



Yunus urges UK support to enhance maritime capabilities

DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENT

Bangladesh has sought the UK's support in enhancing the country's maritime domain capabilities and exploring marine resources, as Bangladesh is purchasing a naval ship from the UK.

The request was made during a meeting in London yesterday between Chief Adviser Prof Muhammad Yunus and Lesley Craig, head of the South Asia Regional Department at the UK's Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO). Commodore Whalley also accompanied the UK delegation.

During the meeting, Craig briefed Prof Yunus on the HMS Enterprise, a multi-role hydrographic survey vessel designed

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Prime accused confesses to trafficking for Russia war

COURT CORRESPONDENT

Alomgir Hossain, a prime accused in a case filed over trafficking people to Russia for forced participation in the war, confessed to a magistrate yesterday.

Dhaka Metropolitan Magistrate GM Farhan Ishtiaq recorded his confessional statement after Alomgir agreed to give it, said a court staffer.

After recording the statement, the magistrate sent him to jail.

Details of the confession could not be immediately known.

Earlier, on the night of February 5, a team from the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) arrested Fabia Zerin Tamanna, a partner at Dream Home Travels and Tours Ltd, at Dhaka airport while she was attempting to flee to Nepal.

According to CID, the trafficking ring lured victims with promises of high-paying jobs in Russia -- offering salaries

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Two injured in mugging incidents in the capital

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Two people were injured in separate mugging incidents in the capital's Wari and Mohammadpur areas, where the muggers stabbed the victims and fled with cash.

One of the incidents took place around 5:00am yesterday in Wari's Tikatuli area, while the other occurred around 11:00pm on Thursday on Tajmahal Road in Mohammadpur.

In Wari, Sirajul Islam, 55, a poultry trader from Dholpur in Jatrabari, was heading to Kaptan Bazar by a CNG-run auto-rickshaw to buy chickens when three muggers stopped him near the Tikatuli rail gate, said his son Abu Bakar.

"They tried to snatch his money. When he resisted, they stabbed him in the hand and leg and fled with Tk 70,000," he told The Daily Star.

Sirajul was taken to Dhaka Medical College Hospital (DMCH) and later released after treatment.

In Mohammadpur, Mithu, 42, a battery-run rickshaw driver, was attacked while driving along Tajmahal Road.

Fakhruddin, a security guard who took Mithu to the hospital, said, "Three muggers tried to snatch his rickshaw. When he resisted, they stabbed him in the abdomen and leg. As he screamed, they fled with Tk 2,000."

Mithu was initially taken to Shaheed Suhrawardy Medical College Hospital and was later shifted to DMCH early yesterday due to the severity of his injuries. He is currently undergoing treatment there.

Inspector Md Farouk, in charge of the DMCH Police Outpost, confirmed that both victims were brought to the hospital after being stabbed by muggers.

VANISHING RIVERS of Patgram

Rampant illegal stone mining puts once-thriving waterways on deathbed; locals blame political influence, lack of action from authorities



S DILIP ROY and MOHAMMAD JAMIL KHAN, back from Lalmonirhat

Abdus Salam, 55, was sifting stones from a dredger machine on Dharla riverbank in Kawamari area of Lalmonirhat's Patgram upazila.

The midday calm was being shattered by the grinding roar of numerous dredger machines scattered across the riverbank, with long iron pipes sucking up stone and sand from the riverbed, leaving craters in their wake, while dust clouds swirl over the surface of the river.

Piles of sediment rise along the banks, as evidence of the relentlessly destructive operation.

"I was once a farmer. I lost all six bighas of my land to river erosion. There's nowhere else to go. But I have to feed my family. So, I'm forced into this. What else can I do?" Salam asked. His voice ached with bitterness.

"It was the local political leaders who started the extraction. We protested. No one listened. Now we do it ourselves. There's nowhere else to go. The riverbed is our last resort," he also said.

Patgram is crisscrossed by three rivers -- the 31.5-kilometre-long Dharla, the 21-km Singimari, and the 4-km Saniajan -- all flowing in from India.

The rivers were once lifelines of the region for farming, irrigation, fisheries and water-based transport. Now they are left on verge of oblivion having suffered

years of rampant, illegal stone extraction. Reminiscing old days, locals describe the rivers as more than waterways.

These rivers are their past and future -- sources of food, identity, and community. Yet, while a handful profit from plundering them, entire villages are left to grieve and survive amid ecological collapse.

Bangkanda's Nazir Ali, 78, recalled a time when boats used to glide across the river. "Now it's

MINING PITS OR DEATH TRAPS?

Day labourer Surat Ali, 60, from Kawamari village, traced back to how the predicament unfolded since around 1991. "We used to collect stones with nets. Then politically influential people brought in dredgers to extract stones on a large scale. That was the beginning of the end," he said.

Over the years, the riverbeds became curved into deep pits that eventually turned into death traps, with at least 20 people -- including seven students, eight

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all sandbars. We get some water during the monsoon. The rest of the time, it's dead."

Nazrul Islam, 78, a freedom fighter from Rasulganj, "My 10 bighas of farmland beside the Dharla, as well as our family graveyard, are all lost to river erosion exacerbated by the rampant stone extraction."

Shamsheer Ali, 65, a farmer from Bangkanda, said those who protested were rather harassed by the administration. "Now I can't even bear to look at the river," he added.

"It's like a festival sometimes -- 400 to 500 dredgers working day and night," said Mahtab Ali, 70, another farmer from Rasulganj. "These rivers are dead. The only solution is proper dredging, not looting."

children, and five farmers or labourers -- drowned over the past two decades, accord

On July 25 last year, Miskat Hossain, 12, drowned in one such mining pit. His father, Nurul Islam Nuru of Bangkanda village, never recovered from the loss.

"The pain of losing my son engulfs me every single day. We protested repeatedly. Nobody cared," he lamented.

Ittekhar Ahmed, president of Patgram Press Club, said, "We've reported on these deaths, but the administration neither kept records nor took any measure. The illegal stone extraction just continues."

THE SYNDICATE

For decades, local politicians and their associates have been engaged in stone extraction, forming syndicates by exploiting their influence.

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of the Wildlife Management and Nature Conservation Department in Sylhet.

A study in 2012 found that the park's maximum capacity is 400 tourists per day, he added.

"During holidays, the forest area becomes chaotic. Tourists

and breeding," said Saju Marchiang, an environmental activist and local eco-tour guide.

According to the Wildlife Management

following Eid-ul-Azha, generating revenue of about Tk 4,50,000.

"The forest is primarily a sanctuary for wildlife, not a



shout, blow horns, and even try to lure animals with food. This disturbs their natural behavior and affects their diet

and Nature Conservation Department, a total of 3,946 tourists entered Lawachara National Park in the four days picnic spot. It's unacceptable that people would enter their habitat and create such disturbances," said Sohel Shyam, founder

of Stand for our Endangered Wildlife, a conservation group.

Sohel and other activists have long called for stricter regulation, including capping daily visitor numbers, mandatory eco-guides for all tourist groups, and penalties for those who flout environmental norms.

Jamil Mohammad Khan, assistant conservator of forests at the Wildlife Management and Nature Conservation Department, admitted that tourist numbers rise during holidays, adding that they have verbally discouraged picnic activities.

"However, there is no official directive yet to regulate the number of visitors," he said, adding, "The forest and its wildlife are the park's main attractions. If they are destroyed, there will be nothing left for tourists to see."

There are no also proper parking facilities either, and drivers hardly maintain the

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5 die of dengue in country

Four deaths recorded in Barguna alone

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

At least five dengue patients died in the last 24 hours -- the highest single day toll this year -- with four of the deaths reported from Barguna, currently the country's dengue hotspot.

With the latest fatalities, the total dengue death toll this year has risen to 28.

In addition, 159 new dengue patients have been hospitalised in the past 24 hours, 124 of whom are from the Barishal division, according to the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS).

With the new admissions, the total number of dengue cases this year has climbed to 5,570, including 4,255 cases reported from outside Dhaka.

Currently, 531 dengue patients are undergoing treatment across the country, with 193 receiving care in Barguna.



No more residential gas connections Says energy adviser

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Sylhet

Energy Adviser Muhammad Fouzul Kabir Khan yesterday said the government will not provide residential gas connections, even in areas where gas is being extracted.

"Instead of pipeline gas, households in those areas where gas is being extracted will be supplied with LPG cylinders at a subsidised rate of 800 takas," he said while talking to reporters after visiting the Kailashtila MST plant in Golaganj upazila of Sylhet.

The adviser also visited the Kailashtila wells 7, 2, and other installations at the gas fields.

"Gas wastage in households is extremely high," he said.

The adviser said gas production in the country is declining by about 200 million cubic feet annually. As a result, the government has had to increase LNG imports to meet the shortfall.

The government efforts are underway to boost domestic production and reduce dependency on imports, he said.

Fouzul Kabir said the two operational wells at the Kailashtila gas field are currently contributing 16 million cubic feet of gas to the national grid.

The adviser said, "In the past, when gas was not widely used, residential connections were provided. Now LPG is available. We are working to reduce its price."

He also said next time, households will rely on LPG, while pipeline gas will be reserved for industries."

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LAWACHARA NATIONAL PARK

Unregulated tourism threatens wildlife, disrupts ecosystem



MINTU DESHWARA, Moulvibazar

An unregulated influx of tourists, especially during public holidays, is threatening the biodiversity and natural balance of Lawachara National Park in Moulvibazar's Kamalganj upazila, raising concerns among environmentalists and forest officials.

The 1,250-hectare park is home to 167 species of trees, 246 species of birds, 20 species of mammals, 59 species of reptiles, and 22 amphibians -- many of them rare or endangered.

There has been a surge in number of visitors to the park in recent years. However, this increase in footfall is disrupting the fragile forest ecosystem.

"The noise, littering, and intrusion caused by large crowds have led to visible discomfort among animals, with many seen hiding in the undergrowth during peak tourist hours," said Rezaul Karim Chowdhury, former divisional forest officer

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