



The Daily Star

DHAKA TUESDAY NOVEMBER 1, 2022

REGD. No. DA 781

VOL. XXXII No. 280

KARTIK 16, 1429 BS

www.thedailystar.net

RABU SANI 5, 1444 HURI

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ESSENTIAL SERVICE ACT Draft tugs at right to go on strike

Cabinet okays it; resets govt office hours to 9-4 from Nov 15

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The cabinet yesterday gave the nod to the draft of the Essential Service Act, 2022, including a clause that criminalises strikes in organisations whose services are declared essential – in a development that stands to set back the country's labour rights.

The International Labour Organisation's principles identify the right to strike as an "intrinsic corollary of the right to organise" as recognised by the United Nations' Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organise Convention. Bangladesh ratified the convention on June 22, 1972.

The maximum punishment for instigating an "illegal" strike, layoff and lockout is one-year imprisonment or a fine of Tk 50,000 or both, as per the draft, which was approved at a cabinet meeting chaired by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina.

Essential services include post and telecommunication, internet, ICT, mobile financial service, digital financial



services, power generation, supply and sales, gas, passengers and goods transportation by road, rail, air and waterways, terminals, customs and food procurement.

In addition, the government can declare any industry or service essential.

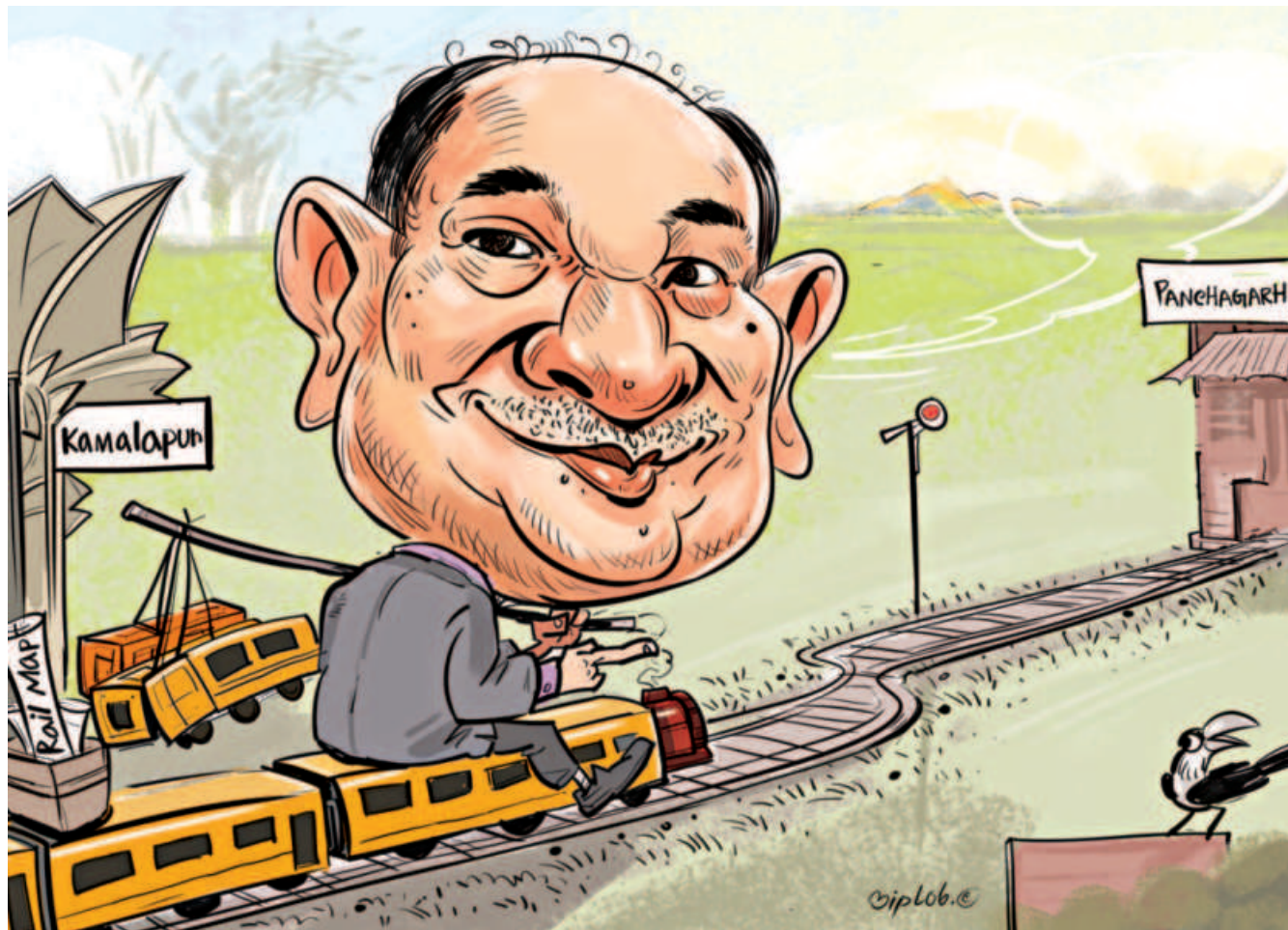
For example, if a strike is called at Chattogram Port and the government deems the activities there cannot be halted, it can declare the service essential, said Cabinet Secretary Khandker Anwarul Islam yesterday at a press briefing at the Secretariat.

"The government will declare some services 'essential'. In addition, if the people suffer, then the government can make these declarations on an emergency basis," he added.

The declarations will maintain the status quo for six months maximum at a time.

The draft incorporated provisions of the Essential Services (Maintenance) Act, 1952, and The Essential Services (Second) Ordinance, 1958, both of which are now in effect.

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Panchagarh now the rail capital!

TUHIN SHUBHRA ADHIKARY

Panchagarh is home to some 11.79 lakh people, representing 0.71 percent of Bangladesh's population, according to the recently published census.

But in terms of railway services, the northernmost district seems to be getting top priority. At the moment, five intercity trains, including three from Dhaka, run to Panchagarh – the highest among all districts, except for divisional headquarters.

The district started getting such priority only recently.

Until a month before the December 2018 election, the district had no intercity train. In November that year, two intercity trains began their trips to the district from Dinajpur.

The district's rail service saw a major boost after Nurul Islam Sujan, who is from Panchagarh, became rail minister in January 2019. In the last three and a half years, six intercity trains and one inter-country train were added to the railway fleet. Panchagarh got two of the six, and another intercity train service

was extended to the district, railway sources said.

These sources, who spoke on the condition of anonymity, said the minister deprived other districts by mobilising rail resources disproportionately towards his home district.

During his time, the BR even withdrew a new rake from another train to add it to a Panchagarh-bound train.

A rake is a formation of coupled coaches or cars that makes up a train minus the loco.

In May 2019, the rail ministry changed the name of the erstwhile Panchagarh Station to Bir Muktiyoddha Sirajul Islam Railway Station. Sirajul Islam, a former Awami League lawmaker from Panchagarh, is the minister's brother.

Naming a train station after a person is rare – there are only two examples of this. One is Shaheed M Mansur Ali Station in Sirajganj and the other is Advocate Matiur Rahman Station in Jamalpur.

In the meantime, every project undertaken since 2019 for the overall development of the BR is running behind

schedule, project documents show.

"Panchagarh seems to be the rail capital of the country because the minister attaches highest priority to it," said a railway official.

Another official said, "It's only normal that Panchagarh will get priority. It's the rail minister's home district, you know."

The minister, however, dismissed that he has any "Panchagarh-centric policy" and said his decisions were aimed at better connectivity.

About the introduction of a disproportionate number of new train services for his hometown, he said, "Panchagarh is the last destination point [in the north]."

He also spoke of implementing the Padma Bridge Rail Link Project to connect Dhaka with Jashore and building a rail line from Chattogram to Cox's Bazar, although both projects were taken up much before he became rail minister.

"You people are hellbent on writing anything when you have nothing to criticise," he told The Daily Star on

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Two add'l DIGs now sent into retirement

Same 'public interest' ground shown

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The government yesterday sent two additional deputy inspector generals (DIG) of police into forced retirement citing that the decision was taken in "public interest".

The two – Md Mahbub Hakim, additional DIG of Tourist Police, and Md Alamgir Alam, additional DIG of the Criminal Investigation Department – are officers of the 12th Bangladesh Civil Service (police) cadre.

The development came two weeks after three superintendents of police were sent into forced retirement.

The government made the move to purge the police administration of officials "not aligned to the ruling Awami League's

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IMF calls for fuel pricing formula by 2024

REJAU KARIM BYRON

The visiting mission of the International Monetary Fund has called for a pricing formula for fuel, fertiliser, electricity and gas by next fiscal year and cut back on subsidy spending to efficient budget financing.

The ten-member mission, which is in Dhaka on a 15-day tour to decide on the conditions for the \$4.5 billion loan sought, held court with finance division yesterday.

For long, the government has been subsidising the prices of fuel, fertiliser, electricity and gas – an unsustainable practice that benefits both the poor and wealthy alike.

Thanks to the Ukraine war, the prices of fuel, fertiliser and gas shot up, prompting the government to hike their prices at home, in what felt like a jolt to the poor and the fixed-income earners.

Adopting a pricing mechanism that is tagged with the prices in the global market then would prevent such price shocks and help the government accommodate additional social spending.

The Washington-based multilateral

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Reform fuel subsidies, slap carbon tax

WB urges govt

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The World Bank yesterday called for reforming the power and energy sectors to achieve energy efficiency and meet Bangladesh's commitment to decarbonising its economy.

At present, the country's power sector is dominated by fossil fuel-based generation. Nearly 70 percent of energy consumption in 2021 was natural gas and only 1 percent was from renewables.

"Energy tariffs and gas prices need to adequately reflect the cost to incentivise energy efficiency and invite investments in less carbon-intensive generation," said the Washington-based multilateral lender in a report titled "Country Climate and Development Report for Bangladesh".

Low tariffs are detrimental to utility financial performance and represent a disincentive for investment in more sustainable energy sources or efficiency.

Plants with captive generators, with access to cheap gas, can produce their own electricity at less than Tk 2.5 per kilowatt hour (kWh), while industry pays Tk 7.5 per kWh for electricity from the grid, said the report, which was unveiled yesterday.

Suboptimal gas allocation practices magnify the problem, with allocation to inefficient public power plants and energy-intensive facilities, such as fertiliser

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Aaron Finch smacks one for six during Australia's Super 12 match of the T20 World Cup against Ireland at the Gabba in Brisbane yesterday. The Australia captain scored 63 off 44 deliveries as his side won the match by 42 runs to move to second position in Group 1.

PHOTO: AFP



Finch revives Australia

AFP, Brisbane

Australia got their Twenty20 World Cup defence back on track with a 42-run win over Ireland at the Gabba in Brisbane on Monday.

Ireland, chasing Australia's 179-5, were all out for 137 in the 19th over to put Australia level on five points with leaders New Zealand, who have a game in hand, at the top of Group 1.

England, who play New Zealand on Tuesday, are third, two points behind Australia but with a superior net run rate, a factor that could become crucial in a tight group.

Ireland, also on three points, had outside hopes of reaching the semi-finals before the match but they were blown away in the chase by the pace and inswing of Mitchell Starc and then by the scoreboard pressure of their 180-run target.

They slumped to 25-5 and handed the World Cup hosts a comfortable win despite a superb unbeaten

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