

TOURISTS CANCEL NEPAL TRIPS

amid unrest, leaving operators distressed

JAGARAN CHAKMA and
SUKANTA HALDER

Bangladeshi tourists are cancelling planned trips to Nepal en masse out of safety concerns amid violent unrest in the neighbouring country, which has seen at least 25 deaths, its premier resign and flee, the military take over, and curfews imposed.

Renowned for its cultural sites and scenic landscapes, Nepal has become one of the prominent tourism destinations in recent years, with the number of tourists increasing by 34 percent last year. Its visa-on-arrival facility for Bangladeshis has further boosted demand, particularly as many other destinations, including India and Western countries, have tightened entry restrictions.

Now, industry insiders fear that the current chaos in the Himalayan country could result in a setback for growth.

The interim government has advised Bangladeshis to avoid trips to the country until the situation subsides.

Besides, the Tour Operators Association of Bangladesh (TOAB) has already instructed all of its member operators to advise their clients currently in Nepal to stay inside hotels as a precaution, the association's President Md Rafeuzjaman told The Daily Star.

"There's no concrete data on how many Bangladeshi tourists are presently in Nepal, since most tour operators do

not maintain or share client-specific records," he said.

However, others say that even without any intervention from TOAB, tourists are taking action on their own.

"No tourists will be travelling from Bangladesh to Nepal in the next two weeks," said Taufiq Uddin Ahmed, a former TOAB president.

"The uncertainty has led to voluntary cancellations. Most are postponing or dropping their plans due to safety concerns," he added.

The unrest in Nepal comes at a time

and adventure sports, Chitwan National Park for wildlife, and Nagarkot, which offers stunning Himalayan views, as well as the Everest Base Camp trek for serious trekkers.

"We are monitoring the situation closely. While inquiries and bookings are still trickling in, we have put all departures on hold until the situation improves," Rahman said.

No untoward incidents involving the tourists have been reported so far.

"But if the unrest prolongs, it will be detrimental for both the Bangladeshi

Others echo similar concerns.

Mainul Islam Razu, owner of Digonto Travel Freak, said on average, 35 to 40 people travel to Nepal through his agency each year.

"Our standard Nepal tour packages start at Tk 1 lakh, including airfare and accommodation. With only a 7 to 8 percent profit margin, even a slight decline in travellers leads to significant losses," he explained.

Apart from affordability and easy entry, Razu pointed out that people visit Nepal seeking peace and nature. "If that sense of safety disappears, they will look for alternative destinations."

But alternatives can be costly. For instance, the airfare for Malaysia or Sri Lanka alone can be up to Tk 70,000 during peak seasons like Durga Puja, which might reduce trips to those places as well.

The strain on tour operators comes at a time when they are also struggling domestically.

"Saint Martin's has just reopened, but Tanguar Haor has been a complete flop since last month, especially in September. Overall, it's been a very tough year for the travel industry," said Razu.

Meanwhile, airlines have also taken precautionary measures. Biman Bangladesh Airlines, with 114 passengers, diverted its Kathmandu-bound flight back to Dhaka amid the volatile situation.

READ MORE ON B2

Tour Operators Association of Bangladesh (TOAB) has already instructed all of its member operators to advise their clients currently in Nepal to stay inside hotels as a precaution

when trips to the country usually begin to surge as the clear autumn sky, mild temperatures, and low rainfall provide a pleasant experience. This is also the best season for trekking since the mountain views are sharp and unobstructed. Major festivals like Dashain and Tihar also take place.

Mohammad Ashiqur Rahman, senior tour counsellor executive at leading tour company Obokash, confirmed that several Bangladeshi tourists are still in popular destinations like Pokhara, which offers scenic lakes

and Nepali tourism industries," Imranul Alam, managing director of Tour Group Bangladesh, said.

He added that, on average, around 200 people travel to Nepal each year through his agency, and the current situation is already impacting his business.

"I am currently in discussions with a corporate client to arrange a trip to Nepal in the upcoming October. However, due to the ongoing situation, the client has already expressed considerable hesitation," he said.

Renowned for its cultural sites and scenic landscapes, Nepal has become one of the prominent tourism destinations in recent years for Bangladeshis.

PHOTO: MAINUL ISLAM RAZU



Trump urges EU to impose 100% tariffs on China, India to pressure Putin

REUTERS, Washington

US President Donald Trump urged EU officials on Tuesday to hit China with tariffs of up to 100 percent as part of a strategy to pressure Russian President Vladimir Putin, according to a US official and an EU diplomat.

Trump also encouraged the European Union to slap India with similarly expansive tariffs, said the official, who requested anonymity to discuss private conversations.

China and India are major purchasers of Russian oil and, as such, they play a vital role in keeping Russia's economy afloat as it continues to pursue its expanded invasion of Ukraine, which began in 2022.

Trump made the request, which was conveyed via conference call, to EU sanctions envoy David O'Sullivan and other EU officials. The EU delegation is currently in Washington to discuss sanctions coordination.

The EU diplomat said the US had indicated it was willing to impose similar tariffs if the European Union heeded the US request. "They are basically saying: We'll do this, but you need to do it with us," the diplomat said.

The US request, if heeded, would result in a change of strategy for the EU,

which has preferred to isolate Russia with sanctions rather than tariffs.

China firmly opposes the US applying such so-called economic pressure, its foreign ministry said at a regular press briefing on Wednesday, adding that it also opposed the use of China in discussions on Russia.

Trump, whose request was first reported by the Financial Times, has frequently threatened to impose tariffs on India and China as punishment for their purchases of Russian crude.

While Trump did hike tariffs on India over the summer by 25 percentage points in part due to its economic relationship with the Kremlin, Trump has yet to pull the trigger on the more punishing options he has floated.

At times, he has complained that Europe itself has not fully decoupled from Russia, which supplied about 19 percent of EU gas imports last year, although the bloc says it is committed to fully ending its dependency on Russian energy.

Later on Tuesday, Trump suggested that the US could, in fact boost trade with India, writing in an evening social media post that the US and India are working to address trade barriers between the nations. He added that he was looking forward to speaking with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

Apple holds down new iPhone prices amid tariff threats

REUTERS, Cupertino

Apple on Tuesday introduced an upgraded line of new iPhones, including a slimmer iPhone Air, and held prices steady amid US President Donald Trump's tariffs that have hurt the company's profit.

The iPhone Air comes with a high-density

battery and a brand new processor, and will be priced starting at \$999. Wall Street had been watching to see whether the company would increase the price of iPhones, or seek alternative routes to make up for tariff costs, such as increasing the cost of iPhone versions with more storage.

The model was the star of the company's

annual product launch event, with CEO Tim Cook saying "we're taking the biggest leap ever for iPhone." Apple called it the most durable iPhone yet. It will use the A19 Pro, a processor chip that it said it had tweaked for better energy efficiency and performance to match the device's thinner battery. Rivals including Samsung already sell phones marketed for their extremely thin profile.

The iPhone Air's price is slotted in between the company's other models, as analysts had predicted. Apple also launched the iPhone 17 and iPhone 17 Pro, the latest upgrade to its flagship smartphone, as well as a new version of its AirPods Pro wireless headphones and a blood pressure monitor in its latest Apple Watch.

A 256 gigabyte version of the iPhone 17 base model will start at \$799, the same as the previous iPhone 16 model with half the storage space. The iPhone 17 Pro will start at \$1,099 for a 256-gigabyte model, the same as the previous year's model with the same storage size, but without the option of a smaller-capacity phone at a lower \$999 like the iPhone 16 Pro.

Apple did not raise the price on watch models or the new AirPods Pro 3 either.

The prices were an indication that Apple was ready to swallow the cost of tariffs to ward off competition from Samsung, Alphabet's Google and domestic rivals in China, even as it has predicted that the levies would cost it more than \$1 billion in the current fiscal quarter.



Apple CEO Tim Cook (centre) poses with new products during Apple's "Awe-Dropping" event at the Steve Jobs Theater on the Apple Park campus in Cupertino, California on September 9.

Bridging the startup gap

MAMUNUR RAHMAN

In recent years, many Bangladeshi teenagers have won gold medals on international platforms for their innovative business ideas. But the question remains: can we create an environment where they can truly grow and thrive? This is a crucial challenge for our nation. While our young people are globally competitive, the current system often fails to support them beyond the initial award ceremony. We must bridge the gap between potential and reality.

My experiences as a country representative for two US-based start-up programmes, LaunchX and Students for the Advancement of Global Entrepreneurship (SAGE), have given me a unique vantage point. I have worked closely with young people across the country who develop globally competitive ideas, from sustainable energy solutions to AI-driven health technology. They are our nation's raw, untapped potential. Yet, as I reflected on a recent global innovation and commercialisation summit in Ontario, Canada, I was left with a disquieting question: where do all these brilliant ideas go?

This is a crossroads for Bangladesh. We have a vibrant, digitally native youth population, but our system is a leaky pipeline. We are good at producing raw talent but fail to capture and nurture it. At the summit, I was struck by the overwhelming presence of Israeli representatives. Many of their impressive projects came directly from universities. This is no accident. Israel, as I observed, consistently spends the largest percentage of its GDP on research and development worldwide.

This reality stands in stark contrast to our own. Our talented teenagers often hit a wall as they move from school to higher education. The dream of building a start-up is quickly replaced by intense societal pressure to secure a "safe" job, leading to what is commonly called "BCS mania", the single-minded pursuit of a government position. This risk-averse culture discourages the kind of experimentation that fuels a start-up ecosystem.

Our current support system for start-ups is well-intentioned but fragmented.



The government's vision to foster a start-up culture is commendable, and the allocation of a Tk 100 crore start-up fund is an encouraging step. However, the real challenge lies in connecting this fund effectively to universities and innovative private-sector service providers.

There is a severe lack of early-stage funding for young founders, a shortage of accessible mentors, and a policy landscape that is more labyrinth than launchpad.

To foster entrepreneurship, our universities must become more than just degree-granting institutions. Students, whether they are studying engineering, fine arts or social sciences, should be encouraged to present and develop business ideas. This would democratise entrepreneurship, allowing innovators from diverse backgrounds to emerge and thrive. Universities should also offer a minor in entrepreneurship, giving students foundational business skills and a structured pathway to turn their passions into viable ventures. During my Humphrey fellowship in the US, I saw the enthusiasm among students from non-business disciplines pursuing such minors at MIT and Michigan State University in particular.

The enormous opportunity of an AI-driven surge in entrepreneurship to harness our demographic dividend is something we must seize, even embracing the idea of founderless start-ups hinted at by publications such as The Economist.

Some might argue that we will catch up in time, pointing to the success of a few unicorns such as bKash and Pathao. But these are the exceptions, not the rule. The vast majority of our young innovators struggle to get off the ground, not because their ideas lack merit but because the foundational support system is missing. We need a shift in mindset, moving from celebrating individual success stories to building a sustainable ecosystem. The talent is here. What our youth lack is a system that believes in them and supports their journey from a brilliant idea to a solution that can tackle our nation's most pressing problems. The time to build that future is now.

The writer is coordinator of Ella Alliance and founder of Ella Pad