

Crew member missing after ferry goes down in Padma

ZAHANGIR SHAH, Manikganj

A crew member went missing after a ferry capsized in the Padma with nine trucks and more than 20 people on board yesterday morning.

The ferry heading towards Paturia terminal in Manikganj early in the morning had to stop less than 500 metres from its destination because of fog, said officials of Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Corporation (BIWTC).

BIWTC Deputy General Manager (Aricha) Khaled Newaz said after several hours being on anchor, the vessel titled Rajanigandha was hit by a bulk carrier and sank around 8:15am.

However, survivors said the ferry sank because it was taking on water.

Twenty men, including the ferry crew members and the truckers, jumped overboard before the vessel listed and sank. They were fished out of water by boatmen in the area.

Officials said 39-year-old Humayun Kabir, the second master of Rajanigandha, is missing.

Divers from the fire service, BIWTC and Bangladesh Navy searched for him until around 8:00pm and suspended the search for the night.

BIWTC salvage ship Hamza joined the rescue operation around noon and salvaged a lorry at 5:00pm and another at 7:30pm.

The second one was one and a half kilometres away from the spot.

The 280-tonne Rajanigandha will be salvaged when a larger rescue vessel joins the effort, said Anwarul Haque, an assistant director of Fire Service and Civil Defence.

Rajanigandha was carrying the trucks from Daulatdia to Paturia. It began the journey around 1:00am, BIWTC officials and survivors said.

When it anchored midriver, the truckers went to sleep.

"After daybreak, we were waiting for the fog to clear. Suddenly, we heard a crew member screaming at the top of his voice and telling everyone to jump overboard because the hull was breached," said one of the truck drivers named Ashique Sheikh.

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Asian Development Bank Country Director Edimon Ginting calls on Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina at the Gono Bhaban yesterday. PHOTO: PID

Mercury below 10C, yet schools stay open in Barishal, Chuadanga

SUSHANTA GHOSH

The mercury dropped below 10 degrees Celsius in Barishal division and Chuadanga district yesterday, but all the primary and secondary schools there were open despite a government directive.

This forced the students to go to their educational institutions amid the biting cold. However, attendance in many schools was lower than normal.

On Tuesday, the Directorate of Secondary and Higher Education (DSHE) and the primary and mass education ministry in separate circulars asked the district education officials to keep primary and secondary schools closed if the mercury drops to 10 degrees Celsius or below.

The Daily Star visited four government primary schools and two high schools in Barishal district yesterday. Attendance at two primary schools in Babuganj upazila and a secondary high school in Barishal city was lower than normal.

An assistant teacher of Guakhola Government Primary School in Bakerganj upazila said they had to keep the school

open as the senior officials did not instruct them to close.

Students of Udayan Secondary High School, a reputed educational institution in Barishal, were seen holding an assembly on the school ground around 9:00am.

The divisional primary and secondary education office said all primary and high schools and kindergartens in Barishal division were open yesterday.

Bashir Ahmed Hawlader, officer-in-charge of Barishal Met office, said the mercury dropped to 9.7 degrees Celsius in Barishal division at 6:00am yesterday.

He said the temperature fell to 9 degrees Celsius on Monday.

Nilufar Yasmin, deputy director of the Department of Primary Education in Barishal division, said district education officials make decisions on the operations of schools.

"I didn't know the temperature dropped below 10 degrees Celsius," she added.

In Chuadanga, the temperature dropped to 9.8 degrees Celsius around 9:00am yesterday, said Jamirur Rahman, officer-in-charge of the district Met office.

"Rain is likely in Chuadanga tomorrow

[today]," he said.

Many parents expressed dissatisfaction over schools being open amid such a cold weather.

"Children can get cold-related diseases if they go out in such bad weather. What's the problems if schools stay closed for a few days?" said Sumon Islam, a parent.

Chuadanga District Education Officer Ataur Rahman said, "We are yet to get any instructions from the higher authorities regarding the closure of schools. That's why we cannot close."

Tabibur Rahman, district primary education officer, said although the temperature remains low in the morning, it increases as the day progresses.

"The temperature rises above 10 degrees Celsius around noon. That's why we have not taken any decision to close schools," he added.

Meanwhile, Victoria Jubilee Government High School and Chuadanga Government Girls High School in Facebook posts last night said classes will remain suspended today as there is a possibility of rain.

[A correspondent in Chuadanga also contributed to this report]

Charges pressed against Tarique in DSA case

COURT CORRESPONDENT

Police have pressed charges against BNP acting chairman Tarique Rahman in a case filed under the Digital Security Act.

Md Hasanuzzaman, sub-inspector of Detective Branch of Police on January 14 submitted the charge sheet to the Dhaka Chief Metropolitan Magistrate's Court.

In the charge sheet, Tarique was shown as a "fugitive" and SI Hasanuzzaman, also investigation officer of the case, appealed to the court to issue an arrest warrant.

The case was filed against Tarique on February 25, 2021, with Shahbagh Police Station for declaring late president Ziaur Rahman "the nation's father of Bangladeshi nationalism". According to the case statement, Tarique Rahman had said this at a rally in London organised on the occasion of the 41st founding anniversary of the BNP.

Zahidul Islam, the then deputy secretary of relief and disaster management of Chhatra League's Shahidullah Hall unit at Dhaka University, filed the case.

Tarique, who is now in London, was convicted and sentenced to different terms in five cases, including the August 21 grenade attack case.

Physically challenged girl raped on running train

Attendant of Lalmoni Express sent to jail

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Lalmonirhat

A train attendant has been arrested for raping a physically challenged girl in the Lalmonirhat-bound Lalmoni Express train.

The arrestee, Akkas Ali, 30, was sent to jail yesterday afternoon following an order by Lalmonirhat Judicial Court, reports our correspondent quoting Officer-in-charge (OC) of Lalmonirhat Railway GRP Police Station Ferdous Ali.

The 13-year-old victim, who meant to go to Mymensingh, mistakenly boarded the Lalmoni Express from Joydebpur Railway Station, said Sub-inspector Ruhul Amin of the police station, also the plaintiff of the case.

According to police, Akkas Ali took the girl, who was travelling alone, to his room after finding that she did not have a ticket. Around 4:00am, the passengers of the train heard the girl screaming and rescued her.

The passengers also beat up Akkas Ali and handed him over to the police.

"As the girl is a minor and no one was present with her, the police filed the case as plaintiff. Police will quickly file a charge sheet with the court against him," said OC Ferdous Ali.

Police took the victim to her family after necessary tests were carried out in the Lalmonirhat Sadar Hospital in the afternoon, he added.

Dengue looks ominous

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lean season. In that way, they will be able to lower the risks of a widespread outbreak, Chowdhury said.

Awareness among people can also play a key role in reducing the number of breeding grounds, according to Chowdhury.

In this reality, Local Government Rural Development and Cooperatives Minister Md Tazul Islam yesterday directed the city corporation, municipality and union council under the local government ministry to play an effective role in dengue prevention across the country this year.

He made the decision at the first meeting of the National Committee on Prevention of Dengue and other mosquito-borne diseases-2024 held at the ministry's conference room.

He asked the ministry concerned to take initiatives to increase the awareness of dengue at the union level involving more than 5,500 union council chairmen across the country.

As the village economy is also strong, the villages have taken on the characteristics of a city. Subsequently, Aedes mosquito larvae can be produced from clear stagnant water in the village.

"Since dengue cases were found in different parts of the country last year, there are fears that it may spread more this year if we do not destroy the breeding grounds of Aedes mosquitoes."

Stressing the need to destroy larvae by identifying those to control Aedes mosquitoes, Islam asked everyone to be aware so that water cannot remain stagnant in flower tubs, under refrigerators, houses and other discarded containers.

He also asked the relevant responsible authorities to be aware from the beginning of the year so that Aedes mosquitoes cannot breed in various government offices, hospitals and their medical waste and vehicles seized at various police stations.

Also at the meeting, Islam stressed the need to ensure quality testing of imported insecticides to destroy Aedes mosquito larvae.

The last time there was some controversy about mosquito insecticide spray; this year, it should be confirmed through testing so that the drug is effective, he said.

Islam also instructed the concerned ministries regarding this year's dengue research and data collection and preservation of the necessary results.

He also directed coordination among different relevant ministries.

BB makes money costlier to tame inflation 51pc seats saw vote rigging

FROM PAGE 1 bringing inflation largely under control. But the BB acted in a cautious manner and insufficiently.

The central bank visibly got down to work in June last year when it raised the policy rate to a record high, scrapped the lending rate cap of 9 percent, and put in place a new interest rate-setting mechanism.

Yesterday, the BB said the recent upward trajectory of inflation has indeed been arrested and a gradual decline has begun.

"However, it is noteworthy that given the global and domestic headwinds prevailing in the economy, this deceleration is occurring at a slower pace rate than initially anticipated."

Bangladesh navigates through a complex global economic landscape, its economy faces several near-term macroeconomic challenges. Foremost among these are the intensifying inflationary pressures fuelled by disruptions in global supply chains and heightened commodity prices.

"Additionally, fluctuations in the value of the taka, especially against the US dollar, are causing ripples through the economy, impacting everything from domestic inflation to trade balances and foreign exchange reserves."

The new monetary policy rightly anchors on the reduction of inflation with a hawkish approach, former governor Ataur Rahman told The Daily Star.

"This gives a signal that the central bank means business and will continue to do whatever is needed to rein in inflation. However, given the persistently high level of inflation for

nearly a year or so, the rise in the policy rate could be more, at least by another 25 basis points."

"Maybe, the BB will come back to it shortly to prove that it is indeed hawkish."

The new monetary policy statement comes at a time when most countries are not sure whether their battle against inflation has been won. Fresh uncertainties for the global economy have been created owing to the Middle Eastern conflict and the Red Sea crisis, which have already disrupted the movement of goods through the key shipping route.

Ahsan H Mansur, executive director of the Policy Research Institute of Bangladesh, said the new policy was not aggressive enough.

"The policy rate should have been increased by 1 percentage point to 1.5 percentage points, while the inflation target should have been set at 3 percent to 4 percent," he said.

"The direction of the monetary policy is right but the measures are not enough to rein in higher inflation."

Zahid Hussain, a former lead economist of the World Bank's Dhaka office, said expectations were high from the MPS as the election was over.

"There is no longer an excuse for delaying actions to reduce inflation, stabilise foreign exchange reserves, relax import controls, and alleviate financial sector vulnerability."

"The challenges are meticulously articulated in the MPS, but they fall short on all fronts in terms of measures concrete enough to yield some visible results within the current fiscal year."

Prof Mustafizur Rahman, a

distinguished fellow at the Centre for Policy Dialogue, a think tank, said the new contractionary monetary policy is appropriate. "But it alone can't control inflation."

"There is a need to ensure coordination between the fiscal policy and the monetary policy and increase the institutional efficiency to stabilise the macroeconomy. The government needs to ensure proper market management."

Kamran T Rahman, president of the Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce and Industry, said the containment of inflation is the most important under the current circumstances.

"We can't afford to have a runaway inflation. All will suffer if inflation continues to remain high," he said, adding that the spike in interest rates will affect businesses.

The central bank said it is contemplating the implementation of a crawling peg system to control unusual fluctuations in the currency's value, amid an increasing call for a gradual shift toward a market-based exchange rate system.

The taka has lost its value by about 28 percent against the dollar in the past two years, making purchases from the international markets costlier for the import-dependent nation.

The crawling peg is a system of exchange rate adjustments in which a currency with a fixed exchange rate is allowed to fluctuate within a band of rates.

The crawling peg will serve as a transitional arrangement, paving the way towards a fully flexible regime in the future, according to the Bangladesh Bank.

Washington keen to work closely with Dhaka

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Bangladesh will be denied visas.

The US said the January 7 parliamentary polls were not free or fair. It, however, spoke of continuing the relationship on trade and other areas of mutual interests.

Yesterday, Haas did not take any questions from journalists. The foreign minister spoke later.

Asked if they discussed elections, Haas said the US envoy did not speak about it, but he thanked the US for sending several election observers.

He alleged that the BNP created anarchy and set fire to trains that led to the killing of people. The voter turnout in the national polls was about 42 percent, but it could have been at least 10 percentage point higher if there was no fog and cold, he added.

"Different countries have different opinions on elections, but the main

thing is the US wants to work with the new government," the minister said.

He said Haas agreed to strengthen bilateral relationship, diversify trade and investment, and work together on combating fanaticism and militancy like the US did in the past.

Talking about his meeting with European Union Ambassador Charles Whiteley, Haas said they discussed European investment in the Special Economic Zones and the funding from the European financial institutions.

"I said that the Rohingya crisis has almost been forgotten because of the other crises like the Ukraine and Palestine, but that should not be the case. The Rohingya should be provided support before they are repatriated with their full rights of citizenship," the minister said.

Whiteley said he spoke of boosting

the relations in the areas of trade and investment and climate change.

He said the EU and Bangladesh will very soon start the negotiation on the Partnership Cooperation Agreement.

Whiteley said they want to have a new structure for the EU-Bangladesh relationship that would be much more political in nature.

Asked about the EU's statement that it regretted that a major political party did not participate in the elections, Whiteley said the meeting was more forward-looking. "That does not mean that we forgot the past. The past is very important," he said.

The EU election expert team is still in Dhaka. It will prepare a report including recommendations that will be made public. The EU will definitely follow those recommendations up, the envoy added.

FROM PAGE 1 integrity, democratic and moral values this success will always remain debatable."

The election has further entrenched the ruling party's absolute control over the country's political landscape and governance, with the scope of unaccountable exercise of absolute power expanding even further.

"Election promises to establish good governance and rein in corruption in the country are likely to become more unrealistic and only documents," Ittekkharuzzaman added.

The study, which was conducted in 50 out of 300 constituencies in eight divisions between June 2023 and January this year, found multiple irregularities in all the constituencies on election day.

As much as 51 percent of the constituencies surveyed saw incidents of vote-rigging, open sealing and booth capturing.

All the Awami League candidates have violated the electoral code of conduct at least once.

Besides, 97.3 percent of the independent (AL) candidates, 87.5 percent of other independent candidates and 84.9 percent of the Jatiyo Party candidates have violated the code.

As much as 98 percent of the candidates spent more than the maximum expenditure limit of Tk 25 lakh in the election in the seats surveyed.

In those seats, candidates spent an average of Tk 1.56 crore in the election, which is more than six times the expenditure limit, TIB found.

The highest expenditure of Tk 38.77 crore was by an AL candidate, the study said, without disclosing the name of the individual.

According to the study, the ruling party used force in various forms to achieve the 50 percent voter turnout target.

Instances were reported where threats were made to suspend government services and allowances from the social security programmes for marginalised and underprivileged individuals, including ordinary voters, if they failed to attend meetings of the ruling party and go to the polling centres and vote for specific symbols, it found.

Additionally, there were cases of government officials openly displaying loyalty to the ruling party and participating in partisan activities, such as supporting and campaigning for the ruling party candidates.

In 85.7 percent of seats, the administration and law enforcement agencies were inactive in various disciplinary violations.

Security was not ensured equally for all candidates, the study found.

In 77.6 percent of the seats, there

were barriers to information flow or obstacles in communication. Polling agents of opponents were not allowed to enter the respective centres in 75 percent of the seats.

Journalists and election observers faced obstacles in entering centres in 61 percent of the seats.

TIB found serious irregularities in 55 percent of the constituencies studied where voters were forced to cast their votes to a specific symbol.

There was fraud in about 43 percent of the seats' votes. In 38 percent of the seats, voters were bribed with either cash or transport or food.

"The Election Commission has acted as one of the catalysts to implement the election agenda in the name of constitutional obligations and legal boundaries. Other state institutions, especially law enforcement and administration, have also been used to support the same agenda," Ittekkharuzzaman said.

The election was the costliest too: the original budget was Tk 1,445 crore, but the expenditure ultimately increased to Tk 2,276 crore, which is triple compared to the 11th election.

The budgets for the 2014 and 2018 elections were Tk 300 crore and Tk 700 crore respectively.

Fakhrul

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rally in Dhaka.

Dhaka Metropolitan Magistrate Tahmina Haque passed the order after their lawyers submitted bail petitions before the court, said a sub-inspector at the Chief Metropolitan Magistrate's Court.

The magistrate also granted bail to Khasru in another violence-related case filed with Paltan Police Station.

On January 10, Fakhrul secured bail in nine cases filed over political violence.

However, the BNP leader will remain in prison as he is yet to get bail in another case filed over the attack on the chief justice's residence. He has been in jail since October 29, said Zaynul Abedin Meshbah, one of his lawyers.

During yesterday's hearing, defence lawyers said Fakhrul and Khasru were sick and the charges brought against them were false and fabricated. They were implicated in the case with the intent to harass them for political reason, the lawyers added.

The prosecution opposed the bail prayers and said the leaders and activists of the BNP and its front organisations, as per the directive of Fakhrul and Khasru, attacked police on October 28.

Police filed the case on October 29 and Fakhrul and Khasru were shown arrested in the case on December 18.