



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

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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

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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

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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

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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

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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

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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

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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

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165 repatriated from Libya

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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

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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

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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

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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

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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.