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Benin plane crash kills 15 Bangladeshi peacekeepers

STAR REPORT

Fifteen Bangladeshi army officers on UN peacekeeping missions in Sierra Leone and Liberia were among the 119 people killed in Thursday's plane crash in the West African country of Benin, the army said.

Thirteen of the officers served with Bangladesh Battalion 8 in Sierra Leone since last year and the two others were stationed in Liberia since October-November, the Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) directorate said.

Those who served at Sierra Leone are Lieutenant Colonel SM Shamsul Arefin, Major Abdur Rahim Mia, Major Mirza Md A Baten, Major Imtiaz Uddin Ahmed, Major Mosharrif Hossain, Captain Arifur Rahman Jalukder, Captain Farid Uddin Ahmed, Captain Alauddin Sardar, Captain Rakibul Hasan, Captain Zahidul Islam, Captain Rafiqul Islam, Captain Abdul Mabud and Senior Warrant Officer Shafiqul Islam.

The officers serving in Liberia were Major M Rawnak Akhtar and Major Mustafizur Rahman Chowdhury. Both were initially with a battalion in Sierra Leone since March before the unit was mobilised to Liberia in October-November to serve the peacekeeping mission there.

"They were on vacation and coming home aboard the Boeing 727 via Beirut. From there, they were to fly to Dhaka via Dubai," said Lt Col Nazrul Islam, director of the ISPR directorate, confirming that no other Bangladeshi officers were on that plane.

The officers were scheduled to

Waiting in tears

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The family was preparing to receive him at Zia International Airport today, after five months of job-inflicted separation.

But the hopes of Lt Col Syed Shamsul Arefin's family collapsed like a house of cards yesterday, when they came to know of his death in a fatal air crash in Benin on Thursday along with 14 of his Bangladeshi colleagues.

The wife and three children of Arefin were numbed by the shock of death, unable to utter a word at their dreary Shankar house in Dhaka.

His dazed 75-year-old mother was still reluctant to believe the truth and pestering the family members with requests to go to the airport to receive his son.

Arefin, the most senior officer among 15 Bangladeshis, took the UTA 141 flight, which smashed into the sea on Thursday after clipping a building as it took off at the West African nation's Cotonou's airport, for home to see his ailing son and mother.

Arefin and the Bangladesh officers were on leave and dreaming of happy family reunions back home.

It was Arefin's first leave after joining the UN peacekeeping mission and he was looking for giving the family, that he missed much during the Eid-ul-Fitr festival, full time during his planned two-month stay in Dhaka.

"Why are you not going to the airport to receive him?" Arefin's

SEE PAGE 11 COL 6

LOST PEACEKEEPERS



Lt Col Arefin

Maj Abdur Rahim

Maj Mirza Baten

Maj Imtiaz

Maj Mosharrif



Capt Arifur Rahman



Capt Farid Uddin



Capt Alauddin



Capt Rakibul



Capt Zahidul



Capt Rafiqul



Capt Abdul Mabud



Sr Warrant Off Shafiqul



Maj Rawnak



Maj Mustafizur

4 troops killed in Iraq attacks

AP, Karbala, Iraq

Armed with car bombs, mortars and machine guns, insurgents launched three coordinated attacks in the southern city of Karbala yesterday, killing four coalition soldiers and wounding 37 others, including five Americans.

The head of the Polish-led multinational force responsible for security around Karbala, Maj. Gen. Andrzej Tyszkiewicz, did not confirm the nationalities of the dead but said five of the wounded were in serious condition. None of the US troops suffered life-threatening wounds.

"It was a coordinated, massive attack planned for a big scale and intended to do much harm," Tyszkiewicz said on Polish television from his headquarters at Camp Babylon. "Four car bombs were used, grenade launchers and guns. We have sent rapid reaction forces and 10 helicopters."

The car bombers were shot before they could enter the military bases, he added.

US Brig. Gen. Mark Kimmitt said 37 coalition soldiers also were wounded.

One car bomb detonated in front

of the main Iraqi police station in Karbala, injuring five soldiers from the US Army's 18th Military Police Brigade as well as an undetermined number of Iraqi police, said Lt. Col. Tom Evans, deputy commander of the brigade. None of the American injuries was life-threatening, and two men were detained in connection with the bombing, Evans said.

"There were different types of attacks at different places," said US Maj. Ralph Manos, a spokesman for the multinational force. The attackers targeted two military coalition camps at the city's university and at a police station, as well as the mayor's office.

Col. Mariusz Michalski, another coalition spokesman, told the Polish news agency PAP that two soldiers died at the Bulgarian camp. He did not confirm their nationality.

Bulgarian soldiers were being evacuated from their two bases in Karbala because it was destroyed. Deputy Defense Minister Ilko Dimitrov told Bulgarian state television that 15 soldiers were slightly injured.

Col. Adam Stasinski, a spokesman for the Polish Defense Ministry in Warsaw, said some projectiles

SEE PAGE 11 COL 3

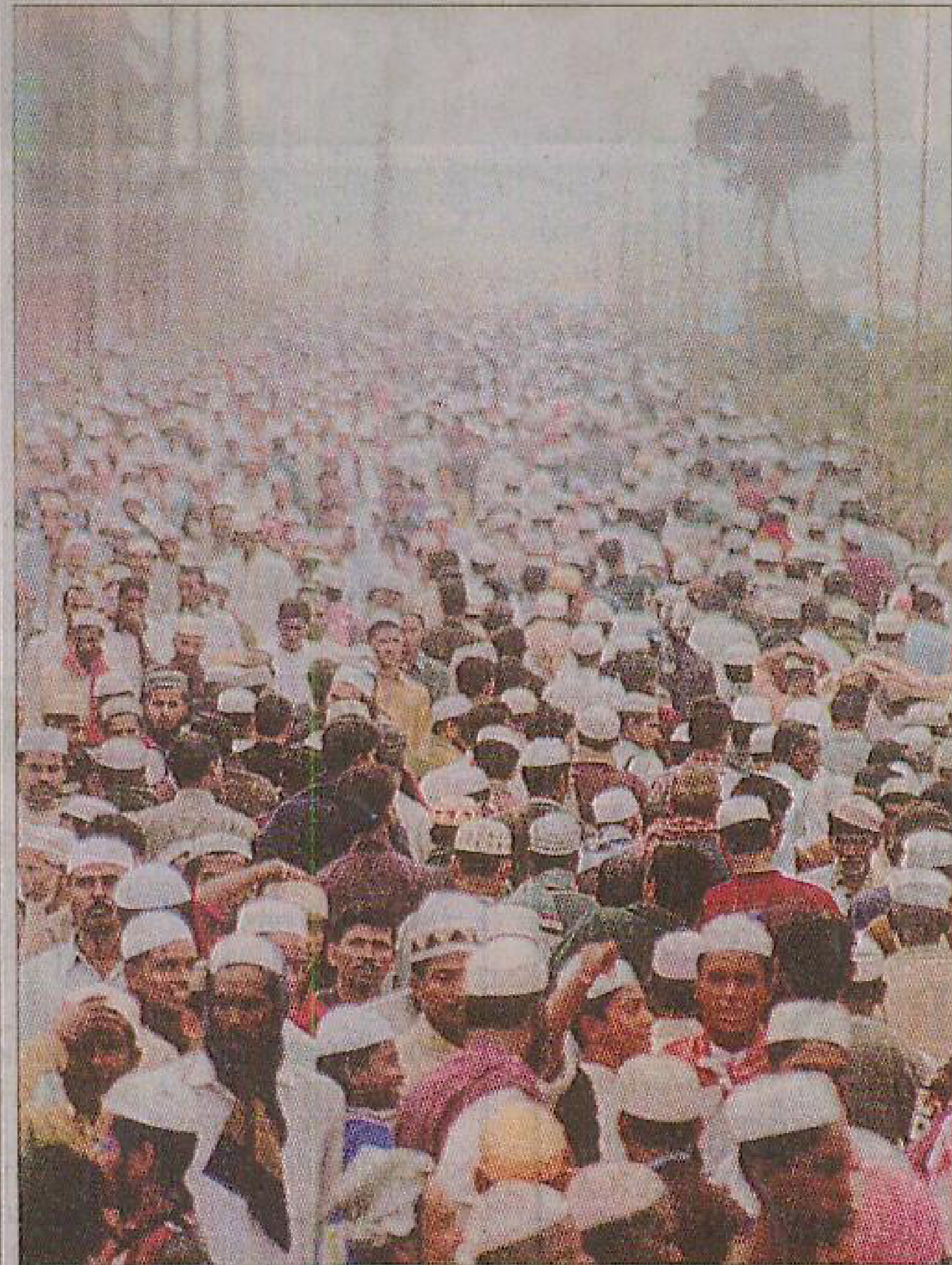


PHOTO: STAR

Thousands of Muslims from home and abroad move towards the Ijtima grounds on the Turag river in Tongi on the first day of the congregation yesterday.

SEE PAGE 11 COL 7

IRAN QUAKE

Toll surges up to 20,000

FOX NEWS, REUTERS, AFP, Bam, Iran

The death toll from a massive 6.7 magnitude earthquake in Iran has hit 20,000 and will likely go higher, according to the country's Interior Ministry.

More than 30,000 were also injured in the quake that devastated the historic city of Bam.

Overwhelmed rescue crews picked through entire city blocks of rubble in search for survivors and bodies yesterday, one day after the tremor.

Many people were still pinned under the rubble of the shattered city of 80,000, their prospects of survival diminishing with the passing of time. Homeless survivors awoke from a piercingly cold night huddled under woolen blankets to find a city without water and power.

"As more bodies are pulled out, we fear that the death toll may reach as high as 40,000. An unbelievable human disaster has occurred," said Akbar Alavi, the governor of the city of Kerman, the provincial capital.

The leader of one relief team, Ahmad Najafi, said in one street alone in Bam yesterday, 200 bodies had been extracted from the rubble in one hour's work. Workers used their bare hands and shovels, while a few bulldozers moved piles of bricks in the search for bodies and survivors.

With hospitals in the area destroyed, military transport planes had to evacuate many wounded for treatment to Kerman, and even to Tehran.

"There is not a standing building in the city. Bam has turned into a wasteland. Even if a few buildings are standing, you cannot trust to live in them," Interior Minister Abdolvahed Mousavi Lari told reporters yesterday.

One man interrupted Lari as he spoke. "My father is under the rubble," the man said, his face streaked with tears. "I've been asking for help since yesterday, but nobody has come to help me. Please help me. I want my father alive."

President Mohammad Khatami

SEE PAGE 11 COL 7

Hajj pilgrims brace for trouble as travel agents strike from Jan 1

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

International flight passengers, specially non-ballotee Hajj pilgrims, are likely to bump into serious trouble as travel agencies will stop booking tickets from January 1, 2004, the first day of an indefinite strike to protest reduction of agency commission.

The strike announced by the Association of Travel Agencies of Bangladesh (Atab) yesterday will affect some 40,000 non-ballotees this Hajj season who are handled by

the Hajj Agencies Association of Bangladesh (Haab) that also supported the strike.

However, some 10,000 ballotee pilgrims under government sponsorship will receive their tickets directly from Biman, which will resume its special Hajj flights from December 31 to ferry 25,000 Bangladeshis to Saudi Arabia.

The Board of Airlines Representatives, a global apex body of airlines, decided to reduce travel agencies' commission from nine per cent to seven per cent from January

1, 2004.

The reduction will have spillover effects on the non-ballotee pilgrims as well as other local passengers, some 70 percent of whom are in the low income bracket and travel to the Middle East to work mostly as labourers, industry sources said.

"Travel agencies would no longer be able to offer the usual four to five percent discount if the decision on commission cut is not reversed," said Atab President M. Muthaimin Saleh, also president of Haab.

SEE PAGE 11 COL 6

MPs to get Nam flats without service charge

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The House Committee of the Jatiya Sangsad decided yesterday to allot some flats, previously earmarked for the Non-aligned Movement (Nam) summit, to the lawmakers free of service charge.

After a six-month haggling with the Ministry of Housing and Public Works on decoration of the flats failed to produce any positive results, the JS house committee in a meeting yesterday decided to receive 184 Nam flats without any furnishing and decoration. Another 140 Nam flats are still under construction.

The committee also decided that no service charge would be applicable to the flat-users since they were

SEE PAGE 11 COL 1

Thousands pour in as Ijtima begins

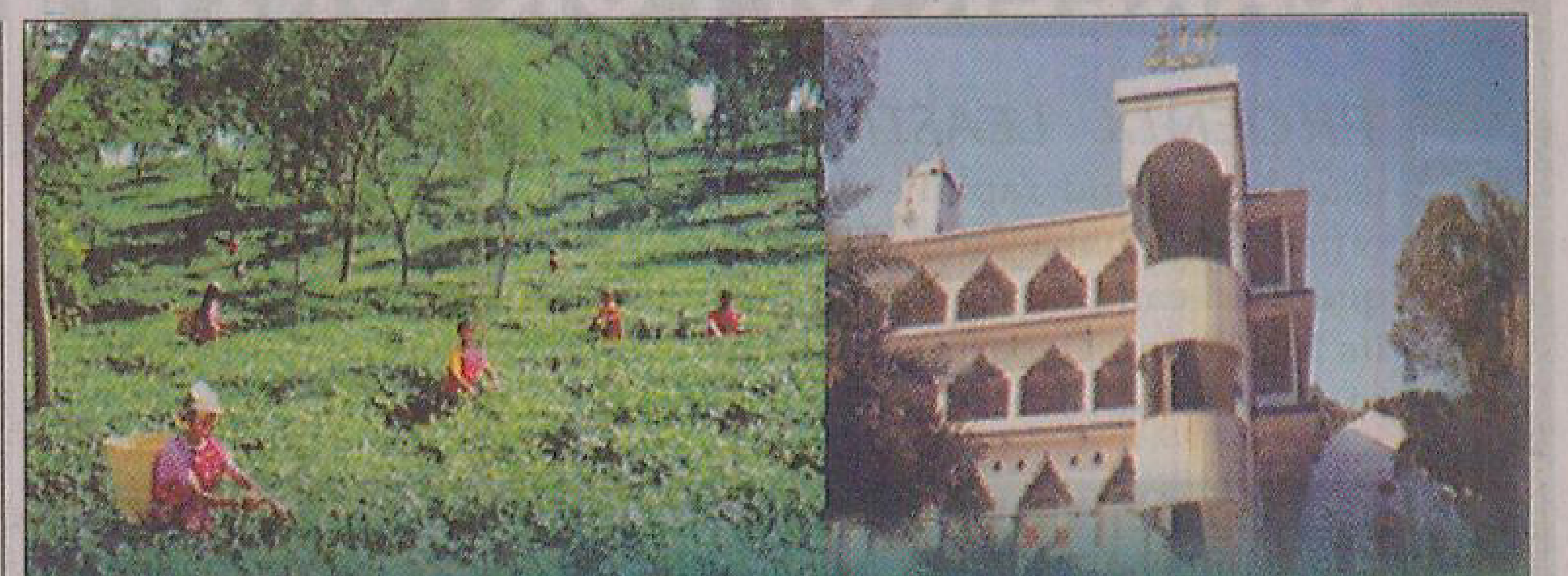
STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The Biswa Ijtima, the biggest Muslim congregation after Hajj, began yesterday at Tongi on the bank of the river Turag with sermons highlighting the significance of Islam by scholars from home and abroad.

The deliberations, on the basic norms and teachings of Islam in the light of the holy Quran and as explained in the Hadith, started after Fajr prayers and ran late in to night with breaks for prayers and for rest.

Moulana Abdul Haq, Abdul Ansary of Pakistan and Miaji Ajmat, Zubair Hasan of India were prominent among those who spoke yesterday.

SEE PAGE 11 COL 7



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Tannery town land acquisition okayed

REZAUL KARIM

The government yesterday approved acquisition of 182.40 acres of land at Savar and Keraniganj to set up a tannery town in the next two years in an effort to cut environmental pollution in Dhaka.

About 700 privately owned units of 185 industries or 95 percent of Bangladesh's tannery industry dot Dhaka's Hazaribagh area and release untreated waste in the Buriganga river, which will be relocated to the town.

The green light to land acquisition came at a meeting of the Central Land Allotment Committee held yesterday with Land Minister M Shamsul Islam in the chair.

The land for the tannery town at Chanda Narayanpur and Char Narayanpur under Kandibailapur

of Savar and Keraniganj upazilas was chosen in a detailed survey.

The deputy commissioner of Dhaka recommended the land that houses no anti-acquisition establishment or institution.

A meeting of the Executive Committee of the National Economic Council (Ecnec) with Prime Minister Khaleda Zia in the chair on August 16 approved a Tk 175.75 crore project to set up the tannery town by December 2005.

One hundred and ninety-five industrial plots of four categories -- 80,000 sqft, 40,000 sqft, 20,000 sqft and a special size -- will be developed in the town.

Bangladesh Small and Cottage Industries Corporation (BSCIC) will develop the town which will employ about 1,00,000 people.

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