



People from all walks of life joined the festivities as Pahela Baishakh returned with renewed zeal on April 14 this year -- from vibrant Baishakhi Shobhajatra processions and Chhayanaut's traditional performances at Ramna Batamul to little moments of joy reflected in painted faces and flower crowns. Across the capital, the Bangla New Year was welcomed with colour, music, and a collective sense of hope, marking a cultural reset rooted in resilience, unity, and new beginnings.

PHOTOS: STAR



PM to meet all upazila health officers

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Prime Minister Tarique Rahman will, for the first time, meet upazila health and family planning officers from across Bangladesh to discuss ways to improve overall healthcare services at the field level, officials said.

The meeting is scheduled for 11:00am on Saturday at Osmani Memorial Auditorium in Dhaka.

Officials at the health ministry said the prime minister is expected to issue directives to improve services. This would be the first time a PM holds such a meeting with UHFPOs, they added.

In its election manifesto, BNP outlined 22 health-related commitments, including raising health expenditure to five percent of GDP, introducing universal e-health cards, ensuring free and quality primary healthcare, and recruiting 100,000 health workers.

In February, the government formed a 13-member cell, led by Health Minister Sardar Md Sakhawat Husain, to implement the manifesto.

UHFPOs lead health services at the upazila and sub-district levels and are expected to play a key role in implementing the commitments.

"The prime minister will listen to grassroots-level officials and discuss the challenges and prospects of field-level health services," Health Secretary Quamruzzaman Chowdhury told The Daily Star.

"We also expect that he will give directives to improve overall services," he said.

He added that the initiative reflects a shift from a top-down approach, with the government seeking input from frontline officials to improve service.

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Govt needs \$2.61b extra until June

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The government is also in talks with other multilateral donor agencies to plug the additional financing gap. The Daily Star has learned from finance ministry officials involved with the proceedings.

Yesterday, at a virtual meeting of the Asia Zero Emission Community, a Japanese-led framework designed to promote decarbonisation, energy security, and economic growth across Asia, Prime Minister Tarique Rahman sought \$2 billion in emergency funds from development partners to manage the inflated fuel import bills, reports BSS.

In March, the diesel price surged by 250 percent, while the LNG price doubled and the fertiliser price rose by 50 percent.

The foreign exchange pressures due to higher import costs and an expanded subsidy burden could persist until June, according to the ministry's impact analysis.

The government has so far held off on passing the higher costs on to consumers, though it is considering price adjustments if additional external assistance is not assured.

The impact report estimates that Bangladesh will require an additional Tk 38,542 crore (about \$3.2 billion) in subsidies between March and June to cover energy and fertiliser imports.

Of this, around Tk 18,000 crore would be needed for fuel alone, an extraordinary requirement not seen in previous years. Gas subsidies are estimated at Tk 13,930 crore, electricity at Tk 4,612 crore, and fertiliser at Tk 2,000 crore.

As a result, the total subsidy bill for this fiscal year, originally budgeted around Tk 59,000 crore, is now projected to balloon to Tk 97,542 crore, the report said.

The broader economic picture has also deteriorated: the monthly trade deficit widened between January and February, inflation edged up in March, and the taka remained under strain in early April.

"Taken together, these developments reduce the room to absorb the shock through reserves without risking a disorderly adjustment," the report said.

As of April 9, gross foreign exchange reserves stood at \$29.95 billion, according to data from the

World Bank.

On Tuesday, WB President Ajay Banga said the institution could mobilise \$80-\$100 billion over the next 15 months for countries hit hard by the war, eclipsing the \$70 billion provided during the Covid pandemic, Reuters reported.

This would include \$20-\$25 billion in the coming months through a crisis response window that allows countries to withdraw up to 10 percent of funds earlier than planned from previously approved programmes, with another \$30-\$40 billion from repurposed existing programmes in about six months, he said.

The IMF has separately announced up to \$50 billion in emergency support for developing and low-income countries, while the Asian Development Bank has unveiled a special package for its developing member countries across Asia and the Pacific to help them cope with immediate economic pressures from the war.

Bangladesh has already begun informal discussions with the development partners about securing its share of the support.

Advisory panel outlines overhaul of governance

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The committee yesterday discussed a draft of the sustainable development strategy, which includes a vision for key sectors such as governance, economic recovery, energy sustainability, and rural development, at its first meeting at the National Economic Council.

Speaking at a press briefing afterwards, Rashed Al Mahmud Titumir, finance and planning adviser to the prime minister, said the government is moving towards a "welfare state".

He said the government is set to formulate a new five-year strategic plan focused on "democratising the economy" to ensure every citizen's participation in national growth.

Titumir called for a paradigm shift in national economic planning, criticising past strategies as "imaginary" narratives that failed to align with reality.

State Minister for Planning Zonayed Saki was also present at the meeting.

A copy of the draft outline obtained by The Daily Star shows the committee's governance plan includes implementing BNP's 31-point reform agenda and the July National Charter.

It deliberates on the formation of an election-time neutral caretaker government and the introduction of a 100-member upper chamber (senate), alongside term limits for the prime minister capped at two terms, the creation of a vice-president post, and measures to ensure a balance of power between the president and the prime minister.

The plan also recommends ensuring restorative justice through the formation of a "Truth and Healing Commission" and building a service-oriented police force under judicial oversight.

The committee called for reforms to the existing justice system, including the establishment of a judicial commission.

To enhance transparency,

it suggested open tender, real-time audits, asset declarations, a strong Right to Information Law, an independent anti-corruption commission, and a ban on secret contracts in power and energy procurement.

The committee also outlined a phased economic roadmap, prioritising short-term stabilisation, restructuring and long-term growth.

It emphasised reforms to improve the business climate, strengthen financial governance, attract foreign investment, and expand support for small and medium enterprises.

The strategy identifies key growth sectors such as ICT, renewable energy, the blue economy, and the creative industries, alongside efforts to diversify exports and boost employment.

In the long run, the committee envisions a significant expansion of the economy, driven by increased investment, improved infrastructure, and greater private sector participation.

Dr Monzur Hossain, member secretary of the General Economics Division, said the outline will be discussed at the National Economic Council, presided over by the prime minister.

Following that, the recommendations adopted will be placed before parliament, tentatively during the national budget session in June.

The committee members are Dr SM Abdul Awal, chief coordinator (SDG) at the Prime Minister's Office; Dr Mahbub Ullah, economist and former professor at the University of Dhaka; Dr Hossain Zillur Rahman, executive chairman of PPRC; Dr Debapriya Bhattacharya, distinguished fellow at the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD); Professor Mustafizur Rahman, also a distinguished fellow at CPD; Dr KAS Murshid, former director

general of the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS); Dr Zaidi Sattar, chairman of the Policy Research Institute; Dr AK Enamul Haque, director general of BIDS; Dr Abdur Razzaque, chairman of Research and Policy Integration for Development; and Dr Selim Raihan, executive director of SANEM.

Other members include Dr Rushidan Islam Rahman, former research director at BIDS; Dr Fahmida Khatun, executive director of CPD; Rasheda K Choudhury, executive director of the Campaign for Popular Education; Dr Tahmeed Ahmed, executive director of icddr; Professor Dr Akhtar Hossain, chief economist at Bangladesh Bank; Dr Zahid Hussain, former lead economist at the World Bank (Dhaka Office); Dr Barkat-e-Khuda, former professor of economics at the University of Dhaka; Dr Zakir Ahmed Khan, chairman of PKSF; Dr Mohammad Abdul Majid, chairman of the Social Development Foundation (SDF); and Dr Mirza M Hassan, head of the governance and politics cluster at BIGD.

Also included are Dr ATM Nurul Amin, emeritus professor at AIT; Professor Dr SM Nurul Alam, former professor of anthropology at Jahangirnagar University; Dr Bazlul Haque Khondker, chairman of SANEM; Professor Dr MA Taslim of the University of Dhaka; Professor Mushtaq Khan, of the University of London; Dr Mohammad Zahid Hossain, chairman of Bangladesh Krishi Bank; Dr Abdul Hannan Chowdhury, vice chancellor of North South University; Professor Ismail Hossain of North South University; Professor MA Baqui Khalily of the University of Asia Pacific; Syed Nasim Manzoor, president of the Leathergoods and Footwear Manufacturers and Exporters Association of Bangladesh; as well as the heads of BGMEA, FBCCI, and BASIS.

Fuel for April, May secured

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According to the Energy Division, national fuel stock currently stands at 1,01,385 tonnes of diesel, 31,821 tonnes of octane, 18,211 tonnes of petrol, 77,546 tonnes of furnace oil, and 18,223 tonnes of jet fuel.

Bangladesh Petroleum Corporation (BPC) officials said diesel stocks can meet demand for around eight-nine days.

Yesterday, two vessels with 60,000 tonnes of diesel reached the Chattogram port's outer anchorage, and two more vessels carrying the same amount would arrive by April 18, they said.

Octane stock is sufficient for about 27 days, while a 30,000-tonne shipment is expected to arrive by April 18, according to BPC data.

Petrol supply, largely dependent on domestic condensate production, can meet roughly 12-13 days' demand.

Four private condensate fractionation plants continue to supply petrol regularly, officials said.

They said jet fuel stock is sufficient for about 12 days and furnace oil for at least 32 days.

Officials said demand patterns have shifted.

Monir said, "The number of vehicles has not increased since February 28. The supply we provided before that date is the same as what we are providing now."

He added that district administrations, depot in-charge, and distribution companies are coordinating. "We have instructed them not to supply even a single litre less than before to any fuel station."

For example, he said Trust Filling Station near Bijoy Sarani, which has the longest queues, typically requires

50,000-54,000 litres of octane, but over 80,000 litres are being supplied in a single day. "This shows that supply has increased, but the demand has surged abnormally due to panic."

The queue at the filling station, at Bijoy Sarani intersection, snaked its way to Mohakhali Bus Terminal yesterday afternoon, this correspondent saw.

Spokesperson Monir linked part of the fuel-buying behaviour to psychological pressure stemming from the US-Israel war on Iran.

Meanwhile, authorities have intensified drives against hoarding. Between March 3 and April 14, government agencies recovered around 5,42,000 litres of fuel and filed 3,510 cases.

Hoarders were fined Tk 1.56 crore, while 45 individuals were jailed. Of the recovered fuel, diesel accounted for 3,66,000 litres, octane 39,776 litres, petrol 87,959 litres, and furnace oil 48,500 litres, officials said.

The country's sole refinery, Eastern Refinery Ltd (ERL), is operating on a limited scale using "deadstock" as crude oil imports remain disrupted.

A shipment of crude oil is expected to depart from Yanbu port on the Red Sea in Saudi Arabia on April 20 and may reach Chattogram by May 2.

The spokesperson said, "The ERL contributes only one-fifth of the supply, which is minor. Currently, two out of four units are in operation using deadstock. In the interim, we are carrying out regular maintenance on the remaining units."

At present, around 30,000-35,000 tonnes of residual stock are being used to keep ERL running.

In fiscal year 2024-25, ERL supplied

about 15.44 percent of diesel demand and 11.92 percent of petrol demand, while octane supply came entirely from imports, the Ministry of Power, Energy, and Mineral Resources said in a statement.

The ministry said crude imports were disrupted after the Strait of Hormuz "closed" on February 28, preventing scheduled imports of 3,00,000 tonnes for March and April. "To manage the situation, the government has approved imports of additional refined fuel, which is being ramped up to offset refinery shortfalls."

Replying to a query from a reporter, Monir said priority is being given to ensuring farmers and industries receive adequate diesel. Besides, the government is installing tracking devices on tank lorries and introducing real-time monitoring of fuel movement.

A fuel pass system has already been piloted at seven stations, with around 1,10,000 users registered, he said.

He added that seven more stations are expected to be included next week. There are plans to gradually bring motorcycles in Dhaka under the system.

On fuel pricing, he said monthly adjustments continue and April prices have already been fixed. Any future revision would depend on decisions by the relevant authorities.

At a separate briefing at the Secretariat, Zahed Ur Rahman, PM's adviser on information and broadcasting, said fuel prices may be reconsidered if the war escalates or prolongs. "Any decision on fuel price adjustment would depend on the evolving global situation."

Tarique on Time's list of 100 most influentials

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President Donald Trump, UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer, Pope Leo XIV, Benjamin Netanyahu, Nepal's Prime Minister Balendra Shah, New York Mayor Zohran Mamdani, among others.

"Rewind just a few months and Tarique Rahman was living a carefree life of exile in leafy southwest London. But the 2024 ousting of Bangladesh's autocratic Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina propelled the 57-year-old scion from opposition agitator to

national leader in waiting -- a destiny he fulfilled in February by winning an electoral landslide after 17 years estranged from his homeland," wrote Time Magazine in his profile.

Tarique Rahman's victory came just days after the death of his mother, Khaleda Zia, Bangladesh's first female prime minister. Still grieving, he told TIME in January that he would focus on uniting the country's 175 million people and reviving South Asia's second-largest economy.

Bangladesh is struggling with high

inflation and youth unemployment, while ties with India have hit a historic low. All of these problems need urgent solutions, Time noted.

"Corruption allegations from the aughts (albeit since quashed by the courts) may mean any honeymoon period will be shorter than most. But after so many years in the wilderness, he's determined not to waste any more time."

"We need to work together," Tarique told Time, "so that people can have their political rights."