



PHOTO: SYED ZAKIR HOSSAIN

Hundreds of fun-loving people wearing colourful masks and carrying festoons pour onto the street in front of the Ramna Park, the focal point of Bangla New Year celebration, to take part in the yearly waltz of Bangalees yesterday.

Fun buries frustration as Nababarsha begins

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The nation yesterday celebrated Pahela Baishakh, the first day of Bangla year 1410, with great enthusiasm and festivities marking the glorious Bengali culture and heritage.

The day once again expressed the nation's determination to move forward with a vision to build a prosperous future.

People from all walks of life irrespective of religion and age, attired in traditional dresses, thronged traditional Baishahi melas (fairs) in the capital and elsewhere in the country, joined festivities and exchanged new year greetings. Various handicrafts and artifacts depicting Bengali culture were the main attractions at the fairs.

Police maintained vigilance to avoid any untoward incident.

The indigenous people in Chittagong Hill Tracts and elsewhere observed the day through traditional festivities.

The day was a public holiday.

With daybreak, artists of Chhyanaut, a leading cultural organisation, organised a musical soiree welcoming the new

year at the Ramana Batamul. As usual, the familiar Tagore song 'esho he baishakh esho esho', presented in chorus, enthralled the crowd.

Apart from the Ramna area, other parts of the city including Dhaka University campus wore a colourful look with men, women and children celebrating the new year amid jubilation.

At 9.30 am, students of Fine Arts Institute of Dhaka University, joined by people, brought out a colourful procession carrying multicoloured festoons, placards and posters, some of those expressing sentiments against the invasion of Iraq.

At the amphitheater in Dhanmondi lake, Bulbul Fine Arts Academy organised a cultural programme in the morning, drawing a large crowd. The artists presented Nazrul Geeti, Tagore song, folk song and dance.

The entire area wore a festive look. Hotels, restaurants and fast food shops in the capital were crammed with customers enjoying the holiday with their dear and near ones.

To begin with public service, some organisations including ORCA, Red

Crescent Society and Rotaract Club organised blood donation programmes at the TSC and Bangla Academy on Dhaka University campus and at Shisu Park.

Various socio-cultural bodies organised painting competitions for children, recitation and baul song sessions at different places in the city.

The Bangla Year was introduced during the rule of emperor Akbar for convenience of tax collection. In keeping with the age old tradition, traders and shopkeepers opened hal khata (fresh account book) and offered sweets to their customers.

The Ministry of Cultural Affairs, Bangla Academy, Shilpakala Academy, Nazrul Institute, Archaeological Department and National Archive and National Folk Arts Foundation organised various programmes including cultural shows and exhibitions on historic documents.

In Chittagong, Pahela Baishakh was celebrated in the city and elsewhere in the district with enthusiasm and traditional festivity.

People wearing traditional dresses

came out in the streets of the port city and started gathering at different venues of fair and function from dawn.

The city turned vibrant as different socio-cultural bodies as well as public and private institutions organised attractive programmes to welcome the New Year.

The programmes include cultural functions, poetry recitation sessions, staging of dramas, holding discussions and rallies, bringing out processions and organising food festivals and painting competitions.

A number of big fairs of traditional handicrafts and food items in different parts of the city were the main attractions for the people.

Like every year, picturesque DC Hill Park was turned as the nerve centre of all festivities centring the Pahela Baishakh in the port city.

A stretch of about half a kilometre green slope surroundings of the DC Hill Park was vibrating with the presence of thousands of cultural-minded people from dawn.

US troops capture heart of Tikrit



PHOTO: AFP

A US Marine sits atop his tank in front of a bronze statue of Iraqi President Saddam Hussein in front of al-Faruq Palace in the city of Tikrit, Iraq, the toppled leader's hometown, after taking control of most of the city yesterday.

STAR DESK

US troops yesterday fought pockets of hard-core defenders of Tikrit after they powered into Saddam Hussein's hometown, backed by warplanes and helicopters, to crush the last major stronghold of Iraqi resistance.

The presidential palace was seized without a fight, the US military said, and large numbers of US troops were visible in the central Tikrit, 90 miles north of Baghdad.

US forces suspected about 2,500 die-hards of the Republican Guard and the paramilitary Fedayeen -- and possibly officials from the Iraqi president's regime -- were holed up in the city.

The Americans destroyed a tank column moving outside the town Sunday and killed a platoon of 15 to 20 Iraqis who attacked the marines' armoured vehicles, the operation's commander, Brig. Gen. John Kelly,

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Anglo-US troops take Iraqi oilfields

AP, Qatar

All oil fields in Iraq now fall within areas controlled by the US coalition, a US general announced yesterday.

Allied forces had previously secured all 1,000 oil wells in southern Iraq. Kurdish allies last week seized the northern oil city of Kirkuk, Iraq's No. 2 oil centre, which pumps as much as 900,000 barrels a day.

US Brig. Gen. Vincent Brooks made the announcement at a US Central Command briefing in Doha, Qatar.

"There is one well we discovered in the north in recent days that is still burning, and that will be addressed as soon as we can do so," he added.

Iraq has the world's second-largest proven crude reserves, at 112 billion barrels, but its pipelines, pumping stations and oil reservoirs have suffered for years from a dearth of funds and lack of maintenance. In recent years, oil revenue has accounted for 95 per cent of Iraq's revenue and is estimated at \$22 billion a year.

On Sunday, Kuwaiti firefighters extinguished the last oil well fire in Iraq's southern al-Rumaila field. Since the war began, firefighters have put out fires at four Iraqi oil wells that were sabotaged by Saddam Hussein's loyalists. Another seven wells sabotaged by Iraqis went out by themselves.

Saddam's forces booby-trapped hundreds of Kuwait's oil wells after invading the country in 1990, and blew them up during the 1991 Gulf War as US forces drove them out of Kuwait. It took months for the fires to be put out.

PMO staff mint money from puffed up photo, documentary budget

STAR REPORT

Excessive use of photo materials and an inflated budget to make a documentary film by two staff at the prime minister's press wing have created a rancour at the information ministry.

High officials concerned at the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) and the ministry raised objection as the two staff have been misappropriating government funds in the name of serving the prime minister, sources said.

There are allegations that these two have been making quick money since the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) came to office in October 2001.

Highly placed sources said one of the two personal photographers of the prime minister is taking unrestrained facilities from the Press Information Department (PID) of the ministry.

They said the photographer, who also was attached with the PM during the past BNP regime, take on average 100 prints a day of photographs related to the PM's day-to-day affairs.

According to an official estimate, citing official reason the photographer received some 22,033 copies of different sizes of photographs from the PID

in eight months from June 2002 to January 2003. Besides, he took hundreds of photo films during the same period.

Officials at the PID said the number of photo films and prints used by the photographer is the highest since independence.

The matter has been brought to the notice of the information minister and other concerned top officials at the PMO who have been surprised. Meanwhile, the PID has sought additional budget to supply films and photos.

The photographer termed the allegations against him as "conspiracy". "One cannot such huge prints of photographs," he said.

"I am not the only photographer attached to the PM. There is another one," he added.

Moreover, the photographer keeps most of the negatives, particularly those having commercial values at his home, although he is to deposit the used films and extra photos at the PID storeroom.

Information Ministry sources said they even could not get photos of the head of the government timely during

publication of special supplements as the photographer did not submit important films to the PID.

They said the photographer did not submit a photo of Prime Minister Khaleda Zia with Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf in time to be used for publication of a special supplement in a Pakistani newspaper.

"Negatives of all important photographs of the prime minister are still with the photographer," said a senior official at the information ministry.

PMO sources said that they received a good number of complaints from different private organisations, and even from several ministers and MPs that sometime they have to pay the photographer Tk 20,000 to Tk 50,000 for a copy of their photo with the prime minister.

The other staff, an assistant press secretary to the PM, allegedly plundered a huge amount of money in the name of making a CD documentary. He likes to introduce himself as spokesman of the Hawa Bhaban instead of his official position, sources said.

Sources said the APS made a

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Food aid flow on new low

REAZ AHMAD

Food aid flow dipped to a new low with barely two lakh metric tons (MT) of grains received during the first 10 months of ongoing fiscal -- just half the annual projection.

Officials fear the target would not be fulfilled in the next two months as the food aid pipeline does not promise much.

In May and June, around 22,000 MT of grains may be available from the US, the largest bilateral food donor to Bangladesh.

Officials noted that with the US diverting at least 64,000 MT of its committed food aid from Bangladesh to some of the drought-affected African countries, the country now faces an awkward food security situation.

A US announcement three days ago that it would make available an additional 25,000 MT of food aid for Bangladesh came as a solace.

After the yield loss in last aman, boro prospect also looks uncertain as seedlings suffered badly due to a prolonged cold spell and foggy weather last winter.

The government sold some four lakh MT of grains from public granaries under a subsidised open market sale (OMS) programme to offset rice price hike during the last Ramadan.

As a result, the current stock at the public silos stands a little over five lakh MT, more than three lakh MT down from the government-set minimum food

Autonomy spark to Petrobangla cos

SHARIER KHAN

The government has given autonomy and financial freedom to all the nine Petrobangla affiliated companies to perk up their performance.

The companies, legally supposed to enjoy the latitude as they were born long ago, pump more than Tk 1,500 crore to the national exchequer a year and figure on the list of top public sector earners.

The cabinet on April 6 decided to give autonomy to six companies while three others had got the status late last year.

As there was no legal measures required, all the government had to do to implement the decision was issuing a fresh gazette notification.

"The autonomy means the nine companies will be able to recruit their own manpower, plan and approve their own projects and bankroll their own schemes," said a Petrobangla source.

Last week, one of these 'liberated' companies, Gas Transmission Company Ltd (GTCL), applied the newfound financial freedom for the first time and approved a Tk 28 crore project to procure coated pipeline.

Without financial freedom, the companies could not retain any part of their earnings for their own development and due to lack of autonomy they could

not hire or promote staff on the basis of performance.

"Our companies are supposed to be allowed to retain at least 10 per cent of revenue. But the finance ministry took it all. And for different projects, we have to depend on the whims of bureaucrats as well as the political leadership," commented an official.

"Now we will be able to retain 10 per cent."

On November 11, last year the government gave autonomy and financial freedom to Titas Gas Transmission and Distribution Company Ltd (TGTCL), Gas Transmission Company Ltd (GTCL) and Rupantarita Praktik Gas Company Ltd (RPGCL).

Jalalabad Gas Transmission and Distribution Company Ltd (JGTCL), Bangladesh Gas Fields Company Ltd (BGFL), Bakhirabad Gas Systems Ltd (BGSL), Sylhet Gas Fields Ltd (SGFL), Pashchimanchal Gas Company Ltd (PGCL) and Petroleum Exploration and Production Company Ltd (BAPEX) got the status last week.

The oldest of these companies -- Titas Gas Company -- was formed in 1966 while the youngest companies -- the PGCL and BAPEX -- were set up three years ago. Seven out of the nine companies are more than a

decade old.

The cabinet at its April 6 meeting stressed that the purpose of establishing the companies was to speed up activities, ensure efficiency and planned development.

But lack of latitude presented a drag on the companies to discharge their duties properly.

The cabinet, however, pointed out that there was no financial restriction on the companies, but they did not apply any of their financial or administrative authority.

"Due to weak management, activities of the employees' unions and inadequate financial capacities, these companies are failing to provide services consistent with the overall gas demand and supply situation," the cabinet noted.

Such a situation led to growing financial and managerial complications, especially in project implementation, recovery of outstanding bills and system loss handling.

The meeting chaired by Prime Minister Khaleda Zia noted that development partners, including the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank, suggested restructuring the companies

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