

## Lanka passes new law to regulate online content

REUTERS, Colombo

Sri Lanka's lawmakers yesterday passed a bill to regulate online content, the speaker of the parliament announced, a law which opposition politicians and activists allege will muzzle free speech.

The Online Safety Bill proposes jail terms for content that a five-member commission considers illegal and making social media platforms such as Alphabet's Google GOOGL, Meta's Facebook META and X, formerly known as Twitter, liable for such content on their platforms.

President Ranil Wickremesinghe's government says the bill is aimed at battling cyber crime including child abuse, data theft and online fraud.

"Sri Lanka had 8,000 cyber crimes complaints last year. We all agree that we need laws to address these issues. This is why we are bringing this law," Public Security Minister Tiran Alles said on Tuesday while introducing the bill in the house.

"It is not to suppress the media or the opposition...Any complaint will be taken up by the commission, who will be appointed by the president and they will decide how to act."

The bill was passed with a majority of 46 votes in the 225-member house, the speaker announced. 108 votes were in favour while 62 members voted against it.

A small group of activists and opposition members protested against the legislation outside parliament. Harsha de Silva, a lawmaker of Sri Lanka's main opposition Samagi Jana Balawegaya, told parliament that it was not right to hold social media platforms accountable.

"This legislation is a threat to our democracy," he said. "This will have a severe negative impact on expanding e-commerce in Sri Lanka, to provide jobs to our youth and help our economy, which is in desperate need of growth."

The Asian Internet Coalition (AIC), which has Apple AAPL, Amazon AMZN, Google and Yahoo as members, warned Sri Lanka that the bill could impact investment in the country's IT industry and called for extensive amendments to it.

"We unequivocally stand by our position that the Online Safety Bill, in its current form, is unworkable and would undermine potential growth and foreign direct investment into Sri Lanka's digital economy," the AIC said in a statement.



People line up behind an OMS truck of the TCB to buy essentials at the Railway Government Primary School in Khulna city's Dakbanga area yesterday. Low-income people having family cards endure long queues to buy rice, onion, pulse and edible oil at subsidised prices.

PHOTO: HABIBUR RAHMAN

## Shop fire kills 39 in China's Jiangxi province

REUTERS, Beijing

A fire at a street shop in Xinyu City of Jiangxi Province has killed 39 people and injured nine, Chinese state media and the local government said yesterday, adding that some people were still trapped.

The fire broke out in the afternoon in an underground floor of the shop on Tiangongnan Avenue in the Yushui district, said the local fire response emergency headquarters, according to the China Daily media outlet.

The injured were taken to hospital, a government statement said, without disclosing how many.

Thick, black smoke could be seen spewing from shops on the street level and engulfing surrounding buildings in video footage on social media platform Weibo.

According to state broadcaster CCTV

News, there was an Internet cafe located below ground level and a training institution upstairs in the building where the fire broke out.

After the latest deadly fire in the country, China's President Xi Jinping demanded that all efforts be made to curb accidents and ensure people's safety, according to Xinhua News.

China has had several fires over the past year and just last week, a school dormitory fire killed 13 students in Central China's Henan province. Seven staff members were taken into police custody over that incident.

Last November, 26 people died and dozens were sent to hospital after a fire at a coal company office in northern China's Shanxi province.

Fires and other deadly accidents are common in China due to lax safety standards and poor enforcement of regulations.



## RED SEA CRISIS US strikes two Houthi anti-ship missiles in Yemen

REUTERS, Washington

The US military carried out more strikes in Yemen early yesterday, destroying two Houthi anti-ship missiles that were aimed at the Red Sea and were preparing to launch, the US military said in a statement.

The US strikes, which took place at roughly 2:30 am (2330 GMT), are the latest against the Iran-backed group over its targeting of Red Sea shipping, and followed a larger round of strikes a day earlier.

The Houthis, who control the most populous parts of Yemen, have said their attacks are in solidarity with Palestinians as Israel strikes Gaza. The attacks have disrupted global shipping and deepened concern that fallout from the Israel strikes in Gaza could destabilize the Middle East.

"US forces identified the missiles in Houthi-controlled areas of Yemen and determined that they presented an imminent threat to merchant vessels and the US Navy ships in the region," the US military's Central Command said in a statement. "US forces subsequently struck and destroyed the missiles in self-defense."

## Man gets life term over rape

BSS, Natore

A Natore court yesterday sentenced a man to life imprisonment for raping a woman after abduction in the district's Bagatipara in 2010.

Muhammad Abdur Rahim, judge of Natore Women and Children Repression Prevention Tribunal, handed down the sentence to Dulal Das, 36, of Chinnapur village in the upazila.

The court also fined him Tk 50,000.

According to the prosecution, the convict kidnapped the woman at night outside her house and raped her in a sugarcane field in the village on July 23, 2010.

The victim later filed a case against Dulal and one Nizam with Bagatipara Police Station.

Police pressed the charge sheet against the duo on September 26 that year.

The court also acquitted Nizam as the charge brought against him could not be proven.

## Covid-19 infection rate down slightly

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The Covid-19 infection rate fell to 8.41 percent yesterday from Tuesday's 8.62 percent while no death was reported.

At least 38 new Covid-19 cases were recorded in the 24 hours to 8:00am yesterday, said a press release issued by the Directorate General of Health Services.

The overall positivity rate stands at 13.09 percent, the DGHS said.

The total number of cases is now 2,046,861. The total number of Covid-19 deaths is 29,481 and the death rate is 1.44 percent.

At least 19 patients recovered from Covid-19 during the 24-hour period.

## 3-year-old dies after hit by auto-rickshaw

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Benapole

A three-year-old child was killed yesterday after a battery-run auto-rickshaw hit him on a road in Jashore's Jhikargacha.

This incident took place when Mahim Hossain, son of Alamin Hossain, was playing on the road in front of his house in Mirzapur village, according to locals.

Mahim was critically injured and taken to Jhikargacha Upazila Health Complex, said BM Kamal Hossain Bhuiyan, the officer-in-charge of Jhikargacha Police Station.

Mahim, who was referred to the Dhaka Medical College Hospital, died on the way to the capital, the OC said.

Police are trying to arrest the driver, he added.

## 60 Syrian migrants rescued near Cyprus

AFP, Nicosia

Cypriot authorities yesterday rescued 60 "distressed and dehydrated" Syrians, including children, from a boat drifting for a week in the Mediterranean, amid a sharp rise in migrant arrivals.

A major operation involving the maritime police and national guard was launched after the boat was spotted drifting 30 nautical miles off Cyprus's southeastern coast, the Joint Rescue Coordination Centre (JRCC) said in a statement.

A maritime police vessel provided first aid, while another boat and two helicopters were mobilised to transport the critical patients and injured to hospital, the JRCC said.

"The migrants were found distressed and dehydrated," it said, adding that three children and one adult had fainted and three others had lower limb fractures.

## Probe body to review content of textbook

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of the Islamic Arabic University, the committee was asked to submit a report to the secondary and higher education division of the ministry as soon as possible.

The other members are Mufti Maulana Kafil Uddin Sarker, governor of the Islamic Foundation; Prof Moshuazzaman, member of the NCTB; Abdul Halim, director of the Institute of Education and Research at Dhaka University; and Prof Mohammad Abdur Rashid, principal of Dhaka Alia Madrasa.

Earlier on Tuesday, Education Minister Mohibul Hasan Chowdhury said any confusion over the content in a textbook will be addressed through the opinions of curriculum specialists.

"In our country, there is a tendency for certain groups to exploit religion to create anarchy and instability," he added.

## 'Can't stay at home as cops hunt us all the time'

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and the banks of canals and beels (waterbodies) are now the places we live in.

"The law enforcers have been constantly after us since October 28. We don't know what crimes we have committed. Our only crime is we are involved in BNP politics," said Md Bashir, a BNP supporter from Bhola Sadar.

He used to run a small shop in Bhola Sadar to eke a living for his family even though he had a brain stroke a few years back and has been suffering from severe eye problems for several years.

"I could not go to my shop as police have been hunting me since a case was filed against me. I don't know how my family members are getting by," said the 55-year-old.

He was among the few hundred BNP men who came to the apex court from different districts including Bhola, Narayanganj, Mymensingh, Barishal and Pirojpur.

Later, Bashir told this

correspondent that he got bail from the HC in a case filed with Bhola Sadar Police Station.

"I am now on my way home," he said.

Yarul Alam, another BNP leader from Bhola, told this newspaper that nine separate cases have been filed with different police stations on false charges against some 400 BNP members in Bhola since October 28.

Around 100 of the accused came to the HC yesterday for anticipatory bail.

Some of them are senior citizens and have been suffering from various diseases, he said, adding that the accused BNP men cannot stay at their houses as police have been hot on their heels.

An HC bench led by Justice Md Nazrul Islam Talukder heard the anticipatory bail petitions yesterday and granted anticipatory bail to a number of BNP activists and leaders for six weeks.

Contacted, Deputy Attorney General Saifuddin Khaled said those who secured bail from the HC are now

## Winter chills bite farming hard

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at Bangladesh Agricultural University, said farmers who have yet to transplant boro seedlings are likely to be affected. But those who already transplanted the seedlings, and the area has not seen low temperatures will not be affected.

Since it is colder in Rangpur, Rajshahi and Sylhet divisions, farmers in those regions may be affected, he added.

"Pumping water into the seedbeds in the morning will be helpful because it will keep the plants relatively warm," he said, adding that covering the seedbeds with plastic sheets will also protect the plants.

According to Bangladesh Meteorological Department, different districts in Rangpur, Rajshahi, Dhaka and Sylhet recorded temperatures below 15 degrees Celsius on multiple days since January 3.

Farmers in several northern

districts say cold weather increases the risk of blight disease in potatoes and affects mustard, onion farms.

In the 2022-23 fiscal year, winter vegetables accounted for over 63 percent of the country's total 2.25 crore tonnes of vegetable production, according to the DAE, which has a target to ensure production of 1.45 crore tonnes of vegetables this winter.

DAE's target for potato production is 1.16 crore tonnes.

Satish Chandra Barman, a farmer in Lalmonirhat, said maize plants were rotting in his farm because irrigated water has not dried due to the lack of sunlight.

He added that half of his 25-decimal boro seedbed had been damaged in recent days.

A farmer in Rajshahi's Tanore said covering the seedbeds with plastic sheets was not of much help due to lack of sunlight.

under the book of the law as they must surrender before the lower courts concerned in six weeks.

He, however, could not say how many BNP men got anticipatory bail from the bench.

Sagir Hossain Leon, a lawyer for 70 accused BNP men, said 24 of his clients from Barishal and Pirojpur have got anticipatory bail from the HC yesterday.

From October 28 to January 21, at least 27,507 BNP leaders and activists were arrested in 1,182 cases across the country, said BNP Senior Joint Secretary General Ruhul Kabir Rizvi on January 21.

The party claimed at least 1,294 of its leaders and activists were given jail sentences in the last couple of months.

Many senior leaders including Secretary General Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir and Standing Committee Members Amir Khasru Mahmud Chowdhury and Mirza Abbas have been in jail after the October 28 rally.

DAE in Rajshahi, said the late blight diseases have not affected many potato farms.

Jahangir Hossain, a former director at Tuber Crops Research Centre, said potato farms may be hit by the late blight disease if the temperature dips below 10 degrees Celsius.

Munshi Rashid Ahmad, director of Horticulture Research Centre, said small, new, and weak plants get affected by low temperatures and lack of sunlight.

DAE Director General Badal Chandra Biswas said the impact of cold on crops has not been estimated yet. However, there will be no major damage, he added.

However, the DAE's potato production target may not be met this year for different reasons, he said. [Our correspondents from Rajshahi, Lalmonirhat and Dinajpur contributed to this report.]

## PM moves to contain cost

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A committee under the principal secretary to the prime minister will be formed and it will sit every two months to evaluate the foreign-funded projects, said Satyajit Karmaker, senior secretary of the Planning Commission, after the meeting.

In fiscal 2022-23, the utilisation of foreign loans and grants stood at 72.4 percent.

GDP growth increases if the foreign loans are utilised properly, show the working paper of the meeting. In fiscal 2017-18, foreign loan utilisation was 91.8 percent and in the next fiscal year, Bangladesh recorded GDP growth of 7.8 percent.

Proper utilisation of foreign loans and grants plays a helpful role in sustainable growth and maintaining a healthy balance of payment.

A pool comprising experienced and skilled project managers is "essential to avoiding delays in project implementation, cost overruns and efficient implementation of development projects", the working paper said.

In the existing system, there is a rule that there should be a full-time project manager for projects above Tk 50 crore and the same officials should not be the project manager for more

than one project.

But this is not followed properly, said a planning commission official.

"If any project director lacks skill, it causes time extensions for the projects. So a pool of project directors from specialists of ministry officials will be created," Salam said.

He also said a committee will be set up comprising all planning commission members to select the new development projects. Now, the programming division of the planning commission selects the projects.

When the matter was presented before the meeting, the PM asked whether such a new system would delay the projects further. When the officials reassured her that it would not create delays, Hasina gave the go-ahead, according to meeting attendants.

Meanwhile, when asked if the government can pay back the foreign loans due to the dollar crisis, Salam said: "The was not discussed in the meeting. Ask realistic questions. Talk about the reality."

"We will not sit idle if any foreign donor tries to close the projects. We have an elected government in place. Are foreigners providing loans without any benefits? They are getting back their loan with interest," he added.

## All 74 aboard Russian plane

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request for comment. It was cited by the Interfax-Ukraine news agency as saying it did not have any reliable information for now but would share it when it did.

Ukrainian media outlet Ukrainska Pravda initially cited military sources as saying Kyiv had shot down the plane because it was carrying S-300 missiles, but later corrected the story saying that information had not been confirmed by other sources.

Andrei Kartapolov, a lawmaker in Russia's parliament and a retired general, said in a TV interview with the SHOT outlet that it was impossible for the operators of Ukrainian surface-to-air missile systems to mistake transport planes for military planes or helicopters as targets.

"It was done deliberately to sabotage the prisoner exchange," said Kartapolov, saying a second Russian

Il-76 transport plane carrying around 80 Ukrainian soldiers to the exchange had managed to turn around.

The Russian defence ministry said its radar operators had detected the launch of two Ukrainian missiles at the time the plane was downed.

Kartapolov, who has close links to the Russian defence ministry, said the plane had been downed by three missiles of either US or German manufacture. He said it had not been escorted by Russian fighter planes because the flight had been agreed with the Ukrainians.

If the details are confirmed, it would be the deadliest incident of its kind inside Russia's internationally recognised borders during the almost two-year-old war.

Russian state media published a list of names of the 65 captured Ukrainian soldiers it said were on board along with their dates of birth.