



Work together for a strong, healthy nation Says Yunus on World Population Day

BSS, Dhaka

Chief Adviser Professor Dr Muhammad Yunus yesterday called upon development partners, non-governmental organisations, media, and civil society to come forward and cooperate with the government in building a healthy and strong nation.

"Let's all take Bangladesh forward," he said in a message marking World Population Day.

Yunus said this year's theme of the day

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Students and parents cross the street through a broken divider in the capital's Kakrail area. Recent rain has left puddles at the spot, making the risky shortcut even more dangerous. Despite a foot-over bridge nearby, many still choose this path for quicker access. The photo was taken recently.

PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

July injured to get free flats

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The Ministry of Housing and Public Works has taken up a project to provide free flats in Dhaka to those who were seriously injured during the July uprising.

A total of 1,560 flats will be constructed at an estimated cost of around Tk 1,400 crore, funded by the government, said Syed Md Nurul Basir, chairman of the National Housing Authority (NHA).

"Many people became disabled or lost their ability to work during the July movement. The government will provide them with flats," he said.

The flats will be built on government land in Mirpur Section 9, and the project will be implemented by the NHA. The authority has already prepared the designs.

Each flat will be 1,270 square feet and include two bedrooms, a drawing room, a living room, a dining room, a kitchen, and three toilets, the NHA chairman told The Daily Star yesterday.

Earlier, the ministry had launched a separate project to provide free flats to the families of those martyred during the July uprising.

That project comprises 804 flats, with a total estimated cost of Tk 762 crore. Each flat will be 1,355 square feet and constructed on government land in Mirpur Section 14.

Chairman Basir said infrastructure development is currently the priority, and building construction is expected to take around four years.

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Starved and tortured for 42 days

2 Bangladeshis held hostage in Libya for ransom; PBI arrests 2 local collaborators

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Alamgir Hossain had nearly lost all hope. For 42 days, he and fellow Bangladeshi migrant Siraj Uddin were held hostage in a Libyan hideout -- shackled, beaten, and starved by human traffickers demanding ransom from their families in Bangladesh.

Each call home came with fresh torture, livestreamed over "imo", as the captors shouted -- "No money, no life."

The two men, hailing from Noakhali and working at a workshop in Tripoli's Jamazaiton area, were abducted on January 8 this year.

"The abductors later handed us over to another group, who accused us of running a manpower business and sending people to Italy," said Alamgir, who migrated to Libya as a welder in 2022.

"They demanded 4 lakh takas from each of us. When we said we couldn't pay, they tortured us and then handed us over to a Bangladeshi group."

Their families soon received ransom demands of Tk 22 lakh per person through video calls.

"There were nine Bangladeshis who tortured us," Alamgir said. "We were barely given food or water. They beat us every day for money."

During the calls, the captors whipped their feet with electric cables, smashed their knees so they couldn't stand, even stripped and assaulted them in the freezing Libyan winter, Alamgir added.

At one point, the abductors declared the victims dead and cut off communication, putting more pressure on the families. Siraj's sister-in-law, Parvin Akhter, managed to send Tk 1.5 lakh on January 13, but the torture continued.

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Migrants trapped in medical scam

Syndicate exploits Gulf-bound workers, issues fake fitness papers

MOHAMMAD JAMIL KHAN

Sohel Howlader (pseudonym) was preparing to travel to Saudi Arabia on a salesman visa. In February, he contacted a recruiting agency in Dhaka's Paltan area to begin the mandatory medical certification process for Gulf-bound workers.

The agency offered him two options: a Tk 10,000 "standard" medical package that could result in an "unfit" certificate if any health issues were found -- rendering his passport unusable until the expiry of the certificate. The other option would be a Tk 20,000 package that guaranteed a "fit" certificate regardless of his condition.

"I took the Tk 10,000 package because I believed I was healthy," Soheli told The Daily Star recently. He passed the test at a centre near 100-foot Road in Dhaka and received his certificate. Still, his travel remains stalled due to procedural delays.

Meanwhile, others were not as fortunate.

Ratan Mia from Cox's Bazar paid Tk 25,000 to an agent for a "fit" certificate from a Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) approved medical centre. After reaching Saudi Arabia, a follow-up check found him unfit, and he was deported.

"Now I'm drowning in debt, chased by loan sharks," he said.

These stories expose a powerful syndicate turning the mandatory health check into a tool for exploitation. Previously known

as GAMCA, the GCC approved centres in Bangladesh are allegedly controlled by a few influential owners who have monopolised the process and profit massively by manipulating referrals and issuing fake certificates.

Former GAMCA president Jahangir Alam Biswas admitted that a racket is extorting workers. "We're trying to resolve the issue through discussions. The ministry is also looking into it, and we've

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held several meetings," he told The Daily Star.

Although there are over 200 approved centres, nearly 90 percent of referrals go to just about 20 centres, according to industry insiders.

To undergo the check-up for jobs in the Middle East, agencies must buy a \$10 referral token from the Wafid system run by the Gulf Health Council. The total cost should not exceed Tk 8,500-9,000 per worker.

But syndicate-linked centres pre-book hundreds of slots in advance, leaving most other centres with no referrals, while a few centres process up to 500 workers a day.

Once tests are done, reports are uploaded online.

In many cases, tests are conducted in Dhaka, but the reports are submitted under the names of district-based centres to avoid scrutiny, a recruiting agency owner said, requesting anonymity.

The syndicate reportedly charges Tk 25,000-30,000 for a guaranteed "fit" certificate -- three times the official fee. As most slots are booked by them, they get to exploit the situation easily.

A highly placed source told The Daily Star that key figures behind the racket include Mohammad Bashir, owner of over a dozen centres and linked to Rabbi International, along with Noman Chowdhury and Enam Chowdhury.

Contacted, Bashir said, "I've never heard of anyone misusing these certificates or any investigation in this regard."

The GCC Approved Medical Centres Association has had no executive committee in Bangladesh for over a decade. Former president Jahangir Alam said Noman Chowdhury currently plays a leading role.

Noman and Enam did not respond to repeated calls.

Industry insiders estimate that by monopolising the process and

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Every country faces risks from militant attacks Says US Chargé d'Affaires

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Many incidents of political persecution and repression during the previous Awami League government's tenure were labelled as "militant activities" to divert attention, said US Chargé d'Affaires Megan Bouldin yesterday.

She made the remarks during a courtesy call on Home Adviser Lt Gen (ret'd) Jahangir Alam Chowdhury at his office in the Secretariat, according to a press release issued by the home ministry.

The two also discussed matters of mutual interest, such as the country's law and order situation, security cooperation, counterterrorism, prosecution of related cases, and the prevention of online sexual harassment of young women, among other issues.

The adviser said the US is a close ally of

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China backs govt's reform initiatives

Its foreign minister pledges cooperation in meet with foreign adviser

DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENT

Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi has expressed full support for Bangladesh's interim government's reform initiatives and pledged cooperation in key areas including trade, investment, medical tourism, and water management.

He made the commitments during a meeting with Foreign Adviser Touhid Hossain yesterday on the sidelines of the 32nd Asean Regional Forum in Kuala Lumpur, according to a foreign ministry statement.

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Govt takes steps for media reform, adopts 12 decisions

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The government has begun implementing several key recommendations made by the Media Reform Commission, with the information ministry initially adopting 12 major decisions.

The ministry disclosed the move yesterday in a press statement, noting that the 11-member Media Reform Commission, led by senior journalist Kamal Ahmed, submitted its report to the government on March 22 this year.

According to the statement, an ordinance ensuring the protection of journalists' rights will be enacted soon following consultations with stakeholders.

A task force will be formed to reform the newspaper circulation auditing system.

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Freeze, confiscate S Alam's assets in Singapore

Court orders ACC

COURT CORRESPONDENT

A Dhaka court yesterday ordered the Anti-Corruption Commission to take steps for freezing and confiscating foreign assets owned by S Alam Group Chairman Mohammad Saiful Alam, his wife Farzana Parveen, their children, and one son-in-law in Singapore.

The couple's sons are Ashrafur Alam, Asadul Alam Mahir, and Ahsanul Alam; their daughter is Maimuna Khanam, and her husband is Ahmed Belal.

The foreign assets include 43 bank accounts, shares of two hotels, eight hotels, development companies, and gold ornaments.

Of the assets, the couple owns shares of two hotels, whose market value stands at 68 million Singaporean dollars. Their sons, daughter, and son-in-law own development companies and other assets. Their daughter owns gold ornaments worth about 53,400 Singaporean dollars. However, the ACC did not mention how much had been invested or deposited in these accounts and companies.

Judge Md Zakir Hossain of the Dhaka Metropolitan Senior Special Judge's Court passed the order after ACC Deputy Director Tahasin Monabil Haq, who leads the inquiry team, submitted an application in this regard.

The judge also ordered the ACC to send a copy of the order to the concerned authorities in Singapore for the next course of action.

On Wednesday, the same court ordered the ACC to

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RMG workers being intercepted by police yesterday as they attempt to march to the state guest house Jamuna to press their demands. Earlier in the day, workers from eight factories of the TNZ Group in Gazipur held a sit-in in front of the Sramik Bhaban at Bijoy Nagar, demanding arrears and other benefits.

PHOTO: PALASH KHAN