



## Saraswati Puja today



STAR REPORT

Saraswati Puja, a major religious festival of the Hindu community, will be celebrated across the country today with devotion, festivity and fervour.

Saraswati, the goddess of wisdom and knowledge, is worshipped by devotees – particularly students – at educational institutions and temples.

The celebration falls annually on the fifth day of the bright fortnight of Magh, marking the birth of Goddess Saraswati. The day is known as “Vasant Panchami”.

The puja will begin in the morning, followed by the offering of “anjali”, a ritual offering of flowers.

On the auspicious day, children are initiated into learning through “hatekhor”, typically with a slate and chalk in hand.

Later, prasad, or blessed food offerings, will be distributed among devotees.

Goddess Saraswati embodies power, creativity and inspiration,

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**THE FLOATING LILY-TROTTER ...** A pheasant-tailed jacana seen walking over waterlily pads on a pond in Chattogram’s Anowara KPZ area, its impossibly long toes spreading its weight like poetry across water. Native to South and Southeast Asia, this waterbird inhabits freshwater wetlands, marshes, ponds, and rice fields rich in floating vegetation. It feeds primarily on insects, larvae, molluscs, and other small invertebrates, delicately plucked from the surface of leaves and shallow water. A master of balance, its elongated toes and claws earn it the nickname “lily-trotter”. Though it is categorised as “Least Concern” on the IUCN Red List, water pollution and hunting still threaten the species’ survival.

PHOTO: KOMOL DAS

## Airlines cheer as surcharges slashed

RASHIDUL HASAN

The government has slashed the fees for landing, air navigation, parking and embarkation, much to the relief of the local airlines which have been saddled by the high surcharges.

The yearly surcharge for runway use, control room, aircraft parking and terminal facilities across the country’s seven airports now stands to 14.25 percent, down from 72 percent, after the Civil Aviation and Tourism ministry amended the rules.

The move comes following long-term requests from the Aviation Operators Association of Bangladesh (AOAB), a platform of privately-owned airline operators, to reduce the annual surcharge from 72 percent to 12 percent to help keep the airlines stay afloat.

The annual surcharge in India is 12 to 18 percent, in Singapore, 8 percent, in Oman 10 percent and in Pakistan 2 percent, according to Mofizur Rahman, managing director of private airline Novoair.

As much as 78 percent of the local airlines’ total outstanding dues of Tk 7,351.45 crore with the Civil Aviation Authority of Bangladesh (CAAB) comprises of the late fee for the surcharges.

At least three to four airlines were forced to cease their operation only because of failure to pay their dues to CAAB, said Kazi Wahidul Alam, an aviation expert.

For instance, the now-defunct GMG Airlines owes CAAB Tk 368.29 crore; the main amount is Tk 56.98 crore and Tk 311.30 crore are surcharge and other charges, according to AOAB.



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## Woman burnt to death in Natore

Her home torched after man’s murder

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Pabna

A woman was burnt to death in a reprisal attack following the killing of a man on Wednesday night in Singra upazila of Natore.

The deceased are Sabiha Begum, 75, and Md Rejaul Karim, 53, a teacher at Bil Haloti Trimohoni College. Both were residents of Kodomtola Kumarpura village, police said.

According to police, unidentified assailants attacked Rejaul, a member of the Singra upazila unit of Zia Parishad, outside his residence around 11:00pm on Wednesday, hacking him to death on the spot.

“Hearing his screams, locals rushed to the spot and found Rejaul lying there, but the attackers had already fled by then,” said Md Abdun Nur, officer-in-charge of Singra Police Station.

About 30 minutes later, a group of agitated people

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## POLLS PLEDGES: COST OF LIVING

# What may cash aid actually mean?

MD ASADUZ ZAMAN

As Bangladesh approaches the February general election, political parties are once again centring their campaign promises on the household ledger.

According to a government survey, average household expenditure reached Tk 31,500 per month in 2022, nearly double the level seen in 2016.

In urban areas, the burden is significantly higher, averaging Tk 41,424, while rural households spend roughly Tk 26,842. Taken together, families appear caught in a quiet “consumption trap”.

Worse still, stubborn inflation has effectively vaporised the savings of low-income households, leaving millions balanced on a financial knife-edge.

The BNP has responded with a “social policy agenda”, including “family cards” designed to bypass traditional, leaky distribution channels.

Meanwhile, Jamaat-e-Islami, the BNP’s principal electoral rival, has proposed a “smart social security card” and a Qard-e-Hasana scheme, offering interest-free loans of Tk 10,000 per month to five lakh unemployed graduates for up to two years.

For the next elected government, the gamble is twofold: finding the fiscal space to fund such transfers without triggering an inflationary

spiral, and ensuring the money actually reaches the pockets it is intended to save.

The BNP’s plan proposes monthly cash transfers of Tk 2,000 to Tk 2,500 to 50 lakh women.

While the amount represents about 6 percent of average urban household spending, for the rural poor it would account for roughly 9 percent.

However, economists are questioning the fiscal and operational realism of the proposal.

The primary objective of such cash support is survival, said Zahid Hussain, former lead economist at the World Bank’s Dhaka office.

“This is just to meet the bare minimum – basically staying alive and keeping people away from a crisis,” he said.

He argued that the proliferation of welfare cards lacks a “scientific approach”.

Hussain said policymakers must first calculate the precise financial requirement to bridge the “poverty gap” for the most vulnerable.

His estimates suggest that addressing the poverty gap would require around Tk 6,000 crore annually. Once administrative costs and leakages are added, the total could rise to Tk 10,000 crore.

Even then, the programme would remain “financially affordable” for the state – provided

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## ‘India somewhat overreacted’

Touhid tells BBC over Delhi’s recall of staff dependents

DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENT

Foreign Adviser Touhid Hossain has said there is no proof that the Bangladesh government has failed to ensure the security of Indians.

He made the comment in an interview with the BBC News India broadcast on Wednesday, a day after India advised the withdrawal of families and dependents of Indian officials from all Indian missions in Bangladesh.

“Given the security situation, as a precautionary measure, we have advised the dependents of officials in the mission and posts to return to India,” the Indian Ministry of External Affairs said.

The Indian missions, however, will continue to remain open and fully operational, it added.

Touhid told the BBC, “There is no proof that we have not been able to ensure security for Indians. But my wishes will not change things. Whether India will categorise Bangladesh as being at par with

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## Govt salary hike questionable amid spending concerns

Says Hossain Zillur

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Hossain Zillur Rahman, a former adviser to the caretaker government, yesterday questioned the sharp increase in government employees’ salaries at a time when public spending efficiency remains questionable.

“A huge salary increase was announced for government officials. But where is the explanation of how much the implementation rate of the Annual Development Programme [ADP] has improved because of it?” he said at a policy dialogue titled “Economic Governance and Corruption Prevention,” organised by the Centre for Governance Studies (CGS) at the CIRDAP auditorium in Dhaka.

Zillur, also the executive chairman of the Power and Participation Research Centre and the president of CGS, said, “A comprehensive review

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# ‘Things are really calming down’

Claims Trump as he launches Board of Peace at Davos

AGENCIES

US President Donald Trump said yesterday that “things are really calming down” as he joined other world leaders at a signing ceremony for his “Board of Peace” at Davos.

“Just one year ago the world was actually on fire, a lot of people didn’t know it,” Trump told the audience, as he again claimed to have ended eight wars.

Trump appeared to touch on those concerns in his opening remarks at the signing ceremony for the board, originally intended to help end the Gaza war, saying the new board would work with the UN as he listed other major diplomatic issues around the region and worldwide.

“Well, this is a very exciting day, long in the making, and many countries have just received their notice, and everybody wants to be a part of it, and we’ll work with many others, including the United Nations,” he said.

Trump, who will chair the board, has invited dozens of other world leaders to join it and sees the grouping addressing other global challenges beyond the stuttering

Gaza truce, though he does not intend it to replace the United Nations, he has said.

Argentina’s President Javier Milei and Hungary’s Prime Minister Viktor Orban were among those to sign papers on stage, as well as leaders from Azerbaijan, Indonesia, Qatar, Pakistan and Kosovo.



The Board of Peace’s potential membership has however proved controversial, with Trump having invited Russian President Vladimir Putin, who invaded Ukraine four years ago.

Russia said late on Wednesday it was studying the proposal after Trump said it would join. France has declined. Britain

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Cargo vessels line the banks of the Bhairab River awaiting loading and unloading. Due to poor navigability, ships can only enter and leave during high tide, slowing operations and prolonging turnaround. Traders say the delays are a major inconvenience. The photo was taken yesterday from Noapara in Jashore.

PHOTO: HABIBUR RAHMAN