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# Tortured in India for ransom

Rab arrests 3 traffickers who promised victims jobs in Europe, Australia

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Rapid Action Battalion (Rab) yesterday said it has arrested three human traffickers who lured people with promises of lucrative jobs in Australia and Europe and trafficked them to India, where they were tortured in captivity for ransom.

Mollik Rezaul Haque alias Selim, 62; Bulbul Ahmed Mollik, 55; and Niranjan Pal, 51, were arrested on Monday from the capital's Pallabi and Uttara.

Selim was the 'ringleader', while Mollik and Pal were his associates, said Mozammel Haque, commanding officer of Rab-4, told The Daily Star.

Fake passports, forged visas, applications and other documents relating to trafficking were found during their arrest.

The arrestees, who previously lived in the Middle East, Malaysia and Romania, admitted to trafficking more than 100 victims to India over the years, according to Haque.

Their gang is active at different places in Dhaka, Feni, Cumilla, Shariatpur and Madaripur.

They target people looking for jobs abroad. They would solicit Tk 12 to 15 lakh with the promise of jobs in Australia, the Netherlands or Portugal, Haque said.

The job seekers were taken to India by legal or illegal ways via road or air on the pretext that it was 'easier' to get a visa from India, Haque told The Daily Star.

Once the jobseekers reached India, the gang's members confined them in safe houses in Kolkata and Delhi, where

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Women, including one carrying an infant, go over the median barrier in front of the Shaheed Suhrawardy Medical College Hospital to cross the Mirpur Road yesterday. The horizontal shadow seen on the road surface is of the footbridge that is just above them.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

**BUSINESS**

## 'Data blindness' could tarnish country's image: CPD

Policymakers in Bangladesh fail to understand the importance of having accurate financial and economic data even though these statistics are needed now more than ever, said a noted economist yesterday. The country's looming graduation to a developing nation has increased the demand for such information a hundred-fold, said Debapriya Bhattacharya, a distinguished fellow of the Centre for Policy Dialogue. "Although the matter has been acknowledged verbally, there is no evidence that adequate measures are being taken," he said, terming the situation as "data blindness".

STORY ON B1

# Migrants may start leaving for Malaysia by January

Says expats minister

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The government hopes to start sending workers to Malaysia by January.

"My expectation is that it [worker-sending] will start in three days, but I know it's not possible... Hopefully, we should be able to work by January," Expatriates' Welfare Minister Imran Ahmad said yesterday.

The minister said this while briefing the media on his recent visit to Malaysia at the Prabashi Kalyan Bhaban in the capital.

During the visit, the two countries signed a memorandum of understanding on labour cooperation in Kuala Lumpur on Sunday.

While employers, as per the MoU, will bear costs incurred at the Malaysian end to recruit Bangladeshi workers, the minister said, adding that the workers would have to pay costs for a few things such as passport fees in Bangladesh.

Besides, they would have to pay Wage Earners' Welfare Board membership, Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training (BMET) registration fees, and

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# AKHAURA-AGARTALA RAIL LINK PROJECT

## Another deadline likely to be missed

TUHIN SHUBHRA ADHIKARY

Already three years behind schedule, the Akhaura-Agartala dual-gauge railway link project is likely to miss its current deadline of June 2022 too.

The Bangladesh government in August 2016 approved the project to improve rail connectivity and boost trade between Bangladesh and India.

Deadline of the project -- being implemented at the cost of Tk 477.8 crore, most of it from India as grant -- has been revised thrice and the current deadline is June next year.

But the project, under which a 14.26km dual-gauge rail line would be constructed, is likely to miss the deadline again as it saw only 50 percent physical progress until November this year.

The project witnessed only 5 percent progress in the last 20 months since March last year, when the pandemic hit the country, documents show.

Against the backdrop, the project steering committee, comprised of officials from both the countries, held its 7th meeting on Monday to discuss how to speed up the work and other related issues.

The Indian officials, in the virtual meeting, even proposed replacing the project contractor with another Indian contractor to accelerate the work, meeting sources said. But the Bangladesh side did not make any decision as they would require consent from the high-ups, they said.

Contacted yesterday, Project Director Shubaktogin, however, said he would be able to make comments once he receives meeting minutes.

### PROJECT, DELAY

There were eight railway interchanges between Bangladesh and India until India-Pakistan war in 1965.

To improve the connectivity between the two countries, governments of Bangladesh and India have already revived five interchanges -- Benapole-Petrapole, Darshana-Gede, Rohanpur-Singabadh, Biral-Radhikarpur and Chilahati-Haldibari.

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# PM leaves for Male today

UNB, Dhaka

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina will leave Dhaka for Male today on a six-day official visit at the invitation of Maldivian President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih.

"A special VVIP flight of Biman Bangladesh Airlines carrying Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and her entourage will depart Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport around 12:00pm," said PM's Press Secretary Ihsanul Karim yesterday.

The flight is scheduled to reach Male, the capital of the Maldives, at 3:00pm where she will be received by the Maldivian state minister for foreign affairs.

According to the foreign ministry, four instruments, including two Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) on health, education, transfers of prisoners and avoidance of dual taxation, are likely to be signed

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# Biden introduces new first pup, 'Commander'



AFP, Washington

A welcome, furry distraction from political morass and flagging approval ratings has arrived at the White House, with Joe Biden introducing the residence's newest inhabitant Monday -- a German shepherd puppy named "Commander."

"Welcome to the White House, Commander," Biden tweeted along with a photo of the pup running with a tennis ball in his mouth.

The Democrat then shared a video introducing the US public to "the newest Biden."

In the clip, the US commander-in-chief walks over to the four-legged Commander, saying, "Hey, pal."

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# Being elected unopposed cannot be encouraged

Says Mahbub Talukdar  
STAFF CORRESPONDENT, Ctg

Election win without any competition should not be encouraged in a democracy, Election Commissioner Mahbub Talukdar said yesterday.

"A culture of being elected uncontested has developed," he told reporters at Chattogram Circuit House after a meeting with law enforcers.

"We will have to think whether we can get rid of this trend by changing the electoral process," he said.

The meeting was held ahead of the fourth phase of the union parishad polls to be held in 840 union parishads on December 26.

A total of 352 chairmen and 1,205 members are being "elected" unopposed in the union parishad polls.

Mahbub said the tenure of the Election

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# Buildings tilt as CDA digs canal in Ctg

SANJOY KUMAR BARUA

Three buildings and five tin-roofed houses were evacuated in Majirghat area of Chattogram yesterday hours after they tilted to one side amid the excavation work of a nearby canal.

The structures, including a Hindu temple, tilted on Monday night as the Chattogram Development Authority was digging the Gulzar canal, said Shakhawat Hossain, officer-in-charge of Sadarghat Police Station.

"We have deployed police forces in the area and urged locals to evacuate the damaged buildings and houses," the OC said.

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Five buildings tilted while the Chattogram Development Authority was dredging the Gulzar canal in the port city's Majir Ghat area yesterday. Later, they started knocking down the establishments, which enraged locals who took to the streets.

PHOTO: RAJIB RAIHAN

# FAST-SPREADING OMICRON WHO sounds warning

Urges people to postpone gatherings as the Covid variant evading some immune responses

REUTERS, Geneva

The Omicron variant of the coronavirus is spreading faster than the Delta variant and is causing infections in people already vaccinated or who have recovered from the Covid-19 disease, the head of the World Health Organization (WHO) said.

WHO chief scientist Soumya Swaminathan added it would be "unwise" to conclude from early evidence that Omicron was a milder variant than previous ones.

"... with the numbers going up, all health systems are going to be under strain," Soumya Swaminathan told Geneva-based journalists on Monday evening.

The variant is successfully evading some immune responses, she said, meaning that the booster programmes being rolled out in many countries ought to be targeted towards people with weaker immune systems.

"There is now consistent evidence that Omicron is spreading significantly faster than the Delta variant," WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus told the briefing.

"And it is more likely people vaccinated or recovered from Covid-19 could be infected or re-infected," Tedros said.

Their comments echoed the finding of study by Imperial College London, which said last week the risk of reinfection was more than five times higher and it has shown no sign of being milder than Delta.

WHO officials said however that other forms of

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**PRAYER TIMING DECEMBER 22**

Fajr Zohr Asr Maghrib Esha

AZAN 5:25 12:45 3:45 5:24 7:00

JAMAAT 6:00 1:15 4:00 5:27 7:30

SOURCE: ISLAMIC FOUNDATION