

Tax on provident fund incomes cut to 15pc

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The National Board of Revenue (NBR) has cut the tax on the income generated by provident and other pension funds to 15 percent from 27.5 percent in this fiscal year.

The reduced rate came into effect on December 10, according to a notification from the tax administration issued yesterday.

"We have cut the tax rate following demand from various stakeholders," said a senior official of the NBR.

Earlier, the tax collector said companies and organisations would be required to pay a 27.5 percent tax on such types of earnings.

The Income Tax Act 2023 incorporates the provision, lifting the tax exemption and amnesty on the compulsion to file returns for funds such as provident funds, gratuity funds, and workers' profit participation funds maintained by the private sector.

The tax applies to recognised provident funds and approved gratuity funds, superannuation funds and pension funds.

The law, however, has exempted government-managed provident funds from taxation, raising questions.

The tax rate will be 15 percent in the case of funds that fail to comply with rules, down from 30 percent earlier, the notification added.

FLUTTERING COLOURS
A painted jezebel taking a lunch break near the National Press Club in the capital. Scientifically known as *Delias hyparete*, this medium-sized butterfly is common in South and Southeast Asia, with occurrences in multiple habitats in nature reserves and urban areas. This butterfly only descends to take nectar from flowers or to rest in the shade under trees, otherwise, it can be seen fluttering at tree-top levels during most of the day, as the only known caterpillar host plant for this butterfly is the Malayan Mistletoe – a parasitic plant found on growing trees. It can't be mistaken for any other butterfly due to its striking colours and graceful flight pattern --. However, the red and yellow on its underside hindwings isn't for beauty purposes but is a warning to predators as it accumulates adequate toxicity during its early stages as a caterpillar!

PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

Govt to set up expats' centres in 36 countries

They can be used to send money home via MFS

BAHARAM KHAN

The government plans to establish "Smart Expats Centres" in 36 countries aiming at bringing home remittance through proper channels to shore up the country's strained dollar stockpile.

The ICT division has already prepared a draft policy on setting up such centres and sent it to the foreign ministry for its feedback.

The main task of the centres would be to ease the process of sending money through the mobile financial services platform, according to officials involved with the process, said sources.

The move to form the centres came at a meeting at the cabinet division on October 5 with Mahmudul Hossain, secretary (coordination and reform) of the cabinet division, in the chair.

"We have discussed many aspects of setting up such smart centres and are moving on positively," Hossain told The Daily Star.

The meeting, attended by officials of various ministries and the Bangladesh Bank, reviewed the demand for manpower in different countries and ways to establish

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77 BNP, Jamaat activists jailed

COURT CORRESPONDENT

Seventy-seven more leaders and activists of BNP-Jamaat and their front organisations were sentenced to different jail terms yesterday in five cases filed years ago over political violence in the capital.

With this, at least 949 BNP-Jamaat activists have been jailed since November 7 this year in 53 cases lodged between June 2011 and November 2018 on charges of illegal gathering on the streets, rioting, damaging properties, arson attacks on vehicles, vandalism, assaulting police personnel and obstructing them from performing their duties.

Fourteen activists of the BNP and its front organisations were sentenced to 33 months' imprisonment by a Dhaka court in a case filed with Tejgaon Police Station in November 2013.

Of the convicts, three were present at the courtroom when Dhaka Metropolitan Magistrate Md Mosharraf Hossain delivered the verdict.

Former Jubo Dal president Saiful Alam Nirob, former councillor of Dhaka City Corporation Anwaruzzaman and former Svecchhasebak Dal Tejgaon unit president Azizur Rahman are among the convicts.

During the trial, three prosecution witnesses testified before the court.

According to the case statement, a group of leaders and activists of BNP and its front organisations illegally gathered in Farmgate's Anwara Park area and torched a bus on November 5, 2013 during a hartal called by 18-party alliance. They also assaulted its driver.

The same court yesterday jailed 20 BNP activists, in absentia, for 21 months over political violence in Banani in September 2018.

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Disease stalks hungry Gazans

UN says some people in Gaza haven't eaten in 3 days; at least 179 killed in 24 hours in Israeli strikes

AGENCIES

Israel pounded the length of the Gaza Strip yesterday, killing families in their homes despite intensifying international calls to reduce civilian casualties from its bombardment as a surge in deadly diseases sweeps through displaced residents.

The war, now in its third month, has left besieged Gaza in ruins and killed at least 18,787 people and injured 50,897, according to Gaza's health ministry.

Ashraf al-Qudra, the spokesperson of the Health Ministry in Gaza, said at least 179 people have been killed in Israeli attacks over the past day.

A UN assessment on Tuesday showed that nearly 40,000 buildings or about 18 percent of all pre-conflict structures have been damaged or destroyed in the Gaza Strip.

Nearly 85 percent of the population of 2.3 million has fled their homes, many sleeping rough, leaving them vulnerable to illness.

At Nasser hospital in Khan Younis, where the trauma ward has been overwhelmed with the wounded, sick babies were also crammed several to a bed in the children's ward, reports Reuters.

"A number of patients come with cases of extreme dehydration, some of which can get

to the point of kidney failure or weakening kidney function," said Dr Ahmed al-Farra, head of paediatrics.

There had already been up to 30 cases of hepatitis A, which takes up to a month to incubate, he said.

The coastal strip is now facing a public health disaster due to the collapse of its health system and the spread of disease, the UN humanitarian office said.

"We've got a textbook formula for epidemics and a public health disaster," said Lynn Hastings, the UN Humanitarian Coordinator for the Occupied Palestinian Territory.

UNRWA chief Philippe Lazzarini said an increasing number of people in bombed and besieged Gaza "haven't eaten for one, two or three days".

In central Rafah, in the south of the coastal enclave, 24 people were killed in an Israeli strike that hit two houses, Hamas media said yesterday.

In the occupied West Bank, which has also seen a surge in violence since October 7, the Palestinian Authority said 11 people were killed in Israeli strikes in the city of Jenin.

Despite international condemnation, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu vowed that "nothing could stop" his country from continuing the war until it achieves victory against Hamas.

- ➔ Gaza death toll rises to 18,787
- ➔ War to 'last more than several months': Israel defence minister
- ➔ 40-45pc of 29,000 munitions dropped on Gaza have been unguided: US intel

Fakhrul's wife files writ for courts to hear his bail pleas

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

A writ petition was filed with the High Court yesterday challenging the legality of a Dhaka court's refusal to accept bail petitions for BNP Secretary General Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir in connection with 10 cases filed over political violence.

Fakhrul's wife Rahat Ara Begum submitted the petition through lawyers, saying that a Dhaka metropolitan magistrate court has violated the fundamental rights of her husband by refusing to accept his bail petitions for hearing.

In the petition, she also appealed to the HC to direct the magistrate court to accept the bail petitions and hold hearings for their disposal, Sagir Hossain Leon, a lawyer for the petitioner, told The Daily Star.

He said the magistrate court concerned refused to accept the petitions on December 12 and 13.

The bench of Justice Mustafa Zaman Islam and Justice Md Atabullah may hear the petition on Sunday, he said.

The lawyer added that of

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AI disinformation spreading before Bangladesh polls

Reports Financial Times

STAR REPORT

Pro-government news outlets and influencers in Bangladesh have in recent months promoted AI-generated disinformation created with cheap tools offered by start-ups, according to a report by Financial Times.

As concerns about Artificial Intelligence-generated disinformation in influencing voters are growing worldwide ahead of crucial elections in the US, the UK, India and Indonesia next year, the report says the concerns have turned into reality in Bangladesh.

Bangladesh is heading to the polls in early January, a contest marked by a bitter and polarising power struggle between incumbent Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and her rivals, the opposition BNP, reads the report.

The FT report put forward examples of disinformation created using AI tools.

In one purported news clip, an AI-generated anchor lambasts the US, a country that Sheikh Hasina's government has criticised ahead of the polls. A separate deepfake video, which has since been removed, showed an opposition leader equivocating over support for Gazans, a potentially ruinous position in Bangladesh with strong public sympathy for Palestinians.

Facing pressure, Google and Meta have recently announced policies to start requiring campaigns to disclose if political adverts have been digitally altered.

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The examples from Bangladesh show not only how these AI tools can be exploited in elections but also the difficulty in controlling their use.

Mind-reading cap turns thoughts into text

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

Researchers have invented a mind-reading cap capable of non-invasively decoding thoughts into text for the first time.



The technology, developed by a team at the University of Technology Sydney in Australia, could help people unable to speak due to illness or injury, while also providing a way for humans to interact directly with machines.

In tests of the cap, participants were told to silently read passages of text while an electroencephalogram (EEG) recorded their electrical brain activity.

An artificial intelligence model called DeWave was then used to decipher the thoughts into written text with an accuracy of between 40 and 60 percent.

"This research represents a pioneering effort in translating raw EEG waves directly into language, marking a significant breakthrough in the field," said CT Lin, a professor at the University of Technology Sydney.



Passengers, mostly children, travel on the locomotive of a Dhaka-bound train from Narayanganj, putting their lives in harm's way. The photo was taken in the capital's Gendaria recently.

PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON

US worried over mass arrests of opposition activists

DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENT

Washington has expressed deep concern over the reports of mass arrests of opposition members and torture in prisons in Bangladesh.

"We urge all sides to exercise restraint and avoid violence. We urge the government of Bangladesh to work with all stakeholders to create conditions in which all may participate in the pre-election and election environment freely, without fear of violence or retribution," Matthew Miller, US State Department spokesperson, said at a briefing in Washington on Wednesday.

He said the US believes that a healthy democracy benefits from a variety of voices speaking freely, engaged in dialogue and discussion in an exchange about the issues of the day.

Miller also said they have seen the Financial Times news item on deep fake materials in election-related disinformation in Bangladesh.

The Financial Times reported that Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's government orchestrated a planned propaganda

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