

Former pope Benedict XVI passes away

AFP, Vatican City

Former pope Benedict XVI has died at the age of 95, the Vatican announced yesterday, almost a decade after he became the first pontiff to resign in six centuries.

"With sorrow I inform you that the Pope Emeritus, Benedict XVI, passed away today at 9:34 in the Mater Ecclesiae Monastery in the Vatican," spokesman Matteo Bruni said in a statement.

He later told journalists the funeral would take place on Thursday, January 5, at St Peter's Square, presided over by his successor Pope Francis.

Benedict had shocked the world in 2013 when he became the first pope since the Middle Ages to step down, citing his declining mental and physical health.

His death brings to an end an unprecedented situation in which two "men in white" -- Benedict and Francis -- had co-existed within the walls of the tiny city state.

Tributes poured in for a brilliant theologian who found himself



Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina distributes free textbooks among primary and secondary school students for the 2023 academic year at her office in the capital yesterday.

PHOTO: PTD

BBC Bangla Radio goes silent after nearly a century

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The BBC Bangla radio broadcast, the most reliable source of news during the years leading up to the Liberation War and later, will be discontinued after 81 years.

The last two sessions on news and current affairs, Prabaha and Parikrama, aired at 7:30pm and 10:30pm yesterday, respectively.

Mansi Barua hosted the show in London while Akbar Hossain was on the broadcast microphone in Dhaka.

The station's broadcast in other languages, including Arabic, Persian, Kyrgyz, Uzbek, Hindi, Chinese, Indonesian, Tamil, and Urdu, will also stop.

The decision came as a part of the BBC World Service's plans to accelerate its digital offering and increase impact with audiences around the globe while adhering to austerity measures.

"High inflation, soaring costs, and a cash-flat licence-fee settlement have led to tough choices across the BBC, and its international services need to make a saving of £28.5m, as



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Russia strikes Ukraine on New Year's Eve

Putin defends Russia's offensive in his New Year message

AFP, Kyiv

Russian strikes yesterday targeted Ukraine, including the capital Kyiv, just hours before New Year's Eve celebrations while President Vladimir Putin told Russians that "historical rightness" was on their side.

As Russian regions in the Far East rang in 2023, the Russian leader delivered his midnight address -- usually set against the backdrop of the Kremlin -- standing among servicemen and women who fought in Ukraine.

At around the same time, explosions shook the Ukrainian capital where AFP journalists heard around 10 loud blasts in the early afternoon.

Kyiv mayor Vitali Klitschko said on social media that at least one person died as a result of the attacks and 20 others were injured.

An explosion tore open one corner of the four-star Hotel Alfavito in Kyiv, spilling rubble into the street, an AFP reporter saw.

Nearby sidewalks were covered in glass from blown-out windows in the area, including from Kyiv's National Palace of Arts.

Filmmaker Yaroslav Mutenko, 23, lives in a nearby apartment complex and said he was in the shower preparing to go to a New Year's Eve party when he heard a boom.

He said there had been similar explosions in the area during a previous attack in October, but nothing as loud as yesterday's explosion.

As he watched rescue workers cordon off the street in front of the hotel, he told AFP he still planned to go to the party at a friend's house.

"Our enemies the Russians can destroy our calm but they cannot destroy our spirit," he said.

The attacks come as Putin's invasion of Ukraine enters its 11th month, with Russian strikes systematically targeting energy infrastructure, leaving millions in the cold and dark in the middle of winter.

According to mayor Klitschko, 30 percent of Kyiv's residents were left without electricity due to emergency power cuts after the strikes on Saturday.

Strikes were also reported in the southern city of Mykolaiv where a local official said six people were injured.

Mykolaiv mayor Oleksandr Sienkivych had said earlier that a fire broke out in one

of the city's districts and several residential buildings sustained damage as a result of the strikes.

In the west, at least seven people were wounded in the Khmelnytskyi region, governor Sergiy Gamaliy said, adding that part of the city of Khmelnytskyi was left without power.

According to Ukraine's army, Russia launched 20 cruise missiles yesterday, with 12 shot down.

According to Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov, Putin delivered his New Year's speech from the headquarters of Russia's southern military district, where he was on a visit earlier yesterday and presented awards to servicemen.

Among the recipients of the awards was Russia's commander in Ukraine, General Sergei Surovikin, Russian news agencies said.

Footage released by Russian state TV showed Putin raising a glass of champagne with soldiers dressed in military uniform, some with awards pinned to their chest.

In his traditional New Year's Eve address, broadcast by channels just before midnight, Putin told Russians that "moral, historical rightness is on our side".

Farmers come to our rescue, yet again

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Including Aman, farmers bagged 3.97 crore tonnes of various grains of rice last year -- much higher than the consumption requirement of 2.51 crore tonnes at 405 grams per capita per day, said BRRI Director General Md Shahjahan Kabir at an event yesterday.

"There will be no crisis of rice in the country until next June even after we consider an estimation error."

Also, international agencies namely US Department of Agriculture earlier forecast an increase in Aman rice production.

It said Boro, which accounts for more than half of the total yearly rice production, grew from 1.93 crore tonnes to 1.97 crore tonnes in 2022 thanks to handwork of farmers.

However, farmers could not bag the full production of Aush, which accounts for less than 10 percent of the total rice production per year, as severe floods hit the north and northeastern parts of the country during planting, said the USDA in its Grain and Feed Update in late October on Bangladesh.

In early December, the Food and Agriculture Organisation in its report, titled Crop Prospects and Food Situation, forecast that Bangladesh would harvest 5.64 crore tonnes of paddy in 2022, which was marginally lower than the previous year but higher than five-year average of 5.49 crore tonnes.

The UN agency also predicted higher production of wheat and maize in Bangladesh in 2022 compared to the previous year.

Mohammad Jahangir Alam, professor of Agribusiness and Marketing at the Bangladesh Agricultural University, said 2022 was challenging for farmers due to high prices of fuel and fertiliser, while natural calamities raised concerns over rice production.

However, despite the concerns, rice production was satisfactory.

"Credit goes to our farmers. They continued their work despite the increase in production cost, and the country has not fallen in a food crisis."

He added the government and agricultural agencies also worked proactively and stood by farmers.

The vegetable production throughout the year has also seen

success thanks to the farmers, who have turned the country almost self-reliant with regard to rice and veggies even after natural disasters such as flood, cyclones and other unpredictable climate change effects.

While all this portrayed success of our farmers, there are still certain aspects that are holding them back.

While the number of arable lands is falling, the cost of production is increasing due to higher costs of labour, irrigation and fertiliser. This has been making it harder for marginal farmers to make a profit.

They, however, have not given up.

In the year 2020, when Covid-19 had the world in its deadly grip, forcing the country to opt for lockdown and bringing the economy to a standstill, it was the farmers who still went out to the fields and worked relentlessly to keep the flow of food steady for the nation.

Today, the farmers grow more than two crops a year as reflected in a cropping intensity (how many crops are cultivated in a land per year) of 214, up from 173 in 2008.

In 2020, Bangladesh was listed as the third highest rice producing country in the world.

It also ranked third in vegetable production, said Bangladesh Agriculture Information Service, citing a report of the UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation from last March.

Meanwhile, the USDA, in another report, said the country is also third in aquaculture and fish production after India and China.

However, the impact of farmers and their success is even higher.

The FAO report states that the fruit production in Bangladesh has increased by 11 percent on average for 18 consecutive years.

The country ranks second in jackfruit production, seventh in mango production, eighth in guava production and 14th in papaya production.

Meanwhile, the consumption of fruits has also increased twofold over the last decade.

Anu Muhammad, a former economics professor at Jahangirnagar University, said food availability per capita has almost doubled in the last 50 years.

"Food production has increased but

the fate of ordinary farmers has not improved as the marketing system is unfavourable for them. The input price for agriculture is also high and bank loans are not available for them."

Bibhash Mondol, a small farmer from Batiaghata in the southwest district Khulna, said they could not get higher prices for their paddy due to what he said was the local business syndicate.

"They [the syndicate] have fixed the price rate in the local market and we do not get more than that," he told this paper over phone.

Bibhash said he had to sell Aman paddy at Tk 1,150 per maund after harvest by the end of December -- a price considerably lower than last year's.

"We farmers in this area have had to suffer from a lack of irrigation sources. Most of the water bodies are either not available for the purpose or are illegally filled up."

With the lack of rain during the season, he had to ultimately spend extra money to irrigate his farmland through diesel-run shallow machines to cultivate the Aman he yielded.

"I had to pay Tk 10,000 per acre of land as irrigation cost. Last year, it was around Tk 8,000," he said adding that cost of tilling for land preparation also increased in 2022.

The ordeal did not stop there. Though the government has fixed the fertiliser prices at Tk 1,100 per sack, Bibhash and other farmers of his area had to spend more over the crop production input.

Liakat Ali from northern district Rajshahi's Tanore also had to bear higher expenses for land preparation and irrigation after the government hiked the price of petroleum by up to 51 percent and that of urea by 36.5 percent in early August.

The labour cost too was increased. "I am cultivating potatoes this season, hoping it makes up for the losses I incurred over fertiliser and irrigation sources," adding that he had to pay at least Tk 300 higher to get one sack of urea.

"We only get one sack of fertiliser after waiting for hours in line. Whereas, we need at least five to 10 sacks. We are then compelled to purchase fertiliser with high prices from the market."

The pesticides price has also gone up,

he said.

Abdur Rouf, a farmer of Gaibandha's Gobindaganj, said compared to last year, farmers got a higher price for the Aman harvested this year.

"This came as a relief to us after being slapped by a higher production cost."

As Abdul Haque returned from harvesting his crops in Barishal's remote Dudhal village, he said the increased prices of Aman have come as a blessing.

"If the high prices persist, we will have some hope for profit after having to spend so much on tilling, labour and transport, owing to the increased prices of diesel and more."

We made

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"...we did not forget children's issues, we did not compromise on printing their textbooks. Yes, we are trying to save money from other sectors [imposing austerity measures], but we've given special attention to printing their [children's] books [textbooks]," she said.

The prime minister came up with the remarks while formally inaugurating the free textbook distribution programme for 2023 at her office.

Hasina said to build "Smart Bangladesh" by 2041, children will be provided with all facilities as they are the driving force in attaining that goal. "We will make sure that our children grow up in such a way that they would be technology-driven and ready to become skilled manpower for the upcoming Fourth Industrial Revolution," she said.

She urged all to give special attention to flourishing the hidden talents of children by nurturing their curiosities.

"We have to build them as worthy citizens of the country for Smart Bangladesh by 2041," she said.

The premier said the main aim of the government is to create technically and technologically skilled manpower by providing proper education.

Education Minister Dipu Moni, State Minister for Primary and Mass Education Md Zakir Hossain and Deputy Minister for Education Mohibul Hassan Chowdhury also spoke at the programme.

Three die under train

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Natore

Three people died yesterday after being run over by a train in Natore's Lalpur upazila.

The Tungipara Express bound for Rajshahi hit Montaj Master, 62, son of Late Jasim Uddin of Keshabpur village; and Zamir Uddin, 60, son of Late Bachchu Sheikh, and Sathi Begum, 35, wife of Manjur Rahman, both of Narayanpur village, while they were crossing the rail lines at the Gopalpur Aziznagar Level Crossing around 1:15pm.

They died on the spot, said Mihir Ranjan Deb, officer-in-charge of Ishwardi Railway Police Station.

Police recovered the bodies and handed them over to the family.

Cop file 5 cases against Jamaat men

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Police yesterday filed five cases against 300 leaders and activists of Jamaat-e-Islami and 5,000 others unnamed over Friday's clash in the capital.

Two of the cases were filed with Khilgaon Police Station, while one case each was filed with Shahjahanpur, Ramna, and Rampura police stations, according to Dhaka Metropolitan Police Media Centre.

The cases were filed for obstructing police duties, vandalism, and offences under the explosives act.

Police have already arrested 15 people in these cases.

Following Friday prayers, a clash broke out between police and Jamaat-e-Islami men after they brought out a procession in the capital's Malibagh-Mouchak area.

One dies from Covid, 23 new cases

UNB, Dhaka

One person has died from Covid while 23 others were infected with the virus in 24 hours until Saturday morning.

With the new numbers, the total number of Covid deaths is 29,440.

The positivity rate rose to 1.27 percent from 0.58 percent, the day before, said a press release from the Directorate General of Health Services.

A total of 1,811 samples were tested during the period.

The mortality rate remained unchanged at 1.45 percent while the recovery rate increased slightly.

In November, the country reported 10 Covid deaths and 1,345 cases.

One dies, four injured in 2 road crashes

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Dinajpur

The driver of a power tiller died in a road accident in Dinajpur's Nawabganj upazila on Friday night.

Monirul Islam, 26, son of Md Manik Mia of Puradpur village, lost control of the tiller he was driving after one of its tyres burst in Akhira village of the upazila. He died on the spot due to head injuries, said Ferdous Wahid, officer-in-charge of Nawabganj Police Station.

Meanwhile, four passengers were injured after the driver of their Dinajpur-bound coach lost control of the vehicle and fell into a ditch in Badhuria area of Nawabganj upazila of Dinajpur around 6:00pm yesterday. The injured are currently under treatment at the Birampur Upazila Health Complex.

Jamaat looks to rear its head

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be tried for its role in the crimes against humanity committed during the Liberation War.

Besides, Jamaat is infamously known for carrying out a series of violent anti-state activities before and after the national election in 2014.

Meanwhile, several of its top leaders were executed for war crimes over the years since 2013.

The party also lost its registration with the Election Commission, becoming ineligible to contest polls in 2018.

Subsequently, the militant organisation seemingly have been underground in recent times.

However, party insiders say, Jamaat now plans to mobilise and demonstrate its strength on the streets ahead of the next election taking advantage of the simultaneous movements of BNP and other like-minded political parties.

On Friday, Jamaat men clashed with police in the capital's Mouchak and Paltan as they took to the streets after a long time.

Party insiders say that Jamaat wants to show its strength on a larger scale and push for its 10-point demand, which includes the government's resignation and holding the next general election under a non-partisan interim government.

"We will force the present government to step down through our simultaneous movement which will be stronger in the days to come," a Jamaat leader said wishing anonymity.

It also tried to show its presence on the streets, following the arrest of its ameer Shaifur Rahman on December 13, 2021, for his alleged involvement with a newly surfaced militant group by the name of "Jama'atul Ansar Fil Hindal Sharqiya".

Earlier on November 9, 2021, Jamaat ameer's son, Rafat Sadiq Saifullah was also arrested on the same ground.

It is now moving ahead with multi-faceted plans ahead of the upcoming parliamentary elections.

Discussions are going on in the political circles that its new party -- Bangladesh Development Party (BDP) has applied for registration.

Although Jamaat is not acknowledging its involvement with

BDP, leaders of the new party are all from Jamaat Shibir.

The International Crimes Tribunal, in a verdict, said the killing of the intellectuals just ahead of the country's victory in December 1971 was the brainchild of Jamaat and Al Badar.

Jamaat actively opposed the country's independence and took part in genocides and crimes against humanity.

Its ten top leaders, including its ameer Maitur Rahman Nizami, and secretary general Ali Ahsan Mohammad Mojaheed, were executed after being found guilty of committing crimes against humanity.

In October, 2022, Law minister Anisul Huq said a draft amendment of the law has been sent to the cabinet division for approval for trying Jamaat on charges of their crimes against humanity.

The amendment of law will be passed within a few days and the trial will begin, the minister added.

US TV news

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as Anwar Sadat and Fidel Castro, and A-list celebrities in a hugely successful career that spanned five decades -- becoming a touchstone of American culture in the process.

She died at her home in New York, tweeted Bob Iger, CEO of Disney, ABC's parent company.

"Barbara was a true legend, a pioneer not just for women in journalism but for journalism itself," Iger said.

Walters won 12 Emmy awards, all but one while at ABC, the network said.

She largely retired from television after signing off in 2014 from the daytime program "The View," which she had launched in 1997.

Walters created a much-copied template for high-profile political and celebrity interviews -- and blazed a trail for women in an industry run by white middle-aged men.

"How proud I am today when I see all the young women who are making and reporting the news," Walters said on her last appearance on "The View."