

Benazir lauds Vajpayee for peace move

PTI, New Delhi

Observing that Pakistani military ruler Pervez Musharraf's "overt" statements for normalisation of ties with India "must be put to the test," former Pakistan premier Benazir Bhutto yesterday gave "credit" to Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee for the peace initiative despite failure of the Agra summit.

"It is to the credit of Prime Minister Vajpayee that he did not lose heart despite the undermining of his diplomacy and the failure of the Agra summit. But then he is a man of many surprises," she told a conference on "Peace Dividend -- Progress for India and South Asia" organised in New Delhi by the Hindustan Times.

Vajpayee, said Benazir, had indicated that his upcoming visit to Islamabad would include meetings

SEE PAGE 11 COL 8



PHOTO: PID

Prime Minister Khaleda Zia is received at Zia International Airport by members of her cabinet, chiefs of three services and diplomats on her return yesterday from the World Summit on Information Society at Geneva.

OLD-AGE ALLOWANCE

Beneficiaries' number to be doubled

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The government has decided to double the number of beneficiaries of its old-age allowance scheme within this fiscal year and assign the newly formed Gram Sarkar, the lowest tier of local government, to make a list of senior citizens.

Presently, half a million people get this monthly allowance of Tk 150 each. The government targets to extend this facility to one million senior citizens.

The cabinet committee on old-age allowance scheme yesterday decided that the Gram Sarkar list will be scrutinised by a committee

headed by the upazila nirbahi officer (UNO) before being sent to the Ministry of Social Welfare for allocation of the allowance.

According to Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, about two million people are above 60.

The cabinet committee meeting chaired by Finance and Planning Minister M Saifur Rahman also decided to redefine old age under this scheme, raising the qualifying age to 60 from 57.

On why Gram Sarkar has been assigned to make the list, Saifur told journalists after the meeting held at the Planning Commission,

"It's Gram Sarkar that can properly assess who qualifies for this benefit."

"But we leave no scope for nepotism and have decided to put the committee under the UNO to scrutinise the lists," he added.

The cabinet committee also decided to spread this benefit as per the distribution of population. A maximum of 24 people in each ward of a union parishad and 12 people in each municipality ward now get the allowance. Under the new decision, the density of population in a ward

SEE PAGE 11 COL 1

Burn victim dies in Barisal

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Barisal

A housewife died at Sher-e-Bangla Medical College Hospital (SBMCH) in Barisal yesterday, 10 days after her husband allegedly set fire on her.

Hosne Ara Begum, 22, a housewife of Lohalia union in Patuakhali, died at the SBMCH in the early hours.

On December 3, her husband Bashir Howlader at his residence at Kuripaikka village poured kerosene on her and set fire. Hosne Ara's relatives said neighbours rescued her and took her to the hospital.

Hosne Ara, an orphan, was married to her cousin Howlader two years ago, they added.

Howlader's family used to torture her for dowry and he burnt her to death, they alleged.

Bhuiyan plays down AL threat

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

BNP Secretary General Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan yesterday rejected the main opposition Awami League's threat of toppling the government saying that the next general election will take place on completion of the government's tenure.

"Nothing will be able to topple the government ... power change-over will only take place through polls as there is no other alternative," he said.

Addressing a discussion meeting yesterday organised by BNP at Jatiya Press Club marking the Martyred Intellectuals Day today, Bhuiyan said the AL, which faced a massive polls debacle two years back, is now threatening to oust the government sometime in March or April.

Block 9 drilling begins today

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The Tullow-Chevron-Texaco along with Bapex (Bangladesh Petroleum Exploration Company) formally begins drilling in Block 9 today after a delay of three months that saw repeated changes in schedule.

The oil and gas exploration companies however informally started drilling works from Wednesday at the Kashimpur site amid confusion centring the transfer of Chevron-Texaco share in the block to Niko Resources.

Though the sale of 60 percent

shares of Chevron-Texaco to Niko violated almost all aspects of the Block-9 production sharing contract (PSC), the government is set to approve the changeover due to pressure from home and abroad, sources said.

Niko, disqualified in the second round bidding on technical and financial grounds, has already been disbursing funds for operations of the block.

A Chevron-Texaco application for the share sale approval waits for legal scrutiny by BNP MP Advocate Khandker Mahub Uddin Ahmed.

The stalemate after the September 17 announcement on the Chevron-Texaco and Niko sale deal caused the operators a loss of several million taka. Gigantic drilling equipment remained stranded at the port for about a month, as none of the baffled partners came forward to clear those.

Sensing Niko's political clout, a hesitant Tullow -- the current block operator -- is now pushing the

SEE PAGE 11 COL 4

KCC suspends executive engineer

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, Khulna

Khulna City Corporation (KCC) yesterday suspended its executive engineer and served show cause notice on a chief engineer on charge of corruption, negligence of duty and inefficiency.

KCC Mayor Tayebur Rahman suspended Mohammad Nazmul Islam, executive engineer-1 of the KCC, while Liaquat Ali Sharif, chief engineer of the KCC, was asked to reply to a show cause notice, a KCC press release said.

Departmental cases were also lodged against them, it added.

When contacted last evening, the KCC mayor said the 'corrupt' officials were warned several times prior to the departmental action.

However, the executive engineer-1 and the chief engineer could not be contacted despite repeated attempts.

Poura chairman removed for corruption

BSS, Cox's Bazar

Chairman of Cox's Bazar Pourasava (municipality) Nurul Absar, who was convicted of corruption in 1999 by a special tribunal, was removed yesterday after the Supreme Court had rejected his prayer for leave to appeal.

The orders for his removal from the post of pourasava chairman were published in a gazette notification on December 11.

The Special Tribunal, Chittagong sentenced him to two years' imprisonment on September 26, 1999. The court also fined him Tk 6 lakh, in default, he will have to suffer six more months in jail.

Absar, a local leader of the Awami League, filed an appeal petition with the High Court Division of the Supreme Court against the judge

SEE PAGE 11 COL 8

US tries to stem Iraqi army desertions

AP, Baghdad

The US-led coalition will reconsider the pay scale for members of the new Iraqi army after about half of the recruits deserted, the US general in charge of Iraqi military operations said yesterday.

Lt. Gen. Ricardo Sanchez, speaking at a news conference, said the major reason for the defections was pay, specifically allowances for married soldiers who were struggling to support their families on \$60 a month.

"We're working to review the pay scales and I think we'll have a decision in the coming weeks," Sanchez said.

But he said the setbacks shouldn't harm the overall goal of training

SEE PAGE 11 COL 2

JS body finds flaw with Rajuk's plot allocation

Authorities asked to recover Gulshan lake from grabbers

SHAKHAWAT LITON

A parliamentary committee yesterday found irregularities in the allocation of two plots to the Rajdhani Unnayan Kortipokkha (Rajuk) Employees Cooperatives Society in Dhaka and anomalies of the organisation, as well.

The Public Accounts Committee instantly rejected the reasons cited by Rajuk in favour of the allocation, constituted a three-member sub-committee headed by Manjur Quader to probe the irregularities and asked it to submit a report in the next 15 days.

The committee also asked authorities to act fast to recover the land of Gulshan lake from illegal occupation and come up with a report on the land grab at its next meeting.

Rajuk under the housing and public works ministry allocated a two-bigha and a 13-katha plots in Uttara to the Society at Tk 3 lakh a acre in 1994 and 1998, causing a financial loss of Tk 12 crore to the exchequer.

The Society has built a shopping

complex on the land.

The committee termed Rajuk's replies to 10 financial objections involving about Tk 68.77 crore as 'inconsistent and insufficient' and asked the comptroller and auditor general (CAG) to further pore over the objections.

"Rajuk has failed to meet public expectations and has turned into a black hole of corruption and irregularities involving government funds," the committee observed.

Its authorities have failed to take care of the organisation's property and implement their decisions, the committee observed.

"The committee directed Rajuk authorities to take stern actions against the persons responsible for the irregularities and misappropriations of public fund," Harun Al Rashid, chairman of the committee, told The Daily Star emerging from the meeting at the Jatiya Sangsad Bhaban.

The CAG's office also asked Rajuk authorities to improve its

SEE PAGE 11 COL 4

3 children hurt as bomb goes off at Badda

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Three street children received splinter injuries when a stray hand bomb went off in South Badda yesterday.

Sagar, 10 and Al-Amin, 8, sustained serious injuries while Hanufa, 10, received minor injury when a bomb blew off as they were scavenging from a dustbin beside Prime Automobiles Garage at 10:30am, according to the victims.

"We picked up a metal container and decided to check it to determine its value. We hit it with a brick and the bomb went off," Sagar told journalists at Dhaka Medical College Hospital (DMCH) later.

The bomb blew Sagar's right wrist and two fingers of his left hand off, Al-Amin was injured in both legs while Hanufa sustained minor injuries, locals said.

Locals admitted Sagar and Al-Amin to the DMCH while Hanufa was released after first aid at a local clinic.

Iran agrees to snap nuke inspections

REUTERS, Tehran

Iran will sign a binding international protocol in the next few days that authorises snap inspections of its nuclear sites by the UN nuclear watchdog, Foreign Minister Kamal Kharrazi says.

Asked when Iran would put pen to paper, Kharrazi told reporters: "In the next few days."

The government gave the formal go-ahead earlier this week for the country to sign the Additional Protocol to the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

This followed the decision in October to suspend the Islamic Republic's disputed uranium enrichment programme to dispel U.S.-led concern that it might be trying to produce nuclear weapons.

Kharrazi spoke to reporters on Saturday after meeting Indian Foreign Minister Yashwant Sinha, who said his country might be prepared to work with Iran on civilian nuclear technology.

EU adopts defence plan sans NATO influence

REUTERS, Brussels

European Union leaders have agreed to set up a military planning cell independent of NATO, but their plan fell deliberately short of French and German ambitions because of Washington's deep suspicions.

Seeking to close a chapter of trans-Atlantic acrimony over the Iraq war, leaders of the EU's 25 current and future members also declared their commitment to a "constructive, balanced and forward-looking partnership" with the United States.

Many in Washington view the EU's project to build an autonomous rapid reaction force as a French-inspired drive to subvert NATO and curb US influence.

The United States was particularly

SEE PAGE 11 COL 3

Table with Prayer Timings for December 14, including columns for Fajr, Azan, Jamaat, Zohr, Asr, Maghrib, and Esha.

Ministries asked to implement cabinet decisions as top priority

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The cabinet has instructed all ministries and their subordinate divisions, departments, directorates and other bodies to give top-most priority to implementation of the decisions taken at the cabinet meetings.

The instructions came in a circular issued last week apparently in the wake of non-implementation of the cabinet decisions in past two years.

Official sources said the rate of full implementation of the decisions is quite insignificant, while the rate of implementation is also too low.

They said the cabinet since its first meeting on October 15, 2001 has taken over 200 decisions, but evaluation showed that most of those have not yet been implemented fully.

If any decision or part of it ceases to be viable, the bodies concerned should place amendment proposal explaining the reasons to the cabinet through their respective ministries, the circular said.

Jamal's son wants serious probe into "abductor's" death

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, Ctg

Abducted businessman Jamal Uddin Ahmed Chowdhury's eldest son Forman Reza Chowdhury has demanded a 'serious investigation' into the death in police custody of Amar Das, a key accused of the abduction.

Forman believes the abductors and their godfather teamed up with police to torture Amar to death to kill off any chances of rescuing his father as he (Amar) had clues to the abduction.

"... Amar has been tortured to death. It (Amar's death) is really surprising to us and we demand a serious investigation into it."

"We are now worried again after his death as his arrest created hope among us about the rescue of our father," Forman said. "We believe Amar was killed as he divulged important information about the abduction of my father."

"After his arrest I talked to Amar at the DB office and he gave me

some important information including names of the abductors and their godfather. I faxed the information to the prime minister and home minister urging them to take action to rescue my father.

"I even assured him that I would withdraw the case to ensure his release from police custody if he helps secure the release of my father. But he died in police custody and now we are undone," Forman lamented.

The autopsy report on Amar's death is yet to be submitted. However, a highly placed source quoting forensic experts present during autopsy said Amar's body bore marks of torture and dark spots were found in the legs and back.

"Amar was an important suspect in the Jamal abduction case. He was also involved in many other abduction and criminal activities. He was arrested and went to jail

SEE PAGE 11 COL 1

Sylhet faces fresh transport agitation

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, Sylhet

The leaders of transport owners and workers associations of Sylhet will announce fresh agitation programmes for Sylhet and Chittagong divisions at a rally scheduled to be held in Chittagong tomorrow.

The leaders said it at a press conference at Sylhet Press Club yesterday evening after an ultimatum to the administration to meet the 20-point demand by Sylhet

SEE PAGE 11 COL 6