NATIONAL PUBLIC LIBRARY

A reading space lost to years of delay

Modernisation project only 66% complete after four years; deadline extended to June 2028

AYSHA TOFAIL *and* TAMANNA YESMIN MARIA

The Sufia Kamal National Public Library used to be more than just a place to find books for Imran Hasan, a former student of History at Dhaka University.

Hasan recalls regularly visiting the library to find study materials he could not afford and to have a quiet place to read.

"There, I could find the books I needed. The quiet atmosphere and spacious reading room made it an ideal place to concentrate, especially when I needed to study for long hours," he said.

Hasan, who now works at a development organisation, looks back on what is widely known as the central public library as a valuable resource that gave students like him access to knowledge regardless of their financial circumstances.

"For students who cannot afford to buy every book, a public library is an important resource. But sadly, I can no longer visit the library," he said.

More than four years after the old public library building in the capital's Shahbagh was demolished, construction of its

SEE PAGE 5 COL 1







Construction of the Sufia Kamal National Public Library in Shahbagh remains incomplete, more than four years after work began. The library is now operating from a temporary space on the 12th floor of the Institution of Engineers, Bangladesh building in Ramna, where limited space has restricted access to books and reduced the number of visitors. The photos were taken recently. PHOTO: COURTESY, STAR

4-day nat'l debate fest begins at JU



JU CORRESPONDENT

A four-day national debate festival began at Jahangirnagar University yesterday, bringing together debaters from schools, colleges, and universities across the country.

The festival, titled National Debate Festival 2026, organised by the Jahangirnagar University Debate Organisation (JUDO), is being held under the slogan "Dhongsho Jontro Thamke Darak Praner Spordhay" (Let the machinery of destruction come to a halt in the face of life's defiance).

The festival features three debate competitions and a closing ceremony. A total of 32 schools, 32 colleges and 32 universities, with more than 500 people, including debaters and adjudicators, are participating in the festival.

The day-long 21st Inter-University Debate Competition was held yesterday featuring 32 teams from universities across the country, with four preliminary rounds, followed by quarter-finals and semi-finals.

The debates covered a range of subjects, including the rise of auteur cinema, whether developing countries should adopt a conservative approach to artificial intelligence (AI) technology, and whether developing countries should prioritise investment in primary and secondary education over public universities.

The 15th Inter-College Debate Competition and the Inter-School Debate Competition are scheduled for November 14

SEE PAGE 4 COL 3

From hopes of a better life to descent into despair

After 32 years in Bahrain, Lilufa Begum returns home scarred by hardship, illness and imprisonment

MOHAMMAD JAMIL KHAN

When 53-year-old Lilufa Begum returned to Bangladesh on November 11 after spending 32 years in Bahrain, she could barely recall where her family lived or how to contact them.

Suffering from physical and mental health problems, she was handed over to BRAC by the expatriates' welfare desk at Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport.

Hours later, her two sisters arrived at a BRAC centre in Dhaka. Although Lilufa struggled to communicate, she recognised them.

"She recognised us when we went to see her. She stretched out her hand towards us," her sister Mazeda Begum told The Daily Star.

Lilufa had left her village in Manikganj's Singair upazila in 1994, hoping to improve her family's financial condition. Her return marked the end of decades of separation, mental illness and imprisonment in Bahrain.

According to BRAC, Bahrain police found her wandering the streets in a mentally unstable condition. She was imprisoned for lacking valid documents before being repatriated on a travel pass.

Lilufa, from Sahrail village, initially worked as a house help in Bahrain for around four years. However, the middleman who arranged her migration took her earnings, leaving her unable to send money home, Mazeda said.

Later, her younger brother travelled to Bahrain and found her. She stayed with him and began supporting their parents financially.

"She used to send Tk 5,000 or Tk 10,000 whenever she could so that our parents could manage their expenses," Mazeda said.

Lilufa returned home on leave around 16 years ago before going back to Bahrain. Her mental health began deteriorating around four to five years ago, according to Mazeda.

Her brother, who still lives in Bahrain, visited Bangladesh around three months ago for his daughter's wedding. He told the family that Lilufa had become mentally unstable and was wandering the streets.

Mazeda last spoke to her sister around two months ago over their brother's phone.

"She never married. She has no husband or children. Our parents are no longer alive. She has no savings, no money, nothing. She is completely helpless," Mazeda said.

After her arrival, BRAC took Lilufa by ambulance to its learning centre in Uttara, where she received clothing, essential supplies, personal care and accommodation.

Lilufa had left her village in Manikganj's Singair upazila in 1994, hoping to improve her family's financial condition. Her return marked the end of decades of separation, mental illness and imprisonment in Bahrain.

As Lilufa struggled to provide information about her family, BRAC staff spoke to her repeatedly before establishing that she was from Singair.

Staff at BRAC's Migration and Reintegration Support Centre in Manikganj then traced her sisters, Mazeda Begum and Shamsunnahar, who broke down in tears upon seeing her after years of separation.

Shariful Hasan, associate director of BRAC's Migration Programme, said he contacted Mahfuzur Rahman, first secretary (labour) at the Bangladesh embassy in Bahrain, after hearing from the sisters.

Embassy officials confirmed that Bahrain police had found Lilufa wandering the streets and imprisoned her for lacking valid documents, he said.

SEE PAGE 4 COL 1

IN BRIEF

Depoliticise professional bodies: president

UNB, *Dhaka*

President Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir yesterday called for keeping professional organisations free from partisan politics, saying politicisation of professional bodies creates unnecessary problems and undermines their professional character.

"Professional organisations should not be politicised," he said, urging all concerned to take initiatives to this end.

The president made the call while inaugurating the 1st International Conference and Dental Expo-2026, organised by the Bangladesh Prosthodontic Society in Dhaka.



He called for an end to the practice of changing the entire structure and affairs of professional organisations whenever the government changes, and collective efforts to bring about positive changes in the country.

He also urged professionals in the health sector to work with greater sincerity and a sense of responsibility, saying people's welfare should remain at the centre of their activities.

Referring to various forms of mismanagement in the health sector and limitations of healthcare services at government hospitals, he said major reforms to the broader healthcare system were needed to ensure medical services reached people at the grassroots. He called upon the relevant authorities to ensure adequate government-appointed doctors at healthcare centres in remote and marginalised areas.

Stressing that the country invests heavily in medical education, he urged young doctors to serve in rural areas, saying a change in mindset was needed among those reluctant to work outside urban centres.

Need more investment in art, culture

Says Khosru; works of 35 artists on display at DD Art Gallery

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Bringing together works by 35 distinguished contemporary artists, DD Art Gallery inaugurated a group art exhibition yesterday at its new premises in Dhaka's Gulshan-1.

Hosted by Miss World Bangladesh 2026 Samanzar Sayeed, the programme began at 6:30pm with opening remarks by gallery founder Rizwan Bin Farouq.

Addressing the event as chief guest, Finance and Planning Minister Amir Khosru Mahmud Chowdhury stressed the need to integrate art into Bangladesh's creative economy.

"Without monetising, nothing sustains," he said, emphasising the need to financially support artists, artisans and craftsmen while creating market opportunities and branding platforms for their work.

He also called for expanding cultural spaces, suggesting a dedicated theatre venue in Dhaka.

"Culture and art purify our body and mind. People are slowly growing a habit of appreciating and enjoying art," said renowned artist Monirul Islam.

The exhibition, presented by Dhaka Bank, features artworks by artists Shahabuddin Ahmed, Rafiqun Nabi, Farida Zaman, Rokeya Sultana and Kanak Chanpa Chakma, among others.



Finance and Planning Minister Amir Khosru Mahmud Chowdhury, artist Monirul Islam, and visitors explore the artworks on display at a group exhibition inaugurated at DD Art Gallery in Dhaka yesterday. PHOTO: SHEIKH MEHEDI MORSHED

Singer Shaikh Shahed Ali no more

CITY DESK



Singer Shaikh Shahed Ali, best known for the song "Rokzana", died at 10:05am yesterday while undergoing treatment at Asgar Ali Hospital in Dhaka.

Ershadul Haque Tinku confirmed his death to The Daily Star.

Shahed had been battling kidney complications and required regular dialysis. As his condition deteriorated recently, he was admitted to Square Hospital on October 24 and subsequently to Asgar Ali Hospital after his blood sodium levels dropped. During treatment, he suffered a mild stroke and also tested positive for dengue.

After developing severe bleeding, he was placed on life support on Thursday.

His namaz-e-janaza was held after Asr prayers yesterday at Baitun Nur Jame Mosque in Gopibagh of Dhaka.

Later, in keeping with his final wish, the singer was laid to rest beside his mother's grave at the Gopibagh Panchayet Committee graveyard.

His illness had halted plans to release 24 songs developed over 11 years under the

SEE PAGE 4 COL 4