

## LAUNCH FIRE

# All her children dead, mother still unaware She is fighting for life

SHAHEEN MOLLA

A six-month pregnant mother with two children jumped into the Sugandha river to save their lives in Jhalakathi on December 23.

However, none of her children, including the one in the womb, could survive.

On December 23, Jiasmin Akhter, 28, boarded the MV Abhijan-10 launch, with her six-year-old girl Mahinur and eight-year-old Tamim, to return to her home in Barguna after a visit to her father's home in Keraniganj upon her grandmother's death.

As the launch caught fire in the middle of the night, she stayed on board for as long as possible with her children as she was not physically fit to try an escape due to her pregnancy.

When the launch was near the shore, the fire caught up to them and Jiasmin, in desperation, jumped into the river with her children.

After being rescued, they were initially admitted to Jhalakathi hospital and later shifted to Barishal's Sher-e-Bangla Medical College Hospital.

They were then brought to Sheikh Hasina Burn and Plastic Surgery Institute in Dhaka. Mahinur died on their way from Mawa ferry terminal.

As Jiasmin was six-month pregnant, doctors conducted an emergency C-section on her on December 25, but found the baby dead in the womb.

Her eight-year-old son Tamim died yesterday from 30 percent inhalation burn injuries. He was kept in the ICU from the start and, as his condition deteriorated, he was put on life support.

The mother, with 15 percent inhalation burns, is now fighting for life in the ICU.

Speaking to this newspaper, Jiasmin's uncle Monir Hossain said, "Her husband Khalilur Rahman has a small shop in Barguna Bazaar. After receiving the news of her grandmother's death 10-12 days ago, she came to Keraniganj with her two children. Khalilur could not leave the shop at that time.

"Despite knowing how to swim, Jiasmin could not get off the launch, worrying about her children, including one in the womb. They suffered burns as they were on the launch till the last moment."

He added that she is still unaware that all her children are dead.

The death toll in December 24 launch fire rose to 48 as another injured died yesterday evening in a Dhaka hospital.

The blaze broke out around 3:00am in the engine room of the Barguna-bound launch carrying some 800 passengers from Dhaka. It engulfed the entire vessel within 10 minutes.



**Construction workers break down part of a building in Kamrangirchar after the Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority ordered the owner to do so. Non-compliance with the order would mean the government might use bulldozers to do the job and the owner would have to bear the cost. The authority has been conducting a drive to free the original channel of the Buriganga of encroachers.**

PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON

## SURGE OF COVID CASES

# Curbs return in West Bengal

## Night curfew imposed; schools, colleges shut

AGENCIES

West Bengal yesterday announced a slew of Covid-19 restrictions, including closure of schools and colleges and imposing a night curfew, as India reported more than 27,000 new cases, with infections sharply rising for a fifth consecutive day.

A 10:00 pm – 5:00 am night curfew has been ordered, following in the footsteps of Haryana, Delhi and Uttar Pradesh. Only essential and emergency services can operate in this time.

Starting today, schools, colleges and universities in West Bengal will be closed, as will swimming pools, gyms, spas and beauty salons, and wellness centres, reported our New Delhi correspondent.

Restrictions have also been imposed on shopping malls, market complexes, restaurants, and bars which will be allowed to operate with only 50 per cent of their total capacity.

Local trains have been permitted to run with half of their capacity and government and private offices would operate with 50 per cent of staff attendance from tomorrow.

Attendance at gatherings for marriages and other social, religious and cultural occasions will be limited to 50 persons, while those for funerals or burials will be limited to 20.

The state reported 4,512 new Covid-19 cases on Saturday, which takes its active caseload to 13,300 – the third-highest in the country after Maharashtra and Kerala states.

West Bengal has also reported 20 cases of the more infectious Omicron variant.

According to one report, the number of Covid-19 cases in the state rose ten times in the last six days from 439 from Monday last to 4,512 yesterday with more than half of them in Kolkata alone.

Kolkata, along with India's national capital Delhi and financial hub Mumbai, is showing an exponential rise in daily new Covid cases over the last one week.

Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee dispensation has put on hold the resumption of its flagship social welfare scheme "duare Sarkar" to take government services at doorsteps to stop crowding.

Delhi logged 3,194 new coronavirus cases over the last 24 hours, 15 per cent higher than Saturday.

Although the number of active cases in Delhi has tripled in just the last three days, Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal said that hospitalisations had not gone up, reported Reuters.

"This means that most people who are coming down with (Covid-19) are not requiring hospital care. They are mild cases," Kejriwal said in an online briefing.

"Cases are going up but there is no reason to worry. There is no need to panic," he said.

Delhi was among hardest hit cities during the second wave of the pandemic in India last year, with hospitals running out of beds and life-saving oxygen, leaving patients gasping for breath.

Mumbai reported 8,063 new cases of coronavirus in the last 24 hours, 27 percent higher than Saturday, NDTV reported.

India has recorded a total of 34.88 million COVID-19 infections, with 27,553 new cases in the last 24 hours, health ministry data showed yesterday.

# Fictitious cases again being filed against BNP men

## Says Fakhrul

UNB, DHAKA

BNP Secretary General Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir yesterday alleged that the government has started filing fictitious cases against the leaders and activists of their party again as it got scared seeing the mass wave of people in their recent programmes.

"The Awami League and the current unelected government have started attacking democratic forces, shooting them and filing fictitious cases against them being afraid of the process of peaceful programmes we've initiated to realise our demand," he said.

Through their various programmes, the BNP leader said it has been proved that people do not want the unelected government to remain in power and destroy democracy. It has also been proven that people want Khaleda Zia to be released immediately and sent abroad for treatment.

He came up with the remarks while speaking at a press conference at the BNP chairperson's Gulshan office.

The BNP secretary general narrated how their party followers came under attack and faced the wrath of law enforcers and ruling party leaders and activists in different districts, including in Sirajganj, Habiganj, Tangail, Thakurgaon, Gazipur and Jhenaidah, during their public rallies from December 22 to 30 demanding Khaleda Zia's treatment abroad.

He said the ruling party and law enforcers have become worried seeing people's spontaneous participation in all rallies of BNP. "They tried to obstruct our every programme and suppress our movement by attacking our leaders and activists"

Fakhrul warned the government that people have started waking up and they will realise their demands and restore democracy through a street movement.

He said their party standing committee will work out the next course of action to push for their demand for Khaleda's treatment abroad at their virtual meeting on Monday.

**OMINOUS SIGN**

Referring to BNP's rally attack in Sirajganj by "armed ruling party cadres" on December 30 last, Fakhrul said armed people have begun coming out in public. "This is an ominous sign."

The BNP leader alleged that the Awami League is a terrorist party and it has not been able to survive without resorting to terrorism since its inception.

Fakhrul said Chhatra League and Juba League activists attacked their rallies brandishing arms, but no case has been filed against them. "They're indulging in terrorism, but shifting the blame on opposition leaders and activists."

He demanded the government arrest the armed people and bring them to justice.



# Chaos at US airport as more than 2,700 flights cancelled

AFP, WASHINGTON

Air travel continued to be severely disrupted in the United States on Saturday, with bad weather in parts of the country adding to the impact of a massive spike in Covid-19 infections fuelled by the Omicron variant.

The United States had 2,723 cancelled flights, more than half of the 4,698 cancelled worldwide, around 11:00 pm (0400 GMT Sunday), according to tracking website FlightAware.

## 9 killed in 5 road crashes

FROM PAGE 1

"He died while being taken to hospital by locals," he said.

Meanwhile in Barishal, three people, including an expatriate, died after crashing their motorcycle into a roadside tree in Muladi upazila.

The dead were identified as Idris Hawlader, 60, Harun Noli, 45, and Rajib Noli, a non-residential Bangladeshi from Oman.

M Maksudur Rahman, OC of Muladi Police Station, said the three were going to Mirganj from Boriya Kazirchat when they crashed into a tree on the side of a road and died on the spot.

In Amtala area of Jashore-Magura Highway, a cyclist died after being crushed under the wheel of a recklessly-driven bus yesterday afternoon.

At least 30 bus passengers were injured in the incident and sent to Jashore General Hospital for treatment.

The dead was identified as Yakub Ali, 52.

According to Mokarram Hossain, sub-inspector of Ichhali Police Outpost, the bus lost control and ran over Yakub when he got on

the road on his cycle. He died on the spot.

The driver and his helper fled the scene, he added.

In Bogra, a man motorcyclist died after being hit by a pick-up truck during an election campaign held in violation of a law in this regard.

Nitish Chandra Majhi, 42, was on Chapapur-Bihigram road in Bogra's Adamdighi upazila during a rally in support of Awami League nominated chairman candidate Shamsul Haque in the Champapur UP election.

Locals seized and vandalised the vehicle, but the driver escaped.

According to Section 6(a) of the UP Election Conduct Rules, no candidate or any political party may hold any public meeting or procession except for street and private meetings. However, the campaign was held with more than 200 motorcycles, locals said.

Jalal Uddin, OC of Adamdighi Police Station, said the body was handed over to the family as no complaint was filed.

The OC said procession was a violation of the code of conduct but it was held without informing police.

# Barely held accountable

FROM PAGE 1

In November last year, the country witnessed another student agitation after two college students were killed in two crashes in Dhaka.

According to police, 2,513 people were killed in 2,562 road accidents in 2017 while 3,502 people lost their lives in 1,701 crashes in the first eight months of last year.

The WB report, available on the website of RHD, says nearly 60 percent of the road crashes take place on the national and regional highways.

"A substantial number of the highway crashes occur at 754 uncontrolled junctions of these highways and minor roads," it reads.

Citing another WB study, the report said halving the mortality and morbidity from road injuries in a developing country like Bangladesh would likely yield an additional 7-22 percent GDP per capita over the period of 24 years.

**'NOT EMPOWERED'** According to the WB report, road safety

management structure exists in Bangladesh but it is not empowered or held accountable for safety outcomes.

Established in 1995, the National Road Safety Council (NRSC) is responsible for preparing road safety strategies. It is comprised of Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA), police, RHD, transport owner and workers' associations, and professionals.

But the institutional arrangement has failed to coordinate effectively, it said.

The functioning of committees has been hampered by poor internal communication, a lack of coordination and integration between them and NRSC, and a scarcity of resources.

The report referred to the high-powered committee led by transport leader and former minister Shajahan Khan, which provided 111 recommendations to curb crashes and bring discipline in the transport sector.

A taskforce led by the home minister was also formed to implement those recommendations.

"However, the plan has some drawbacks, interventions and targets are not scientifically set, funding for proposed activities is lacking or inadequate..."

Prof Hadiuzzaman, director of Accident Research Institute of Buet, said such committees or bodies lack professional persons.

Either influential persons or ex-officio persons dominated such bodies, when road safety is a technical issue that has to be dealt with by professionals.

Directives to ensure road safety often comes from the higher authorities but those remain unimplemented with no one held responsible for the failures, he said.

**FUND INSUFFICIENT** The WB report said the fund RHD, BRTA and police got for road safety was insufficient and not prioritised.

# S African national assembly entirely destroyed by fire

AFP, CAPE TOWN

A massive fire in South Africa's houses of parliament in Cape Town has "burned down" the entire National Assembly where elected parliamentarians sit, a spokesperson said yesterday.

"The entire chamber where the members sit... has burned down,"

Moloto Mothapo said, adding that the blaze had still not been extinguished.

The historic building houses a collection of rare books and the original copy of the former Afrikaans national anthem used during the apartheid era, "Die Stem Suid-Afrika" ("The Voice of South Africa"), which was already damaged.

The cause of the fire is unknown, but an investigation has been opened and an individual held.

President Cyril Ramaphosa told reporters at the scene earlier yesterday that an arrest had been made.

"Someone has been held right now and is being questioned," he said.

# Omicron could lead Israel to herd immunity: official

REUTERS, JERUSALEM

Israel could reach herd immunity amid surging Omicron infections, its top health official said yesterday, as the country approved the use of Merck & Co's molnupiravir anti-viral pill for Covid-19 patients.

The highly transmissible Omicron variant has caused a wave of coronavirus cases across the globe. Worldwide infections have hit a record high, with an average of just over one million cases detected each day between Dec. 24 and 30, according to Reuters data.

Deaths, however, have not risen in kind, bringing hope the new variant is less lethal.

## Framing a strategy

FROM PAGE 1

Finance Minister AHM Mustafa Kamal, Education Minister Dipu Moni, Speaker Shirin Sharmin Chaudhury, State Minister for ICT Division Zunaid Ahmed Palak and ERD Secretary Rabab Fatima also spoke at the programme.

The prime minister asked the concerned to formulate a time befitting strategy paper based on data and information by

thorough research and survey.

Documentaries on the graduation of Bangladesh from LDC to a Developing Country were screened at the programme.

SAFF champion Under-19 Women Football Team came on the stage while their captain spoke on behalf of them.

Later, the prime minister enjoyed a cultural programme.

## Won't tolerate any graft

FROM PAGE 1

all subordinate courts.

"I will receive reports from the cells every month. Old cases will be disposed of with utmost priority and the entire thing will be supervised and monitored," he added.

SCBA Secretary Md Ruhul Quddus Kazal told the function that various corruption and irregularities were taking place at the judicial administration.

Besides, he said, lawyers

have to spend extra money at every step from filing cases through submission of affidavits to placing them before courts to obtaining copies of court orders.

There have been frequent instances when accused persons were sent to jail even after they were granted bail by the High Court because court orders did not reach the lower courts concerned in time, the SCBA secretary said, requesting the CJ to take steps in this regard.