

Swechchhasebak League leader shot dead at Cox's Bazar beach

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, Cox's Bazar

Golam Rabbani Tipu, vice president of Swechchhasebak League's Khulna city unit, was shot dead at Cox's Bazar sea beach last night.

The killing took place at the Seagull point of the beach around 8:00pm, said Ilyas Khan, officer-in-charge of Cox's Bazar Sadar Model Police Station.

Tipu, son of Golam Akbar of Khulna city's Daulatpur area, was a former councillor of Ward-4 of Khulna City Corporation.

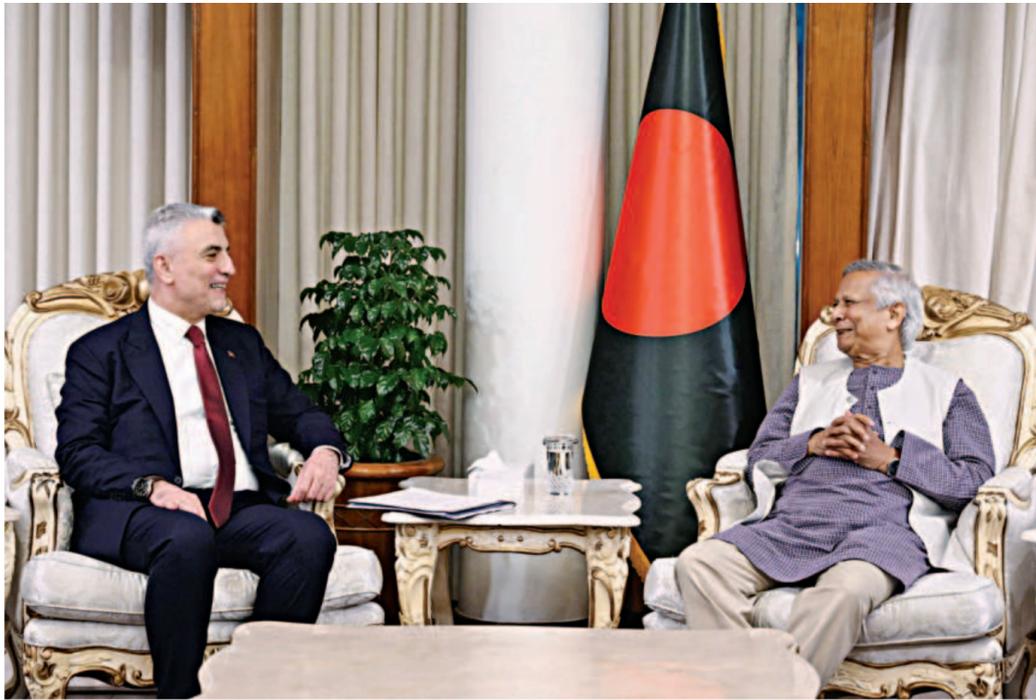
Abdus Salam Babu, an auto-rickshaw driver who took Tipu to a hospital, said he heard a loud bang near the wooden bridge on Seagull Point.

"I saw a person collapse after the bang, but I did not see anyone else there," he added.

Tipu was declared dead when brought to the hospital, police said.

Police confirmed the victim's identity by the national identity card found in his pocket.

The killing of Tipu could be a planned murder due to previous enmity, said Jasim Uddin Chowdhury, additional superintendent of police in Cox's Bazar district. Several police teams and intelligence agencies started working on the matter, he added.



Chief Adviser Prof Muhammad Yunus at a meeting with Türkiye Trade Minister Prof Ömer Bolat at the state guest house Jamuna yesterday.

PHOTO: PTD

Myanmar junta air strike kills 40 in Rakhine

Say ethnic armed group, rescue worker

AFP, Yangon

A Myanmar junta air strike killed at least 40 people in a village in western Rakhine state, a rescue worker and ethnic minority armed group told AFP yesterday.

The Arakan Army (AA) is engaged in a fierce fight with the military for control of Rakhine, where it has seized swaths of territory in the past year, all but cutting off the capital Sittwe.

The Rakhine conflict is one element of the bloody chaos that has engulfed Myanmar since the military ousted Aung San Suu Kyi's civilian government in a 2021 coup, sparking a widespread armed uprising.

AA spokesperson Khaing Thu Kha told AFP a military jet bombed Kyauk Ni Maw, on Ramree island, around 1:20 pm (0650 GMT) on Wednesday, starting a fire which engulfed more than 500 houses.

"According to initial reports, 40 innocent civilians were killed and 20 were wounded," he said.

A member of a local rescue group whose team was helping people in the area told AFP that 41 people were killed and 52 wounded.

"At the moment, we don't even have enough betadine and methylated spirit to treat them as the transportation is hard," the rescue worker said on condition of anonymity to protect their safety.

Photos of the aftermath of the bombing showed dazed residents walking through charred, smoking ruins, the ground littered with corrugated metal, trees stripped bare of leaves and buildings reduced to a few scraps of walls.

AFP has attempted to contact the junta for comment on the incident, but calls have not been answered.

Talks with political parties

FROM PAGE 1

The students and the Nagorik Committee on December 30 said they would formally proclaim the uprising the next day. Student leaders also said the "Mujibbadi" constitution would be invalidated.

Initially, the Chief Adviser's Press Wing said the government had no involvement in the event. However, that very night it said the government would take the initiative to prepare the proclamation based on national consensus.

Later that night, the student group and the Nagorik Committee announced their support for the government initiative and decided to hold a "March for Unity" programme instead of the event to announce the proclamation.

Asked about the students' thoughts on the constitution, Mahfuj said many, including some political parties, are critical of the 1972 constitution.

"If we can reach a point of consensus, then the question arises: What will we do about the constitution? There are proposals from students, but there might also be opposition from other political parties."

"Since this is a contentious matter, we need to keep this in discussions [with the parties]. We will document it and formalise our decisions."

Discussions on the proclamation would also be held with cultural and social organisations and other stakeholders, he said.

Mahfuj also said the government decided to prepare the proclamation after realising that a proclamation by the students alone would hamper existing wider consciousness and unity.

He said that there is a consensus among political parties and others on opposing Sheikh Hasina's fascism. The continuity of this issue may also be described in the proclamation.

The second part of the proclamation will outline how the state will be governed. On these matters, there might be some disagreements.

The adviser said that the BNP has stated they want their 16-year-long democratic struggle, to be recognised in the proclamation, along with the struggles of all other political parties, cultural organisations, and individuals who have fought for their rights and suffered oppression. "We want to make it inclusive and no one will be left out."

Asked about the next national election, Mahfuj said the matter depends on the political parties: how much reform they want. This will be discussed during consultation on the reports of the reform commissions.

He said a decision on local government polls will also be taken following consultation with the political parties. Many services are being disrupted since the interim government removed local government representatives.

Regarding attacks on shrines and cultural activities after August 5, Mahfuj said they feel sorry that they cannot take clear steps against many attacks.

"But from now on, we will take stern action if there is an attack on shrines, qawwali concerts or cultural activities", he said, urging all the victims and aggrieved to file cases.

Chief Adviser's Press Secretary Shafiqul Alam said at the press conference that Prof Muhammad Yunus yesterday directed the authorities concerned to take immediate steps to resolve the waterlogging problem in Chatogram.

Quick measures will be visible in the coming days to improve the traffic situation, he said.

He also said that all students of primary and secondary levels will get textbooks within February.

VAT shock in the middle of the fiscal year

FROM PAGE 1

unprecedented, said SM Nazer Hossain, vice president of the Consumers Association of Bangladesh.

Although Finance Adviser Salehuddin Ahmed on January 2 said the VAT and SD hike would not fuel inflation as the items account for an insignificant part of the basket for consumer price index, the NBR notification indicates a host of goods and services that are used widely in day-to-day life such as mobile phone and broadband internet use, LP gas, spectacles and clothes.

"People are already grappling with high inflation, and this move will only add to their burden," Hossain said.

The VAT and SD increase aligns with the recommendations of the International Monetary Fund as part of a \$4.7 billion loan it approved for Bangladesh in January last year.

The IMF advised the government to rationalise tax exemptions, improve compliance with laws and bring about reforms in tax measures to bolster domestic revenue collection in Bangladesh, which has one of the lowest tax-to-GDP ratios in the world.

The hike in indirect taxes comes as overall revenue collection fell by 2.62 percent in the first five months of the fiscal year, increasing pressure on the government to borrow from domestic and foreign sources.

"If the government aims to increase revenue, it should prioritise curbing tax evasion. That would eliminate the need for such measures and prevent further public suffering," Hossain said.

From today, consumers will be required to pay up to 15 percent VAT on restaurant bills, biscuits, cakes, pickles, tomato sauce, clothes, tailoring, toilet paper, napkin, hotel, sweets, driving licence, non-AC hotel, spectacles, sunglasses, motor workshop and lubricant oil.

Previously, the VAT was as low as 5 percent.

The VAT on certain industrial items such as electric transformer,

electric pole and steel products such as cold rolled coil, limestone and dolomite, was also hiked to 15 percent from 5 percent.

People are also expected to pay more for medicine as the tax collector raised VAT at the trading stage to 7.5 percent from 5 percent.

The cost of printing, cinema ticket, repair and servicing and cleaning services will also rise because of a VAT hike to 15 percent from 10 percent.

The cost of mobile phone and internet services will rise as well. The NBR increased SD on mobile phone use to 23 percent from 20 percent. Now, mobile phone users will face over 42.45 percent in SD, VAT and surcharge, up from 39 percent.

Broadband internet users will face a 10 percent SD, which is likely to push up internet bills.

"This will have a detrimental impact. We are uncertain how we will survive with such extreme measures," said Emdadul Hoque, president of the Internet Service Provider Association of Bangladesh.

The quality of ISP services will deteriorate, he said.

"We urge the government to reconsider such actions as they will not only harm businesses but also undermine services and increase the costs for customers," he added.

The NBR increased excise duty on domestic flights from Tk 500 to Tk 700 per ticket. It raised the excise duty for travel to SAARC countries from Tk 500 to Tk 1,000.

For trips outside SAARC countries but within Asia, the excise duty has been hiked from Tk 2,000 to Tk 2,500.

The excise duty on tickets to Europe and America has been increased from Tk 3,000 to Tk 4,000.

The NBR hiked the SD on the import of certain dry and fresh fruits such as nuts and betel nuts to 45 percent from the previous 30 percent, and grapes, apples, melons, fresh fruits and juices to 30 percent from 20 percent.

Additionally, unmanufactured

tobacco importers will have to pay 100 percent SD during import, up from the previous 60 percent. Imported paints, soap and detergent will also become costlier.

Consumers will also feel the pinch of increased SDs on juice, fruit drinks, and flavoured and electrolyte drinks as SD on the drinks went up by up to 30 percent.

Smoking will become costlier since the NBR hiked SD on all types of cigarettes and tobacco. Liquor served in bars will be more expensive due to an increase in SD to 30 percent from 20 percent.

At the same time, the revenue collector reduced the annual turnover limit for VAT registration for firms to Tk 50 lakh from the previous Tk 3 crore. It also cut the enlistment threshold for turnover tax limit for businesses from Tk 30 lakh to Tk 50 lakh.

The move means that a good number of businesses will come under the net of VAT, the main source of revenue, accounting for nearly 38 percent of total taxes collected by the NBR.

The indirect tax hike was necessary as the government's fiscal space has reached a critically low level, said MA Razzaque, chairman of Research and Policy Integration for Development.

"Without any improvement in revenue mobilisation, the government will have to rely on excessive borrowing, which will be difficult this year given the contractionary policy in place."

More importantly, since the interest rates are now high, the cost of borrowing for the government will be extremely high, he said.

Given the historically low revenue situation, more than one-third of the revenue was being spent on interest payments.

"And this year, the burden could be even higher. Therefore, given the tight fiscal space, the government might not be able to borrow to meet the fiscal deficit."

Government debt

FROM PAGE 1

The debt-bulletin report showed government expenditure in interest payment increased by 21 percent in the last fiscal year to Tk 1.1 lakh crore, which is one-sixth the national budget.

In fiscal 2023-24, foreign interest payments increased by 60 percent and domestic interest payments by 17 percent.

The then-government could not bear the huge expenditure and they had to pay Tk 36,586 crore arrear bills to some power, energy and fertiliser supplying companies through special treasury bonds, the report added.

"If that much interest payments were not needed, the government could spend the money on welfare sectors like health or education," Hussain said.

The domestic debt is no less problematic as the revenue growth is weak, interest rates higher and budget deficits have crawled up, said the White Paper.

"The cost of domestic debt is rising," it said.

Interest payments on such debt relative to revenue increased from 17.6 percent in fiscal 2017-18 to 22.5 percent in fiscal 2022-23, thus shrinking fiscal space.

"It may shrink even more as tighter monetary policy necessitated by high

inflation is increasing interest rates on treasury bills and bonds," it said.

About the foreign loan, the principal and interest payments are projected to expand in the near term. Grace periods of several big loans have ended and many more will end in the near future.

"Maturity of new loans, including grace periods, has become shorter. An examination of active loans to assess the increase in amortisation payments shows sharp increases are imminent."

These include repayments for 213 loans, including the Rooppur nuclear power plant, the Padma Bridge rail link, the Karnaphuli Tunnel and the Dhaka Mass Transit projects.

The white paper said the politicians in charge of the government have used the government's borrowing power recklessly for their own benefits in the past.

They tended not only to take whatever foreign currency loans were on offer but also to incur even larger implicit obligations via unfunded, off-balance sheet liabilities.

"Our most living nightmares of such borrowing are in, but not limited to, energy, transport and banking. Both external and domestic borrowings add to macro vulnerabilities when they do not come with value for money," it added.

Bangabandhu's Homecoming

FROM PAGE 1

In 1971, Pakistan army arrested him from his Dhanmondi residence and sent him to a West Pakistani jail the following day.

In the jail, he had been counting days to the execution of the death sentence he was handed down in a farcical trial.

"I was a prisoner in the condemned cell awaiting hanging. Since the day I went to jail, I didn't know whether I would be alive or not. I was mentally ready to die, but I knew Bangladesh would be liberated," Mujib spoke emotionally about his ordeal in Pakistani prison at a news conference in London.

On arrival at Dhaka (Tejgaon) airport in the afternoon of January 10, Bangabandhu was greeted by tens of thousands of jubilant people who had been eagerly waiting to see their beloved leader since the victory on December 16.

From the airport, he was escorted to the Racecourse Maidan (now Suhrawardy Udyan) where he addressed a mammoth gathering.

Two days later, he took the oath of office as the country's prime minister on January 12.

In a statement posted on its official Facebook page on Wednesday, the Awami League said it would observe the Homecoming Day by placing wreaths at his portrait in front of Bangabandhu Bhaban in the city's Dhanmondi.

Besides, the party will place wreaths at his grave in Tungipara. It will also arrange discussions and distribute food and warm clothes among the destitute. It, however, did not say where it will hold the discussion.

The party urged its front and associate bodies to organise similar programmes to observe the day in a befitting manner.

Govt expands OMS programme

FROM PAGE 12

Yesterday, coarse rice was sold at Tk 54-58 per kg. A week ago, it was Tk 50-55.

Meanwhile, medium-grain rice was sold at Tk 60-65 per kg yesterday, while it was Tk 58-65 last week.

TCB data further showed that in the past year, the price of fine rice has increased by 14.07 percent, medium-grain by 19.05 percent, and coarse by 14.29 percent.

In December 2024, inflation eased slightly – to 10.89 percent from 11.38 – the month prior. It remained above the 10 percent threshold throughout October and November, as per Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics.

Majumder also said the government has sufficient rice in stock to keep this programme running, and at least 175,000 tonnes of rice will be added to the market this month.

He also spoke of the damage that many agriculture lands endured due to the recent floods.

A US Department of Agriculture report, published in the third week of December, said two consecutive floods in August and October damaged around 3 lakh hectares of cropland.

It added that rice production in Bangladesh may fall in the current marketing year of 2024-25, which began last May, due to the reduction in the acreage of Aman season paddy.

Earlier, OMS activities were

conducted through a total of 908 centres across the country, and these will continue.

From July-December 2023, the government has distributed 5.74 lakh metric tonnes of rice and wheat.

In the same period last year, it has increased to 6.10 lakh metric tonnes, according to the Directorate General of Food.

Under this situation, the government is going to import rice from Myanmar, Pakistan, and India, the food adviser said on January 8.

Replying to a query about the price hikes during harvest season, Majumder told reporters at an event at the ministry earlier this week that the flash floods in several districts in the southeastern parts of the country have reduced Aman paddy production, causing the price of rice to be higher than the government expected.

"To address this shortfall, the government has arranged for rice imports and has also encouraged private traders by withdrawing import duties."

He added, "Discussions are underway to import 50,000 tonnes of rice from Pakistan. The process of importing 100,000 tonnes of rice from Myanmar on a government-to-government basis has also been finalised. Additionally, we will import another 50,000 tonnes from India."