

## Security at Utmachhara beefed up

Move comes after Islamist group drives away tourists

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Sylhet

Authorities have taken steps to safeguard visitors at Utmachhara in Sylhet's Companiganj upazila after a local Islamist group recently forced tourists to leave the tourist spot.

As the spot is not named on the government's list of tourist attractions, tourist police could not be deployed; however, the Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB) has been requested to maintain vigilance over tourists' safety, said Companiganj Upazila Nirbahi Officer (UNO) Azizunnahar.

"After we saw the video, we started looking into the matter. We got to know that the Islamist group acted alone. They didn't consult with any locals, not even the local union parishad member."

"The locals want tourism to flourish at the spot," she added.

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Cracks have appeared in the Tk 300-crore embankment in Chattogram's Banshkali upazila, just three years after its construction was completed in June 2022. Efforts to patch the damaged portions with sand-filled geo bags have so far proven ineffective, sparking fears of erosion among locals.

PHOTO: RAJIB RAIHAN

## 'Taandob' will not return to Tangail's Kalihati upazila

Religious groups agree to allow film's screening; organisers say they are no longer interested

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Tangail

The Islamist groups that had opposed the screening of the film "Taandob" in Tangail's Kalihati upazila yesterday backed down from their stance, agreeing to allow the film to be shown.

However, the organisers said they are no longer interested in continuing the screenings, citing potential financial losses caused by the negative publicity stemming from the protests.

On Tuesday, the screening was abruptly halted under pressure from the religious groups, despite the organisers having had official permission from the district council to run the film for a month.

Yesterday, the upazila administration held a nearly four-hour-long meeting with local religious leaders, politicians, and law enforcers in a bid to reach a resolution.

"At the meeting, they [religious leaders] told us they will no longer oppose the film's screening here," Khairul Islam, upazila nirbahi officer of Kalihati, told The Daily Star.

Contacted, Hazrat Ali, a local madrasa teacher, protester, and vice-president of the union unit of

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## Avoid all forms of public gatherings

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However, the actual number of infections remains unknown due to limited testing. Increasing public awareness would encourage more tests and reveal the true scale of the outbreak, he added.

Other directives of the DGHS include covering the nose and mouth with your elbow or a tissue when sneezing or coughing; disposing of the used tissue immediately in a covered waste bin; frequently washing hands with soap and water or using hand sanitiser for at least 20 seconds; not touching your eyes, nose, and mouth with unclean hands; and avoiding contact with infected individuals while maintaining a minimum distance of 3 feet.

People with fever, cough, and breathing difficulties are advised to stay home until recovery and wear a mask covering their nose and mouth. Caregivers should also wear masks as a precaution. If necessary, people are urged to contact the nearest hospital or call the IEDCR at 01401-196293 or the Health Portal at 16263.

The infection rate saw a sharp rise in May, according to the analysis of Covid-19 surveillance data conducted by the Institute of Epidemiology, Disease Control and Research (IEDCR).

Of the 1,409 samples tested in May, 9.51 percent tested positive for Covid-19 — the highest since January 2023, it said.

However, its scientists have emphasised that there is currently no major reason for public concern and stressed the importance of maintaining standard Covid-19 precautions.

Additionally, two new SARS CoV-2 Omicron subvariants, XFG and XFC, were detected for the first time at Chattogram Medical College Hospital in April, according to a hospital-based influenza surveillance study jointly conducted by icddr,b and IEDCR.

Prof Jafor stressed the need for strengthening the vaccination drive against Covid.

He urged all unvaccinated individuals over 18 to get vaccinated, and stressed that pregnant women, people over 60, and those with comorbidities must receive an additional dose.

He added that over 17 lakh doses have already been supplied to civil surgeons, with 14 lakh more available at vaccination centres.

DGHS's Director (hospital) Abu Hossain Md Moitul Ahsan and Line Director of Communicable Disease Control Prof Halimur Rashid, among others, were present at the briefing.

affected countries unless necessary.

Prof Jafor said creating public awareness and preparing for the unfolding situation has become necessary, as people have let their guard down against Covid since the end of the pandemic period.

He said the government is in discussions with international agencies and friendly countries to procure more test kits, as some of the stored kits have expired.

"We have already collected 28,000 rapid test kits, and 10,000 RT-PCR test kits are expected to arrive tomorrow [Wednesday]," he added.

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## US cities brace for more protests

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presidential run in 2028, and the state of California sued Trump and the Defense Department on Monday, seeking to block the deployment of federal troops. Trump in turn has suggested Newsom should be arrested.

Hundreds of US Marines arrived in the Los Angeles area on Tuesday under orders from Trump, after he also ordered the deployment of 4,000 National Guard to the city. Marines and National Guard are to be used in the protection of government

personnel and buildings and not in police action.

Los Angeles Mayor Karen Bass said the deployments were not necessary as police could manage the protest, the majority of which have been peaceful, and limited to about five streets.

However, due to looting and violence at night she imposed a curfew over one square mile of the city's downtown, starting Tuesday night. The curfew will last several days.

Police said multiple groups stayed

on the streets in some areas despite the curfew and "mass arrests" were initiated. Police earlier said that 197 people had already been arrested on Tuesday - more than double the total number of arrests to date.

Democratic leaders have raised concerns over a national crisis in what has become the most intense flashpoint yet in the Trump administration's efforts to deport migrants living in the country illegally, and then crack down on opponents who take to the streets in protest.

## Poor to get Tk 37,076cr next fiscal

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below the Tk 1.4 lakh are counted as ultra-poor.

Considering nutrition and child mortality, years of schooling and school attendance, access to electricity, drinking water, sanitation, cooking fuel and assets, many people are included in the programs.

It also considered people who are consistently unable to meet basic needs and move in and out of poverty due to seasonal or economic shocks.

Analysts have long been calling for separating the real allocation for the poor so that the actual impact can be realised, said Selim Raihan, a professor at the University of Dhaka's economics department.

"So it is a good step, but it is just one step — more things are needed."

The social safety net programmes have targeting errors, such as exclusion and inclusion errors. There are also leakages and corruption, and the programmes are misused politically, he said.

"So, a roadmap is needed on how these problems will be solved."

On the other hand, the database of the programmes is poor and fragmented. There is a lack of coordination among ministries as well.

"So, emphasis is needed to ensure that the funds meaningfully reach the poor. This is necessary as extreme poverty is rising and overall poverty is also increasing," said Raihan, also the executive director of the South Asian Network on Economic Modelling.

The total beneficiaries of the programmes are 7.34 crore and the government is planning to expand the coverage to 7.68 crore.

The proposed allocation for the pro-poor programmes is Tk 37,076 crore

— up 15 percent year-on-year — which is nearly one-third of the entire social security budget.

Among all the 39 pro-poor programmes, the highest number of beneficiaries is in the Vulnerable Group Feeding (VGF) programme: is 1.76 crore. The proposed allocation for the VGF is Tk 1,224 crore.

The second-highest number of beneficiaries is in the Open Market Sales programme: 1.23 crore.

The government proposed Tk 3,433 crore for this programme in fiscal 2026-27 to address the nutritional needs of disadvantaged populations amid the comparatively high food inflation.

The highest allocation among all the pro-poor programmes went to the old-age allowance programme: Tk 4,791 crore.

As many as 60 lakh receive allowance under the programme at present and the government is planning to increase the number of beneficiaries by another lakh in fiscal 2026-27.

The second-highest allocation went to the disability allowance and education stipend programme: Tk 3,845 crore.

In reality, targeting Bangladesh's safety nets has room for improvement. As of 2022, only about 44 percent of social protection benefits reached the bottom 40 percent of households, down from 51 percent in 2016, underscoring the importance of better targeting, according to the Social Security Budget Report 2025-26.

To enhance this, the government is pursuing data-driven tools like a Dynamic Social Registry (DSR). A DSR will continuously update household

data and allow on-demand inclusion of newly vulnerable families, improving precision in identifying the most disadvantaged, it added.

While it is a good step, the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics should be strengthened and the system digitised to implement this, Raihan said.

"If we can introduce NID cards in all the programmes, it will help avoid many problems in the system," he said, adding that India can be a good example as they use their Aadhaar card for every service.

In the upcoming fiscal year, the number of social safety net programmes has been trimmed to 95, down from the current 140. The government proposed Tk 126,731 crore, which is 16.04 percent of the total budget.

This fiscal year, the total allocation for social safety net programmes was Tk 136,026 crore, which was 17.07 percent of the total budget.

Programmes such as building rural bridges were repealed. Those were previously included to inflate total spending, said a finance ministry official.

On the other hand, some small programmes were merged, so the total number of programmes dropped, he added.

Out of the total social safety net, the government proposed to spend Tk 35,282 crore on pensions for government officials and Tk 27,000 crore on agricultural subsidies.

However, interest payments on national savings certificates were removed from the social safety net programmes, which impacted the total allocation, the finance ministry official added.

## People ready, time right for the election

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a referendum because it could be pointless if the general public did not fully understand the complex issues of reform.

"People might laugh it off or misunderstand what they're voting on. Instead, we are involving all political parties. If they can agree on the reforms, then it's more credible than putting everything into a referendum."

On the moderator's question as to why the interim government didn't trust the voters to vote for any of the parties and pick the best ideas, he said, "I wish we could do that — if everybody understood what bilateral, bicameral legislation was, what proportional voting was [and] all those complicated things. People say, 'Forget it. How much money will you give me? I'll vote for you.' Voting can turn into that. So we said we don't want to go that path."

He said political unity is the top priority of the interim government because the interim government intended to announce the July Charter next month, a year after the uprising in 2024.

"We've been holding meetings

and discussing the creation of a July Charter. It's not easy to get all political parties to sit down and debate, but we are doing it.

"I promise you — hopefully, I can deliver on this — that by next month, July, the charter will be announced in the presence of all parties. That is the highest level of unity you can expect in any country, especially just a month or a year after a revolution."

The Consensus Commission led by the chief adviser himself is holding meetings with the political parties on reforms, including of the constitution. The parties still have disagreements over several fundamental issues.

Also, the BNP demands the election by December this year, while Dr Yunus announced early this month that the election would be held in mid-April next year. The National Citizen Party, however, had been seeking more reforms before elections.

During the interview, Prof Yunus also highlighted his government's efforts in economic recovery, particularly reforms in the banking sector, stabilisation of foreign exchange reserves, and the maintenance of macroeconomic

stability.

Also yesterday, UK National Security Adviser Jonathan Powell and British Secretary of State for Business and Trade and President of the Board of Trade Jonathan Reynolds held separate meetings with Prof Yunus, according to the CA Press Wing.

Reynolds reaffirmed the UK's support for the interim government's initiatives to recover misappropriated funds siphoned off to various countries. Special Envoy to the CA Lutley Siddiqi proposed the initiation of a bilateral Free Trade Agreement (FTA) between the UK and Bangladesh, noting that Dhaka has already commenced discussions on FTAs with several countries, including Japan.

During the meeting with UK National Security Adviser Powell, they discussed the Rohingya crisis, democratic transition, recovery of the asset laundered out of Bangladesh, and regional stability in South Asia.

Prof Yunus also visited the House of Lords and observed a debate.

Last night, he attended a dinner hosted by King Charles. Today, Prof Yunus will receive the King Charles Harmony Award from the King.

## Starmer declines

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assisting in finding the money, the report quoted Yunus as saying.

However, according to the report, Yunus said the UK should feel "legally and... morally" obliged to help Bangladesh recover laundered money.

Yunus said the objective of his trip to the UK was to bring out "more enthusiastic support" from the UK.

Yunus, a Nobel prize winning economist, has headed an interim government since a student-led movement ousted Sheikh Hasina last August.

The report says Bangladesh's investigations into the finances of Hasina and her Awami League have at times threatened to reflect badly on Starmer's UK Labour party.

In January, Tulip Siddiq, then anti-corruption minister and a close ally of Starmer, was forced to resign after weeks of questions over her financial ties to her aunt, former prime minister Sheikh Hasina.

She has been accused of receiving material support, including property, from figures connected to the AL.

Tulip has denied any wrongdoing, but resigned from her ministerial position.

Meanwhile, Tulip, who remains an MP, has asked to meet Yunus in a letter this week.

She said she wanted to clear up the "misunderstanding" being perpetuated by Bangladesh's Anti-Corruption Commission.

Yunus, however, told the Financial Times that he would not meet Siddiq.

"This is a legal issue... a legal process," he said of the investigations into Tulip's affairs. "It's not personal."

Yunus said that during her 16-year-rule, Hasina turned her "power into an opportunity to grab money" for some relatives and associates.

There had been a "big looting process", he said.

The report, citing Bangladesh

authorities, said that around \$234b was siphoned off while Hasina was in power, and the UK was a prime destination for "stolen" funds.

Yunus named Canada, Singapore, the Caribbean and the Middle East as other destinations for allegedly misappropriated assets, said the report.

He said the trip to the UK was "just the beginning", and that he was planning further visits. His administration was looking to get support from "all directions" in the UK, including businesses, financial institutions, the police and all intelligence agencies, he added.

"We need the support from the people of Great Britain."

His team still hoped to meet the prime minister, they said.

The UK's National Crime Agency last month obtained freezing orders on two London properties owned by the son of an ally of Hasina.

## 51% Bangladeshi girls married

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Maternal health is also a major concern in Bangladesh, where the maternal mortality ratio stands at 115 deaths per 100,000 live births. About 70 percent of births are attended by skilled health personnel and 54 percent of women aged 15-49 use contraceptives. The total fertility rate per woman is 2.1.

The report estimates Bangladesh's population at 175.7 million, with 28 percent aged 0-14 years and 7 percent aged 65 and older. Life expectancy at birth stands at 74 years for males and 77 years for females.

Natalia Kanem, executive director of UNFPA, in the report said that the State of World Population reports have brought to light a number of concerning findings: that roughly half of all pregnancies are unintended; that public rhetoric around population size and fertility rates is driving fear, which can be, and has been, used to fuel ethnonationalism and undermine reproductive rights; and that, despite

significant advances in sexual and reproductive health and rights, the most marginalised people have experienced the fewest gains.

Data published by UNFPA over the past five years also show that about one in 10 women are unable to decide whether to use contraception. Roughly one quarter of women are unable to make decisions about their own healthcare, Natalia said.

In March, report of UNICEF, UN Women, and Plan International shows that Bangladesh has the highest child marriage rate in Asia, with 51 percent of women, now aged 20-24, got married before 18.

Adolescent girls in Bangladesh continue to face challenges, particularly in child marriage and gender disparities, according to the report.

Despite global progress in investing in girls, Bangladesh continues to struggle with deeply rooted gender inequalities, limiting opportunities for adolescent girls in education, employment, and safety, it said.

## UK freezes assets

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dubbed "Britain's FBI", coincided with this week's visit to London by Chief Adviser Prof Muhammad Yunus.

Saifuzzaman had been a close ally of deposed Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, who fled Bangladesh in August 2024 after hundreds were killed as security forces cracked down on student protests.

After Hasina's departure, Bangladesh authorities launched an investigation into allegations of widespread corruption in her government.

In earlier statements to Al Jazeera, Saifuzzaman said the funds used to buy his overseas properties came from legitimate businesses outside Bangladesh, which he had owned for years. The former minister claimed he was the subject of a politically motivated "witch-hunt" against him.

Saifuzzaman has at least 260 properties in the United Kingdom for which he has paid at least GBP 134.76 million or Tk 1,888 crore, according to The Daily Star's calculation from company filings publicly available on UK government websites.

The three-time Awami League lawmaker has also at least 537 mortgages against properties in the UK. A vast majority of these properties are in London.