

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 steeper 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.

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 Zelensky 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.



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

PHOTO: CA'S PRESS WING

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 Jaflong in Gowainghat is also reportedly near collapse, with residents saying looting intensified 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 sub-contractors. Now, they claim, the field is open to all, fueling a looting frenzy outside quarries including tourist spots like Sada Pathor and Jaflong'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.

Muhammad Sher Mahbub Murad, deputy commissioner of Sylhet,

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 Jaflong 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 Jaflong, but now, even as an adviser, I'm unable to do so. I saw no unity when it came to protecting Jaflong. 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 mirbahi 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 Jaflong 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 Nobjy 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 Bholaganj and takes legal action against those responsible.

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

"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

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.

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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 Sls 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.

Sl 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.

Sl 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, Malotti Rani Robidas, filed a murder case with Taraganj Police Station against 700 unidentified people. Police later arrested four suspects identified from video footage.

Fault lines exposed after NCP leader's comments

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Ruhin Hossain Prince, general secretary of the Communist Party of Bangladesh, said the government should focus on the polls, instead of what political parties say.

"There is a certain quarter that wants to block the election... No one will take this statement into consideration."

Biplabi Workers' Party General Secretary Saiful Huq refused to dismiss the "highly irresponsible" comments. He warned the remarks could be "advance bargaining signals" to derail the election process.

"To call this arrogance would be an understatement... Is it wise to push the entire situation towards further instability and uncertainty?"

"Bangladesh is already facing grave security risks both internally and externally. Everyone agrees that an elected government with clear political command is essential. So, when someone seeks to derail this process, one must consider whether something else is hidden behind it."

Moulana Yunus Ahmad, secretary general of Islami Andolok Bangladesh, said that if Patwary meant reforms before elections, "he is right in some way," but criticised the language and manner as inappropriate.

He also questioned whether Patwary's statement reflected the stance of the party, NCP Office Secretary Mushfiqul Salehin told The Daily Star over the phone yesterday.

"He actually meant that we want all the key reforms before the next election, which was in his speech."

He also questioned whether those opposing polls had public backing.

"You've created a mob culture. Where are you taking the country's law and order?"

Have you seen what has been happening in the education sector over the past year?"

Jamaat-e-Islami could not be contacted, despite repeated attempts for comments on Patwary's remarks.

Prof SK Tawfiq M Haque, director of South Asian Institute of Policy and Governance at North South University, noted similarities in Patwary's tone