

**AFGHANISTAN CRISIS**  
German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock says the country is "heading into the worst humanitarian catastrophe of our time"  
**SEE PAGE 12**

# The Daily Star

SECOND EDITION



REGD. NO. DA 781

VOL. XXXI No. 334

POUSH 10, 1428 BS

Your Right to Know

JAMADIUL AWAL 20, 1443 HIJRI

16 PAGES PRICE : Tk12.00



"The government has to step down before the constitution of the Election Commission. Elections should be held under a neutral government."  
BNP SECRETARY GENERAL MIRZA FAKHRUL ISLAM ALAMGIR



"There is still a wonderful thing you can give your family and the whole country... and that is to get that jab."  
BORIS JOHNSON URGES PUBLIC TO GET VACCINATED ON CHRISTMAS



"I remind you of what our adversaries have been saying for centuries: Russia cannot be defeated, it can only be destroyed from within."  
VLADIMIR PUTIN DEFENDS CRACKDOWN ON KREMLIN CRITICS

## TRAGEDY STRIKES MIDRIVER

At least 40 lives lost as flames engulf launch on Dhaka-Barguna route; over a hundred injured, many missing; engine room source of blaze, fire officials say



Rescuers on boats recover bodies from the ill-fated MV Abhijan-10 in Punabalia of Jhalakathi yesterday morning, hours after a devastating fire raged through the launch, bound for Barguna from Dhaka, in the Sugandha river. The blaze left at least 40 people dead and over 100 injured.

PHOTO: TITU DAS

STAR REPORT

The engine of MV Abhijan-10 developed problems a few hours after it left Dhaka for Barguna around 6:00pm on Thursday. The staffers of the launch tried to fix it, but kept the vessel going with more than a thousand people on board. The passengers noticed the engine behaving erroneously. Little did they know that this would lead to a massive tragedy, claiming at least 40 lives. The people on the bottom floor of the vessel felt everything getting hot nearly half an hour after it left Barishal Launch Terminal around 1:30am yesterday. Most of the passengers were asleep in the cabins and on the decks, but those on the bottom deck were the first to feel extreme heat.

Soon, they saw flames emanating from the engine room and those on the roof saw fire churning out of the exhaust pipe when the vessel was around a kilometre off Jhalakathi Launch Terminal. Instead of stopping at the terminal, the master kept going forward on the Sugandha river until an explosion caused a huge fire around 2:00am. The launch was in Charkathi area of Jhalakathi Sadar upazila at the time. Frenzied passengers started screaming and running while many jumped into the cold water as the fire raged on for about three hours. The deadly blaze reduced the vessel to a skeleton, leaving over 100 with burn injuries with scores remaining missing -- authorities could not say how many. Kamal Uddin Bhuiyan, deputy director of Fire Service in Barishal told The Daily Star yesterday midnight that 39

bodies were recovered in Jhalakathi. Besides, SM Ayub Hossain, resident physician of Sheikh Hasina National Institute of Burn and Plastic Surgery in Dhaka, said a victim identified as Habib Khan, 45, died at 11:45pm while undergoing treatment at the facility. Nearly two dozen passengers with severe burns were undergoing treatment at different hospitals in Dhaka and Barishal. Jhalakathi Deputy Commissioner Md Zohor Ali said it may require DNA tests to identify some bodies as those were charred beyond recognition. Fire service officials could not ascertain the exact reason of the blaze immediately but survivors said the fire originated in the engine room and soon engulfed the vessel as barrels of fuel were kept over a major portion in the

SEE PAGE 2 COL 3

## Search for the loved ones



Harun Mia can't find his daughter, grandson.

STAR REPORT

Putul Begum, from Dhaka's Madartek, boarded the MV Abhijan-10 on Thursday evening to go on holiday to her sister's home in Barguna along with eight family members. Little did they know that this joyous journey would soon turn into a gruesome nightmare. In the early hours of Friday, a heavy flame and screams of frenzied passengers shook the deck of the vessel. When Putul woke up, parts of her body were already burnt. With their lives at stake, jumping into the water seemed to be the most obvious choice. She jumped into the Sugandha river. So did the others. As she was recounting the horror at Barishal's Sher-e-Bangla Medical College Hospital yesterday evening, five of her family members were still missing. She was travelling with her two children, husband, mother, two brothers, the wife of one of the brothers, and their child. Speaking to The Daily Star, she said they were all sleeping on the first floor of the vessel. "Suddenly I heard a scream and saw the massive flame. I jumped into the river and others did the same. Later, I was rescued and brought to the hospital," she said. Her 65-year-old mother Monowara, sons Jibon, 12, and Emon, 5, sister-in-law Ruma, 20, and her five-year-old son Ahon were still untraced till filing of this report around 7:00pm. Putul's husband Rashed was sent to Dhaka for better treatment.

SEE PAGE 2 COL 3

### THE BURNING LAUNCH



PHOTO: COLLECTED

## Chaos and cries

Sher-e-Bangla hospital struggles to cope with sudden arrival of patients wounded in launch fire with its burn unit closed for two years

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Barishal

The air was heavy with the cries of wounded men, women and children at the surgery ward of Sher-e-Bangla Medical College Hospital in Barishal yesterday. A sudden rush of injured patients, their relatives, visitors and journalists to the hospital made the environment chaotic. Most of the injured passengers of MV

Abhijan-10 were undergoing treatment in the hospital corridors due to the increased number of patients. As of filing this report last evening, 70 passengers with burn injuries were admitted to the hospital. Two of them were receiving treatment at the intensive care unit while at least 10 were referred to Dhaka for better treatment. According to hospital sources, 18 patients were

SEE PAGE 2 COL 1



**GREETINGS**  
The Daily Star wishes its valued readers, patrons, well-wishers and advertisers a **MERRY Christmas**

### Christmas today

BSS, Dhaka  
Today is Christmas, the birthday of Jesus Christ. Christians of Bangladesh and across the world will celebrate the day amid festivity and religious fervour. They will celebrate the day by offering special prayers, illuminating churches and putting Christmas trees at homes, places of worship and missions. Elderly people of the community, attired in the outfit of Santa Claus, distribute gifts among children.

SEE PAGE 2 COL 5



## World welcomes Christmas amid pandemic blues

Vaccines, pills and data offer some cheer in face of Omicron advance

AGENCIES

Omicron's rise has heralded another pandemic-tinged Christmas for billions, with Santa's arrival and longed-for family reunions overshadowed by the prospect of yet more Covid restrictions. Festive jokes about reindeer having "herd immunity" and millions isolating "Home Alone" may be wearing thin, but the emergence of the ultra-infectious Omicron variant means the pandemic isn't going anywhere. For a second straight year, surging infections have complicated yuletide plans from Sydney to Seville. In Bethlehem -- the city Christians believe was Jesus' birthplace -- hoteliers expecting an influx of tourists have been disappointed. After a near-total pandemic lockdown last year, Israel's borders are again closed. This year, like last, midnight mass in the city on Christmas Eve will be reserved for a small circle of people by invitation only. In Europe, governments are reimposing misery-inducing safety measures that are draining the fun from Christmas for many. The Netherlands is back in lockdown while Spain and Italy have made wearing masks compulsory outdoors. And with the United Kingdom recording a record high number of Covid-19 infections on Thursday, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson suggested getting a vaccine booster shot as a Christmas gift for relatives. Still, Christmas gatherings will be easier than a year ago in many other places around the world.

SEE PAGE 2 COL 1