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**Everyone enjoys religious freedom in Bangladesh**  
Says PM while visiting Durga Puja mandap at Dhakeshwari temple



UNB, Dhaka

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina yesterday said her government is determined to ensure equal rights for all citizens irrespective of their religions and castes.

"We believe that everyone in the country regardless of religion and caste will enjoy equal rights," she said while exchanging greetings with Hindu devotees at the Durga Puja mandap in the city's Dhakeshwari temple.

Durga Puja, the biggest religious festival of the Hindus, is being celebrated across Bangladesh amid festivities and tight security.

The premier said all irrespective of

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**Creation of Palestine state only solution**  
Says Prof Yunus



STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Nobel Laureate Muhammad Yunus yesterday said the solution to the longstanding Israel-Palestinian conflict lies in the urgent creation of a Palestine state.

He also urged all parties involved in the conflict to immediately stop hostile activities, according to a Yunus Centre press release.

It further said the ongoing conflict between Israel and Palestine is a very old problem, which has become more complicated because of how the people of Palestine have been treated by Israel.

"It has been brewing

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**Kamal defends interest rate caps**

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Finance Minister AHM Mustafa Kamal yesterday vehemently defended the much-maligned policy of capping the interest rates for lending and saving, saying the move saved the banking sector from a disaster.

The interest rate caps helped stage a faster economic recovery from the pandemic, he told reporters at his office in the secretariat. The press briefing was called to inform of the government's investment in 10-year Treasury bonds with the Tk 11.31 crore raised under the Universal Pension Scheme.

Without the caps, the country's small and medium industries would have been in ruins and the financial sector's defaulted loans could have blown up, he said.

Asked about Bangladesh Bank Governor Abdur Rouf Talukder's remark that the interest rate cap was a "political decision", Kamal said: "It is his personal opinion."

It is not possible to tell in advance whether the policy will be good or not.

"But no policy is fixed for good. The government has to make adjustments from time to time to march forward with the progress in the global economy."

Asked about the elevated inflation levels, Kamal said the government is working to control the commodity prices.

He, however, said countrymen will have to tolerate high commodity prices for the time being.

Responding to another query on the declining foreign currency reserves, he blamed it on the global economic crisis that has cropped up due to different



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**Trader beaten to death by 'extortionists'**

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

A shop owner died a couple of hours after a gang of extortionists assaulted him in the capital's Mirpur on Saturday night, said the victim's family members.

Omar Faruk, 40, was attacked by the men for protesting gang activities, said his mother Jahanara Begum.

The incident happened near his home in the Shah Ali area around 9:30pm when Faruk returned from work and found 11-12 drunken men near his home.

"They beat him up indiscriminately after he asked them to go elsewhere," she told The Daily Star.

After Faruk managed to escape and entered his home, the attackers threw bricks at the gate of his six-storey building.

Around an hour later, Faruk fell sick. His family members and neighbours took him to the National Heart Foundation where doctors pronounced him dead around 11:30pm.

His body was sent to Shaheed Suhrawardy Medical College Hospital morgue for autopsy.

Mofizur Rahman Palash, assistant

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Cars lined up near a filling station to stock up on gas in Akbar Shah area as the port city has been facing an acute gas crisis for the past few days. The authorities concerned fear the crisis may continue for a while. Story on P5.

PHOTO: RAJIB RAIHAN



Kahrul Islam sets out of his home every day with a large magnet tied to a rope. As he walks the alleys near several factories in Shyampur's Kadamtali area, he drags the magnet with the rope, drawing in all kinds of scrap metal lying here and there -- amounting to almost 10 to 12kgs per day. He sells each kilogram for Tk 35 per kg, earning around Tk 400 daily. This is how he and his family have been getting by for the past two years.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

**BNP'S OCT28 RALLY**

**No plan to close roads**

Says home boss 'responding to Haas' query'; US embassy says envoy did not discuss this

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan Kamal yesterday said the government has no plans to close roads during BNP's grand rally on October 28.

He told this to journalists after a meeting with US Ambassador Peter Haas at the home ministry.

The minister said the envoy at the meeting had asked him whether the authorities would close roads or do something else when the BNP tries to bring a lot of people to its October 28 event.

But a statement from the US embassy last night said the subject of road closures in Dhaka on October 28 was not discussed at the meeting.

"Ambassador Haas expressed the importance of peaceful demonstrations and interference-free

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**GARMENT WORKERS' MINIMUM WAGE**

**Factory owners offer half of what workers demand**

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The garment factory owners proposed a minimum wage of Tk 10,400, which is half of that being asked by the workers.

Sirajul Islam Rony, the workers' representative at the minimum wage board, proposed Tk 20,393, which is higher than the Tk 17,568 suggested by the Centre for Policy Dialogue but lower than the amounts demanded by the labour rights organisations.

Of the amount, Tk 12,462 would be basic pay, Tk 6,231 house rent, Tk 500 medical allowance, Tk 300 conveyance and Tk 900 food allowance, Rony told reporters after the meeting.

The proposal was made considering the elevated inflation, high house rents and cost of living.

Rony also proposed a 10 percent annual increment, up from 5 percent in the existing wage board. The total number of grades has been brought down to five from seven.

On the other hand, Siddiqur Rahman, the factory owners' representative in the wage board, proposed Tk 5,330 as basic salary, Tk 2,665 as house rent, Tk 750 as medical allowance, Tk 455 as conveyance and Tk 1,200 as the food allowance.

The minimum wage of Tk 10,400 is reasonable given the current volatile situation of the global economy, lower work orders, gas and power tariff hikes and high inflation, he said.

He also called for removing grades one and two from the grading system as the eligible workers receive higher salaries.

Both the workers and owners' representatives proposed introducing subsidised groceries at the factory premises.

The two proposals, which were submitted at the fourth meeting of the minimum wage board that was held yesterday at its office at Segunbagicha, will be assessed at the next meeting to be held on November 1, said Liaquat Ali Mollah, the board's chairman.

Union leaders from different trade bodies yesterday chanted slogans outside of the wage board's office and rejected the owners' proposal. They have been demanding over Tk 23,000 as the minimum salary.

The government formed a wage board on April 9 this year to recommend a new wage structure for the over 4 million garment workers of Bangladesh. The new minimum wage is scheduled to come into effect in December.

**Ancient engravings revealed by drought in the Amazon**

AFP, Manaus

An extreme drought in parts of the Amazon has led to a dramatic drop in river water levels, exposing dozens of usually submerged rock formations with carvings of human forms that may date back some 2,000 years.

Livia Ribeiro, a longtime resident of the Amazon's largest city, Manaus, said she heard about the rock engravings from friends and wanted to check them out.

"I thought it was a lie ... I had never seen this. I've lived in Manaus for 27 years," said Ribeiro, an administrator, after viewing the dazzling relics.

The rock carvings are not usually visible because they are covered by the waters of the Negro River, whose flow recorded its lowest level in 121 years last week.

The engravings comprise an archaeological site of "great relevance," said Jaime Oliveira of the Brazilian Institute of Historical Heritage (Iphan).

They are at a site known as Praia das Lajes and were first seen in 2010, during another period of drought not as severe as the current one.

The rock carvings appear against a backdrop of dense jungle, with the low brownish waters of the Negro River flowing nearby.

Most of the engravings are of human faces, some of them rectangular and others oval, with smiles or grim expressions.

**POLLS SCHEDULE**  
**EC to hold 2 high-profile meets as part of preparation**

MOHIUDDIN ALAMGIR

The Election Commission will hold two meetings with top officials of law enforcement agencies, and secretaries of ministries concerned as it prepares to announce the schedule for the next national election.

The meetings will be on October 30 and November 1, said EC officials.

Chief Election Commissioner Kazi Habibul Awal and four other commissioners will be in the meetings.

EC Secretary Jahangir Alam said notices for the meetings will be sent to relevant offices in a day or two. "These meetings will be to ensure smooth holding of 12th national polls."

EC officials said the meetings will be the start of the commission's final preparations for declaring the schedule of the polls, which is likely to take place in the first week of January.

They said in the meetings the

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