

**ASEAN-JUNTA
CONSENSUS**
Myanmar activists slam the
move, vow to continue protests
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The Daily Star

SECOND EDITION

www.thedailystar.net

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RAMADAN 13, 1442 HIRI

16 PAGES PRICE : Tk12.00



"The government will be forced to impose strict lockdown again if people do not follow health guidelines once public transport services are resumed..."
ROAD TRANSPORT AND BRIDGES MINISTER OBAIDUL QUADER



"Those who have received the first jab are concerned whether they would get the second dose in time."
JATIYA PARTY CHAIRMAN GM QUADER



"We were confident, our spirits were up after successfully tackling the first wave, but this storm has shaken the nation."
INDIAN PRIME MINISTER NARENDRA MODI ON COVID



Is Huji taking over Hefajat?

Investigations find Huji linked to recent Hefajat mayhem; Huji wants change in leadership

MOHAMMAD JAMIL KHAN and RASHIDUL HASAN

Banned militant outfit Harkat-ul-Jihad (Huji) is back, this time in the garb of Hefajat-e-Islam, according to intelligence reports of multiple agencies, including the police.

Huji was found to be involved in the three-day Hefajat mayhem that was carried out across the country from March 26 to March 28 "in protest against the visit of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi".

"It [the mayhem] was actually a planned activity of Huji," according to an official of an intelligence agency.

Talking to The Daily Star, several law enforcers investigating the mayhem said leaders of Huji, which was banned in 2005 following the grisly grenade attack on an Awami League rally that killed 22 people, from which Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina narrowly escaped, a year earlier, started to gather under the Hefajat umbrella. It managed to gain some control over the Qwami madrasa-based organisation recently.

The rapid transformation of Hefajat from an Islamic advocacy platform (of

madrasa teachers and students) to a political pressure group since 2013 drew a lot of radical Islamists outfits like Huji, JMB and Ansar al-Islam to join Hefajat and regroup within it.

Huji started to call the Hefajat shots when a number of its leaders managed to get posts in the recently-formed central committee of Hefajat. They instigated the recent violence that left at least 17 people dead, said the investigators.

"In our investigation, we have got evidence on Hefajat's links with militant outfits. A group of Afghanistan returnees along with some Jamaat-Shibir men became tagged with the religion-based organisation [Hefajat]," Mahub Alam, joint commissioner (Detective Branch) of Dhaka Metropolitan Police, told The Daily Star a couple of days ago.

Huji leaders are known as "Afghan fighters", officials of counterterrorism said.

The joint commissioner said this group (Afghan war returnees) alter the decision of top Hefajat leaders and it is them who mainly carry out subversive activities under the banner of Hefajat.

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Nazma sitting on a sidewalk of the capital's Minto Road with her young daughter on Saturday afternoon. While her husband, a day labourer, is away at work Nazma sells face masks to pedestrians -- a venture that has not been very successful during the relatively empty streets amid the "lockdown".

PHOTO:
FIROZ AHMED

Hefajat disbands central committee

Says its Amir Babunagari; Qawmi teachers, students to stay clear of politics, decides govt-recognised board of madrasas

RASHIDUL HASAN and MOHAMMAD JAMIL KHAN

The central committee of the Qawmi madrasa-based Hefajat-e Islam has been dissolved.

The announcement was made last night by the Islamist outfit's Amir, Junayed Babunagari, through a 1.24-minute video message.

"The committee has been dissolved on advice of some important members of the central committee," he said in the message from Hathazari madrasa in Chattogram.

The Hefajat Amir also said the organisation would run its activities through a convening committee in the coming days.

Hefajat has been under tremendous pressure from the government to restructure its central committee by removing from it those leaders involved in last month's mayhem in different parts of the country, several leaders of the outfit told this newspaper.

At least 17 people were killed as Hefajat men clashed with law enforcers in different parts of the country, especially in Brahmanbaria, from March 26 to 28 in protest of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit.

As of yesterday, 19 top Hefajat leaders and 879 activists were arrested across the country over the acts of violence.

Talking to reporters yesterday, Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan

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First jab of Covid vaccine suspended

Govt hopes to receive 1 lakh doses from Covax in May; another 20 lakh doses needed for second shots

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The government suspended administering the first dose of the coronavirus vaccine yesterday, just a day after the Indian government said there will not be another shipment of the vaccine to Bangladesh anytime soon.

A circular issued by the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS) about the suspension didn't mention when the authorities might resume administering the first dose.

In another development, the DGHS said it needs 20 lakh doses of the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine to continue providing people with their second jab.

"We asked Beximco to see if they can supply 20 lakh doses immediately," DGHS Director General Prof Abul Bashar

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Malls reopen, roads see heavier traffic

People in droves return to capital as lockdown eases

SHAHEEN MOLLAH and MUNTAKIM SAAD

As the government allowed shops and shopping malls to reopen their doors for shoppers amid the "lockdown", a significant rise in public and vehicular movement was seen on the roads yesterday, with heavy traffic congestion in some areas of the capital.

At the same time, many people were seen returning to Dhaka from their districts through the entry points -- Babu Bazar, Amin Bazar Bridge and Tongi Bridge areas. Two ferry terminals on the Padma river saw large crowds from southern districts, ignoring the risks of contracting coronavirus while travelling.

After 11 consecutive days, shops and shopping malls reopened yesterday.

Shopkeepers said the number of customers was low yesterday, as many people have gone back to their village homes. The owners think that crowds will get bigger once public transport resumes.

Visiting some major shopping malls and markets in the capital like New Market, Chandni Chowk, Gausia, Noor Mansion, Bashundhara City Shopping Mall, Shah Ali Shopping Complex, and Mirpur Muktiyoddha Supermarket, this correspondent found many shoppers pouring into the shops from 10:00am onwards due to the upcoming Eid-ul-Fitr.

However, an ongoing ban on public transport created an inconvenience for both shop owners, workers, and consumers.

People were seen travelling on rickshaws, three-wheelers, and even

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Border with India shut for 14 days

Govt declares amid worries over Covid surge; trade will go on

MOUJIB AHMED SUJAN and PORIMOL PALMA

After the recommendation of the health directorate, the government yesterday shut down the border with India from today amid tensions over huge surge in Covid-19 cases in the neighbouring country.

Passengers travel from India to Bangladesh via land will remain suspended from today for 14 days, said Foreign Minister AK Abdul Momen.

Already, air travel between India and Bangladesh has been suspended since April 14 with the beginning of second wave of Covid-19 from the second week of March in Bangladesh.

"We are closing it [border] for passengers for the time-being, but trading will continue," he told The Daily Star yesterday.

The decision came in an inter-ministerial meeting chaired by Foreign Secretary Masud Bin Momen. Top officials from the Prime

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RCC mayor sues journo under DSA

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Dinajpur

Rangpur City Corporation mayor filed a case against a journalist under the Digital Security Act for making remarks against him on social media.

RCC Mayor Mostafizar Rahman Mostafa lodged the case with Kotwali Police Station on Saturday night against Ratan Sarkar, Rangpur correspondent of Somoy Television.

Two days ago, Ratan made a Facebook post against the mayor, bringing some allegations against him.

In the post, he said the mayor could buy some dishonest journalists of Rangpur Press Club and try to kill him. Ratan vowed that he would not let anyone indulge in irregularities.

Recently, Ratan was involved in conflict with journalists in Rangpur.

A journalist in Rangpur allegedly beat up Ratan last week. Ratan ran a report against 10 journalists in Rangpur.

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Shopkeepers sitting outside their stores in the capital's New Market, waiting for customers yesterday afternoon. On the first day that shopping malls were allowed to stay open amid the restrictions to curb the spread of Covid-19, business was slow at the usually bustling New Market. Inset, shoppers going through the disinfection arch and having their temperatures checked before entering Bashundhara City Shopping Complex on Panthapath.

PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN AND PALASH KHAN

NEWS ANALYSIS

FOOD GRAINS

Govt paid no heed as stock plunged

PINAKI ROY

It was obvious that the price of rice would increase amid the pandemic. No special expertise was required to see it coming.

But the government did not take any effective measure to stock up on food grains or regulate the price of rice.

Experts suggested keeping at least 12.5 lakh tonnes of grains in stock. But the stock has now fallen to around four lakh tonnes.

This unusually low level is the least since the stock of 2.8 lakh tonnes in 2008, the year following super cyclone Sidr.

Last season, the country's total demand of food grains was 3.58 crore tonne.

In other words, the national demand is around 30 lakh tonnes of food grains per month. But our current public food grains storage capacity is only 19 lakh tonnes. The government is building five more warehouses and, once complete, the storage capacity of public food grains will reach 24 lakh tonnes.

If the government wanted to feed all of the country from its public storage, the stocks would not last even for three weeks.

The government does not store food grains to meet the demands of the entire nation.

The public food storage serves two main purposes -- to support the government's safety net programmes like Vulnerable Group Feeding (VGF) and Food for Work, providing for people in the wake of natural disasters and to intervene in the local market to control food prices when necessary.

If the hoarders create artificial scarcity and raise the

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