

## Polybag producers to face action from tomorrow

Says environment ministry

UNB, Dhaka

Although a ban on polythene bags took effect yesterday, makers of the product harmful to the environment will face “strict” legal action from tomorrow since Friday and Saturday are weekends.

Tapan Kumar Biswas, additional secretary (Environmental Pollution Control) and head of a monitoring team regarding the ban, revealed the information to the media during a drive against the use of such bags in Dhaka’s Mohammadpur yesterday.

The Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, along with the Department of Environment (DoE), conducted the monitoring drive at Mohammadpur Agricultural Market and several nearby supermarkets as part of efforts to curb the use of banned polythene shopping bags.

Members of the monitoring committee urged shoppers to use jute and cloth bags instead of polythene.

Vendors were instructed to cease using polythene bags, with a warning

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Rickshaws waiting for passengers at Dhaka University metro station near Bangla Academy, disrupting vehicular movement. The photo was taken yesterday afternoon.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

## Israeli strike on Syria weapons depots kills 10

Says monitor

AFP, Beirut

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said 10 people, mostly civilians, were killed in strikes on Syria’s Qusayr region bordering Lebanon, where Israel said it hit Hezbollah weapons depots.

The Britain-based war monitor said later on Thursday that three strikes targeted the town of Qusayr, where Iran-backed Hezbollah holds sway, and surrounding areas, later reporting further strikes on the area.

One strike targeted “a weapons depot and a fuel storage facility for Hezbollah in the industrial city of Qusayr”, killing seven civilians and three Syrian fighters working for the Lebanese group, the Observatory said.

At least 11 other people were wounded, it said, adding that the other strikes targeted warehouses near the Lebanese border and a bridge south of Qusayr.

The Israeli military’s Arabic-language spokesman Avichay Adraee said “weapons depots and headquarters used by” Hezbollah were hit in the Qusayr region.

Adraee said the strikes sought to thwart attempts to “transfer weapons from Iran via Syria to Hezbollah in Lebanon”.

Syria’s official SANA news agency reported Israeli strikes on Qusayr’s industrial zone and some residential neighbourhoods, saying they caused material damage.

## Massive shootout in France wounds five

AFP, Paris

A massive shootout linked to drug trafficking has left a teenager and four others seriously wounded in western France, Interior Minister Bruno Retailleau said yesterday, in the latest such gunfight to injure children.

The shootout erupted in front of a restaurant overnight in the western city of Poitiers, Retailleau told BFM TV/RMC radio.

## Conviction in less than 2pc cases

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governments of Bangladesh and Denmark. The project period ended in June this year.

Currently, the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs funds the OCCs from its operational budget, says Project Director Prakash Kanti Chowdhury.

“The ministry is working on aligning the OCCs with a new project being reviewed by the planning ministry,” he adds.

At district- and upazila-level hospitals, 67 other OCCs operate.

These are linked to NGOs, civil society members, and local administration.

From 2012 to August this year, 137,152 individuals received OCC services. Of them, 16,813 were children and the rest were women, according to government data.

At the 14 OCCs at medical college hospitals, victims of physical assault are the majority. But at DMCH, and medical college hospitals in Cox’s Bazar and Pabna, the number of sexual assault victims are disproportionately high: 6,926; 1,816, and 412 respectively.

DMCH OCC lawyer Fahmida Akter says most sexual assault victims are sent there by the police for medical examinations.

Victims who go to the OCC by themselves are first assessed medically, then the OCC counsellors and police guide them through the process of filing cases.

However, many sexual assault victims initially wish to file cases, but backtrack on the decision later due to social pressure and threats by the perpetrators.

“The women beaten up by their husbands usually do not file cases. But those who avoid filing cases often return with more serious injuries,” Fahmida adds.

When witnesses consistently testify during trial, the proceeding can conclude within a couple of years. But it takes longer when witnesses are absent or unreachable, she adds.

Under the law concerned, cases should conclude within 180 days, but the deadline is rarely met, she says, adding sentencing in rape cases is rare because of lack of witnesses and out-of-court settlements.

“Penalties are more likely imposed in child rape cases, while cases involving adolescents are often settled privately by the families.”

Unless there is evidence of DNA, it is hard to prove a case in which the accused raped a woman by making promises of marriage.

Project Director Prakash says appointment of more lawyers and other steps are being taken to enhance the OCC support.

“A reform committee has been formed to analyse challenges, improve conviction rates, and expedite the trial procedures.”

## Dhaka city running short of buses

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Experts and officials have attributed the current situation mainly to a prolonged pause in issuing new route permits for buses, and the influence of a powerful syndicate of transport leaders who reportedly determine the allocation of these permits.

They also noted that the launch of the metro rail, combined with the ongoing transport chaos and indiscipline, is discouraging businesses from investing in this sector.

According to them, other reasons behind the worsening traffic situation include the authority’s failure to rationalise the haphazardly drawn bus routes and launch a bus franchise system.

The system to bring all the buses under one or some particular companies in the past decade has been much discussed in recent years, but initiatives to launch it failed.

According to the Population and Housing Census 2022, over 10.2 million people live in the city. However, the current population is believed to be much higher.

There are 386 approved routes in the city and adjacent areas, but only 110 of them are now in operation, as the authorities have already synchronized many of these routes around a decade ago, BRTA data show.

As many as 5,594 buses have received route permits from Dhaka Metro Passenger and Goods Transport Committee, a government body led by the Dhaka Metropolitan Police commissioner.

ABRTA official, seeking anonymity, said the government committee recommended giving route permits to 7,043 buses and minibuses on 110 routes, considering the capacity and necessity.

But another committee led by the then Dhaka South City Corporation mayor Sayeed Khokon in March 2019 decided not to give route permits to new buses. They decided to go for rationalising the routes and launch a pilot project, the official said.

Route permits for 1,150 buses and minibuses have already been scrapped for crossing 20 years of economic life. So, 4,444 buses now have permission to operate in the city and adjacent areas, the BRTA official said.

“The pause on issuance of route permits for over five years is the major reason behind the depleting number of buses in the city,” he said.

Mohammad Shahidullah, member secretary of the government committee responsible for giving route permits, said, “We are now working on re-orgnaising the committee and will resume the process upon approval from the authorities concerned.”

Against this backdrop, the government on October 24 gave six months to withdraw outdated vehicles from the streets across the country, considering the shortage of buses.

THE SYNDICATE

Entrepreneurs lost interest in operating buses because nobody can get a route permit without paying a handsome amount of money to a powerful syndicate of transport owners, a transport leader said, wishing anonymity.

The vicious circle keeps anarchy and indiscipline in the sector alive to get benefits of the situation, he said.

The launch of the Uttara-Motijheel metro rail service last year is another reason behind the fall in the number of buses on this particular route, the transport leader said.

A BRTA official said most of the bus owners in the city rent out their vehicles to drivers on daily contracts.

In this system known as “trip-based service”, drivers pay a specific amount to the owner on the basis of daily trips. To maximise profits they drive recklessly to make as many trips as possible in a day, creating serious safety risk.

This system also kept the capital’s bus services from flourishing, the official said.

Transport expert Prof Moazzem Hossain said heavy-investment projects like the metro rail instead of bus service got priority during the Awami League government’s tenure.

He said bus services would cater four to five times more passengers than three metro rail lines in Dhaka, including two under construction the existing one, once these lines are in operation.

While the construction of the metro lines would require around Tk 1.5 lakh crore, developing bus services like those in London would require

only Tk 8,000 crore, according to him.

But bus services did not get priority, and it was a “policy crime” of the previous government, he told The Daily Star on October 26.

RISE IN SMALL VEHICLES, CONGESTION

While the registration of buses and minibuses is witnessing a decline, the number of private cars and motorcycles is on the rise.

According to the BRTA, a total of 893 buses and minibuses got registered in the first nine months of this year in Dhaka city, while the number was 1,887 in 2023 and 2,233 in 2022.

On the other hand, 58,634 motorcycles and 7,384 private cars got registered in the first nine months of this year in the city, while the numbers were 90,403 and 9,687 respectively last year, BRTA data show.

Besides, the number of rickshaws, particularly battery-run rickshaws, saw a sharp rise in the city.

Prof Moazzem, a former director of the Accident Research Institute at Buet, blamed the shortage of buses for the rise in the number of small vehicles, which he said was the main reason behind the deterioration of traffic congestion.

“Improvement of bus services is much needed to reduce traffic congestion,” he said.

Experts suggested bus route rationalisation and introduction of a franchise system to bring discipline in bus services.

These methods were discussed for long and got momentum during late Dhaka North City Corporation Mayor Annisul Huq’s tenure. The initiative lost momentum after his death in November 2017.

The High Court in June 2019 directed the authorities concerned to bring bus services in all metropolitan cities under the franchise system.

A bus franchise pilot project was launched on the Ghatarchar-Kanchpur route in Dhaka in December 2021. Two more routes were added to the project later.

A failure to launch the system fully after around three more years is a clear indication that bus services were not the previous government’s priority, Prof Moazzem said.

## JP, student group

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However, they changed their decision following DMP’s restriction.

Talking to The Daily Star last night, Bin Yamin Molla, president of the Dhaka University chapter of Gono Odhikar Parishad, said they welcomed the decision of DMP and would gather at the foot of the Raju Memorial Sculpture around 11:00am today and decide the next course of action.

Earlier in the day, JP Chairman GM Quader said despite the risks of a confrontation, they would continue protesting “injustice and discrimination”.

The party would hold the rally in the Kakrail area protesting the filing of cases against JP leaders and the price hike of essentials, he told a press conference at the party chairman’s office in Banani.

Yamin of Gono Odhikar Parishad also said they would hold “mass resistance rallies” in front of JP offices across the country at 11:00am.

Speaking at a press conference at the Dhaka University’s Teacher-Student Centre (TSC), he said they would not allow the JP to hold political programmes.

Describing the JP as an ally of the Awami League, which he accused of mass killings during the July uprising, Yamin demanded that the government ban the JP, arrest its leaders, and bring them to justice for backing the AL.

On Thursday evening, a group of people marching under the banner of “Anti fascist students, workers, and masses” vandalised and set fire to the ground floor of the five-storey building housing JP’s central office in Kakrail.

JP leaders stated that the party’s leaders and activists were holding a preparatory meeting for today’s rally at the time.

No case was filed until the filing of this report around 7:30pm, said Payel Hossain, inspector (investigation) of Ramna Police Station.

‘WE’VE COMMITTED NO CRIME’

Condemning Thursday’s incident, GM Quader said, “Do not be afraid, stay where you are. We are ready to die if necessary. Let’s see how many people they are willing to kill. Remember, Islam teaches us to stand against injustice. If you cannot protest with your hands, speak up. We are ready to give our lives for this.”

Referring to recent events, he said, “We’ve committed no crime. We are being forced into a criminal role for reasons unknown to us.”

“We are labelled as associates of the Awami League, but there is no justification for that,” he said, describing the JP’s role from the 9th parliamentary elections in 2008 to the 12th parliamentary elections in 2024.

He expressed disappointment at the country’s current state, saying, “The nation seems divided. It feels like a certain group has taken over the country. We supported them, as did the ordinary people, but now it seems they don’t recognise that support.”

“They are dividing the country... similar to the divisions created under our previous leader [Sheikh Hasina].”

Expressing disappointment with Chief Adviser Prof Muhammad Yunus’ role, GM Quader said, “Our chief adviser, a highly respected figure whom we consider a guardian of the nation, has remained silent despite allegations against us from his closest people. This is deeply unfortunate for us.”

Meanwhile, JP’s former lawmaker Shameem Haider Patwary visited the party office yesterday afternoon.

He said no one has the right to snatch away their rights as they are a registered political party and have the freedom to hold assembly as per the constitution.

“People did not burn our office. A quarter with vested interests who were angry at us previously set fire here last night,” he told reporters.

“There is no state of emergency imposed, and the constitution is not suspended. So, no one has the right to snatch away our constitutional rights. Some people obstructed us illegally and burnt our party office. The state and the government are responsible for it.”

THE BURNT OFFICE

During a visit to the office yesterday, The Daily Star found that the ground floor of the five-storey building was burnt, and other floors were ransacked.

At least four witnesses told this correspondent that when a group of people were vandalising and setting fire to the office on Thursday evening, some police personnel were standing near the office, but they did not take any steps.

## Harris warns Trump

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Reuters/Ipsos polling in October found the race to be sharply divided along gender lines, with Harris leading among women by 12 percentage points and Trump leading among men by seven percentage points.

More than 63 million people have already voted through in-person early voting and mail-in ballots, according to the University of Florida’s Election Lab.

With both candidates campaigned in the Southwest on Thursday, they made their pitches to Hispanic voters.

Harris, who has been receiving a slew of celebrity endorsements, got an A-list boost from pop star and movie actress Jennifer Lopez in Las Vegas, after Mexican rock band Mana played a brief set to introduce them and basketball great LeBron James endorsed her earlier in the day.

“I like Hollywood endings. I like when the good guy, or in this case the good girl wins,” said Lopez, born in New York to Puerto Rican parents.

Trump, while in Albuquerque, New Mexico, argued he could win over the

state’s large Latino population, even polling the crowd to see whether they preferred to be called “Latinos” or “Hispanics.” The response “Hispanics” won handsly.

Once again a campaign issue, the 2010 Affordable Care Act provides coverage to roughly 40 million Americans as part of the country’s patchwork of health insurance programs. A political liability for Democrats when signed into law in 2010, it is now broadly popular.

In his 2016 campaign, Trump repeatedly vowed to repeal Obamacare and following his election, when the House voted to do just that, he welcomed Republican representatives to the White House for a celebration. But the repeal effort died in the Senate in July 2017 when the late Senator John McCain cast the deciding vote with a thumbs-down gesture.

Trump has downplayed the issue during this campaign, though on Thursday he reiterated he would as president push insurers to cover the cost of in vitro fertilization (IVF) treatments.