



It is impossible to say how many days we still have to free Ukrainian land. But we can say we will do it. For we have already reached a strategic turning point. We are already moving towards our goal, our victory.

Ukraine's President  
Volodymyr Zelensky

We are doing a lot and we are making even harder sanctions as we speak. But, of course, we also want to make sure that the situation doesn't escalate any further that we don't end up in World War III.

Finnish Prime Minister  
Sanna Marin



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# TEA revolution in the north

## Small, marginal growers in Panchagarh changing fortune with tea farming

MD QUAMRUL ISLAM RUBAIYAT, *Thakurgaon*

Imran Ali, a farmer in Panchagarh, could barely get by with sugarcane cultivation in his 1.7 acres of land. Then, in 2005, he rolled the dice and switched to tea production, a gamble that went on to change his life forever.

"This has been a gamechanger for me as it needs a very little investment," said the 44-year-old, who earned a profit of about Tk 14 lakh last year and has now expanded cultivation to 8.5 acres.

Ali's story is not an isolated one but is representative of the small farmers in the northern region, whose socioeconomic status has enhanced thanks to switching to tea production from conventional crops like rice, wheat, sugarcane and jute or tobacco farming that progressively ate up their lands' fertility.

With such gusto did they take to it that the region — where tea cultivation began in 2002 on 455 acres of land — has leapfrogged Chattogram, a traditional hilly region suitable for tea cultivation, in gross annual production.

It is now second only to Sylhet, accounting for about 15 percent of Bangladesh's record tea production of 96.5 million kilograms in 2021, according to data from the Bangladesh Tea Board (BTB).

Last year, tea was cultivated on 11,433.9 acres under nine registered and 21 unregistered tea gardens by 8,067 small-scale growers of the northern region.

"As the lands in the northern districts are more fertile compared to Chattogram and Sylhet, growers can pluck leaves after a year of planting the saplings," said Mohammad Shameem Al Mamun, senior scientific

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PHOTO: MD QUAMRUL ISLAM RUBAIYAT



**"As lands in the northern districts are more fertile compared to Chattogram and Sylhet, growers can pluck leaves after a year of planting the saplings."**

Shameem Al Mamun  
senior scientific officer,  
BTRI, Panchagarh.

**15%**  
of country's record tea production of 96.5 million kgs last year came from northern region

**8,067**  
farmers cultivated tea on 11,433.9 acres in 5 districts last year

**50,000**  
acres of land in the region suitable for tea production: tea researchers

Bangladesh Small Tea Growers Association demands auction centre in Panchagarh

Farmers need government assistance for irrigation, training and mechanisation

A tea grower can take home a profit of Tk **1.5 lakh** to **Tk 2.5 lakh** from one acre of land after 3 to 4 years of tea cultivation

Labour shortage hurdle for tea farming

# Kyiv assault 'within days'

## Reports say Russia regrouping after initial setbacks; civilian targets hit; Putin sees 'positive shifts' in talks

AGENCIES

Russian strikes hit fresh civilian targets in central and eastern Ukraine yesterday, including a city previously considered a safe haven, as Moscow's troops edged closer to the capital Kyiv.

More than two weeks after Russia invaded its neighbour on February 24, hundreds of thousands of civilians remain trapped and under bombardment, while the UN estimates some 2.5 million have fled.

Russian forces bearing down on Kyiv are regrouping northwest of the Ukrainian capital, satellite pictures showed, in what Britain said could be preparation for an assault on the city within days.

Western powers have imposed unprecedented sanctions on Moscow and sent funds and

military aid to Kyiv, but have failed to halt Russia, with overnight strikes again reported across Ukraine yesterday.

The first high-level talks between the two sides on Thursday failed to make a breakthrough although Russian President Vladimir Putin yesterday said there were "certain positive shifts".

"There are certain positive shifts, negotiators from our side reported to me," Putin told his Belarus counterpart Alexander Lukashenko during a televised meeting in Moscow.

He added that negotiations are "now being held on an almost daily basis."

Russian and Ukrainian negotiators have held several rounds of talks. The talks have led to the opening of several

humanitarian corridors to evacuate civilians from combat areas. Both sides have accused each other of blocking these efforts.

On the ground, three missiles hit civilian buildings in the central city of Dnipro early yesterday, destroying a shoe factory and killing a security guard.

The city had been considered a safe haven, becoming a hub for the coordination of humanitarian aid and those fleeing more severe fighting in the country's east.

Elsewhere, a care home for disabled people was hit in the village of Oskil, near Kharkiv in eastern Ukraine, in Russian strikes which also destroyed five houses, local officials said. There were no reports of casualties.

Military targets were also

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## VAT WAIVER Edible oil price drops slightly

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The edible oil price has dropped to the government's pre-fixed rate a day after the announcement of value-added tax exemption came.

On Thursday, Finance Minister AHM Mustafa Kamal told reporters after a meeting of the cabinet committee on purchase that VAT exemption has been given at the production stage and at the consumer level until June 30 to rein in the runaway price for the essential cooking ingredient and the forthcoming month of Ramadan.

At present, there is a 15 percent VAT at the production stage, 15 percent at the import stage and 5 percent at the retail level.

However, no statutory regulatory order (SRO) has been issued by the National Board of Revenue yet.

Although the government last month fixed the retail price of a 5-litre bottle at Tk 795 and a one-litre bottle at Tk 168, none followed the rate, with retailers selling a 5-litre bottle for as much as Tk 850 in recent weeks.

However, yesterday, a five-litre bottle of soybean oil of different brands was found selling at Tk 795 in different markets of the capital.

"It is too early to say the price will drop further as the SRO has not come through yet," said Biswajit Saha, director for corporate and regulatory affairs of City Group, a leading commodities importer.

If the VAT is exempted on import, the price will fall, said an official of the Bangladesh Trade and Tariff Commission on condition of anonymity.

But if it is waived at the manufacturing stage, there will not be much of an impact.

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# Driven by greed

## Profit maximisation behind mad races of buses, putting people's lives at risk on city roads



SHARIFUL ISLAM

It was an early January afternoon. A bus was trundling towards Mirpur-10 from Pallabi, picking up anyone who would raise their hands from the side of the road.

The bus of a rival operator swiftly overtook it, made a sharp left and stopped abruptly, cutting off the first bus.

The driver of the first bus started to honk and eventually tried forcing his way past the bus in front. There were a few scrapes but he could not get past.

As both vehicles started moving forward, the drivers desperately tried to overtake each other, scraping the sides of the buses several times as the people on board prayed for dear life.

But this is not extraordinary by any means. People see and endure such recklessness and total disregard for safety every day.

Most city dwellers probably cannot even remember the last time they saw a city bus in pristine condition. Many are devoid of tail lights, blinkers, and sometimes mirrors and headlights. They pick up and drop off commuters in the middle of the road.

Thanks to a nexus of transport companies, bus owners, drivers, and traffic law enforcers, crores of taka change hands every month to make sure unfit buses stay on the roads and to maintain the status quo in the sector. Traffic law enforcers turn a blind eye to these corrupt practices even as road safety has become a major issue in recent times.

The drivers ignore traffic rules as they drive the unfit vehicles, picking up as many commuters as they can to maximise profits. Many of those behind the wheel do not even have a driver's licence.

Meanwhile, safety and rule of law take the back seat. At least 7,809 people were killed and 9,039 others were injured

in 5,629 crashes last year, according to Bangladesh Jatri Kalyan Samity.

About 54 percent of the crashes involved buses being driven dangerously, said Mozammel Hoque Chowdhury, secretary general of the association which came up with the numbers by keeping track of media reports.

He said 5.33 percent of the crashes take place in the capital due to rash driving.

On January 20, 14-year-old Rakibul Hasan was crushed to death between two buses of Ajmery Glory Paribahan. A driver's assistant with no licence was behind the wheel of one of the buses while the driver of the other bus was a drug addict, said Rab officers after arresting them six days later.

**"Our company has around 30 buses. We give Tk 1.5 lakh to the sergeants stationed on the Mirpur-12 to Motijheel route."**

Every month, each transport company pays Tk 1.5 lakh to traffic police and other corrupt officials who look the other way as these vehicles ply the roads. Besides, the bus owners must spend between Tk 600 and Tk 1,000 every day for miscellaneous costs on the roads and at office, contributions to different workers and owners' associations and political groups, terminal fees, and community police fees.

Around 5,500 buses of 110 companies operate in the capital and its adjacent areas, according to leaders of Dhaka Road Transport Owners' Association.

Even by conservative estimation, the transport companies pay a total of Tk 1.8 crore in bribes every month.

"Our company has around 30 buses. We

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A Ukrainian refugee looks on after taking refuge in an athletic complex in the Moldovan capital Chisinau (Kishinev).

PHOTO: AFP