

## Thousands marooned as 3 rivers burst banks in Sylhet

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Sylhet

Several thousand villagers in six upazilas of Sylhet remained marooned as the flood situation worsened in the region.

The road network among Sylhet Sadar, Gowainghat, Kanaighat, Zakiganj, Jaintiapur and Companiganj upazilas has almost collapsed because of the flood.

Three major rivers in the district — the Surma, the Koshiyara and the Sari-Gowain — were swelling for torrential rainfall.

The Surma was flowing 122cm above the danger level at Kanaighat upazila headquarters point in Sylhet at 9:00am yesterday, reported the Flood Forecasting and Warning Centre (FFWC).

At the same time, the Koshiyara was flowing 96cm above the danger level at Amolshid point in Zakiganj upazila.

The Sari-Gowain was flowing 5cm above the danger level at Sarighat point in Jaintiapur upazila, the report added.

Some 193mm of rainfall was recorded between Saturday 9:00am and yesterday 9:00am in Sylhet's Lalakhali area, while 105mm in Sunamganj's Laurergarh and 218mm in Cherrapunji in India's Meghalaya province, read the bulletin.

It also forecasted heavy rainfall would continue in the country's north-eastern region in the next 48 hours.

"The rivers of Sylhet and Sunamganj districts in the north-eastern region of the country may cross their respective danger levels at some points in the next 24 hours," read the bulletin.

"The Brahmaputra-Jamuna and Padma rivers are in a rising trend. This situation may continue in the next 72 hours," it added.

Contacted, an assistant engineer of FFWC last evening said the rivers would be in a rising trend for the next two or three days.

Then, the water level will start falling. There is no possibility of a long-standing flood right now, the official added.

Meanwhile, the Sylhet area went through immense suffering due to the flood.

"As Surma was overflowing, the river protection dike suddenly broke at different points on Saturday and water started entering the village. We are now stuck and waiting for the rainfall to stop," said Yusuf Ahmed, a resident of Uttar Khilogram in Zakiganj upazila.

"Vast areas in our region have been submerged as Surma and Koshiyara rivers are overflowing. Many people have been marooned. We are extending humanitarian support to victims," said Lokman Uddin Chowdhury, chairman of Zakiganj Upazila Parishad.

The district administration has already allocated 103 tonnes of rice to distribute among flood-hit people, said Mozibur Rahman, deputy commissioner of Sylhet.



Motorists queue to buy fuel at a Ceylon petroleum corporation fuel station in Colombo yesterday. Shortages of food, fuel and medicines, along with record inflation and lengthy blackouts, have brought severe hardships to Sri Lanka's 22 million people.

PHOTO: AFP

### IMPORTING WHEAT FROM INDIA

## Govt prepping for G2G deal

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Bangladesh is preparing to strike a deal to import wheat from India, said food ministry Secretary Mosammat Nazmunara Khanum.

The development comes a day after India banned wheat exports to contain its domestic prices, but said it would be mindful of the needs of the neighbouring and other vulnerable countries.

Indian officials earlier said the ban on wheat export was unlikely to affect government-to-government deals.

"That's why, we are preparing to ink a government-to-government deal with India on wheat import," she said, adding, "Although India imposed an embargo on wheat export, its government still can export wheat if it wants."

Eighty-six percent of Bangladesh's annual demand for 85 lakh tonnes of wheat is met from imports. The country started procuring the cereal from India in significant volumes in 2020.

In the Indian financial year that ended on March 31, Bangladesh



was the largest importer of wheat, accounting for nearly half of its record 7 million tonnes of wheat exports, according to estimates by the Directorate General of Foreign Trade under the commerce ministry. The secretary yesterday said the government earlier secured a contract of importing 3 lakh tonnes of the grain. "Of it, we have already received 50,000 tonnes, a shipment of another 100,000 tonnes is on the way to Bangladesh, and we will get the remaining 1.5 lakh tonnes as per the contract," she added. Bangladesh is also finalising a deal with Bulgaria, she said.

"Since there are uncertainties over how long the war in Ukraine may continue... we are now working on importing wheat to meet the demand in the first three months of the upcoming fiscal."

Meanwhile, Food Minister Sadhan Chandra Majumder yesterday said the country will not face a food crisis and India's restriction on wheat export will not affect Bangladesh.

"Wheat export has not been banned by the Indian government. It is restricted for commercial sales. This will have no impact on Bangladesh," the minister said while visiting a government food storage facility in Sylhet.

Bangladesh used to import wheat from Russia and Ukraine before the war started between those countries, he said.

"Boro harvest suffered a little due to the recent flash floods, but the harvest was huge compared to the loss... We also have enough paddy from the last Aush and Aman seasons. The next Aman season will be good because of the sufficient early rainfall."

## Level-headed development targets

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flexibility to adapt to the new business environment," the company told The Daily Star in a written response.

The next highest allocations in the proposed ADP, which will be placed before the National Economic Council tomorrow for approval, will go towards the Matarbari deep sea port and power plant and the Padma rail link projects. They would get Tk 7,000 crore and Tk 5,800 crore respectively.

The Padma rail link project, which started on a slow note, is on great momentum, with rail movement up to Mawa expected by this year, ministry officials said.

As of March, it is about 55 percent complete.

The Dhaka metro rail project, which is about 81 percent complete, would get Tk 2,800 crore.

The project was originally allocated Tk 4,800 crore this year but was revised down to Tk 4,233 crore.

The metro rail may be opened to passengers up to Argargaon this year and fully by next year.

The Padma multipurpose bridge, which is scheduled to open to the public next month, will get Tk 2,023 crore to complete some related works like river training and others.

As of March, Tk 27,151 crore out of its total

estimated cost of Tk 30,193 crore has been spent.

The Dohazari-Gundum rail line, which has seen 35 percent financial progress until March, is to get Tk 1,450 crore next fiscal year, which is Tk 25 crore from this year's original budget. Its allocation was slashed to Tk 933 crore and as of March, Tk 552 crore could be used.

The Payra deep sea port, another priority project of the government, will get Tk 513 crore.

"We hope that the fast-track projects will be completed on time," said Mamun Al Rashid, a member of the Planning Commission.

A committee led by the principal secretary of the

prime minister monitors every stage of the fast-track projects and intervenes if necessary, he said.

In the upcoming budget proposal, the government may allocate the highest Tk 35,842 crore, which is about 14.6 percent of the proposed ADP, for the local government division.

The second highest allocation of Tk 31,295 crore may be made for the road transport and highways division, which is 12.7 percent of the proposed ADP.

Among others, the energy division may get Tk 24,139 crore, the science and technology ministry Tk 16,011 crore and the health service division Tk 15,851 crore.

## Another

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be honest," former Australia captain Mark Taylor told Channel Nine. "Another tragic day for cricket."

The larger-than-life Symonds was hugely popular, not only for his hard-hitting approach to the game but also for his easy-going personality. His demeanour and body language made him appear, as if, he was a player from the classic bygone eras.

"He was just an entertainer. He wanted to go out there and have fun and play the game he remembered to play it as a kid.

"At times he got in trouble for not going to training or maybe having a few too many beers...but that is the way he lived his life and the way he wanted to play his cricket also," Taylor said.

## Techies worry as a2i set to enter IT fray

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This essentially means that a2i will become a tech agency operating similarly to any tech company with one major difference — it will be bankrolled or subsidised by the government.

According to the proposed law, government grants, donations and support will be major sources of funding for the agency, in addition to international grants, consultancy fees, income from services, and "income from own sources".

The agency will also lease out its infrastructure and use its capital for investment and trading.

Each year, the agency will present a budget to the government detailing its financial demands.

The money taken from the government will be used as per its regulations, but the rest of the capital will be utilised in any way the management sees fit.

All staffers of the agency will be public servants, according to the draft legislation.

Several tech industry leaders, all speaking anonymously, said a government-subsidised institution with limited overhead or infrastructural costs will outcompete private players.

On April 21, 2022, five major tech associations wrote a letter to the state minister of Information, raising alarm. The associations are Bangladesh Association of Software and Information Services (Basis), Bangladesh Computer Society, e-Commerce Association of Bangladesh (eCab), Internet Service Providers' Association of Bangladesh and Bangladesh Association of Call Centers

and Outsourcing (Bacco).

The letter stated that certain provisions in the law directly conflict with the business interests of the private sector.

The letter was in response to an earlier draft of the proposed law, but most of the areas of concern pointed out remain either intact, or in similar phrasing, in the finalised proposed act approved by the cabinet.

"It has been a long-standing demand to give local tech companies preferential treatment in getting government gigs and international donor projects. If a2i itself becomes a service provider and consultant, it will become a competitor to private companies," said the letter.

The finalised bill states that services and consultancies will be provided to establish "partnerships" with local and international actors.

It also states that the management will permit joint ventures and partnerships between individuals, firms, companies, and other private and government establishments.

About this provision, the tech associations' letter states that a2i is being given permission to form multiple companies and directly participate in business, which is not "expected of them".

"This will ruin the scope of business for local tech companies," said the letter.

"From the very beginning, the a2i has been providing consultation and executing projects for all ministries and government institutions, as an expert or technical committee. If they now create their own companies and implement

those business ventures, this will completely conflict with public procurement."

The bill empowers the a2i to earn fees by providing services and consultancies. "By this we understand IT consultation. The usage of these two terms [services and consultancies] creates a risk of a2i's participation and interference in all public procurement," it added.

Concerns over "the risk of interference" are compounded by the fact that the bill allows the chair of a2i to empower any officer of the organisation with any power or responsibility it sees fit.

The letter also states that that creates space for the chair to empower individuals based on his or her personal likes and dislikes. "There is a concern about how fair and impartial they can remain."

An analysis of the procurement of 41 services over the last decade shows that one software firm — SoftBD Ltd — got 34 percent of the work (14 contracts). Another firm, Orange BD, got 15 percent of the work (six contracts).

Only 14 out of the 41 contracts were given to vendors, who got one gig each.

A2i's Project Director Dewan Muhammad Humayun Kabir said impartiality would not be a concern.

"When we first started out, there were not many firms who could qualify to bid in the projects. This scenario is fast changing. There will be no concerns about impartiality in procurement."

He also said the involvement of the private sector will be ensured. "Out of the Tk 950 crore worth

## Cop's hand severed by accused

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, CTG

A police constable's left hand was severed from the elbow when an accused hacked him during an arrest drive in Chattogram's Lohagara yesterday morning.

Jony Khan was undergoing treatment at the National Institute of Traumatology and Orthopaedic Rehabilitation (Nitor) in the capital.

Atiqur Rahman, officer-in-charge of Lohagara Police Station, said the incident took place in Lalakhali village after a police team went there to arrest Kabir.

On April 24, two groups of villagers clashed over a piece of land in Lalakhali village. Kabir is an accused in a case filed in this connection, he said.

Police said during the drive, Kabir hacked Jony with a sharp weapon, leaving his left hand severed from the elbow. He also attacked another police personnel, Abul Hossen, injuring him.

Both the injured were rushed to Chattogram Medical College Hospital.

Police could not arrest Kabir till yesterday evening.

## No Covid deaths for 25th consecutive day

STAR REPORT

No deaths from Covid-19 were reported in the country for the 25th consecutive day yesterday.

Thirty-three new infections were recorded in 24 hours ending at 8:00am after 3,818 samples were tested across the country.

The number of Covid-19 deaths remains at 29,127, and the mortality rate is 1.49 percent, said a press release of the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS).

The total number of Covid cases rose to 19,53,012.

The current positivity rate is 0.86 percent, while the overall positivity rate stands at 13.90 percent, said the release.

At least 269 patients recovered from Covid-19 during the period, taking the number of recoveries to 18,99,419. The recovery rate is 97.26 percent, added the release.

## Israel reopens Gaza crossing after nearly two weeks

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel yesterday reopened its only crossing with the Gaza Strip to Palestinian workers nearly two weeks after closing it over unrest, the defence ministry said.

"Following an assessment of the security situation, it has been decided... to open Erez Crossing for passage of workers and permit holders from the Gaza Strip into Israel, beginning Sunday," said COGAT, a unit of the Israeli defence ministry responsible for Palestinian civil affairs.

The crossing is used by 12,000 Palestinians with permits to enter Israel for work.

Israel had closed the crossing on May 3 ahead of Israel's national memorial and independence days, and amid Palestinian violence in the occupied West Bank, although the Gaza front was quiet.

## AL picks No 1 patron of narcotics

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The Daily Star, however, couldn't verify those allegations independently.

On October 26, 2019, a media outlet in Cumilla reported that a local leader of AL, Jahid Iqbal Shariful, who was arrested by Rab with pistol, locally made arms and 78 bullets, had close relations with Rifat.

Rifat, however, claims the allegations against him are nothing but a "dirty conspiracy".

Contacted, AL Joint General Secretary Mahbul Alam Hanif, who is also a member of Awami League's Local Government Nomination Board, said, "We know him as a 'dedicated and tested'

leader. "He joined Awami League politics from Chhatra League. He was a dedicated Awami League leader when the party was in crisis."

Hanif added, "The BNP government had filed many false cases against him. I don't know whether those cases were considered while preparing that list."

When told that it was the PMO that prepared the list, Hanif said he didn't have any idea in this regard.

Faruk Ahmed, superintendent of police in Cumilla, too said he was not aware of any such list.

Lawmaker Bahauddin Bahar could not be reached for comments as he didn't receive phone calls.

Mokabbir Hossain, secretary of Security Services Division at Ministry of Home Affairs, said he wouldn't be able to make comment on this issue right now and without going through the PMO letter.

Masud Parvez Imran, who was among the 14 nomination seekers to contest the polls, said there might be some mistakes while finalising the nomination. "I Hope the prime minister will take the right decision once she comes to know about it."

Cumilla district has 106km boundaries with the India from where illegal drugs are smuggled into Bangladesh, according to law enforcement agencies.

of work we got, we had procured Tk 200 crore of software from the private sector.

"We cannot remain a donor-funded programme. This renders us unable to take on many projects that are needed for the good of the public," he added.

When wrapping up its second phase of funding the a2i, the UNDP final project review report stated the same — that a2i needs to be set up as an institution.

"Due to lack of institutionalisation, the entire functionality and modality of the activities of the project goes through a significant risky nature of work," said UNDP.

In order for the successful continuation and upgradation of the current initiatives along with initiation of new activities, institutionalisation is essential, it concluded.

"The scope of a2i's work needs to be defined. The a2i can be given work related to national safety, security of the country and citizens, for example. Some of the digitisation work should be done by agencies within the government," said Dr Khondaker Golam Moazzem, research director at Centre for Policy Dialogue.

"However, if they can participate in competitive bidding processes for all kinds of jobs along with the private sector, there is a risk of them creating unfair competition. Most of the tech companies are small to medium companies — they might not be able to compete with a2i."

He added, "Procurement processes are not transparent, so it would be difficult to know if they are enjoying undue advantage."