



A NEW DAWN

Heralding the break of a new dawn, a gigantic rooster figure leads the Baishakhi Shobhajatra as it steadily advances inside the Dhaka University campus yesterday with the slogan "Noboborsher Oikyatana: Gonotontre Punorutthan" -- a call from the procession for the revival of democratic values and practices.

PHOTO: PALASH KHAN



BNP will implement July charter

Says Tarique, rolls out Farmers' Card

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Prime Minister Tarique Rahman said the BNP would definitely implement the July charter and warned that any attempt to obstruct the government's public welfare programmes would be resisted with the people's support.

"We must stay alert; we must be cautious [about] the ghosts of autocracy, upon whom a shadow is being slowly cast again... who are once more trying to create anarchy in the country," the BNP chairman said at a public meeting held at the Mawlana Bhashani Science and Technology University campus in Tangail yesterday afternoon.

"The people of Bangladesh have given BNP the responsibility to run the country. The day BNP signed the July charter, others also signed it. We have seen that those who are now in the opposition were initially confused about whether they should sign or not. And there is another party with them. They did not sign at that time. We saw them go and suddenly sign it quickly after the election.

"BNP signed first. Those who shouted loudly for the July charter after the election, we can ask them, 'If you cared so much, why did you not sign first?'" he said.

Tarique said, "I have said before, and I am making it clear again. BNP has signed the July charter, and it will implement it. There will be no change in this. But those who try to obstruct BNP's canal digging,



Family Card, Farmers' Card, programmes to create professional players, and other public programmes, the BNP will resist them with the people."

He said, "We may disagree on some issues, that is not a problem. But those disagreements must be solved through discussion. You will make your point and I will give my logic. If your logic is correct, I will accept it."

The BNP chairman said, "We carry this country in our hearts. We have no other address besides this country. Since this Bangladesh is our identity and our last shelter, we must build this country ourselves."

Before making these remarks at the campus, Tarique inaugurated the Farmers' Card pre-pilot programme at Tangail's Shaheed Maruf Stadium, where several thousand farmers and party leaders and supporters gathered.

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A dangerous turn in banking reform

A new law allows the architects of Bangladesh's banking crisis to buy their way back in

MD MEHEDI HASAN

Reform, in Bangladesh, has a short shelf life. Not long after the interim government began cleaning up the country's rotten banking sector, the BNP administration walked back much of the work. A new law now lets the former owners of five scandal-plagued Shariah banks buy their way back in. The price? A mere 7.5 percent upfront of whatever the state pumped in to keep the institutions alive.

NEWS ANALYSIS

The government and Bangladesh Bank together injected Tk 35,000 crore into what became "Sommito Islami Bank", a state-run vehicle created to absorb the wreckage of First Security Islami Bank, Social Islami Bank, Union Bank, Global Islami Bank, and Exim Bank. Under the Bank Resolution Act 2026, former owners can reclaim the lot for Tk 2,625 crore -- with the rest repayable over two years at a gentle 10 percent simple interest. It is, as one economist drily noted, a reward rather than a reckoning. The amount is also meagre compared to what these very owners allegedly siphoned out through years of rule-bending.

The five banks were not victims of misfortune. They were victims of their owners. Four were dominated by S Alam Group, whose chairman, Mohammed Saiful Alam, stands accused of using depositors' money as a personal treasury. The fifth, Exim Bank, was long the field of

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Baishakh celebrations regain fervour

DOWEL BISWAS

As dawn broke over Ramna Batamul yesterday, Chhayanaut's chorus of 200 performers lifted "Jago alok-logone" into the morning air, opening the celebration of Pehela Baishakh 1433.

The morning programme unfolded in deliberate rhythm -- with Tagore's devotional "E ki sugandha-hilloh bohilo" giving way to Nazrul's sharper invocation, "Arunkanti ke go yogi bhikhari", then

speaking, and assembling should never demand courage.

From Ramna, thousands then streamed toward Shahbagh. Streets closed to traffic became temporary markets of toys, windmills, and folk instruments. Families wandered slowly as children stopped at will.

The Baishakhi Shobhajatra steadily advanced under the slogan "Noboborsher Oikyatana: Gonotontre Punorutthan" -- a call from the procession for the revival of

In closing remarks, Chhayanaut President Sarwar Ali pointed to a climate where cultural expression remains vulnerable, recalling recent pressures on cultural spaces and the lingering memory of the 2001 Ramna Batamul bombing. His message was clear: in a society, singing, speaking, and assembling should never demand courage.

Lalon's strain of endurance, "Boro shonkote poriya doyal", and finally Dwijendralal's luminous "Aji gao mahageet."

Chhayanaut's repertoire moved between resistance, remembrance, and renewal, rehearsing cultural memory as much as celebration.

In closing remarks, Chhayanaut President Sarwar Ali pointed to a climate where cultural expression remains vulnerable, recalling recent pressures on cultural spaces and the lingering memory of the 2001 Ramna Batamul bombing. His message was clear: in a society, singing,

democratic values and practices.

A rooster figure led the procession, heralding the break of a new dawn, while a tiger, a lion, and a fox followed alongside a black elephant with red wings and a white dove of peace, visualising tension and balance.

Farmers carried tools of labour and indigenous groups joined in traditional dress. Children marked their faces with the numerals of the new year and spun paper pinwheels that caught brief winds. Under rain trees, groups of women in red and white saris formed rotating patterns, their movement tightening into a rhythm.

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US-Iran talks may resume in 2 days

Says Trump as progress reported on nuke issue in backchannel talks; IMF cuts global growth outlook

Ships exit Gulf from Iran despite blockade

Lebanon, Israel start direct talks in US

Oil retreats below \$100 per barrel

AGENCIES

Talks to end the Iran war could resume in Pakistan over the next two days, US President Donald Trump said yesterday, after the collapse of weekend negotiations prompted Washington to impose a blockade on Iranian ports.

Gulf, Pakistani and Iranian officials also said negotiating teams from the US and Iran could return to Pakistan later this week, though one senior Iranian source said no date had been set.

"You should stay there, really, because something could be happening over the next two days, and we're more inclined to go there," Trump was quoted as saying in an interview with the New York Post.

While the US blockade drew angry rhetoric from Tehran, signs that diplomatic engagement might continue helped calm oil markets, pushing benchmark prices below \$100 yesterday.

The highest-level talks between the two adversaries

SEE PAGE 2 COL 5



PHOTO: AFP

Smoke rises from the site of an Israeli airstrike that targeted the Al-Hosh area near the coastal Lebanese city of Tyre yesterday.

Eastern Refinery running on fumes

No crude oil arrived since Feb; shutdown likely in a week

MOHAMMAD SUMAN, Ctg

With usable crude stocks nearly exhausted amid import disruptions due to US-Israel war on Iran, the Eastern Refinery Ltd (ERL) has been kept running by drawing from "deadstock", residual crude settled at the bottom of storage tanks that can only be used in limited quantities in emergencies.

Production at the refinery, the lone state-owned oil refinery, has dropped sharply, raising concerns of a possible shutdown within a week unless fresh supplies arrive.

Bangladesh needs to import around 1,20,000 tonnes of crude oil monthly. Due to the ongoing conflict in the Middle East, no crude oil shipments arrived in February and March.

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13-year-old girl raped in Mirpur

STAR REPORT

A case has been filed over the rape of a 13-year-old girl by a neighbour in Dhaka's Mirpur.

The victim's mother filed the case against the alleged rapist, Raju Mia, 50, under the Women and Children Repression Prevention Act with the Mirpur Model Police Station yesterday.

According to the case statement, the victim's mother is a garment worker, and her father is an auto-rickshaw driver. Taking advantage of their absence during working hours, Raju, an auto-rickshaw driver and tenant in the same building, took the girl to a house in Mirpur's Ahmed Nagar area around 3:00pm on September 15, 2025, intimidated her and raped her. Later, the man raped her several times and threatened her not to disclose it, said the case statement.

The incident came to light recently when the teenager fell ill, and a medical test confirmed her pregnancy.

Mahmudunnabi, sub-inspector of Mirpur Model Police Station, said the girl was admitted to Dhaka Medical College Hospital yesterday as her condition deteriorated due to pregnancy.

Golam Azam, officer-in-charge (OC) of the police station, told The Daily Star that the accused, Raju Mia, is currently on the run and efforts are underway to arrest him.

Zelensky says US doesn't 'have time for Ukraine' now

AFP, Berlin

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky yesterday said that US peace negotiators "have no time for Ukraine" because of the war in Iran, in an interview on German television on Tuesday.

Zelensky told public broadcaster ZDF that Steve Witkoff and Jared Kushner, who have helped broker talks with Moscow on ending Russia's war on Ukraine, were "constantly in talks with Iran" at the moment.



'Ostad, bamey plastic, daine tesla': DECODING DHAKA'S BUS TALK



PHOTOS: PRABIR DAS

JANNATUL BUSHIRA

You must be reading the heading and thinking – since when did Bangladesh quietly enter the Tesla-importing business, and more importantly, what does any of that have to do with Dhaka traffic?

Fair question. Suspicious, even. But stay with me.

This is fun. Now, we all know "fun" and "Dhaka traffic" don't usually belong in the same sentence, so let me clarify right away: this is not the window-seat-on-a-double-decker kind of fun, where a timely breeze shows up and Bijoy Sarani somehow lets you pass in one go – let's not get carried away.

But it is the kind of fun that makes those long, unmoving stretches of traffic – where you've already questioned your timing, your choices, and occasionally, your entire existence – feel just a little less like punishment.

Because let's be honest, opting out isn't really an option. Unless you own a helicopter. In which case, congratulations – this piece is not for you.

For the rest of us, however – those firmly committed to the daily ritual of going nowhere slowly – bear with me. This might not clear the road ahead, but it could make the wait feel slightly less pointless, and just a little more tolerable.

So, here's the thing: if you sit long

enough in Dhaka traffic – and we all do – you start to realise it has a coded language. A very specific, high-speed, no-time-for-full-sentences kind of language, mostly spoken by bus helpers hanging off moving vehicles as if they are absolutely committed to defying gravity.

Take the classic: "Ostad, bamey plastic!" Now, if you are unfamiliar with Dhaka's dialect of survival, you might assume this is an environmental complaint. It is not. "Plastic" is not litter here. It is not waste management. It is a private car – smooth, shiny, air-conditioned, very much dentable, and therefore immediately categorised as something to watch out for.

In fact, once you start paying attention, you realise Dhaka traffic is less about lanes and more about materials. Electric rickshaws are now confidently referred to as "Teslas" – a piece of information that would deeply unsettle Elon Musk – while private cars remain firmly labelled as "plastic," for reasons that feel both insulting and strangely accurate.

Then comes the phrase that practically runs the city: "Borabor, shamne clear!"

Now, "borabor" deserves respect. It is doing the work of at least five sentences: keep moving, adjust if needed, squeeze a little more, become reckless, accept your fate.

And "shamne clear?" That one is pure fiction. Not a lie exactly, just a hopeful

interpretation of reality that the standstill has somehow been lifted.

Of course, what makes all of this even more interesting is that none of these helpers actually arrive in Dhaka speaking this language.

Bus helpers come from Noakhali, Barishal, Rangpur, Mymensingh and other parts of the country, each bringing their own dialect and tone. In any other setting, I am sure they would need subtitles to understand one another. And then Dhaka happens. The city trims everything down. Words get shorter. Sentences get sharper. Tone does most of the work.

There's no time for grammar when five vehicles are trying to occupy the same space.

So, what emerges is this shared, improvised language – efficient, direct, and just loud enough to cut through everything else.

And it works. Not perfectly, not peacefully, but just enough.

Even more fascinating is that bus helpers don't hold a monopoly on this system. Rickshaw-wala mamas have their own competing dialect, or code, or set of signals.

Even the humble rickshaw bell has syntax here: One tring means presence. Two trings mean warning.

A desperate, continuous tring tring tring means: "move! Or my Tesla is going to dent your plastic!"

BNP will implement July charter

FROM PAGE 1

On the first day of the Bangla New Year, Tarique called on everyone to support and cooperate in building a beautiful Bangladesh. He said the BNP-led government wants to build a safe Bangladesh where people can live safely and children can grow up, study, work, and prosper in comfort.

He said the government wants to make farmers self-reliant and economically secure. That is why they are giving Farmers' Card. "If we look at all the reviews, we will see that in Bangladesh, whenever the BNP got the chance to run the country, the BNP tried to stand beside the farmers. You trusted the BNP in the last election. This government will fully respect that trust," he added.

Tarique said the BNP and the government believe that

the well being of Bangladesh and its people depends entirely on the survival and prosperity of the farmers.

As soon as the programme was launched, Tk 2,500 was transferred to the bank accounts of 22,067 farmers across 11 upazilas. In Tangail alone, 1,453 farmers received the money.

The initiative aims to recognise farmers as professionals, boost their incomes, and ensure subsidies. The programme is to target 1.65 crore farmers in four years at a cost of Tk 681 crore.

The PM handed over Farmers' Card and saplings to 15 marginal farmers at the event.

Farmers' Card is one of the electoral pledges of the BNP. It has so far launched the Family Card, Sports Card, and canal excavation after assuming power.

Under the scheme, farmers will be entitled to 10 types of services, including fair-priced farm inputs and irrigation, easy farm loans, low-cost agricultural machinery, government subsidies and incentives, weather forecasts and market information on mobile phones, agricultural training, advice on controlling crop diseases and pests, crop insurance, and fair-priced sale of produce.

Using the card, farmers will also be able to buy fertiliser, seeds, fish feed, animal feed, and other farm inputs from dealers through point-of-sale machines.

Yesterday, Tarique warned farmers about prolonged use of deep tube-well as it depletes groundwater. He said the government will restore water levels through canal excavation and river dredging to prevent

national sufferings.

He also announced government support for farmers in agro-based regions, specifically the north, by promoting industries and boosting investment, processing, and exports for better prices and increased foreign revenue.

To secure fair prices and off-season availability, he proposed building cold storages and processing systems for Tangail's famous pineapples.

He said it is important to make women self-reliant, as they make up half of the population, and without their progress, the country cannot move forward.

He said that is why the government promised to introduce a Family Card for women heads of families, and the pilot project has already started.

Monir Hossain Chowdhury, joint secretary and spokesperson of the energy ministry, said, "Refined fuel from ERL has continued to be added to the system over the past two days, albeit at reduced capacity."

"Efforts are underway to keep the refinery operational by combining limited production with the use of deadstock which were stocked in ERL and SPM," he also said.

He also confirmed that Bangladesh is expected to receive a 1,00,000-tonne crude shipment on May 2, which will pass through the Strait of Hormuz on April 22.

"Most of our fuel demand is met through imported refined products. So even if crude stocks remain low, it is unlikely to create an immediate supply crisis," he added.

A dangerous turn in banking reform

FROM PAGE 1

Nassa Group's Md Nazrul Islam Mazumder. Between them, these men presided over years of related-party lending, regulatory evasion, and outright embezzlement. Public deposits were treated as private vaults. Millions of ordinary savers are still waiting to recover their money – and may wait years longer.

The original ordinance, passed in May 2025, barred these owners from any involvement. The interim government had been making genuine headway: restructuring boards, initiating mergers, signalling that the old order was finished. Confidence in the sector, badly battered under Sheikh Hasina's rule, had cautiously begun to return. Many savers were starting to trust the banks again. The new law puts that recovery at risk. Bangladesh Bank officials now warn, with some understatement, that if former owners return, taking the banks back a second time will not be easy.

Zahid Hussain, former lead economist at the World Bank's Dhaka office, puts it plainly. Allowing wrongdoers back in "reinforces a culture of impunity." It tells the financial sector that the consequences of looting are negotiable. It tells depositors that the state's promises are, too. After so many reforms, audits, and a formal merger process, he warns, reversing everything through a single legal adjustment raises serious doubts about whether institutional reform in Bangladesh can ever stick.

Birupaksha Paul, a professor of economics at the State University of New York in Cortland, goes further. The new act, he argues, is a "pernicious compromise" for the BNP government – one that will "further deteriorate the banking health of the economy mainly because of its implied moral hazards."

The concern is not just about these five banks. It is about what the law signals to every banker, every borrower, and every regulator in the country: that recklessness is a price, and it is negotiable. The government, Birupaksha warns, is "going against the grain of social and moral

expectations which wanted to see a new banking order."

The new law is not without guardrails, to be fair. Applicants must inject fresh capital, settle creditor claims, and submit to two years of close monitoring. Bangladesh Bank must conduct due diligence and seek government clearance before any transfer. On paper, the safeguards look reasonable. In practice, Bangladesh's banking regulators have not historically been known for their steeliness when facing well-connected businessmen. The same governance failures that produced this crisis are bound to come back.

There is a pattern worth noting. The Awami League once passed a power purchase law ostensibly designed to attract private investment and fix an energy shortage. It ended up benefiting a narrow group of well-connected businessmen at the public's expense. The law was widely seen as a template for how policy in Bangladesh gets shaped – not around national interest, but around the interests of those with access. The Bank Resolution Act,

passed quietly on a Friday, fits the same mould.

Which raises the uncomfortable question that the amendment's critics are now asking openly: is the BNP government simply caving to pressure from powerful business groups? Is the word "oligarch" – once used almost exclusively to describe the Hasina era – making an unwelcome return? Bangladesh is not the first country to discover that banking reform is politically uncomfortable. Oligarchs, by definition, have resources and connections. They push back. Governments, facing other pressures, find reasons to accommodate them. The technical language of resolution frameworks provides convenient cover.

What is harder to explain away is the timing and the optics. A government serious about reform does not sell banks back to the people who broke them. It does not do so while depositors wait in line. The government insists it is cleaning up the mess left by the Awami League. On the evidence of the new law, it is at least partly recycling it.

Eastern Refinery running

FROM PAGE 1

Officials said there is little likelihood of any shipment arriving in April as well.

Located in Patenga of Chattogram, ERL operates under Bangladesh Petroleum Corporation (BPC) and primarily processes Saudi Arabia's Arabian Light and the UAE's Murban crude to produce 12 types of products including diesel, petrol, jet fuel and octane.

However, with scheduled shipments from these sources being delayed, a supply bottleneck has been created, forcing a gradual scale-down in ERL's operations.

According to BPC data, ERL has a storage capacity of around 2,25,000 tonnes.

In an effort to sustain output, authorities have also tapped crude from Single Point Mooring (SPM) facilities, a fast, safe and low-cost way system to transfer large volumes of fuel

directly from ships through pipelines. However, it is still not fully operational due to operational complexities, including operator selection.

In mid-2024, a limited amount of oil was kept there on a trial basis, which is now being used amid supply shortages.

"The refinery has not yet ceased operations entirely, but output has been reduced significantly. We still have around 25,000 tonnes of stock, which can support operations for more than a week," said BPC General Manager Muhammad Morshed Hossain Azad.

He added that three out of ERL's five processing units remain operational, and have collectively added around 100-120 tonnes of petrol and diesel daily to BPC's storage tanks over the past two days.

Seeking to reassure markets, Morshed said two vessels carrying 60,000

tonnes of diesel were expected to berth at the jetty last night, while another two shipments of similar volume are scheduled to arrive on April 18.

"There is no reason to panic over supply pressure," he added.

According to BPC import data, about 95 percent of Bangladesh's annual fuel demand of around 7 million tonnes is import dependent. About 5.2 million tonnes are brought in as refined fuels such as diesel, furnace oil, octane, and jet fuel, while only about 1.5 million tonnes are imported as crude for refining at ERL.

Officials said ERL typically processes around 4,500 tonnes of crude daily, but output has been scaled down amid the ongoing shortage. At one point, usable stocks fell below 2,000 tonnes, forcing authorities to limit operations.

Baishakh celebrations regain fervour

FROM PAGE 1

The procession moved under visible security arrangements, with police accompanying the route through key Dhaka University points: Shahbagh, TSC, Raju Sculpture, and Bangla Academy before returning to its starting point.

A 27-year-old attendee reflected, "May we have a good year ahead. The tradition of Mongol Shobhajatra is what we carry forward, and I want to continue celebrating it in that spirit."

First-year students dancing in the procession said it was their first time joining. One of them remarked: "Call it Mongol Shobhajatra or Baishakhi, the joy remains the same. The spirit matters most. This is our celebration, and we will continue it our way."

Afsana, an ex-Dhaka University student and now a mother attending with her daughters in matching red saris, added: "Mongol Shobhajatra is not just a symbolic procession. It reminds us every year of who we are and where we came from – our heritage and national identity. My hope is that we move forward as a nation with that spirit of Mongol."

From the moving crowd, Annaya of Jatrabari observed, "You can see a national picture here. We are not thinking of religion or caste. We are marching as Bangladeshis, and that is what I am most proud of."

Watching from afar, Ilham Faruki, a student of DU, said, "It is stunning to see these large artworks move through such an enthusiastic crowd. Extremists have always tried to disrupt this Shobhajatra, but it feels important that it was held peacefully this year with such a turnout."

Another Dhaka University student, Mostakim Ahmed Rahul, noted, "Even as there is debate over whether it

should be called Mongol, Anondo, or Baishakhi, this celebration shows how deeply the people own it."

Elsewhere in Dhaka, Pahela Baishakh unfolded through various programmes.

At Rabindra Sarobar, the "Hajar Konthey Borshoboron" celebration brought together mass renditions of Rabindra Sangeet. The programme opened with "Otho Otho Re" and moved toward "Esho Hey Baishakh" in continuous choral performance.

At Hasan Manzil, the Dhaka South City Corporation staged a civic-historical programme of music and dance by city-affiliated cultural groups. The architecture itself became part of the staging, tying present performance to older urban memory.

Alongside organised events, roadside economies thrived. Closed stretches around Shahbagh, Katobon, and TSC became temporary markets.

In older commercial districts such as Banglabazar, Shankharibazar, and Tantibazar, the Halkhata tradition showed further decline. Traders spoke of a shift from physical ledgers to digital accounting systems and mobile transactions.

Some traders still maintained Halkhata in symbolic form, treating it as heritage rather than necessity. The shift remained gradual, shaped by changing financial systems and consumer behaviour.

Taken together, Pahela Baishakh 1433 across Dhaka presented a persistent cultural continuity: a sense of being Bangali as shared history rather than a fixed definition. Across songs, processions, markets, and crowds, identity appeared less as a declaration than as a repetition carried forward – reshaped each year, but not broken.

US-Iran talks may resume in 2 days

FROM PAGE 1

since the 1979 Islamic Revolution ended in Islamabad without a breakthrough, raising doubts over the survival of a two-week ceasefire that still has a week to run.

Since the United States and Israel began the war on February 28, Iran effectively shut the Strait of Hormuz to nearly all vessels except its own, saying passage would be permitted only under Iranian control and subject to a fee. Nearly a fifth of global oil and gas supplies previously flowed through the narrow waterway, making the

widespread.

In a countermeasure, the US military said it began blocking shipping traffic in and out of Iran's ports on Monday. Tehran has threatened to hit naval ships going through the strait and to retaliate against its Gulf neighbours' ports.

US Central Command said the blockade of Iranian ports involved more than 10,000 US military personnel, more than a dozen warships and dozens of aircraft.

"During the first 24 hours, no ships made it past the US blockade and 6 merchant vessels complied

with direction from US forces to turn around to re-enter an Iranian port on the Gulf of Oman," CENTCOM said in a statement posted on X.

Shipping data showed the blockade had made little difference to Strait of Hormuz traffic yesterday, with at least eight ships crossing the waterway.

The latest standoff has further clouded the outlook for global energy security and the supply of goods that rely on petroleum.

On Tuesday, the International Monetary Fund cut its growth outlook and said the global economy

would teeter on the brink of recession if the conflict worsens and oil stays above \$100 per barrel into 2027.

The International Energy Agency slashed its forecasts for global oil supply and demand growth, saying both are now expected to fall from 2025 levels.

The US' Nato allies including Britain and France said they would not be drawn into the conflict by taking part in the blockade, although they have offered to help safeguard the strait by drawing together a defensive multilateral mission to assist when an agreement is in place.



ESO HEY BAISHAKH

With the rising of the sun, Chhayanaut welcomed the Bangla New Year with songs at Ramna Batamul yesterday, setting the tone for the nationwide celebration of Pahaia Baishakh. Cultural programmes and colourful processions across Dhaka and other districts upheld Bangalee culture and heritage. Large crowds gathered under trees to enjoy music and recitations by artistes in traditional attire while elsewhere dancers in red and white performed on open-air stages before audiences. The festive spirit spread to the streets as vibrant processions featuring giant handcrafted motifs of birds, animals, and masks marched roads, symbolising peace and cultural pride. People of all ages joined in colourful outfits, turning the celebrations into a vivid display of tradition and unity.

PHOTO: PALASH KHAN, MEHEDI HASAN, RAJIB RAIHAN, HABIBUR RAHMAN, TITU DAS, AZAHAR UDDIN



The fading pages of Halkhata

FROM PAGE 4
a new red-cloth-bound ledger book — was once a defining feature of Bangla New Year to traders. However, it has largely lost its grandeur in Chattogram city steadily over the years, except for a few areas — such as Terribazar, Anderkill, Boxirhat, and the old wholesale markets of Chaktai-Khatunganj — where the tradition still flickers on.

With the rapid rise of digital technology, the nature of business has transformed. Paper ledgers have largely given way to computers, software and spreadsheets. Yet, Halkhata has not entirely disappeared; it survives in the practices of a handful of old businesses and craftsmen and in the collective nostalgia of the trading community.

On Monday, a day before the festival, workers were seen in some shops binding ledgers and carefully pasting red fabric onto the covers with glue to complete the traditional look.

"Halkhata was once the backbone of our trade. There used to be over a hundred ledger makers in this area. Now, only around 10 remain," Akash said.

"Large businesses once maintained year-long accounts in thick, red cloth-bound ledgers," Akash says. "Now most have shifted to digital systems. Still, some jewellers, grocers and wholesalers continue to use Halkhata for its enduring reliability, as the entries in a paper ledger cannot be altered easily; it remains a trusted record," he added.

At SB Binding House, manager Alauddin said Halkhata ledger books now sell for Tk 80-700, depending on size and quality. "Red remains the preferred colour, as many consider it a symbol of good fortune," he added.

His family has been in the ledger-book making business for four generations. "We produce books

ranging from 100 to 1,200 pages. Our products are in demand not just in Chattogram but also in Cox's Bazar, Bandarban, Rangamati, Khagrachhari, Feni, Cumilla and Sylhet," he also said.

The origin of Halkhata can be traced back to the Mughal era, when Emperor Jalal-ud-din Muhammad Akbar introduced the modern Bangla New Year in 1584 AD, merging the Islamic lunar calendar with the traditional solar-based Bengali calendar, to streamline tax collection with the agricultural cycle.

The term "Hal" is derived from Persian, meaning "new", reflecting the practice of closing old accounts and opening a fresh ledger at the start of the new year.

Abdur Razzak, owner of Razzak Traders in Khatunganj, recalled another fading aspect of the tradition. "There used to be specialised accountants known as 'Sarkar', who maintained large account books throughout the year. The designation 'Sarkar', like many such terms we used to hear earlier, have now almost disappeared," he said.

"Halkhata was once a grand affair. Preparations would begin days in advance. Invitation letters were sent to debtors, traders travelled from distant places, and around 80 percent of transactions were on credit. That made the occasion truly significant," he added.

While Halkhata festivities were observed across the country yesterday, some business owners will celebrate the occasion today, following the traditional calendar (panjika).

Since the 1980s and 1990s onwards, the tradition began to wane, following the expansion of banking services, decline in credit-based trade, and a growing trust deficit among traders, all of which have contributed to the shift. The recent rise of mobile financial transactions

further contributed to the decline. Moreover, the Bangla calendar is hardly being used to maintain business records anymore, as many businesses follow the Gregorian calendar and maintain records digitally, said traders.

"Halkhata is not merely a ledger. It is a symbol of relationships. It once fostered trust, goodwill and a sense of community between buyers and sellers. We used to celebrate it at our shop," said Jayatu Chowdhury, owner of Promoda Tea House.

"But times have changed. Credit sales have declined, and trust has eroded. Many traders suffered losses after debtors disappeared without paying. We do not arrange Halkhata events anymore," he added.

Although the tradition of Halkhata may have faded, yet, it still endures, even if symbolically, and certainly in the memories of those who once celebrated it wholeheartedly.

IMF, WB may give \$2b

FROM PAGE 4
support for developing and low-income countries, while the World Bank has pledged up to \$25 billion.

Bangladesh is currently under a \$5.5 billion IMF loan programme, with \$1.3 billion due in two instalments by June.

The World Bank is also expected to provide \$400 million in budget support.

The minister said the World Bank was ready to provide "all-out support", including policy backing and financing.

"We assumed office with existing economic deficits, and the war has created a major shortfall. Various measures have been discussed to address these issues. The World Bank will remain active in providing solutions in both policy and financing," he said.

Harvey Weinstein rape retrial begins in New York

AFP, New York

The retrial of disgraced movie mogul Harvey Weinstein on a rape charge on which a jury was previously deadlocked started yesterday, although he will remain imprisoned for other offenses regardless of the verdict.

Weinstein is accused of the third-degree rape of Jessica Mann, who starred in the 2015 romantic comedy

"This Isn't Funny."

The judge declared a mistrial last June after the jury foreperson refused to return to deliberate the case amid a jury-room feud.

Weinstein is being retried on that count in the Manhattan court, and the process of jury selection began Tuesday after a number of rulings by judge Curtis Farber, who said the defense had sought to delay the trial.

Italy pauses defence deal

FROM PAGE 4
education and training of military personnel, research and development and information technology, among others.

Tensions between the two countries have risen over the past week after the Italian government accused Israeli forces of firing warning shots at a convoy of Italian UN peacekeepers in Lebanon.

Italy summoned Israel's ambassador in protest over the incident that damaged at least one vehicle but

caused no injuries.

On Monday, Israel summoned Italy's ambassador following comments by Italian Foreign Minister Antonio Tajani that condemned "unacceptable attacks" on Lebanese civilians by Israeli forces.

Tajani, who is deputy prime minister, was in Beirut Monday for talks with Lebanese President Joseph Aoun and Foreign Minister Youssef Raggi.

He later wrote on X that he was there to "convey Italy's solidarity following Israel's unacceptable attacks against the civilian population".

Fuel perk for officials' pvt cars spared cuts

FROM PAGE 4
When asked why fuel allowance for cars purchased with interest-free loans was excluded from the austerity measures, a senior official from the Finance Division said, "The government has not decided to cut costs in this sector, so it was not included."

In response to further questioning, he added, "Instructions have been issued exactly as the government decided. It is the government that determines what is appropriate or inappropriate; I cannot comment on that."

On April 9, in a letter sent to the Prime Minister's Office, the Cabinet Division announced a 30 percent reduction in fuel allocations for the PM,

ministers, and state ministers. The letter stated that until further notice, cabinet members will receive 12.6 litres of fuel daily, down from the previous 18 litres.

Meanwhile, in a separate office memo, the Cabinet Division notified the secretaries to all ministries and divisions regarding the government's austerity measures, including cost-cutting in sectors such as training, foreign travel, and meetings or seminars.

According to the directives, fuel consumption for all government vehicles will be reduced by 30 percent on a monthly basis, while interest-free loans for government officials to buy cars will remain suspended.

The purchase of government cars,

UNHCR, IOM warn

FROM PAGE 4
prospects for safe return.

At the same time, shrinking humanitarian assistance, harsh camp conditions and limited access to education and livelihoods are pushing refugees to take dangerous routes by sea.

False promises of better wages abroad and misinformation spread by smuggling networks are also luring both Rohingya refugees and Bangladeshi nationals into taking major risks, they said.

Such conditions, the agencies warned, are enabling smugglers and traffickers to exploit vulnerable people and put their lives in grave danger.

Calling for urgent international support, UNHCR and IOM urged the global community to strengthen solidarity and sustain funding for lifesaving assistance for Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh, alongside support for host communities.

As Bangladesh marks the new year, they said the latest tragedy highlights the need to address the root causes of displacement in Myanmar and create conditions for the voluntary, safe and dignified return of Rohingya refugees.

Without collective action, more lives will be lost at sea and along other deadly migration routes, the statement added.

boats, aircraft, and computers must remain completely suspended.

Also, all government-funded foreign trainings will remain suspended, while internal training costs must be reduced by 50 percent. For meetings and seminars, entertainment expenses must be cut by 50 percent, and overall costs by 20 percent.

Other steps include: 30 percent reduction to travel expenses, and to use of fuel, electricity, and gas in government offices; 20 percent reduction to beautification costs for residential buildings and 50 percent for non-residential buildings; and complete suspension of expenses for land acquisition.



The fading pages of Halkhata

Once the heartbeat of trade in Ctg, the tradition now survives in fragments

MOHAMMAD SUMAN, Chattogram

The bustling trading hub of Chaktai-Khatunganj in Chattogram — one of the country's oldest and largest wholesale markets — has been slashed to come alive a week before Pahela Baishakh to observe Halkhata, a thousand-year-old tradition.

Invitation cards used to be sent to traders, shops were cleaned and decorated, and accounts from the previous year would be settled. On the morning of the Bangla New Year, businesses welcomed customers with sweets, small gifts and warm greetings before opening fresh accounts in the traditional red cloth-bound ledgers.

The rhythmic beat of drums echoed through the marketplace, turning commerce into celebration.

Now, such scenes exist mostly in memory.

"It feels almost imaginary now," says Akash Ghosh, a third-generation Halkhata trader at New Khata Ghar in Khatunganj. "But even back in the 1990s, this was exactly how Pahela Baishakh used to be."

Halkhata — the ceremonial opening of

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A trader arranges stacks of red cloth-bound ledger books, or Halkhata, at a shop in Chattogram's Khatunganj on Pahela Baishakh. The traditional Halkhata now survives in limited pockets as digital record-keeping replaces paper accounts. PHOTO: MOHAMMAD SUMON

ME WAR FALLOUT

IMF, WB may give \$2b by June in extra support

STAR REPORT

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank are likely to provide additional financial assistance to Bangladesh, beyond regular budget support, to help deal with the fallout of the US-Israel war on Iran.

Bangladesh could receive up to \$2 billion in emergency assistance by June, sources in an 11-member delegation led by Finance Minister Amir Khosru Mahmud Chowdhury said. The delegation is attending the IMF-World Bank Spring Meetings in Washington.

On Monday, Khosru held meetings with IMF Executive Director Ujjit Patel and World Bank Vice President for South Asia John Jutt on the sidelines.

Speaking to journalists, the minister hinted at the possibility of enhanced support under the IMF's existing programme. "The release of instalments is one matter, but under the programme there could be something even better," he said.

He expressed optimism that Bangladesh would secure additional funding by June and in the next budget. "The discussions have been successful overall. I believe we will largely succeed in addressing the deficit," he added.

Amid disruption caused by the US-Israel war on Iran, the IMF has announced up to \$50 billion in emergency

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Fuel perk for officials' pvt cars spared cuts

BAHARAM KHAN

While the fuel allocation for all government vehicles — including those used by the prime minister and cabinet members — has been slashed by 30 percent amid the ongoing energy crisis, fuel for the private cars of senior officials remains exempt from these cuts.

As such, the government treasury continues to cover the full cost of fuel and maintenance for these private vehicles.

Following the economic pressures triggered by the US-Israel war on Iran, the cabinet on April 2 decided on a policy of austerity. The Finance Division subsequently urged cost-cutting across various sectors. Following this, the Cabinet Division issued a directive on April 9, instructing all ministries to implement savings in eight specific areas.

However, the decision to exclude the fuel allowance for senior officials' personal cars from this list has raised serious questions regarding the fairness and effectiveness of the government's austerity measures.

Officers holding the rank of deputy secretary and above in the administration, armed forces, and judiciary are eligible for interest-free car loans. Additionally, these officers receive Tk 50,000 monthly for fuel and maintenance costs.

According to sources from the Ministry of Public Administration, approximately 11,000 officers currently enjoy this facility.

When approached for comment, at least three officials from the Cabinet Division failed to provide a clear explanation for the exclusion of this sector from the recent austerity drive.

One official, speaking on the condition of anonymity, said, "The fuel allowance for cars purchased under interest-free loans is not included in the current austerity measures. However, the purchase of new cars under this facility will be temporarily suspended."

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7 killed, 6 hurt as truck flips in Cumilla

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Cumilla

Seven passengers were killed and six others injured after a rice-laden truck lost control and overturned yesterday on the Dhaka-Chattogram highway in Daudkandi.

The accident occurred at 3:10am in Hasanpur under Daudkandi Police Station, said Daudkandi Highway Police Station Officer-in-Charge Iqbal Bahar Majumdar.

The victims, mostly agricultural labourers, were heading to Cumilla for work.

The deceased are Mohammad Afzal Hossain, 35, Sohrab Hossain, 40, Salek, 45, Suman, 21, Abu Hossain, Abdur Rashid, 55, and Bishu, 35. They are all from Dinajpur.

Quoting witnesses, police said the truck, travelling towards Chattogram, lost control and veered off the road. Thirteen passengers were riding on top of the vehicle and were trapped underneath when it overturned. Seven died on the spot, while six were injured.

The victims, mostly agricultural labourers, were heading to Cumilla for work. The injured alleged that the truck's helper was driving the vehicle at the time of the crash.

Fire Service and police rescued the injured and took them to a local hospital. They also recovered the bodies.

The OC said the damaged vehicle had been removed and traffic on the highway had resumed.

ANNAPURNA BASE CAMP

A trek beyond their years

NILIMA JAHAN

One is five years old, the other is seven. At an age where most milestones are measured in classrooms, Abyaz Adrito Bhuyan and Anabia Audree Hossain were measuring theirs in Himalayan altitudes.

On April 4, 2026, the young siblings stood at the Annapurna Base Camp, perched 4,130 metres above sea level.

The moment marked the culmination of a demanding nine-day trek, an achievement made notable by the fact that it was completed entirely on foot.

Accompanied by their parents, Shaila Amin Bhuyan and Fahad Hossain, the

knowing where they come from while feeling confident about where they can go."

From the outset, the family set one simple rule: the children would walk every step themselves.

Over nine days, the young trekkers maintained a steady rhythm, hiking between four and seven hours each day.

By the third day, their determination had already turned heads, earning them something of a "celebrity" status among fellow trekkers and local guides.

This achievement, however, was no accident. While Anabia and Abyaz viewed the journey as 'a big mountain walk with family,' their parents had overseen two

emotional," Shaila recalled. "But after a short break, with encouragement and their own determination, they pushed through that final stretch."

At the summit, the rewards were both simple and profound.

"My favourite part was seeing the big snowy mountains," said Anabia, 7. "I felt super proud of myself when people said 'good job' and gave me high-fives."

Abyaz, 5, had his own takeaway, delivered with a hint of sibling rivalry: "I liked that I was faster than my sister."

To ensure safer acclimatisation, the family chose a longer route via Poon Hill, beginning their journey from Ulleri on 27



siblings had traversed one of the world's most iconic and physically challenging high-altitude treks.

For the family, originally from Bangladesh and now based in Portland, Oregon, the journey was about far more than reaching a destination. It was, as Shaila described, "coming full circle."

"Growing up in Bangladesh, the Himalayas always felt both close and distant," she said.

"They were present in our stories, geography, and imagination, yet never truly within reach."

"We wanted our kids to grow up

years of gradual preparation.

The siblings had previously completed a two-day backpacking trip in Norway and tackled multiple day hikes in the Italian Dolomites.

To prepare for the thin Himalayan air, their parents introduced them to a 13,000-foot altitude simulation environment ahead of the expedition.

The most difficult moment came just one kilometre before reaching base camp. After setting out hours before sunrise in sub-zero temperatures, both children hit a wall.

"They were exhausted, cold, and

March and passing through Ghorepani, Tadapani, and Machapuchare Base Camp before reaching their final destination.

Logistics were handled by the Nepal Hiking Team, while the parents remained closely attentive to hydration, rest, and overall health throughout the climb.

Reflecting on the journey during their return to Kathmandu, Shaila said the experience reinforced a powerful lesson.

"Children are capable of far more than we often assume when given the right support and environment," she said. "As a family, we didn't just complete a trek, we grew stronger together with every step."



UNHCR, IOM warn of risks as Rohingyas take sea routes

STAR REPORT

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and International Organization for Migration (IOM) said they were deeply saddened by the boat capsizing in the Andaman Sea, describing it as a stark sign of the dangers facing Rohingya refugees and other vulnerable people who resort to risky sea journeys in search of safety and opportunity.

At least 250 people, including Rohingya refugees and Bangladeshi nationals, have gone missing after the trawler capsized while heading to Malaysia from Teknaf, according to a joint statement issued yesterday by the two UN agencies.

The vessel, which left southern Bangladesh, reportedly sank due to heavy winds, rough seas and overcrowding, the statement said.

The agencies said the incident underscores the consequences of prolonged displacement and the lack of durable solutions to the Rohingya crisis.

They noted that ongoing violence in Myanmar's Rakhine State has dimmed

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Italy pauses defence deal with Israel

AFP, Rome

Italy has suspended its defence agreement with Israel, which involves the exchange of military equipment and technology research, Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni and diplomatic sources said yesterday.

"In view of the current situation, the government has decided to suspend the automatic renewal of the defence agreement with Israel," Meloni said on the sidelines of an event in Verona, according to Italian news agencies ANSA and AGI.

An Italian diplomatic source confirmed to AFP that the agreement had been suspended, saying: "It would have been politically difficult to keep it going."

Approved by Israel in 2006, the agreement is reviewed every five years.

It calls for cooperation across defence industries,

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