



Why everyone's quietly moving to Uttara

RBR

"Uttara is so far away. Oh God, Uttara traffic! Uttara is a gram (village)!"

These are the things I have to constantly hear and bear because I live in this "far-off land" called Uttara.

In my imagination, Uttara is like Malificent's garden. A magical forest realm bordering a human kingdom, Uttara is considered a model town within the broader Dhaka metropolitan city.

To the naysayers, know that this planned neighbourhood is one of the divisions within the Dhaka Metropolitan Police, and it is greener and more tranquil than many of the posh urban core areas or city centres.

Living in this beautiful suburb in the northern part of Dhaka has both pros and cons, and I agree with that. The distance does pose a problem for many, but it is only 22 km away from the zero point. It is not that far, if you compare it with the time it takes to travel to other outskirts and neighbourhoods adjoining the capital.

The traffic bottlenecks in Uttara are a result of jams on the Tongi-Gazipur highway or on Mymensingh road; otherwise, there are only a few signals inside this well-organised residential area that hamper the flow of traffic.

In my two decades of living here, I can say that Uttara has become a thriving hub of economic, social, and cultural activities, which was not the case a few years ago.

Thoroughfares and avenues like Rabindra Sarani, Jashimuddin Avenue,

Sonargaon Janapath, Gareeb-e-Nawaz Avenue and Gausul Azam Avenue, which were lacklustre when I came to live here, are now booming with restaurants, cafes, rooftop eateries, shopping malls, hotels and offices.

With most of the happening cafes opening their branches in Uttara, the after-office hours, evenings, and weekends have become a routine social activity filled with fun, adding to Uttara's vibrant nightlife.

North End Coffee Roasters at Liberty Tower, which is a 13-story posh commercial building located beside the



PHOTO: STAR

Dhaka-Mymensingh highway in Uttara; Gloria Jeans in Navana Centroid, another modern architectural infrastructure in Gareeb-e-Newaz



Avenue; KOI Thé Bangladesh, a fancy bubble/boba tea store in Sonargaon Janapath; are all favourite spots for families and young adults.

Besides regular restaurants, Uttara flaunts two unique options for eating outside -- Yama Hotpot and Grill in Gausul Azam Avenue, which is probably the first of its kind in Dhaka; and Huaxing Chinese Food, which is a hole-in-the-wall kind of authentic Chinese eatery. They do not have fancy or modern ambiance, but they are popular for their authentic flavours and affordable prices.

The warm ambiance of green rooftop cafes, offering a panoramic view of the open fields -- and with their diverse culinary menu, has all added a fun factor to Uttara's soul.

Besides eating out, thrift shopping in Uttara is an added plus point. The street behind Rajlaxmi Complex, the underground markets, and footpath

markets have given a new meaning to cheap street shopping. Uttara residents are crazy for the various van markets selling unusual ceramic crockery, bed sheets, curtains, clothing, costume jewellery, etc.

Urban villages on the outskirts of Uttara make its farmers' market one of the best in town. Villagers sell an array of homegrown vegetables and leafy greens with an organic tag.

The colours and tempo of this laid-back but contemporary and versatile residential area give you a calm yet energetic vibe. Uttara is set to become the next commercial and social hub of Dhaka because of its prime location near the MRT and elevated expressway.

This emerging satellite town is a shade of all the fun colours -- yellow, green, blue, black, and pink. And wait till Uttara Third Phase develops, you will all want to get a piece of this coming-of-age suburban area.

Govt moves to ensure

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other similar injuries.

Category C covers those who have required long-term hospitalisation but are expected to recover and return to normal activities after treatment, as well as those who have already recovered and are able to function normally.

July Warriors would receive a health card to access priority-based, free medical treatment at all government hospitals at the district and upazila levels, medical colleges, and government-designated specialised hospitals, according to the draft.

A board of expert physicians will recommend critically injured victims for advanced medical treatment, both at home and abroad. For treatment abroad, the foreign ministry will provide necessary assistance.

Under the proposed ordinance, a new government agency named the "July Uprising Directorate" will be established to provide the financial assistance to the July Warriors and the families of the July Martyrs. Additionally, the directorate will initiate various projects and programmes aimed at supporting the affected families.

The directorate will prepare and publish official lists of the martyrs and injured individuals, preserve this data in a national database, and ensure their inclusion in official gazettes.

The directorate will be established in Dhaka and

it will uphold the spirit and ideals of the uprising through various initiatives. It will also work to preserve the history and memories of the uprising through research, maintenance of martyrs' graves, installation of memorial plaques, and promotion of this historical event internationally.

Provisions will also be made to set up regional offices of the directorate outside Dhaka, if necessary. The director general heading the directorate will hold the rank of additional secretary under the Liberation War affairs ministry.

Once the July Uprising Directorate is formed, the existing special cell dealing with the uprising will be dissolved, the draft said.

However, all activities previously carried out under this cell will be considered as conducted under the jurisdiction of the newly formed directorate, it added.

If any person, who is not a wounded participant or a family member of a martyr from the July uprising, seeks or receives benefits through deception, it will be treated as a criminal offence under the ordinance, according to the draft of the proposed ordinance.

The punishment for such an offence includes up to two years of simple imprisonment or a fine of up to Tk 2 lakh. Additionally, the government will recover double the amount of any financial benefit wrongfully obtained.

Hunger strike, class boycott

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Prof Rais said threats would not deter them and that the university would remain "shut" until the authorities fulfilled their commitments.

At a press conference, he recalled Wednesday's clashes and said he, on behalf of the teachers' association, had expressed their sorrow to the information and broadcasting adviser. "The adviser himself is a former student ... Our students have been peacefully protesting for two days now, yet the government has shown no response. This government was formed on the blood of the July revolutionaries, and now it discriminates against them. We helped these very people become advisers through our movement -- now they stand against us."

Initially, the protesters had placed a three-point demand: the introduction of a housing allowance for 70 percent of students from the 2025-26 fiscal year until residential facilities are ensured; approval of JnU's proposed FY26 budget without cuts; and the approval of the construction of a second campus at the next ECNEC meeting as a

priority project.

Yesterday, they added a fourth demand, calling for the punishment of police personnel who attacked students and teachers on Wednesday.

On Wednesday afternoon, violence broke out when police intercepted the students' "Long March to Jamuna" from the university's Shaheed Minar. Around 12:40pm, police charged batons and lobbed tear gas shells near Kakrail as protesters attempted to breach barricades.

Over 50 people, including teachers, students, and journalists, were injured. At least 38 individuals were taken to Dhaka Medical College Hospital for treatment. Following the incident, protesters staged a sit-in at Kakrail, blocking nearby roads. JnU Vice Chancellor Prof Rezaul Karim and other teachers later joined the demonstration.

At 10:10pm, Information Adviser Mahfuj Alam visited the protest site, stating that the government had instructed police to refrain

from using force and to engage in dialogue. However, tensions escalated when students began chanting "Bhua, Bhua" (fake, fake). Amid the commotion, a plastic water bottle struck the adviser on the head, prompting him to leave.

At least 300 teachers and students, including the vice chancellor, spent the night in front of Kakrail mosque. In a late-night notice, JnU authorities postponed all examinations scheduled for yesterday.

Notably, amid the ongoing demonstrations, the Dhaka Metropolitan Police yesterday imposed a ban on public gatherings, processions, and rallies near the official residence of the chief justice and the surrounding areas until further notice. The specified location is near the JnU protest site.

Contacted yesterday, University Grants Commission Chairman Prof SMA Faiz told this newspaper that the government is seriously considering creating an emergency fund to address the university's long-standing

residential crisis.

He said he had met with university officials and discussed how temporary housing could be arranged on the seven bighas (2,314 acres) of land owned by JnU. He added that the immediate priority was arranging accommodation for students.

Prof Faiz further stated that the government plans to hold discussions with the university's VC and treasurer, the education and finance advisers, and the Planning Commission to arrange the fund. "We hope to launch this initiative immediately."

Regarding the housing allowance demand, he said, "If approved, this demand won't remain limited to Jagannath University; it will spread to other institutions," adding, "This crisis [the students are facing] didn't develop overnight. Students couldn't raise their voices before because they were denied the opportunity."

"They have shown intelligence and sacrifice, but I urge them to act responsibly and not cross the limits of decency."

Bangladeshis may be given preference

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The ACC said the 37 accused in these cases collected exorbitant sums from 67,380 individuals by charging the workers nearly five times the government-set rate of Tk 78,990.

The accused recruiting agencies include M/s Orbital Enterprise, M/s Orbital International, Snigdha Overseas Limited, Binimoy International, Five M International, M/s Unique Eastern Private Limited, Catharsis International Limited, M/s Ahmed International, BM Travels Limited, BNS Overseas Limited, Rubel Bangladesh Limited and Ifty Overseas.

Former MPs Nizam Uddin Hazari (Feni-2), Masud Uddin Chowdhury (Feni-3), and Benazir Ahmed (Dhaka 20) were also part of the syndicate, the ACC said.

In a letter dated April 23, Azman Mohd Yusof, secretary-general of Malaysia's Ministry of Human Resources, asked Bangladesh to withdraw the allegations of human trafficking and money laundering involving labour migration to the Southeast Asian country.

"Allegations of human trafficking and money laundering -- largely

unsubstantiated -- have impacted the Malaysian reputation," he wrote, according to a Bloomberg report published yesterday.

The letter was sent to Neyamat Ullah Bhuiyan, senior secretary to Bangladesh's Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment. An official familiar with the letter confirmed its authenticity.

Azman asked Neyamat to review all pending allegations and withdraw those without merit, to ensure Malaysia "will preserve and enhance" its Trafficking in Persons (TIP) rankings, a US State Department assessment. It ranks countries based on their efforts to acknowledge and fight human trafficking.

"In addition, we request to prevent the revival of dismissed cases through a formal mechanism," Azman wrote.

Both Neyamat and Asif Nazrul declined to comment on the letter. A representative for Malaysia's human resources ministry did not respond to a request for comment.

A source in Kuala Lumpur, referring to Nazrul's meetings with Malaysian ministers in

Putrajaya, said that as part of the process to reopen its labour market to Bangladesh, Malaysia raised several important issues.

"One of the key concerns is the filing of sensitive cases in Bangladesh that involve human trafficking and money laundering," he told The Daily Star.

Nazrul said he asked the Malaysian ministers to ensure that all registered recruiting agencies, not just the selected ones, have the scope to send workers to Malaysia.

"We said the system should be open for all agencies. They said they would look into the issue," he said.

The adviser urged Malaysian Home Minister Ismail to allow Bangladeshi workers to receive multiple-entry visas, as is the standard for other foreign workers. Currently, Bangladeshi workers are given single-entry visas, which limits their mobility and rights.

The Malaysian minister took the matter seriously and instructed his officials to look into it, Nazrul said.

The discussions also touched on the need to regularise undocumented Bangladeshi workers who have overstayed or

whose visas expired due to employer negligence.

While Malaysia ruled out amnesty for those with long-expired visas, it agreed to continue reviewing and updating its regularisation policies.

Nazrul requested the Malaysian side to recruit skilled workers such as security guards, caregivers, and nurses.

Many employers were allegedly fraudulent but managed to secure approval to recruit foreign workers by bribing officials in both countries.

Andy Hall, a Nepal-based migrant rights activist who closely follows the Malaysian labour market, told The Daily Star, "A lot of the workers were hired by the bogus companies who actually had no jobs to offer."

Many of the migrants don't have passports or renewed work permits. They remain indebted and live a miserable life while frequently facing police raids, he said.

"It will be a blunder if the Bangladesh government again allows recruitment of workers in Malaysia without fixing the system and under the pressure of the syndicate," Hall added.

Academic stalemate grips 4 public univs

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Prof Toufiq Alam, who was recently appointed as BU vice-chancellor after his predecessor was removed amid student protests, acknowledged the situation. "No problem is insoluble. I will work together with students, faculty, and staff to resolve these challenges," he said.

Prof SMA Faiz, chairman of the University Grants Commission, said that the government has taken necessary steps to solve problems at KUET and BU.

"We are leaving no stone unturned in solving the problems. Each university has its own unique issues. We have taken students' demands very seriously," he told The Daily Star.

He said that students are finally getting the opportunity to raise their voices after many years. "They were held captive like slaves, but now they have found an open space where they can express themselves and share their experiences."

He, however, said learning loss is a real issue for students. "I hope everyone takes this matter seriously. Whatever can be done immediately from the commission's side, we will strive to do," he added.

There are 36,676 students currently studying at DU; 17,527 at JnU; 7,941 at KUET; and 7,346 at BU, according to UGC sources.

Most of the public universities saw disruptions in their academic and administrative activities after the July uprising. Vice-chancellors, pro-VCs and other officials of more than 45 universities resigned or were forced to step down from their positions.

While the government had planned to reopen universities on August 18, leading institutions resumed classes gradually between September 22 and October 20. Normalcy did not return to many campuses at that time.

Prof Anu Muhammad, a former teacher at Jahangirnagar University, said many of the new administrations formed after the August 5 political changeover were poorly organised and lacked proper planning, as the government largely failed to manage the situation effectively.

"In some cases, the government seemed nervous or unsure when to be firm or lenient while dealing with the crisis," he added.

Anu Muhammad said the government's recent "support" for some protesters may have led Jagannath University students to believe they could march to Chief Adviser Prof Muhammad Yunus's residence.

He called the students' demand for housing valid but criticised the police response to the demonstration as unnecessary, saying it worsened the crisis and even affected teachers.

In the cases of other universities, a proper follow-up was required after decisions were made, he said.

PROTESTS

At Dhaka University, no classes and examinations took place yesterday as a group of students protested against the killing of Shahriar Alam Shammo, a DU student and Chhatra Dal leader.

The students locked the gates of several faculties, the registrar's building, and the Central Library.

The students and teachers of JnU continued their sit-in yesterday, boycotting classes and exams for the second consecutive day at Dhaka's Kakrail intersection.

Their demands include a housing allowance for 70 percent of students from

the 2025-26 fiscal year until proper residential facilities are ensured.

At KUET, the stalemate began on February 18 when students were injured in an assault allegedly carried out by outsiders. The government later relieved the VC of his duties after a hunger strike by the student protesters.

Academic activities were scheduled to resume on May 4, but the teachers declared a boycott of academic duties, insisting that those responsible for assaulting teachers during student protests must be brought to justice first.

At BU, student protests began on April 15 when the university authorities removed a member from the university syndicate.

Prof Shuchita Sharmin, who had been facing backlash from a faction of students and teachers since the appointment of the registrar, was removed as VC on May 13 amid the protests against alleged irregularities and administrative mismanagement.

[Our correspondents in Khulna and Barishal contributed to this report]