

## Ensure smooth, festive election in Feb next year

### Yunus urges Armed Forces

UNB, Dhaka

Chief Adviser Prof Muhammad Yunus yesterday said that the upcoming national election, scheduled for February next year, will mark an important chapter in Bangladesh's democratic transition.

He called upon members of the Armed Forces to carry out their duties with skill and professionalism to ensure a smooth and festive election.

The chief adviser made the remarks at a reception marking Armed Forces Day at Senakunja in the afternoon.

As a peace-loving nation, Prof Yunus said, Bangladesh believes in respectful cooperation with all friendly countries.

“However, we must always remain

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Prof Muhammad Yunus laid a wreath at Shikha Anirban at Dhaka Cantonment yesterday, honouring the martyrs of the 1971 Liberation War on Armed Forces Day.

PHOTO: PID

## Yunus, Khaleda meet at Armed Forces Day event

UNB, Dhaka

On the sidelines of the Armed Forces Day reception at Dhaka Cantonment yesterday, Chief Adviser Professor Muhammad Yunus held a meeting with BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia and exchanged pleasantries.

The chief adviser inquired about the former prime minister's health and wished her well, said Abul Kalam Azad Majumder, deputy press secretary to the chief adviser.

Khaleda thanked him and asked about the health of his wife, Afrozi Yunus, extending her good wishes in return.

Syeda Shamila Rahman Sithi, the youngest daughter-in-law of Khaleda, was present during the interaction.

Khaleda reached Senakunja around 4:00pm and was received by Army Chief General Waker-uz-Zaman and senior officials of the Armed Forces.

The BNP chairperson left the venue around 5:27pm.

The Armed Forces Division, under the Office of the Chief Adviser, had earlier sent formal

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## 5.7 quake kills 10

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In Old Dhaka's Kasaituli area, a brick-built rooftop railing collapsed, killing Sir Salimullah Medical College student Rafiul Islam, 22; fabric trader Abdur Rahim, 48; and Rahim's 12-year-old son, Abul Aziz Remon. At least 10 others were injured, many of whom had gathered to buy beef at a butcher's stall.

Brig Gen Md Mazharul Islam Khan, director of Mitford Hospital, said the three were brought dead. Twenty others were treated there and 13 of them were admitted.

In Mugda, Md Maksud, a 50-year-old security guard, died when part of a wall collapsed at an under-construction building in Madina Bagh. Police said he was trying to flee when debris from an upper floor struck him on the head. He died at Mugda Medical College Hospital around noon.

In Narsingdi, five people were killed and about 100 injured in Sadar, Palash, and Shibpur upazilas, said Deputy Commissioner Mohammad Anwar Hossain. Four were injured when construction materials fell from an under-construction building in Gabtoli of Chinishpur union in Sadar upazila.

Two of the seriously injured were sent to Dhaka Medical College Hospital, where an eight-year-old child, Hafiz Omar, was declared dead. His father Delwar Hossain Uzzal, who was also admitted to DMCH in a critical condition, also died. The deceased were from Kishoreganj.

Kazem Ali Bhuiya, 75, from Malita West Para in Charsindur union of Palash upazila died on the way to the district hospital after his mud house collapsed on him.

Another man, Nasiruddin, 60, of the same upazila, died after jumping off the side of a road in panic while fleeing his farmland during the quake, the DC said, quoting local residents. His family did not take the body to the hospital.

In Shibpur, Md Forkan, 40, a resident of Gajkila village, fell from a tree during the tremor. He was first taken to Narsingdi District Hospital and then referred to DMCH, but died on the way to Dhaka.

In Rupganj of Narayanganj, a 10-month-old girl, Fatema, died when a boundary wall collapsed on her. Her mother, Kulsum Begum, 30, and neighbour Jasmin Akter, 35, were critically injured and are undergoing treatment. “Fatema was in her mother's arms when the wall came down,” said neighbour Imtiaz Bhuiyan.

Chief Adviser Prof Muhammad Yunus expressed shock and sorrow at the deaths and injuries, saying in a condolence message that the government was monitoring the situation and assessing damage. Authorities earlier urged citizens not to heed rumours and to

remain cautious.

Hospitals in Dhaka saw a surge of patients after the tremor. Some inpatients rushed out during the quake, still wearing cannulas.

Dr Alimul Haque of DMCH's casualty department said most of the injured victims were elderly people who lost balance and children who were injured while running in panic. By night, DMCH had treated dozens of quake-injured patients. Fifty-nine were still receiving treatment at night while the rest received primary care.

Health Adviser Nurjahan Begum, after visiting DMCH, said all government hospitals had been instructed to provide proper care. At least 90 injured people sought treatment at the National Institute of Traumatology and Orthopaedic Rehabilitation. It admitted 18 patients, and several will require surgery, said its Director Prof Md Abul Kenan. Some suffered shoulder dislocations from the force of the tremor.

In Gazipur, more than 152 people, mostly workers, were rushed to different hospitals. Of them, 116 were admitted for treatment, the district administration said.

Multiple power plants, including Bibiyana-2 (341MW), Ashuganj 55MW and 50MW units, and one 600MW SS Power unit, tripped during the quake, causing outages in many areas, officials of the Power Development Board said. The situation became normal hours later.

### ‘DHAKA HAS NEVER SHAKEN LIKE THIS’

Across Dhaka, panic rippled through homes and neighbourhoods.

Saiful Alam Shameem, 60, paralysed on one side and bedridden for two years in Pallabi, said, “It was terrifying. I had no option but to stay where I was. I have never felt such a powerful jolt.”

Eleven-year-old Jaiyan Hasan of Adabor was asleep and initially thought she was dreaming when her bed shook violently. “I thought the building was about to collapse. The glass window beside me was rattling loudly.”

Ashna Fabiyaana of Indira Road, who was alone at home, ran downstairs as soon as the shaking stopped. “Suddenly, the floor started swaying and the whole building began to shake,” she said.

Residents across the capital shared similar accounts, while social media filled with videos of rattling windows and shaking furniture. “Dhaka has never shaken like this before,” a user wrote.

In Dhanmondi, Shabnur Sultana huddled her children under a beam as they screamed. In Kosaituli, Masuma Akter said the weekly holiday may have saved dozens of lives. “If it had been any other day, more than 100 people could have died,” she said.

Mehedi Hasan of Narayanganj said

## Too close to ignore, Dhaka must act now

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can originate closer to the city. A magnitude 6 quake could spell disaster for Dhaka,” he said.

Madhupur fault is around 60km from the city.

Noor explained that shallow earthquakes, like yesterday's, are common in Bangladesh. “These quakes occur close to the surface, so the energy reaches the surface strongly, causing more damage to structures.”

The Comprehensive Disaster Management Plan (CDMP) identifies five major fault zones in Bangladesh – the Madhupur Fault, Dauki Fault, and three Plate Boundary Faults – each capable of generating quakes of magnitude 7-8.5.

Both Ansary and Noor warned that unregulated urbanisation, weak enforcement of building codes, and rampant construction on land-filled wetlands have significantly increased Dhaka's seismic risk.

“Mainly, 4-8 storey buildings are most vulnerable. Dhaka doesn't have many tall buildings. Shallow earthquakes usually have short frequencies, which affect mid-rise buildings more. Taller buildings are impacted by longer waves from distant earthquakes, and we don't have many of those near Dhaka,” Noor said.

Ansary added that a magnitude 7 earthquake within 100 km of Dhaka could cause 100,000-300,000 deaths and flatten roughly 35 percent of the city.

A RAJUK study, based on surveys from 2018-2022, estimates that a 6.9-magnitude quake along the Madhupur Fault could destroy over

850,000 buildings, claiming more than 200,000 lives and injuring another 200,000.

Noor stressed the importance of enforcing building codes. “The message is simple: everyone must strictly follow current regulations. In the past, enforcement was weak.”

of the Bangladesh Institute of Planners (BIP), said structures are being planned and built without considering earthquake risks, despite repeated warnings.

He highlighted ongoing issues: construction on wetlands, large buildings on narrow roads, and constant

YEAR	LOCATION	MAGNITUDE
1762	Arakan quake (Chittagong-Arakan coast)	8.5 to 8.8
1869	Cachar quake (near Jaintia hills/Sylhet region)	7.5
1885	Bengal/Manikganj earthquake	7.1
1897	Great Indian quake (Assam)	8.2 to 8.3
1918	Srimangal quake	7.6
1930	Dhubri (Assam) quake	7.1
1934	Bihar-Nepal quake	8
1950	Assam quake	8.6

He also criticised Dhaka's real estate regulator. “RAJUK was supposed to check building designs, but they don't. It's time to follow Malaysia, Thailand, and Indonesia, requiring third-party verification of designs before approval.”

Ansary called for immediate inspections. “We must identify buildings that need urgent repairs. Some may already have cracks but are still salvageable.”

Adil Mohammad Khan, president

changes to building plans to serve commercial interests. “Even rules on minimum space between buildings are altered whenever developers want,” he said.

Khan cited global examples. “In Chile, strict regulations meant minimal damage during strong quakes. In Haiti, where rules were ignored, destruction was massive. Turkey saw deadly consequences from compromised standards.”

## Salinity puts lives, livelihoods at risk

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livelihoods and habitability of the region.

Once confined to the fringes of tidal rivers, salinity is now steadily seeping deep into soil and groundwater due to reduced upstream flow, rising sea levels, cyclones and reckless changes in land use.

Fields that once yielded rice and vegetables have lost productivity and been converted into shrimp enclosures, while freshwater sources are turning brackish, making daily life a struggle for millions.

Data from the Soil Resources Development Institute (SRDI) paints a stark picture of this relentless march of salinity.

In 1973, salinity-affected land stood at 83.3 million hectares, which rose to 102 million in 2000. It reached 105.6 million by 2009 – a nearly 26 percent increase over 35 years. Another 35,440 hectares of land were affected by various degrees of salinity from 2000 to 2009.

The trend shows no sign of slowing, as salinity is encroaching beyond the coastal belt into fertile inland regions, reshaping both landscapes and livelihoods.

Around 62 percent of coastal land is now affected by varying degrees of salinity, according to a government task force report published in January this year.

“Our recent test results of soil samples from different rivers and areas across the Khulna region show a steady rise in salinity,” said Amarendranath Biswas, principal scientific officer at the SRDI's Batiaghata office in Khulna.

He explained that the rise becomes most evident between March and June, when soil salinity crosses 4 deciSiemens per metre (dS/m) – the level at which crop yields begin to decline.

“The tolerable limit is around 2 dS/m, but in some areas, we found levels ranging from 12 dS/m to 16 dS/m.

According to a World Bank study, climate change is likely to significantly increase salinity in rivers and groundwater by 2050, deepening shortages of freshwater across Bangladesh's southwest coastal belt.

### GRADUAL INVASION OF SALT

The salinity problem stems from a convergence of natural and human-made factors – choices made in the name of development, and the unintended consequences that followed.

In the 1960s, the “Coastal Embankment Project” was launched to protect low-lying areas close to the Bay of Bengal from tidal floods and saline intrusion. Vast tracts of land were reclaimed for agriculture and human settlement. People started growing rice and vegetables across large areas, using groundwater.

But excessive extraction of groundwater led to the depletion of freshwater in shallow aquifers.

By blocking natural tidal flows, the

embankments disrupted the intricate drainage and sediment systems of the delta. Over time, sedimentation raised riverbeds, reducing drainage capacity and causing saline water to stagnate within polders during high tides. Instead of preventing salinity, many embanked areas became prone to waterlogging and soil degradation.

Upstream diversion of freshwater, especially through the Farakka Barrage opened in 1975 and other control structures, reduced freshwater flow into Bangladesh's southwestern rivers during the dry season, weakening the natural flushing mechanism that once pushed saltwater back towards the sea.

Climate change and sea-level rise are amplifying the threat, while cyclones and tidal surges push saline water farther inland.

Sea-level rise may displace nine lakh people in southern Bangladesh by 2050, jeopardising their livelihoods and homes, according to a report by the International Centre for Climate Change and Development published last year.

By the end of the century, the situation is likely to worsen, as rising seas are projected to submerge between 12 and 18 percent of the coastal region, it said.

Sharmin Neelorme, an expert on climate change, explained that tidal movements and wind currents push seawater inland during high tide, leaving salt on land. Normally, river currents and rains carry the deposited salt back into the Bay of Bengal.

“But global warming has intensified tidal surges, making them stronger and higher. As water levels rise, the surges spread farther inland, flooding areas that were previously unaffected,” said Neelorme, a professor of economics at Jahangirnagar University.

### SHRIMP FARMING PARADOX

The unchecked and unregulated expansion of shrimp farming that began in the 1980s has deepened the crisis, according to experts and locals.

Over the last few decades, vast tracts of paddy fields have been turned into shrimp enclosures – locally called ghers – for which farmers illegally cut through embankments to bring in saline water.

Such breaches in coastal embankments to fill ponds have allowed salt to travel farther inland, contaminating both soil and groundwater. Now, many people in the area are trying their luck with crab farming, using a similar method.

While the shift from agriculture to aquaculture brought fast money for some, it systematically altered the landscape and destroyed the freshwater ecosystems that had sustained traditional farming for centuries.

“Shrimp has brought money, but we've lost the soil's fertility, crops, and the sweetness of water. We're trapped,” said former rice farmer Liaqat Ali, who

is now struggling with a small shrimp enclosure in Burigoalini.

The production of shrimp, locally known as “white gold”, has been in decline because of various aquaculture diseases. “We cannot go back to agriculture either, as the land here is no longer suitable for growing rice or any other crop,” he said.

Regarding unregulated shrimp farming, Neelorme said, “When shrimp exports began in the 1980s, we never questioned why we were deliberately allowing saline water into our lands.”

While export volumes have remained static, many marginal farmers have since lost their land to excessive salinity, she added.

Shrimp farming also changed the social fabric, concentrating wealth in the hands of a few landowners. Many small farmers and day labourers are now forced to survive on meagre wages, often under precarious and exploitative conditions.

“I used to grow Aman and Boro. Now I sort shrimp for Tk 300 a day... It's not a life anyone wants,” said 53-year-old Mohammad Rejaul from Shyamnagar in Satkhira.

### HUMAN COST

Rising salinity is now impacting everyday life. In many coastal villages, access to safe drinking water has become a daily ordeal. Tubewells pump out saline water, and women and girls must travel miles to fetch potable water from distant sources.

Skin diseases and waterborne illnesses are common due to prolonged exposure to saline water. Pregnant women face additional health risks, as the consumption of water with high salinity is linked to various health complications.

“While we collect potable water from faraway places, we have no alternative but to use the brackish pond water and saline water from tubewells for bathing, household chores and even cooking. The water damages our skin and leaves rashes that don't heal easily,” said Rahima Khatun, a homemaker from Burigoalini.

In many households, income loss and water scarcity have pushed families into debt. Young men migrate to towns for work, leaving behind elderly parents, while women manage homes under hostile conditions.

As the dry season approaches, villagers in Satkhira and Khulna brace for another year of hardship. Women and girls will walk farther for water and farmers will gamble on uncertain harvests.

While weighing the costs, the people in the area remain resilient.

“We've lived here for generations fighting salinity... If we get support, we'll fight back. But we can't do it alone,” said Gafur.

[Our Khulna and Satkhira correspondents also contributed to the report]

## Quake leaves trail of grief

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son's death to her yet, as such information could worsen her condition,” he said.

Her daughter, a master's student in Dhaka University's Geology Department, collapsed upon learning of Rafiul's death and had to be treated at the hospital.

The family, originally from Bogura Sadar, lived in the capital's Kamalapur, but later moved to Armanitola to ease the children's commute.

Mita's brother, Shahriar Mehfuji, said, “My sister moved to Dhaka so Rafiul could focus on his studies and become a doctor. On Fridays, they usually go to the market to shop for a special holiday meal. Who knew this would be Rafiul's last walk with his mother?”

Mehfuji said he still could not bring himself to inform Rafiul's father, Osman Gani, a teacher at a vocational training centre in Brahmanbaria. **ANOTHER FRIDAY MEAL**

### THAT NEVER HAPPENED

For another family, the weekly Friday tradition of cooking a special meal also ended in heartbreak.

Abdur Rahim, 47, a fabric trader, and his 12-year-old son, Abdur Aziz Rimon, were the two others killed in the collapse of the rooftop railing. Rimon was a fifth grader at Suritola Model Government Primary School.

When the father and son did

not return home, and Rahim was unreachable on phone despite repeated calls, Rahim's brother Golam Mostafa rushed to Mitford Hospital. His worst fears were confirmed when he saw the bodies.

“Rimom wanted to have some beef today [yesterday]. My brother took him to Kasaituli bazar just so they could have some good beef. They never made it back home,” he said, breaking down in tears.

Rahim, originally from Lakshimpur's Chandraganj, had been running a fabric business in Sadarghat for the past 15 years. He lived in the capital's Suritola area with his wife, three sons, and daughter.

### IN THE MOTHER'S ARMS

In Narayanganj's Rupganj, Abdul Haque and Kulsum Begum lived a quiet, hopeful life with their two young children, dreaming of sending them to madrasa one day. But the earthquake shattered those dreams in an instant.

Their daughter Fatema, aged only 10 months, died instantly when a boundary wall beside their home collapsed during the tremor. Kulsum, 30, and neighbour Jasmin Akter, 35, were critically injured.

“Fatema was in her mother's arms when the wall came down,” said neighbour Imtiaz Bhuiyan. “We removed the bricks and pulled out the child. Her mother was unconscious.”

Fatema was buried in the afternoon near their home. Neither parent could be there – her father was rushing from one hospital to another, desperately trying to find treatment for his injured wife.

Mohammad Hossain, Fatema's uncle, said two hospitals refused to admit Kulsum due to a lack of beds. “We've been running around since noon,” he said.

“At Dhaka Medical College Hospital, they only washed and bandaged her head injury and told us to take her home. How can we take her home when she is unconscious? But no hospital will admit her.”

His voice broke with frustration. “We are poor people; we have no power... In my Sonar [golden] Bangladesh, is there no treatment for the poor?”

By evening, they were waiting for an ambulance to take her to the National Institute of Neuro Sciences and Hospital. “I don't know if she'll survive until we get there,” he said before the call dropped.

Rupganj UNO Saiful Islam later said the 10-foot wall that collapsed had no rods or pillars. The administration has provided Tk 20,000 to the family and promised support for treatment.

[Our Narayanganj Correspondent Saurav Hossain Siam contributed to this report]