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## Return stolen assets to the rightful owners

Yunus urges countries, institutions at UN

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Chief Adviser Prof Muhammad Yunus has urged the international community to adopt and enforce strong global regulations to prevent the plunder of resources from developing countries and to ensure their return when stolen.

The current global financial system has failed to stop the illicit transfer of wealth, Yunus said, addressing the general debate of the 80th UN General Assembly in New York yesterday.

In some cases, he added, the very rules of international financial institutions have "enabled" the movement of vast sums of "illegal" money into tax havens.

"I call upon those countries and institutions that shelter such stolen assets: do not be complicit in this crime. Return the wealth to its rightful owners – the farmers, the workers, and the ordinary taxpayers," he said.

Yunus noted that recovering illicit assets stolen from Bangladesh is now one of his government's "highest priorities".

He said billions of dollars were siphoned abroad in the past 15 years through corruption, but legal obstacles in destination countries have slowed recovery efforts.

"Without sincere political commitment from the countries concerned



- Reforms to continue beyond next election
- Equal rights must for Rohingyas in Myanmar
- Two-state solution to ensure justice for Palestine

we will not be able to recover these assets," he warned.

Calling for reforms in global financial governance, Yunus pressed for an inclusive framework for international tax cooperation, coordinated measures against illicit financial flows, and stronger cooperation to recover stolen wealth.

His remarks echoed a white paper on the economy released last November, which estimated that an average of \$16 billion (around Tk 2 lakh crore) was siphoned abroad annually during Sheikh Hasina's "corrupt autocracy". In October last year, Bangladesh Bank Governor Ahsan H Mansur said \$17-18 billion (around Tk 2.2 lakh crore) was siphoned through the banking sector alone between 2009 and 2023.

A high-level joint task force is now investigating 11 priority cases of alleged embezzlement and money laundering. Preliminary findings suggest most of the 10 conglomerates under investigation laundered money to the US, UK, Canada, Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, Hong Kong, and other offshore jurisdictions, an official told The Daily Star recently. The task force is working with agencies in those countries to trace and recover the funds.

### REFORM, DEMOCRACY

This was Yunus's second address to the UNGA since taking office after the August 5, 2024 ouster of the Sheikh Hasina government through an uprising. Delivering his speech in Bangla, he said it was Bangladesh's youth who defeated tyranny and opened a new path toward a just and equal society.

"Our goal is clear: to create a democratic order where power is balanced, where no autocrat can ever return, where no elected leader can destroy democracy, and where those who are meant to protect the people can never again prey upon them," he said.

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WASIM BIN HABIB and  
TUHIN SHUBHRA ADHIKARY

Little Nishan's search for his mother seems never-ending. As he scans the house calling out her name, he bursts into tears when she doesn't appear. Though his father, Swapan Mia, does everything to comfort the two-year-old, the quiet, heartbreaking quest continues.

Just six days ago, Nishan lost his mother, Sharmin Akter, to dengue.

"Nights are the hardest," said Swapan, 34, a mechanic at a garment factory in Gazipur's Boardbazar.

As Nishan grows restless, Swapan takes him for a short walk before settling with him cradled on his thighs. He swings his legs gently, hoping the rhythm will lull him to sleep.

"But he wakes up crying for his mother's breastmilk. He sobs helplessly. My eldest son understands a little that his mother is gone. But how do I make a baby understand?"

Sharmin, 24, a homemaker, developed a fever about a week before her death. Assuming it was nothing serious, she took paracetamol. But three days before she died, she began vomiting and grew too weak to



Each year, several hundred lives are lost and thousands endure physical and financial hardships due to dengue, which is no longer confined to cities or seasons.

earlier, she might have survived. My family is completely ruined," Swapan said, fighting back tears. He is one of hundreds whose

lives have been upended by dengue, a mosquito-borne disease claiming lives almost daily across the country, leaving dreams shattered and families in despair. Gaps in government measures and public awareness have made the crisis worse.

Each year, several hundred lives are lost and thousands endure physical and financial hardships due to dengue, which is no longer confined to cities or seasons.

Government mosquito-control drives remain largely ineffective, with experts blaming outdated strategies, poor planning, and the absence of a comprehensive policy.

As of yesterday, 188 people had died and 44,693 had been hospitalised.

According to the Directorate General of Health Services, many patients and their families remain unaware of dengue's severity and seek care only when it becomes critical.

DGHS data shows 81 percent of dengue patients who died this year were admitted after three or more days of fever. Analysing 114 deaths, DGHS said 74 percent died within 48 hours of admission, half due to Dengue Shock Syndrome. Nearly 43 percent had comorbidities.

SEE PAGE 2 COL 1



On the banks of the Karnaphuli river, workers are busy sun-drying fish to make shutki, a beloved local delicacy. Though the season typically begins in November, this year's preparations started early due to an abundance of catch in the sea. The shutki produced here will be supplied to wholesale markets across the country. This age-old method not only sustains tradition but also provides livelihoods for hundreds of people. The photo was taken on Thursday near Chattogram city's Bastuhara slum.

PHOTO: RAJIB RAIHAN

## NEW CONDITION FOR \$5.5B LOAN IMF limits Bangladesh's foreign loan intake

REJAUL KARIM BYRON and WASIM BIN HABIB

The International Monetary Fund has, for the first time, set a ceiling on how much Bangladesh can borrow from abroad, citing rising risks in the country's external debt.

The lender introduced the new condition for the next instalment of its \$5.5 billion loan package during the fourth and fifth tranche review in June this year.

Under the terms, Bangladesh will be allowed to borrow a maximum of \$8.44 billion during the ongoing 2025-26 fiscal year, with a cap of \$1.91 billion in the first quarter and \$3.34 billion in the first half. The IMF will closely monitor foreign borrowing every quarter.

No such ceiling was there when the IMF originally approved a \$4.7 billion programme in 2023. It approved the fourth and fifth instalments, a top up of the original credit by about \$800 million with a six-month extension in June. So far, Bangladesh has received \$3.6 billion.

A senior finance ministry official said the newly introduced ceiling on foreign loans is based on the IMF's latest Debt Sustainability Analysis (DSA), which reclassified Bangladesh as

### EXTERNAL DEBT

(Public and publicly guaranteed)

IN BILLION US DOLLARS

	2010	2023	INCREASE
Bangladesh	21.15	74.13	3.5 times
India	100.56	214.92	2.13 times
Pakistan	44.08	92.99	2.10 times
Sri Lanka	16.43	41.38	2.51 times
Nepal	3.51	8.62	2.45 times

a "moderate-risk" country for two years in a row in FY23 and FY24.

The downgrade from a "low-risk" country reflects the growing pressure of repayments against export earnings and revenues.

According to the DSA, Bangladesh's debt-to-export ratio jumped to 162.7 percent in FY24,

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## BNP struggles to finalise candidates in half of seats

SAJJAD HOSSAIN

The BNP has identified at least 150 parliamentary seats where it expects difficulties in nominating strong candidates for the upcoming national election, according to party insiders.

For most of the remaining constituencies -- the other half of the 300-strong parliament -- the party says it faces little trouble in settling on a single nominee, based on internal surveys and reports from grassroots organisers.

"There are no qualified candidates in 150 seats, and the chance of winning against rivals is low. If the opposition exploits BNP's weak candidates, it will hurt the party," one insider said.

Senior leaders and others involved in the nomination process cited several reasons for the shortfall: the deaths of expected candidates, declining popularity, old age, and an excess of aspirants in certain constituencies.

In these contested seats, the BNP is considering more than 100 new faces, according to three Standing Committee members who spoke on condition of anonymity. The potential nominees are described as activists known for honesty, sacrifice, grassroots popularity, and a clean image, one of the leaders said.

A party insider said priority is being given to those who actively participated in protests after October 28, 2023,

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## DENGUE DEATHS Families left behind to pick up the pieces

WASIM BIN HABIB and  
TUHIN SHUBHRA ADHIKARY

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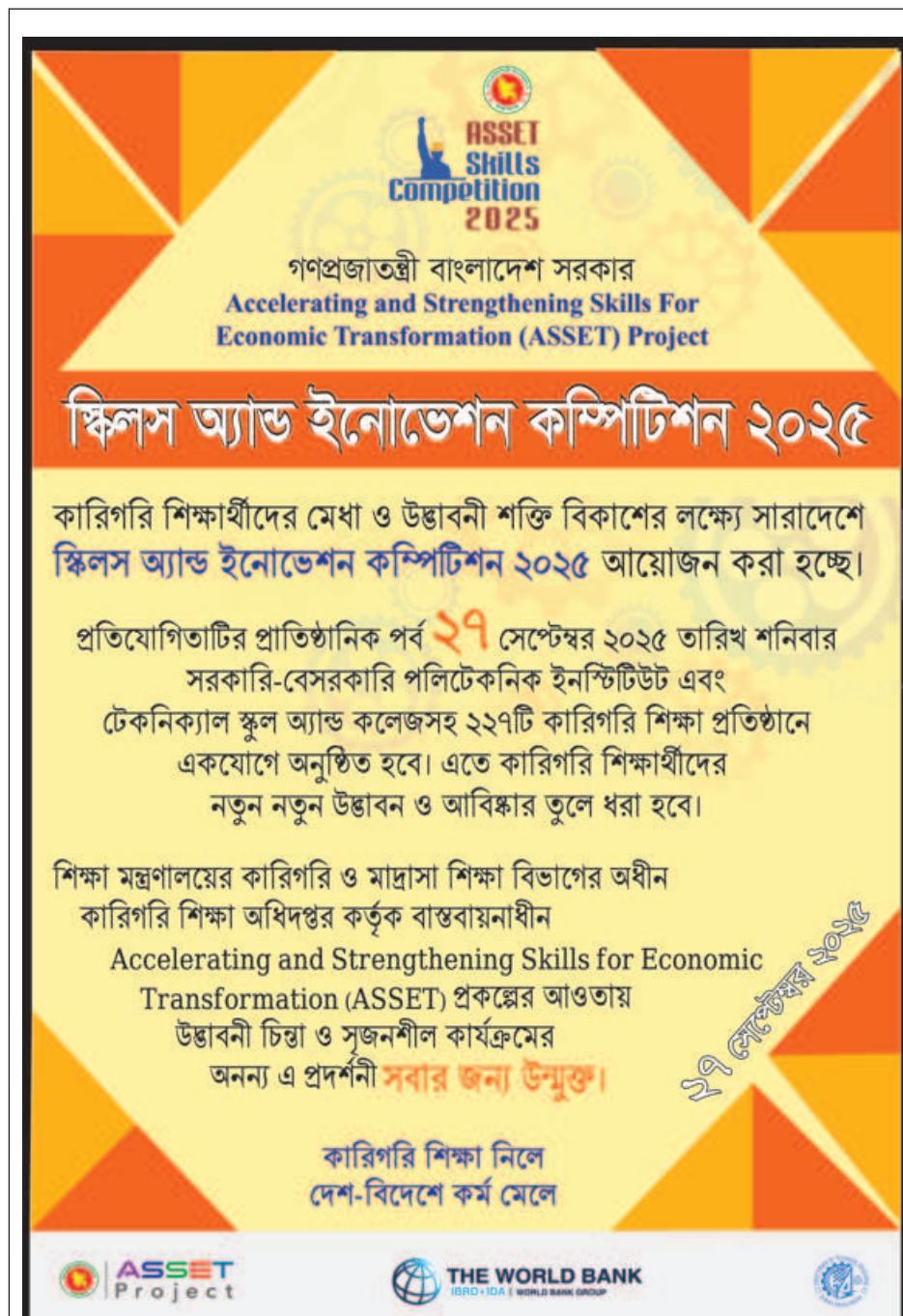
Government mosquito-control drives remain largely ineffective, with experts blaming outdated strategies, poor planning, and the absence of a comprehensive policy.

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# WORLD TOURISM DAY

## Tourism potential remains untapped

Experts, stakeholders urge e-visa, better facilities and stronger promotion

SUKANTA HALDER and ASIFUR RAHMAN

Despite its rich culture, diverse landscapes, and vibrant biodiversity, Bangladesh's potential as a tourist destination remains underutilised, for which tour operators blame poor branding and inadequate infrastructure.

Although Bangladesh Tourism Board data showed the number of foreign tourists welcomed by the country grew to 6,50,000 in 2024 from 6,21,000 in 2019 and 552,000 in 2018, the growth did not translate into higher revenue.

An Asian Development Bank report titled "Key Indicators for Asia and the Pacific 2025" shows earnings from foreign tourists fell to \$440 million in 2024 from



billion earning in 2024, followed by Sri Lanka (\$3.16 billion).

The World Economic Forum placed Bangladesh in the 109th position in its latest ranking of countries in regard to the size of their tourism industries last year.

Against this backdrop, Bangladesh is celebrating World Tourism Day with the theme "Tourism and Sustainable Transformation".

The government has planned various events to celebrate the day. The civil aviation and tourism ministry will hold a discussion and cultural programmes at the Parjatan Bhavan in Agargaon, following a bicycle rally in the morning.

Speaking about problems in the sector, tour operators and experts said many foreigners remain unaware of Bangladesh's diverse attractions, which causes the country to lag significantly behind its neighbouring countries.

From the ancient ruins of Paharpur in Naogaon and Shat Gambuj Mosque (Sixty Dome Mosque) of Bagerhat to the vibrant folk traditions and diverse ethnic communities in the Chattogram Hill Tracts and Sylhet, the country's cultural landscape

is extraordinary, they said.

Home to natural wonders like the Sundarbans, the world's largest mangrove forest, and Cox's Bazar, the longest sea beach globally, Bangladesh is a captivating destination with immense untapped potential among international tourists, they added.

Meanwhile, some tour operators have questioned the accuracy of foreign tourist figures reported by the Bangladesh Tourism Board.

"The actual number of foreign tourists may be significantly lower, as many of them come for business purposes with tourist visas," said Mahadi Hasan, chief executive officer of Bangladesh Eco Adventure.

Blaming Bangladesh's embassies abroad for poor branding, Mahadi said, "Around 90 percent of the embassies don't have basic promotional materials like brochures or flyers."

Alamgir Ferdous, managing director of Chuti Resort Ltd, urged the government and private sector to work together to ensure world-class hospitality services, modern infrastructure, and safety measures at tourist spots to attract more visitors.

Rafiuzzaman, president of the Tour Operators' Association of Bangladesh, said, "Bangladesh has over 1,200 tourist spots, but the number of tourists visiting is hardly impressive."

Rafiuzzaman recommended taking steps to make the visa process more convenient, like introducing e-visa systems and online visa facilities, to reduce unnecessary obstacles for visitors and make travel easier.

Prof Santus Kumar Deb of Dhaka University's tourism and hospitality management department said without the support of the local communities, tourism cannot thrive, as they are crucial in ensuring safety and hospitality.

"For example, Nepal's branding highlights how local communities actively ensure tourist security, especially for women, and embrace tourism."

He mentioned that only 10 percent of the total budget allocation in the civil aviation and tourism ministry currently goes to tourism purposes, which he called inadequate for the development of the industry.

He suggested initiating direct flights to Cox's Bazar from Nepal, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, the Maldives, and India to attract more regional tourists. Besides, initiating regional cruises to travel from Bangladesh to Myanmar, Sri Lanka, or onward destinations would also increase the tourist number, he said.

At a press briefing on Thursday, Civil Aviation and Tourism Adviser SK Bashir Uddin said the ministry was working on amending the rules and regulations, including the national tourism policy and the registration act of travel agencies.

Contacted yesterday, Nuzhat Yasmin, CEO of the Bangladesh Tourism Board, said reform initiatives, including those related to visas, are being carried out, keeping in mind both local and foreign tourists.

## At least 100 feared dead in Nigeria gold mine collapse

REUTERS, Maiduguri

At least 100 people are feared dead following the collapse of a gold mining pit in Nigeria's Zamfara State, survivors and residents said on Friday.

The pit at the Kaduna mining site in on Thursday while scores of artisanal miners were working underground, witnesses told Reuters. Rescue operations continued into Friday.

Sanusi Auwal, a local resident involved in rescue efforts, said at least 13 bodies had been retrieved from the rubble, including that of his cousin. "Over 100 miners were involved during the collapse," Auwal told Reuters by phone.

"We are lucky to be rescued alive. Out of more than 100 people, only 15 of us were rescued," said Isa Sani, who is currently receiving treatment for injuries.

## 4 lakh evacuated, 3 dead as fresh storm batters Philippines

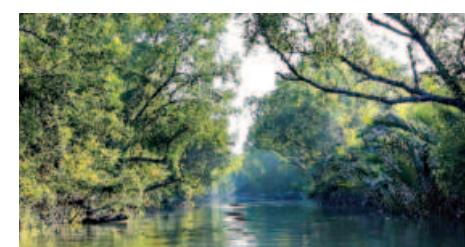
AFP, Manila

The Philippines evacuated hundreds of thousands of people and confirmed at least three deaths yesterday as it faced yet another tropical storm, days after it was battered by deadly Super Typhoon Raga.

Civil defence officials in the Bicol region in the south of Luzon island said three people were killed when walls collapsed and trees were uprooted by Severe Tropical Storm Bualoi, which is sweeping west by northwest at sustained speeds of 110 kilometres (70 miles) per hour.

Evacuees in one province took cover under pews as the roof of a church where they were sheltering was ripped apart by the storm.

Jerome Martinez, a municipal engineer in southern Luzon's Masbate province, told AFP that the wind destroyed the door, windows and ceiling of the church at around 4:00 am.



- Bangladesh ranked 2nd-lowest in SA for tourism revenue
- Over 1,200 tourist spots remain under-promoted
- Only 10% of aviation ministry budget goes to tourism development

\$453 million in 2023.

The report ranks Bangladesh the second lowest in the region that year by this measure. Among the South Asian countries, India topped the list with \$35

## Return stolen assets to the rightful owners

FROM PAGE 1

a political solution in Myanmar's Rakhine State that would ensure the Rohingya equal rights as citizens.

Eight years on, the Rohingya crisis continues without any solution in sight. Moreover, Bangladesh faces a slow but regular flow of Rohingya seeking protection.

The international community, beyond new and enhanced funding for humanitarian assistance, must apply "pressure" on Myanmar or the non-state actor in Rakhine to bring positive changes there and seek a political solution urgently, the chief adviser said.

He emphasised that neighbouring countries must assume their responsibilities.

He said the standard of living in the camps faces a situation of potential collapse given the funding crunch.

He also called for urgent action on Gaza, saying, "Nowhere is this tragedy more visible than in Gaza. Children are dying of hunger. Civilians are being killed without distinction. Entire neighbourhoods, including hospitals and schools, are being wiped from the map."

"We do agree with the UN independent international inquiry commission that we are witnessing a genocide happening live.

Emerging technologies such as AI and quantum computing must not exclude developing countries, he

added.

Yunus also cautioned against disinformation and hate speech, noting how false narratives spread during and after last year's uprising.

### REGIONAL COOPERATION

Calling the UN "the custodian of multilateralism", Yunus acknowledged that global diplomacy is "under strain" and urged greater transparency and dialogue among member states.

He said Bangladesh remains committed to regional cooperation through BIMSTEC, BBN, SASEC, and other platforms, and expressed interest in joining ASEAN.

He also called for revitalising SAARC, saying its institutional framework still has potential to deliver welfare to millions.

On development, he warned that progress toward the Sustainable Development Goals has "fallen dangerously behind" due to shrinking aid and widening financing gaps. He urged donor nations to reverse the trend.

"We must remember that the challenges ahead cannot be met by any single country alone," Yunus said. "In today's world, when crisis erupts in one corner, the security of the whole world is put at risk."

Some aspirants told party leaders they would accept the final decision, though one candidate, speaking anonymously, warned that if the "wrong person" were chosen, grassroots activists would not support them.

Tarique leading candidate selection through video calls

BNP considers 100 new faces to strengthen weak seats

Senior leaders meeting nomination seekers to avoid rifts

Seat-sharing talks with allies underway; draft list due Oct

Chandpur BNP Vice President MA Shukur Patwari, a candidate for the Chandpur-2 seat, said he and five other local leaders seeking the nomination met the senior leaders on September 22. "We were told to support whoever the party nominates," he said.

Muhammad Rahmatullah, a National Executive Committee member and aspirant for Barishal-5, also met senior leaders the same day. "We assured the senior leaders that we will work unitedly and will not go against the party's decision," he said.

Party officials say the BNP aims to finalise its preliminary candidate list

by the end of October.

### SHARING SEATS WITH ALLIES

The BNP has also asked its allies, who staged anti-government protests simultaneously with the BNP during the Awami League's tenure, to submit lists of potential candidates for seat-sharing talks.

Standing Committee members Nazrul Islam Khan and Amir Khosru Mahmud Chowdhury contacted alliance leaders three days ago requesting the lists. Shahadat Hossain, spokesperson of the 12-Party Alliance, said the names would be sent "within a day or two".

BNP leaders say they are also in talks with additional groups, including the National Citizen Party and several Islamist and left-leaning organisations, with negotiations likely to continue until the election schedule is announced.

They said the party will be more careful on seat-sharing this time, since the revised Representation of the People Order no longer allows candidates to use another party's symbol, in this case the BNP's paddy sheaf.

One senior leader, speaking anonymously, said the BNP recognises that leaders of its allied parties generally lack the grassroots support of its own candidates. Nevertheless, the party has asked for complete lists of nominees both to guard against defections and to maintain control over negotiations.

## Indian police detain activist after deadly Ladakh protests

AFP, Leh

Himalayas.

He received the prestigious Ramon Magsaysay Award in 2018 for his environmental work and contributions to reforming local schooling in Ladakh.

His life and work are said to have inspired a character played by Bollywood star Aamir Khan in the hugely popular movie "Three Idiots".

Wangchuk, who is a vocal advocate for Ladakh's environmental protection and tribal rights, was briefly detained by Delhi Police last year during a protest march.

Indian authorities on Thursday cancelled his non-profit's foreign funding licence.

Modi's government split Ladakh off from Indian-administered Kashmir in 2019, imposing direct rule on both.

New Delhi has yet to fulfil its promise to include Ladakh in the "Sixth Schedule" of India's constitution, which allows people to make their own laws and policies.

India's army maintains a large presence in Ladakh, which includes disputed border areas with China.

## IMF limits Bangladesh's

FROM PAGE 1

up from the IMF's earlier projection of around 116-118 percent. The debt service-to-revenue ratio has also risen, squeezing the government's fiscal space for fresh borrowing.

The ratios consistently exceed the IMF thresholds in stress tests due to a downward revision of export figures, the IMF said.

The finance ministry official, requesting anonymity, told The Daily Star, "Although Bangladesh's total external debt remains well below all IMF thresholds, risks have increased in certain areas, prompting this precautionary measure."

Economists say this shift marks a turning point.

"The IMF used to paint a golden picture of Bangladesh's debt outlook. That narrative seems to be changing," said Zahid Hussain, former lead economist of the World Bank's Dhaka office.

He added that the previous complacency based on debt-to-GDP ratio is being reconsidered in light of recent reserve shortfalls and foreign currency liquidity challenges in settling external payments.

Selim Raihan, executive director of SANEM, said the IMF's step seems "cautious and appropriate" to ensure fiscal discipline during the political transition ahead of the election.

"Over the years, foreign loans have risen significantly, and so has the repayment burden. Since these loans must be repaid in foreign currency,

we need to assess repayment capacity not just by debt-to-GDP ratio, but also by revenue and export," he said.

He warned that relying too heavily on loans to cover expenses during this stressed economic period of low investment would be unhealthy, even as reserves, remittances, and revenues show some improvement.

Foreign borrowing surged under the previous Awami League government, driven by mega projects and pandemic-related expenses. An Asian Development Bank report last month said Bangladesh saw the fastest growth in foreign debt among South Asian nations, with public and publicly guaranteed loans more than tripling in 13 years.

Government data shows external debt rose from \$20.3 billion in FY10 to \$68.8 billion in FY24. As of June 2025, the figure stood at \$80.19 billion.

Debt servicing also grew sharply, from \$876 million in FY2010 to \$4 billion last fiscal year.

Finance ministry officials, however, downplayed concerns, saying the interim government's foreign borrowing is much lower than in previous years.

In FY25, Bangladesh took \$8.32 billion in new loans, down 22 percent from the previous year. This fiscal year, new borrowing so far has been negligible, with only \$84 million taken in July and a \$150 million ADB loan signed in August, well below the IMF's ceiling.

## NAT'L ELECTION

### Khaleda Zia expected to contest from Feni-1

UNB, Feni

Former prime minister and BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia has been included as a member of Fulgazi upazila BNP committee in Feni district, her ancestral home.

She has repeatedly been elected MP from Feni-1 constituency (Fulgazi upazila).

Full committees were announced for six unions under Fulgazi upazila on Thursday night. Upazila BNP Convener Fakhrul Alam Swapon and Member Secretary Abul Hossain Bhuiyan approved the committees.

Khaleda Zia has been made the No-1 member of the Fulgazi Sadar union committee.

She is expected to contest the election from this seat, said Convener Fakhrul.



Three children -- Ayesha, Sharmin, and Mursalin -- collect snails from a swampy wetland in Madhobkathi village, Khulna, yesterday. During monsoon, villagers earn extra income by selling snails at Tk 25 per kg, and the children usually gather 3-4kg a day. PHOTO: HABIBUR RAHMAN

## Social media rife with polls-related misinformation

### Say experts; stress cyber awareness

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Political propaganda targeting both prominent figures and emerging faces is surging on social media ahead of the national election, cybersecurity experts said yesterday.

Government and private institutions, including political parties, should launch cyber awareness campaigns to mitigate security risks, they said at an event organised by the Cybercrime Awareness Foundation (CCAF) at Dhaka Reporters Unity in the capital.

False information spread on social media often serves a political purpose. Many political parties or individuals spread propaganda and misleading content to undermine



their opponents," said CCAF Adviser Syed Zahid Hossain. Mushfiqur Rahman, member secretary of the National Committee on Cyber Security Awareness, said a lot of misinformation is being spread through the use of artificial intelligence to create photo cards, which should not be shared without verification.

According to data from the Cyber Police Centre (CPC) of the Cyber Crime Investigation Department (CID), 1,74,830 victims filed complaints there between January 2020 and August 26, 2025.

Of these, 2,789 complaints were accepted for investigation, out of which only 40 cases have been

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## TONGI FIRE

### Another dies at DMCH

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

A shop employee, who sustained critical burn injuries in the chemical warehouse fire at Gazipur's Tongi, died while undergoing treatment at Dhaka Medical College Hospital yesterday.

The victim, Al Amin Hossain Babu, 22, succumbed to his injuries around 10:30am at the hospital's burn unit, said Inspector Md Faruk, in-charge of the DMCH police outpost.

Doctors said Al Amin had suffered 95 percent burns.

Earlier, two firefighters critically burnt in the blaze lost their lives.

Al Amin's co-worker, Anwar Hossain, said they worked at a nearby shop that had a warehouse in the affected market. "We went there to save some goods after hearing about the fire. That's when Al Amin got trapped and was burned."

## RAPE OF EIGHTH GRADER

### 'Arrest, punish perpetrators'

#### Protest rallies held in Dhaka, Khagrachhari

STAR REPORT

A protest march and rally were held yesterday on Dhaka University campus, demanding the immediate arrest and exemplary punishment of those involved in the gang rape of an eighth-grade Jumma student in Khagrachhari, and protesting the arrest and assault of an indigenous student leader.

The programme, organised under the banner of Adivasi Chhatra Janata, took place at the base of the Raju Memorial Sculpture.

Speaking at the rally, Dipayan Khisa, central committee member of Parbatya Chattogram Jana Samhati Samiti, urged legal action against those who abducted and harmed protesters and criticised media narratives that portray indigenous people as criminals.

The rally was presided over by Numongru Marma, president of Bangladesh Marma Students Council Dhaka Metropolitan branch, and chaired by Shantimoy Chakma, general secretary of Pahari Chhatra Parishad, DU branch.

It ended with a march around Shahbagh and back to the Raju Sculpture.

Meanwhile, in Khagrachhari, hundreds of students and indigenous community members held a mass rally protesting the rape and ongoing violence against

SEE PAGE 9 COL 5



Battery- and CNG-run auto-rickshaws ply a damaged road in the Rayerbazar area of the capital yesterday. Due to rain and lack of maintenance, this section of the Gabtoli-Sadarghat-Beribadh road is in a dilapidated state, causing slow vehicle movement and traffic congestion. PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON

## DURGA PUJA

### 'Security can't be for 5 days, it must be for 365 days'

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The Hindu community does not want to see attacks on idols and temples during the upcoming Durga Puja, the biggest religious festival of Hindus, said leaders of two organisations yesterday.

They said even while preparations for the Puja are going on, incidents of vandalising temples and idols have already taken place in 13 districts. In these cases, law enforcement forces acted quickly and arrested the accused.

"If we want to build a discrimination-free Bangladesh, we should not only think about security for five days of Puja, we have to think about security for all 365 days," said Jayanta Kumar Deb, president of Mohanagar Sarbojanin Puja Committee.

The issue was raised at a press conference jointly organised by the Mohanagar Sarbojanin Puja Committee and Bangladesh Puja Udjapan Parishad at the Dhakeshwari National Temple auditorium in Dhaka.

Reading out a written statement, Jayanta said before the Puja, they demanded the withdrawal of false and baseless cases filed against religious and ethnic minority leaders and innocent people.

Puja Udjapan Parishad President Basudeb Dhar said many people of the Hindu community have become victims of these fabricated cases. He requested the government to allow them to take part in the Puja.

Subrata Chowdhury, the Puja Udjapan Parishad's adviser, said those involved in vandalising idols and temples should be punished in accordance with the law.

At the press conference, the leaders also urged that during the Puja the metro rail should remain open until 11:00pm to facilitate smooth movement.

According to the Puja Udjapan Parishad, this year Puja is being held at 33,355 mandaps across the country, 1,894 more than last year, and at 259 mandaps in Dhaka city, seven more than the previous year.

## Musicians, poets decry attacks on Baul traditions



OUR CORRESPONDENT, Mymensingh

An event honouring legendary Lalon singer Farida Parveen in Mymensingh yesterday turned into a cultural protest against recent attacks on Baul culture and practices.

The programme, organised by cultural organisation "Porompora" at Baroitala, on the banks of the Brahmaputra river, honoured the late singer with songs, poetry, and tributes.

Alongside music, artists and activists raised their voices against the ongoing cultural aggression, including the forced shaving of an elderly man's hair and beard and desecration of shrines.

In a symbolic act, Porompora president and poet Shamim Ashraf cut his own hair at the beginning of the programme.

Farida Parveen, known as the "Lalon Konya" for her lifelong dedication to Lalon's music, passed away on September 13.

# Sati river gasps for survival

Encroachment, pollution push Lalmonirhat waterbody to the brink

S DILIP ROY, Lalmonirhat

The Sati river in Lalmonirhat, once a vibrant waterbody around 500 feet wide, has now shrunk to a channel barely six to seven feet across after years of unchecked encroachment, pollution and negligence.

According to folklore, merchant Chand Saudagar of Manasamangal once sailed his boat along this very river route.

With its upstream located near Haribhanga and Balatri areas by the district town's bus stand, the 49 kilometre-long river originates from the Teesta in Parulia area under Hatibandha upazila, flows through Aditmari and Lalmonirhat Sadar upazilas, and then joins the Teesta again.

Locals allege that neither the Lalmonirhat district administration nor the Bangladesh Water Development Board has ever taken effective measures to save the waterway.



They say riverbanks have been grabbed and excavated for fish ponds and farming, disrupting its natural flow. Small bridges and culverts, illegal structures and rampant pollution have destroyed its vitality.

Mahir Uddin, 70, a farmer from Haribhanga, recalled hearing from his late father how trading boats once travelled the Sati's waters, often anchoring at Haribhanga to buy and sell goods.

"Now there is no river -- numerous structures have taken up the space where the river once flowed and boats once moved in numbers," he said.

Abed Ali, 65, of Balatri said, "The river has turned into a thin canal. We've watched it die before our eyes."

Dr Tuhin Wadud, professor of Bangla at Begum Rokeya University and director of Riverine People, said, "While some stretches of the river still exist, others are on the verge of complete disappearance."

"However, there is still a chance to save it. I have submitted a petition to the deputy commissioner with proposals for the river's protection," he added.

He recommended evicting illegal encroachers, cancelling private ownership, rebuilding bridges to the river's original width, removing small culverts, restoring its natural connection to the Teesta, and recording all its channels as river land through a survey.

Contacted, Shunil Kumar, executive engineer of BWDB in Lalmonirhat, said parts of the river still carry water but remain unlisted in government records.

"The river has lost its natural link to the Teesta due to encroachment and embankments. We are currently conducting surveys on it and will soon submit our report," he said.

HM Rqib Haydar, deputy commissioner of Lalmonirhat and president of the district's river protection committee, said, "Everyone knows Sati is a historic river, but in some sections, there are no records of it as a river."

BWDB has been asked to conduct surveys. Once the report is submitted, we will discuss with higher authorities and take necessary steps to restore it through land surveys."



Once upon a time, the Sati river stretched 500 feet wide. Now, after years of encroachment, pollution, and negligence, its channel is barely six to seven feet.

PHOTO: STAR



## A school of hope on the Teesta shoal

S DILIP ROY, Lalmonirhat

Kalikapur Char is a remote shoal within the Teesta river under Lalmonirhat's Kaliganj upazila. Life there is marked by isolation and deprivation, with residents cut off from the mainland by water and further plagued by seasonal floods.

For years, the people of these shifting sandbars have struggled for access to healthcare, electricity, roads and education. For girls, the lack of schools beyond primary level meant education was often out of reach, as the nearest high school lies miles away across the river.

Most were forced to stop studying after Grade 5. That changed in 2008, when Nodi O Jibon Junior High School was established in Kalikapur Char, opening up opportunities that once seemed impossible.

Today, the school stands as a beacon of hope, spreading the light of education among girls and helping them pursue their aspirations despite the odds.

Char residents recall the turning point came when Dr Atiur Rahman, former governor of Bangladesh Bank, visited the shoal for a development programme called Nodi O Jibon (River and Life) run by a non-government organisation.

Moved by the lack of opportunities, he encouraged villagers to build a school and helped mobilise resources.

With contributions from locals

and support from the programme, a tin-roofed building was erected on the sandbar and named after the project that inspired it.

"Before this school was established, girls here had no way to continue their studies after primary level," said Nazir Hossain, 68, a farmer from the char. "Now, our daughters study here and can dream of pursuing college, perhaps even university," he said.

The school continues to run without government support.

distances across sandy stretches and cross narrow water channels, which swell during the monsoon.

Floods and erosion frequently damage the shoal, forcing families to relocate and rebuild. Despite these hardships, attendance has remained steady as parents increasingly recognise the value of education.

The school continues to run without government support.



The school, which began with only a few classrooms, now has 11 teachers and 136 students, 98 of them girls.

Students typically complete their junior secondary education up to class eight before transferring to mainland schools to pursue higher studies.

"I want to become educated and work for my community," said Marjina Akhter, an eighth grader.

"Many girls before me have studied here and pursued college later on. I want to do the same," she said.

Reaching the school remains a daily struggle. Students walk long

distances across sandy stretches and cross narrow water channels, which swell during the monsoon.

Floods and erosion frequently damage the shoal, forcing families to relocate and rebuild. Despite these hardships, attendance has remained steady as parents increasingly recognise the value of education.

The school continues to run without government support.

Mobarak Ali, president of its managing committee, said Dr Atiur donated Tk 10 lakh in 2014 to improve the infrastructure, but teachers still work without regular salaries as the school has yet to be included in the government's Monthly Payment Order scheme.

Mahbubur Rahman, headteacher of the school, said teachers remain committed despite the hardship. "We are teaching the children of the shoal for free with a mission to spread education, especially for girls."

Mujibur Rahman, district education officer in Lalmonirhat, said the school has submitted all required documents for MPO inclusion. He said they will look into it.

## LOW PRESSURE AT BAY Ports asked to raise cautionary signal 3

BSS, Dhaka

The maritime ports of Chattogram, Cox's Bazar, Mongla and Payra have been advised to hoist local cautionary signal 3 as low-pressure over the Bay of Bengal has intensified and turned into a well-marked low.

Bangladesh Meteorological Department, in a special weather bulletin yesterday, said the low may intensify further. Under its influence, gusty or squally winds may blow over the north Bay and Bangladesh's coastal areas and sea ports.

Fishing boats and trawlers in the north Bay have been asked to come close to the coast and proceed with caution until further notice.

## Mother, daughter killed in road crash

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Sylhet

Three people, including a woman and her daughter, were killed when a speeding truck rammed into a CNG-run auto rickshaw on the Sylhet-Sunamganj regional highway yesterday morning.

The deceased were identified as Abadit Keshba, 40, of Ukipara in Sunamganj town; her daughter Prathama Chowdhury, 12; and auto-rickshaw driver Sajal Ghosh, 50, of Nabinagar area, said Suman Kumar Chowdhury, officer in charge of Jaykalas highway police outpost.

Quoting witnesses, the OC said the accident occurred around 7:00am when a Sunamganj-bound truck hit the Sylhet-bound auto-rickshaw, killing Abadit and driver Sajal on the spot.

Prathama, critically injured, was rushed to Shantiganj Upazila Health Complex, where doctors declared her dead. The truck veered off the road and plunged into a roadside ditch.

Locals caught the truck driver, Parvez Ahmed, 40, and handed him over to Shantiganj police.

Gobinda Kumar Das, Prathama's relative, said all three victims were travelling to the temple for prayers. The truck driver is now in police custody, the OC added.

## Murder case filed 13 years after Jubo Dal leader's killing

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Benapole

Thirteen years after the killing of Abdul Khaleq, then general secretary of Jubo Dal's Putkhali union unit in Benapole, his family has finally filed a murder case in a Jashore court.

Khaleq's son, Ahsan Habib, lodged the complaint on Thursday. The court of Senior Judicial Magistrate Mahbuba Sharmin took cognisance of the case, summoned documents and a CD earlier submitted by police, and set the next hearing for November 20, said plaintiff's lawyer Debasish Das.

Thirteen people, including former police officials, were named accused: former OC (investigation) Syed Lutfor Rahman; former SI Abul Kalam Azad; former SI Shikder Matiar Rahman; then DB SI Abul Khayer Molla; Rezaul Islam Reza and his brother Azizul Islam; Shahadat Hossain; Kamal Hossain; Tarikul Islam; Abdur Rob; Yakub Ali; Ziaur Rahman; and Riazul Islam.

Khaleq was allegedly killed on January 3, 2012, for refusing to pay extortion money. The complaint stated that he was attacked at Shahjalal Filling Station on Benapole highway.

Rezaul, Azizul, Yakub and Ziaur Rahman reportedly opened fire, with a bullet from Rezaul fatally injuring Khaleq. The others allegedly blocked the area to facilitate the attack.

The complaint further alleged that then-SI Abul Kalam Azad filed a fabricated case on January 7, 2012, with the OC's involvement, to shield the perpetrators. Police later submitted a final report in March 2013, exonerating all accused.

Khaleq's family claimed they were barred from filing a case at the time and forced into hiding. They returned only after the fall of the Awami League government.



A man wades through knee-deep water in a self-made boat. For the past two and a half months, 57 houses home to hundreds of people in the Ashrayan project in Khulna's Shareghata area have been waterlogged. Built on low-lying land by the riverbank, the project gets inundated every year. As the Sholimari river has silted up, water cannot flow out through the main sluice gate, leaving the area waterlogged.



### Maleque Bhuiyan passes away

CITY DESK

Freedom fighter Lt Col (retd) MA Maleque Bhuiyan passed away on September 24. He was 83.

He was buried with a guard of honour at Banani graveyard, said a press release.

A doa mahfil was held at Banani Chairman Bari Mosque after Juma prayers yesterday. All are requested to pray for the salvation of his departed soul.

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# INTERNATIONAL

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The Daily Star

5

## GAZA CRISIS

### What leaders said at UN



"No, what we need is a powerful army of countries that do not accept genocide. That is why I invite nations of the world, and their peoples most importantly, as an integral part of humanity, to bring together weapons and armies to defend Palestine... I think we've had enough words."

**Gustavo Petro**  
Colombian president

I want to see Netanyahu and those responsible for the genocide against the Palestinian people brought before an international court of justice.

**Gabriel Boric**  
Chile's president

We will not commit national suicide [by accepting a Palestinian state] because you don't have the guts to face down the hostile media and antisemitic mobs demanding Israel's blood.

**Benjamin Netanyahu**  
Israeli PM

We did not stop the genocide in Rwanda. We did not stop the genocide in Srebrenica. We must stop the genocide in Gaza. There are no excuses any more.

**Natasa Pirk Musar**  
Slovenia's president



Rescuers evacuate residents from their flooded homes in Palanas, Masbate province, as severe tropical storm Bualoi hit the area yesterday. The Philippines evacuated hundreds of thousands of people and confirmed at least three deaths yesterday as it faced yet another tropical storm, days after it was battered by deadly Super Typhoon Ragasa.

PHOTO: AFP

## POST-WAR GAZA

### Tony Blair in discussions to run Gaza authority

#### AGENCIES

Former UK prime minister Tony Blair could take a leading role in a transitional authority for Gaza under US-led peace plans, various British media reported yesterday.

It follows Blair's involvement in discussions with the administration of US President Donald Trump and others over the post-war transitional body for the Palestinian territory.

The plan could involve Blair leading the authority with the support of the UN and Gulf nations, according to the BBC and The Economist magazine.

The Financial Times reported that the former UK leader, who worked as a Middle East peace mediator formally from 2007 to 2015, had asked to be on its supervisory board.

The Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, a non-profit organisation,

declined to comment to AFP on the stories.

Israeli media reports last week about his involvement in the US-led peace plan prompted sources close to Blair to confirm that he has been working on a scheme to halt the conflict alongside other parties.

However, they noted he would not support any proposal to permanently displace Gazans, and that any transitional governing body for the territory would ultimately hand power back to the Palestinian Authority, based in Ramallah in the West Bank.

In its report, The Economist said that a body to be known as the "Gaza International Transitional Authority" would seek a UN mandate to be the "supreme political and legal authority" for five years, before handing control to Palestinians.

The authority would have a secretariat of up to 25 people and a

seven person board, it added. It would initially be based in Egypt, near Gaza's southern border, before transferring to Gaza once it is secure, the BBC said.

Former Mossad chief Yossi Cohen told BBC Radio on Friday that "I love" the idea, calling Blair a "wonderful person".

"If he is willing to take this responsibility, which is huge, I think... there is a hope" for Gaza, he added.

"I think that he can bear that burden strongly."

Blair's involvement would inevitably raise eyebrows given his involvement in the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003.

An official UK inquiry into the conflict found he had acted on flawed intelligence when deciding to join the war.

Blair reportedly joined a White House meeting with Trump in August to discuss plans for post-war Gaza.

Trump has floated plans to make Gaza the "Riviera of the Middle East", involving the forced displacement of Palestinians in the territory.



### Faridpur, Cumilla divisions in works

FROM PAGE 12

The recommendations made by the Public Administration Reform Commission were followed while making the proposals, Rashid told The Daily Star.

The committee will place its preliminary decisions before the next meeting of the National Implementation Committee for Administrative Reforms/Reorganisation (NICAR), chaired by Chief Adviser Muhammad Yunus, for final approval.

The NICAR meeting is likely to take place in the first week of October after Yunus returns from the UN General Assembly in New York.

Several current and former senior officials of the public administration ministry and the cabinet division criticised the move to form two new divisions.

"There is no logical reason to create two new divisions," said a former secretary who had served as deputy commissioner and divisional

commissioner.

Divisional administration mainly monitors activities at district and upazila levels, and such monitoring is being done properly from the existing divisions.

"It will only increase costs for the people," he said, asking not to be named.

Another former secretary said the move will only lead to the formation of some bureaucratic posts and an increase in public expenditure.

"At the same time, local politicians will get opportunities to initiate new projects in the name of city development. None of this serves public interest."

The cabinet division can now convene online meetings or video conferences with all 64 DCs at just an hour's notice.

"In this context, further expansion of the divisional administration is entirely irrational," he added.

There is scope to shrink and not expand the divisional administrative

structure in today's context, said a joint secretary of the cabinet division.

There was a time when communication with officers over the telephone was difficult and travelling from Dhaka to a remote district or upazila could take time, he said.

"Remote areas are now accessible by road and rail, and a WhatsApp message reaches the whole country instantly. With minute-to-minute media updates, what's the point of creating new divisions?" he said.

The bid to form two new divisions goes back to November 2022, when a proposal to create two new divisions with greater Faridpur and Cumilla districts, to be named after the Padma and Meghna rivers, was placed at a NICAR meeting chaired by then prime minister Sheikh Hasina.

However, no final approval came.

At present, there are eight administrative divisions: Dhaka, Chittagong, Rajshahi, Khulna, Barishal, Sylhet, Rangpur and Mymensingh.

forced displacement to be a war crime. Nearly the entire population of the Gaza Strip has been displaced during the war.

A Palestinian foreign ministry official slammed Israeli Netanyahu's speech, saying it was "saturated with lies and falsifications".

Meanwhile, The UN yesterday released a long-awaited update of its database of companies with activities in Israeli settlements in Palestinian territories, listing 158 firms from 11 countries.

UN rights chief Volker Turk has condemned as a war crime Israel's policy of settlements on Palestinian land in the occupied West Bank.

While several companies, including Alstom and Opodo, had been removed from the non-exhaustive database, major firms such as Airbnb, Booking.com, Motorola Solutions and TripAdvisor remained on the list.

Humanitarian law also considers

### Babar summits 8,000m Manaslu peak

FROM PAGE 12

"On the same day, our red-and-green flag flew twice on the summit of Manaslu," Zaman said. "Babar fulfilled his long-cherished dream of climbing without supplemental oxygen, while Tanvir proved that success is possible even without formal mountaineering courses abroad."

The climbers began their journey from Bangladesh on September 5, trekking five days from Tilch village to reach base camp. After acclimatisation rotations up to camps 1-3, they launched their final push. On September 24, both reached camp 4 at 7,400 metres, and in the early hours of September 26, guided by Bire Tamang and Phurba Angdi Sherpa, they stood atop Manaslu.

While summit photos are expected to take time due to poor network coverage, the climbers are working to descend safely.

Babar, general secretary of Vertical Dreamers and a graduate of Chattogram Medical College, has already established himself as one of the country's leading mountaineers.

Tanvir, the club's mountaineering secretary and an assistant manager at VF Asia Bangladesh, is from



Kishoreganj and previously climbed Ama Dablam in 2022.

Forhan Zaman said both climbers are determined to continue their journeys. "Babar dreams of climbing all 14 of the world's 8,000-metre peaks. Tanvir, too, is eager to take on more peaks. With proper sponsorship, the red-and-green will continue to fly

higher."

The expedition was supported by several Bangladeshi sponsors, including Samuda, Visual Knitwear, Gigabyte Bangladesh, Chandrabindu Prokashon, Sinovest, Sierra-Romeo, Adiba Footwear, 4S Advance Technologies, Genovers, Source Associates, Ilet Bankers, Kazi Agro and Friesva.

### Won't allow Israel

FROM PAGE 12

Criminal Court arrest warrant over war crime allegations, including using starvation as a weapon, the Israeli prime minister took an unusual route to New York that included flying over the narrow Strait of Gibraltar.

As he walked up to the General Assembly rostrum, dozens of delegations immediately walked out -- meaning they had come just to leave, as Netanyahu was the day's first speaker.

Protesters marched nearby in Times Square calling for the arrest of Netanyahu.

"War criminals don't deserve any peace of mind. They don't deserve any sleep," said Andrea Mirez, a young woman who kept up an overnight noisy protest outside Netanyahu's hotel.

In his opening remarks, Netanyahu displayed a map labelled "The Curse" that he said showed Iranian proxy groups across the Middle East. He then highlighted Israeli military

reforms.

Meanwhile, Albanian President Bajram Begaj, in a meeting with Yunus on the sidelines of the 80th United Nations General Assembly in New York on Thursday, expressed strong interest in recruiting skilled and semi-skilled workers from Bangladesh to meet his country's expanding labour market needs.

"We need workers for our country, and several Albanian companies have already submitted applications to hire from Bangladesh," President Begaj said.

He emphasised that bilateral cooperation could be broadened further, particularly in sectors such

as tourism, highlighting Albania's southern coastline as a promising destination for Bangladeshi travellers.

Yunus welcomed the initiative, noting that Bangladesh, with its dynamic and youthful workforce, is well positioned to support Albania's economic growth. He also urged the Albanian government to ease visa procedures, pointing out that Bangladeshi citizens currently have to travel to New Delhi to apply for visas.

In response, President Begaj said Albania is considering the introduction of e-visas for Bangladeshi nationals.

The chief adviser is also expected to deliver a speech at the UNGA.

### Trump slaps 100% tariffs on medicine

AFP, Washington

US President Donald Trump's announcement of steep new tariffs on medicines and other goods drew pushback from some allies yesterday, with the EU claiming immunity for its pharmaceutical industry under an earlier trade deal.

The announcement late on Thursday evening, which included a 100 percent levy on pharmaceuticals, is the harshest trade policy by the president since last April's shock unveiling of "reciprocal" tariffs on virtually every US trading partner across the globe.

Starting October 1, "we will be imposing a 100% Tariff on any branded or patented Pharmaceutical Product, unless a Company IS BUILDING their Pharmaceutical Manufacturing Plant in America," the Republican wrote on his Truth Social platform.

The European Union yesterday said a July deal with Washington shielded the bloc from tariffs higher than 15 percent on its drug exports. In a separate post, Trump wrote of a 25 percent tariff on "all Heavy (Big) Trucks" made in other parts of the world" to support US manufacturers such as Peterbilt, Kenworth, Freightliner, Mack Trucks and others.

The real-estate tycoon also targeted home renovation materials, writing "We will be imposing a 50% Tariff on all Kitchen Cabinets, Bathroom Vanities and associated products," from October 1.

"Additionally, we will be charging a 30% Tariff on Upholstered Furniture," he added.

### Iran sanctions loom after last-ditch UN vote

#### Tehran, Moscow sign \$25b deal to build nuclear plants in Iran

AFP, United Nations

Sweeping UN sanctions look likely to return on Iran despite a last-ditch effort yesterday by China and Russia for a delay to allow further talks, diplomats say.

European powers were urging Iran to reverse a series of steps it took after Israel and the United States bombed its nuclear sites in June.

Complaining that Iran has not complied with a landmark but moribund deal, the Europeans have triggered a return of sweeping UN sanctions -- notably on its banking and oil sectors -- that are set to take effect at the end of Saturday.

China and Russia at a Security Council session yesterday put forward a draft resolution, seen by AFP, that would give another half year for talks, or until April 18, 2026.

But diplomats said they did not expect it to receive the nine votes on the 15-member Security Council for passage.



Meanwhile, Iran and Russia signed a \$25 billion deal to build nuclear power plants in Iran, state media reported yesterday.

"A deal for the construction of four nuclear power plants with a value of \$25 billion in Sirik, Hormozgan was signed between the Iran Hormoz company and Rosatom," state television said.

Iran has just one operational nuclear power plant in Bushehr in the south, with a capacity of 1,000 megawatts -- just a fraction of the country's energy needs.

According to state news agency IRNA, each plant will have a capacity of 1,255 megawatts, though no details were provided on the timeline.

### Yunus vows labour reforms ahead of polls

FROM PAGE 12

reform agenda and a desire to build on these reforms if elected.

Tasnim Jara, senior joint member secretary of the NCP, offered a personal reflection, recalling the Rana Plaza tragedy as a defining moment in her political journey. Then a medical student, she volunteered to treat the injured.

"That incident shaped my politics," she said, drawing attention to the human cost of unsafe labour practices and the pressing need for reform.

In closing remarks, Yunus reiterated the government's resolve to implement meaningful and lasting

reforms.

Meanwhile, Albanian President Bajram Begaj, in a meeting with Yunus on the sidelines of the 80th United Nations General Assembly in New York on Thursday, expressed strong interest in recruiting skilled and semi-skilled workers from Bangladesh to meet his country's expanding labour market needs.

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The chief adviser is also expected to deliver a speech at the UNGA.

## When justice fails the vulnerable

Low conviction rates in crimes against women, children expose deep flaws

It is hard to imagine the shock and trauma a 25-year-old woman experienced when she saw the person who raped her at the tender age of five walk free, due to numerous loopholes in the country's justice-seeking process that failed to provide sufficient evidence. According to a report in this daily, 20 years ago, she was found in a pool of blood at her neighbour's house, screaming in pain. The neighbour was caught by the locals, handed over to the police, and a rape case was filed against him. On July 21 this year, he was acquitted by the court due to insufficient evidence. Sadly, the existing data on conviction and punishment rates of crimes committed against women and children in this country indicates that this woman is not the only one failed by our justice system. There are thousands of others who wait for years, only to never receive justice—or even the hope of it.

To put this in perspective, between January and August this year, the conviction rate for crimes against children was only 0.52 percent, with a punishment rate of just 0.30 percent. For crimes committed against women, the conviction rate during the same period was 2.61 percent and the punishment rate 1.44 percent. These rates are abysmally low compared to the overall conviction rate for all crimes nationwide. In 2023, the conviction rate for child-related and women-related cases was 0.48 percent and 5.06 percent, respectively, while the overall conviction rate for all criminal cases was 28 percent.

When viewed alongside recent reports of child rape, the impact of low conviction rates becomes stark. According to Ain o Salish Kendra, child rape cases surged by nearly 75 percent in the first seven months of 2025 compared to the same period last year. This suggests that low conviction rates may embolden criminals, knowing they are unlikely to face consequences. A similar trend exists in crimes against women. This year, 10,475 such cases have been filed. Yet, convictions have occurred in only 273 cases, with just 331 accused punished. Rarely do convictions happen within a year. When they do, not all accused are held accountable. The situation is worse for women and children from marginalised and ethnic communities, as we have noted before in this column.

The reasons for these low conviction rates are well-known. Lengthy legal processes and severe case backlogs at the courts often discourage survivors and families from pursuing justice. Additionally, uncooperative police, poor investigations, and the lack of safe homes for survivors and witnesses contribute to the problem. Social stigma and the influence of powerful perpetrators also force many families to withdraw cases or settle out of court, particularly in rape cases. What's urgently needed is comprehensive, sustained action: proper budget allocation, more judges and prosecutors, training and monitoring of law enforcers, better evidence collection, courtroom technology, and public campaigns to fight victim-blaming. Above all, what is urgently needed is the political will to act.

## Save Savar from toxic air

Waste-burning, brick kilns contaminating air as tannery pollution persists

We cannot stress enough the urgency of tackling the worsening air pollution in Dhaka's Savar. On August 17, the Department of Environment (DoE) declared the upazila a "degraded airshed," citing persistently hazardous air caused by open burning of solid and hazardous waste as well as brick kilns. The DoE also issued a circular banning brick burning in all but Tunnel Kilns and Hybrid Hoffman Kilns, and prohibiting open waste-burning. The ban came into effect on September 1, yet, while kiln operations remain paused due to the rainy season, the open-air burning of tyres, batteries, wood, and even chromium-containing tannery waste continues unabated, according to a report in this daily. Such practices are destroying soil fertility, reducing crop yields, and making life unbearable for the locals. During the dry season, northwestern winds carry these pollutants into Dhaka, aggravating the city dwellers' health risks.

This scenario reflects a pattern we have seen before. The tanneries were moved from Hazaribagh to the Tk 1,015 crore Savar Tannery Industrial Estate to save the Buriganga River. However, the Central Effluent Treatment Plant (CETP) installed there cannot fully treat the waste it receives. As a result, pollution continues. Additionally, most tanneries still flout basic labour and safety standards. On the other hand, in February, the High Court ordered removal of the brick kilns, responsible for an estimated 58 percent of Dhaka's air pollution, if illegal, but many owners failed to submit documents by the March 1 deadline. The DoE's new circular, therefore, means little if the rules to protect the environment are not effectively enforced.

Locals in Savar have demanded stricter monitoring and closure of establishments burning tyres, batteries, and hides. Experts, too, have stressed that unplanned industrial development, poor waste management and unchecked kiln operations together have created a toxic mix. Unless these sectors are brought under firm, transparent regulation, shifting locations or issuing bans will only displace—not resolve—the problem. To ensure real change, the government must publish and implement its action plan with clear deadlines. The CETP must be upgraded and the tanneries must be held accountable for compliance with environmental and labour standards. Illegal kilns must be shut down promptly, a mechanism to track and penalise open waste-burning must be put in place. Without such sustained measures, Savar's "degraded airshed" will continue to be a daily threat to public health, livelihoods, and the environment.

## THIS DAY IN HISTORY

### Taliban seize Kabul

On this day in 1996, the Taliban, led by Mohammad Omar, seized the capital city of Kabul, declaring all of Afghanistan an Islamic state.

# EDITORIAL

## Policing the body, governing the soul



### BLOWIN' IN THE WIND

Dr Shamsad Mortuza  
is professor of English at Dhaka University.

SHAMSAD MORTUZA

There is no short supply of news of attacks on individuals or institutions in Bangladesh these days. On the surface, these acts of violence are unrelated: shrines vandalised and devotees assaulted; top university officials threatened or manhandled; political vendettas unleashed on touring leaders by their opponents abroad, etc. These disparate episodes are more than brutality or indecency. They signify the rise of a culture of moral policing and coercion that reflects the deeper logic of state and society: the biopolitical control of life itself. And the mercy that we can seek is not from the state, but from the divine providence.

Consider the case of Halim Uddin Akand in Mymensingh. A devotee of Hazrat Shahjalal (RA) and Hazrat Shah Param (RA), who retired from the mundane life of being a farmer and dedicated himself to spirituality. For 37 years, he kept his matted hair uncut as a sign of spiritual devotion and minded his own business. There is a video floating on social media that shows the elderly fakir being chased through a market by three men in religious attire. They pinned him down and forcibly shaved his hair. As his locks fell to the ground, Halim cried out, looking at the sky, "Allah, tui dehisi!" (Make note of it, Allah).

For a moment, Halim reminded me of all the persecuted prophets labelled as madmen throughout history. He also reminded me of the Welsh bard jumping off the cliff, cursing the king's army who had come to nab him. Halim's prayer is the cry of every hapless oppressed individual to denote an indictment of a society where victims no longer believe earthly justice is possible. The ones who violated Halim's dignity belong to an organised group called "Human Service Bangladesh." They boast their actions as acts of "cleanliness" and "charity." Now why do they suddenly think Bangladesh is rotten and they

were born to set it right (to allude to Shakespeare, the Bard)?

Parading violence as virtue was seen earlier this month when the tomb of Nura Pagla was desecrated in Rajbari. The freshly buried body was dug out and set to fire on a highway. Punishing an individual even after death is unheard of in our cultural memory. Should we reflect on the grim history of punishing Republicanism in England, particularly when Cromwell's body was disinterred, hanged, and

came under the attack by some expatriate groups who ambushed the delegates, including political figures, outside the airport and hurled abusive words and eggs to turn a political demonstration into a physical confrontation. The export of vendetta into the global arena says a lot about our people, and trust me, it isn't positive. It says that we don't have any respect left in us.

That's why I was not surprised to hear that the pro vice-chancellor of Rajshahi University was manhandled by a mob of students. Factionalism has poisoned our campuses. Earlier, we saw the vice-chancellor of Dhaka University being aggressively threatened by student leaders during a "civil dialogue" on Dussehra. These attacks on the university's top administration imply an assault on the fragile authority of education. Attacks on our top officials leave



VISUAL: SHAIKH SULTANA JAHAN BADHON

beheaded, and his severed head displayed on a pole for 20 years? Can death no longer be the final sanctuary where enmities dissolve? Violation of the body, both live and dead, sends a chilling message of intolerance. It tells the larger community that we live in a country that no longer entertain differences, be it spiritual or cultural, even beyond the grave.

Our current head of government took a bunch of political talismans, tied as amulets in his travelling arms, to ward off the political evil spirits that crossed the border with them. In New York, some of the representatives attending the UN General Assembly

little protection for other teachers. Already, there have been a number of attacks on teachers in various educational institutions. When these institutions become a battleground for intimidation rather than inquiry, the social contract between knowledge and society collapses. The centre cannot hold; things fall apart. The rough beasts retreat into the centre, echoing a Yeatsian "second coming."

Across all these apparently scattered events, there is one hinge: the disciplining of bodies (i.e. of mystics, politicians, or teachers) is becoming normalised. We become aware of what Michel Foucault called

biopolitics. In the olden days, sovereign power reserved the right "to take life or let live." But in modern times, power operates within the capillaries of the social body by regulating, normalising, and disciplining life and death. It polices not only how people behave but also how they appear, how they worship, and how they think. The haircut forced on Halim, the burning of Nura Pagla's corpse, the assault on RU pro-VC, and the attack in New York are far from accidents. They are inscriptions of power onto individual and collective bodies.

The big question is: who is empowered to shore up as a mob or pressure group? Who are the sole agents of morality and culture? How can they function independently of the state system, which includes laws and their enforcing authorities? Groups like Human Service Bangladesh embodies what Foucault called governmentality: citizens turning into vigilantes, policing one another under the guise of moral duty. A Facebook entrepreneur can cut the hair of hundreds of "helpless" people, film it, and monetise it as a "service." Students can attack their teachers and claim they are defending justice. Diaspora activists can ambush leaders abroad and call it accountability. Violence becomes governance, coercion becomes order, and humiliation becomes civic virtue.

But there is another history we must not forget. The land that we have come to call our own was not born from intolerance. Among many things, our cultural identity was shaped by Sufis, Pirs and Bauls, by spiritual leaders, by political activists, and by progressive educators who freed the local people from rigid orthodoxy and taught love as the essence of faith. Shrines were the sites of coexistence, Baul songs were the celebrations of human spirit and depictions of social hypocrisy, teachers were the guardians of enlightenment, and politicians were the chaperons of our democracy. To attack them now is not only a crime against individuals but also an act of self-erasure.

We should be ashamed that a 70-year-old fakir must cry to the heavens for justice. In his cry, we hear a call that highlights our disconnection from the ideals of not only of our Liberation War but also of July, when we sought to make a fresh start.

### WORLD TOURISM DAY

## Can we transform tourism into a national strength?



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Today, the world observes World Tourism Day with the United Nations World Tourism Organization's theme, "Tourism and Sustainable Transformation." For Bangladesh, this is more than a ceremonial event. It is time to ask the question: can we sail confidently into a sustainable tourism future while safeguarding our heritage and empowering our people?

Moreover, sustainability is more than an environmental issue; it is a survival imperative. Bangladesh is among the most climate-vulnerable countries in the world. Rising seas threaten our coasts, while salinity intrudes into the Sundarbans. If we allow unchecked construction, plastic waste and over-tourism, we will accelerate the risks of losing our natural resources. Besides, global travellers are becoming more discerning. Increasingly, they seek eco-friendly destinations and authentic cultural encounters. If Bangladesh fails to adapt, it risks being sidelined in the global tourism market.

The question then becomes: how do we chart a course towards sustainability? At least three directions deserve attention.

First, green tourism development must be prioritised. Eco-resorts powered by renewable energy, hotels with global green certifications and strict conservation measures are essential. St Martin's Island illustrates the urgency; without limits on visitors and bans on single-use plastics, its fragile ecosystem may collapse. Countries like Nepal, which utilise conservation fees

from trekking in the Annapurna region to fund both environmental protection and community welfare, offer relevant models.

Second, tourism must become community-centred. The benefits should not flow only to large investors but also to ordinary people. Imagine homestays in the Chittagong Hill Tracts where tourists experience indigenous

**Eco-resorts powered by renewable energy, hotels with global green certifications and strict conservation measures are essential. St Martin's Island illustrates the urgency; without limits on visitors and bans on single-use plastics, its fragile ecosystem may collapse.**

culture firsthand, or festivals in rural Bangladesh where Baul music and crafts are celebrated. Such initiatives preserve traditions while generating income. Importantly, women and youth can emerge as entrepreneurs in tour guiding, handicrafts and hospitality. Sri Lanka's tea plantation tours and Nepal's village homestay networks show how communities can successfully drive tourism.

Third, Bangladesh must embrace digital and policy transformation. A national tourism app could showcase maps, heritage stories and multilingual booking systems, while cashless transactions and e-tickets would modernise travel. Yet, technology alone is insufficient without policy. Stronger regulations are needed to curb coastal overdevelopment, reduce pollution and manage visitor flows in

fragile destinations. Here, Bhutan's "high-value, low-impact" model is instructive: by controlling numbers and emphasising sustainability, Bhutan has positioned itself as a global leader in responsible tourism.

Taken together, these pathways highlight that transformation is not a luxury—it is the only way forward. If appropriately managed, tourism can become a third pillar of the economy, alongside garments and remittances. It can diversify growth, create jobs and strengthen "Brand Bangladesh" internationally. By focusing on sustainability, we can reposition ourselves not as a budget destination, but as a nation renowned for its natural beauty, cultural richness and responsible hospitality.

Ultimately, this year's World Tourism Day is more than a commemoration. It is a mirror held up to us, asking whether we are ready to balance growth with responsibility. If we invest in green practices, empower communities and embrace digital innovation, we can transform tourism into a source of resilience and pride. But if we continue on the current path, we risk losing the very treasures that make Bangladesh extraordinary.

The answer to whether Bangladesh can sail into a sustainable tourism future lies in our collective choices today. Policymakers must create stronger frameworks, businesses must adopt greener models, and communities must be empowered to lead. Above all, we must see tourism beyond recreational purposes. It is a reflection of who we are and the future we want to build. The Sundarbans, Cox's Bazar, and Sylhet, as well as the country's cultural traditions, are our living legacies. If we protect and nurture them, tourism will not only thrive but also transform Bangladesh into a global example of sustainable progress.

## THIS DAY IN HISTORY

### Taliban seize Kabul

On this day in 1996, the Taliban, led by Mohammad Omar, seized the capital city of Kabul, declaring all of Afghanistan an Islamic state.

# What are the current realities of Bangladesh's economy?



Selim Jahan  
is former director of the Human Development Report Office under the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and lead author of the Human Development Report.

SELIM JAHAN

As we come close to the end of 2025, one question that surfaces quite often is what the current realities of Bangladesh's economy are. It has become even more important in the aftermath of the people's uprising last year, which changed the political, economic, social and cultural landscapes of the country. Over the past few years, the economy has been facing tough challenges. Thus, the question regarding its current state is logical.

The first aspect to consider is the progress the country has made in improving its social indicators and expanding physical infrastructures. The life expectancy in Bangladesh is 74 years (2023), as compared to 72 years in India and 68 years in Pakistan. Child mortality in Bangladesh is 31 per 1,000 live births (2023) compared to 59 in Pakistan and 28 in India. Over the years, Bangladesh has been able to reduce the incidence of both national and extreme poverty, even though they have taken an upward trend in recent years.

Inequality and discrimination are a critical reality of our economy. The benefits of human development, as indicated earlier, were not equitably distributed across the country, between rural and urban areas, or among various socioeconomic groups. There are differences in deprivation as well. For example, while the adult literacy rate (15 years and above) in Barisal division is 73.42 percent, it is only 66.53 percent in Sylhet division, according to the 2022 census. Child mortality among the highest income quintile in Bangladesh is 20 per 1,000 live births, while for the bottom quintile it is 50 per 1,000 live births. The incidence of multidimensional poverty in rural areas is nearly 27 percent, more than twice the rate of 13.48 percent in the urban areas.

Inequalities and discrimination are not only economic; they feature prominently in social, political and cultural arenas as well. Moreover, discriminations occur not only in outcomes; they are built into opportunities too. The poor and marginalised groups are deprived of health facilities and educational opportunities.



FILE VISUAL: SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR

They have marginal access to resources, credit facilities and digital services. As a result, these groups also encounter deprivation in employment and income. Marginalised people who live on ecologically fragile lands also face different forms of deprivation. Various marginalised groups are deprived on political fronts and their voices, particularly those of the indigenous groups, are not adequately represented at the national level. On many occasions, the issue of discrimination and lack of security faced by religious minorities has been raised in several forums. These go against the fact that all citizens of the country, irrespective of their religion, caste and creed, have equal rights.

Women still face discrimination in

opportunities, which result in unequal outcomes for them. Both within and outside the home, women are subjected to various forms of harassment and violence. Such violence may be physical or mental, they may be domestic and sometimes they result in sexual violence.

Another aspect of the country's economy at present is the worsening quality of outcomes. Often, we hear that impressive progress has been made in the education and health

opportunities, which result in unequal outcomes for them. Both within and outside the home, women are subjected to various forms of harassment and violence. Such violence may be physical or mental, they may be domestic and sometimes they result in sexual violence.

Currently, the production, savings and investment levels are going through a sluggish phase. With many of its enterprises remaining non-operational at the moment, the RMG sector is in a bind. The foreign direct investments are not coming forth as expected,

If this trend continues, malnourishment is likely to rise among this group, particularly affecting children.

Power and energy problems are expected to continue as a challenge as well. On the one hand, high electricity generation cost is a concern, while on the other, huge power and energy subsidies are also an issue. Adopting power generation treaties without competitive bidding and excess dependency on imported inputs for power generation increase the energy cost. Absence of timely coordination and depreciation of the taka have contributed to the increased cost too. The huge subsidies provided to the power and the energy sector are enjoyed by the rich and powerful section of society. About 54 percent of the power and energy subsidies go to the top 40 percent income group.

Some existing fundamental structural impediments will pose a hindrance to the economy's future progress. For example, even if some improvements are observed in the financial sector, a lot more still needs to be done to ensure economic disciplines and norms in the sector. A culture of transparency and accountability has yet to take root in the economy. There have also been some improvements in the banking sector, but problems still exist in terms of bad loans, inadequacy of credit, inefficiency and ineffectiveness, weak management, etc. A lack of policy and implementation coordination among different sectors of the economy is still prominent. In coming days, sluggish revenue generation may appear as a challenge for Bangladesh as well.

The global economy is projected to suffer from sluggish growth for a while, the effect of which will be felt in Bangladesh too. First, in the absence of countermeasures, the US tariff hikes are likely to slow down exports from Bangladesh to the developed world. Second, if the LDC graduation takes place as scheduled (November 2026), the country will lose some of the trade benefits it has enjoyed as an LDC. It will have to be prepared to tackle these new challenges. Third, the ongoing wars and political tensions in various parts of the world will have their impacts on our economy too.

These are some of the realities facing Bangladesh's economy at present. Though formidable, these are not impossible to overcome. With commitment, proper priority setting, national preparedness, focused policies and strategies, the economy can be steered towards its desired goals.

services, but rarely is it mentioned that most of this progress is primarily quantitative expansions, not qualitative transformations. With multiple stratified structures in education and health services, educational opportunities and outcomes and health services have become further polarised. In education, getting certificates, and not knowledge, has become the primary goal; in the health sector, the priority is on infrastructure, not quality services across the board.

Some fear that in the coming days, Bangladesh may face a series of impediments and challenges both domestic and global. On the domestic front, sluggish economic growth, coupled with low investments and expanding joblessness, may continue to persist.

which is affecting job creation. More than 27 lakh people in Bangladesh are now unemployed (2025). In 2024, nine lakh graduates were unemployed. Nearly 19 percent of youth (15-24 years) are not in education, employment or training (NEET), according to a 2023 BBS survey. Such a waste of human resources is a significant loss to the economy.

The possibility of enhanced poverty and vulnerabilities of the marginalised population may appear as a significant challenge. Eighty-eight percent people from the low-income groups cannot have two full meals of rice; they eat bread or biscuits for one of their daily main meals. About 60 percent of people in this group, whose monthly income is between Tk 10,000 and Tk 15,000 cannot afford breakfast.

in the national pavement. Operation Raise the Colours, the latest outburst of nationalist performance art, saw a hundred thousand march through London. Flags flew from mobility scooters and council flats alike. It felt more like a clearance sale at Poundland than a defence of heritage. Polyester bunting, after all, will not fix train delays, housing shortages or the NHS.

Even Keir Starmer, typically allergic to theatrics, declared the protests "the fight of our times." That is either a terrifying misdiagnosis or an honest admission that political leadership in Britain now revolves around distraction. Because if asylum seekers are causing a national crisis, then the country is not in decline; rather, it is in delusion. Here lies the deeper tragedy: neoliberalism caused the crisis, and populism sold the lie. Austerity gutted communities. Deregulation outsourced livelihoods. Privatisation turned schools, transport, and healthcare into profit machines. But the public, frustrated by real suffering, is handed convenient villains: migrants who neither designed the system nor benefit from it.

The Bangladeshi diaspora is well-acquainted with this dance. From Brick Lane to Leicester's factories, they have fed, clothed and transported Britain. Once treated with suspicion, now taken for granted, their integration is undeniable. Chicken tikka masala is hailed as the national dish, but its originators are still framed as intruders. Today's kebab seller is tomorrow's

cultural icon—just don't tell the protesters. Globally, it is the same story. Giorgia Meloni in Italy defends "Christian Europe." Trump's wall still lingers in American fantasy. Sweden and Germany resurrect their fair right every election. Across the West, neoliberalism fails to deliver security, and migrants become scapegoats in a pantomime designed to distract from policy disaster.

The hypocrisy is glaring. Protesters scream "Britain is full" while riding in Uber cars driven by immigrants. They lament "drains on the NHS" as Nigerian nurses and Indian doctors carry the night shift. They wave flags outside Bangladeshi-owned shops before popping in for crisps. It is not an invasion; it is integration. But facts rarely survive in a rage march. This theatre has no intermission. The script is old: cut public services, sow resentment, blame the outsider. Politicians chant "secure our borders," ignoring that housing is unaffordable not due to asylum seekers but because council homes have been sold off. The NHS is buckling under neglect, not migration, and wages are stagnant because the system was built that way.

The irony is delicious, if bleak. Colonial Britain exported its values at gunpoint. Now, Little Britain imports its labour while decrying foreign influence. Protesters rage outside Travelodge, seemingly unaware that without the diaspora, Britain would fall apart.

There is a reason this pattern feels familiar. The Irish, the Windrush generation, the South

Asians—all were once blamed, then relied on, then retroactively embraced. Britain has a tradition of vilifying the newcomer, then quietly depending on them. Today's refugee is tomorrow's key worker. And that is the final punchline: the protests are not about security or culture, they are about illusion. The illusion that Britain's decline can be blamed on outsiders. The illusion that patriotism lies in bunting, not policy. The illusion that Farage-style populism offers solutions when it only recycles enemies.

While right-wing rhetoric boils over, Bangladeshi communities quietly run food banks, work night shifts, and fill the gaps left by decades of austerity. They know Britain better than the protesters do, because they have lived through suspicion, survived the cycles of blame, and still show up to keep the country running. The real emergency is the political cowardice and the refusal to admit that Britain's decline was homegrown, certainly not imported.

So, Britain marches, flags in hand, chanting at shadows. Farage reappears on cue. The diaspora rolls its eyes and gets on with it. And the country limps forward, stitched together not by nationalism, but by the invisible hands it keeps trying to swat away. Immigrants did not break Britain. Neoliberalism did. Instead of fixing it, populism just handed out pitchforks, and no amount of polyester bunting will ever stitch the nation back together.

## The Great British blame game of flags and fury



### MIND THE GAP

Barrister Noshin Nawal  
is a columnist for The Daily Star. She can be reached at noshinawalnoshin@gmail.com.

### NOSHIN NAWAL

London, September 2025. Word of an assault by a migrant in Essex gets out, and the nation convulses into protest. Union jacks wave like warning signs, crowds chant about "British culture," and Premier Inns become warzones in a theatre of patriotic rage. It looks like satire but feels far too tragic: Nigel Farage, who is reportedly on course to become prime minister, makes another curtain call; right-wing groups choreograph indignation; and Bangladeshis, long part of Britain's story, serve late-night kebabs to the very people calling them invaders.

The incident sparked a protest that was fuelled by a potent mix of neoliberal failure and right-wing populism. The result? A country caught in the grip of a fear that is largely manufactured. Dinghies in the English Channel are recast as Viking longships, and teenagers in asylum limbo are treated as threats to civilisation. Colonial Britain once governed

Bengal; today's Britain trembles at a Sudanese teen asking for Wi-Fi. What is truly remarkable is not the outrage, but the ideological buffet that feeds it. Right-wing populism provides the fury and flags. Neoliberalism—the system that dismantles social services and turns homes into investment assets—sets the stage. And migrants? They are the scapegoats for a nation in decline. The National Health Service (NHS) collapses under decades of underfunding, but the Bangladeshi porter is blamed. Wages stagnate due to deregulation, but the immigrant Uber driver is accused.

Enter, stage right, the panto villain who never leaves: Nigel Farage. Whether dressed in UKIP, Brexit Party or Reform UK regalia, his message never changes: Britain is under siege, and only Nigel sees the threat. Less a politician than a political franchise, Farage recycles his script endlessly: pint in hand, sneer at the ready, blaming the outsider for every crack

in the national pavement. Operation Raise the Colours, the latest outburst of nationalist performance art, saw a hundred thousand march through London. Flags flew from mobility scooters and council flats alike. It felt more like a clearance sale at Poundland than a defence of heritage. Polyester bunting, after all, will not fix train delays, housing shortages or the NHS.

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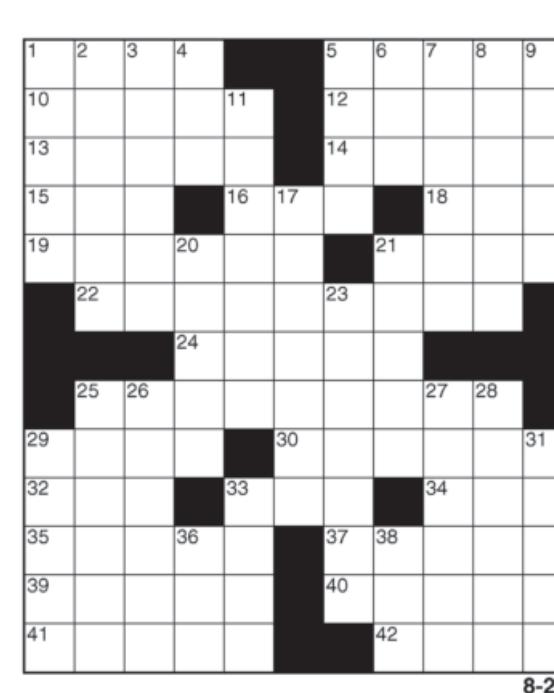
There is a reason this pattern feels familiar. The Irish, the Windrush generation, the South

### CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

#### ACROSS

- 1 In \_\_\_\_\_ (lined up)
- 5 Friendly senorita
- 10 Fence supplier
- 12 Copier need
- 13 Floor worker
- 14 44th president
- 15 They hold power
- 16 German article
- 18 Vault part
- 19 Close relative
- 21 Phoenix team
- 22 Half of a trattoria dinner
- 24 Accra's nation
- 25 Half of a trattoria dinner
- 29 Old German capital
- 30 White Rabbit's cry

- 32 Goof
- 33 Chowed down
- 34 Price add-on
- 35 Rough guesses
- 37 River through Nantes
- 39 Touch base
- 40 Boom type
- 41 Winter gliders
- 42 Stadium group
- DOWN
- 1 Top story
- 2 Horned beasts
- 3 Prepares for a bodybuilding competition
- 4 Tiny
- 5 Heaps
- 6 Angry group
- 7 Bored by routine
- 8 Zodiac twins
- 9 Swift horses
- 11 Hauler's haul
- 17 Occupy
- 20 "Cosmos" writer
- 21 Barn section
- 23 Tooth layers
- 25 Human
- 26 Incense
- 27 Bilingual woman, maybe
- 28 Be the lead of
- 29 Outdoes
- 31 Suits
- 33 Nile reptiles
- 36 Vase item
- 38 Punch-in-the-gut response



### THURSDAY'S ANSWERS





Saleh Sobhan Auneem and Syed Mehboob Hossain receive Best Editing for "Kaalpurush."

PHOTO: SHEIKH MEHEDI MORSHED

## BLENDER'S CHOICE - THE DAILY STAR OTT &amp; DIGITAL CONTENT AWARDS 2024

# Why recognition matters for BANGLADESH'S INVISIBLE STORYTELLERS

DOWEL BISWAS

When the trophies caught the stage lights at the Blender's Choice The Daily Star OTT & Digital Content Awards 2024, they shone not only for actors or directors but for those whose work usually remains unseen. Editors, cinematographers, costume designers, makeup artists, sound engineers, and art directors—the people who give cinema its texture, rhythm, and credibility—stood at last in the glare of attention. For one evening in Dhaka, the invisible became visible.



Rubama Fairuzz takes Best Make-Up for "Kaalpurush".

For the winners, the effects of recognition are tangible and symbolic. Families come to understand the stakes of a career once seen as marginal; colleagues recalibrate their appreciation for peers; young aspirants discover that behind-the-scenes roles are legitimate and valued. The awards do not merely celebrate individual achievement—they assert the collective worth of creative labour in an industry obsessed with stardom.

It is a small shift, but a significant one. Bangladeshi cinema, like many national industries, has long fetishised celebrity, conflating glamour with authorship. But film is not made by stars alone. It is constructed meticulously, by a legion of hands that rarely earn acknowledgement. The awards' focus on technical categories is an act of cultural intervention, asking audiences and peers alike to reconsider who counts in the making of art.

Editor Saleh Sobhan Auneem, who won for Salzar Rahman's *Kaalpurush*, articulated the stakes with striking simplicity. "When I went home with the award, my six-year-old son hugged me and was overjoyed seeing the trophy in my hand. My family and friends now know this profession has worth." For Auneem, recognition is both personal and professional: a public validation that filters into the domestic sphere, redefining a craft often dismissed as invisible.



Shihab Nurun Nabi wins Best Art Direction for "Kaalpurush". PHOTO: SHEIKH MEHEDI MORSHED

His colleague Syed Mehboob Hussain, also recognised for *Kaalpurush*, placed the award within a broader industrial reality. "More than 200 people often work behind a project. But how many are noticed behind the glossy glamour of the screen?" he asked. The awards, in this sense, puncture the myth of solitary authorship, highlighting cinema as a fundamentally collaborative endeavour.

This theme recurred across disciplines. Cinematographer Ishaque Hossain Pablo, who got the Best Cinematographer Award for Robiul Alam Robi directorial *Forget Me Not*, called the award a "lift for every creative who works behind the scenes."

Costume designer Zannat Mouri, honoured for Vicky Zahed's *Tikit*, reflected on the practical and symbolic dimensions of recognition: "Costumes are essential in making a character believable. Yet we work ferociously without acknowledgment. This award will inspire more people like me to step forward with their passion."

Recognition, the winners suggested, is a currency that travels. It reshapes professional legitimacy, shifts peer perception, and, crucially, alters family understanding of a creative career. The Best Makeup Artist award recipient, Rubama Fairuzz, also of *Kaalpurush*, remarked, "Makeup is one of the most important aspects of characterisation, yet it's one of the most neglected. This award gave me strength, confidence, and conviction. It will boost my dedication to the craft."

Art director Shihab Nurun Nabi, who received honours for *Kaalpurush*, offered another layer of insight, pointing to the interdependence of cinematic roles. "Chanchal Chowdhury once told me a set helped him delve deeper into character. That is one of my biggest appreciations," he said. Art direction, he argued, demands creativity, strategy, relatability, and budget discipline—yet it often remains unseen. The award acknowledges not just individual skill but the sector's collective importance.

The resonance of recognition extended beyond national boundaries. Indian sound designer Adeep Singh Manki, awarded for *Sinpaat*, spoke of a "lonely" craft whose significance is rarely understood. "When the *Sinpaat* team contacted me, the

boundary of countries became obsolete. This recognition from Bangladesh is one of the most special awards I've ever received." The gesture underscored a broader truth: art can transcend borders even when cultural and political frameworks do not.

Context matters. In Hollywood, technical Oscars are long-standing institutions; India has its National Awards for craft. In Bangladesh, where star culture dominates both the box office and discourse, the formal recognition of technical work is still nascent. The Blender's Choice initiative is thus not merely ceremonial—it is corrective. It reminds the industry that the creation of cinema is dispersed, multivocal, and dependent on labour too often hidden.

For the winners, the effects of recognition are tangible and symbolic. Families come to understand the stakes of a career once seen as marginal; colleagues recalibrate their appreciation for peers; young aspirants discover that behind-the-scenes roles are legitimate and valued. The awards do not merely celebrate individual achievement—they assert the collective worth of creative labour in an industry obsessed with stardom.

The Blender's Choice-The Daily Star OTT & Digital Content Awards 2024 did more than distribute trophies; it reframed a conversation long overdue in Bangladeshi cinema. By honouring editors, cinematographers, makeup artists, costume designers, sound engineers, and art directors, the awards challenged the entrenched hierarchy that privileges visibility over substance.

Recognition became a form of legitimacy—both social and professional—transforming how families, peers, and audiences perceive creative labour. It illuminated the collaborative architecture of cinema, reminding the industry that storytelling is a collective act, not the solitary genius of a star. For young creatives, the ceremony offered role models and a clear signal that craft matters. For the veterans, it reaffirmed years of dedication that often went unnoticed. In the glow of these awards, the invisible hands that shape Bangladeshi narratives were finally visible, celebrated, and given the cultural weight they have always deserved.



Pablo. PHOTO: COLLECTED



Zannat Mouri wins Best Costume Design for "Tikit". PHOTO: SHEIKH MEHEDI MORSHED

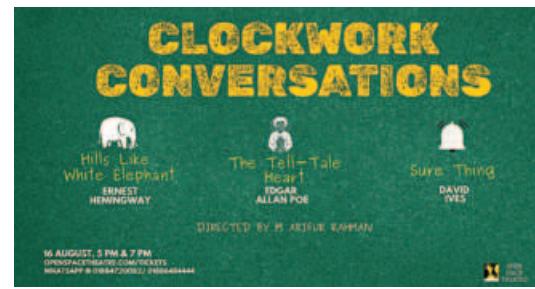


Indian sound designer Adeep Singh Manki receives award in absentia. PHOTO: COLLECTED

## OUT AND ABOUT IN DHAKA



Play: *Khobabnama*  
Sept 27 | 7 pm onwards  
Bangladesh Shilpkala Academy



Play: *Clockwork Conversations*  
Sep 29 | 5:30 pm and 7:30 pm onwards  
Bangladesh Shilpkala Academy



'The Human Voice' by Jean Cocteau  
Oct 9-11 | 7 pm onwards  
Alliance Française de Dhaka

## TRENDY STREAMS

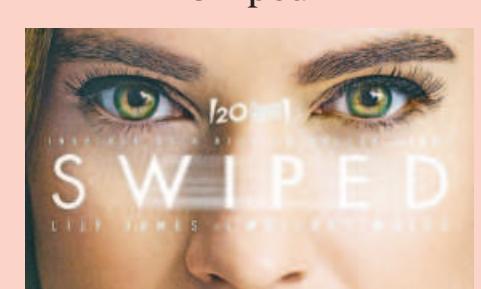
Netflix  
The Ba\*\*\*ds of Bollywood



Amazon Video  
Do You Wanna Partner



Hulu  
Swiped



Chorki  
Jaya aar Sharmin



HBO max  
The White Lotus





Hundreds of students and indigenous community members hold a mass rally in Khagrachhari yesterday, protesting the rape and ongoing violence against women in the Chittagong Hill Tracts.

PHOTO: STAR

Missing girl's body found in neighbour's septic tank  
OUR CORRESPONDENT, Sharifpur

The body of a six-year-old girl, missing for two days, was recovered from a neighbour's septic tank in Vedarganj upazila of Sharifpur yesterday.

The victim, identified as Tayeba, daughter of Titu Sardar of Chhoyalkandi area, was a nursery student at Darun Najat Madrasa. She had gone missing on Wednesday afternoon after leaving home to play.

Her family filed a general diary with the Sakhipur Police Station the same evening and searched extensively.

Yesterday, relatives and locals received a tip that there is a dead body in the septic tank at the house of neighbour Mesbahuddin Mollah.

Receiving information, police recovered the body around noon. The body was later sent to Sharifpur Sadar Hospital for autopsy.

Necessary legal steps will be taken following the investigation, said Additional Superintendent of Vedarganj Circle Police Soumya Shekhar.

## Woman dies, eight injured as speedboat sinks in Padma

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Faridpur

A woman died and eight others were injured after a speedboat sank in the Padma river in Dhaka's Dohar upazila due to strong current yesterday.

Confirming the incident, Charbhadrasan Police Station Officer-in-Charge (OC) Rajiullah Khan said he has visited the Charbhadrasan Upazila Health Complex where the injured are undergoing treatment.

The accident occurred around 5:15pm near Char Moinot ghat of Dohar. The speedboat was heading to Char Moinot from Gopalpur ghat in Charbhadrasan upazila of Faridpur.

The deceased was identified as Durga Rani Roy, 57, from Joydeb Sarkar Dangi village in Gazirtek union under Charbhadrasan.

Among the injured were Durga's three-year-old grandson, Lakshman Roy; son Liton Roy, and daughter-in-law Gita Roy.

Another speedboat reached the spot following the incident and rescued the victims.

The eight injured were taken to Charbhadrasan Upazila Health Complex by a team of Fire Service and Civil Defence. Of them, Mariam, 25, from Bialiangi village in Charbhadrasan, was moved to Faridpur Medical College Hospital after she developed breathing complications.

Another injured, Masud Alam, from Char Ramnagar village in Faridpur Sadar upazila, told reporters that the boat had 18 passengers, although its capacity was only 12. "Before reaching Moindot Ghat, the boat capsized after its bottom broke due to strong currents and waves."

## Siblings drown in B'baria pond

UNB, Brahmanbaria

Two young siblings drowned in a pond in Bogdohor village under Nabinagar union in Brahmanbaria yesterday.

The deceased were identified as Tisha, 9, and Arian, 6, children of one Jamal Mia of the village.

Both were students of Bogdohor Primary School.

Witnesses said the children fell into the pond near their home while playing around noon.

The tragedy came to notice when a neighbor found one of the children's bodies floating in the pond.

Local residents took the bodies to Nabinagar Upazila Health Complex, where doctors declared both children dead.

Helal Uddin, chairman of Nabinagar East Union Parishad, confirmed the incident.

## Contractor digs up roads after losing tender

Hundreds in Lalmonirhat's Kaliganj left stranded for weeks



S DILIP ROY, Lalmonirhat

Failure to secure a government contract led contractor to illegally dig up two roads in Lalmonirhat's Kaliganj upazila, leaving thousands of residents stranded for weeks.

Between August 7 and 15, the contractor used an excavator to cut nearly 1.5 kilometres of each road in Chalbalia and Chandrapur unions, despite having no work order.

Shafiqul Islam, a resident of Chalbalia, said, "Since August 7 we have been suffering. Water has filled the dug up roads, and people can barely walk across."

According to residents, contractor Aminul Islam had been competing for Local Government Engineering Department road

paving projects in the area. When the contracts were awarded to other companies, Aminul allegedly began box-cutting the roads before the official contractors received their work orders.

Although local authorities eventually halted the digging, the damage had already been done.

LGED sources said the projects involve paving a 3,093-metre road in Chandrapur Union at a cost of Tk 3.91 crore and a 5,250-metre road in Chalbalia Union costing over Tk 5 crore. Tenders were floated on June 26, and after evaluation, Mohammad Yunus & Brothers Pvt Ltd won the Chandrapur contract while Barendra Construction Ltd secured the Chalbalia work.

LGED's Kaliganj Upazila Engineer

Habibur Rahman said, "Out of jealousy and frustration over losing the tender, a local contractor illegally began digging up the roads. We immediately stopped the work after receiving complaints."

Representatives of the two winning firms, Elahi Baks and Shah Azam, had submitted two written complaints to LGED authorities.

Contacted for comment, Aminul Islam said, "The matter has been settled. I have nothing more to say."

Lalmonirhat LGED Executive Engineer Kawsar Alam said, "This is the first time in my career I have seen a contractor dig up a road after failing to get a job. With assistance from the local administration, we stopped the illegal work. The road construction will begin soon."

## Arrest, punish

FROM PAGE 3  
women in the Chittagong Hill Tracts.

Around 11:00am, a procession started from Khagrachhari Government College ground and paraded through Chengi Square, Mahajonpara, Narikelbagan, Shapla Chatter, Adalat Road and other streets before ending at Chengi Square. A rally was later held there.

At the rally, Ukkymu Marma announced a road blockade in Khagrachhari today, demanding the arrest of the remaining two accused.

He said all programmes would be suspended during Durga Puja, but warned that if the accused are not arrested within the next few days, an indefinite hartal would be called after Puja.

**PRAYER TIMING**  
SEPTEMBER 27

Fazr	Zohr	Asr	Maghrib	Esha
AZAN 4-35	12-45	4-15	6-00	7-30
JAMAAT 5-10	1-15	4-30	6-05	8-00

SOURCE: ISLAMIC FOUNDATION

## Social media rife

FROM PAGE 3  
that the use of social media has reached."

CCAF President Kazi Mustafiz said election-related propaganda is deliberately spread on social media, with users sharing posts, pictures and videos without considering the consequences.

"We need to learn how to use and fact check before sharing information on social platforms," he said.

Mustafiz said the CCAF will launch a cyber awareness programme across the country throughout October, with the theme "Be Cyber Aware, Stay Safe".

**“গ্যাস আর্টিয়ার সম্পর্ক। এর অপচয় রোধ করে আর্টিয়ার দায়িত্ব পালন করুন।”**

**“বিদ্যুৎ ও আলামী নিরাপত্তা সর্বোচ্চ অ্যাধিকার”**

**গাঁথাটা গ্যাস ফিল্ডস লিমিটেড**  
(পেট্রোবাংলার একটি কোম্পানি)  
**Bangladesh Gas Fields Company Ltd.**  
(A Company of Petrobangla)

**Request for Expression of Interest (EOI)  
for Short-Listing of Consulting Firm**

Dated: 25-09-2025

Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh													
1. Ministry/Division	: Ministry of Power, Energy & Mineral Resources/ Energy & Mineral Resources Division												
2. Agency	: Bangladesh Gas Fields Company Limited (BGFCL), a Company of Petrobangla												
3. Expression of Interest for Selection of	: Consulting firm (International) for consultancy services for drilling of 4 appraisal-cum-development wells at Titas & Kamta fields project.												
4. EOI Ref. No. & Date	: BGFCL/4WDP(Sv)/001/RE; Date: 25-09-2025												
KEY INFORMATION													
5. Procurement Sub-Method	: Quality and Cost Based Selection (QCBS)												
FUNDING INFORMATION													
6. Budget and Source of Funds	: BGFCL's own Fund.												
PARTICULAR INFORMATION													
07. Project Name	: Drilling of 4 Appraisal-cum-Development wells at Titas & Kamta Fields.												
08. EOI Closing Date and Time	: 15-10-2025 and 15: 00 hrs. (BST).												
09. Publication Date of Request of EOI	: 25-09-2025												
INFORMATION FOR APPLICANT													
10. Brief Description of Assignment	: 13.1 Consultancy services by 03 categories of consultants in drilling works of 04 gas wells (Titas well No.: 28, 29 & 30 and Kamta well No: 02) for the period December 2025 to May 2027 (tentative). Titas well No.: 28, 29 & 30 are planned to be drilled directionally up to 3500 m TVD depth (with 3900 m MD) at Titas gas field. Kamta well No: 02 is planned to be drilled directionally up to tentatively 2300 m TVD (with 3550 m MD) at Kamta gas field.												
	13.2 Categories of consultants with estimated man-month are as below:												
	<table border="1" style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse;"> <thead> <tr> <th style="text-align: center;">Category of Consultants</th> <th style="text-align: center;">No.</th> <th style="text-align: center;">Man-month</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td style="text-align: center;">1. Drilling Supervisor</td> <td style="text-align: center;">1</td> <td style="text-align: center;">15</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="text-align: center;">2. Petroleum Geologist</td> <td style="text-align: center;">1</td> <td style="text-align: center;">10</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="text-align: center;">3. Petroleum Engineer (Completion)</td> <td style="text-align: center;">1</td> <td style="text-align: center;">6</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>	Category of Consultants	No.	Man-month	1. Drilling Supervisor	1	15	2. Petroleum Geologist	1	10	3. Petroleum Engineer (Completion)	1	6
Category of Consultants	No.	Man-month											
1. Drilling Supervisor	1	15											
2. Petroleum Geologist	1	10											
3. Petroleum Engineer (Completion)	1	6											
	13.3 The Terms of Reference of the Consultants are as follows but not limited to:												
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Drilling Supervisor mainly shall: prepare/finalize drilling programs; supervise entire drilling operation (including remedial works, if required); &amp; supervise associated third party engineering works.</li> <li>• Petroleum Geologist mainly shall: prepare/finalize mud logging, wireline logging &amp; coring programs; analyze &amp; interpret mud logs &amp; wireline logs; provide well prognosis, sand correlation &amp; well correlation; select DST &amp; completion intervals; provide required geological information to the Drilling Supervisor during drilling operation etc.</li> <li>• Petroleum Engineer (Completion) mainly shall: prepare/finalize well completion programs; analyze &amp; interpret wireline logs; select DST &amp; completion intervals in consultation with Petroleum Geologist; supervise well completion jobs; carry out well test analysis etc.</li> </ul>												
	The consultants shall also require to assist the Client in any other technical matters related to their fields of expertise.												
11. Experience, Resources and Delivery Capacity Required	The Consulting Firm must have: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• At least 10 years of experience (in case of JV, each member should have at least 10 years of experience) in providing consultancy services in oil &amp; gas sector.</li> <li>• Experience in providing consultancy services for at least 3 Nos. oil/gas drilling projects in at least 2 countries outside its own country within the last 10 years.</li> <li>• Must have in their payroll or have agreement/arrangement with minimum 3 (three) qualified &amp; experienced personnel for each category of consultant for providing consultancy services under the project for the period December 2025 to May 2027 (tentative).</li> <li>• Valid registration documents.</li> </ul>												
12. Other Details	Consulting Firms that are deemed well suited to perform the assignment will be short-listed upon evaluation of EOIs. Thereafter, Request for Proposal (RFP) document will be issued to the short-listed firms. Interested Consulting Firms are requested to submit the following documents/information along with their EOIs: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Brochure of the Consulting Firm, which indicates the facilities, manpower and areas of expertise of the consulting firm;</li> <li>• Details of similar work performed;</li> <li>• Experience in similar work environments and situations;</li> <li>• Financial capability related documents such as audited financial report &amp; annual report.</li> <li>• Tax payment related documents.</li> <li>• ISO certificates.</li> <li>• In case of joint venture, joint venture agreement/letter of intent shall be executed on a non-judicial stamp (BDT 300 in value).</li> </ul>												
13. EOI Submission Details	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Consulting firms from all over the world except those who are not having diplomatic relation with Bangladesh are eligible to submit EOI.</li> <li>- The advertisement of EOI along with Sample Format for EOI Submission is available on the websites of Petrobangla (<a href="http://www.petrobangla.org.bd">www.petrobangla.org.bd</a>) &amp; BGFCL (<a href="http://www.bgfcl.org.bd">www.bgfcl.org.bd</a>). The advertisement of EOI is also available on the website of Bangladesh Public Procurement Authority (<a href="http://www.cptu.gov.bd">www.cptu.gov.bd</a>).</li> <li>- Interested consulting firms are requested to submit EOI in accordance with aforesaid Sample Format along with required supporting documents. Consulting firms may also submit EOI in their own format and may attach any other supporting documents related to the consultancy services.</li> <li>- Interested Consulting Firms are requested to submit printed &amp; duly signed EOI (1-original &amp; 2-copies) in sealed envelope within the deadline at the following address: Project office, Drilling of 4 Appraisal-cum-Development wells at Titas &amp; Kamta Fields, Project Office, Level-2, Head Office Complex, BGFCL, Birashar, Brahmanbaria-3400, Bangladesh directly or via postal/courier services.</li> </ul> <p>Interested Consulting Firms can submit duly signed EOI from their organizational webmail/E-mail at the following E-mail addresses within the deadline: <a href="mailto:4wdpproject@bgfcl.org.bd">4wdpproject@bgfcl.org.bd</a>; <a href="mailto:pdd4wells@gmail.com">pdd4wells@gmail.com</a></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- In case of any unavoidable circumstances such as strike, civil commotion, Govt. declared holiday etc. EOI submission closing date will be the following working day.</li> <li>- The Procurement method will be conducted in accordance with the procedures set out in the Public Procurement Act, 2006 and Public Procurement Rules, 2008 of GoB.</li> </ul>												
14. PROCURING ENTITY DETAILS	Engr. A. K. M. Jashim Uddin Project Director, Drilling of 4 Appraisal-cum-Development wells at Titas & Kamta Fields, Project Office, Level-2, Head office complex, BGFCL, Birashar, Brahmanbaria, Bangladesh.												

Procuring Entity reserves the right to accept any or reject any or all EOIs.

**28.10.1213.000.876.09.0032.25(4wdp)**

**(16" x 4)**

25/09/25

(Engr. A. K. M. Jashim Uddin)  
Project Director/Deputy General manager  
E-mail: [4wdpproject@bgfcl.org.bd](mailto:4wdpproject@bgfcl.org.bd)  
Mobile Phone: 0178767848

## FICTION

# The u-turn

ALI TAREQUE

Is he eyeing me? That young man with the receding hairline, flipping through a paperback on a discount table. No, revise that. He is not so young really, as my second take reconsiders. A freshness in his eyes made him look more youthful. If not for his thinning scalp, that little paunch under the draping T shirt, that bulge around the jaw, and the almost palpable discomfiture in his posture, which manifests an assortment of ailments, what—raging forties? Then, I am not in the noon of my spring either, not even close. Admittedly, I still possess some of the charm from my salad days, carried over to the stage where I struggle hard to keep balance between what I see in the mirror and in the eyes of onlookers. Or, as Brent is wont to say—my youth didn't need to be generous and send over its leftover attraction to my current older self. It's the charm of my very present self. Maybe he caresses me into antagonizing my own past just because he wasn't a part of it?

So, is the not-so young man eyeing the not-so-much older me?

How long would a sideways glance away from flipping through a discount paperback have to be to qualify as eyeing? OK, it's not a discount table after all; "Notable Paperbacks", the steel-framed rectangular sign protests



ILLUSTRATION: EMDAD MAHMUD

**Cruising beyond the unwelcome half of the century, the ends of my lips have now started to over-straighten. But it has hardly been three months (OK, maybe a bit longer; six months tops. Was it Christmas or Thanksgiving Eve?), when Brent's beer buddy Douglas attempted to sweet-talk me, rather obviously. "Your smile... the sweetest thing I've ever seen," was his slightly inebriated flattery. Did he add, "for your age"? I don't remember, and neither do I care to.**

from behind the table. Neither is he "flipping through" the pages. Not with one hand hooked in his jeans pocket and the other pressing the pages open. His stocky fingers splay delicately—almost feminine.

How long did his eyes linger on me before tearing away? How does one distinguish between gawking, staring, and a mere impulsive look?

He didn't really go back to the line he was reading before his little distraction, now did he? He has started to seem a bit stiff, a little un-relaxed—the flap of his shirt stopped flapping on his tummy.

So, now he is looking back. That's how it appears at the moment anyway, turning his head in this direction. A quick inventory of my outfit: a long,

white, half-sleeve blouse on top of a knee-length black skirt. Too little time to recollect the shoes, even though from the feel of them on my feet, I would think some kind of sandals. Overall, pretty spartan. That's a shame! Though I can't remember the exact amount, the white XCVI did cost me a small fortune. There's no way he would know that.

Or would he? Unless, of course, there is evidence that he has effortlessly resumed the stream of thought that the line on that page was tying up for him. That is something he certainly hasn't done. His stare clearly hovers somewhere beyond the surface of the pages, even if just around the top of the discount table.

Okay, my self-indulgence is swiftly getting out of hand. XCVI or not, it is certainly not my couture that has made a rubberneck out of him. Especially with the horde of younger girls flaunting their assets in fancier and skimpier outfits.

Then what did? What about the appeal of the old? As a starter, the angelic charm of my eyes, whose only corruption is the knowledge of its being incorruptible—graciously attested by an acquaintance from the sizable clique of my admirers. I say sizable, because it is my prerogative to qualify it as such.

Cruising beyond the unwelcome half of the century, the ends of my lips have now started to over-straighten.

But it has hardly been three months (OK, maybe a bit longer; six months tops. Was it Christmas or Thanksgiving Eve?), when Brent's beer buddy Douglas attempted to sweet-talk me, rather obviously. "Your smile... the sweetest thing I've ever seen," was his slightly inebriated flattery. Did he add, "for your age"? I don't remember, and neither do I care to.

So, he is looking back, as I am almost trotting out of the "J" aisle to make a U-turn into the next aisle, "K"? Or perhaps "I" instead? Would I browse backward? What am I looking for anyway, on the second floor of Barnes & Noble? A mild digression is catching up with me... Not that I mind; we digress all the time. The reality will come back in a matter of seconds. Or I will go back to it. Either way. In the meantime, what really makes him look back at me? Whatever it is, I prepare to wear the "angelic" smile that I am famous for, even if only within the sizable coterie of my *gli innamorati*.

Here he comes. His brows raised a bit with the strain of acting nonchalant. His right arm stressed, as his fingers pressed slightly harder on the pages, flattening the poor book flush on the table.

On this front, nervousness is brewing, overflowing into my smile. But that's okay, it just adds to my middle-age charm; that lack of corruption, again, except for the knowledge of being incorruptible. That is okay, too.

Not much to do about it. Not now anyway. I am about to turn the corner in my haste to move on to the next aisle.

Now that I think about it, Brent is practically following me, also wearing a white shirt, and—wait a minute—isn't he wearing a pair of black shorts too? That's a bad oversight, very bad! I should have noticed it, before stepping into the car at least. Too late now. Besides, this is probably not even a valid concern. This person here is not going to identify him as my husband, not that fast. But no telling; it isn't so easy to cloak the little giveaways that a couple can create around them in the years of getting along with each other.

So, what if he identifies us as married? Doesn't it make the whole encounter even more interesting?

So, he looks this way. But don't his eyes wander a little too much? They hover on my smile—check, rest a bit on the designer collar flanking my majestic neckline—check, but then they dilate to focus on something else, or rather someone else, behind me. Not on Brent, who is maddeningly maintaining a conjugal closeness. Something says that something voluptuous, something skimpy and youthful, even doxy, is lurking behind me. A body that I had barely noticed on my left a second or so ago when I was coming out of the "J" aisle and before I spotted the rubbernecking young man.

He holds his stare for a fraction of a second longer, in which time a sense of

guilt clouds his gaze, borne out of the momentary and momentous liaison with me.

For the umpteenth time, that is OK, because, despite his new distraction, he took a second look at me.

Or... what if he isn't looking at me at all? Not even the first time around?

I pirouette on the short heel of my right sandal (it's the pair with five onyx stones on the thongs and the black bases with raised edges—the feel of its traction reminds me now) and I turn right at the next aisle that begins with "I". Or "K".

Or maybe I just carry on my pretend rush to pick a book for myself, or for a friend, that was intercepted by a sudden wave of thoughts, as I hear the clack-clack of high heels under the swarthy, sweet, and insolent body in scanty red of someone whose age could be less than the difference between that of mine and the young man's. He has gone back to his page-flipping. Or line flipping.

It's all the same.

**Ali Tareque** is a Bangladeshi-born writer based in Houston, Texas. He is the author of the English novel *Echo of the Silence* (Arrow Books/Penguin Random House, 2023) and the Bangla short story collection *Sontan o Sonketer Upokotha* (Roots, 2022). Alongside fiction, he writes poetry, directs plays and films, and performs elocution.

## FLASH FICTION

# Side notes to everything I have ever known

ATIQA TANJEEM

I take my tea with two teaspoons of brown sugar, but some fine mornings, I betray my routine and chase the jolt in my fingers as I put the spoon down after just one or when I reach for another after the second. Even if for a fleeting moment, I love not recognising myself, not knowing where I will lead myself towards, not knowing what words my lips will form.

Truth is, I do know myself. I know myself the way one knows their childhood bedroom: walls that feel crumbly to the touch, a lightbulb that dims on and off, stuffed toys strewn about, cute posters that have yellowed out over the years. Maybe an oddly-placed closet that has heard vile curses from people who stub their toes against it, maybe a pristine vase of plastic bouquets that sits atop a shelf—meant to be admired from afar, but never touched lest it become dirty. You stand at the door's threshold and take a mental snapshot, clambering to savour the nostalgia that washes over you at the mere sight of what was once dear and familiar. It never stays still, though. The bedframe moves from the corner of the room to the middle, innocuous scratches and ink blots appear on the walls, the posters get ripped off. Taking a closer look at what remains is terrifying. You can now see the blotches of dirt on your vase, bugs crawling out of it as



ILLUSTRATION: MAISHA SYEDA

you never cared to clean it; after all, why would you, when it always looked so very perfect from afar? A long-lost friendship bracelet, the one you cried over for weeks, sits abandoned in your closet drawer.

I see myself: sometimes so hazy that I

cannot see a person at all, sometimes so brilliantly vibrant that I fail to fully comprehend the colors. I turn the pages of a book I've read a thousand times, yet the words keep shifting, hiding, and simmering each time my eyes fall upon them. I see the little notes phasing in and out around the margins—begging me to notice them but, at the same time, too shy to be read. I have always loved the side notes; I love the cold, spiked dread that churns in my stomach once they appear, I love the way my knees tremble as I begin to piece together what they say.

Sometimes, they write themselves in languages I will never be able to learn, sometimes I know without even looking. The ink plays peekaboo from the margins, daring me to look away and pretend it never existed. If I ignore it for too long, it threatens to crush my windpipe under its claws.

Sometimes, I can barely read within the margins as my vision clouds and breath hitches; that doesn't matter much to me anyways, the side notes write who I am. They write the exceptions, the surprises, the unexpected, the unplanned. They write me unadulterated, undiluted. I run my frenzied gaze on their prophecies every ticking second of the day, in the hopes that I might just be able to read between the lines.

**Atiqa Tanjeem** is an 18-year-old student who likes to occasionally translate her inner world into readable words.

### Tigers to stay back in UAE

SPORTS REPORTER from Dubai

Bangladesh's Asia Cup campaign ended with a defeat to Pakistan in the virtual semifinal on Thursday. However, the team will not be returning home now. Just a few days later, a bilateral series against Afghanistan will begin in UAE.

The three-match T20I series, scheduled for October 2, 3, and 5, will be followed by ODIs on October 8, 11, and 14. Practice sessions have already been scheduled to start on September 29. Therefore, the players in the T20I squad for the Afghanistan series will not have the chance to return home.

On September 29, the team will switch hotels. Players not selected for the Afghanistan series will return, and a few replacements may arrive from Bangladesh. While the dates of the Afghanistan series are confirmed, there is still some uncertainty about the venues. The ODIs are expected to be held at Zayed Cricket Stadium in Abu Dhabi, while the T20Is are likely to be staged in Sharjah or Dubai.

T20I captain Litton Das, who missed the last two crucial Super Four matches due to a strain on his back, remains somewhat uncertain for the Afghanistan series as well.

### BCB polls: Final voter list published

SPORTS REPORTER

The Election Commission of the Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) on Friday announced the final voter list of 191 councillors for the upcoming board of directors' polls, scheduled for October 6.

The final list included councillors from 15 Dhaka-based clubs that were excluded from the draft list, revealed on September 23, as they were under investigation by the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) for irregularities.

In addition, the councillorships of five districts - Sylhet, Bogura, Pabna, Sirajganj, and Naogaon - were also granted although the councillorship for Narsingdi remained vacant.

"We didn't receive any application from Narsingdi district for the councillorship. There were applications from the other five districts. We checked whether they met the criteria for councillorship and after being convinced, we added them to the list," Election Commissioner Kazi Nazrul Islam, who is also the executive director of National Sports Council, told The Daily Star on Friday.

As per the BCB constitution, the deputy commissioner of a district is supposed to approve the nomination of councillorship from that region as the head of the ad hoc committee running that district's sports association.

However, Nazrul informed that the DCs of those five districts did not approve any names.

"They [deputy commissioners] didn't approve their names. But as they are eligible, the Election Commission decided that they can be included. We followed the BCB constitution before granting their councillorships," he said.

The election commissioner also said that the councillorship of the 15 clubs were granted as they were yet to be convicted by the ACC.

The EC also kept former BCB president Faruque Ahmed's councillorship as it was satisfied with his explanation for late submission.

Nazrul was hopeful that all doubts over the EC's fairness will end after the announcement of the final voters list.

"We are working independently and don't have any biases. After seeing the final voter list, I think everyone will feel that we are doing our job the right way."

On Thursday, the EC had conducted hearings on 38 objections submitted regarding the draft voter list at the BCB office.

The nomination forms for the board of directors election will be distributed today at the BCB office between 10:00am-5:00pm. The candidates will submit their forms on the next day.

### Atletico face early Real reckoning

AGENCIES

Atletico Madrid coach Diego Simeone is wary of dwelling on the past, but when his side host Real Madrid at the Metropolitano on Saturday, echoes of history linger while the future also looms large.

The Rojiblanco have struggled for stability since their controversial Champions League last-16 elimination against Real in March, when Julian Alvarez's decisive shoot-out penalty was ruled out for a double touch. Their season unraveled after that exit, and the slump has continued into the new campaign.

Six games into LaLiga, Atletico sit nine points behind their city rivals, who top the table with a perfect record. Simeone's men have managed just two wins, with criticism of their inconsistency mounting despite heavy summer spending of over 175 million euros on recruits, including Alex Baena, David Hanko, and Thiago Almada.

"We will have a really hard, difficult game against a side that



Sri Lanka's Chamari Athapaththu, Pakistan's Fatima Sana, South Africa's Laura Wolvaardt, and Bangladesh's Nigar Sultana Joty attended the captains' day event in Colombo on Friday ahead of the 13th ICC Women's World Cup, co-hosted by India and Sri Lanka from September 30. The other four skippers -- from Australia, England, India, and New Zealand -- gathered for a similar event in Bengaluru. Having been short on match practice and also seeing their first warm-up against South Africa washed out, Bangladesh will look to gain valuable preparation in today's final warm-up against Sri Lanka before opening their campaign against Pakistan on October 2.

PHOTO: AFP

### Panicky Tigers forget 'basic cricket'

EKUSH TAPADER from Dubai

During the innings break of the Bangladesh-Pakistan Super Four match in Dubai on Thursday, Pakistan legend Wasim Akram looked tense.

When asked about the match situation, Akram, who is working as a commentator at the Asia Cup, said, "The wicket is a bit tricky, but if Bangladesh plays basic cricket, they'll easily make it to the final."

Thankfully for Pakistan, Bangladesh did not play that "basic cricket", suffered a 11-run defeat, and squandered a golden opportunity to play the final.

After the match, Akram spoke to the Bangladeshi media and pointed out that the Tigers' batting struggles reflected the weakness of their first-class structure. "Look, batters with good technique for any format will come from red-ball first-class cricket. That's the area Bangladesh needs to improve."

The term "batting technique" echoed throughout the media box of the Dubai International Cricket Stadium on Thursday night. Journalists and former players turned commentators sat close by, exchanging thoughts in between sips of coffee. The common subject was the technique of Bangladesh's batters -- conversations that were not flattering for the Tigers.

The lack of technical skill among Bangladeshi batters is nothing new. But against Pakistan, the shortcomings in the team management's plans were also glaring.

The management reduced the



number of top-order batters and went in with a cluster of lower-order players. After the side lost early wickets, those batters looked embarrassingly out of place.

Indian legend Sunil Gavaskar told a journalist from his country, "If they had just played with a straight bat, these runs would have come anyway. Who knows what was going through their heads?"

The way nervousness and panic took over Bangladesh's innings while chasing a mere 136, it seemed as if they had no belief that playing with calm heads could get them those runs.

Bangladesh's goal this Asia Cup was to become champions. But apart from one or two flashes, the team never really looked like they could go all the way. In fact,

just reaching the Super Four after various calculations felt like an achievement.

The way the team played in losing causes against India and Pakistan, rekindled old doubts about their T20 abilities. Before the Asia Cup, it looked like Litton Das and Co had finally grown into a proper team in the shortest format. On the bigger stage, however, their frailties were exposed once again.

The batting, in particular, looked like a leaky roof -- plugging one hole for only another to spring up. In trying to increase their six-hitting ability, the batters seemed to have forgotten the skill of rotating the strike. Then in the slog overs, when sixes are a must, the lower-order batters failed completely.

In fact, only opener Saif Hassan, who hit 12 sixes in four innings, consistently cleared the ropes for Bangladesh in the Asia Cup. After him, Shamim Hossain, Tanzid Hasan Tamim and Tawhid Hridoy are jointly second with three maximums each.

Indian legend Sunil Gavaskar told a journalist from his country, "If they had just played with a straight bat, these runs would have come anyway. Who knows what was going through their heads?"

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Bangladesh's goal this Asia Cup was to become champions.

But apart from one or two flashes,

the team never really looked like

they could go all the way. In fact,

### SAFF U-17 CHAMPIONSHIP Can Bangladesh end India jinx?

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh will look to break their title jinx when they come up against India in the final of Saff U-17 Championship at the Racecourse International Stadium in Colombo on Saturday. The match will begin at 6:30pm (Bangladesh Time).

Although Bangladesh clinched two youth titles of the regional championships -- U-16 and U-15 -- in their first final attempts, they never won the U-17 title despite playing back-to-back finals in 2023 and 2024 -- losing to India 2-0 on both occasions.

The charges of Golam Rabbani Choton confirmed the final berth with three successive wins -- two in group stages and one in the semifinals -- without conceding a single goal. They have also played some scintillating football, raising hope of toppling six-time youth champions India.

"Boys are excited and motivated to play the final and they are fully prepared to take on India, who are a very good side," Choton said. "If the boys can implement the game plan and remain united, then we will have a good chance to achieve our target."

Replying to a query, Choton said, "India have always been a strong side at youth level and they are good in physic, transition, ball distribution, set pieces and quick attacks but we can have opportunities to catch them by utilising the big space behind their high-line defence."

### Abahani held by 10-man Rahmatganj

SPORTS REPORTER

Last season's runners up Abahani started the Bangladesh Football League with a goalless draw against 10-man Rahmatganj in Munshiganj on Friday.

Abahani, considered the second favourites, made a disappointing start against a side, who also held them to draws twice in last season's league.

Reduced to 10 men in the 39th minute, the Old Dhaka Outfit even went close to breaking the deadlock at the start of the second half.

Abahani reorganised and pressed hard for a lead until the final whistle but lack of cutting edge saw them drop two points in their opening game.

In Manikganj, Arambagh marked their return to the top-tier league with a 1-1 draw against Fakirpore Young Men's Club.

Arambagh, who last played in the professional league in 2021, took the lead through a strike from Nigerian forward Yaya John Denapo in the 60th minute before Egyptian forward Mostafa Mahmoud equalised in stoppage time.



Bangladesh's Jamal Hossain claimed the Telangana Golconda Masters 2025 title after rain forced the cancellation of the final round at the Hyderabad Golf Association golf course on Friday, sealing victory on a 54-hole total. The 40-year-old, a five-time PGTI winner, had positioned himself perfectly with three brilliant rounds of 61, 62 and 64, finishing at 23-under 187 and with a commanding four-shot lead over India's Akshay Sharma.

PHOTO: PGTI

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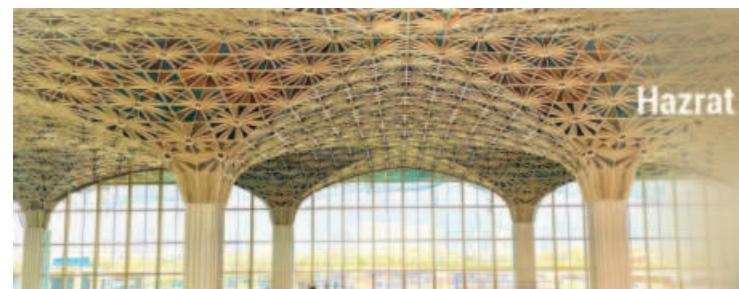


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## Accused dies in hospital after remand

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Bagerhat

A 26-year-old accused died while undergoing treatment at Bagerhat District Hospital yesterday after being remanded at a police station.

The deceased is Mozaffar from Bhaga village in Rampal upazila.

Police said locals caught Mozaffar along with three others on September 18 for allegedly stealing wires and transformers in Rakhalgachhi area.

They were later handed over to the police and sent to jail the same day in a theft case. On Thursday, police secured a one-day remand for Mozaffar.

While being held at Bagerhat Sadar Police Station, he suddenly fell ill early yesterday, said Bagerhat Superintendent of Police Md Asaduzzaman. Fellow detainees alerted police, who rushed him to the hospital around 7:30am.

Dr SK Sohelur Rahman of the hospital's emergency department said an ECG showed a severe heart attack. "We advised that he be referred to Khulna, but his heart stopped around 8:00am before the transfer could be made," he said.

The SP said Mozaffar had four theft-related cases against him.



Palestinians children react after an Israeli strike on a house in Gaza City yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

SEE PAGE 5 COL 4

## Faridpur, Cumilla divisions in works Move criticised by public admin officials

BAHARAM KHAN

The government is set to form two new administrative divisions -- Faridpur and Cumilla -- in line with recommendations from the Public Administration Reform Commission, taking the total to 10.

The development came at a meeting on September 8 of a high-powered committee on administrative reforms headed by Cabinet Secretary Sheikh Abdur Rashid. The Daily Star has learnt from people with knowledge of the discussions.

► Proposed Faridpur division would include Faridpur, Madaripur, Rajbari, Gopalganj, Shariatpur

► Cumilla would comprise Brahmanbaria, Cumilla, Chandpur, Feni, Laxmipur, Noakhali

The proposed Faridpur division would include Faridpur, Madaripur, Rajbari, Gopalganj and Shariatpur districts, according to the recommendations made by the Public Administration Reform Commission in February.

The proposed Cumilla division would comprise Brahmanbaria, Cumilla, Chandpur, Feni, Laxmipur and Noakhali districts.

The meeting also decided to form two new upazilas in Cumilla and Chattogram: Bangra and Fatikchhari North.

Bangra will be created by splitting Muradnagar upazila of Cumilla, which has 22 unions. The proposed upazila would be formed with 10 unions that fall under Bangra Police Station.

Fatikchhari North will be formed by dividing the existing Fatikchhari upazila in Chattogram.

SEE PAGE 5 COL 1

## Babar summits 8,000m Manaslu peak without oxygen tank

STAFF CORRESPONDENT



Bangladesh has scaled new heights in mountaineering as Dr Babar Ali became the first Bangladeshi to summit an 8,000-metre peak without supplemental oxygen yesterday morning.

The seasoned climber reached the top of Mount Manaslu, the world's eighth-highest peak at 8,163 metres, in the Himalayas.

This historic ascent marks Babar's fourth successful 8,000-metre peak, following his climbs of Everest, Lhotse and Annapurna I. Alongside him, fellow Bangladeshi climber Tanvir Ahmed also stood on the summit, achieving the feat on his very first 8,000-metre expedition.

The achievement in Nepal was confirmed by expedition manager Forhan Zaman, president of the mountaineering club Vertical Dreamers, which organised the climb under the banner "Manaslu Ascent: Vertical Duo."

SEE PAGE 5 COL 4

## 'Won't allow Israel to annex West Bank'

Says Trump; Netanyahu denies genocide charge at UN amid walkout, protests

AGENCIES

US President Donald Trump vowed to stop Israel from annexing the West Bank as Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu yesterday vowed in an angry UN address to block a Palestinian state, accusing European leaders of pushing his country into "national suicide" and rewarding Hamas.

Netanyahu, in a defiant speech that was partially broadcast on Israeli military loudspeakers in Gaza, vowed to "finish the job" against Hamas even as Trump said he thought he had sealed a deal on a ceasefire.

Days after France, Britain and other Western powers recognised a state of Palestine, Netanyahu said that they had sent a "very clear message that murdering Jews pays off."

"Israel will not allow you to shove a terrorist state down our throats," Netanyahu said.

"We will not commit national suicide because you don't have the guts to face down the hostile media and antisemitic mobs demanding Israel's blood," he said.

Palestinian Authority president Mahmud Abbas is a rival of Hamas and condemned the attack as well as antisemitism in his own address Thursday, which he delivered virtually after the United States refused him a visa.

Netanyahu -- who has opposed a Palestinian state for decades -- mocked



► Israeli PM says Palestinian state would be 'national suicide' for Israel

► PLO says Netanyahu's speech 'saturated with lies'

► Trump optimistic about Gaza peace deal

► UN identifies 158 firms linked to Israeli settlements

Western support for Abbas and called the Palestinian Authority "corrupt to the core."

But Netanyahu notably did not touch on the issue of annexing the West Bank, which some members of his cabinet have threatened as a way to kill any prospect of a real Palestinian state.

Trump, who has offered crucial support to Netanyahu as Israel comes under mounting global pressure, made clear he would not back annexation.

"I will not allow Israel to annex the West Bank," Trump told reporters at the White House. "No, I will not allow it. It's not going to happen."

Trump voiced optimism about ending nearly two years of devastating war,

echoing the confidence expressed a day earlier on the sidelines of the United Nations by his roving envoy, Steve Witkoff.

"We're getting pretty close to having a deal on Gaza and maybe even peace," said Trump, who also spoke to Netanyahu by telephone on Thursday.

Trump met Tuesday at the United Nations with the leaders of key Arab and Muslim nations who warned him of consequences if Israel moved ahead.

"I think the president of the US understands very well the risks and dangers of annexation in the West Bank," Saudi Arabia's Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan told reporters.

With Netanyahu facing an International

SEE PAGE 5 COL 1



Staring into the horizon, Shahjahan Mizi stands on the edge of the Meghna river where his home once stood. To escape fast-approaching erosion, his house of 18 years had to be relocated. Hundreds like him have lost their roofs to the river's wrath and now live under the open sky. The photo was taken recently in Majherchar village of Bhola Sadar upazila.

PHOTO: MONIR UDDIN ANIK

## Yunus vows labour reforms ahead of polls

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Chief Adviser Prof Muhammad Yunus reaffirmed his government's commitment to implementing key reforms aligned with International Labour Organization (ILO) conventions before the upcoming national elections in February.

Speaking at a high-level dinner hosted at the Bangladesh Permanent Mission to the United Nations in New York on Thursday, he underscored the critical role of labour reforms in attracting large-scale foreign direct investment to Bangladesh.

Yunus attended the event as chief guest. Leaders from three political parties -- BNP, Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami and the National Citizen Party -- also spoke, emphasising the importance of the garments industry and expressing support for continued labour sector reform.

The discussion, moderated by Lutfey Siddiqi, special envoy to the chief adviser, included comments from senior officials of the ILO and various UN agencies.

BNP Secretary General Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir described the garments industry as a cornerstone of Bangladesh's economy. He noted that any future government must prioritise its growth and sustainability, and acknowledged the interim government's efforts to advance labour reforms and ILO commitments.

Sed Abdulla Mohammad Taher, nayeb-e-amir of Jamaat, expressed support for the interim government's

## Israel kills at least 47 more in Gaza

AGENCIES

Israel's onslaught on the Gaza Strip continued yesterday with more than 40 Palestinians killed and dozens injured as rescue teams comb through the debris attempting to save those buried.

At least 47 Palestinians have been killed in Israeli attacks on Gaza since dawn, hospital sources told Al Jazeera. Among the victims were 28 people killed in Gaza City where Israel's army has launched a ground invasion and ramped up its bombardment in an effort to capture and occupy the territory's main urban centre.

As Israeli bombardment continues on Gaza's main urban centre, its military has sent a new warning that it plans to attack more besieged areas.

"Urgent warning to all those who have not yet evacuated the Gaza Port area and the Rimal neighbourhood ... and the tents next to it on Amin al-Husseini Street," spokesman Avichay Adraee said in a statement.

"The army will attack the building soon due to the presence of Hamas terrorist infrastructure inside or next to it."

Israeli military on Wednesday claimed that more than 700,000 Palestinians have left the Gaza City area. The UN humanitarian agency OCHA reported a lower figure, saying 388,400 people have been displaced from Gaza's north since mid-August, most of them from Gaza City.

## Pak PM appeals for India talks at UN, hails Trump

AFP, United Nations

Pakistan's leader yesterday said he was ready for talks with India and hailed the role of US President Donald Trump, who has been panned by New Delhi's reticence on his diplomacy.

Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif addressed the United Nations a day after he met with Trump at the White House alongside Pakistani military chief Field Marshal Asim Munir, who has told the US leader he deserves the Nobel Peace Prize for a ceasefire in Pakistan's May conflict with India.

"Pakistan stands ready for a composite, comprehensive and result-oriented dialogue with India on all outstanding issues. South Asia requires proactive rather than provocative leadership," Sharif said in his speech to the UN General Assembly.

Sharif called Trump's leadership "bold and visionary."

Had Trump not intervened in a timely way and "decisively," the consequences of a full-fledged war would have been catastrophic," he said.

# DURGA PUJA

## A symphony of faith and festivity

DIPAN NANDY

Under the autumn sky, sunlight and clouds play hide-and-seek as Kashful sway gently in the breeze. The morning air carries the soft scent of incense, while the city stirs to life to the rhythm of dhak drums.

climbing rooftops and gathering by riversides. Conch shells and dhak drums reverberated across the sky.

"Every Mahalaya morning brings new hope. The thought of Mother's arrival feels like a fountain of joy. All old fatigue washes away," said 65-year-old Ratna Devi.

Seven-year-old Riya Mitra, eyes sparkling, added, "I woke up early and went to the roof. Since Mother is

Temple, last year's idol was immersed to make way for the new one. The scent of clay and straw filled the air as artisans shaped her fingers and moulded her face. With the structure complete, final touches of colour were being added.

In Old Dhaka's Tantibazar and Shankharibazar, lanes brimmed with festive spirit. Neighbouring areas like Lakshibazar, Farashganj and Armanitola also glowed with anticipation.

beat of the dhak.

"Mother comes every year, but this joy feels different. We wait year after year for this moment," said Priyanka Sen in Shankharibazar. Her cousins Priyanti and Moumita added, "We come to the pandal every day after school. Seeing Mother's form brings peace to our hearts."

Outside, food stalls, lights and children's games created a festive air of

pandals and temples, including 258 in Dhaka city. Last year, 31,461 pandals hosted the festival nationwide, with 252 in the capital.

Security measures have been tightened. Home Affairs Adviser Lt Gen (retd) Md Jahangir Alam Chowdhury stressed vigilance to prevent communal unrest during the festival.

**The heartbeat of celebration**  
In Dhaka, the joy of Durga Puja goes

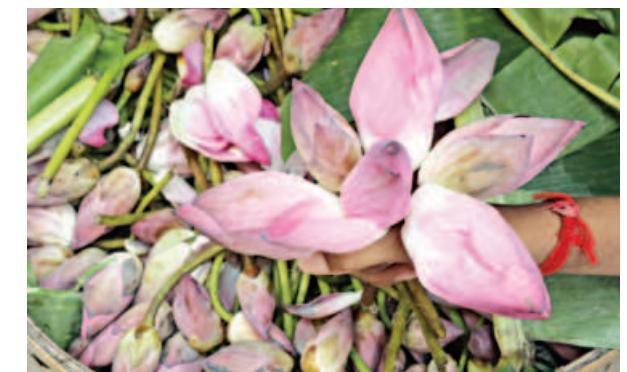


PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

It feels as though daily life is on the verge of transformation. From homes to pandals, one message echoes -- "Maa asche" (Mother is coming).

Priests chant the verses of the Chandi Path with devotion as worshippers close their eyes, immersed in the sacred sounds. Prayers rise for loved ones, near and far: "Ya Devi Sarvabuteshu Matri Rupena Samsthita, Namastasyai Namastasyai Namoh Namah."

Once again, Durga, the destroyer of evil, is returning. This is Sharadiya Puja, though this year she arrives not in autumn but in early winter. The wait has been longer, but her arrival brings joy to every Hindu household.

### Mahalaya: the moment of arrival

On September 21, Mahalaya marked her arrival. With dawn, Pitru Paksha ended and Devi Paksha began. Through the Chandi Path, Durga was invoked to descend to Earth, and her eyes were ceremonially painted. Sacred rituals and the installation of holy pots followed in temples and pandals.

Mahalaya morning saw people

coming, maybe she'll bless me."

That innocent joy spread through the crowd, touching all with its purity.

### Scenes of preparation

Preparations had begun weeks earlier in pandals across Dhaka. At Dhakeshwari

On Wednesday afternoon, little girls tugged at each other's hands, urging, "Come, let's see how Mother looks this year." Adults guided them through glowing lights and floral decorations. The air was filled with incense and the

beat of the dhak.

their own. Thirty-two-year-old Anindya Chakraborty, visiting from Kolkata, reflected, "Visiting Dhaka during this time is special. The aura here is as vibrant as Kolkata's. The excitement is all because Mother is coming."

### The ritual

According to scriptures, this year Durga arrives on an elephant and departs on a palanquin. Arrival on an elephant is seen as auspicious, signifying prosperity and peace. Departure on a palanquin, however, is viewed as inauspicious, believed to foretell disease outbreaks.

The rituals begin with Mahashasthi on September 28, followed by Mahasaptami on September 29, Mahaashtami on September 30 with Sandhi Puja and Kumari Puja at Ramakrishna Mission, Mahanavami on October 1, and Bijaya Dashami on October 2 with mirror immersion and idol immersion.

Bangladesh Puja Ujjapan Parishad President Basudev Dhar said the number of Durga Puja pandals has increased nationwide. Across the country, preparations are underway in 33,355

beyond rituals. It seeps into every home and street -- the glow of idols, the rhythm of the dhak, the scent of incense and the colours of pandals weaving a tapestry of celebration.

The festival is not just a religious event; it is a cultural heartbeat. Anticipation builds in quiet prayers and in the loud beat of drums, in the shaping of idols and in the innocent excitement of children tugging at their parents' hands.

"Religion is personal, but festivals are for all." This mantra seems to echo through every corner of the city. Dhaka, painted in vibrant hues, opens its heart not just to devotion but to celebration.

The arrival of the goddess is a reminder of resilience and tradition, of joy shared across generations. With the beat of the dhak and the glow of the lights, Sharadiya Durga Puja once again marks its place as the soul of the city.

Mother is coming, and with her arrival she brings hope, joy and a promise of peace.



# EMPTY HOMES, EMPTY PROMISES

## Who Will Stand by Our Parents?

**Parents, once considered the cornerstone of family life, now find themselves alone in empty homes. The big dream for the youth has become leaving the country, but what becomes of those who are left behind? They are left in deserted houses, living not with their children but with memories.**

JOBEDA AKTER RINI

There was a time in Bangladesh when the family home was more than just a roof over one's head—it was a living institution. Generations grew together under its shade, sharing meals, quarrels, stories, and responsibilities. Old age was never lonely; it was filled with warmth, community, and care. In those days, children were not just economic contributors but the promise of security, affection, and dignity in their parents' twilight years. To grow old meant to be surrounded by those whom you had raised, to live with respect in a home that echoed with shared histories.

But times have changed. Today, the story is different. A new wave of migration has swept across Bangladesh, especially among the younger generation, the only path to success in a nation where political and economic instability pushes people to escape rather than rebuild. Every day, thousands line up for IELTS coaching centres, visas, and student permits—dreaming of settling abroad for a better life. While these journeys bring remittances, they also leave behind broken households.

Parents, once considered the cornerstone of family life, now find themselves alone in empty homes. The big dream for the youth has become leaving the country, but what becomes



An elderly woman sits in an old-age home, reading the day's paper. With no direct contact with her children, she pours her heart into a letter each month, pinning it to the board behind her—a silent plea for connection. FILE PHOTO: STAR



of those who are left behind? They are left in deserted houses, living not with their children but with memories. What once was the warm sound of laughter is replaced by silence, and the family home has turned into an unspoken alternative to an old age home.

Is money the only thing parents deserve after raising their children with love and sacrifice? Or do they deserve companionship, care, and dignity in their old age? It is heartbreaking that we even have to ask these questions. Even more troubling is how society is slowly adapting to this reality, adjusting to emptiness, normalising absence.

The crisis is real and growing. Bangladesh is undergoing a rapid

demographic transition, with its universal pension scheme, coverage remains limited. In practice, the old age allowance reaches only about one third of elderly citizens and provides very low benefits, and the new pension scheme launched in 2023 requires at least 10 years of contributions, making it inaccessible for many informal sector workers.

Alongside economic insecurity, loneliness and social isolation are widespread; studies on Bangladeshi older adults have found that more than half report feeling lonely, particularly women, rural residents, and those living alone after their children migrate abroad.

Researchers describe a "systematic

neglect" of elderly care, as the erosion of the joint family system combined with weak state support leaves millions of older Bangladeshis facing old age without adequate security, dignity, or companionship.

This abandonment is not just personal; it is systemic. Social values have shifted: children are no longer seen as lifelong companions of their parents but as economic projects. Parents invest everything in educating their children, often at the cost of their own well-being, only to see them disappear overseas, leaving behind remittances in place of love. Physical presence and affection have largely been replaced by short video calls once a day or once a week.

The future is grim if nothing changes. An ageing population, coupled with an unstable political order, will mean millions of abandoned elderly living in isolation. The state has shown little initiative in creating sustainable eldercare systems, and in a society where the focus is solely on political and economic survival, compassion risks being written out of our collective values.

Money may flow in from abroad, but what is the price of this money if it costs parents their dignity and companionship? Bangladesh stands at a moral and political crossroads. If the family is the backbone of society, what happens when the backbone weakens? Who will take care of the parents when dreams of migration overshadow dreams of togetherness?

Empty homes cannot provide care, remittances cannot wipe away loneliness, and no amount of political rhetoric can replace the presence of a child sitting beside an ageing mother or father. It is time we confront this uncomfortable truth: in a nation where "nothing gets fixed", perhaps the most urgent question is not just about politics or economics, but about our humanity itself.

**Jobeda Akter Rini**, is a M.A student in Department of Sociology at South Asian University, New Delhi. She can be reached at [jarini0109@gmail.com](mailto:jarini0109@gmail.com)

# READING TIGER PUGMARKS

## Human-tiger co-existence in the Sundarbans



PHOTOS: MD RAIHAN RAJU



Bishwa Mandal, a fisher and devotee of Bonbibi, who has spent his entire life fishing in the Sundarbans.

MD RAIHAN RAJU

In the shifting mudflats and mangrove thickets of the Sundarbans, survival is a constant negotiation. For the Bonojibis—the people who depend on its marshy terrain, venturing out for fish, honey, and firewood—living alongside tigers is not just a matter of danger, but of daily practice. Over generations, they have developed a quiet language of respect, reading the forest for signs and symbols. Among these, the pugmark of a tiger is not merely a footprint; it is a message, a presence, a reminder that the jungle belongs to more than humans. To acknowledge it, even to greet it, is to accept the terms of co-existence in a shared and perilous home.

"Whenever we venture into the forest and work in the forest creeks—whether fishing, collecting crab, or honey—if we find any pugmarks, we offer Salam to it," shared Bishwa Mandal, an elderly Bonojibi from Abad Chandipur, a village adjacent to the south-western range of the Bangladesh Sundarbans. He added, "If you give Salam, then it brings satisfaction to whom you are offering it. The jungle is a sacred place; if we offer Salam to the tiger and to all creatures in the jungle, they feel respected and acknowledged."

The act of offering Salam also symbolically signifies seeking permission to access the tiger's abode. For them, pugmarks are not merely tracks; they are symbols representing the mythical character of Dakhin Ray (king of the south), also known as the adopted son of Bonbibi (mother of the Forest).

Like Bishwa Mandal, the wider Bonojibis community believes that Salam, as a form of greeting between species, creates a space of mutual respect and dignity and acknowledges the existence of different creaturely beings.

The form of such greeting rituals functions as a way of communication between humans and non-humans. It precisely conveys a sense of collective relatedness and affinity between prey and predator.

Whenever the Bonojibis enter the jungle and step into the alluvial creeks (mal), at first sight they carefully scan the trunks of large trees. They believe tigers often inscribe scratch marks—known as nolir hasor—on these tree trunks with their front claws. These marks are thought

**"Whenever we venture into the forest and work in the forest creeks—whether fishing, collecting crab, or honey—if we find any pugmarks, we offer Salam to it," shared Bishwa Mandal, an elderly Bonojibi from Abad Chandipur, a village adjacent to the south-western range of the Bangladesh Sundarbans.**

to signify their abode and territory, eventually helping them to navigate when returning from the hunt. The Bonojibis refrain from entering the alluvial creeks and dense forest territory if they find any claw marks inscribed on the trees.

If they find any fresh pugmark (taja bager kor) on the muddy creeks, they immediately leave that place. They usually vacate the forest passage for the tiger and try to find another passage for fishing and collecting honey. Most of the Bonojibis are highly skilled in reading pugmarks. They can often tell how old the tracks are and when the tiger last passed through the area by closely observing the condition and

texture of the mud. However, they often face difficulties tracing fresh pugmarks since the forest passages are submerged twice a day due to the tide and ebb cycle of the rivers. The high tides frequently wash away the tracks left on the alluvial forest bed.

For the Bonojibis, pugmarks serve as a repository of numerous signs that in extension unravel the motives and behaviours of tigers. By observing the movement and pattern of these tracks, they can interpret the tiger's intent—whether it is simply walking, searching for prey, lying in ambush, or chasing a target. These marks also help them to guess the tiger's gender and age, distinguishing between a mature tiger and a cub. Additionally, experienced Bonojibis note that the depth of the pugmarks in the alluvial mud can suggest whether the tiger is carrying prey in its mouth.

The matter of reading pugmarks, in other words, functions as a semiotic system related to wildlife, as the Bonojibis meaningfully understand it. That embedded ecological knowledge of semiotics enables both human and tiger to share the forest passages, the food granary of the forest, and cultivate co-existence and mutual survival.

Yet, the risks remain high; a single misreading of pugmarks or a moment of disrespect can lead to fatal consequences. Since 2000, about 300 people have been killed in tiger attacks in the Bangladesh Sundarbans, and in the deltaic villages along the forest's edge you can readily meet survivors whose bodies bear the scars. In this place where river and tide constantly erase and redraw the lines of passage, the pugmark endures as a reminder that co-existence is never without risk, but neither is it without meaning.

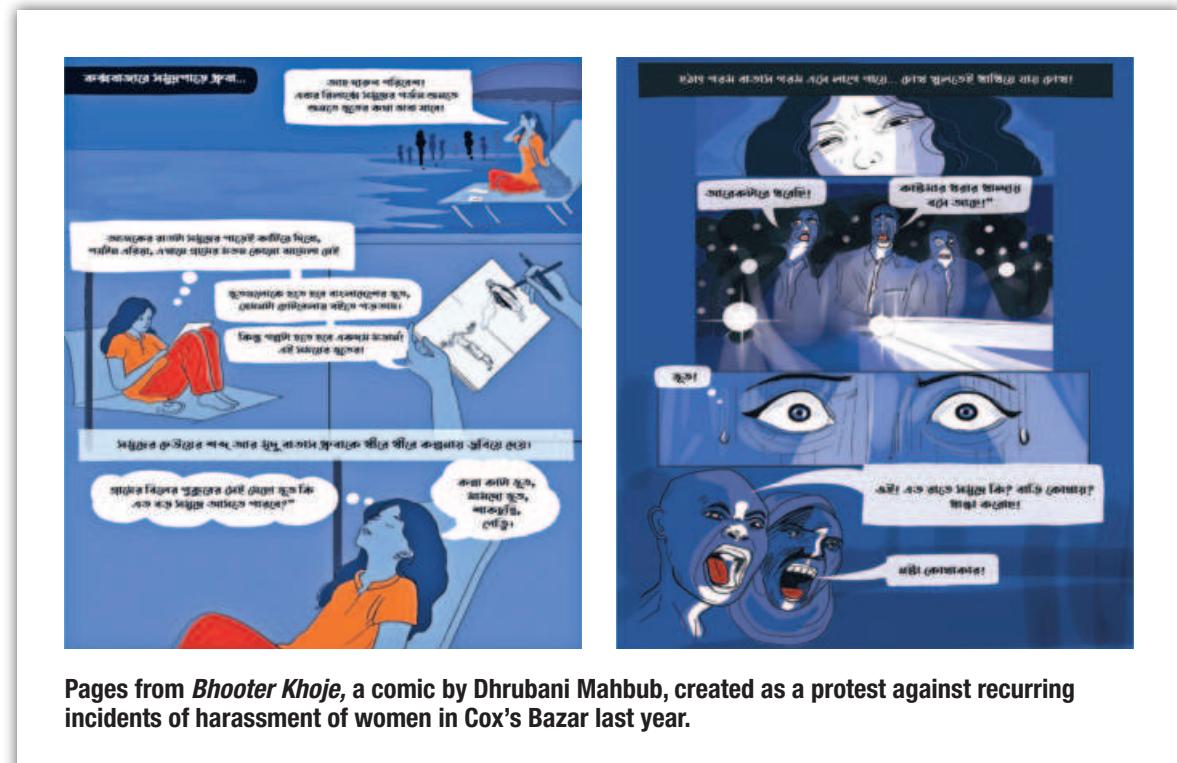
Md Raihan Raju is a journalist at The Daily Star



Pages from the one-shot comic *Amader Geche Je Din* by Natasha Jahan, where she beautifully threads a story from her mother's childhood, published in the *Protibastob* anthology by Dhaka Comics.

## Inking a Bold New Narrative

Art and odyssey of female cartoonists in Bangladesh



Pages from *Bhooter Khoje*, a comic by Dhrubani Mahbub, created as a protest against recurring incidents of harassment of women in Cox's Bazar last year.

**In Bangladesh, where cartooning is still often seen as marginal or whimsical, an increasing number of female artists are taking up their pens to draw stories that are at once personal, political, and profoundly reflective of society.**

### MIFTAUL JANNAT

Amid the clamour of a bustling Dhaka railway station, a young woman stands, sketchbook in hand, each line of her pen capturing the city's chaos and quiet alike. As trains roar past, children gather around her, curious eyes following the swift movement of her pen. For most commuters, it is an odd sight: a woman drawing in public, unbothered by the gaze of strangers. But for the cartoonist, the act is deliberate – a reclaiming of space where women are often invisible, and an invitation for others, especially girls, to imagine that they, too, belong in this frame.

In Bangladesh, where cartooning is still often seen as marginal or whimsical, an increasing number of female artists are taking up their pens to draw stories that are at once personal, political, and profoundly reflective of society. Their work does more than entertain; it amplifies voices, challenges norms, and redefines what it means to be an artist in a country still learning to embrace women in creative careers.

### Why do women draw?



Comic by Rehnuma Proshoon, who uses cartooning to both raise awareness and spread joy.

Every cartoonist begins with a story. For many women, it starts not with ambitions of fame but with a personal urge to express. Dhrubani Mahbub, an artist, cartoonist, and founder of Cartoon People. "By contrast, we male cartoonists often focus on thrillers, action, or superheroes. Female cartoonists bring many fresh perspectives to the community. As a male cartoonist, it stands out to me that not only are their observations

unique, but so is their way of telling a story."

The subject matter of female cartoonists in Bangladesh spans an impressive range, reflecting the diversity of their experiences and perspectives. Their art is playful yet pointed, weaving together childhood nostalgia, social critique, political satire, and intimate confessions. Theirs is a narrative that has been waiting to be inked – one that redefines both the purpose and the possibilities of cartooning in the country.

Alongside superhero-themed comics, men's cartoons in Bangladesh have traditionally leaned towards heavy caricature, political satire, or action-driven stories. Women cartoonists, while not shying away from satire or political themes, often weave in subtlety and emotional nuance.

Take, for instance, a cartoon on street harassment. Rather than portraying the harasser as a grotesque caricature, a female cartoonist might show the young girl's perspective – shrinking into herself, surrounded by oversized male shadows. The message

is clear: it's not just about the harasser.

Natasha details another layer of challenge: the social dynamics within professional circles. Informal networking often takes place in

talent; they provide pathways for young women to debut themselves, to claim a place in a profession historically dominated by men.

"Even if many female cartoonists have amazing works, not many people know them because they don't showcase it anywhere. The community doesn't know them, they don't know us, but they exist," Natasha explained.

For young artists aspiring to enter into the realm of cartooning, their advice is consistent: start, continue, and persist. Rehnuma encourages young women to begin and keep going, emphasising that the key is to enter the creative arena and remain visible.

"Cartooning is a growing industry in Bangladesh, and there's room for new voices. If you enjoy it and want to pursue it, just start. Share your work and put it out there," she said. "There are supportive communities to join, and you can even reach out to individual artists, as most are passionate and happy to guide you."

Dhrubani highlights the importance of practice over perfection, "Continuing to draw is more important than



Illustration by Sarah Saiyara from *Luli*, a children's storybook about a timid girl learning to stand up to bullying.

hits harder – not through exaggeration, but through empathy.

Reflecting on this subtlety, Mehedi Haque, prominent cartoonist and founder of Dhaka Comics, noted, "Girls' comics are often slice-of-life stories, such as a mother's hobby or a pet cat, whereas male comics tend to start with action or thrills. As an editor, I see male cartoonists often focus on grand gestures to impress, but female cartoonists tell clear, readable stories rooted in everyday life. Their works often capture home environments, family issues, and small moments, without losing sight of storytelling."

A woman's lens also brings visibility to what is often ignored. Their cartoons highlight intersections of class, gender, and power, widening the scope of what editorial cartooning can be. Rehnuma emphasises how being a woman gives her a perspective that shapes her storytelling. "Our experiences and challenges allow us to portray certain stories authentically, highlighting voices and perspectives that might otherwise be overlooked." She enjoys exploring social issues alongside children's stories. "For me, cartooning is a way to both raise awareness and create joy," she mentioned.

Dhrubani's work, meanwhile, directly confronts gender disparity, social injustice, and crises of dignity. Regarding one of her recent works, *Attupolobdhi*, she said, "It is based on one of my wishful thoughts. I want to see every person in this society with equal dignity, whether they are women, men, or any other gender."

Natasha underscores the importance of structured initiatives – anthologies, publications, and competitions. She points to recent publications, like *Porichoy, Lines and Dreams* by Cartoon People and *Oboni* by Dhaka Comics, which collectively featured works from around a hundred female cartoonists. These initiatives do more than celebrate

male centric spaces, where critical discussions happen in roadside tea stalls. For young female artists, entering these spaces and gaining credibility can be daunting. "At the early stage, I used to feel irrelevant – small, young, and different," she said. Yet navigating these dynamics becomes a form of resilience, shaping both their confidence and their work.

Outside urban centres, these challenges intensify. Opportunities are scarcer, platforms are fewer, and awareness of creative communities is limited. For many aspiring cartoonists, the hurdle is not talent but visibility – how to bridge the gap between their work and the audiences, anthologies, or exhibitions that can elevate their careers.

**How to empower the next generation**  
Support for female cartoonists can come in many forms: mentorship, community, exposure, and validation. Rehnuma stresses the need for professional opportunities, paid projects, workshops, and platforms where women can showcase their work. Dhrubani's engagement with children illustrates the power of visibility, or simply being present to inspire others to pick up a pen or tablet.

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whether I draw amazingly. To let people know that I exist as an artist/cartoonist – that I belong in the community – is the real step." Natasha urges aspiring cartoonists to read widely and immerse themselves in a diverse array of comics from different countries, not only to learn technique but to rediscover inspiration and feed creative imagination.

**Redrawing the narrative**  
As platforms expand and visibility grows, the contours of Bangladesh's creative landscape are changing, and the ink of these women's narratives is proving indelible. The sketches, comics, and illustrations made by the female artists are not only art; they are calls to imagine, to reflect, and to act. Women are now stepping into spaces once considered male domains, redefining what stories can be told, and how they can be told. They challenge assumptions about who gets to speak, what perspectives are valid, and which experiences deserve artistic exploration.

Through their pens, pencils, and digital tabs, female cartoonists illuminate the subtle and overt inequities of society. In their hands, cartooning becomes a powerful form of cultural commentary, social advocacy, and personal expression. Their journey reflects the intersection of art, gender, and society: a reminder that creativity, when coupled with courage, can redraw boundaries, dismantle stereotypes, and forge new cultural pathways.

**Miftahul Jannat** is a journalist at The Daily Star.

## SAARC MEMBERS' TRADE WITHIN THE BLOC

Share as % of their total trade

Country	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Afghanistan	25.25	27.55	27.38	30.65	31.49
Bangladesh	10.53	12.82	12.40	2.37	2.46
Bhutan	92.35	91.57	89.72	18.39	16.50
India	3.41	3.70	3.10	2.69	2.80
Maldives	19.11	17.77	18.58	20.03	18.51
Nepal	63.92	61.76	62.62	60.11	58.15
Pakistan	3.85	3.15	3.50	3.88	3.75
Sri Lanka	16.93	19.03	20.94	16.80	16.64

SOURCE: INTERNATIONAL TRADE IN GOODS (BY PARTNER COUNTRY) (IMTS), IMF



# South Asia's unfulfilled trade promise

South Asia, home to nearly two billion people and a \$5 trillion economy, trades more with Europe, the US and China than with itself. Intra-regional commerce among Saarc nations stands at just 8 percent of exports

REFAYET ULLAH MIRDHA

South Asia stands at a paradox. The region is home to nearly two billion people, boasts one of the world's youngest workforces, and sits astride vital shipping lanes. Yet despite its scale and strategic location, South Asia has never managed to unlock its intra-regional trade potential.

While China, Vietnam, Bangladesh and others have thrived by exporting to the West, commerce among South Asian nations themselves remains anaemic. Trade within Saarc (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) accounts for only 8 percent of the region's exports – a mere \$38.7 billion. By comparison, Asean (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) nations trade 22 percent of their goods with each other; in the European Union, the figure is nearly half. The shortfall reflects not just economics but politics: the region's trade has been hobbled by infrastructure bottlenecks, high tariffs, cumbersome non-tariff barriers, and entrenched rivalries.

Recent disputes illustrate how fragile cross-border commerce remains. In April, Bangladesh suspended yarn imports from India via land ports to shield its domestic spinning industry. New Delhi retaliated, suspending transshipment facilities and banning certain exports by Bangladesh through land crossings. Nearly \$15 billion in bilateral trade was disrupted by these tit-for-tat moves.

The effects rippled through supply chains. Garment manufacturers in Bangladesh scrambled to secure inputs, while Indian exporters lost access to a lucrative nearby market. Such disputes highlight how quickly political or protectionist impulses can overwhelm commercial logic.

India and Pakistan, the region's two largest economies, remain locked in mutual suspicion. Their trade – once modest – has contracted further following border skirmishes and retaliatory restrictions. In May, renewed hostilities again dashed hopes of resuming normal commerce.

Despite regional stagnation, some bilateral links have strengthened. India has emerged as Bangladesh's second-largest import source after China, supplying cotton, chemicals, spare parts, and foodstuffs. In return, Bangladesh exports garments to the Indian market.

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are equally onerous. Testing and certification are rarely recognised across borders. A Saarc common testing facility exists, but is ignored by members. Exporters complain of duplicative procedures that add weeks to delivery times and inflate costs.

Infrastructure shortcomings compound the problem. A large share of regional trade moves through land ports such as Benapole-Petrapole (Bangladesh-India), which face chronic congestion. Trucks queue for days, burdened by slow customs clearances, cumbersome paperwork, and informal payments. Poor logistics mean it is often cheaper for a Bangladeshi exporter to ship garments to Hamburg or New York than to Kolkata.

Humayun Rashid, chairman of Energypac Fashions, recounts how three of his containers, destined for India, were suddenly blocked at Benapole after Delhi's ban.

"It was all done all of a sudden, and finally, the goods were rerouted to

Chittagong port," he says. "The interests of businessmen of both Bangladesh and India were affected a lot."

#### ASEAN AND EU: THE COUNTERFACTUAL

The contrast with Asean is striking. In the 1980s, Southeast Asia faced similar obstacles: political mistrust, poor infrastructure, and high tariffs. But sustained political will changed the trajectory. Member states harmonised standards, reduced tariffs, and invested in regional institutions. Three decades later, Asean intra-regional trade rose manifold.

The EU's success is even starker: intra-regional trade accounts for nearly half of exports, underpinned by common standards, a single market, and supranational institutions.

South Asia's failure is not due to a lack of attempts. Saarc was founded in 1985 to foster integration. Yet its progress has stalled. Political tensions, especially between India and Pakistan,



have prevented summits from being held in recent years. "The Saarc is in the ICU," says Raihan.

With Saarc paralysed, sub-regional initiatives have been floated. The Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal (BBIN) corridor was meant to ease transport. But Bhutan declined to ratify the Motor Vehicle Agreement, citing environmental concerns. A smaller "BIN" framework founded.

The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (Bimstec), which includes South Asian and Southeast Asian states, has also failed to gain traction. Without binding mechanisms, these forums have delivered little.

For exporters, the consequences are tangible. Bangladesh's garment sector, the backbone of its economy, depends on smooth access to raw materials.

Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) President Mahmud Hasan Khan argues that bilateral trade with India will endure, even amid tensions, citing the example of India-China trade, which continues to expand despite fraught ties.

But others are less sanguine.

Asif Ashraf, managing director of Urmia Group, warns that "no trade tension brings any positive outcomes."

With Bangladesh targeting \$100 billion in garment exports in the coming years, regional demand could prove vital. "We have to sit together and find out the windows of opportunity," he says.

#### SHIFTING GLOBAL DYNAMICS

The case for South Asian integration is growing stronger as global trade patterns shift. Conflicts in Ukraine and the Middle East have disrupted energy and food supplies. Supply chains are being restructured in response to US tariffs and growing geopolitical rivalry. Multinationals are pursuing "China Plus One" strategies seeking new hubs.

Saarc Chamber of Commerce President Md Jashim Uddin says South Asia is ideally positioned.

"The world is looking for 'China

Plus One,'" he says. "With its nearly \$5 trillion economy, two billion people, and strategic location, South Asia offers immense potential."

Yet, he also acknowledges the barriers: lack of coordinated standards, costly and duplicative testing, weak infrastructure, and cumbersome customs.

"These have kept us from becoming the next global supply chain hub," he warns.

Trade integration has not been uniform. Bhutan was once almost wholly reliant on regional trade – 90 percent of its commerce before 2022 – but this collapsed to 16.5 percent by 2024.

Nepal has fared better, consistently sourcing over half its imports from Saarc partners.

For Bangladesh, the trajectory is discouraging. Its share of exports to Saarc members fell from 12.8 percent in 2021 to just 2.8 percent in 2024. India and Pakistan remain at a paltry 3.4 percent.

Most South Asian nations rely far more on Europe, the US and China than on each other.

China, for instance, is Bangladesh's largest trading partner; the EU is its biggest export destination, and the US its single largest national market.

Economists emphasise that the economic case for integration is overwhelming, but political will is absent. Protectionism, mistrust and geopolitical rivalry take precedence over commercial logic.

Raihan says all barriers – tariffs, non-tariff measures, customs inefficiencies, infrastructure bottlenecks – ultimately trace back to politics. Without improved India-Pakistan relations, Saarc will remain inert.

The business community is blunt: diplomacy must take priority. "We need political and economic solutions," says Energypac's Rashid. "Otherwise, businesses will be sufferers."

#### THE ROAD AHEAD

South Asia faces a choice. It can persist with fragmented trade, or it can harness its collective scale to become the next manufacturing hub, drawing investment from companies seeking alternatives to China. If South Asia fails to integrate, others will seize the opportunity.

Southeast Asia, already integrated, continues to attract investment. Africa, with its new continental free trade area, is positioning itself as the next frontier. Asean's lesson is that political will, once aligned, can overcome decades of mistrust. South Asia, however, has repeatedly stumbled.

South Asia's trade potential remains vast. With a large economy and a youthful workforce, the region could be a global supply chain hub. But politics continues to trump economics.

"There is a huge opportunity," says Raihan. "But we have backtracked and missed it because of our rivalries."

Unless tariffs are lowered, standards harmonised, and trust rebuilt, South Asia will remain an outlier: a region where geography and demographics suggest immense promise, but where history and politics deliver chronic disappointment.



#### TRADE BARRIERS

- Non-tariff barriers remain a major obstacle for Saarc intra-regional trade
- Recently, both Bangladesh and India imposed trade bans on certain products through land ports

