

Follow hajj regulations, avoid penalties

Govt urges pilgrims

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Bangladesh's Ministry of Religious Affairs has urged citizens to strictly comply with Saudi Arabia's hajj regulations and avoid attempting to perform the pilgrimage without official permits.

This warning comes after Saudi Arabia introduced tougher penalties ahead of this year's Hajj to control overcrowding and improve pilgrim safety.

Under the new rules, individuals caught performing or attempting to perform hajj without a valid permit could face fines of up to SAR (Saudi riyals) 20,000 (approximately Tk 6.50 lakh).

According to a statement issued by the religious affairs ministry, the Saudi Ministry of Interior also warned of strict action against those facilitating unauthorised pilgrims, including transport providers, accommodation owners, travel agencies and

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Rods protrude from a temporarily sand-filled section of a road in the capital's Segunbagicha area following underground cable installation work by the Dhaka Power Distribution Company. The absence of proper safety measures poses risks to pedestrians, especially at night. The photo was taken yesterday.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

Revitalise family planning, improve reproductive health

Experts urge govt

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Experts and officials yesterday called for reinvigorating the family planning programme to improve reproductive health services, reduce unintended pregnancies, and address the country's declining contraceptive coverage.

They said the programme, once hailed as a successful national intervention to reduce fertility and slow population growth, has remained stagnant for more than a decade, while services have recently been severely disrupted.

Two senior health officials, however, said the government is planning to restructure primary healthcare, with family planning forming a major part of the initiative.

The decline in primary healthcare services is creating multiple problems, including the recent measles outbreak. The family planning programme, another major component of primary healthcare, has remained stagnant for years and requires urgent intervention.

ABU JAMIL FAISEL, public health specialist

They made the remarks at a policy dialogue titled "Declining Primary Healthcare Programme in Bangladesh: The Story of National Family Planning Programme", organised by Bangladesh Health Watch at the CIRDP auditorium yesterday.

Yasmin H Ahmed, adviser to Bangladesh Health Watch, said the family planning programme helped reduce the total fertility rate (TFR) from 6.3 in 1975 to 2.3 in 2011. However, the latest data from 2025 showed the TFR had risen to 2.4.

She said the contraceptive prevalence rate (CPR) increased from 7.7 percent in 1975 to 64 percent in 2022, but later dropped to 58.2 percent in 2025.

The situation turned worse as the procurement of contraceptive methods has remained stalled for over two years, placing the entire system under immense strain, she said, urging the authority to revitalise the programme.

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Stop diverting education funds to other sectors

Demand speakers at dialogue

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Speakers yesterday called for ensuring that education sector funds are not diverted to other sectors, alleging that money from the education budget had previously been allocated to projects such as the Rooppur Nuclear Power Plant and the Bangabandhu Satellite.

Speaking at a citizen dialogue in the capital, they also urged the government to stop assigning teachers duties unrelated to classroom instruction.

The dialogue, titled "Government Priorities and the Education Sector: Budget and Reality", was organised by the Citizen's Platform for SDGs, Bangladesh, at the Bangladesh-China Friendship Conference Center.

It was chaired by the platform's convener and CPD Fellow Dr Debapriya Bhattacharya.

State Minister for Primary and Mass Education Bobby Hajjaj said no teacher would be allowed to enter classrooms without receiving proper training.

"We have already taken that step. Because of this decision, 14,500 teachers marched against me. But we remain firm in our position. They will complete their training and return to classrooms within the next four to six months," he said.

The state minister said 30 to 40 percent of government primary school buildings require urgent renovation, while some need complete reconstruction.

"School infrastructure does not only mean buildings; we want to align building design with the

teaching process," he said.

He added that the government is formulating a "similar standard curriculum" and preparing a sustainable action plan for the next three to five years, which will be made public within six months to a year.

He also said work is underway to bring Ebtedayi madrasas under the Primary Education Board

DEMANDS

Free teachers from non-teaching duties

Ensure proper use of education budget

Focus on quality of education, not just enrolment

Increase investment in education sector

Stop political interference in school committees

Improve teacher training before posting

Reform primary teacher salary structure

and formulate a "Teacher Policy" covering salary, promotion, and career development.

Debapriya said increasing budget allocations alone is not enough without ensuring proper utilisation and evaluation.

"To move development forward, the education sector must be viewed not as an area of expenditure, but as

an investment, where the primary goal will be to create skilled human resources," he said.

He said the focus should now shift from access to educational outcomes. "Students are enrolling in schools, but whether they are graduating with quality education is now the key issue."

Eminent economist Prof Anu Muhammad questioned why education budgets are often said to lack funds while "thousands of crores" are allocated elsewhere.

"Neighbouring countries spend more than five percent of their GDP on education and health. Why can't we?" he said.

An education commission was formed in 2010, but the government that formed it never implemented its recommendations, he added.

He also criticised the burden of ancillary work on teachers due to a lack of support staff in schools.

Rasheda K Chowdhury, executive director of Campaign for Popular Education, criticised the inclusion of unrelated projects in the education budget.

"Education is not considered a single sector. At first, it was linked with the Ministry of Religious Affairs. Then came the Bangabandhu Satellite. Then came Rooppur. These are all included in our education budget," she said.

She also warned against politicising school managing committees, saying she would return to court if political appointments continue despite a High Court ruling upheld by the Appellate Division.

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'Public interest must come first for journalists'

Dawn editor tells Star event

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Journalists should continue informing the public and serving public interest even when authorities dislike their reporting, said Zaffar Abbas, editor of Pakistani newspaper Dawn.

"Our values are very clear that if anything is against democratic values, we will oppose it. Whether it is a civilian government or a military government, if they go after rights activists, we will oppose it," he said while speaking at a programme titled "Journalists at a crossroads: Conversation with Zaffar Abbas", organised by The Daily Star at its office in Dhaka yesterday.

"If there is a clash between the government's version of national interest and our understanding of national interest, we will weigh the public interest and go for it," he said.

Zaffar said journalists must remain confident that their goal is to defend free speech and inform people about what is wrong with society, the government and the authorities.

Speaking about Dawn's liberal values in Pakistan, often regarded as a conservative Islamic country, he described the country as having a "deeply religious society".

"When we talk about liberal values, we are not talking about anything against religion. It is about explaining what a civil society should be all about," he said, adding that he was not challenging any religious narrative.

He said Dawn had openly supported equal rights for women and affirmative action on women's rights and that the same principle applied to other fundamental rights.

"If rights are being taken away, we will write against that," he said.

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TIB seeks PM's backing for 2028 anti-graft summit

STAR REPORT

Transparency International Bangladesh Executive Director Dr Iftekharuzzaman met Prime Minister Tarique Rahman at the latter's office in the Secretariat yesterday.

Atikur Rahman Ruman, additional press secretary to the PM, said, "They discussed measures to free the country from corruption. The prime minister reiterated his government's firm stance against graft."

Speaking to reporters after the meeting, TIB chief Iftekharuzzaman said, "We have made some specific recommendations to the government on good governance and anti-corruption issues. The prime minister has taken the matters very positively and has assured us that these will be implemented."

"We have especially given advice on why reforms and restructuring of institutions like the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) are necessary," he added.

Iftekharuzzaman said, "The government wants to send a message to the world that it is uncompromising in its fight against corruption. As part of this effort, TIB has proposed hosting the 2028 International Anti Corruption Conference

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Ensure workplace safety, protect labour rights

Demand speakers at discussion

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The government should establish a mechanism to ensure safer working environments at multinational companies so that workers' rights are protected and companies are held accountable for negligence, speakers said at a programme yesterday.

They also stressed the need for labour-friendly policies, fair wages, skill development, and stronger protection for workers in both formal and informal sectors.

Rights activists, political leaders, and expatriates made the remarks at a discussion titled "Labour Environment, Evaluation, Rights, and the Future of Work", organised by The Bangladesh Dialogue (TBD) at The Daily Star Centre.

At the event, SM Saif Kader Rubab, director of TBD, said, "Tragedies such as the Rana Plaza collapse led to the introduction of labour laws, minimum wage structures, maternity leave, and labour courts. But the state must still play a more effective and ethical role to ensure workers' rights."

Presenting the keynote paper, TBD Chief Operations Officer Kazi Rakib Hossain said workers in Bangladesh are still deprived of fair wages, workplace safety, and basic labour rights, even 140 years after the beginning of the labour movement.

He said workers in the garment, transport, domestic work, and migrant labour sectors continue to face discrimination, insecurity, and workplace risks.

Kazi Rakib also said women, third gender people,

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Nabo Anande Jaago: The Legacy of Thakurbari -- a cultural event marking the 165th birth anniversary of Rabindranath Tagore -- was held in the capital yesterday. The programme was organised by the Indira Gandhi Cultural Centre, in collaboration with the Fashion Design Council of Bangladesh.

PHOTO: COURTESY

'Nabo Anande Jaago' marks Tagore's birth anniversary

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Marking the 165th birth anniversary of Rabindranath Tagore, a cultural programme titled "Nabo Anande Jaago: The Legacy of Thakurbari" was held in the capital yesterday.

The event was organised by the Indira Gandhi Cultural Centre, in collaboration with the Fashion Design Council of Bangladesh.

The event revisited Thakurbari as a cultural world of its own, with a special focus on the women of the Tagore household and their role in shaping the Renaissance in the Indian subcontinent.

Speaking there, Pranay Kumar Verma, high commissioner of India to Bangladesh, highlighted Tagore's place in the shared cultural heritage of Bangladesh and India. He described Tagore as a towering figure for both nations.

It was presided over by designer Shaibal Shaha.