

2nd phase Ijtema begins today

STAR REPORT

The second phase of the Biswa Ijtema begins on the bank of the Turag in Tongi today.

Usually, the Ijtema begins with "Aam Bayan" (general sermons) by noted Islamic scholars after Fazr prayers and ends with Akheri Munajat (final prayers).

With the participation of the supporters of Maulana Saad Kandhalvi, the second phase of the Ijtema will end on February 11, reports BSS.

The government has taken security measures centring the second phase of Biswa Ijtema.

Meanwhile, thousands of pilgrims boarding buses, trucks and pick-ups from different parts of the country have arrived on the Ijtema ground.

The first phase of Biswa Ijtema ended on February 4 at the same venue. It had started on February 2.

Religious Affairs Minister Faridul Haque Khan yesterday inspected the Ijtema ground and talked to second phase Ijtema-organisers.

Faridul said that a discussion is going on to bring Maulana Saad Saheb in the country.

Meanwhile, four worshippers died ahead of the second phase of Ijtema as of 9:00pm yesterday. They were aged between 65 to 70, said Ijtema Media Coordinator Mohammad Sayem.

JUNTA-REBEL FIGHTING India to end free border movement with Myanmar

AFP, New Delhi

India's interior minister said yesterday that he had "recommended the immediate suspension" of a free movement border agreement with Myanmar, from where thousands have fled since fighting between the junta and its opponents surged last year.

Amit Shah said the foreign ministry was already "in the process of scrapping" the deal, which allows those living in border zones to venture a short distance into their neighbouring nation's territory without a visa.

Many in the border zones share close cultural and religious ties.

Shah said it was necessary "to ensure the internal security of the country and to maintain the demographic structure" of regions bordering Myanmar.



Palestinians inspect the damage following Israeli bombardment of Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Israeli forces intensify strikes on Rafah

14 civilians, including five children, killed; aid agencies warn of humanitarian catastrophe

AGENCIES

Israeli forces yesterday bombed areas in the southern border city of Rafah where more than half of Gaza's population is sheltering, as Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu rejected a proposal to end offensive in the Palestinian enclave.

Netanyahu said later on Wednesday terms proposed by Hamas for a ceasefire that would also involve releasing hostages held by the Palestinian group were "delusional" and vowed to fight on, saying victory was in reach and just months away.

The rejection followed intense diplomacy to end the four-and-a-half-month conflict before a threatened Israeli assault on Rafah, which is now home to over a million people, many of them in makeshift tents and lacking food and medicine.

- ➔ Netanyahu rejects proposal to end offensive
- ➔ Hamas delegation in Cairo for ceasefire talks
- ➔ Death toll in enclave now 27,840

Aid agencies have warned of a humanitarian catastrophe if Israel follows through on its threat to enter one of the last remaining areas of the Gaza Strip that its troops have not moved into during its ground offensive.

UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres said on Wednesday that pushing into Rafah

on the border with Egypt would "increase what is already a humanitarian nightmare with untold regional consequences."

Israel says it takes steps to avoid civilian casualties and accuses Hamas of hiding among civilians, including at school shelters and hospitals, leading to more civilian deaths. Hamas has denied this.

Israeli planes bombed areas in Rafah yesterday morning, residents said, killing at least 14 civilians, including five children, in strikes on houses. Tanks also shelled some areas in eastern Rafah, intensifying the residents' fears of an imminent ground assault.

"We have our backs to the (border) fence and faces toward the Mediterranean. Where should we go?" said Emad, 55, a displaced person who is a father of six.

Vice-chancellors

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Alamgir said, "We want qualified persons appointed to the top administrative positions."

"If someone can fulfil the criteria, like having a sound academic track, having experience in teaching, research and administrative work, integrity, they should be appointed as VC or to other important positions," he added.

Until now, respective laws of four public universities — Dhaka, Rajshahi, Chittagong, and Jahangirnagar — have provisions that VCs of these universities would be appointed by the president after getting elected by the senate of the respective universities.

But in most cases, un-elected VCs run the universities.

However, there is no criteria for the appointment of VCs to other universities.

As per the rules of those universities, the president appoints a VC, but he does so following the consent of the prime minister after the education ministry sends a list of potential candidates.

The UGC prepared a Strategic Plan for Higher Education for 2006 to 2026 that recommended that the existing system of appointing VCs needed to be changed, as it left "scope for political manoeuvring".

The chancellor could form a national search committee, giving it adequate legal backing to recommend the appointment of VCs, it proposed.

"Subsequent governments did not implement any of the recommendations, choosing, instead, to appoint loyalists," said a UGC member.

Former UGC chairman Prof Abdul Mannan said, "Political identity should not be the only criterion for appointment as VC."

In its "Annual Report 2022", the UGC recommended increasing budgetary allocation for higher education and suggested ranking universities. It also recommended academic master plans for all universities and institutional quality assurance cell and a guideline to stop plagiarism.

According to the UGC report, there are 163 universities — 53 public and 110 private.

There are 47.56 lakh higher education students, of whom 22.14 lakh are female. Private universities have 3.41 lakh students, about one lakh females.

Public universities have 36,399 teachers while private universities have 16,508 teachers.

Taxes cut for better supply in Ramadan

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To ensure adequate supply to the markets, the revenue authority lifted 25 percent customs duty on rice imports, apart from slashing regulatory duty to 5 percent from 25 percent.

The reduction will bring down total import tax on rice to 15.25 percent from 62.5 percent. The reduced import tariff on rice will remain valid until May 15 and the importers will require approval from the food ministry to bring the grains from abroad.

Two rice millers and traders, however, expressed doubt whether the cut will inspire imports of the staple given that neighbouring India maintains 20 percent tax on rice exports to discourage shipment from its territory.

Imports from India may not be profitable because of India's imposition of export duty, according to them.

Nirod Boron Saha, president of the Paddy and Rice Stockists and Wholesalers' Association in Naogaon, a major rice market in the north, said prices of the grain usually increase in India after duty reduction by Bangladesh.

"We need to wait for at least a day to observe how the market reacts there. In case of hike in coarse rice prices there, the possibility of import is low."

However, fine rice may be imported as the current prices in Bangladesh may encourage some importers, he added.

Dhaka to buy defence equipment from Delhi

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India granted a \$500 million soft loan to Bangladesh during Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's visit to New Delhi in 2017.

On the second day of his three-day visit, Hasan yesterday delivered a lecture at the Vivekananda International Foundation where he described the current state of relations between India and Bangladesh as a "golden chapter".

He said the two countries are now giving highest priority to three aspects — enhancing mutual trust and confidence, promoting connectivity, and ensuring all round economic cooperation.

Hasan said Bangladesh would not allow any terrorist activities on its soil.

Bangladesh earlier ensured that no insurgents from the northeastern India could take shelter here — a policy that was highly lauded by Indian leadership for keeping the northeast stable.

Other than India, Bangladesh will be able to import rice from Thailand which also produces parboiled rice, Nirod said.

A large rice miller and importer, seeking anonymity, said import of coarse and medium grains is unlikely because of the export curbs by India.

However, consumers may get some benefit from the removal of VAT from domestic processing and trading of soybean and palm oil.

The NBR also cut VAT on import of both refined and unrefined edible oil — soybean and palm oil — which Bangladesh has to import to meet 90 percent of its domestic requirement.

A top official of a leading commodity importer and processor said prices of edible oil may drop by Tk 5-Tk 6 a litre once the new consignment of edible oil, imported at the reduced VAT rate, reaches the country.

Bottled soybean oil was selling for Tk 158-Tk 165 a litre in Dhaka yesterday.

The current prices are higher than a month ago but lower than the same day a year ago, according to data from the Trading Corporation of Bangladesh.

Bangladesh consumes about 1.5 lakh tonnes of edible oil a month.

During Ramadan, demand for the essential commodity, used to make traditional snacks, rises to 2 lakh tonnes, according to estimates by the Bangladesh Trade and Tariff Commission (BTTC).

The VAT benefit will remain effective until April 15, according to the NBR.

Sugar may become a little cheaper following the reduction in specific duty for import of raw sugar to Tk 1,000 per tonne from Tk 1,500.

The official, however, said the impact may be negligible — Tk 0.50 per kg — as other taxes on sugar remain unchanged.

Yesterday, retail price of unpackaged sugar was Tk 140 per kg in Dhaka, showed TCB data.

The price of sugar, consumption of which doubles to 3 lakh tonnes in Ramadan, was 3.5 percent lower from a month ago.

The NBR said the reduced specific duty will remain effective until March 31.

In case of dates, the revenue authority also cut import duty to 15 percent from 25 percent.

BTTC estimates that Ramadan accounts for half of the 1 lakh tonnes annual requirement of dates. Following the duty cut, the total tax on dates import stands at 43 percent from 58.6 percent.

The new duty rates for import of dates have already become effective and will remain in force until March 30.

Fahmida Khatun, executive director of the Centre for Policy Dialogue, said the import tariff cut and VAT removal should lead to a decline in prices but "our past experience tells us that the price does not fall to the extent of tariff and VAT reduction".

She said market surveillance by the government is good now.

"If it continues in the supply chain of the commodities, prices may fall."

from Myanmar.

"In recent weeks, hundreds of people fled from Myanmar to India and Bangladesh. That is why the Indian government decided to go for it," he said during an interactive session at the Vivekananda International Foundation.

On the Rohingya issue in Bangladesh, the foreign minister said Bangladesh has been discussing with Myanmar for the last seven years so that it takes them back with full dignity and honour. Myanmar has been saying that they would take them back but they are adopting delaying tactics, he said.

Hasan said the current situation in Myanmar is an "obstacle" to sending back the refugees. He expected assistance and cooperation from the Indian side for Rohingya repatriation.

About 1.2 million Rohingyas in Bangladesh are creating environmental and security problems besides other difficulties for Bangladesh.

BANGLADESHIS IN MALAYSIA

733 workers to get Tk 2.3cr in unpaid wages

THE STAR/ANN

733 stranded Bangladeshi workers, who were tricked into coming to Malaysia for non-existent jobs, yesterday successfully claimed more than Tk 2.38 crore (RM 1 million) in unpaid wages from their supposed employers.

The Human Resources Ministry of Malaysia yesterday said the workers and their employers reached a mutual agreement in this regard following proceedings carried out by Johor Labour Department officers.

The ministry said the case's conclusion would serve as a precedent for future labour cases.

"This case involves foreign workers who were legally brought into the country but were not provided with employment... Any employers found guilty of this will be blacklisted by the authorities, and their quotas for foreign workers will be cancelled," it quoted.

On January 16, Malaysia's Human Resources Minister Steven Sim said that 751 Bangladeshi workers in Pengerang had been left stranded and jobless in the country after they were duped by employers to enter the country.

Khaleda visits Evercare for regular check-up

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia yesterday visited the Evercare Hospital in Dhaka for a regular health check-up.

"Khaleda Zia reached the hospital at 6:48pm," BNP media cell member Shayrul Kabir Khan told The Daily Star.

It was not clear whether the BNP chief will return to her home after her check-up. Her medical board will decide on that, said Khaleda's personal physician AZM Zahid Hossain.

Khaleda Zia was discharged from hospital last month after staying there for treatment for five months.

Khaleda returns home after check-up

UNB, Dhaka

BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia yesterday underwent health checkups at Evercare Hospital in the capital.

She arrived at the hospital from her Gulshan residence around 6:48pm and stayed there for nearly five hours, said BNP media cell member Sayrul Kabir Khan.

He said that the BNP chairperson underwent several tests at the hospital. Later, the BNP chief left the hospital and reached her residence around 12:15am, he said.

Irregularities, violence mar Pakistan polls

FROM PAGE 1

Despite the heightened security, nine people, including two children, were killed in bomb blasts, grenade attacks and shootings.

At least 26 people were killed in two explosions near electoral candidates' offices in the southwestern province of Balochistan on Wednesday. Islamic State later claimed responsibility for those attacks.

Yesterday's victims included five police killed in a bomb blast and firing on a patrol in the Kulachi area of Dera Ismail Khan district in the northwest, authorities said. Two children died in a blast outside a women's polling station in Balochistan.

Except for Pakistan Muslim League (N), mainstream political parties such as the Pakistan People's Party, Jamaat-i-Islami (JI) and Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf have reported vote rigging at polling stations across the country, reports Dawn.

The PTI also claimed that election results across the country are being delayed after ousted PM Imran Khan's candidate emerged victorious.

"Despite a few isolated incidents, the overall situation remained under control, demonstrating the effectiveness of our security measures," caretaker Interior Minister Gohar Ejaz said in a statement.

Mobile phone services suspended for security reasons were being partially resumed, the Interior Ministry said late yesterday.

The move to suspend mobile networks sparked criticism from leaders of opposition parties, with the Pakistan Peoples Party's Bilawal Bhutto Zardari, the 35-year-old son of assassinated former premier

Benazir Bhutto, calling for its "immediate restoration".

Amnesty International called it "a blunt attack on the rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly".

Chief Election Commissioner Sikandar Sultan Raja said the decision on mobile networks was made by "law and order agencies" following Wednesday's violence.

PTI, in a post on X, called on people to remove passwords from their personal Wifi accounts "so anyone in the vicinity" could have internet access.

However, Nawaz Sharif dismissed talk of an unclear result.

"Don't talk about a coalition government. It is very important for a government to get a clear majority... It should not be relying on others," he told reporters after casting his vote in the eastern city of Lahore.

The military has dominated the nuclear-armed country either directly or indirectly in its 76 years of independence but for several years it has maintained it does not interfere in politics.

"The deciding factor is which side the powerful military and its security agencies are on," said Abbas Nasir, a columnist. "Only a huge turnout in favour of (Khan's) PTI can change its fortunes."

He added: "Economic challenges are so serious, grave, and the solutions so very painful that I am unsure how anyone who comes to power will steady the ship."

If the election does not result in a clear majority for anyone, as analysts are predicting, tackling multiple challenges will be tricky — foremost being seeking a new bailout programme from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) after the current arrangement expires in March.

Falling container kills man

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The victim's cousin Habibur Rahman said Shamim was the sole breadwinner of his five-member family and had been working in the project for three years.

"He had twin baby girls just three months ago... How will his family survive now?" he asked, demanding proper compensation for the family.

Shamim's body was sent to Shaheed Suhrawardy Medical College morgue for autopsy.

Just the day before, Matiur Rahman, 50, a hawker, was killed after a steel frame from the expressway fell on him in Dhaka's Moghbazar area.

On May 29 last year, a 12-year-old boy died after an iron rod fell on him from the under-construction expressway in the capital's Mohakhali.

The Daily Star visited the Tejkunipara spot yesterday and tried to contact the expressway officials. They however declined to make any comments regarding the accident.