

BOOK FAIR
Cut it short
but hold it
in February

**Publishers urge
the authorities**

DU CORRESPONDENT

Writers and publishers yesterday demanded the authorities take an initiative to hold Ekushey Book Fair in February.

If necessary, the authorities can arrange the fair for 15 days due to the spread of Covid Omicron variant, they said.

They made the demand at a press conference, organised by Boibari, at Pathak Samabesh Centre in the capital's Shahbagh.

Publishers claimed they have information that the authorities will not hold the fair this year.

According to the speakers, Bangla Academy authorities said if the government asks them to hold the fair, they will take steps to organise it.

Preparatory work for the event at Suhrawardy Uyan and Bangla Academy now remains suspended.

The speakers said if the authorities arrange the fair sometime after February, they will not take part in it, as they will have to deal with rain and storm at that time.

Due to the pandemic, the fair, traditionally organised in the month of February, was held in March last year.

Publisher Robin Ahsan said writers and publishers recommended organising the fair ensuring health safety amid the pandemic situation. They will meet Bangla Academy Director General Mohammad Nurul Huda today to put forward their suggestions.

The traditional Amar Ekushey Boi Mela began informally in 1972 on the Bangla Academy premises. However, the academy officially took the responsibility to arrange the fair every year since 1978.

Hospitals

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rate this week has increased the most in Chattogram division from the previous week, from 4.71 percent to 9.86 percent.

In the same duration, the bed occupancy rate has increased from 7.29 percent to 8.71 percent in Rajshahi division and from 10.29 percent to 12.14 percent in Dhaka, according to the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS).

In all other divisions, the bed occupancy rate has increased steadily during the same period, but still below 5 percent, except in Khulna division where it is 5.14 percent.

Since the Omicron cases were reported in the second week of December, the bed occupancy rate has reached 10 percent mark on December 26 in Dhaka division.

The rates, however, reached to 10 percent mark on Friday in Rajshahi division and on Wednesday in Chattogram.

Dr Arifa Akram, head of virology department at the National Institute of Laboratory Medicine and Referral Center, said "The trend will continue to rise because we are getting a higher positivity rate -- 15 to 16 percent -- recently."

Key accused

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police recovered my mother's body from a near a bush adjacent to her rented house in Kashimpur the same day," said Jahir.

Sheikh Mizanur Rahman, inspector (investigation) of Kashimpur Police Station, said that during primary interrogation, Anwarul confessed to strangling Sayeda Ghaffar to death to loot her money.



A child playing with the discarded balloons that were used to decorate a shop for an event. The photo was taken at Chattogram city's Kazir Dewri area.

PHOTO: RAJIB RAIHAN

US Omicron cases receding in big cities

France sees drop in ICU patients despite record cases;
India reports 268,833 new infections

AGENCIES

The United States' Omicron wave is beginning to recede in New York and other major cities, official data showed this week, as France reported fewer hospitalizations despite record cases.

The trend of explosive rises in Omicron cases followed by equally fast declines follows similar patterns seen in Britain and in South Africa, where the variant was first reported in late November.

In New York city, the seven-day average of new daily cases has been falling since around January 2, when they peaked at 40,000 a day -- an all-time record.

The figure stood at around 28,500 on January 10, still higher than anything seen in previous waves caused by other strains, an official tracker showed Friday.

Similar drops were visible in New York state, New Jersey and Chicago, the country's third-largest city, as well as in the capital Washington.

But the nationwide average is still rising, with more than 750,000 cases per day, as infections continue to shoot up in most states.

While milder for most people compared to past strains, the transmissibility of Omicron has meant the small fraction who become severely ill amount to a large number, overwhelming hospitals.

More than 157,000 inpatient beds are occupied by Covid patients, according to the Health and Human Services Department, a record high. The seven-day average of daily deaths is over 1,700, approaching the peak last seen during the Delta variant wave in September 2021, which was around 1,900 per day.

The all-time peak came in January 2021, when more than 3,400 people lost their lives per day.

In France, the number of Covid-19 patients in intensive care units has fallen for the second day in a row, despite a record infection rate, health ministry data showed on Friday.

France reported 3,895 Covid-19 patients were in intensive care units on Friday, 44 fewer than Thursday, and the second consecutive fall, despite the seven-day moving average of new infections reaching a new high of nearly 294,000 on Thursday.

In India, authorities yesterday reported 268,833 new cases of the coronavirus in the last 24 hours, taking its total tally to 36.84 million. Deaths from Covid-19 rose by 402 to 485,752, the ministry said.

Meanwhile, Australia yesterday said it has likely neared the peak of its Omicron wave, but warned daily infections will linger near record levels for "the next few weeks" after more than 100,000 cases were reported for a fourth straight day.

Having limited the spread of the coronavirus through tough restrictions earlier in the pandemic, Australia is now suffering record caseloads from the Omicron variant. Most parts of the country have shifted to a strategy of living with the virus as they reached higher vaccination rates.

More than 1.2 million infections have been recorded this year, compared with 200,000 for 2020 and 2021 combined.

Infections have dipped over the last three days while the rise in hospitalisations in worst-hit New South Wales, Australia's most populous state, has slowed slightly, official data showed.

Leahy law poses new challenge to Dhaka

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they are currently assigned?" asks the article's author Daniel R Mahanty, who also set up the Office of Security and Human Rights at the State Department.

The State's website also says, "When vetting an individual for eligibility to receive US training, the individual's unit is also vetted."

Many security units, like Rab, source their manpower from the combined forces.

Furthermore, there is an active demand from several quarters that officers who have served in Rab be banned from joining UN peacekeeping missions. Such a demand was placed last year at the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, which is a caucus body of the US House of Representatives.

Last fiscal year, the US provided 28 percent of the contributions made globally to the UN peacekeeping operations, making it a top donor.

This intertwining

between forces creates the current conundrum, since some security forces have consistently received US assistance, while the Rapid Action Battalion (Rab) and the Investigation Wing of Dhaka Metropolitan Police's Counter Terrorism and Transnational Crime unit have been blacklisted in 2018, said a statement by the office of the Secretary of State.

It declared it is invoking the Leahy law upon those units for committing human rights violations, as per credible information.

This was followed by sanctions on Rab late last year by the Department of the Treasury.

Since the Rab and the CTTC are already flagged, how will the activation of the Leahy law affect funding to other forces that work in tandem? In short, what is at stake?

US government data shows, since 1977, Bangladesh has been offered \$368 million (Tk 3,177 crores) for "peace and

security". The assistance can be broadly divided into three brackets -- weapons and equipment supply, capacity building and training of police, defence, border and security officials, and programmatic support for civil society organisations.

Over the last four decades, around 60-70 percent of these funds were directly earmarked for military spending.

In some of the categories, the expenditures include "stabilisation operations and security sector reform", counter-terrorism, transnational crime, counter-narcotics and conflict mitigation.

Of them, "stabilisation and security sector reform" received the majority chunk or Tk 174 million (Tk 1,500 crores). The primary recipient of this money has seemingly been the combined forces, data shows.

Every year from 2004 to 2020, Bangladesh received credit for procurement of

defence articles, defence services, and design and construction services.

A State department release made in June last year said, "Since 2015, the United States provided \$66.9 million in Foreign Military Financing and \$7.29 million in International Military Education and Training assistance to Bangladesh."

"A d d i t i o n a l l y , Bangladesh received 50 EDA MRAP vehicles [heavy armoured fighting vehicles] in 2019 to support its peacekeepers in Mali."

Similarly, between 2001 and 2011, the country was given \$9.3 million for foreign military students, shows US data.

Details of \$63 million worth of aid were redacted by the website citing confidentiality. It is not possible to determine what this money was spent for, as US investments, for example, in foreign countries are covered by confidentiality clauses.

Between 2005 and 2012, Bangladesh received \$9 million for the elimination of illegal arms to counter terrorism.

In 2011 2012, the aid supported "military and stability operations" to combat terrorism.

Between 2005-2017, \$3 million were given to train and arm counter-narcotics law enforcement. About two million dollars have been spent on border security.

The highest aid received for military goals was in 2014 -- a total of \$88m.

Lt Abu Rushd, editor of the Bangladesh Defence Journal, said Bangladesh will have to prove its transparency. "Money, or arms meant for one force cannot be spent on another."

Professor Riaz pointed out that Dhaka said it is looking for wiggle room.

"I don't think Dhaka can attach any conditions. They can either agree or disagree. And once the US starts an enquiry, other countries might follow suit."

Ivy's hattrick or

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He expressed his firm determination to not leave the election race and urged the local administration not to harass his campaigners for the sake of a free and fair poll.

Taimur, a former top BNP leader, went on to express concern over the returning officer's move to switch off the security cameras installed at some polling stations.

He demanded that the closed-circuit television (CCTV) cameras be turned on in the centres today.

Akter, however, said there is no possibility of having functional security cameras inside the polling booths "for the sake of voters' privacy".

"There will be no privacy if the polling booths remain under CCTV coverage. The booths are usually not monitored, but if any booth has a camera installed, it will be switched off," she said.

Contacted, Narayanganj Deputy Commissioner

Mostain Billah said there is nothing that can be done over the issue as it was the decision of the EC, which is overseeing the election.

Since it assumed office in February 2017, the EC has been under severe criticism for widespread electoral anomalies in the national and different local government polls.

Besides, not all polling centres have CCTV cameras installed, Billah added.

"We want to give the people of the country a model election in a festive atmosphere," said Zaidul Alam, Narayanganj District's police superintendent.

A three-tier security zone has been established to ensure violence-free polls, he added.

Until last night, the atmosphere in the city, which is about 16 kilometres from Dhaka, was largely peaceful, raising hope of clean polls.

The total votes cast in the 2011 polls was 70 percent. It came down to 62 percent in 2016.

Allow a UN panel probe

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The Group is looking into 76 cases of enforced disappearances and has not received any information about those from the government.

The Working Group notes that it has not received replies to any outstanding cases during the reporting period and that only one case has been clarified by the government since the Working Group transmitted the first case to it in 1996," the annual report says.

The victims' families joined the programme yesterday to demand an accountable investigation and protest against "harassment by the police" in the past week.

"We are happy to cooperate with the police and give them whatever information they need, but they cannot harass the families," said Akhi, whose brother Sajedul Islam Suman remains missing after being picked up.

Over the last week, several

families alleged that they were being harassed by the police in the name of investigation.

"MPs and ministers make fun of our tears. They say our husbands got married again and moved away and that there is no enforced disappearance in the country," said Nasima Akter Smriti, wife of timber trader Ismail Hossain Baten.

Ismail was picked up allegedly by Rapid Action Battalion 4 from his business office on June 19.

2019. He has been missing since then.

Nasima said, "I went from door to door after my husband was picked up. Police refused to record a GD [general diary] against Rab. After three years, police are visiting me and asking if it is true that my husband has disappeared."

Jahid Khan described how the police went to his house with a previously-written statement that said the family while filing a complaint in 2013

had intentionally hidden information about who up picked his brother Mahabub Hasan Shujon.

"We were only allowed to say that he is missing. If we did not do what we were told to, they would not record the complaint," said Jahid.

REPORTS 'FABRICATED': DMP

In a statement issued on Friday, the Dhaka Metropolitan Police protested some media reports on the alleged harassment of the victims'

families.

The DMP claimed the reports contained "exaggerated" and "fabricated" information and that it was an attempt to tarnish police's image.

"It is the police's responsibility to keep in touch with the families during an investigation," it said.

According to the DMP statement, Shujon's brother Jahid was spreading lies by saying that the police tried to make their family sign blank papers. "We asked them to provide us with their statement, but they refused to do so."

However, the family of another victim, Kazi Farhad who went missing along with Sujon, gave their statement, police said.

The DMP said police take all complaints seriously and conduct investigations following legal steps. It asked all the people concerned to refrain from disclosing "fabricated" information.

President to address the House today

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

President Abdul Hamid is scheduled to address the 16th session of the 11th parliament this afternoon.

According to the constitution, the president will deliver his speech in the House's first session of the new year.

On January 1, the head of state convened the first Jatiya Sangsad session of 2022 exercising the powers conferred on him by article 72 (1) of the constitution.

The president's speech has already been approved by the cabinet.

The Awami League government's successes and future plans, including the development activities, will be highlighted in his address, sources at the parliament secretariat said.

The duration of the first session of the year is usually longer than others. The JS holds a long discussion on the "thanksgiving motion on the president's address".

Like the previous sessions in the last two years, journalists will not be allowed to cover the new year's first JS session in person. The parliament secretariat has requested journalists to cover the session through following its live telecast on Sangsad Television.