

275 New cases in 24hrs

15,82,985 Total cases

28,056 Deaths

15,47,180 Recoveries

5,411,925 Deaths

279,499,318 Total cases

# Adolescents to get Covid jabs in India from Jan 3

## At-risk adults to get boosters

AFP, New Delhi

India will open its Covid vaccination drive for adolescents and start administering booster doses to its at-risk adult population, Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced yesterday. The highly-infectious Omicron variant has gained a foothold in the country, and the health ministry has raised concerns about its onward spread. "Omicron is a matter of discussion right now," Modi said. "After looking at global developments and examining the last 11 months of our Covid-19 vaccination drive, our scientists have taken key decisions today," he said in his national address. It is time to be "careful and cautious", he added, announcing that vaccines will be available for children aged 15 and up from January 3. The country's healthcare and frontline workers, people above 60

years and citizens with underlying conditions will also start receiving their "precaution dose" a week later, the premier added. India's vaccination drive got off to a slow and glitchy start in January but picked up pace after the devastating second wave in May that thoroughly exposed the national health infrastructure. New Delhi has since administered more than 1.41 billion, mostly domestically produced, Covid-19 vaccine doses. "We understood the importance of vaccines early and because of that more than 61 percent of adults have received both their doses and 90 percent have received at least one dose," Modi said. The country's nearly 480,000 Covid deaths are the third-highest, behind the tolls in the United States and Brazil. But under-reporting is widespread and some studies have estimated India's true toll could be up to ten times higher.

# CPB, BSD will not join

FROM PAGE 1

President Abdul Hamid on the formation of the Election Commission as the president has no power to work independently in this regard. "The President told us that he wants to take advice from us on the formation of the Election Commission. But the fact is he has no power to work on his own as per the constitution. He will have to work on the advice of none but the prime minister," he added. The CPB president also said his party had held a dialogue with the president in 2012 and 2016 on the same issue. "In those meetings, CPB had categorically called upon the president to take measures to enact a law in the Constitution on the formation of the Election Commission. We also have submitted several other proposals on bringing change in the electoral system in a bid to hold elections in a free, fair and neutral manner," added Selim. "None of our proposals placed in 2012 and 2016 were implemented. That's why we think holding a dialogue with the president is meaningless," he added. Selim also said, "If the [Abdul Hamid] needs our recommendations on the formation of the Election Commission, he can go through our previous files." Ruhin Hossain Prince, secretary, CPB, said, "We will welcome the president's dialogue if it is held on strengthening and reform of the electoral system." BSD, another leftist party on December 24 sent a letter to the Bangabhaban and informed the party's "unwillingness" to join the ongoing

president's dialogue, SPB central leader Razequzaman Ratan told the Daily Star. In the letter, BSD said that they have not seen the implementation of the party's proposal made to the president's dialogue in 2012 and 2016. The party does not want to see repetitions of previous incidents. The party said that their previous proposals were still relevant and they wanted the president's steps to implement such recommendations. "We have sent a letter to the Bangabhaban on December 24. We have enclosed our five points recommendations we made during the dialogue held in 2016 for president's consideration," Ratan said. President Abdul Hamid began the dialogue with registered political parties from December 20 and so far held dialogue with the main opposition party in parliament -- Jatiya Party and Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal, a component in the Awami League-led grand alliance. As of yesterday, the president has invited 13 political parties to join the dialogue till January 3. The five-year tenure of the incumbent Election Commission, led by Chief Election Commissioner KM Nurul Huda, will expire on February 14 next. Now there are 39 registered political parties, according to the EC website. But only nine parties have representation in the parliament. Meanwhile, Bangladesh National Awami Party is scheduled to sit in dialogue with the President at 4:00pm.

# Reazuddin Ahmed no more

FROM PAGE 1

Earlier, he served as the chief editor of English daily Financial Express and was also the editor of News Today. He was also a four-time elected president of the Jatiya Press Club and a founding member of the Sampadak Parishad (Editors' Council). He left behind his wife, a son, a daughter, grandchildren and a host of relatives and well-wishers to mourn his death. His son M Masrur Reaz is a former World Bank official and the current chairman of Policy Exchange of Bangladesh, an independent think-tank. His namaz-e-janaza will be held at 11:00am today at the Jatiya Press Club premises. He will be buried at the capital's Banani Graveyard in the afternoon. Family members said Reazuddin was infected with Covid-19 recently. Primarily, he was undergoing treatment at home. As his condition deteriorated, he was admitted to United Hospital on December 16, where he was kept in the ICU. Reazuddin, who served as the deputy editor of The Daily Star during 1991-1992, received the Ekushey Padak in 1993 for his contribution in journalism. He was a frontliner among those who made significant contributions

during different movements to establish journalists' rights in the country. Besides, he was also on the frontlines during the country's anti-autocracy movement. Reazuddin was elected a member of the Bangladesh Press Council on December 21 this year. He also served as the general secretary of undivided Dhaka Union of Journalists and president of Bangladesh Federal Union of Journalists. Born on November 30, 1945 at Narandi village of Monohardi upazila of Narsingdi district, he got his master's degree in economics from Dhaka University in 1967. He completed LLB in 1972. After primarily being involved in teaching, he started his journalism career with the daily Pakistan Observer in 1968. He was an executive member of the then East Pakistan Union of Journalists in 1970. On March 25, 1971, he resigned from the Pakistan Observer to extend his support for Bangladesh's Liberation War. After the country's independence, he joined The Observer and continued there till November, 1990. Reazuddin's published books include "Shotyer Shondhaney Protidin",

# Omicron threat mars Christmas

FROM PAGE 1

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 Britain hitting a record high number of Covid-19 infections again on Friday for a third day in a row, 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. Most Australians are allowed to travel interstate over the festive break for the first time in two years, with Sydney's Catholic Archbishop Anthony Fisher saying that Christmas was "a ray of light" in dark times. And Santa Claus was not deterred from doing his rounds, after showing proof of vaccination and a pre-flight negative Covid test, Ottawa's transport minister said. According to the North American Aerospace Defense Command's (NORAD) Santa-tracking website, Father Christmas had delivered 7.6 billion gifts during his 2021 sleigh ride around the world.

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 Britain hitting a record high number of Covid-19 infections again on Friday for a third day in a row, 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. Most Australians are allowed to travel interstate over the festive break for the first time in two years, with Sydney's Catholic Archbishop Anthony Fisher saying that Christmas was "a ray of light" in dark times. And Santa Claus was not deterred from doing his rounds, after showing proof of vaccination and a pre-flight negative Covid test, Ottawa's transport minister said. According to the North American Aerospace Defense Command's (NORAD) Santa-tracking website, Father Christmas had delivered 7.6 billion gifts during his 2021 sleigh ride around the world.



An investigation team inspects one of the engines of Abhijan-10. The engines have been claimed to be faulty, larger than permitted and installed without prior approval of the authorities concerned.

PHOTO: STAR

# Everything they did was wrong

FROM PAGE 1

68 people are missing. Officials said many of those missing could be among the dead who have yet been identified. The victims' family members, locals, and the launch owner said deaths and injuries could have been fewer had the master moored the vessel to a tree on the bank in Charkathi area of Jhalakathi. Besides, judging by the time it took to reach Barishal from Dhaka, it seemed that the launch was speeding. It left Sadarghat around 6:00pm and reached Barishal by 1:30am. Probe committee members said the main gate of the launch was locked, reducing the chances of people escaping. The authorities have yet to identify 23 of the severely burnt bodies. They were buried in Barguna after officials collected their DNA samples. Over 50 injured passengers are being treated at hospitals in Dhaka and Barishal. An unnatural death case was filed with Jhalakathi Police Station yesterday. ENGINES CHANGED WITHOUT APPROVAL Built in 2019, the MV Abhijan-10 started

operation last year. Hanjalal Sheikh, the owner, told The Daily Star yesterday that he changed the Chinese engines last month because they weren't fuel efficient. But, he did not inform the Shipping Department, said Manjurul Kabir, chief engineer and ship surveyor of the department. Hanjalal claimed that he was not aware that prior permission was required to change engines. The launch authorities mentioned on papers in Sadarghat terminal that the vessel had 310 passengers, but the probe committee said the actual number was much higher. Officials at the Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority said the launch was supposed to have a first-class master but it had two second-class ones. PROBE COMMITTEE FINDS FAULTS IN ENGINES The seven-member probe yesterday visited the launch anchored in Diakul, inspected different parts of the vessel and talked with witnesses and locals. After visiting spot, probe committee chief and Shipping Ministry's Joint

Secretary Tofayel Islam said, "We have preliminarily detected some faults in the engines..." A member of the committee said they were almost certain that the fire originated in the engine room. "People working there were supposed to solve the engine issue easily. We don't know why the fault couldn't be solved," he said, requesting not to be named. Family members of those who were onboard the vessel said after the launch caught fire, it was steered to the bank in the Charkathi area. The crew then fled without mooring it. But the launch drifted away and reached Diakul on the other side of the river half an hour later. By then, the whole launch was burnt. The launch owner said his manager called him after fleeing the launch. A probe committee member said the casualties might have been more had the launch not floated to the bank at Diakul. The committee, formed on Friday, is supposed to submit its report in three work days. [Our correspondent in Pirojpur contributed to this report]

# Some old issues still remain

FROM PAGE 1

The statement said the employers would take care of the workers' accommodation, and health and medical insurances. The migrants will get one weekly day off and be paid overtime if they have to work more than eight hours a day. They will be entitled to annual leaves as well. If a worker is injured at work, they will be compensated. In case the injury is permanent, they will get a lifelong pension upon arrival in Bangladesh. If a worker dies in an accident at work, their family will get a one-time compensation as well as a long-term pension, the statement also said. Asked about the high migration costs and what will happen in case workers are exploited, Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment Minister Imran Ahmad said those would be significantly less this time. Rights activists said each Bangladeshi worker, on average, had to spend Tk 4 lakh for a job in Malaysia during 2016-18, whereas the agreed amount was Tk 39,500. It was Tk 2 lakh during 2007-08 period against the agreed Tk 84,000. During both periods, the private sector was engaged in recruitment. This time, private agencies are being involved again. A new addition to the process is the Malaysian recruiting agencies. According to the recruiting agencies, if the MoU is enforced properly, the actual migrant cost in the Bangladesh end will be less than Tk 50,000 -- recruiting agency's fees Tk 30,000 and a maximum of Tk 20,000 for medical check-up, documentation, and government charges. Rights activists said recruitment fees in both countries should be borne by the employers under the IOM's ethical recruitment model. Violating the model, unauthorised recruitment agents in Bangladesh made migrants pay the fees to secure job contracts from Malaysian companies. This time too, the unauthorised agents will be there. They will work along with licenced Malaysian recruiting agencies, the experts said. At the Bangladeshi end, it has been a long-held business practice that several layers of unauthorised brokers are engaged in enticing jobseekers and charging high fees from them. At the Malaysian end too, there are unauthorised agents. Even the human resources managers of the employing companies charge illegal fees from those agents. That's how the cost of recruitment went up in the past years, they said. Joseph Paul, director of Tenaganita, a rights body based in Kuala Lumpur, questioned why the recruitment cost at the Bangladesh end would be borne by the workers. This is an element of

forced labour, he said. The other malpractices during 2016-18 that worsened the recruitment process was a syndicate of 10 agencies picked by the then Nazib Razak government, despite Bangladesh offering a list of more than 700 agencies for the job. Andy Hall, an independent migrant rights expert on Malaysia, said there are serious concerns that a syndicate of agencies will be dominating the recruitment this year as well. The previous malpractice, in that case, could return, said Hall, now based in Nepal. He also said this fear was there because the previous experience suggests that the employers pass on all the costs to the migrant workers. Some experts believe that Malaysia is now facing pressure from foreign buyers, including those from the US, the UK, and other European countries, over labour rights issues. In the last two years, seven Malaysian firms faced US import bans over allegations of forced labour. Last month, home-appliance maker Dyson cut ties with its biggest supplier, a Malaysian firm, over labour conditions. Under pressure from the US, Top Glove Corp, the world's biggest medical glove maker, agreed to pay \$33 million to migrant workers to reimburse recruitment fees they paid in their home countries. Malaysia fell to "Tier 3" in this year's Trafficking in Persons (TIP) report as it continued to conflate human trafficking and migrant smuggling crimes, and did not adequately address or criminally pursue credible allegations on labour trafficking. "Malaysia, therefore, is under global scrutiny over the forced labour issue that could affect foreign investment in the future," Joseph Paul told this correspondent on Thursday. He suggested that Malaysia regularises some four million undocumented migrants before making fresh recruitment. "There are thousands of Bangladeshi migrants who paid money to agents in the last several years for getting documented but failed due to corruption of the agents." Migrant rights researchers in Malaysia said it needs about Malaysian Ringgit 7,000 (including agent fees) for regularisation, which the migrants affected by the pandemic, cannot afford. Joseph said if new recruitment is really necessary, the arrangement should be such that the employers pay the full recruitment fees. Otherwise, the new MoU means nothing but earning money by certain vested quarters. He also said he has no information that the MoU contains any provision on how to deal with migrants facing abuses by their employers, and

questioned why the MoU was not made public. "We don't want any secret way of dealing in labour recruitment and the consequent forced labour." A Bangladeshi recruiting agent said previously many bogus companies secured job demand letters from the Malaysian home ministry, using bribes. The Bangladesh High Commission in Kuala Lumpur also approved those without verification. "That resulted in a situation where workers went there and faced exploitation, including joblessness, non-payment, and underpayment," he said, adding that some agents also sent workers to Malaysia but those workers found no employment because they were recruited for non-existent jobs. "The Malaysian government and Bangladesh High Commission in Malaysia must be very alert to make sure that the jobs are genuine," he said. "Otherwise, both Malaysia and Bangladesh will be in trouble in the future. Authorities cannot and should not take that risk," said the agent, preferring anonymity.

# Lone arrestee

FROM PAGE 1

before Cox's Bazar Judicial Magistrate Court on Friday night. Earlier, Ziulur told journalists that after talking to the victim they learnt that she was acquainted to the prime accused Ashiqul Islam Ashiq. She along with her husband and children had been staying at different hotels in Cox's Bazar for around three months. However, the victim and her husband told journalists on Thursday that they reached Cox's Bazar on Wednesday morning. Meanwhile, Cox's Bazar deputy commissioner on Friday held a meeting with law enforcers, owners of hotels, motels, restaurants, and cottages, and tour operators. At the meeting, they decided not to rent out any room to any tourist without a national identity card. Several other decisions were taken to ensure security of tourists, meeting sources said. According to the case statement, the woman was gang raped twice by a group of youths on Wednesday. Later, she was kept confined to a room in Zia Guest Inn. The victim managed to open a window of the room and contact a hotel guest who unlocked the door. Rab rescued her around 1:30am early Thursday and arrested Chhoton. On Thursday night, the victim's husband filed the case with Cox's Bazar Sadar Model Police Station accusing seven people. Of them, the four of the named accused are Ashiqul Islam Ashiq, 28, Israfil Huda Joy, 26, Meheddi Hasan Babu, 24, and Riaz Uddin Chhoton.

# Man brakes into couples home, stabs them

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

A man dressed as a chimpanzee broke into a house in Char Khambar Mor area of Jashore and stabbed a couple early yesterday. The man cut the iron grill of the first-floor balcony of the three-storey building and stabbed Mostafizur Rahman, 65, and his wife Charmina Khanam, 42, multiple times. The incident happened around 3:00am, Charmina said. "He first stabbed my husband. As I screamed for help, he stabbed me," she said. The man fled as neighbours rushed there, hearing the screams. The neighbours later took them to a hospital. The family said nothing had gone missing from the flat and they had no idea who the attacker was. Tajul Islam, officer-in-charge of Kotwali Police Station, said police had visited the spot.

# Hong Kong police make record 1.3 tonne ketamine bust

AFP, Hong Kong

A haul of ketamine worth over \$100 million has been seized by Hong Kong officials, police said yesterday. The record-breaking 1.3 tonnes of the drug, valued at around HK\$840 million (\$108 million), is the largest bust of its kind in the city's history. Travel restrictions related to Covid-19 have forced smugglers to make riskier bulk shipments instead of using drug mules travelling through airports, police said. On Friday morning, officers intercepted the narcotics as they were being offloaded from a speedboat in the seaside Lei Yue Mun district. "Drug trafficking syndicates would use fishing boats or oceangoing vessels to transport the drugs to the high seas near Hong Kong waters. Then they will arrange speedboats to smuggle the drugs to shore," Chief Inspector Ip Sau-lan said at a press conference.

# 4th phase UP polls

FROM PAGE 1

The situation remained tensed in the unions ahead of the polls because of clashes that mostly occurred between supporters of the ruling Awami League and its rebel candidates. According to the party sources, several hundred party rebels are contesting the polls. Although 18 registered political parties are participating in the fourth phase of the polls, the contest would presumably be between the AL, its "rebel groups" and the Jatiya Party in absence of the BNP. Elections to the chairman posts of 48 UPs will not be required as candidates have already been elected unopposed, according to the Election Commission data. Most of the unopposed mayors are of the AL, said the party sources. Meanwhile, Election Commissioner Rafiqul Islam said there was nothing to worry about violence. Talking to The Daily Star, he said, "Instructions have been given to law enforcers to control the law and order. Adequate numbers of law enforcers have also been deployed to avert any untoward incidents." According to the EC, they have taken all kinds of preparations to hold polls to the 838 UPs in 58 districts. The EC data shows 135 UP members and 112 candidates for women's reserved seats were also elected uncontested. The EC says that 3,814 candidates are running for chairman posts, 9,513 for reserved member seats for women and 30,106 for member posts. Around 82.51 lakh male and 80 lakh female voters are expected to cast their votes at 9,224 polling centres. So far the AL dominated the elections in terms of winning the chairman positions in the UP polls. The EC announced unofficial results of 2,189 UPs in three phases. Of them, the AL chairman candidates were victorious in 1,278 unions and independent candidates were mostly the AL rebels in 861 UPs. AL candidates, however, performed not as well in the third phase of the union parishad elections compared to previous two phases. In the third phase, the ruling AL candidates won 53 percent of the chairman posts, in the second phase, they won 56 percent of the posts. They won 76 percent chairman posts in the first phase. A total of 707 UPs will go to fifth phase of polls on January 5 and a total of 219 union parishads will go to the sixth phase of polls on January 31. Meanwhile, a supporter of a UP chairman at Shablal village in Magura's Shalikha upazila was killed in polls violence yesterday. At least 10 were injured. The dead is Shariful Mollah, 55, son of Ibrahim Mollah, said Shalikha Police Station Officer-in-charge Tarak Nath Biswas.

Our Jhenidha correspondent contributed to this report.