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**People's Right to Know**

REGD. No. DA 781

Vol. XIII No. 338

DHAKA MONDAY DECEMBER 29, 2003

www.thedailystar.net

POUSH 15, 1410 BS

JULKAD 5, 1424 Hijri

20 PAGES PRICE: Tk 7.00

## Sangsad goes into session Jan 18

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The Jatiya Sangsad (JS) goes into the New Year session on January 18 with uncertainty looming large over participation of the main opposition Awami League (AL).

After President Iajuddin Ahmed yesterday summoned the 11th session of the Eighth parliament, Speaker Jamir Uddin Sircar told newsmen that he would initiate a move to hold dialogues with both treasury and opposition sides in early January to resolve parliamentary stand-off due to AL's abstention.

The AL lawmakers walked out of the budget session as Deputy Speaker Akhtar Hamid Siddiqui switched Leader of the Opposition

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# Dhaka gets more time to decide

### Tripartite talks between govt, investors and US in 1½ months to resolve TU issue in EPZs; WB to coordinate

STAR REPORT

The US yesterday virtually agreed to give Bangladesh an extension of about two months to decide on allowing trade union in export processing zones (EPZs), as the issue will be resolved through a tripartite understanding taking more time.

The latest US nod came from a

high-profile meeting after Bangladesh got bogged down in a conflict between the US that threatened cancellation of trade concessions if it did not allow EPZ unionism by January and foreign investors who opted to roll out of the country if it was allowed.

The World Bank (WB) will now coordinate the understanding among Bangladesh Export

Processing Zone Authority (Bepza), American Federation of Labour-Congress Industrial Organisation and representatives of investors at a meeting in one and a half months.

After yesterday's meeting, US Ambassador in Dhaka Harry K Thomas told newsmen: "The process of dialogues has begun to find out a good solution. We don't

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## Akheri Munajat today

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The Biswa Ijtema at Tongi ends today with the Akheri Munajat (concluding supplications) seeking blessings of the almighty Allah for continued peace, progress and prosperity of the Muslim Ummah.

President Iajuddin Ahmed, Prime Minister Khaleda Zia, Leader of the Opposition in Parliament Sheikh Hasina, senior cabinet members and leader of other political parties are expected to join the Munajat alongside lakhs of other devotees from far and wide.

Muslim scholars continued their deliberations highlighting different aspects of Islam. Moulana Ismail

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# Intelligence unit to check VAT dodge

### Collection up by record 70pc in Jul-Nov

REJAUJ KARIM BYRON

Finance Minister M Saifur Rahman yesterday directed the National Board of Revenue (NBR) to form a separate intelligence unit for detecting VAT (value added tax) evasions.

He also asked the board to maintain separate accounts of VAT payments made by government, private and multinational bodies.

In the first five months (July-November) of the current fiscal year,

VAT collection has grown by a record 70 percent, the NBR officials informed Saifur at a meeting held at the finance ministry, sources said.

Most of it has come from Bangladesh Telegraph and Telephone Board, gas companies of Petrobangla and other governmental agencies. Private companies, in comparison, have paid lesser amount of VAT. This difference prompted the finance minister to emphasise keeping separate

accounts for different sectors.

The NBR proposed to the finance minister to slap an embargo on import of core industrial raw materials, as such imports create wide scopes for VAT evasion.

Saifur, in particular, blamed the services sector for not paying amount of VAT. For instance, only 300 out of the hundreds of restaurants in the city pay VAT. And the total VAT they paid in the last five months

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## Capital feels the chill

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Dhaka residents yesterday got the hang of how winter in full fury may feel as rains and wind chilled them to the bone with skies remaining cloudy for the best part of the day and temperature dipping further thanks to a low in the Bay.

The capital recorded a 2.3 mm rainfall, but that was enough to make people shiver with cold and stay indoors. Other parts of the country also had rains.

Things are not going to get any better today, however, says a weather forecast. Worse still, the mercury is likely to slide further tomorrow although clouds are likely to clear by then.

"The cold will intensify when the mist clears. Temperatures might fall by 2-3 degrees Celsius across the country," said Samarendra Karmakar, deputy director of the Met office.

The depression is now passing through the northern Bay sweeping northern Bangladesh, eastern India, Nepal and Pakistan.

The lowest temperature recorded yesterday was in Chuadanga at 11 degrees Celsius and the highest in Teknaf at 29 degrees. The minimum temperature in Dhaka was 14.8 degrees Celsius and the highest 25.7 degrees.

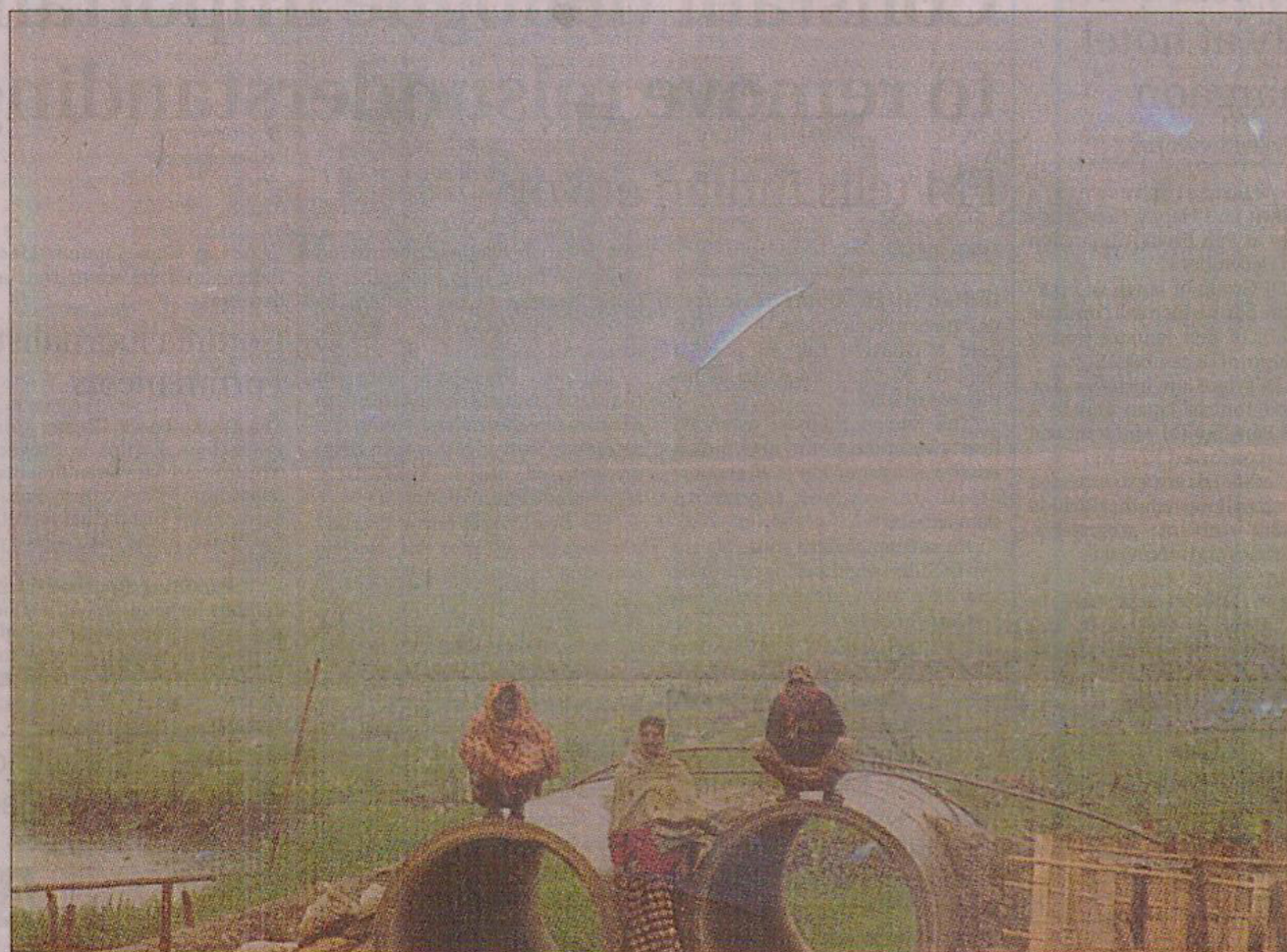


PHOTO: STAR

A chilly fog and intermittent rain laid a grey pall over Dhaka all day yesterday. City dwellers huddled in their warm shawls and sweaters, like these three men in Basabo's Bazarbagh, trying to keep the cold at bay.

# Fears replace hopes in Bam

REUTERS, Bam, Iran

The stench of death is filling Iran's earthquake-devastated city of Bam and fears of epidemics and looting are growing as hopes dwindle for those still buried by a disaster that killed more than 20,000 people.

Aid poured in from around the

world, including Iran's arch-foe the United States, to help deal with what appeared to be the world's most lethal earthquake in at least 10 years.

"It is my impression, with the scale of the disaster, that the toll is more than 20,000," said Interior Minister Abdolvahed Mousavi-Lari.

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## Dhaka to send \$1m aid to Iran

BSS, Dhaka

Bangladesh will send goods worth \$1 million in aid of the people of Iran's earthquake-devastated city of Bam.

Prime Minister Khaleda Zia yesterday gave directives to authorities to immediately send the relief.

The prime minister also asked authorities to send medicines and a medical team of doctors and nurses to help deal with what appeared to be the world's most lethal earthquake in at least 10 years.

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## Bodies of peacekeepers due by Dec 31

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The bodies of 15 Bangladesh Army officers, killed in Thursday's air crash in the West African country of Benin, will be flown back home by Wednesday.

A nine-member army team from Sierra Leone, Benin's strife-torn neighbouring country, has identified the dead and wrapping up other formalities that stemmed from the largest casualties in a single accident in Bangladesh army since independence.

The army headquarters in Dhaka hopes the task would be complete by today.

The officers -- ranking from captain to lieutenant colonel -- were deployed to Sierra Leone and another strife-riven country, Liberia, on United Nations peacekeeping missions.

The 15 peacekeepers were among the 119 people killed in the crash that came after the plane botched its takeoff, clipping a building before tumbling nose down into the nearby Atlantic Ocean.

According to international law, the postmortem will be carried out in Benin, Lieutenant Colonel Nazrul Islam, director of Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR), said yesterday, adding: "If postmortem facilities are available

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PUBLIC LAND CONTROL

# Grabbers doubly stronger

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Encroachers control double the government land held by the government across Bangladesh, a parliamentary standing committee said yesterday, contradicting a much-talked-about academic study.

The parliamentary standing committee on the land ministry at a press briefing at the Jatiya Sangsad Bhaban said eight lakh acres of land worth Tk 70, 000-80,000 crore were controlled by the occupiers when the government controlled only four lakh acres.

Another six lakh acres still remained unused and ungoverned, the information gathered by the Jatiya Sangsad body from the land ministry and authorities concerned showed.

In Dhaka and its environs, the grabbers are far more stronger than the government: they control four lakh acres against the government's one lakh acres.

Giving details of the report, the committee said the government land constituted of about 10 lakh acres of khas land, six lakh acres of vested property and two lakh acres of abandoned land.

The report also contradicts Land

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