

## Nepal waives climbing fees for 97 mountain peaks

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal has waived climbing fees for 97 mountains, officials said yesterday, hoping to steer people to its lesser-known peaks and boost local economies.

Climbers pay for permits on Nepali peaks and the fees vary depending on the mountain's height and popularity, with heftier charges for those such as Everest.

The 97 mountains, ranging in height from 5,870 metres (19,300 feet) to 7,132 metres, are located in the western Karnali and Sudurpaschim provinces.

"We hope it will bring our hidden treasures in the limelight and diversify the mountains Nepal offers," Himal Gautam, of Nepal's tourism department, told AFP.

It follows a busy spring climbing season in Nepal during which the government issued 1,168 climbing permits.

Over half of those were for peaks above 8,000 metres, including Everest, the tallest in the world at 8,849 metres.



PHOTO: CA'S PRESS WING

Chief Adviser Prof Muhammad Yunus returns home after wrapping up his three-day official visit to Malaysia last night.

## Rights situation

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detention, transnational repression and severe curbs on freedom of expression.

Under Sheikh Hasina's administration, rights groups and media reported "widespread impunity" for abuses, with rare prosecutions and mostly administrative punishments for security personnel found guilty, the report said.

It accused the former government of systematically violating constitutional protections on free expression.

Journalists and bloggers faced harassment, intimidation, and arrest under the Digital Security Act, Cyber Security Act and the ICT Act, often for criticising the government or religious views.

As of August last year, 5,818 cybercrime cases were pending in tribunals, including 1,340 classed as "speech-based offences". Even teenagers were prosecuted.

In September last year, the interim government announced the withdrawal of over 1,000 such cases and pledged to release detainees charged solely for speech-related offences.

It also revoked press credentials for 167 journalists tied to the former ruling party, limiting their access to official events.

In the first eight months of last year, rights group Ain o Salish Kendra documented 388 journalists harassed or attacked, including five shot during the protests.

Two journalists were killed and 128 were injured in 120 incidents, according to the Human Rights Support Society.

The report highlighted continued allegations of enforced disappearances under the Awami League, with most victims being political opponents or activists.

Between January and June, HRSS recorded three disappearances and eight illegal detentions lasting more than 24 hours.

After the change of government, many long missing individuals were released from secret detention centres, where some were held for years without charge.

Indigenous rights activist Michael Chakma was freed after more than five years in secret custody. Human Rights Watch estimates around 100 disappearance victims remain missing.

The interim government has faced at least one allegation of disappearance.

Relatives of Aslam Serniabat, an automobile association official, accused law enforcement of abducting him on August 29 last year. Police later produced him in court in connection with a murder case.

## End war

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one. I would like to do it almost immediately, and we'll have a quick second meeting between President Putin and President Zelenskyy and myself, if they'd like to have it," he said.

Trump said that while "certain great things" can be achieved during Friday's summit it is largely geared toward "setting the table" for a follow-up trilateral, which he acknowledged may not be in the offing.

"There may be no second meeting because if I feel that it's not appropriate to have it because I didn't get the answers that we have to have, then we're not going to have a second meeting," he said.

The US leader promised dozens of times during his 2024 election campaign to end the conflict on his first day in office but has made scant progress towards securing a peace deal.

He threatened "secondary sanctions" on Russia's trading partners over its invasion of Ukraine but his deadline for action came and went last week with no measures announced.

According to an AFP analysis of battlefield data from the US-based Institute for the Study of War, Russian forces made their biggest 24-hour advance into Ukraine in more than a year on Tuesday.

## Sada Pathor stripped bare

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He alleged that the administration did almost nothing for months despite media reports and protests from environmental organisations.

However, in April, the government decided to stop stone extraction completely from eight quarries in the Sylhet region.

Despite the decision, stone extraction continued across the region, including around Sada Pathor area, said Abdul Karim Kim.

"The illegal activities only caught national attention when videos and photos of massive looting at the Sada Pathor tourist zone became viral," he said.

The Zero Point area of Jallong in Gowainghat is also reportedly near collapse, with residents saying looting intensifying at night.

Videos circulating on social media showed hundreds of people, accompanied by small "Barki" boats, extracting stones at the Sada Pathor tourist zone. Excavators have also been deployed to dig deep pits, reaching stone layers beneath the riverbed.

"Whoever owns a boat now can extract stones," said Jamal Miah, a local boat owner.

Locals, speaking on condition of anonymity, said the previous syndicate had operated under a controlled system, employing registered workers through subcontractors. Now, they claim, the field is open to all, fuelling a looting frenzy outside quarries including tourist spots like Sada Pathor and Jallong's Zero Point.

They said, even though the quarries remained closed, influential people encouraged boat owners to bring stones to them, without taking into consideration where those were coming from.

"They [the boat owners] all are part of the syndicate," said a resident.

During the Covid-19 lockdown in 2020, the then government cancelled leases for all Sylhet quarries after decades of illegal extraction using heavy machinery. But on January 13 this year, the High Court overturned the order, reopening the door for stone lifting.

On April 27, the government suspended leases for 17 of the country's 51 stone quarries.

"No leases will be given for quarries that are under court injunctions or located within declared Ecologically Critical Areas (ECA)," the government said at that time.

After the decision, on June 14, hundreds of locals blocked the motorcade of Energy Adviser Fouzul Kabir Khan and Environment Adviser Syeda Rizwana Hasan in Sylhet, demanding the withdrawal of the suspension order. The advisers went to visit Jallong to see the situation.

Soon after, Sylhet District Road Transport Owners Workers Unity Council called repeated transport strikes to pressure the government.

"I see an all-party consensus when it comes to stone extraction," Rizwana said on Monday.

She added, "For the past four years, I was able to halt stone extraction in Jallong, but now, even as an adviser, I'm unable to do so. I saw no unity when it came to protecting Jallong. This is the reality of Bangladesh."

In response, Abdul Karim Kim said, "When an adviser says something like that, it gives the local administration a perfect excuse to relax vigilance, handing the syndicate a golden opportunity to loot."

According to locals, Companiganj upazila BNP president Shahab Uddin has long been involved in the stone syndicate and took control of the racket after the previous government fell.

On Monday, under mounting criticism, BNP suspended Shahab Uddin.

"BNP does not support such immoral acts as looting," said Abdul Quiyum Chowdhury, president of Sylhet District BNP. "Anyone involved in these activities will be suspended from the party."

Azizunnahar, upazila nirbahi officer of Companiganj, said, "Stone looting is a heinous crime. Since August 5 last year, we have conducted four joint drives against illegal stone extraction. We will conduct another drive in the area soon."

Muhammad Sher Mahbub Murad, deputy commissioner of Sylhet,

however, admitted that the situation was disappointing.

"We have formed a probe committee headed by an additional deputy commissioner, who has been asked to submit a report as soon as possible," he added.

The authorities, after a coordination meeting of the divisional and district administrations, took a five-point decision yesterday to protect the natural sites of Sylhet.

The measures include round-the-clock deployment of joint forces in the Jallong ECA and Sada Pathor areas, 24-hour police check-posts in Gowainghat and Companiganj, continuous drives to dismantle illegal crushing machines and cut off their power supply, identification and arrest of all involved in stone theft, and recovery of the stolen stones for return to their original sites.

Meanwhile, the Anti-Corruption Commission has launched an investigation into the large-scale looting of stones from Sada Pathor area.

A nine-member ACC team visited the area yesterday afternoon to collect evidence and statements from locals and administration officials.

"We found evidence of illegal stone extraction. We are now looking into who was involved, why the administration remained silent, whether there was collusion, and where the looted stones were taken," said Ashraf Uddin, assistant director at ACC in Sylhet office.

He said the team has spoken with locals and witnesses.

"A detailed investigation report will be prepared, and appropriate legal action will be taken against those found guilty," he added.

Meanwhile, Supreme Court lawyer Advocate Mir AKM Nurun Noby yesterday filed a writ petition with the High Court seeking its order so that the government submits its inquiry report on the looting of stones from Bholaiganj and takes legal action against those responsible.

The petition also sought deployment of additional forces at Bholaiganj and a rule asking officials to explain why their inaction should not be declared illegal.

with political brinkmanship in 1991 and 1996, when there were attempts to block elections under caretaker governments; in 2001; and again in 2006.

"We won't let elections happen' is the language of the old order. They claim to want to bring new politics, but they are speaking the language of the old," he told The Daily Star.

Haque said any party has the right to announce that they would not participate in the election and urge people not to vote.

"But to say, 'We'll see how the election happens' or 'We'll not let it happen' – that is the language of threat, and it does not fall within democratic practice."

He added, "Frankly, I didn't expect such language from them, especially from a group that is part of the younger generation and has experienced political struggles, and that is supposedly seeking change."

"This kind of rhetoric implies coercion or force. Whether they can block an election is another matter – and one could argue that they don't. They haven't yet built an organisation nationwide, nor do they have the capacity to mobilise the masses."

To Haque, this is not the language of constructive politics. "The way he spoke sounded more like the low-level bargaining language of the old political order, rather than something new."

Meanwhile, Iftekharuzzaman, executive director of Transparency International Bangladesh, termed Patwary's remarks "a political stand".

"If he means necessary reforms before the national polls, which they've been saying from the very beginning, that's okay. But if he's trying to threaten or block the polls, it would be a very ominous sign, which is not acceptable."

## We will hand over power

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people," he said on the last day of his three-day visit to Malaysia.

The chief adviser was addressing a special convocation ceremony of University Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) yesterday, where he was conferred an honorary doctorate in recognition of his contribution in promoting social business.

On Tuesday, he held a meeting with Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, attended a business forum, and held meetings with other ministers to discuss bilateral and regional cooperation. He returned home last night.

Regarding last year's uprising in Bangladesh, he said people stood up bravely against a fascist regime and hundreds have sacrificed their lives for a better future where everyone can live with dignity, free from intimidation, discrimination, and injustice.

"Today, we are working to build a new Bangladesh, where governance will be just, the economy will include everyone, and each person will have a fair chance to be successful," the chief adviser said.

He said reforms are the top priority of the interim government.

"To build a stronger and resilient Bangladesh, we need big changes in our economy. This includes supporting entrepreneurs, investing more in education and technology, and working closely with our international and regional partners," Prof Yunus said.

He said people are not poor because they lack talent or dreams, but because the system has never given them a fair chance.

"Our financial system is built to serve the rich, not the poor," said the chief adviser, detailing his Three Zeros theory. The theory envisions a better world without poverty, where everyone has meaningful work and the environment is protected.

"But right now, we stand at a crossroads. The world is facing many serious challenges – climate change, inequality, conflicts, and economic uncertainty."

"That's why we need a new way forward. A way that focuses on social business, sustainability, and putting people before profit."

Prof Yunus said one of the biggest dangers today is that wealth is becoming more and more concentrated in the hands of a few that creates discrimination and injustice.

"What we need is an inclusive economy, where wealth is shared fairly, and where every person has the chance to live with dignity and purpose."

Mentioning a strong friendship with Malaysia, he said as Bangladesh steps into a new era, the country wants to deepen cooperation with Malaysia and to explore new areas like the semiconductor industry, halal economy, renewable

## RANGPUR MOB VIOLENCE 8 cops suspended for negligence

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Lalmonirhat

Two sub-inspectors and six constables have been suspended over the mob beating that left two men dead in Taraganj upazila of Rangpur.

Rangpur Superintendent of Police Abu Sayem ordered the suspension yesterday afternoon on charges of negligence of duty.

The suspended cops are SIs Abu Jobayer and Safiqul Islam; constables Farikud Akhtar Jaman, Dhiraj Kumar Roy, Hasan Ali, Firoz Kabir, Moktar Hossain and Babul Chandra Roy of Taraganj Police Station.

According to district police sources, the eight were on patrol duty during the incident.

SI Abu Jobayer, the previous investigating officer of the murder case, has been removed from the probe, and OC (Investigation) Rafiqul Islam of Taraganj Police Station has been appointed as the new IO.

SP Abu Sayem confirmed the suspensions, saying further action will be taken against them following a departmental probe report.

The victims were Ruplal Robidas, 48, and his relative, Pradip Lal Robidas, 47. Ruplal worked as a cobbler at Taraganj Bazar, while Pradip drove a van.

Around 9:00pm on Saturday, Ruplal was returning home on Pradip's van. When they reached the Burirhat Bottola area in Sayar union, locals stopped them on suspicion of stealing the van and beat them to death.

Police arrived at the scene during the mob beating but left without rescuing the two men.

The next day, Ruplal's wife, Maloti Rani Robidas, filed a murder case with Taraganj Police Station against 700 unidentified people. Police later arrested four suspects identified from video footage.

## A beacon of wisdom goes dark

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hundreds more came to pay their respects, before being brought to his Netrokona town residence around 9:00pm.

He was cremated at the Netrokona Mahashashan later that night, said Sheikh Bahar Majumdar, secretary of the Mymensingh district unit of the Communist Party of Bangladesh, quoting family members.

Born on August 18, 1936, in Netrokona's Kendua upazila, he grew up in a time of sweeping political and social transformations that shaped his enduring commitment to progressive ideals.

He joined the Language Movement in 1948, and in 1952, played a pivotal role in organising demonstrations in Netrokona following the student killings in Dhaka, said Sarwar Kamal Robin, vice-president of Udichi Shilpigosthi Mymensingh.

Jatin later taught in the Bangla department of Mymensingh's Nasirabad College, from where he retired in 2002. His life remained deeply intertwined with literary work, leftist politics, and progressive activism.

He served two terms as president of the central committee of Bangladesh

Udichi Shilpigosthi and one term as president of the same organisation's Mymensingh unit. He was also a central leader of the Communist Party of Bangladesh.

Celebrated for the depth of his influence on Bangladesh's intellectual sphere, his notable works include "Pakistaner jonmo-mrityu darshan" – a memoir examining the emergence and eventual collapse of the idea of Pakistan.

Other works include "Bangladesher kabigan", "Bangaleer somajtantrik oitijhya", "Sanskritir sangram", "Golpe golpe byakoron", "Manabmon, manab dhormo o samaj biplob", and "Dwijatitotto niyotibad o bigyan chetona", among others. He also edited several books and journals.

Jatin received numerous awards, including the Bangla Academy Sahitya Padak in 2007 and the Swadhinata Padak in 2010 for his contributions to literature. In 2005, he won the Prothom Alo Best Book Award for "Pakistaner jonmo-mrityu darshan".

Other honours, such as the Dr Enamul Haq Gold Medal, Khalekdd Chowdhury Literary Award, and Moniruddin Yusuf Literary Award, reflect the range and impact of his work.