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P3
Mohtesam
behind
laundering
Tk 2,000cr: HC



P10
9 parks
for
70 lakh
people



B1
Govt may
miss ADP
target
again



LIGHTING UP THE DARK

The Padma Bridge, a dream project for the nation, in all its glory at night. For the first time yesterday, all the 415 lights along the 6.15km structure were switched on, giving it a stunning look.

PHOTO: YEASIN KABIR JOY

BM DEPOT FIRE HAZARDS

Alerted, but to no avail

MOHAMMAD SUMAN and FM MIZANUR RAHAMAN, Ctg

Six months before the deadly fire at Sitakunda's BM Container Depot on June 4, a team of Bangladesh Investment Development Authority visited the depot and found fire hazards like combustible materials kept near electronic machines and absence of a fire hydrant system.

On December 28, 2021, the BIDA team under the PMO visited the depot and submitted its report to its higher authorities on March 29 this year. The report, a copy of which this newspaper has obtained, mentioned 17 different violations, including those involving fire safety.

The investigators said yesterday that the deadly fire and subsequent explosions, which killed 48 persons including 10 firefighters and injured at least 200, could have been avoided if depot authorities implemented the report's recommendations in time.

They said depot authorities knew about their gross negligence but did not take any steps to correct it.

However, the team did not mention what kind of flammable material was found close to electronic machines. A fire hydrant system was not found inside the depot, said the report.

The team also did not find an alarm system, strobe lights, PA system, emergency lights and exit signage during the visit, the report said.

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RETAINING DUTY-FREE ACCESS

Dhaka in for a setback upon graduation

REFAYET ULLAH MIRDHA, from Geneva, Switzerland

Bangladesh is bracing for a setback in its quest for retaining duty-free market access in the current form upon graduation to a developing nation in 2026, as member countries of the World Trade Organisation are yet to reach a consensus on the matter.

At the 12th Ministerial Conference in Geneva yesterday, the WTO members, however, agreed to provide some support to the graduating least-developed countries (LDCs) based on their needs and the level of development. The support would be country-specific.

These issues, however, have not been specified in the negotiation documents and could be finalised after negotiations in the future.

Over the last two years, Bangladesh, along with other

LDCs, has been lobbying with the WTO for the continuation of market access for the graduating countries for six to nine years.

"The possibility of an extension for the graduating LDCs is very thin," Hafizur Rahman, director-general of the WTO Cell under Bangladesh's commerce ministry told reporters in Geneva.

"We, along with other LDCs, will continue our negotiation to get the general market access, not the country-specific support that is based on needs."

The setback for Bangladesh and other LDCs came after the US argued against providing the trade benefit extension to the graduating countries. The world's largest economy was backed by a few other developed countries, said some negotiators at the meeting venue.

The developed countries argued that all the graduating

LDCs have not developed at the same pace and their needs are not the same. They agreed that the trade extension benefit will be given to the graduating countries based on their needs.

All the LDCs and developing countries, many developed countries and the European Union backed the demand of the LDCs.

"But the demand did not materialise finally because of the opposition of a few developed countries," Hafizur said.

He, however, said, "It's good that the countries have agreed to provide some support to the graduating LDCs."

Mustafizur Rahman, a distinguished fellow at the Centre for Policy Dialogue, said, "We don't want any market access that is based on assessment of development level and needs."

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It's actually Sakku vs Bahar

Cumilla city goes to election, first major one under new EC

MOHAMMAD AL-MASUM MOLLA and KHALID BIN NAZRUL

An unusually calm Cumilla city goes to election this morning amid a lack of enthusiasm and excitement among voters about the polls, considered an acid test for the newly formed Election Commission.

Though the city corporation election is partisan in nature, the opposition BNP's symbol is absent in the battle of ballots as it has boycotted the polls. But two of its former leaders – Monirul Haque Sakku and Nizamuddin Kaiser – are pitted against each other for the office of mayor.

Ruling Awami League candidate Arfanul Haque Rifat, on the other hand, is facing opposition from a section of own party leaders. He, however, is getting the full blessing of local AL lawmaker AKM Bahauddin Bahar, who went on violating the electoral code of conduct to support Rifat.

Despite issuing notice, the EC could not make Bahar leave the city as the MP from Cumilla-6 paid no heed to the commission's directive. Most of the mayoral candidates considered this a failure of EC in its first major assignment.

In fact, the lawmaker's attitude made many voters believe that the race will actually be between Bahar and Sakku with the lawmaker putting in all his efforts to keep his reign intact.

This will be the third election of Cumilla City Corporation, formed in 2011. The last polls held in March 2017 saw Sakku winning a second term with the party support.

According to voters, Sakku, now expelled from the BNP, is highly experienced in electoral politics while his two main competitors – Rifat and Kaiser – are contesting for the first time in any polls.

They also said the political equation this time is different from the previous two elections held in 2012 and 2017.

"When Sakku won the last election, he teamed up with Bahar to work for the city corporation. They were very close. But this time the MP is working for his close aide

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CUMILLA CITY POLLS

Wards: **27**

Wards reserved for women: **9**

Voting centres: **105**

Polling booths: **640**

Voters: **2,29,920**

Male voters: **1,12,826**

Female voters: **1,17,092**

Hijra voters: **02**

Mayor candidates: **05**

Councilor candidates: **106**

Councilor (reserved): **36**

Law enforcers in every centre: **15**

Mobile courts: **27**

Rab teams: **27**

BGB: **12** platoons

Policemen: **3,608**

First election: January **5, 2012**

Second election: March **30, 2017**

Luxury trip at a time for austerity

UGC members, VCs of public universities off to Cox's Bazar to sign agreements

MOHIUDDIN ALAMGIR

Today, the vice-chancellors and registrars of all 50 public universities will be taken to Cox's Bazar by the University Grants Commission, an exercise that is expected to cost at least Tk 15 lakh.

And the reason for the trip, which will also include all members of UGC in its 25-member contingent, at this time of austerity?

It is to sign annual performance agreements with the public universities to ensure good governance, transparency, accountability, excellence and proper utilisation of resources as well as improve their institutional capacity.

This begs the question: could the agreements not be signed at the UGC's office in Agargaon, as in the previous two years?

"The trip is not only sheer wastage of public money but also grossly undermines the cause of National Integrity Strategy," said Iftekharuzzaman, executive director of Transparency International Bangladesh.

The National Integrity Strategy is the government's comprehensive strategy to promote good governance and achieve a corruption-free state and society.

"Such luxury tourism in the name of signing agreements to comply with obligations under the NIS by a publicly funded body like the UGC, which is expected to set examples of integrity for others to follow, is unethical

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Electronic voting machines are being loaded onto trucks on the premises of the Cumilla Zilla School yesterday for sending those to different polling centres. The third election to the Cumilla City Corporation is being held today, with the Election Commission using EVMs in all 105 polling centres.

PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON

PM orders building a Padma Bridge museum

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina yesterday directed the authorities concerned to set up a museum at the Bhanga end of the Padma bridge to commemorate the country's landmark achievement.

The museum will preserve the equipment used to construct the 6.15

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