

'Petrol, chemicals used' to torch train

DB claims BNP activists involved

MUNTAKIM SAAD and
MOHAMMAD JAMIL KHAN

Masud Alam started his journey towards Dhaka from Bhanga Railway Station in carriage "Cha" of Benapole Express around 7:50pm on Friday.

When the train reached Golapbagh area in Dhaka, a commotion among passengers caught Masud's attention. He glanced back and saw a seat three rows behind him on fire.

"The carriage was quickly filled with smoke, and the train's lights went out. Despite this, the train was moving," explained Masud, a software engineer.

He was suffering from smoke inhalation. The tragic fire claimed the lives of four people.

Masud attempted to reach the exit but faced obstacles in the dark and smoke. He finally managed to get a train window open and despite having injuries to his legs, back, and hands, he could get off the slowly moving train.

Masud, along with nine other passengers, are undergoing treatment at the Sheikh Hasina National Institute of Burn and Plastic Surgery.

Witnesses said the fire broke out around 8:50pm. The fire then spread to two other carriages.

Constable Mohammad Ali of Railway Police said, "Suddenly, I heard people in Cha carriage screaming that a fire broke out. Looking forward, I found everything

under the cover of smoke."

"Then I alerted people and managed to stop the train by pulling the chain," he added.

During primary inspection, the Bomb Disposal Unit of the Counter-terrorism and Transnational Crime pointed out that the flames started from a seat in the carriage "Cha".



Rahmat Ullah Chowdhury, chief of the Bomb Disposal Unit, told The Daily Star yesterday, "The fire broke out near a seat of carriage Cha, and we have successfully identified the spot."

About the substances used for the flames, he said, "We primarily found evidence of petrol and chemicals. We may be able to say more about the chemicals after a detailed report."

Anwer Hossain, superintendent of Dhaka Railway Police, told this newspaper, "We suspect arsonists were in the train in the guise of passengers as the fire originated

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Dibakar and Ontora, doctors of DMCH, could not hold their tears as they tried to identify Chandrima Choudhuri Sharani, sister of Dibakar, yesterday morning at the DMCH emergency ward. A doting brother, Dibakar was supposed to pick his sister up from Kamalapur Railway Station once the Benapole Express train would reach. However, Sharani fell victim to the gruesome arson attack on the passenger train, which left four dead and many injured, on Friday night.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

BUSINESS

Export of cotton waste rises rapidly

The export of cotton waste from Bangladesh is rising rapidly on the back of higher demand for recycled garments globally amid growing consumer awareness and their lower prices in the domestic market.

In July-December of the current financial year of 2023-24, cotton waste export jumped 72.15 percent year-on-year to \$264.05 million, data from the Export Promotion Bureau showed.

Cotton waste export stood at \$411.12 million in the entire fiscal year of 2022-23.

STORY ON BI

Int'l community keeping a close watch on polls

PORIMOL PALMA

The international community will be closely watching the election today to see how peaceful and participatory it is after the boycott of the BNP and its allies, which made it a one-sided affair.

A total of 127 observers from India, China, Russia, Japan, Nigeria, Gambia, Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine, Mauritius, and Sri Lanka will be monitoring the national election, according to the ministry of foreign affairs.

Commonwealth, Organisation for Islamic Cooperation, Arab Parliament and African Electoral Alliance will also be observing the polls.

Besides, 73 foreign journalists will be covering the polls.

The EU sent only a four-member delegation instead of a fully-fledged mission as it did not consider the environment in Bangladesh to be conducive for election monitoring.

A five-member joint team of the National Democratic Institute and International Republican Institute is assessing potential electoral violence. The team is scheduled to stay here for six to eight weeks.

The US, along with India, China and other powers, is watching if Bangladesh's elections ease or exacerbate the country's current political crisis, which could reshape how global actors engage Bangladesh, said Geoffrey Macdonald, a visiting expert on South Asia at US Institute of Peace.

India and China will welcome Prime Minister Hasina's fourth term, but are likely wary of the brewing instability created by Bangladesh's political stalemate, he said in a USIP analysis titled "Opposition Boycott Clears Path to a Fourth Term for Hasina in Bangladesh".

Media outlets from all over the world are covering the build-up to the polls extensively.

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Israel, Hezbollah trade fire across Lebanon border

Key Israeli observation post hit; 122 Palestinians killed in 24hrs as Israel continues strikes in Gaza

AGENCIES

Lebanon's Iranian-backed Hezbollah group yesterday said it had fired rockets at Israel and its arch foe said it had struck a "terrorist cell" in retaliation, as top US and EU diplomats visited the region to seek ways to halt spillover from the war.

Shortly after rocket sirens sounded across northern Israel, the military said that "approximately 40 launches from Lebanon toward the area of Meron in northern Israel were identified".

There were no immediate reports of casualties or damage. Hezbollah said it hit a key Israeli observation post early yesterday with 62 rockets as a "preliminary response" to the killing of Hamas' deputy chief earlier this week.

Tensions have been high since Hamas deputy leader Saleh al-Arouri was killed by a drone on Tuesday in the southern suburbs of Beirut, the stronghold of Hamas' Iranian-backed Lebanese ally

Hezbollah, in an attack widely attributed to sworn foe Israel.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and the European Union's senior diplomat Josep Borrell were both in the region on separate diplomatic missions to stop the three-month-old Gaza conflict spilling over into Lebanon, the Israeli-occupied West Bank, and Red Sea shipping lanes.

There has been no let up in the conflict despite several trips to the region by Blinken and other senior diplomats, reports Reuters.

The official Palestinian Wafa news agency reported yesterday that 18 Palestinians were killed by an Israeli attack on a house east of Khan Younis in Gaza.

And in the West Bank village of Beit Rima, the Palestinian health ministry said a 17-year-old was shot dead by Israeli forces and four other people were injured.

Since October 7, Israel's offensive has killed 22,722 people, according to health

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- » Top US, European diplomats seek to stop Gaza spillover
- » Death toll in enclave rises to 22,722
- » Gaza now 'uninhabitable': UN

A 'living skin' protecting Great Wall of China



CNN ONLINE

Rammed earth portions of the Great Wall of China -- built by compressing natural materials with soils -- have been regarded as a weak point in its structure. But these swaths of the iconic landmark developed a natural line of defense against the looming risk of deterioration, a new study has found.

These soil surfaces on the Great Wall are covered by a "living skin" of tiny, rootless plants and microorganisms known as biocrusts that are a source of the heritage site's staying power, according to soil ecologist Matthew Bowker, a co-author of the study published in the journal Science Advances.

"(Biocrusts) are common throughout the world on soils of dry regions, but we don't typically look for them on human-built structures," said Bowker, an associate professor at Northern Arizona University, in an email.

Past studies have found lichen and moss biocrusts to be a destructive threat to modern heritage stone structures due to the microbial communities' long-term impacts on aesthetic value, production of acid and other metabolites, and alteration of microenvironments, which may cause erosion and rock weathering.

Those findings have led to the removal of plants growing on the top of parts of the Great Wall.

US grounds 171 Boeing 737 MAX 9s

REUTERS

US regulators have ordered the temporary grounding of 171 Boeing 737 MAX 9 aircraft for safety checks following a cabin panel blowout late Friday that forced a brand-new airplane operated by Alaska Airlines to make an emergency landing.

"The FAA is requiring immediate inspections of certain Boeing 737 MAX 9 planes before they can return to flight," FAA Administrator Mike Whitaker said on Saturday. "Safety will continue to drive our decision-making as we assist the NTSB's investigation into Alaska Airlines Flight 1282."

A piece of fuselage tore off the left side of the jet as it climbed from Portland, Oregon, en route to Ontario, California, forcing pilots to turn back and land safely with 171 passengers and six crew on board. The plane had been in service for just eight weeks.

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Relatives of a boy, who was killed along with his immediate family during Israeli bombardment, mourn as they hold his body at the European hospital in Khan Yunis in the southern Gaza Strip yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Polls officials at the ready from 3am

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Ballot papers for 39,061 of the 42,024 polling centres will be handed over to the presiding officers by 6:00am today, as polling begins at 8:00am and will continue till 4:00pm without any break.

The remaining ballots for 2,963 centres in remote and hard-to-reach places, like hilly areas, chars, haors and other wetlands, were sent yesterday, said a directive of the Election Commission.

According to the EC directives, the assistant presiding officers, who will act as the presiding officers in the absence of the latter, will receive the ballot papers on the morning of voting day from the returning officers or assistant returning officers. They will then go to the polling centres with adequate security and hand those over to the presiding officers by 6:00am.

Hasan Tariq, presiding officer of Kalikagaon Molitapara Government Primary School, a polling centre in Thakurgaon-1, told The Daily Star, "We were asked to send an assistant presiding officer of the centre to the returning officer's office within 3-3:30am to collect the ballot papers, which would later be handed to us."

Other polling materials, including stamp pads, official seals, and marking seals, were sent to those centres yesterday in line with the EC directive.

"The day before the polling, the presiding officers will go to the polling stations along with polling officials and members of law enforcement and hand over the materials other than the ballot paper," it said.

The Daily Star's photojournalists visited Residential Model School and College and Azimpur Government Girls' School in Dhaka yesterday morning and saw presiding officers gathered on the school premises to collect the materials.

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