



A different DHAKA IN RAMADAN

JANNATUL BUSHRA

Have you ever felt the pulse of Dhaka in Ramadan? The way this unforgiving city pauses just before sunset? As if it's holding its breath with the rest of us, then exhaling in unison with the call to prayer?

If you're an unlucky officegoer like me, you probably have felt it already. For a whole month, this restless metropolis, always rushing and buzzing, has moved to a different rhythm, adjusting to the fests of millions.

This year, the usual office hours have been set from 9:00am to 3:30pm to make fasting easier. However, the traffic in Dhaka is merciless.

The same old fight starts when everyone sets to go home from the office, with thousands of people stuck in traffic, anxiously watching the clock, and silently praying to make it home in time for iftar.

And then, just when frustration peaks, the long-awaited thing happens -- the Maghrib call to prayer.

For a moment, everything starts feeling a little kinder. People who may never have spoken to each other exchange water and dates. After all, it's the time for iftar.



FILE PHOTO



Food packets are passed from one rickshaw puller to another. Traffic cops who were just directing irate crowds now give out water bottles to anyone in the area. People who couldn't make it home in time shows kindness to each other.

If you are a silent observer like me, then you may notice suited men in cars sharing their dates with rickshaw pullers. A young woman, caught in the gridlock, accepting a bottle of water from a traffic police officer. A

CNG driver and a university student, bound by nothing but the same empty stomach, breaking their fast side by side. It is Dhaka at its finest -- raw, real, and deeply humane.

Interestingly, it's not just the streets that change -- markets and bazars take on a whole new rhythm too. As iftar approaches, vendors set up temporary seating on the ground, ready to break their fast right where they work. Those who couldn't manage to buy food are welcome to share a meal with strangers, because during this time, no one eats alone. Mosques that stay quiet for most of the year suddenly overflow with life. Even in residential areas, families set

up water filters filled with sharbat or juice outside their homes, making sure that anyone passing by can take a sip and cool down. The whole city moves with a shared spirit of generosity and togetherness during this sunset!

The busy junction points, like Bijoy Sharani, Shahbagh, or Dhanmondi 27, magically calm down right before iftar. One minute, it's all honking, yelling, and last-minute lane cutting -- then silence. The roads empty out like a classroom right after the last bell. It's an odd, almost serene experience!

To me, Ramadan in Dhaka is all about these quiet moments between the rush, the softening of the edges, and the collective act of slowing down. But like all beautiful things, Ramadan in Dhaka will go away. The old habits will come back. The honking during the sunsets will return. The jostling, the shoving, the frenzied race against time -- they will all make a comeback. The iftar stalls will disappear, and with them, so will the quiet camaraderie that binds this city together at sunset.

And yet, for those of us who have felt it -- the warmth of a stranger's generosity, the silence of a city at peace, the magic of a moment shared -- we carry a flicker of hope. Hope that perhaps, even when Ramadan is gone, we will remember. Remember to pause. Remember to be kind. Remember that Dhaka, even in its chaos, can still come together, if only for a moment, at sunset.

Home adviser urges all not to smoke in open spaces

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Home Adviser Lt Gen (ret'd) Jahangir Alam Chowdhury yesterday urged the public to refrain from smoking in open spaces as people are criticising a recent attack on two women by a group of men in the capital's Lalmaia.

"From what I understand, the two women were reportedly smoking when some people, who were on their way to say their prayers, intervened. In the altercation, the women allegedly threw tea on them," the home adviser said in reply to a question from a journalist while visiting the Public Order Management (POM) Police Lines in Mirpur.

"As you all know, smoking in public is prohibited for both men and women... It is an offence. Therefore, I request that no one smokes in public spaces. Especially during this month of Ramadan, everyone needs to show more restraint," he said.

He added that "religious advisers" are also urging everyone not to eat or drink in public, as it is a sign of disrespect for those who are fasting.

On Saturday evening, two women were taken into custody after they got engaged in an altercation with

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SECONDARY SCHOOL ADMISSION

July victims' families to share quota with freedom fighters' children

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The interim government has decided to include the family members of those injured or killed in the July uprising in the admission quota in government secondary schools for the children of freedom fighters and martyred freedom fighters.

The Ministry of Education issued a notification in this regard on February 20, signed by Mosammat Rahima Akhter, deputy secretary of the Secondary and Higher Education Division.

The order was published on the ministry's website yesterday.

Meanwhile, the Directorate of Secondary and Higher Education directed the heads of secondary schools to implement the order yesterday.

Previously, 5 percent of seats in government secondary schools were reserved for the children of

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We must document atrocities of past regime

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He made these remarks when Gwyn Lewis, the United Nations resident coordinator in Bangladesh, and Huma Khan, the senior human rights adviser at the UN Resident Coordinator's Office in Bangladesh, called on him at the State Guest House Jamuna.

Gwyn Lewis said the UN is ready to provide technical support and assist the people of Bangladesh in building their capacity for this effort.

"This is part of the process of healing and establishing the truth," Lewis said.

The chief adviser thanked the UN for its fact-finding report on human rights violations and abuses related to the July-August 2024 protests in Bangladesh.

"We are very happy to see the UN report. It came on time. It was not an easy task," he said.

The resident coordinator informed the chief adviser that the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Türk will brief member states on the report's findings on March 5 during the 55th session of the Human Rights Council.

She expressed hope that the upcoming visit of UN Secretary-General António Guterres to Bangladesh would bring the Rohingya crisis back to the global agenda, amid dwindling aid supplies.

"We are very concerned about the financial situation," she said, adding that \$15 million per month is required just to ensure food supply for Rohingya refugees.

UN Secretary-General Guterres is scheduled to visit Bangladesh from March 13 to 16.

Robbery on moving bus

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away our mobile phones and wallets."

The whole thing happened within four to five minutes and the robbers got off the bus with the looted items, he added.

Asked if the robbers assaulted anyone, he said, "They held everyone hostage at knifepoint. The passengers gave their mobile phones and wallets out of fear."

OC Jewel said that police went to the spot upon information.

"We are investigating the incident," he added.

Earlier on February 14, a bus was hijacked, and its passengers were looted in the Police Town area on the Dhaka-Aricha highway. At least three passengers suffered injuries from stabbing during the robbery.

Home opposes idea of police commission

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The report also recommended replacing the Police Act of 1861 and the Police Regulations of Bengal with laws compliant with human rights.

The police headquarters had also proposed forming an independent commission like that of Sri Lanka. This model envisions a commission comprising 11 members -- a retired Appellate Division judge or a retired IGP as the chair, four MPs from ruling and opposition parties, and four independent personalities, including a woman and a rights activist.

The serving IGP would be the member secretary, while the home secretary would be an ex-officio member.

The commission would have sweeping powers to ensure the accountability and neutrality of law enforcers, make transfers, promotions, and appointments within the force transparent, and ensure that both the force and its members remain accountable. It

would also oversee the management of complaints against the police.

The Police HQ cited the example of the mass uprising in Sri Lanka and the ouster of president Gotabaya Rajapaksa, during which the police did not use lethal force on protesters and, in turn, did not face public wrath or lose their morale.

"That is because Sri Lanka's police are controlled by an independent commission," said a top officer involved in drafting the PHQ proposal.

The Police Reform Commission sent its proposals to the ministry on December 5.

Senior officials of the home ministry held a meeting on December 29, chaired by home secretary Nasimul Ghani, to review the report. The ministry then sent its opinion in writing to the Police Reform Commission, which then attached it to the full report and submitted it to the government. The report

was published online by the cabinet division in January.

Ghani neither responded to calls made by this correspondent nor replied to a text message.

Officials familiar with the matter said the home ministry objected to the independent police commission because it proposes an "arrangement akin to placing the secretary under the police chief, despite the fact that the senior secretary or secretary of the ministry is the [current] controlling authority of the force".

The reform commission said whether the proposed commission should be a statutory body under an act or a constitutionally structured institution should be decided based on expert opinion. Additionally, the composition of the police commission, its scope of work, constitutional or legal obligations, and other relevant aspects require further analysis and examination, it added.

Thousands flee after Japan's biggest wildfire in decades

AFP, Tokyo

Thousands of people evacuated from parts of northern Japan as the country's largest wildfire in three decades raged unabated yesterday after killing at least one person, officials said.

Around 2,000 people fled areas around the northern Japan city of Ofunato to stay with friends or relatives, while more than 1,200 evacuated to shelters, according to officials.

"We're still examining the size of the affected area, but it is the biggest since the 1992 wildfire" in Kushiro, Hokkaido, a disaster management agency spokesman told AFP Saturday.

Some reports estimated the fire had spread over 1,800 hectares.

Aerial footage by NHK showed columns of white smoke billowing, four days after the blaze first materialised, with military helicopters trying to douse them.

One burned body has been discovered so far, with more than 80 buildings damaged and around 1,700 firefighters mobilised from across the country.

The number of wildfires has declined since the peak in the 1970s, according to government data, but there were about 1,300 across Japan in 2023 -- concentrated in the February to April period when the air dries and winds pick up.

I am worried

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hope future elections will be more visibly free than many claim they have been. There is room for change. I am worried about Bangladesh but I am not without hope," he said.

Sen, who spent much of his childhood in Dhaka and began his formal education at St Gregory's School there, said the situation in Bangladesh affects me deeply because I have a strong Bengali sense of identity," Sen said.

He said he was concerned about how the country would navigate the challenges.

"I have spent a lot of time in Dhaka and began my school education there. Aside from Dhaka, I often visited my ancestral home in Manikganj. On my maternal side, I regularly visited Bikrampur, particularly Sonarang. These places have deep personal significance for me. Like many others, I am worried about how Bangladesh will overcome its current challenges," he said.

On Bangladesh's progress since its independence, Sen highlighted the country's improvements in per capita income, at one point surpassing India, along with a sharp reduction in birth rates and higher life expectancy compared to India.

"Bangladesh has undergone major economic and social transformations,

particularly in advancing women's rights, with contributions from both the government and non-governmental organisations like BRAC and Grameen Bank," he said.

Sen also noted that newspapers in Bangladesh remained "relatively free", with many flourishing despite taking strong anti-government positions.

He praised the Bangladeshi Army for its restraint in not attempting to establish military rule, as has happened in many other countries.

Sen condemned attacks on Hindu minorities and the vandalism of temples, emphasising that it was the responsibility of both the government and the public to prevent such violence.

"This is an important issue because Bangladesh has historically taken pride in its treatment of minorities and its efforts to keep communal forces like Jamaat in check. Unfortunately, there have also been attacks on mosques in India. These incidents, whether in Bangladesh or India, must stop," he asserted.

"There is nothing easier than fuelling communalism by selectively amplifying certain incidents. This is how the Hindu-Muslim riots of the 1940s escalated, leading to bloodshed. We must reflect on our past and consider our future in that light. Selective publicity can be extremely dangerous," Sen said.

Prices of iftar staples hold steady, mostly

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Eggplants, a key ingredient in iftar meals, have doubled in price within a week, currently selling at Tk 60-100 per kg. However, it's still cheaper than last year when the price surged up to Tk 200 per kg.

The prices of broiler and Sonali chicken have increased by Tk 10 per kg compared to last year. Broiler chicken is now priced at Tk 200-210 per kg, while Sonali chicken is being sold at Tk 300-320 per kg.

Meanwhile, the prices of pulse, beef, and fish remain unchanged from last year.

On a positive note, the prices of several essentials, including sugar, grass peas, dates, onions, cucumbers, potatoes, tomatoes, eggs, garlic, green and dry chillies, ginger, and isabgol, have decreased.

Sugar is now priced at Tk 125-130 per kg, down from Tk 140-150 last year.

The price of normal dates has fallen to Tk 180-200 per kg from Tk 220-250, while mid-range and premium quality dates are being sold at Tk 450-800 and Tk 1,000-1,800, respectively -- Tk 30-200 per kg lower than last year.

Local onions are now available at Tk 40-50 per kg, significantly lower than last year's Tk 100-120.

Potatoes are being sold at Tk 20-30 per kg, compared to Tk 25-35 last year.

Additionally, winter vegetable prices have decreased by Tk 5-20 per kg compared to last Ramadan.

Mohammad Gofran, proprietor of Cumilla General Store in Karwan Bazar, said, "Except for soybean oil, the prices of most grocery items are satisfactory as supply is abundant. While some essentials have become more expensive, overall, prices are stable, and several items have even become cheaper."

Jahangir Alam, a private sector employee from Tejgaon's Begunbari area, said, "Prices of onions, potatoes, tomatoes, green chillies, and eggs are reasonable this year. However, stricter government monitoring could have helped stabilise the prices of items that have gone up."

Salha Begum, a domestic help from the Karwan Bazar area, said she spent Tk 1,000 and bought oil, chicken, onion, chickpeas, pulse, sugar, isabgol, and various spices.

"Prices of some items have fallen, while others have risen. All in all, the situation is stable. However, if prices fall further, it will be helpful for people like us who struggle to make ends meet."