



(We are) ready for cooperation on security in the Arctic but it has to happen with respect for our territorial integrity..."  
Danish FM Lars Lokke Rasmussen on Trump's Greenland threats

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## Partial rollout of new pay scale likely from Jan

Tk 20,000cr kept as additional allocation in revised budget to cover salaries, allowances of govt employees

REJAUL KARIM BYRON

The new pay structure for government employees is likely to be partially implemented during the interim government's tenure, effective from January.

Subsequently, an additional allocation of about Tk 20,000 crore has been kept in the revised budget to cover salaries and allowances of more than 15 lakh government officials and employees.

The announcement of the implementation of the new pay structure is likely to be made ahead of the national election on February 12 once the National Pay Commission's report is scrutinised, a senior finance ministry official told The Daily Star. The National Pay Commission's

- 1 Decision will come after Pay Commission submits its report by this week
- 2 After quick scrutiny, govt will announce implementation of the pay scale
- 3 New pay structure will provide a higher increase at the lower grades
- 4 Implementation may begin with revised basic salaries, or allowances

report is expected by January 21.

Either the revised basic salary or the allowances could be implemented from January, so the allocation made in the revised budget would be sufficient.

The new pay structure would provide a higher increase to those at the lower grades, the official added.

Meanwhile, the government has finalised the revised budget, which will come into effect on February 1.

The overall budget size has been reduced by Tk 2,000 crore to Tk 788,000 crore.

While the development budget has been slashed by Tk 30,000 crore,

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BNP Chairman Tarique Rahman with his family at a programme organised in memory of his late mother and former prime minister Khaleda Zia at the South Plaza of the Jatiya Sangsad Bhaban yesterday.

PHOTO: BNP MEDIA CELL

## IAB leaves Jamaat-led bloc, to run solo in 268 seats

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

After days of suspense, Islami Andolon Bangladesh (IAB) yesterday finally announced that it parted ways from the Jamaat-e-Islami-led 11-party electoral alliance, saying it does not want to engage in politics by "depending on others' favour".

The party added that it is preparing to contest the next general election independently in 268 out of 300 constituencies.

The development came just a day after the combine named its single

candidates for 253 constituencies at a press conference, where no IAB representative showed up.

Explaining the decision at a briefing in the party's Purana Paltan central office, IAB Spokesperson Gazi Ataur Rahman said the party had been "deprived of justice" in the seat sharing process and that the alliance had "deviated from Islamic ideals".

He further said they would support candidates in the remaining 32 seats whose values align with the party's principles.

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ALLIANCE DEBACLE 'MAJOR SETBACK' FOR JAMAAT -- PAGE 2

## Khaleda's legacy central to our democratic future

Say speakers at citizens' mourning; urge nation to uphold her ideals, values

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Upholding and emulating the ideals of former prime minister and BNP chairperson Begum Khaleda Zia is essential for building a better Bangladesh and deepening its democratic foundations, speakers said yesterday.

At a citizens' mourning gathering titled "Indomitable Begum Khaleda Zia," people from across professions remembered her as a dignified statesperson, an unwavering democrat, an uncompromising

SEE PAGE 2 COL 1



Flames and thick black smoke engulf a residential building in Uttara yesterday morning, where a fire claimed six lives and left at least 13 others ill from smoke inhalation. Bottom, family members of the victims break down in grief.

PHOTO: COURTESY OF FIRE SERVICE, PALASH KHAN

**She saved others but could not save herself**

SHAHEEN MOLLAH

It was a quiet winter morning in Uttara around 7:45am yesterday, with the household sleeping in on the weekend. When flames from a flat three storeys below began to spread, 14-year-old Rodela was the first to sense the danger.

Her split-second decision saved three lives but cost her own. She woke her father and screamed to alert the rest of the family.

Thanks to her quick action, her father, Shahidul Islam, mother, and younger brother took shelter on the balcony of their fourth-floor flat and survived the toxic smoke. But while trying to reach the roof through the stairs with her uncle and cousin, Rodela did not make it out.

Six people from two families were killed in the fire that broke out on the first floor of a six-storey residential building in the capital's Uttara yesterday, while 13 others fell ill from smoke inhalation.

Doctors and fire officials said none of the deceased -- three of them children -- had burn marks on their bodies, suggesting they died from asphyxiation.

The victims were identified as Kazi Fazle Rabbi, 38, his wife Afroza Akter Suborna, 37, and their two-year-old son Kazi Fayaz Rishan; as well as Hares Mia, 52, his 17-year-old son Rahab, and 14-year-old niece Rodela.

They lived in two flats on the building's fourth floor on Road 18 in Sector II.



STAFF CORRESPONDENT

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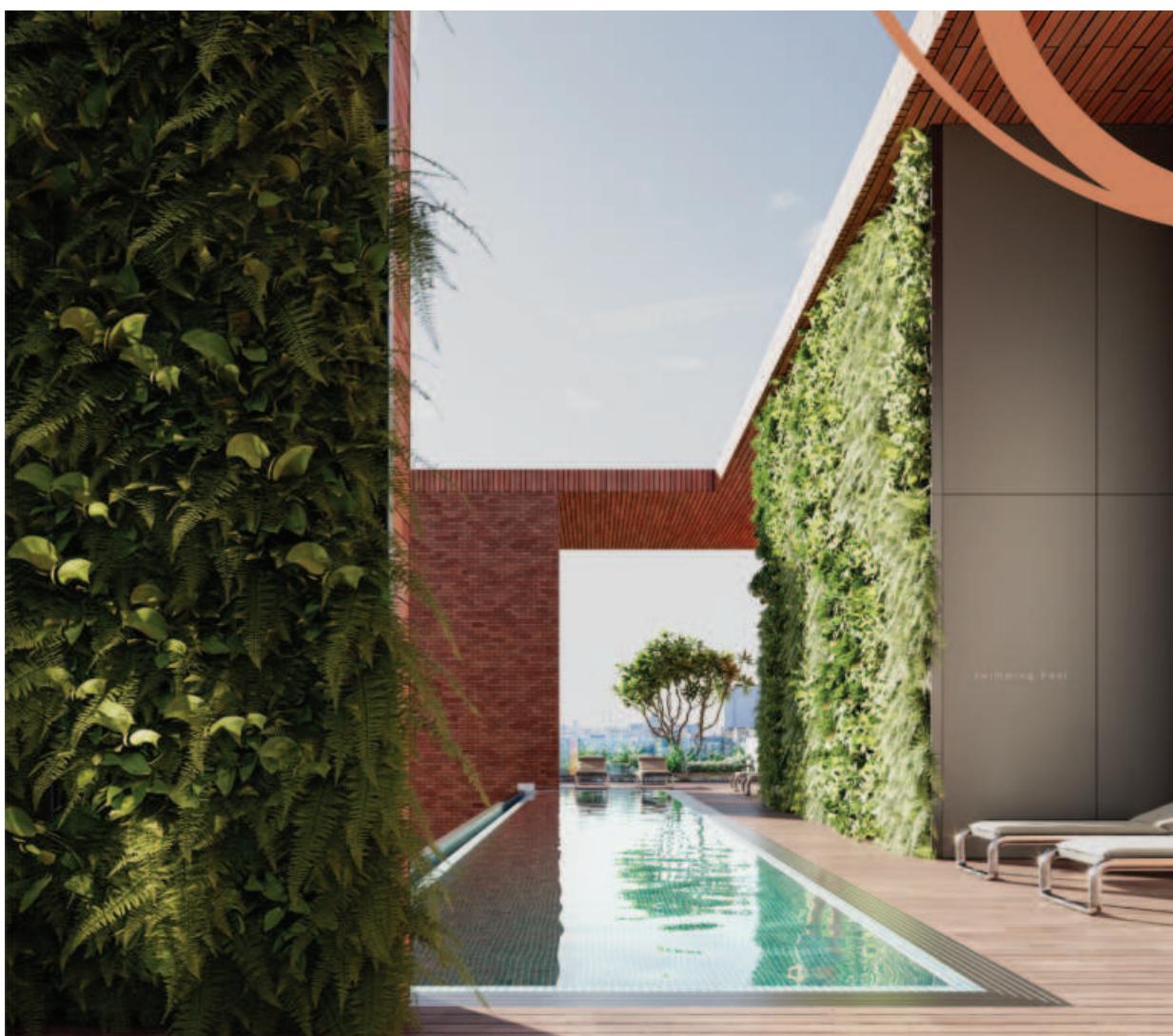
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They lived in two flats on the building's fourth floor on Road 18 in Sector II.

The fire broke out on the first floor around 7:50am, said Talha Bin

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*Serene Living with Nature at Bashundhara*

THE OPUS Block K, Bashundhara

Prime Corner Plot

South, North & East Facing

Fitness Center

Zen Lounge

Infinity Pool with Lush Green Façade

© 16677

RANCON

REAL ESTATE

## Alliance debacle 'major setback' for Jamaat

Says analyst as Islami Andolan continues to allege 'mistrust'

RASHIDUL HASAN

The split in the Jamaat-e-Islami-led II party alliance of mostly Islamist parties is likely to have a major impact on the electoral equation, analysts say, after Islami Andolan Bangladesh (IAB) announced it would quit the coalition and contest the polls independently.

The alliance was formed ahead of the 13th parliamentary election primarily to counter the BNP-led bloc. Jamaat, a long-time BNP ally, was among its key architects, arguing that a united front of Islamist parties could project a stronger Islamic ideological alternative to BNP's nationalist narrative.

"IAB's exit is a major setback," said political analyst Mohiuddin Ahmad. "The alliance's core objective was to counter the BNP. In the present situation, I don't think the Jamaat-led bloc will perform well. The split will divide votes and ultimately give mileage to the BNP."

IAB Secretary General Yunus Ahmed said the party had been the chief proponent of the "one ballot box" strategy -- bringing all Islamist forces under one umbrella and fielding single candidates in each constituency. Initially, five Islamist parties formed the alliance. Jomiat-e-Ulma-e-Islam later left to join the BNP, while Jamaat and six others subsequently joined,

expanding it into an 11 party coalition.

"But Jamaat did injustice to us," Yunus said. "They acted like a big brother, taking decisions without even consulting us."

An adviser to IAB Ameer Syed Muhammad Rezaul Karim, speaking on condition of anonymity, said the BNP had offered IAB a place in its alliance, which the party declined "for the sake of our alliance." He blamed the breakup on "divisions and mistrust," holding Jamaat responsible.

IAB Joint Secretary General and spokesperson Gazi Ataur Rahman said Jamaat unilaterally included three new parties and began allocating seats without discussion. "They were distributing seats as if they owned all 300 constituencies," he said, calling the behaviour humiliating and authoritarian. "We tried our best to stay, but there was no environment left for us."

Asked about the rupture, Jamaat Assistant Secretary General and head of its central publicity department Ahsanul Mahboob Zubair said such developments "can happen in politics."

Jamaat-e-Islami was banned along with other religion-based parties after independence in 1972, but returned to electoral politics in 1986 after the ban was lifted. Its best performance came in 1991, when it won 18 seats with 12.13 percent of the

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Confiscated battery-run rickshaws kept on the side of the road as authorities continue drives against the vehicles to ensure road safety and curb traffic congestion in Dhaka. The photo was taken in the capital's Shyamoli area yesterday. PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON

## Khaleda's legacy central to our democratic future

FROM PAGE 1

leader, and a symbol of resilience whose legacy will continue to shape the nation's political and social course.

The meeting was held at the South Plaza of the National Parliament complex on Manik Mia Avenue and was attended by top political leaders, diplomats, journalists, development workers, academics, researchers, editors, and business leaders. The programme began around 3:00pm with recitation from the Holy Quran, followed by a condolence message.

BNP Chairman Tarique Rahman, his wife Zubaida Rahman, their daughter Zaima Rahman, and family members including Shamila Rahman, wife of Khaleda Zia's younger son late Arafat Rahman Koko, were present.

Presiding over the event, former chief justice Syed JR Mudassir Husain said Khaleda Zia was an inseparable part of Bangladesh's history.

Even in the most difficult times, she displayed patience and personal dignity, enduring long imprisonment in what he described as retaliatory cases. On behalf of civil society, he urged the government to confer the highest honour upon her.

Professor Dr FM Siddiqui, a member of the medical board that oversaw her treatment after her release from prison, called for a high-level investigation committee to examine possible negligence when she was in jail.

"It is unbelievable but true that even after Madam's [Khaleda] liver function test showed problems, the government-appointed doctors did not even run an ultrasonogram and did not stop MTX3 [a medication]," he said.

"Many people ask whether Madam was slowly poisoned. My answer is, Methotrexate [MTX] was the drug that accelerated her fatty liver disease to cirrhosis of the liver. In that context, it [MTX] acted like slow poison for her liver."

"This was wilful negligence. It is an unforgivable crime, and it needs to be examined whether this was part of a long term plan to kill her," he said.

Nurul Kabir, editor of New Age and president of the Editors' Council, said Khaleda Zia played a crucial role in Bangladesh's struggle against military and civilian autocracy.

"Through her death, she clearly



proved that she was not only a leader of a nationalist party, but truly became a leader of the country. This has been proven by the participation of millions of people in her janaza," he said.

Despite immense suffering, she had never publicly expressed pain, anger, or resentment -- a quality that drew people to her and should be practised in today's Bangladesh, Kabir said.

He also expressed hope that the future leadership of the BNP would uphold her democratic ideals.

Law Adviser Asif Nazrul said Khaleda Zia was unjustly convicted in what he termed the most disgraceful and farcical trial in the country's history, describing the Zia Orphanage Trust case as a "sham and disgraceful judgment."

He recalled a time when hardly anyone dared to speak in her defence, saying only four individuals at home and abroad could be persuaded to protest the verdict.

Bangladesh would prosper, he said, only if the country were envisioned as Khaleda Zia had envisioned it.

"Now the biggest concern is what Bangladesh will look like in the days ahead. If we want a better Bangladesh, we must uphold Khaleda Zia, follow her ideals, and run the country in that spirit."

Economist Debapriya Bhattacharya said she passed away at a critical juncture, when her presence and

guidance were perhaps needed most. He noted her rare patience in listening to technical advice.

"She knew how to ask questions," he said. "She did not ask questions for rhetorical purposes; she asked them to test the robustness of logic and to identify any flaws."

He added that she assessed technical advice through the lens of national reality, necessity, and the global context.

Prof Dr Mahbub Ullah, the chief organiser of the event, said people would remember Khaleda Zia for her patriotism, courage, honesty, dedication, sacrifice, and ability to endure oppression.

Mahbubul Rahman, president of the International Chamber of Commerce, Bangladesh, said Khaleda Zia emerged as an indomitable leader at a time when restoring democracy after autocratic rule and advancing the private sector posed enormous challenges.

He said her two tenures saw key economic and infrastructure developments, alongside major social initiatives such as Food for Education, expansion of primary education, and support for girls' education.

Writer Mohiuddin Ahmed said Khaleda's life had three phases -- from 1982 to 1990, her years in power or opposition, and the period after 2007.

She would be remembered both as

an uncompromising leader and later as a victim, he said.

"The country's politics needs her elegance to make politics a gentleman's profession," he said. "She was refined, commanded respect, and possessed a magnetic quality rarely found in politics."

Referring to her last speech on August 7, he recalled her call to move away from vengeance-driven politics, urging a "politics of reconciliation."

"We have spent decades with an eye for an eye, a life for a life," he said, warning that abusive politics would ultimately hand power to thugs.

Mahfuz Anam, editor and publisher of The Daily Star, recalled that the newspaper's founding coincided with Khaleda Zia's rise to the premiership.

He said she deeply respected independent journalism and earned admiration for her tolerance of diverse views and acceptance of criticism.

Despite humiliation and repression, after her release on August 7 she spoke against destruction, resistance, vengeance, and revenge.

"She could have said she did not want revenge but wanted justice for what had been done to her," Anam said. "She did not even say that."

Calling this restraint extraordinary, he said such values, if internalised, could bring about change.

One of her last messages to the nation, he added, was the need to build a knowledge-based society. "We need a knowledge-based society with competence and skills."

Simeen Rahman, CEO of Transcom Group, said Khaleda Zia believed business must be ethical and development value-based.

"I learned through my father, the late Latifur Rahman, founder chairman of the Transcom Group, that Khaleda Zia always encouraged businesspeople to do business ethically and in the right way," he said.

She described Khaleda Zia as uncompromising, strong, and deeply dignified, noting her far-reaching contribution to economic development.

"In the 1990s, Khaleda Zia's market-oriented policies helped speed up growth in the private sector, trade, and investment," she said, citing VAT policy, financial sector reforms, the

**Khaleda Zia is an inseparable part of Bangladesh's history. Even during very difficult times, she showed patience and dignity. The government should award her the highest honour.**

Syed JR Mudassir Husain  
Former chief justice

**Through her sense of responsibility, determination, and leadership, Khaleda Zia established herself as an indomitable and powerful leader. During her two tenures in office, important developments were achieved in the economy.**

Mahbubul Rahman  
President of ICCC

**Khaleda Zia had a significant role in Bangladesh's struggle against military and civilian autocracy. The future leadership of BNP should uphold her democratic ideals.**

Nurul Kabir  
Editor of New Age

**Due to the 1994 drug pricing policy, there was quality development, research, and increased investment in the pharmaceutical industry. As a result, Bangladesh today is almost 100 percent self-reliant in medicine.**

Simeen Rahman  
Transcom's Group CEO

Privatisation Board, and the Securities and Exchange Commission.

She highlighted her role in strengthening remittances, exports, the RMG sector, and the pharmaceutical industry following the 1994 drug pricing policy, which helped make Bangladesh nearly self-reliant in medicine.

Rashed Al Mahmud Titumir, professor of Development Studies at Dhaka University, said Khaleda Zia was the silent architect of Bangladesh's economic modernisation, noting that during her tenure two crore people rose out of poverty and remittance earnings crossed the billion-dollar mark.

Daily Amar Desh Editor Mahmudur Rahman said that in the past century, only five leaders in the region reached the height of popularity, two from the same family -- Shaheed President Ziaur Rahman and Begum Khaleda Zia.

"It is rare in world history that a husband and wife from the same household remained at the height of popularity throughout their political lives," he said.

Addressing Tarique Rahman, he said it was both a source of pride and anxiety to be the son of such leaders. "Being equal to them is extremely difficult, and being their son makes it even harder."

Researcher Faham Abdus Salam said, "Great sacrifice makes a great leader. If we look at the life of Begum Khaleda Zia, it was full of sacrifice."

Veteran editor Shafik Rehman, Bangladesh Puja Udjapon Parishad President Basudeb Dhar, University Grants Commission Chairman Prof Dr SMA Faiz, diplomat Anwar Hashim, Disabled Peoples' International President Abdus Sattar Dulal, and Raja of the Chakma Circle Barrister Devasish Roy, also spoke at the event.

BNP Secretary General Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir, Standing Committee members, and other senior leaders were also present.

On both sides of the stage, large billboards displayed two of Khaleda Zia's most famous quotes, while several monitors were placed around the venue to broadcast the programme so that everyone could follow it clearly.

## She saved others but could not save herself

FROM PAGE 1

with grief. He and his brother Hares's family lived in two flats on the same floor.

"They ran for the roof; we ran for the balcony," he said, breaking down as he recalled the terrifying moments inside.

"Rodela woke me up first, then she woke everyone else." The family, desperate to escape, split into two groups, Shahidul said.

"My brother Hares, his son Rahab, and my daughter Rodela opened the main door to try to reach the roof by stairs. But as soon as they opened it, thick black smoke rushed in. We couldn't see anything. They got lost right there."

Meanwhile, Shahidul, his wife, and their younger son took shelter on the balcony. "We screamed for help from the balcony. Firefighters rescued us about an hour later."

During evacuation, Shahidul saw the lifeless bodies of his brother, nephew, and daughter lying in the living room.

Authorities said the victims were likely overwhelmed by heavy smoke after opening the door, causing them to lose consciousness and later die of asphyxiation.

The death of Rodela's cousin



PHOTO: STAR

**Rodela's grieving father, centre, comforted by relatives yesterday**

Rahab added to the tragedy, as he was not supposed to be at the apartment that night.

Rifat Naznin, a cousin of Hares's wife, said there had been a family event at her father's house and stayed the night at his own home. Coming to deliver that food ended up costing him his life," Naznin said, holding back tears.

Afterward, Rahab was sent to the

Uttara residence to drop off food for the family. "Rahab was only supposed to drop off the food. He didn't return to his grandfather's house and stayed the night at his own home. Coming to deliver that food ended up costing him his life," Naznin said, holding back tears.

Doctors confirmed all three died from asphyxiation, with no burn injuries found.

Hares's wife, Rina, who was at her father's home in Mirpur, remained unaware of the loss of her husband and son until the afternoon, as relatives struggled to break the news to her.

Funeral prayers for the deceased were held around 3:30pm yesterday.

Besides Rodela, Hares, and Rahab, the blaze also killed Kazi Fazle Rabbi, 38, his wife Afroza Akter Suborna, 37, and their two-year-old son Kazi Faiyaz Rishan.

Afroza's cousin Abu Sayed said Rabbi's village home is in Nanuya Dighirpar, Cumilla Sadar upazila. He worked at Eskayef Pharmaceuticals, while Afroza was a senior executive at Square Pharmaceuticals.

They had two sons, Faiyaz and Rafsan. Family members said Rafsan, who was staying at his grandmother's house, was spared from the tragedy.

Afroza's sister, Afra Jahan, said Afroza was declared dead upon arrival at the National Burn and Plastic Surgery Institute, while the bodies of Rabbi and his son were taken to Kuwait Bangladesh Friendship Government Hospital.

Doctors confirmed all three died from asphyxiation, with no burn injuries found.

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the non-development budget has been increased by Tk 28,000 crore -- mainly for the implementation of the new pay structure.

In the original budget for this fiscal year, Tk 84,114 crore was allocated for salaries and allowances. In the revised budget, the allocation is set to exceed Tk 100,000 crore.

At present, the number of government officials and employees stands at about 15 lakh.

In addition, the new pay structure will also apply to employees of various autonomous bodies and state-owned banks, although their salaries are not paid directly from the government budget.

The National Pay Commission may recommend a separate pay scale for the Bangladesh Bank and state-owned banks, distinct from the government pay structure. The move is aimed at making state-owned banks more competitive with the private sector by allowing greater flexibility in compensation.

Separate pay structures are also expected for the judiciary and the armed forces, officials said.

The government formed the Ninth Pay Commission in July last year with former finance secretary Zakir Ahmed Khan as its chairman. The commission was asked to submit its

report within six months.

The last national pay scale was implemented in 2015, meaning nearly a decade has passed since the most recent revision.

The commission is considering the cumulative impact of inflation over the past decade while making its recommendations. The Daily Star has learnt from people involved with the proceedings.

The aim is to ensure the real wages under the new structure do not fall below the 2015 level.

At the same time, the government has

## Ensure justice for Hadi

### Inqilab Moncho reiterates demand during protest

UNB, Dhaka

Inqilab Moncho yesterday staged a demonstration demanding justice for its slain spokesperson, Sharif Osman bin Hadi, with a large number of protesters in attendance.

The protesters organised a procession from the central mosque premises of Dhaka University after Juma prayers.

During the demonstration, they chanted slogans, including "We want justice".

Earlier, on Thursday, a Dhaka court directed the Criminal Investigation Department (CID) to carry out further investigation into Sharif Osman Hadi's murder case.

Dhaka Additional Chief Metropolitan Magistrate Jashita Islam passed the order after the complainant expressed dissatisfaction with the initial investigation and submitted a naraji petition (a no-confidence motion) against the charge sheet, requesting a further probe.

The court also ordered the submission of the investigation report by January 20, said Dhaka Metropolitan Police (DMP) Deputy Commissioner of Prosecution Miah Mohammad Ashis Bin Hasan.

Osman Hadi, who was also a

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Inqilab Moncho brings out a procession on the Dhaka University campus yesterday, demanding justice for its slain spokesperson, Sharif Osman bin Hadi.

PHOTO: STAR

## ISHWARDI SILK SEED FARM

# Once-profitable, NOW LEFT TO CRUMBLE



AHMED HUMAYUN KABIR TOPU, Pabna

The state-owned Ishwardi Silk Seed Farm, located along the Pabna-Ishwardi road, has largely fallen into abandonment due to years of neglect and lack of initiative.

According to the Bangladesh Silk Development Board, the Ishwardi Silk Seed Farm was established in 1962 on 107 bighas of land near the Alhaz Intersection area in Ishwardi upazila of Pabna.

Initially, mulberry trees were cultivated on 59 bighas of land, while the remaining 38 bighas were used to construct 19 buildings, including offices, residential quarters, silkworm rearing houses, a weaving shed and four ponds. At its peak, the facility employed 17 officers and staff members, along with more than a hundred labourers.

During a recent visit, large parts of the farm were found overgrown with vegetation, while most of the buildings were in a dilapidated condition. Currently, official activities are limited to a single room operated by just two officials, with one night guard assigned to patrol the premises.

Facilities such as the silkworm rearing house, cocoon production room, yarn production room and the laboratory have been severely damaged due to a lack of maintenance. In the absence of proper



monitoring, trees and other materials have also been stolen from the premises.

Farm officials said only 11 bighas of land are now being used for cultivating mulberry saplings, while the rest has remained neglected for years.

The farm's decline began in 2018 after staff salaries were stopped.

Md Khokon Ali, acting manager of the

farm, said the primary purpose of the facility is to rear silkworms and produce cocoons for manufacturing silk yarn.

"However, silkworm rearing has remained suspended for the last seven years due to a lack of efficient manpower and necessary funding," he said.

"Currently, we are only planting mulberry trees to supply saplings to other

silk farms across the country. There is no production work taking place at this large facility," he added.

According to farm officials, the institution, once profitable, began incurring losses, followed by disputes between workers and officials over salary arrears. Workers' salaries were eventually suspended in 2018, prompting officials to leave. Since then, the facility has continued to deteriorate.

Sources said around 50,000 mulberry trees were lost due to neglect, while the buildings have remained abandoned.

Md Insaf Ali, the night guard, said, "It's an impossible task to guard this vast area singlehandedly."

Local residents said the farm had once generated employment and supported the country's silk production. They blamed the current state of the facility on a lack of government initiative.

Md Tarikul Islam, deputy director of the BSDB regional office in Rajshahi, said efforts were underway to resume production at the farm.

"Due to a shortage of funds, we cannot begin operations. We are trying to arrange financing to restart silkworm rearing and silk cocoon production at the Ishwardi farm," he said.

## Two killed, three hurt in Cumilla clash

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Cumilla

Two people were killed and three others injured in a clash between two groups over establishing dominance in Cumilla's Nangalkot upazila yesterday.

The deceased were identified as Delwar Hossain, 40, of resident of Aliyara village; and Saleh Ahmed, 60, former member of Boxganj Union Parishad, said police.

According to locals and police, there has been a longstanding rivalry between two groups in the area.

One group is led by Abu Khayer, a former member of the same union parishad, and another group led by Saleh Ahmed.

Both the groups locked in a deadly clash around 12:30pm yesterday, leaving

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## Prolonged cold wave batters the north

### Tentulia records country's lowest temperature for 8th consecutive day

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Thakurgaon

The ongoing cold wave sweeping across the northern region continued to intensify the suffering of poor and marginalised communities yesterday.

Panchagarh's Tentulia upazila recorded 8.5 degrees Celsius yesterday, the country's lowest temperature for the eighth consecutive day.

Meteorological officials say icy winds from the Himalayas are intensifying the cold spell across northern Bangladesh, particularly in Panchagarh and Thakurgaon districts, and the present conditions are expected to persist for the next few days.

Daily wage earners are the worst sufferers amid declining incomes, as they are facing difficulties in coping with the prolonged cold spell while earning their livelihoods.

Taherul Islam and Nazirul Islam of Buraburi Balabari village in Tentulia

## Bodies of missing teen, mother found in tutor's flat

### Teacher, younger sister held

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Police recovered the bodies of a teenage girl and her mother from a private tutor's flat in Keraniganj upazila of Dhaka district on Thursday night, 21 days after they went missing.

The victims were identified as 14-year-old Zobaida Rahman Fatema and her 32-year-old mother, Rokeya Rahman, residents of Muktibag in Kalindi union.

Police arrested tutor Mim Begum, 22, and her 15-year-old sister. During primary interrogation, both confessed to the murders, Keraniganj Model Police Station Officer-in-Charge Saiful Alam told The Daily Star yesterday.

Residents of Muktibag said a foul smell had been spreading in the area for several days. On Thursday night, neighbours traced it to Mim's flat. When she refused to open the door, they called 999.

Police later searched the flat and found Rokeya's body under a bed and Fatema's above a false ceiling in the bathroom. The bodies were sent

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## Fuel station worker fatally run over for demanding payment

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Faridpur

A fuel station worker was killed after allegedly being run over by an SUV in Rajbari's Sadar upazila early yesterday.

Police and witnesses said the incident occurred when the worker at Karim Filling Station demanded payment for fuel. The SUV driver reportedly attempted to leave without paying and ran over the worker, killing him on the spot.

The victim was identified as Ripon Saha, 30, son of Pabitra Saha of Sahapara in Rajbari's Sadar upazila.

Police later seized the vehicle and arrested its owner, Abul Hashem alias Sujan, 55, from his residence in Baro Muraripur village of the upazila yesterday afternoon, said Khondkar Ziaur Rahman, officer-in-charge of Rajbari Sadar Police Station.

The driver, Kamal Hossain, 43, was also detained from Banibhab Nijpara village, said the police official.

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## Govt failed to ensure liveable, equitable cities

### Say speakers

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The government has failed to take effective measures to make Bangladesh's cities liveable, equitable, and sustainable after the mass uprising, despite high public expectations, said urban planning experts yesterday.

Although the interim government approved the National Urban Policy and the Spatial Planning Ordinance in 2025, speakers said it largely failed to address major challenges in urban development, management, planning, and environmental protection in Dhaka and other divisional, district, upazila, and municipal areas.

The observations were made at an online planning and development analysis programme, titled "Urban Planning, Development, Environment and Equity in Bangladesh in 2025: Citizens' Expectations and Achievements", organised by the Institute for Planning and Development (IPD).

Speakers alleged that the government revised Dhaka's Detailed Area Plan (DAP) under pressure from business groups and failed to take strong

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Farmers plant seedlings in a field at Rostumpur in Gainghat, Sylhet, hoping for a good yield as the Boro season begins. The photo was taken recently.

PHOTO: SHEIKH NASIR

upazila, who earn their livelihoods by extracting stones from the Mahananda River, said they have been forced to cut their working hours due to adverse weather.

Usually, they work from 8:00am to 5:00pm throughout the year. However,



for more than a week now, they have been going to the river only after 10:00am and wrapping up work by 3:00pm, as cold winds continue to blow throughout the day. As such, their daily income declined

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## Main accused in Gazipur police attack case arrested

OUR CORRESPONDENT,  
Gazipur

Rab has arrested Jahangir, the main accused in a case over attacking police, vandalising government vehicles, and snatching an accused during a drug recovery operation in Gazipur's Sreepur.

Rab-1 arrested him in the Ansar Road area of the upazila early yesterday.

Confirming the development, Lt Md Nazif Bin Jamal, company commander of Rab-1, said on December 31, when three people were arrested with 30 pieces of yaba during a drive in the Maona area of Sreepur, miscreants attacked the police. Several policemen were injured and two government vehicles were vandalised.

"During the attack, Jahangir seriously injured a policeman with a sharp weapon and helped snatch the accused," he added.

## Bodies

FROM PAGE 3

to Sir Salimullah Medical College, Mitford Hospital morgue for autopsy.

According to police and relatives, eighth-grader Fatema went to her neighbour and private tutor Mim's flat for lessons around 5:00pm on December 25. When she did not return, Rokeya went to look for her, but neither came back.

On December 27, Rokeya's husband, Shahin Ahmed, filed a general diary with Keraniganj Model Police Station. Later on January 6, he filed a kidnapping case, accusing unidentified suspects, as his wife and daughter still remained missing.

Shahin told reporters they had suspected Mim from the beginning and repeatedly informed police.

OC Saiful Alam said Mim initially lowered suspicion by posing as a responsible tutor, claiming Fatema had left after lessons. CCTV footage showed Fatema entering and leaving the flat.

Investigators later found that after Fatema was killed, Mim's younger sister wore her clothes and left the flat to mislead CCTV. She changed outside and returned minutes later.

Police said the motive stemmed from financial disputes. Rokeya had stood guarantor for an NGO loan taken by Mim, who failed to make regular payments, straining relations between the families.

According to OC Saiful Alam, a quarrel broke out between Mim's younger sister and Fatema on the night of the incident. In anger, the younger sister strangled Fatema, who died instantly. When Rokeya arrived, she too was strangled with a scarf.

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Vice Chancellor Prof Abdur Rab inaugurates the 35th founding anniversary of the International University of Business Agriculture and Technology (IUBAT) at its Uttara campus yesterday. Pro-VC Prof Mohammad Mahmudur Rahman, Treasurer Prof Selina Nargis, Registrar Prof Md Montazur Rahman, Controller of Examinations Brig Gen (retd) Dr Md Zahid Hossain, Dean of the Faculty of Engineering Prof Md Monirul Islam, and Dean of the Faculty of Business Prof Mozaffar Alam Chowdhury were, among others, present.

PHOTO: COURTESY

## Parts of Lalar Dighi being filled up

### DoE asked to intervene

SUSHANTA GHOSH, Barishal

within the waterbody rather than on the embankment.

"This more than century-old waterbody has faced repeated attempts at illegal encroachment through forgery. No one could occupy or fill it earlier as the city corporation intervened. Now NHA is filling up part of it to serious environmental and legal concerns.

Locals said sand filling using pipes from a neighbouring river has been underway along the Lalar Dighi embankment adjacent to the Rupatali Housing Estate under Barishal City Corporation for the past 15 days.

The nearly six acre waterbody is largely owned by the district administration. It is bordered by the Rupatali Housing Estate on three sides and a 12-foot-wide road on the western side.

The housing estate, one of Barishal's most upscale areas, was developed in 1977-78 and now covers more than 40 acres.

According to SA land records, Lalar Dighi has around four acres of waterbody, with the remaining area comprising land surrounding it.

NHA authorities, however, claimed ownership of 50 decimals of land along the embankment on the western side of the dighi and said they were filling only that portion.

Officials argued that records identify the land as pond embankment rather than waterbody and that erosion over time caused it to submerge. They said the land is now being reclaimed and that no permission was required, as it is not classified as a waterbody.

However, an on-the-spot visit found that the portion being filled -- around 300 feet long and 80 feet wide -- appears to fall

officer of the Rupatali Housing Estate, said the authority is reclaiming 50 decimals of land acquired in 1977-78 that later eroded into the dighi.

"As this is embankment land and not part of the dighi itself, we did not seek permission from the Department of Environment," he said.

Under the Waterbody Conservation Act, 2000, and the

divisional coordinator of the Bangladesh Environmental Lawyers Association in Barishal, said the Department of Environment has been informed and legal notices have been served on nine entities, including the NHA, BCC and the DoE.

On the seventh day of hearings, the EC also upheld the candidacies of four others, including BNP-nominated Sabira Sultan in Jashore-2. The rest are Arif Ul Islam Mridha (independent, Narshingdi-3), Saifuddin Khaled (NDM, Cox's Bazar-4), and Md Anwar Hossain (independent, former BNP vice president, Sunamganj-3).

The EC heard 43 appeals yesterday -- 30 scheduled and 13 pending. Of these, 21 were rejected, four kept pending, and 18 approved.

Among the valid appeals, seven were from independents, five from the Communist Party of Bangladesh, four from Islami Andolan Bangladesh, and one from Ganosamhati Andolan.

As of yesterday, 353 aspirants have regained candidacy over seven days. Earlier, 2,568 aspirants submitted nomination papers to contest the 13th national election from 300 constituencies by the December 29 deadline.

### VOTER ASSAULTED

Around 3:30pm, Sherpur-2 voter Yazdayin -- who had appealed for cancellation of BNP candidate Mohammad Fahim Chowdhury's nomination -- was assaulted on the EC premises. He was later dragged onto the street and beaten before police intervened.

On the assault incident, Election Commissioner Abdur Rahmehl Masud said voters lodging complaints out of anger would face firm action.

"There is no place for extremists. They will try to create terror, but they must be discouraged. Whatever the candidate, we will take lawful measures to the fullest extent possible," he told The Daily Star.



PHOTO: STAR

local resident Jahangir Molla.

Following the allegations, Dipak Lal Chatterjee, deputy assistant land commissioner in Barishal, visited the site recently. He said a portion of the land belongs to the district administration and that the issue has been brought under official notice.

Rafiqul Islam, administrative

environmentalists disagreed with the claim.

Rafiqul Islam, Barishal divisional coordinator of Bangladesh Pribesh Andolok, said, "Whether marked as pond or embankment, it is part of a major waterbody. Filling it and selling plots is not acceptable for a government institution."

Echoing him, Lincoln Biyen,

Bangladesh Water Act, 2013, filling or altering waterbodies without environmental clearance from the DoE is a punishable offence.

Contacted, Kazi Kaziuddin, assistant director of the DoE in Barishal district, said they have already asked NHA authorities to stop filling the waterbody and submit all documents related to land ownership.

## Prolonged cold wave Ensure justice for Hadi

FROM PAGE 3

From Tk 800-1,000 to only around Tk 400 per day.

Shafiqul Islam, a rickshaw-van puller from Aziznagar area, said, "I can work for four to five hours during the daytime, but it has become almost impossible to stay on the road and pull the van amid cold weather in the early morning and evening."

Moreover, poor people -- especially children and the elderly -- are bearing the brunt of the prolonged cold spell.

Amena Bewa, 72, of Sardarpura village, said it has become a daily struggle to just survive the cold.

To support cold-stricken poor people, the government and various non-government

organisations have been distributing blankets and warm clothes, though the supply remains inadequate compared to demand.

Contacted, Afroz Shaheen Qhosru, upazila nirkabhi officer of Tentulia, said 3,500 blankets have been distributed among people, with around 400 more in the pipeline.

Meanwhile, hospitals across the region have reported an influx of patients suffering from cold-related ailments, particularly children and elderly people.

Agriculture officials advised farmers to take precautionary measures to protect crops, especially Boro seedbeds, which have already been affected in some areas.

Road in Puratan Paltan. He was later airlifted to Singapore for advanced treatment, where he succumbed to his injuries on the night of December 18.

Two killed, three hurt

FROM PAGE 3

the two persons dead on the spot, said Arifur Rahman, officer-in-charge of Nangalkot Police Station.

Additional law enforcers were deployed to avoid further violence, he added.

No case was filed till last evening, said the OC.

Local sources said the same groups clashed earlier on August 3, 2025, when former UP member Alauddin was killed.

Following that incident, both the groups carried out vandalism and arson

'Interim govt not favouring anyone' Says press secy, terms Rumeen Farhana's allegations baseless

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Brahmanbaria

Chief Adviser's Press Secretary Shafiqul Alam yesterday said the interim government is not favouring any candidate contesting for the upcoming national elections.

He made the remark in response to Brahmanbaria-2 constituency's independent candidate Barrister Rumeen Farhana's allegation that her rival candidate may carry out vote rigging on the election day. "Her allegations are baseless. There is no possibility of vote rigging. The government is not working in favour of anyone," he said.

The election will be held in a free, fair and peaceful manner, he expressed hope while talking to journalists after visiting the shrine of Hazrat Shahipir Kalla Shaheed (R) at Kharmapur area of Brahmanbaria's Akhaura upazila yesterday.

He also said unlike previous elections, practices like intimidating oppositions and arrests during campaigning will not recur during the upcoming polls.

Talking about the referendum, Shafiqul Alam said it is essentially a vote in favour of reforms aimed at ending misrule and ensuring that authoritarian governments do not return in the future.

Voting "Yes" in the referendum is necessary to put an end to large scale plundering of public resources that took place in previous regime, he added.

Regarding the implementation of the Wage Earners' Welfare Board for journalists, he said media owners should answer such questions, as journalists are often deprived of their rights despite working under risky conditions. Earlier, during a stopover at the Brahmanbaria Circuit House, Shafiqul Alam told journalists that there is no discussion about reconciliation with killers.

## EC reinstates 18 more aspirants

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The Election Commission yesterday reinstated the candidacy of 18 aspirants, approving their appeals against returning officers' decisions that had earlier cancelled their nominations.

On the seventh day of hearings, the EC also upheld the candidacies of four others, including BNP-nominated Sabira Sultan in Jashore-2. The rest are Arif Ul Islam Mridha (independent, Narshingdi-3), Saifuddin Khaled (NDM, Cox's Bazar-4), and Md Anwar Hossain (independent, former BNP vice president, Sunamganj-3).

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"There is no place for extremists. They will try to create terror, but they must be discouraged. Whatever the candidate, we will take lawful measures to the fullest extent possible," he told The Daily Star.

## Govt failed to ensure

FROM PAGE 3

fields still restricted. He also said the government ignored citizen movements opposing the destruction of Panthakunj Park for a car-dependent expressway link road and cancelled the bus rapid transit (BRT) project from Gazipur to the airport, which was based on public transport.

They also criticised the government for not addressing persistent problems such as traffic congestion, waterlogging, and noise pollution.

Speakers noted that the absence of ward councils weakened community-based problem-solving, while the government failed to involve neighbourhood residents in addressing local issues.

They urged the next elected government to move away from mega projects and prioritise effective planning, coordinated initiatives, improved urban management, and meaningful public participation.

Presenting the keynote paper, IPD Executive Director Dr Adil Mohammed Khan said the interim government had formulated several laws and regulations on planning, building construction, and urbanisation over the past year, but failed to resolve citizens' everyday urban problems.

He said the occupation of playgrounds and parks continued, with public access to many urban areas. IPD member Tofayel Ahmed Sajib, planner Sajid Iqbal, and IPD research associates Jinias Jannat and Kazi Tasnia Tabassum also spoke, among others.

### PRAYER TIMING

JANUARY 17

Fazr Zohr Asr Maghrib Esha

AZAN 5:30 12:45 4:15 5:40 7:00

JAMAAT 6:05 1:15 4:30 5:44 7:30

SOURCE: ISLAMIC FOUNDATION

China, Canada reach landmark deal on tariffs, visas

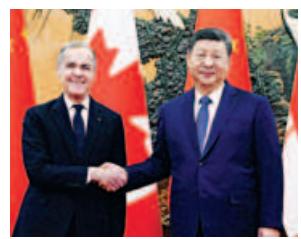
AFP, Beijing

Canada's Prime Minister Mark Carney and Chinese President Xi Jinping agreed on a raft of measures from trade to tourism yesterday at the first meeting between the countries' leaders in Beijing in eight years.

The Canadian premier hailed a "landmark deal" under a "new strategic partnership" with China, turning the page on years of diplomatic spats, retaliatory arrests of each other's citizens and tariff disputes.

Carney has sought to reduce his country's reliance on the United States, its key economic partner and traditional ally, as President Donald Trump has aggressively raised tariffs on Canadian products.

"Canada and China have reached a preliminary but landmark trade agreement to remove trade barriers and reduce tariffs," Carney told a news conference after



meeting with Xi.

Under the deal, China -- which used to be Canada's largest market for canola seed -- is expected to reduce tariffs on canola products by March 1 to around 15 percent, down from the current 84 percent.

China will also allow Canadian visitors to enter the country visa-free.

In turn, Canada will import 49,000 Chinese electric vehicles (EVs) under new, preferential tariffs of 6.1 percent.

"This is a return to the levels that existed prior to recent trade frictions," Carney said of the EV deal.

Welcoming Carney in the Great Hall of the People, Xi said China-Canada relations reached a turning point at their last meeting on the sidelines of the APEC summit in October.



People attend a protest against deportation flights at King County International Airport, used by US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), in Seattle, Washington, US on Thursday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

## Ukraine has fuel reserves for more than 20 days

Says energy minister after series of Russian strikes on power infrastructure; Ukrainian team heading to US for security guarantee talks

REUTERS, Kyiv

Ukraine has fuel reserves for more than 20 days. Energy Minister Denys Shmyhal told parliament yesterday, describing the overall energy situation in the country as very difficult following a series of Russian drone and missile attacks on power infrastructure.

Shmyhal, who took office earlier this week, said the most challenging situation remains in the capital Kyiv, the regions of Dnipro, Kharkiv and Odesa, and in towns near the frontline, where thousands of homes have been without electricity and heating for days in subzero temperatures.

"In some cities and regions, winter preparations have failed. Over the past two days in office, I've seen that many things are clearly stalling," he said.

"There is not a single power plant left in Ukraine that the enemy has not attacked."

On Wednesday, President Volodymyr Zelensky said he would declare a state of emergency in the energy sector to make up for lost time and address issues of disrupted



power supplies following sustained Russian attacks.

Shmyhal, who previously served as prime minister and defence minister, ordered emergency imports of electricity. He said that Ukraine needs to install 2.2-2.7 GW of electricity generation capacity by the end of 2026 to meet its consumption needs.

Meanwhile, the European Commission is considering ways to allow Ukraine's quick accession to the EU as part of a peace deal

with Russia but without giving Kyiv full membership rights, which would only be "earned" after transition periods, EU officials said.

The idea, which is at a very early stage, is intended as a possible gesture to Ukrainians who are seeking EU membership as part of a post-war security guarantee from Europe and who after four years of fighting off a Russian invasion want a credible promise that they are on the path toward economic stability and integration with the West.

Ukrainian EU membership in 2027 was pencilled into a 20-point peace plan discussed between the United States, Ukraine and the European Union, diplomats said, as a measure to ensure Ukraine's economic prosperity after the war ends.

A Ukrainian delegation is en route to the US for talks on security guarantees and a post-war recovery package, President Volodymyr Zelenskiy said on Friday, expressing hope the documents could be signed on the sidelines of the World Economic Forum in Davos next week.

## Israeli strike in south Lebanon kills one: ministry

AFP, Beirut

An Israeli strike on south Lebanon killed one person yesterday, the health ministry in Beirut said a day after raids that Israel said had targeted the Iran-backed Hezbollah.

Israel has kept up regular strikes in Lebanon despite a November 2024 ceasefire that sought to end more than a year of hostilities with Hezbollah, usually saying it is targeting members of the group or its infrastructure.

In a statement, the health ministry said an "Israeli enemy strike" on a vehicle in Mansuri in south Lebanon killed one person.

It also said that a strike on Mayfadun in south Lebanon the previous night killed one person.

Israeli said Thursday's attack killed "a Hezbollah member it alleged took part in attempts to reestablish Hezbollah's infrastructure in the Zawtar al-Shariyah area".

The attacks come a week after Lebanon's military said it had completed disarming Hezbollah south of the Litani River, the first phase of a nationwide plan, although Israel has called those efforts insufficient.

On Thursday, Israel carried out several strikes against eastern Lebanon's Bekaa region, north of the Litani, after issuing warnings to evacuate.

United Nations peacekeepers, deployed in the south to separate Lebanon from Israel, said yesterday that an Israeli drone "dropped a grenade" on its troops.

On Monday, the peacekeeping force said an Israeli tank fired near its troops, and warned that such incidents were becoming "disturbingly common".

Israel and Lebanon agreed to a US brokered ceasefire in 2024, ending more than a year of fighting between Israel and Hezbollah that had culminated in Israeli strikes that severely weakened the Iran-backed group. Since then, the sides have traded accusations over violations.



Firefighters battle a blaze in Guryong village shantytown, Seoul's largest informal settlement, South Korea, yesterday. More than 250 people were evacuated after the fire tore through the impoverished area near the Gangnam district.

PHOTO: AFP

## Israel sees spike in PTSD, suicide among troops

REUTERS, Jerusalem

Israel is grappling with a dramatic increase in post-traumatic stress disorder and suicide among its troops after its two-year assault on Gaza, precipitated by the October 7, 2023, Hamas attack on southern Israel.

Recent reports by the Defence Ministry and by health providers have detailed the military's mental health crisis, which comes as fighting persists in Gaza and Lebanon and as tensions flare with Iran.

Israel's Defence Ministry says it has recorded a nearly 40 percent increase in PTSD cases amongst its soldiers since September 2023, and predicts the figure will increase by 180 percent by 2028. Of the 22,300 troops or personnel being treated for war wounds, 60 percent suffer from post-trauma, the ministry says.

The Gaza war quickly expanded with

cross-border fire between Israel and Lebanon's Hezbollah, and saw hundreds of thousands of soldiers and reservists deployed across both fronts in some of the heaviest fighting in the country's history.

Israeli forces have killed more than 71,000 Palestinians in Gaza and 4,400 in southern Lebanon, according to Gazan and Lebanese officials, and Israel says more than 1,100 service members have been killed since October 7.

The war has left much of Gaza destroyed and its 2 million people overwhelmingly lack proper shelter, food or access to medical and health services.

Palestinian mental health specialists have said Gazans are suffering "a volcano" of psychological trauma, with large numbers now seeking treatment, and children suffering symptoms such as night terrors and an inability to focus.

## BAN FOR UNDER-16S Social media sites block 4.7m accounts in Australia

AFP, Sydney

Tech giants have blocked 4.7 million accounts under Australia's world-first social media ban for under-16s, the country's online safety watchdog said yesterday.

Initial figures showed platforms were taking meaningful action to remove underage users, Australia's eSafety Commissioner Julie Inman Grant said.

"It is clear that eSafety's regulatory guidance and engagement with platforms is already delivering significant outcomes," she said in a statement.

Australia has required big platforms including Meta, TikTok and YouTube to stop underage users from holding accounts since the legislation came into force on December 10 last year.

Companies face fines of Aus\$49.5 million (US\$33 million) if they fail to take "reasonable steps" to comply.

Billionaire Mark Zuckerberg's Meta said last week it had removed 331,000 underage accounts from Instagram, 173,000 from Facebook, and 40,000 from Threads in the week to December 11.

But Meta repeated its call for app stores to be required to verify people's ages and get parental approval before under-16s can download an app.

## US approves \$1.5bn deal for Peru naval base

AFP, Washington

The United States said Thursday it had approved a \$1.5 billion deal for the expansion of a naval base in Peru, where China has funded a separate megaport.

The State Department said that Peru requested to buy \$1.5 billion in equipment and services as part of its modernization in Callao, the country's main naval base which is near the international airport in Lima.

The project will bring up to 20 US personnel from the government or private sector to Peru for up to 10 years, the State Department said.

The sale will "improve the security of an important partner which is a force for political stability, peace and economic progress in South America," the State Department said in a statement.

The United States has a long security partnership with Peru, where lawmakers have authorized the presence of US troops.

## UN sounds alarm on hunger in west, central Africa

AFP, Geneva

Around 55 million people in violence-wracked west and central Africa face acute food insecurity this year and some are on the verge of famine in northern Nigeria, the United Nations said yesterday.

Violence across the region has triggered a hunger crisis that is being exacerbated by aid cuts, the UN's World Food Programme said.

WFP said it had had to slash its food assistance in the area as funding dries up.

In west and central Africa, "a staggering 55 million people will be facing acute food insecurity in the upcoming lean season between June and August 2026", Jean-Martin Bauer, WFP's food security and nutrition analysis director, told reporters

in Geneva.

Those people are in the crisis, emergency and catastrophe phases of hunger -- the three worst of five levels used to assess food insecurity.

The number of people in emergency conditions has doubled since 2020, to three million, he said.

And 15,000 people in certain areas of Borno state in northeastern Nigeria are in the catastrophe phase -- the first time this level has been reached in a decade.

"This is a group that's one step away from famine," Bauer said, speaking from WFP's headquarters in Rome.

"That does mean that people are dying... people are starving."

Borno state is the epicentre of a jihadist insurgency that began in 2009.

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## Biman board appointments must be reversed

They raise questions about the interim government's neutrality

The latest appointments to the board of directors of the state-run Biman Bangladesh Airlines, made at the fag end of the interim government's tenure, are both surprising and deeply controversial. These decisions raise serious concerns about conflicts of interest, abuse of power, and the potential compromise of neutrality ahead of the national election. Of the three newly appointed directors, two currently serve the government with the rank of minister and state minister, while the third is the top civil servant of the Election Commission.

A gazette notification issued on Thursday named National Security Adviser and High Representative for the Rohingya Issue Dr Khalilur Rahman, Special Assistant to the Chief Adviser at the Ministry of Posts, Telecommunications and Information Technology (with the rank of state minister) Faiz Ahmad Taiyeb, and EC Senior Secretary Akhtar Ahmed as new board members. Earlier, on August 26 last year, Adviser Md Bashir Uddin, who oversees the civil aviation ministry, was appointed chairman of the board. This marked the first instance of a minister assuming the chairmanship of a company under his own ministry, departing from the long established norm of keeping operational management separate from the ministry.

Traditionally, ministers have not served as directors of state-owned enterprises because their official positions already allow them considerable influence over policy and strategic direction. Their direct involvement in corporate governance risks creating conflicts of interest, undermining transparency, and opening the door to mismanagement and corruption. Although the gazette notification claims the appointments were made in public interest, they instead invite suspicion about the government's true intentions. At the very least, the move appears to be an attempt to rehabilitate outgoing advisers by placing them in alternative official roles after the end of their ministerial privileges. Moreover, if the government's objective was to restructure or revamp Biman by modernising its fleet or expanding its network, legitimate questions arise about the moral and legal authority of an interim administration to pursue such initiatives when the country is less than four weeks away from electing a new government.

Equally troubling is the appointment of the EC secretary. With the electoral process already underway, safeguarding the commission's neutrality is essential to maintaining the credibility and integrity of both the parliamentary election and the referendum. Assigning a senior election official to another position sets a dangerous precedent and risks being perceived as a reward for service during the election period.

The February 12 election is one of the most consequential events in the nation's recent history. The interim government must avoid decisions that could cast doubt on its impartiality or undermine public confidence in the electoral process. These appointments should be withdrawn immediately to ensure that the integrity of the election is not questioned and that the perception of political favouritism does not tarnish the role of supposedly non-partisan advisers.

## Another death due to ambulance syndicate

Authorities must urgently take action to dismantle this syndicate in Shariatpur

We are horrified to learn about yet another death caused by an ambulance syndicate and its extortion practices in Shariatpur. According to a *Prothom Alo* report, 70-year-old Jamshed Ali Dhali died inside an ambulance after a local ambulance syndicate stopped the vehicle at least twice on its way to Dhaka. This tragedy follows a similar incident in August last year when a newborn died as an ambulance was blocked on the road by the same syndicate. Legal action in that case led to charges against several syndicate members, but it appears to still remain fully active.

Family and witness accounts describe a chilling sequence of extortion and violence. Jamshed, who was admitted to Shariatpur Sadar Hospital, was referred by his doctors to the National Institute of Neurosciences and Hospital in Dhaka. On Tuesday, after initially hiring a local ambulance for Tk 6,000, the family was told to pay extra money. They then arranged for another ambulance, which was not a part of the syndicate's fleet, for a lesser price. But that ambulance, carrying Jamshed, was stopped twice by the syndicate members who demanded to know why the family had arranged an "outside" ambulance. This delayed Jamshed's transfer to Dhaka by 90 minutes, and he passed away before reaching the neuroscience institute.

Reports suggest that ambulance services in Shariatpur have been effectively controlled by an organised syndicate for years. According to *Prothom Alo*, hospitals in the district refer 80-100 patients to Dhaka every day for advanced treatment, yet there are only seven government ambulances to meet this demand. This chronic shortfall has created a vacuum that private operators are exploiting, turning emergency transport into a cartelised service where prices are inflated and dispatch is tightly controlled. Disturbingly, this is not treated as a criminal violation despite being widely known. Although the official fare for a Dhaka trip is supposed to be Tk 4,000, syndicate-controlled ambulances routinely charge Tk 6,000-8,000.

Jamshed Ali Dhali's death calls for an immediate systemic response. Emergency care should not be at the mercy of syndicate whims. We urge the government to crack down on syndicate control of ambulance services through clear regulations, strict enforcement, and transparent oversight of both public and private emergency vehicles. Ambulance operations must be standardised with fixed fares and penalties for extortion. District administrations, law enforcement, and the health ministry must work together to ensure that no patient faces obstruction when every minute counts.

# Is public sympathy for street protests fading?



BLOWIN' IN THE WIND

Dr Shamsad Mortuza  
is professor of English at Dhaka University.

SHAMSAD MORTUZA

The agitating students of seven colleges in the capital are demanding the immediate issuance of the ordinance for their proposed university. These students fought earlier to decouple from their degree-giving entity, Dhaka University, and won the initial battle through the declaration of a separate administrative body. The transition faces numerous logistical challenges because the government cannot create a university overnight. Yet, the students feel the urgency to press their demand, probably before the election next month when a political government is going to replace the interim one, which has been rather sympathetic to students for their contribution to the toppling of the previous regime.

The fact that these students are blocking the roads with impunity is an example of such sympathy. The public, perplexed by the government's inaction, is experiencing the bystander effect. The collective inaction demonstrates a situation where everyone is waiting for someone else to act first. Students need to understand that the time for moral action is rapidly approaching, and the ordinary public's patience could quickly escalate into violence.

We have already witnessed a simmering public reaction. The passive bystanders are feeling the pressure of prolonged blockades at various choke points across the city. One sweat-soaked rickshaw puller was seen pulling the hands of a protester to his neck, asking to strangle him, as his vehicle had been stuck in the same spot for more than three hours due to the blockade. The heartfelt plea came from a man whose daily wage was disappearing because of the street demonstrations. Another paediatric orthopaedic surgeon was heard saying that if they blocked him, many children would miss timely dressings or scheduled operations. A female passenger was heard saying, "You stay in subsidised dorms, enjoy money sent to you by parents like us, and then pose difficulties for others. What kind of education is that?"

Students need to read the public

pulse. They are losing the plot not because their grievances lack merit, but because their tactics have trespassed the personal spaces of others. The lifeblood of any protest is persuasion. The July uprising was successful because everyone felt the ills of discrimination. However, as the suffering visibly shifts, the backlash may become unforgiving.

Protests have a limited lifespan. When the students of seven colleges took to the streets to protest the



Students of the seven colleges blocked key points in Dhaka demanding the immediate issuance of the Dhaka Central University Ordinance two days in a row, paralysing the capital's traffic. The photo was taken on January 15, 2026.

PHOTO: PALASH KHAN

hierarchy claimed and haughtiness exerted by their parent organisation, they gained sympathy through moral coherence. The negative experiences at the DU Registrar's Building form the foundation of a haunting plateau, reinforced by the repetition of similar stories. One would have expected the students to defuse the tension once they secured the assurance for a separate university. But by rushing the process, they are showing their ignorance of the intricate process through which a university operates. And their tactic of arm-twisting the government is exhausting the very public whose attention they need.

campus. Given the current political climate, a firm commitment to the establishment of a new campus seems improbable.

The college administrators have also failed to anchor youth politics in their respective institutions. Teachers who have transitioned to teaching at the university level through civil service examinations fundamentally oppose student demands. The establishment of a university could potentially lead to the removal, withdrawal or posting of numerous Dhaka-based teachers. The issue of intermediate students, who require these teachers' instruction, also arises.

## How to address the root causes of disinformation sprees



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T.I.M. NURUL KABIR

The spread of disinformation, rumour and misleading content on social media has become a critical challenge these days, particularly ahead of the national election. The government has taken a tough stance to curb the insidious circulation of fake and misleading information. A new section 73(A) has been added to the Representation of the People (Amendment) Ordinance (RPO), which says any deliberate act of creating and disseminating misleading information, images, videos, audio or any other content with the intent of influence or malign the electoral process would be treated as a corrupt practice and be punishable.

The National Cyber Security Agency (NCSA) has formed a special cell to monitor online and social media to prevent fake information, misleading content and rumours ahead of the election.

However, concerns have been raised regarding overreliance on legal measures without ensuring due transparency and impartiality, which could be detrimental, and that a multi-pronged approach is needed to gain public trust and combat fake news and misinformation effectively.

While legal measures, regulatory mechanisms and technologically well-equipped fact-checking cells are important, the rooted causes of spreading rumours and fake news should also be addressed.

Proliferation of fake news in political campaigns, particularly during elections, has become a global phenomenon. Social media and biased reporting on a number of news portals can drive political polarisation and social fragmentation by creating the echo chamber effect. People in echo chambers hold similar views and ideas and are drawn to information that supports their existing beliefs, creating a biased sense of identity.

Social media algorithms designed to keep users engaged determine which content is displayed to whom based on previous browsing activity and demographic information. The selective display of content aligned with a user's preference further entrenches fragmentation and polarisation. While users view, share and interact more and more with the content of their preference, every click is monetised by some relevant party.

Heightened fragmentation and polarisation during the political

transition are creating critical challenges for social cohesion in Bangladesh. Social cohesion is the bond between societal actors and institutions. Policymakers recognise the importance of social bonds in driving economic growth and sustainable development. The UN SDG pledges to build an equitable society based on inclusive growth, equality, and peace, where no one is left behind.

The heads of states and governments and high representatives at the Second World Summit for Social Development (WSSD2), held in Qatar on November 4-6, 2025, acknowledged the urgent need to address profound social challenges, especially poverty, unemployment and social exclusion, and address their underlying and structural causes and their distressing consequences. The Doha Political Declaration of the WSSD2 recognises that poverty eradication, promotion of productive employment and decent work for all, and social integration are interrelated and mutually reinforcing, and therefore, all three objectives need to be pursued simultaneously.

Bangladesh has achieved rapid improvements in several of the social development indicators. Several NGO programmes and projects have facilitated income-generating activities among poor and marginalised women, fostering broad-based social development. Mobile telecommunication services have driven rapid digital and financial inclusion in Bangladesh. However, the pace of employment generation has remained very low. Data from

the Labour Force Survey 2024 shows that unemployment is particularly high among educated youth. Lack of employment opportunity and rising inequality in wealth distribution are among the key causes of general discontent and lowered trust in institutions.

Escalation of disinformation and misinformation on social media is more of an effect, and not the root cause of this widespread discontent, low trust in institutions or social fragmentation. Among the main causes of the proliferation of fake news, lack of knowledge and low literacy come first. Dishonesty and partisan political views deeply influence people's sentiments, creating an echo chamber effect, driving social fragmentation.

The problem of tackling fake news and misleading content on online platforms is a complex and multifaceted crisis deeply rooted in ethical, social and cultural norms and attitudes, as well as education level, institutional capacity, transparency, and the commonly prevalent political power-seeking tactics.

To combat this challenge, policymakers, researchers and civil society need to take the initiative to identify the nature and extent of Bangladesh's social relationships as well as people's interactions with formal institutions. By doing so, it can be determined how the positive manifestations of trust, cooperation and institutional efficiency could be strengthened to enhance social cohesion and economic development.

# A strategy for durable poverty reduction in Bangladesh



Mahtab Uddin  
is assistant professor of economics at Dhaka University and  
honorary research director at the South Asian Network on  
Economic Modeling (Saneem).

MAHTAB UDDIN

Bangladesh's poverty rate declined from approximately half of the population in the 1990s to one-fifth by 2019. However, this progress proved fragile. Covid and its related measures disrupted jobs, enterprises, remittance flows, and supply chains. Estimates show a sharp increase in poverty in 2020-21. Although recovery has brought it down again, signs of stress persist due to high inflation and economic tightening. Surveys suggest the poverty rate in Bangladesh may now be higher than in 2019, with extreme poverty also rising. While numbers vary, the trend is clear: poverty reduction has slowed, and reversals are becoming more common.

There are several reasons why Bangladesh was unable to reduce poverty rates as effectively as it intended, and many of these causes are interconnected. Without addressing one, it is impossible to resolve the other. In other words, the country's attempt to keep the poverty rate low failed because it lacked a comprehensive approach focused on the poor.

A durable poverty reduction strategy rests on four interconnected pillars. The first is an accurate identification of poor households. Targeted policy is only as good as its ability to locate the intended beneficiaries. Even after decades of policy prescriptions, Bangladesh has failed to establish a fully operational, regularly updated household registry that is usable across programmes. The National Social Security Strategy (NSSS) envisioned a national household database and systematic tools, including proxy means testing (PMT), to support eligibility decisions and reduce arbitrary inclusion and exclusion. Without this foundation, fragmentation persists and accountability is weak.

Secondly, it must ensure that the poor receive the same education and skills as the non-poor. This might require more schools and infrastructure in pro-poor regions. Additionally, these households need social security support because the poor often face

invest less in human capital (such as education or healthcare) than non-poor households. This is why social security transfers are so valuable for sustainably reducing poverty rates.

Bangladesh's public policy has not consistently matched these realities. Regions with entrenched poverty experience gaps in school quality, teacher availability, healthcare access, and basic infrastructure. Social protection programmes often fall short in

to achieve. Its large labour force remains dominated by informal employment. Of the seven crore employed in 2022, only 15 percent were in the formal sector. Unlike the East Asian comparators, Bangladesh's industrial employment growth was far slower. Garments have powered its growth story, but this concentration has left the economy less diversified than needed. When industrial growth is narrow, demand for semi-skilled

services. For example, international migration channels were controlled by political elites who charged high fees, artificially barring poor households. The elites also captured the banking sector, leading to an increase in non-performing loans. It was more expensive for the poor to access loans. The country also failed to take timely actions to reduce inflation and implement effective education and training policies aligned with global trends.

These weaknesses explain why Bangladesh lifted many out of poverty but didn't build a thick buffer. A large, vulnerable group, living within about 1.25 times the poverty line, remains exposed to shocks. The urgency to address this is rising. While the country benefits from a demographic dividend, an ageing population will increase demand for healthcare and support. Environmental stress, pollution, food safety issues, and antimicrobial resistance will add to health burdens. Acting now is cheaper than later.

To address these challenges, Bangladesh needs coherent and timely policy action. It requires an integrated household registry with transparent eligibility criteria, regular updates, and credible grievance mechanisms, which should be utilised across programmes. The focus should be on improving quality in schools and healthcare in lagging regions, not only through infrastructure but also through staffing, learning outcomes, and accountability. Modernising the curriculum and expanding credible technical and vocational pathways are essential. Social protection must be consolidated, better targeted, and funded at levels that effectively safeguard living standards during shocks. In terms of employment, the priority is diversifying beyond garment products, creating a more predictable business environment, reducing trade and regulatory hurdles, improving logistics, and aligning skills policies with market demand. Governance reforms that reinforce the rule of law and financial discipline, and that expand fair access to services such as credit and safe migration channels, should also be prioritised.

International experience points to a simple lesson: durable progress comes from combining targeted support with structural change and consistent implementation. If Bangladesh acts with urgency and focus, it can protect past gains and restore steady poverty reduction. If it does not, reversals will become more frequent, vulnerability will deepen, and the risk of a prolonged middle-income trap will rise.



FILE PHOTO: STAR

**Bangladesh's attempt to keep the poverty rate low failed because the country lacked a comprehensive approach focused on the poor.**

several preconditions, such as having fewer resources to spend after education, healthcare, and other essentials. The marginal utility of money is much higher for the poor than for the non-poor: i.e. the same SI would mean much more to the poor than to the non-poor. It also means that, compared to the non-poor people, the poor would value present consumption more than future consumption, a phenomenon in economics known as the time value of money. Therefore, poor households tend to both coverage and adequacy. Studies and administrative reviews repeatedly point to significant targeting errors, where benefits leak to non-poor households while eligible poor households remain excluded. At the same time, benefit levels have frequently been too small or too irregular to offer meaningful protection against rising living costs.

The third pillar is the labour market, specifically the creation of decent, productive jobs at scale, which the country has failed

labour becomes weaker, rural-to-urban mobility yields smaller productivity gains, and many migrants end up in low-paid services and manual work with limited opportunities for occupational mobility.

The final pillar that Bangladesh missed was effective governance and coherent policies. Due to corruption, low moral standards, and bureaucratic complexity, the poor had limited access to quality education and healthcare, as well as to migration, social security, and other

## Trump's world vision: Honest, yet precariously primitive

**Dr Daniel Warner**  
is an academic and the author of 'An Ethic of Responsibility in International Relations' (Lynne Rienner). He lives in Geneva.

**DANIEL WARNER**

US presidents are not known for telling the truth. From Thomas Jefferson's denial of a relationship with the enslaved Sally Hemings onwards, there has been no shortage of political distortions emanating from the Oval Office. President Donald Trump, however, has taken a different track. When asked by *The New York Times* reporters whether there were any restraints on his global powers, Trump replied, "Yeah, there is one thing. My own morality. My own mind. It's the only thing that can stop me." "I don't need international law," he added.

There is something almost refreshing about Trump's forthrightness. He says exactly what he means. Surprised by his violations of international law such as striking boats in international waters, killing survivors, and abducting Venezuela's president? Concerned that the US military committed the war crime of perfidy by disguising one of its aircraft as a civilian plane in attacking a suspected drug-smuggling boat from Venezuela? Worried that he did not consult members of Congress before sending armed forces abroad? "He who saves his Country," Trump wrote on Truth Social in February 2025, "does not violate any Law."

And Trump's deeds back up his words. As the US flexes its muscles in Venezuela and threatens other countries in the Western Hemisphere and beyond, the White House announced on January 7 its withdrawal from 66 international organisations. Taken together, the assertiveness in Venezuela and retreat from multilateralism underscore an expansive interpretation of "America First" as well as a very particular 21st century rejection of the rule of law and international cooperation.

White House Executive Order 14199, signed on February 4, 2025, is titled: "Withdrawal of the United States from International Organizations, Conventions and Treaties That Are Contrary to the Interests of the United States." A presidential memorandum followed on January 7, 2026, "I have...determined that it is contrary to the interests of the United States to remain a member of, participate in, or otherwise provide support to the organizations listed in section 2 of this memorandum." Of the 66 organisations named, 31 agencies and offices are associated with the UN, such as the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). Some are non-UN organisations, such as the Commission for Environmental Cooperation; others are described as "hybrid threats" including the International Institute for Justice and the Rule of Law.

Among the UN entities listed for withdrawal, the most consequential is the UNFCCC. No country has ever exited the UNFCCC since its

adoption in May 1992. Described by many as the "bedrock" climate treaty, it is the parent agreement to the 2015 Paris climate accord.

"The United States would be the first country to walk away from the UNFCCC," Manish Bapna, president and CEO of the Natural Resources Defense Council, told Reuters.

**Donald Trump must be credited for his honesty. The 2025 National Security Strategy, White House Executive Order 14199 and the January 7 Presidential Memorandum are transparent statements of policy positions that are already being implemented.**

What do the 66 organisations have in common? According to Secretary of State Marco Rubio, on whose report the withdrawals were based, "It is no longer acceptable to be sending these institutions the blood, sweat, and treasure of the American people, with little to nothing to show for it." He maintained that many of the organisations were "dominated by progressive ideology" and were also "mismanaged, unnecessary, wasteful,

poorly run, captured by the interests of actors advancing their own agendas contrary to our own, or a threat to our nation's sovereignty."

Indeed, the Trump administration interprets any form of multilateralism or international cooperation as an erosion of the US's absolute sovereignty. Behind this assertion lies a reliance on raw power in a lawless world. "We live in a world, in the real world, Jake, that is governed by strength, that is governed by force, that is governed by power," Stephen Miller, deputy White House chief of staff for policy and Homeland Security adviser, said in an interview with CNN's Jake Tapper. "These are the iron laws of the world since the beginning of time."

Miller's comments echo 17th century English philosopher Thomas Hobbes' famous view of human nature, "In the state of nature, life is solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short." US National Security Strategy 2025 defined Trump's foreign policy as "flexible realism," and stated that the US would pursue "peace through strength"—both of which reflect a disdain for law and a return to a Hobbesian state of nature.

As Genevan philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau noted in criticising Hobbes' state of nature, "Hobbes was taking socialised persons and simply imagining them living outside of the society they were raised in." Today, we live in a world that is highly interconnected, with many shared norms and values. To imagine a return to a primitive state of nature

is historically and sociologically impossible. Even the isolated Robinson Crusoe became socialised when Friday appeared.

Trump's nostalgia for American post-World War II domination is as unrealistic as his Hobbesian view of a 21st century political state of nature. Hobbes' hypothetical state of nature was without established governments, international cooperation, treaties, multilateral institutions or mutually agreed upon norms. There may be failed states, violent conflicts, disaster zones as well as unregulated activities such as much of the new digital world. But this does not add up to a lawless state of nature pessimistically described by Hobbes in his 1651 *Leviathan*.

Donald Trump must be credited for his honesty. The 2025 National Security Strategy, White House Executive Order 14199 and the January 7 Presidential Memorandum are transparent statements of policy positions that are already being implemented.

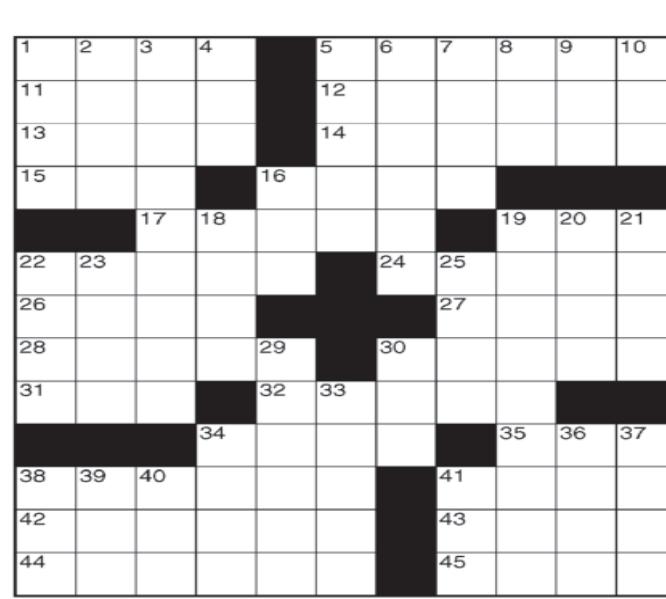
America's post-World War II dominance, absolute sovereignty, and the mythical "state of nature" are relics of the past. None exists today. Clinging to illusions of unchecked American power, or imagining a return to Hobbesian lawlessness before the UN and modern interdependence is folly—strategically reckless, morally bankrupt, and doomed to fail.

*This article was first published on Counterpunch.org on January 16, 2026.*

**CROSSWORD**  
BY THOMAS JOSEPH

**ACROSS**  
1 San Juan Hill  
setting  
5 Some tires  
11 Burden  
12 "Serpico" star  
13 Make printing  
plates  
14 Reverberated  
15 Grumpy friend  
16 Boat's trail  
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19 Manx, for one  
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24 Mary's TV pal  
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27 Sharif of "Dr.  
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1 Like some dorms  
2 "Do — others..."  
3 Tampa Bay  
player  
4 Sturdy wood  
5 Asparagus unit  
6 Green Bay player  
7 Massage target  
8 Carnival city



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# SAFA International Conference 2026

## Next Generation Profession: Converging Ethical AI and Sustainability Reporting



Saturday, 17 January 2026

Hosted by: The Institute of Chartered Accountants of Bangladesh



**CHIEF ADVISER**  
Government of the People's  
Republic of Bangladesh

03 Magh 1432  
17 January 2026**Message**

I am pleased to note that the Institute of Chartered Accountants of Bangladesh (ICAB) is set to organize the SAFA International Conference on "Next Generation Profession: Converging Ethical AI and Sustainability Reporting" on 17 January 2026 in Dhaka.

The unity of our people against years of misrule in July 2024 was forged by those who stood resolute in the face of death. It was through the strength of this historic mass uprising that the Interim Government was formed. Since then, our nation has arrived at a most critical juncture in its journey forward.

Upon assuming responsibility in the aftermath of the uprising, rescuing the economy from a deep and prolonged crisis posed an immense challenge. Over the past months, however, we have begun to successfully overcome this adversity. Key economic indicators—including exports, foreign investment, and foreign exchange reserves—have returned to a positive and encouraging trajectory.

Let us work together to build a safe, happy, and prosperous Bangladesh for the next generation, thereby fulfilling the cherished dreams of the martyrs who sacrificed their lives for the nation. I firmly believe that the national institute, ICAB, has an important role to play in this endeavor.

I am confident that this conference will contribute meaningfully to advancing these objectives and to furthering our collective aspiration of building a prosperous and developed Bangladesh.

I wish the conference every success.

Professor Muhammad Yunus



**ADVISER**  
Ministry of Finance  
Government of the People's  
Republic of Bangladesh

**Message**

I am pleased to learn that the Institute of Chartered Accountants of Bangladesh (ICAB) is organizing the SAFA International Conference on "Next Generation Profession: Converging Ethical AI and Sustainability Reporting" on 17 January 2026 in Dhaka.

Bangladesh's foreign affairs priorities are guided by the principles of peace, friendship, and cooperation with all, while safeguarding national sovereignty and promoting regional and global stability. We consistently seek and encourage constructive engagement among countries of our region based on mutual respect, international law, and multilateral cooperation that promote the exchange of knowledge and expertise across borders.

SAFA always works in line with the spirit of South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), ensuring collaboration and development of skill and expertise for the inclusive welfare of the region.

As a responsible neighbor and an active member of the United Nations and other international bodies, Bangladesh advocates a rule-based international order and collective action in addressing global economic challenges. We support active engagement to promote dialogue, confidence-building, and cooperative solutions to shared concerns.

Bangladesh also places greater stress on development-oriented engagement by linking foreign relations with national development goals, technology cooperation, capacity building, and sustainable progress. Through dialogue, partnership, and principled engagement, Bangladesh seeks to contribute positively to regional stability and global prosperity.

I commend ICAB for organizing this important event and for taking a leadership role in fostering collaboration among professional leaders.

I wish a great success of the conference.

(Md. Touhid Hossain)



**ADVISER**  
Ministry of Commerce  
Government of the People's  
Republic of Bangladesh

**Message**

I am very happy to learn that the Institute of Chartered Accountants of Bangladesh (ICAB) is going to organize the South Asian Federation of Accountants (SAFA) International Conference on "Next Generation Profession: Converging Ethical AI and Sustainability Reporting" on 17 January 2026 in Dhaka.

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I wish a great success of the conference.

(Md. Touhid Hossain)



**GOVERNOR**  
Bangladesh Bank  
(Central Bank of Bangladesh)

**Message**

It gives me immense pleasure to learn that the Institute of Chartered Accountants of Bangladesh (ICAB) is going to organize the SAFA International Conference on "Next Generation Profession: Converging Ethical AI and Sustainability Reporting" on 17 January 2026 in Dhaka.

As the central bank of the country, Bangladesh Bank places strong emphasis on good governance, transparency, and responsible use of technology within the financial sector. Reliable financial reporting and sustainability disclosures enhance market discipline, support prudent risk management, and contribute to informed regulatory oversight. In this context, the role of professional accountants is crucial in upholding reporting quality and strengthening confidence among regulators, investors, and the public. Chartered accountants are key contributors to effective implementation of regulatory requirements and international best practices within banks and financial institutions.

In recent years, sustainability reporting has gained increasing relevance from a supervisory perspective, particularly in assessing climate-related financial risks, asset quality, capital adequacy, and long-term institutional resilience. At the same time, the growing use of Artificial Intelligence in banking operations, credit assessment, and compliance functions present both supervisory opportunities and regulatory challenges. Ensuring that such technologies are deployed ethically, transparently, and within a robust control framework is essential to safeguard financial stability.

From this viewpoint, the quality of financial and sustainability disclosures is critical to effective supervisory assessments, stress testing exercises, and enforcement actions.

I appreciate ICAB's close collaboration with Bangladesh Bank in capacity building and professional development.

I wish the conference a great success.

Dr. Ahsan H. Mansur



**CHAIRMAN (Senior Secretary)**  
Bangladesh Securities and  
Exchange Commission (BSEC)

**Message**

I am delighted to learn that the Institute of Chartered Accountants of Bangladesh (ICAB) is going to organize the SAFA International Conference on "Next Generation Profession: Converging Ethical AI and Sustainability Reporting" on 17 January 2026 in Dhaka. I extend my sincere appreciation to ICAB for selecting a theme that is highly relevant to the evolving needs of the financial ecosystem.

The financial sector today is being reshaped by two powerful force-technological transformation driven by Artificial Intelligence and the growing demand for high-quality sustainability and ESG disclosures. Ethical deployment of AI in accounting, auditing, and financial reporting can significantly enhance efficiency, data integrity, fraud detection, and regulatory supervision. However, these benefits must be accompanied by robust ethical frameworks, professional judgment, accountability, and human oversight to safeguard public trust.

At the same time, sustainability reporting has become a critical element of corporate transparency and long-term value creation. Investors, regulators, and other stakeholders increasingly rely on credible, comparable, and assured sustainability information to assess financial performance, climate risks, governance practices, and social impact. In this regard, professional accountants play a central role in strengthening the reliability and assurance of sustainability disclosures, particularly in listed companies.

I am confident that the deliberations of this conference will generate valuable insights and actionable recommendations for shaping the future of the profession in South Asia and beyond. I wish the conference every success and commend ICAB and SAFA for their leadership in addressing issues of critical relevance to the next generation profession.

Khondoker Rashed Maqsood



**PRESIDENT**  
South Asian Federation  
of Accountants (SAFA)

**Message**

It is my great pleasure to convey warm greetings on the occasion of the SAFA International Conference 2026, hosted by the Institute of Chartered Accountants of Bangladesh (ICAB). On behalf of the South Asian Federation of Accountants (SAFA), I extend my sincere appreciation to ICAB for undertaking this visionary initiative.

The theme of this Conference—"Next Generation Profession: Converging Ethical AI and Sustainability Reporting"—captures the dual forces defining our era. As technology and sustainability considerations increasingly dictate business decisions, the professional accountant must uphold the highest standards of integrity while embracing rapid innovation. The technical sessions and the professional networking landscape, our evolving roles beyond numbers, and the transition from sustainability frameworks to credible assurance—will provide a vital roadmap for this transformation.

**ICAB's Strategic Role in Regional Collaboration**

As a founding member of both IFAC and SAFA, ICAB plays a pivotal role in achieving our strategic mission. By organizing such high-caliber conferences and facilitating participation from general members across all SAFA bodies via digital platforms, ICAB's efforts play a critical role in our collective drive to "globally connect" through regional collaboration. These efforts are vital for enhancing public trust through shared knowledge and fostering deep-rooted goodwill among the professionals of South Asia.

**A Note of Appreciation**

A mega-event of this stature, especially one graced by the physical presence of the President of IFAC, the Presidents and other dignitaries from SAFA member bodies, is a testament to extraordinary coordination. I would like to express my profound thanks to the President of ICAB, the Council, the Board, and the Chairman and members of the Organizing Committee and sub-committee. My special thanks also go to ICAB's management team and their untiring efforts and unwavering commitment. Your hard work has ensured that this gathering is not just a meeting, but a landmark professional milestone.

I am confident that the SAFA International Conference 2026 will reinforce our collective pursuit of excellence. I wish the speakers and participants a most productive and inspiring event.

Mohammed Humayun Kabir FCA



**CHAIRMAN**  
Organising Committee  
SAFA International Conference 2026

**Foreword**

As organizers, our objective is to create a platform that goes beyond formal presentations a forum for dialogue, critical thinking, and cross-border learning. By bringing together leaders from the profession, regulators, academics and international bodies, we hope to inspire new ideas and foster collaboration that will strengthen the profession across South Asia and beyond.

I would like to place on record my sincere appreciation to all members of the Organizing Committee, the office bearers of ICAB, and the Council of ICAB for their guidance, support and unwavering commitment in bringing this Conference to fruition. I extend my special thanks to Mr. Mahbub Ahmed Siddique FCA, Chief Operating Officer of ICAB and Secretary of the Organizing Committee, whose dedication, leadership and meticulous coordination have been instrumental in the successful planning and execution of this prestigious event.

I am deeply grateful to SAFA, ICAB, our international partners, and all contributors who have made this Conference possible. I sincerely look forward to welcoming you to what promises to be a truly engaging and impactful event.

Muhammed Farhad Hussain FCA



**PRESIDENT**  
The Institute of Chartered  
Accountants of Bangladesh (ICAB)

**Address of Welcome**

It is indeed a great pleasure for the Institute of Chartered Accountants of Bangladesh (ICAB) to host the SAFA International Conference on the "Next Generation Profession: Converging Ethical AI and Sustainability Reporting." I warmly welcome all distinguished guests, delegates, and participants to this important gathering, which reflects our shared commitment to professional excellence, ethical values, and regional and global collaboration.

We are deeply honored by the presence of our honorable chief guest and special guests.

We are also privileged to have the President of the International Federation of Accountants (IFAC) Mr. Jean Bouquot with us, underscoring the importance of international cooperation and professional unity. I gratefully acknowledge the leadership of the South Asian Federation of Accountants (SAFA) and the heads of its member bodies for their unwavering support and efforts to strengthen regional connectivity. I also extend my sincere appreciation to our guests of honor, keynote speaker, paper presenter, session chairmen, moderators, and panel speakers for their valuable contributions.

The accounting profession, long recognized as a cornerstone of financial integrity, is undergoing a period of profound transformation. The convergence of ethical artificial intelligence and sustainability reporting is reshaping professional responsibilities and reinforcing the need for transparency, accountability, and public trust. In this evolving environment, it is essential that technological progress is guided by strong ethical principles and a clear commitment to sustainable development. This Conference has been designed to facilitate informed dialogue on the evolving role of professional accountants.

Through focused discussions, it will explore how ethics and technology are redefining the professional landscape, how accountants' roles are expanding beyond traditional boundaries, and how sustainability assurance can provide reliable and decision-useful information to stakeholders.

ICAB, in collaboration with SAFA and the global accountancy community remains firmly committed to ethical leadership, continuous professional development, and serving the public interest. By sharing knowledge and experiences, we strengthen our collective capacity to respond to emerging challenges and contribute meaningfully to sustainable development.

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to our honorable chief guest, special guests, and guests of honor; to our keynote paper presenter, to the President of IFAC, and to the ICAB Council, management, SAFA colleagues, sponsors, speakers, print and electronic media and the participants for their valuable support in making this Conference possible. I also extend my special appreciation to the chairman, conveners, members, member secretaries of the conference organizing committees and sub committees and also to the SAFA President. It is a matter of great pride for us that this year, the SAFA leadership comes from Bangladesh. I am confident that the deliberations of this Conference will be both insightful and constructive, and will contribute to shaping an ethical and future-ready profession with highest level of professional excellence towards achieving overall sustainable development.

N K A Mobin FCA

# NEWS

## Visa freeze

FROM PAGE 12  
determined during the visa interview.

As part of the Trump administration's election promises, immigration laws have been enforced more strictly, with undocumented immigrants being deported.

Over the past year, the US repatriated about 300 irregular Bangladeshis, while more than 300 others are eligible for repatriation. In addition, over 4,000 cases are pending in court, according to a diplomatic source in Washington.

According to the Fiscal Year 2024 Entry/Exit Overstay Report by US Customs and Border Protection, Bangladesh recorded an overall overstaying rate of 5.73 percent. Of this, 5.60 percent were suspected in-country overstays, meaning more than 2,200 of 38,590 expected departures either overstayed their visas or were suspected of doing so.

The report said India's overstaying rate was 1.28 percent, Nepal's 3.12 percent and Pakistan's 3.46 percent.

Tamim said those who violate US immigration rules should face punishment, but questioned why genuine immigrants or visa seekers should suffer as a result.

During a recent meeting between Bangladesh National Security Adviser Khalilur Rahman and US Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Allison Hooker, the latter said the US government would positively consider Khalilur's request to ease travel and business visas for Bangladeshis, as bilateral trade was moving in a positive direction.

She said Washington may review the bond requirement if tourist overstays decline significantly, while also appreciating Bangladesh's cooperation in returning undocumented Bangladeshi nationals.

Mohammad Jalal Uddin Sikder, associate professor at the Department of Political Science and Sociology at North South University, said current US immigration policies could be used as bargaining tools with the countries concerned.

"However, the problem is that when you control legal migration pathways, illegal migration increases. This also creates new criminal networks," said the migration researcher.

The suspension of immigrant visas hampers family reunification, he said.

"This will create family distance and social problems. Parents will not be able to reunite with children, and wives with husbands. Sometimes this can also lead to inhuman conditions and even human rights violations," he said.

He expressed hope that the US would carefully consider these consequences.

## Mob kills

FROM PAGE 12  
minutes, said the ASP.

Eyewitnesses said Mehedi was initially tied up at the house following allegations of theft and stabbing. When police arrived, he was handed over to them. However, after news of Amena's death spread, enraged locals snatched him from police custody and beat him to death.

A video circulating on social media shows the mob dragging the accused from police officers as they tried to put him into a vehicle. He was then thrown onto the road and hit with bricks.

The ASP also said, "The incident occurred almost immediately after police reached the spot. We could not take him into custody before the mob attacked."

Both bodies were sent to Narayanganj General Hospital for autopsies. Police officials said legal action will be taken in connection with both killings.



Fishermen wrap up their nets at Kuakata sea beach after fishing in the bay before returning home in the afternoon. The photo was taken recently.

PHOTO: TITU DAS

## IAB leaves Jamaat-led bloc, to run solo in 268 seats

FROM PAGE 1  
Ataur, also IAB senior joint secretary general, said the briefing was organised on the "instruction" of party Ameer and Chormonai Pir Multi Syed Rezaul Karim.

Asked whether the party left the combine because it did not receive the number of seats it expected, the Islami Andolon leader said, "The number of seats can be more or less. But here, in the process [of seat sharing], our self-respect was hurt. That is also a major reason."

Ataur alleged that Jamaat's "authoritarian" conduct during the negotiations had "humiliated" them.

"We are compelled to declare before you today [Friday] that out of the 270 constituencies where Islami Andolon Bangladesh submitted nomination papers, two candidates were rejected on appeal. The candidacies of 268 others are valid. We have instructed them to contest the election. Not a single one will withdraw."

Islami Andolon had been part of the Jamaat-led 11-party bloc. However, tensions between the two sides over seat-sharing had been in the spotlight over the past several days.

After days of bargaining and marathon meetings, 10 parties under Jamaat's leadership reached a seat-sharing arrangement.

As the 13th parliamentary election drew closer, discussions began on turning the platform into an electoral

run the state based on the platform of unity created by Khaleda Zia.

"... Since we are their competitors, he [Shafiqur] went and made this declaration with a rival force that he would form a national government and govern the state on their platform of unity. He did not discuss this with us or with other partners. He made the announcement unilaterally."

"Our concern now is that if an understanding and coordination are reached with a rival party even before the polls, will this election actually be stage managed? Will it be an election, or will it be a selection?"

The alliance took shape before the polls from a joint movement of eight religion-based parties to press home their demands, including elections under a proportional representation system and a referendum before the polls.

Initially, Jamaat, Islami Andolon, Bangladesh Khelafat Majlis, Khelafat Majlis, among others, objected to NCP's inclusion. While Mamunul Haque's Bangladesh Khelafat Majlis was eventually persuaded, the distance between Jamaat and Islami Andolon widened.

At yesterday's briefing, IAB leader Ataur said, "We know our path ahead may not be smooth, because we do not practise power politics. Our primary goal is Islam. We prioritise Islam and practise politics based on our principles. But here we see that on questions of principles, politics, and justice, we have faced hostility."

He also voiced concern about a "stage managed election".

Referring to Jamaat Ameer Shafiqur Rahman's recent meeting with BNP Chairman Tarique Rahman, Ataur said after the meeting, he stated that they would form a post-election national government with the BNP and they would

alliance. On the eve of the nomination deadline, NCP, LDP, and AB Party joined the bloc.

Islami Andolon and Bangladesh Khelafat Majlis, among others, objected to NCP's inclusion. While Mamunul Haque's Bangladesh Khelafat Majlis was eventually persuaded, the distance between Jamaat and Islami Andolon widened.

At the briefing, IAB leader Ataur said there was also suspicion within the party that "something else is happening behind the scenes" despite talks of unity. "For political gain, Jamaat-e-Islami is moving away from its core slogans and treating power as the sole priority," he alleged.

### JAMAAT'S REACTION

Asked whether the alliance collapsed after Islami Andolon's exit, Ahsanul Mahboob Zubair, Jamaat's assistant secretary general and chief of central publicity & media department, said, "No. Why would it collapse? We did not form any formal alliance. It was an understanding. They [Islami Andolon] could not reach that understanding."

"We have kept a respectable number of seats for them. A liaison committee sat and decisions were made jointly by all parties. They did not even turn up despite saying they would. These things

happen in politics."

In response to another query, the Jamaat leader said no decision has been made yet regarding the 47 seats where no candidates were fielded. "This will be decided within a day or two."

### Alliance debacle

FROM PAGE 2  
popular vote, followed by 17 seats in 2001. The party boycotted the 2014 and 2024 elections and contested the 2018 polls under the BNP's paddy sheaf symbol as part of the BNP-led alliance. Its registration was cancelled in 2013 following a High Court verdict, but restored along with its symbol in June 2015.

IAB traces its roots to Islami Shashontara Andolon, founded in 1987 by Syed Fazlul Karim, the then Pir of Charmonai. After his death in 2006, leadership passed to his son, Syed Rezaul Karim. The party adopted its current name to meet Election Commission registration requirements ahead of the 2008 polls.

According to EC data, IAB secured 11,159 votes in June 1996 and more than 12 lakh votes in the 2018 election -- the third highest tally after the Awami League and the BNP-led alliance -- despite allegations of widespread ballot stuffing on the eve of polling. The party also boycotted the 2014 and 2024 elections.

## Uttara building fire

FROM PAGE 1  
Zasim of the Fire Service Media Wing.

Two units from Uttara Fire Station arrived at 7:58am, brought the blaze under control by 8:25am, and fully extinguished it around 10:00am.

Jahidul Islam, a tenant on the first floor, told The Daily Star he woke up to the sound of shattering glass and what seemed like metal being cut.

Suspecting a burglary, he opened his door and saw flames blazing from the opposite flat, which belongs to the landlord. He rushed out with his wife and child.

The landlord occupies one flat on the first floor and both flats on the second floor. No one from his family was reported dead or injured. He could not be reached for comment.

The injured were taken to Kuwait Bangladesh Friendship Government Hospital.

Safayet Hossain, a senior teacher at Milestone School and College who lives nearby, said he heard shouts of "fire, fire" and saw flames on the first and second floors.

Many people on the upper floors were shouting "Save us, save us," he said, adding that some tried to break window grills with bamboo poles to escape.

Namaz-e-Janaza for the deceased was held in three stages at a nearby mosque yesterday afternoon.

roof door locked while extinguishing the blaze.

Later, many residents who gathered outside the burnt building expressed outrage, saying the locked roof door had prevented escape and cost six lives.

They mentioned that most buildings in the area keep roof doors padlocked, with keys held only by landlords.

As tenants often cannot access the roof in emergencies, residents demanded that roof doors either remain unlocked or that every tenant be provided with a spare key.

The fire may have originated from an electrical short circuit on the first floor, said fire service official Alam Hossain.

Meanwhile, police suspect the fire may have also been caused by a leak from the gas line, said Mohammad Moniruzzaman, inspector (investigation) of Uttara West Police Station.

Gas cylinders for all families are kept on the ground floor, from where gas is piped to kitchens. He said the fire could have started from these pipes or one of the kitchens.

The Criminal Investigation Department has sealed off the building.

The bodies of the victims were handed over to families without autopsies.

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Meanwhile, Russian President Vladimir Putin yesterday discussed the situation in Iran in separate calls with Netanyahu and

Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian, and said that Moscow was willing to mediate in the region, the Kremlin said.

Russia's UN Ambassador Vassily Nebenzia accused the United States of convening the Security Council in a bid to "justify blatant aggression and interference in the internal affairs of a sovereign state" and threats to "solve the Iranian problem through strikes aimed at overthrowing an undesirable regime."

"We strongly urge the hot heads in Washington and other capitals ... to come to their senses," he said.

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Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian, and said that Moscow was willing to mediate in the region, the Kremlin said.

Pezeshkian told Putin that the United States and Israel had played a direct role in the unrest, reports Reuters.

Meanwhile, New Zealand said yesterday it has temporarily closed its embassy in Tehran and flown out its diplomats because of worsening security in Iran, reports AFP.

Diplomatic staff left Iran safely on commercial flights overnight, a spokesperson for the foreign ministry said.

The Tehran embassy's operations were moved to Ankara, Turkey, because of the "deteriorating security situation" in Iran.

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## Fuel station worker

FROM PAGE 3

Police said Hashem is a former treasurer of Rajbari district BNP and former president of the district Juba Dal. He is a contractor by profession.

Talking to reporters, employees of Karim Filling Station said a black Land Cruiser arrived at the filling station early yesterday and took fuel worth Tk 5,000.

When the vehicle driver attempted to leave without paying, station worker Ripon tried to stop it.

The body was recovered and sent to the Rajbari Sadar Hospital morgue for autopsy, added the OC.

OC Ziaur Rahman, officer-in-charge of Ahladipur Highway Police Station, said CCTV footage from the station

shows the black Land Cruiser arriving there around 4:30am. Ripon and vehicle owner Hashem were seen standing beside the vehicle. After a brief pause, Hashem got into the vehicle.

As it started moving, Ripon chased it up to the Dhaka-Khulna highway.

Another worker, Jakir Hossain, also ran after them and later found Ripon's body on the highway with severe injuries to the head and face.

The body was recovered and sent to the Rajbari Sadar Hospital morgue for autopsy, added the OC.

OC Ziaur Rahman, officer-in-charge of Ahladipur Highway Police Station, said both the vehicle owner and the driver are currently in police custody, and legal proceedings are underway.

## Noab, Editors' Council

FROM PAGE 12

Journalists will speak at the convention on the need to protect democratic space and media freedom, ensure the safety of journalists, and uphold the professional dignity and rights of media workers.

Leaders of various journalist organisations, including the Association of Television Channel Owners, Broadcast Journalist Centre, Jatiya Press Club, Bangladesh Federal Union of Journalists, Dhaka Union of Journalists, and

in the day, reports Reuters. The Israeli military did not immediately respond to requests for comment on the incident.

Hamas condemned the strikes on the Al-Holy family, in a statement that did not mention Mohammed or his role in the group. It accused Israel of violating the ceasefire deal in place since October, and attempting to reignite the conflict.

Health officials said the deaths included a 16-year-old.

More than 400 Palestinians and three Israeli soldiers have been reported killed since the ceasefire took effect in October.

## NPA debuts

FROM PAGE 12  
those committed to building a social democratic movement.

The NPA central council includes four former NCP leaders -- Anik

## FICTION

# A trim reckoning



ILLUSTRATION: MAHMUDA EMDAD

**At home, we are graced at the door by my chotomama. Chotomama had been a ruffian in his youth. His best achievement was having a brick thrown at his face once by a thug from a rival party, which led to a scar on his forehead and promotions within the youth-wing of the party and a local fame that Chotomama milked assiduously.**

## SHAHRIAR SHAAMS

"What is that honour? Air. A Trim Reckoning!"

—Falstaff, *Henry IV Part One*

A dead brother is less profitable than a brother almost dead. When Reaz comes home that day with his left arm crudely bandaged and a smirk on his face, I tell our mother we may have made it. This could be our time, if we play it right. Ma tells me to stop joking around, especially now. *Has he really been shot?* Yes, Ma. Reaz acts it out. Policemen gunning down any possible protesters trying to advance to take over their station, people screaming, the lumping of bodies against one another, and a pellet grazing his arm by. The bleeding starts right away and he kneels down. A friend carries him away to a makeshift first aid stand. A young boy in a medic's coat hurriedly washes away the blood with some antiseptic and wraps it in gauge-tape. He returns home promptly. His part is done. He is seven years younger than me and still in college. Taller than all our family and quick to anger, if anyone among us was to join the protests of the last few weeks, naturally it had to be him. He seems built for it. Reaz's injury, minuscule compared to the outright deaths that have been reported in the last few days,

comes on an auspicious day. The day of regime change. A despot flees in secret. Mobs break through walls of the prime-ministerial palace as law enforcement and military patrols are suspiciously absent. So many years of pent up anger is released all of a sudden that a momentary joy takes hold. Reaz is swept by that very joy and goes out with his friends to celebrate, returning hours later not with any of the loot we see being carted out by miscreants on TV but a trophy on his body.

Ma examines his hand. "Take him to the Emergency," she tells me, "This needs to be cleaned and bandaged properly..."

"It's nothing," Reaz shrugs off, but I agree with Ma. An injured hand at a protest is honourable; an amputated hand only invites pity. We rickshaw to the closest ER and wait our turn. There are severe cases on display. Seated awkwardly on the plastic in the waiting room, the smell of Fenyl overwhelming our nostrils, I feel an overwhelming urge to take a picture where I stand in focus, shielding Reaz away from the vulgarity of showing off his wound. But a record will be displayed regardless.

The intern that dutifully wraps up my brother prescribes painkillers on our receipt stub and advises an X-ray, just to be sure everything is in top

shape. "I'm sure everything is," she says, "But get one done if you wish to, tomorrow or soon enough."

Reaz agrees to the picture on the rickshaw back. He understands what a special moment this is for us. Ma and I are old-school middle-classers, men and women who sweat inside public buses and complain about corruption and inflation and follow it up with a little more complaining about the protests against corruption and inflation that have now clogged up the roads and left us stranded under the sun to sweat. But Reaz—he has been adamant in joining the protests for months. Ma forbade him at first. "It is too dangerous," she said. "We are not people for whom luck shines on. Why bother?"

"All my friends are participating," he said.

Luckily for him, in the following few days my mother's mood changed considerably and she managed to keep her mouth shut the first day he sneaked out. Images of hired-thugs beating up people were perennially on our screens. Ma saw injuries of skin bloated into red and instead of reeling my brother in, she let him go. "Everyone is going," she parroted his line now. She cannot be the mother that cages him at home. Revolution must succeed. Or else his friends will laugh at him.

So Ma and I had our eyes glued to our screen while Reaz smeared toothpaste over his face and chanted slogans in front of his school.

Whenever he was at home, he would be frantically texting. His WhatsApp group was perhaps one of thousands that kept the fire alight in these young teenagers. I did not expect them to care so much. I wish I cared as much. He was at the protests a few more days before the government put up a curfew. They turned the internet off so none of them could plot anything dangerous. The summer heat rebounded throughout our rooms. I could sense Reaz's anxiety, his restlessness. We needed that break, even as so many were secretly killed during this time. We needed to understand that if this could not tame the students, then nothing would. They would easily give their own lives away to rid the government. And Reaz almost did, to our mother's glee.

At home, we are graced at the door by my chotomama. Chotomama had been a ruffian in his youth. His best achievement was having a brick thrown at his face once by a thug from a rival party, which led to a scar on his forehead and promotions within the youth-wing of the party and a local fame that Chotomama milked assiduously.

"There is no situation, Ma," I say, laughing. "It's a glorified cut."

"You didn't hear what they were saying at the protests today?" Chotomama says, before he leaves. "They will carry out national survey and make a list of all those who had been injured gravely. Maybe we can get him on that list..."

Reaz protests, "That's for those who lost a hand or leg!"

"Well you almost lost your hand!" Ma says.

"—but I didn't!"

I have them sleep early. It will be a busy day tomorrow. A new dawn for a new country. I will need to go out and buy the paper and keep it preserved as a part of history—a history that I am part of, that I helped fashion through my own brother. He has been a small drop of the ocean that raised a monumental wave and crashed out all the cronies having fun at the beach at our expense. The future is still uncertain but for now there is honor.

I wake up next morning to Ma's voice, "Get up," she shouts, more as a warning. "Your grandmother is here."

Ma tells Nanima of Reaz's brush with death. "My son, yes," she says animatedly, "How could I stop him? I can't be the mother that takes that away from him, even if it breaks me inside." I can imagine Reaz being embarrassed at her actions, but I can sympathise. This is the rare luck that never shines on us, confusing her and making her excitable.

Nanima gets too emotional, "I know something was going to go wrong! That's why I prayed last night. I prayed most of the night and Allah heard me, and see! He saved you, my boy. You are here in peace." Nanima hugs Reaz and combs over his hair, "You imagine what would've happened if I hadn't prayed? I keep telling you two to pray regularly."

I book an appointment with the clinic for the evening. Ma wonders if Nanima will want to accompany us to the clinic, before I flatly turn the suggestion down. There are limits to this circus.

**This is an excerpt. Read the full story on *The Daily Star* and *Star Books* and Literature's websites.**

**Shahriar Shaams** is a writer and translator. His works have previously appeared in *Singapore Unbound*, *Adda*, *Feign*, *Small World City* and in the anthology *Bridges Not Borders*. He can be reached on Instagram @shahriar.shaams.

## POETRY

## The creation of heart

## FARIA MOTIN

One morning,  
God asked His angels to make a heart.  
They did not know what a heart was.  
They asked:  
What does it hold?  
What does it do?  
God said,  
"Take a symphony.  
Look at the leaves—  
how the air touches them,  
how they move without being told."  
The angels wondered.  
God spoke again,  
"Look at the sun and the night,  
how they take turns.  
Put the goodbye of the sun  
into the greeting of the moon."  
"Put how the waves touch the sand  
and vanish,  
only to be reborn  
and reach for it again.  
Put the clouds  
brushing the tops of mountains.  
Put the promise of love."  
The angels asked once more,  
"What is love, God?"  
God answered,  
"The urge to feel death  
without the heart stopping,  
the urge to feel life  
without having to die,  
It is the touch of the unknown  
the unseen,  
the unspeakable."

**Faria Motin** is an artist and cultural activist who expresses her thoughts through writing poems and songs, and adding tune to them.



## POETRY

## Potatoes are burning in the fryer

## KAZI MEHERU TASFIA

The third time I'm washing my hands with dish soap,  
He is on the other side of the phone,  
It's Thursday, November, dry, and cold,  
And my hands smell like garlic and onion,  
And love looks like tomatoes and oregano  
Sitting on the counter.  
Yes, everything circles back to love.  
To love through vegetables  
My hands must get dirty, smelly, oily,  
To dissolve the sound of an aeroplane  
We must love loudly  
Through ink and paper  
Recite a love poem with anxiety in our stomach  
We must write poetry inconveniently  
In order to love mystically  
We must light the candles

Try not to burn the house, your hands, or your heart  
Keep it safe, let it breathe, let the air in.  
In order to love mindfully,  
We must leave the city,  
Must escape the piercing eyes of the new political party.  
To love is to hold the knife  
To love is to do the math  
To love is to carry a box full of fruits  
To love is to buy flowers,  
Either way you carry the burden of it, of love.  
Anyway, my potatoes are burning and he is almost here.

**Kazi Meheru Tasfia** is a poet who tries to rebel through her words. Find her work @poems.words.thoughts on Instagram.



ILLUSTRATION: MAHMUDA EMDAD



## 'CRICKET HAS WON'

SPORTS REPORTER

The scene had been chaotic a day earlier. Fans were left disgruntled, and the cricketers were locked in a standoff with the Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB).

Yet Friday delivered an emphatic response, as the 12th edition of the Bangladesh Premier League (BPL) resumed with the start of the Dhaka phase, a day after Bangladesh cricket was jolted by a players' boycott.

It was the fans' reaction that best captured the shift in mood. Fans, who had turned up for both BPL matches on Thursday, only to witness no action on the field, were seen in numbers on Friday. Loud roars echoed around the ground as the crowd cheered every wicket and boundary, epitomising the enduring bond between the fans and the game in the country.

While spectators had been repelled by security the previous day, the atmosphere on Friday underlined

**The players compromised because everyone wanted the games to take place. This is great news for Bangladesh cricket. Despite all the criticism and discussions, people of Bangladesh love cricket tremendously.**

BPL member secretary Iftekhar Rahman Mithu

their commitment to cricket. Even as Chattogram Royals and Sylhet Titans played out a low-scoring afternoon contest, the focus never drifted from the action on the field.

"Even after so many things that happened, that we have a full gallery today and the games are happening, is proof that cricket has won," BPL member secretary Iftekhar Rahman Mithu told The Daily Star yesterday.

The turmoil was sparked by remarks from BCB director Najmul

Islam on Wednesday night, when he said the board "did not owe to the cricketers and it never asked for any compensation from cricketers" for poor performances. The comments triggered a chain of unpleasant developments.

While uncertainty still lingers over Bangladesh's participation in the upcoming T20 World Cup, the BPL itself was left on the brink of an indefinite postponement. The Cricketers Welfare Association of Bangladesh (CWAB) called for a boycott unless Najmul resigned. In the aftermath, Najmul was removed as chairman of the board's finance committee, and both BPL matches scheduled for Thursday were postponed -- and were eventually played yesterday.

Late on Thursday night, however, CWAB reconsidered its stance and agreed to return to the field if Najmul "apologised publicly" and the process of reviewing his directorship continued.

"It was a gruelling day, but when you get an atmosphere like this, and given the fact that good sense prevailed among everyone, this is highly satisfying.

"The players compromised because everyone wanted the games to take place. This is great news for Bangladesh cricket. Despite all the criticism and discussions, people of Bangladesh love cricket tremendously," Mithu added, revealing that he finally slept soundly after a day of tough negotiations.

On the field, Shariful Islam's career-best T20 figures of five for nine helped Chattogram secure a five-wicket win over Noakhali, and his celebratory dance after a wicket reflected the easing of tensions.

Mithu later confirmed that Najmul is "supposed to reply" to the show-cause letter issued on Thursday, stating that the "process will go on." But for now, however, despite all that transpired, the Dhaka phase of the BPL has begun with renewed promise.

**After more than a day of uncertainty, cricket in the country returned yesterday -- and so did the smiles on the faces of fans, players, and officials, as a large crowd turned up on the opening day of the Dhaka leg of the 12th edition of the Bangladesh Premier League in Mirpur. After two matches were deferred by a day on Thursday due to a standoff between the players and the board, it was smiles all around on Friday, as Bangladesh Cricket Board president Aminul Islam Bulbul appeared relieved and pleased to see play resume. Pacer Shariful Islam even broke into a dance to celebrate his career-best T20 figures of five for nine, which helped Chattogram Royals seal a convincing five-wicket victory over Noakhali Express.**

PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

## ICC delegate to arrive today for talks with BCB

SPORTS REPORTER

A delegate from the International Cricket Council (ICC) is set to arrive in Dhaka today for a meeting with the Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB), a board official confirmed.

"I know that the ICC delegation is coming tomorrow [Saturday]," BCB umpires' committee chairman and Bangladesh Premier League (BPL) member secretary Iftekhar Rahman Mithu told the media on Friday.

"The president is aware of the whole program and our president and vice-presidents are expected to sit in the meeting. We are expecting a good outcome from it," he hoped.

On January 4, the BCB requested the ICC to relocate Bangladesh's matches in the upcoming ICC T20 World Cup away from India, citing security concerns. Last Tuesday, the BCB top brass held a video conference with ICC, during which it maintained its stance while world cricket's governing body asked it to reconsider.

Media reports have suggested that government representatives are likely to be part of today's meeting. Mithu also hinted at that possibility, saying, "Definitely, meeting will take place with the cricket board and maybe our sports ministry as well." According to sources, the ICC will seek to persuade the BCB to reconsider by citing its responsibilities towards all participating teams in today's meeting, while the board remains optimistic that it can convey its concerns.



SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh will begin their ICC Under-19 World Cup campaign today against India in what promises to be a fiery contest at the Queens Sports Club in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe with rain threat looming large.

In recent times, the cricketing rivalry between Bangladesh and India has extended beyond the boundary ropes, adding further spice to an already intense rivalry.

The Young Tigers won their maiden and thus far only U-19 World Cup title in 2020 after beating India in the final. Both teams hurled sledges at their opponents in that match and that trend has continued in their matches since.

Many of Bangladesh's current U-19 crop were part of the intense U-19 Asia Cup final against India in 2024, which the Young Tigers won. Bangladesh captain Azizul Hakim Tamim, who had also led the team in that game, was ready for another intense bout against the familiar foes.

"When you play against big teams, there will be sledging on the field," Tamim had told The Daily Star before the team left for the tournament.

"We have to stay mentally and physically strong. If we do that, we can play much better cricket... We need to win not just with our heads, but also with our body language," he added.



The ongoing tournament has been severely affected by rain. From warm-up games to official fixtures, most matches so far have been reduced to shortened contests.

Bangladesh's two warm-up matches against Pakistan and Scotland finished without a result, while India managed to secure a DLS method win over the USA in a rain-affected tournament opener in Bulawayo on Thursday.

"We just came to practice; there was a lot of rain a little while ago, but the rain has stopped now," selector Ehsanul Hoque told The Daily Star on Friday.

"They've removed the covers from the practice nets, so we're hoping to get some net

sessions in. There's rain forecast again tomorrow [Saturday]."

"We couldn't play the full duration, not even 50 overs [in the warm-up games]. It seems the whole tournament will probably be affected by rain," he said.

Despite the uncontrollable conditions, the selector remains optimistic about the team's readiness. "Everyone is doing really well. Hopefully, they will stay fit and we will start well."

Ahead of the tournament, skipper Tamim had stressed the importance of a strong start.

"Every match is important because the World Cup eventually feels like a knockout tournament," he said. "The first match is definitely crucial. If you win, you stay ahead on the points table."

Bangladesh are grouped alongside five-time champions India, New Zealand, and the USA in Group A.

After facing India, Bangladesh will take on New Zealand on January 20 in Bulawayo before meeting the USA on January 23 in Harare. The tournament will then move into the Super Six stage, where the top three teams from each of the four groups will be divided into two groups of six teams. The knockout phase will feature two semifinals and a final, scheduled for February 6 in Harare.

## Khoi Khoi's gold rush, Ridoy's return to top

SPORTS REPORTER

Khoi Khoi Sai Marma delivered a standout performance at the National Table Tennis Championships, winning six gold medals -- including the singles titles in both women's and girls' events -- at the 40th edition of the tournament, which concluded yesterday at the Shaheed Taj Uddin Ahmed Indoor Stadium.

Her run also propelled BKSP to overall glory, as they clinched nine of the 14 titles across senior and junior categories.

Khoi Khoi swept the singles, doubles, team and mixed titles in the junior section, while also claiming the women's singles and mixed titles in the senior bracket, along with two silver and one bronze medal in the eight-day-long competition.

In the women's singles final, she faced a stiff challenge from reigning champion Sadia Rahman Mou, who competed strongly in the first and third sets before eventually going down 3-0.



In the men's section, Muhtasin Ahmed Ridoy of Bangladesh Army reclaimed the singles crown he had lost to Ramhion Lion Bawm in the 2023 edition, defeating him 3-1 in the final.

He marked his third national title, following earlier triumphs in 2018 and 2020.

"During the 2023 championship, I had targeted both junior and

senior singles titles, but we had to be content with the junior title," said Khoi Khoi.

She credited regular training as the key behind BKSP's success in their first appearance at the national championships.

Khoi Khoi, however, admitted that the packed schedule took its toll, with the tournament featuring a total of 830 matches across senior and junior sections.

"In the last three to four days, we had to play five to six games a day. Even today (yesterday), I had to play five matches," she said.

Ridoy echoed those concerns, urging the federation to "be a bit more organised" and improve its match scheduling.

Several organisers present on the final day also suggested that the federation consider holding the senior and junior championships separately to ease the workload on players and preserve the standard of the national event by introducing clearer eligibility criteria, instead of allowing paddlers of all age groups.



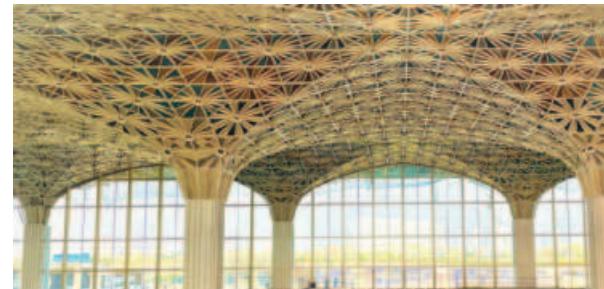
Md. Sharif Hossain  
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## Noab, Editors' Council to host media convention today

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

A media convention will be held in Dhaka today to protest against organised attacks on freedom of expression and democratic values, and to demonstrate a united stance in support of independent, responsible and courageous journalism.

The programme is being jointly organised by the Newspaper Owners' Association of Bangladesh (Noab) and the Editors' Council.

Titled Media Convention 2026, it will take place at the auditorium of the Krishibid Institution, Bangladesh complex, from 10:00am to 1:30pm.

Organisers said democratic values in the country have come under sustained assault in recent times, particularly through incidents of mob violence, marking an unprecedented challenge to freedom of expression and democratic principles.

SEE PAGE 9 COL 7

## NPA debuts with call for justice, social democracy

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The left-leaning political platform Network for People's Action (NPA), led by a group of July uprising activists and four former members of the National Citizen Party, was officially launched yesterday at Dhaka's Central Shaheed Minar.

The platform formally began its journey at 4:00pm, when NPA leader Mir Huzaifa Al Mamduh announced the names of 99 members of its 101 member central council.

He said the platform would outline its next course of action at a press conference next week.

The NPA has three spokespersons -- Tuhin Khan, former joint member secretary of the NCP; Nazifa Jannat, vice-president of the Chhatra Union's central unit; and poet-activist Ferdous Ara.

The three jointly read out the platform's manifesto at the event.

Addressing the programme, NPA key leader Nazifa Jannat said the platform had emerged under the leadership of student activists, outlining five core principles and seven goals and objectives, including democracy, equality, human dignity and social justice, and the protection of life, nature and the environment.

In the welcome speech, NPA founding member Anik Roy said the platform had been formed to unite

SEE PAGE 9 COL 8



US President Donald Trump meets Venezuelan opposition leader Maria Corina Machado in the Oval Office, where she presented him with her Nobel Peace Prize, Washington DC, US, on Thursday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

## Migration to US Visa freeze pushes families into uncertainty

PORIMOL PALMA

frustrated," Tamim told this correspondent.

Tamim is one of hundreds of thousands of Bangladeshis and other nationals who have applied for immigrant visas but now face total uncertainty over reuniting with their families in the US -- a country built by immigrants and their children.

In a statement on January 14, the State Department said President Trump has made clear that immigrants must be financially self-sufficient and

applications and attend interviews, and the department will continue to schedule appointments. However, no immigrant visas will be issued to these nationals during the pause.

No immigrant visas have been revoked as part of the guidance. Tourist and business visas do not fall under the new suspension order.

However, an earlier visa bond policy introduced by the Trump administration has also made it difficult for ordinary visitors and

**Hundreds of thousands of Bangladeshis and other nationals who have applied for immigrant visas now face total uncertainty over reuniting with their families in the US -- a country built by immigrants and their children.**

not be a financial burden on Americans.

"The Department of State is undergoing a full review of all policies, regulations, and guidance to ensure that immigrants from these high-risk countries do not utilize welfare in the United States or become a public charge," it added.

Immigrant visa applicants who are nationals of the affected countries may submit

businesses to travel to the US.

On January 6, the US State Department expanded its visa bond list from seven countries to 38, including Bangladesh, with the measure taking effect on January 21.

The visa bond programme, which began in August last year, applies only to B1 and B2 visas. The bond amount -- \$5,000, \$10,000 or \$15,000 -- will be

SEE PAGE 9 COL 1

## Google to develop high-end phones in Vietnam



STAR REPORT

Google plans to begin developing and manufacturing high-end smartphones in Vietnam this year, Nikkei Asia has reported.

The company already works with a broad network of suppliers in Vietnam that assemble a range of Google products, including Pixel smartphones. Under the new plan, Google is expected to start the "new product introduction" (NPI) process for its premium Pixel, Pixel Pro and

SEE PAGE 9 COL 6



Traders and labourers crowd Karwan Bazar's wholesale vegetable market as winter produce arrives in abundance, turning the capital's largest hub into a hive of activity. The photo was taken yesterday morning.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

## Mob kills suspected thief after woman stabbed to death

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Narayanganj

A woman was stabbed to death after she spotted an attempted theft, while the accused was later beaten to death after being snatched from police custody in Narayanganj's Rupganj upazila yesterday.

The incident occurred in the afternoon at Kerabo intersection in Kanchan municipality, said Mehedi Islam, senior assistant superintendent of police (Circle 'C') in Narayanganj.

The woman was identified as Amena Begum, 45, wife of local grocery shop owner Babul Dewan.

The accused, Mehedi Islam, 32, of the Birabo Khalpar area in the same upazila, died after being beaten by locals, police said. He was a mason by profession.

ASP Mehedi Islam said Mehedi had recently worked at Babul Dewan's newly built house, which was completed just four days ago.

"On Friday around 3:00pm, Mehedi allegedly entered the house after finding it empty and attempted to steal a mobile phone. When Amena spotted him, he stabbed her in the neck," the police official said.

Hearing her screams, locals rushed to the scene and caught Mehedi. Amena was taken to a local hospital, where she later died.

Shortly after news of her death spread, enraged relatives and locals assaulted Mehedi, who died on the spot, the police official added.

The two deaths occurred within a span of around 30

SEE PAGE 9 COL 1

## Iran protests ease after crackdown Say residents, rights group; heavy security presence reported in Tehran, other cities

AGENCIES

Sporadic unrest continues, with reports of 3,000 arrests

US stands by Iranian people, all options on the table

Iran warns of lawful response to any aggression

Putin offers Netanyahu Russia's help in mediating with Iran

New Zealand shuts embassy in Iran

on the table to stop the slaughter," US Ambassador to the United Nations Mike Waltz told the UN Security Council on Thursday.

Iran's Deputy UN Ambassador Gholamhosseini Darzi said Iran does not seek escalation or confrontation and accused Waltz of resorting "to lies, distortion of facts, and a deliberate misinformation campaign to conceal his country's direct involvement in steering unrest in Iran to violence."

Around 3,000 people were arrested during the recent protests in Iran,

SEE PAGE 9 COL 4

## 'Board of peace' formed for Gaza Says Trump; Israeli strikes in enclave kill 10, including senior Hamas figure

AGENCIES

US President Donald Trump on Thursday announced the formation of a Gaza "board of peace," a key phase two element of a US-backed plan to end the war in the Palestinian territory.

"It is my Great Honor to announce that THE BOARD OF PEACE has been formed," Trump posted on his Truth Social platform, adding that the members of the body will be announced "shortly."

"I can say with certainty that it is the Greatest and Most Prestigious Board ever assembled at any time, any place," Trump said.

The board's creation comes shortly after the announcement of a 15 member Palestinian technocratic committee, charged with managing the day-to-day governance of post-war Gaza.

The committee will work under the supervision of the board of peace,

SEE PAGE 9 COL 7

# Where have JU's winter birds gone?

PHOTO: AURITRO SATTAR

## SAKIB AHMED

On misty winter mornings, the lakes and wetlands of Jahangirnagar University once came alive in a breathtaking rhythm of wings and water. Floating lilies drifted across mirror-like surfaces as thousands of migratory birds from Siberia, Mongolia, China, Nepal and other colder regions swooped, dived and skimmed the glistening lakes. Their calls filled the air, turning the campus into one of Bangladesh's

Just a few years ago, around 6,000 to 7,000 migratory birds arrived on the JU campus every winter. Over the past three years, that number has dropped to 2,500-3,000, and this year it has fallen further to around 2,000. Last year, during November and December, birds were seen at WRC Lake, the Transport Chattar Lake and the lake near Al-Beruni Hall. This year, however, the latter two have remained almost empty.

Dr Md Kamrul Hasan, a wildlife expert and professor of Zoology

several bush birds such as the Siberian rubythroat, Siberian stonechat, Bengal bushlark, yellow-crowned babbler and Eurasian wryneck.

Raptors like the long-legged buzzard, white-eyed buzzard and crested serpent eagle have also declined sharply.

Auritro, a student of the Department of Environmental Sciences and a wildlife photographer, said last year the Zoology Department documented nearly 3,000 migratory birds, most of them around the WRC lakes. The lakes near the administrative building and transport area used to host about 500 birds, but this year that number has dropped to almost zero.

A recent field visit to WRC Lake and the Swimming Pool Lake found glossy ibis (khoyna kastechora), fulvous whistling duck (raj shorali), lesser whistling duck (pati shorali) and garganey.

Native Asian openbill storks were also seen, along with raptors such as the changeable hawk-eagle and oriental honey buzzard. For brief periods, greater spotted eagles, Indian spotted eagles and booted eagles were also observed.

"These birds we are seeing now belong to the third or fourth wave of migration," Auritro said. "They are only coming to WRC Lake because it has minimal human disturbance and has been kept in a natural condition."

While experts point to campus-level pressures such as unplanned high-rise construction, delayed lake restoration, deforestation,

## Ferogenus Pochard

been lost."

He said the JU campus now provides shelter but very limited food to 5,000-10,000 sharali, or lesser whistling ducks, and a few other duck species.

"This single factor -- the unavailability of large low-lying areas rich in aquatic and semi-aquatic plants and animals -- is the main cause of the disappearance of 50-70 percent of sharali from the Jahangirnagar University campus," he said.

However, he noted that a significant portion of the population has shifted its roosting sites to low-lying, vegetation-rich wetlands between Dhamrai and Kalampur.

"These adaptable ducks have repeatedly changed their daytime roosting sites over time," Dr Khan said. "During the mid 1980s to 1990s, they moved from the Dhaka Zoo ponds to the Botanical Garden lakes. By the early 2000s, they shifted to the Ceramia Factory lakes at Mirpur. By 2004-2005, they relocated to Jahangirnagar University and nearby low-lying areas."

"They will eventually disappear from greater Dhaka once the remaining low-lying wetlands are converted into housing or industrial developments," he warned. "Nevertheless, a few thousand individuals may continue to survive in small lakes and ponds that persist despite ongoing development, mostly as resident pairs or small flocks."

"In short, if the feeding grounds disappear, the ducks disappear," Dr Khan said. "No amount of lake beautification inside the campus can change this reality."

To attract large flocks of sharali and other ducks and water birds, he said, it is essential to conserve and restore large, undisturbed expanses of waterbodies containing diverse aquatic vegetation, some for feeding and others for daytime roosting.

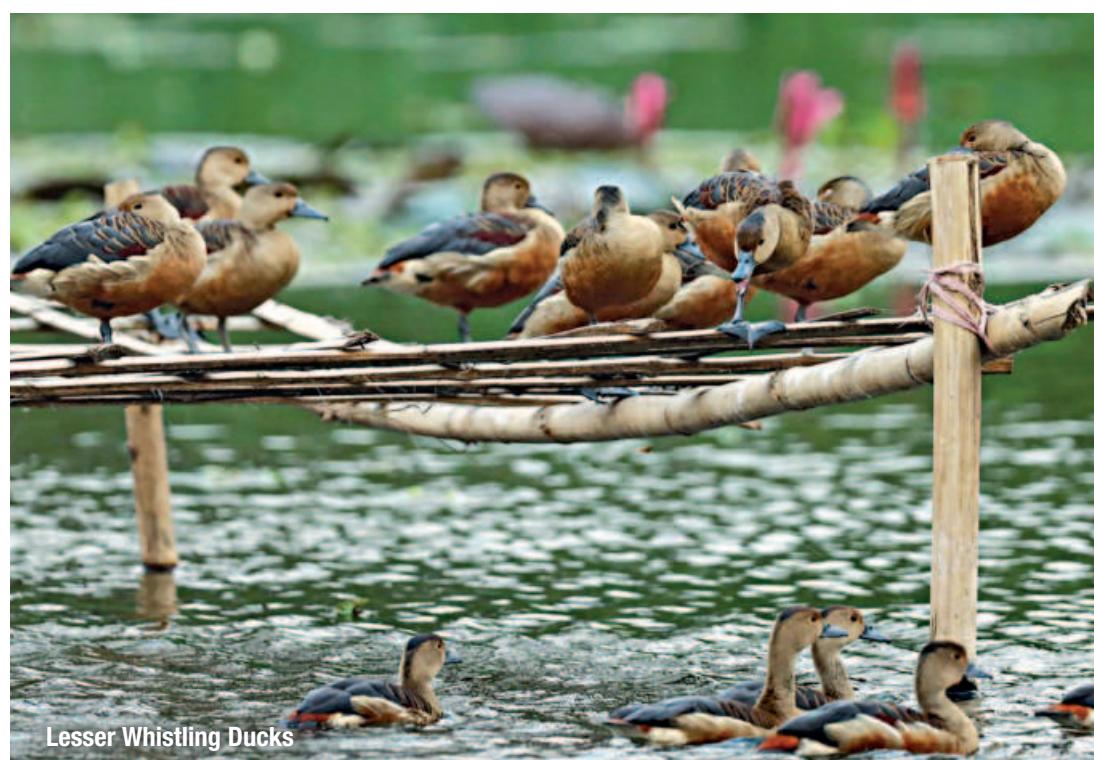
Field observations show that although the administration cleaned lakes and built bird platforms in previous years, very little was done this winter, apart from one lake-cleaning initiative supported by the university's central students' union.

Estate officer Abdur Rob admitted that responsibility lies partly with the university.

"Our budget for lake excavation and bird conservation is inadequate. New buildings, increased human pressure, uncontrolled tourism and open access have damaged bird habitats. We could not properly preserve the lakes that used to be their shelters," he said.

Still, he remains hopeful.

"In recent days, birds have started returning slowly. If we follow expert guidance, some of the old natural environments can be restored," he said.



Lesser Whistling Ducks



Today, these fertile, food-rich lands have largely disappeared under mega housing projects and expanding human settlements. At least 80 percent of previously available waterbodies that once supported migratory birds have been lost.

DR REZA KHAN  
Ornithologist

most magical winter landscapes. For nearly two decades, this spectacle defined JU's winter. Now, the skies are quieter.

After 2020, regular observers began noticing a worrying pattern as the flocks steadily shrank. What was once a congregation of several thousand ducks has dwindled to only a few hundred this winter.

The familiar chorus of chirps and wingbeats has largely faded. Lakes that once teemed with life now feel eerily still, leaving students and nature lovers asking a troubling question: why are the birds no longer coming to JU?

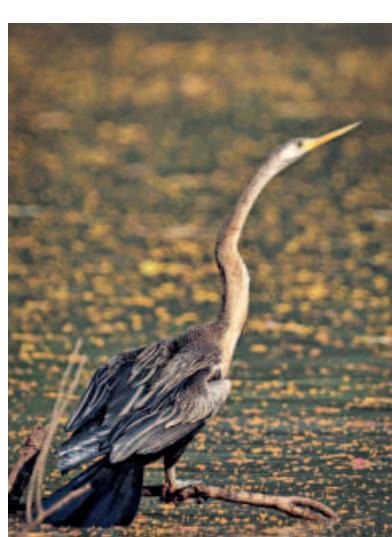
According to the university's Department of Zoology, most of the migratory birds that visit the campus are duck species including shorali, pochard, flycatcher, garganey, patari duck, waterfowl, khoyna and comb duck or nokta. Other regularly recorded species include manikjor, kolai, small nag, water pipit, wagtail, pipit, red turtle dove, baamunia duck, northern pintail and the rare sickle-crested duck, among many others.

at JU, said the first flock of about 30-35 birds landed at the Wildlife Conservation and Study Centre (WRC) Lake on October 13 last year. By late October, the lake was full of birds. This year, however, only two lakes have hosted migratory birds. Besides WRC Lake, some birds have started using Joypara Lake, which was recently cleaned.

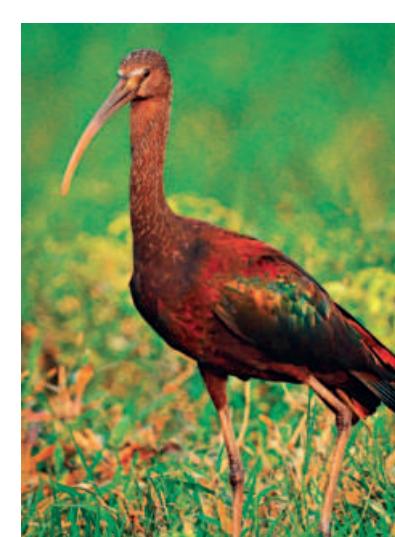
He noted that during the quiet period of the pandemic in 2019-20, about 6,000 birds were counted across JU's lakes during the December peak. In normal years, the number ranged between 4,000 and 4,500. In recent years, however, the decline has been alarming.

"Jahangirnagar University is now going through an overall ecological decline, and migratory birds are disappearing as part of that process," Dr Hasan said.

Conservationist Auritro Sattar, who grew up on the JU campus, has also documented species that have stopped visiting altogether. These include the African knob-billed duck, cotton pygmy goose, common teal, yellow-wattled lapwing and



Oriental Darter



Glossy ibis

leasing out lakes for fish farming and increased human activity, ornithologist Dr Reza Khan said the main cause lies far beyond the JU campus.

"Migratory ducks do not choose roosting sites randomly," Dr

"Today, these fertile, food-rich lands have largely disappeared under mega housing projects and expanding human settlements," Dr Khan said. "At least 80 percent of previously available waterbodies that once supported migratory birds have

# THE LOST SOUL OF JATRA

## Artists and their struggle for relevance

YSTIAQUE AHMED

Today, like many traditional art forms in Bangladesh, Jatra stands on the verge of extinction. What once echoed through open fields and village fairs is now fading into memory. Last December, the Bangladesh Shilpkala Academy organised a month-long traditional Jatra (folk theatre) performance festival to celebrate and support artists striving to preserve the form. Yet such festivals and celebrations are too few and far between to create a lasting impact or bring meaningful change to the lives of these artists.

**A theatre of the people**

The word Jatra means "journey", and the name fits well. Troupes travel from



PHOTO: COLLECTED

political messages became a powerful voice for the oppressed. Another major transformation came with the introduction of women performers, a

Development Society. "When I started, every troupe had seventy or eighty people. We lived together like family."

He recalled a time when lead actors earned nearly one lakh taka a month, and each performance generated substantial revenue. "Now," he said, "a troupe barely has twenty-five people, and most of us have no work." The decline, he explained, began slowly after the 1990s. "Back then, we didn't have to beg for shows. Now, even getting permission to perform is a big hurdle."

"We used to earn thirty to forty thousand taka a night," Polash said. Today, most artists have taken up other jobs, running tea stalls, pulling rickshaws, or working as day labourers.

In many ways, Jatra has always lived on the edge—politically, socially, and legally. "We were chased by police," Polash remembered. "They made laws to control us, to make sure we couldn't perform freely. Those hurdles never really ended."

**The economics of decline**

According to Md Haydar Ali, Assistant Director at the Bangladesh Shilpkala Academy (BSA), the collapse of Jatra is rooted less in culture than in economics. "No funds mean no shows, and no shows mean no audience," he said. "People aren't disinterested; they just have nowhere to go to watch a decent play."

Government support has dwindled over the years. In the 2011–12 fiscal year, the state donated twenty-one lakh taka to the sector. "Since then," Polash said, "nothing. Some artists now receive allowances, but it's barely enough to survive—around sixteen thousand taka a year for those over forty. Even that is uncertain."

**A theatre without a stage**

For Badrul Alam Dulal, former Secretary of the Bangladesh Jatra Unnoyon Parishad, the crisis is deeply personal. His troupe, Ceaser's Opera, now performs only occasionally.

"The members run tea stalls or pull rickshaws," he said. "We've become informal workers, and if we get a show, we all come together."

The decline, Dulal explained, was both moral and economic. "It shifted away from family-oriented shows to attract more money. Dance sections were added, sometimes indecent ones." That stigma has endured. Today, rehearsals are often conducted under the label of 'drama' rather than Jatra to avoid public ridicule. "The tragedy," Dulal said, "is that Jatra used to be an art of pride. Now it's treated like a scandal."

Training has also nearly disappeared. "Young people aren't learning the craft," he said. "The Shilpkala Academy organises workshops once in a while, but it's not enough. Without new artists, the art can't continue."

Bureaucracy has further worsened the situation. To receive allowances or register as a Jatra artist, performers must navigate layers of paperwork, quotas, and approvals. Many genuine artists are rejected, while others exploit the system by posing as performers.

**A voice from the stage**

Few understand the soul of Jatra better than Milon Kanti Dey, a veteran actor, director, and writer who received the Bangla Academy Literary Award in 2022. Speaking from his home in Chattogram while battling cancer, Dey reflected on his six-decade journey.

"Jatra and its artists suffered the most during the 1990s and 2000s," he said. "The government banned us with one hand and praised us with the other by holding festivals. We ran in circles, trying to survive."

Those festivals did bring brief recognition. "Thirty-eight of us received national awards," Dey recalled. "But soon, people with nothing to do with Jatra were enlisted to collect allowances. Now the art is full of impostors. Real artists are invisible."

For Dey, the decline is not only financial but spiritual. "We've lost the soul of Jatra. There is no patriotism, no creativity, no literariness. We perform Kolkatan scripts while living in Bangladesh. It breaks my heart."

What was once an art of resistance has become a struggle for survival. Jatra was never meant for elites or critics; it belonged to the masses. It was their mirror, their protest, their joy. As Milon Kanti Dey put it, "If we can bring back the heart of Jatra, the people will come back too."

Jatra and its artists have survived prejudice, censorship, and poverty. They stood on stage to speak for those without a voice. Today, their voices are fading. A festival here or a token award there will not revive the art.

Actors now take whatever work they can find. Jatra has become a side hustle rather than a calling. A tradition that once stood tall in our culture is quietly crumbling, its songs and painted faces disappearing in the rush of modern life.

**Ystiaque Ahmed**, is a journalist at The Daily Star. He can be reached at [ystiaque1998@gmail.com](mailto:ystiaque1998@gmail.com).



PHOTO: COLLECTED

one district to another, performing on temporary open-air stages throughout the winter months. In its early days, Jatra drew heavily from myth and religion. By the late nineteenth century, however, scripts began to evolve. Social issues, political resistance, and rebellion increasingly came to dominate the stage.

During the colonial era, British authorities viewed these political undertones as a threat. As the struggle for independence neared its peak, Jatra's social and



A male, Sada-Tupi Lal-Girdi White-capped Water Redstart (Phoenicurus leucocephalus).

REZA KHAN

The water of Madhabkunda does not simply fall—it sparkles.

It plunges from the heights in a silvery torrent, yet much of it hesitates below, lingering in shallow pools before resuming its restless journey downhill. As the water rushes onward, it gives birth to a chhara—a perennial hill stream fed year-round by the waterfall's freshwater pulse. Massive boulders stand like ancient guardians, sheltering mosses, lichens, ferns, and stubborn little herbs. Wherever water spares a crack, a crevice, a damp ledge—or even a surprisingly dry niche—life claims its foothold.

These plants have not damaged the rocks; they have claimed them. Small colonies flourish in places that seem impossible to sustain life. Wherever plants exist, creepy-crawlies inevitably follow to feed on them, and the atmosphere around the waterfall was no exception.

Even the 61-metre plunge from the top of the waterfall fails to deter some resolute vegetation. Mosses and ferns cling calmly to the near-vertical rock face, growing along the very wall over which the hissing torrent descends. Water thunders, sprays, and roars—yet life persists quietly, insistently.

**A sudden ruler of the falls**  
Amid this chaos of falling water, slippery stone, and stunted greenery, a sudden movement catches the eye.

A small bird darts across the rocks—fearless, confident, almost defiant. It pauses, stands upright, and flicks its tail.

In that instant, it is clear: this bird has declared himself the top boss of the waterfall.

From the mossy base to the wet rock wall, from sheltered ledges to hidden cracks behind the falling sheet of water, he moves with absolute freedom. He feeds wherever he pleases, snapping up insects and worms flushed out by spray and turbulence. At times,

he ventures behind the watery curtain itself, vanishing briefly into the shimmering veil, only to reappear moments later at a chosen vantage point—prey secured.

The bird is unmistakable.

A white-capped, reddish-black fellow—sharp-eyed, alert, endlessly active. His gleaming white crown contrasts starkly with dark rock, resembling a tiny Turkish fez perched proudly atop a crimson robe. Each flick of his tail flashes vermillion red edged with black, vivid against grey stone and silver water. Apart from the white cap, the head, neck, back, wings, throat, and breast are jet black, while the rest of the body glows deep red.

This is no ordinary resident bird.

**An extraordinary visitor**

He is a male, Sada-Tupi Lal-Girdi or White-capped Water Redstart (Phoenicurus leucocephalus), sometimes informally referred to as a "white-capped" redstart because of his gaudy plumage. A rare winter migrant to Bangladesh's hill regions, the species has fewer than a dozen confirmed national records over several decades.

To encounter one here, at Madhabkunda Waterfall in Moulvibazar, feels nothing short of extraordinary.

It is December. The air is crisp, temperatures hovering between 12 and 14 degrees Celsius. Cool mist rises from the waterfall, and the surrounding forest seems hushed—as if aware that something special is unfolding. The redstart moves effortlessly, perfectly at home in a place where water rules and stone resists.

News travels fast.

Soon, birdwatchers from across the country arrive—drawn by hurried phone calls and whispered excitement. They gather quietly, careful not to disturb the little monarch of the falls. Cameras click softly. Binoculars rise and lower. Smiles spread. For many, this is a

once-in-a-lifetime sighting.

The bird, however, remains indifferent to his fame.

He continues his patrol—darting, flicking, feeding—commanding his watery kingdom with confidence and grace. In that moment, Madhabkunda is no longer just a waterfall; it becomes a rare meeting point of migration, resilience, and chance. And I am fortunate enough to be there—to witness a tiny traveller from distant mountains briefly rule a roaring cascade in the hills of Bangladesh.

**The White-capped Water Redstart: A rare vagrant**

The bird observed at Madhabkunda is an adult male White-capped Water Redstart (Phoenicurus leucocephalus), a member of the Old-World flycatcher family (Muscicapidae)—a group known for insectivorous species adapted to diverse habitats.

**How to identify it**

Adult males are unmistakable:

- A bright white crown sharply contrasting with a deep rufous-red body
- Black face, throat, wings, and upperparts
- A bold black-and-red tail pattern, frequently flicked—a classic redstart behaviour
- Strong legs and an upright posture, ideal for hopping across wet, slippery rocks

Females and immature birds are much duller—brownish grey—and easily confused with other redstarts, making sightings of adult males especially valuable for documentation.

**A specialist of water and stone**

Unlike most redstarts, the White-capped Water Redstart is a highly specialised riparian species. It shows a strong preference for:

- Fast-flowing mountain streams
- Waterfalls and rocky gorges
- Moss-covered boulders and wet cliff faces

While these habitats define its core ecology, migrating individuals sometimes turn up in unexpected places—such as Thakurgaon, and

Rajshahi or Panchagarh—far from typical hill-stream environments.

At Madhabkunda, the species exploits insects and other small invertebrates flushed out by flowing water or trapped among wet rocks and vegetation. Its habit of foraging behind falling water curtains—rarely witnessed but well documented—reflects remarkable adaptation to turbulent aquatic environments.

**Where it comes from**

The species breeds in high altitude regions of Central and South Asia, including:

- The Himalayas (Nepal, Bhutan, northern India)
- Western and central China
- Mountain ranges of Central Asia

During winter, some individuals descend to lower elevations. A few wander far beyond their usual wintering range, occasionally reaching the eastern Himalayan foothills and adjoining hill tracts—bringing rare visitors to Bangladesh.

**Status in Bangladesh**

In Bangladesh, the White-capped Water Redstart is an extremely rare winter vagrant:

- Records are very few—possibly fewer than half a dozen verified sightings
- Mostly confined to hill streams and waterfalls in the northeast and southeast
- Only isolated records exist from Thakurgaon, Rajshahi and Panchagarh outside hill districts
- Sightings are scattered across decades, with no evidence of regular wintering populations

Although globally listed as Least Concern, national mapping can be misleading. Disjunct records from Thakurgaon, Rajshahi to Panchagarh, Madhabkunda, Bandarban, and Khagrachhari—often connected into a single distribution polygon, giving an illusion of wide presence. In reality, the species occurs rarely and irregularly, not continuously across these areas, and it does not visit the country every year (IUCN 2015 Bangladesh Red List Map).

**Why it matters**

This single bird tells a larger story:

- The ecological importance of intact hill-stream ecosystems
- The role of waterfalls as micro-refugia for specialised migrants
- The need to protect freshwater systems not only for fish and invertebrates, but also for highly specialised terrestrial birds

Such observations also highlight the growing value of citizen science and birdwatching networks, which allow rare records to be rapidly shared, verified, and preserved.

**A conservation reminder**

Though globally secure, the White-capped Water Redstart depends on clean, fast-flowing streams, making it vulnerable to:

- Water diversion and damming
- Quarrying and rock extraction
- Tourism-related disturbance and pollution
- Infrastructure developments as authorities were seen building a huge wall on either side of the Chhara as a "protection" measure!

Protecting sites like Madhabkunda Waterfall is therefore essential—not only for scenic beauty, but for maintaining the fragile ecological conditions that occasionally host some of the rarest visitors to our land.

**Dr Reza Khan** is a wildlife biologist and conservationist with over four decades of experience in wildlife research, zoo management, and biodiversity conservation in Bangladesh and the United Arab Emirates. He has worked extensively in wildlife rescue, sanctuary management, and community-based conservation initiatives.

# The little monarch of Madhabkunda

## A rare winter vagrant claims a waterfall in northeastern Bangladesh



PHOTO: REZA KHAN

# ERODING EDGES, EMERGING LANDS

## Mapping the Meghna Estuary

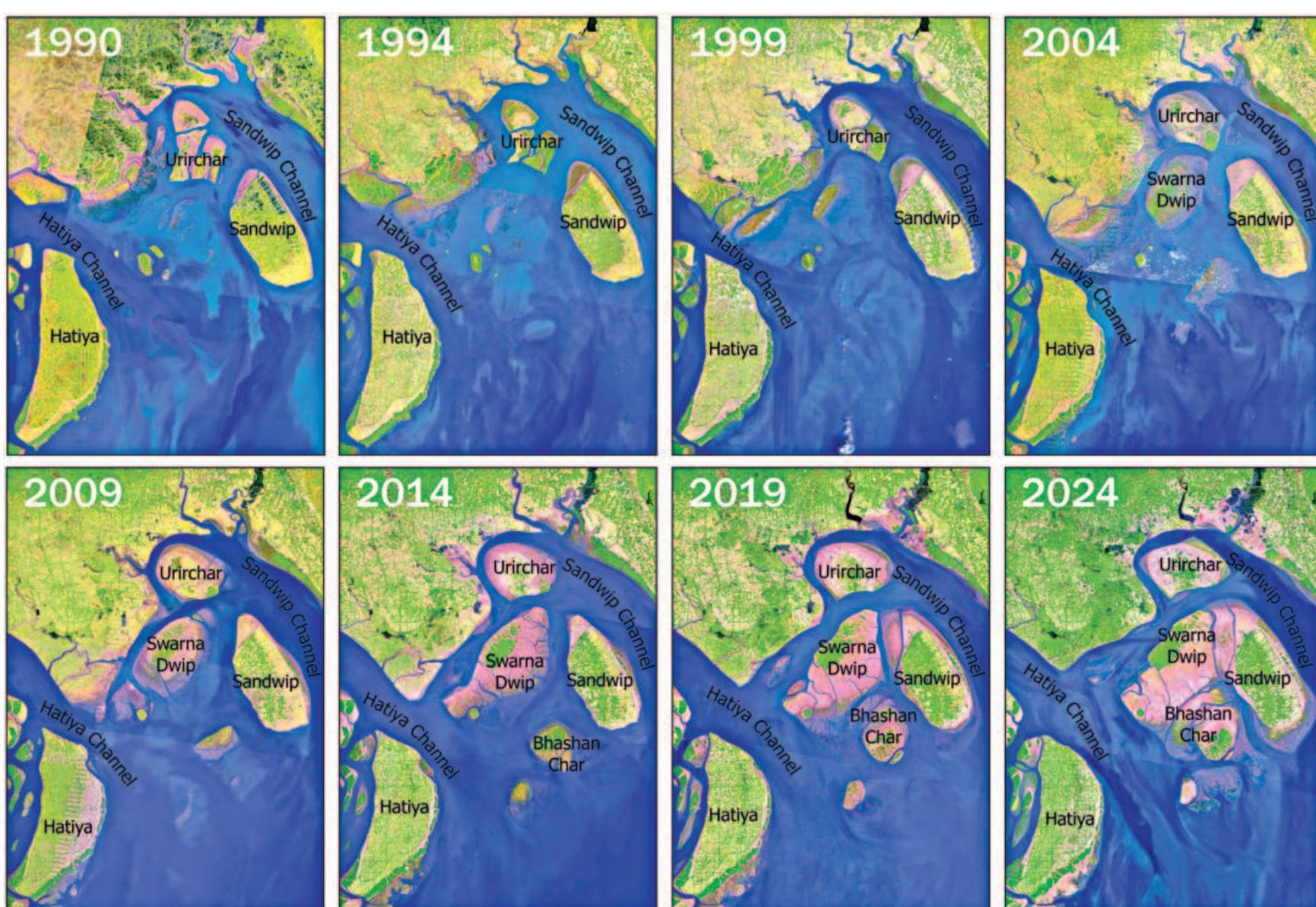
**Natural sediment deposition along the eastern edges of the estuary has made it a major hotspot for new land emergence, according to satellite images taken between 1990 and 2024. During this period, older islands such as Sandwip and Uirchar have gained land, while two new islands—Bhashan Char and Swarna Dwip—have formed.**

ISRAT JAHAN RIA

In the dance of land and sea, erosion carves away the edges, leaving behind a story of loss. What erosion takes may return through accretion, whispering hope, though always in a different form. To grasp the complex dynamics of this interaction, one must look to the estuarine regions of the world—ever-changing landscapes that represent both nature's force and its quiet promise. Bangladesh, the Meghna Estuary, situated where the mighty Ganges/Padma, Brahmaputra, and Meghna rivers converge with the Bay of Bengal, is one of the most dynamic coastal environments in the world. Shaped by the constant interplay of river flow, sediment dynamics, tidal activities, and wave action, it is an ever-changing landscape where new land is created even as other areas are lost to the sea. This unique natural system has profound implications for Bangladesh's economy, environment, and long-term resilience.

### HYDRODYNAMIC PROCESSES IN THE MEGHNA ESTUARY

Spanning nearly 7,880 km<sup>2</sup> across districts such as Noakhali, Lakshmpur, Bhola, and Chandpur, the Meghna Estuary is the lifeline of coastal Bangladesh. Within this dynamic estuarine system, the combined flow of the Ganges-Brahmaputra-Meghna rivers (Lower Meghna River) empties into the Bay of Bengal through four primary channels: Tetulia (Isha), Shahbazpur, Hatiya, and Bamni. Together, the Ganges, Brahmaputra, and Meghna rivers form the world's third-largest river system in terms of river flow and the largest in terms of total sediment discharge. According to the Bangladesh Water Development Board, discharge through this river system varies from approximately 10,000 m<sup>3</sup>/s in the dry season to 160,000



A significant emerging landscape in the Meghna Estuary

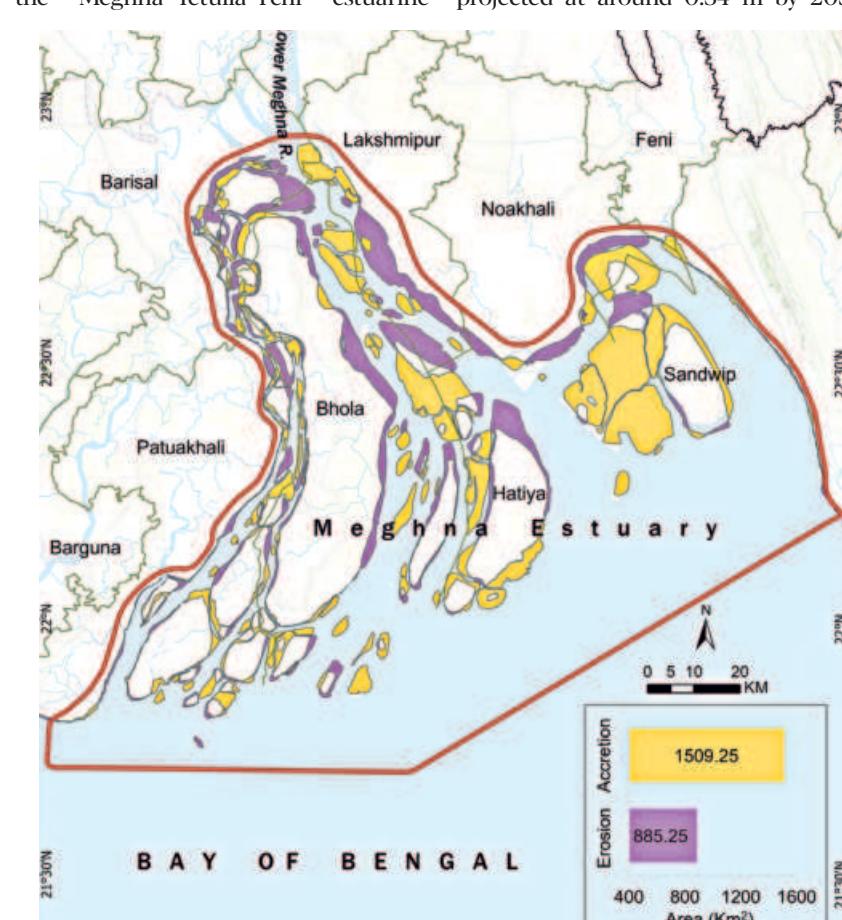
Hatiya, and macro tidal (>4 m) from East Hatiya to Sandwip. In the Meghna Estuary, river outflow, tide, waves, and wind exert combined effects. However, it is not yet fully understood to what extent these parameters dominate circulation processes and drive sediment dispersal mechanisms.

### GEOGRAPHICAL AND ECOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE

The Meghna Estuary plays a central role in the environmental and socio-economic fabric of Bangladesh by shaping the livelihoods of its population. The channels within the estuary form a significant part of the country's inland transport network, serving as vital waterways connecting Dhaka, Chattogram, Noakhali, and Bhola. Despite severe local erosion, the Meghna-Tetulia-Feni estuarine

salinity intrusion, and displacement in the decades ahead. Recent studies have shown that dry-season salinity is intensifying and that the freshwater-brackish boundary is shifting northward. Salinity affects crop production, drinking-water supply, and aquaculture in nearby coastal districts. Its location also makes it highly exposed to cyclones and storm surges, which can devastate vulnerable coastal communities. Modelling research suggests that wind-driven surges, when combined with tides and waves, can significantly elevate water levels, leading to flooding.

Forecasts suggest a significant rise in both the frequency and severity of tidal inundation and cyclone surges, heightening risks for millions of people, agricultural land, and coastal infrastructure, with sea-level rise projected at around 0.34 m by 2050.



Morphological changes of land in Meghna Estuary between 1993 and 2023



The Meghna Estuary with major riverways

m<sup>3</sup>/s in the wet season, carrying nearly a billion tonnes of sediment each year. These forces together create a constantly changing landscape shaped by erosion, accretion, frequent channel shifting, and the formation or disappearance of *chars* in coastal areas such as Bhola, Hatiya, and Noakhali.

According to the Institute of Water Modelling, based on interactions between river discharge and tidal volume moving through the channels in the Lower Meghna Estuary, the estuary is divided into three sub-units: (1) the Tetulia and west Shahbazpur channels (fluvial), (2) the east Shahbazpur and west Hatiya channels (fluvio tidal), and (3) the east Hatiya and Sandwip channels (tidal). The fluvial and fluvio tidal sub-units act as a tidal river with very high discharges during the monsoon, whereas the tidal unit behaves as a tidal estuary without significant freshwater discharge from the Feni River. Interaction between the tidal river and the tidal estuary is induced by the open-sea connection with the Bay of Bengal south of Sandwip Island, as well as by the two channels between the northern part of Sandwip Island and the Noakhali mainland. Differences in tide level and phase between the tidal river and tidal estuary induce flow through these two channels.

Depending on tidal range, the Meghna Estuary is further divided into three zones: micro-tidal (0–2 m) from the Tetulia River to Chandpur, meso-tidal (2–4 m) from South Bhola to North

system has gained over a thousand square kilometres of new land over the past five decades, highlighting the remarkable dynamism of this estuary. This continuous reshaping of the coastline has significant geographical implications, not only in terms of natural processes but also in influencing human settlement, agricultural expansion, and infrastructure development in one of the world's most densely populated coastal zones.

Beyond its shifting shores, the Meghna Estuary is a treasure trove of ecology and economy. For many aquatic species, including hilsa, the estuary serves as a crucial breeding and nursery ground, offering both cultural significance and economic benefits. Its wetlands and mudflats also enrich the soil, filter pollutants, and help moderate salinity intrusion.

At the same time, its vast expanse and high sediment flux serve as natural defences, dissipating tidal energy and buffering inland areas against cyclones and storm surges. Yet this very exposure makes the Meghna Estuary one of the most climate-vulnerable hotspots in South Asia. Rising seas and stronger storms threaten to intensify flooding,

At the same time, newly accreted and geomorphically unstable lands complicate development decisions, as infrastructure built without considering long-term shoreline movement can pose significant risks. Taken together, the background and geographical significance of the Meghna Estuary reveal a system that is both a gift and a challenge: a landscape born of the immense power of rivers and tides that sustains millions of people and unique ecosystems, yet remains fragile in the face of climate change, sea-level rise, and unplanned human interventions.

### MORPHOLOGICAL CHANGES OVER TIME

The enormous flow through the Meghna Estuary makes it one of the most powerful river systems in the world, constantly redrawing the map of Bangladesh. Over the last three decades, the estuary has undergone significant morphological changes because of its remarkable and paradoxical nature. Morphological change in the estuary strongly depends on various physical factors, such as river discharge, wind, waves, and tides. Tide-induced circulation currents dominantly determine sedimentation processes. At the same time, tidal currents themselves

shoreline erodes land in some places, new land emerges through massive sediment deposition in others. Natural sediment deposition along the eastern edges of the estuary has made it a major hotspot for new land emergence, according to satellite images taken between 1990 and 2024. During this period, older islands such as Sandwip and Uirchar have gained land, while two new islands—Bhashan Char and Swarna Dwip—have formed. As these islands continue to expand gradually and are likely to merge into a larger landmass, there is hope for settlement and sustainable livelihoods. These newly formed lands present both opportunities and challenges for reclamation, agriculture, and human settlement. If managed carefully to avoid uprooting vulnerable populations, these lands could be utilised for planned reclamation projects, providing opportunities to increase the amount of arable and habitable land.

### HUMAN ADAPTATION AND POLICY CHALLENGES

The Meghna Estuary is more than just a geographical feature. It is a dynamic living system that embodies both the potential of its abundant natural

resources and the risks that accompany its location. It represents two realities. While new islands emerge, offering prospects for expansion, erosion continues to claim land and displace lives. This paradox underscores the pressing need for adaptive management, sustainable planning, and climate-resilient strategies—not only to capitalise on opportunities but also to mitigate risks in one of Bangladesh's most dynamic and vulnerable landscapes.

Communities living along the estuary have long adapted to their environment through strategies such as floating agriculture, seasonal migration, and rebuilding homes after erosion. At the policy level, although the government has undertaken several measures and projects aimed at safeguarding vulnerable areas—including feasibility studies, the construction of embankments and flood shelters, the promotion of sustainable fishing practices, and the establishment of protected areas for conservation—more effective measures are still needed for the sustainable management of this critical resource, as challenges persist in addressing salinity, climate change, and disaster risk. Moreover, the Government of Bangladesh currently lacks a national policy for the resettlement of displaced people and also lacks comprehensive long-term planning.

Considering the importance of the Meghna River Estuary across multiple sectors in Bangladesh, its proper management has become crucial for the country's long-term development and environmental sustainability. To control erosion, utilise newly formed land, and safeguard communities from storm surges and increasing salinity, effective planning grounded in current scientific research is urgently needed. Estuarine change mapping and monitoring are also essential for long-term resilience and informed decision-making. Unstable *chars* should receive special attention when developing strategies for coastal land zoning and *char* development. If approached wisely, the estuary can continue to provide both protection and prosperity for future generations.

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Soft-shell crabs ready to moult grow in individual cages suspended in shallow brackish water across rectangular ponds at a sprawling farm in Shyamnagar, Satkhira. The photo was taken recently.

PHOTO: HABIBUR RAHMAN

## SOFT-SHELL CRAB FARMING

# The new gold of Sundarbans coast

DIPANKAR ROY

For generations, coastal families living near the Sundarbans have depended on shrimp farming, fishing, timber cutting, and honey collection to survive. Work has always been dangerous. People risk attacks by tigers and pirates, face floods and storms, and must follow strict forest rules. Seasonal fishing bans often leave families with no income for months, making daily survival difficult.

But over the past decade, a new livelihood - soft-shell crab farming - has brought new hope to these communities. The intensive, export-oriented form of aquaculture has expanded rapidly along the southwestern coast, offering a steadier income than traditional fishing or shrimp cultivation.

In Satkhira district, particularly in Shyamnagar upazila, the industry has grown into a major source of employment and foreign exchange. It has also created a new set of environmental and regulatory challenges that now threaten its long-term sustainability.

### HOW SOFT-SHELL CRAB FARMING WORKS

Up until a decade ago, black tiger shrimp (bagda) once known as "white gold" - dominated coastal aquaculture. That boom has faded. Disease outbreaks, repeated natural disasters, falling international demand and volatile prices have eroded profitability. Many farmers have shifted to crabs, often farming them alongside shrimp in the same brackish-water ponds.

Crab farming requires less land, involves lower production risks and delivers quicker returns.

"Exporting naturally collected crabs is transforming lives here. It is creating small entrepreneurs and generating employment for many," said Rajib Joyaddar, owner of Rohan Agro Crab Fisheries in Shyamnagar.

Joyaddar's farm produces roughly 9,000 to 10,000 kilogrammes of crabs each month. The work is still vulnerable to storms and saline intrusion, but income is more predictable than before.

Soft shell crab farming is highly specialised. Crabs are harvested during a brief period immediately after moulting, when their hard exoskeleton has not yet reformed. That window lasts only a few hours.

Farmers collect crab seed, mostly juveniles or sub adults, from rivers, canals and mangrove creeks around the Sundarbans. Hatchery production remains negligible, forcing the industry to rely on wild stocks. Sub-adult crabs are preferred because they moult faster

and survive better in captivity.

Each crab is kept separately in a small plastic box or cage suspended in shallow brackish water. Farmers carefully control salinity, water depth and cleanliness to reduce stress and prevent cannibalism. Crabs are fed small quantities of trash fish or snails every one or two days. Any delay in moulting, often caused by poor water quality, can result in death or loss of value.

When moulting begins, the clock starts. Crabs must be collected immediately, washed and placed in clean or chilled water before the shell hardens again. They are then graded, frozen or processed for export.

An alternative system, crab fattening, has also expanded. Hard-shell crabs bought from local markets are kept in cages for about three weeks, during which they can double in weight.

This method is cheaper, faster

and more efficient, but requires more

conservation. High larval mortality further reduces availability. As a result, seed prices have risen sharply.

Farmers report paying three to four times more than they did just a few years ago, squeezing margins even as export prices fluctuate amid a global economic slowdown.

They say it is vital to reduce dependence on the Sundarbans by developing alternative, low-cost seed supply systems and ensuring fair prices.

### RISE OF AN INDUSTRY

Commercial soft-shell crab farming began along Bangladesh's coast in 2014. Early growth was slow, constrained by limited technical knowledge and access to capital.

Non-governmental organisations later provided training and small-scale financial support, accelerating expansion.

Sundarbans, started soft-shell crab farming in 2017 on 20 bighas of land. It now operates about 55,000 cages. "Everything is manageable," he said, "except the shortage of crab seed."

He explained that crabs weighing about 100 grams are collected locally and fattened for 18 to 20 days using small pieces of tilapia fish. "After moulting, when each crab reaches about 150 grams, they are sold to nearby exporter Farid Nine Star Agro BD Limited," he added.

His farm employs about 25 full-time workers who check the cages six times a day. "Preparing 1,000 boxes requires an investment of around Tk 2 lakh for pond excavation, lime, boxes, pipes, ropes, and bamboo."

He added that crabs weighing 51 grams to 79 grams sell for Tk 800 per kg, while crabs weighing 91 grams to 150 grams sell for Tk 1,300 per kg.

"Tilapia is the sole feed. We buy it at Tk 80 to Tk 90 per kg, cut it into small pieces, and feed the crabs before 2 pm, three days a week," he said.

Farmer Abdullah Al Kayum Abu from the same area pointed to rising seed costs as a major problem. "Earlier, seeds cost Tk 100 per kg. Now it has increased to Tk 300-400," he said.

He explained the soft-shell process in simple terms. "Hard-shell crabs are prepared by cutting their limbs and placing them in saline water. Within three hours, they moult and become soft-shell crabs. If they are not collected within that window, they harden again," he said.

"Hard shell crabs sell for Tk 250 to Tk 350 per kg, while soft-shell crabs fetch Tk 800 to Tk 1,000 per kg," he added.

### PROCESSING AND EXPORTS

After harvesting, crabs are supplied to private processing plants clustered in Shyamnagar. Six factories operate in Burigolani union alone. Crabs are cleaned using chlorine-treated water and oxygen systems, processed to international standards and stored under refrigeration.

Suzit Kumar Mondal, a farmer from Haringar village in Munshiganj union, said, "During the rainy months, we can harvest 40 kg to 50 kg of soft-shell crabs daily. Production drops noticeably in winter."

The Satkhira Fisheries Office reported crab farming on 420 hectares in Shyamnagar, Kaliganj, and Assasuni, with a production target of 3,800 tonnes.

According to the Shyamnagar Upazila Fisheries Office, crab farming operates in 1,195 enclosures in the upazila. Soft-shell crab farming alone

covers 870 enclosures across 220 hectares. Last year, total production reached 1,680 tonnes.

Md Touhid Hasan, senior upazila fisheries officer, said soft-shell crab farming has "huge commercial potential" and is unique to Satkhira, with Shyamnagar contributing about 90 percent of national production.

Datnakhali-based Farid Nine Star Agro BD Limited, one of the largest exporters, has shipped soft-shell crabs to Europe and the United States since 2015. The company exports 300 to 350 tonnes a year.

"The sector has immense potential and could contribute significantly to the national economy with government support and a reliable seed supply," Amir Hossain, manager of the company, said.

Official data underscores the sector's growth. In the fiscal year 2019-20 (FY20), Satkhira exported 567 tonnes of crab worth \$6.7 million. Exports peaked at over 800 tonnes in FY22 before falling to 622 tonnes worth \$8.7 million the next year amid global market uncertainty.

"After shrimp, crabs are our second-largest export product," said GM Salim, Satkhira's district fisheries officer. "Soft-shell crabs have strong international demand. With structured support from government, NGOs and banks, the sector could grow much further."

### SUNDARBANS' ECOSYSTEM PAYS THE PRICE

That growth comes with risks. Nearly all crab seeds still come from the Sundarbans, placing increasing pressure on the mangrove ecosystem.

Gouranga Nandy, chairperson of the Centre for Environment and Participatory Research, warned that unplanned crab harvesting is disrupting the forest's natural balance.

Crabs play a critical role in mangrove ecology: they decompose leaf litter, aerate soil through burrowing and help circulate nutrients essential for forest regeneration.

"Large-scale removal of crabs weakens soil structure and reduces mangrove productivity," he said. "Crabs are ecosystem engineers. Their decline directly affects biodiversity and the resilience of the Sundarbans."

The impact extends up the food chain. "Fewer crabs mean less food for fish, birds and reptiles. The harvesting of egg-bearing females during breeding seasons accelerates population decline."

Destructive collection methods also damage mangrove roots and riverbanks, increasing erosion and weakening natural defences against cyclones and climate change, he added.



Women at a Shyamnagar soft-shell crab farm carefully tend individual crabs in floating cages, managing water and feeding to ensure healthy moulting, forming a vital part of the workforce. The photo was taken recently.

and less prone to disease, making it increasingly popular.

### DOMINANCE AND SCARCITY OF ROCK CRABS

Bangladesh has around 15 crab species across freshwater and saline ecosystems, but commercial farming relies almost entirely on the rock crab.

It moults up to 16 times during its life and remains soft for longer than most species, making it commercially viable.

Global demand for soft-shell crabs has grown steadily, particularly in Europe and North America. Supply has not kept pace. Crab seed shortages have become the industry's central constraint.

Crab collection from the Sunderbans

remains halted for about half a year due to seasonal bans imposed for

the labour demand is substantial. Women make up a large share of the workforce, particularly in harvesting, cleaning and processing. Many young women, previously unemployed, have invested small amounts of capital and entered the sector.

Biswanath Mondol, who runs Bhai Bhai Agro Crab Fisheries near the