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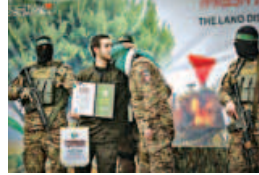
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Gaza ceasefire: Hamas frees 5 more hostages

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Local polls possible by June

Says reform commission, insists it requires consensus among all stakeholders

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The Local Government Reform Commission has proposed a major overhaul of the system to ensure decentralisation of governance.

It also observes that the local polls can be held within June this year, only if the interim government, political parties and the Election Commission reach a consensus on the matter.

Besides, the zila parishad elections in the hill tracts are also possible, it adds.

The commission, led by local government expert Tofail Ahmed, submitted its report to the interim government on February 19. It was released to the press yesterday.

The local government bodies refer to union parishad, upazila parishad, zila parishad, municipality, and city corporation. Elections to these institutions may be held under the same election schedule in order to save time

The reform commission surveyed 46,080 households and found that three-fourths of the respondents did not prefer political parties' participation in local government elections.

and cost.

All relevant laws should be amended by April, it says, leaving a short time to make the reforms.

Currently, the local government bodies have overlapping roles: There are wards in union parishads, a chairperson and two vice-chairs are elected from the same constituency in upazilas, and no direct elections are held in zila parishads.

The election system of union, upazila and zila parishads should be streamlined by bringing them under one common law, says the commission.

Similarly, the municipality and the city corporations should be brought under one law. At present, each of these entities is governed by separate legislations.

The reform commission surveyed 46,080 households and found that three-fourths of the respondents did not prefer political parties' participation in local government elections.

The commission recommends that the deputy commissioner's office act as the central government's representative and become the main authority for land management in a district.

The zila parishad, under the leadership of a chairperson, will be in charge of the development projects. A joint secretary will act as the chief executive officer of the district.

The zila parishad will be the main planning unit where all development and service-related planning will take place.

The upazila parishad will receive the plan for its specific geographical boundary and implement it using its union-based bodies.

SEE PAGE 2 COL 2



A hill in the Pashchim Khulshi area of Chattogram city has been almost flattened to build an apartment complex. Many hillocks have completely disappeared from the area, but the authorities still do not take enough steps to protect the landscape.

PHOTO: RAJIB RAIHAN

SILENCE OF THE SHRINES

Devotees, khadems still living in fear, months after the first wave of attacks last year

TARUN SARKAR

For nearly half a century, the Alimuddin Chishti Mazar in Narayanganj's Rupganj was alive with devotion and music. Every Thursday night, the shrine would light up with mahfils, where Baul singers would pour their hearts out in mystic melodies.

People from all over the town and beyond gathered here, drawn by faith, tradition, and the promise of a spiritual connection.

But on the night of September 11, 2024, everything changed.

The shrine was silenced by a mob attack.

Since then, the gates remain locked, while the mosque inside still bears the scars of vandalism. The tin-and-wood house of late khadem Abdul Haque stands in ruins.

Khadem, in traditional Sufi terms, means a caretaker or servant who serves or looks after a religious site or shrine.

The reporter visited the shrine on October 8 and November 10,



PHOTO: WAHED ASHRAF

The Dewan Sharif Khan shrine, a heritage building in Narsingdi's Palash upazila, was attacked and vandalised on August 5, 2024.

2024, and then again on January 22, 2025.

During the first and last visits, no one was available for comments. However, during the second visit, Bahauddin Naqshbandi, a young local devotee, said that all khadems, imams, and devotees have been avoiding the place for

fear of further attacks.

After Sheikh Hasina fled the country on August 5, 2024, in the face of a mass uprising against her dictatorship, the country saw a different kind of mob attacks – the kind never seen before on such a scale.

SEE PAGE 6 COL 1

JULY UPRISING PARTY

Activists consider more top posts to minimise discord

ASHIK ABDULLAH APU

The July uprising activists are considering increasing the number of top posts in their political party to ensure the representation of all the stakeholders of the movement amid a discord over leadership.

The new party, likely to be launched at a rally on Manik Mia Avenue in the capital on February 26, will have 10 or 12 major positions. These include convener, member secretary, joint conveners, chief organiser, and spokesperson.

The uprising activists are now mulling the creation of new positions like senior joint convener, senior joint member secretary and two spokesperson posts to "accommodate" all quarters involved in the uprising, said sources in the Jatiya Nagorik Committee and the Students Against Discrimination.

Different factions placed several proposals during last Wednesday's meeting, including on the top leadership structure of the party, two Nagorik Committee leaders told this newspaper.

Some proposed creating a super-ten or super-twelve style top structure. The matter has not been finalised yet, according to the leaders.

Sources in the two platforms said that there was consensus among all from the beginning regarding Information Adviser Nahid Islam taking on the post of convener. He is likely to resign on February 25 from the adviser role to join the new party.

SEE PAGE 6 COL 6

Bangladesh firm with 2 people got \$29m from US

Says Trump

STAR REPORT

US President Donald Trump said that a US-funded project to strengthen the political landscape in Bangladesh worth \$29 million had gone to a firm with just two people that nobody had ever heard of.

The newly elected US president was speaking to US governors at the White House on Friday.

During his speech, Trump spoke about a string of USAID projects that were being axed upon recommendation from the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) headed by Elon Musk.

"\$29 million to strengthen the political landscape in Bangladesh. Went to a firm that nobody ever heard of," said the US president. "Can you imagine you have a little firm. You get 10,000 here, 10,000 there, and then we get \$29 million from the United States government. They had two people working in that firm, two people, I think they're very happy, they're very rich."

Trump then mentioned, "They'll be on the cover of a very good business

SEE PAGE 6 COL 6



On February 21, the International Mother Language Day, people pay tributes at the Central Shaheed Minar in memory of the 1952 Language Movement heroes. But the next day, people walk all over the altar with their shoes on. Only a woman and a boy are barefoot in the photo taken yesterday.

PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

Concentration of power stifles democracy

Rehman Sobhan tells SANEM conference

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Renowned economist Rehman Sobhan yesterday criticised the dominance of dynastic leadership within major parties, the growing influence of money in politics, and the escalating political violence, stating that these issues have severely undermined democracy.

The political analyst made the remarks at a session titled "Building Democratic Political Order in Post Insurrection Bangladesh: Putting Citizens in the Driver's Seat" on the second day of the 8th SANEM Annual Economists' Conference, held at the auditorium of the capital's Brac Centre Inn.

He said the political parties in Bangladesh are not merely organisations but entities deeply embedded in society. "In every village, you'll find someone associated with either the Awami League or the BNP... The root cause of the democratic decline in the country lies in the dynastic nature of the leadership within these parties."

"The concentration of power within a few families has stifled the internal democratic processes of these parties," he said, adding that the influence of money in politics is one of the growing challenges facing Bangladesh today.

"Politicians are using their positions not for public

SEE PAGE 2 COL 5



Books and bookshops were torched, his Japanese translator was murdered and his Norwegian publisher was shot several times.



Instead, courts will be empowered in upazilas to deal with criminal and civil cases, and arbitration.

parishad. Each headman or karbari would nominate a male and a female representative from their community to be included in the upazila parishad and the municipality.

"He was allegedly beaten by members of his younger sister Selina Akhter's in-laws, including her husband Md Sharif, over a family feud," the OC said, adding that the accused fled after the incident.

“Our concern is to guard the guardian, that is, to prevent

Among others, Ruhin Hossain Prince, general secretary of Communist Party of Bangladesh, Prof Asif M Shahan, of development studies at Dhaka University, and Sarwar Tusher, co-convenor of Jatiya Nagorik Committee, spoke at the event.

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JULY UPRISING

AL govt, oppositions used children as pawns

Says UN fact finding report

ARAFAT RAHAMAN

Both the previous government (Awami League) and opposition groups recruited, paid, and used children in violence during the July uprising, a United Nations Fact-Finding Mission has reported.

The UN report highlights how high school and madrasa students, young workers, and even street children were drawn into the protests, often with tragic consequences.

Children accounted for 12 to 13 percent of total fatalities, with at least 118 killed. Beyond deaths, security forces allegedly engaged in deliberate maiming, arbitrary arrests, torture, and inhumane detention of minors, breaching both national and international laws.

VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN

Security forces reportedly used indiscriminate gunfire, including lethal ammunition, on child protesters in Dhaka's Azampur, Badda, Dhanmondi, Farmgate, Jatrabari, Mirpur, Mohammadpur, and Rampura areas, as well as in Gazipur, Narayanganj, Rangpur, and Sylhet.

The report cites several specific cases.

A 17-year-old student was shot in the head by police in Mohammadpur on July 19 while standing in a mixed crowd of demonstrators. The previous day, police in Dhanmondi killed another 17-year-old and fatally injured a 12-year-old with nearly 200 metal shot pellets. Some victims were permanently disabled. A 16-year-old boy lost his leg after being struck by bullets and metal shots allegedly fired by the then ruling party supporters. A 17-year-old was left blind after police fired metal shots at demonstrators.

Even young children were not spared. In Narayanganj, a six-year-old girl was shot in the head while watching the clashes from her rooftop.

The UN report states that in multiple cases, security forces deliberately killed or maimed children, sometimes shooting at point-blank range. Protesters who were already injured and incapacitated were among those executed.

SEE PAGE 4 COL 2



Children were not only victims of gunfire but they also faced mass arrests, unlawful detentions, and torture. Many were held in police stations, the Detective Branch headquarters, and prisons alongside adults.

UN REPORT

Work for a better Bangladesh

Fakhrul urges democratic forces

UNB, Dhaka



BNP Secretary General Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir yesterday urged the democratic forces to be more sincere in building a liveable and better Bangladesh for the future generation.

"A ray of hope has emerged among us. We all must be more sincere to rebuild Bangladesh. We need to work together to create a sustainable country..." he said.

The BNP leader was addressing a discussion at Jatiya Press Club, marking the posthumous Ekushey Award given to journalist Mahfuz Ullah.

Fakhrul said political parties had struggled against fascism and endured repression and suppression for a long time.

"Today, we are all filled with hope for the country."

Fakhrul expressed his satisfaction that a talented journalist like Mahfuz Ullah has been honoured by the state with the Ekushey Padak after his passing.

Govt failing to ensure women's safety: speakers

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The interim government is failing to ensure women's safety since August 5 and resist religious extremists instead of prosecuting perpetrators of gender-based violence, alleged speakers at a protest rally yesterday.

The rally, organised by Biplobi Chhatra Maitri in front of the National Museum in Shahbagh, condemned child rape, ongoing violence against women, and the state's inaction.

The Dhaka Metropolitan unit of the platform led the demonstration.

Protesters said hopes for a just Bangladesh after

SEE PAGE 4 COL 7

Reduce energy use to curb load shedding: adviser

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Reducing energy consumption is key to minimising load shedding, said Power and Energy Adviser Faozul Kabir Khan yesterday.

Speaking at a workshop at the BGMEA auditorium in Dhaka, he criticised excessive energy use, pointing out that the event's room temperature was unnecessarily set at 22°C.

"It should be 25°C. No matter what we do, we must change our behaviour. Why wear suits in summer? Will we become 'unsmart' if we don't?" he remarked.

The event, titled "Installation of Industrial

SEE PAGE 4 COL 7



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GLOBAL CONFCE IN MOROCCO Bangladesh too walks out during Israeli speech

DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENT

Bangladesh, among other delegations, staged a walk out at a global conference in Morocco, protesting the presence of Israel's transportation minister, Miri Regev, whose visit has reignited tensions over the North African Kingdom's ties with Israel.

"This is to inform that the Bangladesh delegation was also among the countries that walked out. Bangladesh's position on the Palestinian cause and Israeli genocide and other repressions of the Palestinians is well known," said the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in a statement yesterday.

The ministry said some quarters have been misinterpreting an instant walkout by some delegates from the speech of the Israeli delegate at the 4th Global Ministerial Conference on Road Safety on February 18, 2025 in Marrakesh, Morocco.

"All concerned are requested to refrain from spreading misinformation about this particular situation," the statement added.

According to The New Arab news outlet, Israeli Minister Regev arrived in Marrakesh on February 18 for the conference, after a Moroccan court rejected an appeal by lawyers seeking to bar her from entering the country.

The lawsuit cited her alleged involvement in war crimes against Palestinians.

July Sangram Parishad launched

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

A new platform, July Sangram Parishad (JSP), was launched at the Central Shaheed Minar yesterday, aiming to uphold the revolutionary spirit of the July uprising and push for systemic political reforms.

The platform announced a 65-member convening committee, comprising mostly students from public and private universities. Abu Bakar Siddique Prantor, a Dhaka University International Relations student, was named convener, while Jahangirnagar University student Muntasir Rahman was appointed member secretary.

Prantor called for banning the Awami League and enacting laws prohibiting political activities based on the ideals of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and Sheikh Hasina.

"A national election before implementing necessary reforms will only restore the same system. We need a new constitution to establish a just framework for governance."

Spokesperson Noful Islam, also a Jatija Nagorik Committee member, said, "Youth-led political power must be supported to ensure the revolution's success."



PHOTO: STAR

Winners of "My Dhaka Lens" award pose for a photo with Mahfuz Anam, editor and publisher of The Daily Star; Munem Wasif, contest judge, photographer and faculty of Pathshala South Asian Media Academy; and guests at the capital's The Daily Star Centre yesterday. The Dhaka-themed photo contest was organised by The Daily Star's "My Dhaka" section. Out of more than 2,200 submitted photographs, 38 best ones were selected for the exhibition. Among the winners, 12 contestants received certificates while 4 individuals were given crests and certificates.

Watermelon boom in Patuakhali

Farmers eye bumper sales

SOHRAB HOSSAIN, Patuakhali

Patuakhali's watermelon growers are witnessing a bumper harvest this year, with buyers rushing to purchase the fruit directly from the fields.

Favourable weather conditions have contributed to the high yield, said officials. They said watermelon has been cultivated on 27,079 hectares of land this season, nearly 4,000 hectares more than last year. The production target stands at 8.66 lakh tonnes.

A visit to Amkhola village in Galachipa upazila revealed sprawling fields of watermelons in varying sizes.

Farmer Berek Mridha said, "Due to Ramadan, the demand for watermelon is expected to

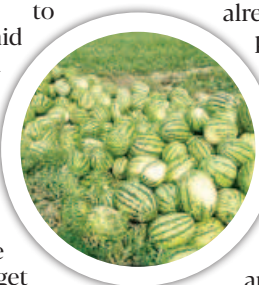
be high. Wholesale buyers from different parts of the country have already arrived and are providing advance payments."

Mojibur Rahman, a farmer from Rangabali, echoed him.

Farmers said traders from Dhaka and other regions have already provided advance payments to many of them.

Aslam Sheikh, a trader from Dhaka's Kadamtali area, said, "I am currently in Rangabali to purchase watermelons and send them to Dhaka via launches."

Md Nazrul Islam, deputy director of Patuakhali DAE, said, "The fertile soil and favourable climate have contributed to high yields. This year, we expect total sales revenue in the district to surpass Tk 2,000 crore."



Girl raped 'by neighbour' in Rangpur

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Dinajpur

A 10-year-old girl was raped allegedly by her neighbour in Rangpur on Friday.

The girl's father filed a case with Mithapukur Police Station accusing the neighbour, Ruhul Amin, 55, said police.

The incident happened around 6:00am when the fourth-grader went to a nearby garden to collect flowers to place them at a local Shaheed Minar, according to the case.

At one point, Ruhul forcibly took the girl to his house and raped her, said Abu Bakkar Siddique, officer-in-charge of Mithapukur Police Station, citing the case.

When the girl started screaming, locals rushed to the spot and rescued her, he said.

Ruhul managed to flee the scene, said the OC.

Initially, the girl was taken to a health complex. As her condition deteriorated, she was shifted to a Rangpur hospital, said the OC.

Police are trying to arrest the accused, he added.

Reduce energy use

FROM PAGE 3

Rooftop Solar System: Prospects and Benefits", was organised by the state-owned Infrastructure Development Company Limited (IDCOL), which finances renewable energy projects.

Faozul took aim at IDCOL, arguing that its renewable energy targets were insufficient. "IDCOL has lost its way. Its primary responsibility is to serve the people. A target of just 300 megawatts of renewable energy by 2025 is unacceptable. Around the world, organisations are aiming for thousands of megawatts – why settle for just 300? This is an unintelligent target," he said.

He criticised IDCOL's urban-focused approach, saying, "Holding seminars in cities won't solve our renewable energy needs.

IDCOL must return to its mandate and focus on promoting solar energy in rural areas. Profit alone cannot determine its success."

The energy advisor also pointed to the heavy subsidies in the power sector, amounting to Tk 420 billion, with Tk 30 billion per tonne. "This money could have been better spent on education or healthcare, where subsidies are even more crucial," he added.

Meanwhile, Alamgir Morshed, executive director and CEO of IDCOL, defended the organisation's role, saying that it provides low-cost financing, technical support, and capacity development for rooftop solar projects.

Md Shahriar Kader Siddiky, secretary of the Economic Resources Division, also spoke.

Govt failing

FROM PAGE 3

August 5 have been shattered as violence against women, children, and indigenous communities continues unabated.

Speakers also condemned the adviser to the Ministry of Women and Child Affairs, questioning her commitment to feminist ideals after assuming office.

Nuzia Hasina Rasha, Dhaka University unit president of the platform, said, "She was once seen as a feminist activist, but her class allegiance is now clear. Has she gone deaf? Why is she not hearing the cries of oppressed women?"

She challenged the government's inaction, asking, "What concrete steps has this government taken to ensure women's safety, equality, and property rights?"

Rasha also denounced the lack of legal action against religious extremists

who attacked a female footballer, saying, "Instead of prosecuting them, they were merely let off with an apology. An interim government that shelters religious fascists cannot be expected to protect women, indigenous communities, or workers."

Platform president Toyob Islam said despite decades of protests, including movements in 1998, 2013, and 2020, gender-based violence persists due to a culture of impunity. "Without exemplary punishment, such crimes will continue," he said.

Condemning the expulsion of ten female students from Chittagong University and misogynistic remarks by the proctor, platform member Shah Shompurno said, "As long as anti-women figures hold policymaking positions, the state will never ensure women's safety."

INT'L HOPE SCHOOL Inter-School Bangla Olympiad held

CITY DESK

The fourteenth Inter-School Bangla Olympiad was at International Hope School (IHSB) in Uttara yesterday, said a press release.

In the daylong programme, more than 1,500 students from 80 English medium and English version schools participated in various age-based categories in essay writing, recitation, dance, singing, drawing, quizzes, and public speaking.

IHSB Principal Roksana Zarin and Chairman Timothy Donald Fisher spoke on the occasion. Housing, Public Works, and Industry Adviser Adilur Rahman Khan was present as the chief guest at the award distribution ceremony, while Mohammad Azam, director general of Bangla Academy, was also present as special guest.

AL govt, oppositions used

FROM PAGE 3
**ARBITRARY ARRESTS,
TORTURE AND FORCED
CONFESSIONS**

Children were not only victims of gunfire but also faced mass arrests, unlawful detentions, and torture. Many were held in police stations, the Detective Branch headquarters, and prisons alongside adults.

Some were reportedly tortured into making forced confessions.

In Rangpur, a 16-year-old boy was detained for 13 days on what the report describes as false charges related to the police killing of Abu Sayed.

In Dhaka, a 17-year-old was tortured at Jatrabari Police Station for two days to extract a confession for a police officer's murder before being transferred to DB headquarters, where the torture allegedly continued.

Despite his lawyer proving he was a minor, a judge sent him to an adult

prison.

Following media pressure, he was transferred to a juvenile detention centre, where he remained until August 6 – the day after Sheikh Hasina fled the country.

The report further accuses the DB at Minto Road and CTC of engaging in incommunicado detention, torture, and other ill-treatment of minors.

Thousands of children were reportedly detained through warrantless home invasions, mass roundups, and street detentions, in clear violation of international law.

Meanwhile, the report states that they have received multiple allegations that the opposition paid children to bring them to the protests. However, they did not provide any separate examples to substantiate the claim.

Shahana Huda Ranjana, a senior coordinator at Manusher Jonno Foundation (MJF), criticised both the authorities and political factions for involving children in the violent uprising.

"The government used all its force to suppress the movement, and the casualty list shows that many of the victims were children," she said.

"But neither the movement to abolish quotas nor the anti-government protests should have involved children. How did they become part of this?" she questioned.

"We saw a large number of street children on the streets, and most were there for money. They were paid, used in a horrifying manner, and suffered the most."

Ranjana said since the fall of the government, many criminals have been released and are now exploiting vulnerable youth.

"We are witnessing an alarming rise in violent teenage gangs. This has become a social disease, and it is deeply concerning," she said.

"There will be more movements in the future, but regardless of who is in power, I plead – do not use children in political battles. They are our future; do not destroy it in such a way."

Students

FROM PAGE 5

Chancellor Prof Dr Muhammad Masud and Pro-Vice-Chancellor Prof Dr Shariful Islam.

In the letter, they blamed Chhatra Dal for the attack on students.

The letter was sent via email to the chief adviser's office yesterday, and some students will submit the letter tomorrow at the CA's office.

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INNOVATION:: CREATION:: LEADERSHIP

‘We are pulling economy back from edge of cliff’

Says finance adviser at launch of his book

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The interim government has been striving to rescue the economy from the brink of collapse since taking office, Finance Adviser Salehuddin Ahmed said yesterday.

“We are pulling the economy back from the edge of a cliff. Only those who have worked from within can fully understand the state of the economy at that time,” he said.

“We’ve taken responsibility, not power,” Ahmed said. His remarks came at the launch of his book “Governor’s Memoirs” at the ICAB auditorium in Dhaka.

The event, organised by Bonik Barta, also featured a discussion on the book’s themes and insights.

Speaking about his book, Ahmed said it not only covers his tenure as governor of Bangladesh Bank but also reflects on various experiences from his life.

The first edition of the book was published in 2019. This time, additional insights have been included, he said.

Economist Mahbub Ullah said Salehuddin’s career depicted the power of education in achieving success.

“The book details his journey from a lower-middle-class background to policymaking roles, with no hesitation in sharing his story,” said Mustafizur Rahman, a distinguished fellow at Centre for Policy Dialogue.

Prof Rashed Al Mahmud Titumir of Dhaka University said, “A governor must have an understanding of politics. Salehuddin Ahmed had a practical grasp of national politics, which aided him during his tenure.”



People try to salvage whatever they can from the rubble after a fire broke out at the Karail slum in the capital's Mohakhali early yesterday. Eleven fire engines completely doused the blaze around 2:30pm. The cause or extent of the fire could not be known yet. No casualties were reported so far.

PHOTO: PALASH KHAN

Students demand arrest of attackers at Kuet

Stage protest on campus, send letter to CA

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Khulna

Students of Khulna University of Engineering & Technology (Kuet) staged a protest yesterday demanding the immediate arrest of those responsible for the recent attack on students.

The protest march began at 12:00pm from the Student Welfare Centre and passed through several halls, including Dr SM Rashid Hall, Shaheed Smriti Hall, Fazlul Haque Hall, Ekushey Hall, and Khan Jahan Ali Hall, before returning to the starting point.

During the demonstration, students chanted slogans such as “Break the shackles of student politics,” “Beware of political agents,” and “Education and terrorism cannot coexist.”

At a brief rally following the protest, students voiced their frustration over the lack of action even after four days since the incident.

They expressed concerned over their security, with many afraid to

leave the campus. They also criticised the university administration, saying that the advisory committee had yet to engage with them or offer any resolution.

A student of civil engineering said, “We urge the chief adviser to take



immediate action and ensure our safety so we can resume our studies without fear.”

Meanwhile, the protesting students sent a letter to the chief adviser, demanding the removal of Vice-

SEE PAGE 4 COL 4

DEVIL HUNT

769 more held across country

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The joint forces arrested 769 more people across the country in the last 24 hours till yesterday afternoon as part of the “Operation Devil Hunt”, according to the Police Headquarters.

With the latest arrests, the total number of people arrested in the operation since its launch on February 8 has risen to 8,079 in the past 15 days.

Additionally, 572 others, who were either accused or wanted in previous cases, were also arrested in the last 24 hours. Law enforcers also recovered a gun and eight sharp weapons.

The government launched the operation on February 8 to restore law and order following an attack on “students and people” in Gazipur.

KOCHOPATRA RIVER

Damaged sluice gate leaves farmers in peril

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Patuakhali

The six-vent sluice gate in Chakamaia union of Kalapara upazila, Patuakhali, has remained unusable for years, causing suffering to farmers.

Constructed in 1965 over the Kochopatra river, the sluice gate was meant to prevent saline water from entering agricultural lands in 50 villages in Patuakhali and Barguna.

However, decades of neglect and lack of maintenance have left the structure in a fragile state.

A recent visit revealed crumbling concrete pillars with exposed rusted rods, while the corroded gates remain permanently open, allowing continuous saline water intrusion. The guide wall has long eroded into the river, and illegal fishing nets were hanging over each gate.

As a result, around 30,000 farmers along the riverbanks face uncertainty over their cultivation.



“Since the sluice gate cannot be operated, saline water continuously inundates our croplands,” said Abdul Malek, a local farmer.

A road built over the sluice gate is also in a dilapidated state, disrupting communication.

“With the gates damaged and left open, water flow remains uninterrupted. As a result, around a 200-metre stretch of three sections of the embankment on the west side has been washed away, while the only road along the canal is also eroding,” said Motaleb Howlader, another farmer.

According to the Water Development Board, the sluice gate underwent only minor repairs since 1965. No substantial repair has ever been carried out to it.

Locals also alleged that certain groups with political backing earn Tk 5,000–20,000 daily by setting fishing nets in front of the sluice gate, often leading to conflicts.

Abdur Rahman Bhuiyan, sub-divisional engineer of WDB’s Kalapara Circle, said at least Tk 8 crore would be required to renovate the sluice gate. “A proposal requesting necessary funding has been submitted to higher authorities. Renovation will commence upon approval and allocation of funds.”

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Trump fires top-ranked US military officer

AFP, Washington

President Donald Trump fired top US military officer General Charles “CQ” Brown on Friday, part of a major shake-up of the armed forces’ leadership.

Trump offered no explanation for Brown’s dismissal less than two years into his four-year term as chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, which followed sweeping layoffs of federal workers and moves to dismantle government institutions just a month into the president’s second term.

Brown had been nominated to the top military role by Democratic president Joe Biden and became only the second Black person to hold the position.

Following Trump’s announcement on Brown, Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth said he was seeking a replacement for Admiral Lisa Franchetti, the first woman to serve as the top US Navy officer.

Trump thanked Brown for “his over 40 years of service to our country” in a post on his Truth Social platform, describing him as “a fine gentleman and an outstanding leader.”



This handout image released by the Hamas Media Office yesterday, shows newly-released Israeli hostage Omer Shem Tov kissing the head of a Hamas fighter shortly after being set free in Nuseirat in the central Gaza Strip.

PHOTO: AFP

Pakistan NGO chief critical of election has home sealed

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan authorities have sealed the home of an NGO chief who authored a report alleging widespread rigging in national elections last year, he told AFP on Saturday.

Polls in February 2024 took place with the nation’s most popular politician Imran Khan jailed and barred from running, and a coalition of parties considered pliable to the powerful military took power.

This month, NGO Pattan published a report on the elections and described them in a statement as “unprecedentedly rigged” with “vote-rigging, fraud and manipulation”.

Pattan chief Sarwar Bari – currently in London – said his home in the capital Islamabad was sealed off on Friday night. “This is obviously in response to the report,” he told AFP.

His wife Aliya Bano said the property was closed off by a team of around two dozen including police officers, magistrates and Islamabad administration officials.

A judge’s order to seal the residence, seen by AFP, said Pattan’s registration as an NGO had been cancelled in 2019 and it was operating illegally.

Bari said he often used his residence for Pattan meetings and postal correspondence but was adamant it was primarily his home.

The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan said in a statement on social media platform X that it was “alarmed” by reports his home had been sealed.

Silence of the shrines

“Shrines, and Baul and Qawwali musical programmes are being attacked in some places. These aren’t happening everywhere, but everyone must keep in mind that we won’t tolerate even a single such attack.”

MOSTOFA SARWAR FAROOKI, cultural affairs adviser

FROM PAGE 1

Scores of ancient shrines, Sufi Darbar Sharifs and Baul Fakir akhras were attacked in different parts of the country, mostly on the first few days of the power vacuum, but also throughout September amid lax law and order.

Although no attacks were reported in October and December, several shrines were targeted in November 2024 as well as January and February 2025.

In October-November 2024 and January 2025, this reporter visited at least 25 spots and spoke to devotees, khadems, and pirs. Many of them said they have not been going to the shrines out of fear of attacks.

The latest attacks took place on February 20 and 21 during Urs at two shrines in Noakhali and Manikganj.

Earlier on January 8, a 200-year-old shrine was attacked in Mymensingh, also during its Urs and Qawwali musical festival.

Three days later, Cultural Affairs Adviser Mostofa Sarwar Farooki told media, “Shrines, and Baul and Qawwali musical programmes are being attacked in some places. These aren’t happening everywhere, but everyone must keep in mind that we won’t tolerate even a single such attack.”

Based on police findings, the chief adviser’s press wing on January 18 confirmed attacks on at least 40 shrines since August 4.

Meanwhile, police have so far arrested 23 suspects in 15 cases. Separately, investigations into 29 general diaries with different police stations are underway, it added.

The Global Sufi Organisation at a press conference at the Jatiya Press Club on January 23 claimed that at least 80 shrines had been attacked since August.

According to The Daily Star’s own findings, along with counts made in media reports, over 70 shrines and akhras across the country were attacked, vandalised, set ablaze or looted in last year’s August and September alone.

In some instances, devotees were publicly humiliated by having their hair and beards forcibly shaved off.

The highest number of attacks – 14 – on a single day took place on the afternoon of August 5, 2024, our findings show.

The Ashrafnagar Darbar Sharif, founded by Syed Ashraf Ali Chandpuri, in Cumilla’s Laksam was one of those attacked that day.

After workers, devotees and spiritual leaders were beaten and thrown out, the attackers vandalised and looted the shrine before finally setting it on fire, Darbar Sharif sources said.

“A Darbar Sharif is a public place. Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists, Christians – all are welcome here. People come here out of love. No one is brought here by force and if someone wants to come, they are not stopped by force,” Pir Syed Md Majedul Haque Chandpuri of the Darbar Sharif told The Daily Star on the site in November last year.

Brahmanbaria’s Samsu Paglar Mazar was attacked twice in two days – August 6 and 7.

Khadem Alauddin, also a union parishad member, told The Daily Star on October 8 at the mazar compound that the attackers hit him on the head. When he regained consciousness two hours later, he found himself in a hospital with multiple stitches to his head.

In Narsingdi, even the homes of khadems and devotees were attacked and looted, said Khadem Sajal Fakir of Kappa Paglar Mazar.

There were multiple attacks also on Shah Poran’s Urs in Sylhet throughout August, but by the second week of September, it turned into a clash, leaving at least 50 people injured, according to media reports.

Clashes also took place at Dewanbagh Darbar Sharif in Narayanganj’s Bandar and Trishal

Kauliarchar incident.

DESTROYING HERITAGE?

Many of the shrines that were attacked were ancient and have historical, archeological and religious significance.

Some were built centuries back when Islam started to gain ground in this part of the world, and the traditions of mazar and Sufism played significant roles, according to Islamic scholars.

Critics of the present-day shrine culture, however, say some activities such as singing, men and women praying side by side, and smoking are not allowed in Islam, and hence, they must stop.

Of the shrines attacked on August 5, four are traditional ancient shrines – Bairam Shah’s shrine in Dhaka, Garib Shah’s shrine in Jessore, Dewan Sharif Khan’s shrine in Narsingdi and Syed Reza Chishti’s shrine known as Shah Bhala in Chuadanga.

The Garib Shah, Dewan Sharif Khan and Shah Bhala shrines are all large and are visited daily by devotees, Pagals, Fakirs and Bauls.

However, Bairam Shah’s shrine has only one room. Hakim Habibur Rahman’s book “Asudegane Dhaka” mentions that the shrine dates back

“If the government had taken effective measures from the outset and taken action against the culprits, then perhaps the attacks on shrines wouldn’t have continued until this February.”

SHAKIR DEWAN, a devotee of a Keraniganj Mazar

kitchen, caretakers’ quarters, and the shelter for the devotees. They then vandalised everything. Finally, they set fire to the mausoleum and various structures.”

The over 300-year-old mausoleum of Charu Miji Shah in Noakhali’s Lakshmi Narayanpur area was vandalised on September 13.

CULTURE OF SHRINES

The tradition of shrines centres around mysticism and it goes back to the early days of Islam.

These traditions of mysticism are known as Tariqa or Silsila. Within each Tariqa, practitioners are characterised by distinct qualities such as Pirs, Fakirs, and mystic devotees (Pagla). The Qalandariya and Madari Tariqa are primarily the paths followed by the spiritually-driven mystics.

In both Semitic and Indian traditions, the path of “divine madness” has been a continuous stream among devotees since ancient times, according to Islamic scholars.

Dr Mohammad Ahsanul Hadi, a Sufi researcher, said there are several opinions regarding the origin of the word “Sufi”. One view suggests that the word originated from “Suffa”, a place in Makkah where a group of young, unmarried emigrants from Madinah lived in poverty. They were called “Ashab al-Suffa”, “Ahlus Suffa” or “Ahle Suffa”.

According to him, the Ahle Suffa would remain eager for the Prophet’s companionship. They would also strive to gain expertise in various branches of knowledge including religion, agriculture, crafts and the sciences.

“The Ahle Suffa often struggled to secure regular meals, some even wore tattered clothes. Some people would mock the Ahle Suffa, calling them mad,” said Dr Hadi, also an associate professor at the Department of Persian Language and Literature at Dhaka University.

The Dargah Sharif, which serves as the centre for Sufi prayers and activities, is typically a complex establishment. Each complex houses a mosque, madrasa, Quran memorisation centre, library, orphanage, community kitchen, hospital, office, guest accommodation and storerooms. Some Dargah Sharifs maintain multiple branches.

Just as the Sufi tradition has the Darbar Sharif, the Baul-Fakirs maintain the custom of establishing akhras and ashrams, which are generally smaller compared to darbars. In many cases, a room in the corner of a residential property is converted into an akhra or ashram.

Our analysis shows that among the four types of institutions in the Islamic mystical tradition, the shrines of the Pagal-Fakirs have been the

most affected. These are places where people of all faiths, races and genders have unrestricted access, and regular musical practices are conducted as part of worship. Annual Urs festivals and fairs are also organised there.

Syed Tarik, a poet and practitioner of the Sureshwari tradition of Fakiri, said shrines have their own unique culture, inviting people, including women, from all religions and castes. People pray as they wish, in their own way. There is no religious rigidity in shrines; they are “spiritual free zones”, he said.

“However, the demolition of shrines is halting worship through music, while also restricting women’s entry and expressions of devotion. By forcefully imposing the Sharia system, there is an attempt to destroy the shrine’s unique culture. Imposing one’s own opinions on others is undemocratic.”

LIVING IN FEAR

Khadems and devotees across the country have been in a state of insecurity even months after the first wave of attacks.

On the other hand, Bauls, who traditionally perform at mazars both for a living and for spiritual delight, cannot fathom how fellow citizens would attack them.

Some estimates suggest, there are about 400,000 professional Baul singers in the country.

“We’ve been living in fear. The attackers continue to threaten us. They’ve even threatened to burn our homes down,” said Sheikh Sadi, a devotee of Malek Darbesh Majar in Cumilla’s Laksam, which came under attack in August.

This mazar’s Urs festival, which usually takes place on September 8, did not take place this year.

Meanwhile, there are also examples of other mazar programmes being forcibly shut down.

In Narsingdi’s Palash upazila, the Urs festival at Yusuf Ali Fakir’s shrine is traditionally held on November 7 every year. This year, a group of people along with police forced the organisers to stop the programme the previous evening, said the shrine’s Khadem Sajal Fakir.

In one of the country’s principal shrines, Shah Paran’s shrine in Sylhet, the yearly Urs did take place this year, but with no musical performance.

Musical performances as part of worship have been suspended at the surrounding shrines as well.

Aleya Begum, a renowned Baul artiste known as Baul Mata, said, “Typically, Bauls remain busy from the month of Kartik until just before the monsoon. However, this year they’re sitting idle. This is because their performances are primarily centred around shrine-based Urs festivals, which are being obstructed in various parts of the country.”

She said she too was scheduled to perform at an Urs in Bandarkhola of Madaripur’s Shibchar upazila on October 8 – but it was obstructed. The organisers then took permission from the district administration to hold it on October 23, but it was stopped yet again.

“We can’t engage in confrontation even when we face such resistance. Fighting is not the way of life for Bauls and Fakirs. While we’ve lost our incomes, what is sadder is that we’ve also lost our inner peace because we can’t sing,” she told The Daily Star.

The writer is a freelance journalist and researcher.

Bangladesh firm with 2 people got \$29m from US

FROM PAGE 1

magazine pretty soon, for being great scammers.”

Before getting to Bangladesh, Trump had also mentioned a USAID project in India. He said, “\$21 million [was] going to my friend, Prime Minister Modi, in India for voter turnout. We’re giving 21 million for voter turnout in India. What about us? I want voter turnout too.”

Both projects were among 17 international aid programs in countries including Bangladesh, Nepal, and India that were cut based on DOGE’s recommendations.

Activists consider more top posts to minimise discord

FROM PAGE 1

However, there were differences of opinion primarily over who would assume the role of member secretary.

The Jatiya Nagorik Committee, the citizens’ platform launched after the uprising, split into three groups over the top posts of the new political party’s convening committee, said insiders.

One consists of leaders of Students Against Discrimination who had been previously involved in Ganatantrik Chhatra Shakti and Chhatra Odhikar Parishad.

Those previously affiliated with leftist politics form the second faction and the third comprises former members of Islami Chhatra Shibir, at least three leaders of the civic platform had previously told this newspaper, requesting to be anonymous.

Although the discord among the groups of student leaders over the new party’s member secretary post has waned, it is yet to be completely resolved.

Ali Ahsan Zonaed, former president of Shibir’s Dhaka University unit and a member of Nagorik Committee’s executive council,

Although the discord among the groups of student leaders over the new party’s member secretary position has waned, it is yet to be completely resolved.

denied a report by a Bangla daily that he had some understanding with former Shibir leaders over the top positions of the new party. “It is not true,” he wrote on Facebook.

He, however, criticised the way the leadership of the new party is being formed as “neither democratic nor inclusive”.

“In this context, discussions about who holds which position are irrelevant. So, we have been emphasising that any qualified person should be able to take up their desired position. We are discussing the criteria for determining this qualification. Resolving this issue is now our primary and main objective,” wrote Zonaed.

Requesting to be unnamed, two leaders of the Nagorik Committee told this newspaper that there are some “differences of opinion” regarding the top leadership.

“There may be some issues, but it is a healthy competition, not a split. We are hopeful about resolving the issues before the announcement of the party and making the announcement on time,” a leader of the Nagorik Committee told The Daily Star.

‘History will not forgive’ us
Says WHO chief on pandemic deal

AFP, Geneva

The head of the UN’s health agency warned Friday that history would not forgive countries if they failed to strike a pandemic treaty at the last hurdle

World Health Organisation leader Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus made the comments with progress slow and time running out for the talks.

But with only five more days of formal negotiations left, scheduled for April 7-11, countries agreed to hold informal meetings in March to try to find compromises on the trickiest issues.

“History will not forgive us if we fail to deliver,” he warned urging more action from countries.



People take part in a rally ahead of the 78th anniversary of the “228 incident” in Taipei yesterday. The “228 incident”, which took place on February 28, 1947, led to the massacre of thousands of people as security forces violently quashed an anti-government uprising.

PHOTO: AFP

Scholz hits back at US over Ukraine, free speech

AFP, Dortmund

Chancellor Olaf Scholz has stressed his support for Ukraine’s sovereignty and defended Germany’s commitment to free speech in a pushback against recent broadsides from the Trump administration.

As US President Donald Tump has reached out to Russia, feuded with Ukrainian leader Volodymyr Zelensky and threatened to sideline Europe, Scholz said that “Germany and Europe must stick to their own positions”.

Speaking at his last major campaign event before today’s elections, Scholz pledged that “we won’t leave Ukraine alone and decide things over their heads and we will ensure that Ukraine is a country that can choose its own government”.

Scholz also pushed back at accusations from Trump’s inner circle, including tech billionaire Elon Musk and Vice President JD Vance who called Germany’s policies against online hate crime “Orwellian”.

Musk has strongly supported the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) and, on the day of Trump’s inauguration, performed a right-arm gesture that some interpreted as a Nazi salute.

“I have nothing against people becoming billionaires but becoming a billionaire because you want the right to insult people and break the law is not acceptable,” Scholz said.

“We in Europe will stick to our rules, for example that Nazi symbols are banned in Germany.”

‘See you in court’
Trump, governor spar over trans rights

AFP, Washington

US President Donald Trump had a heated exchange with a Democratic governor Friday over his order barring transgender athletes from women’s sports.

The Republican president was making televised remarks to a gathering of the country’s governors at the White House when he raised the executive order he signed earlier this month.

“Two weeks ago I signed an executive order banning men from playing in women’s sports. Many Democrats are fighting me on that, I hope you continue because you’ll never win another race,” he said.

“Are you not going to comply with it?” he asked Janet Mills, governor of Maine.

“I’m complying with state and federal laws,” Mills responded.

“Well, we are the federal law... You better do it, because you’re not going to get any federal funding at all if you don’t,” the president said.

“See you in court,” she responded.

“Good, I’ll see you in court. I look forward to that. That should be a real easy one. And enjoy your life after governor, because I don’t think you’ll be in elected politics,” a visibly angry Trump replied.

One killed in ‘Islamist’
knife attack in France

AFP, Mulhouse

One person died and two police officers were seriously injured yesterday in a knife attack in eastern France that President Emmanuel Macron said was an “Islamist terror act”.

Prosecutors said three more officers were lightly wounded in the attack in the city of Mulhouse, carried out by a 37-year-old suspect who is on a terror prevention watchlist, prosecutor Nicolas Heitz told AFP.

The suspect was in custody.

France’s national anti-terror prosecutors unit (PNAT), which has taken charge of the investigation, said the suspect first attacked the municipal police officers, shouting “Allahu Akbar” (God is greatest).

A civilian passer-by who intervened was fatally injured, the PNAT said in a statement. According to Mulhouse prosecutors, he was a 69-year-old Portuguese national.

According to union sources, the suspect was born in Algeria and has been under judicial supervision and house arrest, with an expulsion order from France.

I will explain to him [Donald Trump] that between allies, you don't make each other suffer with tariffs. I will talk to him about this because we need to calm things down.

French President
EMMANUEL
MACRON

GAZA CEASEFIRE DEAL
 Hamas frees 5 hostages

AFP, Palestinian Territories

Palestinian militants yesterday freed five Israeli hostages, among the last living captives to be released under the first phase of a fragile truce that is also expected to see Palestinian prisoners released.

Freedom for the captives caps an emotional two days in Israel, where the family of another hostage, Shiri Bibas, earlier on Saturday confirmed receipt of her remains.

Bibas and her two young sons had become symbols of the ordeal suffered by Israeli hostages since the Gaza war began.

The releases came under the first phase of a ceasefire deal which began on January 19 and is due to expire in early March.

The Palestinian Prisoners’ Club advocacy group said Israel would free 602 inmates, most of them Gazans arrested during the war, yesterday as part of the exchange.

The ceasefire has so far seen 24 living Israeli hostages freed from Gaza in exchange for more than 1,100 Palestinian prisoners released from Israeli jails. There are 62 hostages still in Gaza, including 35 the Israeli military says are dead.

Since October 7, 2023, Israel’s military campaign has killed at least 48,319 people in Gaza, the majority of them civilians, according to figures from the health ministry in the Hamas run territory that the United Nations considers reliable.

On Friday, Arab leaders met in Riyadh to craft a plan for Gaza’s post-war reconstruction to counter Donald Trump’s proposal for the United States to take over the territory without its Palestinian residents.

Trump’s plan has united Arab states in opposition to it, but disagreements remain over who should govern Gaza and how its reconstruction can be funded.

A photo from the meeting showed the kingdom’s de facto leader Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman with the leaders of other Gulf Arab states, as well as Egypt and Jordan.

A source close to the Saudi government confirmed the meeting had finished. He said he did not expect a final statement to be issued as the “discussion was confidential”.

Trump triggered global outrage when he proposed the United States “take over” the Gaza Strip and relocate its more than two million residents to Egypt and Jordan.

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SUNMAYA/2025

Relocate risky factories from Old Dhaka

The apathy of our authorities is risking countless lives

It is appalling that hazardous chemical warehouses and factories in Old Dhaka have yet to be relocated, despite repeated assurances following several devastating fires that have claimed hundreds of lives. Over the past 15 years, multiple tragic fires have erupted in Old Dhaka, causing massive property damage and affecting thousands of lives due to the presence of highly flammable substances. After each incident, authorities have promised to relocate these dangerous warehouses and factories. However, those promises remain unfulfilled, leaving residents of these congested neighbourhoods in constant fear.

After the devastating Nimtoli fire in June 2010, which claimed 126 lives, the government initiated four projects to relocate the chemical, plastic, printing, and electronics industries from Old Dhaka. Fourteen years later, all but one of these projects remain incomplete, reportedly due to bureaucratic red tape and complications with land acquisition. Even the Churihatta fire in Chavkbazar, which killed at least 71 people on February 20, 2019, failed to prompt authorities to expedite the relocation process. In fact, the authorities have not even updated the list of chemical warehouses in Old Dhaka.

A 2019 survey by the Dhaka South City Corporation (DSCC) identified 1,924 chemical warehouses in Old Dhaka, with 98 percent classified as “moderately risky.” However, locals believe the actual number is much higher, as many residential buildings are rented out as warehouses due to lax monitoring by the authorities. According to the Bangladesh Environment Conservation Rules of 1997, industrial units using hazardous chemicals or goods are prohibited from operating in or near residential areas. Following the Nimtoli fire, the DSCC stopped issuing new licenses and renewing old ones for chemical businesses in Old Dhaka. Then, after the Churihatta fire in 2019, the DSCC ceased all chemical trade licensing under its jurisdiction. However, these measures have had little practical impact.

Meanwhile, chemical traders argue they cannot relocate unless the government ensures their resettlement, as outlined in a Memorandum of Understanding signed in 2017. The Bangladesh Small and Cottage Industries Corporation has made 73 percent progress in constructing a Chemical Industrial Park in Sirajdikhan, Munshiganj. Additionally, a temporary project in Shyampur, completed in June 2024, provides space for 54 warehouses. However, these efforts have made little headway in relocating chemical warehouses and factories from Old Dhaka. Similarly, the relocation of plastic and other industries has been slow, plagued by the same bureaucratic delays.

All of this demonstrates an unwarranted apathy on the part of our authorities, putting countless lives at risk for no reason. The fact remains that Old Dhaka is a ticking time bomb due to its congestion and the presence of highly flammable substances. And it is entirely unacceptable for the relocation of these chemical warehouses and factories to take nearly 14 years. The authorities must take immediate action to free the residents of Old Dhaka from such extreme risks.

Ease the congestion at Ctg port

Shortage of locomotives must be urgently addressed

We are concerned about the severe congestion at the Chattogram port, where import-laden containers, particularly those bound for the Kamalapur Inland Container Depot (ICD) in Dhaka, have piled up. The problem is reportedly caused by a shortage of locomotives running between the port and the Dhaka ICD. According to port authorities, at least four pairs of freight trains are needed daily to transport containers from the dedicated Chattogram Goods Port Yard (CGPY) to the Dhaka ICD. However, the railway authorities have been operating only one or two pairs of freight trains on this route for over a month. The pressure on the port has been further exacerbated by the recent increase in imports ahead of Ramadan. Additionally, the countrywide strike by Bangladesh Railway (BR) train crew in late January has also contributed to the congestion. If this issue is not urgently resolved, it will place immense pressure on the port in the coming days.

Reportedly, around 70 percent of the goods arriving at the port are for importers based in Dhaka and its surrounding areas. Of these, approximately three percent are transported by rail, while the rest are moved by road and river routes. It is unfortunate that the railway is struggling to transport even this small percentage of goods efficiently. While the port can accommodate up to 876 TEUs (twenty-foot equivalent units) of Dhaka ICD-bound import-laden containers, as of February 19, it was handling more than double its capacity, with 1,818 TEUs being stored. The situation is so dire that containers unloaded from vessels 15 days ago have yet to be loaded onto Dhaka-bound trains. Moreover, according to port sources, around 500 TEUs of Dhaka-bound containers are currently on several vessels waiting to dock at the port.

We, therefore, urge BR and Chattogram port authorities to address this issue without delay. While the shortage of locomotives due to the introduction of new train services is understandable, this problem cannot persist for months. The railway authorities must make urgent decisions to run enough trains to transport the piled-up containers to Dhaka. Transporting at least 200 TEUs daily by freight trains could help alleviate the current congestion. Additionally, port authorities should consider alternative solutions, such as delivering Dhaka-bound containers from the port yard or the Pangaon Inland Container Terminal in Keraniganj, to ease the congestion.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

Children get first polio vaccine

On this day in 1954, a group of children from Arsenal Elementary School in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, received the first injections of the new polio vaccine developed by Dr Jonas Salk.

EDITORIAL

Impact of bureaucratic inefficiency on the economy

Ahmed Ashfaque Shahbaz
is a PhD candidate focusing on political economy at the University of Exeter in the UK.

AHMED ASHFAQUE SHAHBAZ

The bureaucratic system in Bangladesh is plagued with excessive red tape, which manifests through ineffective procedures and corruption, resulting in overspending on civil service that ultimately limits economic performance. Overlapping regulations and insufficient coordination between government bodies exacerbate the extended timelines required to complete business registrations and obtain land acquisition permits. Manual systems together with hierarchical decision-making and rent-seeking behaviour within bureaucracies simultaneously drive up administrative costs and create delays in making essential decisions. These barriers create obstacles for both domestic and foreign investment while constraining entrepreneurial activities and pushing the working population into the informal economy, which diminishes the tax base and reduces government revenue.

This inefficiency leads to extensive economic consequences. The combination of elevated public expenditure for civil service functions with inadequate accountability measures and inconsistent policy enforcement results in decreased productivity within public services. Businesses face higher expenses because of bureaucratic delays and bribery that degrade their competitive edge and deter investment activities. Infrastructure and export sectors suffer from negative impacts caused by delays in land acquisition and customs clearance procedures. Implementing efficient bureaucratic processes, together with e-government solutions and enhanced transparency, will enable vital reforms to reduce unnecessary spending while unlocking economic growth potential. Tackling administrative inefficiencies will cut government spending while enhancing service delivery and boosting economic growth through improved investment conditions and entrepreneurship opportunities.

Bangladesh's government spending, which stands at 13.02 percent of GDP, far outweighs its revenue collection of only 8.9 percent of GDP, creating a significant fiscal gap. In contrast, Vietnam's

government revenue and expenditure are almost balanced at 19.03 percent and 18.77 percent of GDP, respectively. Despite having a similar GDP—\$481 billion for Bangladesh and \$506 billion for Vietnam—Bangladesh struggles to generate sufficient revenue due to its overreliance on a low-skilled, informal workforce, with 84 percent of workers in the informal sector. Meanwhile, Vietnam has prioritised human development. This structural difference explains Vietnam's higher revenue and more



VISUAL: SIFAT AFRIN SHAMS

effective government spending, even after enduring wars (1955-1975 and 1979) that left its economy in disarray decades ago.

The government overspends on ministries and administration in a system burdened by red tape, corruption, and inefficiency. The inefficiencies in Bangladesh's bureaucracy aggravate this fiscal disparity. Instead of addressing critical gaps in workforce training (vocational training) and healthcare to improve human development, Bangladesh diverts resources to sustain an oversized bureaucracy. For example, while Bangladesh's government expenditure is relatively lower as a percentage of GDP than Vietnam's (13.02 percent vs. 18.77 percent), it fails to deliver corresponding results. Vietnam's efficient governance enables it to focus spending on areas like skill development and technology integration, yielding higher worker productivity and export revenues. For

instance, Vietnam's garment sector, with only 2.5 million workers, is projected to export \$48 billion in 2025, compared to Bangladesh's \$42.83 billion export earning in 2023 with 4 million workers—a clear indication of Bangladesh's productivity gap.

Bangladesh's inability to upskill its workforce has dire consequences. A majority of its labour force is confined to low-paying jobs in agriculture, trade, and unregulated sectors like rickshaw-pulling, while Vietnam has created opportunities in semi-skilled and skilled industries, such as machine operation, legal assistance, and customer service. This structural shift in Vietnam has increased its tax base and allowed the government to invest in further human capital development. In contrast,

reducing dependency on external borrowing. Vietnam's success shows that a country with a similar history of colonialism, war and a comparable workforce can achieve remarkable economic transformation by focusing on human development and efficient governance. Bangladesh has no excuse for falling behind. Instead, it must take bold steps to reform its bureaucracy, reduce red tape, and prioritise its people over unsustainable government spending.

Bangladesh can follow Sri Lanka's lead in introducing bold reforms to reduce government spending by cutting down on unnecessary luxuries and inefficient practices in the public sector, including streamlining ministries. Sri Lanka's President Anura Kumara Dissanayake has set an example by capping the size of ministerial staff, limiting official vehicle usage to two per minister, and ensuring that appointments prioritise existing state service employees. These measures reflect a broader commitment to fiscal responsibility, ensuring tax money is utilised effectively. Bangladesh's government could adopt similar guidelines to reduce overspending. For instance, restricting the perks of ministers, such as luxury vehicles and unnecessary large entourages, would send a strong signal of accountability and free up resources for critical investments in skill development, and infrastructure.

Bangladesh should also consider implementing policies that ensure transparency and efficiency in government expenditures, similar to Sri Lanka's regulations on vehicle procurement and fuel allocations. Reducing ministries and consolidating overlapping functions would streamline governance and cut administrative costs. Sri Lanka's decision to curtail duty-free imports of luxury vehicles for parliamentarians sets a precedent Bangladesh could replicate, ensuring that public funds are not wasted on privileges that primarily benefit officials rather than the public. With a tax-to-GDP ratio of just 8.9 percent, Bangladesh cannot afford to continue overspending on its civil service while neglecting investments that could upskill its workforce and strengthen its economy. By following Sri Lanka's cost-cutting reforms, Bangladesh could create a leaner, more efficient government that redirects resources towards its citizens' long-term development and prosperity.

Why Bangladesh needs deliberative democracy



AISHWARYA SANJUKTA ROY PROMA

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The July uprising of 2024 has irrevocably altered the political trajectory of Bangladesh. The ouster of Sheikh Hasina, after years of political dominance, symbolises the aspiration of the masses. The uprising was not merely a rejection of the old political system but a call for a new era of governance rooted in accountability, inclusion, and deliberation. The formation of an interim government represents the culmination of years of frustration with authoritarianism, systemic corruption, and institutional decay. Bangladesh now faces a critical question: how can it institutionalise its people's aspirations into a sustainable governance framework? The answer lies in adopting deliberative democracy.

Unlike traditional democratic models, which often prioritise majority rule over consensus, deliberative democracy emphasises dialogue, inclusivity, and reasoned and active citizen participation in decision-making. At its core, deliberative democracy is about fostering trust in institutions. For Bangladesh, where mistrust of political elites in the existing system runs deep, this model could serve as an antidote to decades of disillusionment. Through forums, assemblies (citizen committees), and referendums, deliberative democracy, in contrast

to conventional democracy (electoral democracy), actively includes people in the decision-making process. By ensuring that policies represent the will of the people, this strategy can aid in bridging the divide between the governed and the government.

For example, citizens' assemblies—randomly selected representative groups tasked with deliberating on specific policy issues—could be introduced to complement parliamentary decision-making. These assemblies have been successfully implemented in countries like Ireland and Canada. In Canada, they were used in British Columbia and Ontario to deliberate on electoral reform, showcasing their capacity to engage citizens in complex and technical policy discussions.

In Bangladesh, citizen assemblies could address pressing issues like electoral reform, education policy, climate adaptation, and health—areas where public input is crucial. The concept isn't entirely alien to our context. Local governance structures like ward meetings and open budget meetings reflect similar principles of citizen engagement.

However, these systems often fall short of their potential. The entrenched client-patron relationship and citizens' fear of raising their voices have hindered their effectiveness. For

example, although the concept of participatory budgeting is present at the local government's union parishad level through open budget meetings, in practice, these communities rarely can decide on issues related to public fund allocation. A low quality of citizenship, marked by limited political awareness and civic courage, undermines these participatory mechanisms. As a result, ward meetings and similar forums are often reduced to tokenistic exercises rather than genuine platforms for deliberation.

The implementation of deliberative democracy would not only empower citizens but also ensure that resources are used efficiently and equitably. Moreover, deliberative processes can serve as a check on executive overreach by mandating public consultations and expert panels for major policy decisions. As a result, the government would be compelled to justify its actions based on evidence and public consensus rather than partisan interests.

While the theoretical benefits of deliberative democracy are compelling, its implementation will need to consider the existing power imbalances and social norms that stifle meaningful participation. Without a parallel effort to cultivate an empowered and informed citizenry, even the most well-designed participatory frameworks risk becoming symbolic gestures rather than instruments of real change.

Bangladesh requires extensive constitutional revisions to transition to a deliberative democracy. The current constitution, shaped by years of dictatorial changes, cannot support a genuinely deliberative democratic framework. Besides,

the political culture of patronage and partisanship poses significant barriers to implementing deliberative democracy. Additionally, the lack of institutional capacity and resources hinders participatory initiatives.

The interim government can prioritise capacity-building, both within state institutions and civil society, to ensure that deliberative processes are effective and sustainable. Bangladeshi civil society has been at the forefront of the July uprising and can continue to play a pivotal role in the transition to deliberative democracy. By partnering with the government, academia, and international donors, they can help create the institutional architecture necessary for deliberative democracy to thrive.

Moreover, the media can act as a watchdog and facilitator of public discourse. By providing a platform for diverse perspectives and holding decision-makers accountable, the media can ensure that deliberative processes remain transparent and inclusive. In addition, public awareness campaigns are crucial to educate citizens about their rights and responsibilities in a deliberative democracy.

As the nation grapples with pressing challenges such as climate change, economic inequality, and youth unemployment, the need for effective and equitable governance has never been greater. Deliberative democracy, with its promise of collective problem-solving and trust-building, is the key to unlocking the country's full potential. Failure to do so would not only betray the aspirations of the July uprising but also risk the nation back into the cycle of authoritarianism and unrest.

Ecological thinking in Prof Razzaq’s ‘Bangladesh: The State of the Nation’



Kazi Khaleed Ashraf is an architect, urbanist, and writer, and directs the Bengal Institute for Architecture, Landscapes and Settlements.

KAZI KHALEED ASHRAF

I came across the lean book, *Bangladesh: The State of the Nation*, in the early 1990s. I was a young architect then, also aspiring to be a writer. Little did I know about the full depth of the author, Professor Abdur Razzaq, at that time. A scholar but without much writing, a political thinker without being political, a teacher who went on to inspire a troop of teachers, Prof Razzaq, as I gradually have come to know, was truly an illuminated person, a “philosophical architect of Bangladesh,” according to Md Mizanur Rahman, and the “Bengali Socrates” as both Badruddin Umar and Prof Rehman Sobhan noted at different times.

Now, through heading the Bengal Institute for Architecture, Landscapes and Settlements, and being linked to the Gyantapash Abdur Razzaq Foundation, I have come to know more of his work and thinking, as well as his colourful life.

Since the 1960s, Prof Abdur Razzaq wielded considerable influence on the academic and literati circle of his time, or as some would argue—the Bangalee Muslim middle-class thought-machine. His grasp of the political evolution of India, as well as of Bangladesh, was cogent and original. Some have described his “mythical presence” among critical Bengali intellectuals who would become distinguishing figures, including Dr Kamal Hossain, Prof Rehman Sobhan, Ahmed Sofa, and others. Many would regularly visit Prof Razzaq’s home for a word of advice and guidance, and endure his quirkiness. Wearing a lungi and crumpled kurta, with his legs up on the chair, he would welcome his visitors with a sly smile and a wry response.

The reason I picked up *Bangladesh: The State of the Nation* was to find a theoretical frame for writing about the state of contemporary architecture and urbanism in Bangladesh. I wanted to articulate my architectural thinking within larger social and cultural orientations, especially the idea of Bangladesh. What is the nation? What are its constituents? But most importantly, what are its materialities?

I was looking for works that would support my own conceptual orientations. At that time, there were not many writings in the fields of sociology, cultural critique, or philosophy in Bangladesh that hinged the idea of the nation with the production of architecture and urbanism. Architecture then, and sadly now, continues to be treated as a technocratic, engineering, or utilitarian practice, or at best an aesthetical endeavor that decorates our homes. Unfortunately, most architects toed those lines, busy as they were receiving commissions and projects, and practicing architecture largely as a commercial or corporate enterprise. Only the architect Muzharul Islam reminded us of the larger responsibility of architecture, whether as an inherent part of cultural production or a fundament for nation-building. In a presentation to the architects and planners of Pakistan, at a conference in 1968, Muzharul Islam made it clear that the responsibility of the architect should reach out to larger national goals, especially in the context of Bangladesh, where planning every square inch matters. Well, then, we should have a clear conceptual understanding of those square inches.

Prof Razzaq would clarify that in his lean book, providing for a locational ethic for building and planning. Published in 1981, along with a Bangla translation, the book *Bangladesh: The State of the Nation* is based on Razzaq’s Muzaffar Ahmed Chowdhury memorial lecture, delivered at Dhaka University a year earlier.

There were two parts to the book. The first part of the book is strikingly titled “The Nation: Identity and Ecology”, in which Prof Razzaq seeks a concordance between the identity of the Bengali nation and the sum of what constitutes as geography, landscape, and climate. Prof Razzaq adopted the term ecology for the latter. I consider it striking because Prof Razzaq brings up the term

“ecology” at a time when it was not yet in vogue. While the notion of ecology has a long and ancient lineage in European thinking, it evolved from the realm of botanical geography to its proliferation in many fields by the twentieth century, especially as the science of an ecosystem. (At the memorial of Prof Abdur Razzaq last November, Mofidul Haque noted the uniqueness of the use of “ecology” in Razzaq’s writing at a time when the term was hardly practised in Bangladesh. In the Bangla translation of the talk, “*paribesh*” is adopted as the translated term for ecology. I find that inadequate. “*Bastutantra*,” which is gaining traction as ecology, is perhaps a better candidate.)

What I also found striking in Prof Razzaq’s paper, was how he articulated identity not simply as a political notion but also, and perhaps in an essential way, in geographic terms. This is what is glaringly amiss in many later commentaries by his associates and acolytes.

Prof Razzaq begins his essay with what he describes as a catalogue of “unflattering facts” about Bangladesh—by which it was described and known around the world. The nation that he was writing about, was the most densely populated place on earth with the lowest per capita income at that

What is significant to me, reading Prof Razzaq, is the location of the nation. Few Bangalee intellectuals, in articulating the national polity, talked about geographic factors. Although Prof Razzaq would proclaim that ‘the nation in Bangladesh is a nation because it intends to be a nation and nothing else,’ and find its language as ‘the most abiding product of the genius of a people,’ he is also unequivocal about the fact that ‘... the nation has to have a habitat.’

time. (“It is probably the most densely populated 55 thousand square miles on earth.”) And, yet, as Prof Razzaq mentions categorically, Bangladesh has three resources: land, water, and people. The problem of our too many, the so-called population problem, is not a problem to him; it is perhaps a resource boon that is only now being realised.

Raising the question of a greater and lesser identity for a nation, Prof Razzaq makes an argument for why Bangladesh is poised to be a nation in the subcontinental polity. Arguing that there is a “strand of thought developed in the subcontinent which has glorified in losing itself in a greater identity,” but that is not for Bangladesh. As Prof Razzaq notes, Bangladesh, or Bangalees of this region, twice rejected being part of a larger identity, once in 1947, and again in 1971. This is what makes Bangladesh uniquely identifiable and distinct from its cousin in West Bengal. He writes: “West Bengal is a victim, perhaps a willing victim of the siren call of Indian civilization.” I am reminded of Milan Kundera’s dilemma, although in the context of the identity of a writer, between an affiliation for the big nation and an obligation for the small one, in his essay “Weltliteratur.”

What is significant to me, reading Prof Razzaq, is the *location of the nation*. Few Bangalee intellectuals, in articulating the national polity, talked about geographic factors. Although Prof Razzaq would proclaim that “the nation in Bangladesh is a nation because it intends to be a nation and nothing else,” and find its language as “the most abiding product of the genius of a people,” he is also unequivocal about the fact that “...the nation has to have a habitat.” In my recent book of essays, *The Mother Tongue of Architecture* (2024), I point out how language predominates in the



Prof Razzaq would have been immensely pleased at our work on the River Padma.

PHOTO: SYED ZAKIR HOSSAIN

discourse of the Bangalee nation, but by overlooking the geographic and ecological question, and eventually the matter of habitat and habitation, which perhaps is a far more original condition than language. (Did we, at a primordial time, first start to speak or build?) It is at that critical juncture of topics, Prof Razzaq proposes that “geographical factors influence life, but they do not do it automatically.”

Habitat suggests the spatiality of a nation, that is, the physical territorial scope, and this is where the question of ecology emerges. Prof Razzaq is quite clear in proposing “to take the geographical, natural facts of life in Bangladesh, facts which may be said to have direct bearing on the state of the nation.” In that enumeration, rivers are the most important fact.

The character of Bangladesh and its people is dominated today, as it has always been, by the river system and the water it carries. The shifts and turns of the river have been momentous facts for the people, greater than political and governmental upheavals. At the Bengal Institute for Architecture, Landscapes and Settlements, we are dedicated towards understanding the dynamics of land and water. Prof Razzaq would have been immensely pleased at our work on the river Padma—*The Great Padma: The Epic River that made the Bengal Delta* (2023), the book in which I was able to assemble scholars and writers from many fields, including Amitav Ghosh, to relive the imagination of the great river that defines the nation and the land. (I imagine handing over a copy of the book to the professor. Wearing his crumpled kurta and lungi, and that sly smile, he would perhaps invite me to a cup of lemon tea and bakarkhani, and in his inimitable Dhaka accent say, “*Bhaloi kaam korsen.*”)

Razzaq’s ecological notion rests on an understanding of the reciprocity of land and water in Bangladesh (although I have written elsewhere that in Bangladesh, land is borrowed from water). He describes the annual accretion and erosion of land and how that impacts a considerable portion of the people of Bangladesh. He makes it clear by noting that the land available for use varies enormously from year to year, and that is a gift of rivers. “The relative abundance of new land each year,” Prof Razzaq writes, “is the result of the activities of the unique river system of the land.” Here is the punchline that he delivers in the second part of his talk, “Land and water, these are the two resources that the nation in Bangladesh has.”

Continuing his probing perception, Prof Razzaq notes, “Water is abundant, so is silt.” And, consequently, we need to be more vigilant about those two gifts of nature—water and silt. Even with abundance we need the management of water, with which we have faltered as a nation. “Do we make management of water resources the focal point of our planning effort?” he asks. At the time he was writing his lectures, it did not seem to Prof Razzaq that the government or policy-makers had realised the importance of management. There is still a lack of imaginative planning when it comes to this dual gift—water and silt.

With siltation, one encounters that mysterious and pliable land-form—the *chars*. Prof Razzaq notes how *char* lands powerfully “characterizes the practices and the

habits and thoughts of the people.” He presciently points out how those lands can be sites of “experimental practices” in planning more easily than other lands. As far as he sees, nobody has taken any notice of this possibility of the “noticeable” natural fact of life in Bangladesh, and of the prospects of “experimental practices” on those pliable islands. I can briefly mention here the unsuccessful British attempts to colonise *char* areas with “*bhadralok*-farmers” in the 1930s, in Hatiya and riverine parts of Faridpur. Although fictional, Hossain Mia’s Moyna Dwip in *Padda Nodir Majhi*

comes to mind. Daniel Hamilton’s model farm in Gosaba and other islands in the Sunderbans are perhaps a rare and bold experiment in creating a cooperative community there.

Prof Razzaq also notes the status of the city—our biggest architectural enterprise and our most intense habitat, in the state of the nation. Believing in the virtues of the city, but noting that “the difference between metropolitan and non-metropolitan areas will always remain,” he notices an unmistakable trend in society—the drift to the city. Arguing that “civilized life is urban life,” he sees

nothing wrong with the preference for an urban life. He makes a quantitative argument—the “per capita expenditure for a concentrated population on the infrastructure of a civilization is less than on a dispersed rural population.” But as we are faltering in our imagination for planning habitats on pliable land, we are also stalling in receiving those “men who are determined in their preference for an urban rather than a rural life.” The future of the city in Bangladesh eventually rests on a concordance among the three resources—land, water, and people.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

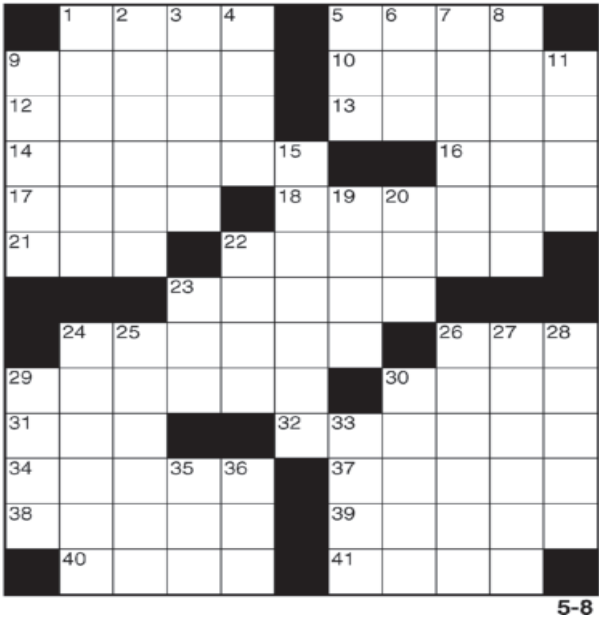
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DOWN

- 23 Social class
- 24 Shows surprise, for example
- 26 Stroller user
- 29 Bald spot cover
- 30 Prefix with sphere
- 31 Curtain holder
- 32 Boardinghouse tenant
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- 37 Syrup choice
- 38 Danger
- 39 City on the Rhone
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19 Places

- 20 Eden resident
- 22 Valentine trim
- 23 Upper limit
- 24 Fan
- 25 Author Welty
- 26 House of worship
- 27 Eggy dish
- 28 Grows weary
- 29 Snare
- 30 Trite
- 33 Yemen neighbour
- 35 Karaoke singer’s need
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YESTERDAY’S ANSWERS



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Dated : 23 February 2025

e-Tender Notice (Re-Tender)

e-Tender is invited in the National e-GP Portal (<http://www.eprocure.gov.bd>) for the procurement works as stated below :

Package No.	Name of Work	Tender ID
12/2024-25/BGB/CB	60' to 120' Aerial Mast Repair/Relocation	1077926
19/2024-25/BGB/CB	Multi Cable 30 Pair Jelly Filled	1077924
20/2024-25/BGB/CB	Multi Cable 20 Pair Jelly Filled	1077925

1. This is an online tender, where only e-tender will be accepted in the National e-GP portal and no offline/hard copies will be accepted.

2. To submit e-tender, registration in the national e-GP portal (<http://www.eprocure.gov.bd>) is required.

3. Further information and guidelines are available in the National e-GP system portal and from e-GP help desk (helpdesk@eprocure.gov.bd).

4. The Tender Notice will be available on the website: www.bgb.gov.bd

MD MAHBUBUR RAHMAN
Lt Col
Director (It)
For Director General
dirit@bgb.gov.bd

GD-49I

Allen Swapan arrives as a spin-off comic book character

The lead character from the Chorki original series *Myself Allen Swapan*, directed by Shihab Shaheen, has now appeared in a comic book. Titled *Chronicles of Allen Swapan*, the comic has been released at the Amar Ekushey Boi Mela and is available at stalls 949-950 of Dhaka Comics.

Although inspired by the web-series, the comic features five distinct and original stories. Among them is *Skondhokata*, written by Zahidul Haque Apu, while *Dome*, *Munsunk*, and *Faad* were penned by Sheikh Korashanee. The two writers collaborated on *Peyaju*.

The illustrations for these five stories were done by Mehedi Haque (*Dome*), Kazi Maruf (*Skondhokata*), Jabir Mahmud Ratin (*Munsunk*), Abdullah Al Zunayed (*Peyaju*), and Meherab Siddiqui Sabit (*Faad*).

The cover art of the book was designed by Asifur Rahman, with editing by Mehedi Haque and Sheikh Korashanee. The comic is rated 'M' (Mature) and is intended for adult readers.



PUJA CHERY confirmed as 'Tagar's' leading lady

Yesterday, the first official look at the upcoming film *Tagar* was released to reveal Puja Chery as the heroine. Moreover, Ador Azad will star opposite Puja in this Aalok Hasan directorial.

The film is set to feature performances by Azad Abul Kalam, Rosey Siddiqui, Sumon Anwar, LR Khan Shimanto, and many others, and filming is scheduled to begin on February 25.

Puja spoke to The Daily Star about the project and stated, "I agreed to take on the role after finding out the film's story has a unique dimension to it."

Tagar's story and screenplay have been crafted by the AR Movie Network team, with dialogues penned by Mamunur Rashid Tanim. The production company has confirmed that the film is set for release during the upcoming Eid ul-Azha.



Unreleased Kausar Ahmed Chaudhury song out now

In honour of Kausar Ahmed Chaudhury's third death anniversary, the official music video for *Shorone Ritwik*, a long-unreleased song written by him, was released yesterday. Written as a tribute to filmmaker Ritwik Ghatak, the song features vocals by Nafis Kamal, composition by Syed Kallol, and arrangement by Tushar Rahman. The video is now available on Prothom Alo and Nafis Kamal's YouTube channels.

The song has been reimaged with Syed Kallol's composition and Tushar Rahman's arrangement for the release. According to the song's production company, Cool Exposure, *Shorone Ritwik* was entrusted to Nafis Kamal by Kausar Ahmed Chaudhury, although the late artiste never heard the final version.



First-ever Munier Chowdhury National Theatre Festival off to a strong start



The inaugural Munier Chowdhury National Theatre Festival began on Friday at the Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy (BSA). Running until February 28, the festival will showcase 16 plays in eight categories, selected from a nationwide theatre workshop.

The opening ceremony, held at the National Theatre Hall, featured Md Wares Hossain as the chief guest. Asif Munier, son of Munier Chowdhury) attended as a special guest, and AFM Nurur Rahman presided over the programme.

Following the inauguration, Rangpur District Shilpakala Academy performed *Chhinomukut*, an adaptation of *Hirak Rajar Deshe*. Yesterday, they staged *Nona Kothon*. Tonight at 7:00pm, Thakurgaon District Shilpakala Academy will stage *Bhoot-Odbhut*, written by Habib Jakariya Ullas and directed by Biplob Sarkar.

WHAT'S THE HAPS?

‘Ek Jora Juta’

On February 21, Prachyanat marked its 29th anniversary and has scheduled a series of events throughout the month. As part of the celebrations, the joint production *Ek Jora Juta* (A Pair of Shoes), a collaboration between Toronto Theatre Focus, Canada, and Prachyanat, will be staged today at the Experimental Theatre Hall of Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy.

The story follows a lost pair of shoes, whose absence creates a void across the land. Life feels empty, and everyone waits for their return to restore hope. Will finding the shoes promise a revival for the world?

Date: Sunday | February 23
Time: 7pm onwards
Venue: Experimental Theater Hall, Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy



‘Kacher Manush Durey Thuiya’ now accessible to visually impaired individuals

To raise awareness about the language of the visually impaired and to honour all forms of communication during Language Month, mobile network provider Grameenphone and OTT platform Chorki launched a special campaign.

The two companies decided to create an audio description of the Chorki original *Kacher Manush Dure Thuiya*, a project under the *Ministry of Love* series. This version of the film is available for free on the MyGP app from February 21 to 23. Today is the last day for Grameenphone users to catch the audio version.

NEWS

Back resolution on Ukraine

FROM PAGE 12

prompting an attack from Trump who called Zelensky a "dictator without elections."

He also falsely blamed Ukraine for starting the war.

But Trump on Friday appeared to shift away from his criticisms and said that Zelensky and Russia's Vladimir Putin will have to "get together" to bring an end to the conflict.

"President Putin and President Zelensky are going to have to get together... We want to stop killing millions of people," Trump told reporters in the Oval Office.

He added Kyiv would "hopefully in the next fairly short period of time" sign a deal handing Washington preferential access to Ukraine's mineral deposits.

The minerals deal has become a major sticking point in the increasingly fraught relations between Washington and Kyiv.

Trump wants Ukraine to give US companies access to its vast natural resources as compensation for the tens of billions of dollars of aid delivered under his predecessor Joe Biden.

"They're very brave, in every way you can imagine. But we are spending our

treasure on some country that's very, very far away," Trump said of Ukraine.

In return, Ukraine is seeking security guarantees from the United States for signing away the precious rights.

Zelensky -- who had rejected the agreement -- said Friday he hoped for a "fair result."

Earlier Friday, Trump described Ukraine as at a disadvantage in the negotiations -- further alarming allies who think he will offer concessions to Putin.

"I've had very good talks with Putin, and I've had not such good talks with Ukraine. They don't have any cards," Trump said at the White House.

He also said during a Fox News interview on the same day that it was not "very important" for Zelensky to be involved in US-Russia talks.

The US president -- who has repeatedly expressed admiration for Putin -- again declined to blame Moscow for the February 2022 invasion, saying that the Russian leader "attacked but they shouldn't have let him attack."

Trump also said that Putin faced no pressure to make a deal.

"He doesn't have to make a deal,

because if he wanted, he'd get the whole country," Trump said.

French President Emmanuel Macron and British Prime Minister Keir Starmer -- who are both due at the White House next week for potentially tricky discussions -- have been accused by Trump of doing nothing to end the war.

Macron said Friday he will tell Trump that "you can't be weak with President Putin."

On the ground, both sides in the war are trying to improve their position on the battlefield amid Trump's push for a ceasefire.

Russia's army on Friday said it had captured two more villages in eastern Ukraine.

With Europe shaken by the new US stance on the conflict, Ukraine got renewed support from German Chancellor Olaf Scholz.

"We won't leave Ukraine alone and decide things over their heads," he said Friday at his last major campaign event before weekend elections.

After speaking to Scholz and other regional leaders, Zelensky said in his televised evening address that "Europe must and can do much more to ensure that peace is actually achieved" in Ukraine.

Pentagon says will cut civilian workforce by at least 5%

AFP, Washington

The US Defense Department will cut its civilian workforce by at least five percent starting next week, the Pentagon said Friday, as President Donald Trump continues slashing the government payroll.

Trump's administration has already begun firing thousands of other federal workers who are on probationary status, and the cuts at the Defense Department -- the largest employer in the United States -- will also focus on recently hired employees.

"We anticipate reducing the department's civilian workforce by

5.8 percent to produce efficiencies and refocus the department on the president's priorities and restoring readiness in the force," Darin Selnick, who is performing the duties of under secretary of defense for personnel and readiness, said in a statement.

"We expect approximately 5,400 probationary workers will be released beginning next week as part of this initial effort, after which we will implement a hiring freeze while we conduct a further analysis of our personnel needs," Selnick said.

The Defense Department employs more than 900,000 civilians, meaning that cuts of five percent would affect a

total of more than 45,000 jobs.

A day before the announcement, Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth said in a video message that "it is simply not in the public interest to retain individuals whose contributions are not mission critical."

"Common sense would tell us where we should start, right -- we start with poor performers amongst our probationary employees," Hegseth said.

- Promoting 'best and brightest' -

"When you look at head count, we're going to be thoughtful, but we're also going to be aggressive, up and down the chain, to find the places where we can ensure the best and brightest are promoted based on merit."

3 arrested, duty officer suspended

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active members of an interdistrict robbery gang. Among them, Muhit is accused in five cases, including two for bus robbery, filed with different police stations, according to Mizanur.

The suspects confessed to their crimes during preliminary interrogation by police, the SP said.

The robbery took place on an Amri

Travels bus under the Unique Road Royals service, which was on its way to Rajshahi from Dhaka's Gabtoli at 11:00pm on Monday. According to the passengers, the robbery continued for three hours on the bus.

Initially, the bus supervisor, driver, and assistant were detained in connection with the robbery and alleged sexual assault, but they were

granted bail by the court later. A case was filed with Mirzapur Police Station on Friday over the incident.

Complainant Omar Ali from Baraigram of Natore said the robbers beat passengers and stole cash, mobile phones and jewellery. They also sexually assaulted two to three women aboard the bus, according to the case statement.

Records tumble

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and Mark Wood removed Steve Smith with an 150-kph rocket.

Short and Marnus Labuschagne (47) propped up Australia before England struck back with their spin duo of Adil Rashid and Liam Livingstone.

Inglis raised 146 runs with Carey, who was dropped on 49 by Archer, as Australia reclaimed control of the see-saw contest and never let it go.

Brydon Carse removed Carey in the 42nd over but Inglis raced to a 77-ball hundred reaching the mark with a six off Archer.

Glenn Maxwell produced an unbeaten cameo of 32 off 15 balls to ease any pressure on Inglis, who sealed Australia's victory with his sixth six.

Australia had arrived with a second-string pace attack and their missing frontline quicks included skipper Pat Cummins.

Stand-in skipper Smith elected to

field and they did not have to wait long for a breakthrough thanks to Carey's spectacular athleticism at mid-on.

Phil Salt had flicked a Ben Dwarshuis (3-66) delivery and Carey moved to his right, leapt and plucked a one-handed stunner on the edge of the 30-yard circle.

The bowler-fielder duo combined again to remove Jamie Smith, whose promotion to number three did not pay off.

Duckett combined in a stand of 158 with Joe Root (68) to lay the foundation for England's big total.

Adam Zampa dismissed Root and Jos Buttler fell for 23 but Duckett went on to eclipse New Zealander Nathan Astle's record for the highest individual score in the Champions Trophy.

Duckett struck 17 fours and three sixes before falling lbw to Labuschagne after a 143-ball knock.

Iran says Russian FM Lavrov will visit Tehran in coming days

AFP, Tehran

Iran's foreign ministry said Saturday that Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov will visit Tehran in the coming days to meet his Iranian counterpart and discuss "regional and international developments".

"The visit ... will be carried out within the framework of ongoing consultations between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Russian Federation on bilateral relations and regional and international developments," Iranian foreign ministry spokesman Esmail Baqaei said, according to a statement by the ministry.

The statement added that Lavrov will also meet with some other Iranian officials.

Unity crucial to save Bangladesh

FROM PAGE 12

collapsed state structure to rebuild the country.

"Many people are talking about reforms now, but in the past, they were nowhere to be seen on the streets. Only BNP has faced the bloodshed of dictatorship, discussed reforms, and announced a 31-point plan," he said.

The BNP leader also said if the party returned to power with the

people's mandate, its top priority would be to rebuild the country.

He said action had already been taken against BNP leaders and activists involved in unlawful activities. "So, the people of the country cannot be misled by the carrying out propaganda against BNP."

He accused Sheikh Hasina of resorting to killings and enforced disappearances to stay in power.

He observed that those who now make "big statements" were absent when the BNP and some other political parties protested on the streets, enduring repression and suppression during Hasina's rule, Tarique said.

He emphasised the importance of holding a credible and transparent national election as soon as possible to rebuild the country in line with the people's hopes and aspirations.

Key suspect held in N'ganj

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women, were injured when members of "Students for Sovereignty" assaulted a group of indigenous people protesting outside NCTB over the removal of the term "adivasi" (indigenous) from textbooks.

Police arrested two of the accused,

Arif Al Khabir, 38, and Md Abbas, 24, in connection with the incident later that night.

The next day, Jagadish Chakma, president of Pahari Chhatra Parishad's Dhaka Metropolitan unit, filed a case against 16 named and 200-300 unidentified attackers with

Motijheel Police Station.

Another suspect, Habibur Rahman, was apprehended on January 29 while detectives arrested Shahadat Farazi Sakib, 35, who was expelled by the Jatiya Nagorik Committee after the attack, on February 12. He was named as an accused in the case.

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BUS ROBBERY 3 arrested, duty officer suspended

OUR CORRESPONDENT, *Tangail*

Police have arrested three suspects in Savar in connection with a robbery and the alleged sexual assault of women on board a moving bus in Rajshahi.

The force also suspended Atikuzzaman, the duty officer of Mirzapur Police Station in Tangail, for negligence of duty, the district's Superintendent of Police Mizanur Rahman said at a press briefing yesterday.

The arrestees are Shahidul Islam alias Muhit, 29, of Manikganj's Doulatpur, Mohammad Sabuj, 30, of Shariatpur's Zajira, and Md Sharifuzzaman alias Sharif, 28, of Savar.

Members of the Detective Branch of police in Tangail and Mirzapur Police Station personnel made the arrests during a joint drive in Savar's Genda on Friday evening. They also recovered Tk 29,370, three robbed mobile phones and a knife.

SP Mizanur said the suspects were

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Locals assess the damage caused by Friday night's fire at a sawmill at Khilgaon Taitola in the capital. Several cars and shops were completely gutted in the fire.

PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

Unity crucial to save Bangladesh from plotters

Says Tarique

UNB, *Jashore*

BNP acting chairman Tarique Rahman yesterday said unity among the democratic forces is crucial to protect Bangladesh and its people from conspirators.

"If we want to protect the people of the country and, above all, to safeguard Bangladesh, we must all remain united at any cost," he said while virtually addressing the council of the Jashore district unit BNP at Central Eidgah Maidan.

The BNP leader warned that autocratic forces were attempting to resurface and that conspirators were not sitting idle. "They are continuing their plans under various pretexts, but we cannot allow them to succeed."

"There may be differences of opinion among us. We'll sit together and discuss. If one discussion is not enough, we will sit again. Through discussions, we'll find solutions to our problems," he said.

He highlighted the BNP's commitment to rebuilding the country, stating that the party had presented a 31-point outline for the reform of the state structure, which includes plans for education, employment, healthcare, and agriculture.

Tarique said the main goal of his party is to restore the

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REVISED BUDGET FOR FY25

Government going for generous ADP

REJAUL KARIM BYRON

In a first, the ministries and divisions would be allocated more funds than they are seeking in the revised development budget for this fiscal year as the government attempts to rev up a slowing economy.

"The implementation has been slow due to the political changeover," said a planning ministry official.

In the first seven months of the fiscal year, only 21.52 percent of the ADP budget could be used.

"Usually, the ministries seek additional funds to what they are allotted. But this time, they demanded less than Tk 200,000 crore."

Since the finance division has made more funds available than the ministries' demands, the planning commission will accommodate the additional funds in the revised annual development programme (ADP), he said.

Subsequently, the number of the projects under ADP has been increased to 1,434 from 1,326 in the original ADP.

Of the 57 ministries and divisions, the allocation for 48 increased by 26 percent in the revised ADP.

The other eight ministries and divisions' allocation increased by

0.81 percent, the planning ministry official added.

Subsequently, the size of the revised budget for fiscal 2024-25's ADP is likely to be Tk 226,125 crore, down 19 percent from the original budget.

The draft of the revised ADP is set to be presented in today's extended Planning Commission meeting to be presided by Planning Adviser Wahiduddin Mahmud.

"Usually, the ministries seek additional funds to what they are allotted. But this time, they demanded less than Tk 200,000 crore."

A PLANNING MINISTRY OFFICIAL

Once the Planning Commission finalises the revised ADP, it will be placed at this month's National Economic Council meeting to be chaired by Chief Adviser Muhammad Yunus.

The proposed revised ADP will see about 46.5 percent of the total allocation going to three sectors: transport and communication, power and energy, and education.

Of the ministries and divisions, the local government and rural development ministry (Tk 36,159 crore), which is 16.74 percent of the total allocation. It was followed by power division (Tk 21,475 crore), road transport and bridges ministry (Tk 18,624.6 crore), primary and mass education ministry (Tk 12,764 crore) and science and technology ministry (Tk 12,129.63 crore).

In the draft proposal, the portion of government's own funds that would go towards ADP has been slashed by about 18.2 percent to Tk 135,000 crore and foreign funds by 19 percent to Tk 181,000 crore.

Besides, the ADP for the state-owned enterprises could be Tk 10,125 crore, which was Tk 13,288 crore originally.

The revised ADP will incorporate seven new directives that the ministries and divisions must follow.

As per one directive, the ministries have to submit combined proposals for small projects instead of sending separate proposals.

Also, the ministries have to give priority to projects taken in light of Green Climate Resilient Development (GCRD), National Adaptation Plan (NAP), Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) and Delta Appraisal Framework (DAF).

ATTACK ON ADIVASIS

Key suspect held in N'ganj

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Police have arrested another suspect over the attack on a group of indigenous people outside the National Curriculum and Textbook Board in the city's Motijheel last month.

The arrestee, Saeed Fazlul Karim Swapan, 42, is a key suspect in a case filed over the attack, according to police.

A team from Motijheel Police Station arrested him during a drive in Narayanganj's Fatullah around 2:30am yesterday, said Talebur Rahman, deputy commissioner (media) of Dhaka Metropolitan Police.

Later, Swapan was produced before a Dhaka court.

Police said they tracked Swapan by using advanced technology. With him, the number of arrests made in the case rose to five.

CCTV footage and video clips of the incident showed Swapan attacking Rupaiya Shrestha Tanchangya, 24, a central leader of the Students Against Discrimination platform, on that day.

On January 15, at least 20 people, including

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Back resolution on Ukraine

US urges countries at UN; Trump calls for Putin- Zelensky talks

AFP, *United Nations*

The United States urged UN members to back its "simple, historic" resolution on the Ukraine war, which diplomatic sources said omits mention of Kyiv's territory occupied by Russia.

Washington's proposal, seen by AFP, appears to rival a separate draft resolution produced by Kyiv and its European allies -- countries that US President Donald Trump has sought to sideline from talks on the future of the three-year-old war between Russia and Ukraine.

Contrary to the Ukrainian-European proposal which blames Russia for the invasion and commits to Kyiv's "territorial integrity," the US's 65-word draft proposal does not criticise Moscow.

Instead, it calls for a "swift end to the conflict" without mentioning Kyiv's territorial integrity.

It also begins by "mourning the tragic loss of life throughout the Russia-Ukraine conflict," before "reiterating" that the United Nations' purpose is the maintenance of "international peace and security" -- without singling out Moscow as the source of the conflict.

Calling it a "simple, historic resolution," US Secretary of State Marco Rubio urged UN member states on Friday "to support (the US draft) in order to chart a path to peace."

The US draft was welcomed by Moscow's ambassador to the UN Vassily Nebenzia as "a good move" -- but stressed that it did not address the "roots" of the conflict.

Earlier this week, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky had complained that his country had been left out of talks between US and Russian officials --

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Great Wall of China may be centuries older than thought

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

Archaeological excavations in eastern China's Shandong province suggest that some of the oldest sections of the Great Wall were built 300 years earlier than previously thought.



Recent digs in the Changqing area show that the engineering marvel wasn't a single construction project, but a series of fortifications built during multiple dynasties.

The Great Wall was built to secure ancient China's northern borders against nomadic groups from the Eurasian Steppe. Historical records suggest the construction of the Unesco World Heritage monument spanned centuries. However, extant documentation of the wall lacks details that could reveal its true origins.

It was believed that the largest portions of the first walls were constructed around the 7th century BC and joined together under the Qin dynasty around the third century BC.

However, new excavations undertaken last year and covering over 1,000 square meters found sections of the wall dating back to the late Western Zhou Dynasty, which ruled from 1046BC to 771BC, and to the early Spring and Autumn Period of 770-476BC.

Josh Inglis and Glenn Maxwell embrace after guiding Australia to a five-wicket win against England in their ICC Champions Trophy fixture at the Gaddafi Stadium in Lahore yesterday. Inglis scored an unbeaten 120 as Australia chased down England's 351, powered by Ben Duckett's 165, with 15 balls to spare.

PHOTO: REUTERS



Records tumble as Aus beat Eng by five wickets

**India-Pakistan
blockbuster clash in
Dubai today at 3:00 pm.**

REUTERS, *Lahore*

Australia pulled off a monster chase against England in the Champions Trophy on Saturday after Josh Inglis's incendiary hundred helped them to prevail in a high-scoring Group B thriller by five wickets.

Opener Ben Duckett smashed 165 to propel England to 351-8, a record total in the tournament's history until Australia overwhelmed it, after they were put into bat.

Inglis, born in Leeds to English parents, hammered 120 not out off 86 balls while Alex Carey (69) and Matthew Short (63) chipped in with half-centuries as Australia reached the target with 15 balls to spare.

The way Australia completed the highest chase in a men's event in an ICC tournament was in stark contrast to their wobbly start.

Jofra Archer took a return catch to dismiss the dangerous Travis Head

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