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"In Moscow, everything that the alliance ... is doing is seen as direct involvement in the [Ukraine] conflict."

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov



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The Iranian nightmare



Ukraine sets sights on fighter jets



Who runs the country?



Business climate improves slightly

OWNING NON-AGRI LAND Govt mulls a 40-bigha cap

Land minister discloses on concluding day of DC conf'ce

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The government is likely to limit the individual ownership of non-agricultural land to 40 bighas in an attempt to cope with the scarcity of farmlands in the country.

The land ministry made the proposal in its draft of the Land Ownership and Uses Act, which aims to protect agricultural land, ensure food security, and reduce the effects of climate change.

However, the authorities will allow ownership of over 40 bighas of non-agricultural land if it is used for setting up large industries, says the draft which will be placed at a cabinet meeting next week.

Land Minister Saifuzzaman Chowdhury talked about the draft while meeting the deputy commissioners at the Osmani Memorial Auditorium in the capital. He, however, didn't go into further details about the draft.

Currently, there is no limit on acquiring non-agricultural land.

Another draft law of the ministry called Land Crime Prevention and Redress Act has been sent to the Cabinet Division for final approval. It is illegal occupation of land as a criminal offence.

On the final day of the three-day DC conference, the DCs met with the top bosses of over 12 ministries and divisions.

They were asked to be prepared for a free and fair 12th national election, slated for January next, and to monitor private clinics to check whether they are charging patients extra for service.

They were also asked to watch out for rumours spread by unregistered online portals and IPTVs.

At the Bangabhaban last night, President Abdul Hamid told the DCs that they should make sure they stay away from corruption and don't abuse power.

The president then asked them to keep the global situation in mind and utilise maximum utilisation of resources and successful implementation of development programmes.

Hamid also urged them to free the land offices from corruption.

Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan told the DCs to start preparing for the national election.

This was the last DC conference before the national election.

The directive also comes at a time when the BNP and like-minded parties are regularly demonstrating for a polls-time caretaker government while the government

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DIRECTIVES FOR DCs

- Staying away from corruption
- Playing due role for free, fair nat'l polls
- Monitoring travel agencies to stop human trafficking
- Keeping watch on unregistered online portals and IPTVs to stop spread of rumors
- Staying vigilant to prevent pvt clinics from charging excessive fees



BREAKING FREE ... A painter puts finishing touches on the mural of a woman defiantly riding a motorcycle in a rural setting as her scarf and the sky become one and the same. The artwork at the TSC on Dhaka University campus is part of an exhibition by Brac with the theme of women leading social changes. It will conclude on February 2.

PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON

Human trafficking rife, conviction rare

Shows UN report

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Only one person was convicted in a human trafficking case in Bangladesh in 2020, according to a UN report highlighting the concern over low convictions of the crime.

The number of people convicted in trafficking cases was nine in 2019, up from four in 2018, said the report of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime.

Dhaka division saw the highest 40 percent of human trafficking cases filed in 2020, followed by Khulna (22 percent) and Chattogram (17 percent).

A total of 373 people were arrested in 2020 while the number of arrestees was 199 in 2019 and 688 in 2018, said the report titled "Trafficking in Persons in Bangladesh", which was shared yesterday during the regional launch of UNODC's global report on "Trafficking in Persons 2022".

The report, which was produced by the UNODC with support from the government, attributed the lack of resources, bribery by traffickers

and insufficient evidence to the low conviction.

It, however, said only one conviction in 2020 was due to reduced capacity caused by the pandemic.

"Nevertheless, the number of convictions from previous years illustrates an equally low level compared to a much higher number of arrests," it said.

Trafficking cases should be closed within 180 working days. However, in practice, the process may be far more protracted due to a lack of resources, it said, adding that investigations are further hindered by high levels of corruption.

The report pointed out that economic need was the most significant determinant of trafficking in persons in Bangladesh.

The other factors are discrimination and marginalisation often in combination with economic need creating multiple layers of vulnerability for certain people to fall into trap of traffickers.

"Poverty and lack of prospects for income generation may lead people to accept risky employment

opportunities as 'the marginal gain potentially derived from the prospective job opportunity significantly outweighs the cost of inaction'."

Though the country saw its per capita income rise and poverty rate decline between 2009 and 2019, many people in rural areas remain relatively poor.

This relative lack of economic opportunities functions as a push factor, enticing people to seek employment abroad under promises of better wages and jobs in countries in North America, Europe and the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC).

While victims from all Bangladeshi regions are detected in the countries of the GCC, those districts sharing borders with India near larger city centres disproportionately report repatriated victims.

For example, Khulna, which shares its western border with West Bengal and is not far from Kolkata in India, reported the most repatriated victims in 2020.

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Sugar price to go up by Tk 5 a kg from Feb 1

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Refiners are set to raise the price of sugar from February 1, their second hike in three months, as the higher price of unrefined sugar in the global market and depreciation of taka continue to push up their production costs.

This time, they are set to raise the price by Tk 5 per kilogram following a discussion with the commerce ministry and Bangladesh Trade and Tariff Commission, according to a statement issued by Bangladesh Sugar Refiners Association yesterday.

From February 1, the retail price of loose sugar will be Tk 5 more at Tk 107 per kilogram. The price of packaged sugar will be Tk 4 more at Tk 112 a kg.

Refiners last raised the prices of sugar on November 3 last year -- to Tk 102 a kg for unpackaged sugar and Tk 108 for packaged sugar -- citing the same reasons.

Retailers in Dhaka have been selling sugar at Tk 120 per kg.

Globally, sugar prices edged up in the last two months of last year, according to World Bank Commodities Price Data released early this month.

The price hike is set to pile on the expenses for ordinary people during Ramadan, which is set to begin in March.

Talking to The Daily Star, Ghulam Rahman, president of the Consumers Association of Bangladesh, said, "The market for the sweetener has become unstable before the fasting month. It should be controlled. Otherwise, people will suffer during Ramadan."

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US SANCTIONS ON RAB Nothing but political

Momen tells JS; all efforts in place to get them lifted

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Foreign Minister AK Abdul Momen told parliament yesterday that the US sanctions on Rab were nothing but a political matter.

The lifting of sanctions is a long-term process, the minister said, adding that strong diplomatic efforts were made since the beginning to resolve it.

Responding to a question from Jatiya Party MP Mujibul Haque Chunnun, he said the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and other agencies of the government are working together to get the ban withdrawn and prevent such bans in future.

The Bangladesh embassy in Washington continues to maintain round-the-clock communication with the US State Department. As per their advice, the foreign ministry is taking immediate steps.

The ministry is also coordinating regularly with the Rab, legal aid agencies, law ministry and the Bangladesh mission in this regard.

Highlighting the steps taken by the government to have the ban on Rab withdrawn, the minister said, "I spoke to US Secretary of State Antony Blinken over the phone after the ban was imposed. At that time, there was an open discussion about how Bangladesh and the United States

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The escalator-equipped footbridge in front of the Dhaka airport used to be a relief for pedestrians, especially the elderly and the ones carrying heavy bags. However, the escalator broke almost two months ago and people now climb up and down the staircase.

PHOTO: PALASH KHAN

Cop's noble act reunites mother, child

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Gazipur

A mother was forced to sell her two-month-old child for Tk 30,000 to repay debts.

Three days after the heartbreaking incident, a police team reunited the mother and her child yesterday.

Lima Hanufa, the mother, said her husband could not secure a job in the last five years after a road accident left him crippled.

After giving birth to their youngest child, Lima, her family's only wage earner, too could not work.

As a result, the amount of the family's debt recently increased to Tk 30,000 -- Tk 12,000 in rent, Tk 10,000 in grocery, and Tk 8,000 in pharmacy, she said.

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