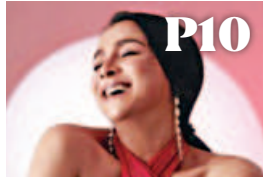




P11 Cancer survivor Haller leads 'Zombies' to glory



P10 People's comments mirror their own mentality



P9 Putin's interview and the West's outrage



P6 Vessel reports missile attack off Yemen's coast

Coast Guard, BGB on alert

Locals fear fresh influx of Myanmar nationals

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, Cox's Bazar

Amid fear of a fresh influx of Myanmar nationals, Bangladesh border and coast guards have stepped up vigilance along the Myanmar border, including the Naf river.

Members of Bangladesh Coast Guard and border forces were seen patrolling the border area over the last few days, as locals say the situation in Myanmar was still tense and more Myanmar nationals, including the Rohingya, may attempt to cross the Naf anytime for shelter.

Last week, both forces intercepted several incoming boats with Myanmar nationals and redirected them towards Myanmar amid weeks-long fierce fighting between Myanmar troops and Arakan Army (AA), an insurgent group that seeks to establish a separate state in Rakhine.

Since last Tuesday, at least 100 Rohingyas were pushed back as they attempted to cross into Bangladesh through the Naf near Teknaf ferry terminal in Cox's Bazar, Coast Guard sources said.



Lt Commander Lutfur Lahil Majid, head of Coast Guard's Teknaf station, said they are on high alert in the prevailing situation.

Although there has been no report of any large-scale Rohingya influx since fighting began in recent weeks, at least 330 members of Myanmar army and border police fled the conflict and took refuge in Bangladesh.

Dhaka and Naypyidaw are now discussing the process of their repatriation, which will be finalised in two to three days, said Chattogram Divisional Commissioner Md Tofail Islam.

Separately, Bangladesh law enforcers arrested 23 Myanmar nationals who entered Bangladesh with weapons, said Chattogram Range Deputy Inspector General (DIG) Noore Alam Meena.

A court in Cox's Bazar yesterday placed 22 of them on police remand for three days each. The remand petition for another Myanmar national named Sadek was rejected on health grounds.

"A case has been filed after arresting 23 people with weapons. Investigation is underway and legal action will be taken for trespassing," said Noore Alam.

He added that the situation on the other side of the border seems "relatively peaceful" at the moment.

"Border Guard Bangladesh is keeping an eye on the situation," he said.

Both Tofail and Noore Alam visited Ghumdhum border area yesterday.

Noor Ahmed Anwari, chairman of Whykong Union of Teknaf, said they heard intermittent gunshots across

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Without any protection, workers unload bags of fly ash from a vessel in Chattogram city's Sadarghat area yesterday. The labourers are not aware of the health risk involved in inhaling fly ash, a key material for making cement. Fly ash inhalation has been linked to respiratory, heart, and kidney diseases.

PHOTO: RAJIB RAIHAN

Shanto's dream comes true

MAZHAR UDDIN

"One of my dreams came true," said Najmul Hossain Shanto as he expressed his initial reaction after Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) declared him as the all-format captain yesterday.

The 25-year-old was unable to further convey his feelings to The Daily Star as he is suffering from a sore throat. He afterwards texted that he would like to speak more when he felt better, but Shanto's delight at his new role was palpable.



Following a board meeting held at the BCB headquarters at Mirpur's Sher-e-Bangla National Cricket Stadium, BCB president Nazmul Hassan Papon informed reporters that they had a "lengthy discussion about captaincy" before placing Shanto "as captain for all three formats for this year".

Hassan, also the new youth and sports minister, stated that Shakib Al Hasan

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Rail bogged down by six projects

TUHIN SHUBHIRA ADHIKARY

Cox's Bazar has to make do with just two daily trains against the huge demand, while travel time for people heading to the north by rail is longer than it should be because the Bangladesh Railway failed to get key projects going.

As many as six major projects of the BR have been on halt for years or have seen very little progress lately. The fate of two of the projects is now uncertain due to complexities over financing.

One of the projects was taken in April 2019 to convert 225 kilometres of metre-gauge (MG) railway line from Akhaura to the Sylhet section into 239km of dual gauge.

The Tk 16,104 crore project aimed at boosting connectivity between the capital and the Sylhet region was supposed to be completed by June 2025.

China was supposed to provide

66.16 percent of the total project cost under a government-to-government arrangement, and almost all necessary procedures, including the selection of contractors, were done.

However, a committee formed by the Prime Minister's Office to review the negotiated contract prices of the two projects including this one asked the BR in November 2020 to bring down the project cost by Tk 3,354.31 crore (20.8 percent).

However, the Chinese contractor disagreed over the revised costs, halting the project's implementation.

The project saw no progress in the last three years even though the rail ministry had formed a committee to renegotiate the price with the contractor, according to officials informed with the proceedings.

"The project is uncertain now.

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PROJECTS AT STANDSTILL
Kulaura-Shahbazpur Line Restoration COST: Tk 678.50 crore TIME: July 2011-December 2024 PROGRESS: 27.50%
Dhaka-Narayanganj Double Line COST: Tk 658.34 crore TIME: July 2014-June 2026 PROGRESS: 47.50%
Procurement of 200 carriages COST: Tk 927.51 crore TIME: July 2016-June 2024 PROGRESS: No progress
Faridpur-Magura Rail line COST: Tk 1202.49 crore TIME: May 2018-June 2024 PROGRESS: 45.63%
Joydebpur-Ishwardi Double Line COST: Tk 14,250.61 crore TIME: January 2019-December 2024 PROGRESS: 7.35%
Conversion of Akhaura-Sylhet Rail Line COST: Tk 16,104.44 crore TIME: April 2019-June 2025 PROGRESS: No progress

Defaulted loans soar 20.7pc in 2023

MD MEHEDI HASAN

The banking sector's defaulted loans soared 20.7 percent to Tk 145,633 crore in 2023 as both governance and accountability continue to get looser.

Defaulted loans now account for 9 percent of all outstanding loans, up from 8.16 percent a year earlier, as per the latest data from the Bangladesh Bank.

"It is a worrying situation that the defaulted loans increased by about Tk 25,000 crore in just a year," said Syed Mahbubur Rahman, managing director of Mutual Trust Bank.

To put things into perspective, the total volume of bad loans in the sector was Tk 22,000 crore in 2008.

The bad loans have increased as wilful defaulters are on the rise, said Rahman, a former chairman of the Association of Bankers Bangladesh (ABB).

The slow loan recovery amid the economic slowdown is another reason for the growing trend of bad loans.

"Banks generally face liquidity pressure when defaulted loans rise, so the growing trend of bad loans will have to stop in any way."

The overall provisioning shortfall stood at Tk 19,261 crore last year, up 75 percent year-on-year.

Rahman went on to emphasise on strict execution of the roadmap announced by the central bank on February 4 to rein in the defaulted loans to a reasonable level and bring in good governance to the banking sector.

The banking regulator wants to reduce the bad loans to less than 8 percent of all outstanding loans by June 30,

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She was 'raped after her eyes, mouth were glued shut'

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Khulna

A woman in Khulna's Paikgachha upazila was reportedly gang-raped in the early hours of yesterday, by criminals who spread glue on her eyes to prevent her from identifying them.

The 42-year-old homemaker and mother of two is now undergoing treatment at Khulna Medical College Hospital (KMCH).

Gold ornaments and cash were also looted by the criminals who broke in when she was home alone, said family members.

According to family members and neighbours, the criminals climbed onto the roof of the one-storey building and broke in through the door of the rooftop.

Hearing her screams, neighbours rushed to her house around 2:00am and rescued her.

The victim's husband
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Hawkers throwing brick chunks at police during their clash with the law enforcers after the latter tried to evict them in Chattogram city's New Market area yesterday. At least 10 people, including five policemen, were injured. Story on page 5.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

Sharif, Bilawal eye Pak PM post

PML-N offers PPP 'president, Speaker' slots

AGENCIES

Political parties in Pakistan yesterday wrangled over terms and conditions of possible coalitions to form the next government after last week's election resulted in no clear winner.

Pakistani media yesterday said top leaders of Nawaz Sharif-led Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) and Bilawal Bhutto Zardari-led Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) met on Sunday and insiders in the meeting said the discussions focused on who would be the next prime minister.

The squabbling is likely to deepen concerns about the stability of the nuclear-armed nation which is mired in an economic crisis and battling a surge in militancy.

This flurry of political activities came as no party won a simple majority to form the next government in the polls. Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf-backed independent candidates came out at the top with at least 93 seats, defying a months-long crackdown. PML-N and PPP respectively won 75 and 54 seats.

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- » Half dozen independents join Sharif's party
- » PTI rules out talks with PPP, PML-N
- » Interim PM rejects polls rigging allegations