



A public transport worker clears tram tracks during snowfall in Vienna, Austria.

PHOTO: AFP

## BRICK KILNS ravage land, waterbodies

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in Patiya, Chandanaish, and Lohagara upazilas.  
“Brick kilns are not only removing fertile topsoil from farmlands; smoke emitted from the kilns is also polluting the air and reducing crop growth and productivity,” said Md Moniruzzaman, Satkania upazila agriculture officer.  
He noted that farmers are failing to achieve expected yields due to kiln-driven pollution.  
Over the past five years, at least 75 acres of cultivable land have been damaged, as per data from the upazila agriculture office.  
As many as 20 brick kilns are currently operating in the upazila's Kaliaish union alone.  
During a recent visit to the union, this correspondent saw that soil has been stripped from farmlands surrounding the brick kilns, leaving large pits across most of the agricultural land within 1-2 kilometres of the kilns.  
Smoke from multiple kilns has severely polluted the air, affecting the entire locality. Farmers say their livelihoods are collapsing.  
Abdul Kader, a farmer from Ward 9 of Kaliaish union, used to cultivate chili and potato on at least 100 decimals of land every year. He has now switched to mustard and a local variety of beans.  
“The smoke from the kilns is damaging our crops. The leaves of chili plants fall, while potatoes do not grow properly since the brick kilns started operation in this area, forcing us to leave the land fallow. We can no longer rely entirely on farming and are having to survive through alternative livelihoods.”  
Another farmer, Abu Taher, said he used to grow tomatoes, but the soot and ash from nearby brick kilns have damaged the crop, causing him losses for two consecutive seasons. “Our farmland is gradually

becoming fallow. To save agriculture, this must be stopped.”  
Despite restrictions, excessive coal and wood burning remains widespread, filling surrounding villages with thick smoke during the brick-making season.  
“During the brick-making season, we have to keep doors and windows shut. Even the fruit trees in our yards are not bearing any fruit,” said Abu Taher, a resident of Kaliaish union.  
Delwar Hossain, assistant conservator of forests in the Chattogram South Forest Division, said, “We are maintaining constant surveillance and have stopped the transport and burning of all types of firewood in kilns.”  
In addition, hills are also being excavated to supply soil for brick production, contributing to landscape degradation and increasing the risk of landslides during monsoon seasons.  
For example, in hilly

Aeochia union under the upazila, several hills are being cut and the soil taken to brick kilns.  
“Hill razing continues openly, with little fear of intervention, as enforcement remains weak,” said Md Hasan, a resident of Aeochia union.  
Contacted, Ashraf Uddin, assistant director of the Chattogram office of the Department of Environment, told The Daily Star, “Whenever we receive information about hill cutting, we take immediate action.”  
The DoE filed a case for hill cutting in this area last November.  
The combined impact of air pollution from brick kilns, topsoil removal, and hill cutting is extremely alarming for the area, warned experts.  
“Topsoil loss reduces agricultural productivity, hill excavation destabilises the land and increases the risk of landslides, and smoke emissions further damage crops and local health. If such practices continue unchecked, the environmental and socio-economic consequences for the area will be severe,” said Md Kamal Hossain, professor at the Institute of Forestry and Environmental Sciences, Chittagong University.  
Concerned officials at the local administration acknowledged the presence of illegal kilns, but action against them remains rare.  
Khondakar Mahmudul Hasan, upazila nirbahi officer in Satkania, said this season the brick kilns are not burning firewood but are still collecting soil illegally through syndicates.  
“We are conducting regular operations to stop this. If the illegal kilns could be shut down, environmental damage could be reduced. However, most illegal kiln owners have obtained stay orders from the courts,” he added.  
According to the upazila

## Cricketers rally

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the T20 World Cup. Tamim also noted that, as a significant portion of the board's revenue comes from the ICC, any decision should prioritise what is best for the long-term future of Bangladesh cricket.  
Sharing a clip of Tamim's comments on Facebook, Najmul wrote that the country had now “witnessed the emergence of another proven Indian agent”.  
The post sparked immediate backlash from within the cricketing community. Several cricketers, including former Test captain Mominul Haque and current Test skipper Najmul Hossain Shanto, expressed their displeasure on social media. Left-arm spinner Taijul Islam said he was “shocked” by the choice of words used by the BCB director.  
Amid growing criticism, Najmul later issued another social media post, claiming that while the sports adviser had suggested dialogue with the ICC to move Bangladesh's World Cup fixtures from India to Sri Lanka, someone who had scored over 15,000 international runs for Bangladesh was now “battering for India”. He added that the remarks reflected his personal opinion.  
The Cricketers' Welfare Association of Bangladesh (CWAB) on Friday issued a statement demanding a public apology from the director, confirming that it had written to the BCB president and was seeking appropriate action.  
“A comment made by BCB director M Najmul Islam regarding former national captain Tamim Iqbal has come to the attention of the Cricketers'

Welfare Association of Bangladesh (CWAB). We are stunned, shocked and outraged by it,” the statement read.  
“Such a remark by a board official about the most successful opener in Bangladesh's history, who represented the country for 16 years, is utterly condemnable. Not only because it concerns a player like Tamim, but because such comments about any cricketer are unacceptable and insulting to the entire cricketing community.”  
“When a responsible board director makes such remarks on a public platform, it raises serious questions about professionalism, ethics and the code of conduct of BCB officials,” the statement added.  
CWAB president Mohammad Mithun, along with several other cricketers, later addressed the issue at a press conference in Sylhet, where he strongly criticised the comments and stressed that Bangladesh should not miss out on participating in the World Cup.  
“I want the Bangladesh team to play the World Cup. Why would players miss out on such a big event?” Mithun said. “The responsibility lies with the cricket board to negotiate and make arrangements so the players can participate, while ensuring their safety and security.”  
Mithun further remarked that cricket was increasingly being dragged into politics, something he felt should not happen.  
Meanwhile, the BCB is awaiting a response from the ICC to a letter sent on Thursday, in which the board outlined its security concerns over sending the team to India.

## EC suspends polls

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Meanwhile, on the last day of filing appeals against returning officers' decisions yesterday following the scrutiny of nomination papers, 141 applications were submitted to the EC, bringing the total to 610.  
Hearings on the appeals

will be held from today to January 18.  
On January 4, the scrutiny of nomination papers of candidates ended. Following the scrutiny, the EC declared 1,842 nomination papers valid and rejected 723 others across the country.

## Avg

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7,800 in October 2025 was priced at approximately Tk 28,500 by December, this reporter found.  
Rising prices have begun to alter consumer behaviour. Many buyers are now turning to the second-hand market, while others are exploring technical workarounds such as using laptop RAM in desktop systems with adapters.  
Nasim Rahman Zeem, a computer science graduate, said the scale of recent price hikes was difficult to justify. “RAM prices are expected to rise,” he said. “But global manufacturers have not yet fully shifted production. The sharp increase in Bangladesh over the past few months does not seem entirely justified.”  
Market analysts say the effects of the price hike will be felt most sharply in the smartphone sector, which is highly sensitive to global supply-chain trends. Counterpoint Research forecasts that average smartphone selling prices could rise by nearly 6.9% in 2026, as manufacturers either pass on higher component costs to consumers or scale back device specifications to protect margins. The firm also expects global smartphone shipments to fall by 2.1% that year, citing higher memory costs as a key factor.  
Budget smartphones are likely to be hit hardest. These devices typically operate on thin profit margins and rely on lower-cost memory configurations, leaving manufacturers with limited room to absorb price increases.

## Winter chill boosts

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Abdul Mannan, a local hawk in the Laldighir Par area, explained that they are selling adult wear for Tk 200 and children's items for Tk 100. “These are fixed prices; we don't appreciate bargaining here,” he said firmly.  
However, for some, bargaining remains a necessity. Khaleda Akter, who came to Laldighi with her son, was seen negotiating hard with a vendor. “We cannot afford the glitzy shopping malls, so I've come here to find something cheaper for my

son.”  
The winter season means a major investment for these small-scale traders. Kamal Uddin, a hawk at Laldighir Par, invested Tk 2 lakh this season. “I bought 20 bundles of warm clothes at Tk 10,000 each,” he said. Each bundle typically contains around eight varieties of items, including woollen caps, scarves, gloves, and earmuffs.  
“My daily sales hover between Tk 3,000 and Tk 4,000. Depending on the quality, I sell sweaters for anywhere between Tk 200 and Tk 500,” he added.

## Political

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steps to prevent such incidents from recurring,” he added.  
Fakhrul also described Tarique Rahman's upcoming visit as a personal goodwill tour, noting that the BNP acting chairman would pay tribute to Shaheed Abu Sayed and other martyrs of the July uprising.  
He said the visit would inspire BNP leaders and activists at the grassroots level.  
Addressing the recent defeats of Jatiyatabadi Chhatra Dal in several university student body elections, Fakhrul said further analysis was needed.  
He claimed that during the tenure of the previous government, Chhatra Dal and other student organisations were barred from campuses and treated as persona non grata, preventing them from carrying out organisational activities.  
Drawing a parallel with national polls, he added, “University elections have never influenced national elections. I firmly believe it will not have any impact this time either.”  
Responding to a question about holding the national election and referendum on the same day, Fakhrul said BNP itself had proposed the arrangement, which was eventually accepted. He added that the proposed reforms under the referendum had earlier been outlined by the BNP through its 31-point agenda. “Reform is a continuous process. I see no reason to say no to it,” he said.

## Dhaka seeks relief on tariff

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The issues were discussed during a meeting between National Security Adviser Khalilur Rahman and US Trade Representative (USTR) Ambassador Jameson Greer in Washington, DC, on Thursday.  
Khalilur, who is on a five-day visit to US, also met Assistant USTR Brendan Lynch.  
The US recently included Bangladesh among countries whose nationals must deposit refundable bonds ranging from \$5,000 to \$15,000 for business and tourist visas, a move Foreign Adviser Touhid Hossain described as “unfortunate.”  
Business leaders said the bond requirement would make necessary travel to the US difficult, potentially affecting trade ties.  
Last year, Washington imposed a 20 percent reciprocal tariff on Bangladeshi goods and sought to narrow trade gaps. In 2024, the US imported \$8.37 billion worth of goods from Bangladesh, while exports to Bangladesh stood at \$2.21 billion.  
Bangladesh has since increased imports of US products, including wheat, cotton and liquefied natural gas (LNG), and pledged to buy Boeing aircraft in the coming years.  
In light of rising trade, Khalilur urged Greer to use his good offices to ease business travel and sought DFC access, citing progress in labour reforms, said the press release.  
“Even before the formal execution of the reciprocal trade agreement,

Bangladesh has made major strides in reducing the trade gap by substantially increasing imports from the US,” it quoted Khalilur as saying.  
The USTR ambassador agreed to positively consider Dhaka's proposals, the press release said.  
Greer also agreed to give serious consideration to Khalilur's proposal to lower or eliminate US reciprocal tariff on apparel using US content, it added.  
Bangladesh Ambassador to the US Tareq Md Ariful Islam accompanied Khalilur in the meeting.  
Khalilur is scheduled to meet US Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Allison Hooker and US Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs Paul Kapoor today.

## Withdraw

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“I think the situation will improve within the withdrawal timeframe. Otherwise, the party will take organisational action against them.”  
Nazrul, a BNP Standing Committee member, said Khaleda Zia left behind her son Tarique Rahman as her successor, describing him as the most popular political figure in the country at present.  
“We believe that people want to see positive changes in the country through him. That is why there is so much expectation and emotion among people about him,” he said, adding that Tarique Rahman would move forward by upholding the ideals of his father, late President Ziaur Rahman, and his mother, former prime minister Khaleda Zia.

Responding to a question about the recent killing of a Swechchasebak Dal leader during the election period, Nazrul said good initiatives often face obstacles. “In any good initiative there are enemies. Those who work for the country and its sovereignty also face enemies.”  
He said maintaining law and order is essential for a fair election and urged the government to remain active and strategic.  
“There are forces that do not want the election now, do not want democratic transition or do not want stability. They will try to create instability,” he said, expressing hope that the government would take appropriate steps to improve the law and order situation.

## Trump halts 2nd wave of attacks

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ceremony for the 100 Venezuelans that her government says were killed during the US assault.  
“Nobody surrendered. There was fighting for the homeland” when the US forces attacked on January 3, she said.  
Venezuela on Thursday began releasing a “large number” of political prisoners, including several foreigners, in an apparent concession to the United States, reports AFP.  
Former Venezuelan opposition candidate Enrique Marquez – who opposed Nicolas Maduro in the contested 2024 presidential election – was among those released

Thursday.  
“It's all over now,” Marquez said in a video taken by a local journalist of him and his wife, accompanied by another released opposition member Biagio Pilieri.  
The White House credited Trump with securing the prisoners' freedom.  
“This is one example of how the president is using maximum leverage to do right by the American and Venezuelan people,” Deputy Press Secretary Anna Kelly said in a statement to AFP.  
Trump broadened his threat to drug traffickers in a Fox News interview that aired Thursday night, saying he would target cartels in land strikes – the US military has already destroyed at least 31 vessels in maritime attacks in the Eastern Pacific and the Caribbean, killing at least 107 people.  
“We are going to start now hitting land with regard to the cartels. The cartels are running Mexico,” Trump told broadcaster Sean Hannity.  
Interior leader Rodriguez's brother, Parliament Speaker Jorge Rodriguez, said “a large number of Venezuelan and foreign nationals” were being immediately freed for the sake of “peaceful coexistence.”  
He did not say which prisoners would be released, nor how many or from where.