

## Rohingya ration cuts 'shameful, catastrophic'

Says UN special rapporteur, urges int'l community to reverse its move

STAR REPORT

The UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar yesterday made an urgent appeal to member states to reverse "the shameful, catastrophic cuts" to food rations for Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh.

The cuts were implemented from Wednesday.

According to a UNB report, Tom Andrews said, "These rations cuts are a stain on the conscience of the international community."

Citing a lack of funds, the World Food Programme cut rations by 17 percent, bringing the number of calories per person to below the accepted minimum standard of 2,100 per day.

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## Allegations against Biman cannot be dismissed

Says state minister for aviation on media reports; carrier issues statement

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Media reports on allegations of irregularities and rules violations in Biman "cannot be completely dismissed", said State Minister for Civil Aviation and Tourism Md Mahubub Ali yesterday.

"However, they are not entirely true either," he said while speaking at a seminar on the aviation industry organised by the periodical Bangladesh Monitor at a city hotel.

"We want transparency in this sector so we are going to investigate the allegations made by the media," he said, adding that he took the reports positively.

Meanwhile, Biman sent a

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Ukrainian rescuers work on the five-storey residential building destroyed after a missile strike in Zaporizhzhia yesterday, amid the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

PHOTO: AFP

## Ukraine clings to Bakhmut

Russia says it battles saboteurs in cross-border raid

REUTERS, Chasiv Yar

Ukrainian forces hung on to positions in the ruined eastern city of Bakhmut yesterday, while Moscow said its security forces had battled Ukrainian saboteurs who had taken hostages in a cross-border raid.

Russia's FSB security force said the situation was now "under control" in Bryansk province just north of the Ukrainian border. Earlier Moscow had said armed Ukrainians had crossed the frontier, fired on a car killing one person and wounding a child, and held hostages in a shop.

In a brief television address, President Vladimir Putin said the attackers had fired deliberately on the car, knowing it held civilians.

"They won't achieve anything. We will crush them," he said, saying Russia was fighting "terrorists and neo-Nazis".

An aide to Ukrainian President

Volodymyr Zelensky called the reports a false provocation by Moscow, but also appeared to imply some form of incident had been carried out by partisans.

Near the front lines west of Bakhmut, in the Ukrainian-held town of Chasiv Yar, the thump of outgoing artillery fire could be heard.

In nearby towns and villages, new trenches had been dug on the roadside 20-40 metres (65-130 feet) apart, an apparent sign that Ukrainian forces were strengthening defensive positions west of the city.

Residents trickled out of the area, carrying bags. "We remained until the very last. We wanted to stay. But we how can we? Our neighbour's flat has now been destroyed. It is time to go," said Svitlana, 47.

The boss of Russia's Wagner private army, Yevgeny Prigozhin, released video of his men waving a Wagner banner and musical instruments atop a ruined multi-

storey building, which he said had been filmed near the centre of Bakhmut.

Bakhmut has been reduced to a blasted wasteland, with a few thousand of its 70,000 pre-war civilian population still inside as armies battle street-by-street.

Meanwhile, Russian missiles crashed into a five-storey apartment block in the southern city of Zaporizhzhia overnight, collapsing upper floors in the centre of the building.

As dawn broke, Reuters journalists saw rescue workers carry the body of a man out of the wreckage. Police said at least four people had been killed.

An international team of war crimes investigators said yesterday the Russian state had funded and operated a network of at least 20 torture chambers during its eight-month occupation of Kherson, recaptured last year by Ukrainian forces.

Russia's aim was to "subjugate, re-educate or kill Ukrainian civic leaders and ordinary dissenters", the team said.

## Schoolboy found dead with throat slit

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Tangail

Police recovered the body of a schoolboy with his throat slit from Paanchtikri area in Tangail's Ghatail upazila on Wednesday night.

The dead was identified as Jahid Hasan, 14, a seventh-grader of Bolorampur High School. He used to operate her father's battery-run auto-van in his free time to earn some extra money for his family and his education, Shamsul Talukder, an uncle of the victim, said.

On Wednesday evening, Jahid had taken the van out. Around 9:00pm, some locals found his body lying next to a school and informed police. Jahid's van, however, was missing.

Azharul Islam, officer-in-charge of Ghatail Police Station, said they suspect some criminals killed Jahid to steal his van. "We will know the facts after the investigation is complete."

## Mayor's son arrested with firearm

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Pabna

Police yesterday arrested a municipality mayor's son for brandishing a firearm during a clash with rivals at the Faridpur town hall premise in Pabna.

Kamrul Hasan, 27, son of Faridpur municipality mayor Kamruzzaman Mazed, is also a Chhatra League activist, sources said.

Police seized the pistol that was licenced to Kamruzzaman, said Faridpur Police Station Officer-in-Charge Mizanur Rahman.

No case has been filed over the incident while police said they were investigating the incident.

Sources added that Kamrul and his men attacked his rival Pungoli Union Chairman Md Sumon over prior disputes when he arrived at the upazila headquarters for official work.

## Barguna cop killed in road crash

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Patuakhali

A police officer died yesterday after he was run over by a bus of Hanif Paribahan in Mirzaganj upazila of Patuakhali.

Nazrul Islam, a sub-inspector at the Special Branch of Police in Barguna, was returning to his workplace on a motorcycle from his village home in Barishal's Bakerganj upazila.

He died on the spot when a Dhaka bound Hanif Paribahan bus hit him on Kathalati road in Mirzaganj.

His body has been handed over to his family after post-mortem at Patuakhali Medical College Hospital Morgue.

## 70,000 ROHINGYAS

### Dhaka wants foreign funds to shift them to Bhasan Char

UNB, Dhaka

The government has placed two proposals seeking assistance from the international community to relocate more Rohingya refugees to Bhasan Char island from camps in Cox's Bazar for the well-being of the displaced Myanmar nationals.

Under the proposals Dhaka wants foreign countries and agencies to bear the expenses of the Rohingya relocation and provide assistance to construct more infrastructures in Bhasan Char to make the remaining two-third areas of the island livable for the displaced people.

PM's Principal Secretary M Tofazzel Hossain Miah placed the proposals at a meeting with the foreign diplomats and representatives stationed in Dhaka, held at the Prime Minister's Office yesterday.

The representatives from 17 countries and agencies, including Australia, US, UK, France, Germany and UNHCR attended the meeting.

"We've told the international community that the more people we can bring to Bhasan Char in a very quick time, the more their safety and the betterment of their children will be ensured. So, now we've given them two proposals," the principal secretary told the media after the meeting.

About the first proposal, he said housing for 100,000 people was built in Bhasan Char and only 30,000 people have so far been moved there.

"Now we want to shift 70,000 more people to the place, which is an expensive matter. We ask the friendly countries who work with us to bear the cost of taking these people from Cox's Bazar to Bhasan Char," he added.

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## Allocate 10pc

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in New Delhi, Foreign Minister A K Abdul Momen also proposed that the companies, which are making a huge amount of money from the Ukraine war, should allocate at least 20 percent of their profits to the most affected countries.

Momen, a special guest of India at the meeting, spoke at two different sessions.

Momen said the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) should remain on top of the agenda of all multilateral initiatives, including the G20.

"India, as a major country of the global South and as the president of the G20, may urge its leadership to allocate sufficient funds and means ... to achieve the SDGs by 2030," he said.

Referring to the climate change crisis, Momen said, "We must save this planet for our future generations. In order to take corrective actions to reverse the trend of global warming, India may ... ask the leaders to dedicate at least 10 percent of their defence expenditures to climate fund."

Momen said the ongoing Russia-Ukraine crisis is causing hardship across the globe.

Many governments are finding it nightmarish to control inflation due to supply chain disruption and chaos in financial transaction mechanisms owing to sanctions and counter-sanctions, he added.

"As the president of G-20, India may impress on the leaders to end the crisis through peaceful means," he said.

The foreign minister said as a

staunch advocate of world peace and security, Bangladesh today is one of the largest contributors to UN peacekeeping operations.

Pointing out that the Covid-19 pandemic had proved the importance of multilateral solutions to global problems, he batted for "a universal, rule-based, open, transparent, predictable, inclusive, non-discriminatory and equitable multilateral system to respond to the growing global challenges".

Termining terrorism one of the gravest challenges to international peace and security, he said, Bangladesh maintains a "zero-tolerance" policy towards it.

On Rohingya issue, Momen said Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina opened Bangladesh's border to give shelter and safety to 1.2 million forcibly displaced Rohingyas on humanitarian grounds. Since then, the country is doing its best to assist them despite resource constraints.

However, the prolonged stay of Rohingyas is creating huge security problems across the region as they are a potential target group for radicalisation and recruitment by terrorist groups, he said.

The international community, including the G20, should come forward to ensure their repatriation to Myanmar without further delay, he added.

Momen thanked India for inviting Bangladesh as a guest country to G20, and said "this gesture clearly reflects the depth and warmth of the unique bilateral relationship that exists between our two wonderful nations."

## CEC sees crisis

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"We have to work to gain the confidence [of the people] in the electoral system. It is the duty of the Election Commission to restore confidence."

Habibul said if the elections are competitive, turnout increases.

Earlier in the day, after taking part in a procession to mark National Voters Day, the CEC urged all political parties to join the next elections and resolve their differences. It would bring a balance at the polling stations as the elections would be competitive, he said.

"If there is a difference of opinion, try to resolve it. The EC cannot act as a guardian," he said.

At the discussion, Election Commissioner Brig Gen (ret'd) Ahsan Habib Khan said they want to hold wonderful elections in which everyone will take part. "The commission will make an all-out effort to create a conducive environment for voters, parties, candidates, agents, and media workers," he said.

Election commissioners Rashida Sultana, Md Alamgir, and Anisur Rahman also spoke at the discussion.

At the programme, Shahedunnabi Chowdhury, who recently retired as the EC joint secretary; Delwar Hossain, Rajshahi region election officer; and Jannat Ara Joli, election officer of Kahlata upazila in Bogura, were awarded for their contribution to EC work.

## EC publishes voter roll

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enrolment campaign of the EC before the next parliamentary polls. The EC enumerators went to the voters and potential voters between May and November last year to collect their information.

Among the new voters, 41,35,067 are men and 39,38,109 are women and 383 are hijras.

Names of 22,09,129 voters who died were dropped from the list, which means the total voter count increased by 58,64,430 and now stands at 11,91,51,440, shows EC data.

Of the total voters, 6,04,45,724 are male, 5,87,04,879 are female, and 8,37 are hijras.

According to the EC, the voters' growth rate is 5.18 percent, which is more than four times the annual growth rate of the population.

The preliminary report of Population and Housing Census 2022 of Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics said the average annual population increase is 18,76,882 and the annual growth rate of population is 1.22 percent.

Voters increased by 1.75 percent in 2020 and by 1.40 percent in 2021. Between December 2018 national election and March 2 this year, a total of 1,49,11,358 voters were added to the voter roll.

There were 10,42,40,082 voters in December 2018 election.

## Dhaka, Delhi discussing de-dollarisation

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For Indian businesses, this arrangement would mean they would get their bills cleared faster as no dollars would be involved.

This was brought up at Wednesday's meeting of the National Economic Council chaired by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, according to people with direct knowledge of the discussions.

At the meeting, Talukder said it would also alleviate the pressure

on foreign currency given the large volume of payments to India.

"The pressure on reserves has come down a lot. The import bills have come down because of the measures taken. It is now possible to meet the import bills with the export proceeds and remittance inflows. But there are other dollar outflows that need to come down."

And the arrangement with the RBI would help on this front.

Das is on board with the idea of the dual currency and the two central banks would be working on the modalities.

It would first be rolled out on a test basis.

But businesses would have to wait to pay their bills in rupees as it would need the cooperation of the private banks.

The governor would sit with the banks soon over the issue.

## Puzzling case of more migrants

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worked but industry insiders give a more practical reading of the contradictory trend of higher overseas jobs and lower remittance.

They say when more workers go abroad, there is a higher demand for hundi in the destination countries.

Much of the financial transaction in the industry is informal, said a veteran recruiting agent on the condition of anonymity.

A portion of the recruitment cost is paid to the visa traders, who can be either the employers themselves or the brokers in the destination countries.

"Selling or buying job visas is illegal, but it is a widespread practice that has been going on for years," he said.

On average, the recruitment cost of a Bangladeshi is \$4,903 or Tk 4.16 lakh, while the average monthly salary is Tk 23,093, according to the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics national survey in 2020.

And it takes 17.6 months for a worker to recoup the amount he had to spend.

On average, 50-60 percent of the recruitment cost, which is equivalent to \$2,943, is used to "pay" the visa traders in the destination countries, recruitment agents said.

The insights the recruiting agencies shared on the relationship between the rise in overseas jobs and the decline in remittance is logical, said Nurul Islam, a former director of BMET.

"We have been talking about visa trading and hundi for a long time but little has been done to address this perennial problem," he added.

It is natural that there is a higher demand for hundi in the destination countries as the visa traders need to be paid more for the jobs created, said CR Abrar, who directs the Refugee and Migratory Movements Research

Unit at the University of Dhaka.

Thus, hundi is made more lucrative than banking channels for sending remittance, said Abrar, also a professor of the university's international relations department.

About \$2 billion is paid to visa traders through hundi in a year if the average migration cost is assumed to be \$2,943 and the number of jobs created abroad is 655,000.

"This is the amount of foreign currency that Bangladesh could have earned annually if the illegal visa trading could be stopped," said a recruiting agent.

While there is such a perception in the public, there is no proof to back up the perception, said Ali Haider Chowdhury, secretary general of the Bangladesh Association of International Recruiting Agencies.

He declined to elaborate further. There is no exact information on the nature of hidden payment that migrants need to pay at home or abroad said Md. Mezbahul Haque, Bangladesh Bank spokesman.

"If that is the case, it is obvious that they will send fewer remittances than what they are supposed to," he added.

In the years when more Bangladeshis go abroad for jobs, it creates a proportionate demand for hundi in the countries the migrant workers are headed to.

Thus, the amount of remittance declined in that particular year, and that has been the case in the last eight years except for 2021.

Studies found that when the recruitment cost is high, more people migrate to a particular country and a portion of them don't actually get jobs, said Syed Saiful Haque, chairman of WARBE Development Foundation, a migrant advocacy group.

"The fact remains that they have already faced loss by making high payment as recruitment cost," he

said, adding that many also become illegals and are deported.

For example, 6.12 lakh of the total 11.35 lakh Bangladeshis who migrated last year went to Saudi Arabia. And, many of them were also deported -- a process that continues as of now, according to Haque.

Last year, 58,000 Bangladeshi migrants were deported, mostly from Saudi Arabia, according to BMET.

"Visa trading and the resultant high recruitment cost are the most dangerous factors in the labour migration sector. This creates a vicious cycle of fraudulence, abuses and economic hardship," Haque said.

He suggested that the government take the issue seriously and break the vicious cycle in consultation with the migrant workers' host countries.

"We know, however, that there is high recruitment cost. That is something that the expatriates' welfare ministry should look into," he told this correspondent.

Contacted, Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment Minister Imran Ahmad said the ministry is trying to bring down the recruitment cost.

However, the issue of informal payment or hundi is something that is dealt by the Bangladesh Bank.

This also involves criminal activity and that should be handled by the home ministry, he said.

"My ministry's main task is to send people abroad and we have been doing it successfully. Last year, a record number of Bangladeshis went abroad for jobs and this year we are hoping for another record."

Asked how far the ministry is successful in bringing down the recruitment cost, Ahmad said: "You see, the migrants also have to take responsibility here. If they are willing to pay more, unscrupulous agencies will take advantage of it. Our people need to be aware of it."