

Ditch political projects

Three review bodies tell Saifur

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Reviewing the government's entire financial management, three high-powered bodies on the finance ministry recommended for not undertaking politically motivated projects in the next budget.

The Public Expenditure Review Commission, the Revenue Reforms Commission and the Committee on Default Loan at a pre-budget meeting put forward the recommendation yesterday.

Finance and Planning Minister M Saifur Rahman chaired the meeting.

Various aspects of the budget for 2003-04 fiscal, including ways to increase revenue collection through revitalisation of income tax, VAT and reforms in tax administration figured

in the meeting. It also touched on human resources, health and agriculture sectors that demand increased investments.

Differing slightly with the recommendation on political project, the finance minister argued that the people's expectation to a political government should be honoured.

"But, we can certainly say the government will not take any project without economic and commercial justifications," Saifur told reporters. He stressed that there would be no project on sheer political grounds.

A political government has to deliver its pledges to people who want the government construct bridges, culverts and roads for the betterment of their fate, he said.

Of the committees, the Public

Expenditure Review Commission submitted a report.

"We have put our suggestions about what the government should do and where to focus its attention," Chairman of the commission M Hafizuddin Ahmed told reporters.

Asked whether the commission identified sectors with overwhelming expenditures, he said there were many of the kind. Now, the government needs to look into the quality of projects.

In his report, he strongly recommended avoiding projects with political motivation in the next budget. He said he would submit another report on public spending sometime in May before the budget was announced.

Dr Wahiduddin Mahmud, chair-

man of the body on default loan, emphasised increased attention to small and cottage industries and the agriculture sector to maintain the pace of GDP growth against global meltdown.

He said a lean cropping this year would call for food grain imports and put strain on foreign currency reserve. He suggested maintaining a conducive atmosphere for trade and industries with institutional and technological support.

"The prime target of next budget should be poverty alleviation," he said.

Chairman of the Revenue Reforms Commission Meer Mustafizur Rahman and other senior officials attended the meeting.

Police murder 2 picked up for quizzing in Bagerhat

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, Khulna

Two persons have been taken into custody for quizzing in police murder and arms looting case recorded with Fakirhat Police Station.

The arrestees are Shukumar Mondal, 35, and his brother-in-law Lilpada Mondal, 32, of Kakarhi village under Mollahat upazila.

They were picked up from a bazar yesterday morning, said OC Nikhil Chandra Das.

The microbus used by outlaws for killing two policemen and looting arms was found abandoned near Kendua Bridge in Mollahat upazila. One bullet and an unused note book were found in the microbus.

Meanwhile, bodies of slain police constables Shah Alam and Abul Kalam were sent to their home districts of Meherpur and Patuakhali yesterday.

Dhaka, Delhi start talks today on trade, push-in

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Bangladesh and India are likely to take up all bilateral issues including trade, communication and push-in at the official talks beginning in the city today.

Indian Foreign Secretary Kanwal Sibal was scheduled to arrive in Dhaka late last night to attend the foreign secretary-level talks to be held for the first time since the BNP-led coalition government took over in October 2001. Sibal was earlier due to arrive yesterday afternoon but his flight was rescheduled.

Foreign Secretary Shamsher Mobin Chowdhury had indicated earlier that the talks would cover border problems, trade and commu-

nications including inland water protocol and all other bilateral issues.

Foreign ministry sources said push-in of Bangla-speaking Indians into Bangladesh and Indian allegation of illegal migration to that country would come up prominently at the talks.

Sibal would have a meeting with Foreign Minister M Morshed Khan this morning. The official talks with Shamsher Mobin would begin at 2:00 pm.

Sources said Bangladesh side would emphasise an end to push-in for further strengthening bilateral relations.

It could not be known whether the Indian side would take up the issues

of land transit through Bangladesh and use of its port facilities. Shamsher Mobin had earlier told reporters, "I will let you know if there is any discussion on transit issue."

Meanwhile, the foreign minister told newsmen on April 23 that Dhaka attaches great importance to ties with Delhi and that allegations like harbouring insurgency against each other or illegal migration could be resolved through discussions.

"To put an end to illegal migration, we feel that all informal and illegal trade between Bangladesh and India should stop. Because of such trade, there are illegal migrations," Morshed Khan had said at a discussion meeting in the city last week.

Mobin denies US pressure to cancel PM-Muselier meet

UNB, Dhaka

Foreign Secretary Shamsher Mobin Chowdhury yesterday dismissed as "rubbish" the notion that a meeting between Prime Minister Khaleda Zia and French State Minister for Foreign Affairs Renaud Muselier was cancelled due to pressure from an American lobby.

"A request was made but there was no appointment fixed for the call on the prime minister. But the prime minister had no time and it was conveyed to the French side," Chowdhury told reporters.

Asked whether the call could not take place because of pressure from the American lobby as reported in some newspapers yesterday, the foreign secretary termed the idea rubbish.

Responding to a question at a press conference at Sonargaon hotel Sunday evening, the French minister said he was scheduled to meet with the prime minister Sunday



PHOTO: STAR

Immigration officials at Zia International Airport wear masks and gloves to check health cards of incoming passengers yesterday following worldwide SARS scare. Bangladesh had two SARS suspects.

Borders on SARS alert

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The government has instructed health officials to screen all incoming travellers at Benapole in Jessore, Bhomra in Satkhira and Darshana in Chuadanga.

An official at Benapole said one doctor with two medical assistants are on duty for examining any suspected SARS patient.

They have been examining all incoming travellers, suspected of having any illness, coming from West Bengal. More than two hundred travellers cross over to Bangladesh from India every day, but officials said they are having difficulties in identifying who is actually ill having symptoms of SARS, as most of the Bangladeshi travellers are returning after surgery or some other medical intervention done in India.

"Every day one doctor from the nearest Sarsha thana health complex comes to Benapole land port and opens an official booth where suspected patients are screened for illness," said

Md Mosharaf Hossain, officer-in-charge, immigration, at Benapole.

The medical scrutiny has started since Thursday but the official said there is no system for isolating the patients. "There is no separate room or place where we can keep a suspected patient in isolation," said another official at Benapole.

An official instruction released from the health directorate last week asked all suspected travellers to undergo quarantine and if required they would be shifted to the Institute of Chest Diseases Hospital (ICDH) in the city.

Medical officers have also been deployed from Khulna division at Darshana in Chuadanga and Bhomra in Satkhira. But no one could be contacted in those places.

Meanwhile, all incoming passengers landing at the Zia International Airport (ZIA) have to undergo medical checkup. All airlines were

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US hosts Iraqi political meet amid protests

AFP, Baghdad

Iraqis of all political stripes gathered for a US-led meeting here Monday to take the first steps toward a new democracy after the fall of Saddam Hussein.

But thousands of mainly Shiite Muslims who were held down under Saddam's rule took to the streets in a show of force, demanding a greater role in the next government as Iraq heads into an unknown political future.

Around 250 tribal chiefs, Shiite and Sunni clerics, Kurdish leaders and other invitees attended the meeting being led by Jay Garner, the retired US general now running post-war Iraq.

"It is our responsibility to start the process of the birth of democracy in Iraq here today," Garner said after the meeting began with a reading from the Koran.

Saying he felt "humble" as it was in ancient Iraq that the code of law and the rudiments of government first began, Garner said: "It's our job to give you the tools that you need,

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Small countries vulnerable after Iraq attack, says Gujral

BSS, Dhaka

The Iraq syndrome has raised concerns regarding vulnerability of sovereignty of smaller states to invasion by stronger ones, former Indian prime minister IK Gujral observed during an exclusive interview with the BSS on Sunday.

Gujral, chairman of South Asians for Human Rights (SAHR), came to Dhaka on April 25 on a three-day visit to attend a meeting of the non-

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Inflation inches up

SARS can take toll on economy, says ADB

STAR REPORT

Inflation rose by 1.5 percentage points on increased food price index went up by 3 percentage points in only two months since December, according to the Asian Development Bank (ADB).

"Inflation on a point-to-point basis rose 5.9 per cent in February this year

from 4.4 per cent in December 2002 as the food price index increased to 6.6 per cent from 3.6 per cent during this period," said the ADB in its Quarterly Economic Update.

Food price index has a weight of over 60 per cent in the overall index. Higher food prices have been mainly attributed to increases in the cost of energy follow-

ing increases in fuel prices in early January 2003, the ADB said.

Energy amounted to over 30 per cent of the input costs in food grain production.

"Non-food inflation, which has been the main driving force behind the steady rise in inflation in the recent past, however moderated to 4.8 per cent

in February from 5.7 per cent in December 2002. This was due to greater exchange rate stability, and tighter fiscal and monetary policy."

Toru Shibuichi, country director of ADB, and other officials were present at the briefing on Bangladesh economy.

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Saddam alive, Tareq Aziz says during interrogation

REUTERS, Washington

Iraq's former deputy prime minister, Tareq Aziz, has told US interrogators that Saddam Hussein survived two airstrikes launched to kill the ousted Iraqi president, USA Today reported yesterday.

Aziz, who is being questioned at an undisclosed location, said he saw Saddam alive after the March 19 and April 7 airstrikes on Baghdad targeting the former Iraqi leaders and his two sons, the newspaper reported, citing a senior defence official.

But USA Today quoted the official as also saying that interrogators had concluded that Aziz was lying about other matters that had come up in questioning.

Aziz, the most recognisable of the 13 former Iraqi officials known to be in US custody, surrendered to US forces last Thursday. He was no 43 on the US list of 55 most-wanted members of Saddam Hussein's administration.



Tareq Aziz

US officials have said the fate of the toppled Iraqi president remains unknown amid mixed reports about whether Saddam was dead or alive. If he is alive, Saddam would mark his 66th birthday on Monday.

US war commander General Tommy Franks said on Sunday Aziz was providing a lot of information to

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