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PDB's questionable deal with Westmont

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Keeping the Cabinet Purchase Committee in the dark, the Power Development Board is modifying a 130 MW barge-mounted power project deal with Malaysian company Westmont Power giving it unauthorised benefits, sources said.

In early October, the committee approved an unsolicited proposal of Westmont to set up the gas-fired barge-mounted power plant in Baghabari.

Westmont proposal sounded very attractive since it said it could set up the plant in only six months and that it would charge only US\$ 2.79 cents per unit of power for 20 years.

The purchase committee gave

certain terms and condition that the payment for power purchase will be made in local currency, Westmont will submit a \$1.5 million bond and it will be liable to pay \$10,000 a day for any delay in the implementation of the project.

Westmont is now persuading the PDB and the power division of the energy ministry to allow it to provide \$5,000,000 bond. It has also convinced the PDB that in case of delay of the project, it will pay only \$1,000 demurrage instead of \$10,000 a day.

In addition, Westmont and its politically-backed lobbies say that it will not accept power purchase payment in local currency. Rather it wants to be paid in dollars.

It is expected that such a contract between the PDB and Westmont will be finalised within

the next two weeks keeping the purchase committee in the dark, sources said.

Industry insiders reveal that Westmont's proposal actually bases on mobilising and installing a 10-year-old unused power unit.

Malaysia's Sabah Shipyard, once owned by the proprietors of Westmont, built a 90 MW barge-mounted power unit in 1994. It was supposed to be installed in the Philippines, but it never materialised due to technical glitches in the unit.

Industry insiders say this unit is being modified for installation at Baghabari.

"There is no record of any independent private power (IPP) company that can install a plant within six months of the contract. It is only

possible when it has a plant ready for mobilisation," said a source.

"And there is no instance in Bangladesh where an IPP has installed an old unit."

Westmont is currently operating a 90 MW barge-mounted power plant for over three years. It submitted the proposal for the 130 MW plant earlier this year.

The power ministry scrutinised its proposal and observed, as per the private sector power generation policy that all independent private power projects should be built on the basis of competitive bidding.

But the ministry feels that the proposal has several positive aspects like lower tariff and a b s e n c e

SEE PAGE 11 COL 8

Save the guest birds

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

They are school-age children but turned away from reading table for a day to join a human chain to protest the mindless killing of guest birds that fly to Bangladesh for winter refuge every year.

Bristy, 8, and Mohibullah, 11, went to Shahbagh yesterday with their mother to take part in the anti-poaching movement of people of all ages. They carried placards of unknown birds they painted themselves.

Bristy and Mohibullah are not the only child participants.

Anisha and Tanzida were among other schoolchildren, urging hunters not to kill the migratory birds. They coined different slogans -- "do not net birds, let them live", "stop killing guest birds" and "stop trading in wildlife".

"Killing birds is a harm for the environment," said Palash, a student



PHOTO: STAR
 The activists of Bandhu, a social organisation, forms a human chain at Shahbagh crossing in Dhaka yesterday in protest against the poaching of migratory birds.

SEE PAGE 11 COL 3

Democracy Day today

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The country observes 'Democracy Day' today, commemorating the fall of autocratic ruler HM Ershad who stepped down on this day in 1990 in the face of a mass uprising.

Many people died in the anti-Ershad movement that led to General Ershad's downfall on this day when he handed over power to a caretaker government ending nine years of autocratic rule after grabbing power through a coup on March 24, 1982.

The country re-stepped into the parliamentary system of democracy through a constitutional amendment after a free and fair election held in 1991 under the first-ever non-party caretaker government led by the then chief justice Shahabuddin Ahmed.

The February 27, 1991 elections brought the BNP to power while the AL emerged as the main opposition party.

SEE PAGE 11 COL 7

Anti-Ahamadia group gives one-week deadline to govt

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

An anti-Ahamadia group gave the government a one-week ultimatum to declare followers of the sect non-Muslims from a hate-filled demonstration of over 30,000 people in Tejgaon yesterday, sparking security fears and galvanising police and paramilitary BDR into broad alert.

Putting up barricades on Tongi Diversion Road, the demonstrators staged a rally at Nabisco crossing after Friday prayers in the presence of hundreds of policemen and other security agents. The road-block halted traffic up to Mohakhali about two hours.

Over 1,000 policemen in riot gear were deployed to Nabisco crossing, GMG Lane, Volvo Lane and Tabani Lane and several platoons of BDR men were on high alert at Tejgaon Police Station to face any surge of violence.

The demonstrators, most in red

band on right arm and red badge on the chest, shouted slogans against the Ahamadias and branded them as kafir.

Marauding volunteers under Khatme Nabuwat Samannoy Committee, a new anti-Ahamadia outfit, screamed abuse at passers-by and even barred ambulances from passing through the road, kept off-limits to traffic even after the close of their rally.

The anti-Ahamadia leaders announced a series of programmes from a supporter-crammed makeshift stage on a truck in the presence of Mohiuddin Khan, a leader of the Islami Oikya Jote, a partner of the ruling BNP-led coalition.

"The government has long ignored demands of Islamic groups. They will not back out of what they want. The government cannot go on without meeting their demands," Mohiuddin said.

The leaders burnt a copy of the Prothom Alo and asked all Muslims

not to read the Bangla daily, branding it as the mouthpiece of Ahamadias.

They threatened the Ahamadias with arson in symbolic imitation of the burning of the newspaper.

The threat came after Mohammad Mahmudul Hasan Mamtaji, the imam of Rahim Metal Mosque in ward No. 37 in Tejgaon, led a group to attack the Ahamadia Mosque on November 21, injuring about 100 people, 12 of them policemen.

Mamtaji, also president of Khatme Nabuwat Samannoy Committee, said the anti-Ahamadia group would not be responsible for the fate of Ahamadias.

"We do not want to take the law into our own hands, but we don't know what will happen to them," the imam warned.

Mamtaji said, "If Ahamadias

SEE PAGE 11 COL 1

UP chairman, listed criminal gunned down in city

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

A union parishad (UP) chairman and a listed criminal were gunned down in separate incidents in the city yesterday.

Azharul Haq, 45, UP chairman of Ekhlaspur in Chandpur, was gunned down at Pallabi as he was returning home in the evening after Maghrib prayers, victim's family sources said.

"A group of unidentified young men who lay in ambush in front of Azharul's house opened fire from behind as he neared the house," said a relative of the victim who witnessed the incident.

Azharul received six bullets and collapsed on the ground. His relatives took him to Dhaka Medical College Hospital (DMCH) where doctors pronounced him dead.

SEE PAGE 11 COL 3

Another arms haul

Rifle, 800 bullets seized at Mohakhali

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

In yet another arms haul in the capital in six days, police recovered a foreign-made gun and about 800 bullets of sophisticated rifles from a house at Mohakhali yesterday.

A tenant of the tin-shed house, Abul Kashem, was arrested. His brother and another person were picked up on suspicion.

The arms and ammunition belonged to 'Galkata' Babul, second-in-command of the notorious criminal outfit led by Banga Babu, said Kashem.

"The types of the ammunition suggest the gunrunners in this case are not the ones who were linked to the huge arms cache seized from Kuril Badda on Sunday," said Commissioner of Dhaka Metropolitan Police Ashrafur Huda.

Acting on a tip-off, Gulshan police led by Officer-in-Charge of the police station Iftekhar Hossain raided the house located behind the Ban Bhaban at around 12:30pm. They found a double barrel foreign-made gun, 25 bullets of .32 bore pistol, seven of .303 rifle, 11 of Chinese rifle, 3 of 9mm pistol and 15 more bullets under a cot in Kashem's room.

Police arrested Kashem and on information from him recovered a velvet bag containing 14 boxes full of bullets of .22 bore rifle. They also seized a pistol cover, a toy pistol, a machete, four knives and a hammer.

"The .22 bore bullets can be used to kill a target even three kilometres away. I think those were brought in for use inside the country," said Golam Rasul, deputy commissioner of the DMP.

During interrogation, Kashem told police Babul gave him the rifle and bullets recently, fearing it was not safe for him to keep those. Kashem however claimed he was ignorant of the contents of the velvet-bag.

Sources said police arrested Babul before the Ramadan and he came out on bail.

Banga Babu was arrested during the Operation Clean Heart last year. During interrogation, he said Babul was given the responsibility for leading the gang earlier led by him.

A case under the Arms Act was filed against Abul Kashem.

In Sunday's arms haul, four AK-47 assault rifles, 20 hand grenades, four time bombs, a large number of AK-47 bullets, explosives and other things were seized.



PHOTO: STAR

Anti-Ahamadia people, left, rally on Tongi Diversion Road yesterday, putting up roadblocks on the major thoroughfare during a demonstration against the sect. Police, right, in riot gear are on the wary watch at the Nakhhalpara Ahamadia Mosque, the high-profile target of anti-Ahamadia attackers.

B Chy meets professionals

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Former president Prof Badruddoza Chowdhury, who stirred the political arena with his recent announcement of an initiative to form a civil society platform, passed another busy day yesterday exchanging opinion with professionals.

Sources close to Prof B Chowdhury told The Daily Star last night that some economists and physicians including several members of the Doctors Association of Bangladesh (DAB) called at his Baridhara residence in the city.

Welcoming his move some of the visitors advised him to float a new political party instead, sources said adding that the former president only greeted the piece of advice with a smile.

36 killed as suicide blast tears thru' Russian train

150 hurt, Chechen rebels blamed

AFP, Moscow

At least 36 people died and more than 150 were injured when a suicide blast blamed on Chechen rebels tore through a Russian commuter train near the war-torn republic yesterday, two days before a national parliamentary election.

The interior ministry in Moscow said a suicide bomber was behind the explosion, the ITAR-TASS news agency reported. The blast was so powerful that it ripped one of the train's cars in half.

Investigators from the Federal Security Service sifting through the

wreckage found body parts of the suspected bomber strewn around, with a bag nearby that had contained mainly plastic explosives equivalent to 10 kilograms of TNT.

"Next to body parts of the suicide bomber we found a bag in which there had apparently been an explosive device that was detonated in the train, equivalent to up to 10 kilograms of TNT," the FSB press service told ITAR-TASS.

Television images showed one of the carriages as a mangled wreck of metal with shreds of bloodied clothing hanging from rods poking out. The roof was collapsed, the windows blown out. The other

train cars looked intact.

Earlier reports had suggested that the blast might have been caused by a remote-controlled bomb placed on the train tracks.

At least 28 people died on the spot and four died in hospital in the Stavropol district, which lies north of Chechnya, emergency ministry officials in Moscow told AFP. Officials did not specify where the other four victims had died.

More than a hundred people were rushed to local hospitals, eight of them in emergency care, r e s c u e

SEE PAGE 11 COL 4



PHOTO: AFP

Investigators examine the wreckage of a commuter train blown up in a suicide bombing in the town of Yessentuki in southern Russia yesterday that killed 36 people and injured 150 two days before parliamentary polls.

Blast in Baghdad kills US soldier, four Iraqis

AFP, Baghdad

A homemade bomb killed at least four Iraqis and one US soldier when it exploded in a crowded shopping street of the capital yesterday as a US army convoy passed by, hospital and military sources said.

Another 15 Iraqis, including two women and a child, were wounded in the blast, which occurred some 200 metres from a mosque in the New Baghdad district.

"A 22nd Signal Brigade soldier was killed today in eastern Baghdad at approximately 9:20 am," the coalition said.

"The soldier was traveling in a three-vehicle convoy when an improvised explosive device detonated between the first and second

vehicles.

The statement did not mention US wounded.

Witnesses had earlier reported seeing at least one US soldier covered in blood and as many as three hurt before the convoy drove away from the devastation.

Blood, pieces of flesh, discarded clothing and shoes littered the street, an AFP reporter at the scene said.

Ahmed Ali, a sweets seller, said: "It's a cowardly act. They hurt one American but they killed and wounded far more Iraqis. I saw one American soldier badly wounded and covered in blood."

"When it exploded the street was blocked with traffic. People in a

SEE PAGE 11 COL 4

PCJSS leader shot dead in Khagrachhari

UNB, Khagrachhari

Gunmen shot dead a local leader of Parbatya Chattagram Jana Sanghati Samity (PCJSS) at Manikya Karbaripara in Panchhari upazila on Thursday night.

Police and witnesses said the assailants stormed into the house of Pancha Kumar Chakma alias Kiron Chakma at about 9:45pm and shot him in the throat point blank. Kiron died on the spot.

Hearing gunshots, police and security personnel rushed to the spot, but could not nab any of the killers.

Kiron was a captain of the now defunct insurgent group, Shantibahini, the armed wing of the PCJSS. He laid down his arms during general amnesty in 1998, when the guerrilla group was disbanded following the CHT peace accord.

He was killed reportedly within 48 hours of United People's Democratic Front (UPDF)

SEE PAGE 11 COL 8

Outlawed party men slay 5 rivals in Shaikupa

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Kushtia

Five underground operatives were slaughtered by their rivals at village Tribeni in Shaikupa upazila of Jhenidah district in the early hours of yesterday.

They were identified as Nuru Kana, 32, son of Fatikuddin of Abdalpur village and Sariful Islam, 35, son of Arab Ali of Retulpura village in Kushtia Sadar upazila and Sahid, 32, son of Khaibar, Newaz, 35, son of Moinuddin and Tariqul Alam, 27, of village Tribeni in Shaikupa upazila of Jhenidah.

According to Jhenidah and Kushtia police, a group of 20 armed men allegedly belonging to Gono Bahini cordoned off a house at the village at about 3:00am where at least ten cadres of outlawed Gono Mukti Foj (GMF) were holding a

secret meeting.

The Gono Bahini men caught five GMF cadres, while others managed to flee. They took the GMF cadres to Tribeni Kuthipara field at gunpoint, beat them up and then slit their throats.

Police recovered the bodies yesterday morning and sent them to Jhenidah Sadar Hospital for autopsy.

Police said the five were murdered following a feud between the two underground outfits over establishing supremacy in the area.

Police have launched a hunt for the killers. Senior police officials, including Deputy Inspector General of Police (DIG), Khulna Range, Aziz Sarkar, visited the area.

Additional police and Bangladesh Rifles (BDR) personnel have been deployed in area.