in 2019. That still left her Tk 1.5 lakh in debt before the pandemic hit.

The lenders have forgiven the interest but how do I pay back the loans?" lamented Lipi, grieving, as her dreams went up in smoke.

There are widespread allegations that Shahidul had a feud with the Hindus of Noagaon village over fishing in a water body (Jolmohal) and he perpetrated the attack by gathering Hefajat supporters over an alleged Facebook post.

In January this year, Shahidul stopped the flow of water in the jolmohal and took the fish in it after pumping out the water. This seriously hampered agricultural work in Noagaon village, which was heavily dependent on the water.

Some villagers then lodged complaint with the upazila administration in this regard. The administration carried out a drive in the water body area on January 8.

Al-Muktadir Hossain, upazila nirbahi officer of Shalla, said some fishing equipment and machines were seized during the drive and the UP member was fined.

On Friday, police arrested 22 people in the two cases. They were sent to jail by a Sunamganj court, OC Nazmul of Shalla Police Station said.

Noagaon village came under the attack from Hefajat supporters on Wednesday, two days after a rally was organised by the Qawmi madrasabased Islamist organisation in nearby Derai upazila. Hefajat Amir Junayed Babunagari and Joint Secretary General Mamunul Haque attended the rally.

The mob launched the attack over a Facebook post allegedly made by a Hindu youth from Noagaon village. in the post, he allegedly criticised Mamunul.

The youth was arrested on Tuesday. RALLIES CANCELLED

In another development, the Sunamganj district administration yesterday held a meeting with the religious leaders from different organisations in the district and asked them not to organise any religious programmes for some days to avoid any untoward incident.

Following the meeting, two rallies, scheduled to be held today in Jamalganj and Dowarabazar upazilas, were cancelled by the organisers. Hefajat leader Mamunul was supposed to join the programmes as chief guest.