

## Ulama Mashayekh holds huge rally at Suhrawardy Udyan

Demand Saad followers be barred from Biswa Ijtema

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Ulama Mashayekh Bangladesh, a platform of Qawmi madrasas across the country, yesterday put forward a nine-point demand, including banning Maulana Saad Kandhalvi and his followers from participating in the upcoming Biswa Ijtema.

It made the demand at a mammoth rally at the capital's Suhrawardy Udyan.

Almost all the speakers at the rally, including Shah Muhibullah Babunagari and Sajedur Rahman, were from Hefajat-e-Islam, a Qawmi madrasa-based organisation.

The event was organised to put pressure on the interim government to bar Saad Kandhalvi from attending the Ijtema, said insiders in Hefajat.

The Ijtema, one of the largest congregations of Muslims, will be held in two phases between January 31 and February 9 next year.

According to sources in the home ministry, the government wanted the two Tablighi Jamaat factions, led by

SEE PAGE 10 COL 5



Thousands of people throng the capital's Suhrawardy Udyan yesterday for a rally, organised under the banner of Ulama-Mashayekh Bangladesh. Leaders of the platform made several demands, including banning the Tabligh Jamaat group led by Indian preacher Saad Kandhlawi from participating in the upcoming Biswa Ijtema.

PHOTO: STAR

## EU calls for revision

FROM PAGE 1

Affairs, led the Bangladesh delegation, while Rensje Teerink, head of Division for South Asia at the European External Action Service, led the EU delegation.

The EU call bears significance as about 1,600 murder cases were filed under the ICT Act since the fall of the Awami League regime. Many of those were against former ministers and businesspersons.

They discussed various aspects of reforms, including the judiciary, public administration, security, and the capacity building of the Legislative and Parliamentary Affairs Division.

Both sides agreed on the need to address the human rights concerns of women, children, and persons belonging to minority and marginalised groups.

"No one should live in fear of violence, harassment or discrimination. Law and order should be ensured for all, including the most vulnerable," the statement read.

Both sides reinforced their commitment to strengthen cooperation in the fields of human rights, good governance, and the

interim government's ongoing reforms.

The EU welcomed the government's strong commitment to advance reforms and take necessary steps towards a democratic, pluralistic and inclusive Bangladesh that is grounded in the rule of law and human rights.

The statement read, "This commitment is notably reflected in Bangladesh's accession to the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance [ICPPED], and in the creation of a Commission of Inquiry on enforced disappearances.

"Announcements to repeal or swiftly amend some of the legislations that have been used to crush dissent and curtail fundamental freedoms, such as the Cyber Security Act, are further signals of this commitment."

At the meeting, Bangladesh explained the process of carrying out structural reforms in several key areas, including through the recently established reform commissions.

The EU welcomed the ongoing work of the commissions and underlined the importance of taking into account

the realities and perspectives of the population in all its diversity, including women and minorities.

The EU and Bangladesh agreed on the urgency and opportunity to make progress on labour rights, including making labour inspections more effective. The EU said its preferential access of Bangladeshi exports to the EU market is premised on the respect for international human rights, labour standards and improved environmental sustainability.

Agreeing on the need for thorough electoral reforms, they acknowledged the recommendations of the EU Election Expert Mission of January 2024 as a helpful reference for Bangladesh to rebuild public trust in the electoral process and ensure that international standards on elections are upheld.

The EU encouraged the Bangladesh government to further cooperate with the UN Human Rights Office and to issue a standing invitation to UN Special Procedures in order to benefit from relevant expertise in the context of the country's political transition.

## IT parks drained away hefty funds

FROM PAGE 1

Till date, Tk 1,473 crore was spent on three hi-tech parks, three software parks and four incubation centres by the Awami League government, which envisioned these establishments as ICT and business innovation hubs that would employ tens of thousands, generate billions of dollars and position Bangladesh as a leading digital nation.

But their returns have been negligible thanks to faulty planning, corruption, poor execution and a lack of supportive ecosystem, found an investigation by The Daily Star involving interviews with over a dozen individuals connected to these parks and an analysis of hundreds of pages of documents.

"Such projects in the name of development in general and with the rhetoric of Digital Bangladesh in particular under long years of authoritarian regime were converted as a licence for partisan political mileage, illicit income and unaccountable wastage of public money," said Iftekharuzzaman, executive director of Transparency International Bangladesh.

Take the case of the Bangabandhu Hi-Tech Park in Rajshahi, which was constructed between July 2016 and June 2024 for Tk 335.5 crore.

At best 500 people are employed across seven investor entities accounting for an investment of Tk 3 crore, said park officials.

Due to petty issues such as rainwater seeping into the buildings, a lack of generator services and other infrastructural challenges, the largest company, Fleet Bangladesh, recently left the park's incubation centre, said its founder Khairul Alam.

"They also promised tax breaks that have yet to be fulfilled," he said.

Over in Jashore, the Tk 253 crore Sheikh Hasina Software Technology Park managed to attract negligible investment.

Despite the abysmally low returns, Palak continued to tout the ventures as successful initiatives, creating the ground for authorising more than 80 such parks all over the country.

He named all the projects after the deposed prime minister Hasina and her family members to expedite approval and shield them from criticism and scrutiny, according to Bangladesh Hi-Tech Park Authority (BHTPA) officials involved with the proceedings.

"Tagging such projects with the names of family members of the fallen head of the government provided added impunity to the multidimensional wastage of mainly borrowed funds, which has also left

a huge burden on the people," said TIB chief Iftekharuzzaman, who also heads the interim government's Anti-Corruption Reform Commission.

The parks have been renamed after the district concerned following the fall of the Hasina government on August 5.

At present, another dozen establishments are on the way that would cost about Tk 7,000 crore of public money.

The projects were often undertaken on a whim and almost always without concerted planning.

In similar areas, multiple overlapping projects were approved, including training centres and incubation centres established within hi-tech parks themselves.

For instance, a Tk 66 crore IT training and incubation centre project was initiated in 2019 in Singra, Natore—Palak's constituency.

And yet, less than 30 kilometres

spent on a hi-tech park, an additional IT park project was approved for over Tk 65 crore. In the same hi-tech park, another Tk 150 crore has been allocated for an IT park.

In Chattogram district, four overlapping establishments have been proposed — an IT park costing Tk 65 crore, another park for Tk 150 crore, a software technology park within the city and the Sheikh Kamal IT Business Incubator Centre at the Chittagong University of Engineering and Technology for Tk 117 crore.

The lack of transparency in the tender evaluation process led to significant corruption within the projects, according to BHTPA officials who spoke on the condition of anonymity.

For instance, an audit into BHTPA by the Office of the Comptroller and Auditor General highlighted six significant irregularities detailing a financial loss of Tk 50.58 crore in fiscals 2019-20 and 2020-21.

Those involved in project design, planning, budgeting, approval and implementation including relevant officials as well as political masterminds must be brought to justice to set examples for the future, Iftekharuzzaman said.

"Officials involved in these projects would face action if found guilty — we are proceeding slowly but surely, and no one will be spared," Shish Haider Chowdhury, secretary to the ICT Division, told The Daily Star.

A committee has been formed to review these procurements.

He acknowledged that most of the projects were undertaken without proper planning.

The projects included large infrastructure in remote areas where there is no business case, he said.

"We are reducing several components of ongoing projects. For instance, if a building was initially planned for seven stories, but four stories are already completed, we are stopping it there. Even then, we remain uncertain if there will be a viable business case after trimming the projects," Chowdhury added.

To lessen further loss, such projects should be frozen until objectively reassessed and appropriately redesigned to ensure value for money, Iftekharuzzaman said.

GSM Jafarullah, the managing director of BHTPA from August 1 last year, had his contractual appointment scrapped on September 3 by the interim government. His successor AKM Amirul Islam could not be reached for comment.

## Sharply split US makes its choice

FROM PAGE 1

voters are expected to cast their ballots, on top of the 83 million who have already voted early.

The first ballots cast yesterday mirrored the nationwide divide. Overnight, the six registered voters in the tiny hamlet of Dixville Notch, New Hampshire, split their votes between Harris and Trump in voting just past midnight.

However, some officials hoped that the change in vote counting rules in some key battleground states may expedite the declaration of results.

Due to the enormous size of the US, voting opened in Hawaii, one of the last states to do so, around 7 hours after voting opened in the country. Hawaii, with four electoral college votes, will be one of the last states to close its polls at 19:00 local time (05:00 GMT). Some locations in Alaska will remain open an hour later.

Yesterday, both candidates put in final pleas to voters ahead of the voting.

"Today, we vote because we love our country and we believe in the promise of America," Harris wrote on social media.

Trump released a sombre, one-minute ad, then posted: "This will be the most important day in American History."

Later, the Republican candidate cast his vote in Florida. His opponent, Kamala Harris, cast her vote by mail ballot to California.

Wearing his trademark red cap, Trump told media present at the voting centre that he was "feeling good." "I feel very confident... and it looks like Republicans have shown up in force," he said.

In a radio interview on the election day, Harris urged Americans to "get out and vote", particularly in battleground states.

"We've got to get it done. Today is voting day, and people need to get out and be active," she said on Atlanta station WVEE-FM.

Harris said she will host her Election Night watch party at her alma mater Howard University, a historically Black university in Washington, DC.

Meanwhile, several media outlets reported that Trump will be joined by Tesla and SpaceX boss Elon Musk this evening.

The former president's campaign is hosting a watch party at Trump's Mar-

a-Lago home and Palm Beach Club for thousands of supporters. It is not clear if Trump and Musk will attend these events.

Long queues formed in Erie, a city in battleground Pennsylvania.

"It's way, way, way more people here than the last election," Marchelle Beason, 46, told AFP after casting her ballot for Harris at an elementary school.

"We're so divided right now, and she's about peace. And everything that her opponent has to say is really negative," she added.

At the same school, 56-year-old Darlene Taylor, who said she lives on disability benefits, noted her main issue is to "close the border".

"We don't need another four more years of high inflation, gas prices (and) lying," said Taylor, who wore a homemade Trump shirt.

Meanwhile, a Pennsylvania court yesterday approved a request by the local board of elections to extend voting hours by two in a strongly pro-Trump county after voting machines in the key swing state experienced an election day software glitch.

On election day, control of Congress, and by extension, the ability of the new president to enact their agenda, is also at stake. All 435 seats in the House of Representatives are up for grabs, as are 34 of the Senate's 100 seats.

Trump's campaign has suggested he may declare victory on election night even while millions of ballots have yet to be counted, as he did four years ago. The former president has repeatedly said any defeat could only stem from widespread fraud, echoing his false claims from 2020. The winner may not be known for days if the margins in battleground states are as slim as expected.

In Georgia, there were five non-credible bomb threats at polling locations across the state, leading to evacuations in two locations. Later, Georgia's secretary of state told the press that the threats came from Russia.

Meanwhile, the FBI warned Americans about two new fake videos falsely citing terror threats and voter fraud, the latest in a string of disinformation that officials feared would intensify on election day.

One fabricated video purporting to be from the federal law enforcement agency falsely cited a high terror threat and urged Americans to "vote

## AC (land) attacked during mobile court drive

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Gazipur

A female assistant commissioner (land) came under attack while conducting a mobile court drive at a local market in Kaliakair upazila of Gazipur yesterday.

The incident took place in the afternoon in Safipur Bazar when Kaliakair Upazila Assistant Commissioner (Land) Dil Afroz was leading the drive to monitor the prices of daily essentials, said Kaliakair Upazila Nibbarhi Officer Kausar Ahmed.

He said, "I have visited the scene. The obstruction of administrative operations and assault on a local administrative official were very unfortunate. We will identify those responsible for the incident and take proper actions."

The UNO also said that the local administration is regularly monitoring the market to regulate the prices of daily commodities.

According to the UNO, the incident happened when the AC (land), during a regular market monitoring drive, fined Tk 10,000 each to two shopkeepers named Arif Hossain and Raju Mia for not having the price lists and sale invoices. Then the two shopkeepers and some other locals created a tense situation there and at one point assaulted the government official.

Dil Afroz did not pick up the phone despite repeated calls.

remotely," while another video includes a fake press release alleging to be from the agency and claiming rigged voting among inmates in five prisons.

Both are "not authentic," the Federal Bureau of Investigation said in a statement.

Federal, state, and local officials have been warning Americans about attempts to undermine the election with wrong information and have urged US voters to seek out credible information from reliable sources.

However, the threats caused little disruption in the voting process as the voters gave their opinion through ballots on who should be the next US president.

No matter who wins, history will be made.

Harris, 60, the first female vice president, would become the first woman, Black woman and South Asian American to win the presidency. Trump, 78, the only president to be impeached twice and the first former president to be criminally convicted, would also become the first president to win non-consecutive terms in more than a century.

Opinion polls show the candidates running neck and neck in each of the seven states likely to determine the winner: Arizona, Georgia, Michigan, Nevada, North Carolina, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin.

Reuters/Ipsos polling shows Harris leading among women by 12 percentage points and Trump winning among men by seven percentage points.

A final outcome of the polls may not be known for several days if the results are close, adding to tensions in a deeply divided nation.

And there are fears of turmoil and even violence if Trump loses, and then contests the result as he did in 2020.

The world is also anxiously watching, as the result will have major implications for conflicts in the Middle East, Russia's war in Ukraine, and tackling climate change, which Trump calls a hoax.

Some experts said Trump's return to power would instantly fuel international instability, with US allies in Europe and Nato alarmed by his isolationist "America First" policies.

Trading partners are also nervously watching his vow to impose sweeping import tariffs.

Trump has said he would not seek election again in 2028.

Manab Zamin Editor Matiur Rahman Chowdhury, New Age Editor Nurul Kabir, Ajker Patrika Editor Golam Rahman, Financial Express Editor Shamsul Haque Zahid, Jugantor Editor Saiful Alam, Ittefaq Editor Tasmina Hossain, Banik Barta Editor and Publisher Dewan Hanif Mahmud, Sangbad Editor Altamash Kabir, Dhaka Tribune Editor Zafar Sobhan, Desh Rupantor Editor Mostafa Mamun, and Sangbad Executive Editor Shahriar Karim.

If we mention the election, you tell us that we are eager to go to power. But if we say you're holding onto power by avoiding discussions on election, what would your reply be? Don't deceive the nation. The people won't just sit back and watch."

The BNP believes that pro-Awami League bureaucrats are getting posted to important positions because of Adviser Ali Imam Majumdar. The party may soon demand his resignation.

If he is an adviser, a free and fair election will not be possible, said several leaders.

Some said the Jamaat had been spreading propaganda against the BNP since early August.

The standing committee members also decided to propose the names of individuals who should be in the Election Commission.