

N Korea shifts on nuclear talks, US interested

REUTERS, Seoul/Washington

North Korea shifted significantly toward US calls for multilateral talks on its suspected nuclear arms plans and Washington voiced interest, saying it would follow up through diplomatic channels.

The North Korean comments on Saturday could mark a breakthrough in the nuclear standoff just days after US-led forces removed Iraqi President Saddam Hussein from power in a war the South Korean president said had "petrified" the North.

"If the US is ready to make a bold switchover in its Korea policy for a settlement of the nuclear issue, the DPRK will not stick to any particular

dialogue format," the North's KCNA news agency quoted a Foreign Ministry spokesman as saying.

Until now, North Korea -- its official name is the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) -- has insisted on bilateral talks.

Washington, which lumps communist North Korea in an "axis of evil" with Iraq and Iran for seeking weapons of mass destruction, wants talks that also include regional players South Korea, Japan, Russia and China.

"We noted the statement with interest," State Department spokesman Philip Reeker said on Saturday, adding: "We expect to follow up through appropriate diplomatic channels."

Islamists' U-turn

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out of the war to forge unity among the like-minded parties.

Mufti Fazlul Haq Amini, an MP of the ruling coalition, who admitted earlier that a move was on to form a new Islamist platform, yesterday refused to comment on it. He said, "There was no formal discussion in this respect."

According to sources, these groups met more than twice for reaching some understanding since the war began, but could not come to any conclusion. However, a three-member committee was formed to work out the possible way of bringing all Islamist forces to a common platform.

Moulana Ubaidul Haq, Khatib of Baitul Mokarram National Mosque, was requested by a group of religious leaders to exert his influence for narrowing the gap among the Islamic parties. "I have tried my level best, but could not break the ice," he told The Daily Star.

The religious groups and parties organised a significant number of anti-war rallies or processions that paraded the city streets over the past weeks.

Some religious groups still believe that they have something to do to save the Islamic holy places in the Middle East. Some of the Islamist parties termed the US invasion as a crusade against Islam and opted for a 'Jihad' against such aggression.

Khatib Ubaidul Haq fears more US-led alliance attacks on Islamic countries and called upon all concerned to stand against those "evil forces". "We will continue our efforts so that these forces

cannot invade more countries," the Khatib told without elaborating what action they might take.

Asked whether they are planning to go for an armed struggle in those countries, one of the religious activists replied, "If the government permits us to go to Iraq, then we will go there to fight for Islam, but if the government refuses to give permission, then we will have to make a decision on the issue."

With the beginning of the Iraq war, Islamist organisations have initiated a move to form a United Islamic Front to fight the western forces. Moulana Nurul Islam of the Ahle Hadit Andolon had requested the Khatib to initiate the move to form the front.

Meantime, the Islamist groups are continuing their campaign to boycott Anglo-American products across the country.

Powell

FROM PAGE 1
Damascus was a state sponsor of "terrorism" and a supplier of military supplies to Saddam's regime.

"And so are making this point clearly and in a very direct manner to the Syrians," he told the "Breakfast with Frost" programme. "We hope the Syrians will respond accordingly."

On Friday US President George W Bush urged Damascus to close its border with Iraq to prevent

BCP cadre shot dead in Kushtia

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Kushtia

A cadre of outlawed Biplobi Communist Party (BCP) was shot dead by his rivals at village Nawdapara in Mirpur upazila of the district yesterday.

According to police, the victim, Akubbar Hossain Mondal, 45, son of late Mozhar Hossain Mondal of the village, was kidnapped by an armed gang belonging to the outlawed Gano Mukti Fouj (GMF) on Friday.

His body was found at Nawdapara canal yesterday morning. On information, police recovered the body and sent it to Kushtia General Hospital for autopsy.

A case was lodged with Mirpur police station accusing seven people.

Two burnt alive as bus catches fire in Banshkhali

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, Ctg

Two persons were burnt alive and ten others injured when a passenger bus caught fire as it skidded off the road in Banshkhali yesterday evening.

One of the dead was identified as Abul Kashem, 35, while identity of the other aged about 50-- could not be known immediately.

Witnesses said the Banshkhali-bound bus from the city with about 40 passengers caught fire with a loud bang when it skidded off the road at Chechuria, about five kilometres off the upazila headquarters.

Of the injured, three were admitted to the local health complex.

Abducted

FROM PAGE 12
A general diary was filed with the Kotwali Police Station yesterday.

Hanif's family sources said that the kidnappers initially asked for Tk 1 crore in ransom but later settled for Tk 90 lakh.

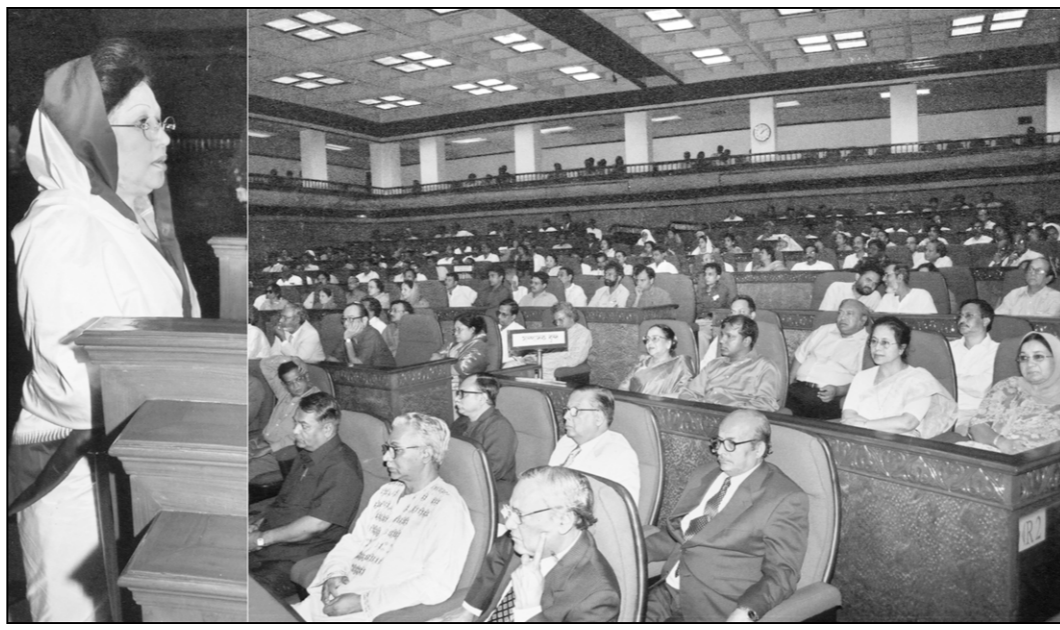
The family agreed to pay Tk 5 lakh to secure his release when the abductor threatened to kill Hanif unless the demand was met by this morning and abduct Hanif's younger brother Harun as well.

The family was in negotiation with the abductors through a clearing & forwarding agent of Khatungonj. Police said they are hopeful of rescuing the businessman.

Meanwhile, local business leaders have informed ministers who hail from Chittagong of the abduction. Local businessmen of Khatungonj were preparing for protest programmes unless the abducted businessman was rescued by today.

Another non-Bengali businessman, Taher Ali Fakhri of Jamal Khan, was abducted and released on ransom in 1995.

The non-Bengali businessmen, mostly of Dawdi Bohra community, have been doing business at the port city for a long time. They migrated to Bangladesh from Madhya Pradesh of India before the partition of the sub-continent in 1947.



Prime Minister Khaleda Zia addresses poets, literateurs, journalists and publishers on the eve of the Nababarsha at the International Conference Centre auditorium yesterday.

Nababarsha today

FROM PAGE 1

The day is a public holiday. With the break of the daylight, artistes of Chhayanaut will gather at the Ramna Batamul and sing the all familiar Tagore song "Esho he Boishakh esho esho..." that literally welcomes the New Year.

A blanket of tight security will be thrown over the lush green Ramna Park and the areas close by to avert untoward incidents.

Dhaka Metropolitan Police (DMP) has taken "foolproof security" measures to ensure unhindered celebrations of Pabala Boishakh in the capital.

Around 3,000 law enforcers, including members of the Detective Branch and Rapid Action Team (RAT), plainclothesmen and horse-mounted police, will be deployed in the city.

The Ramna Park has been divided into eight blocks and people will be screened before entry with metal detectors and video cameras installed at all the entrances, police officials said. Besides, all important points, including Ramna, will be swept by the dog squads, according to sources.

The students of the Fine Arts Institute of Dhaka University will bring out a rally with the revellers wearing colourful masks.

The Bangla Year was introduced during the rule of Emperor Akbar for convenience of tax collection. In keeping with the tradition, traders and shopkeepers will open hakhata (fresh account book) and offer sweets to their clients and visitors.

Different socio-cultural organisations have chalked out elaborate programmes to celebrate the day.

The Ministry of Culture and Bangla Academy's programme will begin at 8:00am on the academy premises. The daylong programmes will include cultural function and discussion.

Shilpakala Academy and Nazrul Institute will arrange special cultural show at the Public Library Auditorium in the evening.

Archaeological Department, National Archive and National Folk Arts Foundation will hold a daylong exhibition of historic documents and artefacts in the Bangla Academy premises.

Nagar Samajik O Sanskritik Kendra, a socio-cultural organisation of the officials and employees of Dhaka City Corporation, will hold art and essay writing competitions for children at Nagar Bhaban at 9:30am.

Bulbul Lolitakola Academy will hold a cultural programme at the amphitheatre at Dhanmondi at 7:30 am. Nazrul Academy will also hold a cultural programme at Ramna Park.

Nilangona Palli will hold a fashion show titled "Swadeshi Poshak Utsab at

the Bakultala premises at the Fine Arts Institute at 4:00pm. Architecture Alumni Association of Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (BUET) will hold a daylong programme on the BUET campus.

Bangladesh Red Crescent Society, ORCA Blood for Life, Rotaract Club of Dhaka mid city and Quantum Foundation will organise separate blood donation programmes at the TSC, Ramna Park and Shishu Park gate areas.

Different electronic media including Bangladesh Betar, Bangladesh Television, ATN Bangla and Channel I will broadcast special programmes to mark the day. National dailies will publish special supplements.

President Dr Iajuddin Ahmed in a message wished the countrymen a happy and peaceful New Year. Prime Minister Khaleda Zia in her message said the New Year came this year in a different scenario with war and confrontations reigning over the world.

She urged all to give up backward-looking thoughts and take a new vision towards the future in order to accelerate national progress and achieve prosperity.

Opposition leader and Awami League President Sheikh Hasina in a message called upon the countrymen to resist "fresh threats and attacks" on culture to consolidate the nation's independence.

Hasina paid tributes to those killed in the Ramna Batamul bomb blasts while celebrating the Bengali New Year 1408 and demanded completion of the trial of the killers.

In the Chittagong Hill Tracts, indigenous people have already started celebrating the New Year with the colourful "Baishabi" festival.

Criminal duo

FROM PAGE 1
The rival groups began at 11:00 Saturday night at a narrow lane at the Tejturibazar rail crossing.

Borhan was shot in the head and died at the spot, while Arman had a bullet pierce through his right eye.

Police took the two to the DMCH at 11:15pm where doctors declared Borhan dead. Arman, who was admitted to the hospital, succumbed to his injuries at 2:30am yesterday.

A murder case was filed with the Tejturibazar Police Station yesterday, no-one was held till writing of this report at 7:00pm yesterday.

Ali was the bodyguard of notorious criminal Pichchi Hannan who later formed a criminal gang of his own after breaking up with Hannan.

Launch mishap

FROM PAGE 1
bodies, including of a local journalist, floating in the river yesterday.

Eight of the victims were identified as Karimganj correspondent of Daily Bhorer Dak Rafiqul Haq Sabuj, 26, Mithamoin upazila Primary Teachers Association President Refayeturrahman Angur, 40, Abdul Aziz, 35, of Bagadia, Azizul, 32, of Baldia, Arzu, 15, of Boirati, Hanif, 45, of Madhobpur, Sarol, 18, of Kiraton and Moti Mia, 40, of Rashidabad village.

A six-member team of divers from Dhaka reached the spot late in the night and started a massive search. Police and divers were trying to locate the sunken launch. A BIWTA rescue team was due to reach the spot last night.

"Hundreds of anxious people gathered on the riverbanks looking for their near and dear ones," police said giving an eyewitness account of the scene.

Education Minister Dr Osman Faruque and Deputy Leader of the Opposition in Parliament Abdul Hamid Advocate visited the spot. This was a second major ferry mishap this month after a ferryboat accident in the Surma wherein 82 people died. The boat collided with a barge and sank in the river near Chatak in Sunamganj district early this month.

Meanwhile, over 200 people were injured and 3,000 houses damaged in two upazilas -- Karimganj and Mithamoin -- in Saturday night's tornado.

Of the injured, 40 were admitted to Karimganj Upazila Health Complex, 16 to Kishoreganj Adhunik Sadar Hospital and two each to Mymensingh Medical College Hospital and Bhagolpur Zahurul Islam Medical College Hospital.

Tejgaon OC

FROM PAGE 12
him before the Chief Metropolitan Magistrate's court, Dhaka, seeking seven days' remand for interrogation.

Sergeant Mohammad Azimul Awal, now lying 'clinically dead' at the Combined Military Hospital, was picked up by Tejgaon police on Thursday night from the Sangsad Bhaban area. He was taken to the CMH from the police station with serious head injury.

Tejgaon police earlier said Awal was picked up as he was allegedly seen talking to some sex workers. He was injured when he jumped out of the police vehicle while being taken to thana.

But army alleged that Awal was picked up by he was returning to army camp after patrol duty. He was seriously injured in the head in police torture at the thana, they alleged.

Army and police are separately investigating the incident.

A civilisation

FROM PAGE 1

They did it to their own history, physically destroying the evidence of their own nation's thousands of years of civilisation.

Not since the Taliban embarked on their orgy of destruction against the Buddhas of Bamian and the statues in the museum of Kabul perhaps not since the Second World War or earlier have so many archaeological treasures been wantonly and systematically smashed to pieces.

"This is what our own people did to their history," the man in the grey gown said as we flicked our torches on Saturday across the piles of once perfect Sumerian pots and Greek statues, now headless, armless, in the storeroom of Iraq's National Archaeological Museum.

A queue of respectfully dressed Baghdad ex-cops formed a queue outside the Palestine Hotel in Baghdad after they heard a radio broadcast calling for them to resume their "duties" on the streets. In the late afternoon, at least eight former and very portly senior police officers, all wearing green uniforms - the same colour as the uniforms of the Iraqi Baath party - turned up to offer their services to the Americans, accompanied by a US Marine. But there was no sign that any of them would be sent down to the Museum of Antiquity.

But "liberation" has already turned into occupation. Faced by a crowd of angry Iraqis in Firdos Square demanding a new Iraqi government "for our protection and security and peace", US Marines, who should have been providing that protection, stood shoulder to shoulder facing them, guns at the ready.

The reality, which the Americans - and, of course, Rumsfeld - fail to understand is that under Saddam Hussein, the poor and deprived were always the Shia Muslims, the middle classes always the Sunnis, just as Saddam himself was a Sunni. So it is the Sunnis who are now suffering plunder at the hands of the Shia.

And so the gun-fighting that broke out on Saturday between property owners and looters was, in effect, a conflict between Sunni and Shia Muslims. By failing to end this violence by stoking ethnic hatred through their inactivity the Americans are now provoking a civil war in Baghdad.

A few US Marine patrols did dare to venture into the suburbs on Saturday - positioning themselves next to hospitals which had already been looted but fires burnt across the city at dusk for the third consecutive day. The municipality building was blazing away last night, and on the horizon other great fires were sending columns of smoke miles high into the air.

Too little, too late. On Saturday, a group of chemical engineers and water purification workers turned up at the US Marine headquarters, pleading for protection so they could return to their jobs. Electrical supply workers came along, too. But Baghdad is already a city at war with itself, at the mercy of gunmen and thieves.

For well over 200 years, Western and local archaeologists have gathered up the remnants of this centre of early civilisation from palaces, ziggurats and 3,000-year-old graves. Their tens of thousands of handwritten card index files - often in English and in graceful 19th-century handwriting - now lie strewn amid the broken statuary. I picked up a tiny shard. "Late 2nd century, no. 1680" was written in

pencil on the inside.

It lay empty. No one knows what happened to the Assyrian reliefs from the royal palace of Khorsabad, nor the 5,000-year-old seals nor the 4,500-year-old gold leaf earrings once buried with Sumerian princesses. It will take decades to sort through what they have left, the broken stone torsos, the tomb treasures, the bits of jewellery glinting amid the piles of smashed pots.

The mobs who came here Shia Muslims, for the most part, from the hovels of Saddam City probably had no idea of the value of the pots or statues. Their destruction appears to have been the result of ignorance as much as fury. In the vast museum library, only a few books mostly mid-19th-century archaeological works appeared to have been stolen or destroyed. Looters set little value in books.

British, French and German archaeologists played a leading role in the discovery of some of Iraq's finest treasures. The great British Arabist, diplomatic schemer and spy Gertrude Bell, the "uncrowned queen of Iraq" whose tomb lies not far away from the museum, was an enthusiastic supporter of their work. The Germans built the modern-day museum beside the Tigris river and only in 2000 was it reopened to the public after nine years of closure following the 1991 Gulf War.

Even as the Americans encircled Baghdad, Saddam Hussein's soldiers showed almost the same contempt for its treasures as the looters. Their slit trenches and empty artillery positions are still clearly visible in the museum lawns, one of them dug beside a huge stone statue of a winged bull.

Only a few weeks ago, Jabir Khalil Ibrahim, the director of Iraq's State Board of Antiquities, referred to the museum's contents as "the heritage of the nation". They were, he said, "not just things to see and enjoy - we get strength from them to look to the future. They represent the glory of Iraq."

Ibrahim has vanished, like so many government employees in Baghdad, and Abdul-Jaber and his colleagues are now trying to defend what is left of the country's history with a collection of Kalashnikov rifles. "We don't want to have guns, but everyone must have them now," he told me. "We have to defend ourselves because the Americans have let this happen. They made a war against one man so why do they abandon us to this war and these criminals?"

Half an hour later, I contacted the civil affairs unit of the US Marines in Saadun Street and gave them the exact location of the museum and the condition of its contents. A captain told me that "we're probably going to get down there". Too late. Iraq's history had already been trashed by the looters whom the Americans unleashed on the city during their "liberation".

"You are American!" a woman shouted at me in English on Saturday morning, wrongly assuming I was from the US. "Go back to your country. Get out of here. You are not wanted here. We hated Saddam and now we are hating Bush because he is destroying our city." It was a mercy she could not visit the Museum of Antiquity to see for herself that the very heritage of her country - as well as her city - has been destroyed.

Cross exam

FROM PAGE 12
for Prevention of Women and Children Repression, Dhaka.

After completion of cross-examination on behalf of the accused, Judge Jazi Rahamat Ullah adjourned the hearing till April 17.

Earlier, lawyers of the principal accused Shahidul Islam alias Shahid completed cross-examination of the witness.

During the cross-examination, Shafi Chowdhury told the court that his statement was recorded by the investigating officer (IO) in May 1998 in the Shazneen murder case and in November the same year in the rape case.

The witness said he had told the IO during the investigation that Minu and Parvin (now accused) gave contradictory accounts of the incident shortly after it took place on April 23, 1998.

The witness went on "security lights on the compound of the house of Latifur Rahman (Shazneen's father) were off on that night."

Some guests-- Anisuzzaman Khan, Enam Ahmed Chowdhury, Iqbal Hossain and Mrs. Yeasmin Morshed-- were interrogating Minu and Parvin near the stairs about the tragic death of Shazneen. Parvin first said she saw a man sitting on Shazneen's body. Then she said she saw a man standing in Shazneen's bedroom. She also said she saw Shahid fleeing Shazneen's room with a knife. Finally, she said she saw nothing.

Shafi Chowdhury further said, "At about 2:30am on April 24, a police team including some women police came and

made an inquest report. I returned to my house at about 5:15 in the morning.

Special public prosecutors (PPs) Arfan Uddin Khan, Mahbub Ahmed and Saima Khanam appeared for the state, while advocates Mizanur Rahman Khan and Abdus Salam Bhuiyan defended the accused.

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.

Deep-sea

FROM PAGE 12
lance aircraft and inadequate Coast Guard personnel, foreign trawlers often intrude into Bangladesh's territorial waters and loot fish resources.

Bangladesh Navy so far seized 56 foreign trawlers and 65 fishing boats for illegal fishing.

Besides the 18, another about 70 fishing trawlers now operate in shallow waters in the Bay, netting shrimp and other fishes.

There are also about 3,000 licensed mechanised vessels, 21,000 unlicensed vessels and 22,000 non-mechanised boats fishing in the shallow waters.

The sources said there is no dearth of properly trained manpower for deep sea fishing. Because of lack of employment opportunity, most of the 50 cadets coming out of the Chittagong Marine Fisheries Academy every year go for jobs in foreign vessels, they said.

Fall of Saddam's last bastion imminent

FROM PAGE 1
Coalition forces yesterday captured Saddam's half-brother Wathban as he attempted to cross the border into Syria, Kurdish TV said.

Three Malaysian journalists covering the war in Iraq were kidnapped by a group of armed men in Baghdad, reports AFP.

A reporter, a photographer and a camera crew member of the Joint Media Team Malaysia (JMTM) were kidnapped Saturday morning.

Looting frenzy
Looters in Baghdad set their sights yesterday on the symbols of Saddam's dying regime, swarming another palace overlooking the Tigris River to nab bone china with the Iraqi eagle insignia, fancy wash basins and bath tubs, and even fish from the garden pond.

Storming the Al-Salam Presidential Palace on the river's western bank, the looters marvelled bitterly at Saddam's life of luxury as they passed shards of crystal from chandeliers and shattered mirrors.

Sporadic bursts of gunfire could be heard on the palace grounds.

The looters, including women in black chadors and young children, hauled away statuary from the manicured lawns and stripped white marble off the walls. Some tried to carry away massive gilded doors.

They tossed hand grenades in the ponds, causing dead fish to float up to the surface, and walked away with nylon bags full of piscine booty.

Demonstrators gathered yesterday morning to call for an end to the looting. Presidential palaces, government

ministries and the Iraq National Museum -- the repository of the nation's cultural heritage -- have been stripped bare.

Elsewhere in the city, however, the convulsions of anarchy appeared to be petering out.

People felt secure enough to come out of their homes and drive around, causing the late morning traffic jams so common to the capital. Buses started running in the centre of town.

Children ventured out to play soccer. Shops began to open and street vendors hawked vegetables loaded onto donkey carts.

Hundreds of cars loaded with personal belongings were entering Baghdad from the city's western approaches, an indication that people who fled the fighting were coming home.

But anger still simmered at US troops for allowing four straight days of pillaging.

A new graffiti, scrawled in English, appeared on a Baghdad wall: "Bush supports looters."

Outside the Palestine Hotel, where foreign journalists are staying, a crowd of at least 60 people vented their anger at the Americans. They carried banners that read: "Bush Down," "American Forces must leave immediately" and "Bush + Saddam One."

In the western suburbs of the capital, a plume of black smoke streaked up into the sky. Whole families, including women and children, used donkey carts to haul off toilets, sinks and bathtubs from a warehouse in the Abu Ghreib

district. Although public transport resumed, some double-decker buses were taken over by looters for ferrying their booty back home.

US troops set up barricades to search vehicles and passengers coming in and out of the western part of the city.

Grenade Launchers Seized In Basra
British forces in Basra have seized 250 rocket-propelled grenade launchers and other weapons believed to have been stored for use by suicide bombers, the Associated Press has reported.

Meanwhile, along the Iraq-Iran border, UK forces flooded the lawless region amid reports of chemical weapons caches and underground chambers where prisoners from the 1991 Gulf War were being held.

Soldiers seized 250 rocket-propelled grenade launchers in the northern part of Basra on Friday, Major Neil Robertshaw, of 10 Transport Regiment, Royal Logistic Corps, said.

In Baghdad, marines uncovered a cache of 310 suicide-bomb vests, at least 160 of them packed with explosives and ball bearings, in an elementary school, US central command reported.

Baghdad Hospitals Crippled
A lack of water and power is crippling Baghdad hospitals struggling to treat the sick and wounded, the International Committee of the Red Cross said yesterday.

Medical equipment is also in short supply after looters cleaned out government warehouses, ICRC spokeswoman Nada Doumani said in Geneva, adding that US forces had to step up security at big hospitals before health care can

improve.

"Now the idea is to safeguard whatever has been left and second to ensure security and safety for the medical personnel to come back to the hospitals," the Swiss-based humanitarian agency's spokeswoman said.

"But I must say a lot of them have stayed in the hospitals to prevent further looting. My colleagues are saying the Iraqi doctors are doing a great job."

Mobs ransacked many of Baghdad's hospitals, prompting the ICRC to remind US-led forces in Iraq of their responsibilities under international law as an occupying power. These include protecting vital public services.

The Karama hospital in western Baghdad was still operating but had very few staff on hand. The Yarmouk hospital was damaged and looted, and the Kindi facility was totally ransacked.

Two-stroke ban

FROM PAGE 12
ers have lost employment. But in reality, with the shifting of the banned 18,000 vehicles outside Dhaka, new jobs were created there."

Secretary General of the Cab Association of Bangladesh (CAB) Anwarul Islam, Transport modeler from the Dhaka Transport Coordination Body (DTCB) M Abdur Rab, World Bank's senior social scientist Warren H waters, environmental scientist of the Bank M Khaliquzzaman, police sergeants and journalists also took part in the discussion.

Indemnity

FROM PAGE 1
Savar Police Station.

On behalf of the government, Additional Attorney General (AAG) Abdur Rezzaq Khan told the court that the joint forces were deployed to improve the law and order after it had severely wors