

RAMPAL POWER PLANT Production resumes after 5 days

OUR CORRESPONDENT, *Bagerhat*

After five days, Rampal power plant yesterday resumed production.

On April 14, power generation at the plant stopped due to mechanical failure, causing severe load shedding in Bagerhat and surrounding districts.

Now 400MW is being generated at the plant, said Anwarul Azim, deputy general manager of Bangladesh-India Partnership Power Company Ltd.

He said the production resumed at 1:00am.

The plant was connected to the national grid from December 17 last year. It stopped production on January 14 due to coal shortage. After about a month, power generation started again on February 15.

15 Tunisian migrants missing in the Med

AFP, *Tunis*

Fifteen Tunisian migrants are missing after their boat sank in the Mediterranean during an attempt to reach Europe, authorities said yesterday.

The boat carrying 19 Tunisians sank Monday night, said a statement by Tunisia's National Guard, which oversees the coastguard.

Four migrants were rescued by a fisherman after the boat sank, while the search for the remaining 15 continued yesterday morning, the statement added.

Tunisia, whose coastline is less than 150 kilometres (90 miles) from the Italian island of Lampedusa, has long been a favoured stepping stone for migrants attempting the perilous sea journey.

Last week, 32 migrants from sub-Saharan Africa drowned while attempting the crossing.

The number of departures of African migrants has intensified after President Kais Saied made a fiery speech on February 21 claiming that illegal immigration was a demographic threat to Tunisia.

The North African country is in the grip of a long, worsening economic crisis that has pushed many of its citizens to take desperate measures in search of better lives abroad.



Shahidul sells hand fans made of palm leaves for Tk 25 each on the streets of Barishal city. He has been earning about Tk 800 a day since the temperatures began to rise a week ago.

PHOTO: TITU DAS

South Asia home to highest number of child brides

Shows Unicef study

REUTERS, *New Delhi*

South Asia is home to highest number of child brides in the world as increased financial pressures and school closures due to Covid-19 forced families to marry off their young daughters, according to new estimates released by Unicef yesterday.

There were 290 million child brides in the region, accounting for 45 percent of the global total, the children's agency of the United Nations said, calling for more efforts to end the practice.

"The fact that South Asia has the highest child marriage burden in the world is nothing short of tragic," said Noala Skinner, Unicef's regional director for South Asia, said in a statement.

"Child marriage locks girls out of learning, puts their health and wellbeing at risk and compromises their future. Every girl who gets married as a child is one girl too many."

A new study by the agency that also included interviews and discussions across 16 locations in Bangladesh, India and Nepal found that many parents saw marriage as the best option for daughters who had limited options to study during Covid lockdowns.

The legal age of marriage for females

is 20 in Nepal, 18 in India, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh and 16 in Afghanistan. It is 16 in Pakistan except for Sindh province, where the minimum age is 18.

The UN study also found that families were pushed by financial strains during the pandemic to marry their daughters young in order to reduce costs at home.

The UN study included interviews and discussions across 16 locations in Bangladesh, India and Nepal.

The agency said potential solutions identified in discussions include enacting social protection measures to counter poverty, protecting every child's right to education, ensuring an adequate framework to enforce the law and making more efforts to address social norms.

"We must do more and strengthen partnerships to empower girls through education, including comprehensive sexuality education, and equipping them with skills, while supporting communities to come together to end this deeply rooted practice," said Björn Andersson, Asia-Pacific regional director of the United Nations Population Fund.

Swathes of Asia sweat in heatwave

AFP, *Bangkok*

Sweltering under a blistering sun, people across South and Southeast Asia have been taking cover beneath any shelter they can find as they pray for cooling rains with record temperatures hitting the region.

Bangladesh saw its highest temperature for almost 60 years in the past week, while in India at least 13 people died from heatstroke along with two in Thailand, according to local media.

Thailand's Meteorological Department said Wednesday that temperatures hit a record-equaling 44.6 degrees Celsius (112 Fahrenheit) in the western province of Tak on April 15.

"This year's record heat in Thailand, China and South Asia is a clear climate trend and will cause public health challenges for years to come," said scientist Fahad Saeed, regional lead for climate policy institute Climate Analytics.

He warned that soaring temperatures were a result of climate change -- and that the impact on vulnerable populations would be dire.

Barishal sees overnight shift

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Barishal Sadar constituency lawmaker and State Minister for Water Resources Colonel (ret'd) Zahid Faruk, who has a long-standing rivalry with the Serniabat family.

Despite this, Hasnat and Khair may join hands ahead of the city polls, slated for June 12, for their own good, local AL sources say.

As AL chief Sheikh Hasina, a relative of the Serniabat family, herself backed Khair's nomination, the father and son have no alternative but to accept it for the sake of their political future.

A little-known Khair has no party portfolio in the city and no followers of his own, and he needs political

also present. Later, some pictures of the two brothers and the Barishal mayor were circulated on Facebook.

Sadiq already expressed his support for his uncle and vowed to work unitedly.

Talking to his supporters on Tuesday, he said, "We were united and will remain united. We work for Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and will do whatever is needed to ensure the victory of her candidate."

Even if they really mean all this, some factors can stand in the way of the AL's success.

If any BNP leader runs for mayor as an independent candidate ignoring the party decision and if the local units work unitedly, the possibility



R-L: Abul Hasnat Abdullah, Abul Khair Abdullah and Serniabat Sadiq Abdullah

support from his brother and nephew for the electoral battle, added the sources.

He also has no permanent residency in the city.

Khair once said he was not allowed at Barishal's Kali Bari Road residence of their father Abdur Rab Serniabat, the minister for irrigation and flood control in Bangabandhu's cabinet.

After winning the party ticket, Khair pledged to work with the local Awami League and is scheduled to visit Barishal today.

It's a common knowledge in Barishal that Khair has a stiff rivalry with Hasnat.

But yesterday, he went to Hasnat's Dhaka residence where Sadiq was

Yaba glut menacing the city

FROM PAGE 1

As this correspondent wanted to know the price of two big-sized yaba pills, he demanded Tk 400 for them.

After a little bargaining, he lowered his price to Tk 250, saying it was his last offer.

For obvious reasons, this correspondent refused the offer saying that "the price is still high".

The Daily Star has visited at least five spots in the capital over the last couple of weeks and learnt that the flow of yaba, a popular and highly-addictive drug, has increased significantly recently.

Besides the Geneva Camp, the four other spots are the capital's Karwan Bazar railway tracks; near the FDC gate of south Begunbari; Gudarghat of Mirpur-1; and near the Ceramic Gate in Pallabi section-12.

During the visits, this newspaper managed to talk to at least three community leaders, two drug peddlers, and two buyers, who confirmed the recent surge in supply.

Law enforcement agencies have attributed the surge and price drop to increased production of the drug in Myanmar under the patronisation of its junta government, a claim supported by reports published in international media.

Last month, the UN said law enforcement agencies across Southeast and East Asia netted nearly 172 tonnes of methamphetamine, the ingredient of yaba, in 2021 -- about seven times more than a decade ago.

The surge in supply has sent street prices in Thailand and Malaysia crashing to all-time lows, according to international media reports.

The reports said the Myanmar junta is protecting large-scale drug production to ensure stability in conflict zones as it faces a revolt against the 2021 coup.

This includes Shan state, Southeast Asia's primary source of methamphetamine, according to the United Nations.

The reports correspond with the recent price drop in Bangladesh.

While visiting the Kawran Bazar railway tracks on Monday night, this correspondent met a yaba user who works at a nearby kitchen market.

"I have been taking the pills since 2012. At first, the price was around Tk 300, but now I can buy it for only Tk 150. It has become cheaper recently," the person said.

Humayun Kabir Khondakar, deputy director of the Department of Narcotic Control (DNC), admitted the surge in supply and price drop.

Khondakar, who has conducted research on yaba for the last two years, said the flow started to increase after the Myanmar military took over power in February 2021 and started patronising yaba production.

Khondakar conducted his research with the assistance of 120 yaba users from different rehab centres, 180 officials of law enforcement agencies, and dozens of yaba dealers in Cox's Bazar.

His research found that Myanmar state patronage has halved the production cost of yaba.

Just two years ago, the production cost of a pill was 1,000 Myanmar Kyat, equivalent to Tk 50. It is now less than 500 Myanmar Kyat, said Khondakar, citing his findings.

A piece of yaba now costs only Tk 25 at the Rohingya camps, he added.

This correspondent, while talking to addicts and traders, learnt that the current slump in price in the capital came around two months ago.

Users and traders said the retail price for a small-sized yaba is now Tk 70 to Tk 80, which was Tk 120 just two months ago.

Asked, a drug trader in the Geneva Camp said the price dropped as a huge number of pills have flooded the market.

Another trader said the drug is now being sold online increasingly, and users can have home deliveries. It all makes the spread of the drug ominously easier.

"For home delivery, the drug dealer always sends female carriers to evade law enforcers," he said.

Asked about the supply surge, Md Mehedi Hasan, assistant director of the Department of Narcotic Control, said the seizure of yaba tripled in recent months.

"We used to seize around 10 to 20 thousand pills a month just a year ago, but it now rose to 50 to 60 thousand pills," he said.

"We have increased our vigilance. We are conducting drives analyzing technical data resulting in the detection of more consignments," added Mehedi.

Officials and experts say only eight to 10 percent of total smuggled narcotics are seized by law enforcers. The rest, around 90 percent, flood the market.

Usually when smuggling increases so do seizures, they say.

According to the annual drug report of Bangladesh 2022 published by DNC, all agencies have seized around 21.66 crore yaba pills in the last five years.

According to the DMP database, 3,675 narcotics cases were filed and around 5,022 people were arrested in the first three months of this year.

During this period, police recovered 120 crore yaba pills along with other drugs, the DMP data added.

Despite the government's "zero tolerance" policy on yaba smuggling, Bangladesh remains South Asia's biggest destination for yaba with a market estimated to be more than \$3 billion, reports Reuters.

Though there is no solid data available on the number of users in the country, law enforcers on several occasions in the past estimated it between 7.5-8 million.

The drug can provide temporary happiness to its users. But in long run, it destroys its abusers both psychologically and physically. It causes anxiety and aggression and damages the kidneys, heart, liver and brain as well. Overdose can even cause death.

Sources say the majority of the yaba consignments are entering the country through different points in Teknaf and Cox's Bazar. After entering the country, the yaba consignments are first stored at the Rohingya camps. From there, those are smuggled to different parts of the country.

The drug smugglers are using ingenious ways for transferring yaba and mainly using poor women and children as drug mules to avoid suspicion and arrests, according to sources at the Rohingya camps.

Contacted, Md Faruk Ahamed, assistant superintendent of police (ops and media) of the Armed Police Battalion (APBn-8), said they are on alert and conducting regular drives in the Rohingya camps.