

Gold worth Tk 55 lakh seized in Benapole

OUR CORRESPONDENT, *Benapole*

Members of Customs Intelligence and Investigation Directorate arrested a woman with gold worth Tk 55 lakh in Benapole yesterday.

Umme Salma, 25, of Dhaka's Demra, was smuggling the gold to India, said Moniruzaman Chowdhury, assistant director of CIID in Benapole.

A team of CIID conducted a raid at International Customs Checkpoint on information that a woman was smuggling gold to the neighbouring country.

The team checked the woman and found 72 bhoori of gold, he added.

CIID deposited the gold to Benapole Customs House and filed a case against her with Benapole Port Police Station, he further said.

HEATWAVE IN EUROPE More than 500 died in Spain: PM

AFP, *Madrid*

Spain's prime minister said "more than 500 people died" during a 10-day heatwave as Europe counts the cost of a record period of extreme temperatures.

Climate change protesters said the scorching weather should be a wake-up call for the continent.

"This has nothing to do with ideologies, but with a reality, with a climatic emergency that the planet is living through," said Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez yesterday.

Speaking against a backdrop of charred trees and burnt ground in the hard-hit northeastern Zaragoza region, he urged people to exercise "extreme caution".

Cooler air swept in yesterday, bringing relief to people from Portugal to Britain, but thousands of firefighters continued to tackle blazes that have broken out in multiple countries after months of drought-like conditions.

The heatwave saw a new all-time record for Britain where the national weather service clocked 40.3C in eastern England, surpassing the previous high set in 2019.

Meanwhile Greek firefighters gained the upper hand in a battle against a wildfire raging for a second day in mountainside suburbs north of Athens that had forced hundreds of people to flee, an official said.

In France, firefighters brought twin blazes near the southwestern city of Bordeaux under control.

Temperatures of more than 40 degrees Celsius (104 degrees Fahrenheit) over previous days have spelled misery for millions and shattered heat records.

EC's dialogue

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said, "It would have been better if they [the BNP] joined the talks. The talks are going well because political parties are giving thoughtful opinions. These will help us hold a better election.

"We are repeatedly taking initiatives to [bring the BNP to the talks]. We will contact them time and again."

The EC's latest talks with political parties started on Sunday. Eleven parties have participated while the BNP, Bangladesh Kalyan Party and Bangladesh Muslim League shunned the talks.

On March 13, the EC began another round of talks with a cross section of people, including educationists, civil society members, journalists, former CECs and ECs, and local election observers.

The CEC yesterday said, "It is really our sole responsibility to ensure that every voter can cast their vote freely. This is the foundation of democracy. And for this, everyone's cooperation is needed. Every party has said they believe in political consensus. Whether there is consensus or not, we said we will continue our efforts."

Road crash claims

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Nirbahi Officer Sajal Chandra Shil, adding that the driver managed to flee the scene.

Alauddin Milan, officer-in-charge of Bakerganj Police Station, said the auto-rickshaw got completely mangled in the impact.

Shah Alam, assistant director at Bangladesh Road Transport Authority office in Barishal, said the bus had no fitness certificate since May 28, 2015, and its registration expired towards the end of 2017.

"We cannot say anything about the driver because we do not have the identity of the driver. We are searching for information on the driver," he told The Daily Star.



A local resident helps firefighters to put out a fire in the town of Bakhmut in the Donetsk region following an airstrike on Tuesday, amid the Russian invasion of Ukraine. PHOTO: AFP

Russia looks beyond Donbas

Lavrov says western arms in Ukraine forced Kremlin to rethink objectives

AGENCIES

Russia's military aims in Ukraine are no longer focused "only" on the country's east, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said, adding that supplies of Western weapons had changed the Kremlin's calculus.

"The geography is different now. It is not only about the DNR and LNR, but also the Kherson region, the Zaporizhzhia region and a number of other territories" Lavrov told state media in an interview published yesterday. "This process is continuing, consistently and persistently."

The pro-Moscow breakaway so-called Donetsk and Lugansk People's Republics (DNR and LNR) are in east Ukraine. Moscow's forces already control the southern Kherson region and parts of the southeastern region Zaporizhzhia.

Lavrov said that while Moscow's aim remains the same -- "denazification and demilitarisation" of Ukraine -- the "geography" has changed since Istanbul talks between Moscow and Kyiv in March 2022.

He said Western supplies of weapons to Kyiv including US-made Himars missile systems had made Moscow review its plans.

Lavrov said Russia's "geographical aims

will move even further from the current line" if the West continues to "pump" Ukraine with weapons, adding that it makes no sense to resume peace talks with Kyiv at the moment.

Russian forces shelled eastern and

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southern Ukraine yesterday after Washington said it saw signs Moscow was preparing to formally annex territory it has seized during nearly five months of war.

Five civilians were killed and 16 wounded by Russian shelling in the Donetsk region, while two civilians were killed by shelling in the city of Nikopol in the south, the respective Ukrainian regional governors said on Telegram.

Roman Starovoit, governor of Russia's Kursk region, which borders Ukraine, wrote on Telegram that Ukrainian forces

had shelled a border crossing there.

Russian President Vladimir Putin, meanwhile, said Moscow would only ease the path for Black Sea exports of Ukrainian grain if the West lifts sanctions on Russia's shipments.

"We will facilitate the export of Ukrainian grain, but we are proceeding from the fact that all restrictions related to possible deliveries for the export of Russian grain will be lifted," he said after talks with both Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan and Iran's President Ebrahim Raisi in Tehran on Tuesday night.

Uncertainty swirled over the planned restart of a huge Russian gas pipeline to Europe today, as Putin warned that its capacity could be further reduced due to slow progress in equipment maintenance.

The West has accused Russia of using its energy supplies as a tool of coercion. Russia denies those accusations, saying it has been a reliable energy supplier.

Setting out its emergency plan, the EU yesterday told members states to cut gas usage by 15 percent until March as part of an emergency plan.

"We believe that a full disruption is likely and it is especially likely if we don't act and leave ourselves vulnerable to it," one EU official said.

1,104 new Covid cases and 1 death recorded

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The health directorate yesterday reported just one death from Covid-19, down from eight the previous day.

The Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS) also reported 1,104 new cases.

However, the positivity rate increased to 12.20 percent from 9.66 percent the previous day.

This takes the total number of confirmed cases to 19,99 lakh and deaths to 29,250 lives.

In Tuesday's inoculation campaign, 56,37003 people received booster shots and 2,24845 their second dose of a vaccine, according to the DGHS.

Man shot dead in Rangunia

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, *Ctg*

A man was shot dead by unidentified assailants in Azimnagar area of Rangunia, Chattogram, on Tuesday night.

Mohammad Enam, 30, was shot in the chest and head, police said.

Enam, who was a tractor driver, was at home with his wife and two children around 11:00pm when the armed men broke in, said Obaidul Islam, officer-in-charge of Dakkhin Rangunia Police Station.

Enam managed to flee and took shelter at a neighbour's house, but the attackers found him and shot him dead, the OC said, adding that the motive behind the murder was not clear.

Former Akhaura UNO, 2 others sued over allegations of irregularities

OUR CORRESPONDENT, *Brahmanbaria*

A departmental case has been filed against the immediate past upazila nirbahi officer of Akhaura and two other officials following allegations of irregularities and negligence during the construction work under Ashrayan project.

Former UNO Rumana Akhter, former assistant commissioner (land) Saiful Islam and Project Implementation Officer Tapas Chakrabarty were accused in the case, said Deputy Commissioner Shahgir Alam of Brahmanbaria at a press conference yesterday.

Rumana and Saiful are currently posted in Rangamati.

The deputy commissioner did not say exactly when the case was filed.

The DC announced that the prime minister is set to virtually inaugurate 834 houses in seven upazilas of Brahmanbaria under the Ashrayan project.

Govt now has cold feet

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"This round of talks can be viewed as preliminary work for the loan if the need arises in future," the finance ministry official added.

Meanwhile, the IMF mission has expressed reservations about the BB's method of calculating foreign currency reserves.

The BB reports on gross reserves -- and includes local investment exposure. The IMF prescribes reporting net reserves.

Going by IMF's method, Bangladesh's actual reserves at present would be about \$7 billion less.

The central bank, however, is defiant and maintains that there should be no distinction between local

and foreign investment exposure.

"We will continue to calculate the reserves in the manner that we have been doing," Kamal said.

The IMF mission also recommended the NBR come up with a robust revenue action plan with reduced exemptions and more autonomy to buy the government more fiscal space.

While Bangladesh's external debt situation is at ease, the IMF mission prescribed more caution while taking on more bilateral loans and providing guarantees to state-owned enterprises' loans.

"It is a consultative committee and the IMF's advice is always helpful," Kamal added.

Rajapaksa ally elected

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for the former leader by the protesters who forced him from his palace after months of demonstrations over the unprecedented economic crisis.

On the streets, the mood was sombre. Soon after the election result was announced, a burst of chants broke out against Wickremesinghe. It lasted only a few minutes, before the small group of protesters left the steps of the secretariat.

But some vowed to keep up their protest against the 73-year-old leader.

Civil engineer Nuzly Hameem said he was "disappointed" by the result. "We expected more from our parliamentarians," he told AFP.

The protests would "obviously" continue, he said, but added "We are burnt out. It's been four months."

"The reason why people came out against Gota(baya) was not a personal grudge. It was protesting for ideals and values he held," said Buwanaka Perera, a 26-year-old protester.

"We see those same values, corruption and oppression in Ranil."

Wickremesinghe has pledged to crack down hard if protesters take to the streets and hundreds of heavily armed troops and police stood guard outside the parliament, but there

were no signs of demonstrators.

As acting president, Wickremesinghe extended a state of emergency that gives police and security forces sweeping powers, and last week ordered troops to evict protesters from state buildings they had occupied.

A court yesterday ordered the protesters to vacate their camp near the Presidential Secretariat and confine themselves only to an area designated as a protest site.

Opposition MP Dharmalingam Sithadthan said ahead of the vote that Wickremesinghe's hardline stance against demonstrators had gone down well with MPs who had been at the receiving end of mob violence, describing him as the "law-and-order candidate".

Wickremesinghe automatically became acting president when Rajapaksa resigned and political analyst Kusal Perera said he had "regained the acceptance of the urban middle classes by restoring some of the supplies like gas and he has already cleared government buildings showing his firmness".

But he appears to be indebted to the Rajapaksas, a clan of four brothers who have dominated Sri Lankan politics for much of the last two decades, for his victory.