

It's time to defuse ticking AIDS bomb

Speakers tell South Asian conference

KAUSHIK SANKAR DAS, from Kathmandu

It is high time South Asian countries took measures to prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS, said speakers at a conference in Kathmandu, Nepal, yesterday.

Forty-two million people are infected with HIV, 4.2 million of them in the SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) countries. Over one million are young people and a large number of them are women, according to recent surveys.

At least half a million people were infected last year alone in South Asia. And an estimated 1,300 people have so far been infected in Bangladesh.

Nepalese Prime Minister Lokendra Bahadur Chand inaugurated the two-day conference "Accelerating the momentum in the fight against HIV/AIDS in South Asia", also attended by Dr Nafis Sadiq, special envoy of the UN secretary-general for HIV/AIDS in Asia, Carol Bellamy, Unicef executive director, and QAMA Rahim, SAARC secretary-general.

Leaders from South Asian countries, senior policymakers, parliamentarians, people living with AIDS,

civil society organisations and NGOs, young representatives and multilateral partners are also participating in the conference, with Unicef and UNAIDS as cosponsors.

"It is high time we protected our young people. It should be our determination to let them live in freedom and security," said the Nepalese prime minister.

Although there is a big difference between South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, the causes for an AIDS catastrophe like poverty, illiteracy, gender discrimination, trafficking in girls, sexual exploitation, intravenous drug abuse, unsafe sex and, most importantly, denial of the disease, are present in South Asia, said Bellamy.

She urged the leaders of the region to break silence, increase investment in education and improve its quality so that children, especially girls, can benefit from it.

The representative of 22 young participants, Deluckshi Navaretnam, emphasised that young people need access to correct information about sexual and reproductive health and it should be included in school curriculum.

Deluckshi has asked how young people infected with HIV can feel safe and comfortable when they are

forced to leave school or denied access to healthcare and become victims of stigma and discrimination.

Dr Nafis Sadiq said, "The stakes are so high that we need to change the way we see it. It is time for the leaders to speak out against the obstacles and silence surrounding the social stigma attached to the disease."

In the afternoon session, heads of delegates of the countries like Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka delivered speeches and gave plans of action to fight the disease.

Minister for Health and Family Welfare Khandaker Mosharruf Hossain, who heads the Bangladesh team, explained various steps taken by his government and said 248 HIV-positive cases have been reported through government sources until December 2002, although other sources estimated more.

"A strong strategy and national plan has been laid out by the government. Its implementation is moving but slowly," the minister added.

Dr Peter Piot said, "Education is the main vaccine in this crisis."



PHOTO: STAR

Awami League (AL) President Sheikh Hasina addresses a meeting of the AL Central Working Committee (ALCWC) at the party central office on the Bangabandhu Avenue in the city yesterday.

Non-metered autorickshaws stay off roads

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

A large number of CNG-run autorickshaws without meter stay off roads, fearing police action.

The government made the use of meters mandatory for the vehicles from Saturday, but many of them failed to install.

Also, some installed meters went out of order although they have a one-year warranty.

Commuters complain that the auto-rickshaw drivers still charge high fares, taking advantage of transport shortage.

The drivers say their income hit a

low, down from Tk 200 a day -- the amount earned before installation of meters.

A vehicle can cover a maximum of 150 kilometres a day, which earns Tk 750. The 150km run costs a driver Tk 120 in fuel and he pays the vehicle owner Tk 500 in rental, which leaves only Tk 130 for him.

But not everyone can drive 150km, Jainal Uddin, a driver, explained.

If the government takes an initiative to reduce the daily rent for the vehicles, the drivers can earn more, said Nur Mohammad, another driver.

Water transit

FROM PAGE 1 transit facilities up to May 3, this year, following repeated requests by Delhi as the agreement was supposed to expire on February 3, 2003.

The trade agreement was first signed on October 4, 1980. Earlier, it was extended after every three years. But after its expiry in 2001, Bangladesh wanted a recasting of the agreement.

The annual trade between India and Bangladesh went heavily in favour of Delhi. During the fiscal year 2000-2001, Bangladesh imported goods worth over \$1173 million from India, while its export value was only \$63 million.

"Such bilateral agreements should serve both the sides," said a high official at the ministry of commerce.

According to sources, the issue of preferential treatment was raised during the trade talks between the two countries several times. Though India has agreed to withdraw some trade barriers for reducing the trade gap with Bangladesh, its impact is yet to be felt.

The water transit facilities were incorporated in the 1972 India-Bangladesh cooperation agreement. After the expiry of the agreement, it was renewed on an ad hoc basis.

Initially, the agreement was extended for a period of six months to a year. But it is now being extended for two to three months.

JS dances

FROM PAGE 12 The ALCWC expressed concern at the continued 'push-in' bids by the Indian Border Security Force, Bangladesh's inclusion in the US-made list of 'terror-risk' countries, price rise of essentials in the country and fare hike of public transports.

It took up a three-day programme from February 19 to mark the International Mother Language Day on February 21 and decided to hold a mass rally in the city on March 7.

The meeting decided that from now on the seven organising secretaries of seven organisational divisions of the party would discharge their responsibilities. They are Saber Hossain Chowdhury (Dhaka), Mahmudur Rahman (Dhaka), Bishal Baral, Bir Bahadur (Chittagong), Sultan Muhammad (Rajshahi), Sultan Muhammad (Rangpur), Abdur Rahman (Sylhet) and Abdul Mannan (Khulna).

AL presidium member Syeda Zohra Tajuddin would be acting president of the AL during Hasina's stay in Saudi Arabia from tomorrow to perform Hajj.

Downer said Sunday that the High Commissioner to Zimbabwe, Jonathon Brown, had sent a "disturbing report" warning that widespread protests during Australia's match in Bulawayo were likely to turn violent.

With concern growing about security, Downer has also called on the ICC Board to reverse its decision to support matches going ahead as scheduled in Zimbabwe and Kenya.

Several Australian players have expressed concerns, England wants its match in Zimbabwe moved and New Zealand's cricketers want their match against Kenya moved to South Africa for security reasons.

New Zealand cricket also says it is likely to appeal to an ICC technical committee to resolve the dispute over its refusal to play a World Cup match in Kenya.

Downer said Monday that there were risks of playing in Zimbabwe for both the players and the Australian fans who have bought tickets for the matches.

"I understand 400 Australians have bought tickets for the game, so we obviously have concerns for our security as well," Downer told commercial radio here.

He said the ICC might have to pay compensation to the Zimbabwe Cricket Union if world cup matches were cancelled.

"Our answer to that is, well, if compensation has to be paid, we'll have a look at making a contribution ourselves to that compensation," he said.

Attack on houses of AL men: 20 hurt

OUR CORRESPONDENT, N'ganj

At least 20 people were injured, six of them bullet-hit, as supporters of the newly elected chairman of Kanchpur Union Parishad, a local BNP leader, attacked houses of Awami League activists on Sunday night.

Hours after Fazlul Huq was declared elected, armed BNP activists led by his son Shamim attacked houses of defeated candidate and local Awami League leader Sabur Khan and his supporters.

The attackers fired shots and exploded a number crackers. They demolished 15 houses and ransacked another seven belonging to AL activists, local people alleged.

Of the victims, Jihad Khan, 22, Majibur Rahman, 30, Sohel Khan, 20, Hashem, 20, Kabir, 21 and Hasan, 20 were taken to Dhaka Medical College Hospital with bullet injuries.

Sabur Khan later alleged that though they were victims of attack, police threatened them of action for creating a law and order situation.

No case was filed till writing of this report yesterday.

16 push-in

FROM PAGE 1 pushed four Indians back after BSF had pushed them in.

Some Indian nationals have been gathered in seven border points in Meherpur and Lalmonirhat apparently to be pushed into the Bangladesh territory.

In two such attempts, the home minister said, the BSF opened fire and the BDR retaliated in one case.

"The BDR has been kept on the highest alert and its vigilance along the border areas has been strengthened," the home minister said in a statement issued in the wake of heightened tension on the Bangladesh-India border.

He said India has created an 'inhuman' and grave situation on the no-man's land by making repeated attempts to push its nationals into Bangladesh, which is 'unfortunate'.

"The push-in attempts are not conducive to the improvement of the friendly relations between Bangladesh and India, and the practice is against the international norms."

The home minister was optimistic that New Delhi would work towards improving the neighbourly relations in a positive and constructive manner while referring to Dhaka's request to New Delhi to stop push-in attempts.

BTTB cell phone

FROM PAGE 12 turn, the ministry asked the BTTB to comply with the ECNEC conditions.

But the BTTB still wants to implement the project and then to form a company for its operation, the sources said.

"We have requested the ministry to allow the board to implement the project under the present structure and then to run it through a separate company," BTTB Chairman SATM Badrul Hoque told The Daily Star.

If things move as planned, the BTTB will enter the mobile phone market by the first week of February next. Formation of a company for implementation will substantially delay the project, he said.

Other sources said formation of a new company needs registration with the joint stock company, initial capital, manpower recruitment and physical infrastructure.

Telecommunications Minister Aminul Hoque, however, thinks implementation of the project through a separate company will not create any problem. "We are on the right track and the project would be completed in time," he told The Daily Star.

The World Bank earlier suggested the government to corporatise the BTTB and to form a sepa-

rate company for its mobile phone project.

Meanwhile, the Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (BTRC) has asked the BTTB to have separate licences for operation of its fixed line telephone network, mobile phone and Internet service.

Initially, the BTTB will release 2.5 lakh phones, which will be increased to 10 lakh. The BTTB's mobile phones will have facility for access to Internet, sending short message and storing data.

The project will be financed through floating bonds worth Tk 594 crore.

It will be the country's fifth mobile phone network and the first in public sector. The four private companies have so far provided about 10.50 lakh cellular phones in the country.

The eight companies that bid for the project are Siemens, Ericsson, Motorola Inc, Canadian Netas-Nortel, ZTE Corporation, China Machinery and Equipment Import and Export Corporation (CMEC), Huawei and China Putian.

Two bids were cancelled due to lack of required documents, the sources said.

Five alleged abductors arrested

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Five alleged abductors were arrested after they kidnapped four timber traders in the Buriganga river on Sunday.

The kidnappers -- Billal Hossain, Arman Hossain, Mostafa, Ali Akbar, Abdul Barek -- were members of the infamous Bashir Group of Lalbagh, police said.

The group demanded Tk 10 lakh from the four traders -- Chunnun, Shahid, Idris and Kashem -- when they went to a sawmill in Kamrangirchar at around 2:00pm.

After receiving Tk 1 lakh from the traders, the abductors tied them up, and took them to a trawler.

Keraniganj police intercepted the trawler near Swarighat and rescued the traders.

Two of the alleged kidnappers however claimed innocence and said the other three arrestees forcibly took control of their

AJM owes farmers, traders Tk 38 crore in unpaid bills

UNB, Dhaka

Jute farmers and traders at 36 jute purchasing centres are yet to receive Tk 38 crore in unpaid bills from the Adamjee Jute Mills (AJM) even nearly seven months after its shutdown.

The creditors blamed the Bangladesh Jute Mills Corporation (BJMC) and Jute Ministry for prolonging disbursement of their bills and sought interference of the prime minister, finance minister and jute minister to expedite their payment.

"A Tk 150-crore government allocation to BJMC for jute purchase during 2002-2003 has been disbursed among various mills except Adamjee," Khorshed Ahmed Dula, a leader of the farmers and jute traders, told a press conference held at the National Press Club yesterday. M Azmal Ali Khan, SA Hamid and Tarun K Saha were also present.

They alleged that despite repeated assurances by BJMC officials, no tangible measure has been taken to pay the arrears.

DU law dept. chairman removed before term expiry

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The Dhaka University (DU) yesterday removed Dr Mizanur Rahman from the law department as its chairman allegedly before expiry of his tenure.

Dr Mizan said, "The authorities violated the university ordinance by removing me five months ahead of the completion of a three-year tenure."

However, DU Vice-Chancellor Professor SMA Faiz said his tenure expired in March last year.

Liaquat Ali Siddiqui has been made the acting chairman.

Shazneen case

FROM PAGE 1

The witness also told the court that he saw 10 to 12 people including carpenter Shaniram lying nearby as if they were asleep, in spite of so much noise around. He saw them despite all the security lights on the compound of the house being off, as some other lights were on.

Shazneen Tasnim Rahman, 15, the youngest daughter of Latifur Rahman, Chairman of Transcom, was raped and murdered at their Gulshan residence on April 23, 1998.

Special public prosecutors (PPs) Arfan Uddin Khan and Mahubul Ahmed appeared for the state, while advocates Mosharraf Hossain Kajol, Mohammad Hanif, Anwarul Kabir Babul, Mizanur Rahman and Abdus Salam Bhuiyan appeared for the accused.

Mayor's 'final'

FROM PAGE 1 controlling authority of the DCC instead of the local government and rural development ministry.

"When I took over, the DCC had a debt of Tk 631 crore, which hampers development works," Khoka said.

The DCC has already paid back Tk33 crore and asked the government to waive another Tk250 crore.

He said to overcome its fund crisis, the DCC has undertaken construction of modern shopping centres and car parks.

Flag meeting

FROM PAGE 1

Two other push-in attempts took place at the same time in Goralganj and its adjacent area in Panchagarh. The BSF brought the Bangla-speaking Indian nationals on truck to the border and tried to push inside the Bangladesh territory. The BDR and local people however forced the Indian border guards to take them back. The BSF fired several rounds of blank shots during the incident.

Our Kushtia correspondent reports that a company commander level flag meeting between the BDR and BSF at Gangni of Kazipur yesterday proved futile. Sources said the Indians have brought over 700 people to the frontiers along Nabinagar, Hridoypur, Pathar Ghata, Fulbari, Bestoganj, Islampur and Rautbati and tried to push them in.

Our Satkhira correspondent reports that the Indian border guards brought about 200 people near the Soladana BSF camp for the same purpose.

AFP, Houston

NASA officials continued yesterday to probe the source of a massive systems failure that caused the space shuttle Columbia to break up, with early evidence pointing to the loss of protective heat shields from the spacecraft during takeoff.

NASA fears that a falling piece of fuel-tank insulation from the Columbia might have damaged crucial ceramic tiles that protect the orbiter during its fiery descent through Earth's atmosphere.

Officials on Sunday revealed that temperatures shot up on the left side of Columbia as it re-entered Earth's atmosphere, just before it disintegrated in flight.

The disaster -- 17 years after the explosion of the Challenger space shuttle -- claimed the lives of all seven astronauts onboard.

Columbia broke up over Texas Saturday, 16 minutes before it was scheduled to land at Cape Canaveral, Florida, strewn with potentially toxic debris over vast expanses of eastern Texas and parts of Louisiana.

The hunt for the shuttle's debris in the states of Texas and Louisiana gathered pace on Sunday. Charred human remains were found Saturday near the Texas town of Hemphill, according to search team members.

NASA space shuttle programme director Ron Dittmore said at a press conference Sunday that Columbia's temperature rose significantly on its left side before it burst into flames and broke up some 61,000 mete above central Texas.

The temperature increase was on the left side of the mid-fuselage, especially around the left wheel well, as Columbia crossed California heading towards its scheduled landing at the end of a 16-day mission, Dittmore said.

The astronauts on board the space vehicle apparently never knew they were in trouble.

At the time of the incident, "there was no indication that the crew was alarmed," Dittmore said.

The drag on Columbia's left side increased, and the onboard computer tried to correct the rollover effect by banking the shuttle toward the right, he said.

The NASA official said the drag could have indicated a missing heat-resistant tile or a rough tile on

one of the wings. The shuttle has 24,000 such tiles that resist the intense heat that hits the shuttle as it re-enters the Earth's atmosphere.

Dittmore emphasized that there was no firm theory as to the cause of the disaster, saying "one single loss of a tile would not be the loss of a vehicle."

NASA will look "more carefully" in the area of the wheel well, and will inspect shuttles in Florida.

Meanwhile, hundreds of investigators and emergency service volunteers hunting for the wreckage of Columbia, fanned out over a 320-kilometer long zone in eastern Texas and Louisiana.

Most of the debris has been cordoned off where it fell but some has already been taken to Barksdale Air Force Base in Louisiana where NASA's inquiry is based.

The special force has been spread out over a huge area of Texas and Louisiana since the shuttle burst into flame and broke up as it re-entered the atmosphere on Saturday.

Authorities have repeatedly warned the public not to touch any fragments they find, which may be covered with toxic substances from propellants used aboard the spacecraft.

Meanwhile, hundreds of people gathered at the Kennedy Space Center, in Florida, where Columbia was supposed to have landed to pay their respects, while the entrance to NASA ground control at the Johnson Space Center in Houston, Texas, was turned into a makeshift shrine, with flowers, flags and messages.

Special memorial services were held and makeshift shrines set up with flowers and photos of the seven astronauts at many of the sites where chunks of wreckage fell to Earth.

President George W. Bush is due today to attend a NASA memorial service in Houston, Texas, for the seven lost Columbia astronauts.

In an emotional nationally televised address Saturday, Bush said: "These men and women assumed great risk in this service to all humanity."

The president and First Lady Laura Bush plan to travel to the Johnson Space Center for the service, which is to begin at 12:45 pm (17:45 GMT), the White House

Road accidents kill 7 in Jessore, Bagerhat

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Seven persons were killed and 40 others injured in separate road accidents in Jessore and Bagerhat on Sunday night and yesterday.

Of them, three were killed in Jessore and four in Bagerhat.

In Jessore, a road accident at Mathurapur near Sathmail Bazar on Jessore-Dhaka highway left three persons dead and 15 others injured yesterday, according to UNB.

Only one of the deceased could be identified as Ibrahim, 47.

Witnesses said a motorbike carrying Ibrahim and his co-rider Shamim, 30, overturned on the highway after hitting a pedestrian at about 10:30am.

Almost simultaneously, a speeding Dhaka-bound bus ran them over before hitting a tree and falling into a roadside ditch. Ibrahim and two other unidentified persons were killed on the spot.

The bodies were sent to the General Hospital morgue for autopsy.

The wounded persons -- Abul Kashem, Shaheen, Tariqul Islam, Mansur Mia, Jahanaara and Shamim -- were admitted to a local hospital. Shamim was later shifted to the Khulna Hospital.

Our staff correspondent from Khulna adds: Four persons, three of a family, were killed and 25 others injured in a road accident on the Rupsha-Mollahat highway at about 10:30pm on Sunday.

The deceased were identified as Nasima, 30, her son Monir, 10, and niece Tamanna, 5, and another minor boy Russel, 10.

Police and witnesses said the accident took place when a Dhaka-bound passenger bus (Dhaka-Metro-7068) skidded off the road and fell into a roadside ditch near Kendua bridge under Mollahat upazila.

The injured were admitted to Fakirhat upazila health complex and Bagerhat sadar hospital.

The bus driver fell the seen. Police seized the bus.