

TORTURE AT IU Probe body to submit report February 26

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

One of the committees formed to investigate the torture of a student at Islamic University in Kushtia is likely to submit its report on February 26. The probe body formed by the university authorities on February 15, the day after the incident, and headed by Prof Reba Mandol has completed taking depositions of 40 students, including the victim, both accused, two house tutors and four staffers.

“We are reviewing the statements and will submit the report on time,” Prof Debashish Sharma, a member of the committee, told reporters.

On February 14, Phulpuri Khatun, a first-year non-residential student of the university, alleged that its BCL Vice President Sanjida Chowdhury and activist Tabassum Islam, along with others, tortured her on the night of February 12 for staying at university’s Deshratna Sheikh Hasina Hall without their “permission”.

Beside the university probe committee, two others bodies are carrying out investigations into the incident.

Grameenphone network restored after hours of disruption

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Normal service of the Grameenphone mobile network was restored across the country after more than two hours of disruption, the telecom giant’s officials said yesterday.

Khairul Basher, head of communications at the carrier, said the network was restored at 1:50pm after about two hours of disruption, which happened due to damage to fibre-optic cables caused during road construction work in Gazipur, Tangail, and Sirajganj.

While Grameenphone officials said the network was disrupted for two hours, users have been complaining of connectivity issues since before 11:00am yesterday.



The mangled remains of an auto-rickshaw after it collided head-on with a bus in Sujabad-Dahapara area of Bogura’s Shajahanpur upazila yesterday morning. The accident left the driver of the three-wheeler and its four passengers dead. The bus was set ablaze by angry locals. Story on page 12.

PHOTO: MOSTAFA SHABUJ

Ukraine ‘will prevail’

Zelensky says ahead of invasion anniv; G7 mulls new sanctions; UN prepares peace vote; Putin to deploy Sarmat nuclear missile

AGENCIES

Ukraine “will prevail” over invading Russian forces, President Volodymyr Zelensky said yesterday, a day before the first anniversary of Moscow’s assault on his country.

“We have not broken down, we have overcome many ordeals and we will prevail. We will hold to account all those who brought this evil, this war to our land,” Zelensky said on social media.

In India, G7 ministers yesterday discussed imposing fresh sanctions on Russia. And the UN General Assembly was preparing to vote on a motion calling for “lasting” peace in Ukraine.

The year-long conflict has devastated swathes of Ukraine, turned Russia into a pariah in the West and according to Western sources, has caused 150,000 casualties on each side.

The approach of the first anniversary of Russian troops storming across the border on February 24, 2022 has seen Western leaders step up their show of unity with Kyiv, with the Spanish prime minister the latest leader to visit the capital.

“This has been the most difficult year of my life and that of all Ukrainians,” said Diana Chestakova, 23, who works for a publishing house and whose boyfriend has spent the last year away in the military.

“I am sure that we will be victorious, but we don’t know how long we will have to wait and how many victims there are still to come,”

In Moscow, President Vladimir Putin promised to boost arms production as Russia marked the annual “Defender of the Fatherland Day” holiday.

In India, G7 finance ministers met in the city of Bengaluru to discuss further

sanctions and more financial help for Ukraine.

A senior US official has said that the United States and its G7 allies planned to unveil “a big new package of sanctions” around the anniversary, including measures to crack down on the evasion of existing sanctions.

US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen told the G7 meeting that the unprecedented Western sanctions imposed on Moscow over the last 12 months were hurting Russia badly.

“Our sanctions have had a very significant negative effect on Russia so far... Russia is now running a significant budget deficit,” Yellen said.

“It is finding it extremely difficult... to obtain the material it needs to replenish its munitions and to, for example, repair 9,000 tanks that have been destroyed because of the war,” she added.

Poor response

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A Bangladeshi will have to spend at least Tk 6.83 lakh to perform hajj under government management this year, up by around Tk 1.61 lakh from the previous year. The minimum cost for performing hajj under private management has been fixed at Tk 6.72 lakh this year, about Tk 1.5 lakh more than that of the previous year.

Apart from this, each pilgrim will have to pay about Tk 22,000 for a Qurbani coupon from the Islamic Development Bank in Saudi Arabia. The amount is used for meeting the expenses for sacrificing animals.

The hajj will be held in late June.

Abdus Salam Aref, general secretary of ATAB, said a Bangladeshi pilgrim will have to spend around Tk 8 to 9 lakh to complete hajj this year.

The HAAB, a platform of around 1,500 private hajj agencies, said this year’s airfare was high for which the costs of hajj packages have increased significantly.

“The airfare of Biman was Tk 1.40 lakh last year. But this year it is around Tk 2 lakh ...,” said HAAB President M Shahadat Hossain Taslim.

Sources at the HAAB and ATAB said in India, the airfare is around Tk 1.25 lakh and in Pakistan it is about Tk 1 lakh.

“Due to the high prices of hajj packages, we are now worried whether the hajj agencies and the government will be able to send the targeted 1.27 lakh Bangladeshis to Saudi Arabia to perform hajj this year,” he added.

Md Khorshed Alam, managing partner of Al-Madina Travels and Hajj Kafela, said many people had completed pre-hajj registration through his firm.

“When we are asking them why they are not completing their registration, 99 percent of them are saying that the prices of hajj packages have increased significantly this year.

“They say that they are finding it difficult to manage the additional money due to such huge increase in the prices,” he said.

HAAB and ATAB leaders said in Bangladesh husband and wife, or mother and son or close relatives perform hajj together.

“Due to the increased costs, it would be very tough for a family to manage Tk 15 to 16 lakh for two persons,” said the ATAB secretary general.

ATAB leaders said they have already asked Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina to reduce the prices of hajj packages.

Undoing of Bangladesh economy

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Hossain, a diabetic patient, had to switch to rice for sustenance after the wheat price snowballed to an all-time high in the global market with the onset of the Ukraine war.

“The change in diet wrecked my health,” said the owner of a small grocery shop at Sirajganj Sadar.

The doctor has advised him to move back to his previous wheat-based diet, which he can ill afford thanks to elevated inflation and the 41.5 percent price hike of loose flour in the past year.

Since the war began on February 24, inflation averaged 8.14 percent, way higher than the reasonable 5 percent.

The elevated price level means Chisty, an SME entrepreneur in Dhaka, is unable to replace his wife’s stolen smartphone, that his wife lost her smartphone last week, but he can’t buy a new one for her at this moment as his net income has reduced to a large extent.

“My income has reduced greatly. I can’t get her a new smartphone. I asked her to use an old feature phone used by my father who died in 2021.”

Such intense is his cost of living crisis that he has to entirely cut back on indulgence.

“Before, I used to buy beef twice a month. Now, I can’t even buy beef once in two months.”

His purchasing power is deteriorating so swiftly that he is

concerned about how he will manage his living expenses with his income in the days ahead.

“The prices of most of the commodities have declined in the global market, but our economic woes remain due to our own inherent problems,” said Ahsan H Mansur, executive director of the Policy Research Institute of Bangladesh.

The Bangladesh economy has failed to absorb the shock emanating from the war.

The central bank should have withdrawn the interest rate cap of 9 percent on loans and allowed the floating exchange rate immediately after the war started, said Mansur, a former economist of the IMF.

“Had we taken the measures on time, the ongoing worse situation could have been tackled largely. But we have made the situation critical. So there is no scope to blame the war blindly.”

If the central bank does not take the issues with the utmost importance, the country will have to face more stress, said Mansur, also the chairman of Brac Bank.

“The macroeconomy has not turned around yet after a year of the war. Rather, its vulnerability may deepen in the coming days,” said Selim Raihan, executive director of the South Asian Network on Economic Modeling.

There is no effective policy to restore stability in the foreign exchange market

while a good number of them went to Canada.

Khaled Hasan Khan escaped Kyiv through the Hungary border and moved to Switzerland. He has been living there for the past 11 months with his wife and daughter.

Khaled had moved to Kharkiv, the second largest city in Ukraine, in 1984 for higher studies. He met his wife Rokhsana Ahmed in 1988 at the university they were both students of.

“We got married and moved to Kyiv in 1997 and began building our future. We surrendered our Bangladeshi passports and became Ukrainian citizens.

“But the war snatched everything away from us. I am a few months short of turning 60. Can you imagine, someone at my age is having to learn a new language to earn a living? My wife and I are both having to learn Swiss now.”

Khaled added, “We are almost always depressed. My business, friends, home are all there [in Ukraine]. Yes, Switzerland is a beautiful country and the Swiss government arranged everything for us. But we are still refugees here. Living the life of a refugee is a completely new and very painful experience.”

As men under 60 are not allowed to leave Ukraine, Khaled has been unable to go visit his home again in fear of not

as several exchange rates of dollar-taka are being followed, he said.

Remittances are not rising to their expected level although Bangladesh sent a record number of workers abroad last year.

The government should take strict measures to contain hundi – an illegal cross-border financial transaction system – to boost remittances.

“We have not taken any effective measure to stop the illicit money flow. Besides, the country’s banking sector is still facing higher amounts of default loans and scams.”

The government should implement the recommendations of the IMF properly to restore discipline in the macroeconomic zone, said Raihan, also a professor at the University of Dhaka’s economic department.

The war has already created a wide range of instability both at micro- and macroeconomic levels, said Anu Mohammad, a former professor of Jahangirnagar University’s economics department.

The net income of the industrial workers has decreased to 30-40 percent since the inception of the war due to inflation, he said.

The prices of essentials may rise again in the future as there is no sign of the war ending anytime soon, said Binayak Sen, director general of the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies.

being able to return to Switzerland to his family. “If I go there now, I will not be able to come back. If I can’t come back, my daughter’s future will be in jeopardy. Once I turn 60, I will go and visit.”

His wife Rokhsana was able to visit Kyiv a month ago, as there is not such restriction on women. She went and checked on their home and businesses.

Upon her return, she had just one thing to say, “The war must stop. The sufferings must come to an end.”

Ukraine has now surpassed Syria as the world’s largest displacement crisis, with more than 13 million people displaced, including 8.1 million refugees forced to cross borders and 5.4 million people displaced inside the country.

Lack of political consensus

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“During the discussion, they [delegation members] expressed optimism that the next general election will be held in a free and fair manner.

“We have told them that we always welcome the media and election observers for holding a free and fair election. We will invite foreign observers to see the next national election,” the CEC added.

Mother, son killed in road crash

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Pabna

A mother and her four-year-old son were killed in a road crash on Bogura-Nagarbari highway in Sirajganj’s Ullapara yesterday.

Koruna Khatun, 25, and her son Torikul Islam, of Chala village in the upazila, were waiting for a vehicle beside the highway, said Bodrul Kobir, officer-in-charge of Hatikumrul Highway Police Station.

A pickup van hit them around 10:30am when its driver lost control over the vehicle, he said, adding that both the victims died on the spot.

The pickup van driver fled with his vehicle after the accident, he further said.

Former UP member killed

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Mymensingh

A former union parishad member was killed allegedly by his neighbour in Mymensingh’s Nandail on Wednesday evening.

Abu Sayeed, 50, former member of Kharua union parishad, was killed by one Abdus Sattar and his cohorts, alleged the victim’s family.

On information, police recovered the body around 10:00pm on Wednesday, said Abdul Kadir, sub-inspector of Nandail Police Station.

The body was sent to Kishoreganj General Hospital morgue for autopsy yesterday morning, he said, adding that the body had sharp injury marks on its head.

No case was lodged in connection with the murder until this report was filed.

Schoolboy killed in train accident

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Dinajpur

A schoolboy was killed in a train accident in Dinajpur’s Hakimpur yesterday.

Wadud Hossain, 16, grade-X student of Gohara Dwimukhi High School, was cut under the wheels of a train at a level crossing in Satkur village, said Abu Sayem Mia, officer-in-charge of Hakimpur Police Station.

The accident took place around 11:30am when the victim was crossing the level crossing without noticing the oncoming train, he added.

Police handed over the body to the family members, he further said.

The devil is in implementation

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have certain policies they want to pursue. So it is a homegrown programme which is being supported by the IMF. Let’s be clear about that.”

One of the long-term issues of the Bangladesh economy is the low tax revenue, and the IMF programme has focused on addressing this.

The root of Bangladesh’s economic problems is its ‘pretty weak’ fiscal position, said Srinivasan, who assumed his current position of overseeing the IMF’s work on all countries in the Asia-Pacific region in June last year.

“And that is based on mobilising higher revenue, largely because Bangladesh has one of the lowest tax-GDP ratios across the world. Bangladesh is an outlier in terms of tax revenue as a share of GDP.”

The ratio is below 9 percent, which is lower than the low-income developing countries’ average of 12 percent and emerging markets’ average of 17 percent.

“One anchor for the programme is on ensuring that the fiscal position comes on a strong footing. They have to boost the tax revenue to GDP, which is very, very important.”

Part of improving the fiscal position is rationalising the subsidy expenditure.

“Not all subsidies are good, not all subsidies are geared towards the poor and the vulnerable. If you look at Bangladesh, a lot of subsidies are given for gas and electricity. Who drives cars? Who consumes air conditioning? It is

not the poor, it’s the rich people. Those people do not deserve the subsidy they are getting in the context of a country going through a fiscal problem.”

Blanket subsidies also limit how much the government can support the social safety net programmes and infrastructure spending.

Subsequently, the lender insists on providing targeted subsidies and not blanket subsidies or blanket tax exemptions.

It is important in the case of Bangladesh for fiscal discipline to rationalise subsidies, make taxes progressive and broaden the revenue base, Srinivasan said.

“For the poor and vulnerable, you provide them targeted support through direct transfers and so on. You create a social registry and you see who are the poor and vulnerable and you provide them targeted support. That is the way to go, esp. when you are facing such significant fiscal problems.”

Vulnerabilities in the banking sector are also being addressed through the programme.

“Clearly, the state-owned commercial banks are on the weaker side. But in the context of the pandemic, they did provide the kind of support which was needed for the economy. Now, going forward those vulnerabilities have to be addressed.”

The vulnerabilities stem from inadequate regulation and supervision.

The authorities with the help of IMF staff will address the issues in the financial sector, he added.

Confusion as ministers differ in opinions

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convicted and imprisoned in a corruption case in 2018. She was released in March 2020 with an executive order and on condition that she would not leave the country and must receive medical treatment in the country.

Agriculture Minister and AL Presidium Member Abdur Razzaque on Wednesday echoed the law minister and said Khaleda could run her party and direct party activists even from jail.

However, Information and Broadcasting Minister Hasan Mahmud yesterday contradicted the law and agriculture ministers and said Khaleda could not engage in politics due to the conditions for her release.

“Considering her age and health issues, she was released and allowed to stay home on conditions. As per the conditions, she cannot take part in politics,” he said while talking to reporters at his secretariat office.

“Anyone sentenced to two or more years cannot take part in elections as per the law of Bangladesh. Khaleda

Zia has been sentenced to more than two years. So, there is no question of her participating in elections,” he said.

The confusion was further fuelled by Awami League General Secretary and Road Transport and Bridges Minister Obaidul Quader who made contradictory comments within two days.

On February 20, he said the BNP chief must follow the conditions of her release if she wants to get involved in politics.

Then yesterday, Qader said that as a convicted person, there is no scope for Khaleda to get involved in politics.

“Has Khaleda Zia been relieved from her sentence? She is convicted. Has she been released [from jail]?” he said.

“Had she not been sick, she would have been in jail. So where is the opportunity [for her] to get involved in politics?” he said while addressing a meeting of the AL and its associate bodies.

All four ministers, however, have said that she cannot run for office.