

E-gates to ease air travel from July 7

27 are ready at HSIA

RASHIDUL HASAN

The days of lengthy immigration formalities at Dhaka airport will soon be over as 27 electronic gates are set to become operational from July 7.

The immigration formalities will take very little time for the arriving and departing travellers, thanks to the automated border control system, said Mokabbir Hossain, secretary at the security services division of the home ministry.

"The passengers will not need to wait in queues, as the e-gates will open automatically for those with an e-passport," he added.

Col Md Khalid Saifullah, additional director of the e-passport project, yesterday told The Daily Star that the government had plans to set up a total of 50 electronic gates at other airports and land ports under the "E-Passport and Automated Border Control Management Project".

Officials at the HSIA said the e-gates would automatically complete the immigration formalities, minimising human interactions.

Even though the e-gates were inaugurated by Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan Kamal in June last year, the Department of Immigration and Passports (DIP) has not been able to use them. As a result, immigration of e-passport holders is now being done manually.

Bangladesh is the first country in South Asia to launch e-gates for e-passports.

The Special Branch of police, which is in charge of immigration, said as there was no link between the e-passport server and the e-gates, the immigration police were carrying out the formalities manually.

When the e-gates become operational, the camera attached to the gate will identify the passenger automatically

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A mobile court checking the expiry dates of drugs at the pharmacy of BDM Hospital on Humayun Road of Mohammadpur in the capital yesterday. The court fined the hospital Tk 50,000 after finding expired drugs and chemicals.

PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON

US won't send rocket systems to Ukraine

Says Biden as Moscow's troops enter outskirts of Sievierodonetsk; EU not ready to agree on Russia oil ban

AGENCIES

US President Joe Biden said yesterday he would not send rocket systems to Ukraine that could hit targets well inside Russian territory, despite urgent requests from Kyiv for long-range weapons.

"We are not going to send to Ukraine rocket systems that can strike into Russia," Biden told reporters in Washington.

Pro-Western Ukraine has received extensive US military aid since Russia invaded its neighbour in late February, but says it needs long-range rockets equivalent to what Moscow's forces use.

Kyiv has asked the United States for mobile batteries of long-range rockets, the M270 MLRS and the M142 HIMARS, which can launch multiple rockets at the same time with a range of up to 187 miles (300 kilometres), eight times or more the distance of artillery in the field.

This could give Ukrainian forces the ability to reach, with great precision, targets far behind Russian lines, though it is unclear if that is their intent.

"If the US really wants Ukraine's victory, maybe it is time to give us long-range MLRS?" Ukrainian President

Volodymyr Zelensky's advisor Mykhailo Podoliak tweeted recently.

"It is hard to fight when you are attacked from a 70 km (43 miles) distance and have nothing to fight back with."

Since failing to capture Kyiv in the war's early stages, Russia's army has narrowed its focus, hammering cities with relentless artillery and missile barrages as it seeks to consolidate its control, reports AFP.

Moscow's forces have continued a push in the eastern Donbas region, upping the pressure on the twin cities of Sievierodonetsk and Lysychansk.

Russian troops have entered the outskirts of Sievierodonetsk, according to the regional governor yesterday.

Incessant shelling has left Ukrainian forces defending ruins in Sievierodonetsk, but their refusal to withdraw has slowed the wider Russian offensive across the Donbas region. Luhansk region governor Serhiy Gaidai said Russian troops had advanced into the city's southeastern and northeastern fringes.

The Russians "use the same tactics over and over again. They shell for several hours - for three, four, five hours - in a row and

then attack", Gaidai said.

But he said Ukrainian forces had driven the Russians out of the village of Tshkivka to the south, potentially frustrating Moscow's push to encircle the area, reports Reuters.

The European Union has sought to make Moscow pay a heavy price for invading Ukraine, but leaders arriving for a summit acknowledged they were unlikely to pass a new round of sanctions yet, having failed to agree to ban imports of Russian oil.

European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen acknowledged that agreement had not been reached, but added: "I'm confident that thereafter there will be a possibility."

The failure has infuriated Kyiv and caused frustration among its biggest supporters within the EU.

French Foreign Minister Catherine Colonna became the latest Western dignitary to go to Kyiv, visiting a mass grave in the suburb of Bucha, where hundreds of dead civilians were found after Russian forces withdrew following their failed assault on the capital in March.

Private tutor sent to jail over raping schoolgirl

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Dinajpur

A Joypurhat court sent a private tutor to jail yesterday on charge of raping his student in Akkelpur upazila.

The arrestee, Abdul Barik, 48, is from Akandpara village of the upazila.

Quoting family, police said Barik has been teaching the girl Arabic for the last five months. On May 26, he asked the girl, a 10th-grader, to come to his house. When she went there, Barik took her to a bush and raped her.

Hearing her screams, locals rescued the girl and admitted her to Akkelpur Upazila Health Complex.

The victim's mother filed a case with Akkelpur Police Station on Sunday night, said Saidur Rahman, officer-in-charge of the station.

Police later arrested Barik and produced him before the court that sent him to jail yesterday.

The girl was sent to Joypurhat Modern Hospital for medical tests, the OC said.

10 hurt in AL fighting over control of sand quarry

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Tangail

At least 10 people were injured when two groups of ruling Awami League activists clashed over taking control of an illegal sand quarry in Tangail's Bhuapur upazila on Sunday night.

The clash took place between the supporters of Nikrail Union Parishad Chairman Masudul Haque, also the expelled general secretary of the union unit AL, and former chairman Matin Biswas, also president of the unit, said locals.

Police arrested eight people after the groups filed two separate cases, said Faridul Islam, OC of Bhuapur Police Station.

One of the injured was admitted to Bhuapur Upazila Health Complex, while the rest took treatment at private clinics.

Locals alleged that the ruling party men have been lifting sand illegally at different places, including Govindasi, Nikrail and Arjuna unions, of the Jamuna.

For this, the riverside villages, roads and embankments faced erosion during the rainy season, they said.

Two children drown in pond

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Chapainawabganj

Two children drowned in a pond near their house at Tikrampur in Chapainawabganj municipality area yesterday morning.

The victims were Didar, 5, son of Delwar Hossain, and Tisha, 3, daughter of Mohammad Hossain of Tikrampur area.

Quoting locals, Mozaffor Hossain, OC of Sadar Model Police Station, said the two children drowned around 11:30am.

Locals and family members rescued them and rushed them to the 250-bed Chapainawabganj Sadar Hospital where doctors declared them dead, added the OC.

Clamp down on rice hoarders

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association. So, the meeting asked for monitoring and supervising the rice market, he added.

The drives will be conducted by mobile courts and Directorate of National Consumer Rights Protection.

An instruction was issued to the commerce minister, the food minister, the commerce secretary, the food secretary and the agriculture secretary to sit for a meeting on conducting surveys and find out reasons for price hike of rice and going for drives afterwards. Drives will begin two to three days after market monitoring is done.

Replying to a question, the cabinet secretary said the inaugural ceremony of the Padma Bridge will be replicated in all the districts.

OTHER DISCUSSIONS
The cabinet yesterday okayed the draft of Bangla and English versions of Regional Trade Agreement (RTA) Policy, 2022. The

policy is designed to protect and expand the country's export markets.

"To overcome the challenges of graduation from LDC, we've taken steps to go for regional trade agreements by protecting and expanding our export markets as well as ensuring duty-free access," he said.

The cabinet also approved the proposal for providing the transit facilities to Nepal under the Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal-Motor Vehicle Agreement (BBIN-MVA) by canceling its earlier decision on the Operating Modalities for the Carriage of Transit Cargo between Nepal and Bangladesh.

"We had inked a deal on transit with India," he said, adding that the cabinet has approved BBIN for transit to the countries.

The meeting approved the draft of Bangladesh Small and Cottage

Industries Corporation Act, 2022, said the cabinet secretary.

The proposed law will particularly promote women entrepreneurs as the existing law had not focused on women properly.

The cabinet also approved in principle the draft of International Mother Language Institute (Amendment) Act, 2022, aiming to form a language research trust under the institute.

Scholarship and fellowship will be given from the permanent fund of the trust for language research and development, said Anwarul, adding that its name would be "Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman Language Research Trust".

The meeting endorsed the ratification proposal for an agreement to be signed between Bangladesh and Oman on the mutual visa exemption for the holders of diplomatic, official, special or service passports.

Higher toll proposed

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following the Toll Policy-2014. Under the policy, the base toll is Tk 2 on each kilometre on important highways and Tk 400 for a bridge above 750 metres.

It was vehemently opposed by stakeholders, including bus operators.

Then, following the recommendations of a committee, and instruction of Road Transport and Bridges Minister Obaidul Quader, the Division proposed Tk 10 as base toll and the finance ministry approved it on April 4 last year.

NEW PROPOSALS
The RHD, which is an agency under the Road Transport and Highways Division, submitted four proposals for fixing the toll rate as the Padma Bridge is going to be opened on June 25.

One of the rates is Tk 18.40 per km - which comes as the base toll according to the 2014 policy.

The department

proposed Tk 33.71 per km, adjusting the inflation over seven years since 2014 when the toll policy was formulated and considering the quality of expressway compared to other roads.

It also proposed Tk 25 as base toll by just multiplying the interim toll rate with 2.5, without giving any expiation for this.

RHD mentioned Tk 34.70 as proposed by another committee earlier.

However, the Road Transport and Highways Division, after holding a meeting on May 19, found the proposed rates high. It said the rate should not be more than Tk 15 (1.5 times higher than the interim rate) or 18.40 as per the toll policy, sources said.

Meanwhile, the Division had called a stakeholder meeting on May 24 to discuss the toll rate.

But the meeting was postponed as, what the sources said, the outgoing secretary of the division Nazrul Islam wanted that the toll would be fixed after

a new secretary takes over from June 4.

WHAT AUTHORITIES WILL DO?

Sabuj Uddin Khan, additional chief engineer of RHD for Dhaka zone, under which the expressway falls, said they would start collecting toll from the expressway from July 1 this year.

"A new toll rate would be fixed. If the new toll rate is not fixed before July 1, we will start collecting toll following the interim toll rate," he told The Daily Star yesterday.

In August last year, the Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs had approved a proposal to give Korean Expressway Corporation (KEC) the responsibility to collect toll from the expressway.

However, no formal agreement has been signed yet.

Asked about it, Sabuj Uddin said, "We are expecting to sign the contract [with KEC] within seven to 10 days. However,

they have already started background work."

Replying to another question, he said the main infrastructure required for toll collection is completed.

However, KEC will introduce an automated system for collecting toll but they would require three more months to install it, he said, "Till then, we will collect toll manually."

Rustam Ali Khan, executive president of Bangladesh Road Transport Owners' Association, said, "The increase in toll will ultimately drive up the transport fare and people will have to bear it."

Rustam, also general secretary of Bangladesh Truck Covered-Van Owners Association, said they were planning to hold a press conference to request the prime minister to have the toll rate for Padma Bridge reduced, the news about the expressway's toll rate further concern them.

Contacted, Nazrul Islam, outgoing secretary of Road Transport and Highways

Division, said the toll rate would be increased as the interim rate for the period until the opening of Padma Bridge.

Currently, a vehicle has to pay tolls for three bridges on this route. "With all three bridges considered, the toll for the entire expressway would not be that much."

The proposed rate is lesser than the rate fixed for Dhaka Bypass expressway and Rampura-Amulia-Demra expressway. Both projects are under implementation, he told this newspaper last night.

People benefit from the development. So, they have to pay for it like other countries, he said, adding that the authorities will try to keep it at "tolerable level."

Asked about possible impact on transport cost, Nazrul Islam said the bus operators may think of increasing fares but they have to consider that the expressway would raise their trips and cut the travel time and cost.

Iran Guards accuse 'Zionists' of assassinating colonel

AFP, Tehran

The head of Iran's Revolutionary Guards yesterday accused "Zionists" of assassinating a colonel in Tehran earlier this month, the Guards' official website reported.

Colonel Sayyad Khodai, 50, was fatally shot on May 22 outside his home in the east of the Iranian capital by assailants on motorcycles. He was hit with five bullets, according to official media.

The colonel was killed "by the most

vicious people, the Zionists, and God willing, we will avenge his death," Major General Hossein Salami said, according to an official statement released by the Guards' Sepah News website.

The general did not, however, use the term "Zionist regime", routinely used by the Islamic republic as a direct reference to its arch enemy Israel.

Iran had earlier blamed the killing on "elements linked to the global arrogance", its term for the United States and Washington's allies including Israel.

Will amnesty work at all?

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The amnesty will be available for as long as the pressure on foreign currency reserves persists, Kamal said at the press conference.

"Why would anyone want to bring back money from abroad at such a cost when the only benefit is to enable making the money white in Bangladesh?" asked Zahid Hussain, a former lead economist of the World Bank's Dhaka office.

Many countries have

tried such "amnesties" with varying effects, and those that came with a limited-period opportunity, lower tax on repatriation of cash and credible threats of detection if the opportunity is missed, he added.

The modalities of the campaign are still being worked out, Kamal said, adding that the Bangladesh Bank would be implementing it.

The Daily Star spoke with the top executives of the central bank yesterday,

who mentioned receiving no such instruction from the government yet.

"If tax dodging was the only or the main reason that drove the money out in the first place, it would be reasonable to expect some response. In general, it seems to me tax dodging is a relatively minor reason why capital flies out of Bangladesh," Hussain said.

The dominant reason probably is seeking safe havens abroad for income earned through illicit

means.

And the Bangladeshis may want to give legitimacy to assets acquired through such means if the host governments take measures to detect illegally acquired assets.

They would want to make their property rights safe in the country where their assets are physically held.

"But these policies disincentivise honest compliance with the tax laws. The issue is not just

moral. Will it not encourage the flight of honest taxpayers out of the tax net?"

The unseen impact on the morale of the honest taxpayers is rarely assessed, Hussain said.

"When you consider the likely dynamic effects and the inherent tax injustice, it is clear that the moral costs are certain, but the financial gains such as increased revenue collection or voluntary repatriation of capital, are not."