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CLOSURE OF FACTORIES

## Eid joy eludes jobless workers

REFAYET ULLAH MIRDHA

An uncertain future is overshadowing the joy of the upcoming Eid for thousands of workers who have lost their jobs due to factory closures and layoffs in the wake of last year's political shift.

Trade union groups estimate that nearly 1 lakh workers, mostly in the garment and textile sectors, have lost their jobs in the past seven and a half months as factory owners closed production units or announced layoffs due to financial struggles.

Recovery has slowed and is likely to continue as entrepreneurs have refrained from investing in new units or expanding existing operations due to the country's ongoing economic and political uncertainty.

Many workers are now desperately searching for new jobs, while others have returned to their villages, unable to make rent and afford daily necessities in the capital.

With no steady income, buying their family members anything for Eid is a distant thought as the loss of employment has made it difficult for many to support their families and cover expenses for their children and elderly parents.

SEE PAGE 2 COL 1

Laid-off  
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A FAMILIAR YET ARDUOUS WALK... After toiling away in the fields all day, local women gather their pitchers for a familiar yet arduous hike. As the sun loosens its fiery grip, they form small groups and tread two to three kilometres across the parched, crackling earth in search of life's most essential element -- freshwater. In the dry season, freshwater becomes scarce in regions highly affected by salinity. With reservoirs reduced to one for roughly every five villages, these resilient women must endure this ritual daily. The photo was taken on Wednesday from Khatail village in Dakop upazila of Khulna.

PHOTO: HABIBUR RAHMAN



WORLD  
WATER  
DAY

## Debate, demo swirl over banning AL

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

A Facebook post by NCP leader Hasnat Abdullah early yesterday touched off intense public debate and also demonstrations over the question of banning Awami League.

Hasnat wrote that there was an ongoing conspiracy to rehabilitate the Awami League as per India's plan.

A proposal for this "refined" Awami League to be helmed by AL leaders Saber Hossain Chowdhury, Shirin Sharmin Chaudhury, and Fazle Noor Taposh was pitched to Hasnat and two others "at the cantonment" in the afternoon of March 11, he wrote.

"We were asked to accept this proposal in exchange for" a parliamentary seat-sharing agreement, wrote the chief organiser of the NCP around 2:00am.

"We were told that multiple political parties, when presented with this proposal, had agreed to the rehabilitation of the Awami League on certain conditions. [We were told that] It is better to have several opposition parties, including a weak Awami League, than just one party in opposition.

"We were further told that those who will lead this 'refined' Awami League will start publicly admitting the crimes of the Sheikh family from April-May onwards, distancing themselves from Hasina while pledging allegiance only to Bangabandhu's Awami League."

He said the offer was immediately rejected with the assertion that efforts should be made to prosecute the Awami League rather than rehabilitating them. Hasnat and the two others then abruptly left the meeting.

Hasnat then urged people to unite. "There is no place for Awami League's comeback in post-August 5 Bangladesh. The Awami League must be banned."

**"The Jamaat-e-Islami was banned. But that did not stop the party's political activities. I think the Awami League should be dealt with political programmes, not a ban."**

Anu Muhammad, former teacher at Jahangirnagar University

His post came hours after Chief Adviser Muhammad Yunus told the International Crisis Group that the interim government had no plans to ban the AL. But AL leaders accused of murder and crimes against humanity will be tried in Bangladeshi courts, he added.

SEE PAGE 2 COL 4

## Political decisions rest solely with political entities

Says NCP, condemns CA's  
remark on AL question

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The National Citizen Party yesterday condemned Chief Adviser Prof Muhammad Yunus' remark that the government had no plans to ban the Awami League.

"When the trials for crimes committed by the Awami League, including the Pilkhana massacre, the Shapla Chhatar massacre, enforced disappearances, crossfires, electoral fraud, and the July killings, have made no visible progress, such a remark from a person holding a key position in the state is unacceptable," NCP Convener Nahid Islam said at a press briefing.

On Thursday, the chief adviser told the International Crisis Group that the interim government had no plan to ban the AL, but individuals within its leadership accused of crimes, including murder and crimes against humanity, will be tried in Bangladeshi courts.

Responding to a query, Nahid said the decision on elections or whether a party can conduct political activities is entirely a political matter.

"This decision lies solely with the government, political parties, and the people. The army or any state institution has no jurisdiction to comment, propose plans, or make decisions on this issue," he said.

He said such practices should not exist in Bangladesh.

"Political decisions should come from the political arena through democratic means, and we aim to move towards that democratic process," said the NCP chief.

SEE PAGE 2 COL 4



Rohingyas  
are victims  
of racial  
discrimination

Says Prof Yunus

UNB, Dhaka

Chief Adviser Prof Muhammad Yunus yesterday called for global action against racial injustice and highlighted the plight of the Rohingyas, who remain victims of racial discrimination and prolonged statelessness.

Since 2017, Bangladesh has sheltered over a million forcibly displaced Rohingyas, but their repatriation to Myanmar remains the only sustainable solution to this protracted crisis, he said in a message on the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination.

SEE PAGE 2 COL 4

## DHAKA'S GROUNDWATER Drying up alarmingly

Experts blame WASA's  
impractical management

PINAKI ROY

The old channel of the Buriganga in the Vakurta area is now like a mere canal connecting the Dhaleshwari and the Turag, and dividing Savar and Keraniganj upazilas.

Despite being near so many water bodies, the residents of Vakurta are struggling to get water from their tube wells due to the fast-declining groundwater level.

They wonder whether it is the causal effect of the WASA's installation of a good number of deep tube wells in the area.

### DESICCATED AQUIFERS OF DHAKA

70pc of water supply comes from  
groundwater

2,000 million litres of water  
extracted every day

Groundwater up to 66m below  
surface in densely populated areas

Groundwater level depleting by  
1-1.5m every year

By 2050, groundwater expected to  
fall to 100m

Don't try to  
rehabilitate  
allies of fallen  
regime: Tarique

Fakhrul urges all to  
act with caution

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

BNP acting chairman Tarique Rahman has urged the interim government not to take any steps that would allow fugitive allies of the fallen regime to be rehabilitated in the state and politics.

"By turning minor issues into major ones in the country's political arena, doubts and suspicions have been created or are being created knowingly or unknowingly ...," Tarique said while addressing an iftar event virtually yesterday.

BNP organised the iftar event in honour of working professionals at the Ladies Club in the city's Eskaton.

The allies of the fallen autocrat still hold thousands of crores of taka looted from the state and the people. In



The presence of army personnel around the capital was noticeably high yesterday, with troops stationed at key intersections and checkpoints. The photo was taken in the Purana Paltan area.

PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

"All of us are facing the problem -- none can use their hand tube wells anymore," said Lokman Hossain, who runs a grocery shop on the bank of the Buriganga.

The tube well in Lokman's home, installed by his grandfather, is 200 feet deep. But these days, it cannot lift any groundwater for the family's consumption.

Lokman blames the WASA for their water crisis, saying the numerous deep tube wells installed by the authorities about a decade ago have desiccated the area.

To get any water from the ground, the residents have to install a powerful pump, which costs Tk 40,000 and is beyond the affordability of many in the area.

"We feel helpless," Lokman said, adding that they are getting their water supply through a pipe from their neighbour's home, who could afford to install a pump.

Lokman's neighbour Mamta Begum is more resentful. "WASA is taking water from our village for the city dwellers," she said.

It is the same scenario in Bauta village in Keraniganj.

The residents get water through their tube wells only in monsoon and nothing during the dry season from March to June, said Akhil Chandra Das, a local.

The problem persists in all villages in the area, including Vakurta, Baherchar, Battoli Bazar, Balughata and Bauta. Several lakh residents of Bhakurta and Tetuljhora unions in Savar and Taranagar union in Keraniganj are in the same boat.

As many as 20,000 hand-driven tube wells in the area have gone dry.

Dhaka WASA, however, denies drying up the grounds. A total of 42 deep tube wells have been installed in the Vakurta area and 1,227 in Dhaka and its surrounding areas, said Abdul Kader, deputy chief of public relations at Dhaka WASA.

All those pumps are extracting water from the aquifer 400 to 1,200 feet deep, he said, adding that about 2,000 private deep tube wells are also in operation in the city.

SEE PAGE 6 COL 5

SEE PAGE 2 COL 1

## Polls to take place in December

Says Mahfuj Alam

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Information and Broadcasting Adviser Mahfuj Alam yesterday called upon all to prepare for the next general election, saying that the polls would be held within the December timeline.

"Chief Adviser Muhammad Yunus said that the election would be held on time. It is scheduled for the end of this year, in December," he said at a prayer and iftar event organised for the injured in the July uprising.

"A timeline has already been set, and the election will take place within that timeframe. Everyone should start preparing for it."

Mahfuj hoped that the political parties would act responsibly, and the state organs would stop sabotage and cooperate properly so that the election could be held at the right time.

"No matter what organisation you belong to, your responsibility as part of the uprising is to stay united -- against the Awami League, in demanding reforms, and in seeking justice," he added.

## Eid joy eludes jobless workers

FROM PAGE 1

Alif Hossain used to earn around Tk 25,000 per month, including overtime, as a senior washing operator until the Beximco factory, where he worked, was shut down last year.

Struggling to support his parents, wife, and son, he remains in Dhaka, paying Tk 4,000 monthly rent in hopes of finding work after Eid. "I've been going through a tough time," said Alif.

However, Sohan Mia, who drew Tk 29,000 per month, returned to his village to Bogura after receiving his arrears and service benefits following the shutdown.

Sohan was able to pay his outstanding rent before leaving Dhaka, but he remains unemployed and deeply stressed about the future of his seven-year old son, wife, and sister.

"How can my family feel the joy of Eid when I don't have a job?" he asked.

Milon Mia from Kurigram, who previously earned Tk 35,000 a month as a senior supervisor, is now struggling with temporary daily-wage work in a subcontracting factory. "Supporting five family members, including parents and siblings, has become nearly impossible this Eid," he said.

A former senior store in-charge at a garment factory in Savar, where he worked for 32 years, could not join any factory after losing his job. "My two children have stopped going to school," he said.

The factory management promised to pay nearly Tk 15 lakh in service benefits and arrears a lot earlier, but the payment is uncertain as the management does not respond to his phone calls anymore, he said.

Requesting not to mention the factory name, he alleged that the government gave it interest-free loans to pay the workers, but the factory management did not disburse the money.

The factories owned by people linked to the ousted Awami League government were particularly hit by the political changeover. Beximco Group shut down 14 textile and garment units after its vice chairman, Salman F

## Drying up alarmingly

FROM PAGE 1

The existing water services heavily rely on groundwater, with about 70 percent of the water supply provided by Dhaka WASA being sourced from aquifers, according to WASA documents.

The rest is refined from the Shitalakhiya, Buriganga and Padma by the five water treatment plants dotted around Dhaka.

Dhaka WASA produced about 2,680 million litres of water (mld) per day for 20 million residents of the capital and its suburban areas, according to its annual report of fiscal 2022-23.

As per Dhaka WASA's projection, the demand for water this year would be 3,598 mld per day, meaning more water has to be extracted from the aquifer -- an unsustainable practice, as per the water supply master plan of Dhaka WASA published in 2014.

Despite annual recharge every year, there is an overall declining trend in groundwater level due to over-extraction, according to the master plan.

Subsequently, it advocated shifting the bulk source of water from groundwater to surface water to limit the supply from deep tube wells to 1,260 mld per day.

A large scale extraction from such aquifers may cause a permanent depletion of water level, said Anwar Zahid, a senior groundwater researcher.

In the 1970s, the groundwater level was less than one metre below the surface. Now, it has dropped to 70 metres, according to his research.

In 2022, the groundwater levels in



An aerial photograph taken yesterday shows smoke billowing from a substation supplying power to Heathrow Airport amid efforts to douse the remainder of the flames after a fire broke out in Hayes, west London. Britain's Heathrow airport, Europe's busiest, was shut down early yesterday after a major fire at an electricity substation cut power to the sprawling facility west of London, officials said.

PHOTO: AFP

Zones.

He also said that apart from Beximco, the government financially supported six garment factories facing payment difficulties.

Md Towhidur Rahman, president of the Bangladesh Apparel Workers Federation, highlighted the severe difficulties workers face this Eid.

"Although terminated workers from Beximco received government-assisted service benefits, many remain unemployed," he said.

**BACK PAY**

Initially, the Industrial Police listed 203 factories at risk of failing to pay workers before this Eid, with additional verification by the BGMEA and BKMEA.

However, the number would be significantly lower after further assessment due to the government's disbursement of nearly Tk 2,325 crore from unpaid cash incentives for garment exporters, Secretary Shafiquzzaman said.

He also said the government had been coordinating with the BGMEA, BKMEA, and other agencies to manage payment issues effectively.

BGMEA administrator Anwar Hossain said 98 member factories were initially identified as vulnerable, but after reassessment, only five to 10 factories may be critically affected.

Additionally, to tackle liquidity shortages, BGMEA managed funds from unpaid cash incentives.

"Last week, the government disbursed Tk 2,000 crore, and another Tk 325 crore is underway for small and medium enterprises. However, around seven factories may only pay bonuses before Eid, deferring salary payments until after the holiday," Anwar said.

Employment Secretary AHM Shafiquzzaman acknowledged that the ministry did not have exact data on how many factories were closed since the political changeover.

Regarding the re-employment of the workers, Shafiquzzaman said a committee was working on the issue so that the workers can find jobs in the member factories of the BGMEA and Bangladesh Knitwear Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BKMEA), and units inside the Export Processing

zones.

Mohammad Mamun, an officer-in-charge of Industrial Police, said the situation over back pay at the factories before Eid was worse than that of previous years, with firms that are not members of BGMEA and BKMEA particularly vulnerable.

The police were collaborating closely with the BGMEA and BKMEA to resolve the payment crisis, he added.

## Debate, demo swirl over banning AL

FROM PAGE 1

Around the same time Hasnat made his Facebook post, a group of Dhaka University students marched on campus, demanding a ban on the AL.

The students, led by former coordinators of Students Against Discrimination, AB Zubayer and Musaddiq Ali Ibne Muhammad, marched to Raju Bhaskarjo and held a brief rally there.

Zubayer said various political groups, agencies, and communities were putting pressure on the government not to ban the AL.

"There won't be any election until the Awami League is banned or the trial for massacre takes place," he said.

There were similar demonstrations at Rajshahi University (RU), Jagannath University (JU) and Jahangirnagar University (JU), demanding a ban on the AL yesterday afternoon.

Meanwhile, at an event in the capital's Dakhinkhan area, BNP Senior Joint Secretary General Ruhul Kabir Rizvi said, "If individuals who are to lead the Awami League have committed no crimes, have no involvement student killings or embezzlement, then why can't such an Awami League participate in politics?"

People are discussing whether the AL should be banned, but they are not questioning whether those responsible for the mass murder should be held accountable, he said.

"Didn't people see... which police officer, which OC, which AC, which DC played a role there? Which Awami League leader ordered the bloodshed during the mass movement? The trial must be ensured without delay," he added.

Jamaat-e-Islami Ameer Shafiqur Rahman wrote on Facebook that the people would not accept AL's rehabilitation. He urged people to rise above party affiliations and exercise restraint and be vigilant and united.

"Bangladesh is going through a critical juncture in its history... the fallen fascists are conspiring at home and abroad to destabilise the country," he wrote.

The people want trial of those responsible for "genocide", the rehabilitation of the families of the martyrs of 2024, proper treatment for the "countless" injured, and fundamental reforms to clean up the mess created over the last 15 years, he said.

In an ideal situation, the government would have simply ignored the AL question and the people would have shunned the party, he said.

"But the discussion persists. There had been talks about an inclusive political approach and not banning anyone. In some cases, the Awami

## Fourth-grader raped in Pabna

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

A fourth-grader was allegedly raped by her nephew in the Gopinathpur area of Shantia upazila in Pabna, on Wednesday night.

The victim's family filed a case with the Shantia Police Station, and police arrested suspect Md Akash, 19, on Thursday.

The accused, a resident of Gopinathpur village, was sent to jail yesterday by a court.

Saidur Rahman, officer-in-charge of Shantia Police Station, said the incident occurred when Akash visited his grandfather's house, near the victim's residence on Wednesday.

The victim, who had gone to the house that day, was allegedly raped by Akash. The victim later disclosed the incident to her family, prompting her father to file a case against Akash, said family members, and police officials.

The victim was sent to Pabna General Hospital for a medical examination on Friday, the OC added.

In another development in Patuakhali, police have arrested another suspect in connection with the gang rape of a college student in Dumki on March 1.

A team from Patuakhali Detective Branch police conducted a raid and arrested the juvenile suspect who had been hiding at a relative's house yesterday.

Confirming the arrest, Patuakhali DB Police officer-in-charge Md Jasim Uddin said the suspect was handed over to Dumki Police Station.

On Wednesday afternoon, Dumki police arrested the other suspect Sakib Munshi, 19.



Even though this tubewell is 200 feet deep, the declining groundwater levels prevent it from lifting water during the dry season.

PHOTO: PALASH KHAN

exceed the natural recharge rate.

"However, in Dhaka, this balance has been dangerously disrupted," Nahid said.

In contrast, in river-adjacent areas of Mohammadpur, Gondalia and Hazaribagh, the levels are at 36.5, 21 and 33 metres below the surface respectively.

The aquifers in the Dhaka metropolitan area are permanently losing more than 500 million cubic metres of water annually, he said, citing a study. And this is not being replenished through natural recharge.

It is imperative to create opportunities for artificial groundwater recharge using various methods to improve the water table, he said, adding that the quality of water used for recharge must be ensured.

## Political decisions rest solely with political entities

FROM PAGE 1

During the briefing at the Jatiya Nagarik Committee office at Banglamotor, Nahid said despite the recent UN report which explicitly stated that the crimes committed in Bangladesh in July are tantamount to "international crimes", the slow pace of the trial is condemnable.

"Since our inception, we have been saying that without ensuring trial for the crimes, acknowledgment of the crimes, and regret, any effort to allow the Awami League to continue as a political entity is tantamount to rehabilitating the fascists," Nahid said.

The party also demanded revoking the AL's registration with the Election Commission. "The NCP pledges to resist any attempt by this mafia group to politics," he added.

Nahid said all political parties must keep in mind that the AL is not a democratic political party; it is a fascist organisation.

"It [AL] was not defeated in an election. As an organisation, the Awami League made a deliberate decision to commit mass killings in Bangladesh. Consequently, it was overthrown through

an unprecedented student-citizen uprising in the country's history. As a result, the Awami League currently exists outside the democratic framework," said the NCP convener.

He also urged the government and all anti-fascist political forces to unite to ensure the AL's trial and cancellation of its registration.

Nahid Abdullah, chief organiser (South) of the newly launched NCP, said politicians do politics.

"Since the discussion we had was initiated by senior military authorities, we deem it as an interference in political affairs. Politics should be determined by politicians, and the course of political events or the future direction of politics should remain in their hands," Nahid said.

Nahid stated that both formal and informal discussions have taken place with military officials since August 5 and the context of March 11 was different, as high-ranking officials were on the other side of the discussion.

"I have clarified the sequence of events in my statement, where everything has been presented [Facebook post]," he said.

He further explained that they were

## Rohingyas are victims

FROM PAGE 1

The global community must engage actively to ensure their early repatriation to their homeland in Myanmar, Yunus said.

On this occasion, Bangladesh reaffirmed its unwavering

commitment to combating racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia, and related intolerance in all its forms.

This year marks the 60th anniversary of the adoption of the International Convention on the

Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD).

"As a state party to ICERD, Bangladesh upholds non-discrimination as a core principle of governance and society," said the chief adviser.



## Struggling for every drop

Plight of hill villagers in Bandarban for safe water

MONG SING HAI MARMA

Residents of Thangkhroi Para, a centuries-old village in Bandarban Sadar upazila, are grappling with an acute drinking water crisis even before the peak of summer.

Their only source of water is a stone pit in a dried-up stream called Thangkhroi, where water trickles down at an agonisingly slow pace. Meanwhile, as the dry season sets in, this meagre supply dwindles further, making survival increasingly difficult.

Home to around 30 families, Thangkhroi Para is a picturesque yet remote village located approximately 15 kilometres from Bandarban town.

Rugged terrain and a lack of proper transportation isolate the community, causing their struggles to go largely unnoticed by authorities, leaving residents to fend for themselves.

SEE PAGE 4 COL 2

## COASTAL AREAS IN KHULNA Where drinking water becomes a luxury

DIPANKAR ROY

When Razia Begum, now 56, got married at just 16, water was not a concern. Like most women in her village of Banisanta in Khulna's Dacope upazila, she collected freshwater from nearby ponds. Life was simple, and water was abundant.

But everything changed with the spread of shrimp farming. Once brimming with freshwater, the ponds gradually turned saline. By the early 2000s, Razia and her neighbours were caught in a mounting crisis. By 2002-03, access to drinkable water became a daily battle that stretched on for years.

To cope, the community restored a pond near Amtala Banisanta Government Primary School, three kilometres from Razia's home. For years, she walked the distance to fetch water. But declining health – kidney disease and bone ailments – have now made that impossible.

"My family needs at least three pitchers of water a day. Each 15 litre pitcher costs 30 taka, and delivery adds another 10 taka. We spend 2,500-2,700 taka a month just for drinking water," Razia said.

For a household of 10, surviving on a modest monthly income of 9,000 taka, this is a crushing burden.

Her father-in-law is immobile,

and her husband too ill to work. The family depends on her son, an easy bike driver, and her son-in-law, a security guard, for survival.

"Nearly 15-20 percent of our income goes into buying water. If we add in medical costs for waterborne diseases, the expenses are even higher," Razia added.

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"Nearly 15-20 percent of our income goes into buying water. If we add in medical costs for waterborne diseases, the expenses are even higher," Razia added.

Just half a kilometre away,

Taslima Begum faces similar

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survives on one 20-litre water jar

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## Unrepaired

FROM PAGE 5  
support from local affluent people, rebuilt the roads and constructed a bridge in the village that were damaged in flooding."

Residents of several other villages in the upazila echoed similar concerns.

Khald Bin Wahid, executive engineer of BWDB in Moulvibazar, said a proposal for necessary repairs to prevent erosion in Brahmangram and Hamarkona has been submitted for funding. Repairs will commence once allocations are approved, he added.

Tajuddin, UNO of Moulvibazar Sadar, said a letter has been sent to the local UP chairman to outline a project plan based on public needs. Further steps will be taken upon receiving a response, he added.

## Cops suspect

FROM PAGE 3  
ongoing to determine whether there were motives beyond internal dispute.

Police are reviewing CCTV footage from nearby areas, he also said.

Sumon had at least seven criminal cases against him. He was arrested in a mugging case on January 19 but later released on bail, said the DC.

Originally from Rangpur's Mithapukur, Sumon lived with his wife and two children in Mirpur's Bhashanteek area.

His ISP business was based in Mohakhali's TB Gate area.

His brother-in-law claimed Sumon had an ongoing dispute with a cable TV service provider in Mohakhali's TV Gate area, who had threatened him multiple times.

## Keeping a tradition alive

## Ayesha's journey to preserve clay jewellery

SOHRAB HOSSAIN, Patuakhali

In the village of West Chila in Barguna's Amtali upazila, a young artisan is breathing new life into a fading tradition.

Ayesha Akter Akhi, a college student, has dedicated herself to crafting intricate clay jewellery, an age-old art form that is on the verge of disappearing.

What started as a personal endeavour rooted in nostalgia has turned into a flourishing small business. Over the past four years, Ayesha has meticulously crafted over 500 clay jewellery pieces -- earrings, necklaces, bracelets, and entire jewellery sets -- selling them primarily through online platforms.

The earnings from her craft have provided much-needed financial support for her family.

Ayesha's journey began with a cherished childhood memory. "When I was little, my mother gifted me a pair of clay earrings. I wore them for years, but one day, I lost them. I loved those earrings dearly, and I wanted to recreate them. That's how I started learning this craft on my own," she shared.

After passing her HSC examination from Amtali Bokulnesa Women's Degree College in 2021, Ayesha got married



but remained committed to her passion.

Now, while pursuing a degree at Amtali Government College, she continues her business, while shaping delicate, artistic clay ornaments.

At first, her work gained little attention. However, as her designs evolved -- showcasing intricate patterns and vibrant colours -- her handmade jewellery began gaining traction. Customers, charmed by the uniqueness of her creations, started placing more orders through online platforms.

Ayesha's clay jewellery sets are also quite affordable, priced between Tk 70 and Tk 150.

"Gold jewellery has become too costly and beyond our reach," said Tanzila, one of Ayesha's customers. "I purchased a clay jewellery set from Ayesha online, and I absolutely

love wearing it."

Ayesha's husband Gazi Md Soleman stands firmly beside her in her endeavour. "She is doing a great job, and I always support her. The income from her jewellery sales has been a great help to our family," he said.

Her mother, Mariam Begum, fondly recalled, "I once bought a pair of clay earrings in my childhood and later gifted them to my daughter. Those earrings lasted 25 years before they were lost. Ayesha's passion for making clay jewellery stems from that memory."

With a desire to keep this artisanal craft alive, Ayesha remains optimistic.

"I started this initiative to preserve my mother's memories and to revive a disappearing tradition. So far, I have created over 500 pieces and sold 300 of them. The response has been incredible, and with financial support, I could expand my work even further," she said.

## Struggling for every drop

FROM PAGE 3  
CLIMBING HUNDREDS OF FEET FOR WATER

For the women of Thangkhroi Para, collecting water is an exhausting daily battle.

Shainuching Marma, a 40-year-old homemaker, has to climb nearly 500 feet up a steep and hazardous hill daily to fetch water for her family.

She also said the crisis extends beyond her village, affecting nearby Upor Buri Para, Niche Buri Para, and

returns home to find a shortage of drinking and cooking water, forcing her to make another trip in the evening.

"I can't collect water in the morning because there are too many people waiting in line. We have to go through this hardship every day," said Shainuching.

Shainuching said the crisis extends beyond her village, affecting nearby Upor Buri Para, Niche Buri Para, and

## WAITING HOURS FOR A JAR OF WATER

Meching U Marma, 45, and Redama Marma, 55, of the village shared similar struggles.

With the stream nearly dry, they have built a narrow bamboo structure to channel water from a rock cavity. Yet, filling a single jar takes hours.

"Once one person collects water, the next has to wait for a fresh supply. The queue of women collecting water stretches from morning until night," they said.

This same water is used for cooking, bathing, washing clothes, and even for livestock, raising health concerns.

## A CRISIS SPREADING ACROSS VILLAGES

A recent visit to the area revealed that the crisis is not limited to Thangkhroi Para. Three other villages -- Upor Buri Para, Niche Buri Para, and Sakkridong Para -- are facing the same dire situation.

Over 200 families, nearly 1,500 people, are struggling without access to safe drinking water, forcing them to rely on unsafe sources.

Maui Aungpru Marma, 56, a resident, said, "Our village has been suffering from a drinking water crisis for a long time. Over the past few years, we have submitted multiple applications to the chairman of the Bandarban Hill District Council for deep tube wells and water reservoirs, but no action has been taken."

"We don't know where else to turn," he said.

Jamchari Union Parishad Chairman Kasing Shai Marma acknowledged the issue.

"Not just Thangkhroi Para, but four other villages in the area are also suffering. We have requested the Public Health Engineering Department and the government to ensure access to safe drinking water," he said.

Contacted, Mohammad Julhaz, assistant engineer of the District Public Health Engineering Department, said, "Between 2022 and 2025, 472 deep wells and 110 ring wells were installed across the district, spending Tk 8.08 crore. However, no plans have been made yet for remote hilly areas."

Meanwhile, Anupam Dey, executive engineer of the District Public Health Engineering Department, pointed out additional challenges.

He said, "Due to the hard rock layer and high iron content in the hills, installing tube wells

is difficult. Moreover, deforestation has lowered the groundwater level. However, plans are underway to build surface water treatment plants in some areas."

Rights activist Leluang Khumi highlighted that this crisis in the hilly areas is not new and has been worsening over the years.

"Hundreds of villages in other hilly areas of the district are facing similar water shortages. This problem must be addressed through sustainable development planning. If the authorities do not act soon, the situation will become even more critical," he said.

## A man

FROM PAGE 3

Salehuddin Ahmed, business leaders, civil society members, and Apex Group employees.

International Chamber of Commerce, Bangladesh President Mahbubur Rahman reminisced about their close companionship alongside other notable business figures, including the late Transcom Group Chairman Latifur Rahman and the late Square Group Chairman Samson H Chowdhury.

Eminent economist Rehman Sobhan said Elahi was a brilliant student who completed his degree at Dhaka University during a politically turbulent time. He said Elahi's decision to move to Bangladesh proved wise. It allowed him to reach a level of prominence in business that might not have been possible in Kolkata's North Indian dominated business sphere.

Tapan Chowdhury, chief executive officer of Square Group, highlighted Elahi's rare combination of integrity and entrepreneurship, which led to his appointment twice as an adviser to the caretaker government.

Shaheen Anam, executive director of Manusher Jonno Foundation, noted his unwavering commitment as the foundation's governing board chair.

She expressed gratitude for the honour Elahi bestowed on the foundation by associating his name with it.

Mohammed Farashuddin, former governor of Bangladesh Bank; NBR Chairman Abdur Rahman Khan; and Syed Almas Kabir, former president of the Bangladesh Association of Software and Information Services, also spoke, among others.

## Water crisis grips residents amid

FROM PAGE 3

water release from Kapta Lake, leading to a decrease in the Halda River's freshwater flow.

The current salinity level at the Mohra water collection point is 2,100 mg/L, whereas, during normal times, it ranges from just 100 to 300 mg/L. During high tide, water collection is stopped, causing disruptions in the water supply system,"

said CWasa chief engineer Maksud Alam.

"We are trying to reduce salinity by blending water from other treatment plants with the processed water from the Mohra project," he added.

Md Humayun Kabir Majumder, chief engineer (distribution) of PDB, Chattogram Region, said power generation at the Kapta Hydropower Plant has been reduced since November due to a decline in the lake's water level. Currently, only one unit is operational.

"If the reduced water release from Kapta Lake was causing salinity in the Halda River, the problem should have arisen back in November. However, there was no intrusion of saline water at that time," he said.

## Where drinking water

FROM PAGE 3

up to 25 percent of his income on water," she added.

This is not an isolated crisis. In Polder 33, covering five unions of Dacope upazila, the situation is dire.

Out of 1,813 tubewells, only 247 are operational, and most provide saline water. Of 532 pond sand filters, only 56 work. All 153 VSSIs and 890 SSTs -- types of tubewells -- are out of order, according to the Dacope Public Health Engineering Department.

Md Abdullah Al Mahmud, sub-assistant engineer at Dacope Public Health Engineering Office, explained, "The underground aquifers here are so saline that tubewells are ineffective. No matter how deep we dig, the water remains undrinkable. We need targeted interventions -- preserving good ponds, promoting rainwater harvesting, and investing in RO (reverse osmosis) treatment."

The coastal regions of Bangladesh face high salinity due to their geography and environmental challenges.

claimed.

Maksud Alam, however, mentioned that the water supplied by CWasa is treated in accordance with WHO guidelines, making it completely germ-free, but they cannot reduce the salinity level.

In future projects, efforts will be made to ensure both germ-free and salinity-free water, he added.

Dr Idris Ali, former professor of chemistry at Chattogram Government College and a researcher on Karnaphuli River's water, said a salinity level of 250 mg/L or more is harmful to the human body, especially among children, the elderly, pregnant women, diabetic patients, and those with high blood pressure.

Additionally, people with weak immune systems may face further health issues from saline water, including digestive problems, he said.

He criticised CWasa for failing to learn from past experiences, as saline water intrusion in the Halda River during the dry season is a recurring problem, and stressed the need for preventive measures beforehand.

Rahman, BEDS' chief executive.

Still, the problem is vast. The Department of

Public Health Engineering reports coastal water salinity levels often range between 3,000-4,000 mg of chloride per litre -- far exceeding the 600 mg safe limit.

Standard RO systems can't filter such high salinity, but the department is developing advanced filtration solutions.

Over the past five years, DPHE has distributed more than 125,000 rainwater harvesting tanks (3,000-litre capacity each) across three coastal districts, offering four to five months of drinking water during monsoon season.

Md Jamanur Rahman, superintending engineer of DPHE Khulna, said, "Our freshwater is shrinking due to shrimp and crab farming. This must be regulated. Surface water treatment and pipeline distribution are the most effective long-term solutions."

He also called for accurate mapping to ensure NGO-led projects serve the right communities.

Planning and Development Division  
Khulna University, Khulna

Tender No : KU/PD-189/2017-235

Date : 20/03/2025

## e-Tender Notice No. 04/2024-2025

e-Tender is invited in the National e-GP system portal (<http://www.eprocure.gov.bd>) for the procurement of

Tender ID No.	Package No.	Name of the Work	Online Tender Closing and Opening date
1089517	KU/PD-392/2024	Procurement and Installation of Radio Frequency Identification (RFID) Gate for Two Female Halls of Khulna University, Khulna	10-Apr-2025 16:00:00
1089472	KU/CSE/EDGE/Goods-06/2025	Supply of Training KITs (Course Curriculum, Pen, Note Book, Bag, ID Card) for EDGE-CSEKU project	10-Apr-2025 15:30:00
1088358	KU/PD-415/2025	Procurement of Engineering and Other Equipments for Khulna University, Khulna (Lot-02)	09-Apr-2025 15:30:00
1087414	KU/PD-413/2025	Procurement and Installation of Medical Equipments for Medical Centre of Khulna University, Khulna	10-Apr-2025 15:00:00
1084917	KU/PD-404/2024	Procurement and Installation of Laboratory Equipment for Institute for Integrated Studies on the Sundarbans and Coastal Ecosystems (IISCE) of Khulna University, Khulna	13-Apr-2025 16:00:00
1084870	KU/PD-400/2024	Procurement and Installation of Heavy Printing Machine for Printmaking Discipline of Khulna University (Lot-2)	07-Apr-2025 15:30:00
1084833	KU/PD-414/2025	Procurement of Engineering and Other Equipments for Khulna University, Khulna (Lot-01)	09-Apr-2025 15:00:00
1081791	KU/PD-408/2025	Supply and Installation of 30 (Thirty) Nos Smart Board for Different Labs of Khulna University	13-Apr-2025 15:00:00

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. To submit e-Tender, registration in the National e-GP system portal (<http://www.eprocure.gov.bd>) is required. The fees for downloading the e-Tender documents from the National e-GP system portal have to be deposited online through any registered Bank branches upto banking hours on e-GP system. Further information and guidelines are available in the National e-GP system portal and e-GP help desk ([helpdesk@eprocure.gov.bd](mailto:helpdesk@eprocure.gov.bd)).

  
(Prof. Dr. Kazi Saiful Islam)  
Director (In-charge)  
Planning & Development Division

GD-731

## KUSHIYARA RIVER

# Unrepaired dam leaves locals in peril

MINTU DESHWARA, Moulvibazar

Every monsoon, as the Kushiyara River swells, the people of several villages across Moulvibazar Sadar upazila brace for the inevitable – floodwaters creeping into their homes, submerging roads, and washing away their livelihoods.

At the heart of this crisis lies the Kushiyara River Protection Dam, a structure built in 1970 but now standing in a vulnerable state, breached repeatedly for over the past two decades.

Eventually, homes, roads, markets, schools, other establishments, and vast croplands get submerged.

Despite patchwork repairs and desperate pleas from residents, a lasting solution remains out of reach.

For years, LGED and the local union parishad have attempted partial fixes, yet these have done little to resolve the issue.

to farmers, while residents also go through a lot of sufferings," said Swadhin Mia from Hamarkona village. "This situation has been persisting for the past 21 years. Despite repeated visits by local leaders and officials, nothing has changed yet," he added.

Since the dam is not listed with the Water Development Board, no formal project has ever been initiated by WDB to repair it. While parts of the dam were later paved with LGED's funding and brick-soling by the local union parishad, the damaged sections remain unaddressed.

"Residents of Hamarkona, Brahmangram, Notunbasti, Muslimnagar, and parts of Sherpur Bazar villages bear the brunt of the flooding. Every year, hundreds of families become displaced and forced to seek shelter elsewhere after losing their homes to the flooding," said Humayun Mia from Hamarkona village.

Mudrat Ahmed Mohan of the same village shared, "Last year, the dam broke at three places, inundating the entire area. No government project was undertaken to repair it. Later, local Hamarkona Boys Club and Muslimnagar Oikya Parishad, with

SEE PAGE 4 COL 1

## HEATHROW POWER OUTAGE

### Biman flight forced to return to Dhaka

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

A Biman Bangladesh Airlines flight to London was forced to turn back yesterday after a power outage disrupted operations at Heathrow Airport.

According to a Biman statement, Flight BG 201 departed Dhaka at 8:42am, made a brief stop in Sylhet Osmani International Airport at 9:06am, and resumed its journey at 10:46am.

However, an unexpected power failure at Heathrow, which caused significant delays and operational difficulties, forced the Boeing 787-9 to turn back before reaching London.

The flight landed in Dhaka at 1:15pm with 267 passengers, including the pilot and crew, onboard.

According to the BBC, Heathrow was to be closed all day yesterday due to a fire at a nearby electrical substation, which supplies its power. The airport, Europe's busiest, warned of "significant disruption" over the coming days and advised passengers not to travel until further notice.

At least 1,351 flights faced possible cancellations, according to Flightradar24.

Biman, which operates four weekly flights to London, said upcoming flights may also be affected.

## 2 killed, 21 injured in Bogura road crash

UNB, Bogura

Two people were killed and 21 others injured when a truck hit a pedestrian before crashing into a human haulier on the Sherpur-Dhunat road in Bogura's Sherpur upazila yesterday.

The deceased were identified as Harun or Rashid, 52, and Hanif, 35.

Hanif and the injured were day labourers travelling to Kusumbi village in Sherpur upazila to harvest potatoes from Dhunat upazila.

Sub-Inspector Tofazzal Hossain of Sherpur Police Station said the truck first knocked down pedestrian Harun. About 200 yards later, it rammed into the human haulier near Ranabirbala Bashir Pagla Shrine, overturning the vehicle carrying the labourers. The accident killed Harun and Hanif on the spot and left the others injured, he added.

The human haulier was carrying 17 women and five men.

Bakhtiar Uddin, warehouse in charge of Sherpur Fire Service, said the injured were taken to the Upazila Health Complex. SI Tofazzal said police seized the truck, but the driver managed to flee.



Fishermen prepare their nets to catch fish from the Sugandhya River in Babuganj, Barishal. The photo was taken recently.

# Breaking fast, building bonds

## Century-old mosque welcomes people of all faiths for iftar

FM MIZANUR RAHMAN

At first glance, one might mistake it for a grand event – rows of plates, glasses, water jugs, and an array of mouth-watering iftar items neatly arranged.

Some sit alone, others in groups, preparing their meals. This is the scene every Ramadan at the historic Anderkilla Shahi Jame Mosque in Chattogram.

For the past 25 years, this iftar gathering has brought together thousands of Muslim devotees. However, it is not limited to the Muslim community; people of all religions, races, and backgrounds are welcomed without discrimination.

Here, neither wealth nor profession matters – only



the spirit of brotherhood and harmony.

The Anderkilla Shahi Jame Mosque, a witness to Chattogram's Mughal past, was built by Shaista Khan in 1667 on the orders of Emperor Aurangzeb to commemorate the Mughal conquest of the region.

According to sources, Maulana Saeed Muhammad Anwar Hossain Taher Jaber Al Madani, the mosque's Khatib since 1996, initiated the iftar gathering in 2001. Initially a small affair, it took its current grand form in 2008, pausing only during the pandemic in 2020.

Mohammad Hasan Murad, personal assistant to the Khatib, said, "Since the first

day of Ramadan, we have been organising iftar for thousands of devotees. The number grows as the month progresses, and in the last 10 days, we serve nearly 5,000 people under the Khatib's supervision."

Asked how such a large gathering is managed, he said, "Many people donate food for the God's blessings. We store these donations in two storerooms and prepare our iftar from them."

"It's open to everyone. People from all religions participate, fostering unity and harmony," he added.

Chef Abul Hossen, who leads the cooking team, said, "A team of 12 cooks and 30 assistants prepare nine items for iftar every day, working from the morning."

Fazlul Karim Manik, a businessman from New Market, said, "I come here every year. Poor and destitute people, alongside distinguished guests, all break their fast together, seeking blessings from the Almighty."

## EID TRAVEL THRU JAMUNA BRIDGE

### Authorities gear up to prevent hassles

MIRZA SHAKIL, Tangail

As Eid-ul-Fitr approaches, the authorities concerned have taken measures to ensure a seamless Eid journey for holidaymakers travelling to the northern districts via the Jamuna Bridge on the Dhaka-Tangail highway.

According to sources at the Highway Police and Traffic Police departments, approximately 18,000 to 20,000 vehicles travel daily through the Jamuna Bridge on around 116 routes to 23 districts, including 16 in the north. During Eid, this number doubles.

To manage the heavy traffic flow during the Eid holidays, the 13-kilometre east link road of the Jamuna Bridge from Elenga has been upgraded to four lanes this year.

Additionally, if necessary, Dhaka-bound vehicles can take an alternative route through the Govindasai-Bhupur Road after crossing the bridge, said Shintia Azmeri Khan, executive engineer of the Roads and Highways Department in Tangail.

Meanwhile, the bridge authority is prepared to handle the increased traffic on the Jamuna Bridge during Eid. Additional toll booths will be set up, and more employees will be deployed to facilitate smooth vehicle crossings.

A couple of wreckers will also be on standby to remove any broken-down vehicles on the bridge, said Ahsanul Kabir Pavel, executive engineer of the Bangladesh Bridge Authority in



Tangail.

While a large number of vehicles can now reach the end of the bridge more efficiently using the four-lane east link road, Jamal Hossain, a bus driver on the Dhaka-Rajshahi route, expressed concerns about potential congestion at the east end of the bridge.

He noted that vehicles might still face bottlenecks after paying tolls.

The situation could worsen if an accident occurs or if vehicles break down on the bridge, he added.

Sajedur Rahman, in charge of the Elenga Highway Police Outpost, said that if vehicles can quickly reach the end of the bridge using the four-lane link road, tailbacks may be avoided, making the journey more convenient this time.

Deewan Hossain, traffic inspector in Tangail, mentioned that a traffic police unit will be deployed on the highway during Eid, especially at night, as in previous years.

"We hope that head-on collisions on the east link road will be avoided due to the four-lane upgrade. Previously, it took a long time to clear accident wreckage from the road, leading to severe tailbacks," he added.

Md Mizanur Rahman, superintendent of police in Tangail, said that 750 police personnel will be on duty along the highway, providing full support to ensure a smooth and hassle-free Eid journey while maintaining law and order.

"It will be a coordinated effort to overcome the existing challenges," he added.

Mir Helal and Shah Alam could not be reached for comments.

## 2 shot as JCD, Jubo Dal men clash in Ctg

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, Ctg

Two people sustained bullet injuries during a clash between Jubo Dal and Chhatra Dal members over hanging an Eid banner in Chattogram city's GEC area last night.

Additionally, one person was stabbed, and another was beaten during the clash.

Police said the clash erupted between supporters of Shah Alam, joint convenor of Chattogram City unit BNP, and supporters of Barrister Mir Helal, BNP's central assistant organising secretary, in the Debar Par area of Kushum Bag.

The injured are Jihadur Rahman Jiad, Kamal Hossen, Anwar Hossain Mona, and Ramiz. According to police, Jiad and Kamal, both members of Jubo Dal, belong to Shah Alam's group.

Of the four, Jiad sustained two bullet wounds and is currently receiving treatment at Chattogram Medical College Hospital.

Mojibur Rahman Kawsar, officer-in-charge of Khulshi Police Station, said, "A brawl broke out between Jubo Dal and Chhatra Dal members over hanging an Eid banner in the GEC area around 9:00pm. Following the altercation, both groups engaged in a violent clash in the Debar Par area."

"On information, police went to the spot and brought the situation under control," he added.

Mir Helal and Shah Alam could not be reached for comments.

## Rapist gets life term in Jashore

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Benapole

A Jashore court on Thursday sentenced a man to life imprisonment for raping a schoolgirl in Abhaynagar upazila of Jashore in 2020.

Judge Golam Kabin of Jashore's Women and Children Repression Prevention Tribunal 1 passed the order, said Public Prosecutor Abdul Latif.

The court also fined Tk 50,000 to the convict, Shamin Hasan, a resident of Bashuari village in the upazila.

He will have to serve three more months in prison if he fails to pay the fine, Abdul Latif said.

The rape incident took place on August 18, 2020, and the victim filed the case the same day.

After investigating the case, law enforcers submitted a charge sheet to the court against Shamin Hasan.

## 3 cops withdrawn after assault on journo in Rangpur

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Dinajpur

Three policemen have been withdrawn from duty following an assault on journalist MA Salam Biswas in Badarganj upazila of Rangpur.

A probe committee has been formed to investigate the incident.

The officers – ASI Robiul Alam, and constables Al-Amin Hossain and Mojibur Rahman of Badarganj Police Station – were closed yesterday, said Rangpur Range DIG Aminul Islam.

Salam Biswas, Badarganj correspondent of the national daily Amar Desh, sustained injuries to his hand and leg and was hospitalised.

The incident occurred on March 19, about 100 yards from Badarganj Police Station.

Salam was recording a dispute among police officers near a pickup when Constable Al-Amin ordered him to stop. Upon refusal, officers allegedly assaulted him, dragged him inside the station, and beat him again.

A video shows Al-Amin threatening to beat Salam if he didn't stop recording. Later, local journalists rescued Salam. Journalists across Rangpur demanded justice for the victim.

DIG Aminul Islam assured appropriate action.

## BEATING OUR OWN SCORES

During October '24 to February '25  
we have handed over 7 PROJECTS

### AHEAD OF SCHEDULE

LA MAISON | Bashundhara R/A  
5 months ahead

BLUE SKY HOMES | Bashundhara R/A  
3 months ahead

PINE HURST | Uttara  
2 months ahead

### ON TIME

WINSOME HOME  
Bashundhara R/A

BREEZY HOMES  
Bashundhara R/A

SILVER WOOD  
Aftabnagar

LIBERTY  
Khilgaon



SCAN HERE  
btibd.com

Fishermen prepare their nets to catch fish from the Sugandhya River in Babuganj, Barishal. The photo was taken recently.

PHOTO: TITU DAS

## Hamas urges Muslim nations to act to end Gaza 'genocide'

AFP, Gaza City

Hamas has called on Arab and Muslim nations to take urgent action to halt Israel's renewed offensive on Gaza, saying they had a "direct moral and political responsibility" to "end the genocide".

Israel resumed its air campaign early Tuesday with a wave of deadly strikes, shattering a relative calm that had pervaded in the war-ravaged Palestinian territory since a ceasefire took hold on January 19.

On Thursday, the military said that troops had resumed ground operations in the southern area of Rafah, while continuing activity in other parts of the territory.

Gaza's civil defence agency said 504 people had been killed since Israeli air strikes began, including more than 190 under the age of 18.

The toll is among the highest since the war started more than 17 months ago with Hamas's attack on Israel.



In a statement, Hamas said the "continued massacres... place direct political and moral responsibility on the Arab League and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation to end the genocide carried out in full view of the entire world."

"We call on the Arab and Islamic countries to take urgent action in the international forums, particularly the UN's Security Council, and implement immediate measures to halt the aggression," it added.

Israel's renewed offensive after talks on extending the truce reached an impasse has drawn widespread international condemnation.

The first stage of the ceasefire, under which Israeli hostages held by Hamas were exchanged for Palestinian prisoners, expired early this month.

Israel rejected negotiations for a second stage, demanding the return of all remaining hostages under an extended first stage. Hamas insisted on engaging in talks for phase two.



Palestinians use animal-pulled carts to transport their belongings as they flee Beit Lahia in the northern Gaza Strip following a Israeli evacuation order yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

## RUSSIAN GAS TRANSIT FACILITY ATTACK Rivals trade blame

Doubts rise over US-backed energy ceasefire; Kyiv says still in talks with US about minerals deal

AGENCIES

Russia and Ukraine yesterday accused each other of blowing up a Russian gas pumping station in a border area where Ukrainian troops have been retreating, amid talks over a proposed US-backed moratorium on attacks on energy infrastructure.

Video footage showed a blaze at the Sudzha facility, which is located inside Russia several hundred metres from the Ukrainian border.

It is inside a pocket of Russian territory that had been captured by Ukrainian forces last year, but which Moscow has mostly recovered from in heavy fighting in recent weeks. Russian troops pushed Ukrainian forces out of the nearby town of Sudzha last week.

Russia's defence ministry said Ukraine's troops had left the pumping station and blown it up in their retreat. Moscow described this as a violation of the moratorium on attacks on energy

infrastructure, which it said it has abided by since a phone call between President Vladimir Putin and US President Donald Trump on Tuesday.

Kyiv said Russian forces had blown up the facility themselves as a provocation, describing Russia's accusations as fake.

Putin agreed to the pause in attacks on energy facilities during his phone call with Trump when Putin rejected a proposal for a more comprehensive 30 day ceasefire. Kyiv says it is prepared to accept the proposal if hammered out formally in talks.

Russia's Investigative Committee, which probes serious crimes, said it had opened a criminal case over what it called "an act of terrorism" which had done "significant damage" to the gas transit facility, which once took Russian gas to Europe.

The Ukrainian military accused Russian forces of shelling it with artillery in a false flag "provocation".

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov yesterday said that Putin's order for Russian forces to temporarily halt attacks

on energy infrastructure in Ukraine remained in force, and the Sudzha explosion showed Ukraine could not be trusted to keep its word.

Separately, a new explosion rocked an oil depot in Russia's Krasnodar region yesterday where firefighters had been trying to extinguish a blaze that had broken out on Tuesday after a Ukrainian drone attack.

Russia has pounded Ukraine's energy grid throughout the war, causing frequent blackouts affecting civilians and industry.

Meanwhile, Ukraine is continuing to hold talks with the United States about a minerals deal, a foreign ministry spokesman said yesterday.

The White House said on Wednesday it had moved beyond "just the economic minerals deal framework" and was focused on peace between Ukraine and Russia, and President Donald Trump said on Thursday that the US would sign the minerals and natural resources deal with Ukraine shortly.

## Take action to uphold freedom of expression

FROM PAGE 12

other journalists were injured in the incident. Six suspects were later produced in court on February 24.

On the same day, four journalists were attacked by masked assailants wielding bamboo sticks and firearms in Lakshmpur. Two days later, three journalists were reportedly assaulted by BNP men on the Supreme Court premises.

On February 9, police officers allegedly beat five journalists covering a protest in Dhaka. Additionally, on February 25, a BNP member in Thakurgaon was reported to have assaulted a journalist following an article accusing him of extortion.

The statement said that it is not only journalists that have faced attacks, but authors and poets and human rights defenders too.

On February 10, a group attacked a bookstall at the Amar Ekushey Book Fair for allegedly selling books by exiled writer Taslima Nasreen. While Chief Adviser Muhammad Yunus ordered an investigation, no perpetrators have been held accountable, the statement said.

On February 13, poet Sohel Galib was arrested for "hurting religious sentiment" through a poem. Similarly, on March 3, the Dhaka Cyber Tribunal ordered an investigation against human rights defender Rakhal Raha for a Facebook post that questioned free speech

restrictions in Galib's case. The UN Human Rights Committee has stated that freedom of speech protections under Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) extend even to expression deemed offensive. The Rabat Plan of Action also clarifies that freedom of religion does not include immunity from criticism or ridicule.

The rights groups said that Bangladesh's legal framework on cyber security also enables impermissible restrictions on freedom of expression.

On February 25, Kurigram police sought the arrest of writer Nahid Hasan under this law for "hurting religious sentiment".

The Cyber Security Act (CSA), a draconian piece of legislation, which has previously been used against government critics, human rights defenders, journalists and bloggers, in a manner which contravenes their right to freedom of expression. The provision in the CSA relating to hurting religious sentiment has, in the past, been used to curb freedom of expression and harass human rights defenders under the guise of religion, the statement said.

Despite the interim government's commitment to repealing the CSA, its proposed replacement, the Cyber Protection Ordinance 2025, retains

problematic provisions, including those criminalising offences related to religion. Human rights groups have expressed disappointment over the lack of meaningful consultation in drafting the new law.

The human rights groups acknowledged the challenges faced by Bangladesh's interim government following the ousting of former prime minister Sheikh Hasina's administration.

However, they stressed that genuine reforms are necessary to ensure stability during the transition.

The organisations urged the government to conduct transparent consultations on any new legislation and align it with international human rights standards, drop all charges against individuals detained solely for exercising free speech, and repeal laws that restrict expression on religious grounds.

They urged the government to ensure no arrests under the CSA while it remains in effect, investigate attacks on journalists and media workers, and prosecute perpetrators fairly and protect journalists, activists, and human rights defenders from intimidation and violence.

The groups emphasised that journalists and activists must be allowed to operate without fear, and the government must uphold its obligation to protect freedom of expression in Bangladesh.

The two countries also held a Foreign Office Consultation on December 9 last year.

"There might be statements from political figures but our leadership is all for a good relationship with India -- we have interdependence on many aspects," said a foreign ministry official.

Earlier, there was another possibility of a bilateral meeting between Yunus and Modi on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly in New York in September last year. However, that did not happen as Modi had left New York before Yunus arrived.

"But nothing more than that is expected," said an Indian government official.

Relations between the two countries soured after the ouster of former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina on August 5 last year and her eventual

fleeing to India the same day.

Since then, the Indian government drastically reduced the number of visa seekers in Bangladesh. It also did not respond to Dhaka's official request for Hasina's extradition.

New Delhi repeatedly expressed concerns over the repression of minorities in Bangladesh, and Dhaka responded by saying that those statements were akin to interfering in the internal issues of Bangladesh.

Bangladesh also accused sections of the Indian media and political figures of exaggerating reports of minority attacks and making provocative remarks.

Chief Adviser's Office repeatedly said that the majority of the attacks on minorities, mostly Hindus, were not religious in nature but political.

## Hundreds rally demanding

FROM PAGE 12

general of Khilafat Majlis called for an end to the genocide in Gaza, a halt to attacks and persecution of Muslims in India, and opposing any attempts to rehabilitate the Awami League in Bangladesh.

Mamunul, also former joint secretary general of Hefazat, urged the government to take diplomatic initiatives through the United Nations and other international bodies to stop the genocide in Gaza.

He warned India, stating, "If Aurangzeb's tomb is desecrated, the Muslims of this country will not remain silent. If necessary, we will march towards Aurangzeb's tomb."

Regarding the Awami League, he said, "The people of this country have removed them, and any attempt to rehabilitate them will not be tolerated. If efforts are made to reinstate the Awami League, it will have to be done over our dead bodies."

Hefazat-e Islam Bangladesh's Naib-e-Ameer, Ahmed Ali Qasemi, also condemned and protested against the brutal attacks on Palestinians in Gaza.

In addition to demanding an end to the aggression against Indian Muslims, he accused India of betraying the people of Bangladesh by sheltering Sheikh Hasina. He warned that any attempt to bring the Awami League back to power would be resisted by students and the public.

Meanwhile, protest rallies were also held in various parts of Dhaka and across the country, demanding justice for Israel's brutal attacks on Palestine and condemning the genocide in Gaza.

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Bangladesh's Foreign Adviser Touhid Hossain and Indian External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar, however, held meetings on two occasions: once on the sidelines of UNGA on September 23 last year and then on the sidelines of the 8th Indian Ocean Conference 2025 in Oman on February 16.

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## We must do more to address inequalities

### Findings of SDG Report 2025 paint a worrying picture

The findings of the recently unveiled National SDG Report 2025 highlight, once again, the deeply unequal nature of whatever progress Bangladesh has achieved over the years. According to a report based on the study, prepared by the Citizen's Platform for SDGs in collaboration with the government and the UNDP, a whopping 87.5 percent of the population—or 15 crore people—do not have access to all eight basic services, namely clean drinking water, basic education, sanitation facilities, hygiene facilities, clean fuel and technology, basic information services, basic mobility in rural and urban contexts, and basic waste collection services. This means that a vast majority of the citizens are facing persistent risks and hardships due to inadequate infrastructure and policy failures.

There are many other aspects related to these struggles. For instance, per the study, more than 26 percent of the population remains food insecure. Maternal and infant mortality rates remain high in a number of districts, while entrenched disparities persist between rural and urban areas, with the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) and other poorer regions bearing the brunt. The picture is even grimmer for the most vulnerable segments of the population. Dalit and Adibashi communities, for instance, remain trapped in traditional, caste-determined occupations due to stigma and limited access to education and skills development. Approximately 8.9 percent of children are also engaged in economic work, with a third of them performing hazardous labour.

The report also highlights our fragile gains in poverty reduction, the persistent gender gap, and the disparities in education in terms of both access and quality. These findings are consistent with that of other recent studies and surveys that together paint a worrying picture of the ground realities facing poor and marginalised communities. It confirms that our development policies are not working as well as they should; instead, they are helping sustain inequalities year after year.

We must reverse this trend. First of all, our approach to governance must change. The authorities must prioritise inclusive development, rather than focusing on GDP figures that mask deeper inequalities. At the same time, political parties must play a greater role by integrating measurable SDG commitments in their manifestos and supporting programmes geared to that goal. We need tangible action for tangible outputs—proper data collection to list all vulnerable households, targeted policy interventions to address disparities, and increased investment in social infrastructure to increase access to essential services. Governance reforms are also crucial as corruption and inefficiency in public service delivery are directly linked to exacerbating inequalities. We must address all these interconnected issues for sustainable progress.

## Exercise foresight in legal reforms

### Quick fixes to laws on violence against women will achieve little

We agree with experts and rights activists that when it comes to legal reforms concerning sexual violence, the government should not yield to populist pressure. Quick fixes have little chances of success in preventing crimes against women and children. Even the introduction of the death penalty for rape in 2020 did not lead to a higher conviction rate; rather, it often delayed trials, according to experts. The Awami League government implemented the change when thousands took to the streets demanding justice for the gang rape of a woman in southern Bangladesh. In criminal cases, guilt must be proven beyond a reasonable doubt. But when death penalty is the maximum sentence, the burden of proof becomes heavier, which in turn stalls the legal process.

What brings up this conversation is the fact that the interim government, in response to protests demanding justice for the rape and murder of an eight-year-old, recently set a 15-day deadline for rape investigations and a 90-day limit for trials. What made the government think that merely shortening the timeframe would yield better results when cases remain unresolved even within the current 180-day limit? As experts pointed out at an event on Wednesday, numerous other urgent reforms are needed in the Women and Children Repression Prevention Act, 2000. These include expanding the definition of rape to include all genders, an important change given recent incidents involving young boys and men. Then there is the issue of sexual consent and setting a specific age threshold for it. This is important for a country like ours where 51 percent of girls are married before their 18th birthday.

Experts have also called for broadening the legal interpretation of "penetration," determining fines based on the severity of a sexual offence, and establishing state-run compensation funds for victims. Ensuring victim and witness protection is another crucial area requiring government attention. So, instead of merely shortening the timeframe for investigations and trials, the government should focus on establishing proper facilities and recruiting trained personnel to improve the legal process. We hope the law adviser will consider expert recommendations and prioritise sound legal reforms over populist measures.

## THIS DAY IN HISTORY



### Arab League formed

On this day in 1945, representatives from Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Transjordan, Saudi Arabia, Iraq and Yemen met in Cairo to establish the Arab League, a regional organisation of Arab states.

# EDITORIAL

## WORLD WATER DAY

# New leadership, old rivers, and the long road to clean water



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NAZIFA RAIDAH

Of the 200 crore people around the world who lack access to safe drinking water, seven crore live in Bangladesh. That's 3.5 percent of the global population. In real terms, it means two out of every five people in this country rely on contaminated water.

Sanitation doesn't look any better. Forty-one percent of the population still doesn't have access to improved or basic sanitation. That's around seven crore people deprived of a basic human need, and constantly exposed to diseases, because they either don't know better or simply don't have access to anything better.

So, when we look at SDG 6—access to clean water and sanitation for all—it's no surprise that Bangladesh is way off track. With just five years left before 2030, Bangladesh's SDG tracker shows that, out of eight targets and 11 indicators, we're only likely to meet one: Indicator 6.1.1, "Proportion of population using safely managed drinking water services". That's under Target 6.1, which aims for universal and equitable access to safe and affordable drinking water for all. Reality? Very different.

And I say "it's no surprise" because Bangladesh officially pledged to achieve the SDGs in 2015, when the UN member states adopted the agenda. On paper, things looked okay. Rivers were declared as "living entities" (like in five other countries), monitoring bodies like the National River Conservation Commission (NRCC) were set up to track river health, a cluster of regulatory bodies were formed, and even the former prime minister herself was put in charge of the National Water Resource Council. This council was supposed to meet annually, review reports, and coordinate action. Guess how many times they met? Zero.

As of 2022, if you went to the Ministry of Water Resources or the NRCC, you wouldn't find updated databases or credible reporting on river conditions. Even in 2025, we still don't know how many rivers are intact.

What we do know is that Sheikh Hasina's government turned the whole system into a playground for syndicates. I spent two years reporting on rivers, and I can tell you most of the big stories weren't about solutions.

They were about river dredging cartels selling sand to buyers with no names and no faces, pollution that no one was being held accountable for, floods, neglected communities, no awareness, no manpower, no drive to engage the people most affected—basically, the lack of everything.

Here's what surprised me, though. Usually, it's the people at the top eating the biggest slices of the cake. But when it came to looting public resources, the rot started from the bottom. Union parishad members, chairmen, and local muscle (many too dangerous to



PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

The cleanup efforts of rivers like the Buriganga need community involvement and innovative approaches. The photo was taken in March 2025.

name) were cashing in. During the dry season, they'd create land out of embankments, blocking river flow, messing with navigation, and flooding low-lying areas.

When I asked an NRCC official how often the ministries sit for meetings, he said, "Barely, but they do sit." I asked why the minutes weren't uploaded to the website, he pointed to a lack of manpower. Then he paused and asked if what he was saying would be published. After I assured him it wouldn't, he sighed in relief, "Because we can't disclose how things operate. Especially in light of recent events."

That "recent event" was the sudden

communities. Just business.

These conversations made something painfully clear: the lack of freedom of speech has choked even the most basic forms of transparency. You can't even ask simple questions—like whether people are doing their jobs, whether meetings are happening, whether data is being tracked—without stepping on toes.

Thankfully though, we're now in the hands of someone capable. Adviser Syeda Rizwana Hasan, a woman on a mission, has taken on the mammoth task of showing the youth of Bangladesh what clean, pollution-free rivers look like. This is a journey

I'm personally excited for.

Back in September, she pledged to clean up eight rivers in eight districts. But on February 11, she announced that the government had initiated a working plan to clean four major rivers surrounding the capital: Buriganga, Turag, Balu, and Shitalakkhya. Just days earlier, on February 2, in a step towards restoring Dhaka's waterways, three advisers of the interim government inaugurated excavation work in six canals. The project aims to improve water flow, combat pollution, and reclaim the canals from decades of neglect. These are essential moves, both environmentally and urbanly.

Besides this, the initial work of the long-awaited Teesta River project has finally resumed, bringing renewed hope to the communities living along its banks. If implemented well, the project will curb bank erosion, reclaim land, and store floodwater for use during the dry season.

If one takes a closer look, they'll notice how each of these moves directly addresses the indicators of SDG 6. If given five more years, at this rate, the environment adviser might meet her original goal—maybe not just eight rivers, but more. Only time will tell.

The only qualm I have with the current efforts, and one that could perhaps accelerate river cleanups even further, is the lack of community involvement and innovative approaches. Recently, Bangladesh sought US assistance for the restoration of the Buriganga River. But what would help more is collaboration with independent organisations. For example, River Cleanup, a Belgium-based international non-profit, structures its work around the theory of change and actively involves local communities while building awareness of plastic pollution. Or take the Seabin, an innovation by an Australian start-up that helps collect garbage before it enters the ocean. These are short-term solutions, but effective. If innovation is truly sought, it will be found. And if help is asked for, it should be specific and directed at organisations that can help solve our river problems in tangible ways.

This is not to say that we are not moving in the right direction; we are. This is just to say that the movement can grow louder—from a cautious step to a collective roar, one where communities care for rivers again and become part of the change. If anything, I'm just glad that we've gone from having no meetings to finding meeting minutes available on ministry websites.

The times, they are a-changin'. Thank goodness.

## Taming inflation in Bangladesh

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STEFAN LILLER and OWAIS PARRAY

Spiralling prices not only dampen economic growth but also have deleterious effects on the consumption of low-income households. As prices increase, they must spend a larger proportion of their income and even cut down spending on day-to-day necessities. Persistent inflation can push more people into poverty and make those who are already poor even more vulnerable.

More than 18 percent of Bangladesh's population is below the national poverty line. According to the global rate for lower-middle-income countries, around 30 percent can be classified as poor. Many can find themselves crossing into poverty given a single shock. Inflation is such a shock, forcing poor people to cut their expenditures, including on food, health, and education.

Bangladesh has experienced high inflation since 2022. After hovering around 5.5 percent between 2016 and 2021, the inflation rate started rising sharply due to global supply shocks exacerbated by the conflict in Ukraine and the surge in demand following the winding down of the COVID-related public health measures.

Bangladesh was not alone in seeing a price upsurge in 2022. Inflation spiked globally in both developed and developing countries. In developing countries, it rose from 7.2 percent (2021) to 9.8 percent (2022), while in high-income countries, inflation doubled

from 3.1 percent to 6.2 percent. While many countries were able to reverse this trend quickly, the upward pressure on prices continued in Bangladesh, peaking at 10.8 percent in December 2024.

The good news is that, lately, price hikes are slowing down. The inflation rate in February 2025 was 9.3 percent, lower than the December 2024 peak but still quite high. The battle, therefore, needs to continue and should be fought on multiple fronts to avoid a resurgence of double-digit inflation.

A multi-pronged response that addresses supply constraints alongside monetary and fiscal policy adjustments is needed to tame persistent inflation. Relying too much on monetary contraction will not suffice to combat escalating prices, driven partly by supply-related issues such as import tariffs, poor logistics, and market distortion.

Brakes more aggressively between October and December 2024 with a 1.5 percent increase in the policy rate. Before that, the policy rate was below the inflation rate. However, a restrictive monetary policy can discourage borrowing and investments. The business community in Bangladesh has already raised concerns about high interest rates.

Monetary contraction can be a powerful signal for managing future expectations and ensuring that inflation does not get anchored. However, an extended period of monetary tightening can slow down the economy. This must be avoided, especially when the GDP growth of Bangladesh is losing momentum.

While maintaining a degree of monetary tightening and fiscal prudence, addressing deeper structural problems that tend to stoke inflation in Bangladesh must be addressed.

Moving forward, a whole-of-government response is needed to curb inflationary pressure. Better price monitoring, coordination among various institutions for synchronising and better sequencing of import tariff policies and strengthening the competition commission are actions that can be rolled out in the near term. Other measures such as improving the regulatory environment, streamlining compliance, and reducing bureaucratic inefficiencies will also reduce business costs and help stabilise prices.

Lastly, it is important to recognise that all these measures will take time to show results. It is therefore critical that existing social protection measures are further broadened to prevent more people from falling below the poverty line. Increasing cash transfers to the most vulnerable populations can be a quick and effective way of helping them cope with abnormal price hikes. Such transfers not only help avoid reversals in poverty reduction but are also investments for building economic resilience.

As a recent UNDP paper on inflation shows, an expansionary monetary

policy has played a part in driving inflation in Bangladesh, but there is evidence that supply-side problems are also at play. The present episode of high inflation is a result of a confluence of factors.

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# Why non-discrimination demands secularism



Dr S R Osmani  
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S R OSMANI

The Constitution Reform Commission, in its report, proposed to discard "secularism" as one of the fundamental principles underlying the Constitution of Bangladesh. I would like to argue against this proposal. What could be the possible explanations for this proposal? A little reflection shows that there can be only three possible reasons for discarding secularism: first, secularism cannot be accepted as a matter of fundamental values; second, secularism may be a valuable general principle, but it is not relevant in the present context of Bangladesh; and third, secularism is both valuable and relevant for Bangladesh but it has become redundant following the introduction of new principles, which will suffice to meet the concerns underlying the demand for secularism.

For ready reference, I will describe the first argument as the "value judgement" argument, the second as the "irrelevance" argument, and the third as the "redundancy" argument.

#### What is secularism?

It is first necessary to clarify the concept of secularism, because it has multiple meanings, and different meanings apply to different contexts. An important contextual distinction is between the personal level and the societal level. At the personal level, secularism usually refers to one's attitude towards religion. A "secular person" may mean that a person is either (a) non-religious or even anti-religion, or (b) religious but practising privately, without trying to denigrate other religious dispositions (including atheism, agnosticism, etc). In either case, secularism at the personal level tends to evoke a sense of antagonism among a segment of religious people.

The antagonism towards secularism at the personal level is often transferred to debates on secularism at the societal level. But this is a mistake, because secularism at the societal level is very different from what it means at the personal level. In particular, secularism

at the societal level does not represent any attitude towards religion. The society as a collectivity doesn't have a mind of its own and hence cannot have an attitude; secularism at this level is a principle of governance.

A typical society is composed of individuals with very different attitudes towards religion; therefore, while dealing with matters of religion, the state must take a stand on how to deal with this pluralism. Secularism represents one particular stand, which can be described as the "liberal democratic" response, and is defined as the principle that, in the conduct of its affairs, the state will treat all religious views with neutrality—without favouring any particular view or discriminating against any.

The underlying logic is perhaps best explained with the help of the concept of "overlapping consensus," introduced by political philosopher John Rawls: it refers to a common ground where individuals with different beliefs can agree on shared principles while maintaining their differences in other areas. Secularism is supposed to represent an overlapping consensus in the context of diversity in religious beliefs. People may disagree on whether religiosity is better than atheism or agnosticism, and religious people may disagree on which religion is the "right" one, yet they may all agree that the state should treat all religious views neutrally without favour or prejudice.

Secularism is thus essentially a concept of neutrality. But neutrality does not imply that the state accords equal "value" to all religious views. This is because the idea of equal value cannot belong to an overlapping consensus, since people might feel that only their own religious view is worth valuing. Neutrality simply implies a commitment not to favour or discriminate against any religious view, without making any judgement on the value of any particular view. Secularism is thus

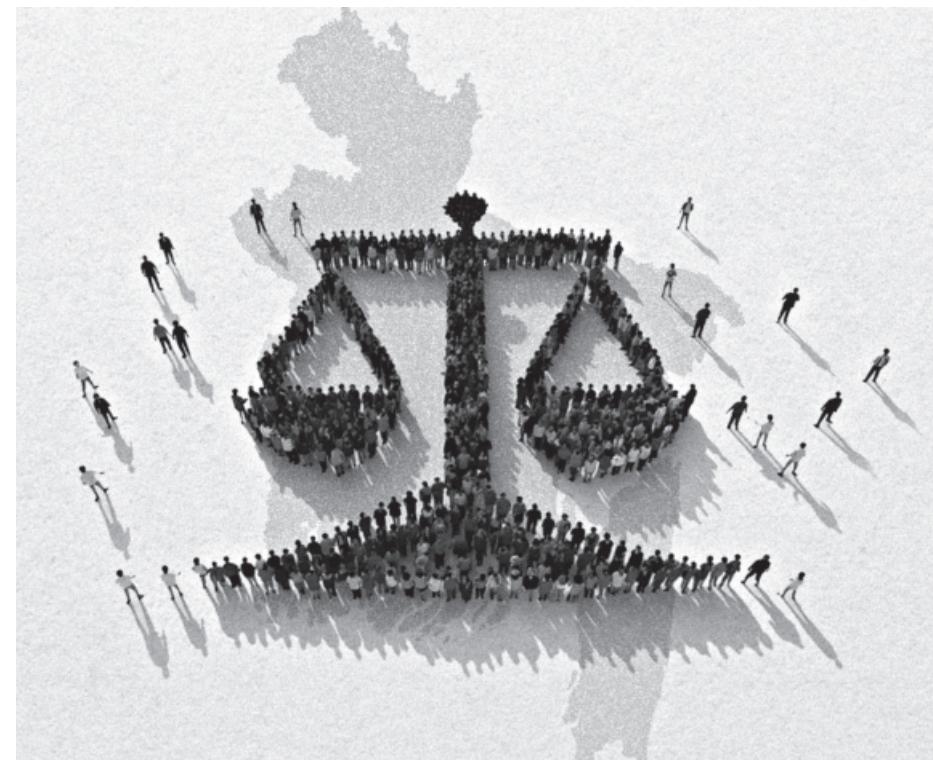
entirely consistent with the spirit of non-discrimination that inspired the July mass uprising.

#### Countering the three arguments

Not all beliefs can be accommodated within an overlapping consensus, however. For example, it leaves out the ideology of theocracy, which demands that a state's institutions must be based on religious principles. Since only one religion will

mean rejection of religion; it simply means rejection of domination of one religion in the affairs of the state.

This brings me to the other two arguments for discarding secularism—namely, "irrelevance" and "redundancy" arguments—which are compatible with liberal democratic values. The "irrelevance" argument could be made as follows: the emphasis on secularism may have been relevant at a certain stage in



VISUAL: SHAIKH SULTANA JAHAN BADHON

command primacy in this ideology, theocracy cannot seek an overlapping consensus. The liberal democratic principle of secularism is thus fundamentally incompatible with the ideology of theocracy. Therefore, proponents of theocracy in Bangladesh will necessarily reject secularism as a matter of principle—that's the "value judgement" argument for discarding secularism.

By the same token, those of us who subscribe to liberal democratic values must reject theocracy and uphold secularism. Just to be clear, rejection of theocracy does not

our history, when our society was ripped apart by deeply ingrained mistrust between different religions, but we have gone past that stage and there now exists such a high degree of harmony and mutual confidence between different religious beliefs and groups that inscribing the principle of secularism in the constitution has become irrelevant. However, certain events unfolding after the July uprising provide incontrovertible proof, if one was at all needed, that this argument is simply not credible. We should therefore reject this argument as empirically untenable.

The "redundancy" argument says the new principles proposed by the reform commission will suffice to take care of the concerns underlying the demand for secularism. Some commentators have suggested that the proposed principle of "pluralism" will serve the purpose. I beg to differ. The respect for pluralism is noble, but the question is: how would we operationalise the respect for plural values when some values turn out to be mutually incompatible, such as theocracy versus liberal democracy? Simply valuing pluralism does not provide a clue as to what to do about the impasse created by this incompatibility in a manner that respects the ideal of non-discrimination.

In my view, in the face of incompatible values, there is only one way of operationalising the respect for pluralism and non-discrimination. It involves a two-pronged strategy. First, enshrine the principle of secularism to represent the overlapping consensus among those who uphold liberal democratic values. At the same time, allow democratic space to those who wish to espouse the values of theocracy through legal means. Their values will not be reflected in the constitution at present, but given the democratic space they will enjoy, they will have the opportunity to inscribe their values in the constitution should they succeed in ascending to power someday through democratic means.

Should this eventually happen, I am under no illusion that the champions of theocracy will return the favour. Both history and current trends in the country suggest that they are unlikely to offer any space to liberal values if they come to power. Nonetheless, in order to be consistent, those of us who believe in liberal values must offer the space for legal propagation of theocratic values, with the hope that our own values will triumph in the court of public opinion.

But for that triumph to be possible, we must demonstrate to the believers in liberal democracy that we can meet their concerns for pluralism among themselves. And that in turn requires that we enshrine the principle of secularism in the constitution to represent the overlapping consensus among them, and then implement it with steadfastness. I, therefore, believe that the Constitution Reform Commission's proposal to discard secularism is a grave mistake.

## Building a future for Bangladeshi football



BLOWIN' IN THE WIND

Dr Shamsad Mortuza  
is professor of English at Dhaka University.

SHAMSAD MORTUZA

Bangladeshi booters are now in Shillong to participate in the AFC Asian Cup 2027 qualifiers. Their opponent is India, who will be playing before a host crowd and the high altitude chill of Shillong. Against the formidable opponent, the newest member of the team, Hamza Choudhury, has made a rallying cry. In his Sylheti accent, he declared, "We will win against India." This jolt of belief coming from the former England U21 international player, with Premier League experience for Leicester City and Sheffield United, signals something new for Bangladeshi football.

The Bangladesh Football Federation (BFF) has been scouting for players with dual nationality for some time now. Danish Bangladeshi Jamal Bhuyan and Finnish-Bangladeshi Tariq Kazi have been instrumental in reviving our football. According to a football fan page, there are nearly 30 foreign-born players with Bangladeshi roots who could be considered for our national cause. Then again, we need to be realistic in thinking that our diasporic footballers are willing to sacrifice the comfort of developed countries to relocate to a country that lacks basic amenities.

To make the imported inspiration sustainable, we need to create an ecosystem for our players. This process includes a long-term vision, building of infrastructure, investment in youth development, and inculcation of national pride beyond political badges.

We need to be bifocal, admitting that the optics should focus on both the near and the far, both home and abroad. We must pursue the resources of foreign-born talent as part of a larger institutional strategy. Overreliance on these figures may give

the local players the impression that they will soon be replaced by outsiders. We must present the integration of foreign-trained players as the nation's mission to enhance its football sector, benefiting all stakeholders, including the local players. The presence of players like Hamza must serve to inspire local players to work hard for the team.

The media hype over Hamza is understandable. If he can seamlessly integrate into our system, he can inspire other Bangladeshi origin players to join our national set-up. Unless the players find the same professional atmosphere, coaching services, and training facilities, they may not be interested in moving to Bangladesh. For the betterment of both these foreign-born/trained players and our homegrown ones, we must focus on developing our infrastructure. We must ensure that our homegrown players are developed with equal care and attention. Above all, we must avoid any system that prioritises or privileges one group of players over others. A lot will depend on the coach. And we must respect his decision because he is the one who understands team dynamics.

In cases of women's football, we have seen how a remote village football academy at Kalsindur in Mymensingh produced a number of footballers who brought us glory in the SAFF championship. Most of our players do not even see a proper football pitch. We need funding and sponsors for turf fields, training facilities, and local academies in every division. Such investment is essential for the growth of football.

In the 1990s, there was a sports lottery that helped the federation generate funds. We bought those tickets not necessarily to win a million

**For long-term sustainability, we need sports diplomacy that forges strategic partnerships with footballing nations such as Japan, Germany, and South Korea. The government can create bursaries for local talents to train abroad or earn diplomas. Instead of sending officials on foreign tours, we need exchange programmes that facilitate our players' access to elite training methods.**

upgrade and certified, international standard coaching staff, BKSP cannot become the desired centre of talent cultivation. As part of sports diplomacy, overseas missions can encourage donor countries to further support this institute.

We need to recognise the unifying power of sport. In a nation often fragmented by politics and region, football (as well as cricket) has the rare power to bring us together. It is a stage where our dream becomes one. The other reason for investing in sports involves the fact that it answers to one of Bangladesh's greatest challenges: youth engagement. With rising unemployment and disillusionment, sport can become a national platform for inspiration, discipline, and identity.

While we wish our booters the best of luck for their away game in India, we need to renew our commitment to building a footballing culture rooted in professionalism, patriotism, and policy. With thoughtful scouting, strong institutions, global exposure, and nationwide infrastructure, Bangladesh can not only return to its former footballing glory but surpass it.

## CROSSWORD

BY THOMAS JOSEPH

### ACROSS

1 Isolated  
6 Fuses  
11 Sub sounder  
12 Plain to see  
13 Rho follower  
14 Copycat's cry  
15 Before, to bards  
16 Sch. support group  
18 Quill need  
19 Musical note  
20 Play on words  
21 Player's peg  
22 New York's – Island  
4 Encircle  
25 Latte preparer  
27 Speedy horse  
29 Missouri motto  
32 Not neg.  
33 Dessert choice  
34 Galloped  
35 – Alamos  
36 "2001" computer  
37 Company abbr.  
38 Psi follower  
40 Mortensen of "Green Book"  
42 Tiny amounts

43 Clear sky

44 Entertainer Midler  
45 Raison –

### DOWN

1 Rate  
2 Belgian sleuth  
3 "Black Panther: Wakanda Forever" co-star  
4 Zodiac animal  
5 Fur trader  
6 Grown girl  
7 Second person  
8 "Black Panther: Wakanda Forever" co-star  
9 Tiresome talker  
10 Excited  
17 Libya neighbor  
23 Bar bill  
24 Car in a 1964 song  
26 Put on hold  
27 Poise  
28 Dorm sharer  
30 Crèche part  
31 Concert bonus  
33 Full moon, for one  
39 Acquire  
41 Mineral suffix

### WEDNESDAY'S ANSWERS



WRITE FOR US. SEND US YOUR OPINION  
PIECES TO  
dsopinion@gmail.com.

PHOTOS:  
SHEIKH MEHEDI MORSHED

**His Chatgaya dialect may have provided a starting point for 'Boli', but it was his complete immersion into the character that truly captivated audiences. "I broke myself for the role," he explained, "to become exactly what my director, Iqbal Chowdhury, envisioned." The transformation was radical.**

## NEELADRI NAVIYA NOVELI

The air crackled with quiet intensity as AKM Itmam, the rising star of *Boli (The Wrestler)*, settled into a chair at The Daily Star's premises. He was a whirlwind of energy, a man with a flight to catch in less than 24 hours, yet he exuded a calm focus that belied his hurried schedule.

"I have always aspired to be an actor," Itmam began, "after my father, who worked in the theatres for three decades." The story of his father, a college professor who used theatre to inject life into economics pedagogy, resonated deeply. Itmam, a Chatgaya by blood, carried that flame.

His journey began in his hometown, but the pull of the capital, with its vibrant cultural scene, proved irresistible. He pursued his passion alongside his studies, eventually graduating with a degree in Computer Science and Engineering. "To keep my mother happy," he admitted with a wry smile, "and to keep myself happy, I pursued what I love: acting."

The international success of *Boli*, showcased at prestigious festivals like Busan, Shanghai, and Barcelona, didn't happen overnight. Itmam's path was paved with rejections, a testament to his unwavering spirit. "I was rejected many more times than I auditioned," he revealed, his eyes reflecting the resilience forged in those trials.

He also confronted the preconceptions that came with his background as a fashion model. "They might have thought I was nothing more than my brawn," he joked, acknowledging the challenge of being seen beyond his physical

appearance. But Itmam was more than just a physique. He was a storyteller, a chameleon capable of inhabiting diverse roles.

His Chatgaya dialect may have provided a starting point for *Boli*, but it was his complete immersion into the character that truly captivated audiences. "I broke myself for the role," he explained, "to become exactly what my director, Iqbal Chowdhury, envisioned." The transformation was radical. The model's sculpted physique, meticulously crafted for TVCs and ramp shows, had to go. He gained eight kilograms in two months, fuelled by a diet that would make any foodie envious – a dozen eggs, twenty dates, watermelon, peanut butter milkshakes, and cheeseburgers, all on top of his regular meals.

Beyond the physical transformation, Itmam delved into the psychological depths of his character. "Did you know I had lived with an imaginary hedgehog and counted its thorns, because my *Boli* director demanded it?" he asked, a playful glint in his eyes. He embraced the absurdity and the unconventional methods that brought his character to life.

His journey has taken him beyond the borders of Bangladesh. He's graced the stages of the Czech Republic, playing the titular character

in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. "What an exhilarating experience it was to be chosen among the many natives and then perform live on stage," he recalled, his voice filled with wonder. The language barrier in Europe remains a challenge, but Itmam embraces the

experience. He finds artistic inspiration in the streets of Brno, but he remains a wayfarer, ready to move on when the city loses its allure. "Every nook and cranny of this city is an artistic respite for me," he said, before adding, "but the moment I find it monotonous I will leave for someplace else."

His journey began with Prachyanat, where he learned by observing seasoned actors. Landing the role of Dewan Gazi in *Dewan Gazir Kissa*, previously played by the legendary Aly Zaker, was a pivotal moment. "It boosted my confidence like never before," he explained, "that meant I had something and I am on the right track."

AKM Itmam is a juggler, balancing his passion, profession, and higher studies with remarkable dexterity. He's a rising star, but he remains grounded, aware that his journey has just begun. As he prepared to leave, a sense of anticipation filled the room. We couldn't agree more: this is a star in the making, and the world is waiting to see what he does next.

## STYLE STATEMENT

## Ariana Grande

Ariana Grande was visibly seen embracing glamorous, fairytale-inspired gowns at award shows this year, inspired by her film *Wicked*. A standout red carpet moment was when she donned a structured baby pink Schiaparelli gown. She made slight modifications to the design, specifically enhancing its sparkling tulle skirt.

To complement the look, Grande accessorised with De Beers jewellery, including a diamond tennis necklace with drop details and elegant yet sizeable diamond studs. Her sleek ballerina bun ensured the dazzling pieces took centre stage.

For makeup, she opted for a soft and romantic aesthetic, featuring baby pink lipstick, a cool-toned blush, and her signature winged-out liner.



## WHAT'S PLAYING

## 'ExtraL' by Jennie (feat DoeChii)



*ExtraL*, a powerful and empowering anthem for women from Blackpink's Jennie on her album *Ruby*, also features the incredible Swamp Princess, DoeChii, and is undoubtedly a track that has been on repeat for many people, as proved by musical charts worldwide.

Right from the opening note, the song exudes confidence, starting with a minimalist instrumental intro that transitions into a rich, bass-heavy beat.

Jennie's strong presence sets the mood, while DoeChii's rap injects a sharp edge, creating a bold, unapologetic energy. The chemistry between the two artistes is undeniable, making *ExtraL* a highlight of the album.

This track is a prime example of Jennie's growth as an artiste, highlighting her skill in merging various genres. DoeChii blends playful cat imagery with strong calls for asserting rights, strength, and claiming resources.

The music video video incorporating in sync dance steps, a familiar trope of the K-pop genre, flexes Jennie's sharp yet poised moves that depict the lyrics of the song decisively.

OUT AND ABOUT  
INDHAKA

Play: '12 Angry Men'  
March 24 | 4-5:30pm and 7:15-8:45pm  
Natmandal, Dhaka University

## 'Adolescence' breaks new ground in coming-of-age dramas



*Adolescence*, a limited series on Netflix from the UK, stands apart from traditional coming-of-age narratives.

The show's four episodes are filmed in a continuous take, a style perfected by co-creator and lead actor Graham, director Philip Barantini, and writer Jack Thorne.

Set in real time, it follows the Miller family from the police's arrival at their home to the devastating reveal of

key evidence against Jamie Miller (Owen Cooper), arrested for the suspected murder of a classmate, all in under an hour.

The first episode shows his dramatic arrest and interrogation with his family present. In the second, detectives interview staff and students at Jamie's school. The third features a conversation between Jamie and a psychologist while he's in custody. The final episode

follows Jamie's family months later, still grappling with his incarceration.

Although it delves into the challenges of growing up in a social media-centric society, the show addresses topics such as masculinity and teenage self-esteem with subtlety, avoiding exaggeration or preachy messages. Drawing inspiration from actual knife attacks, it provides a thoughtful exploration of adolescence.

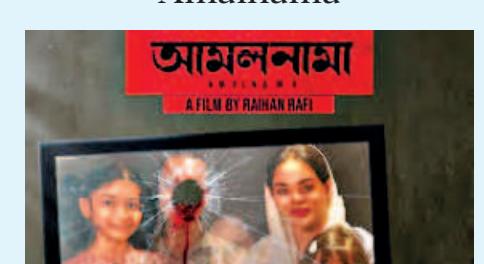


'Legacy of Underground'  
April 11 | 2pm onwards  
National Library Auditorium



Rishka Festival  
April 11-14 | 11am-10pm  
Aloki, Gulshan Tejgaon Link Road

## TRENDY STREAMS

Netflix  
The ResidenceApple TV+  
The StudioHBO Max  
When No One Sees UsPrime Video  
The Wheel of TimeChorki  
Amalnama

## Bangladesh football riding THE HAMZA WAVE

ATIQUE ANAM

When Bangladesh football team captain Jamal Bhuiyan told the press on Thursday, "It feels our [Lionel] Messi is here," about the arrival of Hamza Choudhury, he wasn't exaggerating.

Hamza's tryst with Bangladesh football till now - his arrival, the two-day visit to his ancestral home in Habiganj, him joining and then training with the Bangladesh team - has been treated like an event by the local media and lapped up with tremendous enthusiasm by the fans.

Seeing Hamza don the Bangladesh jersey has been a dream for legions of fans for years. And now, as the midfielder currently playing for Sheffield United in the English Championship League, who has represented England at age-level, and has nearly 100 appearances for former English Premier League (EPL) champions Leicester City, is days away from representing Bangladesh on the field, the excitement among fans and officials has reached the zenith.

Along with the excitement, inevitably, there also comes expectations. Hamza is set to debut for Bangladesh with the highly anticipated clash against India in an Asian Cup Qualifiers match in Shillong on March 25 and fans are hoping to see their ace from England bamboozle their neighbours in the tie.

However, the reality remains that football is a team sport. An individual, no matter how brilliant, can't win matches alone. If not, it wouldn't have taken Lionel



Bangladesh's Hamza Choudhury (C) with his teammates during yesterday's practice session at the North-Eastern Hill University ground in Shillong.

PHOTO: BFF

Messi

five

attempts

to

win

the

World

Cup.

Hoping that Hamza alone can transform Bangladesh's footballing fortunes won't be prudent, but still, his influence both on and off the field has the potential to be transformative.

A strong defensive midfielder who can also play as a right-back, Hamza's tactical awareness and European football experience will bring a new dimension to Bangladesh's squad. But at the same time, Hamza would also have to adapt to South Asian football's unique challenges, something his current captain can give

him a few pointers about.

Hamza's story draws parallels with that of Jamal, who first came from Denmark in 2011 and struggled in the Bangladesh Football Federation's (BFF's) trials, and was initially overlooked. However, he persevered, returned to the domestic league, and eventually became the leader of the team.

Players like Tariq Kazi and Syed Shah Kazem Kirmanee have followed Jamal's path, proving that foreign-based talents can thrive if given time and support. Hamza's journey in Bangladesh might

similarly get off to a jerky start, but his long-term potential is immense.

Hamza's decision to play for Bangladesh could pave the way for more players of Bangladeshi heritage to make the jump. BFF has been actively scouting talents from Europe and North America, hoping to strengthen the squad with foreign-based players.

Many nations have successfully adopted this approach. Sri Lanka have naturalised around 14 foreign-based players, Afghanistan boast a squad largely composed of foreign-based talents, helping them rise in Asian rankings, and Indonesia have integrated European-based players which has led to dramatic improvements in their international performance. Bangladesh are now trying to follow suit.

BFF, which usually struggles for sponsorship, has recently secured a long-term sponsor for the men's national team. Additionally, his influence could also inspire a new generation of young footballers in Bangladesh.

But Hamza's presence alone is not enough to ensure sustainable growth in Bangladesh football. For that the BFF must develop better football infrastructure, improve state of domestic football, and invest in youth development.

If these elements come together, then Hamza's arrival could become the catalyst for a new era in Bangladeshi football. For now, he may not be the ultimate solution, but he is certainly a step in the right direction.

## Sports reform proposal asked to be submitted by April 20

SPORTS REPORTER

The Youth and Sports Ministry on Thursday instructed the Search Committee to submit its reform proposal and finalise the formation of ad-hoc committees for various national sports federations by April 20 as the ministry has been facing difficulties in disbursing funds to federations due to the absence of full executive committees.

Following the fall of the Awami League government on August 5 last year, the interim government formed a five-member Search Committee on August 29. The committee was later revised on October 1 with the objective of reforming and depoliticising the country's sports sector. However, only 21 ad-hoc committees have been formed out of the 55 sports federations and associations over the past six months.

"Five months after the committee's revision on October 1, the formation of ad-hoc committees for various sports federations remains incomplete. As a result, the allocated budget for the 2024-25 fiscal year has yet to be disbursed due to the lack of ad-hoc or full committees," stated a circular from the Youth and Sports Ministry.

"This delay has hindered the federations' ability to conduct scheduled activities, negatively impacting the sports sector. Only three months left to the end of the current fiscal year, and if the federation can't spend its allotted allocation for the 2024-25 fiscal year, then it could hamper getting the desired allocation from the government for the upcoming 2025-26 fiscal year," the circular added, urging the Search Committee to expedite the formation of remaining ad-hoc committees and submit its reform proposal by April 20.

Search Committee convener Jobayedur Rahman Rana acknowledged the ministry's directive and said they would respond soon regarding their progress.

"We requested the ministry to arrange meetings with divisional sports associations long ago, but they have yet to respond. Without these meetings, finalising the reform proposal is challenging," Rana told The Daily Star.

Rana noted that while the committee has already met with officials and players from all 55 federations for two to four hours each, they have yet to meet with district organisers.

"We are making every effort to submit our recommendations and finalise the ad-hoc committees by the deadline, as 90 percent of the work has been completed," said Rana, adding that the Search Committee can only make recommendations for the ad-hoc committees, not announce it.

## There was no doubt about helping Shakib: Surrey coach

SCAN QR CODE  
TO READ FULL  
STORY



"He [Shakib Al Hasan] wanted to do some work to rectify his [bowling] action. There was no doubt in my mind that we were going to help him," Surrey head coach Gareth Batty said about all-rounder Shakib, whose bowling action was cleared on Thursday, allowing him to bowl in any competition.

## Run fest on the cards as IPL returns

REUTERS, New Delhi

Bowlers have been allowed to use saliva to shine the ball in the Indian Premier League but it is the batters who will be salivating at the prospect of breaching the 300 mark when the world's richest Twenty20 league gets under way on Saturday.

Lifting the saliva ban, a COVID-19 legacy, will allow the fast bowlers to try and generate some reverse swing in a format which treats them as cannon fodder.

But the continuation of the Impact Player rule, which allows teams to play an extra batter substituting a bowler in a match, will ensure it will rain fours and sixes across 13 venues over the next two months.

Royal Challengers Bengaluru's 263-5 against Pune Warriors stood as the league's highest total for a decade but that 2013 mark was bettered four times in last year's IPL -- three times by Sunrisers Hyderabad alone.

Hyderabad's 287-3 against Bengaluru

This is the 18th season of the Indian Premier League.

With 8004 runs in 252 matches, RCB's Virat Kohli is the highest run-getter in the tournament.

Yuzvendra Chahal, who will play for Punjab Kings this season, is the highest wicket-taker in the tournament. He has 205 wickets in 160 games.

Chennai Super Kings' MS Dhoni is the player with most matches in the competition, having played a total of 264 matches.



is the new benchmark but Nathan Leamon, a strategy consultant with defending champions

Kolkata Knight Riders, is among those who believe 300 is achievable.

"We have already seen a huge escalation in scores over the last two years," the former England lead analyst told ESPNcricinfo.

"It would be naive to think that we have got to the fullest extent of that -- of teams learning how to take advantage of the new laws. You have seen several games where 260 has been scored, which never used

to happen. You have seen several games where teams score 100 in the powerplay ... So something has changed."

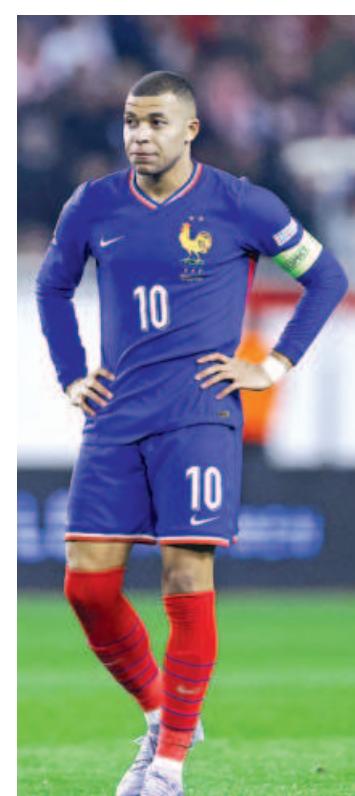
RCB, who face Kolkata in Saturday's IPL opener at Eden Gardens, are likely to be involved when the 300-mark is breached given the traditionally flat pitch and small boundaries in Bengaluru.

RCB's Rajat Patidar is one of five new captains in the 18th edition of the tournament, which will culminate with the May 25 final in Kolkata.

Ajinkya Rahane has been appointed Kolkatta captain after the departure of Shreyas Iyer, who will spearhead Punjab Kings' bid to win their maiden IPL title.

## A bleak France return for Mbappe

The UEFA Nations League on Thursday saw a few exciting games, including high-octane clashes between Spain and Netherlands. Kylian Mbappe also returned for the France national team, but the forward had a day to forget.



Real Madrid star Kylian Mbappe's return to the French national team following a six-month break did not go as planned as an Ivan Perisic-inspired Croatia beat the two-time world champions 2-0 at home in the first leg of their quarterfinal fixture.

Mikel Merino's 93rd-minute equaliser earned Spain a 2-2 draw against the Netherlands in the quarterfinal first leg. Spain raced into an early lead through Nico Williams but Dutch goals -- scored by Cody Gakpo and Tijjani Reijnders -- had flipped the tie on its head. However, an 81st-minute red card for teenager Jorrel Hato gave Spain a way back into the encounter.

Germany are in prime position to host the final stage of the tournament after coming from behind to beat Italy 2-1 in Milan.

Rasmus Hojlund fired Denmark into a slender 1-0 first-leg lead against Cristiano Ronaldo's Portugal.

Vinicius Junior struck a dramatic winner in the ninth minute of stoppage time to give Brazil a 2-1 win over Colombia in their South American World Cup qualifier on Thursday. The five-time world champions had taken a sixth-minute lead in Brasilia through a Raphinha penalty only for Luis Diaz's fine 41st-minute strike for Colombia to level the game. The victory leaves Brazil well-positioned in second place in the 10-team CONMEBOL qualifying group, four points behind leaders Argentina who travel to Uruguay on Friday.

PHOTO: REUTERS



The wicketkeeper-batter formed small partnerships with the lower order batters as Dhanmondi inched towards the target.

However, he kept losing partners in regular successions and Dhanmondi were soon 175 for 9, still 42 runs away from the target with 50 balls to go.

In the 44th over, Sohan decided to put caution to the wind, as he hit two consecutive sixes off Mohammad Saifuddin to complete his ton but in the next ball got caught at deep midwicket by Hridoy as Mohammad Seized victory. Despite the defeat, Sohan, who hit 10 fours and four sixes, was adjudged player of the match.

This was Sohan's second century in the ongoing DPL and with Mushfiqur Rahim having retired from ODIs, performances like these could put him back in the national team's radar.

"Obviously, if an opportunity comes, I will give my best. In ODIs I have done well and I will try to begin where I had left off," Sohan, who averages 82.50 in ODIs after five innings with three not outs, told reporters yesterday.

Meanwhile, Prime Bank Cricket Club romped to a nine-wicket win against Shimpukur Cricket Club at BKSP Ground 3 as Mohammad Naim hit a 64-ball 104 in chase of 160.

Abahani maintained their pole position, scraping to a two-wicket win over Gazi Group at BKSP Ground 4. Mominul Haque picked up a fourer to bowl Gazi out for 199 before Mohammad Mithun's 76 took Abahani over the line.

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## Hundreds rally demanding end to Gaza genocide

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Hundreds of protesters, including members of several religious groups such as Hefazat-e-Islam Bangladesh and Khilafat Majlis, staged demonstrations in front of the Baitul Mukarram National Mosque yesterday, demanding an end to the Israeli onslaught in Gaza.

The rally took place after the Jumma prayers. Khilafat Majlis staged a protest march and left the mosque premises, while Hefazat-e-Islam leaders and activists continued the demonstration at the site.

Besides, another similar protest was seen on the street in front of Baitul Mukarram under the banner of "Aam Janata" (The Masses).

During the demonstrations, members of the army, Rab, and police were present in a strict security stance with water cannons, a riot vehicle, and two prison vans parked nearby.

Police were seen searching the bags of people entering the mosque. Besides, a large number of plainclothes officers were deployed.

At the gathering held in front of the mosque, Mamunul Haque, secretary

SEE PAGE 6 COL 4



Protesters in front of the north gate of Baitul Mukarram Mosque after Juma prayers yesterday, seeking justice of Israel's attacks on the Palestinian people. Israeli strikes killed several hundred Palestinians in recent days.

PHOTO: PALASH KHAN

Israel threatens to annex parts of Gaza

Defence minister says he plans to expand 'buffer zone'

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli Defence Minister Israel Katz yesterday threatened to annex parts of the Gaza Strip unless Hamas released the remaining Israeli hostages held in the war-battered Palestinian territory.

The warning came as Israel stepped up the renewed assault it launched on Tuesday, shattering the relative calm that had reigned in the war-battered territory since a January 19 ceasefire.

Gaza's civil defence agency said Thursday that 504 people had been killed since the bombardment resumed, one of the highest tolls since the war began more than 17 months ago with Hamas's attack on Israel.

"I ordered (the army) to seize more territory in Gaza... The more Hamas refuses to free the hostages, the more territory it will lose, which will be annexed by Israel," Katz said in a statement.

Should Hamas not comply, Katz also threatened "to expand buffer zones around Gaza to protect Israeli

SEE PAGE 6 COL 6

## Oxygen found in distant galaxy

### It may provide answers on how ours developed

INDEPENDENT.CO.UK

Scientists have announced the surprising discovery of oxygen and other heavy metals in the most distant known galaxy.

The galaxy, which is known as JADES-GS-z14-0, is 13.4 billion light years away from Earth. It was just found last year using NASA's James Webb Space Telescope.

"I was really surprised by this clear detection of oxygen in JADES-GS-z14-0," Gergö Popping, an astronomer at the European Southern Observatory's European ALMA Regional Centre who did not take part in the research, said in a statement. "It suggests galaxies can form more rapidly after the Big Bang than had previously been thought."

The finding was made in two separate studies conducted by two different teams of astronomers. It has allowed scientists to improve distance measurements to the galaxy.

They used the Atacama Large Millimeter/sub-millimeter Array: a group of dozens of radio telescopes in the Chilean desert and the largest astronomical project in existence.

The images show the galaxy as it was when the universe was less than 300 million years old, just about 2 percent of its current age, the researchers noted.



## Take action to uphold freedom of expression

Human rights defenders urge govt

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

International human rights organisations, in a joint statement yesterday, urged the government to uphold freedom of expression and opinion, highlighting alarming incidents of arrests, harassment, and violence against journalists and human rights defenders in recent weeks.

They emphasised that Bangladesh has a long history of suppressing free speech and asserted that breaking from this past is essential to building a rights respecting future.

Amnesty International, Article 19, Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development, CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation, Fortify Rights, Front Line Defenders, Human Rights Watch, PEN America, and the Committee to Protect Journalists issued the statement.

The organisations pointed out that although some recent attacks were not perpetrated by state actors, the government is responsible for ensuring the protection of all individuals exercising their right to free speech. They called for immediate action to safeguard journalists and others from violence and intimidation.

The statement said that February saw a surge in violent attacks against journalists. On February 3, a journalist in Shariatpur was assaulted with hammers and knives after reporting on medical negligence at a private clinic. Three

SEE PAGE 6 COL 4



The trial run of vehicles on the service lane of the 13km east link road of Jamuna Bridge in Tangail being conducted yesterday. If successful, the 7.3-meter-wide service road is set to open for traffic on March 24, just in time to ease Eid travels to the north.

PHOTO: MIRZA SHAKIL

Bangladesh football riding the Hamza wave

P11

Prime Bank

HSBC



PRAYER TIMING  
MARCH 22

Fazr Zohr Asr Maghrib Esha  
AZAN 4:45 12:45 4:45 6:11 7:45

JAMAAT 4:55 1:15 5:00 6:26 8:15

SOURCE: ISLAMIC FOUNDATION

SEHRI, IFTAR TIMING

RAMADAN MARCH SEHRI IFTAR

21 22 6:11

22 23 4:43 6:11

23 24 4:42 6:11



# CHENGDU

## A Blend of History and Modern Charm

NAZIBA BASHER, back from China

It was a soggy morning when we arrived in the city of Chengdu. After travelling all the way from Yunnan province, our 10-member journalist delegation was inevitably exhausted. But as soon as we boarded the bus, local tour guide, Dora, wasted no time lifting our spirits by sharing what we were about to experience in what is known as "China's happiest city."

Nestled in the heart of Sichuan province, Chengdu is a city where ancient traditions blend seamlessly with modern innovation, all under the watchful eyes of its most famous residents – the giant pandas.

The people of Chengdu, many of whom are from Muslim tribes, are more than just friendly, with every Salam responded to with a "Walaikum", and every smile returned with an even bigger one.

Known for its laid-back lifestyle and fiery Sichuan cuisine, Chengdu is a sensory delight, with the air thick with the numbing aroma of mala (Sichuan peppercorn and chilli) wafting from bustling street stalls. Teahouses dot the cityscape, where locals spend hours sipping jasmine tea, playing mahjong, and debating everything from poetry to politics.

Yet beneath its leisurely charm, Chengdu is a powerhouse of technology and industry, home to a rapidly growing high-tech sector. The city's vibrant nightlife, neon-lit skyline, and thriving music and art scenes stand in stark contrast to its ancient roots, where the Wuhou Shrine whispers tales of the Three Kingdoms era, and the Thatched Cottage of Du Fu keeps the spirit of China's most celebrated poet alive.

and thriving music and art scenes stand in stark contrast to its ancient roots, where the Wuhou Shrine whispers tales of the Three Kingdoms era, and the Thatched Cottage of Du Fu keeps the spirit of China's most celebrated poet alive.

Whether you come for the pandas, the hotpot, or the history, Chengdu has a way of pulling you in – one spicy bite, one tea-scented afternoon, and one misty sunrise at a time.

**ALL THINGS PANDA**

Tucked away in the lush outskirts of the city, the Chengdu Research Base of Giant Panda Breeding is a sanctuary dedicated to the conservation of China's most beloved national treasure.

Established in 1987, the centre plays a crucial role in panda research,

**DUJIANGYAN IRRIGATION SYSTEM**

The Dujiangyan Irrigation System is a marvel of ancient Chinese engineering that has stood the test of time for over 2,000 years.

Built in 256 BCE during the Qin Dynasty by governor Li Bing and his son, this ingenious system was designed to control flooding from the Min River while providing a sustainable irrigation network. Unlike traditional dams, Dujiangyan redirects and distributes water using a combination of levees, channels, and a unique fish-mouth-shaped embankment, allowing floodwaters to be managed without disrupting the river's natural flow. Today, it continues to supply water to vast stretches of farmland, reinforcing its status as one of the world's oldest functioning irrigation systems.

Beyond its function, Dujiangyan is a symbol of Chinese innovation and environmental harmony. Unlike modern dams that can obstruct ecosystems, this system works with nature, preventing soil erosion and

passed down only within families or to chosen apprentices. Accompanied by traditional Sichuanese instruments such as the erhu and gong, these performances bring to life folklore, historical tales, and legendary characters, often infused with humour and satire.

Beyond its theatrical spectacle, Sichuan Opera is a cultural treasure that reflects the region's unique spirit and artistic ingenuity. Unlike the more formal Peking Opera, Sichuan Opera embraces a livelier and more improvisational style, incorporating acrobatics and even hand shadows to engage the audience.

The opera's adaptability has helped it survive through generations, blending tradition with modern storytelling elements to remain relevant today, with history and magic seamlessly intertwining on stage.

**THATCHED COTTAGE OF DU FU**

The Thatched Cottage of Du Fu, located in the scenic outskirts of Chengdu, is a

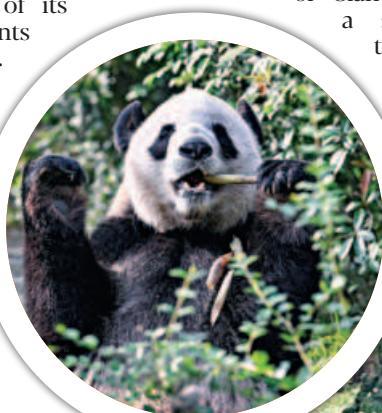
melancholic beauty found in his verses. The place is not only an important cultural landmark but also a peaceful escape that allows one to understand the profound impact of Du Fu's poetry on Chinese heritage. It remains a symbol of the intersection between literary history and the beauty of the Sichuan landscape.

### THE SICHUAN HOTPOT

The famous Sichuan hotpot, an iconic dish from the vibrant province, is a bold celebration of spices, flavours, and conviviality. At the heart of the experience lies a bubbling pot of broth, often divided into two sections – one brimming with a fiery mala (a numbing and spicy combination of Sichuan peppercorns and chilli peppers), and the other offering a milder, savoury base.

The unique heat of the broth is balanced by its intense fragrance, which fills the air and entices all who gather around the table. Diners dip an array of ingredients, including thinly

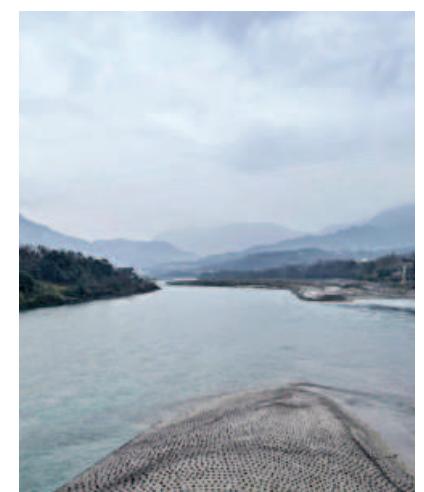
**Yet beneath its leisurely charm, Chengdu is a powerhouse of technology and industry, home to a rapidly growing high-tech sector. The city's vibrant nightlife, neon-lit skyline, and thriving music and art scenes stand in stark contrast to its ancient roots, where the Wuhou Shrine whispers tales of the Three Kingdoms era, and the Thatched Cottage of Du Fu keeps the spirit of China's most celebrated poet alive.**



Red Panda



Chengdu cityscape



Dujiangyan Irrigation System

breeding, and rehabilitation, ensuring the survival of this once-endangered species.

With sprawling bamboo forests, carefully designed enclosures, and state-of-the-art veterinary care, the facility mimics the pandas' natural habitat while providing a safe space for breeding efforts. Visitors can witness adorable cubs tumbling over one another in the nursery, adult pandas lazily munching on bamboo, and conservationists working tirelessly to protect these gentle giants.

Beyond its panda conservation efforts, the centre is a hub for wildlife education and ecological research. It collaborates with global organisations to enhance genetic diversity and reintroduce pandas into the wild, tackling the challenges of habitat loss and human-wildlife conflict. The base also houses red pandas, another endangered species, adding to its conservation efforts.

With interactive exhibits, educational programmes, and serene walking paths, the Chengdu Panda Base is more than just a tourist attraction – it's a vital stronghold in the fight to preserve one of the world's most cherished species. Sichuan's model proves that with the right resources, education, and policies, species recovery is possible and has far-reaching positive effects on ecosystems and communities around the world.

maintaining ecological balance.

Recognised as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, it draws visitors from around the world who come to marvel at its enduring ingenuity. The surrounding area, with its scenic temples, ancient pagodas, and breathtaking Mount Qingcheng, adds to the site's cultural and historical significance, making Dujiangyan not just an engineering wonder, but a testament to China's deep-rooted wisdom in sustainable water management.

### SICHUAN OPERA

Much like our "Jatraa Pala," Sichuan Opera, one of China's oldest and most vibrant theatrical traditions, is a mesmerising blend of music, acrobatics, comedy, and illusion that has captivated audiences for centuries.

Originating in the Sichuan province during the Qing Dynasty, this art form is known for its distinctive musical style, playful storytelling, and the famous "face-changing" (bian lian) technique.

Performers, dressed in elaborate, colourful costumes, switch between vividly painted masks in the blink of an eye – a skill so secretive that it is

revered site that honours the legacy of Du Fu, one of China's greatest poets from the Tang Dynasty.

The cottage is a modest yet poetic retreat, originally built in the eighth century and situated amidst tranquil greenery and bamboo groves, where Du Fu lived during a turbulent period of his life.

Surrounded by gardens and ancient trees, the cottage served as a refuge for the poet as he sought solace from political unrest and personal hardship.

Today, it stands as a testament to Du Fu's enduring influence on Chinese literature, drawing visitors who come to reflect on his timeless poetry, which captures themes of nature, hardship, and the human condition.

The site, now a museum, has been preserved and expanded with various pavilions, stone tablets, and exhibitions dedicated to Du Fu's life and works. Du Fu's Thatched Cottage remains an embodiment of the poet's deep connection with nature, as the surroundings inspired many of his most famous poems.

With all these combined, Chengdu stands as a testament to the harmonious blend of history, culture, and innovation that defines Sichuan province. As the city continues to grow, it remains deeply rooted in its traditions, offering visitors a truly unforgettable journey into the heart of China's past, present, and future.



Sichuan Opera



Thatched Cottage of Du Fu





PHOTO: COLLECTED

## FICTION

## Back in the old house

**Only when ma fell sick, and I had to take a indefinite leave of absence from work to take care of her, did I become privy to my mother's hopes and dreams. I am ashamed to say that even after spending 17 solitary years with ma, I never for once paused to think who ma was as a person, much less ask her.**

SAJAL HOSSAIN DHALY

I was raised in the old country, back in the old house where all my siblings had grown up long before I was born. It was a family house but lacked all the familiarity, for none of us ever felt quite at home, least of all me. My earliest memories back in that house coincide with memories of being taught cuss words by my immediate older brother, watching TV with my father in the living room—with me seated on the floor with my legs crossed, him almost passed out on the sofa hungover—and my memories of my mother hand feeding me bhaat. I remember next to nothing besides these facts from the old house where I was raised. I was 7 when we moved out. Not all of us moved out exactly. Mother moved out after filing a divorce. She endured 23 years of that marriage, but it was finally time to move on. But of course, not everybody was ready to move on. All three of my brothers decided to stay back with baba. They already having developed much of their functional brains, they thought the agency to make that decision was a gift they had, which I did not, as I decided to leave with ma. When they first heard I chose ma, they became incredulous and animated. "Why would you throw your life away like that?" "Ma is abandoning us! Why are you going with her?" "I expected you to be smarter than this." But nobody ever asked me why I wanted to leave baba, why I wanted to be far away from him. My siblings thought the age of 7 was too little for one to make a logical, informed decision. They thought I chose ma for the virtue of my gender. They thought I chose her because I was the youngest and thus received the most of our shared mother's love and affection.

The reason why ma wanted to leave baba was apparent. Not only us siblings, but it was clear as day even to our close relatives and even neighbors. The first 7 years of my life I had grown up amongst the cacophony of shouting, clattering of breaking ceramic and glass, slamming of doors; hidden between these cacophonies were the whimpering of my siblings as we hid beneath our study tables or inside our wardrobes, afraid to fall in baba's crosshairs during these lengthy tirades. In these moments, now I realise as an adult, we had failed ma. I don't know about my siblings,

but I have grown conscious of betrayal towards my mother. We abandoned her, all four of us siblings, to save our skin. To stay neutral in baba's eyes. To stay away from his warpath. And in doing so, we sacrificed our mother to the wolf.

As to the reality of my decision at the age of seven, I have no personal recollection of it. Why exactly did I choose ma over baba, when all three of my siblings chose otherwise, I do not remember. I can tell you now that it was the right thing to do and so I did it, but did the seven-year-old me think so too? Or did she want to stay with her mother? Or did she merely want to escape baba? I remember one thing for certain, I was betraying baba forever, and our relationship would be strained irrevocably—which it has been, maybe for the better.

Only when ma fell sick, and I had to take a indefinite leave of absence from work to take care of her, did I become privy to my mother's hopes and dreams. I am ashamed to say that even after spending 17 solitary years with ma, I never for once paused to think who ma was as a person, much less ask her. It was only when she thought she was on her deathbed did she deem it important enough to impart some of her childhood aspirations to someone. She had gone blind in both eyes by then, diabetes—which soon gave way to glaucoma—had done its thing. She used to be in a trance most hours of the day in those days, rambling on about having to do the housework, cook, do the dishes. In one of these reveries she one day told me about missing her childhood friends—Sumi, Khadija, Chadni, her closest friends growing up. She talked about missing playing with them, wearing only their tiger striped shorts, around Sir Salimullah Medical College Mitford Hospital, playing Bangladeshi renditions of tag and hide and seek. She reminisced about those days, long before the '71 war, long before her marriage, long before leaving her home in older Dacca, to live down south with baba.

I listened to these stories attentively. My words of affirmation and questions would fall on deaf ears, as she would keep blabbering as if I was not there, continuing her story to a third, silent listener whom I could not see. Perhaps it was god himself, perhaps the devil had come to take her; maybe it was the ghosts of her friends who had come to comfort her in her

final moments. She talked fondly of her three friends, until her forehead creased into a frown and she remembered how Chadni was the first to be lost to marriage. A balding businessman in northern Dhaka had claimed Chadni. Similarly, the other two girls fell too, though I could not tell clearly to what circumstances because by then ma's words were unintelligible. She talked like this to herself until her final breath, lodged in her hospital bed snugly. No one who saw her could say that she was in any sort of pain or distress. She looked like an angel whose wings were clipped and then chose to just snuggle up in a bed contentedly. Before her last breaths she did talk about wanting to learn crafting with jute and sell them at melas. She was extremely fond of melas she used to tell me. So I was able to connect the dots. By this point she was completely catatonic, saying single words in single syllables with long pauses between each. I remember the words bangles, teep, shari, mela, nagordola, mela, ma, phool, bangles, mela, before she stopped talking and breathing. By this point I was a mess and the doctors ushered me out of the cabin to take her off life support.

Ma was also a young girl once. Just as I was seven with hopes and dreams, going to school wanting to accomplish them, ma was also a young girl filled to the brim with aspirations to change the world. Had she lived those dreams, her stalls at melas would not have changed the world exactly, but they would have changed lives. Her hand woven baskets and accessories with jute could have lit up the eyes of a wife. The bangles she procured from different vendors could have changed the trajectory of a relationship, one where a man was buying churi for his distant lover, saving up gifts for when they inevitably meet after a long time. Her teep could have found its place on the forehead of a village bride, making her shine like the moon. Ma could have changed lives, and those people could have gone on to change the world, thus making ma someone who could have shaped the world I live in today. She was also a child one day before being wed to baba, before moving into the old house. She was also a child.

Sajal Hossain Dhaly is a student of BRAC University, majoring in Literature.

## POETRY

## Across life

SNIGDHA DEY

She told me in her last visit—  
"Hold on to hope, my child.  
Even beneath the deepest of forests,  
A few pieces of sun fall.  
If you ever feel the world around you eroding  
Into oceanic darkness,  
You shall hold on to hope, my dear.  
Drifting over the raft of night,  
Daylight returns each time.  
You must hold on to hope, my dear child."  
Tonight, as I take  
The final steps of my life,  
Her presence accompanies  
Me until the end of the path.

**Snigdha Dey** is a first-year English Honours student. She can be reached at s90967474@gmail.com.



ILLUSTRATION: AMREETA LETHE

## POETRY

## Barenness

SURAYA AKTER

Beneath the ocean of a cave  
Are you not born with barenness?  
From a cave of grace, a warm sphere  
Barefoot, barehanded, and barely clothed.  
O man, decline the desert flowers.  
Before you disgrace your cave  
Are you not born with barenness?  
Now, you wander through a storm of deserts.

**Suraya Akter** is a student at North South University majoring in English literature.



ILLUSTRATION: AMREETA LETHE

**Khero Khata**

Khero Khata is Star Books and Literature's writing corner, where we post prompts soliciting submissions in the form of flash fiction and poetry. Selected pieces will be published in print and/or online.

**This month's prompt:**

**Headlines**

Email us your submissions (500 words) at [dsliteditor@gmail.com](mailto:dsliteditor@gmail.com) by March 28, 2025.

## POETRY

## A home for her homeless heart

PURBITA DAS

Having jotted down the iambic stanzas on the chopping board and collected the veggies alive from the realms of metaphors that smell the labor of her regular gardening records;

She places some candles at the heart of her living room where her lost lullabies take some deep breaths to start their days.

Morning, evening, night—  
There is this ode to life that she reads out to every bird dropping off to her apartment like paying guests who only join the sleepers' compartment.

A symphonic cassette of poetry murmuring through the twigs of her well-groomed plants and their grandchildren love their master's presence and pressure to bloom like a mature sunshade tent in where

she can take the pen and paper to turn the blues of her life into some tolerable features in yellow colors.

Everywhere you take a look—

You come across the sensation of her year built suppressed wishes and paradoxical desires

to be dead among the worst interpreters of life.

This is where the good music of her gone days are preserved forever.

This is where she plays the piano of her mind like a maestro does in between the breaks of a



DESIGN: MAISHA SYEDA

terribly beautiful war.

This is where she would live with the love of her life so that no one knows the location of their happily ever after.

**Purbita Das** is doing her post graduation in Applied Linguistics and ELT at the University of Dhaka.

# HIMBA VILLAGE

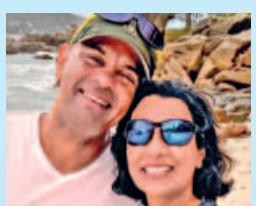
## An oasis of peace in Kalahari

After years of travelling together across the globe, ticking off country after country, Namibia had long sat high on our bucket list. It was a dream destination, and as we finally landed, we knew we were in for something unique. From Namibia, we self-drove through the wild, uncharted landscapes of Botswana and Namibia, exploring the Okavango Delta and the vastness of the Kalahari Desert. It was a journey beyond words that would forever change us.



**Sarmin Shahariath and Rejaul Bahar,** married since 2005, are avid travellers.

So far, they have travelled more than 115 countries across seven continents.



Want to share your travel experiences with us? Please send your stories to

**holiday@  
thedadlystar.net**

# HIMBA VILLAGE

## An oasis of peace in Kalahari



seem impossible, the Himba people had mastered the art of living in harmony with nature. They didn't need to accumulate wealth or material possessions to feel fulfilled. Their happiness came from the relationships they nurtured, the community they built, and their deep connection to the world around them.

As we looked at the vast Kalahari

We left the village feeling humbled. In a world where we are constantly told that happiness lies in more -- more money, more things, more success -- the Himba taught us that happiness is about less. It's about simplicity, connection, and being present in the moment.

Our visit to the Himba village reminded us just how lucky we



### REZAUL BAHAR

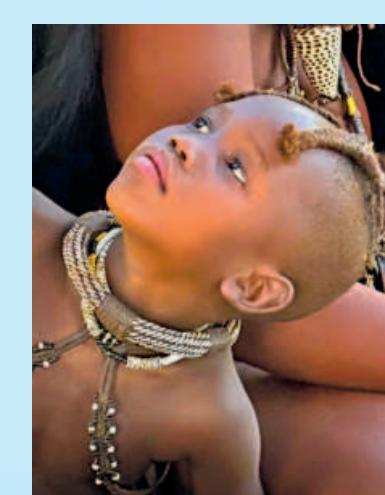
However, one of the most unforgettable experiences of this journey was our visit to a Himba village in northern Namibia, where time seemed to slow down. We drove to the village from Etosha National Park, which was about an hour south of the park's south gate. The heat was relentless, searing the earth and making every inch of the journey feel like a battle against nature itself. It was hard to imagine how people could survive here -- how they live with so little, surrounded by such vast emptiness.

We've travelled to 117 countries, seen the extremes of wealth and poverty, and, at times, experienced both ourselves. But the Himba village was something

else, a living testament to the idea that happiness doesn't always come with riches.

The Himba people, semi-nomadic and deeply connected to their traditions, live in a world that feels removed from the rest of the fast-paced humanity. The village was simple -- clay huts, grass roofs, and life lived entirely in tune with the land. There are no luxuries here, no modern comforts. Only the scorching sun, the dry earth, and the animals. Here humans were not masters, but one of the many species of Mother Earth who share this barren but beautiful landscape.

As we walked through the village, the heat was almost unbearable. Sweat dripped from our faces as we marvelled at the serenity of the people who seemed



might have discovered something many of us seem to have forgotten: that happiness is not tied to wealth.

In the desert heat, where life

are. Not because of the material things we have, but because we have the freedom to live our lives with choices and opportunities. So many people in the world don't have that luxury, yet they manage to find joy in the smallest things. We often take our comforts for granted, never stopping to realize how fortunate we truly are.

The visit taught us something we will never forget: that happiness isn't about what we have, but about what we value. And sometimes, the richest lives are the simplest ones. In the vast, unforgiving deserts of Namibia, we were reminded that life is not about the things we accumulate, but about the love we give and the way we live.

As we continued on our journey, we carried with us a new understanding of what it means to be truly rich -- and a deep sense of gratitude for the life we are lucky enough to live.



# SALT, SWEAT AND SURVIVAL

## Where is the farmers' labour in the price?

MOKAMMEL SHUVO and SIFAYET ULLAH

There is an old tale, passed down through generations, about a king and his youngest daughter.

When the king asked his daughters how much they loved him, the youngest replied, "Like salt". The king, offended by what he saw as a meagre comparison, banished her to the wilderness.

Only later, when he tasted food without salt, did he understand its irreplaceable value. Filled with remorse, he brought his daughter back, honouring her for speaking a truth he had failed to grasp.

This story is more than a fable; it is a parable about the human tendency to undervalue what is essential until it is gone.

The salt farmers of Bangladesh are the modern-day embodiment of that youngest daughter. For centuries, they have toiled under the sun, harvesting salt from the earth and sea, their labour as vital to survival as the mineral itself.

Yet, like the king, society has often overlooked their worth. These farmers, who produce the salt that seasons food and sustains industries, are trapped in a cycle of exploitation, climate vulnerability and economic neglect.

Their story is not just about salt; it is about the invisible hands that sustain civilisations and the systems that fail to reward them.

Meet Nurul Absar, a 65-year-old salt farmer from Chowfaldandi village in Cox's Bazar. Like countless others, he invests everything – his time, his sweat, his meagre savings – into the salt fields, only to find himself questioning the very value of his labour.

"Where is my cost?" asks the farmer. "Where is my cost for polythene, water and everything I invested in my salt field, let alone the price of my own labour?"

He said that his total investment, including land rent, polythene, field preparation, water and labour, stands at Tk 320,000 for one acre. "If the weather favours, I will get a maximum of 750 maunds of salt."

At the current market price of Tk 250 per maund, Absar's total return at the end of the season would be around Tk 187,500. "If this rate continues, I will suffer a loss of Tk 132,000," he added.

Reflecting on the past three years, he said, "We earned a reasonable amount when the price ranged from Tk 350 to Tk

**Low market prices and high land lease costs have left salt farmers frustrated. The current market price of salt is Tk 247 per maund, while production costs stand at around Tk 321**

500 per maund – just enough to ensure three meals a day and clothing, nothing more. I never dreamed of owning a car or land. I just want to earn enough to provide my family with good food."

Although he has dedicated himself fully to salt farming, Absar sounded frustrated. "I don't understand why I can't make a decent living although I've given my heart and soul to salt farming," he wondered.

### THE BIRTH OF AN INDUSTRY

The salt industry in Bangladesh produces enough to meet local demand.

Cox's Bazar district accounts for 87 percent of the country's total salt production, while the remaining 13 percent comes from Banskhali upazila in Chattogram district. Most salt farmers inherit the profession and rely on traditional methods.

In coastal Cox's Bazar, salt is harvested through a process that uses solar heat and seawater with high salinity. The production season runs from November to May each year.

According to the Salt Industry's Development Office in Cox's Bazar, salt cultivation first began in the region in 1960, covering around 6,774 acres of land and yielding 1.20 lakh tonnes. At the time, farmers produced 17.54 tonnes per acre.

Mohammad Zafar Ahmed Bhuiyan, deputy general manager of the office, said that the then EPSIC (now BSCIC) began salt production in the coastal region using solar methods.

"Until 1986, loans were provided to salt farmers and salt was purchased to ensure fair market prices," he said.

In 2000, the introduction of the polythene method in salt production brought revolutionary success to the industry, said Bhuiyan. This innovation led to a dramatic increase in high-quality salt production and farmers widely adopted it.

In the 2023-24 fiscal year, the country's salt production reached 24.37 lakh tonnes, the highest in history, against an annual demand of 25.28 lakh tonnes. During that season, salt cultivation covered 68,505 acres of land, involving 40,695 farmers.

Bhuiyan said low market prices and high land lease costs have left salt farmers frustrated.

The current market price of salt is Tk 247 per maund, while production costs stand at around Tk 321.

"High quality, white, granular and mature salt is often not produced due to a lack of farmer training, while the use of diesel powered pumps in salt fields is driving up production costs," he added.

The BSCIC official said farmers are forced to rely on local lenders, which prevents them from getting fair prices for their produce. Besides, in coastal areas, government khas land is being illegally occupied by various groups, who lease it to farmers at high rates, further increasing production costs.

### SWEAT, DEBT AND DESPAIR

Crude salt produced by farmers in Cox's Bazar is sent for refining in the next stage. The industry usually relies on three types of salt mills.

"Vacuum mills account for 65 percent of the country's total salt production, while mechanical factories refine around 25 percent, and traditional mills process the remaining 10 percent of crude salt," said Shamsul Alam, president of the Traditional



Salt Millers Association in Islampur, Cox's Bazar.

According to Alam, there are 15 vacuum salt factories, 42 mechanical factories and 205 traditional salt mills in the country.

"About 65 percent of the salt produced in Bangladesh is used for industrial purposes. Currently, the decline in industrial demand has pushed down salt prices at the field level," he said.

Alam also highlighted key challenges in the salt industry, including the production of immature salt, the dominance of middlemen and rising land lease costs.

Salt farmers also echoed concerns about the increasing cost of land.

"This year, the lease price for 40 decimals of land has almost doubled," said Abul Kasim of Chowfaldandi village. "Previously, we leased it for six months at Tk 30,000, but now it has jumped to Tk 50,000," he added.

Mostafa Kamal, president of the Bangladesh Salt Farmers' Welfare Parishad, said a limited group of people controls vast salt producing areas in Cox's Bazar.

"They have cleared mangrove forests and turned the land into salt fields. These

individuals lease out the land to small salt farmers and make huge profits. This syndicate is responsible for the rising land costs in salt farming," he said.

Kamal added that if farmers could lease land directly from the government at lower rates, they would benefit significantly.

### QUALITY VS QUANTITY

Salt Millers Association President Alam said locally produced crude salt contains around 75 to 80 percent sodium chloride (NaCl), compared to nearly 99 percent in India.

"As a result, the refining cost in our country is higher," he said.

He also mentioned that Bangladeshi farmers often harvest salt within a week, while producing high-quality salt requires 12 to 15 days. "They prioritise quantity over quality, which ultimately affects the standard of the salt," he said.

Salt Farmers' Welfare Parishad President Kamal claimed that the NaCl content in Bangladeshi salt is around 90 percent.

He admitted that the overall quality is slightly lower, attributing it to the country's weather conditions.

Mohammed Wahidul Islam, a farmer from Kutubdia upazila in Cox's Bazar, said low-quality salt reduces their income as demand for such salt is low in the market.

"After getting early warnings about cyclones and rainfall, we are often forced to collect immature salt from the field before it has fully developed," said Islam.

### WHO CONTROLS THE PRICE?

Salt farmers are forced to take loans from middlemen or intermediaries at high-interest rates, as accessing formal loans is difficult. In return, they must sell their salt to these middlemen at prices lower than the market rate.

Alam said they buy crude salt at Tk 350 per maund at the mill gate, but farmers receive only around Tk 250 per maund at the field.

"Middlemen are eating up the profit of salt farmers," he said, adding that the market price varies by at least 20 percent from the field due to their influence.

Abdul Kader, a salt farmer from Chowfaldandi village, said they sometimes have to sell salt to middlemen at lower prices because they borrow money from them in times of need.

However, Sarwar Kamal, a middleman from Kutubdia, defended their role. "We collect salt from remote fields, transport it using additional labour, and sell it to millers, making a profit of Tk 10 to Tk 20 per maund," he said.

### IMPORTS AND INEQUITY

Salt farmers' associations have frequently raised concerns over imports, saying that large salt industries secure government approval by exaggerating salt production and demand data, contributing to a decline in the price of crude salt in the market.

Kamal urged the government to halt salt imports to protect local farmers.

Alam said that since the salt produced in Bangladesh has a lower NaCl content, the actual refined salt production is lower than the gross production of crude salt. As a result, industries need to import salt to meet local demand.

In the last fiscal year, the demand for salt was 25.28 lakh tonnes, while crude salt production stood at 24.37 lakh tonnes. This year, the country's demand is estimated at 26.10 lakh tonnes.

Kamal also pointed out that industries are importing edible salt under the guise of sodium sulfate, which is used in various industries.

### ERRATIC SKIES, UNCERTAIN FUTURES

Nabi Hossen, a 52-year-old farmer from Chanua union of Banskhali upazila under Chattogram, has been involved in salt farming for 22 years. However, he now faces mounting challenges due to extreme weather events, largely caused by climate change.

He said his production costs have increased significantly due to unpredictable weather patterns, including irregular rainfall and cyclones.

"Erratic rainfall puts us into uncertain conditions. Most of the time, extreme rainfall damages our salt in the field, which puts our livelihoods at risk," he said.

Between 2019 and 2023, at least 10 cyclones hit Bangladesh, causing significant damage to salt farming. These storms destroyed cultivation infrastructure and flooded salt pans, severely disrupting production.

In 2021, Cyclone Yaas washed away 52,000 tonnes of salt in Chattogram and Cox's Bazar.

Abdul Halim, a farmer from Moheshkhali upazila in Cox's Bazar, lost his entire salt yield during the cyclone. "I still carry the scars of the disaster that devastated me," he said, adding that he has yet to fully recover from the losses.



PHOTOS: MOKAMMEL SHUVO