

## USING PADMA BRIDGE

# Bus fares rise on 13 routes in southwest

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The authorities have increased the bus fares on 13 routes of south-western districts, which will come into force on June 26, a day after the inauguration of the Padma Bridge.

As per a circular issued by Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA), the fares will be raised by Tk10 to Tk11 after adjusting the toll of the newly constructed bridge.

The BRTA uploaded a chart of the new bus fares on its website yesterday.

On May 17, the government fixed the toll rate for using Padma Bridge, which is around 1.5 times higher than the average toll paid on ferries plying the Padma.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina will inaugurate the long-cherished bridge on June 25 and it will be opened to traffic the following day, Road Transport and Bridges Minister Obaidul Quader said yesterday.

The bus fares on these routes are likely to go up again when the government

will start collecting toll for using the Dhaka-Mawa-Bhanga Expressway. The Roads and Highways Department said it is likely to start collecting toll for the expressway from July 1. However, no order has been issued yet in this regard.

The new rates will be applicable for only those buses which will start from Saydabad of Dhaka, not for those starting from other inter-district terminals in the capital.

Buses which would use other terminals have to take fresh route permits, BRTA officials said.

As per the circular, the fare on Dhaka-Bhanga-Madaripur-Barishal route would be Tk412, Tk504 on Dhaka-Rajoir-Gopalganj, Tk649 on Dhaka-Gopalganj-Khulna, Tk218 on Dhaka-Janjira-Shariatpur, Tk534 on Dhaka-Barishal-Pirojpur, Tk628 on Dhaka-Gopalganj-Bagerhat-Pirojpur, Tk501 on Dhaka-Barishal-Patuakhali, Tk327 on Dhaka-Bhanga-Madaripur, Tk633 on Dhaka-Gopalganj-Khulna-Shatkira, Tk288 on Dhaka-Bhanga-Faridpur, Tk653 on Dhaka-Madaripur-Barishal-Bhola-Char Fashion, Tk219 on Dhaka-Buriganga second bridge-Shariatpur, and Tk694 on Dhaka-Madaripur-Barishal-Patuakhali-Kuakata.

**The bus fares on these routes are likely to go up again when the government will start collecting toll for using the Dhaka-Mawa-Bhanga Expressway.**



A view of a shopping mall damaged by a Russian missile strike, as Russia's attack on Ukraine continues, in Kharkiv, Ukraine yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

## HAZARDOUS GOODS

# Fire scare grips Ctg port

MOHAMMAD SUMAN, CTG

Panic spread among officials at the Chattogram Port when smoke began billowing from an acid-loaded container on Tuesday, around three days after the BM container depot fire and explosion.

The container had been lying on the port's yard 7 for around 12 years.

After a two-hour effort, the port's firefighters were able to bring the situation under control.

At least 257 such containers of hazardous chemicals and other inflammable materials have been lying idle in yard for years, leaving the country's premier seaport at the risk of deadly explosions.

On Saturday, at least 45 people were killed in a devastating fire and explosion at the BM shipping container depot in Chattogram's Sitakunda.

After the BM depot explosion, the port authority wrote to Chattogram Customs on Sunday saying the same incident may occur at the port unless hazardous materials are immediately removed.

The 257 imported containers contain hazardous cargo, including hydrogen peroxide, sulfuric acid, sulfate, thinner, sodium sulfate, methanol, ethyl hexanol, potassium chloride, calcium carbide, nitric acid, calcium oxide and other flammable goods, the letter read.

Port officials said those containers have been lying at designated sheds and yards for five to 15 years.

Customs officials and importers cited a number of reasons for the delay in moving those containers.

The reasons include a fall in prices of the goods in the local market, failure to submit original documents in support of the shipment, failure to get clearance permit reports, and

the list [of hazardous materials] by the port has allowed us to know the present condition of the goods. Inventory of most of the containers has already been done, following which the goods will either be auctioned off or destroyed as soon as possible according to the relevant law."

He, however, said they were not able to sell some goods despite putting them up for auction several times due to low price offers.

After visiting the ill-fated BM depot on Monday, Shipping Minister Khalid Mahmud Chowdhury told top customs officials to auction off or destroy all kinds of dangerous goods inside the port to prevent another such tragic incident.

After the Beirut port explosion in Lebanon in 2020, the Chattogram port and customs authorities have actively begun looking into the handling of such cargoes.

They have formed a six-member committee to list the hazardous products.

The committee found various types of chemicals and hazardous materials, which were imported between 1992 and 2019, and are currently kept in around 55 pallets, 13 drums, and around 900 packages.

In the last two years, customs officials said they have auctioned at least 24 containers containing various

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**At least 257 containers of hazardous chemicals and other inflammable materials have been lying idle in yard for years.**

importers' refusal to pay fines for anomalies.

However, following the letter, Customs authorities on Monday auctioned off 30.5 tonnes of hydrogen peroxide imported four years ago.

The customs sold it at only Tk 5.20 lakh, far below the reserved price (a minimum price a seller would accept from a buyer) of around Tk 25 lakh, for its quick removal from the port area.

Ali Reza Haider, deputy commissioner of Chattogram Customs House, told The Daily Star that they have taken the issue very seriously.

"Checking and sorting through

# Noose tightens on low-income groups

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branded ones were Tk 57, up Tk 5.

Taleb Sheikh, a security guard for a house in the capital's Tejuri Bazar, has a family of four. He said that with the prices of essentials going up, it has become difficult for him to run his family.

"Earlier, if we spent Tk 100 a day, we could eat. Now even Tk 200 seems not enough. We just eat rice, eggs, vegetables and lentils every day.

"We don't want to eat meat,' my son and daughter say to console me... but the fact is I don't have the money to buy fish or meat. I may have to send my children

back to the village home," said a dejected Taleb.

What he did not know is that sending them to the village may not help.

The food inflation in rural areas was 6.71 percent and in urban areas 5.49 percent in March, according to the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics. It put the overall food inflation at 6.34 percent in March, which was 5.60 percent in January.

According to a recent multisectoral research report jointly prepared by the Power and Participation Research Centre and the Brac Institute of Governance and Development, more than three crore people

became poor again during the pandemic.

It said this number decreased as Bangladesh began recovering from the pandemic fallout, but the recent price hike of essentials has made 21 lakh people poor again.

People like Taleb could be in for tougher times ahead. For them, there is no light at the end of the tunnel yet.

Retailers and wholesalers fear the prices of imported items could increase further due to supply disruptions caused by the Ukraine war.

Shahjahan Talukdar, wholesaler and owner of the Mukta Rice Agency of Karwan Bazar, one of the

largest kitchen markets in the capital, said, "I have been in the rice trade for years. I have never seen the prices of rice rise during the peak season. It always dropped."

SM Nazer Hossain, vice-president of the Consumers Association of Bangladesh, said there was inflationary pressure in the country and its effects hit all sectors.

He said the soaring prices of essentials have put consumers under a lot of pressure as the costs have gone up for almost everything.

Market monitoring needs to be strengthened. If not, some traders will increase the prices to make a quick buck, he said.

# Bet on poor, future

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Only in Mongolia, Nepal and the Kyrgyz Republic in Asia were the impacts of school closures more severe.

In the upcoming fiscal year, it is essential that the government prioritises spending on education, which has historically been meagre.

Children who have dropped out of school during the pandemic must be brought back to classrooms through financial support and incentives.

For those still in school, effective learning programmes should be devised to offer appropriate support such as tutoring or special classes to bridge the learning gap, the ADB report said.

And for the youth already out of school, they must be given additional skills training.

Ample funding must be provided to equip the youth with digital skills and awareness, which can become a key driver for productivity and economic growth, according to the Manila-based multilateral lender.

And raising labour productivity is of the essence seeing that the duty benefits that Bangladesh currently enjoys would be evaporating not long after graduation.

Bangladesh's exports simply need to be competitive and varied vis-a-vis peers if the current trend is to continue once the safety guard of duty benefits come off.

Another side-effect of graduation is the loss of the option of concessionary

loans from multilateral and bilateral lenders.

That means the government would have to rely more and more on local revenue mobilisation to fund its expenses to support its growth aspiration of becoming an advanced economy by 2041.

At south of 10 percent, Bangladesh's tax to GDP ratio is one of the lowest in the world, restricting the government's fiscal space for the present and for the future.

This must be remedied with urgency.

The tax administration must be automated and the tax policy needs to be streamlined and conducive to plug the longstanding ailments of leakages, corruption and evasion.

And the budget must have explicit references toward this direction. Otherwise, a rude awakening awaits the government.

The characteristic of a middle-income country is more and more people are employed in industries and services and fewer and fewer people in agriculture. To prepare for the transition, farm mechanisation needs to take off in earnest in Bangladesh, and the budget must incentivise that well.

When Kamal, a chartered accountant, took charge as the finance minister for five years in 2019, he contended that he would be going great guns as "this was his subject".

So, for him, anything less than smooth graduation would mean he failed to score a distinction in his greatest exam. And his bid for that starts now.

# Commuters

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at Dhanmondi-32 around 5:00pm, causing gridlock in the areas.

People who were stuck on roads were posting on the "Traffic Alert" Facebook group, urging members to avoid certain areas. The roads over which the procession moved were shown in dark red on Google Maps, signifying that there was major congestion in those areas.

There were a number of private hospitals in those areas. Patients and their relatives also suffered due to the congestion.

"Avoid Karwan Bazar, Panthapath and Dhanmondi 32. I have been stuck for 50 minutes in front of Square Hospitals," said Mashrufa Jahan, who came to visit her relatives at the hospital.

Sanwar Hossain, a passenger stuck in the traffic jam, said, "Usually traffic jams occur in the morning due to the movement of office-goers and school or college students. However, the traffic pressure is comparatively less at noon. But today [yesterday], there is much more pressure around noon."

Kamrul Islam, a car driver, said he was stuck for four hours on his way to Mohakhali from the airport.

Private job holder Rakin Ahmed said he is a regular commuter in the city.

"But today [yesterday], I faced the worst traffic jam of my life..." he said.

Maruf Ahmed said he came from Bashundhara Residential Area to Dhanmondi 27 on an Uber car. It cost him Tk 908.

Mohua Islam, another private employee, said she started for her office

## 11 CASES AGAINST KHALEDA

# Hearing on charge-framing in September

COURT CORRESPONDENT

A Dhaka court yesterday set September 20 for the hearing on the charge framing of 11 cases, including one filed over sedition, against BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia.

Judge KM Emrul Kayesh of Dhaka Metropolitan Sessions Judge's Court adjourned the hearing and fixed the new date, said Additional Public Prosecutor Tapash Kumar Pal.

The adjournment came following separate petitions submitted on different excuses.

Among the 11 cases, 10 were filed in the first three months of 2015 over arson attacks, while the rest was filed with a Dhaka court on charges of making seditious comments on freedom fighters and martyrs of the Liberation War.

# Imam hacked to death in Joypurhat

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Dinajpur

Police yesterday recovered the body of an imam, who was hacked to death in Joypurhat's Kalai upazila.

Police recovered a body of an Imam, who was hacked to death in Kalai Upazila of Joypurhat on Wednesday morning, said police.

Police said the dead was identified as Md Mohsin Ali, son of Mohammad Ali in the upazila's Belgharia village. He was also an Arabic tutor.

SM Moin Uddin, OC of Kalai Police Station, said the Mohsin left his home on Tuesday to take private classes but did not return home. The next day, farmers found his stabbed body in a nearby paddy field.

Police sent the body to Joypurhat Modern Hospital for autopsy. "We have begun investigation and a case is being filed in this regard," the OC said.

# JP leader stabbed by rival's follower

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Tangail

Abul Kashem, a former MP and Jatiya Party presidium member was stabbed by his party rivals in Tangail yesterday.

He is currently undergoing treatment at a local private clinic.

Speaking to reporters, he said the party's general secretary Mujibul Haque Chunnun, some others and he were going to join an extended meeting of the district committee at Tangail Press Club auditorium.

Followers of Kashem's rival Mozammel Haque, joint convener of the district committee, stopped him on the first floor of the club. During a scuffle, one of them stabbed him from behind.

Asked, Mozammel Haque denied the accusation against his men.

Contacted, Mir Moshraf Hossain, officer-in-charge of Tangail Sadar Police Station, said, "Necessary legal measures will be taken after investigation."

# We can now achieve even bigger feats

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engaged in the matter.

"They thought we would surrender to them. But I am the daughter of Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. I didn't and will not bow down to injustice."

The PM said she, her government and her family members and cabinet members faced tremendous pressure, humiliation and false cases regarding the baseless corruption allegation that ultimately proved to be false at a Canadian court.

Explaining the rise of project cost in comparison with the design made by the caretaker government in 2007, Sheikh Hasina said there were no rail lines, electricity and gas connections in that design.

Besides, the cost for land acquisition in the new design went up three times

and the amount of acquired land was increased several times.

She also mentioned strong river training and construction of a bridge with navigation clearance and a rise of length of the main bridge as the reasons behind the higher project costs.

In his motion, Chief Whip Noor-E-Alam Chowdhury said, "Honourable Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, a daughter of Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, should be cordially congratulated and thanked on behalf of the nation through special discussion in parliament for her courageous and firm leadership, unconditional love for the people and providing the nation the gift of Padma Bridge.

"The 6.15-km bridge with a four-lane highway and railway is a reality today. It

is a symbol of pride, self-confidence, and self-respect for Bengalees."

MPs of the ruling AL and the main opposition Jatiya Party lauded Sheikh Hasina and her government.

However, BNP MP Rumeen Farhana criticised the government, saying a lot of money was looted by inflating the construction costs and it set a "textbook example of corruption".

She said the cost of constructing each kilometre of any bridge in India, China and Malaysia is Tk 700-800 crore. But in Bangladesh, constructing each kilometre costs Tk 1,400 to Tk 1,500 crore.

Rumeen said each kilometre of the Padma bridge should not have cost over Tk 1,400 crore. But in reality, the cost was Tk 5,000 crore.

The BNP MP also said it was the government's failure to take loans on

lucrative terms for such a large project like the Padma Bridge.

AL MP Tofail Ahmed said there were many conspiracies over the Padma Bridge.

Obaidul Quader said, "Through the construction of the bridge, we have taken revenge against the World Bank for humiliating us and labelling us as thieves."

AL MP Matia Chowdhury called upon the WB to apologise before attending the inaugural programme of the bridge.

Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal MP Hasanul Haq Inu said the Padma Bridge is not just a bridge, it is a wonder of the engineering world.

Jatiya Party MPs Anisul Islam Mahmud, Kazi Feroz Rashid, Pir Fazlur Rahman and Rowshan Ara Mannan among others praised Hasina for her bold leadership in giving a fitting reply to the WB.