

2 killed, 50 hurt in picnic bus wreck in Gopalganj

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Benapole

Two people, including a teacher, were killed and 50 others were injured after a picnic bus from Jashore hit a roadside tree in Gopalganj’s Kashiani on Thursday night.

The dead are Sudipta Biswas, 37, assistant teacher of Bangari Secondary School in Jashore’s Bagharpara upazila, and Bidyut Biswas, 47, guardian of a student.

Twenty-seven students are now receiving treatment at Jashore General Hospital while three of them were taken to the hospital’s Incentive Care Unit, said Akhtaruzzaman, superintendent of the hospital.

Besides, three others, who suffered serious injuries, were sent to Dhaka Medical College Hospital for better treatment, said the doctor.

Police and students said the school authorities arranged an annual educational excursion to visit the mausoleum of Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in Gopalganj’s Tungipara.

Over 200 people, including students, teachers, school managing committee members and staffers, joined the tour.

The accident happened around 12:00am when they were returning home from Gopalganj by three buses, said Tajjul Islam, officer-in-charge of Jashore Kotwali Police Station.

The OC said one of three buses tried to overtake another bus at Kashiani in Gopalganj and hit a roadside tree after its driver lost control over the steering, leaving Bidyut dead on the spot and 51 people injured.

Sudipta died soon after he was taken to Jashore General Hospital, said Saiful Islam, a physician at the hospital.

Tamizul Islam Khan, deputy commissioner of Jashore, said the district administration is giving all-out support to the injured.



An aerial view shows damaged and collapsed buildings, in the aftermath of a deadly earthquake in Hatay, Turkey, yesterday.

PHOTO: STAR

Russian missiles pound Ukraine’s energy system

Kyiv says new Russian ground offensive has begun in east

REUTERS, Kyiv

Russia struck power facilities across Ukraine with missiles yesterday, the day after Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky concluded a tour of Western capitals, as Ukrainian officials said a long-awaited Russian offensive was under way in the east.

Ukraine’s air force said 61 of a total of 71 Russian missiles had been shot down. But Energy Minister German Galushchenko said Russia had hit power facilities in six regions with missiles and drones, causing blackouts across most of Ukraine.

Russia has repeatedly attacked civilian infrastructure far from the front lines over the last four months, leaving millions of urban Ukrainians without power, heat or water for days at a time in the middle of

winter.

The barrages have often followed Ukrainian diplomatic or battlefield advances.

This one came as Zelensky ended a tour of London, Paris and Brussels with standing ovations ringing in his ears, though no public promises of the fighter jets he was asking for.

Kyiv’s mayor Vitali Klitschko said 10 Russian missiles had been shot down over the Ukrainian capital after air raid sirens blared across the country during the morning rush hour and officials urged weary civilians to heed them and shelter.

European Council President Charles Michel said the attacks were indiscriminate and constituted war crimes.

“The EU and its member states stand by Ukraine and all Ukrainians. And will

further speed up the provision of military equipment, including air defence,” he tweeted.

Russia denies targeting civilians and says the facilities it attacks are relevant to Kyiv’s war effort.

Ukraine has been bracing itself for a new Russian offensive in the belief that, after months of reverses, President Vladimir Putin wants to tout a battlefield success before the anniversary of the invasion he launched on Feb 24.

Putin will give his delayed annual showcase address to parliament, akin to the US president’s State of the Union speech, on Feb 21. That was the date last year when he recognised the breakaway Ukrainian regions of Donetsk and Luhansk as independent, a prelude to invading.

A good initiative falls short of goal

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Farming would require far fewer workers and much less investment if the government could popularise the use of modern equipment, he said.

Launching the project on February 21, 2021, Agriculture Minister Muhammad Abdur Razzaque said paddy seedlings on each acre of land could be planted with a transplanter in an hour and that would reduce the cost of hiring workers by around Tk 4,500.

In the places where synchronised farming is being done for demonstration purposes, the farmers were given free seeds and seedling trays. The transplanters for planting seedlings were also used for free. The harvesting will be for free as well.

Mahmudul Hasan, additional

deputy director of the DAE in Tangail, said synchronised cultivation was done on two 50-acre blocks in Dhanbari upazila and one block of the same size in Delduar upazila this year. This is the third such experiment in Dhanbari.

Dhanbari Agriculture Officer Masudur Rahman said farmers on their own have yet to cultivate this way.

Farmers owning land in the same location do not seem to be willing to cultivate together, he said, adding that using the equipment on smaller pieces of land is not cost effective.

Anwar Hossain of Bhatkura village, who participated in the synchronised farming with DAE assistance, said the harvest was better than usual.

“We get 18 to 20 maunds of rice

from one bigha of land, but the output rises to 25 to 28 maunds in the integrated farming method,” he said.

“I wanted to cultivate paddy in this method along with several farmers. But the authorities did not provide us with a seeding machine,” said Anwar.

Many other farmers in Tangail said they were ready to form groups and adopt mechanised farming, but the equipment was not available.

Asked about this, DAE DG Badal said there was a shortage of seeding machines. “But farmers can prepare seedbeds manually if they want.”

The government is trying to create entrepreneurs who would own seeding machines, transplanters and harvesters and rent those out.

NCTB withdraws

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Several mistakes were also found in three textbooks for the ninth and tenth grades. NCTB in mid-January issued corrections to mistakes in books for class 9 and 10 books.

Late last month, the education ministry formed two probe committees to identify mistakes in textbooks and ascertain whether the errors were the result of any negligence of NCTB officials.

Dhaka University Professor Emeritus Serajul Islam Choudhury said the withdrawal of textbooks “was a political decision in the face of demands made by some religious groups”.

“We don’t find such debates over English medium or madrasa books. But we see it in the case of the Bangla medium, which is our mainstream... in the past, the authorities also showed the tendency to compromise by dropping contents following demands of Hefajat,” he added.

On the debate over Darwin’s theory of evolution, he said there is no disagreement that it is scientifically proven.

Brac University Professor Emeritus Manzoor Ahmed said the decision of withdrawing two textbooks came amid controversy and criticism from religion-based groups. “It seems to me such a decision is one kind of surrender of government,” he told this newspaper. “The government did not make the decision following proper procedures. As they have formed two probe committees, they could have reached a decision following their reports,” he opined.

Asked whether they have taken the step under pressure from religious groups, Prof Moshuazzaman evaded a direct answer by saying, “We made the decision keeping in mind different types of criticisms.”

In 2017, writings of famous authors were scrapped because they were either non-Muslims or the contents were disliked by Islamists, said a former NCTB member, who was involved in the process. He added the exclusions were done on instructions from “higher authorities”.

On condition of anonymity, an NCTB official said no textbooks were fully withdrawn since at least 2010.

Also yesterday, Education Minister Dipu Moni said, “We will prepare one new book each for sixth and seventh grade. The topics that are being talked about will not be studied in classrooms.”

Regarding criticisms from various quarters, Dipu Moni, while speaking at a programme in Chandpur, said, “There is nothing anti-Islamic in these books. Still, we listen to people, we also give importance to it and respect it.”

Bangladesh approached

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India carried out the reforms with such sincerity that after two years, it informed the lender that it did not need further instalments of the sanctioned amount.

The reforms were much-needed but the Indian authorities were dragging their feet then.

“For Bangladesh, that is possible,” said Basu, who served as the chief economic adviser to the government of India from 2009 to 2012.

Indian advisors told the IMF that they need reforms and urged them to make it happen through the conditions in the loan programme, said Basu, who is now an economics professor at Cornell University.

“In the case of Bangladesh, the same thing might be happening.”

Chief among IMF’s conditions are raising the tax-GDP ratio and paring back on subsidy expenditure.

“Tax-GDP ratio can be increased in the region. But 14-15 percent is possible.”

He, however, acknowledged the inertia among the tax administration that prevents the tax-GDP ratio from going up.

“It is not easy though. This is a target that must be there. You have to give attention and you have to try better.”

Subsidies must be pared back intelligently, he said.

“In many countries, as political pressure intensifies, subsidy starts to increase. There comes a time that subsidy needs to be withdrawn a bit and that must be done intelligently.”

The ordinary people are the most

vulnerable people, so when the subsidy is cut, buffers need to be provided for them.

“At the same time, fiscal deficit must be watched. Subsidy cannot be a free good – you have to make people understand this. There is a balancing act involved,” Basu added.

Meanwhile, in his speech, Basu said every crisis provides an opportunity.

Bangladesh Pathashala, a social organisation, arranged the discussion at RC Majumder Auditorium. Rehman Sobhan, chairman of the Centre for Policy Dialogue, chaired the event.

One of the major problems in developing countries like Bangladesh is the implementation of policies, said Mustafa K Mujeri, executive director at Institute for Inclusive Finance and Development.

“Bureaucracy does not want massive changes. They prefer marginal changes,” he said.

Shamsul Alam, state minister for planning, said during his initial days as a member of the planning commission, he faced questions from bureaucracy about the necessity of planning.

Citing some decisions by former finance minister AMA Muhith regarding giving the planning ministry the responsibility to make projections for economic growth and poverty reduction, he said political far-sightedness is important.

More autonomy for the Bangladesh Bank is necessary so that the central bank can determine the interest rate and solve foreign exchange issues.

“It should be given more scope,” Alam added.

Death toll nears 24,000

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From the debris in the southeastern city of Antakya. Twenty minutes later, they rescued seven-year-old Muhammed Huseyin, NTV news channel reported.

Three-year-old Zeynep Ela Parlak was also rescued in Antakya yesterday, while in Adiyaman province, rescuers saved a 60-year-old Eyup Ak and in Gaziantep, two people were pulled out alive including a child whose age was not known.

But hopes were fading that many more would be found alive.

Some 24.4 million people in Syria and Turkey have been affected, according to Turkish officials and the United Nations, in an area spanning roughly 450 km from Adana in the west to Diyarbakir in the east. In Syria, people were killed as far south as Hama, 250 km from the epicentre.

Up to 5.3 million people in Syria may have been made homeless by the devastating earthquake, a United Nations official said.

Rescuers, including teams from dozens of countries, toiled night and day in the ruins of thousands of wrecked buildings to find buried survivors. In freezing temperatures, they regularly called for silence as they listened for any sound of life from mangled concrete mounds.

Temperatures in the Turkish city of Gaziantep, located near the epicentre of the quake, plunged to minus three degrees Celsius (26 degrees Fahrenheit) early yesterday.

Despite the cold, thousands of families have been living in cars and makeshift tents – too scared or banned from returning to their homes.

Monday’s quake was the largest Turkey has seen since 1939, when 33,000 people died in the eastern Erzincan province.

It now ranks as the seventh most deadly natural disaster this century, ahead of Japan’s 2011 tremor and tsunami and approaching the 31,000 killed by a quake in neighbouring Iran in 2003.