

## LALMONIRHAT-BURIMARI 34 lives lost in 15 months on road

DILIP ROY

The 100 kilometre Lalmonirhat-Burimari highway in northern Bangladesh has become one of the country's most dangerous roads, plagued by accidents, narrow width, and flawed design.

Built in 1988 and declared a national highway in 1989, it now carries around 5,000 vehicles daily, including trucks and buses, despite being only 5.5 metres wide against the standard 10.3 metres.

According to district police and highway police data, 65 accidents occurred between January 2025 and March 17, 2026, leaving 34 dead and 55 injured. Twenty-seven cases have been filed. The highway's 84 bends and 11 railway crossings, coupled with potholes and carpeting swellings, make commuting perilous.

On March 17, a truck hit NGO worker Shariful Islam's motorcycle near the Model Mosque in Patgram upazila, killing him, his wife, and one child.

Truck driver Mashiur Rahman, 48, said, "I drive trucks on different highways, but I have never seen so many bends, railway crossings, and such a narrow road anywhere else. Even at 30-35km per hour, accidents still occur."

Another driver, Zia Islam, 45, noted it takes three and a half hours to pass the road, adding, "Driving overloaded trucks on such a narrow road is extremely risky."

Night coach driver Sohag Islam, 50, said vehicles often overturn at bends, injuring drivers and pedestrians.

Transport worker Mominul Islam said workers have long demanded expansion and modernisation.

Sub-Divisional Engineer Mozammel Haque of Lalmonirhat RHD said, "No other highway in the country has so many bends and railway crossings. It is extremely risky. Without a project, the problems cannot be solved. For now, repairing potholes and carpeting swellings is urgent, but we have not received allocation."

## Afghans search

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Independent experts said it was challenging to establish the truth about the target in the face of the competing claims without a third-party investigation.

Yesterday, relatives gathered at the site looking for their missing loved ones who were among the hundreds recovering there. Many said they did not know whether their relatives were alive or dead.

"We came here looking for our patient, he is missing," said Mazar, 50, who gave only one name. "We checked the lists, but his name was not in the list of the living. Maybe he is injured or has been killed," he said.

The Afghan interior ministry said funerals of some of those killed at the centre took place yesterday. Afghanistan and Pakistan have fiercely disputed the target of the air strike.

Afghan authorities said the attack had clearly targeted a well-known rehabilitation centre, a former Nato military base named Camp Phoenix that had been converted into a civilian facility about a decade ago.

Pakistan has said it hit Camp Phoenix, a "military terrorist ammunition and equipment storage site." It added that secondary detonations visible after the strikes indicated the presence of large ammunition depots there.

The EU, UN agencies and international aid groups have said civilian and medical facilities should not be targeted during a conflict and called for immediate de-escalation.

"There are enough elements to confirm that this was a civilian facility that was hit," said Jacopo Caridi, country director for aid group Norwegian Refugee Council in Afghanistan, adding that military infrastructure may have been located nearby. "They might have missed the objective, but the result is that civilians were killed or injured."

Jennifer Brick Murtazashvili, a political scientist at the University of Pittsburgh and an Afghanistan expert, said it was plausible for civilian facilities to be located within or near former military sites in Kabul.

## Doctor shortage

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Shirin Akter, a Sharankhola resident, recalled her narrow escape when her labour pain started at night. "We first went to the local health centre, but there was no specialist. We had to rush to Khulna. It took several hours. Fortunately, nothing bad happened," she said.

Public health experts say the shortage of doctors and overstretched facilities leave the residents extremely vulnerable while also facing crises such as rising salinity and natural disasters.

Md Noor Alam Sheikh, a member of Dhoriti

Rokhbay Amra (DHORA), noted that climate-change impacts in the region make regular medical supervision a necessity for local residents.

"The existing healthcare gaps also directly affect maternal and child health outcomes," he added.

Contacted, Bagerhat Civil Surgeon ASM Mahabubul Alam acknowledged the crisis.

"We are aware of the doctor shortage. Process is ongoing to recruit doctors against the vacant posts," he said.

He, however, could not specify when these vacant posts would be filled.

## 2 patients die

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"We saw smoke coming from old bed foams stored in the room," he said, adding that the fire might have originated from a lit cigarette.

During the fire, panicked patients, attendants, doctors and nurses from different floors rushed outside, and several people sustained minor injuries while descending the stairs, including three Ansar members who were assisting in managing the situation. A ward master was also injured, witnesses said.

At the time of the fire, 66 patients were admitted to the medicine department.

All were later shifted to the hospital's main building, the hospital director said.

Kazi Ansar Ali, retired assistant commissioner of BMP, said his father Ataur Rahman died due to a lack of oxygen while being brought down from the fourth floor amid the panic. He alleged that oxygen could not be arranged from a private ambulance stationed on the hospital premises.

Abul Hossain's son said his father had been undergoing treatment at the hospital for several days. He rushed there after hearing about the fire and found his father dead.



Workers dry papad or papadum (thin crisps made from ground pulses) under the sun from early morning until afternoon before moving to the next stage of production. Ahead of Eid, production of this popular snack rises, as it is sold at fairs and across the country at wholesale prices of Tk 120-150 per kilogramme. The photo was taken in Dakkhindih village of Phultala, Khulna yesterday.

PHOTO: HABIBUR RAHMAN

## Fuel supply holds steady despite

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last few days ahead of the Eid rush. Yesterday was no exception, though the lines were shorter compared to previous days.

Only Trust Filling Station in the capital's Bijoy Sarani had heavy pressure of motorcycles and private cars. In other city pumps, motorcycle queues have shortened, but those of private cars remained the same as before.

Only one station was found not selling fuel - Eureka Enterprise in Mohakhali railway gate. But some pumps were rationing fuel on their own, as bikes were not allowed to fill more than Tk 500 worth of fuel and cars Tk 3,000.

Workers at the pumps said they needed to ration fuel as demand will still remain during the Eid holidays and the depots will remain closed.

Meanwhile, the government is still looking for alternative sources to import fuel from the international market, as some scheduled consignments are yet to be ensured, raising concerns over supply amid the Middle East crisis.

BPC officials said they

are now actively considering all available procurement routes - including direct purchases, government-to-government (G2G) deals, and open tenders - as supply disruptions intensify.

The BPC currently imports around 50 percent of its yearly fuel demand through G2G arrangements, with the remaining half sourced via international tenders. Under existing agreements, crude oil is brought from Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates and processed at the Eastern Refinery in Chattogram.

However, geopolitical tensions escalating since early March have reduced shipments through the Strait of Hormuz - a critical route that carries around 20 percent of global oil trade as well as crude oil for Bangladesh - disrupting shipment schedules.

At least three crude oil shipments were uncertain, according to BPC officials.

According to the Energy Division, although 17 letters of credit (LCs) were opened in March to import fuel oil by the BPC, only six consignments have arrived so far. Four are currently

awaiting delivery, while the remaining seven face uncertainty.

A similar trend is emerging for April, where only three shipments have been confirmed against 15 LCs, raising concerns over reliance on previously committed cargoes.

As a result, the government has moved to secure fuel under emergency arrangements by importing 100,000 tonnes of diesel and 25,000 tonnes of octane through direct procurement from Dubai-based supplier Petrogas International Corporation, which is supplying fuel to countries in the GCC and Europe.

Besides, efforts are underway to scale up imports from India and explore options from Africa and the United States. Different proposals from various international suppliers are being evaluated based on capacity, quality, and pricing.

In addition, amid the rise in prices of fuel and liquefied natural gas in the global market, the government has been increasing dependence on coal for electricity generation.

According to Argus

Media, a London-based energy and commodity analyst, the amount of imported and arriving coal in March stood at 1.5 million tonnes.

Besides, Bangladesh has bought a small amount of coal from South Africa this time, in addition to typical imports from Indonesia. About 608,000 tonnes of Indonesian coal has been discharged in Bangladesh this month so far, alongside 55,000 tonnes from South Africa.

A further 837,000 tonnes of coal from Indonesia is scheduled to arrive in Bangladesh over the rest of March, according to preliminary fixtures. Coal prices are also increasing following the Middle East conflict, with the latest 5,000 kcal/kg priced at \$72.46 per tonne, up from \$69.60 per tonne.

Power Grid Bangladesh data shows power demand has dropped to between 11,000 megawatts (MW) and 12,000MW as the Eid holiday started, down from between 13,000 MW and 14,000MW.

Of the total, 4,500MW is coming from coal, which is nearly on par with gas-fired power generation.

## Progress in reducing child mortality slowing UN warns, says around 4.9m children under five died in 2024

AFP, United Nations

Progress in reducing child mortality is slowing, the UN said in a report Tuesday, with an estimated 4.9 million children worldwide dying in 2024 before reaching the age of five.

"Most of these deaths are preventable with proven, low-cost interventions and access to quality health care," said the joint report by the World Health Organization and Unicef.

The organizations noted that the number of deaths among children under five has fallen by more than half since 2000. But since 2015, the pace of this decline has slowed by more than 60 percent.

Child deaths remain heavily concentrated in a few regions: in 2024, sub-Saharan Africa accounted for 58 percent of all these deaths and South Asia for one-quarter.

Of the 4.9 million children who died worldwide, the report estimated that 100,000 of them, aged 1 to 59 months, died from severe malnutrition.

"The toll is far greater when indirect effects are considered, as malnutrition weakens children's immunity and increases their risk of dying from common childhood diseases," the report said.

The main causes of newborn mortality are complications related to premature births (36 percent of cases) and those occurring during labor and delivery (21 percent).

Beyond the first month of life, preventable infectious diseases such as malaria, diarrhoea, and pneumonia remain major causes of death.

"Evidence shows that investments in child health remain among the most cost-effective development measures," the report said.

Low-cost interventions, such as vaccines, treatment for severe acute malnutrition, and skilled care at birth "deliver some of the highest returns in global health, improving productivity, strengthening economies and reducing future public spending."

## It has potential

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canals. In 2023, LGED listed 10,642 canals. Proper definitions are necessary.

DS: What was the context of the 1976 canal excavation programme, and how does it compare to the present?

Rokon: Although the late President Ziaur Rahman launched the programme on a large scale in 1977, it actually began in November 1976 in Jashore. The first two projects were rivers, not canals. At that time, apart from Farakka, there were no major barrages, sluice gates, or bridges like today, so the river system was different.

DS: What are the major risks in implementing the current project?

Rokon: Preventing salinity requires sufficient upstream freshwater flow, which is currently lacking.

Maintaining the navigability of major rivers through dredging alone is costly and almost impossible. Instead, if their natural water flow can be increased, rivers can maintain their own navigability. However, deepening canals can help increase rainwater storage capacity, which will be highly useful during the dry season.

DS: What are your thoughts on canals in Dhaka city?

Rokon: Canals in Dhaka are primarily important for drainage, and there are separate World Bank projects for them. The problem is that although projects are often undertaken in the name of cleaning canals, the sources of waste are not stopped. If these canals are restored and waste sources controlled, they could enable water transport, ease Dhaka's traffic issues, and generate revenue through tourism. There are plenty of examples globally of how canals in urban areas can be used for amusements. They can also improve the overall urban environment.

DS: Does the current programme have any detailed master plan?

Rokon: I have not seen any central master plan or detailed design. There may be small local plans, such as the Shahpara Canal in Dinajpur, but I have not seen any overall prioritised list or a national-level plan so far.

DS: What were the environmental and

economic impacts of the canal excavation programme in the 1980s?

Rokon: There was no scientific assessment conducted at that time, but it is generally believed that it had a positive impact on fish production, irrigation, and groundwater recharge. Politically, it increased President Ziaur Rahman's popularity. The current programme may also have political benefits, but scientific supervision is needed for environmental and agricultural gains.

DS: What role does river excavation play in addressing climate change and salinity?

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## Rohingya food aid to be slashed

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This reduced ration will be activated from April 1.

The vulnerability level has been determined mainly by socioeconomic conditions. About 33 percent of the 1.2 million Rohingya have been categorised as highly vulnerable, 50 percent as moderately vulnerable and 17 percent as vulnerable, Rahman said.

The funding shortage was already on the decline in the last several years, but it accelerated after the Donald Trump administration drastically withdrew funding, said an official of the UN High Commissioner for the Refugees in Bangladesh.

"The Rohingya were feeling the impact since early 2025, but now, it will be even more. Funding shortage will have a direct impact on the health and overall wellbeing of the refugees," the official said.

The total funding requirement for the Rohingya in 2025 was \$934 million, but only 53 percent

of the sum was received, according to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs.

In 2024, 64 percent of the funding was received, in 2023 71 percent and in 2022 70 percent.

After the US cut funding worldwide, the WFP had decided to halve monthly rations to the Rohingya to \$6 per person ahead of the Eid-ul-Fitr last year.

The ration cut did not take place after the Trump administration announced \$73 million in new aid to the Rohingya through the WFP.

"As of now, we have not received any new funding commitment from the US this year. Plus, overall funding has now declined significantly," said the UN official, preferring anonymity.

The UN and the Bangladesh government, meanwhile, will be launching the Joint Response Plan (JRP) to the UN in Geneva in April or May.

The JRP is now pending

with the foreign ministry for review, the UN official said.

Given the current global scenario, the fund requirement has now been revised down by 26 percent from 2025, he added.

According to the office of the RRRRC, there are 1.2 million Rohingyas, including new arrivals of 144,000.

About 750,000 Rohingyas fled the military campaign in 2017, and annually, about 30,000 babies are born in the refugee camp, while new influxes take place every day.

"Rohingya continue to enter Bangladesh every day - that's the report that we are getting from the field despite our border forces keeping a strong watch along the Bangladesh-Myanmar border," said RRRRC Rahman.

The situation in Rakhine State - call it security, socioeconomic or health - still remains worrisome as the Myanmar military and Arakan Army continue to be locked in battle, according to the UN and government

officials.

Therefore, Rohingya repatriation is still a far cry, which contradicts the then Chief Adviser Muhammad Yunus's pledge made on March 14 last year.

After joining an iftar with one lakh Rohingyas at the Rohingya camp in Cox's Bazar in the presence of UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, he had pledged to work collectively with the UN to ensure that the Rohingyas can celebrate Eid this year by returning to their homes in Myanmar's Rakhine state.

After the new government was formed in February, the foreign ministry is taking stock of various stakeholders on the next course of action on the Rohingya.

"Given the current situation in Rakhine State, I don't think we can start the repatriation anytime soon. We would give a special focus on this, however, to make it happen at the soonest," a foreign ministry official told this correspondent yesterday.

## Trump issues threat again, Cuban leader

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resistance," he wrote in a statement on X.

Cuba is open to broad talks with Washington and allowing more investment, but it will not discuss changing its political system, an envoy told AFP on Tuesday.

Tanieris Dieguez, Cuba's deputy chief of mission in Washington, said the two neighboring countries "have a lot of things to put on the table" but that neither should ask the other to change its government.

"Nothing related with our political system, nothing with our political model - our constitutional model - is part of the negotiations, and never will it be part of that," she said.

"The only thing

that Cuba asks for any conversation is respect to our sovereignty and to our right to self-determination."

The New York Times, quoting unnamed US officials, said the Trump administration has called for Cuba to sack Diaz-Canel, who is seen as resistant to change.

Rubio denied the report late Tuesday, writing on X that the article was "fake" and was among media reports that relied on "charlatans and liars claiming to be in the know" as sources.

A total electricity breakdown Monday underscored the parlous state of Cuba's economy.

The country lost Venezuela as its chief

regional ally and oil supplier this January after a US military operation toppled Venezuela's socialist leader Nicolas Maduro.

Power was restored to two-thirds of the country early Tuesday, including to 45 percent of the capital Havana, home to 1.7 million people.

"What we fear all the time is that the blackout will drag on and we will lose the little bit that we have in the fridge, because everything is so expensive," said Olga Suarez, a 64-year-old retiree.

"Otherwise we are used to it because here almost all the time you go to bed and wake up without electricity," she told AFP.

Adding another scare, a 5.8-magnitude earthquake

struck off Cuba's coast early Tuesday. There were no immediate reports of casualties or damage.

Cuba's ageing electricity generation system is in shambles, with daily power outages of up to 20 hours the norm in parts of the island, which lacks the fuel needed to generate power.

But since Maduro's January 3 ousting, the island's economy has been further hammered by a de facto US oil blockade.

No oil has been imported to Cuba since January 9, hitting the power sector while also forcing airlines to curtail flights to the island, a blow to its all-important tourism sector.

And Trump is explicitly saying he wants the Cuban government to fall.