





Russia claims capture of Soledar

Ukraine rules it out

REUTERS, Kyiv

Russia yesterday said its forces had taken control of the town of Soledar in eastern Ukraine, in what would be a rare success for Moscow after months of battlefield reverses, but Kyiv said its troops were still fighting in the town.

Reuters could not immediately verify the situation in Soledar, a small salt mining town that has been the focus of relentless Russian assault for days.

Kyiv and the West have played down the town's significance, saying Moscow sacrificed wave upon wave of soldiers and mercenaries in a pointless fight for a bombed-out wasteland, unlikely to affect the wider war except insofar as the huge losses have sapped manpower on both sides.

But the capture of the town has taken on an outsized importance as it would, if confirmed, give Moscow a trophy for one of the bloodiest campaigns of the war following major battlefield setbacks throughout the second half of 2022.

"The capture of Soledar was made possible by the constant bombardment of the enemy by assault and army aviation, missile forces and artillery of a grouping of Russian forces," Moscow's defence ministry said.

Seizing the town would make it possible to cut off Ukrainian supply routes to the larger nearby city of Bakhmut, and trap remaining Ukrainian forces there, it said. Moscow has been trying to seize Bakhmut for months.

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PHOTO: MOSTAFA YOUSUF

A hillock being razed at Chunati Wildlife Sanctuary in Chattogram's Lohagara upazila to sell the soil and wood to brick kilns. The illegal activity that puts the wildlife and natural resources at risk has been going on at the sanctuary for years. The photo was taken recently.

Ready to do whatever necessary

Momen says on US Indo-Pacific Strategy

UNB, Dhaka

Ahead of US official Donald Lu's visit, Foreign Minister AK Abdul Momen yesterday said Bangladesh stands ready to do whatever necessary for the people's welfare, noting that the government is still looking into the issues related to US Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS).

"It's not that transparent. It's not mentioned there how it will bring benefits. We are studying," he told reporters while talking about the IPS and its economic component.

Donald Lu, who became assistant secretary of state for the Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs on September 15, 2021, is scheduled to arrive in Dhaka today, wrapping up his India tour.

"We will raise our issues. It's very normal to have good relations between

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World's longest river cruise on its way

Modi flags off 51-day voyage thru India, Bangladesh



OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi yesterday virtually flagged off the world's longest river cruise that will travel through India and Bangladesh, offering tourists a unique opportunity to experience the art, culture, history, and spirituality of both countries.

While stressing the importance of waterway connectivity between the countries, the Indian PM also inaugurated a multi-modal terminal in West Bengal's Haldia port.

Modi, while addressing the event virtually, said the terminal, which is connected with India-Bangladesh protocol waterways, will link the Kolkata port with Bangladesh, facilitating businesses from Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand, and West Bengal states.

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CHUNATI WILDLIFE SANCTUARY UP chairman's men plundering it for yrs

Say locals; hillocks razed, hundreds of trees felled as forest dept, admin remain indifferent

MOSTAFA YOUSUF, back from Lohagara, Chattogram

For years, under the nose of the Forest Department and the local administration, a syndicate led by a local union parishad chairman has been razing hillocks and tearing down trees at Chunati Wildlife Sanctuary in Chattogram's Lohagara upazila.

The country's first ever wildlife sanctuary, Chunati was widely lauded for its conservation efforts. Now a temporary road has been cut through the forest in Sufinagar area of Chunati union to transport the logs and sand from the hilly areas of the forest cover.

Visiting the area on December 17, this correspondent spotted workers dredging hillocks. A large part of a hillock was totally destroyed, resembling a dead patch of land.

Md Manik, a labourer, was shoveling sand into a truck in Sufinagar, adjacent to Chattogram-Cox's Bazar highway.

"This sand belongs to Md Kamruddin, grandchild of Chunati Union Parishad Chairman Joydul Abedin Jonu. The sand is being collected by cutting hillocks from the sanctuary," he told The Daily Star.

Md Junayed, driver of the truck carrying the sand, however, provided a false narrative at first. He claimed the sand was collected from Chakaria, a neighbouring upazila. After some pressing questions, he quickly admitted that the mud and sand was collected by razing hillocks at the Chunati sanctuary.

The sanctuary, overseen by Chattogram Divisional Forest Office (Wildlife and Nature Conservation), was established in 1986. It is a major corridor for the movement of Asian elephants -- categorised as critically endangered by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN).

The government designates the sanctuary for the protection of wildlife and natural resources.

A study in 2021 found that about 16 percent of the well stock of Chunati beat was degraded by illegal logging and encroachment of reserve forest area.

Further havoc is currently being wrecked in various parts of the sanctuary,

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Train runs over woman, daughter in Lalmonirhat

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Lalmonirhat

A woman and her daughter were crushed to death on rail tracks at Patgram upazila in Lalmonirhat yesterday morning.

The deceased were identified as Sumi Begum, 26, wife of Rasheduzzaman, and their daughter, Tasmira Tabasum Tasin, 6, of Dhabalsuti Rahmanpur area of Burimari union in the upazila, reports our Lalmonirhat correspondent.

According to locals, Sumi Begum, along with her two children, jumped in front of the train when the Burimari-bound passenger train from Lalmonirhat crossed Beltali Ghunti area around 10:30am.

Her two-year-old son survived but was critically injured and locals took him to Patgram Upazila Health Complex.

Patgram Police Station Officer-in-Charge Omar Farooq said there was no definitive proof whether

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Pharaoh Ramses II's sarcophagus to return to Paris on loan



AFP, Paris

The sarcophagus of ancient Egyptian pharaoh Ramses II is to return to Paris in April for the first time in almost 50 years, on a rare loan of the relic outside Egypt.

The ornate coffin will be on show in the French capital from April 7 to September 6, the star attraction alongside an exhibition previously shown in San Francisco and which will conclude in Sydney -- minus the sarcophagus.

"I almost wept for joy that I would be seeing him again here when they told me he was coming to Paris," said Dominique Farout, an Egyptologist at the prestigious Ecole du Louvre art history school who is scientific commissioner to the exhibit.

"I was 16 in 1976" when Ramses II was last in Paris, Farout added. "I had a big poster in my bedroom. I went eight times in a row."

Farout said Egyptian authorities had made an exception in loaning the yellow-painted cedar-wood sarcophagus to France. It did not travel

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U-19 WOMEN'S T20 WC Bangladesh face Australia in the opener

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The inaugural ICC U-19 Women's T20 World Cup will kick off today with Bangladesh taking on Australia in their Group A clash at Willowmoore Park in Benoni.

The match will start at 2:00 PM (BST) and will be telecast live on sports streaming site Rabbithole.

The UAE will face Scotland in the other game at the same time while hosts South Africa will take on India and Sri Lanka will play against USA at 05:45pm (BST).

16 teams were divided into four groups, with the top three from each making it to the Super Six, which consists of two groups of six. Group 1 will have three teams each from Group A and Group D while Group 1 will have teams from Group B and Group C. The top two from each Group 1 and 2 then

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PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

People buy warm clothes from street vendors on Bangabandhu Avenue. They sell the products at cheaper prices than the shopping malls do. However, their presence contributes to traffic congestion in the capital's Gulistan area. The photo was taken last week.

Biden probed over improper storage of classified docs

Special counsel appointed; Republican announces enquiry

AFP, Washington

The US attorney general named an independent prosecutor Thursday to investigate President Joe Biden's handling of classified documents, after a furor over secret papers found at his former office exploded with the discovery of a second batch.



The new find -- like the original, from Biden's time as vice president -- was uncovered in the garage of his home in Wilmington, Delaware, where he often spends weekends, the White House said.

Attorney General Merrick Garland announced that Robert Hur, an appointee of Biden's predecessor Donald Trump, would be empowered to examine whether the cache violated any law.

"Under the regulations, the extraordinary circumstances here require the appointment of a special counsel," Garland, who runs the Justice Department, said.

The appointment came hours after the White House acknowledged the finding of second batch of papers but did not address their contents -- supercharging a scandal over a first set found at a Washington think tank where Biden had an office.

Republicans in Congress, who have been accusing

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