

## CHAR PEOPLE IN KURIGRAM, LALMONIRHAT In grip of bitter cold

S DILIP ROY, Lalmonirhat

Braving the bitter morning cold, Majibur Rahman went to his field in Chinatuli char on Teesta river in Lalmonirhat Sadar upazila's Rajpur union.

However, with no warm clothes to shelter him, the 67-year-old farmer failed to stay out for long.

"We can't afford warm clothes and blankets. No one come here to donate those as we live in a remote area," he said.

Residents of about 500 shoals on 26 river basins in Lalmonirhat and Kurigram have been struggling as they have no blankets or warm clothes to shelter themselves from the chilly winds and dense fog.

Usually in winter, the government and many other organisations distribute blankets among the needy. However, those hardly ever reach the residents of these remote shoals, they said.

During a recent visit, this correspondent saw 90-year-old Mokshed Ali, living in Ghughumari shoal on the Brahmaputra in Kurigram's Ulipur upazila, shivering in the cold. He was wrapping himself with just a towel.



"Unable to afford blankets and warm clothes, we have been trying to stay warm by burning straws in the morning and at night," said his 85-year-old wife Masiran Begum.

Only 400 blankets have been allocated by the government for this union against a demand for more than 6,000, said Mozaffar Hossain, chairman of Saheber Alga Union Parishad. "The situation is the same across all the unions as donors don't want to come to these remote areas," he said.

According to the district relief and rehabilitation office sources, 66,000 blankets have been allocated and distributed in nine upazilas of Kurigram, while a letter was sent to the ministry concerned, seeking 20,000 more blankets.

In Lalmonirhat, 29,000 blankets have been allocated and distributed in five upazilas while 20,000 more blankets have been sought.

"The ministry does not provide special allocations for the shoal people. A special allocation would be greatly beneficial," said Abdul Hai Sarkar, district relief and rehabilitation officer in Kurigram.



PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON

An electric pole tilts towards a shop as workers dig up a significant portion of the Mansur Ali Sarani in the capital's Moghbazar for drainage works. Though supported by bamboo canes, the pole remains in a precarious position and may fall any minute, damaging the shop entirely. Besides, pedestrians are also forced to walk on the street, risking lives, as the work goes on at a snail's pace. The photo was taken recently.

## Teacher dies as pick-up crashes into home garden

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, Cox's Bazar

A schoolteacher was killed as a pick-up van hit her after it ploughed into a home garden as the driver lost control over the vehicle in Ramu, Cox's Bazar yesterday.

The accident took place in Officerchar area, said Ramu Police Station Officer-in-Charge Dewan Abu Taher.

Imari Rakhine, 49, wife of Uhla Rakhine from the area, died on the spot, said the OC.

A senior teacher of Sonachari High School in Naikhyangchhari upazila of Bandarban, Imari was also the president of Baniyarjiri Government Primary School management committee.

OC Abu Taher, quoting the deceased's relatives and locals, said during the accident Imari Rakhine was working at her flower garden. The driver managed to flee, he said.

The body was sent to Cox's Bazar District Sadar Hospital morgue for post-mortem.

## Robbers break into bank, loots Tk 9.78 lakh

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Bogura

Robbers looted Tk 9.78 lakh by breaking open a trunk inside a sub-branch of NRBC bank at Palli Mangal Bazar area in Bogura Sadar upazila on Saturday night.

Police said the bank's security system was inadequate and there was no night guards.

The robbers cut the connections of three CCTV cameras before looting the place, they added.

Adjacent to the bank's building, there were two other two-storied structures, and the robbers gained entry by breaking the door on the roof, suspect cops.

"A case is being filed in this connection. No one has been identified yet," said Saihan Oliullah, officer-in-charge of the Bogura Sadar Police Station.

Abdur Razzak, owner of the building which hosted the bank, said, "Upon waking up around 4:00am, I found my flat locked from the outside. I called some people who live nearby and they came and unlocked our door. Then, I found the bank's main gate lock broken. I quickly contacted the branch manager and dialed 999 for police assistance." The bank is on the ground floor of the building.

Bank manager Rashedul Islam refused to comment on the matter.

## WORLD LEPROSY DAY

# Tea workers most vulnerable

MINTU DESHWARA, Moulvibazar

It all started when she discovered discoloured skin on different parts of her body. But for Rupom Bhumij, a 53-year-old tea worker, seeking a doctor's advice for what she thought then as a "minor issue" was a luxury she couldn't afford.

She prioritised ensuring two square meals a day for her family over seeking help. In the meantime, her condition kept deteriorating. It was only when her toe fingers stiffened she sought a doctor's diagnosis: leprosy.

"The leprosy had progressed to an ulcer on your leg," the doctor said.

Her battle extended beyond physical and financial challenges, as stigma attached to the disease ostracised her from the community.

Hope arrived in the form of HEED Bangladesh and The Leprosy Mission International Bangladesh, who now guide her through government-backed treatment.

She is not alone. Leprosy rate is highest among tea workers of Bangladesh.

The reason? Malnutrition, unhygienic living conditions and lack of awareness, according to Moulvibazar Civil Surgeon Chowdhury Jalal Uddin Murshed.

"Leprosy is not hereditary and mildly contagious as it spreads through the air. Immediate treatment can help cure the patient," said Dr Murshed.

Skin discoloration, lumps, pimples, and thickening of earlobes are the primary



Tea garden workers in the country's northeastern region are at high risk of developing leprosy due to their unhygienic living conditions, malnutrition and lack of awareness.

PHOTO: STAR

symptoms of leprosy, he mentioned, adding most patients tend to ignore the signs at the initial stage fearing mental and social abuse.

"Leprosy detection programmes have been strengthened in such regions which has increased patient identification and the government is treating them for free," he added.

Philip Gain, researcher and director of Society for Environment and Human Development; and Dr Mohammad Noore Alam Shamim, assistant director (disease control) of DGHS in Sylhet, echoed him.

According to the Statistical Handbook on

Bangladesh Tea Industry 2019, there are 166 gardens in the country, employing 1,40,164 workers.

There are 135 tea estates in three districts of Sylhet division, with 46,450 registered and 15,153 casual female workers, while 500,000 others are their dependents.

According to the health department, 2,959 people were diagnosed with leprosy in the Sylhet Leprosy Hospital last year.

The number was 257 in Moulvibazar district alone -- the highest in the country.

Meanwhile, 180 were diagnosed in Sylhet, 117 in Habiganj, and 103 in Sunamganj. Most patients are tea workers and their family members, especially women and children.

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## 513 students died by suicide last year: report

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

At least 513 students from schools, colleges, universities and madrasas died by suicide in 2023, revealed Aachol Foundation, a student-based social organisation.

Among them, 60 percent of the students were female, with a majority (67 percent) falling within the vulnerable age group of 13 to 19 years old. Around 44.2 percent were enrolled in school, while 27.3 percent were college students.

The organisation also revealed that Dhaka division recorded the highest number of student suicides, with 149 cases reported.



The data collected from 105 national and local newspapers, as well as online portals were released at a virtual press conference yesterday. Out of the total, 227 students were enrolled in schools, 140 in colleges, 98 in universities, and 48 in madrasas.

According to the organisation, the major cause of student suicides was identified as "obhiman" -- a Bangla word which can be roughly translated to "emotional hurt" or "wounded pride".

It accounted for 165 students (32.2 percent), followed by 14.8 percent attributed to romantic relationships.

Mental health issues were cited as a factor in 9.9 percent of cases, while family conflicts and violence were factors in 6.2 percent and 1.4 percent of suicides, respectively.

Academic stress led to 4.5 percent of suicides, with 3.5 percent of students taking their lives after

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## Who felled 56 trees?

### Mahoganies chopped down by forging tender

SHUSHANTA GHOSH, Barishal

At least 56 trees were felled along the Dhaka-Barishal highway recently. The fallen giants, mostly mahogany trees, are victims of a seemingly elaborate hoax. Apparently, a forged tender authorised their demise, shrouding the incident in mystery.

No culprit has yet been identified, leaving the authorities concerned bewildered.

The Roads and Highways Department (RHD) seized the logs that were chopped down in Bamrail-Jayshree union under Ujirpur upazila, confirmed Masud Ahmed Sumon, the executive engineer of RHD in Barishal.

"On Wednesday afternoon, 56 logs were seized and brought to the sub-divisional zone office. When we sent the tender documents to the Arboriculture Department in Dhaka, they said that it was fake," he said.

According to the tender, dated December 31, 2023 and signed by Md Amanat Ali, sub-divisional arboriculture officer of RHD in Dhaka, one Elahi Agro Limited in

Gournadi upazila of Barishal was issued the work order to fell trees on the highways.

Masud Ahmed said usually the executive engineer calls for such a tender, but the document said it was called by the sub-divisional engineer. "So, I was confused and informed the arboriculture department, and they claimed that it was fake," he said.

Mir Mukut, executive engineer, Arboriculture Department of RHD in Dhaka, confirmed the matter. "We will file a case in this connection," he said.

"It will be investigated if anyone from the office was involved in it," he added.

Meanwhile, Elahi Agro Ltd was found to be a rice mill company in Gournadi. "My company did not participate in any tender for tree felling on the highway," said Farhad Munshi, its owner.

Ujirpur Police Station OC Md Zafar Ahmed said, "Although it is shown that a letter has been sent to us before felling trees, we do not know anything about the matter." Amanat Ali could not be reached for comments.



Logs kept on the premises of the sub-divisional zone office in Barishal after at least 56 trees were felled along the Dhaka-Barishal highway using a forged tender.

PHOTO: TITU DAS