



LIKELY REFORM PROPOSAL Govt officials may be able to retire after 15yrs

BAHARAM KHAN

For government employees, voluntary retirement with pension benefits currently requires 25 years of service. The Public Administration Reform Commission is set to recommend lowering the requirement to 15 years.

The commission is also likely to recommend doing away with a legal provision that allows the authorities to force employees to retire after they have been on the job for 25 years or more, said multiple sources in the commission.

Sections 44 and 45 of the Government Service Act-2018 would need to be amended in order to implement these recommendations.

The Public Administration Reform Commission held a meeting yesterday to finalise the recommendations. It will hand the chief adviser the recommendation on February 5, which is the new deadline for the submission.

“Currently, if a government employee voluntarily retires before 25 years in service, they do not get pension benefits. This is why the commission is recommending

An officer should not be afraid of forced retirement for disagreeing with the government or having a history of being a member of an opposition party.

the change,” said a source.

However, those retiring after 15 years will not get the full pension benefits, for which one must be on the job for 25 years.

No commission member is willing to explain on record the rationale behind the recommendations.

“Officers often receive better job offers in the private sector. Unless they have been on the job for 25 years, they often do not take those opportunities because they do not want to lose their pension benefits. We want to change that.”

As to why the government should not be allowed to force someone to retire, another source said, “An officer should not be afraid of forced retirement for disagreeing with the government or having a history of being a member of an opposition party.”

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Chief Adviser Prof Muhammad Yunus, accompanied by Cultural Affairs Adviser Mostofa Sarwar Farooki and other officials, visit a stall at Amar Ekushey Boi Mela in the capital after its inauguration yesterday.

PHOTO: PID

20 Bangladeshis feared dead in Libya

DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENT

Twenty bodies, believed to be of Bangladeshis killed after a boat capsized in the Mediterranean near Brega of Libya last week, have been buried in the north African country.

Bangladesh foreign ministry in a message to the media last night said no identification document was found on them and that the Red Crescent, which handled the burials, believes the victims were Bangladeshis.

It said the bodies were buried in Ajdabiya, which is about 40km away from Brega on Friday, as they were decomposing.

The incident occurred in an area under the jurisdiction of the Eastern Libyan Government, based in Benghazi. The Bangladesh embassy has yet to obtain the necessary clearance to visit the site.

PHOTO ON PAGE 2

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DEATH IN CUSTODY Army camp commander withdrawn

Armed forces
launch probe

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The Inter Services Public Relations (ISPR) has announced the formation of a high-level investigation committee to determine the cause of death of Jubo Dal leader Touhidul Islam in Cumilla.

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Star INTERVIEW

‘No room for politics under AL name, ideology’

WASIM BIN HABIB and
BAHARAM KHAN



As the interim government is going to complete its six months in office, calls for the national election are growing louder. Several reform commissions have already submitted their reports, and the government may soon engage with political parties. Nahid Islam,

a July uprising leader, who is now serving as an adviser to the interim government, lately spoke with The Daily Star's Wasim Bin Habib and Baharam Khan on a range

of pressing issues.
TDS: How would you evaluate the six months since the interim government took office?

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MTB | Mutual Trust Bank PLC

BNP drafts July uprising declaration Says it's in talks with parties to ensure broader acceptance of proclamation

SAJJAD HOSSAIN

The BNP has finalised its draft declaration of the July uprising. It is currently discussing the draft with allies and like-minded parties for their feedback to ensure broader acceptance.

The party would interact with the advisers of the concerned ministries later and the declaration would take a final shape after reaching a greater consensus, BNP standing committee member Salahuddin Ahmed told The Daily Star.

The draft was made as per the discussion in a meeting held with Chief Adviser Prof Muhammad Yunus and other political parties on January 16, he said.

"I believe the declaration should bear signatures of all parties concerned, as it carries political and historical significance. The process is ongoing, and we, all stakeholders, need to have patience," he added.

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Some of the bodies that washed up ashore in Libya. They are feared to be of Bangladeshis who tried to cross the Mediterranean to reach Europe from Libya.

PHOTO: EMBASSY OF BANGLADESH IN LIBYA

1,500 videos, photos of July atrocities collected

Says joint initiative of 2 non-profits

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Bangladesh Protest Archive, a digital platform that has been collecting videos, audio recordings, and photos documenting the state-led atrocities, including police brutality, perpetrated during the July uprising last year, announced its official launch yesterday.

Two non-profit organisations—Activate Rights, which advocates digital rights among youth in Bangladesh, and Witness, an international organisation that helps human rights defenders use video to expose injustice—are jointly collaborating on the initiative.

The launching ceremony was organised at DrikPath Bhubon in the capital's Panthapath yesterday.

Bangladesh Protest Archive aims to use digital evidence of the gross human rights violations during the July uprising to pursue justice through formal channels in Bangladesh and internationally.

It has so far collected around 1,500 videos and photos from open sources, including social media, as well as from journalists and the public.

The platform also allows independent users to contribute to the archive by uploading media recorded personally or media recorded by trusted sources to its website (bangladeshprotestarchive.com).

Prominent photographer Shahidul Alam, Dhaka-based fact-checkers Qadaruddin Shishir and Minhaj Aman, researcher Altaf Parvez, and human rights defender Mustain Billah, also a member of the interim government's Constitutional Reform Commission, spoke at yesterday's event.

Govt officials may be able to retire after 15yrs

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But if an employee does something wrong, the authorities can launch departmental procedure and force them to retire. "But such retirement should not be forced under the pretext of public interest."

The option of voluntary retirement after 15 years is an opportunity for some. A joint secretary who worked at the Prime Minister's Office when the Awami league was in power, said, "I have lost the enthusiasm for work. I got the job by obtaining brilliant results. I worked in important positions because of my ability to work well. But now I am labelled as a fascist collaborator. If they implement the recommendations, I will retire and leave the country."

Another source in the commission

said the recommendations were not designed to give advantage to a particular group.

"In the past, recommendations of various commissions were rejected. As this commission was formed after a mass uprising, we hope the government will implement its recommendations."

"We strongly recommend stopping the current practice of giving promotions to more officers than there are posts. Those who do not get promotions will have the opportunity to leave the service after 15 years and move on."

The commission may propose reducing the time an officer gets to provide information sought under the Right to Information Act. It may also propose increasing the penalties

under the act.

Public administration researcher and former secretary AKM Abdul Awal Majumder said, "In the armed forces, there is an opportunity for retirement after 15 years. Most officers cannot advance further after a major promotion, so they voluntarily retire and join other work. However, I don't think this opportunity will be taken by many in the civil administration. But if the option is there, I don't see any harm."

The commission will recommend lowering the number of ministries and divisions to 25 to 30 from the current 55.

The Economic Strategy Redefinition Task Force has already recommended merging the road, rail, water, and air transport ministries.

The commission may recommend not allowing officials of one institution to work in another on deputation.

It may recommend promotions to the rank of deputy secretary based on the Senior Service Pool (SSP) Order-1979.

The SSP initiative was taken during President Ziaur Rahman's tenure. It was not implemented by the HM Ershad government.

In that case, opportunities for administration cadre promotions to the rank of deputy secretary may be more limited.

However, the commission is also going to recommend reserving 50 percent of the positions for administration cadre promotions to the rank of deputy secretary.

Army camp commander

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The armed forces' press wing also said that legal action would be taken against those found guilty as per military law.

"Appropriate steps have been taken to investigate this unexpected and regrettable incident. In the meantime, the commander of the army camp in question has been withdrawn with immediate effect," read the ISPR statement issued yesterday.

Meanwhile, the government has also ordered an urgent investigation.

In a statement issued by the CA Press Wing, Muhammad Yunus condemned any form of custodial torture and extrajudicial killings, stating that upholding human rights in all aspects of national life remains a core mission of the administration, which includes some of the country's top rights activists.

Touhidul was buried at his family graveyard after his funeral around 2:30pm yesterday.

He was the convener of Jubo Dal's Panchthubi union unit.

Touhidul used to work at a shipping company in Chattogram. He returned home on January 26 after his father's death. The family was supposed to hold a qulkhani on Friday.

In the early hours of Friday, Touhidul was picked up from his home in Ittala village by men who identified themselves as members of the joint forces, said his wife.

Later in the morning, Touhidul was found dead at Cumilla Medical College Hospital.

Speaking to this newspaper on Friday, Mohinul Islam, officer-in-charge of Kotwali Police Station, said, "The joint forces informed us around 11:00am that an injured man was found in Jhakunipara on the banks of the Gumti River. Police took Touhidul to Cumilla Medical College Hospital, where doctors pronounced him dead."

His body bore marks of trauma

Ekushey spirit

FROM PAGE 1

The chief adviser said this explosion instilled the determination of building a "New Bangladesh" and was deeply rooted in the country's 170 million people.

"We have come to take an oath on this commitment through this ceremony of Amar Ekushey," he said.

Yunus said on August 5 last year, the historic student-mass uprising brought down a 16-year autocratic regime.

The chief adviser recalled with deep respect all the courageous students, masses and workers who gave their lives and were brutally injured in the July uprising.

The uprising achieved through great sacrifice has brought this year's book fair before the people with a new significance, he said.

The theme of this year's book fair is "The July uprising: Rebuilding a new Bangladesh".

"The July uprising strongly united the nation. Because of this, we found

and injuries, according to an inquest report prepared by the Kotwali Police Station. However, Touhidul's family has yet to file a case.

CONDEMNATIONS

Different political parties and human rights organisations, including BNP, Bangladeshher Samajtantrik Dal (BASOD), and Ain O Salish Kendra (ASK) have expressed concern and outrage over Touhidul's death.

They stated that such incidents are a violation of human rights and the rule of law. They emphasised the need to identify those involved in the killing and ensure justice through a proper investigation.

BNP Secretary General Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir said, "It's unfortunate that such extrajudicial killings are taking place during the tenure of an interim government supported by political parties participating in the democratic movement after the fall of the Awami fascist government in the student-public movement. This brutality reminds us of the Awami fascist era"

"No government forces have the right to torture and kill anyone. No matter how powerful the perpetrator is, bringing them under the law and ensuring exemplary punishment is one of the conditions of the rule of law," Fakhrul said in a statement issued yesterday.

Rights group Ain O Salish Kendra (ASK) also expressed concern over Touhidul's death. It demanded a trial of the culprits involved after a neutral probe.

"It's the state's duty to ensure the safety of a person detained by the state," ASK said in a statement, adding that such a kind of death is not acceptable at all.

ASK urged authorities to take proper steps to ensure justice for the family and provide them with compensation.

People suffer as students keep blocking road

FROM PAGE 12

protesters marched towards Gulshan-1 and blocked the intersection around 6:40pm, which caused a traffic jam that lasted until 7:50pm.

The students then announced the withdrawal of the blockade from the intersection, considering public suffering. However, they soon marched back to the college gate and resumed blocking the road at Mohakhali.

The students ended their demonstration for the day around 8:10pm, vowing to resume the protests and continue until their demands are met.

Mahmudul Hasan Muktar, a political science student and spokesperson for the protesters, said, "We will engage in talks only if someone comes forward with a proposal on a full-fledged university."

He added they would strongly resist any attempts to politicise their demand.

On Friday, the protesters issued an ultimatum, demanding that Titumir College be declared a university by 4:00pm the next day, or they would block roads or railways in north Dhaka under the programme "Barasat Barricade to North City".

Some students had been on a

hunger strike in front of the college's main gate since Thursday. As of yesterday, 12 students were on hunger strike. Six of them were hospitalised after falling ill.

Meanwhile, the education ministry urged the protesters to have patience, saying that the issue was under consideration.

It said in a statement that a committee, led by the University Grants Commission chairman, is working on plans to establish a separate university for the seven colleges affiliated with Dhaka University, including Titumir College.

The ministry said the concerns of

the students were being addressed with empathy, and the committee already held discussions with student representatives from Titumir College and the other six colleges.

The statement said the government was committed to enhancing educational opportunities and improving the quality of these institutions. It added that all possible solutions are being explored.

The ministry also advised the protesters to refrain from setting deadlines and actions that could disrupt public life or interfere with regular academic activities at the college.

Only wealthy have access to politics

FROM PAGE 12

money on community events, make donations to local institutions and work to build public support through informal patron-client networks, the report said.

"A common perception in Bangladesh is that those unable to spend money cannot be credible candidates for MP."

Many politicians interviewed for the report indicated that candidates often spend between Tk 2 to 5 crore to gain the favour of influential party leaders, particularly within the AL and Jatiya Party.

"In some cases, additional payments were allegedly made directly to members of the prime minister's family to secure nominations," it said. Jatiya Party Secretary General Mujibul Haque denied the allegations brought on by the report. "This allegation is an absurd one. None have to pay for getting party nomination," he told The Daily Star.

During the campaign phase, candidates need to spend Tk 3-5 crore or even more depending on the constituency and level of competition.

Candidates have to spend money on the day of the polls to secure votes

on top of their electioneering costs: a minimum of Tk 50 lakh was spent on average per candidate on the election day.

Vote buying was a feature of all election contests in 2024, with payments per vote being Tk 1,000 to Tk 5,000.

Candidates in Bangladesh's elections typically rely on formal and informal funding sources. The formal sources include contributions from political parties and personal savings. Informal sources include donations from businesses, vested interest groups and sometimes illicit contributions from foreign actors and criminal syndicates.

This illegal funding typically originates from tax evasion, extortion and organised crime syndicates, which provide financial backing to candidates in exchange for political influence once elected, the report said.

Even after winning the election, some candidates need to spend another Tk 4 to 5 lakh to expedite administrative processes such as the official publication of election results or necessary documentation.

"Because of the highly expensive election process, only people who have wealth are getting the

chance to enter into politics," said Shahab Enam Khan, one of the researchers for the report and a professor of international relations at Jahangirnagar University.

As much as 85 percent of the MPs possess movable or liquid assets worth Tk 1 crore each or more in 2024, according to Transparency International Bangladesh. Nearly 82 percent of the lawmakers possessed assets worth more than Tk 1 crore in the 2018 parliament, according to Shushashoner Jonno Nagorik.

Some of the interviewees even said that the election expenditure might be about Tk 100 crore in some constituencies, said Nurul Huda Sakib, another researcher for the report.

"High election expenditure has become a normal matter. We reported the average figure of election expense, the figure might be much more than that."

The high cost of elections is leading to an increasing number of businessmen entering politics, he said.

"This trend is also contributing to the growth of crony capitalism and kleptocracy," said Sakib, a professor at Jahangirnagar University's

department of government and politics.

As much as 66 percent of the elected MPs were businessmen in the 2024 parliament. In the 1991 parliament, 38 percent of the MPs were businessmen. In the 1973 parliament, only 18 percent of the MPs were businessmen.

"The use of money and muscle have increased businessmen in politics and as a whole criminalised politics," said Ruhin Hossain Prince, general secretary of Ruhin Hossain Prince.

To strengthen legal frameworks and promote a coordinated approach in deterring financial misconduct, kleptocracy and the illicit use of wealth in electoral processes, fostering collaboration among key institutions is essential, the report said.

It proposed a task force composed of the Anti-Corruption Commission, the Information Commission of Bangladesh, the Comptroller and Auditor General and the Election Commission to oversee the political parties' candidate selection processes and campaigns.

The report also suggested facilitating party nomination based on merit rather than privilege.

Who will I call baba now?

FROM PAGE 12

and took away our phones. They said they were looking for illegal firearms and ransacked the house but found nothing. Then they left with my husband on a pickup truck without explaining why he was being taken. They said they wouldn't hurt him

"In the morning, they came back to our village. They were looking for a local named Kawser. Touhidul was with them at the time. He looked badly hurt."

Yesmin said Touhidul was not involved in any criminal activities.

"We want justice. We want those

involved in his killing to be punished." Lutfur Rahman, a neighbour, who was detained alongside Touhidul, said, "They broke into my house and picked me up too. We were taken to the local army camp. There they tied Touhidul to a tree and tortured him all night. The individuals involved were wearing masks."

Touhidul's niece, Mahbuba Uddin, a teacher at Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman Science and Technology University, said, "We spoke with army officials. An army officer from Cumilla Cantonment, Lieutenant Colonel Mahmudul

Hasan, assured us that the army would take action against those responsible."

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His body bore marks of trauma and injuries, according to an inquest report prepared by the Kotwali Police Station. However, Touhidul's family has yet to file a case.

the courage to rebuild a country devastated economically, politically, institutionally, and humanely," he said.

"Our young men and women, teenagers, painted their dreams, their aspirations, their demands on the walls of the streets with incredible determination. Our street walls have now been transformed into historical documents," he said.

Congratulating the book fair organisers for presenting these murals at gates of the fair, the chief adviser said the boi mela, organised by Bangla Academy, has become an integral part of national life.

Stressing the need for recognising the contributions of Bangladeshi expatriates and expatriate workers, he said Bangladeshis are showing their achievements in various fields all over the world.

"We want to remember all of them on Ekushey. They all celebrate Ekushey February remembering their country..." Yunus said.

Swechchhasebak Dal leader

FROM PAGE 12

injured. He was taken to Nangalkot Upazila Health Complex where on-duty doctor declared him dead.

Medical officer at the hospital Md Masud Alam said the person was brought dead around 3:10pm.

"However, no injury mark was found in his body. The cause of his death could not be known

immediately," he told The Daily Star. Nangalkot Police Station's Officer-in-Charge AK Fazlul Haque said their preliminary probe suggests that Selim was killed during a clash between two groups of BNP men.

Gafur could not be reached for comments despite repeated attempts.

Contacted, Alam said he knew nothing about the clash.

ক্ষুণ্ণ ও নিরাপদে রেমিট্যান্স পাঠান
প্রিয়জনের প্রয়োজনে...

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DHAKA'S DYING RIVERS

Pollution sources nearly doubled in 5 years

HELEMUL ALAM

The rivers encircling Dhaka have been gasping for survival for decades, choked by pollution and encroachment.

Recent data, however, shows that the situation is deteriorating further -- and may be worse than previously imagined. A study conducted by the River and Delta Research Centre (RDRC) in January revealed that pollution sources around Dhaka's rivers have nearly doubled over the last five years, surging from 608 to 1,024.

The RDRC study, conducted in January using high-resolution satellite imagery and field surveys, exposes the breadth of pollutants choking the Buriganga, Turag, Shitalakhya, Balu, Tongi Canal, Karnatali, and Dhaleswari rivers. The findings revealed 102 industrial waste outlets discharging untreated pollutants into the waterways, along with 75 municipal sewerage lines and 216 small private sewerage outlets spewing domestic and industrial waste.

Additionally, the study highlighted 38 sluice gates and 62 service canals acting as conduits for contaminants, while 144 large dumping stations and 297 smaller dumping points worsened the situation with

STUDY AT A GLANCE

- Industrial waste, municipal sewage significantly contribute to pollution
- Many small private outlets discharge untreated waste
- Sluice gates, canals facilitate pollutant flow
- Waste disposal issues worsen environmental crisis
- Past government investments failed to reduce pollution
- Lack of enforcement hampers effective pollution control
- Legal protections for rivers remain largely ineffective

indiscriminate waste disposal. Dockyards, numbering 12, along with 46 industries and 36 kitchen markets, were also identified as major contributors to the pollution.

Dr Md Kamruzzaman, director general of the Department of Environment, said the department is yet to receive the final report.

"Once we have the full report, we will

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WORLD WETLANDS DAY. The Buriganga is now more of a mixture of pollutants -- chemical, household and medical wastes, sewage, dead animals, plastics and oil -- instead of the thriving river it once used to be. The intense degradation of its water quality has long been detrimental to the environment and the river ecosystem. Once considered Dhaka's lifeline, the river bears the brunt of pollution, with 506 sources identified as contributors. These include 12 industrial waste lines and 20 large municipal sewerage lines, alongside 167 small private sewerage outlets discharging untreated waste, according to recent data.

PHOTO: PALASH KHAN

THE WAIT IS OVER!

Month-long Ekushey Boi Mela kicks off

DIPAN NANDY

The atmosphere around Dhaka University was filled with a special energy yesterday, reflected in the streets and the eager faces of visitors.

After all, it was the first day of the month-long festival of books.

As soon as the clock struck 5:00pm and the gates of Suhrawardy Udyan opened, enthusiastic book lovers poured into the fairgrounds, exploring the vast collection of literary works.

Earlier in the day, Chief Adviser Professor Muhammad Yunus inaugurated the Amar Ekushey Boi Mela at 3:00pm.

The theme of this year's book fair, "July Gono-Obbhutthan: Natun Bangladesh Binirman," carries profound significance, coming in the wake of the July uprising that led to the fall of the Awami League government. The echoes of that movement resonate throughout the fair, transforming it into not only



PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

a celebration of literature but also a reflection on the power of people's voices.

The influence of the July uprising is particularly evident in the newly introduced "July Corner," dedicated to showcasing literature and narratives surrounding the movement.

The colours chosen for this year's fair -- red, black, and

white -- hold deep symbolism: red represents revolution, black signifies mourning, and white symbolises the eternal lamp of hope.

As in previous years, commercial publishing houses have set up their stalls at Suhrawardy Udyan, while government-run offices, autonomous bodies, and social

organisations occupy spaces within the Bangla Academy premises.

During a visit, this correspondent saw crowds gathered around popular publishing houses such as Anyapokash, UPL, Anannya Prakashan, Batighor, Agami, Kotha Prakash, and many others, eagerly browsing and purchasing their favourite books.

While some stalls were still finalising decorations, the festive spirit remained undiminished.

"I have been eagerly waiting for this day. I love reading books, especially on historical topics," said Jahangir Alam, a student at Dhaka University.

His younger brother, fifth-grader Abu Humaira, added, "I prefer horror stories -- they are more thrilling."

Atika Anwar, a private university student, said, "Even though it's just the first day, I couldn't resist coming. I've been visiting the fair since my college days."

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Cancer accounts for 12pc of annual deaths

Says BSMMU study

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Cancer is responsible for 11.9 percent of all deaths in Bangladesh annually, according to a new study by the Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University.

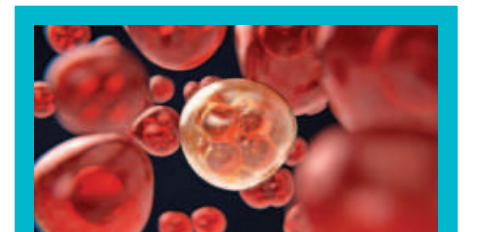
Also, 52.9 new cases are reported per 100,000 people every year, said the population-based cancer registry by BSMMU's Department of Public Health and Informatics (DPHI).

Among the 38 different cancers prevalent in the country, lung cancer (11.4 percent) causes the most deaths, followed by laryngeal cancer (8.5 percent), and stomach cancer (5.7 percent), the study also revealed.

The cancer prevalence in the country at present is 106 cases per 100,000 population -- with 118 per 100,000 among males and 96 per 100,000 among females, according to the study.

The findings were shared at a programme titled "Cancer Burden in Bangladesh: Evidence from a Population-based Cancer Registry", organised by BSMMU at its Super Specialised Hospital in Dhaka yesterday.

Laryngeal cancer was found to be the most prevalent (13 percent) among males, followed by stomach cancer (10.4



- 52.9 new cancer patients per 1 lakh annually
- 38 different cancers prevalent
- Laryngeal cancer most prevalent among men
- Breast cancer most prevalent among women
- 46pc of all cancer cases linked to tobacco use

percent), lungs (8.7 percent), lip and oral cavity (7 percent) and esophagus cancer (6.1 percent), said Md Khalequzzaman, associate professor of DPHI at BSMMU and principal investigator of the study, while presenting the findings.

In females, breast cancer (36.4 percent) was the most common cancer, followed by cervical cancer (11.1 percent), lip and oral cavity (10.1 percent), thyroid (7.1 percent) and ovaries (5.1 percent), he added.

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'Stand by us'

Families of July martyrs demand justice, rehabilitation; threaten hunger strike for govt 'inaction'

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Family members of those martyred during the July-August mass uprising have accused the interim government of neglecting their plight and failing to deliver justice.

At a press conference held in front of Jatiya Press Club yesterday, they alleged that the government has made no significant progress in arresting or prosecuting those responsible for the killings, nor has it officially recognised the martyrs.

Many families are living in dire conditions, they claimed, as no steps have been taken to rehabilitate them.

The families announced they would begin a sit-in and hunger strike on February 4 if their demands are not met by tomorrow. At least 20 relatives of the martyrs, including mothers, fathers, siblings, spouses, and children, spoke at the event titled "Ensuring Immediate Arrest and Trial of All Perpetrators, and Securing the Just Demands of the Martyrs' Families."

Bithi Akter, widow of Hafizur Rahman, who was shot in Agargaon on August 5 and died on August 16, said, "If you cannot fulfil our demands, then kill us too. We have no reason to live anymore."

"My child asks for food and clothes, but I cannot provide. My landlord doesn't excuse the rent for a single month. If the government refuses our demands, then kill us, kill our children too -- we'll all become martyrs, and no one will remain to protest on the streets," she said.

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At least 20 family members of those martyred in the July uprising held a human chain in front of Jatiya Press Club yesterday, demanding that the government immediately arrest or prosecute those responsible for the killings and officially recognise the martyrs. They also said many families are living in dire conditions as no steps have been taken to rehabilitate them.

PHOTO: STAR

Energy laws lack transparency

Speakers tell roundtable

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

People deserves transparency regarding the laws governing the energy sector, speakers said at a roundtable yesterday.

"People are not aware of the national energy policies and how they impact them," said Dr Kamal Hossain, an eminent jurist.

The discussion was organised by Lawyers for Energy, Environment and Development, Coastal Livelihood and Environmental Action Network (CLEAN), and the Bangladesh Working Group on Ecology and Development, who launched a book compiling 22 laws pertaining to the energy sector of Bangladesh.

The discussion was held at the Bishwo Shahitto Kendro.

Hasan Mehedi, chief executive of CLEAN, questioned how the country could aim to generate 40 percent of its energy from renewable sources when it has not repealed past policies focusing on the expansion of fossil fuel-powered energy sources.

People are not aware of the national energy policies and how they impact them.

Dr Kamal Hossain

SEE PAGE 4 COL 3



Artists perform at the National Poetry Festival at Hakim Chattar, next to Dhaka University Central Library yesterday. The two-day event is organised by Jatiya Kabita Parishad.

PHOTO: STAR

Girls' football match Energy laws lack

FROM PAGE 5
Haji Madrasa, expressed regret over the incident and apologised for the disruption of the women's football match in Tilakpur on Tuesday.

"A misunderstanding among locals led to this unfortunate event, and we feel ashamed before the nation and the world. We assure that such an incident will not happen again in Joypurhat," he said.

Nazrul Islam, president of Tilakpur union unit of Jamaat-e-Islami, said, "We support sports being conducted in accordance with government regulations. The

incident was caused by a misunderstanding among local Muslims, and we do not want such occurrences in the future."

Abdus Samad, khatib of Tilakpur Puroho Bazar Jam-e Mosque, clarified that there had neither been any opposition to the match itself nor were any objection to the game taking place openly.

Samuil Hasan, president of the organising club T-Star and also organisational secretary of the upazila unit BNP, described the incident as a "misunderstanding" and assured that the issue would be resolved promptly.

FROM PAGE 3
"We have made many contrasting policies in the past," said Mehedi. "Previous energy policies predicted that we would need 40,000 MW by this year, but currently we only need 16,000 MW."

"We should be exporting electricity, not having an energy sector dependent on imports," he added, pointing out that multiple studies have shown Bangladesh can generate up to 30,000 MW of electricity from wind.

Speakers also discussed the risks of challenging various laws during the previous Awami League-led government.

"We could not garner the courage to challenge

the indemnity clause of the law during the previous regime," said Dr Quazi Zahed Iqbal, an advocate of the Supreme Court.

CR Abrar, executive director of the Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit, said, "We need clarity on how international agencies helped the state against the people's interests."

Speakers highlighted the need to document the political backdrop in which anti-people laws were drafted.

"Electricity is neither affordable nor universal, yet the general public are paying through the nose for it," said Sekender Ali Mina, executive director of the Safety and Rights Society.

1,800 people get free

FROM PAGE 5
specialised doctors provided service to around 1,800 people from surrounding villages.

The services include blood pressure and diabetes check-ups. They were also given medicines free of charge.

The camp was held commemorating Faraaz Ayaaz Hossain.

Faraaz has become an epitome of supreme sacrifice for the cause of humanity. His refusal to leave his friends during the militant attack at Gulshan's Holy Artisan Bakery on

July 1, 2016 was not only an act of bravery that the world saluted but also set the burning example of what a pristine youthful mind can do when it comes to choosing the right path at the expense of mere mortality. A discussion was also held as part of the event.

Among others, Narail Deputy Commissioner Sharmin Akter Jahan, Bangladesh Southern University VC Sharif Ashrafuzzaman and former Narail Sadar upazila chairman Sharif Humayun Kabir were present.

Cancer accounts

FROM PAGE 3
The study was conducted on a total of 2,01,668 participants from 46,631 households in Hossainpur upazila of Kishoreganj, with 48.4 percent being male and 51.6 percent female, since July 2023.

The researchers conducted face-to-face interviews at every household using web-based National Cancer Registry software.

The study found a total 214 cancer patients among the participants. Of them, 92.5 percent were aged 18-75 years, while 2.4 percent were aged below 18 years and 5.1 percent were over 75 years old.

The five most common cancers were breast (16.8 percent), lip and oral cavity (8.4 percent), stomach (7 percent), larynx (7 percent), and cervix (5.1 percent).

The researchers found that 46 percent of all cancer cases were linked to tobacco use, with 75.8 percent of

male cancer patients being smokers. Also, 40.5 percent males and 60.6 percent females consumed chewing tobacco. According to the study, co-morbidities among cancer patients included hypertension, diabetes, cardiovascular disease, chronic kidney disease, and stroke.

The study also found that 60 percent of cancer patients received a combination of surgery, chemotherapy, and radiotherapy, while 7.4 percent did not receive any treatment after diagnosis.

A follow-up was conducted on 58,539 participants from 13,411 households between July 1, 2024 and January 14, 2025. During this time, 52.9 new cancer patients were added per 100,000 population.

BSMU Vice Chancellor Prof Md Shahinul Alam chaired the event while Prof Md Sayedur Rahman, special assistant to the chief adviser for health, spoke among others.

Stand by us

FROM PAGE 3
Reema Akter, whose husband Mohammad Sohag was killed in Bangshal, said, "Why is the government ignoring us? Why do we have to beg for what is rightfully ours? We cannot bear this anymore. Please stand by us."

Rabiul Awal, whose brother Imam Hasan (Taim) was killed in police firing in Jatrabari, said he has been seeking justice for six months without any progress. "For months, I've run from one government office to another, but none of the perpetrators have been arrested or put on trial," he said.

Shahina Begum, mother of Sajjad Hossain, who was killed in Ashulia on August 5 and had his body burned after his death, broke down in tears.

"They killed my son like an animal and then burned his body. Yet no one has been arrested. If the criminals are not caught, how will justice be served?" Many families also spoke of their struggles after losing their primary earning members.

Saidur Rahman Khan, grandfather of Shahrar Khan Anas, who was shot dead in Chankharpu, said, "This government was formed based on the martyrs' sacrifices. But now it has abandoned us. Its first responsibility should have been to support the martyrs' families, yet we are being forced to protest for our rights."

Mosharrif Hossain, father of journalist Mehedi Hasan, who was killed in Jatrabari, asked, "What was his crime? Was reporting the truth a crime? The fascist regime murdered my son for delivering news. The interim government made many promises, but nothing has been done for us."

Abul Hasan, father of Shahriar Hasan Alvi, who was shot dead in Mirpur, moderated the event. "The government hasn't inquired about any of the martyr families. Many of us are living in inhumane conditions. Some families can't even afford milk for their children," he said.

Urban planner Adil Mohammad Khan said, "The absence of a city-wide sewerage treatment system and the unchecked dumping of industrial waste are key contributors."

"Solid waste mismanagement and improper disposal by city dwellers exacerbate the problem," he added.

He criticised Dhaka's city corporations for lacking clear guidelines and failing to penalise violators.

THE NUMBERS TELL THE STORY
The Buriganga bears the brunt of pollution, with 506 sources identified as contributors. These include 12 industrial waste lines and 20 large municipal sewerage lines, alongside 167 small private sewerage outlets discharging untreated waste.

The river is further polluted by 30 sluice gates and 21 service canals, which channel contaminants directly into its waters. Additionally, 92 large dumping stations and 162 smaller dumping points exacerbate the crisis, with six dockyards, four industries, and 11 kitchen markets adding to the river's woes.

The Turag is burdened with 97 pollution sources. These include 13 industrial waste lines and 12 large sewerage lines, along with five small private sewerage outlets. The pollution is compounded by four sluice gates and seven service canals, while 15 large dumping stations and 27 smaller dumping points contribute to its degradation. Industrial pollution is significant, with seven industries and seven kitchen markets identified as major culprits.

In the Shitalakhya, 173 pollution sources were recorded, making it one of the most heavily polluted waterways. These include 42 industrial waste lines and 20 large sewerage lines, as well as 26 smaller sewerage outlets. The river is also affected by 18 service canals, 33 small dumping points, six dockyards, 21 industries, and seven kitchen markets, all of which contribute to its declining health.

The Balu suffers from 33 sources of contamination. These include three industrial waste lines, three large sewerage lines, and two small private sewerage outlets. Eight service canals and eight small dumping points further pollute the river, alongside six industries and three kitchen markets. The Old Buriganga is affected by 89 sources, including seven large sewerage lines, four sluice gates, and one service canal. The river is further burdened by 28 large dumping stations and 46 small dumping points. Industrial activity contributes as well, with one industry and two kitchen markets adding to the river's contamination.

The Tongi Canal faces pollution from 79 sources. These include 29 industrial waste lines, 13 large sewerage lines, and 11 small sewerage outlets. Six service canals,

The wait is over!

FROM PAGE 3
The fair will be open daily from 3:00pm to 9:00pm, except on public holidays, and will run until February 29. On February 21, in observance of International Mother Language Day, the fair will open at 8:00am and continue until 9:00pm.

Publishers are hopeful for strong sales this year as visitors can finally enjoy the fair without restrictions.

"Our business has suffered over the past couple of years. This year, we hope to recover from those losses," said Aditya Antor, co-owner of Itadi Grantha Prokash, speaking to The Daily Star.

MANUSCRIPT SCRUTINY
Regarding the scrutiny of manuscripts before publishing books at the book fair, Cultural Adviser

Mostofa Sarwar Farooki said, "A media report is causing misunderstanding. It cites a police official claiming that books should be submitted to Bangla Academy or the police for review before printing. This is unbelievable, this is absurd. It is nowhere near our government's policy."

He made these remarks yesterday morning while delivering the keynote speech as the chief guest at the inaugural ceremony of the Jatiya Kabita Utsab, held at the Central Library premises of Dhaka University.

DMP'S CLARIFICATION
The Dhaka Metropolitan Police (DMP) has clarified that no decision or suggestion has been made requiring police approval for manuscripts before

publication at the book fair. In a press release yesterday, the DMP said they had only requested Bangla Academy to be cautious in allowing "provocative" books at the fair.

During a security inspection at Suhrawardy Udyan on Friday, DMP Commissioner SM Sazzat Ali said, "We have asked Bangla Academy officials to ensure that no books containing provocative language or content are displayed at the fair. These should be carefully reviewed before being placed in stalls."

However, the DMP emphasised in its statement, "No decision or suggestion has been made by the police regarding the vetting or approval of books for future publication."

Pollution sources nearly doubled

FROM PAGE 3
inform the ministry and take necessary actions," he said.

The DoE plans to finalise its response by mid-February, including the possibility of convening an inter-ministerial meeting.

However, critics remain skeptical.

"The last government spent around Tk 1,000 crore on projects to protect Dhaka's rivers, but the doubling of pollution sources shows that enforcement has been abysmal," said Mohammad Azaz, chairman of the RDRC.

Urban planner Adil Mohammad Khan said, "The absence of a city-wide sewerage treatment system and the unchecked dumping of industrial waste are key contributors."

"Solid waste mismanagement and improper disposal by city dwellers exacerbate the problem," he added.

He criticised Dhaka's city corporations for lacking clear guidelines and failing to penalise violators.

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The Tongi Canal faces pollution from 79 sources. These include 29 industrial waste lines, 13 large sewerage lines, and 11 small sewerage outlets. Six service canals,

four large dumping stations, and seven smaller dumping points exacerbate the problem, with five industries and four kitchen markets also playing a role in polluting this vital waterway.

The Karnatali river suffers from 26 pollution sources.

These include five small sewerage outlets and one service canal, as well as five large dumping stations and 14 smaller dumping points. One kitchen market further adds to the river's environmental stress.

Finally, the Dhaleswari has six identified sources of pollution. These include three industrial waste lines, two industries, and one kitchen market.

In 2019, the High Court declared rivers as legal entities, with the National River Protection Commission designated as their legal guardian. While the judgement marked a historic milestone, the ground reality remains dire. The NRPC has struggled to act decisively, hampered by limited enforcement power and institutional inertia.

Meanwhile, industrial development has come at a devastating cost to the environment.

"Unchecked pollution is not only destroying rivers but also harming farmlands," said Khan, the urban planner.

"A balance between industrial development and environmental sustainability must be struck, but the government has consistently failed in this regard."

PRAYER TIMING
FEBRUARY 2
Fazr Zohr Asr Maghrib Esha
AZAN 5:30 12:45 4:15 5:52 7:15
JAMAAT 6:05 1:15 4:30 5:56 7:45
SOURCE: ISLAMIC FOUNDATION

Buying House /Agents Required
Looking to Buy stock of Ladies, Mens wear, childrens wear, Minimum quantity 500 to 25,000 pes per style. For meeting in Dhaka. Contact:+8801730889200 mail :delowar.hossain8419@ mail.com

NORTH SOUTH UNIVERSITY
Center of Excellence in Higher Education
TENDER NOTICE
Tender No. NSU/24-25-T06

North South University is inviting sealed offer from bona fide/ reputed organization/ tailoring house/ manufacturer for making and supplying liveries; and supplying shoes, socks and sandals.

Detail of the items are mentioned below:
Lot: 1- Making and supplying of liveries
Lot: 2- Supplying of shoes, socks and sandals

Interested bidders may collect a schedule of tender from Southeast Bank Ltd. Bashundhara Branch, Dhaka from 10:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. on all working day's till **February 16, 2025** by paying non-refundable amount of Taka 1,000.00 (One Thousand) in cash for each schedule.

The bidders must submit **earnest money @ 2.5%** of the quoted price in the form of Pay Order issued from any scheduled bank drawn in favor of North South University along with their offer. The sealed offer must be submitted on **February 17, 2025** by 2.15 p.m. at the office of the undersigned. **The offers will be opened at 2:30 p.m. on the same day.** Representatives of the participating bidders may remain present at the time of opening the bids. NSU authority reserves the right to accept or reject any or all the tenders without showing any reason.

Director, Internal Affairs
NORTH SOUTH UNIVERSITY
Bashundhara, Dhaka-1229
Phone : +88-02-55668200, Ext. 1204, Fax: +88-02-55668202
E-mail to: procurement@northsouth.edu, www.northsouth.edu

25 hurt as six

FROM PAGE 5
Md Moniruzzaman, in-charge of the highway police outpost, confirmed the incident and said the situation returned to normalcy by afternoon.

He further explained that heavy sand and soil-laden trucks had left the road slippery, which, alongside poor visibility amid fog, caused the drivers to lose control over steering, causing collision.

"In many areas, visibility has significantly decreased. Drivers and passengers are advised to use headlights and drive cautiously," Moniruzzaman added.

High pumpkin

FROM PAGE 5
for Tk 15-20 per kg. He said no significant problems exist in the sector.

Mohammad Samir Hossain Siam, agricultural marketing officer, said efforts are underway to find new markets with higher demand for pumpkins, which could help raise prices for local farmers.

Mercantile Bank PLC.
61, Dilikusha C/A, Dhaka-1000, Bangladesh. Website: www.mblbd.com Contact Centre: 16225

INVITATION OF TENDER

Mercantile Bank PLC. is hereby inviting tender from bonafied security printing firms as per terms & conditions stated below:

Name of Procuring Entity	Mercantile Bank PLC.			
Tender Name	Printing of MICR Cheques and other Security Instruments			
Procurement Method	Open Tender			
Details of Tender Schedule				
Date of Tender Invitation & Publication	Starting Date of selling	Ending Date of selling	Submission Date & Time	Opening Date & Time
02.02.2025	03.02.2025	09.02.2025	10.02.2025 within 11.00 AM	10.02.2025 after 11.30 AM
(10.00 AM to 05.00 PM)				
Name & address of the tender selling and receiving office	Mercantile Bank PLC., General Services Division, Monir Mansion (3 rd Floor), 18, Dilikusha C/A, Dhaka-1000. Interested tenderer shall submit a request on official letterhead and collect the tender documents upon payment of Tender price.			
Eligibility of Tenderers	Bonafied security printing firms having well experience in Security Printing of MICR cheque & other security Instruments for Automated Clearing House (ACH), as per specification and standardization of Bangladesh Bank guidelines.			
Price of Tender Document	Tk.4,600/- (Four thousand six hundred) only in cash mode (non-refundable).			
Earnest Money	Each tender must be accompanied by Earnest money for 5% (Five Percent) of the total work out amount on the basis of the rate quoted by the tenderer in the form of Pay Order from any schedule Bank of Bangladesh in favor of Mercantile Bank PLC.			
Other terms & conditions can be found in the tender document.				
Mercantile Bank PLC. reserves the right to accept or reject any or all the tenders without assigning any reason whatsoever at any stage of the procurement process.				

Vice President & Head General Services Division

VANDALISM AT VENUE Girls' football match to be rescheduled soon

OUR CORRESPONDENT, *Dinajpur*

The Joypurhat district administration has announced to reschedule a women's football match, which was previously cancelled after being disrupted following vandalism of the tin fence surrounding the playing field.

The decision was conveyed on Friday after a meeting between an investigation committee, the organisers, and local religious leaders, said Anisur Rahman, officer-in-charge of Akkelpur Police Station.

Members of the investigation committee, accompanied by an army team, visited the playing field and spoke with local residents. Law and order in the area remained stable, he added.

Akkelpur upazila nirbahi officer Manzurul Alam, a member of the probe body, said that the incident resulted from a "misunderstanding", as acknowledged by local religious leaders.

He assured that there were no longer any obstacles to women's football being played on the field, adding that arrangements for the match would be made soon.

Some individuals involved in the vandalism were also present and attributed the incident to "miscommunication".

Mostakim Hossain, a teacher of the local Bacha SEE PAGE 4 COL 1



PHOTO: MD QUAMRUL ISLAM RUBAIYAT
A group of women drying paddy on a field in Bathin village of Thakurgaon's Sadar upazila yesterday. The northern region saw bumper yields of Aman paddy, leaving local mills busy preparing the crop for consumption.

Arakan Army releases cargo vessel after 16 days

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, *Cox's Bazar*

A cargo vessel carrying 1,600 sacks of dried fish reached Teknaf Land Port yesterday after it was released by Arakan Army.

The Myanmar-based rebel group had seized the vessel 16 days back on its way to Teknaf from Yangon.

The vessel arrived at the Teknaf Land Port jetty at 12:45pm yesterday, said port officials.

Syed Mohammad Anwar Hossain, manager of United SEE PAGE 4 COL 5



ARIAL BEEL High pumpkin yield, low profit for farmers

TANJIL HASAN, *Munshiganj*

Despite a bumper harvest of pumpkins in the Arial Beel area of Munshiganj, farmers are struggling financially due to a steep decline in market prices.

By the end of January, the water in Arial Beel had dried up, allowing farmers to harvest the pumpkins they had cultivated along the banks of the waterbodies in the area.

Farmers typically grow two varieties of pumpkins: a larger, colourful local variety and a pest-resistant hybrid variety, which has gained popularity in recent years. While this year's harvest was abundant, market prices have fallen

sharply, leaving farmers struggling to cover their production costs.

"Last year, I sold pumpkins for Tk 30-32 per kilogramme, but this



year I'm getting only Tk 8-10 per kg. The situation is the same for all the 3-4 thousand farmers here. How can we survive like this?" said Abul Kashem, a farmer from Gadighat in

Shyamsiddhi union.

The cost of production has also increased significantly. Fertiliser prices have risen by Tk 500-700 per bag compared to last year, and labour costs are adding to the financial strain, said farmers.

Nurul Haque, another local farmer, said, "It costs about Tk 15,000 to grow pumpkins, with additional costs for transporting the produce to the city. With the current market prices, we are barely covering our costs, let alone making any profit."

Contacted, Bipul Kumar Mohanta, deputy director of the DAE in Munshiganj, said farmers are currently selling pumpkins SEE PAGE 4 COL 5



1,800 people get free health check-ups

Faraaz Hossain Foundation holds medical camp

OUR CORRESPONDENT, *Bagerhat*

A daylong free health check-up camp for underprivileged people was organised in Narail Sadar upazila on Friday.

Faraaz Hossain Foundation in collaboration with Sharif Atiar Rahman Smriti Parishad organised the camp at RBFM Bhabanipur Secondary School ground.

Since morning till evening, there were long queues of people at the camp where a team of 21 SEE PAGE 4 COL 1

DHAKA-RANGPUR HIGHWAY 25 hurt as six vehicles crash amid dense fog

OUR CORRESPONDENT, *Dinajpur*

At least 25 people were injured in a road accident involving six vehicles on Dhaka-Rangpur highway amid dense fog yesterday morning.

The vehicles, including two passenger buses, a truck, a pick up, and a covered van, collided at Garer Matha Mor (intersection) in Mithapukur area around 7:30am.

According to highway police and local sources, the vehicles, travelling from Dhaka, lost control due to poor visibility and crashed into each other at the intersection.

On information, officials from Barodorga Highway Police Outpost reached the spot, rescued the injured, and arranged for their treatment. They also initiated the process of clearing the damaged vehicles from the highway. Those with serious injuries were rushed to nearby hospitals. SEE PAGE 4 COL 5

No room for politics under AL name, ideology

FROM PAGE 1

Nahid: We assumed responsibilities in an extraordinary situation and have been navigating a kind of revolutionary phase. It was an unprecedented situation for Bangladesh. Naturally, there was tension and uncertainty. However, over the past six months, the situation has become more stable. Although progress is slow, things are improving. People may have expected faster actions, but various constraints posed limitations. Despite these, the government is doing its best.

TDS: What were the main challenges during this time?

Nahid: The biggest challenges were maintaining law and order and stabilising the prices of essentials. Ensuring national unity while meeting people's expectations has always been a challenge. As everyone can see, the government's structure is small, but it's work scope is quite extensive. We've to move forwards by maintaining a balance among political parties while keeping national unity intact. Meanwhile, the reform commissions are submitting their reports, begun, with arrests already underway. So, I believe we're making progress. If the political parties show more goodwill, we can advance at a faster pace.

TDS: What were the things you wanted to achieve during this period but couldn't?

Nahid: There are some regrets. If we could take some stricter measures from the very beginning, changes could have come sooner. Over these six months, we haven't been able to improve the administrative and law and order situations to the desired level. That said, our biggest achievement has been the transition from uncertainty to stability. In the early days, there were speculations about whether the government would remain in power, or there would be a counter-revolution. There were conspiracies within the country, along with geopolitical pressures. There was an international campaign against us, and tensions surrounding minority communities in the country were deliberately flared. Now, those tensions have largely subsided. I believe this is significant progress.

TDS: As for the law and order situation, incidents like muggings are occurring daily, even in broad daylight, which is concerning.

Nahid: Yes, that's true - some challenges still exist. Incidents of mugging and criminal activities are occurring in some areas. We're trying to restore the police's morale to its previous state. The police force is currently undergoing a transformation including new training and restructuring. However, such comprehensive changes take time.

For example, many members of the Dhaka Metropolitan Police have been transferred outside Dhaka, and new officers have been brought to the capital. This transition period has created temporary challenges, as officers need

time to adjust to their new environments. Initially, there was criticism when the police were perceived as inactive (following the fall of the AL government). Then when they took decisive actions, there was criticism again. Such contradictions make it difficult for them to stabilise. That said, we are committed to ensuring that the police regain full operational capacity.

TDS: Why was the police uniform changed? Do you think it'll lead to any qualitative improvement in the force?

Nahid: We don't expect a change in the uniform will solve everything, but it carries symbolic and psychological significance. A few days ago, I visited the graves of some martyrs. Relatives of one of the martyrs were infuriated upon seeing uniformed police officers who were accompanying me, even though they had no involvement in the deaths. The reactions might have been different if the officers were in plainclothes, as the primary identity of a force is represented through its uniform. This aspect is being taken into consideration. On one hand, we expect police to protect human rights, while on the other, they're responsible for controlling riots. The government is working to improve police effectiveness through advanced training.

TDS: Various shrines have been attacked, while a girls' football match was disrupted. What're the reasons?

Nahid: These incidents are deeply concerning and unacceptable, and may have occurred due to gaps in law and order situation. We acknowledge that such events are embarrassing for the government. We're taking these incidents seriously and trying to take appropriate action, while also considering compensation to the affected shrines.

TDS: The students and youth say the election should be held after reforms. On the other hand, the chief adviser has announced an election timeline. Is there a conflicting position between these two issues?

Nahid: From the beginning, we've maintained that elections and reforms are not contradictory. In fact, while elections are crucial for democracy, but reforms are equally necessary to ensure fair polls. Over the past 15 years, elections haven't been conducted properly. The people have lost much of their faith in the electoral institutions. During the (July-August) movement, we said we wanted to create a new arrangement to prevent the return of fascism. We want to ensure that no future government can manipulate the electoral system for party or personal gains. This is a long term process, but we want to lay the foundation now. We want to take political (parties) commitment so that whoever comes to power will continue the reforms.

TDS: Do you think the reforms can be completed within the timeframe set by the chief adviser?

Nahid: If you notice, the first six reform commissions we formed are related to

state structure and electoral reforms. Some of the commissions have already submitted their reports. We plan to discuss these issues with political parties this month. The parties were eager to know a specific timeframe. From that perspective, we believe the timeframe given by the chief adviser is consistent with the reform initiatives.

TDS: BNP previously suggested that the election could be held on August 5, terming it a historic date. What is your response to this?

Nahid: August 5 will also be a historic date in 2026. If this date is chosen as a milestone for the democratic journey, I don't see an issue.

TDS: There are discussions regarding a political party by the students and youth, and the resignation of two advisers including yourself. Will you really be resigning?

Nahid: As advisers, we're still focused on the government responsibilities. No decision has yet been made regarding our resignations.

TDS: Since you were a key figure in the July uprising, many expect you to join a party. What's your personal view on this?

Nahid: I haven't decided yet. My focus remains on where I can contribute most effectively. I need to carefully assess whether I can make a greater impact within the government or by working on the ground. When the time comes, I will make that decision based on what best serves the country.

TDS: BNP Secretary General Mirza Fakhrul has raised questions about the government's neutrality. Do you think this is related to the formation of the students' party?

Nahid: The students didn't form a party immediately after the uprising in order to gain the trust of the political parties. If they had, many other would have shown interest in being involved and they still might. So, you can understand the perspective of the youth. The government prioritising the advice of political parties in making key decisions. When the issue of removing the president arose, we did the same. Therefore, BNP's allegations of bias aren't justified. I don't know if they're considering any alternative plan or other options by removing Dr Yunus. If they are, I don't believe it will serve them or the country well.

TDS: Is there any crack developing in national unity?

Nahid: The uprising brought together people from different political and ideological backgrounds. Naturally, there were differences, but that doesn't mean there is a lack of unity. During the movement, we took a united stance. So, differences will exist, but this does not mean it's a weakness.

We don't expect everyone to have the same stance over every issue. However, the key question is how united we can remain on major national challenges. I believe that national unity is still intact.

If it weren't and political parties didn't cooperate, it would've been more difficult to run the government.

I hope this cooperation will continue in the future. Through our collective efforts, if we can maintain a consistent path towards reforms and ensure a responsible democratic transition, it'll be an achievement for all, especially those in the upcoming government. Their task will be easier.

TDS: How much reform can realistically be accomplished? There isn't much time.

Nahid: That's precisely why we weren't eager to announce an election timeline in haste. If even the minimal expectations of the people, shaped by the mass uprising and consequent bloodshed, are not met, they will lose faith in us and take to the streets. Sheikh Hasina's government was also an "elected government" in 2008, but it committed misdeeds. This suggests that an elected government doesn't necessarily guarantee the country's safety. We're aware of the recommendations made by "Teen Joter Ruprekha (roughly translated to 'tri-alliance outline') in 1990, but those plans weren't implemented. This time, we aim to create a roadmap for the public through reforms in the state structure, which can continue no matter who comes to power next.

TDS: Several journalists have been arrested and are in jail. Many were charged with murder, and some were laid off. Can these not be seen as a threat to freedom of press?

Nahid: No one has been arrested for criticising the interim government. However, some individuals in the media are facing legal proceedings due to allegations of criminal activity that extend beyond journalism. Many of those who were closely involved with the previous regime and failed to uphold journalistic ethics, who were complicit with fascism, are accused of being involved in (the July) killings. However, I believe the role of journalists and the media over the past 15 years needs deeper discussion. It isn't possible to address these through the legal framework. There must also be some form of accountability for those who committed moral or social wrongs as collaborators of fascism. If the government takes such measures, it may be questioned. I think the initiative should come from within the media itself through independent reviews and professional standards bodies.

TDS: While there may be allegations of financial wrongdoings against some journalists, but many are charged with murder. Isn't this putting pressure on other journalists?

Nahid: We've ensured a process for review if any case isn't filed properly. We've also communicated with the law ministry regarding the accused in cases who have applied for a review. Some journalists are also facing corruption allegations, which are being investigated

by the Anti-Corruption Commission and other relevant government agencies. The government isn't pressuring the media, but there is undeniable public frustration. However, certain groups have portrayed this internationally as a crackdown on press freedom, which does not reflect the full picture. In the past, media outlets were forcibly shut down following changes in government. That hasn't happened since this government was formed, though there's resentment among the people over the role of some media outlets.

I won't take names, but certain media outlets directly supported the fascist government during the July uprising. Was that ethical? To this day, they haven't acknowledged their role, nor have they explained their actions. They didn't say they wouldn't repeat such practices in the future. If the journalists who compromised ethical standards in the past takeresponsibility, acknowledge their misdeeds, and commit to not doing so in the future, this pressure perhaps will also lessen.

TDS: The recently approved draft of the Cyber Protection Ordinance 2024 contains several repressive provisions, as highlighted by civil society groups such as Transparency International Bangladesh. What are your thoughts?

Nahid: The law is being revised to ensure journalists and all sectors of society have freedom of speech and expression. I admit our government rushed the drafting process. The intention was to pass it quickly so that the victims of false cases filed under the Cyber Security Act could get some relief. Now, we've decided to cancel cases related to speech and writing offenses.

TDS: Will the government take into account the concerns raised by stakeholders?

Nahid: Absolutely. Further discussions will take place. We aim to create the best possible law with input from all stakeholders. I believe we can do that if stakeholder meetings are held properly.

TDS: In your opinion, what will be the future of Awami League politics? Will it be able to participate in the next polls? Will it be banned?

Nahid: It can't be definitively said at this moment. Whether Awami League should be banned or allowed to contest polls is something that requires national consensus. It'll also depend on the decisions from the courts and the Election Commission. However, as those who led the uprising, we believe Awami League has lost its moral and legal legitimacy to continue politics.

TDS: But you have mentioned reconciliation...

Nahid: Yes, but not under Awami League's banner. Those from the Sheikh family or individuals identified as corrupt or involved in mass killings have no right to continue politics.

TDS: What about Awami League members who were not involved in

corruption or violence?

Nahid: There is no room for politics under the name or ideology of Awami League. Their ideology is fascist, which led to 15 years of oppression and mass killings. Those who realise their mistakes must abandon that ideology. Their political and civil rights remain intact - they can join other parties or form a new one.

TDS: If someone from the Awami League, who wants a clean image, wants to join the Anti-discrimination Students' Movement - would you accept them?

Nahid: I am not currently involved with the platform, so I don't want to comment.

TDS: You don't want Awami League to continue politics, but there's no provision for prosecuting a party in the amended ICT Act...

Nahid: At that time, the decision was made based on consultations with national and international stakeholders. Legal experts and learned advisers of the advisory council gave their input.

Our main focus is to ensure that the judicial process is not questioned. However, there're other ways to ban a party outside courts as well.

TDS: Is such an initiative being taken?

Nahid: For now, we're focusing on the judicial process. Once progress is made in that regard, decisions on related matters will become easier.

TDS: Critics say if the prosecution of a party was included in the law, Jamaat-e-Islami would have to be prosecuted for its 1971 crimes as well...

Nahid: That's not the case at all. After discussing with experts, all necessary actions to maintain international standards have been taken.

TDS: Could you share something about the progress of the judicial process in ICT?

Nahid: We hope that the judicial proceedings of the important cases will begin before August.

TDS: Will the election be held after that? Nahid: It'll depend on the judicial timeline. However, our aim is for the public to see justice being served, and then move forward with a fair and credible election.

TDS: If everything goes well, we'll be heading toward an election atmosphere in six months. What do you plan to do during this time?

Nahid: Law and order, along with the economic condition, need further improvement. If the police aren't properly operational, holding an election will be difficult. Many people might've thought that an election will fix everything, but that's not the case.

A good election requires a conducive atmosphere. We want to organise the most transparent and credible election in the country's history. The 1991 election is often considered the country's fairest election, but we aim to set an even higher standard.

READ FULL INTERVIEW ON THE THE DAILY STAR WEBSITE

'The entire system needs an overhaul'

An exclusive with Mostofa Sarwar Farooki

Since taking charge at the Ministry of Cultural Affairs, Mostofa Sarwar Farooki has faced a steep learning curve. The director has had to learn to navigate the complexities of government bureaucracy and a febrile political climate, where controversies are quick to erupt.

CYRUS NAJI

The latest was caused by the Bangla Academy's recent cancellation of its awards, in the face of criticism of the selection. "To be honest, the entire system needs an overhaul," said Farooki in his first in-depth interview since joining the interim government. "The fellows who go on to crown the award recipients among the nominees are given only 30 minutes to decide. Now you tell me, is that enough time to research someone's works?"

The adviser emphasised the importance of bringing new thoughts and ideas to the forefront. "Right now, Bangla Academy itself is an institution that needs to be remodelled philosophically and bureaucratically. Awami League created fellows according to their own preferences over the last 15 years. Imagine if someone with published works praising Hitler after the fall of Nazism were to receive a literary award – how would that seem?"

Politics is nothing new for the filmmaker-turned adviser, who believes "filmmaking is a political job". However, under the previous government, he said, he had to be careful when expressing his views on social media.

Asked about those views, Farooki cited the Gonojagoron Moncho in 2013, which he called "the beginning of fascism."

"They used to claim that if we believed in our Liberation War, we weren't allowed to ask questions about it," he said. "Isn't that the same as what right-wing extremists say? They are the other side of the same coin."

According to the adviser, the cultural sector suffered incessantly under Sheikh Hasina. He alleges that the previous pervasive self-censorship meant that no form of art was allowed to challenge the government in any way.

When one of his films was blocked from release, he understood that he had been sent "a very dangerous signal". "Even though I continued to voice my dissent on social media, I was also concerned about the safety of my family and me". The interim government's Commission of Inquiry on Enforced Disappearances has since received 1,676 complaints of enforced disappearances.

Things changed dramatically in the August of 2024. Two months after the uprising, Farooki was asked to join the government by Information Adviser Nahid Islam. Although he did not take the offer seriously at the time, he decided to accept it when he learned that the request came directly from the Chief Adviser, Dr Muhammad Yunus.

"I decided to speak to the chief adviser, and I told him I didn't want to take up the role, but within three minutes he convinced

me," the adviser recalled. "He said 'Farooki, you need to do something for the nation.'"

Now in office, he has ambitious plans: he wants to restore Panam Nagar and turn Cox's Bazaar into a cultural capital, hosting arts festivals and colleges – "think of Cannes, think of Venice", he said.

Since taking office, he has prioritised workshops by different cultural organisations, holding concerts and festivals, and producing short films to publicise the interim government's goals. "Theatre production workshops are taking place in different towns," he said, adding that more than 150 different programmes across multiple disciplines have occurred in the last three months—sometimes focusing on Baul songs, sometimes on art exhibitions.

His mention of Baul songs raised the question of security: in various parts of the country, mazars (shrines) have been attacked by religious fundamentalists. In November, a Baul festival was cancelled by local authorities, citing security concerns. The adviser responded defiantly, "We will double the number of Baul events in a month," but sought to downplay the threat, "They are not a general tendency," he said. "If you consider that police forces are still

challenge power and decide to make a film that suits the narrative of the government, that is called propaganda," he said, adding that it was "a tragedy for art in general is when artists don't take the side of the oppressed, but the side of the oppressors."

Whether artists formerly aligned with the Awami League will continue to receive government grants for their films or theatre projects will depend, Farooki said, "on the scripts, but the formula they used before to get funds—praising Sheikh Hasina and Sheikh Mujib—that will not work." Other than that, the adviser believes that one is now entirely free to create films or other artworks that criticise the government.

"We need to remind ourselves not to make the same mistakes as the previous government," he said, stressing political and cultural inclusivity.

The adviser is now turning his attention to the country's cultural heritage, neglected for decades; there is no national modern art gallery, and thousands of the best paintings by 20th-century masters languish unseen in institutional storage at Shilpakala and the National Museum. Apart from two rooms in the National Museum, there is no permanent display of modern art in a country prized for the quality of its art.

"There are 807 Zainul Abedin paintings dumped in a storage unit being destroyed," he acknowledged. "Our cultural ministries never knew what their job was—they didn't care or know how to project and protect Bangladeshi cultural heritage."

Farooki has channelled his efforts for reform through the governing council of the National Museum, which controls six other museums across the country, appointing architect Marina Tabassum as chair. "She has been given the mandate and freedom to change our National Museum. We told Marina, 'Please prepare the reform plan, even if it takes three years, as I believe whoever comes after the election will want to implement it.'"

The adviser acknowledged the budget issue in the museum sector. The room holding the National Museum's collection of 807 Zainul Abedin paintings lacks a dehumidifier, for instance.

However, many artists and curators argue that, without a dedicated National Gallery, it will be impossible to do justice to the wealth of Bangladeshi modern art. Farooki refused to be drawn on whether a new art gallery is needed. "We need to structure the curation and change the way we preserve things," he highlighted, but left open the possibility of a new art museum.

Meanwhile, in early January, Farooki received notice he would be responsible for creating a new museum, in the site of old Gono Bhaban, dedicated

to the July Revolution. This museum, he hoped, would be an "immersive" experience that would "take you on the traumatic 15-year journey that Bangladesh went through." He has plans for a soft launch on August 5 this year, the anniversary of the uprising's victory, after a nationwide open competition to choose the design.

A committee had already formed in November, with Ebadur Rahman as convener. That committee began making plans for the new museum, but principal responsibility was transferred to the cultural ministry in early January. The adviser described it as "a very important priority" for his ministry, and has already formed an advisory

committee for the museum, including Mr Rahman, which will meet within a week.

Meanwhile, Mostofa Sarwar Farooki continues to struggle with a tight budget and a bureaucracy he described as slow and outdated: "They [the previous regime] destroyed the country's cultural sector for over a decade," he concluded.

"Just imagine how much effort we'll need to fix it." Will he stay on to finish the job? "I don't have any plans to be a minister," the adviser said, "but I would be happy to be an informal adviser."

Cyrus Naji is a writer and researcher working in Dhaka.



PHOTO: SHEIKH MEHEDI MORSHED

"Bangla Academy itself is an institution that needs to be remodelled. Awami League created fellows according to their preferences. Imagine if someone with published works praising Hitler after the fall of Nazism were to receive a literary award – how would that seem?"

being reorganised and compare the number of incidents to those under the previous government, you will see that we are doing really well."

"In every country, there are some extreme right-wingers," he conceded. "However, this narrative, in part, is propaganda spun by Indian media." He added, "Sheikh Hasina was not a secular leader at all – she used the mere notion of secularism to divide the nation. The Liberation War and secularism were shields to hide her wrongdoings."

Nonetheless, many cultural figures in Bangladesh feel a natural affinity for the Liberation War and secularism. Are they now free to produce work with those themes? "If, as an artiste, you don't

Coldplay sets new Guinness record, surpasses Taylor Swift

The British rock band Coldplay has set a Guinness World Record for the most-attended tour in history with their *Music of the Spheres World Tour* in Ahmedabad, India – surpassing that of Taylor Swift's record for her *Eras Tour*.

Coldplay has sold more than 10.3 million tickets for its *Music of the Spheres World Tour*, which began in March 2022 with a performance in Costa Rica. With over eight months left on the tour, the band has the potential to break even more records, according to Guinness World Records.



Taylor Swift's *Eras Tour* remains the highest-grossing music tour, earning \$2.07 billion despite fewer attendees. However, according to Guinness World Records, Coldplay also has a strong chance of surpassing this record.

Priyadarshan confirms 'Hera Pheri 3' with Akshay, Paresh and Suniel Shetty

Filmmaker Priyadarshan, who recently celebrated his 68th birthday, expressed his desire to direct *Hera Pheri 3*, which will feature the original trio of Akshay Kumar, Paresh Rawal, and Suniel Shetty.

On Twitter, Akshay extended his wishes to the director during his birthday and in response, Priyadarshan hinted at the development of *Hera Pheri 3*.

Priyadarshan wrote back, "Thank you so much for your wishes, Akshay Kumar. As a gift in return, I am willing to do *Hera Pheri 3*. Are you ready, Akshay?" He also tagged actors Suniel



Shetty and Paresh Rawal in his post.

The *Hera Pheri* franchise follows the financially struggling

Raju, Shyam, and their landlord Babu Rao, whose lives change when they intercept a ransom call and plot to keep the money.

WHAT'S THE HAPS?

'Sufi Fest 2025'

This year's *Sufi Fest*, orchestrated in collaboration with the Shahbaz Foundation and The Space, is geared up to become an event worth remembering.

The event, with entry tickets available at three different price levels, will feature a variety of activities, including discussions, live Folk, Qawwali, Sufi Raqs, Sufi Hadra, and musical performances. Additionally, there will be various stalls, exhibitions, art sessions, and meditation experiences among other arrangements.

Date: Thursday, February 20

Time: 10am onwards

Venue: Ahsan Manzil Museum



BSA launches Munier Chowdhury National Theatre Festival

For the first time, Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy (BSA) is hosting the Munier Chowdhury National Theatre Festival. As per the Academy, 16 theatre troupes will be selected for the festival from a 15-day production-based theatre workshop, already underway across the country in three phases.

On January 5, BSA held a gathering with theatre



workshop directors from all 64 districts, where Director General Syed Jamil Ahmed provided guidelines for the festival and workshops.

Workshops are being held across multiple districts in Dhaka, Chattogram, Rajshahi, Khulna, Rangpur, Barishal, Sylhet, and Mymensingh divisions.

The third and final phase of the workshop, beginning on February 3 and concluding on February 17, will be held in Dhaka's Madaripur, Barishal's Bhola, and Chattogram's Cumilla.

INTERNATIONAL

56 killed
as fighting
grips greater
Khartoum

AFP, Port Sudan

Artillery shelling and air strikes killed at least 56 people across greater Khartoum on Saturday, according to a medical source and Sudanese activists.

Sudan's regular army and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF) have been locked in a battle for power since April 2023 that has intensified this month as the army fights to take all of the capital Khartoum and its sister cities of Omdurman and Khartoum North.

RSF shelling killed 54 people at a busy market in Omdurman on Saturday, overwhelming the city's Al-Nao Hospital, a medical source told AFP.

"The shells hit in the middle of the vegetable market, that's why the victims and the wounded are so many," one survivor told AFP.

Across the Nile in Khartoum, two civilians were killed and dozens wounded in an air strike on an RSF-controlled area, the local Emergency Response Room (ERR) said.

Although the RSF has used drones in attacks including on Saturday, the fighter jets of the regular armed forces maintain a monopoly on air strikes.

The ERR is one of hundreds of volunteer committees across Sudan coordinating emergency care.

In addition to killing tens of thousands of people, the war has uprooted more than 12 million and forced most health facilities out of service.

A volunteer at Al-Nao Hospital told AFP it faced dire shortages of "shrouds, blood donors and stretchers to transport the wounded".

The hospital is one of the last medical facilities operating in Omdurman and has been repeatedly attacked.

After months of stalemate in greater Khartoum, the army retook several bases in Khartoum last month, including its pre-war headquarters, pushing the RSF increasingly into the city's outskirts.

Witnesses said Saturday's bombardment of Omdurman came from the city's western outskirts, where the RSF remains in control.

A resident of a southern neighbourhood reported rocket and artillery fire on the city's streets.



A former Palestinian prisoner released by Israel is hugged by members of his family as he disembarks a Red Cross bus after arriving in Ramallah, in the occupied West Bank yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Hamas-Israel complete 4th hostage-prisoner swap

Five Arab FMs reject forced displacement of Palestinians

AFP, Gaza City

Freed Palestinian inmates were greeted by a cheering crowd in the occupied West Bank city of Ramallah yesterday, after Hamas released three Israeli hostages from the Gaza Strip in the fourth exchange under the group's ceasefire deal with Israel.

Three other buses carrying freed Palestinians also arrived in the southern Gaza city of Khan Yunis, with the inmates in grey prison uniforms met by hundreds of well-wishers.

In Ramallah, the bus carrying the inmates struggled to make its way through the jubilant throng of supporters as it arrived from the Israeli-run Ofer Prison.

Several of the freed inmates were hoisted onto the crowd's shoulders, including an elderly man who raised his crutches over his head in a triumphant

pose.

Earlier in Gaza, hostages Ofer Kalderon and Yarden Bibas were paraded on stage by Hamas fighters before being handed over to the Red Cross in the southern city of Khan Yunis. American Israeli Keith Siegel was freed shortly thereafter in a similar ceremony at Gaza City's port in the north.

Israel's military later confirmed that all three were back in Israel.

Israeli campaign group the Hostages and Missing Families Forum hailed the release as "a ray of light in the darkness".

After holding the hostages for more than 15 months, Hamas began releasing them on January 19 under the terms of the ceasefire deal with Israel.

Groups in Gaza have so far handed over 18 hostages to the International Committee of the Red Cross in exchange for hundreds of Palestinian prisoners, many of them women and minors.

The Palestinian Prisoners' Club advocacy group had said Israel would free 183 prisoners yesterday.

Hamas sources said a fifth hostage-prisoner exchange would take place next Saturday.

After yesterday's hostage release, Gaza's key Rafah border crossing was reopened, with the health ministry in the Hamas-run territory saying 50 Palestinian patients had gone through the crossing to Egypt.

The fragile ceasefire's 42 day first phase hinges on the release of a total of 33 hostages in exchange for around 1,900 people, mostly Palestinians, held in Israeli jails.

Negotiations for a second phase of the deal are set to start on Monday, according to a timeline provided by an Israeli official.

The second phase is expected to cover the release of the remaining captives and to include discussions on a more permanent end to the war.

Indian troops kill 8 Maoists

AFP, Raipur

Indian commandos shot dead at least eight Maoist rebels in the dense jungles of central India yesterday, as security forces ramp up efforts to crush the long-running conflict.

More than 10,000 people have been killed in the decades-long insurgency waged by the rebels, who say they are fighting for the rights of marginalised Indigenous people.

The gunfight broke out early on Saturday in the forested areas of Bijapur district in the state of Chhattisgarh, considered the heartland of the insurgency.

"After a fierce gun battle, bodies of eight Maoists were recovered today from the jungles of Bijapur district," top police officer Sundarraj P. told AFP.

Weapons recovered from the rebels included a grenade launcher and rifles, he said, adding that a search was still underway.

A crackdown by security forces has killed some 287 rebels in the past year, an overwhelming majority in Chhattisgarh, according to government data.

Amit Shah, India's home minister, said last year the government expected to crush the rebellion by 2026. The Maoists demand land, jobs and a share of the region's immense natural resources for local residents.

20 Bangladeshis

FROM PAGE 1

according to the ministry message.

Meanwhile, Shariful Hasan, associate director (Migration and Youth Platform) of BRAC, in a social media post last night said most of the deceased were from Madaripur and Shariatpur, and some from Bhairab.

He said this based on information from the Bangladesh embassy in Libya and the victims' families.

"According to my information, at least three more bodies may have washed up. There were at least 25 people in the group. I think two are alive, but I don't know where they are. It is unclear how the accident happened," he wrote.

He said Bangladesh ranked first among countries whose nationals attempted to cross the Mediterranean in 2024. In the past year alone, 13,044 Bangladeshis were identified as taking this route.

The Bangladesh embassy has not been able to confirm the number of Bangladeshis killed in last week's boat capsizing.

"We have heard that several Bangladeshis may have died in the boat capsizing, but we have no confirmation yet," an official of the embassy told The Daily Star last night.

The official said once a clearance is obtained, a team from the embassy would travel to the area to gather information, identify the deceased, and facilitate repatriation of the bodies if those are of Bangladeshis.

On January 30, the Bangladesh embassy in Libya on its Facebook page said several bodies of migrants had been recovered over the past two days from the shores of Brega. It said the bodies washed ashore after a boat carrying migrants capsized in the Mediterranean.

The embassy urged anyone with information about Bangladeshis who may have died, been injured, or affected by the incident to come forward. Concerned individuals can contact the embassy via its Facebook page or official mobile numbers: +218916994202 and +218916994207.

Remnants of fascist regime still present

FROM PAGE 12

protect ourselves, our families, the people of the country, and overall Bangladesh, we all must remain united at any cost.

"So, we take the first vow at this council that all BNP leaders and workers will remain united under any circumstances. Our second pledge is that, with the people, we'll build the country by maintaining unity," he said.

The BNP leader said there could be differences of opinion among democratic parties and organisations on various political issues, including the future function of parliament, its tenure, the tenure of governments --

both interim and elected -- and the limit for a person's tenure as prime minister.

"We can resolve these issues through discussions. But if we engage in excessive debates on these matters, we will fall behind in rebuilding the country," he said.

Tarique said the country and its people would suffer if the rebuilding activities of Bangladesh were hindered. "We'll sit together and engage in discussions. If we can't resolve it in one sitting, we'll continue to meet and find solutions through dialogue."

He said the people of Bangladesh have not had the right to vote in the last 15 years, as the Awami League

government took it away at gunpoint in the name of dummy, voter-less, and rigged elections.

The BNP leader also accused the Hasina regime of destroying all institutions and plundering significant amounts of money in the name of development, as it had no accountability to the people.

He said the government's accountability is ensured when the people can elect their representatives through their votes.

At another programme, BNP Secretary General Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir said that Hasina continued to conspire against the country from Delhi.

Justice for mass killing first

FROM PAGE 12

party," he added.

Taking a dig at the ousted Awami League, he said those who threatened to banish them have now fled the country.

"They used to send us abroad without passports, visas, or tickets; but now they are fleeing without those," he said.

He also took a swipe at former Supreme Court judge Justice Shamsuddin Chowdhury Manik, saying, "Have you seen a Supreme Court judge sleeping on a banana leaf? That was his fate due to his

misuse of power while in office."

On education, he pledged that if Jamaat comes to power, it will prioritise education and establish a modern, job-oriented system.

"Our brightest minds leave the country for higher education and never return, whereas, in the past, the Mughals, British, and Portuguese came here seeking fortune. Now, the situation has reversed," he said.

Highlighting the integrity of his party's activists, he said his party activists are not involved in any extortion or litigation trade.

"Critique us as much as possible. It will only make us work harder. If we fail to deliver, you have every right to abandon us," he said.

Shafiq said if Jamaat comes to power, Sunamganj will witness rapid development.

"If not, we will fight alongside the people for their rights and development," he said.

Sunamganj district Jamaat Ameer Maulana Tofayel Ahmed, Jamaat's Assistant Secretary General Advocate Ahsanul Mahboob Zubair were present at the meeting among others.

BNP drafts July uprising declaration

FROM PAGE 2

For input from other anti-fascist political parties to refine the document and discuss its upcoming programmes, the BNP held meetings with the 12 party alliance, Jamiat Ulama-e-Islam Bangladesh, and Jatiyatabadi Samamona Jote in the last two days.

It plans further discussions with its partners and those who boycotted the last parliamentary election in January 2024.

The draft declaration traces its roots from the 1971 Liberation War to the fall of the Sheikh Hasina government following the July-August mass uprising led by students last year, according to party sources.

They say the declaration underscores a firm commitment to preventing the resurgence of fascism and ensuring justice for crimes against humanity, including enforced disappearances and killings during Hasina's rule.

It also stresses the urgency of holding free and fair polls and completing constitutional reforms through an elected parliament.

Leaders of the Students Against Discrimination, which spearheaded the uprising, and its citizen platform the Jatiya Nagorik Committee attempted to make a July uprising proclamation in late December last year. However, the government said it would make the proclamation itself after consensus among all the parties.

After the uprising leaders submitted their draft to political parties, an all-party meeting was convened on January 16. The BNP decided to support the students' initiative with necessary revisions.

According to party sources, the party has carefully chosen the term "declaration" rather than "proclamation"

for the document.

They said the BNP decided to draft the declaration after discussing the matter within its policymaking forum.

A standing committee member, who was involved in drafting the declaration, said that BNP adopted aspects of the students' proclamation that align with the party's ideology.

"We have modified and reformulated the unreasonable aspects of the students' manifesto," the leader added, speaking to this newspaper on condition of anonymity.

According to sources, the party believes the declaration remains relevant despite the time elapsed since the uprising and the formation of the interim government.

The core elements of the draft would remain intact, with possible minor adjustments based on the feedback from allies, according to the party sources.

Meanwhile, a comparison between the student-led draft and BNP's version reveals key differences.

The students refer to the 1971 war as a "People's War" while the BNP calls it the "Liberation War", explicitly mentioning the March 26, 1971, independence declaration, which is absent in the students' draft.

On constitutional reforms, the students criticise the 1972 constitution for failing to reflect the aspirations of Liberation War participants, advocating for its amendment or abolition.

The BNP, however, proposes systematic reforms through an elected parliament.

Its draft also highlights the formation of the interim government on August 8, 2024, led by Prof Muhammad Yunus, based on the Supreme Court's opinion under article 106 of the constitution.

In contrast, the students' draft

demands immediate structural reforms before the next election. It credits the Students Against Discrimination for leading the July uprising, while the BNP's version attributes the mass movement to people from all sectors of society.

The BNP's draft includes detailed casualty figures, citing over 2,000 deaths, including of women and children, and thousands left with life-altering injuries like the loss of a limb or eyesight. The details are absent in the students' draft.

While the students focus on the persecution of students and youths under Awami League rule, the BNP's draft broadens the scope to include opposition leaders, activists, and others.

Both drafts demand justice for crimes committed during the uprising, while the BNP also wants justice for the crimes during the 16 years of fascist rule, including enforced disappearances and human rights violations.

The students' draft calls for a "New Republic" to address systemic oppression and inequality, urging official recognition of their declaration effective from August 5, 2024. On the other hand, the BNP's draft focuses on constitutional reforms through an elected parliament, avoiding the term "New Republic".

The BNP focuses more on the political struggle against the Awami League, describing the uprising as a continuation of the struggle, and emphasising the role of political parties and other organisations in leading the movement.

The students' draft focuses on the broader societal impact of discrimination, corruption, and environmental degradation, emphasising the role of students and common people in the movement.

Language Movement

FROM PAGE 12

In February of that year, Muslim League leaders and many other members of the Pakistan Constituent Assembly opposed a proposal to use Bangla in state affairs. Immediately afterwards, like their peers in Dhaka, the students of Faridpur also erupted in protests centring Rajendra College and the schools.

According to Ahmed Rafiq's book *Bhasha Andolan: Teknaf Theke Tetulia*, the protesters in Faridpur decided to successfully enforce a strike announced centrally from Dhaka for March 11, 1948 by the Rashtrabhasha Sangram Parishad. Rajendra College students, led by Syed Mahub Ali, Mohiuddin Ahmed, Abdul Matin and others, started campaigning for the strike in the last week of February through processions and street rallies.

A spontaneous strike was observed in Faridpur, Dr Abu Muhammad Delwar Hossain wrote in his book *Bhasha Andolaner Ancholik Itihas*. Police baton-charged the protesters, injuring Mahub Ali, Mohiuddin Ahmed and several others when the demonstrators brought out a procession from Rajendra College and started marching around the city. The police detained 11 student leaders, but released them later due to the sympathetic role of Faridpur district's administrator Abdul Halim Chowdhury.

After the government declared Urdu as the sole state language of Pakistan on January 27, 1952, a Rashtrabhasha Sangram Committee



Faridpur Central Shaheed Minar.

PHOTO: SUZIT DAS

was formed in Faridpur in early February, with Imamuddin Ahmed as the president and Monowar Hossain as the general secretary. With the support of leftist leaders and activists, the movement spread all over Greater Faridpur. A Flag Day was observed in Faridpur on February 4. And it was decided that a strike would be enforced on February 21.

According to the book *Bhasha Andolone Faridpur* by Rezaul Karim, the agitated students took to the streets when the news of killings of students in police firing in Dhaka on February 21 reached Faridpur that afternoon through telegram. Several student protesters in Faridpur were injured when the police clubbed them outside Kotwali Police Station.

A full-day strike was observed in Faridpur on February 22. On that day, the students marched from Rajendra College to Chawkbazar Mosque in violation of section 144 of the CrPC,

which restricts gatherings. The police attacked the procession and arrested several demonstrators. In protest, the students staged a sit-in outside Kotwali Police Station until the police released the arrested students at midnight.

From February 23, Faridpur practically became a city of processions. All administrative activities came to a standstill as the movement spread to the rural areas. In protest against the killings in Dhaka, school students also joined the processions in Faridpur.

The Daily Azad newspaper on February 27 reported that the students of Char Atra Azzia Junior High Madrasa in Faridpur enforced a full-scale general strike against the killings in Dhaka. They also flew the national flag at half mast, brought out a procession and held a rally.

[Translated and edited by Oshamul-Sufian Talukder]

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR: LATE S. M. ALI

Mega corruption in megaprojects

The system that allowed this must be fixed

Despite corruption being prevalent under the previous regime, the extent of it in regards to eight mega projects is shocking. According to a report by a government-formed task force, the costs of these projects—Padma Bridge, Padma Bridge Rail Link, Jamuna Railway Bridge, Dhaka-Mawa Expressway, Bangabandhu Tunnel, Dhaka Metro Rail Line-6, Terminal 3 of Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport, and BRT Line-3—rose by a staggering 68 percent, or \$7.52 billion, from the initial estimates. Initially, the total estimated cost of these projects was \$11.2 billion, but it eventually surged to \$18.64 billion, primarily due to poor and faulty feasibility studies, corruption, and delays in project initiation.

The task force has also identified several other factors contributing to cost overruns, including delays in land acquisition, a prolonged and corrupt land valuation process, misuse of acquired land, and conflicts with other projects. Consequently, while these mega projects have been completed, their success has come at a hefty price—both in terms of time and resources—leading to substantial resource wastage. The report found that such megaprojects are often formulated through a top-down approach, heavily influenced by political and external factors. Project ideas are typically conceived by ministers, influential politicians, ministries, secretaries, and donors before being presented to the prime minister for approval. Once approved, the project is handed over to the relevant ministry for feasibility studies and proposal preparation, with instructions for swift implementation. However, these projects often do not align with the relevant department's master plan or priorities. Moreover, feasibility studies are frequently treated as a mere formality, with a tendency to exaggerate project benefits and underestimate costs. Land acquisition, which typically begins during the project implementation phase, is also plagued by corruption, inefficiencies, and delays in valuation and compensation assessment.

It has been found that foreign government funded projects often incur high construction costs due to direct procurement methods and non-competitive bidding practices. For instance, India's lines of credit, intended to support Bangladesh's development, come with stringent conditions—one being that 75 percent of project content must be sourced from India. This restriction limits Bangladesh's procurement flexibility, often resulting in inflated costs and compromised quality.

In addition to these megaprojects, the Awami League government undertook numerous other projects during its tenure, many of which underwent frequent revisions, leading to delays and cost escalations. Ultimately, it is the people of Bangladesh who bear the burden of such massive corruption and inefficiency.

Moving forward, ensuring transparency and accountability in all development projects is crucial. The task force committee has made two key recommendations. First, the Planning Commission should have the authority to appraise, approve, coordinate, and oversee all public projects. Second, all four modes of transport should be brought under a single ministry, potentially the transport ministry. The government should seriously consider these proposals and implement systemic reforms to ensure that public projects genuinely serve the public interest.

Why is custodial death continuing?

The govt must end this practice immediately

We are appalled by the death of a 42-year-old man in Cumilla less than 24 hours after his arrest. According to the inquest report of the Kotwali station in Cumilla, the body of Touhidul Islam bore marks of trauma and injuries—and the pictures from the report shows how brutally he was tortured. The hospital director stated that Touhidul's body showed signs of injury. All of these corroborate the family's assertion that he was tortured to death. Joint forces allegedly picked the man up from his house at 2:30 am—police later found his body on the bank of the Gomati River at 11 am. The police had been informed by the joint forces.

We are shocked that security forces continue to torture, kill, and detain arrestees, showing little change in their treatment. Custodial deaths and extrajudicial killings were a hallmark of the last regime, where the police and other forces enjoyed complete impunity for these heinous crimes. Are we to believe that, despite an end to the repressive Awami regime, some members of the security and law enforcement forces still feel the same sense of infallibility that they torture arrestees to death?

The Human Rights Watch's World Report 2025 has stated that there are concerns that security forces in Bangladesh have continued to carry out abuses, including the arbitrary arrests of opposition supporters and journalists and denying them due process and proper access to legal counsel. The chief adviser has denounced any form of custodial torture and extrajudicial killings. He has stated that upholding human rights in all aspects of national life remains a core mission of the administration, which includes some of the country's top rights activists. We welcome his prompt reaction and his statement reiterating the government's commitment to "eliminate human rights violations in police interrogations, crime management, and judicial procedures" by engaging with political parties over the findings of several commissions to reform the criminal justice system.

While reforms are crucial, and so is dialogue with political parties, we feel that the interim government must act now to immediately stop the police and other security forces empowered with magistracy from abusing their power. We have seen that even after the fall of Sheikh Hasina's government, there have been other deaths in custody, and the causes have remained a mystery. This only gives more credence to the idea that these deaths were a result of torture.

We hope that the probe into Touhidul's death will be fair, thorough, and swift and that the perpetrators will be given appropriate punishment. Custodial torture and death must stop immediately.

Why Bangladesh struggles to attract FDI



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SELIM RAIHAN

Bangladesh has struggled to attract substantial foreign direct investment (FDI), as reflected in its low FDI as a percentage of GDP compared to regional peers. In 2023, Bangladesh's FDI-to-GDP ratio was only 0.4 percent, while Vietnam's was 4.3 percent. In that year, Vietnam attracted around \$39 billion in FDI, whereas Bangladesh saw only around \$3 billion. The July-September quarter of FY25 showed a 71 percent year-on-year decline in FDI for Bangladesh. It is well known that foreign investment drives economic growth by bringing capital, creating jobs, transferring technology, and enhancing global market access. For Bangladesh, with its large workforce, FDI is essential for industrialisation. Therefore, the decline in FDI threatens Bangladesh's goal of becoming a middle-income country and requires immediate policy reforms.

Several factors contribute to the low inflow of FDI and the recent decline. Reversing the unsatisfactory FDI trend requires bold, forward-thinking policies and decisive action. Policymakers must take a holistic approach to creating a more attractive investment climate.

Firstly, bureaucratic red tape and corruption are significant deterrents to investment in Bangladesh. The country ranks poorly in global business environment indices and Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index. Investors face excessive red tape, an unpredictable and unfriendly tax system, slow decision-making, and policy uncertainty. Lengthy procedures for obtaining permits, land, and utilities, combined with demands for bribes, frustrate both domestic and foreign businesses. The lack of transparency and accountability in

governance further erodes investor trust. To address these issues, bureaucratic reforms are essential. Simplifying procedures, digitising services, and operationalising "one-stop service centres" (which are largely dysfunctional now) can reduce



VISUAL: ANWER SOHEL

delays. Strengthening anti-corruption measures and ensuring accountability will help rebuild trust in the system.

Second, Bangladesh's political landscape, marked by partisan conflict, the dominance of crony capitalists, and policy reversals, adds to investor uncertainty. Additionally, macroeconomic instability—high inflation, currency depreciation, and fiscal deficits—raises concerns about business viability. Investors seek stability, which Bangladesh struggles to guarantee. Establishing consistent policies, ensuring fair competition, and combating corruption are crucial. Strengthening institutions, enforcing contract laws, and maintaining

political stability will foster a conducive environment for long-term investment.

Third, while the country has made some progress in infrastructure development, including mega projects like the Padma Bridge and metro rail, significant gaps remain. Power shortages, inefficient ports, and congested transport networks raise business costs. In contrast, Vietnam's integrated industrial zones offer a seamless experience. Bangladesh must prioritise infrastructure by accelerating key projects and improving maintenance. Public-private partnerships (PPPs) should be used to mobilise resources, but

Fifth, Bangladesh boasts a young and growing workforce, but the quality of human capital remains a challenge. Many investors struggle to find adequately trained workers, particularly in technology-intensive sectors. Without substantial investment in education and vocational training, Bangladesh risks losing out on high-value FDI to competitors with better-equipped labour markets. Bangladesh must revamp its education system, align vocational training with industry needs, and promote STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) education to prepare workers for the evolving job market.

Finally, Bangladesh's reliance on the ready-made garment (RMG) sector, which accounts for over 80 percent of exports, makes it vulnerable to external shocks and limits its appeal to diversified investors. While the RMG sector has been a success story, over-dependence on a single industry is risky, especially as global demand fluctuates and competition intensifies from other countries. To attract a broader range of investors, Bangladesh must diversify its economy. Policymakers must create an enabling environment for emerging industries by offering incentives, investing in skills development, and fostering innovation. Special economic zones (SEZs) with world-class facilities and streamlined regulations can serve as hubs for new industries and attract foreign investors.

The low level and decline in foreign investment are not just economic issues but reflections of deeper structural and governance challenges. For Bangladesh to achieve its ambitious development goals, it must confront these challenges head-on. Policymakers must recognise that attracting foreign investment is not just about offering tax breaks or incentives but about creating a stable, transparent, and business-friendly environment.

The time to act is now. The global economic landscape is rapidly evolving, and competition for investment is fiercer than ever. If Bangladesh fails to address the root causes of its waning FDI, it risks falling behind its peers.

Can 'engineering diplomacy' solve Bangladesh-India water issue?



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SHAFIQU L ISLAM

Bangladesh is still recovering from the devastating August 2024 floods, one of the worst regional floods in its history. Millions were displaced, livelihoods shattered, and diplomatic tensions reignited. Yet, this crisis could be the turning point for regional cooperation.

The science and misinformation of the floods

The floods were driven by intensified monsoon rains, a shifting jet stream, and the Madden-Julian Oscillation funnelling moisture into south-eastern Bangladesh. Districts like Feni and Noakhali, areas not typically prone to severe flooding, experienced record-breaking rainfall and devastating impacts—half a million displaced, over 300,000 hectares of farmland submerged, and schools and roads left in ruins.

But alongside the rising waters came a surge of misinformation. Social media was rife with accusations that India had released water from upstream dams to worsen the floods in Bangladesh—a narrative fuelled by decades of mistrust over water sharing. While these claims were scientifically questionable, they complicated mitigation efforts and strained relationship between the two neighbours.

Addressing natural calamities requires more than just technical fixes—it demands an understanding of the social and political narratives that shape perceptions and responses. This is where engineering diplomacy can play a transformative role.

Engineering diplomacy: A bridge between science and society
Engineering diplomacy offers a pathway forward. It synthesises

scientific facts ("numbers") with cultural and political contexts ("narratives") to create solutions that are technically defensible, societally acceptable, ethically responsible, and politically feasible. Rather than framing the floods merely as a natural disaster or a political weapon, engineering diplomacy would encourage both nations to explore shared interests. Bangladesh's vulnerability to extreme weather and India's role as an upstream actor are not mutually exclusive—they are intertwined challenges that demand shared solutions. By moving from positions ("India must release more water") to interests ("how do we ensure equitable water availability?"), engineering diplomacy fosters trust and pragmatic problem-solving.

What Bangladesh and India can do together

The 2024 floods underscore the shared stakes for both nations. India, too, faced devastating floods in upstream regions like Tripura and Bihar highlighting how interconnected the challenges are. Recognising this shared vulnerability, Bangladesh and India can take specific steps towards resilience and cooperation:

Initiate a "devising seminar" for shared resilience

The two countries can convene multi-stakeholder workshops with representation from four critical communities from Bangladesh and India—knowledge, political, resource, and affected—which can create a platform for collaborative problem-solving. This informal yet structured dialogue can focus on key areas like real-time data sharing, joint flood forecasting systems, and

equitable water-sharing protocols for transboundary rivers such as the Feni and Gomati. I have discussed details of a devising seminar in an earlier piece for the Himalayan rivers. We need informed conversations to hammer out the details required to act and move forward on how to develop and share transboundary resources for an equitable and sustainable future. Complexity of transboundary issues demands learning from other river basins like the Nile, Jordan, and Danube—and adapting to local situations.

Strengthen public perceptions against misinformation

Debunking misinformation and conspiracy theories during a disaster usually does not work. Countering misinformation isn't just about presenting facts—it's about addressing the fears and mistrust that fuel these narratives. Within the context of current Bangladesh-India relations, these narratives are not surprising.

Collaborative projects that are responsive to the underlying interests—not positions—of both parties may be an effective way to ease these tensions, lessen misinformation virality during future floods, and make practical progress on flood resiliency challenges. For example, statements that simultaneously acknowledge that Bangladesh has legitimate fears of water control by India while being clear that the evidence in this particular case does not suggest India's political interference could go far to debunk conspiracy-inspired narratives. As a proactive measure, both nations can launch joint public communication campaigns now to start developing trust in the information they share. By aligning messaging with scientific findings and cultural sensitivities, these campaigns can build trust and reduce the likelihood of misinformation inflaming tensions when the next flood hits the region.

Reactivate collaborative institutions

The Joint River Commission between India and Bangladesh offers a formal venue for cooperation but has been largely inactive. Reactivating its

subcommittees, particularly the Indo-Bangladesh Experts on Flood Forecasting and Warning Systems, could reinvigorate bilateral efforts. This subcommittee has not met since 2004.

Demonstrate collaboration through pilot projects

Pilot initiatives such as joint construction of flood-resilient embankments or shared water-storage facilities for the Feni and Gomati rivers can demonstrate the benefits of collaboration. In addition, establishing a shared platform for real-time data exchange on rainfall and river flows to improve flood forecasting accuracy and initiating joint training programmes for disaster response teams to equip them with advanced tools and techniques for flood mitigation can serve as examples of tangible steps forward. These projects will turn shared challenges into opportunities for cooperation.

Expand collaboration beyond water

Collaboration doesn't have to stop at rivers. To develop actionable strategies, a different approach that goes beyond water and includes a package of mutually beneficial options is needed. For example, joint solar parks and renewable energy projects can reduce energy insecurity on both sides. The inclusion of Sundarbans—as perhaps the only transboundary ecosystem that has a World Heritage site and Ramsar site on both sides of the boundary—within the upcoming 2026 Ganges Water Treaty negotiations can serve as an example of how to operationalise engineering diplomacy processes and tools for effective transboundary water cooperation. We need to look for opportunities to engage affected groups in value-creating exercises before final decisions are made. This will encourage issue and option linkages and increase opportunities for meaningful negotiations. Seeking broader consensus (total unanimity is not essential) and relying on professional neutral facilitators is likely to help formulate nearly self-enforcing and easier to get compliance agreements.

A six-month progress report on the govt's economic record



AN OPEN DIALOGUE

Dr Abdullah Shibli is an economist and works for Change Healthcare, Inc, an information technology company. He also serves as senior research fellow at the US based International Sustainable Development Institute (ISDI).

ABDULLAH SHIBLI

The interim government (IG) headed by Dr Yunus is already facing some headwinds as it prepares to celebrate the first six months of its term on February 8. It has been fighting tooth and nail to contain inflation, solve the banking crisis, and reduce the budget gap. While the successes of the IG in these three areas are slow to come, social and print media have also highlighted some of the IG's economic and administrative setbacks. However, one also has to weigh the hurdles that the IG had to face and overcome. The transition of power was hardly smooth. Compared

political economy and on every move of the IG. Electioneering has already made an impact on the programmes launched by the interim government. Political parties are jockeying for power and publicly announcing that they can do better than the IG. Members of the various committees convened by the IG are also now openly pushing for their own points of view.

If it provides any solace to the IG, even a very popularly elected new administration often faces critics who are not gun shy. Take the case of the US. On January 23, only three

and tighten border security have put the lives of Americans at risk. It is well known that the media "experts" are often prone to hyperbole, and you can never win them all.

Fortunately, nobody, not even diehard Awami League supporters, can proclaim publicly that the IG has made Bangladesh weaker. The IG has managed to contain dengue fever, is

Being an indirect form of taxation, raising VAT will adversely affect the average consumer, and might trigger further inflation. Whether the increase was made in response to pressures from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) or as a short-term measure to close the shortage in its revenue collection, the IG needs to focus on tightening income and

"lame-duck" administration once elections are announced. After that, the complex political dynamics and the mood of the stakeholders will change. The legitimacy of the IG is already being questioned, and its actions may face more pushback. One has to wonder how much can be achieved in terms of reforms and economic growth in such a fraught environment.

The budget for FY2025-26 will be challenging. The previous government's imprint on the current budget is evident. It left a legacy of corruption and give-outs thanks to the megaprojects, and the lion's share of next year's budget will go to debt servicing. Balancing the development budget and providing a friendly investment climate will also require a lot of creativity from the finance adviser.

Higher interest rates, energy crises, and law enforcement issues have also raised uncertainty in supply chains. Business leaders of the country have called upon the IG to engage in more frequent dialogues and work closely with entrepreneurs and industrialists to foster a business-friendly environment. Finance Adviser Salehuddin Ahmed acknowledged this in a recent gathering organised by the American Chamber of Commerce in Bangladesh (AmCham). "We have to create a business-friendly foreign exchange market, credit flow, regulatory regime, and revenue customs tax," he said.

The white paper has made a set of recommendations to stabilise the economy. The country needs institutional reforms in the banking, energy, and the financial sector, as we all agree. The white paper recommends raising the tax rate on higher-income individuals and the corporate sector. Domestic resource mobilisation has been lagging and raising direct taxes is a recommended pathway. According to various

sources, the National Board of Revenue is currently working on this. It has also taken steps to digitalise the tax filing system. Recently the chief adviser announced, "We are gradually preparing to collect all types of taxes online," and provided plans to make tax compliance more accessible for everyone.

Bangladesh Bank governor recently said the IG has set a target to reduce inflation to seven percent by the end of June and eventually below five percent in the next fiscal year. Unfortunately, the public may not see the benefits right away. Every month the BB has to assess data in real time. To quote Raphael Bostic, the president of the Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta, US, "It's hard to know for sure how things are going to evolve on a week-to-week or month-to-month basis." The US Fed has the world's best tools to gauge inflation, and tons of staff pouring over data and using some of the coolest models. So, the impact of the policies to curtail inflation in Bangladesh may take a little longer to manifest itself, and the impact may be felt probably after Ramadan.

There has been some progress initiated by the banking sector reform task force. To shore up the failing banks, asset quality review is in progress, and BB has hired auditors including some of the Big Four accounting firms.

The biggest challenge the IG will have to handle in the coming weeks is the election schedule. On January 24 at a World Economic Forum meeting, the chief adviser said that the government is waiting to hold elections, but the people have to decide whether they want a short-agenda or a longer-agenda in terms of reform. "If people want quick reforms, then we have set a target to hold elections by the end of this year. And if they say, no—we need long-term reforms; then we will need another six months," he said.

The looming parliamentary election in Bangladesh is casting a long shadow over the country's political economy and on every move of the IG. Electioneering has already made an impact on the programmes launched by the interim government. Political parties are jockeying for power and publicly announcing that they can do better than the IG.

to other countries where autocratic regimes were recently deposed and the economies bounced back, particularly the Intifada in Syria or "Aragalaya" ("people's struggle") in Sri Lanka, Bangladesh is not doing too poorly.

The looming parliamentary election in Bangladesh is casting a long shadow over the country's

days after Trump's inauguration as the president, *The New York Times* ran an op-ed, "Trump Is Already Making America Weaker and More Vulnerable." The well-regarded columnist Nicholas Kristof, wrote that Trump's executive orders on the first day to allow TikTok to operate, withdraw from the Paris Agreement and the World Health Organisation,



VISUAL: SIFAT AFRIN SHAMS

trying hard to manage inflation, and is making our borders secure. So, where is all the criticism targeting the IG coming from? I will only focus here today on a few of its economic vulnerabilities.

As mentioned, curbing inflation and raising revenue are two of the IG's toughest challenges. If the only goal was to curb inflation, the IG could use all the levers of monetary and fiscal policies, including higher interest rates, raising taxes, and curtailing government expenditures. It has done all of these. However, these steps are not popular and might conflict with the other goals—raising revenue, boosting investment, repairing the physical infrastructure, and providing social services.

The interim government recently raised VAT on several essential items,

corporate tax loopholes.

The Daily Star published an editorial on January 20, "What was the point of a white paper on economy?" and advised the IG to take immediate actions based on the panel's recommendations. The editorial aptly reflects the views of many scholars and some concerned citizens. However, after a careful review of the white paper, I found that most of the recommendations are not specific enough and require vetting before the IG can take policy actions based on them. Some measures taken by the IG after it assumed power have already shown some results, including banking reforms, foreign exchange control, and providing support to the victims of the July uprising.

It is possible that the IG only has one more year before it becomes a

WORLD WETLANDS DAY

Urban farmers' contribution must be recognised to restore Dhaka's wetlands

Efadul Huq is assistant professor of environmental science and policy at Smith College in the US. Mohammad Azaz is chairman of River and Delta Research Centre (RDRC).

EFADUL HUQ and MOHAMMAD AZAZ

At the corner of Banani Bridge, Rofikul and Johra run a temporary food stall. Around the stall, they grow vegetables on small patches of land along the Gulshan-Banani (or Korail) lake. The couple, long-term resident of the Korail neighbourhood, has been growing their food for many years. In 2020, the pandemic motivated them to focus more on this venture. They joined a group of urban farmers, Nogor Abad, which finally led to the establishment of the food stall. They grow chemical-free vegetables, fruits and spices, many of which find their way to the stall's tables. They also cook and sell packaged meals with the produce. Their earnings helped Johra reduce her working hours as a domestic worker to lead the couple's independent venture.

When we visited them in December 2024, Rofikul told us about the flowers he planted to draw pollinators. We spotted a common kingfisher perching on a bamboo pole in Johura-Rofikul's vegetable plot. Rofikul smiled proudly when we complimented him for creating homes for all forms of life along the lakeside.

Johra and Rofikul's greening practices, which received no formal recognition from urban authorities, depict the model of a healthier, fairer, and more liveable Dhaka, not just for people, but for a multispecies urban life. In fact, the couple's greening practices belong to a kaleidoscope of urban farming initiatives all over Dhaka. When done thoughtfully, such farming can benefit both farmers and their local ecologies—a medicine for the polluted urban soil, water, and air. However, urban farming practices, especially poor people's greening practices, are invisible in Dhaka's planning, architecture, and governance. When government authorities plan ecological infrastructure for the city, such as Hatirjheel, they displace poor people and erase their practices of environmental stewardship. An anti-

poor, anti-agricultural bias is baked into the technocratic ecological projects common in Bangladesh's urban development and governance.

The city corporation provides rebates to property owners engaged in rooftop greening. But there's no recognition for informal greening initiatives along lakes and canals or in Dhaka's slums where over 30 percent of the population live. This double standard not only exacerbates inequality but also undermines the ecological renewal of Dhaka. The prevalent argument against offering support to informal greening is that slum dwellers do not have tenure rights. But poor urban dwellers often do more to green Dhaka with fewer resources because their food and livelihoods are often dependent on greening. Not recognising their practices is a missed opportunity for creating pragmatic responses to Dhaka's environmental crises.

The limitations of Bangladesh's urban and spatial governance are rooted in profoundly exclusionary patriarchal, racial-capitalist, and colonial models of planning, architecture, and development. Government actors refuse to admit that their planning and development remain at a stubborn distance from the lived experiences of ordinary urban residents. In neighbourhoods like Korail, the state's exclusionary perspective has been internalised by political leaders who also use their power to forcefully grab lakeside land to the detriment of the environment and potential livelihoods.

If we are serious about creating a different Bangladesh, we cannot tolerate such exclusionary and violent urbanisation. To build nature-centred fair cities in Bangladesh locally-led agroecological restoration and stewardship are required. Agroecological practices refer to farming in a way that centres around the health and well-being of farmers while also restoring and sustaining local ecologies.

We surveyed 52 farming households in the Korail area in 2019 to learn about their growing practices. The survey found that the farm produce is worth 12 percent of their average monthly household income. For low-income families who have precarious and low-wage jobs, this contribution is significant. It reduces household food expenses

and allows mothers to allocate income elsewhere, such as education and health.

More recently, the ReWET initiative has conducted an ecosystem service valuation for the Gulshan-Banani (Korail) lake. Within its broader economic-ecological valuation framework, ReWET's latest study estimated the value of potential farming and fisheries in the lake and lakeside. Investigators found that farming in a restored Gulshan-Banani lake can be worth Tk 12.5 crore annually.



Greening practices along the Gulshan-Banani Lake by Korail residents are a model for creating a liveable Dhaka.

ReWET's economic valuation report on Gulshan-Banani Lake restoration challenges the myth that environmental conservation does not generate as much economic returns as land and housing development. The report claims that the total worth of benefits for a restored Gulshan-Banani lake over 20 years would be Tk 3,00,000 crores. The restoration would bring multiple economic benefits across various sectors, including property value, public health, and climate adaptation.

What we see in Korail is a global south urban innovation that bridges economic development with urban environmental restoration. Urban

agroecological practices underway in Korail are an integral part of such a restoration initiative, which ensures that environmental compliance vis-a-vis lakes and wetlands is not merely a matter of beautification, but a core dimension in national and urban economic development.

Agroecological restoration can also advance social inclusion and empowerment of women and youth. In our collaborative research with Korail's farmers, we have been documenting how women have more voice and agency within the household

shared that they turned the unsafe places around their homes into gardens. These reclaimed spaces provide community benefits. In Korail, we found that places where men once loitered, did drugs, and smoked have now become green spaces that feed the neighbourhood. Youth involved in farming also report a greater sense of dignity and pride in their neighbourhood.

The state does not require substantial financial investments to support urban wetland restoration. It simply needs to grant urban farmers

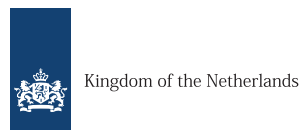
highlights a deep recognition of the importance of urban wetlands and their direct benefits to livelihoods and quality of life.

By enabling such locally-led efforts, the state could open up a new pathway for addressing Dhaka's environmental woes. Once empowered, communities will care for common resources like wetlands, because investing in restoration is, for these communities, an investment in a better future. Nevertheless, coproduction, which emphasises engaging directly with local communities to ensure their voices shape the restoration process, must be at the centre of agroecological restoration efforts. ReWET, for example, is bringing together diverse stakeholders—RAJUK, Dhaka North City Corporation, the District Commissioner's Office, the Department of Environment, and local residents—to create a co-creative model of urban wetland restoration.

However, coproduction is not without its challenges. Government agencies are not used to working closely with slum dwellers as collaborators in restoration projects. Such participatory processes predictably involve informalities that make officials uncomfortable. Communities, too, can be reluctant to engage with government officials as they have to invest substantial resources and energy to reach officials. Turf politics at the local level further complicates efforts, as political leaders and their strongmen often seek rent from restoration projects. These dynamics can leave urban farmers and lake stewards feeling threatened, adding a layer of complexity to achieving truly inclusive and fair urban restoration.

We urgently need to restore Dhaka's urban wetlands, because they are critical ecological infrastructure, particularly given the severe climatic forecasts, the prevalent destruction of ecosystems, accelerating urbanisation, and widening inequalities. Social inclusion and empowerment must be at the front and centre of restoration efforts. Co-production of restored urban wetlands must include local residents, particularly the most ones, by recognising their knowledge, experiences, and the role of urban farmers as environmental stewards.

PHOTO: COURTESY



BRIDGING THE DIGITAL DIVIDE for Persons with Disabilities

Swisscontact in collaboration with The Daily Star organised a roundtable titled 'Equity in ICT: Inclusive Training Pathways for Persons with Disabilities' on December 4, 2024. Here we publish a summary of the discussion.



Nadia Afrin Shams,
Team Leader,
Swisscontact

The Building Youth Employability through Skills (BYETS) project is a skill development initiative targeting three key sectors: ICT, RMG, and agro-processing. Spanning 12 districts across 4 divisions, the project aims to provide vocational training to 25,000 youths by 2026.

December 3 marks the International Day of Persons with Disabilities, a day observed globally for over three decades to celebrate the abilities of people with disabilities. It serves as an opportunity to foster a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by individuals with disabilities and to address the barriers they encounter in our society. While significant progress has been made, there remains a considerable journey ahead, with substantial ground still to cover.

As implementers, our decision to organise this roundtable stems from a shared understanding: any development project that fails to uphold the principles of inclusion will inevitably struggle to achieve its objectives. From its inception, the BYETS project has prioritised addressing various dimensions of inclusion. ICT was identified as a crucial focus area, given its potential to act as a catalyst for individuals with mobility restrictions, enabling them to work as freelancers and earn a livelihood from their homes.

Initially, we faced challenges at every stage, from identifying suitable partners and addressing infrastructure and capacity gaps to finding qualified trainers and reaching target groups. Ensuring regular attendance in training programmes for individuals with mobility challenges was particularly problematic.

To address these challenges, we partnered with the Centre for the Rehabilitation of the Paralyzed (CRP). Together, we designed a pilot project targeting at least 20 people with disabilities. However, due to capacity limitations at CRP's lab, we could only accommodate 10 participants at a time.

As the project progressed, feedback revealed that the existing curriculum lacked full inclusivity, indicating areas for improvement. In response, we collaborated with ICT Industry Skills Council under NSDA to refine the curriculum. Each step of the journey brought new challenges. Furthermore, training alone is insufficient. Aspiring freelancers need access to essential tools such as computers, which many participants cannot afford. This presents yet another obstacle that must be addressed.

Our current focus is specifically on inclusion for individuals with mobility disabilities. However, inclusion is a much broader issue that encompasses many other aspects.

Through our experiences, we have realised that this journey cannot be undertaken by a single organisation, individual, or project alone. It requires collaboration. With this in mind, we have identified organisations working on similar initiatives and recognised the importance of engaging with them.



Prof. Dr. Mohammad Sohrab Hossain,
Executive Director,
Centre for the
Rehabilitation of the
Paralysed (CRP)

Equity is crucial in every sector as we strive to build a more equitable Bangladesh. However, the disability sector remains particularly challenging and has not progressed as it should, especially in terms of creating a skilled workforce through collaborative approaches. Advancing this sector will be difficult without collective initiatives.

The BYETS project, initiated by Swisscontact in collaboration with CRP, marks a promising milestone, signalling the beginning of a journey with aspirations for meaningful outcomes.

At CRP, we rehabilitate approximately 1 lakh individuals annually, confronting numerous challenges. Health, rehabilitation, and education must be integrated as core pillars of equal rights for people with disabilities (PWD). However, when it comes to building a skilled workforce among PWD, we often struggle to find



candidates who meet eligibility and compatibility criteria. Moreover, those who complete training frequently lose interest if they fail to secure suitable employment opportunities.

In our vocational training programmes, 50-60% of participants successfully secure jobs or become entrepreneurs, while the remainder do not. To address this, post-training initiatives must focus on sustainability by developing facilities, providing devices, offering logistical support, and ensuring continuous encouragement.

Recent research by CRP has highlighted that even when individuals with disabilities receive health and rehabilitation support along with skill development training, many still struggle to find employment. Technological barriers further exacerbate this challenge. For example, a quadriplegic person with a spinal cord injury requires different training from someone whose spinal cord injury affects only their lower body. Their capabilities, activities, and daily living needs vary significantly.

Research also suggests that when direct training cannot be provided to a person with a disability, training their caregiver can be an effective alternative. We have implemented similar training models in ICT, prioritising PWD while considering this alternative approach.



Riduan Rahman,
Trainee, Centre for the
Rehabilitation of the
Paralysed (CRP)

I am currently participating in a five-month training programme at CRP titled MS Office and Digital Marketing. The programme includes residential facilities that provide accommodation and meals for trainees. During the initial two months, we focused on mastering MS Office applications, such as Word, Excel, and PowerPoint, which are indispensable for any professional role. The subsequent months have been dedicated to digital marketing, encompassing tools such as SEO, social media marketing, SMS, and email marketing. These skills align with current job market trends while also opening opportunities for freelancing, an especially viable avenue for individuals with disabilities.

While these training initiatives are empowering, significant challenges persist. Many skilled individuals with disabilities, including graduates from previous cohorts, struggle to secure employment due to inaccessible workplaces, such as buildings that lack wheelchair-friendly designs. Moreover, although CRP provides devices during the training period, access to such essential resources post-training is often unaffordable, limiting progress in freelancing and IT-related work. CRP's inclusive training model is commendable; however, trainees coming from rural area still struggles. Expanding such initiatives with inclusive residential facilities is crucial.



Mahinur Akhtar Maisha,
Trainee,
Centre for the
Rehabilitation of the
Paralysed

Despite my disability, I have gained substantial knowledge and skills since joining CRP. However, increasing CRP's capacity through enhanced funding could enable more individuals like me to benefit from its comprehensive training programmes, which include residential and meal coverage.

After completing the course, establishing oneself in a specialised field such as digital marketing necessitates sustained effort over four to six months. During this

critical period, financial support is indispensable but currently unavailable. Additionally, many workplaces remain inaccessible to individuals with disabilities, further limiting employment opportunities.



Birendra Nath Adhikary,
CEO, ICT
Industry Skills Council
(ISC)

Formal skill development initiatives in Bangladesh began in 2011 with the launch of the National Skills Development Policy (NSDP), which led to the establishment of the National Skills Development Council and, subsequently, the National Skills Development Authority (NSDA) in 2018. The NSDP was revised in 2022, introducing 15 sector-specific Industry Skills Councils (ISCs).

The policy emphasises training marginalised populations, including persons with disabilities, to transform them into a skilled workforce. However, addressing high dropout rates and unemployment requires collaborative efforts across sectors. Expanding resources and facilities, such as those at CRP, is critical for scaling such initiatives.

The ICTISC, in partnership with the NSDA, plays a pivotal role in advancing skills development. Its efforts include creating competency standards, developing competency-based curricula and learning materials, and ensuring the proper registration and operation of training centres.



Aziza Ahmed,
Head of Operations,
Bangladesh Business
& Disability Network
(BBDN)

BBDN aims to integrate persons with disabilities into mainstream income-generating jobs by bridging the gap between their skills and available job opportunities. Through partnerships like our MoU with BASIS, we regularly organise job fairs and receive vacancy announcements. However, a major challenge remains: the disconnect between ICT sector job opportunities and the preparedness of disabled candidates with market-relevant skills.

Currently, two types of institutions focus on skills development for disabled individuals: disability-specific centres like CRP, which offer basic training, and mainstream centres that provide market-driven training in areas such as graphic design and network analysis. Unfortunately, many disability-focused centres do not align with market needs, limiting their impact.

To address this, disability-focused centres must collaborate with mainstream institutions to offer inclusive classrooms with mid-to-advanced-level, market-aligned skills. Training should go beyond entry-level competencies to empower disabled individuals for freelancing or IT careers. Expanding training capacity, improving accessibility, and fostering collaborations with freelancers and market-driven programmes are key steps to enabling disabled persons to succeed in competitive IT professions.

It is also vital to ensure proper accessibility to training centres. Despite our MOU with BASIS, we've encountered challenges with the BASIS Institute of Technology & Management (BITM), where trainees often face accommodation issues.



Vashkar Bhattacharjee,
National Consultant -
Accessibility, A2i

As a person with a disability, I owe my current privileges to assistive technology, particularly talking software. Laptops and

smartphones have radically transformed my life, highlighting the critical importance of digital inclusion. Recently, I participated in over ten national and international webinars, demonstrating the power of these technologies.

At A2i, our focus is on blended learning, with an emphasis on e-learning. We have developed Muktopaath, a platform specifically for differently-abled citizens. A2i is dedicated to promoting digital inclusion, digital literacy, and accessibility training.

While I have access to global news like BBC and The New York Times, such opportunities are rare in Bangladesh. It is crucial that assistive technologies, such as screen magnifiers, AI tools, and screen reading software, are universally available, regardless of socio-economic background.



Ruhi Murshid Ahmed,
Advisor,
Bangladesh Steel
Rolling Mills Limited
(BSRM)

People with disabilities must be integrated into the broader workforce. To facilitate this, labour laws need to be updated to ensure priority access to government offices and services. I would also humbly suggest that The Daily Star feature the remarkable achievements of differently-abled citizens on a monthly basis, as part of a national motivational initiative.

The Centre for the Rehabilitation of the Paralyzed (CRP) regularly offers skill development programmes. However, what often goes unaddressed is the crucial question: What happens after individuals acquire these advanced skills? The focus should not merely be on imparting skills but also on creating opportunities for their real-world application and employment.



Shamsin Ahmed,
Founder and CEO,
Identity Inclusion

When discussing the empowerment of differently-abled individuals, it is essential to consider the classical economic principle of supply and demand. Currently, there exists a significant mismatch between the number of trained differently-abled individuals and their employability.

Recently, we conducted a project with Swisscontact, which revealed the poor rate of financial inclusion for differently-abled individuals. While agent banking has helped address this to some extent, it remains inadequate. Moreover, ATMs are not designed with the needs of differently-abled users in mind.



Asif Siddique Tarafder,
Senior
Specialist, BRAC,
Skills Development
Programme

As a person with a disability, I am actively engaged in empowering differently-abled individuals at BRAC by equipping them with market-relevant skills. Our approach includes technical, vocational, and entrepreneurial training. Through our nationwide ICT programme, facilitated by 15 centres, we consistently focus on building competencies, ensuring accessibility, and creating employment opportunities for differently-abled individuals.



Shararat Islam,
Communications
Analyst, UN Women

I want to emphasise intersectionality, as women with disabilities face compounded

challenges linked to caste, class, race, and ethnicity. In a recent project with the ILO and seven OPDs (Organisations of Persons with Disabilities), we identified significant policy gaps and a lack of awareness, echoing concerns raised by others.

While laws like The Rights and Protection of Persons with Disabilities Act exist, their implementation remains insufficient. Access to resources and knowledge continues to be a major barrier, especially for women with disabilities.

There is a pressing need to raise awareness about the abilities of persons with disabilities and how

To further enhance participation, waiving NSDA assessment fees for persons with disabilities would encourage greater involvement in evaluations conducted by training providers.



Fahim Mashroor,
CEO and Co-founder,
Bdjobs.com

Physical disability poses significant challenges in the ICT sector, requiring

tailored accommodations. Flexible options, such as e-learning, empower individuals to pursue training without mobility barriers. Hybrid work models

RECOMMENDATIONS

- » Collaboration among stakeholders, including expertise and financial resources, is essential to achieving a greater impact in addressing the needs of persons with disabilities.
- » To tackle mobility-related challenges, in-house facilities, accessible accommodations, and disability-friendly transport must be established and incorporated into training programmes.
- » To ensure sustainability, post-training initiatives should focus on providing critical resources such as device accessibility, logistical support, and consistent encouragement.
- » The job sector must embrace inclusive workspaces to create equal employment opportunities for skilled and competent individuals with disabilities.
- » Collaboration between disability-focused and mainstream training centres is imperative to expand capacity and deliver market-driven training.
- » Training centres should be made more accessible to a diverse population of disabled individuals from varying socioeconomic backgrounds.
- » Development projects and initiatives supporting persons with disabilities must prioritise their voices, choices, and agency at every stage of planning and implementation.
- » All governmental and private sector initiatives must ensure adequate representation from the community of persons with disabilities.
- » Banks and private sector can take special initiative as part of their CSR to provide easy EMI based loan or other provisions so ICT devices are readily available to PWD.
- » Providing access to personal computers, internet packages, and reliable connectivity is crucial for individuals with disabilities, particularly when required for training and skill development.
- » Comprehensive data on the July protests must be collected and analysed to facilitate effective rehabilitation and support measures.
- » Make the tax rebate policy more effective and appealing to better incentivize employers to hire individuals with disabilities.

to collaborate effectively with them. Unfortunately, education systems and cultural practices often perpetuate misconceptions.

The diverse nature of disabilities—spanning at least 12 types—often goes unacknowledged.



Hari Pada Das,
TVET Institutional
Strengthening Expert,
European Union

Our collaboration with the European Union focuses on a government budget support programme for mainstream education, which includes both government institutions and private TVET facilities. As part of this initiative, two sub-indicators were introduced to promote disability inclusion. These indicators aim to encourage the government to improve accessibility, upgrade physical infrastructure in public institutions, and train teachers to better support students with special needs. Unfortunately, progress in these areas has been limited.

The high cost of assistive devices remains a major barrier. Instead of relying solely on donations, these devices could be provided through mortgage schemes or bilateral agreements.

One of CRP's core areas of expertise is training individuals with spinal cord injuries, who are wheelchair users and face significant accessibility barriers when seeking employment. Digital marketing training offers these individuals a viable pathway to work remotely from the comfort of their homes.



Md. Mahbubul Islam,
Principal, CRP MM
Vocational Training
Institute

A significant challenge lies in encouraging women with disabilities

to step out of their homes. Our centres in Manikganj and Gonakbari are dedicated to addressing this issue. At Gonakbari, we operate a facility capable of training 40 girls, generously supported by Marks & Spencer since 2006. Despite this, many women remain hesitant to attend. In Manikganj, our centre accommodates 30 trainees, but limited residential facilities currently restrict housing to just 10 girls. To address this, plans are in place to construct an additional floor to expand capacity.

One of CRP's core areas of expertise is training individuals with spinal cord injuries, who are wheelchair users and face significant accessibility barriers when seeking employment. Digital marketing training offers these individuals a viable pathway to work remotely from the comfort of their homes.

should be selectively implemented, allowing persons with disabilities to choose what suits them best.

Bangladesh's ICT training landscape already includes noteworthy efforts from organisations like Programming Hero and Ostad, offering affordable online programmes. However, widespread lack of access to computers, smartphones, and affordable internet hinders progress. Around 80-90% of households lack computers, and 50-60% do not own smartphones, while high internet costs exacerbate the digital divide. To bridge this gap, donor agencies and policymakers must align support with these pressing needs.

Loan-based systems, offering repayment plans over three to five years, could enable individuals to acquire essential devices and connectivity. Existing policies, such as mandatory in-person assessments by the National Skills Development Authority (NSDA), must be revised to accommodate non-mobile participants in e-learning initiatives.

To tackle high unemployment rates among graduates, particularly those with disabilities, entrepreneurship should be actively promoted. A reliable database of disabled individuals, including July protest survivors, is crucial for connecting them with employers.



Tanjim Ferdous,
In-Charge, NGOs &
Foreign Missions,
Business Development
Section, The Daily Star,
& Moderator

Today's discussion underscores the need to address barriers to skill development, expand work opportunities, and prioritise inclusive approaches across training initiatives, infrastructure development, policy execution, and public-private partnerships.

The discussion also emphasises that the tax rebate policy should be more practical, incentivizing employers to hire people with disabilities and benefit from the rebate. However, the existing rebate structure is not encouraging employers to adopt it and employ people with disabilities. According to the current tax rebate policy, if any employer hires 10% or more than 25 individuals from the physically challenged or third-gender community, the employer is entitled to a rebate of 75% of the salary paid to these individuals or 5% of the tax payable, whichever is lower.

Neutral body to aid BPL fixing probe

SAMSUL AREFIN KHAN

A Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) official yesterday said that the board has decided to form an independent inquiry body to support the Anti-Corruption Unit (ACU) investigations regarding the alleged match and spot-fixing issues in the ongoing Bangladesh Premier League (BPL).

"The committee will work based on the ACU reports... We are taking it very seriously. As the issues have escalated to such a level, we have no other option but to control the damage honestly," BCB director and media committee chairman Iftakhar Rahman Mithu told The Daily Star, after a meeting with four other BCB directors, including BCB boss Faruque Ahmed, at the BCB office yesterday.

The decision to form the independent committee came after BCB faced significant backlash following several media reports from The Daily Star and others, which stated that the ACU had identified eight matches as suspicious for spot-fixing and match-fixing, based on anonymous tips and media reports.

Additionally, the ACU is monitoring 10 players and four franchises for suspicious activities in the BPL's 11th edition.

The inquiry panel will consist of retired judges, barristers, and former cricketers with no connections with the cricket board, Iftakhar informed.

"There's already been so much controversy and talk regarding the issues. So, what we've actually done is make the independent committee neutral, giving it the opportunity to observe the situation and provide a verdict."

"We are trying to announce it (inquiry body) within the two days... Our point is, whatever has happened, enough is enough. Otherwise, we can't save bangladesh cricket, let alone BPL," he added.

In a press release yesterday, BCB stated that it "maintains a zero-tolerance policy towards corruption in any form" and is "in the process of establishing an independent inquiry body to further support the ACU in its investigations."

Iftakhar claimed that the committee would be similar to the BPL anti-corruption tribunal formed in 2014, which dealt with match-fixing allegations during the 2013 BPL and subsequently provided a verdict on the ACU's investigations and other players and team officials -- notably handing former Bangladesh skipper Mohammad Ashraful an eight-year ban (three years suspended).

Meanwhile, that anti-corruption tribunal also criticised the ICC's Anti-Corruption and Security Unit for allowing a tainted game to go ahead to gather evidence and also called the ACU's investigations "flawed and incomplete," according to several media reports.

PLAYOFFS LINE-UP

QUALIFIER 1:
Fortune Barishal vs
Chittagong Kings

ELIMINATOR:
Rangpur Riders vs Khulna
Tigers



Chittagong Kings opener Parvez Emon plays a shot during his 41-ball 75 that helped his side set up a 24-run win over Fortune Barishal at the Sher-e-Bangla National Cricket Stadium in Mirpur yesterday. The win saw Chittagong climb to second on the standings at the expense of Rangpur Riders, meaning they will face league-leaders Barishal in Qualifier 1 on Monday. Meanwhile, Rangpur will take on fourth-placed Khulna Tigers in the Eliminator earlier on the same day.

PHOTO: STAR

No Guardiola rift, says Arteta as Arsenal host City

AFP, London

Arsenal manager Mikel Arteta insists there is no rift with his old friend Pep Guardiola ahead of the Gunners' latest high-stakes battle against Manchester City on Sunday. Guardiola's players accused Arsenal of



In a heated finale, John Stones scored a stoppage-time equaliser for City, whose striker Erling Haaland celebrated by throwing the ball at Arsenal defender Gabriel Magalhaes.

Arteta, who worked as Guardiola's assistant before taking charge of Arsenal in 2019, responded to City's aggression by hinting the Premier League champions were no angels.

"I have been there before, I was there for four years. I have all the information. So I know. Believe me," he said at the time.

Guardiola was believed to have been frustrated with Arteta, saying he should "be more clear" about what he was insinuating.

With second-placed Arsenal and fourth-placed City meeting in a crunch encounter in north London this weekend, there could be more strain on Arteta's relationship with Guardiola.

But Arteta is adamant he is still on good terms with his fellow Spaniard.

"I was there for four years, so I know how competitive they are. They win and win again. That is what I meant," he said Friday of the terse exchanges in September.

"If there was a problem, we wouldn't have been talking on the phone and

messaging each other. If not, it wouldn't happen."

City have pipped Arsenal to the Premier League title for the past two seasons, adding to the intensity of the rivalry.

But just an hour before Arteta faced the media on Friday, Guardiola had played down talk of a feud between the pair, describing their relationship as "exceptional".

Arteta echoed Guardiola's desire to bury the hatchet, saying of the rivalry: "Normal. Two teams trying to win."

"I don't take anything personally that happens on the pitch. It's been that way since I was a player. It is full of emotions. We just move on."

Arsenal cannot afford to slip up against City as they try to close the gap on leaders Liverpool, who are six points ahead of them with a game in hand.

Although Arsenal are unbeaten in six games in all competitions, injuries to Gabriel Jesus and Bukayo Saka have threatened to derail their bid for a first title since 2004.

Arteta is keen to sign a new striker before Monday's transfer deadline, but he would not be drawn on reports that Arsenal have made a bid for Aston Villa striker Ollie Watkins.

"I'm very confident with the work the club is doing and exploring every opportunity that can have an impact on the team," he said.

"I don't want to give any assurances. It doesn't only depend on us, the possibilities are affected by three parties."

Arsenal are the only side in the Premier League to have not lost a home game in the Premier League this season.

Having won 12 consecutive league games against Arsenal between 2017 and 2023, Manchester City are now winless in their last three against them (two draws, one loss).

City have lost just one of their last 40 Premier League matches played from January until the end of the campaign, losing 1-0 to Brentford on the final day of 2022-23.

using "dark arts" during a fractious 2-2 draw between the Premier League title rivals in September.

City midfielder Rodri suffered a serious knee injury in the clash, while Arsenal played over half the game with 10 men following Leandro Trossard's dismissal in a separate incident.

BUTLER 'not interested' about rebel players

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh women's football team coach Peter Butler is apparently adamant about continuing his training camp with junior players even as Bangladesh Football Federation continues its effort to bring back the boycotting senior players to training.

Butler conducted his first training session yesterday with 13 footballers -- mostly juniors -- at the Bangabandhu National Stadium as 18 senior players declined to join the training.

Afeida Khandaker, Shaheda Akhtar Ripa, Kohati Kisku, Munki Khatun, Sapna Rani, Surma Akter, Irene Parvin, Akalima Khatun, Surovi Akanda Prity, Zainab Begum, Arpita Bishwas, Halima Khatun and Yearzan Begum were the ones who attended the training session, which involved aerobics. Later in the day, the same players participated in a gym session at the BFF House, with assistant coaches Mahbubur Rahman Litu and Mahmuda Akter Ananaya overseeing the session.



Butler, who returned to Bangladesh last week following a two-year extension of contract, told reporters in the evening that he was fine with continuing with the junior players.

"I don't have any idea about this. I have no interest (about rebel players) either. I am doing my job professionally. I will

continue the training with those who attended today," said Butler, who will conduct another training session at the BNS this morning.

The BFF has called up under-20 players from Bangladesh Army and BKSP to join the camp today. Butler, whose rift with the senior players was first brought into public domain by the seniors during last year's triumphant SAFF Women's Championship campaign, said he was looking forward to working with the juniors.

"The under 20 players are joining the camp. I'm hopeful they will serve the country in the future," added Butler.

However, the BFF high-ups were continuing their effort to bring the senior players back to training after having formed a seven-member special committee headed by senior vice-president Imrul Hasan, which sat for a meeting last night.

Mahfuza Akter Kiron, the chairman of BFF's women's wing, told reporters that they are working to convince the senior players to join training.

"We are working to bring back the girls. We definitely want the girls to be in camp, training and playing. This is what we want. Beyond that, there is nothing we want. We are working on it continuously and trying to convince them," Kiron said. The BFF executive member, who previously held a stricter attitude towards this issue, said she spoke to the players and remains hopeful of a resolution.

"They are adults, aren't they? They have the authority to take any decision. We can't say anything in regard to that. We brought them here as children. I tried to convince them. I told them, don't do this. It is not good for anyone; not good for the country," Kiron added.



Neymar greets 20,000 passionate Santos fans as Brazil's all-time top scorer marks his triumphant return to his boyhood club in a grand unveiling at Urbano Caldeira Stadium in Sao Paulo on Friday night. After an unremarkable 18-month spell at Al Hilal in Saudi Arabia, the 32-year-old signed a six-month deal with Santos, reclaiming the iconic No. 10 jersey once worn by Pele at the club where it all began for the former Barcelona and PSG forward at just 17 in 2009.

PHOTO: AFP

Five events in next football season

SPORTS REPORTER

The 2025-26 football season will feature five tournaments -- the highest in the history of the country, informed BFF's Professional Football League Committee chairman Imrul Hasan following a meeting at the BFF House yesterday.

"There will be five tournaments next season. The season will start with the Challenge Cup, and end with the Independence Cup, which will be held with only local players. The other events are the Bangladesh Premier League, Federation Cup and Super Cup," Hasan told reporters following the meeting.

Hasan, also the senior vice-president of the federation, also said that final of the Federation Cup will be held in Mymensingh on April 22.

"We have decided that the final will be held on April 22 in Mymensingh. Qualifier 1 and 2 will be held on April 8 and Qualifier 3 will be held on April 15," Hasan said, adding that the upcoming Bangladesh Championship League will feature 11 teams.

Brighten the mountains and seas, celebrate the New Year together, and embark on a path of cultural exchange.

HDFC SinPower Limited brings together its Chinese and Bangladeshi employees to celebrate the Chinese New Year.



On January 29, 2025, in Dhaka, Bangladesh, HDFC SinPower Limited hold a grand cultural event with the theme of "Lighting up the Mountains and Seas, Bringing 'New Year Together'". The venue was filled with a strong Chinese New Year flavor and a warm festive atmosphere. This event not only invited Ms. Yang Hui, Director of the Confucius Institute of Dhaka University, and all faculty and staff, but also representatives of HDFC shareholders, Chinese and Bangladeshi employees and their families, as well as community management personnel, gathered together to participate in this New Year's celebration.

The event venue was thoughtfully decorated with dazzling red couplets, intricate Chinese knots, and auspicious festive Chinese characters. Lanterns glowed warmly, reflecting the rich essence of traditional Chinese culture and enhancing the joyful atmosphere. Chinese and Bangladeshi employees of HDFC, along with representatives from the Confucius Institute of Dhaka University and community managers, came together to celebrate this vibrant and heartwarming New Year gathering.

During the event, Chairman Zhou Jinsun took the stage to deliver a heartfelt New Year's speech. He reflected on the company's dedication and remarkable accomplishments in the Bangladesh project over the past year, expressed deep gratitude to all employees for their hard work, and extended his sincere New Year wishes. Immediately following his speech, the much-anticipated annual Outstanding Employee Award ceremony was held. The Chairman of HDFC, the Director of the Confucius Institute, and shareholder representatives presented honorary certificates and prizes to the award-winning employees. This not only served as high recognition of their outstanding contributions over the past year but also motivated all employees to keep striving forward and achieve even greater success in the year ahead.

The event featured a series of captivating performances, each more exciting than the last. The celebration kicked off with a breathtaking lion dance performed by the teachers and students of the Confucius Institute at Dhaka University. Chairman Zhou Jinsun and Director Yang Hui performed the ceremonial "eye-dotting" ritual, bringing the lion to life and instantly electrifying the atmosphere. The venue erupted with thunderous applause.

Following this, a mesmerizing Guzheng performance, as fluid and melodious as flowing water, enchanted the audience. A soulful solo of "As You Wish" filled the air with deep and gentle emotions. The wind pipe and whistle performances introduced an exotic flair, while the martial arts display was both powerful and dynamic. A vibrant dance performance infused the stage with energy, and through a joint performance in Bengali and Chinese songs, employees from both cultures came together in perfect harmony, receiving rounds of cheers and applause from the crowd.

Throughout the event, interactive games and lucky draws kept the excitement alive, pushing the festive atmosphere to new heights with rounds of laughter and cheers echoing across the venue. Meanwhile, the bustling food district was a highlight in itself, where exquisite Chinese delicacies met the rich flavors of local Bangladeshi cuisine. As guests indulged in the diverse dishes, they also experienced the magic of cultural fusion through food.

This event not only provided Chinese employees working abroad with a sense of home but also served as a bridge for deeper cultural exchange between China and Bangladesh. It united everyone in a shared vision for progress and collaboration. As the celebration came to a joyful conclusion, it left unforgettable memories for all participants and set a hopeful tone for the new year ahead.

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JUBO DAL LEADER'S DEATH IN CUSTODY

Who will I call baba now?

Asks Touhidul's daughter

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Cumilla

After Touhidul Islam's body was brought back from Cumilla Medical College Hospital yesterday morning, his neighbours gathered at his house in Italla village to see him for the last time. His wife, four daughters, and relatives were found to be inconsolable.

"Who will I call baba now? He was such a good man. My good Baba... they tortured him and killed him. We, four sisters, are orphans now. I want justice for my father's murder," Tasfia Akhter, 14, Touhidul's eldest, said with a choked voice.



Tasfia Akhter

Jubo Dal leader Touhidul Islam, 42, was allegedly tortured to death after being taken from his Cumilla residence in the early hours of Friday by members of the joint forces.

The ambulance carrying Touhidul's body was later parked in front of the Cumilla Press Club, where hundreds of locals formed a human chain. They demanded justice, claiming that Touhidul was abducted and brutally murdered.

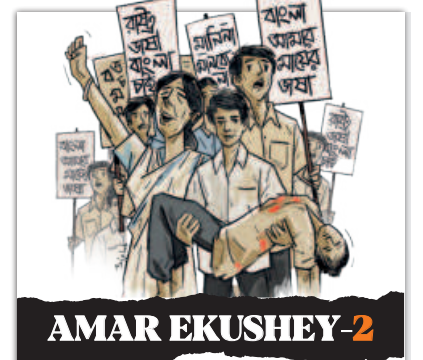
Addressed the media, Touhidul's wife, Yesmin Nahar, said, "In the early hours of Friday, four men arrived at our house and identified themselves as members of the joint forces. As soon as I let them in, they detained Touhidul

SEE PAGE 2 COL 1



PHOTO: PALASH KHAN

Biswa Ijtema goers perform their ablutions at a pool before offering Zohr prayers. The annual event on the bank of the Turag in Tongi sees the congregation of thousands of Muslims. The first phase of Biswa Ijtema ends today with the Akheri Munajat.



AMAR EKUSHEY-2

This year marks the 73rd anniversary of the 1952 Language Movement. Drawing on research based on various published books, this 21-part series tells the story of the historic struggle for our mother tongue.

Language Movement in Faridpur

AHMAD ISTIAK

Like other parts of the country, the demand for Bangla as a state language was made also in Faridpur, where the Language Movement began in 1948.

SEE PAGE 7 COL 4

DEMO AT TITUMIR COLLEGE

People suffer as students keep blocking road

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Private firm employee Mohammad Ekram Hossain visited Chandrima Udyan with his wife and daughter to enjoy the weekend. As evening approached, he hired an autorickshaw to head home to Madhya Badda.

However, the journey came to an abrupt halt at Amtoli in Mohakhali around 6:00pm as students of Government Titumir College blocked the road for the third consecutive day on Saturday to press for the demand that the college be turned into a university.

For the next 50 minutes, Ekram and his family waited inside the autorickshaw, hoping for a way to continue their journey. When the students announced an hour-long blockade at Gulshan-1 intersection, Ekram chose to walk home.

"Road blockades occur at any time. There is no security on the road. We do not know when the road will be cleared. No one knows anything, and there was no police," a frustrated Ekram told The Daily Star.

Contacted, Al Amin Hossain, additional deputy commissioner of Dhaka Metropolitan Police (Gulshan Zone), said police were on alert. "We have remained near the gathering to monitor the situation and maintain law and order. We will take action if any untoward incidents occur."

As the students' ultimatum to meet their demand remained unfulfilled, they blocked the road outside the college after 4:00pm. As a result, traffic on both sides of Bir Uttam AK Khandaker Road, from Mohakhali to Gulshan-1, came to a standstill. After 6:15pm, the

SEE PAGE 2 COL 1

Swechhchasebak Dal leader killed as two BNP groups clash

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Cumilla

A Swechhchasebak Dal leader was killed during a clash between two groups of BNP men in Cumilla's Nangalkot upazila yesterday.

The deceased was identified as Md Selim Bhuiyan, 45, convener of Hesakhal union unit of Swechhchasebak Dal, said police.

Locals said there was a longstanding political rivalry between Gafur Bhuiyan, former BNP lawmaker, and Mobasher Alam Bhuiyan, former president of the upazila BNP.

Yesterday, Selim, who was a supporter of Gafur, was heading to a political programme in Kakoitola area along with a few partymen.

On their way, supporters of Alam attacked them at Banggodda Bazar around 3:00pm, triggering a clash between the two groups, the locals claimed.

Selim was critically

SEE PAGE 2 COL 5

Only wealthy have access to politics

Finds a report by British public body

MOHIUDDIN ALAMGIR

Elections in Bangladesh are an expensive affair, with candidates spending between Tk 5-10 crore to secure nominations and for their campaigns, according to a report by the Westminster Foundation for Democracy.

The situation has worsened in recent years — particularly during the past four Awami League-led governments from 2009 to 2024 — where the influence of financial resources in politics has increased dramatically, it said.

The rising costs of electioneering have created barriers for many aspiring politicians, particularly those from less affluent backgrounds and marginalised communities, including women and youth, said the report titled "The cost of politics in Bangladesh".

The report was prepared by the Westminster Foundation for Democracy, the UK public body dedicated to strengthening democracy and open societies around the world.

The research for the report was done between July and December last year. As many as 25 in-depth key informant interviews were taken with former members of parliament, election

- Tk 2-5cr donation to party leaders for nomination
- PM's family was paid, in some cases, for securing nomination
- Tk 3-5cr spent on campaigning
- Tk 50 lakh spent on polls day
- Tk 5,000 spent to secure a single vote

SOURCE: COST OF POLITICS IN BANGLADESH REPORT

officials and other stakeholders.

Two focused group discussions were held. Researchers also gathered data from secondary sources from government publications, prominent international organisations and academic literature that delves into the political economy of Bangladesh.

To put themselves in contention for nomination, candidates often spend

SEE PAGE 2 COL 1

Remnants of fascist regime still present

Says Tarique

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Although Sheikh Hasina's autocratic rule has ended, her regime's remnants are still present in the country, BNP Acting Chairman Tarique Rahman said yesterday.

In a virtual address to the council of the party's Brahmanbaria district unit, he emphasised the need for all citizens to stay united in the face of any kind of challenge.

He said that the "autocratic Hasina" government ruled the country for a long time, which may have eroded public trust in political parties. It is now the responsibility of BNP leaders and activists to rebuild confidence among the people.

The only option for democratic forces is now to stay united to move the country forward and rebuild it with peace as the cohorts of the fallen fascists are trying to raise their ugly heads again, he added.

"The autocrats against whom we waged the movement are now on the run. Although the head of the autocratic regime fled, many of its remnants are still present in Bangladesh," he said.

Although councils are supposed to be held every two years, the council at the field of Sohagpur Abbasuddin Khan Model College took place after nearly 12 years as part of the party's efforts to overhaul its grassroots.

The party's acting chairman said that the conspirators continued their efforts to destabilise the country in various ways, including through agitations under the guise of placing various demands.

"We can't allow them to achieve their goal. If we want to

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Titumir College students march on Mohakhali-Gulshan Road demanding that the institution be recognised as a university. Inset, in the afternoon yesterday, they placed bamboo across the road to block traffic.

PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

Justice for mass killing first even if it delays polls

Says Jamaat ameer

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Justice for the mass killings during the uprising must be ensured, even if it delays the elections, said Jamaat-e-Islami Ameer Shafiqur Rahman yesterday.

"Justice must be served to those who killed people in the past and during the student-led movement in this country. If elections have to be delayed for that, so be it," he said at a meeting of Sunamganj district Jamaat at Government Jubilee High School ground in Sunamganj.

The Jamaat chief also slammed the political environment prevailing in the country.

"Real change is not possible through those who engage themselves in politics of deceit," he said, alleging that leaders of some political parties put party before the nation.

"Even they put individuals ahead of the

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জাতীয় নিরাপদ খাদ্য দিবস-২০২৫

শাক-সবজি ও ফলমূল থেকে বালাইনাশক দূরীকরণের উপায়

বালাইনাশক যথাযথভাবে ব্যবহার না করার কারণে ফল ও শাক-সবজিতে বালাইনাশকের অবশিষ্টাংশ থাকতে পারে। নিম্নবর্ণিত পদ্ধতিতে ফল ও শাক-সবজি পানিতে ভিজিয়ে বালাইনাশকের অবশিষ্টাংশ দূর করা যায়:

- প্রবহমান পরিষ্কার পানিতে ফলমূল ও শাক-সবজি ধুয়ে নিন
- ৫% সিরকা বা ২% লবণ-পানিতে অথবা শুষ্ক পানিতে ১৫ মিনিট ভিজিয়ে রাখুন
- পুনরায় পরিষ্কার প্রবহমান পানিতে ধুয়ে নিন
- যে সকল ফল ও সবজির খোসা ছাড়ানো যায় সেগুলোর খোসা ছাড়িয়ে নিন
- পট্টিক তাপমাত্রায় রান্না করুন

বাংলাদেশ নিরাপদ খাদ্য কর্তৃপক্ষ, খাদ্য মন্ত্রণালয়

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