

'No helmet, no fuel' goes nationwide

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The police headquarters has directed all field-level police officers to implement the "no helmet, no fuel" policy to prevent road accidents.

The directive was issued at yesterday's monthly crime review meeting headed by the Additional Inspector General of Police (Crime and Operations) Md Atiqul Islam.

The instruction came a day after Road Transport and Bridges Minister Obaidul Quader declared that filling stations would not supply fuel to motorcyclists without helmets.

At the meeting, Addl IGP Atiqul also directed the police officials to complete the investigation of the road accident cases properly.

He noted that the ongoing special drives against unfit vehicles would continue.

All metropolitan police commissioners, all range deputy inspector generals and superintendents of police of all districts attended the meeting virtually, while PHQ's DIG operations and DIG crimes participated in person.

INDIA ELECTION Dance videos of Modi, rival turn up AI heat

REUTERS, New Delhi

An AI video shows an ecstatic Narendra Modi sporting a trendy jacket and trousers, grooving on a stage to a Bollywood song as the crowd cheers. The Indian prime minister reshared the video on X, saying "such creativity in peak poll season is truly a delight."

Another video, with the same stage setting, shows Modi's rival Mamata Banerjee dancing in a saree-like outfit, but the background score is parts of her speech criticizing those who quit her party to join Modi's. State police have launched an investigation saying the video can "affect law and order".

The different reactions to videos created using artificial intelligence (AI) tools underscore how the use and abuse of the technology is increasing and creating worries for regulators and security officials as the world's most populous nation holds a mammoth general election.

India's Election Commission last week warned political parties against AI use to spread misinformation and shared seven provisions of information technology and other laws that attract jail terms of up to three years for offences including forgery, promoting rumours and enmity.



The mother of Asim Jawad, the pilot who died after a BAF fighter jet crashed in Chattogram, meets Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina at the Gono Bhaban yesterday. Asim's daughter is seen on the PM's lap.

PHOTO: PTD

Israel's tanks push into Jabalia in north Gaza

Pounds Rafah without advancing; 39 more Palestinians killed

REUTERS, Cairo

Israel's tanks pushed into the heart of Jabalia in northern Gaza yesterday, facing anti-tank rockets and mortar bombs from Hamas members concentrated there, while in the south, its forces pounded Rafah without advancing, Palestinian residents and Hamas said.

The slow progress of Israel's offensive, more than seven months after it was prompted by Hamas' deadly cross-border raid, highlighted the difficulty of achieving Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's aim of eradicating the group.

Armed wings of Hamas and its ally Islamic Jihad have been able to fight up and down the Gaza Strip, using heavily fortified tunnels to stage attacks in both the north - the focus of Israel's initial invasion - and new battlegrounds like Rafah.

"The operation in Rafah is still limited in space and in targets," military spokesperson Lt Col Nadav Shoshani said, adding that its attacks were based on specific intelligence.

At least 35,272 Palestinians have been killed and 79,205 have been wounded in Israel's military offensive on Gaza since October 7, the Gaza health ministry said in a statement yesterday. The toll includes

at least 39 deaths over the past 24 hours, it said.

Egypt has rejected an Israeli proposal for the two countries to coordinate to re-open the Rafah crossing between Egypt's Sinai Peninsula and the Gaza Strip, and to manage its future operation, two Egyptian security sources said.

- S Africa seeks halt to Israel's Rafah offensive at ICJ
- Egypt rejects Israeli plans for Rafah crossing
- Death toll in enclave rises to 35,272

South Africa yesterday asked the top UN court to order an immediate halt to Israel's incursion in Rafah, describing it as a "genocidal" operation threatening the "very survival of Palestinians".

Top lawyers for Pretoria kicked off two days of hearings at the Peace Palace, home of the International Court of Justice

(ICJ), imploring judges to order a ceasefire throughout Gaza. Israel will respond today.

The United States anchored a temporary floating pier to a beach in Gaza yesterday to boost aid deliveries, but it was still unclear how it would be distributed given the challenges that have beset the United Nations and relief groups for months.

Israel declared major operations over in northern Gaza months ago while pledging to return to prevent Hamas regrouping. Israel said yesterday that five of its troops were killed by friendly fire in a Gaza battle.

Yesterday, around a week after they moved back in, Israeli tanks were heavily bombarding the main market in the heart of Jabalia, a decades-old refugee camp, and several stores there caught fire, residents and Hamas media outlets said.

"They are bombing like crazy, destroying the houses and the main market in the camp," one of the camp's residents told Reuters via a chat app.

In Gaza City to the south, medical teams and the Civil Emergency services said they were continuing the search for casualties in the suburbs of Zeitoun and Sabra after dozens of bodies were recovered in the wake of a six-day army raid there.

Comilla univ student suspended for 'hurting religious sentiment'

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Cumilla

The Comilla University authorities yesterday suspended a student for allegedly making derogatory comments against religion on social media.

Acting Registrar Amirul Haque Chowdhury issued the suspension letter to the Physics department student yesterday, confirmed by the university's Public Relations Officer Emdadul Haque.

On Wednesday, a show-cause letter was sent to the student, which he did not reply to within the stipulated time of 24 hours, said the PRO.

Proctor Kazi Omar Siddique said, "The proctorial body found the allegation against the student to be true."

Keshabpur upazila chairman, OC sued

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Benapole

A case was filed on Wednesday with a Jashore court against three persons including an officer-in-charge (OC) and an upazila chairman over taking lease of land.

Jahangir Alam, a fish farmer from Keshabpur upazila, filed the case against Zahir Uddin, OC of Keshabpur Police Station; Mofizur Rahman Mofiz, the newly elected chairman of the upazila; and one Selimuzzaman Asad of Altapol village.

The district's Judicial Magistrate Salman Ahmed has taken the case into cognisance and ordered police to investigate the matter and submit a report within seven days, our Benapole correspondent reports.

According to the case, Jahangir took a lease of 450 bighas of land in Madhyakul Mauza for fish farming for five years. The lease agreement was signed with 214 farmers for a total of Tk 1.8 crore.

However, Mofiz, upon being elected chairman, allegedly signed another agreement with 100 farmers among the 214 to cultivate the same land.

Farmer Jahangir alleged that since February 2024, Mofiz and Asad have been threatening him to relinquish his lease and hand over the land to them. When he attempted to lodge a complaint with the Keshabpur Police Station, the officials reportedly refused to register it.

Worker burned to death in Badda fire

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

A worker died in a fire that broke out at a foam factory and spread to the nearby building at Satarkul in the capital's Badda Wednesday night.

Deceased Mofizul Islam, 37, was a worker of Roxy Foam Limited.

Firefighters recovered his charred body lying on the stairs of a two-storey building adjacent to the factory.

Mofizul's brother-in-law Noor Alam said the victim along with one of his coworkers used to live in a first-floor room of the building. After his work at the factory, he returned his room around 10:30pm. The factory was closed when it caught fire, he added.

Shafiqul Islam, deputy assistant director of Fire Service and Civil Defence, said two fire engines rushed to the spot at 11:20pm and doused the flame after an hour's effort.

No let-up in reserves slide

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Bankers say, mismanagement in the forex market in Bangladesh, frequent policy changes by the central bank, and the gap between the official exchange rate and the unofficial one are also to blame.

Since August 2021, forex reserves have fallen by \$24 billion.

A chief executive of a private bank, seeking anonymity, says when the exchange rate of US dollar was Tk120 per dollar in the market, the central bank fixed the rate at Tk110. This prompted Bangladeshi expatriates to remit through illegal channels.

At a time when countries devalued their currencies against the dollar, the central bank of Bangladesh upheld the value of its currency, says the executive, adding that this was not a good decision.

Before 2022, the central bank used to fix the dollar vs taka exchange rate. Then the Association of Bankers Bangladesh and Bangladesh Foreign Exchange Dealers Association fixed

the rate in line with the direction of the central bank.

As the initiatives failed to calm the forex market, the banking regulator last week introduced a crawling peg system. As per the system, the mid-rate of USD is set at Tk117 per dollar.

Since 2021, the BB pumped around \$27 billion to the market from its reserves. The banking regulator is now more cautious when it comes to injecting USD to banks.

IMPACT ON THE ECONOMY
Some international credit rating agencies, including Fitch, put Bangladesh on a negative outlook last year because of the depleting reserves and volatile forex market.

Forex reserves is one of the major indicators of economic strength of a country, says Mustafa K Mujeri, former chief economist of the Bangladesh Bank.

When foreign investors and banks want to invest or give loans to a country, they first check its forex reserves, says the executive director of Institute for

Inclusive Finance and Development, adding that the higher a country's reserves, the better its credit rating.

Every country has a policy of maintaining forex reserves to settle the import bills for at least three months. It is risky if a country does not have one, according to him. If the reserves are not respectable, foreign investors lose confidence in the country.

CENTRAL BANK'S EXPECTATIONS
The central bank expects the reserves to rise after the introduction of the crawling peg system.

BB Deputy Governor Habibur Rahman said curbing forex reserve depletion was a major focus of the central bank.

"We have introduced the new system to this end," he said, adding that the hike in the exchange rate would help raise export and remittance flow in the coming months.

"Subsequently, the deficit in the financial account will narrow. It will give a boost to the reserves."

Smooth sailing for hajj pilgrims leaving Dhaka

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still only available at Dhaka airport, and therefore around 3,000 hajj pilgrims who will travel to Saudi Arabia via Chattogram and Sylhet international airports, will not get the facility.

The "Makkah Route Initiative" is one of the Ministry of Interior's initiatives within the "Pilgrim Experience Program" in seven countries: Bangladesh, Morocco, Indonesia, Malaysia, Pakistan, and, for the first time, Türkiye and Côte d'Ivoire.

The initiative aims to provide high-quality transportation services for pilgrims from beneficiary countries to Saudi Arabia. The initiative streamlines the hajj process for participants by allowing them to complete key procedures from their home country.

This includes electronic visa issuance, biometric data collection, and airport departure checks after verifying health requirements.

Luggage is coded and sorted based on pre-arranged transportation and

accommodation in Saudi Arabia.

Upon arrival, pilgrims are whisked away on dedicated buses to their residences in Makkah and Madinah, with their luggage delivered by service agencies.

Group Captain Kamrul Islam, executive director at Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport, said, "The Saudi authorities have set up something like a mini airport inside the Dhaka airport to complete immigration and other necessary formalities of Bangladeshi pilgrims."

After arriving at the Hajj Camp at the city's Ashkona, pilgrims only need to obtain a boarding pass and complete Bangladeshi immigration formalities.

Luggage of hajj pilgrims are managed and taken care of by the respective staff of the religious affairs ministry and Dhaka airport.

Pilgrims are then taken to the Dhaka airport by bus, where Saudi immigration formalities are completed.

"Travelling under the Makkah

Route Initiative feels like domestic travel," Abdul Alim, a hajj pilgrim said at the Ashkona Hajj Camp recently.

"In the past, Bangladeshi hajjis had to wait hours on end with all their luggage at the Saudi airport to complete immigration formalities.

"Those days of suffering are now over."

4,000 PILGRIMS YET TO GET VISA
As of yesterday, around 4,000 aspiring hajj pilgrims were yet to get visas to Saudi Arabia, according to the religious affairs ministry.

Additional Secretary Matiu Islam said the ministry has already warned 12 hajj private agencies to complete the visa process for all pilgrims scheduled to perform hajj under their management.

Around 3,000 pilgrims are scheduled to perform hajj under the 12 private agencies.

A total of 20,291 pilgrims have so far travelled to Saudi Arabia on 51 flights of Biman, Saudia and Flynas airlines in the last seven days since May 9.

Illegal rickshaws rule Dhaka streets

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registrations or their registrations had expired.

During the day, battery-run rickshaws mainly ply different alleys of the city, but those invade a large number of streets in the evening, making traffic worse.

Leaders of the Rickshaw Van Easybike Sramik Union said battery-powered rickshaws are operated using tokens or cards issued by local politicians and influential people under the banners of different organisations.

The battery-run rickshaw owners avail the tokens or cards every month for Tk 1,000 to Tk 2,500 for each three-wheeler.

In Jatrabari, Shvampur, Postagola, Wari, Sadarghat, Pallabi, Rupnagar, Bhasantek, Khilgaon, Magda, Mandla, Maniknagar, and Kamrangirchar areas, battery-run rickshaws are controlled by different gangs and influential people, said Ariful Islam Nadim, joint secretary of the sramik union.

All these gangs and influential people have police backing, he claimed.

In Dhaka's posh areas like Gulshan, Banani, Baridhara, DOHS, and Bashundhara Residential Area, rickshaws are controlled by the neighbourhoods concerned, and a rickshaw puller needs to pay Tk 12,000-15,000 to have permission from those neighbourhoods, BLS study said.

Ariful blamed the two city corporations for the high number of illegal rickshaws, saying that they do not register new rickshaws.

"The government can earn good revenue by registering battery-run rickshaws. The money is now pocketed by local politicians, influential people and cops," he said.

Jabbar Miah, a rickshaw puller from Jatrabari, said he drives a battery-run rickshaw because it can be driven with less physical labour than a pedal rickshaw.

"I can make about Tk 1,000 a day. But I need to pay Tk 2,000 a month for the token."

Nazir Amin, another rickshaw puller from Kamrangirchar, said he pays a Tk 2,300 a month to a man who controls the business.

"If police catch my rickshaw, I have to pay them Tk 1,200 to get it back. If a rickshaw puller cannot not pay the amount, his battery-run rickshaw gets

dumped [impounded]," he said.

Transport expert Prof Hadiuzzaman said the increasing number of rickshaws have been worsening traffic in the capital over the years.

"If non-motorised vehicles keep on increasing, it will only aggravate the traffic as the streets are not becoming wider," he told this correspondent on Wednesday.

Hadiuzzaman, also a teacher of civil engineering at Buet, said rickshaws should be given registration numbers after improving the registration system.

"If the rickshaws were registered, the government would earn revenue and widespread extortion of rickshaw pullers would stop."

He suggested adopting a comprehensive policy for granting route permits and registering rickshaws, and arranging training for the rickshaw pullers.

The expert said steps should be taken to regulate battery-run rickshaws.

"These rickshaws should be allowed to operate on specific routes after registration. Besides, such rickshaws should be modified to make them suitable for certain roads as there are many weaknesses in those, including the braking system," he said.

He said the BRTA is not capable of registering such a large number of battery-run rickshaws.

DNCC Public Relations Officer (PRO) Mokbul Hossain said they have developed a comprehensive plan to ensure discipline in operating pedal rickshaws in the DNCC area.

"The plan is currently awaiting approval from the Local Government Engineering Department," he said.

Mokbul said the corporation will issue digital number plates with QR codes to pedal rickshaws to prevent the reuse of previous number plates. He, however, did not mention the time when they would introduce the system.

He could not confirm when they would renew the pedal rickshaw registrations and what actions would be taken against the illegal ones.

The DNCC official said their magistrates carry out drives occasionally against battery-run rickshaws.

DSCC PRO Abu Naser said that they have renewed the registrations of rickshaws recently.

"We have developed an app, which can scan QR codes, to access the

information of registered rickshaws."

He said the city corporation was carrying out campaigns to make people aware of the risks of battery-run rickshaws, and to discourage them from using those.

Md Monibur Rahman, additional police commissioner (traffic) of Dhaka Metropolitan Police, said they have already freed some major roads from pedal rickshaws to ease congestion.

"We are conducting drives against battery-run rickshaws. Our efforts are underway to bring discipline to the city streets," he said.

Regarding allegations of some police officers taking bribes to allow battery-run rickshaws on roads, the DMP official said they have taken steps against those involved based on evidence, and they would continue to do so.

BRTA Director Mahbub-E-Rabbani said they are against allowing battery-run rickshaws on the streets as those pose high risks.

"If a pedal rickshaw is converted into a motorised one, it won't be safe," he added.

Buet teacher Hadiuzzaman recommended making more public transport available on the major roads, including highways.

"If this can be done, the trend of rickshaws on major roads would be down and the accidents involving battery-run rickshaws would decrease significantly," he said.

Bangladeshis have \$5.9b in tax havens

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OCCRP said that Dubai is popular because of "the emirate's inconsistent responses to requests from foreign authorities for help arresting and extraditing fugitives."

Transparency International said in a press release, "It is difficult to understand how high-profile PEPs, including officials that are under investigation or subject to sanctions elsewhere, can purchase and own these properties without being subject to scrutiny. Authorities should be able to identify suspicious cases themselves, and also share intelligence with their foreign counterparts and target assets."