



The unmanned level crossing at Bou Bazar Monshapara village in Nilphamari Sadar upazila. Four people including three siblings were crushed under a running train on December 8 on this spot, however, it still lies unsafe and unguarded.

PHOTO: STAR

UNMANNED LEVEL CROSSING

Four deaths in a week fail to draw attention of BR

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Nilphamari

Even after the deaths of four people including three siblings, who were crushed under the wheels of a running train on December 8 at an unmanned level crossing at Bou Bazar Monshapara on Darwani-Nilphamari road in Sadar upazila, the authorities concerned are in slumber as the level crossing still lies unguarded.

No visible steps have yet to be taken regarding the accident prone level crossing on Parbatipur-Chilahati route, under the west zone.

The accident occurred as the victims had been staying on the rail tracks adjacent to their houses and

could not notice the approaching train as the train driver did not blow the whistle either due to the absence of a rail gate and a gateman, said the locals.

Railways Minister Nurul Islam Sujon visited the victims' families on December 11 and provided financial assistance to them. He also declared to give the victims' families land and brick built house under Ashrayan-2 project as they had been living on railways' land beside rail tracks.

Many residents of the village including Abdur Razzaque (40) said that during the minister's visit, they urged him to set up rail gates at the crossing and appoint a gateman.

On a recent visit to the spot, it was found that everyday thousands of people and various vehicles cross the level crossing taking risks.

Railways authorities seemed to have finished their duty just by hanging signboards on both sides of the crossing asking pedestrians to cross it carefully at their own risks.

Kofil Mamud (70), a resident of the village, said the accident on December 8 happened as the train driver had not blown whistle and it only happened because of the absence of a guarded level crossing on the spot.

Sirajul Islam (60), another local, said that six people have been crushed under running trains

in the last couple of years near the crossing but it still lies unsafe.

Abdul Jabbar, a local UP member, said that they would file a mass petition demanding construction of a rail gate and deployment of a gateman in the crossing.

Inspector of Works Pakshi division of BR's West Zone Tohidul Islam said that on the 65-kilometre-long rail line in Parbatipur-Chilahati section, there are 41 authorised crossings and of them, 15 are open and process is on to construct rail gates on 10 rail crossings. However, he didn't specify whether this one at Bou Bazar Monsha para point is included in the list.

Cold, dense fog disrupt life in two northern districts

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Lalmonirhat

Bone-chilling cold hit the people hard in Lalmonirhat and Kurigram as people in the two northern districts experienced the lowest temperature of this season yesterday.

Moreover, mild cold wave accompanied by thick fog have been disrupting the normal life in the bordering districts, close to the Himalayas.

Normal life has almost come to a standstill due to the mild cold wave and dense fog.

Subal Chandra Roy, temperature record keeper in Kurigram's Rajarhat Met Office, said the lowest temperature was recorded 10.5 degree Celsius at 8:00am yesterday.

People living in the Brahmaputra, Dudhkumar, Gangadhar, Teesta and Dharla river basin areas, especially low-income group people, are the worst sufferers.

Day labourers, farm workers cannot go out of home for work due to the adverse weather.

The cold has intensified as the sun is not seen throughout the day. As a result, the entire area is covered with thick fog.

Vehicles are seen moving with their headlights on even in the day time.

Due to the cold wave, dense fog and absence of sunlight sufferings of the cold-hit people, especially children and the

elderly ones, have increased this winter.

Ahela Bewa, 58, of Char Kalmati in Lalmonirhat Sadar upazila said the cold-hit people in the area are compelled to rely on fire, generated from burning straws, as they do not have sufficient winter clothes.

People in groups warm themselves in the heat from burning straws and other waste materials in a bid to combat the ongoing cold spell, she added.

Delwar Hossain, 62, a farmer from Shimulbari village in Kurigram's Phulbari upazila said it is very difficult for the farmers to continue their work in the field due to the adverse weather for the last few days.

Sometimes they have to leave the cropland as it is hard to continue their work for hours due to the severe cold, he said.

People living in the char areas are the worst sufferer in the winter as most of them can't afford to buy warm clothes due to poverty.

Meanwhile, people belonging to the low-income people are seen buying winter clothes at a low prices in different makeshift shops in the town.

Day labourer Afar Rahman of Char Sardob village in Kurigram Sadar upazila said taking advantage of the adverse weather many shopkeepers are charging higher price.

Buildings tilt as CDA digs canal

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However, Newton Das, deputy assistant director of Chattogram Fire Service and Civil Defence, said only one three-storey building and a temple tilted due to the canal excavation in the city's Majirhat area.

"We have urged locals to leave the area as it becomes riskier," fire service official said.

Around 1:30pm yesterday, hundreds gathered in the area to protest the CDA continuing with their canal excavation work.

Locals alleged that the CDA did not stop their work even after the houses and the temple tilted.

Swapon Das, a resident of one of the buildings, said, "CDA didn't stop their work even after our houses and the temple became tilted."

"We have been living here from the

British era. We have land documents. I have constructed the building around two years ago with the approval from CDA," said Swapon Das, who showed this correspondent documents.

"When we protested, CDA people threatened us," said Punom Das, another resident of the affected area.

Kolpona Das, an elderly woman who was part of the protest, said, "They have damaged our houses. This is injustice. The government should protect us."

Kazi Hasan Bin Shams chief engineer of CDA, said, "The owner of the buildings have illegally occupied the land. We will take stern action against them."

Ahmed Moinuddin, executive engineer and canal excavating project director of CDA, did not answer his phone despite several attempts to reach him.

Being elected

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Commission ends in around 55 days, adding that the commission was taking the challenge of holding the sixth phase of UP polls using EVMs at every polling centre on January 31.

Earlier in the meeting, Mahub asked law enforcers and election officials to properly maintain the electoral code of conduct and make sure the constituents can vote for the candidates of their choosing and safely return home.

Biden

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The clip also shows Biden throwing a ball for the new dog, who later enters the White House led on a leash by Biden, alongside his wife Jill.

The new arrival is certainly a welcome distraction for the president, whose approval rating has dropped in recent weeks and is staring down a rejection of his signature social spending bill amid a surge in Covid-19 cases.

The White House has given no further details on Commander.

He is the third dog to join the Bidens at the White House. They had revived the long-standing tradition of White House pets that was broken under former president Donald Trump, when they arrived at the White House with German shepherds Champ and Major.

The president and first lady announced in June on Twitter that Champ had died at age 13.

Their other pooch, Major, has had some trouble adapting to life at the White House.

In March, he was briefly sent back to the Biden family home in Delaware after at least one biting incident, and in April the first lady's spokesman announced some "additional training" for the dog.

Joe Biden attributed Major's un-presidential behavior to the way he gets surprised by Secret Service agents and others appearing around every corner in the busy White House complex.

Migrants may start leaving

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service charges for Bangladeshi recruiting agencies, he said.

He, however, said he was hopeful that the migration cost this time would be significantly less.

Earlier, most part of the migration cost, set at maximum Tk 1.60 lakh, was supposed to be borne by the employer, he said.

Unfortunately, those were paid by the workers, he added.

As per the deal, the expatriates' welfare ministry will send a list of all licensed Bangladeshi recruiting agencies to the Malaysian government, said Ahmed Munir Saleheen, secretary of the ministry.

The MoU signed by Imran Ahmad and his Malaysian counterpart will be in effect until December 2026.

It will end a freeze of more than three years on Bangladeshi workers' recruitment

in Malaysia.

Under the new MoU, the costs that employers would cover include the service charge for the Malaysian recruiting agencies, travel to and from Malaysia, and accommodation, according to the expatriates' welfare ministry.

Moreover, employers will cover the immigration, visa, medical test, insurance, Covid-19 test, and quarantine fees in Malaysia, it said.

The Malaysian recruiting agencies would be a new inclusion in the labour-sending process as previous recruitments were done by Bangladeshi agencies.

Briefing media, Imran Ahmad said all sectors in Malaysia would be open for hiring Bangladeshi workers, adding that they have learnt that Malaysia was in need of six to seven lakh workers at present.

PM leaves

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during the visit.

The four proposed deeds are Agreement on Avoidance of Double Taxation and Prevention of Fiscal Evasion with respect to Taxes on Income; Agreement on the Transfer of Prisoners; MoU in the areas of Healthcare and Medical Sciences between Bangladesh and Maldives (renewal); MoU between Bangladesh and Maldives on Cooperation in the area of youth and sports development.

Besides, the MoU on Recruitment of Qualified Health Professionals between Bangladesh and the Maldives will be renewed.

During the visit, Bangladesh will gift 13 military vehicles to the Maldives as a token of friendship between the two South Asian nations, according to the foreign ministry.

On December 23, Prime minister Sheikh Hasina will be formally received by Maldivian President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih at the Presidential Palace.

She will be given a guard of honour there.

The prime minister will have a bilateral meeting with the Maldivian President to discuss various issues.

After the meeting, the officials concerned of the two countries will sign the instruments in the presence of the Bangladesh Prime Minister and the Maldivian president.

A joint statement will be issued between the two countries while the two leaders will jointly appear in front of the media.

The prime minister is scheduled to reach Dhaka on December 27.

Libya minister arrested over lack of school textbooks

AFP, Tripoli

Libya's education minister was arrested on Monday as part of an enquiry into a lack of schoolbooks, the prosecution service said.

Moussa al-Megarief "was placed in preventative detention pending an investigation into (possible) negligence", it said in a statement.

Tortured in India for ransom

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they were tortured to realise ransom amounting to Tk 15 to Tk 20 lakh from each.

"The traffickers captured video of the torture while issuing death threats and sent the clips to the victims' family members to compel them to send the demanded ransom. Those who provided the money are released."

Pal had admitted sending three men -- Billal Hossain, Robin Hossain and Shaheen Khan of Nawabganj -- to India last year promising them to send to Portugal and Malta. They returned home from India after six months after paying a ransom.

However, an individual named Jahangir

from Shariatpur was recently able to escape from their clutches and return home.

Jahangir informed Rab-4 of his ordeal, which began when he met Selim and Mollik in 2019. The duo demanded Tk 34 lakh for sending Jahangir to Australia and his nephew Akash to the Netherlands.

On October 10, 2019, Jahangir paid them Tk 14 lakh.

Then in December last year, the gang took Jahangir and Akash to India on forged visas and started torturing them in confinement. Their family paid the gang Tk 9.5 lakh more during confinement, where Akash remains.

Rab investigated the case and finally arrested the trio, who have five to seven other associates, Haque said.

WHO sounds warning

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immunity vaccinations may prevent infection and disease.

While the antibody defences from some actions have been undermined, there has been hope that T-cells, the second pillar of an immune response, can prevent severe disease by attacking infected human cells.

WHO expert Abdi Mahamud added: "Although we are seeing a reduction in the neutralisation antibodies, almost all preliminary analysis shows T-cell mediated immunity remains intact, that is what we really require."

However, highlighting how little is known about how to handle the new variant that was only detected last month, Swaminathan also said: "Of course there is a challenge, many of the monoclonals will not work with Omicron."

She gave no details as she referred to the treatments that mimic natural antibodies in fighting off infections. Some drug makers have suggested the same.

In the short term, Tedros said that holiday festivities would in many places lead to "increased cases, overwhelmed health systems and more deaths" and urged people to postpone gatherings.

"An event cancelled is better than a life cancelled," he said.

But the WHO team also offered some hope to a weary world facing the new wave that 2022 would be the year that the pandemic, which already killed more than 5.6 million people worldwide, would end.

It pointed towards the development of second and third generation vaccines, and the further development of antimicrobial treatments and other innovations.

"(We) hope to consign this disease to a relatively mild disease that is easily prevented, that is easily treated," Mike Ryan, the WHO's top emergency expert, told the briefing.

"If we can keep virus transmission to minimum, then we can bring the pandemic to an end."

However, Tedros also said China, where the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus was first detected at the end of 2019, must be forthcoming with data and information related to its origin to help the response going forward.

"We need to continue until we know the origins, we need to push harder because we should learn from what happened this time in order to (do) better in the future," Tedros said.

Dhaka urges sanctions

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promote human rights are still increasing their trade with Myanmar. In the last four years, their business with Myanmar has increased manifold.

Bangladesh has sheltered Rohingyas since the 1970s when they fled persecution by Myanmar authorities.

Effective pressures including economic sanctions on Myanmar prompted it to take back Rohingyas in the past, but despite agreements with Myanmar since the largest influx of 750,000 Rohingyas in 2017, there has not been any repatriation.

Apart from putting pressure, the friendly countries and UN agencies need to work to create conducive conditions in Rakhine, he said.

Asked, Brig Gen (ret'd) M Sakhawat Hussain -- a security expert and former election commissioner -- said generally western countries impose sanctions.

If the US imposes such sanctions on arms supplies, it will surely be a blow to Myanmar as many of the countries will not be able to do money transactions with it, he said.

Also, having a coalition of friends is a good idea because a number of countries, including Bangladesh, Pakistan, Malaysia, Thailand, Saudi Arabia, Canada and the Netherlands face problems due to the influx of Rohingya refugees. They can surely form a coalition and work globally to address the crisis.

If Bangladesh wants repatriation of the Rohingyas, it needs to explore different avenues including establishing contacts with the National Unity Government

(elected government leaders) and the Arakan Army that is trying to establish autonomy in Rakhine State.

Prof Imtiaz Ahmed of International Relations (IR) Department of Dhaka University suggested engaging China, India and Japan, the major regional players, more vigorously for Rohingya repatriation.

"These countries can play a key role," he said at the seminar.

He said the western countries had not imposed sanctions on Myanmar for so long as they tried to promote democracy under Aung San Suu Kyi, but now the country is under a military regime and more than a thousand civilians were killed by the military since February.

Major economic sanction is the only way to put pressure on Myanmar, he said.

Prof Delwar Hossain of the international department of Dhaka University said Myanmar has been conducting atrocities against and ethnic cleansing of many ethnic groups for decades, but the global community has not been serious about it.

He suggested that the UNGA include the issue of sanctions in its resolution on Myanmar.

He also said the global civil society has been focused on the situation of Rohingyas in Bangladesh, but not the persecution in Myanmar and it is high time the international community shifts its eyes on Myanmar.

UNDP Resident Representative Sudepto Mukherjee and Bhorer Kagoj Editor Shyamal Dutta also spoke at the event, among others.

Another deadline likely to be

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Work for the revival of another interchange -- Shahbajpur-Mahishasan -- is underway.

To open a new interchange between Akhaura and Agartala, the Executive Committee of the National Economic Council in August 2016 approved the 477.81-crore project. Of the amount, Bangladesh will provide Tk 57.05 crore while the rest will come from India as grant.

The rail link is expected to open up markets of India's north-eastern states for Bangladesh, enhance smooth transportation of goods and facilitate people to people contact. The connectivity will also reduce transport cost and save time.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina recently said, "We have to enhance the connectivity. Everything [required establishment] of Akhaura-Agartala rail route remains there. It just needs to reopen."

She said this while Indian High Commissioner Vikram Kumar Doraiswami called on her at the Gono Bhavan on November 30.

The project titled "Akhaura-Agartala Rail Link" was supposed to be completed within December 2018. But Bangladesh Railway managed to sign a contract with an Indian company on May 21, 2018, just six months before the expiry of the original deadline, for the construction.

But project officials in a meeting on

November 25 this year, which was the preparatory to Monday's meeting, said the project is running on the third time-extension due to slow work progress and the Covid-19 situation.

The construction work remained halted from March to June 2020 due to Covid lockdown and the work was again hampered when the government imposed a lockdown in April this year, show the meeting documents.

"At present, the pace of the work at the field level is very slow," read the documents.

Thailand halts

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of local transmission of the Omicron variant.

It also came weeks after the country reopened to foreign visitors in November, ending nearly 18 months of strict entry policies that contributed to a collapse in tourism, a key industry and economic driver that drew 40 million visitors in 2019.

About 200,000 visitors who had previously registered for the quarantine waiver and "sandbox" programme will still be eligible, said government spokesman Thanakorn Wangboonkongchana.

"This is not to shut off tourists but to temporarily suspend arrivals," he said.

The decision will be reviewed on January 4, he added.