

# Crowds flock to Bangladeshi town for solar eclipse

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DHAKA (AFP) – A tiny town in northern Bangladesh is braced for a rare taste of mass tourism as thousands of people pour in to witness a full solar eclipse on Wednesday.

The event -- the longest total solar eclipse of the 21st century -- will be visible in a narrow corridor across north India, eastern Nepal, north Bangladesh, Bhutan and China.

Banamali Bhoumik, the district administrator of Panchagarh town, told AFP that 20,000 visitors were expected and he encouraged residents to "vacate their houses and share beds" to accommodate the influx.

"Already people are rushing in from every corner of the country," he said. "We have made huge preparations, including offering cheap meals and setting up special prayer halls."

Hotels, guest houses and government bungalows were already full, he added.

Total solar eclipses occur when the moon comes between the Earth and the sun, completely obscuring the sun.

The excitement this time around is largely due to the unusually long duration of the instant of greatest eclipse, or "totality" -- when the sun is wholly covered.

At its maximum, this will last six minutes and 39 seconds -- a duration that will not be matched until the year 2132.

"There is tremendous enthusiasm centering on the eclipse," F.R Sarker, the head of the Bangladesh Astronomical Association, said.

"This will be the only total solar eclipse Bangladeshis can see in the next 105 years. We are lucky it's happening in our time."

People in the capital Dhaka will be able to see a 93 percent eclipse, Sarker said.