

Tarique, Fakhrul, Khasru invited to prayer breakfast in the US

Says BNP media cell

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

BNP acting chairman Tarique Rahman, Secretary General Fakhrul Islam Alamgir and standing committee member Amir Khasru Mahmud Chowdhury have been invited to attend the National Prayer Breakfast in the US, the BNP media cell said in a statement yesterday.

The National Prayer Breakfast Foundation facilitates and executes the event under the leadership of the US Congress. President Donald Trump will attend the event in Washington, DC, on February 5-6.

The BNP secretary general has received the invitation in a letter signed by Representatives Ben Cline, Zach Wanip, Tom Suozzi and James Slattery, said the BNP media cell.

Some 3,500 guests, including international invitees from over 100 countries, attend the event that comprises of a series of meetings, luncheons, and dinners and has taken place since 1953.

It is designed to be a forum for the political, social, and business elite to assemble and pray together.

4 killed in speedboat accident on Meghna

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Munshiganj

Four people were killed in a collision between two speedboats on the Meghna in Gazaria upazila of Munshiganj around 9:30pm on Friday, said police.

They are Ashraf Uddin Adud, 36, of Gazaria upazila; Mahmud Gazi, 40, and Babul Sarkar, 48, of Munshiganj Sadar; and Md Naeem, 30, of Chandpur.

The victims are known criminals who used speedboats to oversee and

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PHOTO: REUTERS

Smoke rises over the hills from the Palisades Fire near Santa Monica, Los Angeles County, California, US, on Friday. Story on page 12.

32 killed in 48 hours in Gaza

AFP, Jerusalem

The health ministry in Hamas-run Gaza yesterday said that 32 people were killed in the Palestinian territory over the past 48 hours, taking the overall death toll to 46,537.

The ministry said at least 109,571 people have been wounded in more than 15 months of conflict between Israel and Hamas.

The ministry of health added 499 deaths to its death toll on Saturday, specifying they have now completed the data and confirmed identities on files whose

information was incomplete.

A source in the ministry's data collection department told AFP that all the 499 additional deaths were from the past several months.

Meanwhile, Gaza's civil defence agency said an Israeli air strike on a school-turned-shelter yesterday killed eight people, including two children, while the Israeli military said it targeted Hamas militants.

Agency spokesman Mahmud Bassal confirmed eight people, including two children and two women, were killed by Israeli shelling on the Halwa school in the

northern Gaza city of Jabalia.

The attack was the latest in a series of Israeli strikes on school buildings housing displaced people in Gaza, where fighting has raged for more than 14 months.

The number of dead in Gaza has become a matter of bitter debate since Israel launched its military campaign against Hamas in response to the Palestinian militant group's unprecedented attack last year.

Israeli authorities have repeatedly questioned the credibility of the Gaza health ministry's figures.

IMF to crank up pressure to boost tax collection

FROM PAGE 1

As per the IMF's estimates, the tax measures will bump up Bangladesh's tax-to-GDP ratio by 0.5 percentage points this fiscal year.

Bangladesh failed to meet the tax revenue collection targets so far under the programme, which began in January 2023.

It is unlikely that the country would be able to meet the target set for this fiscal year either, given that tax collection in the first five months of the fiscal year was down 2.62 percent year-on-year to Tk 1,30,185 crore.

The tax revenue collection target set by the IMF for the first half of the fiscal year is Tk 2,15,120 crore. And for the entire fiscal year, the target is Tk 4,78,050 crore.

To achieve the full-year target, the government has to increase its tax revenue collection by 29 percent from fiscal 2023-24's receipts.

The staff mission suggested the Bangladesh authorities take several prior actions, including a number of measures in the revenue sector to demonstrate its commitment to

the programme, before it places the proposal for the release of the fourth tranche before the IMF board next month.

In this context, the NBR on Thursday went ahead with its bid to hike the value-added tax and supplementary duty on nearly 100 goods and services, an unusual policy measure in the middle of a fiscal year.

As a result, consumers will be required to pay up to 15 percent VAT or SD, up from as low as 5 percent previously, for the goods and services.

Such an unpopular decision was taken hurriedly at a time when the country's overall inflation continuously hit double-digit, said Zahid Hussain, a former lead economist of the World Bank's Dhaka office.

Inflation averaged 10.87 percent in the first half of fiscal 2024-25, shows data from the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics.

"Most probably, the IMF will include the tax revenue collection target under QPC, which is why the government suddenly imposed the tax measures."

It is a bad time for Bangladesh to

see the tax revenue collection target be converted into a QPC, he said, adding that the sudden tax measures, including a hike in VAT and SD on several products, will definitely put more pressure on common people.

The government should negotiate with the IMF so that the multilateral lender does not include the tax revenue collection target under QPC at this moment, Hussain added.

Talks are ongoing to revise down the tax collection target given the July uprising, which hampered revenue mobilisation and economic activities, finance ministry officials said.

Under the existing loan programme for Bangladesh, the IMF has set three QPCs: minimum net international reserves (NIR) and ceilings for budget deficits and accumulation of external payments arrears.

Besides, there are four indicative targets (ITs), which, although not mandatory, carry considerable weight in assessing performance under the programme.

Tax collection is an IT for Bangladesh under the programme so far.

Airborne superbugs lurk in Dhaka hospitals

FROM PAGE 1

The study – "Antibiotic resistance of bioaerosols in particulate matter from indoor environments of the hospitals in Dhaka, Bangladesh" – was conducted in four hospitals and two ambient locations. It revealed that the particulate matter (PM) – tiny particles in the air – carried harmful bacteria that were resistant to several antibiotics.

Samples were collected from Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University Hospital, Khwaja Badrudduza Modern Hospital, Dhaka Medical College Hospital, and Monno Medical College Hospital. The data was collected from February to June 2023.

Antibiotic resistance, or antimicrobial resistance (AMR), occurs when a pathogen – such as a bacterium, parasite, or fungus – becomes resistant to a specific medication, rendering that treatment ineffective in combating the infection.

The levels of fine particulate matter (PM_{2.5}) at the hospital sites were found to exceed the National Ambient Air Quality Standards for Bangladesh.

Ultra fine particles (such as PM_{1.0}) has the ability to extend the penetration up to the bloodstream through alveoli (air sacs in the lung), capturing the whole body.

The study showed that the PM concentrations at these hospitals were not only higher than national standards but also exceeded the World Health Organization's recommended limits for PM_{2.5} and PM₁₀ (15 µg/m³).

The highest amounts of PM_{1.0} and PM_{2.5} were found at Dhaka Medical College Hospital (80.46±11.32 µg/m³; 220.60±16.52 µg/m³), while the highest PM₁₀ concentration was 1452.21±189.78 µg/m³ for sampling point of DMCH. PM_{2.5} and PM₁₀ can

also enter and affect the lungs.

Among the 11 types of bacteria found in the air, including *Staphylococcus aureus* (Staph), *Escherichia coli* (E. coli), and *Pseudomonas aeruginosa* (Pa), many are known to cause serious HAs like pneumonia, and urinary tract and blood infections.

Alarmingly, most of the bacteria were found to be resistant to multiple antibiotics, making them much harder to treat, the study said.

Various global studies showed that antibiotic resistance has become a significant problem around the world, accelerating at what some scientists say is "an alarming rate", causing an estimated 800,000 additional deaths each year.

The United Nations considers antibiotic resistance a "fundamental threat" to the entire planet's health and safety. "Particulate matter creates the perfect vehicle for bacteria, allowing them to thrive and spread.

This concerning interplay between air pollution and bacterial growth has added a new dimension to the battle against antibiotic resistance," said Salam, also dean of Dhaka University's science faculty.

Antibiotic susceptibility testing revealed that all bacterial isolates (a pure culture of a single species of bacteria that has been identified and separated from other bacteria) from the hospitals were resistant to at least four antibiotics. Some displayed resistance to up to nine.

Ampicillin, azithromycin, erythromycin, and cefixime showed the highest resistance rates, ranging from 81-90 percent.

Health experts warn that for hospital patients, especially those with weakened immune systems, this

invisible threat could be the difference between recovery and worsening health.

The study pointed to several factors contributing to the spread of these bacteria, including overcrowded hospitals, outdated building infrastructure, and poor air circulation. Hospitals with old furniture, walls, and flooring were found to harbour more bacteria, allowing them to spread through the air more easily.

Speaking to The Daily Star, Dr Samsad Rabbani Khan, deputy programme manager of the antimicrobial resistance containment programme at DGHS's Communicable Disease Control, said, "We welcome this study as it confirms our perceptions. There's no denying that antimicrobial resistance [AMR] is a worrisome issue globally as well as in Bangladesh. Initially, we were aware of the presence of AMR in humans and animals."

He, however, said the DGHS lacked evidence regarding its existence in airborne environments.

"This study provides critical aspects of AMR's airborne presence in hospital environment, shedding light on a previously unexplored dimension of the problem."

Khan said they are undertaking various activities based on the National Action Plan. "Currently, we are conducting antimicrobial resistance surveillance in the human and animal health sectors. We are in the preliminary stages of developing environmental AMR surveillance."

To overcome the challenge, he suggested the strengthening of infection prevention control and enforcement of antimicrobial stewardship and good clinical practices in all hospitals.

Won't stand communal attacks: govt

FROM PAGE 1

National Emergency Services 999 connects a focal point from police headquarters whenever an allegation of communal violence is reported to the helpline.

Police attach the highest importance to addressing all allegations, Azad said.

The Bangladesh Hindu Buddhist Christian Unity Council has said that a total of 1,769 communal attacks and acts of vandalism took place against minorities in Bangladesh.

The council said those attacks, acts of vandalism, and incidents of looting included 2,010 incidents on the lives, properties, and places of worship of the minority community.

Police have collected the list of allegations prepared by the council.

They have visited every location, establishment, and individual mentioned in the council's report.

All the aggrieved persons have

been requested to lodge complaints with the police. Proper security of the aggrieved people has been ensured.

Regular cases, general diaries, and other appropriate lawful measures have been taken according to the findings of the investigations.

Of the 1,769 allegations, police have so far registered 62 cases based on the merits of the claims, according to the police report on communal attacks since August 4, 2024.

At least 35 culprits have been arrested based on the findings of the investigations, it said.

It was found that in the majority of the cases, the attacks were not communally motivated – rather, they were political in nature, the report said.

Investigation revealed that 1,234 incidents were political in nature and 20 were communal, according to the police report.

At least 161 claims were found to be

false or untrue, the report added.

According to the claims of the council, 1,452 incidents – or 82.8 percent of total claims – took place on August 5, 2024, when Hasina was ousted from power.

At least 65 incidents took place on August 4 and 70 incidents on August 6, according to the council – a copy of which has been obtained by police.

Apart from the council claims, police have also received 134 allegations of communal violence from August 5, 2024, till January 8, 2025. Police responded to all those complaints with utmost importance.

At least 53 cases have been filed over those complaints. A total of 65 offenders have been arrested in these cases.

In all, since August 4, there have been 115 registered complaints of communal attacks resulting in the arrest of at least 100 people.

VAT, SD hike 'suicidal' for economy

FROM PAGE 1

"This decision will fuel inflation and adversely impact the general public – we do not support this move," said Taskeen Ahmed, the newly elected president of the DCCI, at a press briefing at the chamber's office in Motijheel.

The government did not hold any discussion with the stakeholders before taking any of the contentious decisions.

"It would be a suicidal step for the economy given the wide-ranging economic implications."

Bangladesh is currently going through a critical moment and economic challenges mainly due to limited foreign exchange reserves, rising import costs, high energy costs, elevated inflation, high interest rates along with low access to credit.

Increasing VAT on more than 100 products, raising the income tax on a few industries and planned doubling of gas price tariff for industrials and captive users is a "catastrophic decision for our business, trade and investment as well as for the overall economy", Ahmed said.

"We have already shared our official reaction. We will meet with government officials, including the governor and the commerce secretary, to convey our concerns."

To meet the budget deficit and lessen the pressure on the economy, he suggested the government to take austerity measures in government expenditures.

At the same time, he also urged the government not to take unnecessary projects and to heighten monitoring so that the projects under the annual development programme are completed on time.

He urged the government to cut unnecessary expenditures instead of burdening businesses.

"A 20 percent reduction in government spending could save at least Tk 50,000 crore, which could then be used to meet budgetary needs."

Ahmed also criticised the recent announcement of the doubling of the corporate income tax rate to 20 percent for manufacturers of freezers, refrigerators, motorcycles, air conditioners and compressors in the middle of the fiscal year.

"This will not only put the businessmen in danger but also tarnish the image of the country."

Policy continuity is important for entrepreneurs, said Ahmed, also a vice-chairman of IFAD Group.

"Entrepreneurs are encouraged to invest subject to obtaining a long-term supportive tax structure. So a sudden decision to increase tax or duties in the middle of the year is not desirable at all."

Subsequently, both local and foreign investment may be hindered.

"This will not bring any good for the economy," he said, adding that the price of motorcycles may increase by 10-15 percent in the next three months due to the sudden increase in corporate income tax.

In a separate event, the Jatiya Nagorik Committee also demanded immediate withdrawal of the ordinance issued by the interim government to hike VAT and SD on nearly a hundred goods and services.

"This move will increase inflation and business costs, affecting the quality of life of ordinary people. While it is a normal process for the government to expand its revenue base, it must ensure that the living standards of ordinary people do not dip and their sufferings do not aggravate further," Akhtar Hossain, the platform's member secretary.

Hossain said the country's economy has become fragile, and foreign exchange reserves are at their lowest due to rampant corruption and money laundering by the previous illegitimate government.

"Against that backdrop, the previous government had decided

Time will tell if AL can join polls: CEC

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Sylhet

Chief Election Commissioner AMM Nasir Uddin yesterday said time will determine whether Awami League can retain its registration and participate in the upcoming national election.

He made the remark while speaking to journalists during a views-exchange programme regarding the updating of voter lists and preparations for the national polls at the Sylhet Circuit House.

Asked if AL can participate in the next election, he said, "Time will tell."

About the registration of political parties, the CEC said the decision will be taken after the election reform commission submits its report.

Speaking about local government elections, he said, "Local government elections require multi-layered steps and are very tough to implement before the national election."

Nasir Uddin further said, "The Election Commission is working as per the roadmap given by the chief adviser."

He also addressed issues surrounding voter list updates, saying, "Those who were previously involved in corruption while updating voter lists will be brought to justice."

He added that all non-residential Bangladeshis will be included in the voter list periodically.

Engage in politics of host nations

Touhid urges expats

BSS, Dhaka

Foreign Adviser Touhid Hossain yesterday urged Bangladeshi expatriates to engage in the politics of their host countries instead of the politics back home.

"This is our path, if we want to be influential globally," he said while inaugurating an NRB [non-resident Bangladeshi] conference on Bangladesh branding at a hotel in the capital.

"If NRBs hold important positions in their host countries, it will create a strong brand image for Bangladesh worldwide," he added.

Citing the example of the Indian diaspora, Touhid said, Indians achieved significant global influence by securing crucial positions in governments and political bodies in different countries, especially in Western ones.

The foreign adviser remarked that Bangladesh's political parties are among the largest in the world, with widespread branches across numerous countries.

"Have you seen people from any other country gathering at airports in foreign lands to chant slogans against someone?" he asked rhetorically.

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