



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 Pehala 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

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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

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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

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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

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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

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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.