

Every mid-January, in the city we call home, colourful kites take flight brushing against the northern wind. Kites are so much more than pieces of coloured paper; there are passionate stories related to them and entire cult followings. According to Hindu scriptures, Shakrain or Makar Sankranti is the celebration of the sun's journey from the Southern to the Northern Hemisphere. The Sun god is worshipped for good harvest and the day is celebrated on January 14, on the last day of the Bangla month of Poush.



SHAKRAIN CELEBRATIONS

The art, culture and controversies of a kite festival

RBR

Samar Nandi has been in the trade for over 50 years and his tiny kite store, Shonkho Niketon, is a living testament to the popularity of this annual, Hindu festival symbolising unity and friendship of the community.

"It is a heritage of Old Dhaka. Kolta Bazar, Dholaikhal, Gandaria, Islampur, and adjoining areas are the neighbourhoods where the celebrations become most visible," said Nandi. "There is an art in flying kites. I started making them for myself at the age of 15 and later took it up as a profession. I make about 100 kites a day and each design has a name – Chokhodhan, Boadhan, Tekkadhan, Do Baaz, Ponkhi, and many more."

Nandi also sources kites in bulk from a master kite-maker known as Hashem chacha. The kites by Hashem chacha are some of the major attractions of Shonkho Niketon.

Since the start of January, the small shop of Samar Nandi has been abuzz with activities. The entire lane of Shankhari Bazaar wears a colourful, festive vibe. Sale is at its peak and almost every small vendor, even the cha wallahs and vegetable sellers, shift



gears to cash in on the seasonal trade. The making of the kite requires doli bash (Assamese bamboo) or muli bash, found in the Sylhet and Kaptai regions of the country. The thinly shaped cane helps to connect the corners of the kite and provide support. Kite makers prefer coloured paper imported from China or India. The paper is glazy, hard and does not tear easily.

The thread used to fly kites is worked upon and in the olden days, this used to be known as "Manja" – the string was passed through a mixture of ground glass powder and glue, making it abrasive. The whole purpose of this exercise was to make the strings sharp enough to easily sever the competitor's kites during a fight.

"Strings are a big business during Makar Sankranti and several different types of string, imported from China and India, are now available. The old glass-coated Manja is no longer in use," explained Nandi.

Diamond-shaped kites are often considered the easiest to fly. Its simple design and balanced structure make it stable in the air, making it a good choice for beginners and children. November to January is the perfect time when the favourable northern wind assists kite flying.

Zahid Sharif, an entrepreneur and former resident of Old Dhaka is a Shakrain enthusiast and believes that the fervour of the whole festival of kite is unmatched in terms of gaiety. The main attraction is kite fighting – the competition to snag each other's kites or cut the other's kites down.

"The kite becomes me and I feel as if

I am soaring high up in the sky. It gives me freedom and pleasure. There are certain methods in kite fighting and is popularly known as "chore kata" and "tane kata". Running after fallen kites is indeed a charm many people no longer experience," said Sharif.

As colourful kites fade against the twilight sky, Shakrain wraps Old Dhaka in festivities that blend tradition and modernity. People hold rooftop parties with professional DJs spinning popular Bollywood songs. Some fireworks light up the night sky; fire-spinning acts are also very popular. This has created a division among the people of regions of Old Dhaka regarding the celebration.

Shakrain has changed over the years and the celebrations are now cacophonous.

This creates a lot of problems for infants, the elderly, and particularly for pets. There is also the persistent problem of lighting fireworks given the proximity of buildings in Old Dhaka.

The spectacle of kite fighting, music, and fireworks mark a cultural crescendo, echoing joy and nostalgia.

However, the evolution of Shakrain demands reflection on balancing the essence of our heritage with the evolving rhythms of Old Dhaka.

Nearly half of them businesspeople

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Those who mentioned business as well as farming are Agriculture Minister Abdus Shahid, Food Minister Sadhan Chandra Majumdar, Housing and Public Works Minister Ubaidul Muktaadir Chowdhury, State Minister for CHT Affairs Kujendra Lal Tripura, State Minister for Power Nasrul Hamid, Land Minister Narayan Chandra, and Public Administration Minister Forhad Hossain.

Those who mentioned farming as their only profession are Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, Liberation War Affairs Minister AKM Mozammel Haque, and State Minister for Shipping Khalid Mahmud Chowdhury.

Those who are in the legal profession are Law Minister Anisul Huq, Education Minister Mohibul Hasan Chowdhury, Industries Minister Nurul Majid Mahmud Humayun, Social Welfare Minister Dipu Moni, Environment and Climate Change Minister Saber Hossain Chowdhury, and State Minister for Information Technology Zunaid Ahmed Palak.

At least three council members are former officials of the armed forces. There are several doctors, former bureaucrats, teachers, a journalist, and a diplomat.

Fifteen members of the council are from Dhaka division, nine from Chattogram, three from Sylhet, and two each from Barishal, Khulna, Mymensingh, Rajshahi and Rangpur divisions.

Asked whether the size of the cabinet will increase, Nooh-Ul-Alam Lenin, advisory council member of the ruling Awami League, said, "It is for the prime minister to decide. I think some members will be added."

Gas crisis leaves households, industry on edge

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Households too are counting additional expenses for the unreliable gas supply.

Take the case of Jahangir Hossain Babu, a pharmacy owner in the Hosne Dalan area of Bakshibazar, who has to stay up till 3 in the morning to cook. "We are paying bills every month, but we are not getting enough gas. Though many of our areas have gas connections, they are using bottled LPG. I can't afford that, so I have to wait till 3-3:30 am as that is when the gas pressure is usable," he added.

For Mohammad Hasan's tenants at his two-storied building at Uttarkhan's Madarbari, it is back to the olden times of cooking with firewood in an earthen stove on the roof as they do not get gas at decent hours.

Around 2,050 families in the Bhasantek BRP area have started using firewood or LPG depending on their means as they get gas from 1:30am to 4:30am.

"We need to stay awake till midnight to cook but we are paying bills for the piped gas for all hours of the day," said Hasna Bantu, who pays Tk 7,500 as rent for her two-bedroom flat in the area.

Sohel Rana, a private employee in Azimpur, used to come home for lunch every day. Now, he has to eat out as his wife can't cook for want of gas during the day.

"I can't afford to eat out like this for long," said an exasperated Rana.

The gas crisis was found during multiple visits in Kamrangchhar, Demra, Purba Dogair, Hazinagar, Kolatia, East Shewrapara, Mirpur, Shyamoli, Pallobi, Banasree, maximum areas of Puraan Dhaka including Gendaria, Nababganj, Naranda, Mohammadpur and Bhasantek.

Their suffering is unlikely to recede soon, according to Petrobangla officials who spoke on the condition of anonymity to speak candidly on the situation.

Gas production will increase

slightly once operation resumes in one of the two floating storage and regasification units (FSRU) resume production on January 14, said Md. Kamruzzaman Khan, director of Petrobangla's operation and mines department.

The FSRU has been under maintenance since November 1 last year. The two FSRUs supply 850 mmcf of gas a day; now, the lone operational FSRU is supplying about 500 mmcf.

Supply will increase by about 200mmcf, which will not be enough to meet the demand, said another Petrobangla top official.

Local gas production also is declining, including the Bibiyana gas field, which is the most prolific producer.

Petrobangla Chairman Zanendra Nath Sarker acknowledged the drop in production in the local gas fields.

"But we are working to increase production. We have a plan to add about 618mmcf of gas by 2026. Of the amount, we have already added around 70 mmcf."

To meet the immediate gas crisis, there is no alternative to ramping up LNG imports, Sarker added.

Given the acute strain on the dollar stockpile, it is unlikely that the government would be able to ramp up imports much.

As of January 10, foreign currency reserves stood at \$20.2 billion, enough to meet a little over three months' import bills, according to the latest published data by the Bangladesh Bank.

In the World Economic Forum's Global Risks Report 2024, the 70 Bangladeshi businesses that participated in the study cited energy supply shortage as their number one threat to the economy and their business.

In 2024, the government plans to import 24 LNG cargoes from the spot market, according to officials of the Rupantarita Prakritik Gas Company, the state-owned entity that purchases from the global spot market.

Between February and December last year, a total of 23 cargoes was purchased from the spot market.

Bangladesh also imports LNG through a 10-year import deal with Oman and a 15-year import deal with Qatar. Last year, a total of 56 LNG cargoes arrived from the two countries, which is the same as in 2022. In 2021, 64 LNG cargoes arrived.

PM, ministers pay tribute to Bangabandhu, 1971 martyrs

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martyrs of Liberation War by placing a wreath at the National Memorial in Savar around 11:00am.

They stood in solemn silence for some time to remember with profound respect the memories of the martyrs who made supreme sacrifices for the independence of Bangladesh.

Hasina, also the Awami League president, signed the visitors' book on the National Memorial premises.

"Bangladesh's journey towards socio-economic advancement will be continued," she wrote in the book.

The premier pledged to build a hunger- and poverty-free "Sonar Bangla" as dreamt by the father of the nation.

She also wrote that the AL won the January 7 national polls securing people's votes. "This win is the victory of the people and democracy as well."

Hasina took oath as the PM for the fifth term on Thursday evening, three days after her party secured a landslide victory in the 12th parliamentary polls, bagging 222 seats.

President Mohammed Shahabuddin administered the oath of office to Hasina and her new cabinet colleagues at the Durbar Hall of the Bangabhaban.

Her cabinet of ministers includes 25 ministers and 11 state ministers.

No chance for outsiders

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ahead in regards to a successor for the BCB president.

"I wanted to end it this term which will end next year. I will try to end it this year," Hassan had told reporters on Thursday. While there exists no conflict of interest in being the BCB president while holding a position in the ministry, the BCB boss talked about some predicaments if he wanted to leave now.

"First thing is that even if I wish for it, I can't leave now. We have seen this in the case of Zimbabwe where they were suspended for almost two years, and also in the case of Sri Lanka. I feel that there can't be a rush to take a decision which may harm the country's cricket," he told reporters yesterday.

He identified two factors of importance. One being his own board's term, which is for four years. Another was the ICC board's term under the current ICC chairman Greg Barclay, which runs till 2024.

He pointed out that he is in various ICC committees, and that ICC does not accept changes in these positions. Moreover, BCB cannot nominate someone to take over the roles that Hassan is serving in the ICC committees as only the ICC can nominate from their present directors for the committees.

In any case, no one outside of the current board of directors would be able to come in as BCB president if Hassan does resign eventually.

"I have to talk to them [ICC]. I feel that at the earliest, when ICC's term ends, I can talk to them and have an opportunity to get out of it smoothly. But in that case, those that are directors now, one has to be chosen from among them. There is no opportunity for someone to come from outside," he said.

What are the criteria for electing a new president in case Hassan decides to cut short his tenure?

Shedding light on the matter, BCB CEO Nizamuddin Chowdhury told The Daily Star yesterday, "The BCB president has to be an elected person. The election process is that the person has to be a councillor of

BCB. After that he has to become a director through election. Then from the directors one can become the president. That's the process.

"At this moment, no one from outside [BCB] can become president since you have to become a councillor and there is no constitutional provision for that right now. Councillors are called before their tenure ends but current councillors have term until 2025."

Hassan was first elected as the BCB boss in 2012 and has been at the helm ever since. The 63-year-old was re-elected as the BCB president in October 2021 for a third successive term.

Israeli strikes

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Gaza health officials said the 11 people had been killed by a single air strike around dawn in a house in Deir Al-Balah belonging to the Fayad family, a prominent name in the city.

Israel said earlier that its forces had killed dozens of militants in nearby Maghazi and in the southern city of Khan Younis. The armed wings of Hamas and fellow Islamists Islamic Jihad each said their fighters had hit Israeli tanks and bulldozers with anti-tank rockets in several areas where Israel was operating.

"Distorted" genocide case
Israel yesterday also called a genocide case brought against it at the UN's top court as "profoundly distorted" and "malevolent".

South Africa has launched an emergency case at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) arguing that Israel stands in breach of the UN Genocide Convention, signed in 1948 in the wake of the Holocaust.

Pretoria wants judges to force Israel to "immediately" stop the Gaza campaign. At least 23,708 people, mostly women and children, have been killed in Israel's offensive, according to Gaza's Hamas-run health ministry.

Both Israel and its ally the United States have dismissed the case as groundless and vowed a robust defence.

Holy Shab-e-Meraj on February 8

BSS, Dhaka

The holy Shab-e-Meraj will be observed on the night of February 8 with due respect and religious fervour as the moon of Hijri month of Rajab (1445 Hijri) was not sighted anywhere across the country yesterday.

The decision was taken at a meeting of the National Moon Sighting Committee at the Islamic Foundation at Baitul Mukarram in Dhaka this evening with Joint Secretary of the Ministry of Religious Affairs Md Naib Ali Mandal in the chair, an Islamic Foundation (IF) press release said.

As per the decision, the Holy Rajab month will begin on Sunday (January 14), the release added.

Every year, on the night of Rajab 26, Muslims observe Shab-e-Meraj when Prophet Hazrat Muhammad (peace be upon him) embarked on a special journey to meet Allah.

In the journey, the Prophet travelled on the "Buraq" to Heaven where Allah gave him some instructions to take back to the devotees regarding the details of prayers.

Muslim devotees will offer special prayers at mosques and homes, seeking blessings from Allah for the welfare of the entire nation and the Muslim Ummah.

Unidentified man found dead in Rangpur

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Dinajpur

Police yesterday recovered the body of an unidentified man, presumed to be in his 50s, in Rangpur city's Borail Bazar.

Criminals dumped the victim's body after stabbing him to death elsewhere anytime between Thursday night and early yesterday, said Porsuram Police Station Officer-in-Charge Hossain Ali.

Informed by locals, police recovered the body of the unidentified man around 10:30am and sent it to the Rangpur Medical College Hospital for an autopsy, he added.

The OC said the police were trying to identify the victim.

6 crude bombs found on Islamic univ campus

UNB, Islamic University

The authorities of the Islamic University in Kushtia recovered six crude bombs from different spots on the campus early yesterday.

A group of students found two crude bombs kept at Lalon Shah Hall's gate and informed the university's proctorial body, said IU Proctor Professor M Shahadat Hossain Azad.

On information, with the assistance of police and Ansar members, the bombs were recovered from the spot, he said.

Later, four crude bombs were recovered from various parts of the campus.

Of the four, one was recovered from adjacent to Shaheed Ziaur Rahman Hall area, two from near the Business Administration Faculty, and another one from Jatirpita Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman Hall area.

Miscreants might have placed the crude bombs to create fear among the students of the university, the proctor said.

When asked about the matter, IU Vice Chancellor Professor Shaikh Abdus Salam said, "We have informed the police and they will look into the matter."