

DHAKA AT THE PALAIS

Cate Blanchett’s DFF, its Bangladesh connection, and a fleeting opportunity



(L) Clare Stewart, Akuol de Mabior, Mohammed Amer, Cate Blanchett, Bao Nguyen, and Annemarie Jacir

PHOTO: STAR

SADI MOHAMMAD SHAHNEWAZ, *from Cannes*

When I walked into the Salle de Conférence de Presse for the Displaced Filmmakers Fund (DFF), admittedly a bit late after a screening, one thing instantly came to mind: Annemarie Jacir, Mohammed Amer, Akuol de Mabior, and Bao Nguyen are incredibly talented directors of the highest calibre. However, I wondered whether the fund could also be used to amplify voices that would otherwise have no way of being heard. I will circle back to this point.

Murmurs about the DFF conference spread around Cannes yesterday afternoon, with international journalists discussing its merits

and imagining the participation of their own countries in the future. It is, indeed, one of the most significant humanitarian-meets-cinema initiatives at Cannes this year, designed for filmmakers whose careers have been fractured by forced exile, war, or political persecution.

Cate Blanchett spearheaded the fund in her capacity as a UNHCR Global Goodwill Ambassador, alongside the International Film Festival Rotterdam (IFFR).

“Ten years ago, 60 million people were displaced,” the actress said to a room full of international journalists. “Today, more than 120 million are facing this fate. When you are

displaced, you don’t stop being a filmmaker. An entire career is lost to their respective tragedies.”

The inaugural batch of the Displaced Filmmakers Fund created immediate critical impact through funding worth EUR 100,000. All five short films — including Mohammad Rasoulof’s *Sense of Water* — premiered to standing ovations at IFFR. The filmmakers proved that displaced artists do not need “charity”, but rather professional resources to reclaim their narratives on some of the world’s most prestigious stages.

As the conference continued, journalists became increasingly eager to question the panel. “How do we get our films into the DFF?” many asked, albeit indirectly. The answer, at least as I perceived it, is: you do not — at least for now.

As of today, inclusion in the fund is invitation-based. A nominations committee creates a “longlist”. Members have included Blanchett herself, Ke Huy Quan, Waad Al-Kateab, and representatives from UNHCR, UNIQLO, and the Hubert Bals Fund.

“Hey, where are you going? Cate Blanchett is here, what’s the matter with you?” joked Mohammed Amer when a reporter was seen leaving the press conference. Thanks to the Palestinian-American comedian’s semi-biographical Netflix series *Mo*, Amer is already world-famous, especially among audiences sympathetic to the Palestinian cause.

The entire cohort of the DFF has already reached

While the DFF may currently prioritise institutional stability, there remains hope that the initiative will eventually extend to underrepresented voices, including Rohingya communities struggling for survival beyond filmmaking.

legendary status. Rithy Panh is the architect of Cambodian cinematic memory; Annemarie Jacir is arguably one of the most poignant Palestinian

voices working today.

Through the press conference, I also learned about “exiled” media organisations in France, comprising entire newsrooms of journalists displaced from their countries. These are the people who could truly benefit from greater visibility and funding.

This brings me back to my earlier point about voices needing amplification.

One must remember that one of Cate Blanchett’s most transformative moments as a Goodwill Ambassador was her 2018 visit to the Rohingya camps in Cox’s Bazar. She spent time with Rohingya musician Mohammed Sayidul Islam, who was writing ghazals about camp life and exile. She later addressed the UN Security Council, speaking specifically about meeting refugee artisans and storytellers.

The DFF’s invitation-only policy — even if intended to ensure that talented directors tell underrepresented stories — means access is primarily available to those with high-level networks or already established careers. This also implies they may already possess enough cultural cachet to secure funding through other means.

It may not be too far-fetched to imagine that, in the DFF’s initial stages, gatekeeping is being exercised to ensure the stability of incoming funds. However, one can still remain hopeful that an initiative as noble as the DFF will eventually branch out to reach underrepresented talent, even in communities as marginalised as the Rohingya, who are currently too embroiled in a struggle for survival to focus on luxuries such as filmmaking.

After the press conference, speaking briefly with Cate Blanchett and the directors, the collective optimism in the room was palpable. The DFF is a vital step forward, but it remains a fleeting opportunity for those at the very bottom of the geopolitical ladder.

One can only hope that as this initiative grows, its gaze shifts toward the truly invisible. Until a storyteller like Mohammad Sayidul Islam can trade his camp-born ghazals for a director’s chair, the world’s most prestigious stages will remain incomplete. The dialogue has started at the Palais; now, it’s time to widen the circle.

NEWS

HC seeks report on measles

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In the petition it is mentioned that more than 500 children have died so far due to the devastating measles outbreak since March.

“Thousands of children across the country are being infected, and the situation has already turned into one of the most serious public health crises in the country’s recent history. These deaths were neither sudden nor unavoidable.”

Rather, the disaster resulted from policy changes in vaccine procurement and supply systems, disruption of long-standing effective mechanisms, disregard of warnings from international organisations, and the lack of adequate healthcare infrastructure. Notably, Bangladesh had previously received the Gavi Award twice for its success in eliminating measles and rubella between 2009 and

2015, according to the petition.

The Law and Life Foundation Trust further stated in the petition that serious disruptions in the supply of measles vaccines and immunisation activities arose after the previous interim government decided to replace the long-standing UNICEF-managed vaccine procurement system with an open tender method. UNICEF reportedly issued repeated warnings to the then health adviser, Nurjahan Begum, about the potential vaccine shortage, outbreak risks, and possible child deaths, but those warnings were allegedly ignored.

INQUIRY COMMISSION

In response to a separate writ petition, the same HC bench issued a rule asking the government to explain in four weeks why it should not be directed to form an inquiry commission into child deaths caused by the measles outbreak.

The cabinet secretary, health secretary, home secretary, public administration secretary and the director general of DGHS, among other officials, were named as respondents.

Filed as public interest litigation on May 17, Supreme Court lawyer M Ashraful Islam in the petition sought directives to probe the role of former chief adviser of the interim government Dr Muhammad Yunus and other advisers over the measles vaccine shortage and to bar 24 individuals — including Dr Yunus and all former advisers — from leaving the country until the inquiry is complete.

The petition stated that UNICEF had warned the Yunus-led interim government about the impending measles crisis, yet neither Dr Yunus nor the health adviser took steps to prevent the deaths of children.

Draft law may tighten govt grip on NHRC

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The ordinance authorised the commission to determine punishment and recommend punitive measures against responsible individuals and institutions, he said.

On April 9, parliament repealed three ordinances related to the NHRC, issued between 2024 and 2025.

He added that the weaknesses in the 2009 law were among the reasons the commission never received “A” category status under international standards.

Most past incidents of enforced disappearance, killing, and other rights violations involved allegations against certain members of law enforcement agencies, he said. “In such a context, retaining this provision would effectively serve as protection for them.”

Referring to section 13 of the draft, Iftekharuzzaman said the commission has not been given authority to investigate whether human rights violations are taking place.

He said the draft also removed the scope, included in the ordinance, for the commission to inspect, visit, and investigate possible detention sites of

intelligence agencies and the military.

Such places may be used to keep people subjected to enforced disappearance and torture, he said.

TIB also raised concerns over the proposed selection committee for appointing commissioners.

According to the TIB statement, the committee would include the speaker, law minister, home minister, a ruling party lawmaker, and the cabinet secretary. Iftekharuzzaman said such a structure creates a serious risk of establishing government control over the commission.

He said the repealed ordinance stated that the National Human Rights Commission “shall not be under any ministry or department of the government”. This clause has been dropped from the draft law, he added.

“On one hand, the commission is described as an independent institution; on the other hand, what could be the justification for removing a clause that safeguards its autonomy and independence?” he asked.

TIB further said the ordinance required inclusion of representatives

from ethnic minorities and women as commissioners, but the draft replaced that with the condition of finding “qualified candidates”.

Iftekharuzzaman said this could turn the commission into a “male-dominated” and “majoritarian” institution.

He also criticised provisions allowing 30 percent of the commission’s staffers to be deputed from government service and permitting a serving government employee to become a commissioner while on leave from their post.

Iftekharuzzaman said such provisions would, as in the past, place the commission under full bureaucratic and government control, reducing it to a “figurehead institution”.

The graft watchdog termed the move contradictory and self-defeating and urged the government to abandon this path. It also called on the government to reconsider the controversial provisions, taking into account concerns, to honour its election manifesto pledge to protect human rights and help establish an independent and effective National Human Rights Commission.

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DUET’s senior faculty members.

Speaking to this correspondent yesterday, Prof Iqbal said he already begun carrying out administrative duties and hoped that everything will be resolved soon.

He said, after assuming office, he has cleared unpaid salaries, bonuses,

and overtime payments for university staff, and also sought updates on students injured during recent violence.

Asked when he expected to start office from the campus, Prof Iqbal said discussions were ongoing with teachers and that a general meeting would be held before any move was

made.

Meanwhile, police filed a case over recent clashes at the university.

Aminul Islam, officer-in-charge of Gazipur Sadar Metropolitan Police Station, said 200 to 250 unidentified individuals were accused in this connection.

Govt plans major expansion of fire service

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nationwide awareness programme is also being held to mark the week.

“We are undertaking numerous initiatives for the overall development of the fire service,” he said, adding that the construction and reconstruction of 20 fire stations are currently underway across the country to improve emergency response services.

“The procurement of 100 ambulances is also underway to expand services.”

Salahuddin noted that while 538 fire stations are currently operational, the number remains inadequate given the country’s population and rapid urbanisation.

He said, “Twenty projects involving the construction and reconstruction of fire stations are currently being implemented to improve emergency response.”

“To strengthen rescue capabilities, a proposal to create 72 posts for a dedicated diver unit was recently approved. This recruitment is

expected to enable the force to operate more efficiently during vessel accidents and water-based rescue operations.”

The minister said the government is also considering a major overhaul of the department’s organogram.

“A proposal to increase the total number of Fire Service officials to more than 30,000 is under review. To support this expansion and modernise training, an initiative has been taken to establish the Fire Service and Civil Defence Academy in Gazaria.”

Describing the force as a “symbol of speed, service, and sacrifice”, he praised the bravery of officials who risk their lives to protect citizens.

“The members of this force are working tirelessly, standing beside people not only in firefighting but in all kinds of disasters. Their professionalism is truly worthy of praise.”

Reviewing the department’s performance in 2025, Salahuddin said firefighters brought 27,059 incidents under control, saving assets

worth around Tk 3,263 crore.

During the same period, the force responded to 7,815 road accidents, recovered 1,038 bodies, and rescued 9,266 injured people.

Ambulance services were provided to 10,480 patients, while more than 2.56 lakh people received fire safety training.

The department also conducted over 10,500 building inspections and 2,000 surveys as part of its awareness drive.

At the event, which included a medal distribution and passing-out parade, the home minister handed over medals to 20 officers and employees in recognition of their heroic service.

Senior Secretary of the Ministry of Home Affairs Manjur Morshed Chowdhury attended the event as a special guest, while Director General of the Fire Service and Civil Defence Department Muhammad Jahed Kamal presided over the ceremony. Lawmaker Mostafizur Rahman Bhuiyan Dipu also attended.

the interim government to ensure judicial independence, correcting them before reintroducing them as bills in parliament.

“We have not said that we will not approve those ordinances. We are just deferring it for consultation with stakeholders as there are some errors. We will further scrutinise and correct the ordinances and bring those as bills in parliament later on.”

US approves \$4.2bn in helicopter sales to South Korea

AFP, Washington

The United States said Monday it had approved the sale of more than \$4 billion in military helicopters to South Korea, which has vowed to buy more US weapons as it defends against the North.

The State Department said it had given its approval for South Korea to spend \$3 billion on 24 “Romeo” Seahawk naval helicopters, used to track and destroy submarines as well as land targets.