



**P7** NZ PM Jacinda Ardern calls off wedding for Covid pandemic



**P5** Louhajang river is on course to die



**B1** Refund for Qcoom customers begins today



**P6** Masud Rana: Still a pop culture phenomenon



Two men running dangerously between buses after they were dropped off by one in the middle of Mirpur Road near the capital's College Gate yesterday. Widespread demonstrations have failed to bring order on the roads even though the frequency of crashes keeps escalating.

PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

## Omicron raging at community level: DGHS

### Gradually replacing Delta

MOUDUD AHMED SUJAN

Community transmission of the quick-spreading Omicron variant of the coronavirus is now occurring in Bangladesh, said health officials yesterday – in an acknowledgement that forebodes an unprecedented surge in cases in the days ahead.

The positivity rate is a useful measure of how much the coronavirus is spreading in a community. When the positivity rate of COVID-19 tests increases, it can mean that more virus is spreading in the community.

Since January 1, the positivity rate has increased more than 15 times.

And yesterday's positivity rate of 31.29 percent was the highest since July 30 last year, when the Delta variant swept through the country leaving hospitals at breaking point.

Bangladesh saw its highest positivity rate of 33 percent on July 24 last year.

"There has been community transmission of Omicron," said Nazmul Islam, spokesperson of the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS), in a press bulletin yesterday.

First identified in Botswana and South Africa in November last year, the Omicron has a distinctive combination of more than 50 mutations, allowing it to dodge antibodies produced by vaccines and previous infections.

Global data shows it is two to three times as likely to... SEE PAGE 2 COL 1

## Pro-govt panel will only find pro-govt EC Speakers tell webinar

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The Election Commission bill that was placed in parliament yesterday is akin to election engineering, said speakers at a webinar on EC formation law.

The search committee that is being proposed in the bill will be comprised of people friendly to the government, said noted jurist Shahdeen Malik.

He was speaking at a virtual discussion hosted by Shushashoner Jonno Nagorik (Shujan) titled "Proposed Election Commission Appointment Law: Thoughtful Civic Response".

"I am feeling very hopeless. The government-friendly people who will be taken into this search committee will only find commissioners friendly to the government," he added.

The proposed law, he said, is the first step towards engineering the election so that those who are in power now come... SEE PAGE 2 COL 4

# Legal cover for past ECs is the mainstay

### Bill placed; opposition parties say they didn't want a law like this

RASHIDUL HASAN

Law Minister Anisul Huq yesterday placed a bill in parliament seeking to give a legal shield to the current and previous Election Commissions formed through search committees, amid opposition from a BNP lawmaker.

Once passed, the law will provide legal cover to all activities of the search committees.

Sources said the Awami League-led government wants to pass the bill in the ongoing JS session so that the upcoming Election Commission can be constituted through a search committee in line with the act.

The tenure of the incumbent commission, led by CEC KM Nurul Huda, expires next month. Ahead of the general elections in

2014 and 2018, the president picked CECs and other commissioners in 2012 and 2017 following recommendations by search committees.

After Anisul tabled the "Appointment of the Chief Election Commissioner and Election Commissioners Bill 2022" around 11:25am yesterday, BNP lawmaker Harunur Rashid opposed the move, saying it was nothing but an attempt to validate the two ECs "that destroyed the country's electoral system".

Demanding withdrawal of the bill, he also said, "The two Election Commissions must be brought to book."

The opposition, however, was muffled by a voice-vote since the AL holds an absolute majority in parliament. JP MPs remained silent.

The bill was later sent to the parliamentary standing committee on the law ministry for scrutiny. The committee was asked to submit its report before the House within seven days.

The government move came nearly 50 years after the constitution prescribed enacting a specific law for forming the EC.

Talking to The Daily Star later in the day, Jatiya Party and Workers Party leaders, who during a recent dialogue with President Abdul Hamid demanded a specific law for EC formation, said they wanted the law, but not like the one being framed.

They said the proposed law has many limitations. Workers Party President Rashed... SEE PAGE 2 COL 4

## Run with half staff till Feb 6 Govt orders public, pvt offices

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Amid the steep rise in the daily Covid-19 cases, the government has directed all public and private offices to halve the presence of manpower at the respective offices till February 6 from today.

The decision came at a time when Bangladesh reported 10,906 new coronavirus cases in a day, the highest in a day since August 10, with a 31 percent positive rate.

In its circular, the cabinet division said all the government, semi-government, autonomous and private offices will operate their daily activities with half of their manpower following health guidelines properly.

"Other officials will stay at their workstation and carry out official activities using virtual platforms," reads the circular.

The Supreme Court will issue necessary directives in this regard.

The Bangladesh Bank and Finance Division will give their directives to banks, insurance and financial institutions in this regard.

The Bangladesh Bank has already instructed banks to collect Covid-19 vaccine certificates from their employees... SEE PAGE 2 COL 1

## Uphold democracy PM to cops as Police Week begins

UNB, Dhaka

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina yesterday asked police personnel to discharge their duties with the utmost professionalism and uphold democracy in the country apart from maintaining peace and stability.

"I believe every police personnel will perform his or her duties with professionalism to maintain peace and stability in the country and uphold democracy through pro-people policing," she said.

Sheikh Hasina said this while inaugurating the Police Week 2022 – from January 23 to 27 – with the theme "Skilled Police, Prosperous Country, Bangabandhu's Bangladesh".

The programme was held at Rajarbagh Police Lines in the capital while the prime minister joined it virtually from the Gono Bhaban.

Hasina said the long 24 years of struggle of Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and the win in the Liberation War in 1971 has brought this independence for the country.

"You've to protect the country's independence from all kinds of blows as it came in lieu of your predecessors' blood."

On behalf of the prime minister, Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan Kamal inspected the parade and took the salute.

He also distributed Bangladesh Police Medal (BPM) and President Police Medal (PPM) awards among the winners.

This year, as per the Public Security Division's Police Wing-2 of the Ministry of Home Affairs' notification, Bangladesh Police Medal (BPM) and President Police Medal (PPM) awards were given for outstanding work in 2020 and 2021. Around 115 police officials got awards for each year.



A long queue of migrant workers waiting for their first Covid-19 vaccine dose at Dhaka Medical College Hospital yesterday. New daily cases and deaths due to the virus are now galloping in the country.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

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