

Govt agrees to withdraw L/C margin by December

Savings instrument rates to be pegged to market to get IMF loan

REJAUL KARIM BYRON

The government yesterday committed to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) that it will completely withdraw margin on letters of credit (L/Cs) on imports and peg interest rates on savings instruments to market by December.

The National Board of Revenue (NBR) will also form a fully-fledged Large Taxpayers' Unit (LTU).

In exchange, the IMF will disburse the \$70 million second tranche of the Poverty Reduction Growth Facility (PRGF) loan.

The government yesterday finalised a memorandum of economic and financial policy (MEFP) with a visiting IMF mission, outlining the tasks for the government by

December. This five-member mission came to Dhaka on October 17 to assess the progress in commitments that the government made.

The IMF mission led by its Assistant Director Chanpen Puckatikom held a meeting with Finance Minister M Saifur Rahman at his residence yesterday. Bangladesh Bank Governor Dr Fakhruddin Ahmed and Finance Secretary Zakir Ahmed were present.

"We have agreed on the draft MEFP," Puckatikom told journalists after the meeting. "Now it is up to the government to finalise it."

Back in June, the IMF board approved a \$490 million PRGF loan for Bangladesh to be disbursed in seven instalments. The first instal-

ment of \$70 million was disbursed in late June and the IMF board will decide the second instalment at a meeting on December 17.

In the last 12 days, the visiting IMF mission met high officials of the finance ministry, Bangladesh Bank, NBR, energy ministry and other important offices. They discussed reforms of the nationalised commercial banks, state-owned enterprises and the power sector.

Following the IMF suggestions, the central bank cut L/C margin on imports down to 50 percent this month.

The Bangladesh Bank and finance ministry have been working on the interest rate of savings instruments.

Govt believes in free flow of information, says PM

UNB, Dhaka

Prime Minister Khaleda Zia has reaffirmed that the government believes in free flow of information and people's right to know.

"Even in the changed world scenario, we have taken steps to relax the Official Secrets Act," she said, adding that the media in the country were now working in a complete independent environment.

The prime minister was addressing a function marking the handing over of audiovisual vans and multimedia projectors to Mass Communications Department at the International Conference Centre yesterday.

She handed over to district information officers the keys and allotment letters of 24 vans and 64 multimedia projectors received under "Advocacy on Reproductive Health".

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English Road in Dhaka is jammed with vehicles yesterday, showing no effect of the joint operation of police and Bangladesh Rifles, enforced in the capital to ease traffic snarl-ups.

PDB quick to restore power supply

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The Power Development Board (PDB) yesterday remarkably restored power supply across the country in less than 24 hours after the Wednesday's massive blackout.

The PDB engineers made 22 out of 23 power plants of the country up and running -- meeting the full peak demand of 3483 mega watt (MW). The left out plant is one of the two units of 420 MW Raosan power plant. The unit needs three days to start up again.

Experts have fixed the technical glitch at Ashuganj substation that led to the shut down of 21 power plants one after another Wednesday at 9:40am, sources said.

"To restore regular power supply, we have replaced a system called bus-bar loop and a 132 KV bushing in the substation," said a PDB official.

The two 64 MW power units in Ashuganj were installed in 1970. As these old units were performing poorly they have been refurbished recently and those are now generating power.

Shakil's death

Locals besiege Khilgaon Police Station again

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Locals at Meradia laid siege to Khilgaon Police Station yesterday demanding immediate arrest of the officials involved in the killing of Shakil Ahmed Chowdhury Sumon in police custody.

Over 400 people marched to the police station at about noon to besiege for two hours.

They chanted slogans demanding arrest of Entajer Rahman, former OC of the police station, and second officer Mahub. They also demanded capital punishment to the alleged killers.

"We want to see that Entajer and Mahub are arrested," Sumon's uncle Jasim Uddin told a rally during the siege. Pointing out that withdrawal of Rahman was insufficient he added, "we can not let the killers go scot-free".

Earlier in the morning, members



PHOTO: STAR

A patient is transported by rickshaw-wan in the midday heat on Johnson Road yesterday. Scarcity of ambulances in the capital is so acute, even the critically ill are forced to travel in slow vehicles.

UN withdraws staff from Iraq 'temporarily'

BBC ONLINE

The United Nations has ordered the withdrawal of its remaining international staff from Baghdad as part of a review of the security situation there.

"We have asked Baghdad staff to come out temporarily for consultations with people from headquarters on the future of our operation," UN spokeswoman in Geneva Marie Heuze said yesterday.

UN officials insist they are not pulling out of Iraq -- the withdrawals

would be staggered, meaning there would always be a presence in the Iraqi capital.

The order comes amid ongoing attacks on aid workers -- the latest was on the Red Cross headquarters in Baghdad on Monday, which killed 12 people.

The bombing was one of a series of attacks that left a total of 36 dead -- making it the bloodiest day since the start of the US-led occupation.

Both the UN and the Red Cross have already said they will reduce their numbers in Iraq.

An estimated 50 foreign UN workers are said to remain in Iraq after most were pulled out following a devastating attack on UN headquarters in August that also killed top UN envoy Sergio Vieira de Mello.

The Red Cross has not yet determined how many staff to pull out -- a move decided on in the wake of the first suicide attack ever on the humanitarian organisation.

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Anomalies found in Rajuk projects

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Two sub-committees constituted by the parliamentary standing committee on estimates found irregularities in the implementation of different housing and road construction projects under Rajuk.

The convenors of the sub-committees, also ruling BNP lawmakers, yesterday submitted their preliminary probe reports to the committee at a meeting held at the Jatiya Sangsad Bhaban with committee Chairman Sayed Mahedi Ahmed in the chair.

Meeting sources said Abu Hena, convenor of a sub-committee, told the meeting that the government allocated only Tk 12 crore for Jhilmil

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Tripathy for joint approach to remove any mistrust

UNB, Dhaka

Outgoing Indian High Commissioner ML Tripathy has said Dhaka and New Delhi can initiate a joint approach to remove any mistrust or misgivings between the two next door neighbours.

In an interview with UNB yesterday, he described the Indo-Bangladesh relations as "intimate, unique and diverse". Any differences between the two countries could be addressed through constant, candid and friendly dialogue, he said.

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ML Tripathy

DU admission form on offer from Dec 8-24

DU CORRESPONDENT

Distribution and submission of application forms for the first year honours admission to Dhaka University (DU) will continue from December 8-24, according to a schedule announced yesterday.

Admission tests for the session 2003-4 will begin on January 2, 2004, a DU press release said.

The application forms for over 4,000 seats will sell at Tk 300 each, up from Tk 250 last year, at university bank branches under five units including a new unit, uma, for the law faculty.

The students to apply under humanities and law faculties will have to collect forms of kha and uma units from the TSC branch of Janata

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Rejoinder and our reply

The Ministry of Women and Children Affairs protested a report headlined "Of a blessed bureaucrat" run by The Daily Star on October 27.

The rejoinder signed by Shefayet Hossain, public relations officer of the ministry, said Ferdous Ara, a joint secretary, was in charge of development and planning of the ministry and responsible for implementation of 32 projects relating to Beijing Platform For Action and the National Plan of Action.

Every single visit cited in the report was relevant to her area of work. She made the visits at the instruction of higher authorities, so

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Job seekers to Malaysia flock to clinics ignoring minister's caution

RAFIQ HASAN

Anisur Rahman was in the middle of a long queue at a city clinic for medical checkup required for a job he hopes to land in Malaysia but its prospect is anything but certain.

Months ago, Anis also made a down payment of Tk 50,000 on a service charge of Tk 1.30 lakh and

submitted his passport to a middleman of a recruiting agency although it is still months away before Malaysia allows fresh workers following a ban in 1997.

People have lost money like that to dishonest middlemen and Anis is playing a dangerous gamble he hopes will pay off. But that will not happen until he gets a visa which he

does not know when, if at all.

Meanwhile, his agent told him to obtain a medical report, which costs Tk 1,000, but the report is valid for 45 days only and unless he flies to his cherished destination within this time period, he will need to get a fresh report.

"If a person fails to reach

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Rain may tame raging fires in California

REUTERS, Los Angeles

Rain and incoming fog may help Californian firefighters tame voracious fires that have killed 20 people and devoured thousands of homes in their raging path.

Fire officials said the only hope they had for preventing a repeat of Wednesday's disaster on Lake Arrowhead in the San Bernardino mountains was incoming fog that was expected to creep in from the ocean and envelop the mountains by the week's end.

Rain and some sleet had also started falling on Thursday morning in some parts of the devastated state.

"The good news is that a little too late the weather is changing on us. ... We will still have trouble (on Thursday) in the higher elevations, but by Friday we will get higher humidity ... and this will help the fire suppression effort," said Andrea Tuttle, the head of the state's

Forestry Department. Tuttle said that the San Bernardino Mountains, the winter playground for nearby Los Angeles, could erupt in flames of Biblical proportions because of a huge infestation of minute bark beetles which killed 70 percent of the trees around Lake Arrowhead and surrounding communities.

"Lake Arrowhead is the perfect storm of factors combining to produce a really dangerous situation -- three or four years of drought, a bark beetle infestation, decades of fire suppression and really widespread residential development all mixed up together," said Jay Watson of the Wilderness Society.

The flames that raced up the canyon leading to Lake Arrowhead, about 70 miles east (110 km) of Los Angeles, reached heights of 300 feet (90 metres), twice the size of the area's once majestic pine and fir trees.



PHOTO: STAR

Army personnel yesterday man the water tank in Fakirerpul to ensure adequate supply of water during Ramadan.

Sehri, Iftar timing

Ramadan	Oct	Sehri	Iftar
4	31		5-23
5	Nov 1	4-43	5-23
6	Nov 2	4-44	5-22

	Sun Rises	Sun Sets
Oct 31		5-20 pm
Nov 01	6-05 am	

Prayer Timings

October 31		
	Azan	Jamaat
Fajr	4-43	4-50
Juma	12-15	1-20
Asr	4-00	4-15
Maghrib	5-23	5-30
Esha	7-30	8-00

Source: Islamic Foundation