

War enters 'NEXT PHASE'

Say Israel, US as Iran attacks intensify; Tehran strikes Israel, claims destroying US radars in UAE, Jordan, Qatar

AGENCIES

Israel and the United States yesterday stepped up their attacks against Iran and its allies in the sprawling Middle East war, as US President Donald Trump demanded Iran's "unconditional surrender" to end the crisis.

Fresh strikes rocked Iran and Lebanon yesterday, which followed warnings from Israel and the US that the war was entering a new phase. Tehran residents yesterday described the strikes as the

'worst night' of attack so far.

"We are now moving to the next phase of the operation," Israel's military chief Lieutenant General Eyal Zamir said in a televised statement.

"We have additional surprises ahead which I do not intend to disclose," he added.

The Israeli army said it hit over 400 targets across Iran yesterday.

US Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth also announced, "firepower over Iran

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Smoke rises following airstrikes in a central area of the Iranian capital Tehran yesterday. PHOTO: AFP

'Give peace a chance'

Urges UN rights chief as 'major humanitarian emergency' declared in ME

AFP, Geneva

The United Nations rights chief yesterday called for cool heads to prevail in the Middle East and urged the warring sides to pull back and "give peace a chance".

The crisis sparked in the Middle East a week ago by the barrage of US and Israeli strikes on Iran "has been spreading like wildfire", Volker Turk told reporters in Geneva.

"The world urgently needs to see steps to contain and extinguish this blaze," he said, lamenting that "instead, we are only seeing more inflammatory, bellicose rhetoric, more bombings, more destruction, killings, and escalation that fuels it further".

"I urge the states involved to take immediate steps to de-escalate, to give peace a chance. And on other states to call clearly on those involved to pull back," he said.

"Cool heads must prevail if we are to prevent further terror and devastation for civilians."

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Trump demands 'unconditional surrender' from Iran, says deploying ground troops will be 'waste of time'

US military says it has sunk over 30 Iranian ships so far

Israel claims destroying 80% of Iran's air defence, over 60% of missile launchers

Iran says countries have begun mediation efforts

Saudi Arabia 'intercepts 3 missiles' launched towards air base

UAE 'intercepts' 9 ballistic missiles, 109 drones

Iranian army says it attacked 'US-owned' oil tanker off Kuwait

Negligence fuels surge in gas-related fires

Experts call for regular monitoring of pipelines, greater caution by users

RAFIUL ISLAM

A couple of hours before dawn, 32-year-old Pinky Akter woke up and went to the kitchen to prepare seheri. Her family members were asleep.

As she lit the stove connected to a household gas pipeline, an explosion ripped through their house in the capital's Rayerbazar, engulfing it in flames.

Pinky and three of her family members suffered burns and were rushed to the National Institute of Burn and Plastic Surgery around 4:30am on February 23.

This was one of the five incidents of gas explosions over the last two weeks.

Fire officials and experts say such blasts from accumulated gas have been on the rise due to the negligence of gas suppliers and a lack of awareness among users.

According to fire service data, gas cylinder-related fires are on the rise, with 920 incidents reported last year, compared to 704 in 2024. They made up 3.4 percent of the country's 27,059 total fire incidents last year.

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EXPERTS' RECOMMENDATIONS

- Periodically check building's gas lines and those in kitchen
- Keep kitchen doors, windows open to allow any leaked gas to diffuse into the air
- Turn off gas burners properly, especially before going to bed
- Clean septic tanks regularly, ensure ventilation so that gas can escape
- Install gas detectors at homes, workplaces
- Authorities should conduct regular inspections to detect faults in pipelines

10 of a family burnt in 'gas explosion'

Doctors say 5 in critical condition

STAR ONLINE REPORT

Ten people, including women and children, sustained burn injuries after a suspected gas leak triggered an explosion in a house in Dhaka's Turag area early yesterday.

The incident happened around 3:30am on the first floor of a three-storey building near Member Bari on Kabarstan Road in Sector 10 of Kamarpara. Parts of the ground floor and first-floor walls collapsed.

The injured were admitted to the National Institute of Burn and Plastic Surgery.

The victims were identified as Rubel Chowdhury, 30, a ride-sharing motorcyclist; his pregnant wife Sonia Akter, 25; their daughter Roza, 4; Sonia's elder sister Riya Akter, 27; Sonia's brother Enayet Matobbor, 32, a Bangladeshi expatriate to Dubai who was visiting his sister; Enayet's wife Delwara Begum, 28; their

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Survival odds grim for victims of gas fires

Doctors say inhalation injury, higher burn percentages reduce survival chances

TUHIN SHUBHRA ADHIKARY

With up to 40 percent burns to their bodies, three cousins from Chattogram's Haliashahar have been fighting for their lives at the National Institute of Burn and Plastic Surgery (NIBPS) in the capital.

Aged between four and 10, the condition of Umme Ayman Snigdha, Farhan Ahmed Anas and Humayer Ahmed Ayesha is stated to be critical.

They lost six of their family members in a fire caused by a gas pipe leak at their house on February 23. The six suffered 40 to 100 percent burns to their bodies.

"Our entire family was shattered in the blink of an eye," said Abul Kashem, a maternal uncle of Ayesha who lost both her parents.

Data show that half of the victims of similar fire incidents, who were treated at NIBPS over the past year, had 20 to 100 percent burns to their bodies, making it extremely difficult for doctors to save them.

The issues of gas explosions and fire safety came to the fore again after a series of fire incidents linked to gas leaks were reported in Chattogram and three other districts within a span of three days last month.

Apart from the casualties at the Haliashahar house, four members of a family, including a three-year-old, suffered burns in a fire reportedly triggered by a gas leak at a rented flat in the capital's Rayerbazar on February 23.

The following day, four members of another family, including a toddler, were injured in an explosion caused by a "gas line leakage" in Cumilla's Daudkandi upazila. Two of them suffered over 40 percent burns to their bodies.

On February 25, three members of a family suffered burns in a blast reportedly caused by a gas line leak in Chandpur's Kachua upazila.

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HISTORIC MARCH 7



The day the nation held its breath

MOHIUDDIN ALAMGIR

Bangladesh bristled with anticipation, convinced that a defining moment was approaching.

The military junta in West Pakistan refused to transfer power despite the Awami League's sweeping victory in Pakistan's first national election. Across East Pakistan, anger surged. By the first week of

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The speech that emboldened us all

SEE PAGE 7



Motorists crowd two filling stations in the city's Paribagh yesterday after Juma prayers. The congestion it caused nearly blocked the street, which is usually quiet on weekends.

PHOTO: PALASH KHAN

People overwhelm filling stations amid fear of supply crunch

BPC caps fuel sales per vehicle

HOW MUCH FUEL CAN EACH VEHICLE BUY PER DAY?

 Motorcycles up to 2 litres	 Private cars up to 10 litres	 SUVs & microbuses up to 20-25 litres of petrol/octane	 Pickup trucks & local buses up to 70-80 litres of diesel	 Long-distance buses, trucks, covered vans & container trucks up to 200-220 litres of diesel
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ASIFUR RAHMAN and MOHAMMAD SUMAN

Filling stations across the country, including in Dhaka and Chattogram, were overcrowded on the weekend as panic buying continued amid fears of supply disruptions due to the war in the Middle East.

The Bangladesh Petroleum Corporation (BPC) yesterday capped the amount of fuel that can be sold to vehicles each day.

In a statement, the state-run fuel corporation said that amid the ongoing global crisis, negative reports circulating by some media and on social media about the country's fuel stock have triggered a surge in demand.

"To meet this additional demand,

dealers are trying to collect more fuel than usual from depots," the statement said.

"Reports have also emerged that some consumers are attempting to purchase more fuel than necessary from dealers or filling stations and store it without authorisation. These matters have come to the attention of the Energy and Mineral Resources Division, BPC, and other relevant authorities."

The government sought to reassure the people that fuel imports are continuing as scheduled and shipments are arriving regularly.

At the same time, fuel is being transported from the main installations to depots across the country by rail and tankers.

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CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION US extradites Bangladeshi from Malaysia

STAR REPORT

The US Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) has secured the extradition of a Bangladeshi national from Malaysia after arresting him with the assistance of Malaysian authorities.

FBI Director Kash Patel confirmed that Zobaidul Amin, 28, accused of operating an international child sexual exploitation enterprise and wanted since 2022, was flown to the United States and arrived in Alaska on Thursday.

He was expected to be formally charged yesterday, according to Malaysian newspaper Free Malaysia.

Patel expressed gratitude to Malaysian authorities for their cooperation, saying, "Thank you to our Kuala Lumpur office, the government of Malaysia, and our great local partners all over the country who assisted with the investigation and arrest."

In a post on X, Patel shared images appearing to show three FBI officers escorting the suspect to a private jet on a runway in Malaysia.



Smoke rises from the site of an Israeli airstrike in Beirut's southern suburbs yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

AL leader dies within 40 minutes of release on bail

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Panchagarh

An Awami League leader, who was in Panchagarh Jail, died in a hospital shortly after being released on bail.

Harunur Rashid, 55, was hospitalised after falling ill on Wednesday. He died in ICU of Dinajpur Medical College Hospital on Thursday, Jailer Akherul Islam of Panchagarh Jail told The Daily Star.

According to prison and hospital sources, the prison authorities received the bail order around 3:30pm on Thursday. At 3:40pm, the order was sent to the hospital via email. At 4:08pm, doctors declared Harun dead.

Harun was a former member of Panchagarh Zilla Parishad and ex-organising secretary of Debiganj upazila unit AL.

According to prison sources, Harun was arrested on October 16 last year in a case filed under the Negotiable Instruments (NI) Act. He was sentenced to one year of simple imprisonment. Another case had also been filed against him.

Jailer Akherul said Harun received initial treatment at the prison

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War enters 'next phase'

FROM PAGE 1

and over Tehran is about to surge dramatically".

A day earlier, Hegseth said the US was "accelerating, not decelerating" its war on Iran, with more assets heading to the region.

"There will be no deal with Iran except UNCONDITIONAL SURRENDER!" Trump wrote on Truth social media.

"After that, and the selection of a GREAT & ACCEPTABLE Leader(s), we, and many of our wonderful and very brave allies and partners, will work tirelessly to bring Iran back from the brink of destruction, making it economically bigger, better, and stronger than ever before."

Trump made the remarks just hours after Iran's president announced that unspecified countries had begun mediation efforts, one of the first signals of any diplomatic initiative to end the conflict.

On Thursday, Trump said it would be a "waste of time" to send ground troops into Iran, but he has insisted he would "have to be involved" in choosing Iran's next leader.

Trump also indicated he is keen to see Iran's leadership structure removed and that "we want to go in and clean out everything" quickly.

"We don't want someone who would rebuild over a 10 year period," he said. He added that he had ideas for a new leader but declined to name anyone.

The war, now in its seventh day, has dragged in global powers, upended the world's energy and transport sectors, and brought chaos to even usually peaceful areas of the volatile region.

United Nations Secretary General Antonio Guterres yesterday condemned "unlawful attacks" across the Middle East and warned that the situation could spiral out of control.

"All the unlawful attacks in the Middle East and beyond are causing tremendous suffering and harm to civilians throughout the region -- and pose a grave risk to the global economy, particularly to the most vulnerable people," he said.

"The situation could spiral beyond anyone's control. It is time to stop the fighting and get to serious diplomatic

negotiations."

On the ground, Israel pursued a major expansion of the war in Lebanon, pounding the capital, Beirut, after ordering an unprecedented evacuation of the entire southern suburbs of the city.

It also launched a new wave of attacks on Iran, saying 50 of its warplanes had struck a bunker still being used by Iran's leadership beneath Khamenei's destroyed Tehran compound.

On Thursday, Israel's military chief Lieutenant General Eyal Zamir said that more than 60 percent of Iran's ballistic missile launchers and 80 percent of its air defence systems have been destroyed.

The US military said it has sunk over 30 Iranian ships, including an Iranian drone ship. US Admiral Brad Cooper, who leads US forces in the Middle East as the head of Central Command, told reporters that ballistic missile attacks by Iran have decreased by 90 percent.

According to the Iranian Red Crescent Society, US and Israeli strikes on the country have killed 1,230 people since the beginning of the war on February 28, a number AFP Reuters could not independently verify. The Lebanese health ministry has reported 123 people killed and 683 wounded as a result of Israeli attacks.

In Israel, at least 10 people have been killed, according to first responders there. The US military has reported the deaths of six of its personnel.

In Lebanon, Israel struck several towns in the south of the country overnight, with widespread destruction in the southern Beirut suburbs, considered a Hezbollah stronghold and home to hundreds of thousands of people.

APFTV cameras captured a fresh strike on the area yesterday, footage showing plumes of smoke billowing from buildings.

Iran also kept up its attacks on Israel, with a volley of missiles aimed at Tel Aviv while rocket trails also lit up the sky in Netanya, further north. AFP journalists in Tel Aviv reported hearing several blasts over the city after the military said it detected launches from Iran.

The UAE, Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia all reported fresh drone and missile attacks.

The day the nation held its breath

FROM PAGE 1

March 1971, the non-cooperation movement had reached its peak, defying repeated attempts by the army to suppress it, including firing on protesters.

In effect, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman had already emerged as the de facto leader of Bangladesh, commanding the loyalty of millions. Against this charged backdrop, he was scheduled to address a rally on March 7.

The nation waited, breath held in collective suspense. Would he declare independence and sever ties with West Pakistan once and for all? Would this be the moment?

It had been known since March 1 that Bangabandhu would outline the future course of action at the March 7 rally. Soon after, it was announced that President Yahya Khan would address the nation on March 6, wrote Archer K Blood, then US consul general in erstwhile East Pakistan, in his book "The Cruel Birth of Bangladesh: Memoirs of an American Diplomat".

"This coming conjunction gave rise to much anxiety, hope and speculation in East Pakistan. The key question debated was whether or not Mujib would use the occasion to declare the independence of Bangladesh, and, if so, how would the army react," he added.

Major General Khadim Hussain Raja, then commander of the 14th Division in East Pakistan, recalled the tense hours in his book "A Stranger in My Own Country". On the eve of March 7, two East Pakistani gentlemen met him, introducing themselves as Mujib's emissaries.

Raja wrote that he issued a stern warning.

In case Mujib attacked the integrity

of the country and proclaimed independence unilaterally, "I told the emissaries to inform Sheikh Mujib that, during his speech, I would have the army -- armed with guns and tanks -- standing by in the cantonment, ready to move immediately," he wrote.

"I would have the army march in immediately with orders to wreck the meeting and, if necessary, raze Dhaka to the ground."

Scientist MA Wazed Miah, in his book "Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Ke Ghire Kichhu Ghotona O Bangladesh", described a different scene unfolding that morning.

Bangabandhu's residence at Dhanmondi 32 was packed with leaders and activists of the Awami League and others from early morning. Inside, Bangabandhu sat with party leaders in a closed door meeting. After lengthy discussions, he emerged to say they had reached a consensus: a four-point declaration would be made at the afternoon rally.

The declaration, he said, would reflect the political reality of the time and the demands raised by students and the people. It would call for an end to martial law and the transfer of power to the elected representatives of the people, among other demands. The statement would be released to the press after the rally.

Wazed Miah, the husband of Bangabandhu's eldest daughter Sheikh Hasina, wrote that Bangabandhu later set out for the Ramna Race Course, now Suhrawardy Udyan, standing on a truck alongside Awami League leaders. A boat-shaped stage had been erected at the venue. As he arrived, the vast crowd roared with slogans.

But the sea of voices fell silent the

Iran's Revolutionary Guards yesterday said their forces had targeted radar systems in the United Arab Emirates, Jordan, and Qatar.

"US THAAD radars deployed in the United Arab Emirates and Jordan, as well as the US FPS 132 over the horizon radar (Desert Eye) stationed in Qatar, have been destroyed by the missile and drone units of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)," said the Guards on their website Sepah News.

It also said it targeted US forces at two military bases in the Gulf -- al-Dhafra airbase in the UAE and Ali Al Salem Air Base in Kuwait. No immediate details were provided about possible damage or casualties.

The Iranian army yesterday claimed that they attacked a "US owned" oil tanker off the coast of Kuwait, setting it on fire, reported Al Jazeera.

Qatar, without specifying any base, said it intercepted a drone attack on a US air base on its territory early yesterday, while Saudi Arabia said it shot down three drones east of its capital. The UAE said it intercepted 9 ballistic missiles and 109 drones fired by Iranian forces.

Thirteen people, seven of them civilians, have been killed in Gulf countries since the war began.

The conflict has expanded as far afield as the Sri Lankan coast, where a US submarine torpedoed an Iranian frigate, and Azerbaijan, which threatened retaliation after a drone hit an airport.

Meanwhile, an Iranian warship has docked in the southwest Indian port of Kochi.

"IRIS Lavan... docked at Kochi on March 4. In this context, its crew of 183 are currently accommodated at naval facilities in Kochi," said an Indian government source.

Like the IRIS Dena, the Iranian warship sunk by a US submarine Wednesday off the coast of Sri Lanka, IRIS Lavan had also been part of a naval fleet review off India's port city of Visakhapatnam.

Meanwhile, after the Senate, the US House of Representatives rejected an effort on Thursday to stop Trump's air war on Iran.

moment Bangabandhu rose to speak.

Emotion choking his voice, the towering orator began: "I have come before you today with a heart laden with sadness..."

In the 19-minute speech that followed, he recounted how Bangladesh had been denied their democratic rights despite securing a majority in the election. He called on people from all walks of life to prepare for resistance against tyranny, exploitation, subjugation, and deprivation by the Pakistani military junta, urging them to turn every home into a fortress.

He also laid out detailed instructions for how the country would be run under the ongoing non-cooperation movement.

Then came the thunderous crescendo: "The struggle this time is a struggle for emancipation. The struggle this time is a struggle for independence. Joy Bangla."

The crowd raised their hands in unison, pledging solidarity with the call.

The speech stirred a nation, inspiring millions to prepare for the Liberation War that began weeks later, when the Pakistani military launched a brutal crackdown on the night of March 25, attacking unarmed Bangladeshis and unleashing a genocide that would continue for nine months.

Reflecting on the moment, Archer Blood later wrote, "Mujib's speech on March 7 was more notable for what he did not say than for what he actually said. He did not, as some feared and some hoped, declare an independent Bangla Desh. Instead, he called for a peaceful, non-cooperation movement to continue the struggle for independence and emancipation of Bengalis."

Negligence fuels surge in gas-related fires

FROM PAGE 1

Similarly, fire incidents related to gas pipeline leaks rose to 562 last year from 465 in 2024, marking a 21 percent increase, the data show.

Experts from the Fire Service and Civil Defence and the Department of Explosives said that when gas leaks and accumulates inside a room or a closed space without proper ventilation, it creates ideal conditions for an explosion.

Fire officials said an explosion can occur if gas concentration in a confined space is between five and 15 percent.

Gas can build up from a tiny leak in a pipeline or from a loose LPG cylinder regulator that controls the flow of gas. Besides, gas generated in sewerage lines or septic tanks can accumulate in toilets, they said.

Many of the gas explosions occur on the ground floor of buildings, as gas leaked from pipelines or sewerage lines gets trapped there over time.

The built up gas causes an explosion when it comes in contact with a spark from an electrical short circuit or when someone lights a matchstick, said Brig Gen (ret'd) Ali Ahmed Khan, former director general of the Fire Service and Civil Defence.

He, however, said the likelihood of an explosion from a pipeline leak drops sharply if the trapped gas can escape into open space.

Ahmed blamed weak regulatory oversight, negligence by gas distributors, including Titas Gas, and a lack of public awareness for such fire incidents.

More than one crore consumers -- including households, restaurants and industrial units -- rely on gas cylinders, while around 38 lakh households use pipeline gas supplied by state-run distributors across the country.

Blaming most of the gas cylinder-related explosions on illegal refilling, Mohammed Amirul Haque, president of the LPG Operators Association of Bangladesh, said that nearly 95 percent of such incidents are linked to cross-filling of LPG cylinders outside authorised plants.

"At licensed LPG plants, cylinders are filled following proper procedures.

10 of a family burnt

FROM PAGE 1

son Junayed, 10; Enayet's younger brother Habib, 26, a mason by profession; Enayet's niece Ayesha Akhter, 19; and Abu Kalam Rubel, 35.

Sajed Matobbor, Enayet's nephew and Ayesha's brother, who paints houses for a living, resides on the second floor in the same building.

At the hospital, he said there was a loud bang around 3:30am and the glass windows in his room broke. He thought there was an earthquake and went to the roof. Later, when he heard cries of "fire" and got out of the building and learned that his family members were taken to the hospital.

He said Rubel was a ride-sharing motorcyclist who lived with his family on the first floor of the building. Enayet, who works in Dubai as an expatriate

'Give peace a chance'

FROM PAGE 1

His comments came as fresh strikes rocked Iran and Lebanon yesterday, with Israel vowing to escalate to a new phase in the Middle East war that has spiralled rapidly throughout the region and beyond.

The war has dragged in global powers, upended the world's energy and transport sectors, and brought chaos to even usually peaceful areas of the volatile region.

Turk voiced particular concern about the situation in Lebanon, which he said was "becoming a key flashpoint".

"I am extremely concerned and worried about the latest developments following Hezbollah's attacks on Israel and Israel's heavy counter-strikes, as well as its extensive displacement orders that have already forced hundreds of thousands of people to flee their homes,"

But when those are refilled manually at unauthorised facilities, safety standards are not maintained, which significantly raises the risk of explosion."

He further said that in many cases, illegal operators underfill cylinders or mix other substances with gas, compromising safety.

"It will be extremely difficult to check gas cylinder related blasts unless illegal refilling is stopped," he added.

Experts noted that many users hire inexperienced or untrained technicians to connect their stoves to gas cylinders or household pipelines, which can result in faulty installations.

Besides, low quality pipes and regulators are sometimes used during stove installations, increasing the likelihood of gas leaks.

FINGERS POINTED AT TITAS GAS

Many consumers allege that state-run Titas Gas, which supplies gas to 27.58 lakh households across 12 districts including Dhaka, has been negligent in maintaining and repairing its ageing pipelines and in disconnecting illegal gas lines. There have also been claims that Titas staffers do not immediately respond to complaints.

One of the major gas explosions involving a Titas pipeline occurred at a Narayanjan mosque on the night of September 4, 2020. At least 34 people were killed.

At that time, fire officials said the explosion was caused by an accumulation of leaked gas from an underground Titas pipeline that somehow came in contact with an electric spark.

Titas Gas had suspended eight officials and staffers in connection with the blast.

There was another big gas explosion in Moghbazar on June 27, 2021, which left 12 people dead and 50 others injured. The blast triggered partial collapse of a building and shattered the glass walls of dozens of nearby structures.

A fire service investigation later found that the explosion resulted from the accumulation of a huge amount of methane gas from leaks in a Titas Gas

pipeline and a sewerage line inside the building.

When contacted, Md Al Amin, manager of the public relations department of Titas Gas, admitted that a good number of gas explosions had occurred following leaks from their pipelines.

He, however, refuted allegations of delayed response to gas leak complaints, and said that a customer care hotline is always available and staffers work round the clock to deal with emergencies.

He also said they publish advertisements through media outlets regularly to raise public awareness.

EXPERTS' SUGGESTIONS

Several experts suggested a set of precautionary measures to keep homes safe from gas accumulation and explosion.

Ahmed said, "When a water tap starts leaking, we can easily see water dripping and fix it. But a gas leak is not visually detectable. That's why we must periodically check the building's gas lines as well as those in kitchens."

He further said kitchen doors and windows should always be kept open so that any leaked gas can diffuse into the air instead of building up indoors.

Residents returning home after several days should not immediately switch on lights or fans; instead, they should first open doors and windows to let in fresh air to dilute built-up gas, if any, he added.

Experts also stressed the need for ensuring proper ventilation in septic tanks so that gas can escape rather than getting trapped in basements or rooms on the ground floor. These tanks should be cleaned regularly.

They advised people to turn off gas burners properly, especially before going to bed, and to immediately inform the authorities if there are any signs of leaks in gas lines.

Installation of gas detectors at homes and workplaces can provide an additional layer of safety. At the same time, the authorities should conduct regular inspections of gas and sewerage lines to detect faults early, they said.

All are currently undergoing treatment, with five in critical condition.

Senior Station Officer Alam Hossain of Uttara Fire Station told The Daily Star firefighters rushed to the scene but did not have to take any action as the fire had already been extinguished.

"We suspect the explosion occurred due to accumulated gas, which damaged several flats," he said.

Sajed said Rubel's house was entirely in ruins after the blast. As soon as he reached the hospital, he spoke to Sonia, who told him that she would not survive. Enayet told him to look after his children. He said all of them were in pain.

"We have informed our relatives. We are from a low-income background. We don't know if we can afford the medicines and treatment in the coming days," Sajed said.

safe passage.

"UNHCR has declared the escalating crisis in the Middle East as a major humanitarian emergency requiring an immediate response across the region," Ayaki Ito, the agency's emergency chief and its cross-regional refugee coordinator, told a press briefing in Geneva.

"The recent escalation of hostility and attacks in the Middle East have triggered significant population movements -- while clashes along the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan have also forced many thousands of families to flee," he said.

The affected regions already host nearly 25 million people as refugees, internally displaced people, or refugees who have recently returned from abroad, said Ito.

Tap global e-commerce for jute startups

President urges the youth

UNB, Dhaka



Referring to this year's National Jute Day theme, "Build the Jute Industry, Create Employment," President Mohammed Shahabuddin called on the country's youth to explore startups and innovation in the jute sector and utilise global e-commerce platforms to expand Bangladesh's jute products in international markets yesterday.

"There will be a call to the creative young generation to open new horizons in the jute sector by promoting 'Made in Bangladesh' branding through startups and innovation and by connecting with global e-commerce platforms," said the president.

He made the remarks while addressing the inaugural ceremony of National Jute Day 2026 and the opening of a nine-day Jute and Diversified Jute Products Fair at the Osmani Memorial Auditorium in the capital.

Extending greetings to entrepreneurs, farmers, researchers, and businesspeople

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Prime Minister Tarique Rahman speaks before an iftar hosted in honour of diplomats at State Guest House Jamuna in Dhaka yesterday, calling for deeper international partnerships rooted in trade, investment, and people-to-people ties. He also sought support for Bangladesh's candidacy for the UNGA presidency. Story on page 12.

PHOTO: BNP MEDIA CELL

Tarique launches training workshop for BNP lawmakers

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The BNP yesterday started a training workshop for its lawmakers ahead of the first session of the 13th National Parliament, scheduled for March 12.

The programme was inaugurated at 10:30am at the party chairperson's office in Dhaka's Gulshan by Prime Minister and BNP Chairman Tarique Rahman.

Additional Press Secretary Atikur Rahman Ruman confirmed the development, saying Tarique was personally attending the workshop.

The opening session was attended by IGRD Minister and BNP Secretary General Mirza Fakhru Islam Alamgir, and senior leaders, including Standing Committee members MP Abdul Moyeen Khan, Finance and Planning Minister Amir Khosru Mahmud Chowdhury, Liberation War Affairs Minister Hafiz Uddin Ahmed, and Social Welfare Minister AZM Zahid Hossain.

Tarique delivered the welcome address, while his daughter Zaima Rahman was also present.

Party leaders explained that the workshop is designed to brief newly elected MPs on parliamentary procedures, code of conduct, bill drafting and review, budget analysis, and the functioning of parliamentary committees.

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Taqi murder probe lingers after 13 years

Mourners demand swift submission of charge sheet

STAR REPORT

Family members and leaders of various political, social, and civic organisations visited the grave of Tanwir Muhammad Taqi yesterday morning, marking the 13th anniversary of the teenager's murder in Narayanganj.

Expressing frustration over the lack of justice even after more than a decade, they demanded the investigation be completed and the charge sheet filed without further delay.

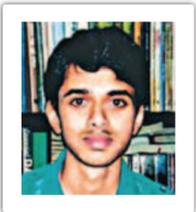
Around 10:00am, mourners visited Taqi's grave at Siraj Shah's shrine in the Puran Bandar area and offered prayers seeking eternal peace for his soul.

Prior to this, several organisations laid wreaths at the grave to pay tribute. These included Shantrash Nirmul Taqi Mancha, Narayanganj Sanskriti Jote, Khelaghar Ashor, Ganosamhati Andolon, Kranti Khelaghar Ashor, Somomona, Communist Party of Bangladesh, Bangladesh Samajtantrik Dal, Bangladesh Mahila Parishad, Udichi Shilpigosthi, and Anubhob.

Those present included Taqi's father, cultural activist Rafiur Rabbi, his younger son Rakib Muhammad Saki, member secretary of Shantrash Nirmul Taqi Mancha Halim Azad, former president of Narayanganj Sanskriti Jote Ziaul Islam Kajol, general secretary Dina Tajrin, former general secretary Dhiman Saha Jewel, district coordinator of Ganosamhati Andolon Tariqul Suzon, executive coordinator Anjan Das, city convener Niamur Rashid Biplob, district president of the Communist Party Hafizul Islam, NAP general secretary Awlad Hossain, among others.

Taqi was abducted on March 6, 2013, and his body was recovered two days later from a canal connected to the Shitalakhya River. A year later, the Rapid Action Battalion (Rab) disclosed details of the killing at a press conference, outlining where, how, and on whose orders the murder was carried out.

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Firewood market heats up as LPG costs stay high

SHAHEEN MOLLAH and ASIFUR RAHMAN

Narvin Begum, a day labourer supporting a four-member family, uses LPG for quick morning cooking and firewood for other meals.

Earlier, she used to pay Tk 15 per kilogramme of firewood. Now she has to pay Tk 20.

"A maund used to last nearly a month. Now expenses are higher, but gas alone is still beyond our reach," said Narvin, a resident of Mirpur.

With rising cylinder costs and supply disruptions creating volatility in the liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) market, a lot of households are adjusting their cooking habits.

With rising cylinder costs and supply disruptions creating volatility in the LPG market, a lot of households are adjusting their cooking habits. Many Dhaka residents are turning to firewood, which in turn is driving up prices in the informal fuel market.

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As a result, even households and small businesses that rarely rely on LPG are feeling the effects of the recent price volatility.

Although LPG supply has been increasing steadily, cylinders are



still selling for Tk 400-500 more than the government-fixed rate. LPG is now being sold at Tk 1700-1800 per 12kg cylinder.

Meanwhile, firewood prices remain elevated, putting pressure on low-income families and small eateries that depend on wood as their primary cooking fuel.

During visits to Bhasantek, Damalkot, Mohammadpur Geneva Camp, Mirpur-13, Korail, Mohakhali's Sat Tala slum, Duaripara, and Karwan Bazar, The Daily Star found firewood selling for Tk 15-25 per kilogramme depending on quality - noticeably higher than rates seen just months ago.

Traders say the surge began when gas cylinder shortages and higher LPG prices prompted many households and restaurants to temporarily switch fuels.

"At that time demand jumped

overnight," said a firewood trader at Mohammadpur Geneva Camp. "Prices rose quickly, and they have not come down because supply is limited and buyers are still there."

At the camp, shuttering wood - considered a durable fuel - now sells for around Tk 25 per kilogramme, while sawmill offcuts cost about Tk 20. Tree branches sell for roughly Tk 15 per kilogramme.

Traders said good-quality wood was selling for Tk 10-15 per kilogramme before the spike.

For restaurants using clay stoves and street food vendors, the price increase has translated into higher operating costs.

Asif Billah, manager of the local eatery Shamim Hotel, which operates around the clock, said the restaurant uses about five maunds of firewood daily, in addition to LPG.

SEE PAGE 4 COL 1

Publish white paper on interim gov't's tenure

Demands Gonotantrik Jukta Front

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Leaders of the Gonotantrik Jukta Front yesterday called for the publication of a white paper detailing the activities and decisions of the interim government during its time in office.

The statement said there has already been much discussion and criticism from different groups about the activities of the interim government.

After the July uprising, the government was given responsibilities such as ensuring justice, carrying out reforms, and organising elections.

"It was also expected to control rising prices, improve law and order, and establish

SEE PAGE 9 COL 4

165 repatriated from Libya

UNB, Dhaka

A total of 165 Bangladeshi nationals have been repatriated from Libya with the assistance of the Bangladesh Embassy in Libya, the foreign affairs ministry, the expatriates' welfare ministry, the Libyan government, and the International Organization for Migration (IOM).

They returned to Bangladesh on a Buraq Air flight at 5:30am yesterday.

Of the returnees, 143 had been detained at the Ganfouda Detention Centre in Benghazi, while the remaining 22 were distressed, vulnerable and physically ill Bangladeshis who had been living in Benghazi and nearby areas and expressed willingness to return home voluntarily.

According to officials, most of them had entered Libya attempting to reach Europe illegally

SEE PAGE 9 COL 4

Decay threatens 250-yr-old Lalmonirhat mosque

Archaeology department says work can begin if committee seeks formal approval

S DILIP ROY, Lalmonirhat

Worshippers at Nidaria Jame Mosque, a protected 18th century monument in Lalmonirhat, are facing safety risks as parts of the boundary wall and a tin-shed veranda remain in a fragile condition due to a lack of renovation.

Declared a protected archaeological monument in 1994 by the Department of Archaeology, the over 250-year-old mosque at Kismat Nagarband village under Panchgram union has seen little visible repair work in recent years, locals and mosque authorities said.

They urged the immediate need for steps to ensure safe prayer facilities



while preserving the historic structure.

According to the Department of Archaeology, the three-domed mosque was built in 1762 by Mansur Khan, son of Masud Khan, as indicated by a Persian inscription engraved on a black stone on the front wall.

The rectangular structure features

octagonal corner towers and three mihrabs on the western wall, reflecting Mughal-era architectural style.

Locals said the main structure has remained largely unchanged since its construction and has not undergone significant renovation for many years.

SEE PAGE 4 COL 3



PHOTO: MEHEDI HASAN

A mother looks through children's books at a stall of the Amar Ekushey Book Fair at Dhaka's Suhrawardy Udyan yesterday, holding her little one in her arms. The photo was taken yesterday.

INTERNATIONAL

Cost to US for war on Iran is \$3.7bn in first 100 hours

AGENCIES

The US-Israeli war on Iran is estimated to have cost Washington \$3.7bn so far in its first 100 hours alone, or nearly \$900m a day, driven largely by the huge expenditure of munitions, according to new research.

An analysis by Washington-based think tank the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) underlined the colossal cost of the war, which entered its seventh day yesterday, as the US attacks Iran with stealth bombers and advanced weapons systems.

Researchers Mark Cancian and Chris Park said only a small amount of the estimated \$3.7bn cost of the war in the first 100 hours was already budgeted for, while most of the costs - \$3.5bn - were not.

That meant the Pentagon would likely need to request more funding soon to cover the unbudgeted costs, they said.



Houthi supporters hold placards of late Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei during a demonstration in solidarity with Iran and Lebanon, amid the US-Israeli conflict with Iran, in Sanaa, Yemen, yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

SCHOOL STRIKE
US probe points to likely US responsibility

REUTERS

US military investigators believe it is likely that US forces were responsible for an apparent strike on an Iranian girls' school that killed scores of children on Saturday but have not yet reached a final conclusion or completed their investigation, two US officials told Reuters.

Reuters was unable to determine more details about the investigation, including what evidence contributed to the tentative assessment, what type of munition was used, who was responsible or why the US might have struck the school.

US Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth on Wednesday acknowledged the US military was investigating the incident.

The officials, who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss sensitive military matters, did not rule out the possibility that new evidence could emerge that absolves the US of responsibility and points to another responsible party in the incident.

Reuters could not determine how much longer the investigation would last or what evidence US investigators are seeking before the assessment can be completed.

Iran now stands largely alone

Russia, China stay on sidelines, prioritise own strategic gains

REUTERS, Dubai

With its supreme leader killed and its war machine under relentless US pressure, Iran now stands largely alone - its longtime partners Russia and China offering nothing more than diplomatic condemnations and expressions of concern.

'COLD CALCULATION'

With the Strait of Hormuz already shut, the attacks have sent energy prices soaring, destabilising global markets and forcing major economies to scramble, underscoring the world's exposure to the fallout from Tehran's response to the war.

Russia and China's restraint reflects a cold calculation, analysts say: intervening as Iran faces Israel and the US would bring high costs, limited gains and unpredictable risks - burdens neither power appears willing to shoulder.

"Putin has other priorities, and chief among them is Ukraine," said Anna Borshchevskaya, a Russia expert at the Washington Institute. "It would be foolish for Russia to go into a direct military confrontation with the United States."

STARK PARADOX

China has spent years embedding itself in Middle Eastern diplomacy, while Russia has cast Iran as a pillar of its anti-Western alignment.

Yet as the conflict flared, both powers were constrained - China

by its dependence on Gulf energy and trade and by security priorities in Asia, and Russia by a grinding war in Ukraine that has sapped its capacity to shield partners and sharpened its need to preserve ties with oil-rich Gulf states. The result is a stark paradox: Iran remains strategically useful to both, but

on Venezuela alone.

China's key vulnerability remains energy flows through the Strait of Hormuz, which carries some 45 percent of its oil imports. But Beijing has built strategic reserves and substantial volumes of Iranian oil already sitting in tankers or storage, experts say.



not useful enough to fight for. **CHINA ALLIANCES FOCUS ON TRADE**

Unlike the US, whose alliances rest on mutual defence obligations, China prefers partnerships built on trade, investment and arms sales, ties that stop short of dragging it into costly conflicts beyond East Asia, said Evan A Feigenbaum from the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

Beijing maintains ties with Iran and Gulf Sunni rivals, and in Latin America, never placed all its bets

HIGHER OIL PRICES HELP RUSSIA

Russia also sees concrete benefits: rising oil prices strengthen its war economy.

Russia does not benefit from the collapse of the Iranian regime, but it is also not tying its fate to Tehran's survival, said Borshchevskaya. Moscow is hedging, preserving flexibility, regardless of the conflict's outcome, and would build ties with any new government, even one aligned with Washington.

Iran's proxies in Iraq reluctant to join war

REUTERS, Baghdad

Iran has spent decades and billions of dollars preparing foreign proxy fighters like A J, a commander in a pro-Iranian paramilitary group in Iraq, for a moment just like this. Since the US and Israel went to war on the Islamic Republic a week ago, A J has been awaiting marching orders from Tehran.

But they have yet to come. And so as the leadership in Tehran faces a potentially existential threat, many of the fighters and militia groups the Iranians cultivated in Iraq have so far not entered the fight for them.

There has been no mass mobilization of Iran's proxies inside Iraq, one of the last redoubts of the Islamic Republic's once-formidable system of alliances stretching from Gaza, Lebanon and Syria to Yemen and Iraq.

Some pro-Iranian groups in Iraq have claimed attacks in recent days, to be sure. One group said it had fired drones at "enemy bases in Iraq and the region," and several explosions rocked the northern city of Erbil, a Kurdish stronghold that hosts a US base.

But most missile and drone attacks have come directly from Iran, Kurdish officials say.

US can't provide enough missiles for Gulf nations

Says EU commissioner

AFP, Warsaw

The United States is not in a position to provide enough missiles to the Gulf states and Ukraine to defend themselves, EU defence and space commissioner Andrius Kubilius said yesterday.

"It's very clear that after the Iranian crisis ... it became more urgent for us in Europe to ramp up production of air defence and anti-ballistic missiles," Kubilius said in Warsaw.

"Americans really will not be able to provide enough of those missiles, both for the Gulf countries, for American army itself, and also for Ukrainian needs."

Kubilius said Europe was facing a "huge challenge" in developing anti-missile defence, stressing that Ukraine's needs were "immense".

He said "for the winter season alone" Ukraine needed around 700 Patriot, PAC-2 and PAC-3 missiles, which is "more or less equal to the number of missiles that American manufacturers are capable of producing in a year".

At a joint press conference with Polish defence minister Wladyslaw Kosiniak-Kamysz, Kubilius emphasised that "the situation (in Europe) is really critical".

"It is clear that we are going to have to develop our missile production very quickly and very urgently," he added.

Missile fire hinders Middle East rescue flights

REUTERS, Dubai

Emirati airlines resumed some flights to global cities from the war-hit Gulf yesterday, but a Lufthansa jet that was headed to the region diverted over safety fears and an Air France repatriation flight was forced to turn back due to missile fire.

The outbreak of the US-Israel war against Iran has led to flight cancellations across the Middle East, leaving airlines and governments scrambling to support thousands of stranded passengers. Shares in carriers from New Zealand to Japan have slid meanwhile, as the conflict drives up fuel prices.

Passengers have paid huge sums to get out of the Middle East, with last-minute dashes to the airport, overland trips to less impacted hubs and fighter jets at times escorting passenger planes out. Some described it as "absolute chaos".

With most airspace in the region still closed over missile and drone concerns, some people with deep pockets have turned to private jets while charter flights and limited commercial services struggle to evacuate tens of thousands of travellers.

A Lufthansa flight to Saudi capital Riyadh diverted to Cairo yesterday over safety concerns after a similar move by an Air France late on Thursday.

"(It) reflects the instability in the region and the complexity of repatriation operations," French Transport Minister Philippe Tabarot said.

Britain's first repatriation flight from Oman landed at London's Stansted Airport early yesterday after delays. Similar repatriation flights arrived or were due to arrive back in countries from Poland to Portugal.



Survival odds grim

FROM PAGE 1

Earlier in March last year, eight members of a family suffered burns in a fire resulting from a gas leak in Narayanganj's Siddhirganj. Four of them died from burn wounds, highlighting the high fatality rates in fires triggered by gas explosions.

That same month in 2024, at least 32 people, including women and children, were injured after a gas cylinder caught fire due to a pipe leak in Gazipur's Kaliakoir. Fourteen of them later died from their injuries.

REASONS BEHIND HIGH FATALITY Prof Nasir Uddin, director of NIBPS, said a major reason for the high fatality rate among patients with gas-related burns is inhalation injury, meaning their airways get burnt.

Another reason is that the percentage of burns is usually much higher in such incidents, he added.

Since January last year, NIBPS has received 235 patients, who suffered burns in 60 fire incidents caused by gas leaks. The institute counted only those incidents in which at least two to 10 people were injured.

Of the 235 patients, nearly half - 117 - suffered more than 20 percent burns to their bodies, with 71 of them having 41 to 100 percent burns.

"When a patient suffers an inhalation injury along with over 20 percent burns, the scope for intervention is extremely limited.... Given our medical capability, if burns exceed 30 percent and the airway is also affected, the risk of death rises by more than 50 percent," he told

The Daily Star.

Another crucial issue is the availability of medicines and equipment. In developed countries, advanced and expensive drugs are used in burn management.

"We cannot administer those medicines here due to budget constraints," he said.

FROM JAN 2025 TO FEB 25, 2026	
BURN %	PATIENTS
1% to 20%	118
21% to 40%	45
41% to 60%	40
Over 60%	31
Others	1
TOTAL	235

Nasir further said foreign experts who visited Bangladesh after the Milestone Air crash last year recommended international-standard dressing materials, antibiotics and other essential medicines for proper treatment of burn patients.

"We have already sought additional budget allocation from the government, stressing that our institute should not be treated like other general hospitals. It should be doubled at the very least."

People overwhelm filling stations amid fear of supply crunch

FROM PAGE 1

"Hopefully, within a short time, an adequate buffer stock of fuel will be built up," the statement added.

BPC also instructed that consumers must present the original copy of the previous purchase receipt or bill when buying fuel again. Customers must collect a receipt from filling stations clearly stating the quantity, price, and purpose of the fuel purchased.

The statement further said fuel must be sold at government-fixed prices, warning that charging extra during a crisis would be a punishable offence. It added that fuel prices are usually set at the beginning of each month, and no decision has been taken so far to increase prices in the current situation.

Anindya Islam Amit, state minister for power, energy, and mineral resources, yesterday visited several filling stations in Dhaka. He told reporters that some people were trying to hoard fuel.

"But we are here to inform them that they should not be anxious about the situation, as we have adequate stock. Our scheduled fuel supply is also functioning," he said.

Officials at the BPC said the country currently has about 14 days' stock of petrol, a 27 days' supply of octane, and diesel reserves for around 11 days.

Bangladesh has around 18,000 tonnes of petrol in stock but is able to keep 37,000 tonnes. It has 28,500 tonnes of octane against a capacity of

53,000 tonnes. Condensate from local gas fields is used to produce some of these fuels. Diesel stock at depots currently stands at about 1,80,000 tonnes. Two consignments of diesel, of about 57,000 tonnes, have already arrived at ports and are awaiting unloading, BPC officials said.

On average, the country sells 12,000-13,000 tonnes of diesel a day. In recent days, however, sales have surged to over 20,000 tonnes daily due to panic buying.

Officials said stock levels remain largely unchanged over the weekend as fuel supply operations usually remain closed on Friday and Saturday. While the field-level situation may remain similar today, supply is expected to normalise from tomorrow.

They added that dealers and filling stations would receive around 10 percent less fuel than last year's demand during the same period, as current demand appears inflated due to panic buying.

About 20 percent of Bangladesh's fuel imports consist of crude oil shipped through the Strait of Hormuz, currently closed amid the war, while the remaining 80 percent of refined petroleum products are imported from China, Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia.

Even though crude oil supply has faced disruptions, there has been no major problem in fuel imports, officials said. In some cases,

shipments have been delayed, but no contracts have been cancelled so far.

LONG QUEUES

Despite the assurances, fears of a possible shortage triggered panic buying yesterday, with long queues of cars and motorcycles at filling stations in Dhaka and Chattogram.

In Tejgaon, two filling stations were overcrowded around noon, with queues causing congestion in nearby streets. Nazmul Hasan, a motorcyclist who earns a living by sharing rides, told The Daily Star that he had been waiting in queue for about an hour. "I usually need fuel worth Tk 200 to Tk 300 every day. Others may manage with less, but we [ridesharing drivers] cannot run our vehicles without fuel," he said.

This time, however, he arrived prepared to fill his tank. "I have come to know that there might be problems regarding the fuel supply amid the war in the Middle East," he said.

In Shahbagh, the line at Meghna Model Service Center stretched toward the intersection near InterContinental Dhaka. Filling stations in the Asadgate area were similarly crowded.

Another motorcyclist, Mohammad Imran, was seen waiting in a queue under Shahbagh Metro Rail Station to buy fuel from a station at least half a kilometre away. He said he had gone there after failing to get fuel at two filling stations in Motijheel.

He, too, had come to fill his tank fearing a possible shortage.

A similar situation was observed in Chattogram, where large crowds gathered at filling stations fearing possible price hikes and supply disruptions.

Several filling stations in the port city had long lines of motorcycles and cars. Many drivers were moving from one station to another.

At some filling stations, sales were restricted to Tk 100-200 worth of fuel for motorcycles and Tk 500-1,000 for cars.

Filling station workers said customer pressure had multiplied over the last three days, with many drivers trying to purchase more fuel than usual.

Prof M Shamsul Alam, energy adviser to the Consumers' Association of Bangladesh, said the government must take firm action to suppress hoarding and ensure equitable distribution of fuel among all classes of consumers, specifically the marginalised populations.

It is essential for the leadership to set a public example, he said. Instead of just imposing restrictions on the general public, high-ranking officials and ministers should reduce their own vehicle use and opt for public transport to demonstrate a collective commitment to austerity during this shortage.

"Rather than leaving the situation to chance, the government must build public consensus and manage the crisis with a mentality of 'sharing what we have'," he said.

Refrain from partisan appointments

Govt must show it is true to its commitment to fight corruption

If manifestos are visions, the steps that a ruling party takes in its first weeks in government signal its mission and the direction it intends for the country. Therefore, it is crucial for the BNP, which formed the government two weeks ago with a large mandate through a credible election, to be mindful of its actions and assess if they align with its election manifesto, the 31-point programme, and the July charter commitments, as well as what Prime Minister Tarique Rahman said in his first address to the nation.

Good governance and measures to restructure "all constitutional, statutory and public institutions" to "reinstate transparency, accountability, and credibility that transcend parochial political lines" are an integral part of BNP's manifesto and 31-point programme. However, some of the recent decisions by the BNP government appear inconsistent with these pledges. The appointment of the new central bank governor is one: it raises concerns that political considerations may have influenced the choice since he was a member of BNP's election steering committee during the 13th general election.

As the country's key financial regulator, the central bank should have been headed by a non-partisan professional with solid experience in formulating monetary policy. Its autonomy and independence are more crucial now when the global economy stands at the brink of a major disruption because of the war in the Middle East. Sadly, the government's decision seems to lack foresight. In fact, the recent changes in another key institution send a similarly worrying signal. Last week, the chairman and two members of the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) were allegedly asked to "step down voluntarily," with immediate effect. This is incomprehensible because the former ACC leadership took uncharacteristically bold steps to crack down on the nexus of oligarchs, politicians, and phantom corporations that were involved in complex financial laundering operations during Sheikh Hasina's regime.

There is also a lack of transparency in the way the above incidents unfolded. To fight corruption, the government's first priority should have been to keep these two key institutions, as well as other oversight bodies including the National Human Rights Commission and the Election Commission, depoliticised. As the Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) recently pointed out, appointments to these institutions must be based on competence, not political consideration. Therefore, we urge the government to practise what they preached and ensure that appointments do not simply follow party preferences. Also, in line with TIB's recommendation, it should enact a new law to establish a truly independent police commission. These initial days of the government are also the time for BNP to set standards in the fight against corruption by taking hard decisions, rising above party interests, even if that requires retracting previous actions.

A school that has no toilet!

Govt must ensure proper sanitation facilities at all education institutions

It is difficult to imagine how students and teachers can spend their entire day in a school without access to even a basic toilet. Yet, this has been the reality at a government primary school in Habiganj for nearly two years. With around 180 students and four female teachers, Olipur Government Primary School in the district's Shayestaganj upazila has been operating without usable sanitation facilities on the campus, forcing children to seek access to the houses nearby when they need to. While there is a toilet at a nearby mosque, it is in a dilapidated condition and not usable. This has become a matter of embarrassment on a daily basis for the school's students and teachers.

The situation has gotten to the point where regular classes are getting disrupted, and attendance has reportedly declined as many students are reluctant to come to school. In a country where retaining children in primary education still remains a challenge, such a situation undermines years of effort to improve enrolment and attendance. The problem is even more serious for female students, for whom the absence of safe and private sanitation facilities create significant physical and psychological discomfort. Absence of a basic sanitation facility can severely hinder girls' education as many are compelled to miss school during menstruation due to stigma and inadequate infrastructure.

Reportedly, the construction of a wash block by the local public health engineering office began two years ago. However, it remains unfinished due to prolonged negligence by contractors. Such delays raise serious questions about oversight and accountability in public infrastructure projects, particularly when the beneficiaries are schoolchildren. That the relevant authorities have remained oblivious to this critical matter for so long is equally concerning. This is just one example of how the absence of basic sanitation facilities can hamper academic activities. Many schools across Bangladesh continue to lack clean and hygienic sanitation facilities, undermining a proper learning environment.

We, therefore, urge the authorities to complete the wash block at the school and make it fully functional without further delay. At the same time, they must investigate why construction was stalled for so long and hold those responsible to account. More importantly, this incident should prompt the authorities to review the conditions nationwide to ensure that all government schools have adequate and properly maintained sanitation facilities. Authorities must also ensure gender-friendly toilets that can improve attendance, comfort, and confidence of female students.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

Attack on Alabama civil rights protesters

On this day in 1965, US state troopers used nightsticks and tear gas to attack American civil rights activists as they crossed a bridge in Selma, Alabama, during their attempted march to the state capital in Montgomery.

When our indifference breaks our children



BLOWIN' IN THE WIND

Dr Shamsad Mortuza
is vice chancellor at the University of
Liberal Arts Bangladesh (ULAB).

SHAMSAD MORTUZA

The posthumous Swadhinata Padak for Maherin Chowdhury, a teacher who died saving at least 20 students from the burning remains of Milestone School and College after it was hit by a fighter jet last year, brought back sad memories of losing children and teachers in a single tragic blow. Her heroism gave us hope in a world that remains oblivious to the pain and sufferings of children. Last week, we saw how a reckless attack by US-Israel killed 160 children in a school in Iran. These children had nothing to do with the war game or geopolitical interests of the grown-ups. Yet, they fell prey to our rivalry, greed, lust, ego, whim, and political machinations. We approach an apocalyptic future where, in the words of WB Yeats, "The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere/ The ceremony of innocence is drowned."

However, our reflection on helpless and hapless children seems to have a blind spot. Far from the headlines and battlefield smoke and rubble, there is an emotional battle that our children are waging daily. They suffer and choose harm's way as they fail to match the expectations of the adults or peers, as they feel misunderstood, underappreciated or ignored, and as they yearn for space to ventilate their anger or frustration or to love and be loved.

This harm is slow and invisible. They were made visible by a recent survey conducted by Aachol Foundation, a mental health awareness platform, which showed a spike in the number of student suicides in Bangladesh: 403 cases reported in 2025, up from 310 in 2024. The actual figure could be higher as there are many unreported incidents. But what these figures will not tell us is that, behind each number, there is an absent figure who has left a deep hole in the lives of the ones they have left behind.

The figures will not tell us of the blank stare of the parents with which they feel the empty room, the reading desk, or the seat at the dining table. The folded school uniform that will never be worn will keep on posing questions: why did we not see it coming? Why did we not listen to them when they reached out? The education-level distribution of



VISUAL: SHAIKH SULTANA JAHAN BADHON

students who committed suicide presents sobering data. Out of the 403 reported incidents, 190 students are from school (47.4 percent), 92 from colleges (22.8 percent), 77 from universities (19.1 percent), and 44 from madrasa (10.7 percent). The adolescents and pre-teens are clearly among the most vulnerable groups.

The survey, based on media reports, identifies depression, emotional stress and resentment as the main causes. It's about time we identified the indifference and ignorance of grown-ups as one of the major contributing factors behind the failure to protect children's emotional health. Often, albeit unknowingly, we expose children to our own frustrations, anxieties and stresses. We try to distract them with gadgets and devices and thereby expose them to ideas foreign to them. We exert undue pressure to perform and excel in a competitive academic world. We expect them to live our dreams instead of nurturing their own. At school, they feel added peer pressure. Bullying, harassment,

insensitive teachers, beatings and public humiliations are common in many education institutions. Many do not have trained psychosocial counselling services or proper orientation to deal with young minds. Teachers, already overburdened with workload normally, work overtime to supplement their main income with second jobs or coaching. They perhaps

curated and perfected, or a perverted reality where the dark and primitive side of humanity is on full display. The algorithms are designed to capture the users' attention, which can eventually cause screen addiction. Children in a fragile state may not have the maturity to sift the imagined from the real. Their self-esteem is compromised, often leading to depression. The

do not have the headspace to deal with each student with the required personal care and attention. Since students share their time at both home and school, both institutions need proper orientation of mental health.

Losing around 30 students in a plane crash or 160 students in a missile attack is shocking. But losing 400-plus students through a slow process of death is no less tragic. Most of these deaths probably had an ordinary beginning. Grown-ups often say things in front of children, not even realising how they are impacting them. "Why don't you die?" is a common phrase that adults use to express their frustrations. But for a child, this may sound literal. In our culture, suicide is also presented as an emotional blackmail. "You should think of your family?" can act as a trigger for a troubled mind who might think the priority is being shifted from the individual to the rest.

Then there's the overexposure to social media, where our children enter a bubbled reality where everything is

other atrophy of early exposure to digital media is an unrealistic attitude towards love and intimacy, which adds confusion with a toll on their emotional health.

The use of narcotic substances is becoming normal among teens and young adults. Gateway drugs like tobacco and weed as well as hard synthetic drugs can impact the decision-making process of individuals. Consequently, many decisions are taken impulsively. Instead of investing in or engaging solutions, many young ones find death as an easy way out.

Emotional health is a complex and nuanced issue. It should be dealt with by trained professionals. All education institutions must come up with awareness campaigns for both parents and teachers. Losing 400 students to self-harm can never be a good sign for a country. This is a ravaging blow, more than an air crash or a missile attack. We must stop the system that kills our children slowly and softly from within.

We must collectively stop tolerating preventable deaths



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SABBIR AHMAD

On October 26, 2025, Abul Kalam Azad was walking through the Farmgate area of the capital when a 150kg bearing pad dislodged and fell from the overhead metro rail track. The massive component knocked Azad down and killed him instantly. About 30 minutes later, I walked on the same stretch of pavement after a routine check-up at the nearby Islamia Eye Hospital. Had my appointment been slightly more efficient, or had I skipped the post-check-up wait at the pharmacy, it could have been me under that bearing pad. In Dhaka, survival isn't a right guaranteed by the state; it is a game of chance where the odds are increasingly stacked against citizens.

The Farmgate tragedy reveals a landscape where systemic flaws and inefficiency built into the nation's operational framework have created an environment of constant encounters with death. We also apparently built a society that has mastered the art of looking away. The data from 2025 alone reads like a grim register of preventable catastrophes, yet we treat these events with a horrifyingly high tolerance and acceptance.

On July 21 last year, a military training jet malfunctioned and

plummeted into the Milestone School and College campus in Uttara. Thirty-six people were killed, 35 of them schoolchildren and teachers. Flight paths cutting directly over densely populated residential zones and schools are not due to a lack of space; it is due to a lack of accountability. Our inefficiency in zoning and safety planning turned a school into a crash site.

On October 14 of the same year, 17 people died in a chemical warehouse fire in the capital's Mirpur. They didn't die because the fire was unquenchable; they died because the emergency exits were padlocked from the outside—a choice made by warehouse owners who value inventory over human lives. Only two days later, another 16 perished in Chattogram EPZ. These industrial zones are touted as regulated, yet they operate with a culture of neglect.

If our infrastructure is a threat, the ground beneath is a ticking clock, too. On November 21, a leisurely Friday morning turned terrifying when a 5.7 magnitude earthquake shook the country. Ten people died that day, not due to the quake itself, but because our buildings are structurally compromised by either systemic negligence or corruption. Rajuk

continues to oversee a capital where almost all high-rises fail basic fire and seismic safety standards. When a building in Dhaka collapses during a tremor, it is more likely the result of negligence rather than an "act of God."

The state seems to have perfected a theatre of accountability designed to pacify the public until they inevitably forget or accept the tragedy as "fate."

As a society, we have developed a mental armour that allows us to witness horror yet turn around to our daily routines. Tolerance is what empowers a negligent authority. Our focus must shift to cultivating a citizenry that refuses to let the state bury its failures in a committee report.

The script appears the same every time: a disaster followed by a public and media outcry with numerous related discussions, talk shows, and newspaper articles. Then, the government announces a committee to "probe" the incident. Often, a sum of money is handed to grieving families as compensation. Within weeks or even a few days, public outrage subsides, the media moves on, and the committee fades into the background, or its report collects dust.

Since the Rana Plaza collapse in 2013, many committees have been

launched. Their recommendations—mandatory fire exits, electrical overhauls, the relocation of chemical warehouses, and seismic retrofitting—remain largely untouched. In this country, safety is not a standard but a commodity to be negotiated. This culture of negligence is subsidised by people's desperation. Workers accept jobs in firetraps because the alternative is starvation. Families move into seismically unsound apartments because the system has failed to ensure safety standards.

We must also confront our own apathy. As a society, we have developed a mental armour that allows us to witness horror yet turn around to our daily routines. Tolerance is what empowers a negligent authority. Our focus must shift to cultivating a citizenry that refuses to let the state bury its failures in a committee report. Bangladesh's new leadership faces a fundamental choice: continue the ritual of "probing and paying" or dismantle the systemic rot. We need conscience and accountability in the form of criminal liability, independent oversight, transparency and regular national audits of major infrastructure.

Standing outside that eye hospital, watching the chaos that followed Azad's death, I realised that we are all living in a state of near misses with a profound, systemic disregard for human life. Instead of continuing to accept easily and forget quickly, we need to demand a system that values our lives. The cost of a functioning state is high, but the cost of the current culture of apathy is higher. We must overcome our collective will to accept the unacceptable.

The speech that emboldened us all



THE THIRD VIEW
Mahfuz Anam
is the editor and publisher of The Daily Star.

MAHFUZ ANAM

We need to remember Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's speech on March 7, 1971 simply because it is an inseparable part of our nation's liberation struggle. The speech brought us all together, gave us direction amid confusion, inculcated a new vision, empowered us with the courage to defy and the confidence to believe in ourselves, and set free a spirit that readied us to make the supreme sacrifice. The piercing power of the words, the conquering spirit of the voice, the rhythm of the oration, and the flood of energy that swept through us all—both those who were there and those who heard it on the radio—were extraordinary.

Together, the speech suddenly turned a desperate people into a unified bastion of courage, determination and bravery, with a clear and immediate goal of plunging into the struggle to free our motherland. That day cannot be compared, that hour cannot be imagined, that moment cannot be replicated, that speech cannot be duplicated, and its result cannot be understood except in terms of the birth of Bangladesh.

Many did not instantly realise it, but as

course, celebrate the man, but far more importantly, we bask in the glory the speech helped us achieve. There were all sorts of stigmatised stereotypes of the Bangalees being always disunited, unable to act with precision and, most critically, lacking the courage to withstand threats, power, and danger. But the speech told our enemies that we were not afraid, that we could unite and we were ready to defy.

The psychological impact of the speech cannot perhaps be fully understood by those who were not victims of what we had suffered through the years under the colonisers. When one is faced with overwhelming odds, the strength of the mind and the courage of the heart matter far more than can otherwise be gauged. March 7, 1971 did this most effectively. For those who did not hear it themselves, it may be difficult to appreciate its value. For the *Muktijoddhas* (freedom fighters) who carried the speech in their hearts, and for those who heard it repeatedly through its broadcast on Swadhin Bangla Betar, its value and capacity to keep us motivated were clear, and they felt its

walks of life attended the meeting—farmers, workers, daily labourers, street vendors, small shopkeepers, students, political activists from all shades of opinion and political commitment, and ordinary men and women. When the hour came, Bangabandhu took us on a journey towards a future where we would be free, able to laugh, play, live, and grow in a place that would be our very own.

As we recall that speech today, we must

arrogant, and too self-centred to accept the reality that Sheikh Mujib would be Pakistan's prime minister. Along with some Pakistani generals, he was determined not to allow that to happen. Bhutto invited Yahya to his home in Larkana, Sindh, where he spent several days persuading Yahya to postpone the convening of the National Assembly. On March 1, Yahya declared an indefinite postponement of the National Assembly's first session. Thus began

busy street corners and parks. The student artists would start singing patriotic songs and crowds would begin gathering. Once the crowd was large enough, we would interrupt the singing and start our speeches, informing people about the grand rally, stressing its importance and answering questions from the public.

Every morning, we would gather at the Teacher Student Centre (TSC) to be assigned to different processions touring various parts of the city. By March 6, we had covered the whole city several times and had held hundreds of processions, rallies and street-corner meetings.

As on all the previous days, the group I was part of—belonging to the East Pakistan Students Union (EPSU)—gathered at the TSC on the morning of March 7 at about 9am and reached the Race Course by 10:30am. The stage was at the northern corner of the huge field (renamed Suhrawardy Udyan after independence). By the time we arrived, the crowd had already reached halfway up to the High Court ground located on the southern side of the field. We found ourselves in the middle.

We watched the crowd grow within a very short time. I remember the endless streams of processions entering the field from all sides. Thousands marched, chanting slogans with sheer passion and energy. As they settled down, they continued their slogans. After a while, they began singing in groups, and we all joined in. There was an inexplicable sense of joy and pride. We had come together to defy the "enemy" and tell the world about our struggle for freedom.

By the time Bangabandhu arrived, we were an ocean of people united in spirit, moved by courage, and dreaming of a future of dignity. As he climbed the stairs towards the stage, he saw more than a million people intensely waiting for him. Here was a 50-year-old leader standing at the peak of his popularity, about to utter words that would determine our future and ensure our place in history.

The speech he delivered is now known to the world and has a place in the hearts of all proud citizens of an independent Bangladesh. Like all history-making leaders, Bangabandhu was not flawless. He, like many of his ilk, made mistakes and took actions that were not best suited to the welfare of the people. As a nation of 55 years, we must judge him in his totality. As is the global practice, let expert historians—not the instant ones we produce whenever political winds change direction—put the final judgement on Bangabandhu. The narrative of the day should not be allowed to cloud history.



Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman addresses a massive crowd of people at the then Ramna Race Course ground (now Suhrawardy Udyan) in Dhaka, delivering his historic speech on March 7, 1971.

PHOTO: ARCHIVE

remember that it has earned a place in the gallery of the world's greatest speeches, included in Unesco's Memory of the World International Register. It is an inseparable part of Bangladesh's history. It is also an indelible part of that supreme pride that is ours as citizens of a country that came into being through the sacrifices of millions of men, women, youth and children, all being victims of unimaginable brutality that formed part of the genocide Bangalees had to endure.

In the general election of 1970, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman received the mandate from the people of Pakistan to govern the country as its prime minister. President Gen Yahya Khan acknowledged this and declared him to be the "future prime minister of Pakistan." Tragically, a conspiracy soon began. Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, who emerged with the majority of seats in West Pakistan, was too proud, too

the final act to deprive the Bangalees of their legitimate right to power.

Bangabandhu immediately launched the non-cooperation movement and declared that he would address the nation from the Ramna Race Course on March 7. That set the stage for the historic speech.

We, the students of Dhaka University belonging to all student organisations, became fully involved in publicising the call for the non-cooperation movement and for attending the meeting. There was no other way but to organise street demonstrations, continuous rallies, processions, and street-corner meetings to appeal to the public to attend the gathering.

We obtained dozens of trucks—most of them lent to us for the occasion—on the backs of which we placed student singers with a few microphones and a tabla player, accompanied by some political activists. We drove them to

Those of us who were there at the Ramna Race Course on that day have our own personal memories. Reminiscing them still warms our blood and generates that special feeling of pride that automatically holds our heads high. The outpouring of millions of people who turned up to listen to Bangabandhu gave us all an incomparable strength and a unique feeling that nothing could keep us oppressed.

time unfolded, we felt that all the necessary instructions to earn our place under the sun were there. As we were facing totally unfamiliar situations, that speech gave us a sense of direction. And as we faced the possibility of death, the spirit of sacrifice triggered in our hearts and minds when we heard that speech gave us the courage to dive into the unknown without the least hesitation.

When we eulogise the speech, we, of

courage-giving power when going into battle.

Those of us who were there at the Ramna Race Course on that day have our own personal memories. Reminiscing them still warms our blood and generates that special feeling of pride that automatically holds our heads high. The outpouring of millions of people who turned up to listen to Bangabandhu gave us all an incomparable strength and a unique feeling that nothing could keep us oppressed. People from all

Let history breathe



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JANNATUL NAYM PICAL

For 15 and a half years, between 2009 and 2024, Bangladesh was governed by a political culture that elevated Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Sheikh Hasina's father, to a status greater than history and closer to doctrine.

The transformation did not happen overnight. It was built brick by brick: murals across district towns, statues at intersections, Bangabandhu Corners in public institutions, commemorative volumes, state-funded films, endless seminars and anniversary programmes, and a proliferation of institutions bearing his and his family members' names. Crores were spent to ensure that Sheikh Mujib was omnipresent. So much so that he became indistinguishable from the Liberation War itself. Over time, the narrative hardened: to question the scale of his portrayal was to question the birth of the nation.

Yet, the Liberation War of 1971 was not the work of one man. It was the product of millions of freedom fighters, political leaders, student activists, cultural organisers, rural villagers, defecting officers, and ordinary

citizens who bore extraordinary costs.

When history compresses that vast, collective struggle into a single towering personality, it does injustice to everyone else. The more the state insisted on singular glory, the more frustration simmered beneath the surface. It became visible after Hasina's departure in the wake of the student-led mass uprising. Some of the reactions were extreme and indefensible. But beneath the excesses lay a message: people were rejecting overglorification. Mujib's historical stature did not require exaggeration. His role was already monumental. By inflating it beyond proportion, the state had rather weakened his legacy.

Now, Bangladesh stands at another political turn. The return of BNP after nearly two decades inevitably brings renewed attention to Ziaur Rahman, whose role during the 1971 war—including broadcasting the declaration of independence from Chattogram, and fighting and giving leadership on the ground—remains historically significant. During Hasina's regime, many of Zia's

contributions were marginalised or erased from official memory. It was, therefore, natural to expect that a democratic political transition would restore balance. But early signs suggest something else: inversion and sometimes sheer neglect.

At this year's Amar Ekushey Boi Mela, much like last year, numerous "Zia Corners" and dedicated shelves featuring books on Ziaur Rahman are prominently visible—a commendable move. What is disappointing, however, is the relative neglect of other war heroes and the Liberation War itself, whether through dedicated corners, stalls, or newly published titles.

A report by bdnews24 noted that, as of March 3, the fair's management did not include any titles on the Liberation War in its regular bulletins of newly released books. However, at least nine new titles on the subject were available at the stalls.

More ironic is the programming of Bangladesh Television (BTV), long known to reflect the priorities of whichever party occupies state power. Since the beginning of March, BTV has been airing a segment in its news bulletins titled "Uttal March," a day-by-day recollection of the events of March 1971. The initiative is also praiseworthy, but its execution is problematic. The introductory montage and title card centre overwhelmingly on Ziaur Rahman's independence declaration, featuring multiple images of him, while offering little visual or narrative space to other central figures.

During the historical recounting, the pattern becomes subtler but more telling. Names like Yahya Khan and Zulfikar Ali Bhutto are pronounced without hesitation. But when it comes to leaders and mass organisers within the then East Pakistan—those who mobilised, negotiated, declared, marched and defied—the script drifts into passive constructions. During the broadcast, actions occur, but actors dissolve. Protests happen; flags are raised; resistance builds. Yet, who did those things goes unspoken.

A passive voice is not merely a stylistic choice. In historical narration, it can be overtly political. When agency is removed, memory becomes blurred. When names disappear, accountability and contribution fade. Even ahead of March 7, there has been little effort to commemorate the day Sheikh Mujibur Rahman "effectively declared the independence of Bangladesh," as noted by Unesco on its official website.

Judging by the practices during the 15 and a half years of Hasina's regime and early signals on social media, the historical significance of March 7 is very much at risk of being politicised, much like the way Ziaur Rahman's radio announcement of independence was downplayed during the Awami League regime. If such patterns get established, Bangladesh risks sliding once more into a "specific narrative"—a curated version of history where only one camp's hero is glorified while another's presence is dimmed. The country has already witnessed how such monopolisation of memory breeds

resentment.

The Liberation War of Bangladesh is too foundational, too sacred, and too complex to be reduced to partisan ownership. Mujib's leadership mattered. Zia's actions mattered. So did Tajuddin Ahmad and Syed Nazrul Islam's wartime governance. So did the student leaders of 1969 and 1971, the unnamed freedom fighters in villages and border camps, women who endured unspeakable trauma, diplomats, cultural activists, the farmers who sheltered fighters, and the families who never saw their loved ones return. A mature nation does not fear multiplicity in its history. It embraces it.

After the July uprising, many imagined a new Bangladesh where truth would not carry a party label, archives would be open, and history would be written with evidence rather than expediency. That vision demands intellectual honesty from all sides, not merely a transfer of narrative control from one political camp to another.

The Ministry of Liberation War Affairs may not yet be fully attentive to how state media is framing the narrative, therefore shaping public memory. If so, this is the moment for correcting the course. A national broadcaster must serve history, not hierarchy. A book fair must celebrate scholarship, not proximity to power. And a government confident in its legitimacy should not need to curate history defensively.

Bangladesh's past is large enough to contain all its protagonists, but only if they are allowed to be named.

CROSSWORD
BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS
1 Plains tribe
6 Trivia fodder
11 Egypt's Sadat
12 Boise's state
13 Designer's asset
14 Eternal City resident
15 Fencing sword
17 Sty resident
18 Not too bad to tolerate
22 Avenue liners
23 Skewed views
27 Honolulu hello
29 Treasure stash
30 Swindle
32 Pine or palm
33 Preference, informally
35 Diet no-no
38 Realise

39 Suspect's defence
41 Sun-powered
45 Diner pages
46 Packing box
47 Tests
48 Really stoked

DOWN
1 "Krazy ___"
2 One ___ million
3 Hurt responses
4 Turning point
5 Corn pancake
6 Like a cabin at night
7 Commotion
8 Summer spot for some
9 Bangkok native
10 Ditty

16 Flow out
18 Pulsate
19 Singer Fitzgerald
20 In a frenzy
21 Soil burrower
24 Ticked off
25 At any time
26 Beholds
28 Hollywood greeting
31 Convent resident
34 Puccini opera
35 Renown
36 Baseball's Rodriguez
37 Singer Turner
40 Lazy fellow
42 Pet perch
43 Had breakfast
44 Stop colour

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11-13

YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

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				A	O	K	A	Y		
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PHOTO: COURTESY

Partho Sheikh and Samiha Rahman.



PHOTO: COURTESY

Mostafizur Noor Imran and Nazia Haque Orsha.



PHOTO: SHEIKH MEHEDI MORSHED

Arafat Mohsin Nidhi and Raba Khan.

Together in prayers, together in festivities

Raba-Nidhi's gift-giving tradition is practical and playful. Rather than surprising each other separately, they prefer shopping together. "I like giving him something he truly needs," Raba laughs. "He's not materialistic, so it's actually hard to buy for him."

RAKSHANDA RAHMAN MISHA

The upcoming Eid will be a great reprieve for everyone, especially couples in Showbiz, who have trouble getting to spend prolonged amounts of time together, due to their busy schedule. We spoke to some of the most renowned young couples in the industry for their plans.

Since tying the knot, Mostafizur Noor Imran and Nazia Haque Orsha, they have been a constant source of strength and comfort for each other. Their connection began during a film shoot and blossomed naturally during the pandemic, growing stronger through every challenge.

For them, Ramadan brings cherished moments of togetherness. Nazia shares that they recently enjoyed iftar side by side at home. She prepared simple, comforting dishes—chickpeas, *piyaju*, noodles, *beguni*, and *sharbot*. "Just homely food," she says warmly. "He likes all kinds of cooking and never criticises anyone's food."

Their approach to Eid is refreshingly spontaneous. They rarely plan far in advance, preferring to let celebrations unfold naturally. When it comes to gifts, Noor believes in thoughtfulness over extravagance. "She pays attention to small details," he says. "I think she would choose something practical and meaningful." For Nazia, he prefers selecting something elegant and personal. "Gifts should feel intimate and considered—not just expensive."

This Eid, however, carries a touch of melancholy for Nazia, as it will be her first without her mother. With new responsibilities resting on her shoulders, she is still deciding whether to spend the holiday in Dhaka or with her sisters. Despite the emotional weight, family remains her greatest priority.

Arafat Mohsin Nidhi and Raba Khan also found love through work. Their story began while collaborating on a music video, eventually leading to marriage in 2025. Together, they co-founded Merge Creative, a production house dedicated to developing original content and fiction projects.

Balancing creativity and companionship,



PHOTO: REMINISCENCE PHOTOGRAPHY

Xefer Rahman and Rafsan Sabab.

the couple navigates demanding schedules with care. "So far, we've managed to have iftar together two or three times," Raba explains. "Soon our work will pick up, so we try to ensure at least the first few iftars are shared."

Their gift-giving tradition is practical and playful. Rather than surprising each other separately, they prefer shopping together. "I like giving him something he truly needs," Raba laughs. "He's not materialistic, so it's actually hard to buy for him."

Food is another expression of love in their home. Nidhi proudly praises Raba's tuna curry, beef dishes, and her signature green curry chicken. This Eid will be especially meaningful as they celebrate both family time and their first anniversary. "We're planning a small family trip, maybe abroad," Nidhi shares. "Last year, our biggest plan was our wedding right after Eid. This year, we want to slow down and

enjoy." Their shared love for family keeps them grounded—whenever work pauses, they head home.

From friends to life partners, Xefer Rahman and Rafsan Sabab's wedding brought together a vibrant circle of celebrities celebrating their reunion. This marks their first Eid together as a married couple.

Throughout Ramadan, they have focused on balancing work with togetherness. "We've been fortunate to share most of our iftars," Rafsan says. Preparing the table and organising the meal together have become part of their ritual. But the most meaningful moments, they agree, are the days spent breaking fast with their parents.

"It's always wholesome to meet both our families and share quality time," Xefer adds. For Eid, family remains at the heart of their plans. Shopping will begin with gifts for parents and loved ones. "We start by visiting our parents' homes," Rafsan explains. "That's what truly adds colour to our celebrations."

Travel is another shared passion. While this Eid will be dedicated to family and close friends, Xefer looks forward to exploring new countries together in the future. For them, love is rooted in both adventure and family bonds.

Partho Sheikh and Samiha Rahman's story is one of reconnection. After losing contact in 2017, they reunited in 2022 and rediscovered their bond. Years later, they are now celebrating their first Eid as husband and wife.

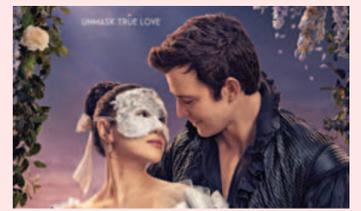
Despite busy schedules, they have kept Ramadan intimate. Most of their iftars have been spent at each other's homes rather than outside. "We haven't taken a day off to go out for iftar or seheri together yet," Partho shares.

This Eid feels special. "She's already looking at panjabis for me," he smiles. "After marriage, the element of surprise changes. Now it's about choosing things together." The couple is also planning a post-Eid getaway. "We're thinking of going to Thailand, or maybe another nearby country, about a week after Eid," he reveals.

For Partho and Samiha, this Eid represents new beginnings—blending traditions, planning travels, and building a life shaped by second chances.

TRENDY STREAMS

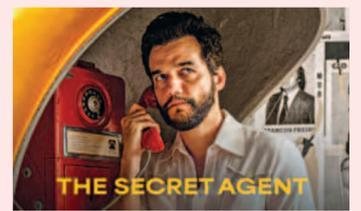
Netflix
Bridgerton



Prime Video
Young Sherlock



Hulu
The Secret Agent



HBO Max
DTF: St. Louis



Chorki
Meu



OUT AND ABOUT IN DHAKA

Amar Ekushey Boi Mela
Feb 26- March 15 | 11 am- 9 pm
Bangla Academy



Screening: Le Procès du chien (Dog on Trial)
March 9 | 2 pm onwards
Alliance Française de Dhaka,
Dhanmondi



Play: Art
March 13 | 3:30 pm onwards
Experimental Theatre Hall, BSA



'Risk It All' by Bruno Mars

Bruno Mars returns with Risk It All, a smooth pop-soul track built around piano, steady percussion and his unmistakable vocal control. The song centres on devotion and the willingness to sacrifice everything for love, themes Mars has often explored across his catalogue. Since its release, Risk It All has drawn millions of

streams on Spotify and secured spots on major global pop playlists. The track has also seen steady pickup on radio, extending Mars' long run of commercially successful singles. Musically, the song stays close to the formula that has defined much of Mars' work: classic soul-pop structures paired with contemporary production.

TV TALKIES

'THE ART OF SARAH'

The Art of Sarah is a South Korean thriller on Netflix. It tells the story of Sarah Kim, a stylish businesswoman with many secrets. One day, a dead body linked to her is found, and detective Park Mu-gyeong starts investigating. He discovers Sarah has lived multiple identities and hidden her past. The series shows lies, ambition, and identity in a suspenseful way. Since its release, *The Art of Sarah* has attracted viewers worldwide and is now gaining attention in Bangladesh.



STYLE STATEMENT

Alexandra Saint Mleux

For her Monaco wedding to Charles Leclerc, Alexandra Saint Mleux embraced timeless romance in a couture gown by Paolo Sebastian. Crafted from delicate French Chantilly lace, the elegant fishtail silhouette hugged the body before flowing into a soft train. Scalloped detailing framed the neckline, while floral appliqué and subtle butterfly motifs added texture across the fabric. Sheer off-shoulder sleeves lent the dress an ethereal softness.

Saint Mleux also added a personal touch, embroidering the couple's initials and wedding date into the gown—transforming the already dreamy creation into a deeply sentimental bridal statement.





Two workers, including 52-year-old physically challenged Moynu Mia, use mahogany and a wood-turning machine to carve cricket stumps, spade and machete handles, and other wooden tools. They earn around Tk 700 to Tk 1,000 a day. The photo was taken in the Kaurikhara area in Pirojpur recently.

PHOTO: TITU DAS

We were not

FROM PAGE 12

by Foreign Minister Khalilur Rahman, who earlier said consent had been obtained from two major political parties – BNP and Jamaat – before signing a trade agreement with the United States.

Speaking at a briefing after a meeting with US Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs Paul Kapur on Wednesday, Khalilur said the US trade representative had spoken with the heads of the country's two main parties before the election and received their consent.

"So it's not that we did this in the dark," he said.

Before the agreement was signed, Khalilur, who served as national security adviser in the Muhammad Yunus-led interim government, played a key role in negotiations with the United States on behalf of Bangladesh.

Shafiqur's statement yesterday marked Jamaat's first formal response to the issue.

PROTEST

Jamaat yesterday brought out a protest procession demanding that Khalilur and former interim government adviser Syeda Rizwana Hasan be questioned over allegations of "election engineering" in the 13th parliamentary polls.

Leaders and activists of the party's Dhaka city units held a brief rally at the north gate of Baitul Mukarram National Mosque after Juma prayers before bringing out the procession.

Addressing the programme, Jamaat Secretary General Mia Golam Porwar said, "Is there any opposition party in the country other than Jamaat-e-Islami? You (Rizwana Hasan) said those who are now in the opposition were not allowed to enter the mainstream.

"We believe you could not have carried out the engineering alone. Reveal the names of others who were involved."

A day earlier, Jamaat Nayebe-Ameer and Deputy Leader of the Opposition Syed Abdullah Mohammad Taher alleged that Khalilur had played a role in the alleged election engineering and raised the same allegation against Rizwana.

Meanwhile, leaders of Jamaat and Bangladesh Khelafat Majlis yesterday signed the condolence book for Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei at the Iranian embassy in Dhaka. Khamenei was killed in a US-Israeli attack in Tehran earlier this week.

Trump hints

FROM PAGE 12

imposed an energy blockade on the communist-ruled nation that has seen its fuel stocks plunge, in the wake of the US capture of president Nicolas Maduro of Venezuela – a key oil supplier to Cuba.

No oil has been imported to the island since January 9, forcing airlines to curtail flights to the island and deepening a long-running economic crisis.

Many in Cuba fear it could be next on Trump's list of foreign interventions, especially after the United States and Israel launched attacks on Iran that killed the country's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

Both Trump and Rubio have made no secret of their desire to bring about regime change in Havana.

Will enhance

FROM PAGE 12

The gathering provided an opportunity for the PM to exchange greetings with diplomats and dignitaries during the holy month of Ramadan.

In his speech, Tarique stated that his government would pursue prudent deregulation, enhance the ease of doing business, and foster a competitive environment attractive to responsible investment. "Our goal is to unlock the full potential of our people and private sector."

He said Bangladesh's foreign policy will be pragmatic and sustainable, guided by friendship to all based on mutual interests, trust, and sovereignty. "We value bilateral and multilateral partnerships, and remain open to dialogue and stronger collaboration in the years ahead."

The PM said the government would focus on ensuring law and order, maintaining macroeconomic stability, and advancing human resource development through training, upskilling, and capacity enhancement at all levels of society.

"We are committed to liberal economic policies that encourage enterprise and innovation. Public-private partnerships will be strengthened as a cornerstone of growth."

Noting that Bangladesh stands at a crucial juncture of opportunity, the PM said, "Our aspiration is to build a diversified, technology-driven, and sustainable economy that creates jobs for our youth, empowers women, encourages entrepreneurship, and promotes shared prosperity."

He said the government has a plan

to strengthen technical and vocational education, introduce third language in curriculum, and expand preventive healthcare services in rural areas, ensuring that the benefits of growth reach every corner of our nation.

"We recognise that public trust depends on transparency and integrity, and we will take firm measures to combat corruption at all levels of governance. Democracy, for us, is not confined to the ballot box; it is an ongoing commitment to inclusion, transparency, and dialogue."

Tarique stated that the government's commitment is firm: strengthening democratic institutions, upholding the rule of law, protecting freedoms, and ensuring accountability. "We are equally committed to safeguarding human rights, protecting freedom of expression, and fostering a culture of tolerance and pluralism."

He added that the government has already taken initiatives to gradually introduce Family Card and Farmers' Card to provide targeted social and economic support to the women in every family, as well as agricultural communities.

Turning to the environmental issue, the PM said that as a climate-vulnerable nation, "we remain committed to working constructively with our global partners to advance climate resilience and sustainable development."

He also introduced and sought support for Bangladesh's candidate Foreign Minister Khalilur Rahman for the presidency of the 81st session of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) for the 2026-2027 term.

Record 16.91 lakh ballots

FROM PAGE 12

or 1.07 percent, while in 1991, the first election after the fall of military dictator HM Ershad that paved the way for the restoration of democracy, such ballots stood at 3,73,322, or 1.08 percent.

In the February 12 polls, Noakhali-4 tops the chart with 11,433 invalid ballots out of 3,99,000 cast. Close behind, Moulvibazar-4 recorded 11,347 votes, representing over 4 percent of the total ballots, which is by far the highest proportion in this

marked a record number of cancelled votes, a matter that requires research.

"From my analysis, I think many people came to vote this time with the intention of spoiling their ballots," he said, adding that in some cases, a box placed beside the symbol confused voters about exactly where they should mark their choice.

He added that postal ballots also contributed to the problem. "Ballots had been sent out earlier, but some voters marked their preference for

INVALID VOTES

YEAR	INVALID VOTES	VOTES CAST
2026	16,91,080	7,66,81,193
2024	9,98,188	5,02,91,305
2018	8,87,690	8,35,32,911
2014	2,63,037	1,73,92,887
2008	36,294	7,06,48,885
2001	4,49,082	5,57,36,625
1996 June	4,62,302	4,28,80,576
1991	3,73,322	3,44,77,803

NOTE: 2018 information was taken from a book published by Shushoaner Janno Nagarik. EC did not published election reports for that polls

Election to 147 seats took place in 2014, rest were elected unopposed.

group. Mymensingh-4 followed with 10,998 votes, while the hill districts of Rangamati (10,112) and Khagrachhari (10,080) also saw a significant number of cancelled ballots.

Kurigram-2 registered 9,629 invalid votes, Dinajpur-6 had 9,424, and Cumilla-10 recorded 9,197, all hovering around the 2.25 percent mark of total votes cast. Rajbari-2 had 9,309 invalid ballots, while Cumilla-6 recorded 9,092 votes, rounding out the top 10.

Talking to The Daily Star, Abdul Alim, election specialist and former member of Electoral Reform Commission, said this year's polls

a symbol or candidate who was eventually no longer in the race."

EC Secretary Akhtar Ahmed told this correspondent that they would look into the matter as to why there were so many invalid votes. Following the polls, Ramadan has begun, and voting in two constituencies is still pending. "We will take some time to carry out a proper analysis.

"Why the number is so high is something researchers can explain better. We are not a research institute. Even so, we will certainly have discussion on the matter," he added.

Bumper harvest, low prices

Pumpkin farmers from shoals in Rangpur region suffer losses

S DILIP ROY, Lalmonirhat

Farmers from shoal areas within the Teesta, Brahmaputra and Dharla rivers in Rangpur region reaped a bumper harvest of sweet pumpkins this season, but low market prices have left many struggling to recover the production costs.

Pumpkin cultivation expanded significantly in shoal areas across Lalmonirhat, Kurigram, Nilphamari, Rangpur and Gaibandha districts in recent years, driven by favourable weather and low disease incidence. According to the Department of Agricultural Extension (DAE), pumpkins have been cultivated on 11,000 hectares in the region this season, with a production target of 2,40,000 tonnes. About 92 percent of the crop is being grown in shoal areas.

Farmers say around 60-80 maunds of pumpkins can be produced per bigha of land at a production cost averaging Tk 16,000-20,000. However, while

pumpkins were sold for Tk 500-700 per maund last year, prices have fallen to Tk 350-400 this year. Retail prices now hover around Tk 8-12 per kilogramme, making it difficult to recover the production cost.

Tamiz Uddin, a farmer from Kalmatia char (shoal) in Lalmonirhat Sadar, cultivated pumpkins on 20 bighas at a cost of Tk 3.60 lakh, and harvested



an average yield of 70 maunds per bigha. Yet, he remains disappointed. "The yield has been good, but wholesalers want to buy at significantly lower prices than last year. The production cost may not be recovered," he lamented.

Farmer Nazrul Islam of Roumari upazila had expanded

pumpkin cultivation from eight to 12 bighas this year, hoping to build on last season's Tk 1.20 lakh profit. "The low market prices extinguished that hope," he said.

Farmers warned that without fair prices, pumpkin cultivation may decline next season.

Traders attributed the slump in pumpkin prices to a surge in potato production. Potatoes are selling at Tk 10-14 per kg, reducing demand for other vegetables.

Shahidul Islam, a wholesale trader at Rangpur Municipal Market, said, "When potato prices are low, people buy them more, lowering demand for other vegetables. That is why pumpkin prices are also low."

"When potato prices are high, buyers shift to other vegetables. Then the prices of sweet pumpkin and all other vegetables also increase, benefitting farmers."

Sirajul Islam, additional director of DAE in Rangpur region, said higher production has increased supply and reduced prices.

Publish white paper

FROM PAGE 3

an administration free from party influence and corruption. However, during the interim government's time, mob violence increased seriously," the statement reads.

According to the statement, there is a public perception that some statements from government officials directly or indirectly encouraged such incidents.

The statement said that, except for the verdict in one case against Sheikh Hasina, there has been no significant progress in the trials related to killings during the uprising.

"The widespread misuse of legal cases has led to the harassment of many innocent people," the statement said. "Instead of making decisions through consensus among all parties, attempts were made to

impose them unilaterally, which has hindered important reforms."

It also said various corruption allegations against advisers of the interim government have appeared in the media and on social media.

Gonotantrik Jukta Front also demanded proper investigations into corruption allegations against the former advisers. "If anyone is found guilty, they should be brought to justice," the statement added.

The signatories of the statement included Bazlur Rashid Firoz, general secretary of BASAD; Kazi Sazzad Zahir Chandan, president of CPB; Mosharrefa Mishu, general secretary of Gonotantrik Biplobi Party; Masud Rana, coordinator, BASAD-Marxist; and Abdul Ali, executive president, of the Socialist Party of Bangladesh, among others.

Prime accused held

FROM PAGE 4

The incident occurred on January 14. The victim's father, Saifur Rahman, filed a murder case against Kalam and others with Kochakata Police Station the following day.

According to the case statement, Kalam and his associates made advances on the younger sister of the deceased, Shahida Khatun, 36. Shahida came to know about the matter and called for a village arbitration against the accused in January this year. However, as Kalam and his associates failed to appear

on the scheduled day, the matter remained unresolved.

Around 7:30pm on January 14, while Shahida was engaged in household work, Kalam and his associates attacked her. At one stage, they slit her throat with a sharp weapon and fled the scene, leaving her dead on the spot.

The case statement notes that Shahida was targeted and killed because she protested the stalking of her sister.

Kalam and the other accused went into hiding after the murder.

CID sues Hadi murder

FROM PAGE 4

submitted by Tajul for 2023 and 2024 were found to be forged. The reports were shown to have been prepared by chartered accountant SM Zakaria, who died during the Covid-19 pandemic, suggesting that the accused used his name and address to produce fake audit documents.

CID's Financial Crime Unit is currently investigating the case.

CID further said two audit reports

submitted by Tajul for 2023 and 2024

were found to be forged. The reports were shown to have been prepared by chartered accountant SM Zakaria, who died during the Covid-19 pandemic, suggesting that the accused used his name and address to produce fake audit documents.

CID's Financial Crime Unit is currently investigating the case.

165 repatriated from Libya

FROM PAGE 3

by sea after being lured and assisted by human traffickers.

Many of them also alleged that they had been kidnapped and subjected to torture at different times in Libya.

Officials from the foreign ministry, other relevant ministries and the IOM received the returnees at the airport.

The IOM provided each returnee with travel allowances, food items, primary medical care and temporary

accommodation where necessary.

The foreign ministry requested the returnees to share their difficult experiences with others to raise public awareness.

It also said it is working together with the Bangladesh Embassy in Libya, the expatriates' welfare ministry and the IOM to ensure safe repatriation of Bangladeshi nationals detained at various detention centres in Libya.

AL leader dies

FROM PAGE 2

hospital after falling ill. He was later taken to Panchagarh Sadar Hospital and then transferred to Dinajpur Medical College Hospital. A Panchagarh court on Thursday afternoon granted him bail in the NI Act case.

The judge also ordered the

withdrawal of another case filed under section 420 of the Penal Code.

Jailer Akherul said that after receiving the bail order, the authorities quickly completed the formalities and sent it to Dinajpur Medical College Hospital so that he could be freed as soon as possible.

Afghan-Pak troops trade fire

FROM PAGE 12

several Afghan border posts. Dozens gathered in Kabul yesterday to protest Pakistan's attacks on Afghan territory, chanting anti-Pakistan slogans, a witness said, while the Bakhter news agency said a large gathering in Laghman Province demonstrated against Pakistan's recent attacks.

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Tarique launches



PHOTO: BSS

FROM PAGE 3

Experienced lawmakers will share their knowledge with newcomers to strengthen parliamentary efficiency.

The two-day programme has been divided into several sessions.

On the first day, ministers, state ministers, and advisers joined the morning session, while MPs from Rajshahi, Rangpur, Dhaka, and Faridpur attended in the afternoon.

Today, MPs from Dhaka district, Mymensingh, and the remaining parts of Dhaka division will participate in the morning session, followed by lawmakers from Sylhet, Cumilla, and Chattogram in the afternoon.

BNP secured 209 seats in the 13th parliamentary election, including 146 first-time lawmakers. A senior BNP leader said the workshop will guide MPs on raising points of order, drafting and reviewing bills, taking part in debates, highlighting constituency issues, discussing the president's address, and ensuring attendance during parliamentary sittings.

Tap global

FROM PAGE 3

associated with the sector, Shahabuddin described jute, widely known as the "golden fibre", as an integral part of Bangladesh's heritage, culture and economic development.

He noted that Bangladesh jute and jute products once enjoyed strong global demand.

"The world is shifting towards sustainable and eco-friendly products, opening a new window of opportunity for Bangladesh's jute and jute-based industries," he added.

He urged stakeholders to enhance innovation, technological adoption, and product diversification to meet rising global demand.

Shahabuddin said reviving sector-based industries and attracting domestic and foreign investment remain priorities of the government to generate employment. He added that initiatives have been taken to reopen closed and vulnerable jute mills and expand research to develop high-yielding jute varieties and diversified products.

The president also said agricultural loans of up to Tk 10,000, including interest, have been waived for more than 1.1 million farmers, boosting the agriculture sector, including jute cultivation. He also announced that "Farmer Cards" will be distributed in phases from Pahela Baishakh on April 14.

He urged farmers to adopt improved cultivation methods and focus on producing quality fibre, while encouraging entrepreneurs to develop modern, affordable jute products aligned with global demand.

On the occasion, he virtually inaugurated the nine-day Jute and Multipurpose Jute Products Fair at the Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy premises. A total of 19 individuals and organisations were honoured in 12 categories, and a documentary film was screened to mark the day.

ESSAY

HOPE, RAGE, AND LOVE-WORLDS: The many meanings of feminised tears



ILLUSTRATION: MAHMUDA EMDAD

NAZIA MANZOOR, SHARMEE HOSSAIN

In classical studies of sensory experiences, philosophers such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty suggest that bodily sensations constitute our lived reality. Sight, sound, touch, taste, smell construct our life and make meaning of our existence. Senses are not purely biological, but are shaped by culture, environment, and politics. Senses also have a hierarchy—with vision ranking supreme above the other lesser, feminised senses. The physiological and emotional process of crying is often viewed in a gendered way and seen as an expression of weakness. Conventional wisdom suggests that a woman's tears make her feminine, while male tears emasculate. Are tears that simple? Can the action and consequence of crying be simplified in such a binarised way? What about tears of rage, love, healing? Is crying a feminist act? What does the immediate action of crying and the politics of tears reveal about the structures of feelings our society is organised around? Are some tears more legitimate than others? Is crying more than the literal shedding of tears?

I was drawn to the question of tears while thinking through the concept of feminist rage. Many women cry when they are angry and too often, their tears delegitimise their anger. As though if anger is accompanied by tears, that

anger is not justified. How many times have we found ourselves attempting to make a point but were shaken by our own uncontrollable, rage-fueled tears? Our social and cultural codes often disallow or at the very least, frown upon feminine anger. An angry woman challenges the myth of the soft, eternal feminine woman. Oftentimes thus, it is our inability to show anger that leads to crying. Yesterday, as my closest colleague and I attempted to talk about the seven-year-old girl found with her throat slit in Sitakunda Eco Park, we took turns crying and seething. I wanted to simultaneously cry, vomit, and scream. She kept crying and raging. Through tears and rage, we sat in solidarity and helplessness, standing alongside the seven-year-old fighting for her life, the dead eight-year-old from Magura, and the 5,632 children whose rapes led to cases being filed in the last 10 years in the country we lovingly call home.

We have bled for this country. Our foremothers and forefathers sacrificed life, limb, livelihood, safety, and more for this nation. And no, this conversation is not leading towards Ekattor because it is March, but because our sentiments and feelings—expressed through tears of love and loss—led to the birth of this nation. Recall for instance, the tears of the Birangonas, so instrumental in building our national narrative. The

foundational concept of Bangladesh itself rests on the tears of the Birangonas, the women who were raped, violated, killed, maimed, impregnated, and left to bear the consequences of war. It is no small feat that in our collective national imagination, the Birangonas and their pain represent strength and power of the Bangladeshi women and are detached from narratives of pity and shame. The raped women of 1971 are part of the public memory of 1971. As Mojib discovers his dead, raped sister Momena's body in Shahidul Zahir's *Jibon O Rajnoitik Bastobota* (1988), "He fell to his knees, his heart wailed out, and as if in a state of delirium, he merely uttered, 'Allah, Allah.' Bending down over Momena's face and gazing at her half-open eyes staring at the sky, he wept, crying, 'Aapa, Aapa.' Mojib's sobs bear witness to the trauma and the aftermath of 1971, invoking the placement of tears and helplessness as part of the metanarrative of the Bangladesh War.

Similarly, when our national anthem tenderly croons, "Ma tor bodon khani molin hole, ami noyon jole bhashi"—'noyonjol' acts as a site of intense patriotic zeal. Our heart weeps for our nation-state, mythologising her as mother, the mother who needs our devotion, our protection, our care. 'Desh' as mother sustains us and our tears for our mother-nation sustains the nation state. The analogy between

land and woman, between "desh" and "nari" deserves to be problematised. It is after all what has, for centuries, fueled and justified colonial occupation.[a] Women and land are sites that symbolise the colonial desire to conquer and tame, pillage and rape, plough and own. And yet, when Nazrul Islam Babu writes "chokh theke muche felo osrutuku, emono shukhero dine kadte nei" in his famous "Shob Kota Janala Khule Dao na" sung by Sabina Yasmin, we note how the ethos of the nation state does not rest only on narratives of valour and bravery but also on the notions of tears, sacrifice, and emotions. Almost 55 years later, each time the song is played, the essential formation of the modern nation state concretises in its instrumentalising of human pain and sorrow.

Our "bichedi gaan"—a genre based almost entirely on the pathos of unrequited love, the pangs of longing, and the profound heartbreak that comes with a love that changes life—has for centuries sustained our lifeblood in this part of the world. 'Prem' for us is the divine feminine and 'prokiti' the divine masculine, forming the ethos of the natural world in our music, poetry, and philosophy. Binding the human with the environment, in profound contrast to the nature/culture split prevalent in the western ontological order, 'prem' and 'prokiti' explore the 'biched' or rupture between love and nature, marking it as the site where some of our most profound cultural expressions lie. When Lalon laments "ami ek dino na dekhilam tare", that grief is love itself. The ecstatic devotion of Sufi music too, often leads the singer and the listener to tears. Stepping away from the ratio-centric rigidity of 'modern' thoughts, the notes and tunes of longing urge the human soul to seek the Divine. Sufism's celebration of 'fana'—the breaking down of human ego—similarly attests to the act of losing oneself to the divine, accompanied by tears. Between 'bichhed' and 'fana', between seeking and longing, between lover and god, between seeker and beloved, the human spirit rises in love and pain.

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

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Sharmee Hossain teaches English at North South University.

POETRY SPRING STAYED LONGER THEN

NUBISHA RABYA TOPOTE

I miss those spring days
when the sun lay on my skin
like a sunflower opening without trying.
I kept saying your name,
softly, again and again,
as if repeating it could slow the afternoon.
We sat under a tree,
branches moving gently above us,
birds filling the silence we didn't need to break.
The sky felt endless then—
so wide it made the future seem harmless,
like something far away
that would never reach us.
We didn't think about what comes after warmth—
how summer rushes in too quickly,
how storms arrive without warning,
how winter quietly takes things away.
We didn't wonder.
We didn't prepare.
We just wandered,
believing time would stay kind
as long as we didn't look at it too closely.

Nubisha Rabya Topote, a class 10 student at Viqarunnisa Noon School and College, is a budding poet who finds inspiration in every opportunity to write. Find more of her work @nubishawrites.



PHOTO: COLLECTED

CREATIVE NONFICTION

The devil wears Maria B

TASHFIA AHMED

I sit on a chair. Sometimes I wish I were sitting on my old chair of humble plastic, but right now my chair is a plush armchair, with armrests no less, swaying and swooning on its cabriole legs of sturdy s-curve perfection. Its upholstery is luscious mauve velveteen and rapturous foliage embossing embraces its expanse. But my chair is mass produced. It has room for only one. Just me. And even I barely fit on it at times. That does not make it any less expensive.

And though its upkeep keeps my bank balance on its toes till the end of the month, I cannot imagine trading it in for anything less—owing to the vantage point it gives me to watch over all things just as beautiful, to claim them for myself; to look up and find that its height is just right for my hands to reach for more, and know that this chair has the ability to take on more intricate chippendale and thusly raise me to higher heights of bigger, more beautiful boards of claims.

But when you have grown up sitting on sticky plastic, sooner or later, the pins securing the upholstery start to unhook and sting.

I felt my first sting when I was told my bill at a Pakistani multi-brand retailer's counter had amounted to nearly 50K. Suddenly, the velveteen of my chair started stinking of mildew and its wooden skeleton rattled like termite fodder.

50K can comfortably sustain a month of livelihood in a low-income nuclear family.

50K can lavishly dine 50 people for a whole day...right?

Sitting on my pretty chair of Pinterest-core magnificence, I felt out of touch with reality: with the cost and value of money. Thereby, all the posts I shared on my Facebook timeline and all my Instagram reel reposts, all of them about the inbred



ILLUSTRATION: MAISHA SYEDA

disease of capitalism and neocolonialism perpetuating patriarchal control and survivalist competition, all rendered meaningless in that one instant of pure, absurd vanity. All in the name of the biannual pandemic of Eid shopping.

I realised that my chair wasn't just fancy, it was also positioned on a pedestal of my own worship, contradicting the virtues that the religious teachings of Ramadan promotes. It's an ironic realisation-slash-observation that bumps and skitters around on Facebook statuses every Ramadan, often accompanied by a hastily snapped picture

of overpriced boutique designs and/or the swarming horde of consumers at Aarong or the tristate mela displays.

The stuffing of frills and bows battering my seat are starting to feel like they're morphing into something alive and biting. I fidget my fingers on a lipstick-cage-bag charm I had bought from a small-business Facebook page selling "aesthetic" products (which they probably sourced from Shein). The cap of the lipgloss I've placed in the "cage" and the other bag charm I've hung my employee ID card from are both matching shades of lime green. My

Instagram Explore page tells me how to add whimsy to my life in 2026 and shows me aesthetics of the "divine feminine" through imagery of pastels and nature and ethereal, gossamer-like fabrics. I consume it all—with my eyes, with my salary.

My salary. To quote Anthony Bridgerton, "the bane of my existence and the object of all my desires." (At this point, I am reminded of and starting to feel an urge to order online the *Bridgerton* collection stationery I'd seen at an Alok event this Ramadan, but I digress.) The point is: my salary (with the rest of my side-hustle incomes) puts

me in a comfortable income-bracket, positioning me as a privileged woman in Dhaka's urban landscape, but this privilege does not come without the caveats of being employed, and thus, being working class nevertheless. And this exactly is why the comfortable armchair of my employed self is, at its joints, creaking.

It's the fact that I will receive a Whatsapp text in my team's group chat from our supervisor of the dresscode on Sunday being any shade of purple or pink, and all of us employees will wear our curated outfits while our students recite poems talking about "oh women so divine, so beautiful, such flowers" at the special morning assembly, and we will take group pictures in our ombre of purples and pinks, and share them on the Whatsapp group and our personal Facebook profiles. It's the fact that I'm all set for this International Women's Day with my solid lilac Dubai georgette coords and matching studs, just like I am every year with a new carefully curated purple or pink outfit. It's the fact that some brand will once again unleash another galling marketing campaign regurgitating the same old message of "je raadhe, shey chul o baadhe" or "ghor and office duto tei expert" while other brands advertise Women's Day Sales to make the women in your lives feel special.

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

Tashfia Ahmed is a writer and an educator at *Scholastica*. She requests readers to send her, on her Instagram @tashfiarchy, recommendations of any essays, articles, books and visual content that can actively support her strife in becoming a better feminist.

A stark reminder of the quality gap

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh's women's football team suffered a heavy 5-0 defeat to a dominant DPR Korea side in their second Group B match of the AFC Women's Asian Cup 2026 in Sydney on Friday. The loss was a harsh reminder of the vast gap between Bangladesh and Asia's top footballing nations, echoing a similar defeat nine years ago.

In 2017, during their debut at the AFC Women's U-16 Championship in Thailand, Bangladesh was overrun by DPR Korea in a 9-0 thrashing. The Koreans, led by forward Kim Kyong-yong, went on to win the tournament, with Kim scoring five goals in that match. Fast forward to Friday's encounter, and Kim again starred for her side, netting two goals in the 5-0 victory.

Though Bangladesh's women's football team has made considerable progress since 2017, most notably with their historic qualification for the AFC Women's Championship, the gap in technical and tactical quality remains glaring. The senior squad, largely consisting of players from that U-16 team, found themselves on the receiving end of another one-sided game.

The match at Western Sydney Stadium was always going to be a monumental challenge. DPR Korea, one of the most well-organised teams in Asian football, dictated play from the outset, just as they



had nearly a decade ago. Their precise use of the flanks and dangerous crosses kept the Bangladesh defense on constant alert, while the sharp finishing and fluid passing highlighted their superior level of play.

Under the intense Sydney sun, DPR Korea showcased world-class technical skills and fitness, outpacing Bangladesh with quick reactions, seamless one-touch

football, and high-intensity pressing. And Bangladesh could never match their opponents' pace and precision.

Bangladesh's lack of experience against top-tier Asian teams was evident throughout the match, underscoring the difficulties they face due to limited opportunities to compete at such high levels. While they showed resilience in their opening 2-0 loss to defending

champions China, that spirit was not evident against DPR Korea. The relentless pressure from the Koreans forced Bangladesh into multiple errors, disrupting their attacks and forcing them to defend almost throughout the match.

After the final whistle, coach Peter Butler acknowledged the disparity in quality. "I can't criticise the girls because we're just not at that level," he said in the post-match press conference. "But I'm proud of their efforts and what they've given us. They're a smashing group of girls."

"We played against an absolutely fantastic team today, probably one of the best, if not the best, in Asian football. In terms of strength and technical ability, they were streets ahead of us. Losing by five, six, or seven goals is no disgrace."

Butler also pointed out the impact of the intense heat. "We just couldn't contain them. It was a complete mismatch. Unfortunately, some of our girls struggled in the sun, and we didn't do ourselves justice," he added.

With DPR Korea and China already securing spots in the quarterfinals, Bangladesh's hopes now rest on their final group match against Uzbekistan on March 9 in Perth. As one of the two best third-place finishers, there is still a slim chance for Bangladesh to advance to the knockout stages.

However, to progress, Bangladesh will need a much stronger performance than the one shown against DPR Korea.

WBPL EoI deadline extended after requests

SPORTS REPORTER

A Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) official on Friday said the board has extended the deadline to March 8 for submitting Expressions of Interest (EoI) for franchises of the upcoming Women's Bangladesh Premier League (WBPL) following requests from interested parties.

"We have received requests from interested parties to extend the deadline for their preparation," WBPL governing council chairperson Rubaba Dowla told The Daily Star.

The BCB had invited EoIs from potential franchisees on February 18 for the three-team WBPL, which is scheduled to be held from April 4 to 14.

The initial deadline for submitting EoIs was March 4.

However, it was learnt that only two parties expressed interest in acquiring the franchise rights of the Rajshahi and Chattogram teams, prompting the board to extend the deadline.

Sources said the BCB wants to avoid a situation similar to the men's Bangladesh Premier League earlier this year, when the board had to take over the franchise rights of Chattogram Royals just a day before the tournament began.

The players' draft for the inaugural WBPL is scheduled to be held on March 14. If the franchise issue is not resolved soon, the draft date could also be rescheduled.



Heavyweights sail as BFL resumes

SPORTS REPORTER

Bashundhara Kings and Abahani resumed the second phase of the Bangladesh Football League with victories as the league returned after a two-month break with matches held at four venues on Friday.

Kings, despite the absence of Raphael Augusto and Dorielton Gomes, beat a reinforced PWD 2-0 at Kings Arena, with Mohammad Ridoy and Emmanuel Sunday scoring either side of the break.

A first win after a defeat and two successive draws helped the five-time champions take solo lead with 21 points from 10 matches.

Abahani, meanwhile, climbed to third place in the 10-team table with 16 points from 10 matches after securing a convincing 4-1 win over Rahmatganj in Cumilla.

Abahani looked formidable after fielding all three of their foreign recruits for the first time. Brazilian forward Bruno Oliveira struck a brace in his first match of the season in Bangladesh, while Nigerian striker Emeke Ogbugh also found the net in his debut appearance. Syed Shah Quazem added the fourth before Rahmatganj pulled one back through Solomon King. Meanwhile, Bangladesh Police and Brothers Union shared the spoils in a 1-1 draw in Gazipur while in Manikganj, relegation-threatened Arambagh earned a valuable point in a 1-1 draw against Fakirerpool Young Men's Club.

Men's, Women's DPL uncertain as stagnation continues

SPORTS REPORTER

Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) is yet to solve the ongoing club cricket crisis as both the men's and women's Dhaka Premier League (DPL) are facing uncertainty.

Last year, the 12-team men's DPL was played between March 3-April 29 while the nine-team women's league took place between February 19-March 13. This year, however, the BCB is yet to settle on a schedule for either List-A tournaments.

In a coordination meeting held on March 2 with Women's DPL teams, where six of the nine teams attended, three clubs wanted to play the league, while the others said that they will not participate without national team players' involvement.

This year, BCB has decided to bar women's national team players from the league keeping in mind their upcoming assignments, which includes the ICC Women's T20 World Cup, and the inaugural Women's Bangladesh Premier League (WBPL).

"There is the World Cup in June and there is a Sri Lanka series coming up before that [in March-April]. The Women's BPL [probable dates in April] is there too. So, the women's wing has decided not to allow national team players to play the domestic league," a BCB women's wing official who attended the meeting told The Daily Star.



Batter Afif Hossain appeared in good spirits after earning a recall to the national side as he prepares for a practice match against a BCL All Stars XI in Mirpur today ahead of the ODI series against Pakistan. While the national team will be occupied with the ODI series, it may be some time before the rest get game time given the uncertainty over the upcoming Dhaka Premier League. PHOTO: STAR

"We haven't decided on the [women's] league yet, we will talk to the high-ups before taking a decision," the official said.

Meanwhile, many of the men's DPL clubs are still continuing their boycott

of domestic leagues over alleged irregularities in BCB elections which saw Aminul Islam Bulbul getting elected as the president in October last year.

"As clubs from the third division through to the premier division had collectively decided to boycott, we are sticking to it," Rafiqul Islam Babu, councillor from Indira Road Krira Chakra told The Daily Star.

The crux of the controversy surrounding the BCB election was a letter signed by the BCB president Bulbul sent on September 18 to regional associations that nominated councillors from outside of ad-hoc committees, instructing them to re-submit the list.

The High Court ordered a stay for 15 days on the letter, however, later Supreme Court chamber judge stayed the HC order.

Mohammedan SC councillor Masuduzzaman told The Daily Star, "As long as this illegal board is here, the clubs will not play any domestic leagues... We are waiting for a decision from the courts."

Cricket Committee of Dhaka Metropolis (CCDM) officials said there is no hope of the league starting before Eid ul Fitr.

"We haven't been able to set a date for a coordination meeting. We had set dates of March 15 [to start DPL] but now nothing will happen before Eid," an official said yesterday.



Zidane's final act

The 2006 FIFA World Cup final in Berlin became the dramatic final chapter of Zinedine Zidane's legendary career. After returning from international retirement in 2005 to rescue France's struggling qualification campaign, the 34-year-old produced a series of dazzling performances in the tournament, including a masterclass against Brazil and a decisive semifinal penalty against Portugal. In the final against Italy, Zidane audaciously scored a Panenka penalty against Gianluigi Buffon, giving France an early lead. But in extra time, a brief exchange with Marco Materazzi ended in one of football's most infamous moments when Zidane headbutted the Italian defender. Referee Horacio Elizondo showed a red card, ending Zidane's career in controversy as he walked past the World Cup trophy he had hoped to lift once more.

**** Read full story on The Daily Star's website**

SAMSON'S MOMENT finally arrives

AGENCIES

After spending most of his international career lurking in the shadows of bigger stars and failing to fulfill his incredible talent, Sanju Samson has finally risen to the occasion in the ongoing ICC T20 World Cup.

Having made his T20I debut for India in 2015, he had to wait 11 years before playing his first match in an ICC T20 World Cup.

He was picked for the group-stage match against Namibia in Delhi, where he made a brisk eight-ball 22 but was then left out for the high-stakes match against Pakistan.

Picked in the side as the backup opener, Samson would have most likely spent the rest of the tournament warming the bench had not been for two factors -- India getting thrashed by South Africa in their first game in the Super Eights and opener Abhishek Sharma's monumental slump in form.

He returned for the match against Zimbabwe, making an unremarkable 15-ball 24 and then hit a potentially career-defining 97 not out off 50 deliveries to take India over the line in a virtual quarterfinal against West Indies.

Then in the semifinal in Mumbai, the 31-year-old right-hander delivered once



again with a 42-ball 89 that set up India for a massive 253-7, which proved to be seven runs out of England's reach even after a brilliant 48-ball 105 from Jacob Bethel.

Samson said his knock against England on Thursday was the product of years of quiet work and difficult stretches.

"I have been trying for a few years to

do something like this for my country... a lot of patience, inner work, training and practice," Samson told reporters after India set up a final showdown with New Zealand.

Samson, who was named the player-of-the-match in India's last two games, admitted the knock in the semifinal was shaped by the momentum he carried from his innings against West Indies in the previous match.

"The last innings definitely played a good role today [Thursday]. I knew I was timing the ball well and taking good decisions. If you're in form, you should definitely contribute again," he said.

Samson also said failure in the home series against New Zealand earlier in the year prompted a reset in both his technique and mindset.

"I was trying a bit too much in the New Zealand series. I wanted to make an impact and get into the XI of the World Cup here... I had to respect the game and come back to my basics," he said.

With India just one win away from securing back-to-back T20 World Cup titles, Samson is hoping to carry his form into the Sunday's final in Ahmedabad. "Definitely I feel grateful, but we have one more step to go. If we do that, then I think all the work, everything was worth it."



Lionel Messi presents a jeweled football to US President Donald Trump as Messi and his Inter Miami teammates were honored by Trump at the White House on Thursday in recognition of their 2025 MLS Cup championship. The players arrived bearing gifts, including a No. 47 jersey from the team's signature pink kit -- symbolising Trump's status as the 47th president. Meanwhile, Trump remarked that Messi "may be better than Pele."

PHOTO: AFP

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PM says at iftar with foreign diplomats

BSS, Dhaka

Prime Minister Tarique Rahman yesterday sought deeper engagement with the international community through partnerships rooted in expanded trade and investment, technology transfer, cultural and educational exchanges, and stronger people-to-people ties.

"We believe prosperity today is built through cooperation and connectivity, not isolation," he said before an iftar hosted in honour of diplomats at the State Guest House Jamuna, according to PM's Press Secretary Saleh Shibby.

Ambassadors and representatives of foreign missions stationed in Dhaka, ministers, state ministers, and lawmakers attended the event, according to officials concerned.

PHOTO ON PAGE 3 SEE PAGE 9 COL 2



Eid shoppers throng Dhaka's New Market area yesterday as the weekend drew crowds, causing severe traffic congestion. Some hawkers taking up half the width of the street for their shops only made things worse.

PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED

NATIONAL ELECTION

Record 16.91 lakh ballots rejected

MOHIUDDIN ALAMGIR

An unprecedented number of ballots was rejected in the February 12 national polls.

According to the Election Commission data, 16,91,080 ballots were cancelled, amounting to 2.20 percent of the 7,66,81,193 votes cast. Since 1991, the tally of invalid ballots has never crossed the 10-lakh mark.

EC officials said ballots are usually cancelled if a voter does not mark any option, selects more than one option, or marks an option incorrectly.

The January 2024 election, which was one-sided as major parties, including the BNP and Jamaat, boycotted the polls, saw 9,98,188 invalid votes, or 1.98 percent of ballots cast, according to EC data.

In the 2018 polls, marred by allegations of ballot box stuffing on the night before voting, the invalid ballots were 8,87,690, just 1.06 percent.

The 2014 election, another one-sided contest due to the boycott by major parties, including BNP and Jamaat, saw 153 candidates elected unopposed, leaving voting necessary in only 147 constituencies. That year, 2,63,037 ballots were rejected, amounting to 1.51 percent of total ballots cast.

Meanwhile, the 2008 election, in which all registered parties took part, recorded 6,36,294 disallowed votes, less than 1 percent.

Before that national polls, 4,49,082 ballots were cancelled in 2001, also less than 1 percent. In the June 1996 election, the number of invalid votes were 4,62,302,

SEE PAGE 9 COL 2

Scientists grow chickpeas in 'moon dirt'

REUTERS, Washington

Scientists working to cultivate the field of extraterrestrial agriculture have grown chickpeas in dirt made mostly of simulated lunar soil, a step toward enabling astronauts on long-term moon missions to produce their own food.

Researchers said harvestable chickpeas were grown in soil mixtures composed primarily of "moon dirt" modeled after lunar samples retrieved during Nasa's Apollo missions more than half a century ago.

Chickpeas of a variety called "Myles" were raised in a climate-controlled growth chamber at Texas A&M University. Seeds were coated with beneficial fungi and planted in a mix of the simulated lunar soil, made by Florida-based company Space Resource Technologies, and a nutrient-rich substance called vermicompost produced when earthworms break down organic waste.

Harvestable chickpeas grew in soil mixtures of up to 75 percent lunar simulant. As the percentage of simulated moon soil - known as regolith - increased, the number of harvestable chickpeas decreased, though the size of the chickpeas remained stable. Seeds planted in 100 percent lunar simulant failed to produce flowers and seeds, experiencing early death.



We were not consulted before US deal: Jamaat

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Jamaat-e-Islami Ameer Shafiqur Rahman has said his party was not consulted on agreements signed with different countries during the tenure of the interim government.

"Several agreements were signed with different countries during the tenure of the previous interim government. Unfortunately, the government did not consult us in any way regarding those deals," he wrote in a post on his verified Facebook account yesterday.

Shafiqur said Jamaat had repeatedly demanded that, in the absence of a parliament, the interim administration should consult political parties before taking decisions on major issues such as international agreements, as it had done on several other national matters.

"However, the government at the time did not take our demands into consideration. Our position on the matter is therefore clear, and there is no room for confusion," he added.

His remarks came amid controversy over comments

SEE PAGE 9 COL 1

Three-year-old party set to sweep Nepal polls

REUTERS, Kathmandu

A three-year-old party led by rapper-turned-politician Balendra Shah looked set to sweep Nepal's general election yesterday, trouncing established rivals in a result analysts likened to a "tsunami".

Thirty-five-year-old Shah and his Rastriya Swatantra Party were on course to win a majority in the 275-member lower house of parliament, leading in 100 of the 137 seats, the election commission said.

At 1200 GMT, vote counting was under way for 165 seats filled by direct election in the 275-member lower house, while the rest will be decided through proportional representation.

Balendra Shah, the former mayor of the capital Kathmandu, has dominated the race to become prime minister, gaining near-rockstar-like fame on social media across the Himalayan nation after a youth-led uprising.

"At least one member from each household seems to have voted for it (RSP). Otherwise this type of tsunami would not have been possible," analyst Puranjan Acharya told Reuters.

Political instability has plagued the nation of 30 million for decades, crippling a largely agrarian economy grappling with unemployment and corruption.

That unrest erupted into street protests last September after a social media ban brought thousands onto the streets, triggering clashes and deaths that led to former prime minister K P Sharma Oli's resignation.

The Nepali Congress, the country's oldest party, was leading in 10 seats and had won just one. Vice President Bishwa Prakash Sharma said in a post on X that the party had accepted the voters' verdict.

"I voted for Rastriya Swatantra Party because Balen is there," said



Balendra Shah's Rastriya Swatantra Party is ahead in 100 of 137 directly elected seats in the lower house.

Shah, 35, has gained near-rockstar fame among youth.

Balendra Shah, a rapper-turned-politician and the prime ministerial candidate for Rastriya Swatantra Party (RSP).

PHOTO: REUTERS



Trump hints US will turn to Cuba after Iran

AFP, Washington

President Donald Trump suggested Thursday that he would turn to an unspecified project for Cuba, the Caribbean island already facing a US energy blockade, after the war against Iran.

"We want to fix, finish this one first -- but that will be just a question of time before you and a lot of unbelievable people are going to be going back to Cuba," Trump said at a White House reception.

Addressing US Secretary of State Marco Rubio, the Miami-born son of Cuban immigrants, Trump added: "You've been doing a fantastic job on a place called Cuba."

Washington has

SEE PAGE 9 COL 1

Afghan-Pak troops trade fire

US says over 1,15,000 displaced

REUTERS, Kabul

Pakistani and Afghan troops exchanged fire at dozens of points along their border yesterday as the UN said their week-old conflict has forced the displacement of more than 100,000 people.

- No negotiations taking place to end conflict: Pak
- Taliban strikes Pak base in Balochistan province
- Kabul provides safe haven to militants: Islamabad

The South Asian nations show no signs of rapprochement in their worst fighting in years, adding to the volatility in a region also contending with US and Israeli strikes on Iran - a nation that borders both Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Combat has included Pakistani air strikes on Taliban government installations, such as the Bagram air base north of the Afghan capital Kabul.

Afghanistan's Ministry of Defense said Taliban forces struck Pakistani military installations along the 2,600-

SEE PAGE 9 COL 4



As onion flowers bloom, farmers are busy tending the fields. Besides spraying pesticides, pollination is also being done using sticks wrapped with a piece of cloth. As seed prices are good, many have turned to seed production. The photo was taken in Rajshahi's Godagari upazila.

PHOTO: AZAHAR UDDIN

A stark reminder of the quality gap

P11

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PRAYER TIMING
MARCH 7

	Fajr	Zohr	Asr	Maghrib	Esha
AZAN	5-02	12-45	4-30	6-06	7-30
JAMAAT	5-12	1-15	4-45	6-16	8-00

SOURCE: ISLAMIC FOUNDATION

SEHRI, IFTAR TIMING

RAMADAN	MAR	SEHRI	IFTAR
17	7		6:06
18	8	4:58	6:06
19	9	4:57	6:07

The fading echo of CHALAN BEEL

Vast natural wetland shrinks by 85% in a century amid unplanned development



Farmers plant paddy seedlings across the vast stretches of Chalan Beel.

AHMED HUMAYUN KABIR TOPU,
Pabna

The Chalan Beel was once no less than a natural wonder — a vast expanse of water where fishermen thrived, kingfishers and egrets hunted, and life moved with the rhythms of ebb and tide.

That vibrant environment today is a mere shadow of its past. The echo of life that once resonated across the wetland is fading.

Over the past century, Chalan Beel's environmental balance and biodiversity have been gradually endangered in the name of development.

According to a recent survey by the Center for Environmental and Geographic Information Services (CEGIS), the wetland's area shrank by 85 percent, from approximately 1,085 square kilometres in 1914 to about 168 square kilometres during monsoon at present, and merely 52-78 square kilometres during winter.

Historically, Chalan Beel comprised 163 smaller waterbodies connected by 47 rivers and over 90 canals, spanning 41 upazilas across six districts.

Currently, it spans only nine upazilas across Pabna, Natore and Sirajganj.

The CEGIS survey found that 109 sluice gates, 12 polders and 215 water control structures installed around Chalan Beel over the years have severely restricted natural water flow. Most connecting rivers and canals have dried up, shrinking the wetland and gravely affecting the livelihoods of those who depend on it.

Abdus Salam, 60, a farmer from Sarara village in Pabna's Chatmohar upazila, said the changing landscape has brought financial ruin.

Salam cultivates mustard after monsoon waters recede each year, followed by paddy. This year, waterlogging made mustard cultivation impossible.

"Monsoon water from the beel earlier used to drain naturally into the Boral river via the Betuapara canal," Salam said. "Today, that canal has virtually disappeared due to years of encroachment. As such, the

water remains stagnant on cropland, making it impossible to cultivate."

During a recent visit to the Betuapara canal, this correspondent observed several structures over a narrow trench with no visible flow, hardly resembling the waterway it once was.

In Natore's Singra upazila, while the soil remains rich, cultivation is often limited to a single crop due to severe waterlogging and rapid growth of water hyacinth.

"Clearing one bigha of land for post-monsoon cultivation requires

"Now, the canal runs dry during the Boro season, so we depend on diesel-powered shallow machines to pump water for irrigation, raising the cost by Tk 3,000-4,000 per bigha," Rahman said.

"The falling water table is another growing concern. Even two decades back, there was water at 20 feet depth. Last year the table was at 32 feet, and this year I had to reset my pump to 35 feet depth."

Local farmers said if the canals could be restored or electricity made available, irrigation costs could be

through the heart of the wetland caused major obstructions to water flow.

Several other roads, including the one from Chatmohar Notun Bazar to Mannannagar, have further split the waterbody over the last decade.

New threats continue to emerge. There is a plan to establish a university campus at Buripotazia in Sirajganj's Shahzadpur upazila, which threatens a vital water discharging point.

"If the university is built there, the existing waterbody will suffer

Environment in Natore, confirmed that neither the park nor the resort obtained the required clearance from the department.

The gradual destruction of the wetland has devastated fish stocks.

According to CEGIS, 81 fish varieties were once found in Chalan Beel. Currently, only 27 remain, of which 10 are endangered and five critically vulnerable.

Annual natural fish production dropped from over 25,000 tonnes before 1982 to 12,217 tonnes in 2007. Despite environmental

natural wetland for increasing production and bringing communication comfort at the cost of environmental assets," he said.

The government has recently launched a feasibility study to save the wetland.

The Department of Bangladesh Haor and Wetland Development began the study in August last year. It is expected to conclude in February 2027.

Md Tanvirul Haque, the project director, said, "We will identify the real problems and find a solution to



A structure being built on a waterbody at Chalan Beel.

10-12 labourers and costs Tk 6,000-7,000, raising the cost of cultivation significantly," said farmer Ashraful Islam from Shatpukuria village.

"Decades ago, natural water flow in the canals would carry the hyacinth away. Now, with the canals' flow choked by unplanned structures, the weeds stay trapped in our fields," he added.

Environmental degradation has forced a shift from the use of free surface water to expensive mechanical irrigation.

Saidur Rahman, a farmer in Chatmohar, recalled that his grandfather cultivated Boro paddy relying entirely on the Kinushardar Jola canal.

Chalan Beel's decline began in 1914 with the development of the Ishwardi-Sirajganj railway link.

More aggressive damage occurred later.

In the 1980s, the Bangladesh Water Development Board built a three-gate sluice at Charghat and the Baghabari-Tarash embankment, disrupting the flow of the Boral river, the wetland's primary lifeline.

Between 1995 and 2010, about 1,188 kilometres of paved roads and over 800 culverts were constructed within Chalan Beel, further disrupting its ecological balance.

In 2003, the construction of the Hatikumrul-Bonpara highway

irreversible damage," said SM Mizanur Rahman, founder of "Save Boral Movement" and "Save Chalan Beel Movement".

Illegal encroachment by influential local individuals through unplanned residential and commercial structures has further exacerbated the situation.

In 2014, a tourist park was built within the wetland in Singra upazila. The owner, Md Kabir Hossain, claimed he had followed proper procedures and that the park does not hinder natural flow.

A seven-storey resort was recently built within Patul Beel in Naldanga of Natore.

Md Rafikul Islam, assistant director of the Department of

AT A GLANCE

- Chalan Beel shrank from 1,085 sq km to 168 sq km in a century
- Once spread across 41 upazilas, it now spans only nine

REASONS FOR DEVASTATION

- 109 sluice gates, 12 polders and 215 water control structures restricting natural flow
- 1,188 km of paved roads and over 800 culverts fragmenting the wetland
- Encroachment through residential, commercial and tourism structures
- Shift to mechanical irrigation lowering groundwater table

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Restore natural water flow by dredging rivers, canals
- Remove or redesign unplanned water control structures
- Ensure coordination among govt agencies in development projects
- Prevent illegal encroachment, enforce environmental clearance

degradation, the region remains vital to national food security.

It produces 1.98 million tonnes of paddy annually, meeting 5 percent of national rice demand, 29 percent of the nation's garlic demand, 14 percent of mustard and 8 percent of lentils. Annual agricultural production in Chalan Beel is valued at over Tk 15,000 crore.

SM Mizanur Rahman said no financial gain can compensate for the environmental damage sustained.

"We are deliberately killing this

restore the wetland."

Md Mokhlesur Rahman, BWDB's Rajshahi divisional engineer, noted a lack of coordination among government agencies.

"Different authorities conduct different projects, and in most cases, development leads to destruction because of a lack of coordination," he said.

"We must work together to dredge the rivers and canals to save and restore Chalan Beel."



A vast canal at Chalan Beel.



With the canals' flow choked by unplanned structures, hyacinths stay trapped in fields.



Structures like these have further exacerbated the wetland's demise.



Several roads have split the waterbody over the last decade.

THE SLOW SUFFOCATION OF A CITY

Dhaka's silent COPD burden

FABI HUDA

The first thing you notice, on entering the lanes of Shyampur, is how little sky there is. Tin walls press close on both sides, laundry is strung overhead, and the air is filled with the dark fog of industrial smoke from the adjacent factories. When asked whether the smoke bothers them, residents simply shrug, calling it "Dhaka'r aboha" (Dhaka's weather).

Across the city in Dakshinkhan, a woman in her mid-forties stands over a makeshift gas stove, boiling water for a cup of tea. She does so, punctuating the task with a heavy cough, which she explains is just part of her daily life. When prompted about the cough, she laughs: "Daktar ki bolbe? Dhaka-y toh eishob shobar e hoy" (What would the doctor say? It happens to everyone in Dhaka.)

She says it as matter-of-factly as the women of Shyampur.

Bangladesh is home to one of the most densely populated megacities in the world. On top of that, Dhaka continues to record some of the worst air quality in the world. IQAir's 2023 World Air Quality Report recorded Dhaka's mean annual PM2.5

long-term PM2.5 exposure and COPD development is now well established in the literature: higher exposure leads to a higher disease burden. Which is why it is surprising that national studies have estimated the prevalence of COPD at approximately 12.5% among Bangladeshi adults over 40, with slightly steeper rates in densely populated urban areas.

Dhaka's residents are exposed to multiple sources of contaminants due to unregulated industries within the boundaries of the city corporation. Along with this, the increasing number of vehicles pushes nitrogen oxides and black carbon into dense residential lanes, while some households, particularly in informal settlements, rely on biomass burning clay stoves that fill small, unventilated rooms with smoke that, by some estimates, carries health risks equivalent to smoking 400 cigarettes per hour.

In Shyampur's settlements, where workers bring factory overflow home, every family member is in danger of being exposed to the same chemical contaminants as a factory worker. While random coughing and sneezing may seem inconsequential



A narrow lane in a Shyampur informal settlement: tin walls press close on both sides, laundry strung overhead, and no through ventilation.



A cooking space in a Dakshinkhan informal settlement: a gas burner on a soot-darkened ledge, walls blackened with years of combustion residue, and a lattice vent as the only source of air.



A clay biomass stove in active use in Dakshinkhan, a Dhaka informal settlement, its open flame visible at the mouth of the vessel. The wall behind shows years of accumulated soot.



Interior of a single-room dwelling in a Shyampur informal settlement: a young mother with her infant, clothes hung to dry overhead, and cooking and living spaces undifferentiated.



Industrial smoke rising from factory compounds adjacent to a residential area in Shyampur.

PHOTOS: FABI HUDA

concentration at 80.2 micrograms per cubic metre, which is more than sixteen times the WHO's recommended guideline of 5 µg/m³. Yet Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD) is probably unheard of by many. It is a progressive, irreversible inflammatory disease of the airways and one of the most underreported health crises in urban Bangladesh. The association between

to work productivity, if left untreated, over time they reduce lung function. Exposure to occupational dust directly impairs physical work capacity and endurance, which can leave daily wage earners, who have no sick leave or job protection, with a household that does not eat that day.

Diagnosing COPD uses spirometry as the clinical gold standard, a lung function

test that measures airflow obstruction. Studies on respiratory health services have found spirometry available in fewer than 20% of Bangladesh's public secondary-care facilities, suggesting a negligible presence at the primary care level, where most patients first present. And why would it be otherwise when individuals themselves do not consider their consistent coughing an issue? As seen in peri-urban Dhaka among adults with symptoms consistent with COPD, the majority attributed their symptoms to dust, ageing, or tobacco use, citing these as reasons for not seeking immediate medical consultation. Even if a patient reaches an upazila-level care facility with respiratory symptoms, they are typically managed symptomatically, usually treated for a presumed acute infection, prescribed a short course of antihistamines, and discharged.

Moreover, Bangladesh's national health reporting does not disaggregate COPD as a distinct diagnostic category in most institutional settings. While it is mandated that spirometry tests be available at the NCD corners at the Upazila Health Complex (UHC) level in Bangladesh, they are still not reaching enough people, as the national protocol for COPD management at the primary health care level remains awaiting implementation.

The national DHIS2 health information platform has not been updated to incorporate disaggregated NCD data, which results in an incomplete epidemiological record. This, coupled with a lack of community-based spirometry screening initiatives targeting high risk populations such as informal settlement residents, and the absence of any systematic effort to equip community health workers with validated and low-cost screening tools such as CAPTURE (the COPD Assessment in Primary Care to Identify Undiagnosed Respiratory Disease and Exacerbation Risk), only exacerbates this knowledge gap. A disease that is not measured cannot generate the policy pressure required to fund treatment. The result is an unanswered burden in the health system, in which millions carry a diagnosable, manageable condition that eventually leads to deteriorating health and work capacity. Women are generally disproportionately impacted, as research documents that non-smoking women with high biomass exposure develop COPD at rates comparable to male smokers. Yet women with respiratory symptoms face compounded barriers to care: restricted mobility, household responsibility, economic dependence, and the gendered expectation that physical suffering is part of the domestic role.

At the policy level, COPD must be integrated explicitly into Bangladesh's NCD surveillance framework, with standardised diagnostic coding, systematic prevalence estimation, and reporting requirements that make the burden legible to planners. At the community level, public health communication must actively discourage the normalisation of respiratory issues, clearly and repeatedly asserting that buke bhaar and morning cough are symptoms of diseases that can be identified and managed. But most importantly, while Bangladesh's ambient air quality standards exist on paper, enforcement remains chronically weak, with PM2.5 concentrations persistently exceeding national standards for nearly half the year. Weak institutional capacity and political barriers to industrial compliance have been identified as key drivers of this phenomenon; industrial emission regulation in peri-urban Dhaka, specifically for unregistered factory discharge in areas like Shyampur, remains aspirational at best.

Whether it stays that way is in the hands of current policymakers, and in their commitment to a cleaner Dhaka city.

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When boys don't know

The missing half of menstrual conversations in our slums

MOSHARRAT MONIMA

In recent years, Bangladesh has made significant progress in destigmatising menstrual hygiene. Yet the reality reflects the harrowing gap that remains to be addressed: globally, 500 million people lack access to adequate menstrual hygiene facilities (World Bank, 2023), and in Bangladesh, one in three adolescent schoolgirls still misses school every month due to menstruation, while only 53% had heard about menstruation before their first period (UNICEF Bangladesh, 2022).

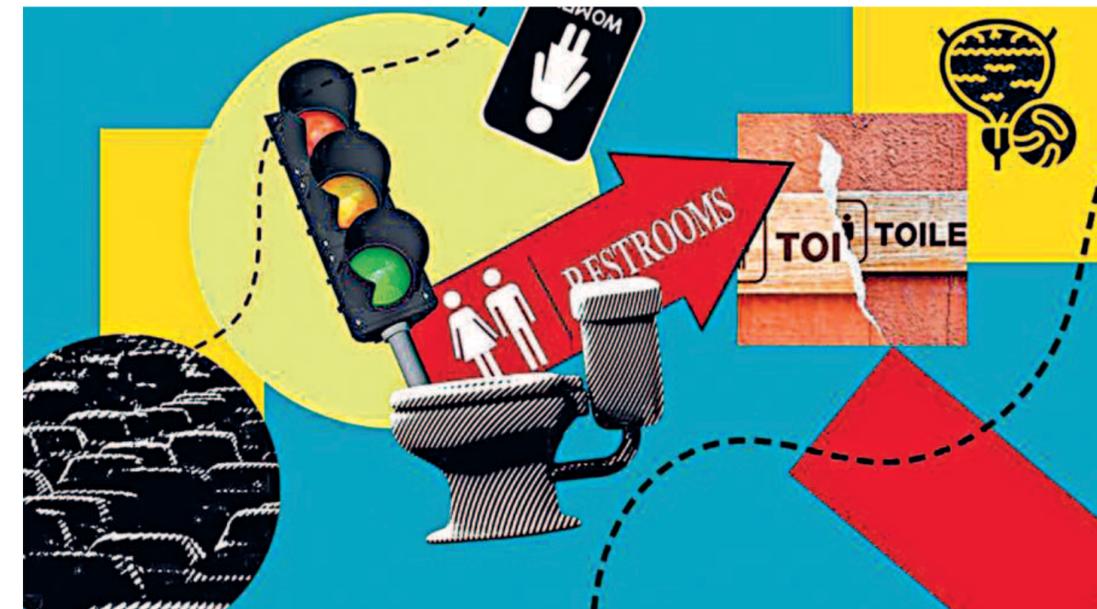
But this is just one side of the coin. In conventional research, we have yet to see the conversation on menstrual hygiene being brought forward to educate and raise awareness among a crucial group: adolescent boys.

While walking through the narrow lanes of Kalyanpur slum in Dhaka, I spoke with 12 adolescent boys aged 15-19 to understand what they knew and felt about menstruation. What emerged was a picture of silence, stigma and missed opportunities.

LEARNING FROM WHISPERS, NOT FROM SCHOOLS

Two-thirds of the boys had some idea about menstruation from friends, Facebook reels and television dramas. Not one mentioned learning about it in school. This is unsurprising. Although the National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB) includes basic puberty content in grades six to ten, these chapters are routinely skipped by teachers who feel culturally ill-equipped (The Daily Star, 2023). Where content does exist, girls are taught in segregated sessions, while boys receive nothing comparable. Adolescent Sexual and Reproductive Health programmes in Bangladesh have historically focused predominantly on girls (Population Council, 2017), creating a structured information gap: boys are not uninformed by accident; they are deliberately excluded.

One boy confused sanitary pads with nappies. Another recalled a television scene of a girl's stain but remembered only the embarrassment, not the biology. Knowledge about menstruation and nutrition was even less explored; only two boys vaguely suggested that girls might need more iron. Yet iron deficiency is the most prevalent nutritional deficiency in the world, disproportionately affecting women of reproductive age because monthly blood loss more than doubles their dietary iron



FILE VISUAL: ALIZA RAHMAN

requirements (Percy, Mansour, & Fraser, 2017; Fernandez-Jimenez et al., 2020). In informal settlements like Kalyanpur, where food insecurity is chronic, this gap has real consequences. These boys, on the precipice of adulthood and future husbands and fathers making household decisions, remain unaware of the nutritional needs of the women beside them.

THE VEIL OF EMBARRASSMENT
Eight of the twelve boys were uncomfortable discussing menstruation, describing it as a "girls' matter", private, embarrassing and off limits. This discomfort is not incidental. Gender sociologists have long observed that boys are socialised to treat menstruation as belonging to a "female sphere" they should not enter (Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler, as cited in Bobel et al., 2020). Goffman's theory of stigma explains this further: shame around menstruation emerges not from biology but from the interactional space, enacted through exclusion and the anticipation of ridicule (Bobel et al., 2020). A 2022 Plan International survey across

multiple countries found that more than one in three boys believes periods should be kept secret (Plan International, 2022).

The effects are evident. In the cases we considered, the boys confessed that teasing accompanies stains at school because boys simply do not understand what is happening. Stigma breeds where there is ignorance. In a pilot study conducted in Bangladesh, it was found that if boys are incorporated into MHM discussions, bullying is reduced and boys begin to raise concerns with teachers if they see signs of discomfort emanating from their peers (Khan et al., 2023). The Government of Bangladesh's own National MHM Strategy (2021), under which MHM discussions are being conducted, has identified male engagement as one of its guiding principles; however, it has not been fully implemented (MoHFW, 2021).

A QUIET SHIFT

Yet the story does not end in pessimism. Seven boys described menstruation as a natural process that should not be shameful. Ten out of twelve expressed a clear desire to

learn more. "I'd like to start from the basics and learn everything properly," one said, recalling how girls were taught separately while boys were left out. "If it had been shared with everyone, it would have helped." Their curiosity signals something important: boys are not resistant to inclusion. They are waiting for it.

CAN BOYS BE PART OF THE SOLUTION?

When asked if they could support menstruating girls, five said yes, that they could buy pads, offer help and reduce embarrassment. Seven felt they had no role, not because they were indifferent, but because they lacked knowledge. "If I know about things, I can surely help," one boy said. The divide was not ideological. It was informational.

Evidence confirms this. In Uganda, including boys in school health clubs focused on menstrual health reduced bullying and turned male students into active supporters (Plan International, 2022). In Bangladesh, a quasi-experimental study is currently testing the effects of involving male family members

in menstrual hygiene management, with the expectation that greater male awareness will reduce stigma and improve outcomes (Murshid et al., 2023).

BEYOND PADS AND POLICY

Bangladesh has made commendable strides in promoting menstrual hygiene management. The Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics' 2018 National Hygiene Survey reported that 97% of women had a place to wash and change during their periods. Between 2014 and 2019, the proportion of women using old cloth during menstruation dropped from 85% to 63%. School absenteeism among girls due to menstruation fell from 40% to 30% over the same period (BBS, 2018; The Daily Star, 2022). Bangladesh was one of only two countries out of 46 to report on Menstrual Health Indicators for the UN's Joint Monitoring Programme in 2021 (The Daily Star, 2022). Most significantly, the Government of Bangladesh released its National Menstrual Hygiene Management Strategy in 2021, signalling an institutional commitment to systematic MHM across the WASH, health and education sectors (MoHFW, 2021). Yet infrastructure and product distribution alone cannot dismantle silence. Cultural taboos, gender norms and educational gaps must be addressed alongside physical facilities.

There should be education on reproductive health for both girls and boys. Community-level projects by NGOs, adolescent-led clubs and "uthan boithok" should specifically target boys. Teachers and parents should be encouraged to discuss the topic with girls without hesitation or shame.

The boys I spoke to are not dismissive. They are curious. They asked me questions about cramps, nutrition, length of time and how they could help in the future. They spoke about how schoolboys laughed and asked how they could change this.

When boys are left out of the lesson, girls carry the burden alone.

Breaking the silence means bringing boys into the classroom, into the conversation and into shared responsibility. Only then can menstruation move from being a whispered topic in slum alleyways to one discussed with knowledge, dignity and respect.

Dr. Mosharrat Monima is a research associate at BRAC JIGSPH and a dental surgeon by training. She can be reached at monimasami@gmail.com.

WITHOUT A BANGLADESH WILDLIFE SERVICE, OUR WILDLIFE HAS NO FUTURE



Often misunderstood as the “Mechhobagh,” the endangered fishing cat is a vital nocturnal wetland species deserving protection rather than prejudice. PHOTO: STAR



The Burmese red serow, a rare goat-antelope locally known as “bon chhago,” in Baraiyadhala National Park in Chattogram’s Mirsharai upazila. PHOTO: KAMRUL HASAN

REZA KHAN

On March 3, as the world marked World Wildlife Day, Bangladesh was reminded of a structural question: can biodiversity survive under a revenue-oriented forest governance model? This article examines why institutional reform—not sentiment—is now essential.

A STRUCTURAL GOVERNANCE PROBLEM, NOT A SENTIMENTAL ONE

Bangladesh is not facing a sentimental conservation crisis. It is facing a structural governance problem.

For decades, our forests have been administered under a model historically shaped by revenue forestry—timber extraction, plantation establishment, and regulated cutting cycles. That model made sense in colonial and

reports submitted to the Convention on Biological Diversity recognise forest degradation and biodiversity decline. Global assessments by the Food and Agriculture Organization distinguish between natural forest loss and plantation expansion—a distinction that matters deeply for wildlife. Increasing plantation cover does not necessarily mean increasing habitat quality.

In the Chittagong Hill Tracts and central Sal forests, natural forest mosaics have been replaced in many areas by plantations. Peer-reviewed research across South Asia consistently shows that wildlife diversity is lower in monoculture plantations than in native forests.

ENCROACHMENT, CONVERSION, AND GOVERNANCE



Human–elephant conflict has intensified as habitats shrink and corridors disappear. PHOTO: STAR

Bangladesh should consider establishing a Bangladesh Wildlife Service (BWS)—a statutory, specialised body focused exclusively on biodiversity conservation.

early post-colonial periods when wood supply and state revenue were dominant goals. But ecology does not operate on ledger books. A forest is not a timber warehouse. It is a living system of soil fungi, insects, shrubs, seed dispersers, predators, wetlands, and hydrological networks. Remove enough of that web, and what remains may look green on satellite images but function poorly as an ecosystem.

The issue is not dedication. It is design.

THE DUAL MANDATE DILEMMA

Bangladesh’s Forest Department, under the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, carries a dual mandate: to conserve biodiversity while also generating forest revenue. These objectives can often conflict with one another.

Plantation forestry—often monocultures of fast-growing species such as acacia, eucalyptus, teak, or rubber—may increase canopy cover statistically, but they rarely replicate the structural complexity of natural forests. A monoculture plantation does not replace a mixed evergreen forest ecologically.

Official assessments already acknowledge this challenge. National

VULNERABILITIES

Encroachment compounds the problem. Investigative reports by Transparency International Bangladesh and national newspapers have documented illegal occupation and conversion of forest lands. Forest governance remains vulnerable to political pressure, land speculation, and opaque transfers. When forest land becomes negotiable, wildlife habitat becomes disposable.

The Sundarbans, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, illustrate the tension between development and conservation. Industrial activities, shipping routes carrying hazardous cargo, pollution, and climate stress intersect in this fragile mangrove ecosystem. The 2014 oil spill exposed vulnerabilities in regulatory preparedness and emergency response. The mangrove forest protects millions from cyclones, yet it remains under pressure from competing economic priorities.

WILDLIFE DECLINE IS MEASURABLE

Wildlife indicators reflect this systemic strain. Bangladesh once hosted thriving populations of large mammals such as tigers, leopards, and elephants. Today, the Bengal tiger population in



A crocodile caught by locals in Manikganj Sadar upazila was handed over to the Forest Department on November 8, 2025. PHOTO: STAR

the Sundarbans remains small and vulnerable. Human–elephant conflict in Sherpur–Jamalpur, Cox’s Bazar, and the Hill Tracts has intensified as habitat shrinks and corridors disappear. Numerous species are now nationally threatened according to the IUCN Red List of Bangladesh.

This is not simply failure. It is a mismatch between ecological complexity and institutional structure.

WHY WILDLIFE GOVERNANCE REQUIRES SPECIALISATION

Wildlife conservation requires specialised ecosystem management: maintaining habitat connectivity, securing genetic corridors, regulating invasive species, balancing predator–prey dynamics, integrating wetlands, and mitigating human–wildlife conflict. These tasks demand ecological expertise, long-term monitoring, and landscape-level planning. They cannot be secondary functions under a timber-oriented administrative model.

Globally, countries facing similar pressures have evolved their institutional structures. India operates separate wildlife wings within its forest system and maintains dedicated wildlife research institutions. The United States separates its Fish and Wildlife Service from the Forest Service. Kenya established the Kenya Wildlife Service as a specialised agency focused on wildlife protection and protected area management. The lesson is clear: biodiversity governance requires institutional specialisation.

Bangladesh should consider establishing a Bangladesh Wildlife Service (BWS)—a statutory, specialised body focused exclusively on biodiversity conservation.

WHAT A BANGLADESH WILDLIFE SERVICE SHOULD DO

Such a service would require several foundational pillars.

Legal clarity and enforcement authority. The Wildlife (Conservation and Security) Act 2012 exists, but enforcement remains uneven. A wildlife service should have dedicated investigative capacity to address wildlife trafficking, coordinate with customs and border forces, and prosecute wildlife crime effectively.

Science-based ecological planning. Wildlife corridors—such as those

linking Teknaf with the Hill Tracts—require landscape-scale GIS mapping, long-term population monitoring, and habitat restoration strategies. Conservation must move beyond isolated protected areas towards connected ecosystems.

Land transparency and accountability. Digitised forest boundary demarcation using satellite verification should be mandatory. Publicly accessible forest land registries would reduce opacity and limit arbitrary conversion. Independent land audits, potentially coordinated with anti-corruption authorities, could strengthen accountability.

Financial independence. If conservation agencies rely on timber income, incentives become distorted. A Wildlife Service should be funded through national budget allocations, climate finance mechanisms such as REDD+, biodiversity offsets, and regulated



Vultures are declining silently. PHOTO: MD REZAUL KARIM CHOWDHURY

eco-tourism revenue—ring-fenced exclusively for conservation.

Specialised recruitment. Wildlife biology, conservation genetics, landscape ecology, and community conflict mitigation are professional disciplines. Recruitment systems must prioritise ecological science, not solely silviculture or timber management. Community integration. Many

forest landscapes are inhabited or used by indigenous and forest-dependent communities. International evidence demonstrates that secure tenure rights and participatory management reduce deforestation and conflict. Conservation cannot succeed without social legitimacy.

Transparency through measurable indicators. Annual wildlife population audits, publicly available forest cover change data, and open reporting systems would strengthen public trust and institutional credibility.

INSTITUTIONAL REFORM REQUIRES POLITICAL WILL

Creating a new institution is not a magic solution. Bureaucratic expansion without political will can produce fragmentation. A Bangladesh Wildlife Service would succeed only if insulated from patronage politics and granted genuine enforcement autonomy. Institutional reform must be accompanied by cultural reform.

FORESTS AS ECOLOGICAL INFRASTRUCTURE

There is also a broader philosophical shift required. Forests are not merely carbon stocks or timber reserves. They are flood buffers, cyclone shields, climate regulators, and biodiversity reservoirs. Bangladesh is one of the most climate-vulnerable countries in the world. Mangroves reduce cyclone impact. Sal forests stabilise soil and regulate microclimates. Biodiversity supports pollination, pest control, and agricultural resilience.

Ecology teaches us about trophic cascades: when apex predators decline, entire food webs destabilise. Remove top carnivores, herbivore dynamics shift, vegetation structure changes, and erosion intensifies. Wildlife conservation is not sentimental tiger photography; it is system stability engineering.

A STRUCTURAL CORRECTION, NOT AN ADMINISTRATIVE LUXURY

Bangladesh does not lack environmental laws. It lacks institutional alignment with ecological reality.

If forest governance remains structurally oriented towards revenue generation, wildlife will continue to decline quietly—even while plantation statistics improve. Climate vulnerability, habitat fragmentation, and human–wildlife conflict are converging pressures. Reform delayed today may make restoration impossible tomorrow.

A Bangladesh Wildlife Service is not an administrative luxury. It is a structural correction.

If we are serious about ecological security, the question is no longer whether we can afford to create a Wildlife Service. The question is whether we can afford not to.

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



PHOTOS: MONG SING HAI MARMA AND MINTU DESHWARA

ECONOMY OF THE HILLS

Where women rule the market

MONG SING HAI MARMA AND
JAGARAN CHAKMA

In the early hours of dawn, when Bandarban's residents are still asleep, the roadside market known locally as Marma Bazar is already teeming with activity.

Vendors spread banana leaves and empty sacks across the pavement, arranging freshly harvested vegetables. Their wares range from pumpkin greens, taro stems, water ferns, okra, brinjal, and lesser-known wild greens. Soon they are seen bargaining with customers, townspeople returning from morning walks.

The scene could be anywhere in Bangladesh. Except for one detail: every vendor is a woman.

They come from nearby villages at dawn, foraging for wild greens or gathering crops from small plots before making the journey to town on foot or by local vehicle. The money they earn



decisions.

After marriage, men move to their wives' houses and help with household activities and betel leaf cultivation, according to Saju Marchiang, publicity secretary of the Khasi Social Council. The youngest daughter typically inherits family property, and lineage is traced through the mother.

Monika Khonglah, head of Meghatila Punjee, says women manage all financial matters in each family. They prepare betel leaves for sale, sell them to traders, and handle all related financial transactions.

Yet even in communities where women hold formal authority, broader constraints remain.

Violence in the hills has squeezed the space for women. And perhaps most critically, land rights remain elusive.

"Where are the land rights for them to undertake large scale farming?" Dey asks.

She argues that there are gender-specific needs that should be addressed. Facilitating cooperative based farming among women in the hill districts could promote large-scale, environmentally friendly agriculture.

"To do so, the state should support them by ensuring access to capital, developing infrastructure, and providing incentives to establish market linkages so that women can scale up and emerge as significant economic actors," she notes.

WOMEN EMPOWERMENT: WHY THE HILLS ARE DIFFERENT?

From vegetable vendor Ekhyang Nu Marma to entrepreneur Tejashree Chakma, women maintain a strong presence across the Chittagong Hill Tracts' economic landscape. Their journeys differ in scale and setting, but their impact is undeniable.

Fahmida Khatun, executive director of the Centre for Policy Dialogue, sees this as a noteworthy example of women's economic empowerment in Bangladesh.

The national picture is less encouraging. "While women make up about 51 percent of the country's population, only around 40 percent participate in the labour force, and nearly 90 percent of them work in the informal sector," Khatun points out.

What makes the hill districts different? Both Khatun and Dey point to social structures.

Khatun notes that women in Bandarban, Rangamati and Khagrachhari are actively engaged in trade and small businesses, playing a visible role in local markets and contributing to household income.

Comparatively supportive social environments in many indigenous communities encourage women to take part in economic activities and decision-making. "This example shows that when social barriers are reduced, women can play a powerful role in strengthening local economies," she says.

The challenge now is to build on their entrepreneurial energy while addressing the structural barriers that remain. If cultural norms permit greater mobility, women lead — the hills are proof of that. The question is whether policy will catch up.

[Our Moulvibazar correspondent Mintu Deshwara also contributed to this report.]

my sons' school transport costs."

Her story is common. For many women in the hill districts, commerce begins with need rather than ambition.

Soma Dey, associate professor of Women and Gender Studies at Dhaka University, notes that subsistence farming, such as jhum cultivation, is widely practised in the Hill Tracts districts. "They engage in this form of farming to ensure food security for their families. For the same reason, they go to markets with fresh produce"

The associate professor explains, "Mobility restrictions are lower in indigenous cultures than among Bengalis, which is a major reason women here are more economically active both inside and outside their homes."

Yet even survival-driven enterprise creates ripples — supporting families, preserving food systems, and maintaining social networks that have existed for generations.

FROM MARKETS TO STOREFRONTS

A hundred yards from Marma Bazar, a different facet of the situation is seen at the Happy Market, also known as Burmese Market, where traders sell handloom clothes mostly made by Indigenous artisans. The shops here open later than the Marma Bazar, but the shopkeepers and salespeople here are also mostly women.

Kroi Sapru Marma is one of them. She sold five cows for nearly Tk 600,000, used the proceeds to rent a shop, and built a business. Now she runs two outlets and has paid for her younger brother's education at Jagannath University.

"I managed both studies and business. Now I run two shops. I have supported my younger brother's education at Jagannath University," she says, holding her 11-month-old child. "Now I can contribute to my family."

Nearly 80 percent of Indigenous clothing shops in Bandarban town are run by women, according to Chandra Tanchangya, owner of Shoi and Wa Shopping Centre. Many young women work as sales assistants. And established entrepreneurs boost employment and income generation for women who cannot afford to open up businesses in urban areas.

Tanchangya, owner of "Maing

Collection", who started her business in 2016, sells clothes wholesale to women in remote areas.

"I also support college and university students in starting online businesses," she says. "So far, eight students are running online ventures with products from my shop."

PRESERVING CRAFT, BUILDING LIVELIHOODS

In Khagrachhari's Pankhaiya Para, Bina Chakma, 54, has been trading traditional handmade dresses, such as Pimon, Hadi, bags and Aalam, for over a decade. Everything she sells is woven on traditional waist looms, ranging from everyday wear to high-end pieces.

She started the business to support her family and cover her children's education. Her sales now average Tk 1 lakh per month. The business employs weavers from villages, keeping the craft alive while generating income.

Around 350 women entrepreneurs are involved in this trade across Khagrachhari district, she estimates. Some also run home kitchens, selling traditional food and sweets.

"It is quite difficult to maintain a solvent family with a single income," Bina says. This is why, in her view, women entrepreneurs embrace self-reliance and play an important role in strengthening their families and communities.

Lita Khisha, a history lecturer at a private college, entered the business in 2020 for side income. She trades mid- to high-range traditional tribal women's outfits.

Selling mainly through online platforms, she carved out a niche market among customers seeking authentic and quality handwoven outfits. Her monthly sales now average around Tk 80,000, though the figure fluctuates with seasons and festivals.

For women like Bina and Lita, business serves a dual purpose. On one hand, it sustains families financially. On another hand, it preserves cultural practices that might otherwise fade.

BREAKING CONVENTION

Not all stories follow traditional paths. Tejashree Chakma's trajectory is less typical.

Born in Rangamati, she graduated from East West University's English Department in 2019. In her final

semester, she received an offer to pursue postgraduate studies at the University of Oxford. Her family urged her not to leave the country.

"That moment changed my future plans," she recalls. "I decided that if I could not go abroad, I would build something of my own, something unique, and enjoy my freedom."

She returned to Rangamati and launched a clothing business, selling both traditional and non-traditional wear. But the apparel market was saturated. Competition was fierce.

"I did not just want to do business," she says. "I wanted to do something different."

Searching for a less competitive and more distinctive venture, she identified a gap in the local market for quality sports items. She shifted the focus of her business entirely.

The gamble paid off. Within three to four months, her monthly sales climbed to Tk 5-6 lakh. She invested Tk 15 lakh with family support and now employs three staff at her outlet in Rangamati's Post Office area.

Her average monthly profit is around Tk 1.5 lakh, three times what she believes she would have earned in a salaried job.

"If I had continued in a job, I would earn at best Tk 50,000 a month," she says. "But business gives me freedom. I enjoy making my own decisions and creating something unique."

For Tejashree, entrepreneurship is not merely financial. It is about standing out, taking risks, and building an identity defined by independence and innovation.

THE CONSTRAINTS

Yet this visible economic participation does not tell the complete story.

"They do not have equal rights in decision-making," Soma Dey says. "For example, in the Chakma community, household and community heads are men. This implies that the power structure is unequal and men dominate decision-making."

The picture varies dramatically across indigenous communities. The Khasi people, who cultivate betel leaves in deep forests along the Indian border in the Sylhet region, live in a matrilineal system where women hold authority over family property and major



keeps families afloat.

This is not an anomaly. Across the three hill districts of Bandarban, Rangamati, and Khagrachhari, women are the visible driving force of local commerce. They sell foraged vegetables, run established shops, trade handloom textiles, operate home kitchens, and launch ventures that bridge tradition and innovation.

ECONOMICS OF NECESSITY

Ekhyang Nu Marma, 35, from Saing Phra Para, sells at Marma Bazar to support two schoolgoing sons. Her husband drives a three-wheeler, but his income alone cannot comfortably sustain their family of four.

Without substantial capital, she farms a small plot beside her home and forages in the wild.

"By selling these vegetables, I can buy salt, fermented fish paste, oil, onions, and garlic," she says. "It also helps cover