

'Planet on brink' after warmest decade on record UN warns as heatwaves stalk oceans, glaciers suffer record ice loss

AFP, Geneva

Global heat records were "smashed" last year, the UN confirmed yesterday, with 2023 rounding out the hottest decade on record, as heatwaves stalked oceans and glaciers suffered record ice loss.

The United Nations' World Meteorological Organization (WMO) issued its annual State of the Climate report, confirming preliminary data indicating that 2023 was by far the hottest year ever recorded.

And it came at the end of "the warmest 10-year period on record", the WMO report said. UN chief Antonio Guterres said the report showed "a planet on the brink".

"Earth's issuing a distress call," he said, pointing out that "fossil fuel pollution is sending climate chaos off the charts", and warning that "changes are speeding up".

The WMO said the average near-surface temperature was 1.45 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels last year -- dangerously close to the critical 1.5 degree threshold that countries agreed to avoid passing in the 2015 Paris climate accords.

"Never have we been so close... to the 1.5C lower limit of the Paris Agreement," WMO chief Andrea Celeste Saulo warned in a statement.

The report, she said, should be seen as a "red alert to the world".

Going through the data, the organisation found that "records were once again broken, and in some cases smashed", warning that the numbers "gave ominous new significance to the phrase 'off the charts'".

Saulo stressed that climate change was about much more than temperatures.

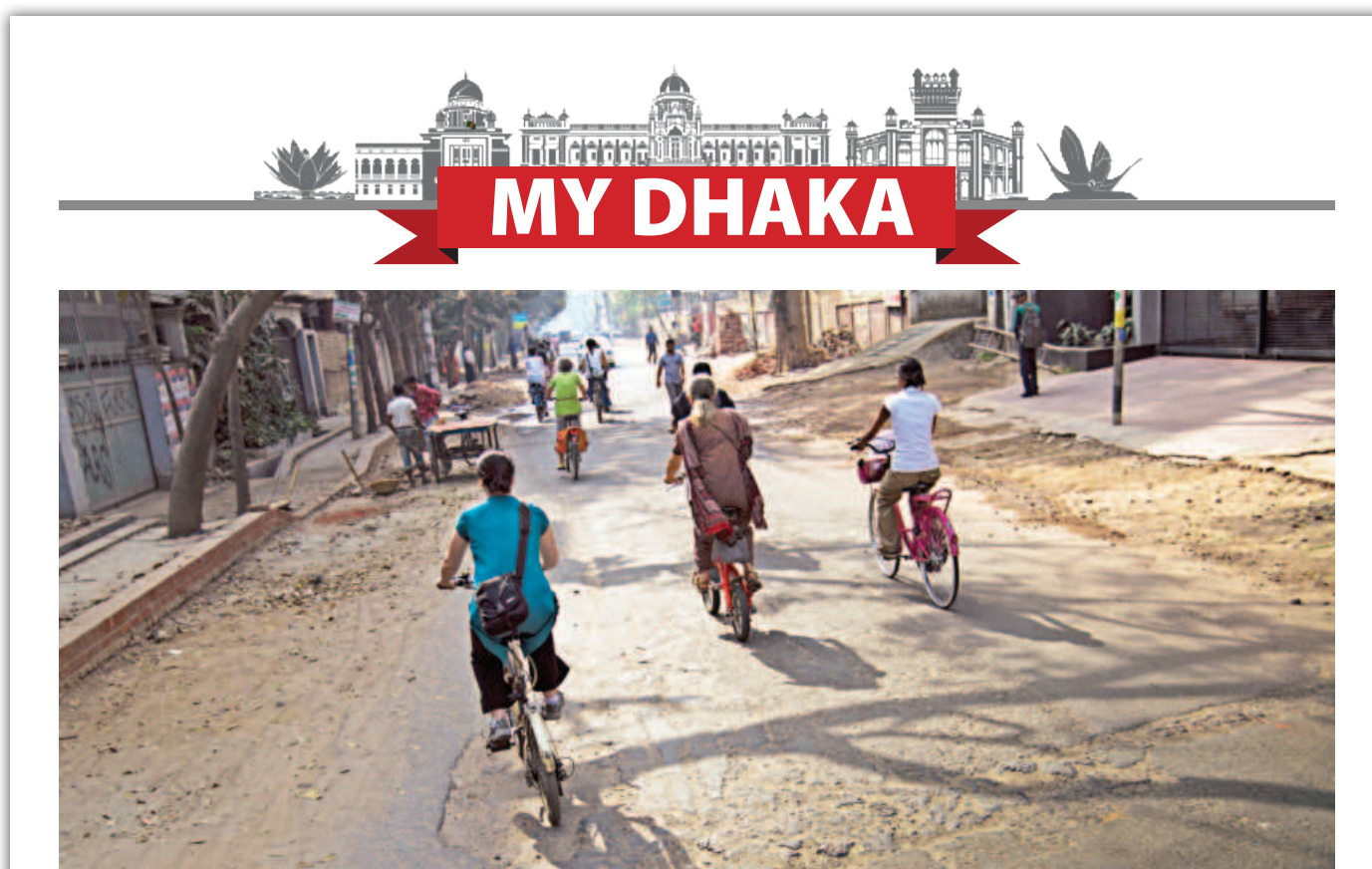
"What we witnessed in 2023, especially with the unprecedented ocean warmth, glacier retreat and Antarctic sea ice loss, is cause for particular concern."

One especially worrying finding was that marine heatwaves gripped nearly a third of the global ocean on an average day last year.

And by the end of 2023, more than 90 percent of the ocean had experienced heatwave conditions at some point during the year, the WMO said.

More frequent and intense marine heatwaves will have "profound negative repercussions for marine ecosystems and coral reefs", it warned.

At the same time, it warned that key glaciers worldwide suffered the largest loss of ice ever since records began in 1950, "driven by extreme melt in both western North America and Europe".



PHOTOS: LS ARCHIVE; JANIFAR RAHMAN

BICYCLES AGAINST TRAFFIC Dhaka's road to a healthier commute

AYMAN ANIKA

If you ask anyone what would be a defining trait of Dhaka, the notorious traffic congestion might be one of the answers.

However, in recent years, a growing number of individuals -- from students to professionals -- are mounting their bicycles, not just for the thrill of a morning ride but as a committed choice for their daily commutes.

This shift is driven by necessity and aspiration, as Dhakaites seek to navigate the city's traffic gridlocks, reduce their carbon footprint, and embrace a healthier lifestyle.

MD Kaiser Hossain, director of communications and public relations at H&H International Foundation and a member of BDCyclists, cycles routinely. Reminiscing about his early years, he shared, "In my school years, cycle was my primary mode of transportation."

Hossain notes a significant shift over the years. "After a gap of a couple of years, I started cycling again in 2013 and have been a member of the BDCyclists group since then. I cycle regularly; likewise, I have seen many office goers use bicycles to navigate the city."

He also pointed out the differences between urban and rural cycling

cultures, stressing the importance of encouraging cycling from a young age in the city.

He emphasised on the dual benefits of cycling for health and the environment. "In the rural areas of our country, you would see school children riding cycles to attend their classes. But in Dhaka, you rarely come across such a scenario. We should encourage our children to learn cycling from their early years."

BDCyclists is a community of cyclists in Bangladesh. It was initiated in 2011 by a group of enthusiasts and now works for the promotion of cycling amongst the masses. Despite the growing popularity of cycling, Dhaka's streets can often feel unwelcoming to cyclists.

Janifar Rahman, an employee at SOS Children's Village Dhaka, shares her personal experience: "I enjoy a sense of freedom whenever I ride my bicycle."

She finds cycling efficient for her commute from Mohammadpur to Mirpur but voices safety concerns. "However, my complaint is that the roads are not bicycle-friendly. Sometimes, I feel very scared whenever a truck or bus is behind me or overtakes me."

Safety concerns, stemming from the chaotic traffic and sometimes

less-than-respectful attitudes towards cyclists from motor vehicle drivers, further complicate the decision to cycle. The fear of accidents, theft, and lack of emergency support mechanisms are tangible disadvantages that many cyclists face.

Despite these challenges, the experience of cycling in Dhaka is uniquely rewarding. Ask any regular commuter, and you will hear tales of exhilaration, of discovering hidden corners of the city, of mornings filled with the promise of a new adventure. There's a sense of reclaiming one's time and freedom, of being more in tune with the city's rhythms and one's own body.

Kazi Dhiman, a graphic designer, echoes the sentiment of efficiency. "My office used to be near the Beribandh. So, as I lived in Mirpur-1, I used my cycle to commute every day. It was a time-efficient option because if I had taken the local bus, it would have taken me hours to reach the office."

In Dhaka, cycling, with its blend of advantages and disadvantages, is more than an easy option for commuting -- it's a conscious approach to embracing sustainability and a commitment to a healthier life. The challenges are real, but so are the opportunities for transformation.

As more Dhakaites turn to bicycles, the narrative of the city's commute is slowly but surely changing, paving the way for a greener, healthier Dhaka.



GAZIPUR GAS CYLINDER FIRE 2 more injured die, death toll now 13

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Two more persons, who sustained injuries in the gas cylinder fire in Gazipur on March 13, died at Sheikh Hasina National Institute of Burn and Plastic Surgery in Dhaka yesterday.

With the deaths of the two, the number of fatalities from the fire went up to 13.

The victims are Mashiur Rahman, 22, and Yeasin Arafat, 21.

Mashiur, who suffered 60 percent burns on his body, died around 9:00pm, resident surgeon Tariqul Islam told The Daily Star.

Earlier around 7:00pm, Yeasin, a 21-year-old garment factory worker, died with 62 percent burns on his body.

The fire broke out after a gas cylinder came in contact with a cooking stove in Gazipur's Kaliakoir.

Fifteen injured were still undergoing treatment at the burn institute.

Jubo League leader's eye gouged out

UNB, Lakshimpur

Criminals gouged out the eye of a local Jubo League leader in Sadar upazila of Lakshimpur on Monday night.

The victim, Kamal Hossain, is the president of ward-3 of the Bashikpur union unit Jubo League and a fruit seller at Poddar Bazar.

Kamal came under attack on his way to the Bazar from his house around 8:30pm, said police and locals.

The criminals gouged out his right eye when he reached Nandigram, leaving him critically injured, they said.

He was rushed to Lakshimpur Sadar Hospital. Kamal was later moved to Dhaka Medical College Hospital as his condition was critical, said Anowar Hossain, resident medical officer of Sadar Hospital.

There had been a conflict between the victim and a fertiliser trader of Poddar Bazar, said Enamul Hoque, the officer-in-charge of Chandraganj Police Station. This dispute might have led to the attack.

2 get life for raping teenager

UNB, Tangail

A Tangail court yesterday sentenced two people to life imprisonment for raping a 13-year-old girl in 2022.

Sagar Ahmed, 21, and Ahmed Nabil, 21, of Sakhipur upazila were handed down the punishment by Woman and Child Repression Tribunal Judge Mahbubur Rahman.

According to the prosecution, Sagar had relations with the girl.

On June 29, 2022, Sagar asked her to meet him at a place in Basarchala village. When the girl went there, Sagar and Nabil took her to an abandoned place and raped her.

Her father then filed a case against Sagar, Nabil and Farhad Hossain.

The court also acquitted Farhad as allegations brought against him could not be proved.

Thousands suffer

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Chapainawabganj bound Banalata Express was supposed to leave Dhaka at 1:30pm yesterday. But the train did not reach Dhaka till 2:20pm when this correspondent talked to a passenger of the train.

"I came here from Mirpur at 12:30pm with my ailing aunt. But we are not sure when the train will reach," Rafiqul Islam said.

The train reached Dhaka at 2:45pm.

Like Rafiqul, several hundred other passengers were seen waiting for trains at the Kamalapur Railway Station yesterday.

Another Chapainawabganj-

bound train, Rajshahi Commuter, was supposed to leave the capital at 12:20pm but it did not reach Dhaka till 3:15pm.

Rajshahi bound Silk City Express was supposed to leave Dhaka at 2:40pm but railway authorities rescheduled it to 6:40pm.

Contacted, Asim Kumar Talukder, general manager (west) of BR, said they were trying to solve the problems but it would take two to three days to bring the situation to normal.

Meanwhile, BR yesterday continued its attempts to repair the rail track which was damaged following the derailment of nine

carriages of Bijoy Express on Sunday near Hasanpur Railway Station in Cumilla's Nangalkot.

Currently, BR is operating trains using a single line in this area and that is why most of trains between Dhaka and Chattogram and Cox's Bazar are one to one and a half hours behind schedule, Saiful Islam, divisional railway manager (Chattogram), said.

"We hope that the repair work will be completed within tomorrow [today] and the rail operations will be normal within two days," he told The Daily Star yesterday.

BR currently operates 367 passenger and 42 freight trains daily.

Salam Murshedy

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delivered the verdict after hearing of a writ petition seeking its directives to recover the property allegedly occupied by the MP illegally.

The full text of the HC judgement is yet to be released.

After the HC passed the verdict, writ petitioner's lawyer Aneek R Haque told reporters that the court asked the Anti-Corruption Commission to conduct a proper investigation into the case filed in this connection in an impartial manner.

The people have won through this verdict, the lawyer said.

Meanwhile, Murshedy's lawyer Mohammad Sayed Ahmed Raza termed the HC verdict a rare one.

He said the HC usually does not give such orders without any judgment from a civil court in a case regarding an abandoned property or any property that is owned by the government.

The HC ordered directly transferring the property in a public interest litigation, which is a rare ruling.

"Once the full text of this judgment is released, we will carefully go

through it and then we will take further steps," he added.

Supreme Court lawyer Syed Sayedul Haque Suman, now an independent lawmaker, submitted the writ petition as a public interest litigation to the HC on October 31, 2022 regarding the house-29 of CEN (D)-27 located on the Road-104 of Gulshan 2, which is in the possession of Murshedy.

In the petition, Suman said Rajdhani Unnayan Kartripakkha (Rajuk) had given the ownership of the luxurious building of the Public Works Department to Murshedy, lawmaker from Khulna-4, by forging documents.

During the hearing on the petition, ACC lawyer Khurshid Alam Khan told the HC that the commission in a probe found that fraudulence, forgery, and abuse of power occurred during the allocation of the Gulshan house and plot to Murshedy.

Following the enquiry, the graft watchdog filed a criminal case against 11 people under the Penal Code and Section 5(2) of the Anti-Corruption Act of 1947, he added.

TIB slams move to relax provision for public servants

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is now being done every five years. Even that provision is not being followed properly by government employees.

"If this obligation is not in place, the government employees will be encouraged to get involved in corruption," he said, adding that people will face difficulties getting services at offices and exchange of illegal money will largely increase.

Iftekharruzaman added that the argument that the government can collect its employees' wealth statements from their annual income tax returns to the NBR is "meaningless" because it is not possible as per the Income Tax Act, 2023.

The statement also said without court orders, the Anti-Corruption Commission cannot see the income tax returns of person accused of corruption or acquiring wealth disproportionate to their legal incomes. As a result, corrupt officials will get protection rather than being held accountable.

Bangladesh breathed worst air last year

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from 2022's mark of 65.8 µg/m³. There were four months in 2023 where the monthly concentration averages were above 100 µg/m³ and two months where the average breached 150 µg/m³, the report said, adding that Dhaka ranked second worst among capital cities.

Brick kilns, vehicle emissions, dust, emissions from factories, household cookstoves, plastic incineration, and unlined landfills are the key sources of air pollution in Bangladesh.

"Air pollution in northern South Asia can be transboundary in nature, as pollutants converge and drift across the shared Indo-Gangetic Plain. Smoke from countries, including India, Nepal, and Pakistan, can drift into Bangladesh during crop burning season," the report said.

Central and South Asia were the worst-performing regions globally. South Asia is of particular concern, with 29 of the 30 globally most polluted cities being located in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh.

Only 10 countries and territories had better air quality than they had in 2022: Finland, Estonia, Puerto Rico, Australia, New Zealand, Bermuda, Grenada, Iceland, Mauritius, and French Polynesia.

Experts said the air quality situation in Bangladesh was gradually

worsening and the issue should get top priority considering the health impact.

Prof Abdus Salam, of Dhaka University's Chemistry department, told The Daily Star yesterday, "Various studies have shown that many parts of the country, especially the urban areas, are no longer liveable at all. Over the years, Bangladesh has shown huge progress according to many indicators but when it comes to air quality, we are going in the opposite direction."

The air quality expert said Bangladesh should take long-term steps to improve air quality and this sector needs well-thought-out investments.

According to the WHO, air pollution is the greatest environmental threat to human health as it causes an estimated one in every nine deaths worldwide and is responsible for an estimated seven million premature deaths across the globe every year.

Prof Abul Bashar Mohammad Khurshid Alam, director general of the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS), said, "Due to poor air quality, the number of patients with asthma and respiratory diseases is increasing in urban areas. Children are the worst victims and we are also noticing allergic manifestation in the

adults."

He, however, said industrial air pollution is more lethal than street air pollution as carcinogenic elements are present in industrial air pollution.

PM2.5
The report said while PM2.5 poses direct health risks, its implications extend beyond human health to complex environmental processes impacted by the Earth's climate.

It said climate change, primarily driven by greenhouse gas emissions, plays a pivotal role in influencing concentrations of PM2.5 air pollutants, and fossil fuel emissions are simultaneously responsible for the majority of PM2.5-related deaths.

Fossil fuel emissions account for 65 percent of global CO2 emissions and are also the primary cause of the majority of PM2.5-related deaths, highlighting the interconnected relationship between air quality and climate change, the report finds.

"A clean, healthy, and sustainable environment is a universal human right. In many parts of the world the lack of air quality data delays decisive action and perpetuates unnecessary human suffering. Air quality data saves lives. Where air quality is reported, action is taken, and air quality improves," states Frank Hammes, Global CEO, IQAir.

'They deserve gallows'

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general manager Sofiz Uddin Ahmed, former assistant general manager Kamrul Hossain Khan, and Dhanmondi branch's former senior executive officer Meherunnisa Mary were sentenced to 10 years in prison for breach of trust and seven concurrent years for cheating. Each was fined Tk 12 lakh.

Jamal Uddin Sarker, former chairman of Savar's Tetuljhara Union Parishad, was awarded five years in jail for issuing fake trade licences and two concurrent years for cheating. He was also fined Tk 7 lakh.

Of the convicts, Jasmine, Tanvir, Tusher, Mir Mohidur, Sofiz, Mainul, Kamrul and Malek are behind bars, while the rest are absconding.

The court issued conviction warrants against them.

On March 27, 2016, another Dhaka court framed charges against them in the case. Since then, 59 prosecution witnesses testified before the court.

On October 12, 2012, the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) filed a case with Ramna Model Police Station, accusing 22 people.

In October 2013, ACC Assistant

Director Mashiur Rahman pressed charges against 20.

Three of the accused died during the trial.

In May 2012, Bangladesh Bank detected a scam of over Tk 3,500 crore in Sonali Bank's Ruposhi Bangla Hotel branch. Of the sum, Hallmark alone took Tk 2,686 crore using forged documents in connivance with some bank officials.

The ACC, which was tasked to investigate the matter, filed 11 cases against 27 top officials of Sonali Bank and Hallmark Group.