

18 killed as Russia strikes across Ukraine

130 injured; residential buildings hit

REUTERS, Kyiv

Russia yesterday unleashed one of its biggest missile attacks on Ukraine of the war, killing 18 civilians, wounding more than 130 others and hitting residential buildings in Kyiv, the south and west of the country, officials said. The Ukrainian foreign ministry said the vast end-of-year air assault showed there should be "no talk of a truce" with the Kremlin at a time when uncertainty hangs over the future of vital Western support for Kyiv.

"Today, millions of Ukrainians awoke to the loud sound of explosions. I wish those sounds of explosions in Ukraine could be heard all around the world," Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba said, urging allies to continue with long-term military aid.

In the capital Kyiv at least three people were reported dead and twenty-two confirmed wounded after residential buildings and another uninhabited property were hit, police and other officials said.

Kyiv resident Mariia told Reuters she had been awoken at home by a "horrible sound" and taken shelter in her bathroom.

"It was so frightening. A missile was flying and everything was buzzing, whirring. I didn't know what to do. I wanted to run down to the shelter," she said. "As I went inside the bathroom, the mirror flew off (the wall)."

The Air Force said it had shot down 87 cruise missiles and 27 drones out of a total of 158 aerial "targets" fired by Russia.

Nato member Poland's military said an unidentified aerial object had entered its airspace from neighbouring Ukraine and been tracked by its air defences until its signal disappeared.

Yuri Ihnat, a spokesperson for the Ukrainian Air Force, neither denied nor confirmed the report, but noted similar incidents in Poland and Romania during past Russian air strikes.

Army chief General Valeriy Zaluzhnyi said the attack had targeted critical infrastructure and industrial and military facilities. There was no immediate comment from Russia, which denies targeting civilians.

"Russia attacked with everything it has in its arsenal... Approximately 110 missiles were fired, most of which were shot down," President Volodymyr Zelensky said on Telegram messenger.

Ukraine has been warning for weeks that Russia could be stockpiling missiles to launch a major air attack on the energy system. Last winter, millions of people were plunged into darkness when Russian strikes pounded the power grid.



MY DHAKA

In search of affordable dental care in the city

RBR

Rahima Sultana is a house help working at three different places to make ends meet. She needed immediate dental attention and hurried to a dental clinic nearby.

Sultana came back with a repair -- the dentist had removed the decayed tooth tissue and then filled the cavity. The dental work cost her Tk 3,000; had she opted for a tooth extraction, it would have been Tk 5,000!

That was not the end of her misfortune. A few days later, her mouth was still sore from toothache. Even though it was an expensive dental disaster for her, who hardly had any savings to spare on health care, let alone dental care, the filling was breaking off and the infection worsened.

Finally, she went to the dental unit of BIRDEM, the Bangladesh Institute of Research and Rehabilitation in Diabetes, Endocrine and Metabolic Disorders and extracted three infected teeth for Tk 2,400. The prescribed medicines finally cured her.

Dental work in any part of the world is expensive and Dhaka is no exception. So, where do the toiling masses go for affordable and reliable dental work? Here comes in handy the general dentistry departments of government



hospitals, dental colleges, and semi-government hospitals -- they all offer professional treatment at low prices.

Among these institutes, BIRDEM and Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University (BSMMU) -- the premier Postgraduate Medical Institution in Dhaka -- offer praiseworthy dental care for all.

At BIRDEM, anyone can walk in to avail treatment. First, they need to take a slip and are then referred to the precise care unit for specific dental care. There are departments of conservative dentistry and endodontics, paediatric dentistry, orthodontics and dentofacial orthopaedics, prosthodontics, dental surgery, and so on.

"We are a non-profit medical organisation. We have a social

welfare department at BIRDEM to help the poor and destitute patients; the goal is to provide total healthcare including rehabilitation for all diabetics irrespective of gender, economic and social status through different institutions of Diabetic Associations of Bangladesh, which also includes dentistry," explains Dr Rafia Nazneen, associate professor and Head of Conservative Dentistry and Endodontics, BIRDEM.

The dental departments of these government and semi-government hospitals have specialist doctors; the workstations and equipment are made sterile using autoclave steam sterilisers. "Maintaining hygiene is also one of our top priorities," she added. "Dentistry is a skill development job; it is just not about using your head. This learning takes time. Daily we see 30 to 40 patients, besides other departments have their own patient count."

Patients waiting in long queues vouch for the doctor's professionalism. Diabetic patients are more comfortable to come at BIRDEM than any private dental clinic.

Dr Rafia Nazneen said, "The fees that we charge patients here are subsidised. And our salary is on a government scale. Working for government hospitals is prestigious, making money is not our priority."

The case of Rahima Sultana brings to attention people's struggle for affordable healthcare. It is a blessing that through institutions like BIRDEM and BSMMU people have some outlet to receive quality healthcare at a fraction of the cost incurred elsewhere.



2 killed, 1 hurt in road crashes

STAR REPORT

Two people died in two separate road accidents in Bogura and Dinajpur between Thursday night and yesterday afternoon.

In Dinajpur, a man died and another was injured when their motorcycle collided with a truck on the Dinajpur-Gobindaganj road at Joynagar village in Phulbari upazila in the afternoon.

The deceased, Mominul Islam, 38, from the upazila's Lalpur village, was a field staffer at Phulbari Upazila Veterinary Hospital.

On the bike with him was his brother-in-law, Abu Taher, 52, said Mostafizur Rahman, officer-in-charge of Phulbari Police Station.

Mominul died on the spot, while locals took Taher to Phulbari Upazila Health Complex.

The truck fled the scene after the incident, said police.

In Bogura, a policeman was killed in a motorcycle accident in Shahjahanpur upazila Thursday night.

The deceased, Abdul Latif, 48, a constable of Bogura district police, was from Ullapara upazila of Sirajganj district, reports UNB.

He was riding his son's motorcycle to the oil pump in Banani and crashed into a tree, said Shahjahanpur Police OC Shahidul Islam.

He was pronounced dead at Bogura Shaheed Ziaur Rahman Medical College Hospital upon arrival.

Joypurhat Sugar Mills goes into production

UNB, Joypurhat

Joypurhat Sugar Mills began crushing sugarcane for the fiscal year 2023-24 yesterday, with a goal of producing 2,170 tonnes of sugar from 35,100 tonnes of sugarcane.

Sheikh Shoaib Alam, chairman (Grade-I) of Bangladesh Sugar and Food Industry Corporation (BSFIC) inaugurated the ceremony marking the sugar mill going into production at its premises around 4:30pm.

The crushing target was fixed at 35,100 metric tonnes of sugarcane in 28 days with the recovery rate of sugar at 6.20 percent.

Last season, Joypurhat Sugar Mills incurred a loss of Tk 69 crore.

Akhlasur Rahman, managing director of the sugar mill, presided over the programme, while Secretary of BSFIC Chowdhury Ruhul Amin Kawsar, Sugar Mill Workers Union President Ali Akhtar and its General Secretary Ahsan Habib Rumel, spoke on the occasion.

HK democracy advocate seeks asylum in Britain

AFP, Hong Kong

Hong Kong democracy activist Tony Chung said yesterday he had fled to Britain because he could no longer endure supervision from authorities, who had pressured him to become an informant and limited his work options.

In 2021, Chung, then 20, became the youngest person to be imprisoned under Hong Kong's national security law -- imposed by Beijing after massive pro-democracy protests kicked off in 2019 in the former British colony.

Sinohydro flouting duty-free import rules

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Md Faisal, who has been a driver at the company for five years, was seen busy negotiating with several of them.

When this correspondent approached him posing as a customer, Faisal said they are selling each dump truck for Tk 10 lakh, mixing truck for Tk 15-20 lakh, floater excavator Tk 15-18 lakh, crane for Tk 10-15 lakh, forklift for Tk 6-10 lakh. Besides, various steel structures and old equipment are being sold for Tk 70,000 to Tk 200,000 per tonne.

Faisal, 27, said he connects the potential customers with the yard in charge, "Mr Gao," once the buyers primarily accept the offer.

NO PAPER TRAIL

Visiting the yard, The Daily Star found at least 35 tractors (Model-Eicher 5560), 34 dump trucks (Model-25T), 78 forklifts (Model-5T, 3T and 2T), four concrete mixing trucks (Model-8m3), 12 submersible pumps (Model-150LQ-480-6), 12 generators, 43 excavators (Volvo and Hitachi) and piles of steel structures and rubber pipes were on sale.

Three mixing plants, including a new plant for making cement blocks, were also on display for sale.

The Daily Star spoke to seven potential customers who went to the yard from Dhaka, Chattogram, Barishal and Bhola to buy vehicles and equipment on November 24.

Six of them said they had previously bought various construction vehicles and machinery from the Sinohydro yard.

One of them owns a Bhola-based construction materials supplying company. In a secretly recorded video, he said he bought three concrete mixing trucks for Tk 65 lakh and 10 dump trucks for Tk 1 crore. He was seen busy installing new batteries as they got damaged since the vehicles were not in use for a long time.

He said he sells these materials to construction companies at a 20-30 percent profit margin.

He also said there are no documents with these vehicles. So, after the purchase, it costs several lakhs more to prepare the documents with the help of

brokers at Bangladesh Road Transport Authority.

Four months ago, he bought 12 trucks and excavators from the yard, he said, adding that he already completed the paperwork from the BRTA.

Contacted, Mohammad Abdur Razzak, director (enforcement wing) of BRTA, said, "We have received information about registration of different models of dump trucks, tractors, ready mixing trucks on the pretext that the documents got lost after import. We have started looking into the matter seriously as the number of such registrations has gone up recently."

He said their primary investigation reveals about 350 such vehicles have been registered this year alone.

A Dhaka-based businessman told The Daily Star at the Sinohydro yard on 24 November that all transactions are made in cash and no party keeps evidence.

He said when Sinohydro officials declined to provide any document, he did not buy any items from there.

The Daily Star has tracked down another big buyer, Nannu Mia, a businessman from Dhaka's Postabazar area.

"I bought 38 dump trucks, 36 trucks and three ready-mixing trucks. They sold out quickly as their prices are much lower than the market price. Negotiations are underway to buy three more concrete ready mixers," he said in late November.

Sinohydro project Director Qu Yan did not respond to our two emails sent to the company's official email address on December 21 and 24. The company general manager in the Dhaka office, Qiu Chenyang, also did not respond to our email queries.

However, Mr Gao, in the charge of the Sinohydro yard in Jazira, in a WhatsApp message said, "We are handling relevant procedures for transferring temporary imports to permanent imports, which were imported under re-export conditions."

He did not respond to the question as to why the company is selling the goods already, and why the company did not seek NBR's permission

beforehand. He also would not say how many of those goods have already been sold in the local market.

NBR'S CONDITIONS

Sinohydro initiated the import process in January 2015, under Customs Prosecution Code-170 (used to import capital machinery and other equipment) and IM-5 (used for re-export items), using duty waiver facilities.

Customs laws do not allow sales of capital equipment imported with duty waiver without prior approval from the customs office. Even after the NBR permission, the importer must pay the prescribed duty.

The NBR allowed Sinohydro to import the goods on 12 conditions, top among them is re-export of the products.

The re-export condition is very stringent and specific. The stipulated time for the mandatory re-export is initially six months, but this can be extended every six months until the relevant project completes.

For the time extension, the company must apply in writing and get NBR's permission in writing. But Sinohydro has never applied for time extension, multiple sources said.

Other conditions include the imported goods and machinery should be used only for the Padma bridge project, and they cannot be sold or transferred locally without NBR permission.

Documents show Qu Yan, project manager of River Training Works of the Padma bridge project, and Md Shafiqul Islam, Padma bridge project director, signed a joint undertaking for the conditional imports.

In case of failure to comply with the conditions, the company is obliged to pay the prescribed customs duty, according to the joint undertaking obtained by The Daily Star.

But the company has not done that either. There is also no official record that the customs house at the Chattogram Port, through which the products were imported, asked the company to pay the duty.

MYSTERIOUS SILENCE
Prof Moinul Islam of Chattogram

University said the role of the customs is mysterious.

"Irregularities of this nature and scale can only happen when customs officials go silent," said Prof Moinul, who teaches economics.

Mohammad Fyzur Rahman, commissioner of Chattogram Customs House, said contractors of several megaprojects have taken advantage of this type of duty-free import facilities.

"Demand letters or show cause notices should have been issued to the companies concerned after six months. In this case, there may have been an oversight," he told The Daily Star.

He also said relevant officials will be instructed to look into the matter.

A customs official on condition of anonymity said if the authorities secured a bank guarantee equivalent to the revenue against the consignments, the customs authorities could encash the guarantee without serving any notice.

"The risk of not getting the evaded duties is high as it is a foreign company. So, if any company wants to take such re-export benefits in the future, the customs authorities should take a bank guarantee," the official added.

Chattogram Customs House Deputy Commissioner AKM Khairul Basar, who took charge a month ago, said, "The National Board of Revenue provides import facilities on condition of mandatory re-export for various government projects. Sinohydro has imported various goods under this facility, but we have no information that the company returned those goods."

He added that they are looking into why the Chinese company did not seek time extension and why no action was taken against it.

"We will have the details once we have been through the official files," he told The Daily Star on Sunday.

NBR Member Md Masud Sadiq (Customs Policy) said there is no scope for selling any goods brought under re-export facility.

"In case there is evidence of selling such items before paying duty, there is a provision for collecting fines on top of the duty amount evaded," he said.



An injured man being taken to safety after two groups of Awami League activists clashed at Barishal city's Bangabandhu Udyan where AL President Sheikh Hasina addressed a campaign rally yesterday afternoon. PHOTO: TITU DAS

35 hurt in clash at AL rally venue

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was sweating as he fell ill.

Saiful Islam, director of the hospital, said there was no injury mark on the body.

Sources at the hospital said 23 injured men were admitted there after the clash.

Pankaj said his supporters were attacked by Shammi's. "Siraj was one of our supporters... Thirty-five of my men are now in hospitals."

Khurshed, one of the injured AL men, said he and many other supporters of Pankaj were entering the venue in a procession when Shammi's supporters attacked them.

However, Shammi's spokesperson Syed Monir said Pankaj's men were the first to attack. As police dispersed the crowd, some people were struck by batons.

In Pabna-1 constituency, at least 10 people were injured as the supporters of the AL nominee and an independent candidate clashed in Shanthia Bazar area.

In Faridpur town, a makeshift

campaign office of AL nominee Shamim Haque was set on fire early yesterday, said Niaz Zaman Sajib, publicity affairs secretary of Faridpur district AL.

Shohidul Islam, officer-in-charge of Faridpur Kotwali Police Station, said police will investigate the matter after receiving a complaint.

In another incident in the town, two supporters of AL leader and independent candidate AK Azad were assaulted by his rival's men yesterday.

In Lalmonirhat's Kaliganj, Shariful Islam, 35, an office assistant of Kaliganj Upazila Parishad, said he was assaulted on Thursday afternoon after he refused to join the election campaign of the AL.

"I refused to join because I am a government employee. Then they hit me with bamboo and wooden sticks," Shariful said.

He filed a complaint with Kaliganj Police Station in this regard.

Imtiaj Kabir, officer-in-charge of the police station, said police would investigate the matter.