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The Bhadra river that once flowed across the Khulna division with fury now looks like a canal. Illegal brick kilns on the riverbank are mostly to blame. The river was once 500-metre wide but now it is 15-30 metres wide. The photo was taken in Khulna's Dumuria upazila.

PHOTO: HABIBUR RAHMAN

## Start online classes again

### Govt asks schools, other educational institutions

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The government on Friday asked all schools and colleges to resume online or virtual classes, as it announced the closure of schools and all educational institutions again from January 21 till February 6, due to a surge in Covid-19 transmission.

The directorate of secondary and higher education (DSHE) in an 11-point directive yesterday also asked the educational institutions authorities keep up their efforts to vaccinate all students aged 12 to 17.

The Cabinet Division issued a gazette notification with a five-point directive in this regard, adding that university authorities will take their own decision about closure.

The directive issued by DSHE acting director general professor Shahedul Khair Chowdhury, also asked all schools and madrasas to keep all sports competitions suspended until further orders.

The DSHE also said offices of the educational institutions will remain open, adding that heads of the institutions can engage teachers and staffers in work for emergencies but will have to maintain health rules.

Dormitories may remain open while maintaining health protocols until further notice.

The authorities concerned will take measures to keep electricity, telephone, water, internet connections uninterrupted in classes, libraries

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## N'ganj shows polls can be fair

### Say speakers at CPD webinar

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The recent Narayanganj city polls showed that a free, fair, and peaceful election is possible if the government and administration do not interfere, academics and election experts said.

Speaking at a webinar yesterday, they also stressed the need to ensure devolution of power to local government so that they can play a more impactful role in providing services.

Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) organised the webinar on NCC polls held on January 16.

Badiul Alam Majumdar, secretary of Shushashoner Jonno Nagorik (Shujan), said the NCC election was "unique".

"We can learn a lot from the election. If the government and the Election Commission are willing and the candidates are not corrupt, a free and fair election can take place."

The polls also showed that the authorities concerned should be more careful about EVM use in national elections, he said.

It further revealed that many people still have doubts about EVM as it does not have the voter verifiable paper audit trail mechanism (which allows voters to verify that their votes are cast). Besides, the machine cannot read all voters' fingerprints, Badiul said.

Former election commissioner M Sakhawat Hussain said another important lesson from the NCC election is the peaceful coexistence of candidates.

"But the questions of whether the situation will be the same in other elections...Jatiya Sangsad and local government elections are not similar," he added.

CPD Chairman Professor Rehman Sobhan emphasised

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## KL FOR 25 RECRUITING AGENCIES

# Can Dhaka stick to its no-cap stance?

PORIMOL PALMA

A debate over syndication in labour recruitment in Malaysia is swirling around, especially after Dhaka and Kuala Lumpur signed a memorandum of understanding in this regard on December 19.

At the heart of the debate is the syndicate of 25 Bangladeshi agents and 250 subagents mentioned by Malaysian Human Resources Minister M Saravanan in a letter to Bangladesh Expatriates' Welfare Minister Imran Ahmad on January 14.

In his reply, on January 18, Imran stressed on allowing all valid recruiting agencies of Bangladesh in the hiring process to ensure transparency, highlighting the Bangladesh Competition Act 2012 and the ILO charters on overseas labour recruitment.

Despite such a stance by Imran Ahmad, it is evident from his statements made to the media on different occasions that he is in favour of quickly opening the Malaysian labour market, which has remained closed since

September 2018.

The then Mahathir Mohamad government shut the market for high recruitment costs that led to forced labour and other forms of exploitation.

Many suspect that for the sake of opening the market, the minister may compromise on the Malaysian preference for syndication which was the case in 2016.

## NEWS ANALYSIS

While media reporting brought up various aspects of corruption and labour exploitation under the G2G Plus arrangement since 2016, a group of recruiting agents - Somnilito Somonnay Front - recently came up with a stunning figure of money allegedly laundered at that time.

In a letter to the prime minister on January 13, the Front, a fraction of Bangladesh Association of International

Recruiting Agencies (BAIRA), said during 2016-18, an estimated Tk 5,000 crore was laundered to Malaysia from Bangladesh as payment to lobbyists and agents in Malaysia from each of the recruitment costs.

According to the letter, 274,000 Bangladeshi workers paid on average Tk 350,000 each for a job in Malaysia during that time. The group also appealed to the PM to stop the recurrence of any syndication to protect the Bangladeshi migrants.

Under the G2G Plus arrangement in 2016, Malaysia forced Bangladesh to accept its offer that 10 recruiting agents would do the recruiting job though Bangladesh then had sent a list of 745 agencies.

But what was the basis of selecting the ten agencies was never explained.

However, this time around, M Saravanan, in a statement on November 26 as the negotiation on the MoU was going on, told local media that Malaysia will become a "dumping ground" if 2,000 agencies in Bangladesh are

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## Soybean oil prices soar

### Likely to go up even more

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Prices of edible oil further increased at retail yesterday amid refiners move to sell the essential commodity at higher rates.

Yesterday, traders in some places in Dhaka and Chattogram cities sold 5-litre bottles of soybean oil for as much Tk 775. A week ago, consumers could buy the same bottles for Tk 760 each. Prices of one litre bottle of soybean oil also went up slightly at some kitchen markets in the two major cities.

"Companies have told us that prices of 5-litre bottles of soybean oil could go up to Tk 820. We have to place orders considering the new price," said a salesman of a store in Agargoen Banik Sambay Market of Dhaka.

"If we confirm the orders, we have to sell the oil at that high price," he added.

The market for the edible oil, which Bangladesh has to import to meet 90 percent of its annual requirement, sees fresh spikes although the commerce ministry said prices would not increase until the first week of February.

Soybean oil with new prices will be available in the market in 5-7 days, said a top official of Tk Group, one of the major importers and processors.

Biswajit Saha, director for corporate and regulatory affairs of City Group, one of the largest importers and processors, said refiners fixed each of bottle of soybean oil at Tk 165.

Officials of two refiners also said they decided to sell soybean oil at Tk 165 per litre.

# Omicron now dominant in EU

### Says bloc's health agency; US study says vaccines highly efficient against severe Omicron cases

AFP, Stockholm

Omicron is now the dominant Covid-19 variant circulating in the European Union and European Economic Area (EEA), the bloc's health agency has said.

"The transmission category for Omicron in the EU and the EEA changed from community to dominant," the Stockholm-based European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) said in its weekly update on communicable disease threats.

The EEA includes Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway.

The ECDC said Omicron, which was first discovered in South Africa, was now "dominant in the majority of EU/EEA countries", with a "78 percent pooled prevalence".

Covid is currently soaring across Europe, with cases increasing by nine

percent in the region in the past week, according to an AFP database.

The World Health Organization said last week that the Omicron variant could infect half of all people in the region by March this year.

According to an AFP tally, the number of average daily cases globally leapt to a record 3.1 million last week till Thursday, an increase of 11 percent compared to the previous seven days.

At a global level the number of Covid-related deaths took a rise again, up nine percent compared to the previous week to 7,526 per day.

The US mourned the most daily deaths with 1,969 per day, followed by Russia with 698 and India with 380.

However the upsurge was less marked than in previous weeks, when the highly contagious Omicron variant began its rampage.



Another wave of coronavirus is sweeping through the country and the government is conducting awareness programmes to curb the spread. Still many are callous about following the health guidelines. The photo was taken in the capital's Gulistan area yesterday.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

## AL man killed by 'rivals' in Jhenidah

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Jhenidah

An Awami League activist was beaten and hacked to death allegedly by party rivals in Sharutia village of Shaillkupa, Jhenidah, on Friday night.

Mehedi Hasan Swapan, 30, was a supporter of Julfikar Kaisar Tipu, who contested the union parishad polls on January 5 as an AL rebel. Tipu was defeated by AL nominee Mahmudul Hasan Mahmud.

Around 10:30pm on Friday, several supporters of Tipu took Mehedi to Taltola bridge area, where he was beaten and hacked indiscriminately, said police, quoting his family members.

Police are trying to arrest the killers.