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What message does South Asia get?



The celebration of Pahela Baishakh, the first day of the Bangla calendar, is strong on the folk motif. The photo of a student decorating an earthen pot ahead of Pahela Baishakh, which will be on Thursday, was taken at the Faculty of Fine Arts in Dhaka University yesterday.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

Pak parliament to elect new PM today

PML-N's Sharif, PTI's Qureshi file nomination papers; Imran says 'freedom struggle begins'

AGENCIES

As Pakistan recovered from Saturday's long and tiring National Assembly (NA) session which saw Imran Khan lose his government, politicians yesterday submitted their nomination papers for the prime minister's election.

PTI Vice Chairman Shah Mahmood Qureshi submitted four forms with the NA Secretariat, while PML-N President Shehbaz Sharif, the joint opposition's candidate for the post, filed 13 forms.

The NA will meet at 2:00pm today to elect the new prime minister, reports Dawn online.

Senior PTI leader and former information minister Fawad Chaudhry, meanwhile, said the PTI leadership had recommended its representatives resign en masse from the national assembly.

The Speaker would be obliged to accept those resignations that would necessitate by elections in probably more than 100 seats.

That could plunge the country into another crisis as the election commission has previously said it would not be ready to hold elections until October.

The decision to resign was tied up with the acceptance of PML-N President Shehbaz Sharif's nomination papers for prime minister's elections, to which the PTI had raised objections. In a later development, the NA Secretariat rejected the objections and accepted Shehbaz's nomination.

Elaborating on the PTI's decision to nominate its Vice Chairman Shah Mahmood Qureshi for the prime minister's position after a successful vote of no-confidence against Khan, Chaudhry said that contesting the election offered the party a way to challenge Shehbaz's nomination papers.

He said it was a "great injustice" that Shehbaz would be contesting the election for the prime minister on the same day he is to be indicted in a money laundering case.

"What can be more insulting for Pakistan that a foreign selected and foreign imported government is imposed on it and a person like Shehbaz is made its head," he riled.

Imran Khan yesterday reiterated his "foreign conspiracy" claim and said the "freedom struggle begins today".

"Pakistan became an independent state in 1947; but the freedom struggle begins again today against a foreign conspiracy of regime change. It is always the people of the country who defend their sovereignty & democracy," Khan tweeted.

Strict security measures are still in place around the D-chowk with police saying that the roads leading to Parliament will be opened after election of the new premier.

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KIDNAPPED IN LIBYA

Mother flies to Benghazi, brings back son

SUMON ALI

Shahinoor Begum left no stone unturned in the search for her kidnapped son even though everyone told her that there was no hope.

The 45-year-old mother sold her properties and spent around Tk 20 lakh in ransom to have her son released from a Libyan human trafficking gang and then embarked on a journey from her nondescript village in Cumilla to the war-torn Libyan city of Benghazi to find her son Yakub Hossain, aged around 20.

Yakub went missing while he was trying to go to Italy from Libya by taking the perilous boat journey through the Mediterranean. The family didn't know his whereabouts for six months.

"People around me said my son was dead. Some said he got killed. But I refused to believe them. I sold everything we had to bring my son back. I paid about Tk 20 lakh to his captors in four instalments for his release. I still couldn't find him. Then I went to Libya," Shahinoor told this correspondent.

On March 21, the iron-willed woman returned to



Shahinoor Begum

Yakub Hossain

her village in Debidwar with her son.

Shahinoor said her husband, who also lives in Libya, had two heart attacks after their son went missing.

"It destroyed our financial stability. I spent days crying, not sure what to do. Then I decided to go to Libya," she said.

She first travelled to Dhaka to get a passport and travel documents. "I paid Tk 3 lakh to a travel agent

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Hriday Chandra Mondal, assistant teacher of Binodpur Ram Kumar High School, walking out of Munshiganj jail yesterday. His arrest on charges of hurting religious feeling drew widespread criticism from across the country.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

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SOARING COST OF LIVING

Middle class in a tight spot

MD SHAHNAWAZ KHAN CHANDAN and MD ASADUZ ZAMAN

Excluded from the government's social safety net, middle-income families are struggling to cope with the rising prices of basic goods and services.

The inflation rate rose to 6.17 percent in February from 5.6 percent in January, according to Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics.

It might be just a figure in economic terms, but for a middle-income earner like Md Abdul Hye, a senior officer at a private bank, it meant a decline in his purchasing power.

Hye, who runs a family of six with his monthly income of around Tk 60,000, said he was finding it hard to meet his family's basic needs with his earnings and some contribution from two of his three children.

"Whenever I see reports of price hikes in newspaper, I panic. I cannot bear the thought of failing to provide for my children's education," said an anxious Hye.

His elder son and daughter will complete university education next year, while his younger son is a class-XII student.

"I'm struggling to pay their tuition fees though two of my children support me by doing part-time jobs," said the 53-year-old banker.

His wife Parisa Akhter also feels the pinch of soaring prices.

"The situation is so dire that if any of us falls sick and needs to be hospitalised, we don't have any savings to pay for treatment. I wish I could do a job and support my husband..." said Parisa.

Hye said, "The government provides cash incentives and other support to ultra-poor families but we don't get any help from any quarter... We cannot even stand in queues behind OMS [Open Market Sales] trucks."

He is not alone. Many like him are grappling with the soaring cost of living.

Rezwan Haque, an NGO worker, earns around Tk 35,000 per month. He said it's impossible for him to support his three-member family with this income.

"My wife is six months pregnant. She needs nutritious food and medicine. My mother is suffering from old age complications."

To meet the expenses, Rezwan works as a delivery man after office hours to earn some extra money.

"After office hours, I work as a delivery man for an online food and grocery delivery platform to supplement my meagre income."

"Initially, I felt very sad and embarrassed to do this job. But gradually I realised that many people like me are doing it for extra money to survive in this situation..."

"After paying for basic food, medicine, house rent and transport cost, I cannot save a penny," he lamented.

WHAT EXPERTS SAY

Experts have voiced concern over exclusion of middle-income families from the social safety net, saying many of them are joining the ranks of new poor as a result of rising inflation.

Hossain Zillur Rahman, executive chairman of the Power and Participation Research Centre (PPRC), said, "Inflationary pressure, particularly on poorer households, is more severe than what the official

RELATED STORY ON PAGE 3

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Hriday Mondal released on bail, at last

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Munshiganj

Hriday Chandra Mondal was released on bail yesterday afternoon, after spending 19 days behind bars on charges of hurting religious sentiments.

He walked out of jail around 4:50pm, said Jailer Abul Bashar of Munshiganj jail.

Talking to journalists at the jail gate, Hriday, a science teacher of Binodpur Ram Kumar High School in the district, said, "My demand to the state is that no such incident recurs in the country. The state should ensure security to the people like me. At the moment, I feel even my own home is not safe."

"I request the police and administration to ensure my security so that I don't have to face more harassment when I go out of home."

Replying to a question, he said, "The reason the