



CLOCKWISE: Under the shade of the historic banyan tree at Ramna Park, Chhayanaut brought together over 150 performers who captivated the audience with 24 thoughtfully curated pieces on the morning of Pahela Baishakh to celebrate the first day of the Bangla New Year. The Faculty of Fine Arts brought out the Anondo Shobhajatra from Dhaka University campus. A group of women performed a dance during a colourful procession at an event titled “Oligoli Halkhata” at Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed Park in Gulshan.



PHOTO: SHEIKH MEHEDI MORSHED, AMRAN HOSSAIN, PRABIR DAS

## Fitch flags risk to Bangladesh

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help preserve price competitiveness in the US market, it could also magnify debt burdens for countries with sizable external liabilities.

The report comes as part of a broader assessment of Asia-Pacific sovereigns, many of which are highly exposed to global trade.

“APAC’s high trade openness and exposure to US demand leave it particularly exposed to US tariff risks,” Fitch said.

The agency said export-oriented growth models across the region, including in China, Vietnam, Taiwan, Thailand and South Korea, face direct threats from the evolving trade environment.

Although the US imposed a 10 percent tariff on most imports, lower than the 15 percent rate Fitch had assumed in its March Global Economic Outlook, the effective tariff on China exceeded expectations. Meanwhile, temporary exemptions, such as one granted on April 11 for some electronics goods, may offer brief relief to affected economies.

Still, the outlook remains clouded by uncertainty. “Tariff rates remain very volatile,” Fitch said, adding that full implementation of the April 2 tariff measures, largely paused on April 9, would significantly increase the economic and credit impact for APAC countries.

Fitch also flagged limited fiscal headroom for many governments in the region. While countries like Singapore, Taiwan and China could deploy fiscal support without endangering their ratings, others like Indonesia and Thailand may face greater pressure due to high debt and modest consolidation since the pandemic.

Fitch warned that prolonged fiscal loosening in response to trade shocks could weaken sovereign ratings over time.

“Sustained large-scale fiscal loosening could put downward pressure on some ratings, particularly if it led to a change in fiscal strategy over the medium term,” Fitch said.

## Soybean, palm oil prices spike

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The adviser also said that improved supply and increased competition might bring down the prices soon, he said.

Bashir said the government had been forgoing around Tk 550 crore in revenue from edible oil every month. In the months leading up to Ramadan, nearly Tk 2,000 crore in revenue was waived.

Since October last year, the government has lowered VAT on edible oil twice.

On December 15, the National Board of Revenue lowered VAT on the import of crude and refined soybean oil and crude palm oil to 5 percent.

As the rate went back to 15 percent

## In coffins, from faraway lands

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**UNKNOWN CAUSES AND LACK OF RESEARCH**

The expatriates’ welfare ministry classifies deaths resulting from illness as natural causes.

Government data suggest that most migrant deaths occur due to stroke or brain hemorrhage. Other causes include heart diseases, work-related accidents, road crashes, suicides, and homicide.

The majority of the deceased were between the age of 38 and 42, with many dying within a brief period after joining work.

Despite this alarming trend, the government has yet to conduct any studies or investigations to determine why so many workers are dying abroad. **WHY ARE MIGRANT WORKERS DYING?**

Prof Tasneem Siddiqui, acting executive director of the Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit (RMMRU), said Middle Eastern countries have extreme desert climates, and unskilled Bangladeshi workers are often employed in high-risk jobs under harsh conditions. Many have to work for 12-18 hours a day in cramped and unhygienic environments.

Mental stress and prolonged separation from family also contribute to health complications like strokes and heart diseases, she pointed out.

A 2023 study by the RMMRU found that a significant proportion of Bangladeshi migrants in the Middle East work at construction sites.

They endure extreme daytime heat, which could lead to organ damage; respiratory, heart and kidney diseases; and brain-related disorders, the study said, adding that climate change is exacerbating the risks.

Exposure to high temperatures creates long-term health issues, often requiring lifelong medical treatment, mentioned the study titled “Deadly Heat: The Impact of Extreme

Temperatures and Climate Change on Migrant Workers in the Gulf Region”.

Tasneem said there is no official registry or documentation of heat-related fatalities. Heart failure is often recorded as the cause of death on certificates issued by host countries.

“Scars or injury marks are sometimes found on the corpses. We have repeatedly stressed the need for re-autopsies to determine the actual cause of death.”

It’s necessary to install a freezer at the airport where bodies can be preserved for performing re-autopsies, she said.

She urged the authorities to keep in mind the best interests of migrant workers while signing Memorandums of Understanding with host countries, ensuring that workers receive all

NUMBER OF REPATRIATED BODIES						
YEAR	ksa	malaysia	uae	oman	kuwait	
2022	1,500	738	411	461	235	
2021	1,266	801	388	430	241	
2020	785	697	374	349	278	
2019	1,323	736	429	341	322	
2018	1,196	638	307	254	252	

necessary supports, including treatment and insurance.

“Only safe migration can bring down the number of deaths abroad,” she added.

Shariful Hasan, associate director of the BRAC Migration Programme and Youth Platform, said that stroke and heart attack are the most cited causes on death certificates of migrant workers.

“It’s not normal for people aged 32-38 to die suddenly from stroke or heart attack. These workers, who go abroad spending large sums, become so desperate to earn money that they

often engage in risky work.”

He further said migrant workers often live in cramped accommodations under harsh weather conditions, with limited access to nutritious food, clean water, and healthcare. Excessive heat and poor living conditions could contribute to their deaths.

“The government must investigate these deaths, identify the actual causes, and take steps to prevent further loss of life.”

Shakirul Islam, chairperson of Ovivashi Karmi Unnayan Program, said the government must probe the causes of deaths mentioned on death certificates and ensure appropriate compensations for the families of the deceased.

Migrant workers often endure severe mental stress due to a lack of

work and unpaid wages. There should be mandatory health insurance for workers, with embassies ensuring its enforcement, he said.

Asked about the rise in migrant deaths, Shariful Islam, deputy director (Welfare) at the Welfare Board, said it’s difficult to investigate the causes of deaths because autopsies are conducted abroad under the host country’s legal framework.

“Migrant workers are given a three-day orientation before departure, but most don’t follow the instructions,” he said, underscoring the need for an extensive awareness campaign.

SM Nazer Hossain, vice president of the Consumers Association of Bangladesh, said over the last two to three years, the cost of living increased.

Although the government has taken several measures, buyers have benefited in very few cases, he said, adding that now, the hike in edible oil prices will further worsen their hardship.

Raising prices at this moment was not the right decision—the government could have explored alternative ways to generate revenue, he added.

Bangladesh’s annual demand for edible oil stands at around 24 lakh tonnes, with about 90 percent met through imports, according to the Bangladesh Trade and Tariff Commission.

increase the tax-to-GDP ratio. “NBR reforms are being implemented, along with various policy changes. We are strengthening our position to stand on our own feet. We have sufficient strength.”

Anisuzzaman said, “We believe that the garment sector will not be significantly impacted, as the existing opportunities will continue for some time.”

On Bangladesh’s progress in meeting the human rights and environmental conditions required to obtain GSP+ benefits, he said the chief adviser provided clear instructions to accelerate efforts in addressing these conventions promptly.

“The reform commissions and their reports will help us in this regard. Significant labour reforms have been implemented, along with democratisation efforts, which are part of addressing these issues.”

## Pak foreign secy arrives today

**First Dhaka-Islamabad FOC in 15yrs set for tomorrow**

STAR ONLINE REPORT

Pakistan Foreign Secretary Amina Baloch will arrive in Bangladesh today to attend the Foreign Office Consultation (FOC), the first such diplomatic engagement in 15 years, as Dhaka and Islamabad seek to normalise relations.

At tomorrow’s FOC at the State Guest House Padma, Foreign Secretary Md Jashim Uddin will lead the Bangladesh side, while Amina Baloch will head the Pakistan delegation.

All bilateral issues will be discussed during the FOC, said diplomatic sources.

Pakistan’s Deputy Prime Minister Ishaq Dar, also the foreign minister, is expected to visit Bangladesh on April 27–28.

Relations between the countries have been warming since the fall of the Awami League-led government last August. Pakistani Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif and Chief Adviser Prof Muhammad Yunus has met twice since then – on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly in New York in September last year and at the D 8 summit in Cairo in December.

Since then, Bangladesh has eased visa rules for Pakistani nationals and launched direct shipping.

Both countries’ businesses are showing keen interest in boosting trade, said the sources, adding that Pakistan also wants to enhance cultural exchanges and establish direct air connectivity.

## US officials arrive

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The visit comes amid a clear shift in US foreign policy. The previous Biden administration prioritised democracy and human rights – issues that hold less significance for current administration led US President Donald Trump.

The visit takes place at a time when there seems to be a sharp shift in policy from that of the Biden administration.

The focus of the Biden administration’s foreign policy was democracy and human rights, issues that seem to be not so important to the current US President Donald Trump.

Trump is more transactional, said foreign policy experts.

Trump imposed high tariffs on the countries exporting to the US, including Bangladesh. Concerned by the fresh 37 percent tariff for Bangladeshi products, Chief Adviser Muhammad Yunus wrote to Trump requesting the suspension of tariffs for 90 days and committing to import more from the US.

On April 10, Trump, however, suspended the new tariffs, except for those on China, for 90 days.

Meanwhile, the US Trade Representative and Bangladesh’s commerce ministry held a virtual meeting last week, during which the US side wanted to know what actions Bangladesh would be taking.

“From Bangladesh side, our priorities will be a reduction in tariffs, support for the interim government reforms and elections, funding for the Rohingya plus their repatriation at the earliest,” a foreign ministry official told The Daily Star.

Bangladesh has already unilaterally reduced tariffs to zero on 190 US products and offered zero tariffs for 100 more products to reduce the trade imbalance.

Also, Bangladesh can import more US products, including cotton and soybean.

In 2024, Bangladesh’s exports to the US were \$8.4 billion, and imports were \$2.2 billion.

On the first day, the US diplomats are expected to meet major political parties, including the BNP, Jamaat-e-

Islami and the newly-formed National Citizens’ Party (NCP).

Tomorrow, the delegation is scheduled to call on Foreign Adviser Touhid Hossain and National Security Adviser and Chief Adviser’s High Representatives on Rohingya and Other Priority Issues Khalilur Rahman.

The delegation is also likely to call on Yunus.

“It is not yet finalised,” a diplomatic source said.

During the interactions, Chulick will focus on reforms and democratic transition, the source said.

“Everybody is curious about the elections in Bangladesh. So, definitely, the interim government wants support from all and keep them on board as it reforms and goes for elections,” the diplomatic source added.

On the other hand, Herrup will be focused on the Rohingya crisis, funding and the Myanmar crisis.

Bangladesh has been sheltering 1.2 million Rohingyas, most of whom faced military atrocities in Myanmar in 2017.

Despite funding cuts globally, the Trump administration, on March 28, announced \$73 million in new financial aid for Rohingya. The US is the largest provider of aid to the Rohingyas, contributing nearly \$2.4 billion since 2017.

“With global funding shortages, we will be seeking funding from the US. At the same time, we will also seek US support for the Rohingya repatriation at the soonest possible time,” said another diplomatic source.

Myanmar, which has been roiled in a civil war since the military coup in 2021, is now trying to recover from the devastation of a 7.7 magnitude earthquake.

The Arakan Army now controls around 80 percent of Myanmar’s Rakhine State, which is facing a humanitarian crisis. Additionally, rampant drug and arms trafficking, along with kidnapping and human trafficking, are fuelling regional security concerns.

“All these issues may come up during the discussion,” the source said.

## BNP meets CA today

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At today’s meeting with the CA, the BNP would seek to know specifically when the interim government intends to hold the national election.

Prof Yunus has said on multiple occasions that the next election would be held between this December and June next year while the BNP insists the government should be more specific.

The party has also expressed concerns that some key individuals in the government were out to delay the election.

BNP Secretary General Mirza Fakhru Islam Alamgir and several other leaders are scheduled to meet the CA at state guest house Jamuna around noon.

BNP standing committee member Salahuddin Ahmed on Sunday questioned whose agenda Prof Yunus was serving by remaining vague about the election.

“Why can’t you stick to one time frame? You are a world famous and respected person. Such shifting won’t be well received nationally and internationally,” he said.

At today’s meeting, the BNP will clearly state its position that the national election must be held in December, said party leaders.

The leaders will also hint that they may take to the streets to press home its demand.

They will ask the CA to officially inform the Election Commission and publicly announce that polls would be held in December.

The issue was discussed at the BNP standing committee meeting, at the BNP chairperson’s Gulshan office. BNP acting chairman Tarique Rahman presided over the meeting.

Tarique on Sunday criticised those who are advocating reforms.

“They are talking about reforms while occupying key posts, being inside air-conditioned rooms at expensive offices. They are propagating reforms while enjoying government benefits like cars, salaries, bonuses, and allowances,” he said.

Meanwhile, CA’s Press Secretary Shafiqul Alam yesterday said, “The dialogue between our political parties and the Consensus Commission will determine the extent of reforms we will undertake. The decision on how much reform we will implement will be made, based on the consensus reached by the political parties.

“If it is decided that we will carry out 200 reforms, the question arises whether we will implement 10 of them now and leave the rest [for the next government]... This entire matter depends on the dialogue between the political parties and the Consensus Commission,” he added.

This would be BNP’s first meeting with the CA focusing solely on the election timeline.

The party believes that uncertainty has recently increased as several political leaders and advisers made “confusing statements”.

In their meeting with the Chief Adviser today, they are eager to pinpoint exactly when the election roadmap will be revealed.

The BNP has been demanding a national election since the fall of Sheikh Hasina in early August last year.

In early February, BNP leaders said the CA had told them that the election would be held by December this year.

The leadership now feels that the government has shifted its stance.

## Ensure strong monitoring for smooth transition

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turbulence in the transition process.

“We have already made the decision [over LDC graduation]. We have to move at full speed,” Chief Adviser’s Press Secretary Shafiqul Alam quoted Prof Yunus as saying at a press conference at the Foreign Service Academy following the meeting.

Finance, planning, industries, education, and several other advisers, top officials of the ministries attended the meeting.

Bangladesh in 2018 met the criteria for graduation in all three categories – per capita income, human asset index, and economic vulnerability index. It is expected to be upgraded in November 2026.

Many, including a section of economists and businesspersons, were in favour of a deferment by a couple of years.

They reasoned that the economy needed time to cope with the

severe fallout of the pandemic, the Russia-Ukraine war, and high global inflationary pressure over the last few years.

“There is no way for us to turn back from here; rather our collective effort must focus on ensuring its safety. This is a national issue and requires united efforts from all of us,” Anisuzzaman Chowdhury, special assistant to the chief adviser, told the briefing.

He said they are confident that there will be no problems, but there will be precautionary measures for any kind of hurdles.

The meeting decided to have a separate negotiating body as there is no such trade agency in Bangladesh although many developed countries like the US and Japan have such an entity.

He said economic diplomacy is on and that there are always challenges and opportunities.

Talking about businessperson’s

concerns, Anisuzzaman said that whether the transition to a developed country is delayed or not is irrelevant. Opportunities like duty-free access that Bangladesh is currently enjoying will not end in 2026. Australia has stated that the existing opportunities will remain, whether Bangladesh graduates or not. The UK has expressed the same sentiment. During the recent chief adviser’s visit to China, they also assured continued support.

Regarding the possibility of the termination of concessional loans from international lenders after graduation, Anisuzzaman said, “Aid is not a very big issue for us ... Even if we don’t receive concessional aid, it will not create a major problem for us. Similarly, our dependence on aid has decreased over time.”

He further mentioned that the government has taken steps to mobilise domestic resources and