

India to remove troops from Maldives by May

Says Male

REUTERS, New Delhi/Male

India will withdraw its troops from the Maldives by May, the Maldivian Foreign Ministry said yesterday, as the two countries seek agreement on a pullout that has strained ties.

The roughly 80 soldiers stationed in the Indian Ocean archipelago will be replaced by civilians, officials from both countries said.

As global powers jostle for influence in the Indo-Pacific region, India and China have wooed the Maldives, which has traditionally been close to neighbour India.

New Delhi's ties with Male have under strain since Mohamed Muizzu was elected president of the Maldives last year, pledging to end the country's "India First" policy.

He has called for the withdrawal by March 15 of the troops stationed to provide support for military equipment given to the Maldives by New Delhi and assist in humanitarian activities in the region.

The first set of Indian troops will leave by March 10 and the rest by May 10, the Maldives said.

The first set of Indian troops will leave by March 10 and the rest by May 10, the Maldives said, citing an agreement reached at a high-level meeting in the Indian capital on a range of issues concerning bilateral cooperation.

India's foreign ministry said the two countries "agreed on a set of mutually workable solutions to enable continued operation of Indian aviation platforms" that provide humanitarian services to Maldives.

The ministry did not immediately respond to a request for comment on the troop pullout, and its statement did not mention a timeframe.

India says the soldiers, who include a dozen medical personnel, provide help with humanitarian aid and medical evacuations for the residents of the country's remote islands.

New Delhi has given Male two helicopters and a Dornier aircraft, which are mostly used for marine surveillance, search and rescue operations and medical evacuations. The Indian troops manage those operations.

The next bilateral meeting will be in Male in the last week of February, the Maldives foreign ministry said.



DHANMONDI LAKE

A welcoming oasis for city residents

FEDA AL HOSSAIN

Dhaka can be full of chaos. With all the noise pollution, traffic congestion, and overcrowding, there still exist a few places where you can find respite from all that and just get lost in the serenity and Dhanmondi Lake is one of them.

If you think of it, Dhanmondi has changed drastically in the recent past. It is now more crowded than ever before, noisier, and busier. Yet, the lake somewhat holds onto the olden days. It is not that it did not embrace change, for the better or for the worse, but you still see many of the larger trees, and get a chance to experience the serenity of the waters. This is what makes it a place to relax amidst nature.

There are some really exciting spots for visitors to explore like the bridge at Dhanmondi 8 where you get an elevated view of the lake, or the entrance from Dhanmondi 5 which leads you to an island-like setting and enjoy a mesmerising view of the waterbody.

The lake welcomes everyone and that is where its charm resides. If you are taking a stroll, you will see a diverse range of people all seeking solace in the abundance of greenery. Whether at dawn or later in the evening, there will be health-conscious people busy exercising.

At midday, you will find



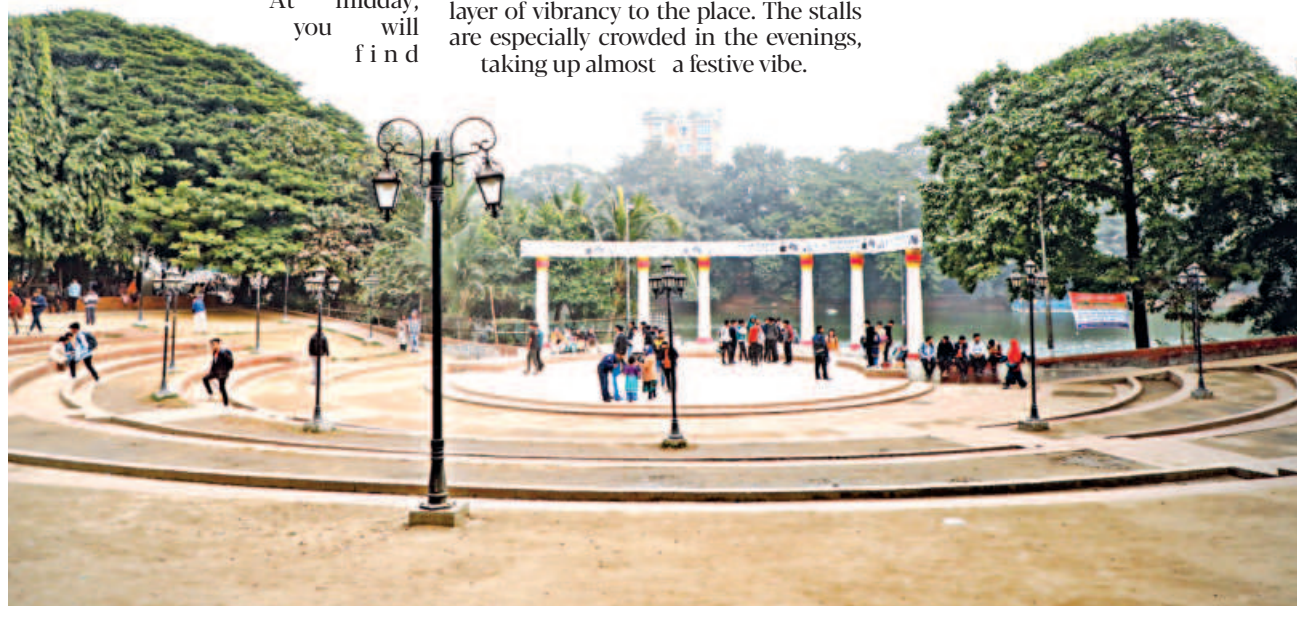
PHOTOS: PRABIR DAS

students chatting away animatedly with their friends; couples taking this opportunity to have a date in the tranquil setting, and sometimes listening to the musical events that take place at the Rabindra Sarobar amphitheatre.

Recreation options on a tight budget are rare in the capital and Dhanmondi Lake offers just that! The lake has become a place where foodies converge thanks to the numerous eateries without putting a dent in the wallet. From restaurants to street food stalls selling fuchka, chotpoti, ice cream, coffee, and more, the food zones add a layer of vibrancy to the place. The stalls are especially crowded in the evenings, taking up almost a festive vibe.

However, every good thing has its bad side and the Dhanmondi Lake is no exception. It will soon lose its charm due to a lack of proper maintenance, environmental degradation, and rampant commercialisation. Such a beautiful place is now polluted with garbage as people end up littering.

A city is not just about the glitzy concrete structures, but also about places where anyone is welcome to spend quality time. As a place that essentially serves as an oasis for the residents of Dhaka, we should do our utmost to properly maintain Dhanmondi Lake.



Senegal president calls off February 25 election

AFP, Dakar

Senegalese President Macky Sall yesterday announced the indefinite postponement of a presidential election scheduled for February 25, just hours before official campaigning was due to start.

In an address to the nation, Sall said he signed a decree abolishing a previous measure that set the date, because lawmakers were investigating two Constitutional Council judges whose integrity in the election process has been questioned.

"I will begin an open national dialogue to bring together the conditions for a free, transparent and inclusive election," Sall added, without giving a new date.

Battle resumes

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presumably fired from Myanmar, on Uttarpara road of Tambru, around half a kilometre off the zero line of the border, said Mainuddin, a resident of Tambru area.

"I heard more than 100 gunshots and three mortar explosions from my shop at Tambru Bazar," said Mohammed Shafiul Alam, a tailor.

He said he shut his shop out of fear and returned home.

Other traders also kept their shutters down at Tambru bazar after the gunfire had begun in Myanmar, Shafiul said.

Hundreds of people living near the zero line along the border in Ghumdhum have been away from homes for the last few days.

Locals claimed that the Arakan Army captured all border outposts, situated opposite Naikhongchhari upazila, of the Myanmar Border Guard Police.

The military and the border police personnel were under siege at a military camp, which locals call the "Right Camp", opposite Tambru BGB camp in Ghumdhum.

Uni enrolment drops to a four-year-low

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Graduate unemployment has doubled in five years, according to the Labour Force Survey 2022.

In the Labour Force Survey 2016-17, a total of 390,000 graduates were found unemployed. That number has soared to 799,000 in the latest version of the survey.

The unemployment rate among persons with tertiary-level education rose to 12 percent in 2022 from 11.2 percent in 2016-17.

"Why will students go for higher education if they do not see any light at the end of the tunnel? Higher education in many universities and its affiliated colleges seriously lack quality," Chowdhury added.

The economic hardship caused by the pandemic was one of the main reasons behind the drop in enrolment, said MA Mannan, another former UGC chairman.

Many university students used to meet their study expenses by working as tutors. But they lost that source of income during the pandemic and subsequently dropped out, he said.

39 killed as US starts strikes

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Despite the strikes, the Pentagon has said it does not want war with Iran and does not believe Tehran wants war either, even as Republican pressure has increased on US President Joe Biden to deal a blow directly.

Iran, which backs Hamas, has sought to stay out of the regional conflict itself even as it backs groups that have entered the fray from Lebanon, Yemen, Iraq and Syria - the so-called "Axis of Resistance" that is hostile to Israel and US interests.

US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said after the strikes that Biden had directed additional action against the IRGC and those linked to it. "This is the start of our response," Austin said.

"We do not seek conflict in the Middle East or anywhere else, but the president and I will not tolerate

Besides, many university students now go abroad in search of quality education, Mannan added.

The number of students going abroad for higher studies has tripled in 15 years.

In 2022, at least 49,151 Bangladeshi students went abroad for higher education in 58 countries, according to the latest Unesco data. It was 24,112 in 2013 and 16,609 in 2008.

Many educationists say the quality of university education in Bangladesh is lagging behind many countries.

Asked about why Bangladesh is behind others, Mannan said: "None can deny that the country's quality of education has not reached the desired level because proper learning and teaching environment could not be ensured."

Another disappointing development is that female enrolment in universities continues to trail behind the males, in a reverse of the scenario that is seen in the case of school enrolment.

In 2015, female enrolment in universities was 12.11 percent against

17.83 percent male. Seven years later, female enrolment increased to 17.19 percent against 20.07 percent for males.

"Higher education is costly and when the question of choice arises on who to send to university, the sons get preference over the daughters in the family," said Rasheda K Choudhury, executive director for Campaign for Popular Education.

Besides, most of the higher education institutions lack facilities like halls for female students.

Muhammed Alamgir, the acting chairman of UGC, has a different opinion: girls drop out of education before the time comes for signing up for university and hence fewer enrolments than boys.

The pandemic-induced financial constraints are to blame for the lower overall enrolment in 2022, he said.

Asked if there are quality issues when it comes to university education, Alamgir said that they are planning to set up a training academy for university teachers to enhance their skills.

Imran

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in January 2018 in a secret ceremony seven months before the former cricket superstar became prime minister for the first time.

There was controversy over whether they had wed before the period was complete. After initial denials of the marriage, PTI confirmed it weeks later.

The Khans both denied wrongdoing.

"Can say I'm a witness in the Nikkah and it's a categorically yet another fake case," Khan's media advisor Zulfi Bukhari told Reuters. "From witnesses to the evidence to the procedure."

Bushra's ex-husband, Khawar Maneka, to whom she was married for about 30 years, brought a criminal complaint against the Khans, said a person with direct knowledge of the matter.

3 more die on Biswa Ijtema ground

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Gazipur

Three more devotees died on the Biswa Ijtema ground yesterday.

The deceased are Sherpur's Nowsher Ali, 65; Bhola's Quader Hossain, 55; and Netrokona's Shadhin Ahmed, 45.

Habibullah Raihan, media affairs coordinator of the Ijtema, confirmed the deaths at noon yesterday.

The reasons behind the deaths were not known immediately, he added.

Earlier, between Wednesday and Friday, a total of six participants died on the Ijtema ground due to old age complications, cardiac arrest, and respiratory problems.

They are Matur Rahman, 55, from Jamalpur; Ekhlash Mia, 70, from Netrokona; Shah Alam, 60, from Bhola; Abdus Sattar, 70, from Netrokona; Yunus Miah, 60; and Md Zaman, 40.

The first phase of the 57th Biswa Ijtema began on Friday after the Fajr prayer along the banks of the Turag River.

The first phase will conclude with the final supplication on Sunday.

The second phase is scheduled to begin on February 9.

2 sisters killed in road crash

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Mymensingh

Two sisters were killed and three others injured in a head-on collision between a lorry and a three-wheeler on Bhoraduba-Ghatail road in Mymensingh's Bhaluka upazila yesterday morning.

The deceased - Asma Akter, 35, and her sister Shirina Akter, 26, - were residents of Hatiber village in the same upazila. They were both readymade garment workers.

Of the injured, two, including another sister of the deceased Ajula Akter, 28, were admitted to Mymensingh Medical College Hospital, police said.

Quoting locals, Shah Kamal Akanda, officer-in-charge of Bhaluka Police Station, said the battery-run auto-rickshaw, bound for Bhoraduba, collided head-on with an egg-laden lorry in Hatiber area around 5:00am, leaving the two siblings dead on the spot.

On information, police rescued the injured from the scene and recovered the bodies. However, the lorry driver managed to flee with the vehicle.

A case was filed with the police station in this connection, said the OC.

19 killed in Chile wildfires

AFP, Santiago

Wildfires blazing across central and southern Chile have left at least 19 people dead, officials said yesterday, warning the toll was likely to climb as responders comb through burnt-out homes and the flames continue to spread.

President Gabriel Boric has decreed a state of emergency "due to catastrophe" over the fires, as dry conditions in the area and temperatures soaring to 40 degrees Celsius (104 degrees Fahrenheit) exacerbate the crisis.

The blazes are concentrated in the Valparaiso tourist region, along central Chile's coastline, where they have ravaged thousands of hectares of forest, cloaked coastal cities in a dense fog of gray smoke and forced people to flee their homes.

Funding for another metro

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design, and procurement documentation in November 2022.

Meanwhile, South Korea signed a "Framework Arrangement" in May last year to provide a soft loan of \$3 billion during the 2023-2027 period. Of the funds, \$1.5 billion will be for the southern route of Mass Rapid Transit Line-5.

The interest rate will be 0.01 to 0.05 percent with a 40-year repayment period and a 15-year grace period, said the finance ministry officials.

The country's first metro rail line, formerly known as MRT Line-6, came into full operation, except the Motijheel-Kamalapur part, on January 22, significantly reducing travel time in a major part of the city.

Now, the metro trains operate between Uttara and Motijheel from 7:00am to 8:40pm six days a week.

Construction work of two more metro rail lines - MRT Line-5 (northern route) and MRT Line-1 - is going on.

The northern route of MRT Line-5 will be a 20km route from Hemayetpur to Bhatara via Gabtoli, Mirpur-10 and Gulshan. The deadline for the Tk 41,239 crore project is 2028.

The MRT Line-1 is the biggest infrastructure project in the transport sector, involving Tk 52,561.43 crore. It will be a 31.24km route with 19 stations. It will have a 19.87km underground section from Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport to Kamalapur and a 11.36km elevated section from Notun Bazar to Purbachal.

PROJECT DETAILS

The southern route of MRT line-5 will start from Gabtoli and end at Dasherbandi via Kalyanpur, Shyamoli, Asad Gate, Russell Square, Karwan Bazar, Hatirjheel, Tejgaon and Aftabnagar. There will be 11 underground and four elevated stations.

The tunnel section will be between Gabtoli and Aftabnagar while the elevated portion is from Aftabnagar to Dasherbandi, according to the project documents.

Nineteen trains with six air-conditioned coaches will be operated initially.

As per the documents, each metro train will have a maximum carrying capacity of 1,908 passengers with a maximum 323 passengers in each of the four middle coaches and a maximum of 308 in each of the trailer coaches.

The travel time between Gabtoli and Dasherbandi is estimated to be 28 minutes. A train will run every four minutes and 30 seconds in 2030.

The resettlement cost has been estimated at Tk 4,716 crore.

According to the project documents, the population of Dhaka is estimated to be over 20 million at present and will be close to 30 million in 2035. This project will contribute to reducing traffic congestion and improving the environment of Dhaka city and its adjoining areas.

As per the time-bound action plan, the government will build a 140km network of metro rails consisting six lines in Dhaka and adjacent areas by 2030.

Once the planned network consisting of six lines comes into reality, 50 lakh people will be able to use the facilities.

Israel pounds Gaza cities

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30 percent" of Gaza's structures had been affected by the war, according to AFP.

Gaza health authorities say more than 27,000 Palestinians have been confirmed killed since the start of the war, 107 of them in the past 24 hours, with thousands more feared lost amid the ruins.

Tens of thousands of people have arrived in Rafah in recent days carrying belongings in their arms and pulling children on carts, since Israeli forces last week launched one of their biggest assaults of the war to capture nearby Khan Younis, the main southern city.