

“Canada doesn’t live because of the United States. Canada thrives because we are Canadian.”  
Canadian PM Carney says in Trump retort

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## Election race heats up

From streets to doorsteps, candidates spend a busy day courting voters

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The candidates of major political parties and independents stepped up their campaigns yesterday, the first weekend of the electioneering window, spreading out across cities and villages to woo voters ahead of the February 12 polls.

From busy streets to quiet lanes, aspirants and their supporters distributed leaflets, raised slogans and went door to door, appealing for votes with vision-filled promises.

With posters banned for the first time, many say the festive mood is muted, though small processions through neighbourhoods and side streets have revived a sense of competition reminiscent of past elections.

“After a long hiatus, seeing different parties hold processions in our locality is refreshing,” said Rezaul Karim, a resident of Mirpur 10. “Finally, we are witnessing a real campaign and true competition.”

Friday prayers added rhythm to the campaign. In many areas, candidates and their teams gathered outside



PHOTO: STAR

BNP Chairman Tarique Rahman addressing a rally in Bhasantek area of the capital yesterday evening.

**19** DAYS TO VOTE

mosques to reach large groups of male voters as they streamed out after Juma prayers, handing out leaflets and exchanging greetings.

With just 19 days to go, the tempo is expected to grow even more relentless, in what is widely seen as the country’s first truly competitive election since 2008. Campaign teams are working tirelessly to ensure their candidates are visible everywhere.

BNP Chairman Tarique Rahman addressed a rally at the Begum Anwara Degree College ground in Panchrukhi, Araihazar, Narayanganj. Later in the evening, he went to BRB Maidan in Bhasantek, part of the Dhaka-17 constituency, from where he is contesting. It includes the Cantonment area, where he spent a significant period of his life.

He said people want change and solutions to their problems. If voted to power, the BNP will listen to public demands, he said. Freedom of movement and ensured security are essential to establishing good governance, Tarique added.

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Jamaat-e-Islami Ameer Shafiqur Rahman speaking at a gathering in Thakurgaon yesterday.

PHOTO: COURTESY OF PARTY'S FACEBOOK PAGE

## T20 WORLD CUP ROW ICC yet to respond to BCB's latest request

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

As of yesterday, International Cricket Council has not responded to Bangladesh Cricket Board's latest letter seeking the intervention of ICC's Dispute Resolution Committee to review the board's request to relocate the national team's matches in next month's ICC Men's T20 World Cup from India.

BCB made the request to ICC on Thursday, hours after Youth and Sports Adviser Asif Nazrul declared there was “no scope” to change Bangladesh's stance of not sending the team to India over security concerns, saying it was “the government's decision”.

The previous day, ICC had rejected Bangladesh's relocation request and set a one-day deadline for BCB to convey whether the Bangladesh team would travel to India for the World Cup, set to begin on February 7, with online reports indicating Scotland could replace the Tigers if BCB doesn't change its decision.

The deadline ended on Thursday but the game's governing body is yet to respond.

Yesterday morning, Times of India reported that BCB had sent a letter to ICC, seeking the involvement of the Dispute Resolution Committee. A BCB director, seeking anonymity, confirmed it to be true to The Daily Star.

As per the Terms of References of the ICC's Dispute Resolution Committee, it is an independent arbitration



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Rajshahi Warriors players celebrate with the trophy after winning the final of the Bangladesh Premier League by beating Chattogram Royals by 63 runs at the Sher-e-Bangla National Cricket Stadium in Mirpur yesterday.

PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

## MANIFESTO EXPECTATIONS

With the national election less than a month away, political parties are finalising their manifestos. The Daily Star spoke to experts to identify the pressing issues that should top the agenda for parties.

## Business community wants well-defined economic roadmap

REFAYET ULLAH MIRDHA and JAGARAN CHAKMA

Political parties need to prioritise law and order, macroeconomic stability, and ease of doing business in their election manifestos, say business leaders and trade bodies.

The parties should focus on maintaining law and order to facilitate a better business environment, and commit to time-bound reforms, better access to finance, and reduction of logistics costs to support sustainable growth.

“Ensuring security and public order should be the top priority in the manifestos of political parties,” Faisal Samad, director of Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA), told The Daily Star.

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## US ‘armada’ heads towards Iran

Trump renews warnings to Tehran against killing protesters

Rights group confirms over 5,000 killed during protests

UN rights chief urges Iran to ‘end brutal repression’

Iran internet blackout lasted two weeks: monitor

AGENCIES

President Donald Trump said on Thursday that the United States has an “armada” heading toward Iran but hoped he would not have to use it, as he renewed warnings to Tehran against killing protesters or restarting its nuclear program.

US officials, speaking on condition of anonymity, say the aircraft carrier USS Abraham Lincoln and several guided-missile destroyers will arrive in the Middle East in the coming days.

One official said additional air-defence systems were also being eyed for the Middle East, which could be critical to guard against any Iranian strike on US bases in the region.

The deployments expand the options available to Trump, both to better defend US forces throughout the region at a moment of tensions and to take any additional military action after striking Iranian nuclear sites in June, reports Reuters.

“We have a lot of ships going that direction, just in case ... I'd rather not see anything happen, but we're watching them very closely,” Trump told reporters aboard Air Force One on his way back to the United States after speaking to world leaders in Davos, Switzerland. At another point, he said: “We have an armada ... heading in that direction, and maybe we won't have to use it.”

The US-based Human Rights Activists News Agency (HRANA) said yesterday it had confirmed that 5,002 people had been killed, including 4,714 protesters, 42 minors, 207 members of the security forces and 39 bystanders.

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## ‘Rohingyas are not Bengalis’

### Bangladesh rejects Myanmar's ICJ submissions

BSS, Dhaka

Bangladesh has strongly rejected Myanmar's recent submissions to the International Court of Justice, saying references to the Rohingyas as “Bengalis” distort history, undermine their identity, and seek to justify atrocities committed during the 2016-17 violence.

“The Government of Bangladesh calls upon Myanmar and others having authority over Rakhine to demonstrate a genuine commitment to the recognition of Rohingyas as an integral part of their society and State, and facilitate their return by creating a conducive atmosphere in Rakhine and their reintegration with equal rights, in safety and with dignity,” read a statement issued by the foreign ministry yesterday evening.

In the detailed statement, Bangladesh said Myanmar's portrayal of the Rohingyas

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Election campaigning gathered pace yesterday on the second day, with candidates holding rallies and events across the country. (From left, clockwise) BNP candidate for Dhaka-6, Ishraq Hossain, campaigning in Old Dhaka's Suritala; Saiful Alam Khan Milon, Jamaat's candidate for Dhaka-12, interacts with a voter in the capital's Mogbazar area; Nahid Islam, NCP convener and 10-party alliance candidate for Dhaka-11, waves to locals during a rally in Badda's Hossain Market area; and Mufti Syed Muhammad Rezaul Karim, ameer of Islami Andolan Bangladesh, presents the party's electoral symbol, a hand fan, to a candidate during a rally in Narayanganj's Fatullah.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN / STAR



## Election race heats up

FROM PAGE 1

Jamaat-e-Islami Ameer Shafiqur Rahman flew from Dhaka to Syedpur and then travelled by helicopter to the Sugar Mill Ground in Panchagarh, where he addressed a rally.

He said if the 10-party alliance is elected, five years would be enough "to change the face of northern Bangladesh". He later addressed rallies in Dinajpur, Thakurgaon and Rangpur.

Alliance partner National Citizen Party's Convener Nahid Islam campaigned in Shahjadpur of the Dhaka-II constituency, from where he is contesting.

Islami Andolan Bangladesh ameer Syed Muhammad Rezaul Karim launched his campaign in Narayanganj. Speaking at a rally in the Kajlarpur area of Jatrabari, he said a group has drawn up a blueprint to deceive people with colourful visions of power.

"Those who can betray even their own comrades cannot be trusted with the safety of Islam or the country," he said.

BNP Secretary General Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir campaigned at Sholtohori Bazar in Thakurgaon Sadar upazila.

Referring to communal harmony, he said, "Just as in the past Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists and Christians together built our society and our

country, we want to move the country forward in the same way. We want to ensure equal security for all."

Jamaat Secretary General and Khulna-5 candidate Mia Golam Porwar, speaking at street rallies in Dumuria and Phultala upazilas, said there is no alternative to ending an era of misrule, corruption and political repression.

Chittogram witnessed vibrant campaigning as candidates carried out door-to-door drives across several constituencies.

In Chattogram-II, BNP candidate Amir Khosru Mahmud Chowdhury campaigned in Laldiri Char, saying that after 17 years people are finally ready to exercise their voting rights.

In Chattogram-9, Jamaat candidate AKM Fazlul Haque held a mass contact programme after Juma prayers at Kapasgola Jamat Jame Mosque, pledging to work for organised urban development and justice.

BNP Standing Committee member Salauddin Ahmed, a candidate for Cox's Bazar-1, addressed a street rally in Chakaria.

He said the people have regained ownership of the country and freed democracy from confinement. "Now that democracy must be strengthened so that everyone feels they are owners of this state.

[Our correspondents in respective districts contributed to this report]

Therefore, on February 12, each of us must exercise our voting rights freely and independently," he said.

NCP Member Secretary Akhter Hossen campaigned in Rangpur-4 as the 10-party alliance candidate, saying that despite domestic and foreign conspiracies, people will bring the alliance to power.

In Lakshmipur-1 (Rangpur), Azizur Rahman, an Ishapur Union BNP leader, is seeking votes for the party, even as his son Mahbub Alam is contesting as an NCP candidate.

Mahbub, a frontline activist of the July uprising, is also the brother of former information adviser Mahfuj Alam.

This time, 1,981 candidates, including 249 independents, are contesting the polls. Campaigning will continue until 7:30am on February 10.

Alongside the general election, voters will also take part in a referendum on key constitutional reforms aimed at strengthening democratic institutions and rebalancing state powers.

With the Awami League barred from contesting, analysts say the race is shaping up primarily as a contest between the BNP- and Jamaat-led alliances.

[Our correspondents in respective districts contributed to this report]

is voted to power, Bangladesh would remain Bangladesh and not become Pakistan, Afghanistan or Iran.

"In governing the country, we will follow the Charter of Madinah as a model, where justice and the rule of law will be established, and people of all religions and backgrounds will enjoy equal rights."

Expressing frustration over the current situation, he said they had expected a peaceful Bangladesh after August 5, but anarchy had continued.

"Many false cases have been filed. Many innocent people have been accused, and money has been taken to remove their names from the cases."

Today, he will visit the grave of Abu Sayed, a martyr of the July uprising and a student of Begum Rokeya University. Shafiqur will then address rallies in Gaibandha, Bogura, Sherpur, Sirajganj, and Pabna.

[Our correspondents in Lalmonirhat and Thakurgaon contributed to this report.]

### CORRECTION

In the front page report titled "Record crore-rich candidates in race", published yesterday, the first paragraph under the subhead "FOREIGN ASSETS" should read: Iltekhuruzzaman said information suggested involvement of a declared dependent of a candidate in a house worth £1.4 million purchased in 2013 in the UK, which was not mentioned in the affidavit.

We regret the error.

## No one shed blood for another Hasina Says Nahid as he launches campaign in his constituency

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

National Citizen Party Convener Nahid Islam yesterday said the upcoming election is crucial for safeguarding the country's sovereignty, saying that no one shed blood in the July uprising to elect "another Sheikh Hasina, another extortionist, or another looter."

Nahid, who is contesting from the Dhaka-II constituency, also alleged that a group, alarmed by a surge in public support for the 10-party alliance, is spreading misleading statements and trying to create an atmosphere of fear ahead of the polls.

Addressing a rally marking the inauguration of his election campaign in Shahjadpur, Nahid said, "After 16 years of fascist rule, this election is an opportunity to

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## 'Committed to ensuring rights of people' IAB ameer starts 18-day campaign

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Narayanganj

Ameer of Islami Andolan Bangladesh (IAB) Mufti Syed Muhammad Rezaul Karim, popularly known as Charmonai Pir, has launched an 18-day election tour following his party's withdrawal from Jamaat-e-Islami's alliance ahead of the polls.

The tour began yesterday after Juma prayers from Narayanganj-4 (Fatullah). On the same day, he also joined election rallies of party candidates in Narayanganj-3 (Sonargaon-Siddhiganj) and Dhaka-5 (Demra-Jatrabari).

According to the party's central publicity wing, Rezaul will visit key districts across all divisions during the 18-day programme, continuing until the election. The tour will include direct exchanges of views with people from different walks of life, including prominent ulema, academics and social workers.

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## Business community

FROM PAGE 1

Underscoring the need for an environment that would instill confidence among businesspeople, he said businesses must be provided with adequate energy supplies, and utility prices in the industrial sector should be lowered to help them stay competitive in the global market.

Mohammad Hatem, president of Bangladesh Knitwear Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BKMEA), said the parties must commit to restoring law and order in industrial zones and implementing reforms to the customs system and the National Board of Revenue (NBR) to facilitate trade and business.

"At present, banks are imposing various charges on businesses, along with high interest rates. Political parties should clearly outline in their manifestos how they plan to address these issues if they are voted to power."

Echoing his views, Taskeen Ahmed, the president of Dhaka Chamber of Commerce and Industry (DCCI), said political parties should make lowering the cost of doing business a top priority in their manifestos.

"They should cover issues such as developing railways, waterways, and ports; simplifying the licensing and approval process; strengthening infrastructure planning and coordination; and expanding fully automated systems for customs and trade to reduce the lead time."

He also said they should make time-bound commitments to tackle urgent issues such as energy shortages and take measures to ensure smooth day-to-day business operations.

"The business community expects a credible roadmap that ensures policy certainty, enhances competitiveness, and supports sustainable economic growth."

Tapan Chowdhury, managing director of Square Pharmaceuticals Ltd, said, "We want a more business-friendly environment. Businesses remain hesitant to make investment decisions because of the existing uncertainties."

In recent times, many workers lost jobs due to the closure of several factories. The next government will need to take measures to help reopen these industrial units, he added.

Hoping for a fair election and a smooth transition of power, MA Jabbar, managing director of DBL Group that mainly exports garments, said the next government should choose the right people to run the crucial ministries if they want to serve people in the true sense.

On a similar note, Abul Kasem Khan, vice chairman of A.K. Khan & Company Ltd, said, "We expect to have a stable government... The economy must not face any setback because of political instability."

Emphasising the importance of both political stability and economic clarity, Mohammed Amirul Haque, president of the LPG Operators Association of Bangladesh (LOAB), said, "We expect political parties to outline the direction they intend to take the economy. This should be clearly reflected in their manifestos."

He highlighted regulatory hurdles in the LPG sector, saying companies currently need to obtain and renew

### BUSINESS COMMUNITY'S EXPECTATIONS

Controlling inflation thru' coordinated fiscal, monetary policies

Ensuring security and public order, especially in industrial zones

Improving ease of doing business

Providing uninterrupted and affordable energy supply

Simplifying business licensing, approval processes

Reducing logistics and transport costs thru' infrastructure upgrades

Expanding access to affordable finance, especially for SMEs

the private sector will contribute to national development, he observed.

"We want ease of doing business. Still, we need 27 to 29 signatures from officials at government offices to start a business venture. We want deregulation and a one-stop service in the real sense."

Asif Ibrahim, former president of Dhaka Chamber of Commerce and Industry (DCCI), stressed the need for a comprehensive plan to put in place a multimodal transport network comprising railways, waterways, seaports, and land ports to relieve pressure on roads, which handle over 70 per cent of freight movement.

"Digitisation of customs, permits, and freight tracking could cut clearance times by 30 to 50 percent." Simplifying licensing procedures and rationalising tariffs would also improve efficiency and transparency, he added.

Ibrahim recommended expanding private investment and public-private partnerships (PPPs) to modernise infrastructure.

Targeted support for Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) -- through trade finance, cargo insurance, and regulatory simplification -- could help reduce hidden costs and strengthen Bangladesh's competitiveness in global trade.

Meanwhile, the Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce and Industry (MCCI) has prepared a 10-point reform agenda, urging political parties to incorporate key private sector demands into their manifestos.

The agenda starts with restoring macroeconomic stability by reducing inflation through coordinated fiscal and monetary policies, along with ensuring a predictable exchange rate.

The chamber advocates banking sector reforms to curb irregular lending and improve recovery mechanisms for non-performing loans.

Regarding the tax policy, MCCI calls for a simplified and digitised system that will ensure compliance with regulations and expand the tax base without overburdening existing taxpayers.

The chamber also underscores the need to boost export competitiveness ahead of Bangladesh's graduation from LDC status through free trade agreements (FTAs), tariff rationalisation, and round-the-clock operations at ports and customs.

It also called for improving the investment climate and reforming the energy sector to ensure reliable and affordable supply.

The UN nuclear watchdog must clarify its stance on US and Israeli attacks on Iran's nuclear sites last June before inspectors are allowed to visit those facilities, Iranian media yesterday quoted the country's atomic chief as saying.

Mohammad Eslami said the inspections so far had been limited to undamaged sites and he criticised the watchdog for letting Israeli and US pressure influence its actions.

## US 'armada' heads towards Iran

FROM PAGE 1

The nationwide shutdown of the internet by authorities in Iran, which activists fear is aimed at masking the true scale of a crackdown on protests, has lasted more than two weeks, a monitor said later on Thursday.

"Iran has now been under a national internet blackout for two full weeks," said Netblocks in a post on X.

"At hour 336, connectivity levels continue to flatline with only a slight rise at the backbone supplying regime-whitelisted networks," it said. "A few users are now able to tunnel to

the outside world," it added, without specifying the tools used for this.

The UN Human Rights Council held an emergency session yesterday to discuss the "alarming violence" used in Iran against protesters, while a group of states called on United Nations' investigators to document alleged abuses for future trials. UN rights chief Volker Turk urged Iran authorities to "end brutal repression".

Meanwhile, an influential Iranian cleric warned that Iran may target US-linked investments in the region in retaliation for any US attack on

Some are like cuckoos of spring. They appear only in spring and sing 'kuhu kuhu', then disappear. They have no connection with the people, the grassroots, or the poor and distressed. We hate this kind of politics. We were there, we are here, and we will remain, Insha Allah."

He also said he does not want to see a single unemployed person in the northern region. If elected, Jamaat would generate large-scale

# DHAKA

## Feb election a benchmark for future polls

**Yunus tells US ambassador**

BSS, Dhaka

Chief Adviser Prof Muhammad Yunus has said the February 12 general elections would set a benchmark for all future polls in Bangladesh.

He made the remarks when the newly appointed US Ambassador to Bangladesh, Brent Christensen, paid his maiden courtesy call on the chief adviser at the state guest house Jamuna in Dhaka on Thursday, said the chief adviser's press wing yesterday morning.

During the meeting, the two sides discussed a wide range of issues, including the upcoming general elections, sweeping labour laws approved by the interim government, the planned Bangladesh-US tariff agreement and Rohingya crisis.

The chief adviser highlighted key foreign policy initiatives of the interim government including Dhaka's planned bid for ASEAN membership, and the need to revive Saarc as a key platform for regional and economic cooperation in South Asia.

Yunus said the government was fully prepared to hold free, fair, and transparent elections on February 12. He noted that the European Union would deploy a large number of election observers and expressed hope that other development partners would also send

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PHOTO: CHIEF ADVISER'S PRESS WING

## BARISHAL-5

### Manisha banks on grassroots support

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Barishal

Dr Manisha Chakraborty, candidate of Bangladesher Samantantrik Dal (BSD) from Barishal 5 constituency in the upcoming national parliamentary elections, has drawn considerable public attention with her campaign.

Of the 123 candidates contesting the 21 parliamentary seats in Barishal division, Manisha is one of the only two women candidates -- highlighting the persistent gender gap in electoral politics. The other is BNP candidate Israt Sultana Ilen Bhutto, who previously served as a member of parliament.

Manisha told this correspondent that she is focusing on direct engagement with voters through door-to-door campaigning, particularly among low-income communities.

"I have already visited all the slum areas and met people there. My main strength lies with low-income, working class people, young voters, and women," she said.

Manisha was recruited into the health cadre through the 34th BCS examination but chose not to join government service. Instead, she dedicated herself to BSD's politics, while providing free medical services to the poor and remaining actively involved in labour rights movements.

She hails from a family with a strong legacy in the Liberation War, with both her father and

grandfather being freedom fighters.

In 2018, during her campaign for the post of Barishal City Corporation mayor, Manisha first introduced the concept of "earthen banks" to collect small donations from supporters. This time, she has expanded the initiative alongside online fundraising.

"My campaign is funded through public donations. We



have distributed 100 earthen banks to well-wishers, and many people themselves are collecting contributions to build the polls campaign fund to my support," she said.

"While elections are often equated with money, however, for us that is not the priority.

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## Camps, crime, civic woes take centre stage in Dhaka-16

SADI MUHAMMAD ALOK and SHARIF M SHAFIQUE

Kahkasan, a young woman from the Bihari Camp in Mirpur-II, lives under the constant fear of eviction. Growing up in the congested camp, she has faced a lack of water, gas, and other civic rights, alongside persistent health risks and an unstable environment.

Now a voter, the 23-year-old student's demands are simple yet profound -- basic civic amenities and permanent housing.

Furthermore, the newly enrolled young voter yearns for the security and education of the girls in the camp, as well as the guarantee of a dignified life.

Her story is echoed across Dhaka-16, from Rupnagar, Kalshi, and Pallabi, where long-standing problems remain unresolved.

Drug peddling and mugging are among residents' top concerns.

Due to poor drainage, even light rain floods roads, while local canals have effectively become open sewers.

Garment factories -- the economic backbone of the area -- are often targeted by extortions and gangs, and slum fires continue to recur.

A M Salimullah, a resident

If we form the government, we will begin phased permanent rehabilitation for the people living in Urdu-speaking camps. Once people have stable homes, crime in these areas will naturally decline.

AMINUL HAQUE  
BNP candidate

Past governments used these residents for criminal gains. We want to give them a normal life and a better environment and future for their children.

COL (RETD) ABDUL BATEN  
Jamaat candidate

of Pallabi Housing Society, said the area's problems are frequently ignored due to its location on Dhaka's outskirts.

"Security is a major issue. Drug trading happens in broad daylight, and mugging and theft are rising. Yet, these

issues are rarely addressed," he told The Daily Star.

He hopes the upcoming election will bring stability. "We want a peaceful environment. An elected government might end this ongoing instability."

Dhaka-16, which includes wards 2, 3, 5 and 6 of Dhaka North City Corporation, is set for a closely contested race.

The BNP has nominated Aminul Haque, convener of Dhaka Metropolitan North BNP and former captain of the national football team.

His main rival is Jamaat-e-Islami candidate Col (retd) Abdul Baten, a former army officer.

Both candidates have launched formal campaigns.

Abdullah Al Mansur, office secretary of the National Citizen Party (NCP) -- part of the Jamaat-led 10-party alliance -- said Jamaat workers are focusing on door-to-door outreach in slum areas, while the BNP is maintaining a strong street presence through rallies and meetings.

Meanwhile, with over 50,000 voters residing in Urdu-speaking camps, the community is seen as a key "swing bloc" in the constituency.

However, Sadaqat Khan, president of the Urdu-speaking Peoples Youth Rehabilitation

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## MUSABBIR MURDER Another alleged shooter arrested in Narsingdi

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The Detective Branch (DB) of Dhaka Metropolitan Police has detained another alleged shooter in connection with the murder of Swedchhaseb Dak leader Azizur Rahman Musabbir.

The detainee was identified as Rahim.

A DB team arrested him during a drive in Narsingdi early yesterday and recovered two firearms, said a DB official.

Contacted, DB Additional Commissioner Shafiqul Islam told The Daily Star that the operation is still ongoing.

"The operation team has not yet returned. However, I have heard that two firearms have been recovered. We will inform you later through a press release," he said yesterday.

Musabbir, former general secretary of the Swedchhaseb Dak's Dhaka North city unit, was shot dead on January 7 in an alley near Kazi Nazrul Islam Avenue. His wife filed a murder case with Tejgaon Police Station the following day, accusing four to five unidentified assailants.

Earlier, on January 11, the DB detained four individuals in connection with the killing. During a press briefing that day, Shafiqul Islam said Zinnat was one of the shooters, while Bilal was the main planner of the murder. Detained Rahim is the brother of Bilal.

## Democratic reform, an end to inequality

### Promises Gonotantrik Juktafront in election manifesto

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Gonotantrik Juktafront yesterday unveiled its election manifesto ahead of the 13th national election scheduled for February 12, calling for a complete democratic restructuring of the state and an end to inequality, corruption, and authoritarian rule.

The manifesto was announced by BSD General Secretary Bazlur Rashid Firoz, also a central leader of the alliance, at a press conference at the Dhaka Reporters' Unity.

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## 'Relations between Jamaat and US a warning sign' Says Farhad Mazhar

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Poet and columnist Farhad Mazhar yesterday described the reported relationship between Jamaat-e-Islami and the United States as a "dangerous warning sign".

He made the remarks while responding to a question at a discussion titled "Nationwide gas, electricity and safe water crisis: what society should do", held at the Jatiya Press Club.

A journalist referred to a report published on Thursday by the US-based The Washington Post, which said the United States was seeking

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## CHILD ABUSE

### Sharmin Academy manager sent to jail

COURT CORRESPONDENT

ADhaka court yesterday sent Pabitra Kumar Barua, the manager and administrative officer of Sharmin Academy in Dhaka's Nayapaltan, to jail in a case filed over the assault on a four-year-old student.

Dhaka Metropolitan Magistrate Aminul Islam Junaid passed the order after police produced him before the court, seeking confinement in jail, said a sub-inspector working at the court.

While Pabitra was standing inside the dock at the courtroom, a journalist approached him about the reason behind the alleged abuse of the child.

In response, Pabitra said the incident occurred due to the circumstances at the time.

"The child was not beaten in the manner being

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PHOTO: STAR

## SARASWATI PUJA

### DU, JnU mandaps spotlight attacks on media houses

TANGILA TASNIM and RAKIB MADBIR

The Saraswati Puja celebration of Dhaka University's Department of Mass Communication and Journalism, held at Jagannath Hall yesterday, featured the themes of mob violence and arson attacks on Bangladeshi media houses.

The puja began yesterday morning through invoking the goddess followed by the offering of anjali, a floral tribute.

To highlight the violence and arson attacks on the media houses in December last year, the altar's backdrop was designed to symbolically represent the burnt building of The Daily Star.

Anuska Chakrabarty, one of the organisers and a student of the department, said, "Today we worship our goddess for a prosperous academic life, creativity, wisdom and inspiration. We always aim to reflect and protest through the themes. Each year, we choose a theme that resonates with the

events happening in our society."

"As students of the journalism department, it is our duty to protest against mob violence, a severe violation of freedom of expression. Journalism serves the public and spells out the truth. When journalists and media houses face brutal attacks, it is a serious

goddess idols provided by our hall authority. As in every year, we are hosting the largest puja at this venue."

Meanwhile, the Department of Mass Communication and Journalism of Jagannath University, in its Saraswati Puja celebration yesterday, also highlighted recent mob violence and arson attacks against Bangladeshi media organisations, with images depicting the fire-damaged buildings of The Daily Star and Prothom Alo placed behind the altar.

The puja was held beneath the Shajid Building on JnU campus, beginning at 8:30am with the offering of anjali.

Upoma Mandal, a student of the department and one of the organisers, said, "Alongside worshipping the goddess of knowledge, wisdom, creativity and inspiration, we have used this year's puja theme to protest the brutal attacks on the media. Without a free media, democracy cannot be

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# INTERNATIONAL

## AFGHAN WAR

### UK fury over Trump's Nato front-line remark

AFP, London

Britain said Donald Trump was "wrong to diminish" the role of Nato troops in Afghanistan, as a claim by the US president that they did not fight on the front line sparked outrage.

In an interview with Fox News aired on Thursday, Trump appeared unaware that 457 British soldiers died during the conflict in the South Asian country following the September 11 attacks on the United States.

"They'll say they sent some troops to Afghanistan," Trump told the US outlet, referring to Nato allies.

"And they did, they stayed a little back, a little off the front lines," he added.

Trump also repeated his suggestion that Nato would not come to the aid of the United States if asked to do so.



In fact, following the 9/11 attacks, the UK and a number of other allies joined the US from 2001 in Afghanistan after it invoked Nato's collective security clause.

As well as British forces, troops from other Nato ally countries including Canada, France, Germany, Italy and Denmark and others also died.

"Their sacrifice and that of other Nato forces was made in the service of collective security and in response to an attack on our ally," Prime Minister Keir Starmer's official spokesman said.

"We are incredibly proud of our armed forces and their service and sacrifice will never be forgotten," he added.

Carrie Minister Stephen Kinnock earlier said he expected Starmer would bring the issue up with Trump. "I think he will, I'm sure, be raising this issue with the president... He's incredibly proud of our armed forces, and he will make that clear to the president," he said.

"It just doesn't really add up what he said, because the fact of the matter is the only time that Article 5 has been invoked was to go to the aid of the United States after 9/11," he added.

## ICC yet to respond to BCB

FROM PAGE 1  
body that handles disputes involving the ICC, its member boards, players and officials.

However, it is not an appeal body against decisions of the ICC and can only examine whether ICC followed its own rules and procedures while making the decision.

The ICC had last formed a panel under this committee in 2018, when Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) demanded \$60 million as compensation from Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) for not honouring a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) that required the two boards to play a number of bilateral series between 2015 and 2023. The three-member committee dismissed PCB's compensation claims.

Meanwhile, Cultural Affairs Adviser Mostofa Sarwar Faruqui yesterday echoed the statements made by Asif Nazrul and BCB president Aminul Islam Bulbul on Thursday, accusing ICC of double standards.

"When India decides not to play in Pakistan, ICC



Supporters of ousted Venezuelan president Nicolás Maduro, including health sector workers, demonstrate outside the UN headquarters in Caracas to demand his release on Thursday. Venezuelan lawmakers gave their initial backing to plans to throw open the oil sector to private investors, paving the way for the return of US energy majors -- a key demand of President Donald Trump.

PHOTO: AFP

## Russia presses Donbas claim ahead of UAE talks

Zelensky hopes first Ukraine-Russia-US talks in Abu Dhabi are 'step toward ending war'

AGENCIES

Russia said it was not dropping its key demand that Ukraine pull out of its eastern Donbas region, ahead of three-way talks between Ukrainian, Russian and American officials in the UAE later yesterday.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said territory remained the key issue and would be on the agenda for the talks, which look set to be the first direct public negotiations between Moscow and Kyiv on a plan being pushed by US President Donald Trump to end the almost four-year-long war.

The Donbas issue is key. It will be discussed as will be the modality of how the three sides see it," he tells journalists via a voice message. Speaking about the talks in Abu Dhabi - which he will be sending a Ukrainian delegation to - he says: "It's a step - hopefully towards ending the war - but different things can happen."

The Ukrainian president also says he discussed Donbas with President Trump in Davos on Thursday.

"Russia's position is well known on the fact that Ukraine, Ukrainian armed forces, have to leave the territory of the Donbas. They must be withdrawn from there," Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said. "This is a very important condition," he added.

Kyiv is under mounting US pressure to secure a peace deal in the nearly four-year-old war with



Ukrainian soldiers fire a BM-21 'Grad' multiple rocket launcher toward Russian positions near Druzhkivka in Ukraine's Donetsk region.

Moscow, which has demanded Ukraine give up its entire eastern area of Donbas before it stops fighting.

Putin's demand that Ukraine surrender the 20 percent it still holds of the eastern Donetsk region have proven a key stumbling block.

Zelensky has refused to give up land that Russia has not been able to capture in four years of grinding, attritional warfare.

The Ukrainian leader added that a deal on US security guarantees for Kyiv was ready, and that he was only waiting on Trump for a

specific date and place to sign it.

Ukraine has sought strong security guarantees from allies in the event of a peace deal to prevent Russia, which has shown little interest in ending the war, from invading again.

Asked about using Moscow's frozen assets to fund reconstruction on Russian territory, Zelensky dismissed as "nonsense" the idea of using the money to rebuild "their parts".

Russia had previously floated the idea of using frozen assets to pay for the recovery of Russian-occupied territory inside Ukraine.

## BNP ready to deliver change

### FROM PAGE 1 'COUNTRY MUST BE REBUILT'

Tarique said corruption and the destruction of institutions during the past regime have severely hindered the country's progress.

"We have to rebuild it. To do that, democracy must be established. And why must it be established? Because only

by democratically electing your representatives can you take your local problems to them," he said.

He added, "In the elections held over the past 15 years, could you reach the so-called MPs? Could you take your area's problems to them? You could not. That is why,

if we want to solve local problems and develop the country, we must elect representatives democratically, not only in the national parliamentary election, but also at the municipal, upazila, and union parishad levels."

The BNP leader

said accountability is essential and that elected representatives must understand what the people want.

"Just as I came to you today and listened to your problems, I expect future representatives at every level to meet the people directly, identify their problems, and take initiatives to solve them," he said.

### 'HOUSING OUR MAIN PROBLEM'

During the event, Tarique invited several residents, including students, marginal workers, onto the stage to outline the main problems facing Bhashantek.

Van driver Md Juwel, who has lived in the area for 50 years, said, "We live in slums. Our main problem is housing. We need more support as we are poor. Our roads are also in very bad condition."

Shanta, a homemaker, said there were no proper employment opportunities for

women in the area. Lili Akter, a resident of the nearby slum, demanded rehabilitation for slum dwellers, while university student Hena Akter called for the area to be developed in an orderly and well-planned manner.

Tarique assured them of addressing the issues.

During the programme, Tarique invited a woman from the audience onto the stage after she wanted to meet him.

Once on stage, she, visibly emotional, apologised, saying she had once stolen guavas from trees at Tarique's house.

In response, Tarique said a guava tree would be planted at her home.

The woman also alleged that during the Awami League's tenure, a local party leader forcibly occupied her family's land and harassed her relatives.

She urged Tarique to look into the matter.

Tarique's wife Zubaida Rahman and other BNP leaders were present at the programme.

DHAKA SATURDAY JANUARY 24, 2026  
MAGH 10, 1432 BS  
The Daily Star 5

## Pak police arrest prominent rights activist

Says lawyers' group

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistani police arrested a prominent rights activist and her husband yesterday as they were heading to a court hearing in Islamabad on "cyberterrorism" charges, her family and a lawyers' association said.

Iamaan Mazari, a 32 year old lawyer and vocal critic of Pakistan's military, faces a dozen charges but it was not immediately clear if yesterday's detention was related to any of them.

Mazari and her husband, fellow lawyer Hadi Ali Chattha, were granted bail in a cybercrime case on Tuesday and the couple sought blanket bail to prevent arrest in any other cases so they could appear in subsequent proceedings.

Syed Wajid Ali Shah Gillani, president of the Islamabad High Court Bar Association, alleged in a video statement that police manhandled the couple before arresting them.

Mazari's mother Shireen Mazari, a former minister of human rights, also said in a post on X that her daughter was arrested, alleging police used violence as she was detained.

Islamabad's police force has not replied to an AFP request for comment.

Iamaan Mazari told AFP on Tuesday that she and her husband feared arrest over undisclosed police cases, a move she said would be a "grave injustice".

## IMMIGRATION RAID

### Fury over five-year-old's detention in US

### UN rights chief 'astounded by the now-routine abuse' of migrants

AFP, Minneapolis

Democrats and local officials in Minneapolis expressed outrage Thursday at the detention of a five-year-old boy in a massive immigration crackdown, as US Vice President JD Vance defended federal agents' actions.

Thousands of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents have been deployed to the Democratic-led city, as the administration of President Donald Trump presses its campaign to deport what it says are millions of illegal immigrants across the country.

The UN rights chief voiced astonishment yesterday at the US authorities' "now-routine abuse" of migrants and refugees, urging Washington to "end practices that are tearing apart families".

Vance confirmed Thursday that the five-year-old boy, Liam Conejo Ramos, was among those detained, but argued that agents were protecting the boy after his father "ran" from an immigration sweep.

"What are they supposed to do? Are they supposed to let a five-year-old child freeze to death?" he said. Democratic Texas congressman Joaquin Castro rejected that explanation, branding Homeland Security authorities "sick liars."

## MEDITERRANEAN SEA

### French navy boards tanker from Russia

AFP, Paris

France's navy, with the help of allies, on Thursday boarded a tanker alleged to be from Russia's sanctioned "shadow fleet" in the Mediterranean, President Emmanuel Macron said.

"This morning, the French Navy boarded an oil tanker coming from Russia, subject to international sanctions and suspected of flying a false flag," he said on X in English, adding the operation had been carried out "with the support of several of our allies".

Local maritime authorities said the navy seized an oil tanker called "Grinch" between Spain and Morocco, after it started its journey in the Russian Arctic port of Murmansk.

A ship called "Grinch" is under UK sanctions, while another called "Carl" with the same registration number is sanctioned by the United States and European Union.

Ship tracking websites marinetrack and vesselfinder said the vessel had been flying a Comoros flag.

"After the team boarded, an examination of documents confirmed the doubts as to the regularity of the flag," the Mediterranean Maritime Prefecture said.

The ship "is currently being escorted by the national navy to a point of anchorage for further verifications," it added.

Images released by the French military showed masked soldiers boarding the Russia-linked ship in an operation involving a navy boat and two navy helicopters.

## A peaceful start to electioneering

EC must enforce the rules impartially to ensure a credible election

The peaceful beginning of the campaign for the 13th parliamentary election is an encouraging sign, particularly given our troubled electoral history. The first two days of electioneering passed without major violence or disorder, with political parties and candidates launching rallies, door-to-door outreach, and digital campaigns. After years of one-sided polls and widespread public disillusionment, this election represents the first truly competitive contest in more than a decade.

Candidates from major parties—BNP, Jamaat-e-Islami, NCP, Islami Andolan, Ganotantrik Juktajfront, and others—visited voters, held rallies, and announced their platforms. The Election Commission has urged strict adherence to the electoral code of conduct. Yet, reports from the very first day of campaigning point to multiple breaches of the rules. Despite a landmark legal reform banning all types of posters, they have already appeared in some areas. Similarly, while only biodegradable materials are permitted for banners and festoons, non-degradable materials such as plastic and polythene are being used openly in the capital and elsewhere. Loudspeaker campaigning, though regulated by strict time limits, has also raised questions about compliance. Individually, these may appear to be minor breaches, but collectively they signal a lack of discipline—and, more importantly, a lack of deterrence.

Muscle power and money have long played a prominent role in our politics. Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) reports that this election will feature the highest-ever number of candidates with assets exceeding Tk 1 crore, including 27 aspirants declaring movable and immovable assets of Tk 100 crore or more. The EC must rigorously examine affidavit disclosures, verify any inconsistencies, and coordinate with oversight bodies to ensure that wealth and influence do not undermine the democratic process.

As political competition is intense, accusations and counter-accusations are already emerging. As election expert Badiul Alam Majumdar has rightly noted, some level of tension is normal, but it must never spill over into violence or systematic unfairness. Preventing that outcome requires an EC willing to act decisively. Responsibility, however, does not rest with the EC alone; political parties must also refrain from unfair practices, respect environmental and legal rules for campaigning, and focus on engaging voters. The administration and law enforcement agencies, too, must perform their duties impartially and professionally.

This election offers a chance to restore credibility to the country's electoral system. The EC must act with courage and impartiality to ensure that. Political parties must compete honourably, and candidates must respect both the letter and the spirit of the law. Only by doing so can we ensure that February 12 delivers a truly free, fair and credible election.

## Repair and return Harin Ghata's glory

Authorities must ensure routine maintenance of facilities in eco-parks

The deterioration of the Harin Ghata eco-park in Barguna due to neglect and lack of routine maintenance is disheartening. The park, home to a larger breed of spotted deer compared to those seen in the Sundarbans, was developed into an eco-tourism site in 2015 by the environment ministry. It used to feature walking trails, resting shades, a rest house, a watchtower, shaded huts, and public washrooms. The area once attracted many tourists, with revenues reaching as much as Tk 1.2 lakh in 2024 from park ticket sales. But now, most of the sheds and washrooms lie in ruin, and many of the slabs of the 950-metre trail that leads to four beautiful, secluded beaches—Laldia, Ruhita, Padma and Char Lathimara—are either missing or broken in places. As a result, most tourists cannot access the beaches. Even climbing the five-storey watchtower has become a challenge because of the unsafe stairs.

The park is a reminder of our culture of developing infrastructure and then allowing it to descend into ruin. While our fervour is impressive when it comes to raising or allocating funds during the development stage of a project, it somehow vanishes when it comes to maintaining the facilities. The Harin Ghata eco-park faced a similar fate. Much of its facilities were damaged by Cyclone Remal in May 2024. One and a half years later, the level of damage remains the same as the authorities have not yet taken any steps to carry out the necessary repairs. This implies that they have little interest in earning revenues or augmenting the tourist appeal of the park. Otherwise, how could they not repair and at least make the washrooms functional in a more than 3000-acre eco-park?

Bangladesh does not have a shortage of scenic places that can be leveraged for generating revenue through tourism. What we lack is the willingness and sincerity of public officials responsible for preserving and maintaining the facilities needed to make these natural sites, like the Harin Ghata eco-park, accessible to the public. If we want to attract tourists to this country, making and broadcasting promotional videos is not enough. Authorities must repair and routinely maintain the facilities that make places of tourist interest comfortable for visitors.

## THIS DAY IN HISTORY

### Opportunity lands on Mars



On this day in 2004, the six-wheeled robotic rover Opportunity, which was launched in mid 2003, landed on Mars and—like its twin rover, Spirit, which had landed on January 3—analysed rocks and soils and relayed pictures back to Earth.

# EDITORIAL



Aasha Mehreen Amin  
is joint editor at The Daily Star.

### AASHA MEHREEN AMIN

The termination of two teachers of the University of Asia South Pacific (UAP), under pressure from groups of former and current students, on allegations of "Islamophobia" and being sympathisers of the ousted regime, is part of a disturbing trend. Teachers have been forced to resign, physically assaulted and mentally abused online with the administration failing to stand by them.

On December 18, Assistant Professor Layeqa Bashir and Associate Professor ASM Mohsin of the Department of Basic Sciences and Humanities at the UAP were terminated. The university administration's reason in the notice was "the prevailing situation resulting from student protests."

This happened without any institutional process. Instead, Prof Layeqa was first asked to resign and when she protested the move, an investigation committee was formed that invited complaints against her. Layeqa told *The Daily Star* that if she held anti-religion views, this would have been noted during semester evaluations. Instead, she alleged that complaints were invited from the entire student body after the committee was formed. But even before the investigation report was submitted and without giving any chance for her to respond, the university administration decided to terminate her along with Prof Mohsin.

According to reports, it all started on December 10 over Layeqa's Facebook post where she objected to face-covering while having no issues with other aspects of purdah. This was in the context of the murder of a mother and daughter in Mohammadpur where the murderer, a domestic worker, had covered her face and worn one of the victim's clothes to escape undetected. Layeqa had added the story at the bottom of her post.

Although the post had been set to be visible only to her friends, screenshots were leaked which led to an eruption online of demands for her termination. A week later, she apologised for any hurt feelings from her post, saying the remarks

were personal and written from the standpoint of personal security following the Mohammadpur double murder. She apologised if anyone was hurt by her post and said it had no connection to her workplace. But this did not assuage the students and the protests continued, with the protesters demanding the termination of Prof Mohsin for not taking any action against Prof Layeqa. According to Prof Mohsin,

such vicious attacks on academic freedom and freedom of speech



VISUAL: SHAIKH SULTANA JAHAN BADHON

he was terminated without any written complaint being made against him and with no inquiry committee formed. He was also not given any opportunity to respond.

At a press conference, one of the students demanded that teachers of other universities with the same mindset be identified and expelled. We all know how such incendiary comments can lead to dangerous situations.

What is most disturbing is that the UAP administration, instead of waiting for a full report of the investigation, announced the termination of both. Their lack of

professionalism and courage to stand by their faculty members is shameful and unwarranted. Prof Layeqa told *The Daily Star* that verifying the identity of a student during exams or interviews, including checks for devices, was routine and lawful, referring to the viral video of her asking a student on Zoom to show her face for identification, that was also used to tag her as anti-religion.

Is this the "new Bangladesh" we are to look forward to? Where teachers can be terminated on the whims of former and current student mobs, due to allegations that have not been proven or have been made by distorting the facts? Apparently, some students objected to Prof Layeqa's teaching about ancient customs and beliefs, which were very much a part of the subject she was teaching.

Such vicious attacks on academic freedom and freedom of speech

opinions against the regime and its cronies could be targeted. Private universities, however, were more or less spared of this.

Not anymore. Now, after an uprising that promised to do away with such repression, it is back with a vengeance, only the actors are different. Groups claiming to uphold Islamic values (and some affiliated with political parties) have become emboldened and have decided to "cleanse" the universities of those they have tagged as anti-Islamic or "agents of the AL."

There have been some who have expressed their outrage at Prof Layeqa Bashir's arbitrary termination and expressed solidarity with her. The University Teachers' Network has condemned the UAP's arbitrary termination of the teachers without due process and stated that the teachers should be reinstated. A member of the network has aptly called it an assault on the academic freedom of all universities. Women's rights organisation Naripokkho has also protested the termination of Prof Layeqa and the weaponisation of "hurting religious sentiments" to harass, torture and even kill people.

On face value, these incidents seem to be part of a widespread campaign to target anyone who does not appear to conform to certain ideologies. In the name of righteousness or safeguarding religion, certain groups—some politically affiliated—are carrying out this campaign, first by casting aspersions or even abuse on social media and then gathering enough people to create a mob and get the job done. For educational institutions, this is particularly dangerous as it aims to censor and control teachers, students, curriculum, and even campus environment.

Unless university administrations treat these cases with professionalism and fairness, these incidents will keep happening. Few teachers will want to risk termination, harassment or physical assault while trying to make students learn, which may compel them to leave out important parts of the curriculum and lead to constant self-censorship. This is a debilitating chokehold on intellectual development. Ultimately, it will be the students who will pay the price of this rabid intolerance of diverse opinions even when they are fact-based. For university education that is meant to enlighten minds through deeper knowledge and exposure to the unfamiliar and unconventional, these attacks on academic freedom will be nothing less than catastrophic.

## Is Bangladesh's most vital vote not getting enough attention?



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### ZAKIR KIBRIA

A curious drama is unfolding as Bangladesh approaches a historic double-header on February 12: a parliamentary election and a constitutional referendum. One is hailed as vital for the nation. The other asks citizens to approve or reject the July National Charter, a document proposing over 80 foundational reforms with a "Yes" or "No." We are so focused on the roar of the electoral battle that we risk missing the constitutional equations that will rewrite the nation's rulebook for generations to come.

What exactly is on this coloured ballot? The charter isn't minor tinkering. A "Yes" vote instructs the next parliament to enact a new political architecture, including reinstating a non-partisan caretaker government for elections, creating a 100-member upper house of parliament, and implementing 30 specific reforms—from prime ministerial term limits to judicial independence—binding on future governments. It's a generational choice presented in the simplest binary term.

Yet, for a nation of over 12.7 crore registered voters, this monumental decision arrives shrouded in technical complexity and overshadowed by the electoral frenzy. As one young voter recently confessed, the issues still feel distant, the details obscure. How did a vote of such constitutional gravity become the subplot in the story?

The plot twist lies in the role of the stage managers. The interim government, tasked with neutrally overseeing both the polls, has become the most powerful campaigner for a "Yes" outcome in the referendum. It has launched a large-scale, statewide effort, coordinating across all ministries and even mobilising private banks and NGOs. Its message is unequivocal: vote "Yes" to implement all reforms; vote "No" and gain nothing.

Special Assistant to the Chief Adviser Ali Riaz defends this, arguing that the government emerged from a popular uprising with a mandate for reform and sees "no legal restriction" on its campaigning. He frames the referendum as a safeguard against fascist rule. All advisers have publicly urged people to support reforms by voting "Yes."

However, this blurs a fundamental democratic line. As constitutional expert Shahdeen Malik has warned, this "clearly illegal and unethical" behaviour constitutes direct government interference. Imagine a football referee not just enforcing rules but sprinting alongside one team, cheering them on. The entity meant to guarantee a fair debate has become its most powerful protagonist, steering public discourse towards a pre-approved answer.

This is where we encounter the architecture of a "foretold consensus." French philosopher Jacques Rancière

argued that politics is fundamentally about the "distribution of the sensible"—what a society decides is visible, sayable, and debatable. Our current moment is a potent example. By declaring the upcoming election the singular, all-important event, our public narrative performs a powerful act of curation. It makes one democratic act hyper-visible and

**What exactly is on this coloured ballot?**  
**The charter isn't minor tinkering. A 'Yes' vote instructs the next parliament to enact a new political architecture, including reinstating a non-partisan caretaker government for elections, creating a 100-member upper house of parliament, and implementing 30 specific reforms binding on future governments.**  
**It's a generational choice presented in the simplest binary term.**

History offers a cautionary note. Bangladesh's past referendums live in two distinct memories. In 1977 and 1985, under authoritarian rulers, they produced suspiciously overwhelming "Yes" votes (98.9 percent and 94.5 percent, respectively) to legitimise power. The 1991 referendum was different, a consensus-driven exercise that restored parliamentary democracy. The 2026 referendum occupies a troubling grey zone. It is not the uncontested plebiscite of 1977 and 1985. However, the active steering by the interim government also distinguishes it from the consensus model of 1991. When the state campaigns for a specific result, the process risks becoming less about deliberative choice and more about the administration of a foretold conclusion.

The path forward is not to diminish the election's importance but to expand our democratic sensibility. A healthy democracy can hold two crucial conversations at once. We must be able to ask, openly and constructively: can a complex charter of over 80 reforms be meaningfully decided by a single binary choice without deeper public engagement and control? Does a government-run campaign for one side strengthen or weaken the long-term legitimacy of the outcome?

As voters prepare to receive two ballots—one white, one coloured—on February 12, the story of Bangladesh's democratic revival will not be written by a single vote, but by the conversation we choose to have about both. Let us celebrate the return of electoral competition, but let us also turn up the volume on the referendum, pull it from the shadows of foregone conclusions, and subject its monumental proposals to the light of relentless, curious and respectful public debate. Only then can we move beyond a chronicle of foretold consensus and start writing a truly democratic script.

## THIS DAY IN HISTORY

### Opportunity lands on Mars



On this day in 2004, the six-wheeled robotic rover Opportunity, which was launched in mid 2003, landed on Mars and—like its twin rover, Spirit, which had landed on January 3—analysed rocks and soils and relayed pictures back to Earth.

# How we lost leverage in cricket diplomacy



## BLOWIN' IN THE WIND

Dr Shamsad Mortuza  
is professor of English at Dhaka University.

SHAMSAD MORTUZA

When the Fizz was pitched as a slingshot to hit back at the monstrous decision of the IPL that forced the Bangladeshi fast bowler's franchise team to release him on security grounds, we vaulted our cricket board as David, on whom our nationalist pride rested, and expected the Indian (and by extension the international) cricket authorities to yield like Goliath. As a proud nation, we were angered by the trivialisation of our national hero in a flimsy, politically constructed context with racial undertones. Our cricket board rightfully asked, "If you cannot provide safety for one of our players in your own words, how do you expect our players, staff, media, and fans to be safe during the T20 World Cup?"

The grievance was legitimate. The players' welfare is one of the central concerns of the International Cricket Council (ICC), and they immediately followed the protocol to initiate a third-party risk assessment. A Canadian firm did the survey and found the playing condition suitable. Bangladesh's grievance was valid, but its diplomatic execution was flawed. The cricket council board outvoted our plea 14-2, with only Pakistan supporting us.

The "professional" body had little to say about the strong nationalist, albeit populist, stance taken by Bangladesh. The country's call to boycott India as a game venue due to security concerns has received overwhelming support from locals, as evidenced by their social media outcries. But we failed to gain international sympathy. Consequently, Bangladesh is left to its own devices, with the possibility of Scotland, the top performer in the qualifying round, filling in the void created by our non-participation. The outcome signifies that the cricketing world is unimpressed with our diagnostic reasoning regarding the Fizz episode as a real concern.

We needed to argue that this episode is not a mere sentimental tantrum, as there have been many reported incidents of Bangladeshi or presumed Bangladeshi being attacked in different parts of India. In that given context, to play in the opening match against the West Indies on February 7 in Kolkata is a



VISUAL: ALIZA RAHMAN

difficult proposition. Bangladesh does not seek retaliation but equal and fair treatment. We hoped India, above all teams, would share our concerns, as they have created the exclusive option to play against Pakistan in neutral venues. Bangladesh's plea is backed by the 18 crore viewers whose national dignity should also be a priority for an international body. And realpolitik would have allowed some leeway to de-escalate the tension and provisions for future engagement.

The problem that Bangladesh cricket is facing now is a backlash from showing its

smartly shifting the argument from security to logistical disruption.

Bangladesh's moral logic failed to triumph over the procedural governance issues.

Why would other countries, sponsors, fans, and

communities suffer due to the last-minute

request for a venue change? If West Indian

fans have already booked their tickets and

hotels for Kolkata, what right does one have to tell them to rebook their flights and stay in

Colombo? This is a no-brainer.

There are lessons to be learnt from this

abortive attempt to turn any sympathy we

might have for Fizz's security concerns into professional support at the ICC meeting. I don't know whether there was any shuttle diplomacy engaged by BCB to employ its foreign envoys or lobby firms to talk to member countries before the board meeting was held. From information available in the public domain, I can discern that ICC stuck to its operational logic, highlighting third-party security assessments, broadcast

on our side, we probably thought the India-Pakistan neutral venue issue would give us some sort of leverage. For Pakistan, supporting Bangladesh would enhance its moral claim, especially since Pakistan is adversely affected by India's refusal to play the other "Midnight's Child" at home, which is justified by security concerns. Bangladesh failed to realise that the ICC's governance might treat the India-Pakistan case as a "legacy exception." Weeks before a tournament, we cannot expect such exclusivity and disrupt governance. Exposing the hypocrisy has not given us any bargaining leverage. Our adventurous tryst with triumphalism overlooked the need to reach out to neutral boards for support at the board meeting. Instead of a unilateral escalation of tension, we need to build a coalition with an emphasis on enhanced safety protocols for conditional participation. Cricket started as a test of endurance. One must be committed to the long term. Instead, we approached the issue with a typical boundary-or-die mentality.

We showed minimal concern for the players who should have been the central focus of the issue. World Cups represent unique opportunities for many players. These are gateways to careers, income, and recognition. Ironically, to protect the prestige of one player, we have now diminished the potential of many others. One official has already publicly humiliated national players for earning money without bringing any noteworthy trophies. Again, such rhetoric is not healthy for the morale of the players before an international tourney. We don't know to what extent the ICC will punish us: demerit points, future participation in sports, damage claimed by sponsors, revenue loss. The list is not exhaustive.

It is imperative that we revert to the fundamental objectives of sports. This entertainment serves as a licensed platform for rivalry, transforming political anxiety into regulated competition. The current episode exposes rather than confines aggression. Instead of using cricket as a buffer zone, it has been pulled back into geopolitics. The ICC can very well question how some state actors overshadowed the guaranteed sovereignty of BCB.

It is too early to assess the true cost of this incident right now. We will have to wait, and we will see how the future unfolds. However, the controversy surrounding the Fizz issue has taught us a valuable lesson: cricket diplomacy thrives when it maintains dignity in a quiet manner, but it falters when it is proclaimed loudly.

## We need a national RSV vaccination strategy

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is associate scientist at icddr,b.

RIDWANA MAHER MANNA and  
ANIQA TASNIM HOSSAIN

Respiratory syncytial virus, known as RSV, is a common virus that most adults mistake for a mild cold when affected. Common symptoms such as a runny nose, slight cough, or a low-grade fever rarely cause concern. But for babies under 12 months of age, RSV can turn deadly. In newborns, severe RSV infection attacks the lungs, causing excessive breathing difficulty and leading to serious illness such as pneumonia and bronchiolitis. As RSV appears more or less harmless in older children and healthy adults, it is frequently underestimated, allowing the virus to spread unnoticed until a baby becomes critically ill.

In early 2025, a premature 10-week-old in Dhaka was rushed to the hospital, struggling to breathe. What began as a mild cold quickly became a medical emergency. Doctors diagnosed RSV, and the baby required oxygen support and intensive care to survive. In one of many similar cases, a six-week-old baby girl in rural Bangladesh fought the virus and narrowly survived after prolonged

CROSSWORD  
BY THOMAS JOSEPH

hospitalisation. These are not isolated cases. Across hospitals in Bangladesh, infants are repeatedly admitted with severe RSV infection, raising serious concern among healthcare providers, yet remaining largely unnoticed beyond hospital walls.

From October to April each year, RSV circulates widely across the country. During this peak season, hospitals admit thousands of infants with severe respiratory illness. Many arrive too late. RSV is now one of the leading viral causes of pneumonia, which remains the leading cause of death among children under five in Bangladesh.

Evidence clearly shows the scale of the

problem. Globally, a major international health study published in 2024 by *The Lancet*, one of the world's leading medical journals, estimates that RSV infects about 33 million children under five, leading to 3.6 million hospitalisations and more than 118,000 deaths every year. In Bangladesh, the latest Global Burden of Disease estimates indicate that RSV contributes to more than 500 child deaths annually and accounts for over 47,000 years of healthy life lost. Even more concerning is that RSV-related deaths among Bangladeshi children have increased steadily over the past three years.

This virus is especially dangerous because it strikes babies before they are old enough to receive routine childhood vaccines, creating a critical gap in protection. The question, therefore, is not whether RSV is serious, but how we can protect infants during this most

vulnerable period of life.

One proven solution is maternal immunisation. When a pregnant woman is vaccinated, her body produces protective antibodies that pass to her baby before birth, providing immediate protection from day one. This approach is not experimental. Bangladesh has already used maternal vaccination to nearly eliminate newborn tetanus. Additionally, many high and low-middle income countries now offer maternal vaccines for whooping cough, influenza, Covid, and, most recently, RSV. Maternal immunisation has become standard public health practice, not an exception.

After decades of research, we now have new tools to prevent RSV. In 2023, the first RSV vaccine for 32-36-week pregnant women was approved for use. In 2025, the World Health Organization (WHO) prequalified this vaccine, confirming that it meets global standards for safety and effectiveness. This creates an important policy opportunity for Bangladesh, with potential financial support from the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunization (Gavi), which works to expand access to life-saving vaccines in low-income countries.

Some may also be concerned about whether Bangladesh can deliver vaccines at the correct stage of pregnancy. But Bangladesh already delivers time-sensitive antenatal interventions every day. For example, pregnant women receive tetanus vaccines at specific stages, and antenatal

corticosteroid injections are given to mothers at risk of preterm birth to help mature a baby's lungs before delivery. These services rely on accurate timing and existing antenatal care systems. With appropriate guidance and digital tracking, the same systems can safely support maternal RSV vaccination.

Evidence from real-world settings is compelling. In Argentina's 2024 RSV vaccine rollout, where about 60 percent of pregnant women were vaccinated, severe RSV illness in infants fell by nearly 75 percent. Hospital admissions dropped sharply, intensive care admissions declined by more than three-quarters, and, notably, all RSV-related infant deaths occurred among babies whose mothers had not been vaccinated. The message is simple and clear: vaccinating mothers saves babies' lives.

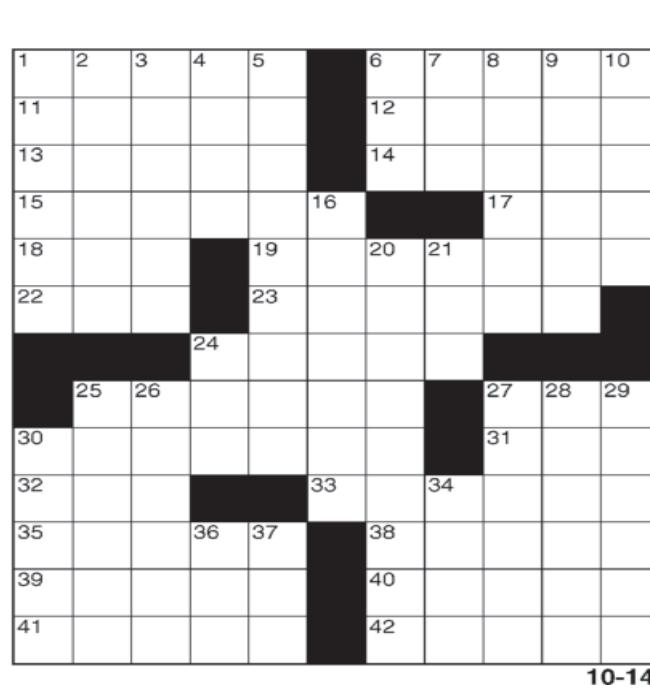
Bangladesh is not starting from scratch. The country is globally well recognised for its Expanded Programme on Immunization (EPI), which has achieved high childhood vaccine coverage and dramatically reduced diseases like measles and polio. The delivery platforms, cold chain systems, trained health workers, and public trust already exist. What is missing is a coordinated maternal immunisation platform that brings pregnancy-based vaccines into routine antenatal care across both public and private sectors.

Digital systems under Bangladesh's national Health Management Information

System (HMIS) are already in place. These systems can register pregnancies, schedule vaccines, and send reminders. With better use of these tools, maternal and child immunisation services can remain closely connected, ensuring no woman or baby is missed. Public awareness is equally

important. Expectant parents need to know that maternal vaccines are safe, carefully tested, and designed to protect both mother and child. Bangladesh has shown sustained leadership in public health, from pioneering oral rehydration therapy to achieving high childhood immunisation coverage. Maternal immunisation is the next step in the trajectory.

Policymakers must establish a dedicated platform and formally include RSV vaccination within national immunisation guidelines for pregnancy. Health managers must integrate maternal vaccination into routine antenatal care. Development partners, including Gavi, should align financing to support rapid introduction. Healthcare providers must be trained and supported to counsel and vaccinate pregnant women, even in busy and resource-constrained settings. Delay will cost lives. With the systems, evidence, and experience already in place, Bangladesh has a real chance to protect its newborns and infants before serious illness takes hold. When we vaccinate a mother, we protect two lives and secure the promise of tomorrow.



## THURSDAY'S ANSWERS

O	P	E	R	A	Z	E	B	R	A
F	I	X	E	D	A	L	O	O	F
F	E	T	E	D	P	E	R	S	E
	E	L	S	E	C	R	E	W	
C	A	N	S	T	O	T	O		
E	L	S	M	A	N	O	W	A	R
L	O	I	R	E	C	R	E	T	E
S	T	O	O	L	I	E	D	O	N
N	U	T	S		A	C	M	E	
P	A	C	T		M	A	S	H	
A	V	O	I		S	T	O	O	P
L	O	R	N		T	E	R	R	A
E	N	D	E		O	R	D	E	R

WRITE FOR US, SEND US YOUR OPINION  
ION PIECES TO  
dsopinion@gmail.com



**"The time period my film deals with is very much the post-July phase. From July onward—basically immediately after the fall of the government—we are fictionally developing that period. The incidents we show are mostly events from the aftermath. We wanted to tell the story in a neutral way, without imposing a point of view"**

**Mohammad Touqir Islam**



**"We are still too close to the real events. Right now, documentaries work much better than fiction. Fiction needs a little more time. Once there is some historical distance, filmmakers will be able to explore it more deeply and meaningfully"**

**Mostofa Sarwar Farooki**

**"Filmmakers must be careful not to turn films into propaganda. You can have your personal point of view, but imposing it on the audience diminishes the work. Quality will only come when films are approached honestly and thoughtfully"**

**Bidhan Rebeiro**



**"Whether more films are made depends on the political climate and the mindset of filmmakers. Post-election, there may be more room to explore July, but it has to be done with integrity, not just because funding is available"**

**Sadia Khalid Reeti**



### SHOWBIZ SPECIAL

# 18 months, few good films: Does July need historical distance to reflect on?

**The Ministry has been actively producing documentaries on July and its context, focusing on three key themes: the past covers 16 years of authoritarianism and the July Mass Uprising; the present celebrates an inclusive Bangladesh, highlighting ethnic diversity, cultural festivals, and traditional New Year celebrations; and the future looks toward a democratic Bangladesh.**

**RAKSHANDA RAHMAN MISHA**

The July Uprising was when raw courage, anger, and hope collided on the streets. One can still picture Abu Sayed facing bullets with unwavering resolve—moments that make one's chest tighten just thinking about them. The entire nation rose together, not just in protest, but in an extraordinary act of bravery that demanded to be remembered.

There are so many untold stories from July, yet when we look at our cinema, it gives the impression that the silver screen has barely scratched the surface of what July truly was. Are filmmakers hesitant to tell these stories? And why, in such a short period, have we only seen few July-related films make it to the theatres?

Ministry of Cultural Affairs Adviser Mostofa Sarwar Farooki shared his perspective on documenting the July Revolution. "We are still too close to the real events. Right now, documentaries work much better than fiction. Fiction needs a little more time. Once there is some historical distance, filmmakers will be able to explore it more deeply and meaningfully."

The Ministry has been actively producing documentaries on July and its context, focusing on three key themes: the past covers 16 years of authoritarianism and the July Mass Uprising; the present celebrates an inclusive Bangladesh, highlighting ethnic diversity, cultural festivals, and traditional New Year celebrations; and the future looks toward a democratic Bangladesh. On the Chief Adviser's Facebook page alone, these documentaries have racked up 118 million views, with millions more across other platforms.

Film critic Bidhan Rebeiro believes timing and perspective are key. "From what I have observed so far, this still needs more time. The events are still recent, and there is a sense of heat surrounding them. When someone works with that kind of heat, the time and mental space needed to dive deep are limited. What dominates instead is immediacy, and within that immediacy, there is a tendency for works to turn into propaganda films. Once this tendency fades, filmmakers can reflect more thoughtfully and create higher-quality works."

Critic Sadia Khalid Reeti added that execution and intent matter just as much as timing. "Quality depends on who is assigned the work and with what intention. Many people have taken on July projects, but not all have the expertise. Some were rushed to align with the current government, and that urgency affected the depth of the films. Honest intent is essential. If someone is making a film only for funding, the quality suffers." She also noted that many filmmakers might hesitate because the aspirations of July remain unfulfilled. "The hopes that people took to the streets for, the ideals they fought for, have



largely not been realised. From that perspective, I understand why some filmmakers are reluctant to engage with the subject fully."

Director Mohammad Touqir Islam, who helmed *Delipi*, shared his approach: "The time period my film deals with is very much the post-July phase. From July onward—basically immediately after the fall of the government—we are fictionally developing that period. The incidents we show are mostly events from the aftermath. We wanted to tell the story in a neutral way, without imposing a point of view. Since the film is set in a village, we aimed to show how people experienced July and its aftermath impartially." He added, "Because the film is based on events from the immediate present, all our references were right there. That made it easier to select incidents and cross-check information. We tried to express the period as clearly and naturally as possible, without censorship."

*Delipi* impressed with its symbolic approach, addressing July without explicitly naming it, making the story feel both universal and deeply relatable. The film struck a delicate

balance between satire and optimism, particularly in its uplifting ending, though a deeper exploration of the political and social dynamics could have added more depth.

In contrast, *Ekhane Rajnotik Alap Joruri* took a bolder route, confronting July head-on. Its urgency and determination to tackle the political climate were evident, but the storytelling sometimes felt rough around the edges, and the political commentary lacked the subtlety that would give it a lasting impact.

On both films, Bidhan observed, "Even the films we are talking about—*Delipi*, for instance—display a certain kind of satire. I wouldn't say they have a very deep political vision, but there is an immediacy in these films. They speak to the needs of the present moment. Regarding *Ekhane Rajnotik Alap Joruri*, it included July elements, but I feel it didn't fully transcend the immediacy; it hasn't yet become a film that will stand the test of time."

Reeti shared a similar sentiment: "*Delipi* felt very smart to me. Without explicitly calling July 'July', it symbolically addressed all the problems and demands we had. Especially the ending—it was so optimistic and positive. *Ekhane Rajnotik Alap Joruri*, released recently, felt bold in addressing July directly. But when I watched it, it seemed to lack the finesse."

On the future of July-related films, both critics urge caution and thoughtfulness. Bidhan pointed out, "Filmmakers must be careful not to turn films into propaganda. You can have your personal point of view, but imposing it on the audience diminishes the work. Quality will only come when films are approached honestly and thoughtfully." Reeti added, "Whether more films are made depends on the political climate and the mindset of filmmakers. Post-election, there may be more room to explore July, but it has to be done with integrity, not just because funding is available."

In a place where history, politics, and creativity collide, the silver screen has barely touched the surface of July. Last year, the government announced funding for feature films on the movement; whether they will actually get made, and whether they can truly capture the raw emotions of that time, only time will tell.

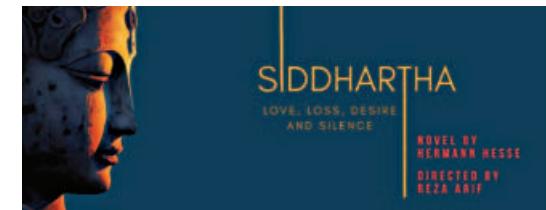
### TV TALKIES

## Agatha Christie's Seven Dials

*Agatha Christie's Seven Dials* is a 1920s murder-mystery Netflix series inspired by Christie's novel *The Seven Dials Mystery*. The story follows Lady Eileen "Bundle" Brent as she investigates a suspicious death after a country-house party prank goes wrong, slowly uncovering a secret conspiracy. Starring Mia McKenna-Bruce, Helena Bonham Carter and Martin Freeman, the series premiered on Netflix in January 2026, and is currently trending at the top in Bangladesh.



### OUT AND ABOUT IN DHAKA



**Siddhartha**

Jan 24 | 7:00pm onwards  
Experimental Theatre Hall, BSA



**Unplugged Vibe Session**

Jan 26 | 4:00pm onwards  
Yamaha Flagship Center



**Pop & Disco Night**

Jan 29 | 6:00pm onwards  
Jatra Biroti

### TRENDY STREAMS

**Netflix**  
The Rip



**HBO Max**  
A Knight of the Seven Kingdoms



**Hulu**  
The Beauty



**Apple TV**  
Drops of God



**Prime Video**  
The Night Manager



# NEWS

## Netrakona man killed over land 2 more found dead within six hours

OUR CORRESPONDENT,  
Netrakona

Three unnatural deaths were reported within six hours in Kalmakanda upazila of Netrakona yesterday.

At Nazirpur, Mosharraf Hossain, 46, was allegedly killed by his younger brother, Mozammel Hossain, following a dispute over ancestral land.

According to police and family members, an argument broke out between the two brothers during land measurement and escalated into a scuffle. Mosharraf collapsed after being pushed and was taken to Durgapur Upazila Health Complex, where he was declared dead.

Meanwhile, the body of Rabiqul Islam, 37, was found hanging inside his room at Chinahala village.

Earlier in the same morning, a two-year-old child, Sani, son of Jalal Mia, drowned in a pond at Baroindu village.

According to police and family members, he was declared dead at Kalmakanda Upazila Health Complex.

Kalmakanda Police Station Officer-in-Charge Md Siddiq Hossain told The Daily Star that the bodies of Rabiqul and Mosharraf were sent for autopsy while the child's body was handed over to the family.

## Democratic reform

FROM PAGE 3

In its opening statement, the alliance said despite Bangladesh's birth through the Liberation War in 1971, people's aspirations remain unfulfilled even after 54 years.

It blamed successive governments -- both military rulers and elected regimes -- for failing to establish genuine democracy and for allowing corruption, repression and inequality to deepen.

The manifesto strongly criticised the past 15 years of rule, saying state institutions were destroyed by corruption, enforced disappearances, killings and vote rigging.

Referring to the July uprising, in which more than a thousand people were killed and thousands injured, the alliance said the people are still waiting for justice and meaningful change.

Among its key pledges, Gonotantrik Juktajfront promised to restore democratic rights, including freedom of speech, assembly and political activities.

It vowed to repeal repressive laws, ensure an independent judiciary, reform the police and make the Anti-Corruption Commission fully independent.

The alliance also proposed major electoral reforms, including restoring paper ballots, scrapping electronic voting machines, introducing the right to recall lawmakers and ensuring voting rights for expatriates.

On the economy, the manifesto focused

## Manisha banks

FROM PAGE 3

We are contesting with minimal resources and maximum public support."

According to her affidavit, Manisha declared movable assets worth Tk 31.28 lakh, including Tk 12.64 lakh in cash, Tk 4.64 lakh in bank deposits, Tk 5 lakh in fixed deposits with financial institutions, five bhoru gold, and Tk 69,000 invested in the stock market. She owns little to no immovable property. She also declared annual income of Tk 3.29 lakh through earnings from her medical practice and bank interest.

While she claimed that there has not been any major violations of the electoral code of conduct, Manisha alleged that BNP activists held a meeting at a school under Ward 24, and hurled communal remarks during campaigning.

## Protect UN's

FROM PAGE 12

join Trump's new grouping, neither has confirmed participation.

Ruhul Amin, owner of Dhaka-based Catharsis International, was accused by agents of collecting these fees, which allegedly exceeded \$1 billion over a decade. If agencies failed to pay, Bestinet's system allegedly blocked new recruitment orders.

These and other charges pushed recruitment costs as high as \$6,600 per worker, according to a 2024 memo prepared for Anwar -- more than double previous levels and far higher than fees paid by Indonesian or Nepali workers, according to the report.

While in Davos, Switzerland, Trump said that once complete, the board "can do pretty much whatever we want", while adding that "we'll do it in conjunction with the United Nations".

Beijing's foreign ministry said on Wednesday that "no matter how the international situation changes, China firmly upholds the international system with the United Nations at its core".

Brazil has also expressed scepticism about the Board of Peace, saying it could represent "a revocation" of the United Nations.

Lula's special advisor Celso Amorim told Brazilian media that "we cannot consider a reform of the UN made by one country."

During Trump's global tariff onslaught last year, China and Brazil sought to present their countries as staunch defenders of the multilateral trading system.

Xi told Lula in August they could set an example of "self-reliance" for emerging powers.

China, a permanent member of the UN Security Council, engages with the international body even as it has objected to what it terms internal interference.

Advocacy groups like Human Rights Watch have accused China of seeking to undermine the United Nations by reducing contributions to the organisation's rights budgets, establishing an alternative international mediation body and blocking activists from UN events.

## Democratic reform

FROM PAGE 2

on curbing price hikes, breaking market syndicates, creating jobs and reducing inequality.

It pledged state intervention in essential goods, progressive taxation and increased spending on health, education and agriculture.

The alliance also promised free primary healthcare, food security through rationing, fair wages for workers and equal rights for women.

Calling for a people-based political force, the alliance urged voters to support its candidates to transform parliament into a platform for the rights of workers, farmers and the oppressed.

In an apparent reference to Jamaat, he said, "Driven

## Committed to ensuring

FROM PAGE 2

Yesterday afternoon, Rezaul addressed a public rally in Jatrabari as the chief guest in support of Islami Andolan's Dhaka-5 candidate Md Ibrahim.

"We are committed to ensuring the fundamental rights of the people and building a humane and just society. A just society cannot be established without Islamic principles," he said.

Calling on voters to support the hand fan symbol, he said casting ballots in its favour would "fulfil people's expectations" and "establish peace".

In an apparent reference to Jamaat, he said, "Driven

by colourful dreams of power, a party has drawn up a blueprint to deceive the people. Those who can betray their own allies cannot be trusted with Islam or the country."

He also said Islami Andolan had refused to take an easy path to power by compromising with injustice.

Earlier, addressing another rally in the Hariharpura area of Panchabati under Narayanganj-4 constituency, Rezaul said, "Keeping the country, Islam and Sharia in mind, we have placed one box -- the hand fan. There is no other box in favour of Islam."

## No one can declare

FROM PAGE 12

Mujibur Rahman and Ziaur Rahman created false narratives for partisan interests. While historical debates are possible, he said, using false and baseless criminal allegations against Jamaat to satisfy political vendettas is unjust.

Porwar further said that Sheikh Mujib had resolved the 1971 issue during his lifetime. "He wanted to overcome divisions and ensure national unity," he said.

Mujib later repealed the Collaborators Act and sought to move forward inclusively, he said, adding that both Mujib and Ziaur Rahman shared this vision.

Calling on voters to support the Daripalla symbol, Porwar said there is no alternative to ending an era of misrule, corruption, and political repression.

Bangladesh said Myanmar has persistently denied the Rohingya their constitutional guarantees,

since 2020, making it a long-running drag on the company's finances.

Earlier, Andrew Bosworth, Meta's Chief Technology Officer and the head of Reality Labs, has called an all-hands meeting and encouraged employees to attend in person, describing it internally as the "most important" meeting of the year, according to Business Insider.

The job cuts come as Mark Zuckerberg, Meta's CEO, has instructed senior leaders to rein in budgets for 2026 while committing tens of billions of dollars to AI. That investment includes expanded funding for Meta's internal research efforts, known as the TBD Lab, which Zuckerberg has described as pursuing

## Meta to cut 1,500 jobs

FROM PAGE 12

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"superintelligence".

As part of the AI drive, in 2025, Meta invested \$14.3 billion in Scale AI and recruited its chief executive, Alexander Wang. In late 2025, Meta also acquired Manus, a fast-growing AI agent startup, in a deal valued at more than \$2 billion.

Alongside the strategic shift, Meta has redesigned its employee review and bonus system, introducing a new performance programme called Checkpoint, reports Business Insider. Under the system, which is due to take effect in mid-2026, a small group of top performers will be eligible for bonuses of up to 300 percent of their base payout, while around 20 percent employees are expected to be rated "Outstanding" and receive double their base bonus.

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## Camps, crime, civic

FROM PAGE 3

Movement, expressed deep frustration.

"We are denied our fundamental rights. Our education and health are neglected, our land is being encroached upon, and we face harassment through politically motivated cases," he said.

"Peace will not return to the camps without permanent rehabilitation. Political parties have made promises before only to exploit our votes, but have abandoned us after elections. This time, we will vote for whoever guarantees permanent rehabilitation in their manifesto," he added.

Talking to The Daily Star, BNP's Aminul Haque said he has been documenting local grievances for months.

"I grew up here, and people know me as a sportsman and a neighbour. I have already discussed the camp issue with the BNP Chairperson. If we form the government, we will begin phased permanent rehabilitation. Once people have stable homes, crime in these areas will naturally decline," he said.

He also called for politics based on unity and harmony. "I want to practice the politics of brotherhood, sincerity, and love. People of all views should coexist in harmony. If we stay united, many problems can be solved." "I believe people from all walks of life will vote for me and allow me to serve as their representative," Aminul added.

Advocacy groups like Human Rights Watch have accused China of seeking to undermine the United Nations by reducing contributions to the organisation's rights budgets, establishing an alternative international mediation body and blocking activists from UN events.

## Rohingyas

FROM PAGE 1

as illegal migrants before the International Court of Justice is aimed at reinforcing a false narrative of internal security threats to divert attention from atrocities committed against the community.

He also said Islami Andolan had refused to take an easy path to power by compromising with injustice.

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## No one shed blood

FROM PAGE 2

and electricity shortages, extortion, and terrorism -- we will work to resolve these problems," he said, adding that occupied playgrounds, canals, and land would be restored and opportunities created for youths to engage in sports and community development.

Advocate Atiqur Rahman Atiq, a nominated candidate for Dhaka-11 and former central president of Bangladesh Islami Chhatra Shibir, was present at the event. Atiq withdrew his nomination in line with a party decision.

"One Hasina has gone, another may emerge; one extortions has gone, another may follow, but no one shed blood for this," he said.

"The upcoming election is not just about changing the government; it is about changing the power structure, reforming the country, re-establishing democracy, ensuring freedom of expression, and upholding national sovereignty."

Nahid further said, "When students, workers, and women across Bangladesh have taken to the streets to campaign for us, misleading statements are now being spread. Various negative narratives are being created to spread fear and panic."

"But this election is meant to defeat land grabbers, extortionists, looters, and loan defaulters," he added.

He warned that any attempt to occupy polling stations or commit voting irregularities would fail. "If there is any intention to occupy or seal polling stations, forget it. It will not succeed," he said.

Referring to the referendum, Nahid said a 'Yes' vote would mean standing in favour of reform, good governance, sovereignty, and the July popular uprising.

"We will reject dynasticism and discrimination and move forward with the reform process," he said.

Highlighting local issues in Dhaka-11, Nahid said the constituency remains deprived of civic amenities. "Traffic congestion, gas

## Relations between

FROM PAGE 3

"friendship" with Jamaat-e-Islami and would impose a 100 percent tariff on Bangladesh if Jamaat attempted to implement Sharia law. The journalist sought Farhad Mazhar's reaction.

In response, Farhad Mazhar said every political party in Bangladesh is connected to the United States in some way, either directly or indirectly.

He argued that following the July uprising, what he described as a "constitutional counter-revolution" has been portrayed internationally as a regime change in favour of the US.

"Even before the mass uprising, and even before Gono Odhikar Parishad, I said removing Sheikh Hasina was not the main issue. The US would do that anyway. Our task was to think about how to build a new Bangladeshi state," he said.

Farhad Mazhar said international law has little meaning in practice. Citing US President Donald Trump's actions, he called it a harsh reality.

"Amid this situation, my concern is simple -- how do I survive with 17 crore people? I do not want to be dragged into any war," he said.

He also questioned why political discourse often focuses on opposing India while remaining silent on what he described as US imperialism.

Farhad Mazhar said Jamaat had not opposed the proposed stabilisation force being sent to Gaza and claimed this showed Jamaat's policy alignment and relationship with the US.

"That is why the United States is making these statements in advance. I see this as a very dangerous warning sign," he said.

Later in the day, he also attended several meetings in the Debipur union of Sadar upazila.

## Support BNP

FROM PAGE 12

activists here in trouble. We will take care of you. You will not be in danger. We are with you."

He said that those responsible for wrongdoing would be punished, while those not involved would not be targeted.

At 78, Fakhrul said he remains young at heart and capable of solving local problems if given the chance. He recalled contesting elections in the constituency since 1991, sometimes winning and sometimes losing, but "Even when I lost, I never abandoned you."

Later in the day, he also attended several meetings in the Debipur union of Sadar upazila.

PRAYER TIMING

JANUARY 24

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



COLLAGE: MAISHA SYEDA

## FLASH FICTION

## The rickshaw artist

**One day, he thinks, he will paint the girl with the red earphones into the scene, somewhere between the tiger and the cranes: just a small figure, running late, carrying the whole exhausted evening on her shoulders.**

AJWADUL ISLAM KHAN

In Dhaka, the traffic doesn't run; it limps. At seven in the morning, the buses are full, coughing black air, CNGs wheezing past, rickshaws threading between them like colourful tops. From the expressway above, you'd think the city is having a stroke, but downtown it's just another evening.

Aminul pedals one of those needless. His rickshaw is older than his marriage, older than his daughter, and far more famous. The hood is painted with a single continuous scene: a river view at sunset, a tiger drinking beside a girl in a red sari, cranes in construction straight into the smog of Dhaka. Tourists photograph it when the light is right. Local boys call it "the moving cinema."

Tonight, a greyish blue sky is

hovering above. Aminul whistles as his bell is busted, a thin tuneless sound that repulses people away rather than attract them, perfect for parting the crowd. His shirt sticks to his back like glue. He is 42 and feels sixty until the wheels turn, then he feels 16 again.

At the corner of Elephant Road a woman flags him. She is maybe 25 years old—a university badge hangs from her neck, earphones in—an exhausted kind of beauty that belongs only to this city.

She climbs on without bargaining; that alone tells him she's late for something that matters. "Hatirjheel," she says, voice almost lost under the horns.

He nods and pushes off. The rickshaw groans like it's personally offended. They crawl through Kakrail, past the mosque spilling light and men onto the pavement, past biryani smoke

thick enough to chew. She takes out one earphone. Polite.

"Bhai, your rickshaw is incredible. Who painted it?"

"My daughter," he lies, because the truth is too long for one ride.

Actually he painted it himself, night after night under a single bulb, using brushes made from his wife's old hair and colors bought with money meant for the gas bill. He painted what he remembered from his village before the river ate half of it, before he came to Dhaka with two shirts and a promise.

The girl leans forward. "What's the tiger drinking?"

"Moonlight," he says.

She laughs, surprised, and the sound is so light it almost lifts them out of the jam. At Hatirjheel, the lake is a black mirror holding a thousand broken bulbs. She tells him to keep the change and as walks away; she touches the

Painted tiger's head, her hand shaking like it might bite any minute.

Aminul watches her disappear into the neon. Then he looks at his hands on the handlebars: cracked, stained with cobalt and crimson that will never quite wash out.

The traffic exhales. He rings the broken bell anyway—a dull clunk—and pedals back into the breathing city.

One day, he thinks, he will paint the girl with the red earphones into the scene, somewhere between the tiger and the cranes: just a small figure, running late, carrying the whole exhausted evening on her shoulders.

Dhaka will understand.

**"The rickshaw artist" was awarded the first prize in the flash fiction segment of the creative writing competition at NSU DEML 2025 Winter Fest.**

## POETRY

## Memories

IFTEHAZ YEASIR IFTEE

My memoirs of 2025, do you know I want to forget you?  
Breezy January, when you took my grandma away from me  
And I had to dig a grave five feet deep, didn't you know I would never want to meet you again?  
Or dear April, when you stripped away my job, tore apart my savings  
And make me surf aimlessly between my rooms, Didn't you think I have other months to survive?  
Ah! How many dates I now cannot recall, have killed me bit by bit.  
They have given me death in a life I cannot live.  
Days of no ration and rusted kitchen supplies,  
Fear and shame of guests arriving suddenly  
And judging my unpreparedness and smelling my insolvency—  
Have made July and August the most distasteful.  
The days went by, but still the roof held firm.  
The empty kitchen taught us how to stand,  
And in the quiet of that barren year,  
I found a pulse that hunger could not stop.  
And now, as you pack your bags to leave and mix quietly in the dark,  
Do you know that I want to forget you?  
Do memories know, I want to forget them?

Iftehaz Yeasir Iftee, a student at IBA, University of Dhaka, is a featured poet in the global anthology *Luminance* under the pseudonym Brotibir Roy.



## FLASH FICTION

## Pirouette of a phoenix

RIFAH TASHFIA ISLAM

Emily's right leg trembled as she stood alone on the wooden stage, the darkness that surrounded her felt almost alive. The curtains emanated an ornate grandeur that seemed to swallow her diminishing confidence. A deep, velvet red breathed around her like the wings of a creature waiting to rise. Beyond the blinding lights, the audience blurred into a dark maze of minuscule, glowing faces. Some stared at her with eager curiosity, others with an impatience that she could practically feel with the crawling bead of sweat on the back of her neck.

The silence pressed against her chest, the buzzing in her head mingling with the thudding of her heart. She closed her eyes and the past rushed



ILLUSTRATION: MAHMUDA EMDAD

**A hoop shone above her like a silver halo, a strip of silk hung around it like a cascading waterfall in white, waiting for her to hold on. A soft gasp echoed around as she placed her right foot forward, the only foot she had now, yet the only foot she needed.**

In. The flashes flickered through the remnants of that unfortunate night.

She remembered finishing her final routine that night, her lungs burning delightfully from the effort, her head swaying slightly through the graceful turn, and legs spinning in rhythm, when a sharp, electric jolt sliced through her left leg. A single moment. A single fall. A single failed attempt at a pirouette. What followed were sirens, concerned questions, the metallic taste of a fear that was so foreign to Emily that she blocked everything out until—"We're so sorry... we couldn't save the limb." These few words would replay in her head endlessly.

What she did not understand was that the silence held a more merciless kind of pain—the quiet, pitying glances, the gentle touch of condolence

that felt more like pricks of a thousand thorns, the whispered assumptions that her life as a dancer had ended before it even began. Her body showed its fractures, but her spirit held the punctures no one could see.

Weeks passed, where she couldn't bring herself to listen to music. Months passed where she couldn't wake up without mourning the leg which used to spin her through the glossy floors of the studio. Until one day, an anger rose inside her, a fire that crackled beneath. This fire was quiet but fierce; the pitying stares stirred the embers that were sitting beneath the ash. She held onto a realisation that she did not mourn her lost limb as much as she was made to mourn what everyone assumed she lost with it.

Emily wanted the stage again, she wanted the movement, the flow, the adrenaline, and most importantly, herself.

She was told what she asked for was impossible, she was dismissed for balance would be unreliable and her safety was uncertain. However, the time to heed to warnings was long gone. It was time to listen to the memory of familiar beats: both of her heart and the music.

She found her way, through muscles that burned, blisters that reopened, moments that frustrated her to tears and relentless training that moved like sand through the hands of time.

Just like that, three years had passed and Emily relearned how to hold onto gravity. She found strength in parts of her she didn't know existed. It was like a language of her own. She spoke with every part of her body that translated her refusal to let her identity shrink around the absence of a limb.

And now, as she stood centrestage, the air thick with anticipation, a moment suspended on the edge that was risky, one she had bled and dreamed into existence. Emily opened her eyes.

A hoop shone above her like a silver halo, a strip of silk hung around it like a cascading waterfall in white, waiting for her to hold on. A soft gasp echoed around as she placed her right foot forward, the only foot she had now, yet the only foot she needed.

Gentle music hummed through the air as she lifted herself with a practiced grace, twirling like a bird taking her first, confident flight. When she released her hands in an impossible moment of suspension, everyone saw her in her true form:

No longer a girl missing her left leg—but a phoenix, mid-pirouette, who was reborn under flashing lights.

**"Pirouette of a phoenix" was the first runner-up in the flash fiction segment of the creative writing competition at NSU DEML 2025 Winter Fest.**

## FLASH FICTION

## Lumi and Neveah

ZANNATARA HOSSAIN

Inner monologue: "Life is a bit sometimes. You don't know what might happen the next moment. Currently having my lunch, keeping all my random thoughts aside. It's been raining since morning. These days, my mind keeps drifting from here to there like the weather. The weather is so uncertain, so is my mind."

Life feels so pathetic at this moment. Like, how unstable could it become for me? I wonder if I hadn't met people on the way, and only if I hadn't wasted so much time and effort on them! How amazing would it be for me? How can I blame the bad weather outside when I'm to blame for not taking the necessary equipment? I didn't shut my window.... sometimes wonder when it all started... Maybe the day when I had learnt how to tie my shoelaces or when I could cross big roads on my own without needing the big warm hands of my father."

Neveah wonders when it all began to feel less like a human connection and more like a train journey, meeting new people only to watch them

leave at the next station. Perhaps this belief has begun to take root in her since the day she started losing people, even after giving her all. She often finds herself reminiscing about the letters she once wrote, wishing that the people she has lost, at least, could read them.

In one of those unsent letters, she wrote:

Dear best friend,  
It's been so long since I last talked to you. I know I could text you and check up on you at any moment. But how can I do that when you have been the one to put winters in our hearts? Do your eyes still twinkle whenever you think of me? Or do you still have dimples when you hold back a laugh? Does your cat 'furry' still wet your bed? Do you not miss me? I still stare at our shared memories with affection and warmth. Is your life better when I'm not in the picture anymore? Why is it like that you're more present in the memories you left than in the ones we made together?

**"Lumi and Neveah" was the second runner-up in the poetry segment of the creative writing competition at NSU DEML 2025 Winter Fest.**



ILLUSTRATION: MAHMUDA EMDAD

# Star SPORT

DHAKA SATURDAY JANUARY 24, 2026, MAGH 10, 1432 BS

## Tanzid's ton as Rajshahi rejoice

ABDULLAH AL MEHDI

Rajshahi Warriors opener Tanzid Hossain Tamim capped a brilliant night with a ton in the Bangladesh Premier League (BPL) T20 final, guiding his side to a 63-run win over Chattogram Royals in Mirpur yesterday.

Rajshahi secured their second title, following Rajshahi Kings' triumph in 2020, while Tanzid became just the third player to score a hundred in a BPL final, after Chris Gayle and Tamim Iqbal.

At the Sher-e-Bangla National Cricket Stadium, the southpaw was careful early, but the first signs of intent came against the best that the tournament had to throw this season, Shoriful Islam. A swivel pull over square-leg for six was characteristic of his strokeplay, but this time he kept up his aggression through to the latter end of the innings to give Rajshahi the upper hand.

Having struck just one fifty in his 12 innings ahead of the final, Tanzid had been carrying a burden. However,

### SCORES IN BRIEF

**Rajshahi Warriors:** 174 for four in 20 overs (Tanzid 100, Sahibzada 30; Shoriful 2-33, Muktidul 2-20)  
**Chattogram Royals:** 111 for nine in 17.4 overs (Baig 39, Asif 21; Binura 4-9, Murad 3-15)

**Result:** Rajshahi won by 63 runs

**Player of the final:** Tanzid Tamim

**Player of the tournament:** Shoriful Islam

the manner in which he dispatched Shoriful again through extra cover for four showed he was intent on making his presence in the middle count. The 25-year-old would follow up with a maximum against Chattogram skipper Mahedi Hasan, another impact Powerplay bowler, as Rajshahi reached 40 for no loss after the Powerplay.

He would go after Mahedi again in his second over, this time producing back-to-back sixes to really put pressure on a Chattogram attack which had put opponents this season on a tight leash.

Tanzid's fifty came in 29 deliveries, with six sixes already under his belt. Sahibzada Farhan's departure after a run-a-ball 30 brought an end to an 82-run opening stand, and Tanzid went on to get a reprise on 54 when dropped by Muktidul Mugdho.

He added 47 more runs for the third-wicket stand with Kane Williamson, who struck a brisk 15-ball 24. In the 19th over, Tanzid finally reached three figures with a push towards point for a single. Raising his bat and helmet, arms outstretched, he earned full admiration from the crowd, having set a new milestone as the Bangladesh batter with the most BPL tons.

Shoriful, meanwhile, claimed two wickets but also became the highest wicket-taker in a single BPL edition with 26 scalps.

Chasing 175, Chattogram never got going, eventually restricted to 111.



Rajshahi Warriors captain Najmul Hossain Shanto and veteran wicketkeeper-batter Mushfiqur Rahim celebrate after a commanding 63-run victory over Chattogram Royals in the final of the Bangladesh Premier League (BPL) at the Sher-e-Bangla National Cricket Stadium in Mirpur yesterday. [Inset] Earlier, Tanzid Tamim lit up the final with his third BPL century, a fluent 62-ball 100 featuring six fours and seven sixes, as Rajshahi posted 174 for 4 -- a total that proved more than enough to secure their second BPL title.

PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

## BPL 12: More drama than delivery

SAMSUL AREFIN KHAN

The 12th edition of the Bangladesh Premier League (BPL) reinforced the tournament's reputation as a magnet for controversy, where off-field volatility consistently eclipsed the on-field action, requiring the governing body to repeatedly overhaul the schedule just to keep the league afloat.

The tournament faced immediate instability during its maiden away-from-Dhaka start in Sylhet. Before the opening match on December 25, the Chattogram Royals ownership withdrew due to financial insolvency, forcing the Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) to assume direct control of the franchise. Simultaneously, coaching staff at Noakhali Express staged a brief walkout over alleged mismanagement.

The league was then struck by tragedy on December 27 when Dhaka Capitals assistant coach Mahbub Ali Zaki passed away during a team warm-up session. This sombre atmosphere deepened on December 30 following the death of former Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia, which prompted the BCB to suspend play and cancel the post-Sylhet Chattogram phase entirely to accommodate a revised fixture.

When play resumed, the focus shifted from domestic logistics to international diplomacy. On January 3, the release of Mustafizur Rahman by the Kolkata Knight Riders ignited a row that saw the Bangladesh government and the BCB lodge a formal complaint with the ICC, even threatening the national team's participation in the upcoming T20 World Cup in India.

Shoriful, meanwhile, claimed two wickets but also became the highest wicket-taker in a single BPL edition with 26 scalps.

Chasing 175, Chattogram never got

### BPL 12: HIGHLIGHTS

**Most runs:** Parvez Hossain Emon (Sylhet) – 395 runs

**Most wickets:** Shoriful Islam (Chattogram) – 26 wickets

**Highest total:** Chattogram 198-5 against Sylhet

**Lowest total:** Noakhali 61 against Sylhet

**Highest score:** Tawhid Hridoy (Rangpur) – 109 off 63 balls

**100s:** 4 (Najmul Hossain Shanto, Hassan Eisakhil, Tawhid Hridoy and Tanzid Hasan Tamim)

**5-fer:** 3 (Faheem Ashraf, Nasum Ahmed and Shoriful Islam)

**Best bowling figure:** Nasum Ahmed (Sylhet) – 5/7 against Noakhali

**Hattricks:** 3 (Mehedi Hasan Rana, Mrittunjoy Chowdhury and Ripon Mondol)

**Most catches:** 10 (Litton Das, Tanzid Hasan Tamim)

**Most catches in a match:** 5 (Shahibzada Farhan (Rajshahi) against Sylhet)

**Most stumping in a match:** 4 (Adam Rossington (Chattogram) against Dhaka)

triggered a league-wide player boycott. The strike was only resolved after the board stripped Najmul of his finance-related duties, leading to yet another rescheduling of the final phase in Dhaka.

Parallel to these disruptions, the BCB

intensified its efforts to safeguard the league's integrity following previous scandals, as the ICC Anti-Corruption Unit conducted rigorous screenings throughout the tournament. A Noakhali Express player, speaking on condition of anonymity, said, "Even a first ball dismissal was questioned. Phones were checked regularly, and sometimes I didn't even carry my phone to the ground."

Adding another layer of embarrassment to an already turbulent season, the latest jolt came yesterday when BCB director Muhammad Mukhlesur Rahman stepped down as chairman of the board's audit committee following allegations linking him to match-fixing during the tournament.

BPL governing council member secretary Iftekhar Rahman said the season had been "extremely difficult" due to time constraints. "But our goal was to organise a clean BPL. Integrity issues have improved compared to last year," he said, adding that ensuring player payments is now the board's priority and that franchises will be reassessed next season -- and revenue sharing will depend on profitability.

Former Bangladesh captain and Rangpur Riders assistant coach Mohammad Ashraful told The Daily Star that while the final eventually featured the best teams, the overall impact was limited.

"A major reason for lower scores was the cancellation of the Chattogram leg," Ashraful said. "Except for [Abdul Gaffar] Saqlain, we didn't really discover many new young players, which is tragic."

He stressed the need for structural reform: "Until we implement a proper home-and-away system, the BPL will not have a significant impact."

### SONY SPORTS 2,5

Australian Open

Third round

Live from 6:30 am

**SONY SPORTS 5**

Sri Lanka vs

England

2nd ODI

Live from 3:00 pm

**SELECT HD2**

ICC U19 World Cup

India vs New

Zealand

Live from 1:30 pm

**SELECT HD1**

Premier League

Live from 3:00 pm

**West Ham vs**

Sunderland

Live from 6:30 pm

Man City vs Wolves

Live from 8:00 pm

Bournemouth vs

Liverpool

Live from 11:30 pm

West Ham vs

Sunderland

Live from 6:30 pm

Man City vs New

Zealand

Live from 8:00 pm

Bournemouth vs

Liverpool

Live from 11:30 pm

## BCB audit committee chairman steps down following allegations

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) director Muhammad Mukhlesur Rahman stepped down from his role as audit committee chairman on Friday following allegations of involvement in match-fixing in the 12th edition of the Bangladesh Premier League (BPL).

"Yes, he has resigned from his role as audit committee chairman," a BCB director informed.

Mukhlesur, who was elected from Chapainawabganj District Sports Association in the BCB elections on October 6 last year, has been accused of involvement in fixing -- a matter that came into the light after journalist Riasad Azim published a bombshell investigative report on his social media handle on Thursday night.

"We have already handed the details to Alex Marshall [chairman of BCB's Integrity Unit]. He will begin his investigation from tomorrow," a BCB director informed. "We have received allegations and it will be investigated," he further added.

## U-19s into WC Super 6

STAR SPORTS DESK

Bangladesh cruised to a seven-wicket victory over the USA in Harare yesterday to secure a place in the Super Six stage of the ICC U-19 World Cup.

The win was set up by a disciplined bowling effort, with the Bangladesh pacers doing most of the damage. Iqbal Hossain Emon led the charge with figures of three for 41, while fellow quicks Al Fahad and Rizan Hossain claimed two wickets apiece as the USA were bundled out for 199 in 50 overs.

For the USA, Adnit Jhamb top-scored with a brisk 68 off 69 balls, while openers Sahil Garg (35 off 60) and Utkarsh Srivastava (39 off 65) got starts but failed to capitalise.

In reply, Bangladesh got off to a solid start as opener Zawad Abrar raced to 47 off 42 balls. His opening partner Rifat played a watchful 30 off 55 deliveries, and the pair added 78 runs before Zawad was dismissed in the 15th over by Garg. Srivastava then removed Rifat in the 18th over, bringing captain Azizul Hakim Tamim to the crease.

Tamim steadied the chase with Kalam Siddiki, adding 88 runs for the third wicket. The skipper reached his half-century before falling to Ridvik Appidi with Bangladesh 24 runs shy of victory. Kalam remained unbeaten on a composed 30 off 55 balls, while Rizan Hossain chipped in with an unbeaten 20 as Bangladesh reached the target with 51 balls to spare.

The defeat eliminated the USA. India, Bangladesh and New Zealand have qualified from Group B, though second place remains up for grabs. New Zealand would need to lose to India in their final group match today for Bangladesh to finish second.



### 'MY LEVEL IS GETTING BETTER AND BETTER'

Carlos Alcaraz stepped up his quest to win a maiden Australian Open as he overwhelmed showman Corentin Moutet on Friday to reach the last 16. Top seed Alcaraz was never in danger against French 32nd seed Moutet, easing through 6-2, 6-4, 6-1 at Rod Laver Arena in 2hr 5min. It was the Spaniard's 100th Grand Slam match and he boasts a remarkable 87-13 win-loss record, matching the legendary Bjorn Borg at the same stage of his career. "I think my level is getting better and better," said the six-time Grand Slam winner. PHOTO: REUTERS

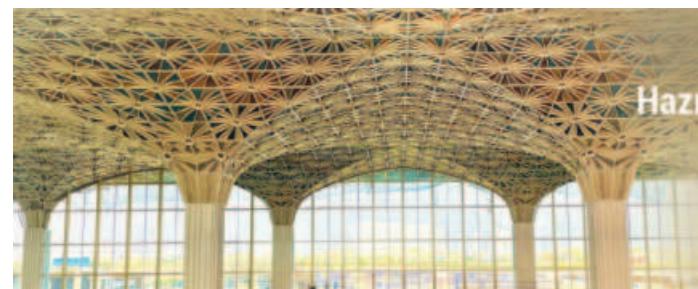


Sabina Khatun (R) celebrates with Masura Parvin following one of her four goals in a 9-1 thrashing of Pakistan in their penultimate match of the inaugural SAFF Women's Futsal Championship in Bangkok on Friday. The win consolidated Bangladesh's lead at the top of the seven-team table with 13 points from five matches. Sabina, who previously led Bangladesh to back-to-back SAFF Women's Football Championship titles, can lead Bangladesh to another success when they take on Maldives on the last day of the competition on Sunday.

PHOTO: SAFF



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## 'No one can declare a Muslim infidel' Says Porwar

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Khulna

Comparing Jamaat-e-Islami's ideals and activities with "kufr" and "shirk" is "irresponsible, ignorant, and a violation of Islamic principles", the party's Secretary General Mia Golam Porwar said yesterday.

Porwar, a candidate for Khulna-5, made the remarks at a street rally in Dumuria upazila. He also attended street rallies in Phultala upazila.

Porwar said such comments insult the fundamental teachings of Islam.

"No one has the authority to declare a Muslim -- who believes in Allah, the Prophet (PBUH), angels, afterlife and destiny -- as an infidel," he said.

Addressing BNP Chairman Tarique Rahman, Porwar said Tarique could have asked his late mother why she



SEE PAGE 9 COL 4

## Protect UN's central role in global affairs China's Xi calls on nations; EU has 'serious doubts' about Trump's 'Board of Peace'

AFP, Beijing

Chinese President Xi Jinping called on countries to protect the "central role" of the United Nations in international affairs, urging his Brazilian counterpart yesterday to help safeguard international norms, state media reported.

The comments come after US President Donald Trump unveiled plans for his new "Board of Peace" at the World Economic Forum.

- ➊ Uphold UN's central role, fairness and justice: Xi
- ➋ Brazil expresses scepticism about Board of Peace
- ➌ China, Brazil yet to confirm role in Trump's new bloc

Although originally meant to oversee Gaza's rebuilding, the board's charter does not seem to limit its role to the Palestinian territory and has sparked concerns Trump wants to rival the United Nations.

European leaders have serious doubts about the scope of Trump's "Board of Peace" but are ready to work with the United States and the newly founded body in Gaza, EU chief Antonio Costa said yesterday.

While China and Brazil have both been invited to



A north-bound truck carrying iron rods tipped onto its side after hitting a road median in foggy conditions on the Dhaka-Aricha highway at Baliaarpur in Savar early yesterday. The driver sustained minor injuries.

PHOTO: PALASH KHAN



## Support BNP for development Fakhrul urges voters

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Thakurgaon

BNP Secretary General Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir yesterday said that voters must support his party if they want development.

Speaking at an election rally at Sholtohori Bazar in Thakurgaon Sadar upazila in the afternoon, Fakhrul said BNP had governed in the past and had experience in delivering development.

"If we want development in this area, you must support us. Development is not possible without the BNP," he added.

Addressing members of the Hindu community, he pledged that BNP would ensure no one faces injustice or oppression and that temples would be protected from vandalism.

"Just as Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists and Christians have together built our society and our nation in the past, we want to move the country forward in the same spirit," he said.

He noted that people had been deprived of voting rights over the past 15 years. "Now an opportunity has come," he added.

Referring to ousted prime minister Sheikh Hasina, Fakhrul said, "Hasina has gone to India. It is good that she has gone there. But she has left her supporters and

SEE PAGE 9 COL 8

## Bangladesh-Malaysia labour route rife with corruption

Bloomberg probe says cartelised recruitment, political links driving migrant exploitation

### STAR REPORT

Endemic corruption in the Bangladesh-Malaysia migrant worker system is enriching a powerful few while trapping migrants in a punishing economy of exploitation, Bloomberg reported in an investigative piece published yesterday.

Titled "Everyone gets a cut, and migrant workers pay the price," the months-long investigation describes a recruitment system manipulated by businesses linked to political elites.

The report opens with the story of Shofiqul Islam, who borrowed to pay \$4,400 for a construction job in Malaysia. The job never materialised, his employer vanished, and his visa expired, leaving him stranded in a derelict building outside Kuala Lumpur. Shofiqul died there in February 2024.

He is one of more than 800,000 Bangladeshis who have gone to Malaysia over the past decade, often sinking into debt to pay recruitment fees far higher than those charged to workers from

other countries, sometimes for jobs that do not exist.

Bloomberg interviewed more than 100 people, including current and former officials, labour analysts, recruiters and migrants, and found a system shaped by entrenched corruption, designed to extract as much money as possible from



FILE PHOTO: REUTERS

desperate workers, often leading to debt bondage, forced labour and human trafficking.

More than a dozen interviewees said figures in Malaysia's ruling elite, including at the highest levels of government, are aware of the abuses but do little to stop them because recruitment fees benefit everyone involved.

A representative for Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim referred Bloomberg to the Ministry of Home Affairs, which did not respond. Bangladesh's government also declined to comment.

### AMIN'S BESTINET

Malaysia has recruited Bangladeshi workers since the 1980s, with unofficial payments long embedded in the process. But costs surged after a man from Bangladesh rose to prominence: Aminul Islam, known as Amin, reported Bloomberg.

A controversial member of Malaysia's elite, Amin told Bloomberg in his first interview last July that he has spent his career helping migrant workers and denied responsibility for their hardships.

Companies he founded have generated more than \$100 million in profits over the past decade, filings show. Amin declined to comment on his personal wealth.

After migrating from Bangladesh in 1988, Amin built businesses providing housing and transport for workers before moving into

SEE PAGE 9 COL 1



## Meta to cut 1,500 jobs as Zuckerberg bets on AI

### TECH & STARTUP DESK

Meta is preparing to cut about 1,500 jobs from its Reality Labs division, a move that would affect roughly 10 percent of the unit's workforce, as the company intensifies its focus on artificial intelligence (AI).

According to a recent filing submitted to the state's Employment Security Department, Meta has already laid off 331 employees in the Seattle area and across Washington as part of the broader job cuts. The reductions will affect staff at four Meta facilities in Seattle and on the Eastside, as well as about 97 employees who work remotely in Washington. The layoffs are scheduled to take effect on March 20, the filing shows.

Meta's Reality Labs, which focuses on virtual and augmented reality (AR) technologies, employs roughly 15,000 people and accounts for about 19 percent of Meta's total global workforce of approximately 78,000 employees. The division has accumulated more than \$70 billion in losses

SEE PAGE 9 COL 4



Haate Khori, a ritual marking the start of a child's education, being performed during Saraswati Puja, a major religious event of the Hindu community, at the Jagannath Hall premises of Dhaka University yesterday. Inset, people throng the area to visit the mandaps.

PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

## US withdraws from WHO Global health experts urge re-think

REUTERS, London

The United States officially left the World Health Organization (WHO) on Thursday after a year of warnings that doing so would hurt public health in the US and globally, saying its decision reflected failures in the UN health agency's management of the Covid-19 pandemic.

President Donald Trump gave notice that the US would quit the organization on the first day of his presidency in 2025, via an executive order.

According to a press release from the US Health and State Departments, the US will only work with the WHO in a limited fashion in order to effectuate the withdrawal.

"We have no plans to participate as an observer, and we have no plans of rejoining," a senior government health official said. The US said it plans to work directly with other countries - rather than through an international organization - on disease surveillance and other public health priorities.

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Today 24<sup>th</sup> January 2026 is the 4<sup>th</sup> death anniversary of Mr. Hasan Ahmed. His bereaved mother, brothers, sisters, officers and employees of the company seek forgiveness from Allah subhanahu wa ta'ala for his departed soul.

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Qutub Shah  
Mosque in  
Kishoreganj

Shashi Lodge

PHOTO: STAR

# MYMENSINGH

## a land of stories, songs and untapped tourism



The twin temple



Kacharibari in Ishwarganj



Sherpur zamindar palace



Gouripur House



Alexander Castle



Rabindra Botomul

### MD AMINUL ISLAM

With nearly 250 years of history behind it, Mymensingh stands quietly as one of Bangladesh's most culturally rich regions, yet remains largely underexplored.

From the flowing Brahmaputra to the green hills of Haluaghata and Dhabaura, the district offers a rare blend of natural beauty, folk heritage and historical depth that could easily place it on the country's tourism map.

The spirit of Mymensingh lives in its stories and songs. The renowned Mymensingh Geetika, rural fairs, folk music and age-old traditions continue to shape the region's identity.

Landmarks such as the Zainul Abedin Sangrahashala, the Bangladesh Agricultural University (BAU) campus, Shashi Lodge, Gouripur Rajbari and Nazrul-related heritage sites reflect a long legacy of art, literature and education.

"The region is well known for its rich history, unique folk culture and natural beauty, but continues to face multiple limitations despite strong prospects of becoming a full-fledged tourism city," said tourism researcher and development expert Sajal Quraishi.

"The art gallery has the capacity to attract international tourists. The BAU campus itself is a major tourist destination. Its vast area, botanical garden, germplasm centre and agricultural museum can serve as research hubs for students," he said.

"Local foods such as the famous Muktagarha Monda also have huge potential for food tourism."

Imtiaz Ahmed, member secretary of the Archaeological Preservation Committee of Mymensingh region, said the city, known for art and culture, was established in 1787. Despite being a 238-year-old district with immense tourism potential, the sector has not flourished due to a lack of proper initiatives and planning.

Although the region is home to many attractive locations, tourists remain largely unaware of them, he said. There are 11 officially declared archaeological heritage sites in the district, yet the present generation knows very little about their history.

According to government and archaeology department sources, major attractions in the district town include Shashi Lodge, Mymensingh Museum, Alexander Castle, Gouripur Lodge, Raj Rajeshwari Water Works and Bipin Park. Other sites include the Independence Monument; the Old Brahmaputra River and its adjacent Zainul Uddyan; Nazrul Memorial Centres, Jatiya Kabi Kazi Nazrul Islam University and Babor Zamindar Bari in Trishal; Atani Zamindar Bari, Maharaja Suryakanta's residence and century-

old temples in Muktagarha; Gouripur Rajbari, Birangana Sakhina's Mazar and Ramgopalpur Zamindar Bari; pineapple and rubber gardens and Borovila Beel in Phulbaria; Kadigarh National Park and a crocodile farm in Bhaluka; Gabrakhali Park and the Ethnic Cultural Academy in Haluaghata; china clay hills in Dhabaura; language martyr Abdul Jabbar Memorial Museum in Gafargaon; and the Atarobari Zamindar Bari in Ishwarganj, a palace once visited by Rabindranath Tagore.

Archaeological researcher Swapan Dhar described Mymensingh as a pilgrimage of folk culture, festivals, music and legends. He said the region's cultural heritage has made significant contributions at both national and international levels.

The stories of Mahua, Malua, Chandrabati, Dewana Madina Pala, Kamala, Dewan Bhavna, Dasu Kenaram and Kajolrekha from Mymensingh Geetika are highly admired in world literature, he said, adding that sites associated with these folk epics could offer a unique experience for tourists.

Dhar said greater Mymensingh could emerge as a major tourism hub, as the wider region includes many tourism-rich locations. These include the Someshwari River, china clay hills, Birishiri Tribal Cultural Academy, Chandradanga waterfalls, Komola Ranji's Dighi, Dingapota Haor, Tonk Shaheed Memorial and Ranikong Mission in Netrakona; Madhutila Eco Park, Pone Tin Ani Zamindar Bari, Gajni Abokash Kendra, Raja's Hill

and Panihata Tarani Hills in Sherpur; Jangalbari Fort, Egarisindur Fort, Sholakia Eidgah, Pagla Mosque, Shahidi Mosque, Qutub Shah Mosque and Taljanga Zamindar Bari in Kishoreganj; and Gandhiji Ashram, Hazrat Shah Jamal (R) Shrine, Zeal Bangla Sugar Mills and Dayamoyee Temple in Jamalpur.

Besides Poune Tin Ani Zamindar Palace, the district also has Tin Ani Zamindar Palace, Araiani Zamindar Palace and Nayani Zamindar Palace, all enriched with architectural heritage and local history. A historic mosque in Sherpur could also draw the attention of thousands of tourists to the frontier district, known for its greenery and hillocks," said Hakim Babul, a senior journalist in Sherpur.

However, the buildings are in a

pitiable state. All archaeological sites should be protected from further decay, as the palaces reflect the history and tradition of the district, said Babul, also convener of the citizen platform Jonouddhog Sherpur.

The architectural features of the palaces, including wide steps and decorated columns, reflect Greek architectural influence, he added.

Kishoreganj, too, holds strong potential to rise as a tourist zone. The Qutub Shah Mosque, a 16th-century structure built by Hazrat Qutub Shah (R), is one of the district's most significant archaeological landmarks. A shrine of Qutub Shah (R) is attached to the five-domed mosque.

The district has developed through a blend of ancient and modern architectural traditions.

SK Rasel, a young journalist in Kishoreganj, said besides the mosque, many antiquities in the district have been listed by the Department of Archaeology.

These include Qutub Shah Mosque, Harshi Mosque, the memorial temples of poet Dwijibangshi Das and poet Chandrabati, Isha Khan's Palace in Jangalbari, Shadi Mosque, Shah Mahmud Mosque, Saheb Bari (Selkandarnagar) Mosque and Gurui Mosque.

Locals have repeatedly demanded better preservation of these sites, he said, noting that they are among the strongest symbols of the district's history and tradition.

Experts point to the absence of coordinated planning, limited promotion and slow conservation efforts as major obstacles. Many archaeological and cultural treasures remain unknown even to domestic travellers.

Tourism researchers and cultural activists believe a comprehensive tourism master plan, combined with heritage conservation, river dredging and private investment, could transform Mymensingh into a leading destination for cultural and eco tourism.

Despite its promise, tourism in this culturally rich region remains largely untapped.

Mymensingh Deputy Commissioner Md Saifur Rahman said efforts are underway to develop tourism in the district.

With the cooperation of the Department of Archaeology, initiatives will be taken to develop heritage and historically significant structures, he said.

Sabina Yeasmin, field officer of the Department of Archaeology for Dhaka and Mymensingh, said the region has many ancient and historical structures that could be highly attractive to tourists if properly preserved and promoted.

# Tragic legacy of Bangladesh's captive elephants

MIFTAHUL JANNAT

Imagine a child ripped from its mother's embrace, shackled in heavy metal chains, subjected to systemic starvation, and relentless beating until resistance gives way to fear. All its instincts utterly crushed and soul completely shattered—until what remains is not a child, but an obedient tool. This is how the traditional Hadani training of baby elephants unfolds, and disturbingly, it continues to this day.

The child in training may not be human, but for an animal as exceptionally intelligent, deeply social, and fiercely bonded to family as an elephant, the pain, trauma, and loss are no less profound. Behind the spectacle of their captivity, the silent suffering remains largely unseen.

"Early separation from the mother and herd, followed by violent "breaking" methods locally known as Hadani causes profound and lasting biological, psychological, and behavioural harm," mentioned Dr Reza Khan, eminent wildlife, zoo and safari park specialist with over four decades of experience of working in Bangladesh and the United



On January 17 in Shibbari, Sylhet, a female captive elephant named "Sundarmala" was struck by a train, leaving her legs broken and trapped in a ditch. She endured unimaginable pain for two days before passing away on January 19.

PHOTO: COLLECTED FROM FACEBOOK

2026, a video went viral showing him shackled and beaten during Hadani training in Moulvibazar's Kulaura Upazila, sparking nationwide outrage. Following intervention by the local Forest Department, Birbahadur and his 42-year-old mother, Sundarmala, were reportedly released into the Kalapahar forest.

However, this release proved largely symbolic rather than a genuine return to freedom. Releasing captive elephants into the forest without proper rehabilitation only exposed them to greater danger—and the consequences emerged just ten days later.

Sundarmala was struck by a train in the Shibbari area of Sylhet. The collision shattered her spine, broke her legs, and caused massive internal injuries. She tumbled into a ditch and remained abandoned by her mahout and owner. She suffered for two days before dying, while her owner took no responsibility for her. Her death left the young Birbahadur motherless, once again trapped in a system that treats captive elephants only as sources of income.

"The accident happened at around 10:00pm, but no assistance arrived for nearly 12 hours. An animal of this size lying in a ditch would never go unnoticed," said Amirul Rajiv, animal rights and environmental activist and coordinator of the Bangladesh Tree Protection Movement. "Wild elephants can regulate their body temperature, but captive ones are vulnerable to cold. In places like Thailand, elephants are covered with thick blankets for protection. Sundarmala remained in cold water without any warmth, and

even after being pulled out, no measures were taken to keep her warm. Moreover, chains were used around her neck to pull her out, which may have caused further internal injuries."

According to experts, such emergencies should be handled exclusively by trained forest department officials. Instead, large crowds often gather at the site, worsening the situation. "Uncontrolled crowds only increase stress and panic for injured elephants," Rajiv added. "What was needed was a swift, professional response from trained forest officials and immediate veterinary care."

**Regal giants reduced to mere 'slavery'**  
Sundarmala's death was not an isolated incident. In May 2023, another calf named Rajabahadur was killed at the Tongi rail gate in Dhaka. The mahout had tied the mother elephant near the railway tracks. Terrified by the sound of a passing train, the calf ran astray and was dragged to its death, while the mother was forced to witness her child's gruesome death before being beaten and driven away from the scene.

Authorities failed to hold the owners accountable in either case, issuing no notices or pursuing justice. This lack of consequences allows abuse to continue unchecked, perpetuating a cycle of cruelty and neglect that repeatedly surfaces in incidents of elephants dying in train collisions, electrocution, and other forms of human–elephant conflict.

"When we talk about elephant conservation in Bangladesh, elephants are described as critically endangered—but nowhere is it stated that only wild elephants are critically endangered while

private or captive elephants are not a concern. In reality, all elephants should be considered critically endangered," emphasised animal rights activist, Founder and Chairperson of People for Animal Welfare (PAW) Foundation, Rakibul Haque Amil.

While there is at least some discussion and effort—effective or not—around protecting wild elephants, captive elephants receive almost no attention. "Their deaths are often dismissed as matters of private losses, rather than conservation. It is time to formally bring captive elephants under the country's conservation framework," added Amil.

These critically endangered animals are subjected to multiple forms of exploitation.

**Commercial use and extortion:** Captive elephants are often forced to perform on the streets to solicit money or rented out for wedding ceremonies. Some groups involved in extortion also use elephants to illegally collect money from the public.

**Mutilation for ivory:** Male elephants sometimes have their tusks cut at the root for illegal sale, leading to severe infections, chronic pain, and long-term suffering.

**Forced or unnatural breeding:** Captive elephants are also often subjected to coercive breeding practices. "Forced breeding (mating) is essentially rape," said Amil of the PAW Foundation. "Elephants are extremely selective. Female elephants do not mate indiscriminately; they carefully choose a bull, much like humans consider who can provide safety and security for her child until it matures—sometimes up to 15 years."

Unnatural breeding carries additional risks. "Captive breeding programmes typically rely on very few individuals, increasing hidden inbreeding and accelerating the loss of genetic diversity," noted Dr Reza Khan. "Over time, this weakens disease resistance, fertility, and adaptability. Forced breeding may also favour traits unsuitable for survival in the wild, while diverting attention and resources away from genuine conservation efforts."

**Overwork and neglect:** Many captive elephants are worked to the point of collapse and are sometimes underfed and dehydrated. An adult elephant requires around 100 litres of water a day, a basic need that is often denied. Numerous cases show elephants dying from exhaustion, a direct result of chronic neglect.

**Breaking the chains of captivity: What must change**

Although a High Court rule in February 2024 suspended the issuance and renewal of licences to adopt elephants from the wild following a writ petition, the ruling did little to improve the condition of elephants already in captivity. Forced breeding has continued, increasing their numbers—and with it, exploitation and suffering.

Animal rights activists, wildlife biologists, and field experts stress the urgent need for an updated and publicly available discrete national list of all captive elephants, maintained by the Forest Department, to ensure proper tracking and prevent abuse.

**Furthermore, experts recommended:**

- Immediately halting forced breeding and holding licensed owners strictly accountable for deaths, abuse, or neglect.
- Establishing a mandatory national registration system for all captive elephants, supported by microchipping, DNA profiling, and a transparent central database.

- Empowering authorities with adequate funding to conduct unannounced inspections, confiscate abused elephants, and bring captive elephants under conservation oversight.

- Revitalising the Wildlife Wing of the Forest Department with full-time wildlife biologists, adequate budgets, trained manpower, veterinary facilities, GPS and radio-collar systems, and proper elephant management infrastructure.

- Expanding government-supported 'Elephant Response Teams' nationwide to manage human–elephant conflict without violence.

- Strictly enforcing the Wildlife Management Order 2026, alongside meaningful penalties, habitat protection, community engagement, and a functional Wildlife Trust Fund.

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In the traditional 'Hadani' training, baby elephants are torn from their mothers and tied to logs, dragged across the field to break their wild spirit—turning these gentle souls into tools for human control.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

Arab Emirates. "Elephants are highly social and cognitively complex animals. Removing a calf from its family during critical developmental stages disrupts normal brain development, stress-hormone regulation, learning capacity, and social behaviour."

Research shows that elephants subjected to such treatment frequently develop chronic trauma-like conditions, including persistently elevated stress hormones, abnormal fear responses and impaired social skills. Many show heightened aggression or extreme withdrawal and struggle to cope with unfamiliar situations.

**A mother and calf lost to cruelty**  
The human inflicted suffering of captive elephants has once again come to light in the recent story of a seven-year-old calf named Birbahadur. Earlier in January

Authorities failed to hold the owners accountable in either case, issuing no notices or pursuing justice. This lack of consequences allows abuse to continue unchecked, perpetuating a cycle of cruelty and neglect that repeatedly surfaces in incidents of elephants dying in train collisions, electrocution, and other forms of human–elephant conflict.

"When we talk about elephant conservation in Bangladesh, elephants are described as critically endangered—but nowhere is it stated that only wild elephants are critically endangered while

were once rare—maybe two or three would wash up on Cox's Bazar beach," he said. "Now, large numbers are stranding on the shore, and fishermen are finding them in their nets."

What is clearer, he added, is the sharp decline in pelagic fish species, the mainstay of coastal fisheries. "We have clear evidence that pelagic species are declining at an alarming rate. An almost 80 percent decline didn't happen overnight. It occurred gradually over many years."

Coastal environmental conditions may be tipping the balance in jellyfish's favour. "Our coastal and ocean waters are low in oxygen beyond a certain depth," Dr Sharifuzzaman said. "Most fish can't survive this, but jellyfish thrive. When natural equilibrium is disrupted, someone benefits. In this case, jellyfish."

This imbalance is already affecting fisheries. "As jellyfish populations increase, they replace fish in fishermen's nets," he said. "Rising jellyfish numbers signal commercial fisheries decline, which we've seen alongside an 80 percent drop in pelagic species."

Studies by the Monterey Bay Aquarium further suggest that jellyfish play a role in transferring microplastics into marine food chains. By ingesting plastic particles directly or through contaminated prey, jellyfish can pass pollution up the chain when they are consumed by larger species, deepening the ecological consequences of their spread. For coastal communities, that shift would mean not just ecological loss, but the slow erosion of a way of life that has sustained generations.

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## Fish stocks collapse in the Bay of Bengal, fishermen at risk

YSTIAQUE AHMED

A historic decline in fish stocks in the Bay of Bengal is reshaping both the marine ecosystem and the lives of thousands of coastal fishing families. A recent comprehensive fisheries survey shows that the stock of small pelagic species has fallen by 78.6 percent in just seven years, from 158,100 tonnes in 2018 to only 33,811 tonnes in 2025. As fish disappear, jellyfish are moving in, increasingly dominating coastal waters where fishermen make their living.

The Bay of Bengal is central to Bangladesh's food security and economy. Fish from these waters contribute around 12–15 percent of the country's total fish production, according to a Department of Fisheries report dated June 26, 2025. Fish provide nearly 60 percent of national animal protein intake and play a significant role in blue economy exports. A collapse of this scale therefore raises urgent concerns about the future of fisheries and the livelihoods of fishermen in these areas.

For fishing families, these environmental shifts are not abstract trends but daily struggles. Najir Hossain, a fisherman, and his wife Rokeya describe how unreliable catches have pushed them into debt. "We catch fish throughout the year, and only two months are restricted," Rokeya said. "But fish are so few in number now that we have to take out loans just to get by."

Their income, once relatively stable, has become uncertain. "Our husbands and sons rent trawlers from the owners and go out to sea. We used to earn a decent income from the catches," she said. "Now that is no longer guaranteed."

They also face enforcement pressures and insecurity at sea. Rokeya alleged that nets are



As trawlers return from the Bay of Bengal, hilsa catches are being carried to a landing centre in Cox's Bazar. Fishermen say lighter hauls this year (2025) are failing to cover their costs.

sometimes confiscated or destroyed during patrols. These nets and fishing gear are worth a huge sum. On top of that, they do not own them; the trawler owner does. When they are taken or burned, the loss is huge.

Trawler owners echo these concerns. Abul Kalam, who owns around 60 fishing trawlers, says the decline has been steady and puzzling. "Five to ten years ago, we had plenty of fish. It kept decreasing year after year, but we don't know the exact reason behind this decline," he said.

Fishing seasons have also become less predictable. "Normally, in winter fish go deeper, and the rainy season is our peak time, especially June and July," Kalam explained. "One trawler carries seven to eight fishermen in total. In a single trip, we can

earn between 1.2 to 2 lakh taka per trawler, but the fuel and other costs are higher. Now, even in peak season, catches are low." After all the expenses, each of the fishermen earns around 10 thousand taka per trip."

Higher market prices have partially offset losses, but not enough to ensure stability. "Before, when we had plenty of fish, prices were low. Now we catch less fish, but prices go up. In that sense, it kind of balances out," he said. "Still, when catches are poor, we have to take loans to continue operations. We have labourers and fishermen whose lives depend on these trawlers."

When fishing fails, many workers are forced to find temporary alternatives on land. "Some work as drivers for local tom-toms, while others work as day labourers," Kalam

said. "That's how they survive."

Marine scientists say the decline in fish and the rise in jellyfish are driven not by a single cause, but by a combination of long-term environmental and human pressures. "Factors such as climate change, global warming, pollution, and overfishing are behind both trends," said Dr Md Ashraful Haque, CSO at the Cox's Bazar Marine Fisheries Research Centre.

Scientists note that jellyfish are benefiting from these pressures. Dr Haque said they feed directly on fish eggs and fry, hampering recovery. "Jellyfish prey on fish eggs and fry, contributing to fish decline," he said. He also highlighted a breakdown in predator-prey balance, noting a sharp fall in sea turtle populations, which normally keep jellyfish numbers in check.

The increase in jellyfish is also creating operational problems for fishermen. "Jellyfish get trapped in nets and gear," Dr Haque said. "A single jellyfish can weigh 10–12 kilograms, and a swarm can easily damage or destroy fishing nets."

Observations suggest that jellyfish sightings have increased noticeably in recent years. Dr SM Sharifuzzaman, director and professor at the Institute of Marine Sciences, University of Chittagong, said the phenomenon has become visible only recently. "Jellyfish are a recent phenomenon; we have been observing their rise over the last five years," he said. "After February and March, when the climate gets warmer, we see the presence of jellyfish or their swarms in the sea."

Dr Sharifuzzaman explained that jellyfish, or gelatinous zooplankton, include both small and large species that can bloom rapidly under favourable conditions. "They



ILLUSTRATION: SALMAN SAKIB SHARYAR

## Is Bangladesh ready for ageing?



An old-age home in Gazipur.

PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

**Older people face higher rates of non-communicable diseases (NCDs), such as heart disease, diabetes, stroke, cancer, and chronic respiratory illnesses. Bangladesh already has one of the highest burdens of NCDs in the region.**

**Managing these conditions requires long-term and continuous care, routine monitoring, long-term medication, and rehabilitation—something the current health system, which is heavily oriented toward acute and hospital-based treatment, is not fully prepared for.**

### AKM NURUZZAMAN

Bangladesh stands at a demographic turning point. For at least three decades, the country has benefited from a youthful population, declining fertility, and an expanding workforce, which is often referred to as a 'demographic dividend'. Over the last 30 years, this 'window of opportunity' supported rapid economic growth in Bangladesh, but it is now shrinking. At the same time, the population of Bangladesh is ageing at one of the fastest rates compared to many South Asian and developed countries. The question confronting policymakers is no longer whether this transition will happen, but how well the government is prepared for it.

According to an estimate, Bangladesh had roughly 16.5 million people aged 60 and above in 2024, representing 10 percent of the population. By 2050, the number of aged people will have more than doubled, reaching around 40 million people, or 19 percent of the total population. People may already be in despair thinking about their old age. It is a hard reality: people will get older, and children will often receive preference over older people. Even though an old woman or man has a solid legacy to contribute to this world, a child does not yet have a solid footprint in society. We need a balanced approach that considers both the incoming and outgoing age cohorts.

The demographic dividend is not a permanent gift. Bangladesh is now in the later stages of its dividend window, perhaps with a decade left, but no more. After that, rapid ageing combined with limited wealth, limited pension coverage, and limited health system readiness will create vulnerabilities that could intensify over time. The old age dependency ratio—the number of elderly persons per 100 working-age adults—is also set to rise sharply, indicating growing pressure on the workforce. Ageing is often misunderstood as a social or

to households, particularly women, thereby magnifying economic and social stress.

Conventionally, most older Bangladeshis rely on informal savings, family support, or small government allowances that are insufficient to meet basic needs. The formal pension system covers only a small fraction of the population, primarily government employees and a limited share of formal private-sector workers. Without a sustainable pension system that includes options for informal workers, fiscal pressure will intensify. As life expectancy increases and family structures continue to change, reliance on traditional care arrangements is weakening, placing millions at risk of falling into old age poverty.

Bangladesh has taken steps to formulate policies, such as the *National Policy on Older Persons 2013*, aligned with international conventions, including the *Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing (MIPA)* 2002, the *Maintenance of Parents Act 2013*, the *National Committee on Older Persons 2017*, the *Action Plan to Implement the National Policy on Older Persons 2013*, and the draft *Probin Unnayan Foundation Act 2017*. The Constitution of Bangladesh, in Article 15(d), declares the introduction of a social security programme for elderly people, alongside the *Universal Pension Scheme Rules*, 2023. Some safety-net programmes have already been undertaken under the *National Social Security Strategy (NSSS)*, such as the *Old Age Allowance, Allowance for Freedom Fighters, Allowance for Widows and Husband-Deserted Women, and Vulnerable Group Feeding (VGF)*. Six government old-age homes are operated by the Government of Bangladesh under the Department of Social Services (DSS). The Ministry of Health and Family Welfare has improved NCD screening and developed policies on healthy ageing. The government has also shown willingness to discuss pension reform and long-term care strategies, but the scale of future demand far exceeds the scale of current preparedness.

First, the old-age allowance is too small to meet basic needs, and pension coverage remains low. Informal workers, who constitute over 85 percent of the workforce, have almost no long-term financial security. Second, primary health care and community-based care require more trained personnel in geriatrics, better referral pathways, affordable essential medicines for hypertension, diabetes, and arthritis, as well as trained palliative caregivers and community-based home care models. For these, no formal regulatory or financing model currently exists. Third, skills development, re-skilling of older workers, and higher female labour-force participation remain urgent needs. Fourth, without actuarial projections, realistic costing of pensions, and long-term modelling of pension costs and health system needs under ageing scenarios, future fiscal stress will be difficult to manage.

### What can be done?

The transition to an ageing society is unavoidable, but the outcomes are not. Bangladesh can meet this challenge with a coherent and well-sequenced strategy, considering both *ex ante* (preventive) and *ex post* (reactive) interventions. Better preparation will ease the later part of life. During old age, not all older people will fall sick simultaneously, or with the same magnitude or nature of illness. At the same time, there will be some individuals who are able to support their families and society in many ways. To understand the management of this demographic group, analysis can be undertaken across several areas.

First, primary health care for older adults can be strengthened by integrating NCD management, rehabilitation, counselling, and community-based geriatric care into routine services, and by making medicines for hypertension and diabetes widely affordable. The Diabetic Association of Bangladesh may be an important case to explore for supporting other NCDs.



The transition to an ageing society is unavoidable, but the outcomes are not.

PHOTO: STAR

Considering mobility restrictions, digital health services might be one option, particularly for follow-up treatment. There is also a need to encourage preventive health-care systems—such as recreational activities, inclusive religious practices, mental well-being, positive thinking, emotional intelligence, outdoor games, nutrition literacy, physical exercise, and active lifestyles—within health policy, giving them greater importance than curative treatment services, particularly for younger people.

Second, the government might reorient its existing pension schemes by expanding pension coverage through contributory micro-pension schemes for informal workers, combined with a gradual enhancement of the old age allowance, if necessary.

The Universal Pension Scheme in Bangladesh introduces four distinct schemes: *Progoti* (private sector), *Surokkha* (informal sector), *Somota*

(below the poverty line), and *Probash* (Bangladeshis abroad). This system aims to provide financial security from birth to old age. While acceptance is still scaling up, the contributory scheme is expected to have far-reaching positive impacts for citizens. People should also prepare themselves for how they would like to live in their old age. This can be done through investment in pension schemes, insurance, or other facilities. Bangladesh can also explore the superannuation system in Australia, where a portion of salary is set aside in an investment fund for old-age benefits.

Third, considering IT-based technological change and global demographic shifts—particularly in developed and African countries—there is an urgent need to boost the size and productivity of the workforce by investing in skills, promoting automation in production, manufacturing, and service sectors, and raising female labour-force participation through childcare provision, safe transport, and flexible work policies. There may need to be a balanced approach to designating the workforce for both domestic and international labour markets. In addition to public interventions, there is a need to develop family-based eldercare models, community support programmes, caregiver training systems, and regulated public-private eldercare services. Bangladesh also requires greater private investment in establishing eldercare services, alongside more community-managed eldercare facilities. The *Probin-Nobin Interaction Centre* of the government-established *Palli Karma-Sahayak Foundation (PKSF)* can be explored in this regard.

Fourth, it is also important to conduct demographic-fiscal modelling to estimate future pension liabilities and healthcare spending, and to prepare evidence-based budget frameworks for ageing.

Bangladesh still has a decade left of favourable demographics, but that window is narrowing. If the country fails to prepare for rapid ageing, the gains of the last 30 years may weaken under rising social and fiscal pressure. If it acts decisively, investing in people, productivity, and protection, ageing can be managed and even turned into an opportunity for innovation in health, social care, and economic resilience. We have to remember that we must equip ourselves with specialised services that are not yet available at the scale required for an ageing population of 40 million within the coming 25 years. Bangladesh has shown repeatedly that it can tackle large national challenges with creativity and determination. The demographic transition ahead may be among the most significant, but it is one for which preparation cannot be delayed. It is inevitable, rapid, and unforgiving if ignored.

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# API Park: The pharmaceutical lifeline still out of reach

The project, approved in 2008, was meant to anchor the industry's next phase of growth. Nearly two decades later, the site remains largely idle.

## JAGARAN CHAKMA

On a quiet December 11 afternoon, entering the API (active pharmaceutical ingredients) Industrial Park in Gajaria upazila of Munshiganj, located about 50 kilometres from Dhaka city along the Dhaka-Chittogram Highway, felt oddly nostalgic, like stepping into a forgotten picnic spot.

Neatly paved roads lined with mango trees led us in, but the illusion quickly faded.

Despite 26 plots being allocated to pharmaceutical companies, only a handful of buildings stood. The rest? Overgrown jungle. Most plots remain untouched, with minimal signs of construction or industrial activity. A few scattered workers could be seen, but the park was eerily silent – far from the hub of pharmaceutical innovation it was meant to be.

For the companies who poured money into the park hoping for a

For years, trade preferences and intellectual property flexibilities under LDC status softened the risks of import dependence. That protection is ending as Bangladesh graduates from least developed country (LDC) status later this year, which could fundamentally alter the cost structure and competitiveness of its pharmaceutical industry.

Bangladeshi firms have invested heavily in modern formulation plants, international compliance, and complex dosage forms over the past two decades.

Yet formulation alone does not ensure resilience. APIs account for a significant share of production costs. Import reliance exposes manufacturers to foreign exchange volatility, supply disruptions, and rising global prices.

After LDC graduation, local firms will also no longer freely produce patented medicines without licensing under TRIPS (Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights). This



An aerial view of the park's infrastructure, featuring the Tk 80 crore central effluent treatment plant. Designed to handle hazardous chemical waste for dozens of factories, the facility remains unused and deteriorating.

on the industry.

"After graduation, we won't be able to make new molecules freely, and rising API prices will increase medicine costs," he said.

Bangladesh's dependence on imported APIs limits its ability to absorb these shocks. "The API Park was meant to reduce this dependence."

Some industry figures argue that Bangladesh should adopt a more selective approach to API production.

Monjurul Alam Monju, former chief executive officer of Beacon Medicare, said producing every API domestically is unrealistic, particularly for specialised treatments such as cancer, where domestic demand is limited.

"Developing APIs requires heavy investment and long term commitment," he said. "Countries like India and China can do this because of their large markets."

Instead, Monju suggested focusing on a limited range of APIs with consistent local demand, supported by targeted government incentives.

However, Mustafizur Rahman, distinguished fellow at the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD), said API backward linkage is essential for keeping our pharmaceutical sector competitive, noting the country imports around \$1.2 billion worth of APIs annually.

Rahman pointed out that Bangladesh may face immediate impacts from losing preferential trade benefits if it cannot secure an extended TRIPS waiver, which was proposed but not accepted at the WTO in December 2024. "This is a critical issue," he stressed.

Others see the problem as deeper than infrastructure. Raful Alam, a former principal scientist at PTC Therapeutics in the United States, said Bangladesh lacks sufficient investment in drug discovery and medicinal chemistry.

"Our pharmaceutical industry is heavily focused on formulation," he said. "Without building capacity in organic chemistry and non-clinical research, true self-reliance will remain out of reach."

## NO TIMELINE FOR GAS SUPPLY

Officials involved in the project acknowledge the delays but cite national energy constraints.

GM Rabbani Talukder, deputy general manager of the Bangladesh Small and Cottage Industries Corporation, said core infrastructure – roads, drainage, a 20 MVA substation and gas pipelines up to plot boundaries – has been developed.

"The problem is gas supply," he said, adding that Titas Gas and the energy ministry have cited national shortages.

Alternative solutions, including sustainable energy options on adjacent land, are being explored.

Razib Kumar Saha, deputy managing director of Titas Gas Transmission and Distribution PLC, said "There is currently no timeline for supplying gas to the API Park due to insufficient reserves."

A proposal for a coal-based power plant exists but remains at an early stage, he added.



Vines grow over rusting tanks at the API Industrial Park, a symbol of the stagnation facing the project.

brighter future, the delay has only brought frustration.

"I invested in good faith. Now I'm under serious financial pressure," said Md Halimuzzaman, managing director of Healthcare Formulations Ltd, which invested nearly Tk 500 crore in the park and is now having to pay hefty loan instalments of Tk 20 lakh per day.

The vision behind the park was clear: reduce Bangladesh's dependency on imported raw materials by fostering local production of API – the raw materials needed to make medicines. But nearly two decades since the project was approved, progress remains minimal. While land development and roads are largely complete, basic utilities like gas are still missing.

**WHY API AND THE PARK MATTER**  
Bangladesh's pharmaceutical industry, which now meets almost all domestic demand for finished medicines and exports to more than 150 countries, has long carried a structural weakness: low local production of APIs.

Currently, around 85 percent of APIs are imported, mainly from India and China.

will increase costs and reduce margins, making domestic API production more critical than ever.

The state recognised the vulnerability early.

In 2008, the government approved a dedicated API Industrial Park in Gajaria, Munshiganj, to reduce import dependence and anchor backward integration. Nearly eighteen years later, the park has yet to come alive.

The API Park, spanning 200 acres, was designed to host 42 manufacturing plots with shared infrastructure: internal roads, drainage, a high-capacity electricity substation, and a central effluent treatment plant (CETP). Clustering API producers in one zone was intended to lower entry barriers, ensure environmental compliance, and make backward integration commercially viable.

More than two dozen pharmaceutical companies, including major players like Square, Beximco, Incepta, Acme, and Ibn Sina, applied for plots. Several began investing soon after allocation, borrowing from banks to construct factories and install equipment.

The facility has never been used. With no factories operating, it sits idle, deteriorating in the open.

## NO GAS, NO PRODUCTION

The paramount failure for the park is not having access to gas, the one utility without which API production cannot function sustainably.

API manufacturing is energy- and steam-intensive. Natural gas is essential for generating steam used in chemical synthesis, distillation and purification processes. Without gas, production costs rise four to five times.

Healthcare Formulations is among the companies most affected by the delay.

The factory has been fully constructed and equipped. But production is yet to begin due to lack of necessary utilities.

"We invested based on the expectation that utilities would be provided," said Halimuzzaman. The company planned to start by producing 20 API molecules and add at least four new formulations every year.

Operations have not begun because there is no gas connection.

Running the factory entirely on electricity, Halimuzzaman said, is not technically feasible and would be prohibitively expensive.

Other companies face similar

A shift began after 2010, as Bangladeshi firms entered regulated export markets and saw the strategic value of backward integration. Incepta invested heavily in scientific capacity, establishing a dedicated API research and development division in 2011 that now employs more than 100 scientists.

But scaling up small-molecule API production remains constrained by energy availability. "API manufacturing is steam-intensive," Muktadir said. "Without gas, using diesel increases costs four to five times. You cannot compete globally under those conditions."

He said the API Park was intended to resolve this bottleneck. "Instead, what we have is land and roads, but no gas, no steam and no functioning ecosystem."

## THE OTHER CONUNDRUMS

The timing of this failure is increasingly consequential.

Bangladesh's graduation from LDC status will end the TRIPS waiver that allows local companies to produce patented medicines without licensing.

Export incentives are already being reduced, from 10 percent to 5 percent this year, with further cuts expected.

Shawkat Haider, executive director of Beximco Pharmaceuticals, said these changes will place new pressure



A view of the API Industrial Park in Gajaria, Munshiganj, where neatly paved roads and utility corridors sit surrounded by overgrown jungle. The 200-acre site remains largely idle, with most allocated plots showing no signs of industrial activity.

PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON