



People enjoy boat rides on the Laal Shapla Beel in Sylhet's Jaintiapur upazila. The Dibir Haor there has four such beels, of which the Laal Shapla Beel is most popular among locals and tourists for the beautiful display of floating red lotuses across the water body. However, the beel has been a victim to land grabbers for the past few years, threatening not only its tourism value but also its biodiversity.

PHOTO: SHEIKH NASIR

DHAKA-WASHINGTON TIES

## Bangladesh seeks thaw Relations to reach new heights, says Miller

PORIMOL PALMA

Dhaka plans to strengthen its engagement with Washington to smoothen the strained relationship following the US measures taken to keep Bangladesh under scrutiny as far as democracy and human rights are concerned.

The Biden administration slapped sanctions on Rab and seven of its current and former officials on human rights violations on December 10. It also did not invite Bangladesh to the Democracy Summit on December 9-10.

The recent amendment to the US Leahy Law makes it mandatory for Bangladesh, like other countries getting funding from the US on security issues, to inform how and where the fund is being used.

Dhaka is discussing the law before sending the written consent in response to a letter from Washington on December 1.

According to international relations experts, the Biden administration's focus is on democracy and human rights globally, and its recent actions indicate that it wants Bangladesh to do more to improve democratic values and human rights.

Though initially Dhaka protested the sanctions, Foreign Minister AK Abdul Momen late December wrote to US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, requesting him to reconsider the sanctions.

On January 3, he told reporters that some countries are dissatisfied with Bangladesh and that the

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TRANSPORT AT HALF-CAPACITY

## Owners lobbying to get order withdrawn

TUHIN SHUBHRA ADHIKARY

Transport leaders are at it once again: throwing their weight to get the government to take a decision that serves their interests.

With the view to preventing a third wave of Covid-19 cases and a subsequent lockdown, the government has ordered half capacity in public transport to maintain social distancing.

The move has left the transport leaders with their arms up in the air.

They are now engineering to get the Cabinet Division to walk back on the decision in a fashion not too dissimilar from the one seen back in November to get the government to hike the bus and launch fares following a 23 percent hike in diesel and kerosene prices.

The Daily Star has learnt after speaking with a host of launch and bus operators that they would be hiking the fare if they have to operate at half capacity.

To avert such a scenario, which would be of great inconvenience for the ordinary citizen, the launch and road transport leaders were busy lobbying yesterday.

In a letter to the shipping secretary, the Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority (BIWTA) said the big launches are spacious enough to maintain social distancing even at full capacity. Besides, launches have separate cabins.

Subsequently, it requested the shipping ministry to take steps to amend the cabinet division's order.

"We are waiting for a response," BIWTA

Chairman Golam Sadeq told The Daily Star last night.

Contacted, Mahbub Uddin Ahmed, president of the Bangladesh Inland Waterways (passengers' carriers) Association, said they did not demand to operate launch with full capacity but it would be better if the government allowed them to.

"Like the planes, we want to operate buses with full capacity while maintaining the health guidelines," said Mashiur Rahman Ranga, president of the Bangladesh Road Transport Owners Association, after a meeting with the Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA).

There would be a scarcity of public transport on the roads if the buses and minibuses run at half capacity while all offices and other establishments stay open, BRTA Chairman Nur Mohammad Mazumder told reporters after the meeting quoting the transport leaders.

The transport owners also demanded that the government arrange a crash programme to vaccinate all transport workers as many of them are still unvaccinated, he said, adding that all their proposals would be forwarded to the road transport and bridges ministry.

Like the BIWTA, the BRTA will write to the ministry to amend the cabinet division's decision regarding half capacity, said an official requesting anonymity due to the sensitivity of the issue.

As things stand, the road transport owners will operate at half capacity at the existing fare from Saturday, according to Mazumder -- just like the Bangladesh Railway.



People crowd a TCB truck in the capital's Motijheel area yesterday, as prices of daily essentials keep escalating. Many customers buy the products and sell them later at higher prices after striking deals with outside shopkeepers, depriving others of an adequate amount of essentials.

PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

ANTI-STATE COMMENTS

## Govt mulls scrapping passports It's for those abroad

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The government has taken initiatives to scrap the passports of those engaged in anti-state activities and making anti-Bangladesh comments while living abroad.

AKM Mozammel Haque, chairman of the Cabinet Committee on Law and Order, came up with the comment while talking to journalists yesterday.

"Those who are involved in anti-state activities and making anti-state statements abroad will be listed and their passports will be impounded."

He, however, did not mention anyone's name. "The list will be made upon verification," he said.

The issue came into the discussion at the Cabinet committee meeting on law and order held at the home ministry.

"We have advised those who are doing these anti-state activities abroad to have their passports revoked," said the minister.

"Let a list of them be prepared, by collecting data of who is doing what and what they are doing. The decision has been taken and instruction is given to cancel their passport," he added.

In recent times, some Awami League leaders have been found complaining that some Bangladeshis from abroad are involved in anti-state propaganda.

## St Martin's Island declared marine protected area

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The government has declared 1,743sqkm of the Bay of Bengal, including St Martin's Island in Cox's Bazar, a marine protected area.

Earlier, 590 hectares of the island had been announced an ecologically critical area.

Issuing a press release yesterday, the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change said the decision was taken to help prevent uncontrolled ships and motor boats, overfishing, dumping of waste and harmful chemicals in the sea, destruction of coral colonies and depletion of the area's biodiversity.

St Martin's Island is now the second, and by far the largest, marine protected area in the country.

According to The Wildlife Conservation Protection Act-2012, under which the declaration was made, no person shall harvest, destroy or collect any natural resources or disturb or threaten any wildlife, destroy their habitat and pollute watercourse. It will even restrict people from entering the area without permission from the authorities.

However, people will be able to enter the area with permission, perhaps by paying an entry fee, for study or investigation purposes on relevant and helpful subjects on wildlife, photography, research, and ecotourism.

The declaration will help the authorities concerned enforce laws to limit extraction of marine resources from this protected area, which will ultimately increase marine fish resources and aquatic animal breeding there, said the release.

## Fire at Sajek, again

### Cottage owners suspect sabotage

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, CHATTOGRAM

A fire left a cottage in ashes in Rangamati's Sajek early yesterday, around 40 days after four other cottages and a restaurant were gutted in another fire in the tourist destination.

The owners believe these are nothing but acts of arson.

KM Aslam Hossain, a sub-inspector of Ruilui Police Camp at Sajek valley in Bagaichhari upazila, said yesterday's fire at "Rock Paradise" could be an act of sabotage.

"The electricity in the area went off just 15 minutes before the incident," he said.

Bagaichhari does not have any unit of the fire services. So, teams from nearby Dighinala in Khagrachhari had to step in to douse the flames.

Al Amin, station officer of the fire services in Dighinala, said they were informed around 2:35am and reached the spot in the remote area around 5:15am.

"We are investigating to know how the fire originated," he said.

Speaking to The Daily Star, Hossain

Mohammad Omar, owner of Rock Paradise, said, "It is definitely an act of sabotage. Why are fires breaking out in Sajek? All these seem pre-planned."

Maruati Lushai, owner of three of the four cottages ravaged by the December 2 fire, said no one from the administration provided her with any help so far. "Everyone here knows these are pre-planned arson attacks, but no one dares to protest..."

There are 84 cottages in the tourist spot, according to Rahul Chakma John, organising secretary of cottage owners' association at Sajek valley. "Owners and employees of all cottages are passing their days in fear of more arson in future," he said.

He demanded proper security in the area.

Asked about the allegation by the cottage owners, Bagaichhari Upazila Nirbahi Officer Shariful Islam said, "We need more time to know the details."

"We couldn't provide them with support because they did not ask for it," he said, replying to another question.