

BCL general secy hurt in infighting

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Chhatra League General Secretary Lekhak Bhattacharya was injured in infighting between its two factions yesterday at a programme on the Dhaka University campus marking the student front's 74th birth anniversary.

The inauguration of the birth anniversary celebrations was held at the foot of Aparajeyo Bangla in front of the Kala Bhaban (arts faculty building).

BCL sources said several former and current leaders of the student front took the stage of the programme. A few minutes before the start of the event around 2:00pm, the two BCL factions clashed over taking front row seats in front of the stage.

Chhatra League leaders and activists from the DU's Kabi Jasimuddin Hall and Dhaka College units started throwing brick chips at each other, said a BCL leader on condition of anonymity.

He said a brick chip hit Lekhak while he was getting off the stage to pacify the two factions. Some BCL men later took Lekhak to Dhaka Medical College Hospital.



Defying health safety rules, students throng the Covid-19 vaccination centre at Morgan Girls School and College in Narayanganj city. The photo was taken around 11:00am yesterday before the start of vaccination for the day.

PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

707 unions go to polls today

MOHIUDDIN ALAMGIR

Tension is running high in many unions across the country over the possibility of violence during today's fifth phase elections to 707 union parishads.

According to media reports, at least 76 people have so far been killed and several hundred injured in violence over the ongoing staggered UP polls. Of them, nine were killed in violence over the fifth phase polls.

Tension prevailed in many unions where clashes occurred mostly between supporters of the ruling Awami League candidates and those of the party rebels.

AL sources said several hundred party rebels are contesting today's polls.

Speaking to The Daily Star, Election Commission Secretary Humayun Kabir Khandaker yesterday said, "Instructions have been given to law enforcers to control law and order. An adequate number of law enforcers have been deployed to avert any untoward incidents."

There are some 1.42 crore voters in the 707 unions. The contest would presumably be held between the AL, party rebels and the Jatiya Party candidates as the BNP is not taking part in the elections.

Elections to chairman posts of 48 UPs will not be required as candidates have already been elected unopposed, according to Election Commission data. Most of them are AL nominees, said party sources.

COVID-19 PANDEMIC

US sets global record with 1m cases in a day

Delhi imposes weekend curfew; China locks down another city

AFP, WASHINGTON

The United States reported more than one million new Covid-19 cases Monday after the long New Year's weekend, according to data from Johns Hopkins University, as the Omicron variant spread at a blistering pace.

There were 1,080,211 new cases in the country, a global record, although the number of cases reported on a Monday is usually higher than other days because of delays in weekend tallying, especially after such a three-day holiday weekend.

Still, the figure is double the number of daily cases compared to the previous Monday.

The rolling average over seven days -- which experts see as more reliable -- was 486,000 cases per day as of Monday evening, the university said.

The new figure comes a day after top US pandemic advisor Anthony Fauci said the country was experiencing "almost a vertical increase" in Covid-19 cases, adding

the peak may be only weeks away.

The heavily mutated Omicron strain -- the most transmissible to date -- accounted for around 59 percent of US cases in the week ending December 25, according to government modeling.

Fauci said the experience of South Africa -- where the strain was first detected in late November and peaked quickly, then subsided nearly as speedily -- offered some hope.

Rates of death and hospitalization in the United States have been lower in recent weeks than during previous Covid surges.

With 9,382 deaths over the past seven days, the nation's death toll has fallen by 10 percent, week on week. In the last seven days, the country has recorded 3.4 million cases according to Johns Hopkins data.

The US record during previous waves was 258,000 cases per day, for the week of January 5 to 11, 2021.

Covid-19 has killed at least 5,441,446 people globally since the outbreak emerged in December 2019,

according to an AFP tally compiled from official sources on Monday.

In India, capital New Delhi will lock down over the weekend as authorities grapple with a fresh surge in coronavirus cases, partly fuelled by the fast-spreading Omicron variant.

All residents besides essential workers will now be asked to stay home from Friday night to Monday morning.

The country was battered by a devastating Covid outbreak last year that overwhelmed hospitals and crematoriums, but daily case numbers had since then stayed reasonably low until last week.

In China, more than one million people in a city in central China were being confined to their homes yesterday after three asymptomatic coronavirus cases were recorded in the country's latest mass lockdown.

The central Chinese city of Yuzhou in Henan province is locked down as a part of the country's zero Covid strategy.

Priority now

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rail should not be limited to Dhaka only and that it should be available in Chattogram, too," Planning Minister MA Mannan told reporters quoting Hasina after the meeting of the Executive Committee of the National Economic Council, where the directive was given.

She called for a metro rail from the Shah Amanat International Airport to the railway station.

"With the experience of Chattogram, we will expand it further to other major cities with airports and stations," Mannan said, adding that the planning ministry will push for the projects.

At the meeting yesterday, a total of 10 projects, including three fresh projects, under eight different ministries worth Tk 11,244 crore were passed.

Seven of the projects were for revision.

When the projects were conceived, they were supposed to cost Tk 3,099 crore. Their estimated expenditure has now billowed close to five times to Tk 14,961 crore.

The projects are seeking an extra year to a full decade.

Mannan said all the delays have valid reasons, including the pandemic. The other two major reasons are the price hike of construction materials and delays in land acquisition as the laws are too complicated.

"We have another important reason but many would not believe

it. When we take a loan from another country or international organisation, they give lots of conditions. This means we have to face two bureaucratic systems," he added.

One of the revised projects is the Ashrayan-2 project, a landmark endeavour of the Awami League-led government to alleviate poverty and homelessness, which was revised for the fourth time.

It was given with another year and an extra Tk 6,316 crore. The project's total allocation now stands at Tk 11,143 crore, which is many times more than the original cost.

When probed on the cost overrun, Mamun-Al-Rashid, a member of the Planning Commission, said the project was implemented all over the country.

"We will not deny that some mismanagement did happen in two or three places," he said, adding that Hasina said the quality of the lodgings cannot be compromised for the budget constraints.

About the increase in project figures, he said those who have no land or home will get Tk 2.5 lakh each under the project.

The small and middle-sized projects, including the three mega projects that will be completed this year, will expand the GDP by 1.5 to 2, said Shamsul Alam, the state minister for planning.

The Padma bridge will open in June, Karnaphuli in October and Metro Rail in December, he said.

Miles forward

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private stakeholders, are expected to be open to the public this year.

Two other mega projects, Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) and first-ever elevated expressway, are making good progress and also likely to be put into service by this year.

"These projects would work as precursors to big scale development of the country in next phases," Prof Shamsul Hoque, a noted transport expert, told The Daily Star on December 20.

He, however, added, "Cost overrun and shifting of deadlines have overshadowed the elation. This also exposed that our planning was weak and our projection about deadlines was casual."

BIG BRIDGE, BIG DREAM Padma Bridge, a self-funded project of the government worth Tk 30,000 crore, is likely to open in June.

The 6.1km double-deck bridge across the mighty Padma had been in talks since mid '90s. The government approved the project worth Tk 10,161 crore in August 2007 to be built with donor assistance.

The dream project became uncertain in September 2011, when the lead donor, World Bank, suspended its promised \$1.2 billion loan on allegations of corruption conspiracy, which were later thrown out by a Canadian court. Other donors also cancelled their funding.

Then in 2012, Prime

Minister Sheikh Hasina took a bold decision to implement the project with own funds.

The first span was installed in September 2017. The project was moving ahead smoothly but then came the onslaught of Covid-19, slowing down the progress.

The bridge, with road and rail tracks, is expected to contribute around 1.2 percent to the annual GDP growth and increase economic activities of the people of the impoverished southwest region.

ERA OF ELECTRIC TRAINS Bangladesh would enter the era of electric trains once the metro rail project comes into operation.

The government planned to develop a 1,280km network of metro lines in the capital and adjacent areas within 2030 to reduce the horrendous traffic congestion and pollution. There would be six metro lines -- with elevated and underground options.

Though the idea of constructing Mass Rapid Transit (MRT) lines first came in 2005, the first project for building metro rail network in the capital was approved in December 2012. Formally known as MRT Line 6, the first metro track is being laid from Uttara Third Phase to Motijheel at the cost of Tk 21,985 crore.

Eight sets of trains have already reached Dhaka and their performance tests are going on.

Officials of Dhaka Mass

Transit Company Ltd, the implementing agency, said they will complete all types of trials by September to launch metro rail operation in the first phase -- from Uttara to Agargaon -- from December.

Once completed, the metro rail -- with 16 stations -- will be able to carry 60,000 people an hour, bringing down the commute time between Uttara and Motijheel to around 40 minutes from the existing two hours.

Even people in the upper class may consider shifting modes of transport once the metro rail service comes into operation, which could reduce the number of small vehicles on the roads -- the major reason for traffic jams, said Prof Shamsul.

UNDERWATER WONDER To link two parts of Chattogram, the government took up the project to build a tunnel under the Karnaphuli river, the first-ever in South Asia. The 9.1km tunnel with a cost of Tk 10,374.42 crore will help develop a modern transportation system between Dhaka, Chattogram and Cox's Bazar, and will also be linked to the Asian Highway.

Although the project was approved in November 2015, physical work began in December 2017. The project authority recently sought a six-month extension of the current deadline of December 2022, but officials maintain that they would be able to open the tunnel within this year.

COMMUTERS' RELIEF

In 2012, the government took up a project to cut down Dhaka's perineal traffic congestion by building an elevated expressway under public-private partnership.

After extending the deadline several times, the authorities now aim to open a portion of the expressway -- from Airport to Tejgaon Rail Station -- to the public in December.

Once fully completed, the 19.73km expressway stretching from Shahjalal International Airport to Kutubkhali on the Dhaka-Chattogram highway is expected to help people cross Dhaka without having to face the traffic congestion inside the city.

Besides, the Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) service from the airport to Gazipur is also expected to be open in December.

The project was taken up in November 2012 for building the 20.5km bus corridor to allow people to reach Dhaka from Gazipur. It was supposed to be completed by December 2016 but got delayed due to various complexities.

The service would start with 100 new buses, which would be able to transport 20,000 passengers per hour. There would be 25 stations on the corridor.

However, officials say, meeting these deadlines definitely depends on many factors, particularly Covid pandemic. If the Covid situation deteriorates again, it will be difficult for some projects to complete their work in time.

DIALOGUE WITH PRESIDENT Samyabadi Dal asks for law on EC formation

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Bangladesher Samyabadi Dal during its dialogue with President Abdul Hamid yesterday joined the chorus of political parties recommending that a law be enacted to form the Election Commission.

In its written proposal presented to Hamid, the party said people's hopes will be reflected if an EC is formed through a law in line with the constitution.

Past experience shows that an EC formed without a law becomes a subservient institution, the party said.

"We have urged the president to take steps for framing a law to form the Election Commission," party General Secretary Dilip Barua told The Daily Star after the dialogue held at the Bangabhaban.

"If a search committee needs to be formed due to constitutional obligations, the president can form such a committee comprising heads of constitutional bodies.

"We also proposed that it is realistic to form an election-time government under Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina," he added.

According to a Bangabhaban press wing statement, during the dialogue the president said it is important to ensure political etiquette and a healthy environment in politics for a fair and credible election, and this is a task to for the political parties.

Bangladesher Samyabadi Dal in the written proposals also recommended for instant actions against misuse of religion, money and arms.

It also said most MPs in parliament are businessmen and that is a hurdle for democracy to flourish. Dominance of businessmen in parliament also limits the scope of people's franchise rights.

A seven-member delegation led by Dilip took part in the dialogue.

The president late last month started dialogues with registered political parties on the formation of the next EC as the tenure of the Election Commission led by KM Nurul Huda expires on February 14.

The president will have to form the new EC before the tenure of the incumbent EC expires, according to the constitution.

Thirteen parties have so far joined the dialogue.

However, three parties -- Communist Party of Bangladesh, Bangladesh Samajtantrik Dal and Islami Andolon Bangladesh -- have refused to participate. The BNP said it would not join the dialogue.

According to the Bangabhaban press wing, the president has invited nine more political parties for the dialogue.

The president said it is important to ensure political etiquette and a healthy environment in politics for a fair and credible election, and this is a task for the political parties.

It's real

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"Due to inadequate testing and genome sequencing capacity against a large population, the reality will be worse than what the data may indicate," Prof Ridwanur said.

Covid-19 cases in India yesterday increased by 10.75 percent compared to the previous day.

"Due to the large population density in our country, low rate of vaccination and rampant violation of health protocols, Omicron may put hospitals at capacity just as the Delta did."

According to the Directorate General of Health Services, only 31 percent of the population has received two shots of a Covid vaccine. Besides, most people don't wear masks and social distancing is a far cry.

Prof Abul Bashar Mohammad Khurshid Alam, director general of the DGHS, on Monday said the Omicron variant may cause a major spike in Covid-19 cases in March and April.

Officials yesterday reported 775 new cases, which is one and a half times higher than the number a week ago.

The DGHS identified Dhaka and Natore as the high-risk areas where the positivity rate was over five percent.

Besides, the number of patients in hospitals across the country has increased by almost 13 percent in the week preceding yesterday.

Health and Family Welfare Minister Zahid

Maleque yesterday said the government may consider enforcing a lockdown and shops will be ordered to close at 8:00pm in a week.

Medical tests and screening of passengers, who are arriving from Omicron-infected countries, at gateways -- land, air, and waterways will be strengthened and all educational institutions (madrasa, pre-primary, primary, secondary, higher secondary and universities) and coaching centres must maintain health rules.

The minister said, "If infection rate surges and the situation goes out of control, then we have a plan to enforce a lockdown."

Maleque said the restrictions will include reducing the number of public events, cutting down the number of passengers in public transport, ordering restaurants not to sell foods to unvaccinated people and penalising people for not wearing masks outdoors.

Meanwhile, the Institute of Epidemiology, Disease Control and Research completed genome sequences of a total of 18 samples collected between December 1 and 13 and all of those of the Delta variant.

"We regularly collect samples for genome sequence. The latest data indicated the Delta variant was dominant as of early December. But the situation may soon change," Prof Tahmina Shirin, director of the IEDCR told The Daily Star yesterday.