

## ECONOMIC CRISIS It'll last for at least 2 more yrs Says Sri Lankan govt

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka will have to endure its unprecedented economic hardships for at least two more years, the country's finance minister said Wednesday while warning of an imminent cash crunch.

Months of blackouts and acute shortages of food, fuel and pharmaceuticals have brought widespread suffering across the South Asian island nation.

Public anger has sparked sustained protests demanding the government resign over its mismanagement of the economic crisis, Sri Lanka's worst since independence in 1948.

"People should know the truth. I don't know if people realise the gravity of the situation," Finance Minister Ali Sabry told parliament.

"We won't be able to resolve this crisis in two years, but the actions we take today will determine how much longer this problem will drag."

Sabry said the country now has less than \$50 million in usable foreign exchange reserves, needed to finance

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essential goods to keep Sri Lanka's import-dependent economy ticking over.

Official data shows \$1.7 billion in reserves, but most of that figure includes a Chinese currency swap which cannot be used to pay for imports from other countries.

Sabry said the government had erred by delaying an approach to the International Monetary Fund for a bailout.

Negotiations with the IMF are ongoing but Sri Lanka's central bank chief has said any assistance from the lender is months away.

The government will unveil a new budget soon and raise taxes to replenish state revenue.

"It was a historic mistake to sharply reduce taxes in 2019," Sabry said, adding that the previous central bank chief had also blundered by exhausting foreign reserves to defend Sri Lanka's overvalued currency.

Sri Lanka's economic crisis took hold after the coronavirus pandemic hammered income from tourism and remittances.

Unable to pay for fuel imports, utilities have imposed daily blackouts to ration electricity, while long lines of people snake around service stations for petrol and kerosene.

Hospitals are short of vital medicines and the government has appealed to citizens abroad for donations.



Small boats used by people to commute across the Buriganga are moored in the capital's Dkkhin Keraniganj as the city was still relatively empty yesterday after the Eid holidays. Much larger boats that bring in people from other districts are docked at Sadarghat Launch Terminal on the other side of the river.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

## 53 CASES OVER HEFAJAT MAYHEM

# 9 years gone, probe yet to be completed

SHARIFUL ISLAM

Law enforcers are yet to wrap up the investigation of any of the 53 cases filed in the capital over the May 2013 Hefajat mayhem.

The probes remain stalled for nine years though Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan in December 2020 hinted at completing those.

His hint came amid threats by Hefajat-e-Islam leaders of knocking down all sculptures in the country.

The minister then said, "The cases have been pending for quite a long time. We have to dispose of them."

Asked about the state of the investigations, DMP Additional Commissioner (Detective Branch) AKM Hafiz Akhter yesterday said they were yet to complete the probes in any of 53 cases.

"We had a meeting earlier to complete the investigations, but we could not make much progress as we were busy in tackling other crimes," he told The Daily Star.

On May 5, 2013, thousands of members of Hefajat, a Qawmi

madrasa-based Islamist organisation, clashed with law enforcers and ruling Awami League men, turning the capital's Motijheel and Paltan areas into a battleground.

They set fire to hundreds of shops, vehicles, and police outposts and looted stores, including those

**A total of 83 cases were filed in seven districts, including Dhaka, accusing 3,416 named and 84,796 unnamed people. Many of the accused were from the Hefajat, the Jamaat-e-Islami and the BNP.**

of Islamic books. Clashes also took place in several other districts in the following couple of days.

Although Hefajat claimed that about 2,000 of its leaders and activists were killed in the incident, the government put the death toll at

13, including three policemen.

The organisation, however, could not provide names and addresses of its men who it claimed to have been killed.

A total of 83 cases were filed in seven districts, including Dhaka, accusing 3,416 named and 84,796 unnamed people. Many of the accused were from the Hefajat, the Jamaat-e-Islami and the BNP.

Police, government officials, relatives of the victims, Islamist leaders, businessmen, shop owners, employees of different offices and political parties filed those cases.

Only one of the cases has so far been disposed of in Bagerhat. Police have pressed charges in 18, and submitted final reports in two others. Investigations of the 62 have been stalled, said police sources.

Of the 83 cases, 53 were filed in the capital against more than 50,000 people, including seven for murder.

Despite several attempts, this correspondent could not reach the home minister yesterday over the phone for comments.

## 5 cops hurt in clash between AL factions

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Pabna

At least five law enforcers were injured when police tried to control the situation during a clash between two rival AL groups in Pabna's Bera municipality area yesterday.

Arbinda Sarkar, OC of Bera Police Station, said former mayor Abdul Baten and sitting mayor Asif Sams Ranjan had long standing feud over establishing supremacy in the area.

When both groups took position in the port area at noon to attack each other, police, on information rushed to the spot. Asif's men then suddenly began attacking the cops, leaving at least five of them injured, he said.

Police, however, was able to bring the situation under control after removing both groups from the spot.

Additional police force has been deployed in the area and legal action will be taken against the attackers, the OC said.

## 1 killed, 30 hurt as rivals clash

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Faridpur

A man was killed and 30 injured in a clash between two rival groups in Khardia village of Faridpur's Saltah Upazila yesterday morning.

The dead was identified as Sirajul Islam, 27, a saw-mill worker.

According to locals, there was a longstanding conflict between Rafique Mollah, chairman of Jadunandi union parishad, and Alamgir Mia, president of Jadunandi AL, over establishing supremacy in the area.

Rafique's supporters attacked the houses of Alamgir's supporters with lethal weapons. Sirajul was killed on the spot. In a counter-attack, Alamgir did the same to supporters of Rafique, and vandalised and looted at least 50 homes.

ASP (Nagarkanda circle) Saminur Rahman said police brought the situation under control.

No case was filed in this connection till the filing of this report at 4:30pm.

## Beaten by drivers of three-wheelers, man dies

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Munshiganj

A farmer died after being beaten by drivers of an auto-rickshaw and mishuk in Sirajdikhan upazila of Munshiganj.

Ali Hossain, 52, a farmer, was a passenger of the auto-rickshaw.

ASP Rashedul Islam, said, "Ali was paying Tk 5 but the driver demanded Tk 10. This created a conflict between them. The mishuk driver from nearby joined in and the two drivers beat the passenger to a point where he was knocked onto the barbed wire of a boundary wall.

He added that after locals settled the dispute and the two drivers left the scene, Ali began feeling sick. He was declared dead by on-duty doctors in hospital.

"The drivers are on the run and a driver to arrest them is underway."

## Record hike in soybean oil prices

FROM PAGE 1

The prices of edible oil have been hiked considering the rise in prices of the item in the international markets, Ghosh told The Daily Star over the phone.

Earlier, the government had fixed the price of soybean oil by taking into account the base price of crude soybean oil of \$1,400 per tonne and crude palm oil of \$1,300 per tonne.

Now, a base price of \$1,750 per tonne was considered, the secretary said.

The new price might make all the businesses involved in the cooking oil supply chain happier, but it will deal a major blow to the end consumers.

SM Laizur Rahman, a resident in Mirpur, said the consumption

of oil in his family of eight members has come down due to the increase in the price of soybean oil.

"We have cut back on the consumption of vegetables and fish to free up some money for oil purchase. Now the new price will make it harder for us to afford it at all."

SM Nazim Hossain, vice-president of the Consumers' Association Bangladesh, said

soybean oil prices have been hiked three times in the last four months, including yesterday's increase.

"In the last few months, the prices of essential commodities have gone up. A fresh hike in oil prices will pile more pressure on consumers. And the lower-income people will face an even

more difficult situation," he said, urging the government to take proper steps to bring prices under control.

**SUPPLY CRUNCH, BLAME GAME CONTINUE**

In the capital, The Daily Star correspondents visited stores in Mirpur 1, 2, 10, 12, Kazipara, Mohammadpur, Green Road, Hatirpool and some areas of old Dhaka yesterday and found no soybean oil in retail stores.

The scenario was the same in Chattogram City's Kazir Dewri, Chawkbazar, Aturar Depot and, Hamzarbagh markets.

"I have not had any soybean oil in my shop for the last 15 days. The dealers can't say when we will get the supply," said Monwar Hossain, owner of Yasin General Store in Karwan Bazar,

the largest kitchen market in the capital.

"Dealers say refiners are not supplying them oil. But if the price rises, maybe dealers can resume supply," he said yesterday morning.

No soybean oil was found in 23 of the 25 shops that these correspondents visited in Karwan Bazar yesterday.

"I have been running this grocery shop for 25 years. This is the first time I could not sell even a litre of soybean oil to my customers before Eid. I have not had any oil in my store for the past three weeks," said Nurul Alam Sikder, a retailer in Pallabi.

In Chattogram, traders said the product was not traded yesterday in Khatunganj, the country's largest wholesale

commodity market.

Abdur Rahim, a wholesaler in Khatunganj, said all kinds of shops, except for those of edible oil dealers and brokers, were open from 10:00am.

"Retailers are placing orders but we are failing to supply them," he mentioned.

On Wednesday, Monjur Mohammad Shariar, director for administration and finance of the Directorate of National Consumers Right Protection under the commerce ministry, said adequate quantity of cooking oil is being supplied by refiners, but most of the dealers and retail traders are stocking the product. As a result, the soybean oil crisis still persists at the retail level.

The supply crunch is

prevailing despite adequate imports in recent months.

According to the National Board of Revenue (NBR), more than 13.68 lakh tonnes of palm oil and soybean oil were imported in the four months to April.

The average import cost of palm oil stood at \$1,180 to \$1,740 per tonne and soybean oil from \$1,380 to \$1,869 per tonne.

Bangladesh imported 13.93 lakh tonnes of palm and soybean oil during the same four-month period in 2021, NBR data showed.

On April 27, AHM Safiquzzaman, additional secretary of the commerce ministry, said the country had edible oil reserves that could meet the demand for at least one and a half months.

## Another

FROM PAGE 1

Bappi, 21, and Moazzam Hossain Sajeeb, 23, were

arrested in Cox's Bazar, he said, adding that they cut their hair to deceive cops and were looking for jobs at hotels in the beach town.

Moin said in a CCTV camera footage from April 19, Siyam was seen hitting Nahid with an iron rod after the latter fell to the ground.

Law enforcers are also looking for Emon who was seen hacking the delivery person with a sharp weapon.

On April 18 night, employees of Welcome Fast Food and Capital Fast Food in New Market engaged in a brawl that eventually led to pitched battles the following day, leaving two men dead and many others injured.

The other person who died in the clash was Morsalin. The Rab director yesterday said officers did not find any footage of the incident and were trying to identify the killers.

Video footage of the attack on Nahid went viral on social media. Journalists present near the scene took photos and were also attacked.

Five cases, including two for the murders, were filed later.

In one of the cases, police accused 24 individuals, mostly leaders of the BNP and its affiliated bodies.

Besides, over 1,700 unnamed people were accused in the five cases.

Detectives earlier arrested five Dhaka College students involved with Chhatra League in connection with the murder of Nahid.

**CONDOLENCE**

**Abul Maal Abdul Muhith**  
25 January 1934 - 30 April 2022

Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Dhaka (MCCI) is deeply saddened by the passing of Mr. Abul Maal Abdul Muhith, the former Finance Minister. MCCI expresses its deepest condolences to Mr. Muhith's bereaved family and humbly requests all to pray for his departed soul. May Allah grant him Jannatul Firdous.

**MCCI**  
Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Dhaka

## Bangladesh slips 10 notches

FROM PAGE 1

harassment, surveillance and smear campaigns.

Bangladesh's lowest score was in the "safety" category.

"Exposed to police violence, attacks by political activists and murders orchestrated by Jihadist or criminal organisations, Bangladeshi journalists are all the more vulnerable because this violence goes unpunished," said RSF.

"The Digital Security Act is often used to keep journalists and bloggers in prison, in appalling conditions," it added.

In the wake of World Press Freedom Day, the Editors' Council called upon the authorities concerned to reform the

DSA in order to ensure press freedom in the country.

The council came up with the call in a statement issued on the occasion, undersigned by the council's President Mahfuz Anam and General Secretary Dewan Hanif Mahmud.

"From the very beginning, the Editors' Council and journalists have been concerned and made objections regarding the Digital Security Act. Recently, the law minister also said that there have been numerous [incidents of] misuses of the law and hinted at reforms to it. The minister's comments proved that the Editors' Council's concerns were

genuinely on point," the statement read.

Stressing that journalists are under digital surveillance across the globe and threatened in upholding their duty in dissemination of information, the Editors' Council cited Unesco Director-General Audrey Azoulay's call to protect journalism and journalists by generating awareness about the benefits and risks of working in the digital age and prepare a roadmap to this end.

"Digital surveillance can reveal the information collected by journalists and expose their sources, thereby lowering the security of the sources. Such surveillance can

also expose journalists' personal information that will in turn lower their own security," it said, adding that such digital measures – surveillance, online harassment, hacking – are being utilised by both state and non-state entities to disrupt journalists in their professional pursuits and also compromising their personal security.

The council observed that security forces in different nations are adopting various digital surveillance measures that are detrimental to the expansion of press freedom.

Stressing that use of digital technology in journalism has become important amid the

ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, the council observed that the need to ensure security to journalists is now more than ever in the digital era.

A separate report by Article 19, launched on the same day, scrutinised the conditions of women journalists in Bangladesh and five other countries.

"Women journalists face additional, gendered, often sexualised threats, discrimination, and misogyny – in their workplaces, when out reporting, and online – not only from the powerful forces that attempt to silence them but also sources, colleagues, and even their own family members."