

## All set for 78th Oscar

AFP, Hollywood

Tension reached fever pitch as Hollywood began the final countdown to today's Oscars, with a posse of "serious" films, led by "Brokeback Mountain," set to overrun the big night.

As workers frantically put the finishing touches on preparations for the 78th annual Academy Awards, which start with the legendary red carpet celebrity fashion show, the anxious nominees are crossing their fingers.

In a year laden with small-budget movies packing weighty political or social messages, Taiwan director Ang Lee's film about gay cowboys is the frontrunner for the top awards, including best picture and best director. "We're almost there and I think 'Brokeback' is still leading the race," said veteran Hollywood Reporter online columnist Marty Grove.

But the aching story of two macho farmhands who fall in love despite themselves and pursue an unfulfilled 20-year romance faces a last-minute challenge from a dark horse, Paul Haggis's racial drama "Crash."

"The buzz is that the threat to 'Brokeback' from 'Crash' is now very real," awards expert Tom O'Neil of the website [TheEnvelope.com](#) said of the tiny independent movie that may crash Ang Lee's party.

"Brokeback" has a passionate following, but you also have 'Capote' and 'Transamerica' this year and they may have created a gay fatigue," he told the news agency.

But like other pundits, O'Neil is still betting that the offbeat Western which has swept Hollywood's awards season and led the Oscars race from the start will still rope in five statuettes today.

It rides into the Oscars armed with a leading eight nominations, including best picture, director, best actor for Australia's Heath Ledger and best supporting role nods for Jake Gyllenhaal and Michelle Williams.

The movie faces off against the six-times nominated "Crash," about a group of ethnically diverse people whose lives collide in a Los Angeles car accident - and George Clooney's political drama Good Night, and Good Luck, which is also up for six awards.

Also competing for best picture are "Munich" - Steven Spielberg's epic about the aftermath of the Palestinian massacre of Israeli athletes at the 1972 Olympics - and "Capote," about US author Truman Capote, both of which are up for five Oscars.

"Capote" star Philip Seymour Hoffman is widely favoured to win the best actor Oscar for his staggering title role in Bennett Miller's biopic, facing off against the Australian star of "Brokeback," Heath Ledger, 26.

Also vying for the award is Joaquin Phoenix, who played country star Johnny Cash in the biopic "Walk the Line," nominated for five Oscars. David Strathairn, for his role as newsman Ed Murrow in "Good Night," and Terrence Howard for "Hustle and Flow."

"The Oscars upssets almost always happen in the supporting actor categories, so we may see the jaw-dropper of the evening be Jake or Michelle winning for 'Brokeback,'" O'Neil said.

Most pundits predict that Briton Rachel Weisz will win the women's award for her role as an activist fighting the pharmaceutical industry in Kenya in "The Constant Gardner," with Williams - Heath Ledger's real-life fiancée - trailing for her portrayal of his cuckolded wife in "Brokeback."

Also competing for best supporting actress are Frances McDormand for "North Country," Amy Adams for "Junebug" and Catherine Keener, who played writer Harper Lee in "Capote."

Heartthrob Clooney is tipped to beat out Gyllenhaal and win best supporting actor for his role as a CIA spy in the oil industry thriller "Syriana."

Clooney, who is up for three Oscars, also faces competition from Paul Giamatti for "Cinderella Man," Matt Dillon for "Crash," and William Hurt for "A History of Violence."

Facing off against frontrunner Ang Lee for best director are "Capote's" Miller, Haggis for "Crash," Clooney as director of "Good Night," and Spielberg for "Munich," the only big-budget film in the major categories.

The politically outspoken Clooney is also nominated for his best original screenplay for "Good Night," the story of newspaperman Ed Murrow's crusade against the repression of the US and Communist witch hunt of the 1950s.

## Biman

FROM PAGE 1 clients living on the East Coast of USA and in Canada."

Mahmoodur Rahman claimed that high fuel cost at the base station Zia International Airport and poor fuel efficiency of aging DC-10s are holding Biman back from achieving financial viability on American and European routes.

In Biman's 13-strong fleet, the three-decade old DC-10s that usually operate on Dhaka-New York route have been grounded at least three times in the last six months in Brussels and New York for various mechanical faults. In late last year the US federal aviation did not allow a Biman craft operated by John F Kennedy Airport without fixing 17 faults they found in the plane.

Amidst a schedule chaos, the Biman Bangladesh Airlines on Feb 19 decided to cut its international flights as an immediate solution and lease two aircraft to maintain its dwindling fleet.

Following a meeting with State Minister for Civil Aviation Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir the management of the airline floated tender for leasing two aircraft in a bid to recover from the schedule disarray caused by grounding of its three DC-10s and one airbus at a time.

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## Inflation rate dips further

FROM PAGE 1

clients living on the East Coast of USA and in Canada."

Meanwhile, in case of food items, inflation rate dropped by 0.47 percentage point to stand at 6.67 percent in January from 7.14 percent in December.

Inflation rate dropped by 0.43 percentage point in non-food items and stood at 6.70 percent in January, while it was 7.13 percent in December.

Zaid Bakht, research director of Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS), said the BB's tight monetary policy has resulted in the decline of private and public sector credit. The exchange rate situation was also rather stable.

Besides, prices of goods except oil were stable in the international market. All these factors have jointly contributed to the decrease in inflation rate, Bakht said.

A planning ministry source said production of aus and aman rice was better in fiscal year (FY) 06 than in FY 05. Moreover, the cost of food items saw a downward trend in December as the market had adequate supply of winter vegetables.

In the current FY, 17.45 lakh

tonne aus rice was produced as against 15 lakh tonne in FY 05.

Agriculture ministry sources said 1.12 crore tonne aman rice will be produced this year compared to last year's poor production of 98 lakh tonne due to floods.

The sources also said price of rice this year is not as high as last year's due to a rise in aman production.

A BB source said the central bank's tight monetary policy has caused a decline of 2.26 percentage points in the growth of private sector credit from September 30 to December 31 last. During the same period, net government credit growth also declined by 9.19 percentage point.

All these factors are responsible for the decline of inflation rate of food and non-food items both in rural and urban areas.

In January, inflation rate in rural areas was 6.77 percent compared to 7.23 percent in December.

For food items, the rate was 6.40 percent in January and 6.96 percent in December and for non-food items, it was 7.40 percent in January and 7.71 percent in December.

## Army puts decision on hold

FROM PAGE 1

interest by meritorious youths, expansion of job market and high salary in the private sectors and growth in higher education," an army officer told The Daily Star on condition of anonymity.

Officer shortage has also been caused by appointment in other places on deputation especially in the Rab. Many of them are in different countries participating in UN missions. However, a good number of young officers went into voluntary retirement in the last few years, he said.

Many other young officers have also applied for retirement, said sources.

Talking on this, another army officer said that many officers do not find job satisfaction in the service as it was before.

There is a shortage of a few hundred junior-level officers in the army presently, which led the authorities to resume the short course.

"The step was taken as a temporary measure to address the immediate problem and the decision was to continue for four to five years," said an army officer.

But the authorities stumbled in the very first year as no more than some 25 could qualify in the short course whereas the authorities

expected the number would be more than 50, said a source, adding: "Response from suitable candidates was not encouraging. The authorities are likely to review the policy."

The revival of short-course recruitment has given rise to a controversy.

The two-year long course was introduced with the aim to produce quality officers. "There are questions whether similar quality officers will come through the 45/50-week short course," he said.

The army authorities, meanwhile, are learnt to be pondering about new steps to attract talent and meritorious youths to the army.

According to the new policy, 350 will be recruited in the BMA in two batches a year from now on. Generally, the BMA recruit 200 on an average in two batches every year.

Referring to the issue of recruitment of candidates who failed earlier tests, an army officer said, "Those who have been called again performed well in most tests. The authorities have recruited them only after being sure that the problems can be solved through training later. For example, one showing poor performance in swimming or any other physical test can be trained to do better later."

## Thai PM vows

FROM PAGE 16

Thais) party did not win more than half the votes cast in the poll.

The opposition Chart Thai (Thai Nation) Party, led by former Prime Minister Banharn Silpa-archa, rejected Thaksin's offer on Saturday, saying "meaningful and concrete political reforms cannot take place under the current structure."

Thailand's main opposition Democrat Party published ads in major Thai newspapers on Saturday, saying the election could not be fair because Thaksin has taken over political institutions meant to be independent.

"This election is not a solution to the crisis faced by the country. It is an attempt to whitewash and extend a mandate that he and his cronies have exploited at the expense of the people and the country," one of the ads read.

Friday's rally, held two days before a major anti-Thaksin protest at the same venue on Sunday, was designed in part to demonstrate his support in the countryside where 70 percent of Thais live and who helped return him to power last year in a second landslide election victory.

Thaksin has seen his popularity wane since relatives sold off their \$1.9 billion stake last month in Shin Corp, the telecoms empire he founded, to a Singapore state investment firm.

The deal angered the middle class in Bangkok who demanded Thaksin's resignation over the tax-free deal which has fuelled weekend anti-government protests in the capital.

Tens of thousands of protesters are expected at Sunday's rally organised by the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) which threatened to take its followers on street marches if Thaksin did not resign.

PAD rejected Thaksin's offer on Friday to meet one-on-one with his critics and vowed to press on until the Thai leader was forced out. "People listening to his speech felt that what he said did not clear any of the charges made against him," a PAD spokesman told reporters.

## Bangla Bhai

FROM PAGE 1 (SI) Humayun Kabir of Bagerhat DB as an investigation officer (IO) of the case on January 1, 2003. Their names have been included in the supplementary charge-sheet after further investigation.

The accused were involved in a bomb attack on the house of Awami League (AL) leader Tarapada Poddar of Gaola village under Mollahat upazila on the night of August 15, 2002. The AL leader was seriously injured in the attack.

Bangla Bhai was arrested in connection with the attack, but released on bail from Bagerhat jail one month after the arrest.

However, some military sources argued that many talented candidates could have applied if they knew that some conditions would be relaxed.

One army officer on condition of anonymity said that a candidate rejected once can face the ISSB for the second time. But he would be rejected forever if he fails in his second attempt.

"As number of qualified candidates was not up to the expectation of the army authorities, they decided to recall some from the disqualified group only after reminding them that this would be considered as their second ISSB test," he added.

Talking to The Daily Star Tuesday, an army officer seeking anonymity said as far as he is concerned, no such candidates have been recruited through long courses, but a few might have been recruited through short courses.

"The young generation is usually interested in joining the army. However a downturn was noticed in last couple of years," he said.

On Friday night, Air Force One flew through into the Pakistani capital without lights to conceal the plane's profile as it delivered Bush and his wife, Laura, from India. Layers of security, including three helicopters that circled overhead, shadowed Bush's motorcade as it ferried him from the fortified US Embassy compound to the presidential palace.

At the grand official building in the heart of Islamabad's government district, Bush was escorted down a red carpet behind raised swords gripped by Pakistani troops in dark green uniforms.

Just two years ago Pakistan's leading nuclear scientist, A.Q. Khan, was exposed as the chief of a lucrative black market in weapons technology that had supplied Iran, Libya and North Korea. Pakistan's government denied any knowledge of his proliferation activities.

But Bush said the United States was committed to helping Pakistan meet its rising energy needs. He expressed no objections to plans by India and Pakistan to build a pipeline to bring much-needed natural gas supplies from Iran, a project that had brought US disapproval. Washington opposes investments that benefit Iran, which it suspects of trying to build nuclear weapons.

"Our beef with Iran is not the pipeline," Bush said. "Our beef with Iran is the fact that they want to develop a nuclear weapon."

Bush was departing for Washington late Saturday after a state dinner. A huge ballroom at the presidential palace was already decked out in the morning for the evening's formality under 11 brightly lit chandeliers, tables were adorned with orchids draped from candleabra and elaborate crystal stemware.

The day before the president arrived, an American diplomat was killed in a suicide car-bombing at a US consulate in the southern city of Karachi, a hotbed of Islamic militancy. Musharraf called it a vicious act timed to coincide with Bush's visit.

Bush said he was unfazed. "We're not going to back down in the face of these killers," he said.

On Saturday, Pakistani police detained Imran Khan, the leader of a small opposition party, ahead of a planned protest. Khan, a respected former Pakistani cricketer captain, has condemned Musharraf as an "American slave."

Hoping to broadcast American compassion to the Muslim world, Bush showcased the US assistance offered after an earthquake devastated Pakistan in October, killing 86,000 people and leaving more than 2 million homeless.

"It is staggering what the people of this country have been through," said Bush, who earlier saw a film on the quake and visited with victims, including orphans, widows, women in wheelchairs and children who lost limbs. "We're proud to help."

Musharraf said Pakistan would have been hard-pressed to handle relief operations without US military Chinook helicopters and medical assistance.

Bush was also seeking to heighten ties between the two countries by taking in cricket, a popular sport here. "Maybe I'll take the bat," he quipped. "I don't know. We'll see. I'm kind of getting old these days."

American and the green-and-white Pakistani flags were posted in honor of Bush's first visit to Pakistan. Streets were mostly empty, aside from the armed security officers standing guard.

Meanwhile, students of the Geology and Mining Department took out a silent procession on the campus yesterday demanding immediate arrest of Shibir leader Mahub Alam Shalehi, a suspect of Prof Taher murder. The AL-backed student body has threatened to enforce a strike at the university if Shalehi is not arrested.

Meanwhile, students of the Geology and Mining Department took out a silent procession on the campus yesterday demanding speedy trial of the killers of Prof Taher, a teacher of the department.

Samajtantrik Chhatra Front (SCF) and Bangladesh Chhatra Federation will jointly hold a rally on the campus today protesting the killing of Prof Taher and demanding arrest of Shibir leader Shalehi.

## 'Stealth sharks' to patrol the seas

AFP, Paris

The Pentagon is reportedly funding research into neural implants with the ultimate hope of turning sharks into "stealth spies" capable of gliding undetected through the ocean.

According to the British weekly New Scientist, the research builds on experimental work to control animals by implanting tiny electrodes in their brain, which are then stimulated to induce a behavioural response.

"The Pentagon hopes to exploit sharks' natural ability to glide quietly through the water, sense delicate electrical gradients and follow chemical trails," says the report, carried in next Saturday's New Scientist.

"By remotely guiding the sharks' movements they hope to transform the animals into stealth spies, perhaps capable of following vessels without being spotted."

The unusual project is being funded by the Pentagon's Defence Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA), which pioneered the Internet as a platform for robust communications.

Scientists involved in the scheme presented their work last week at a meeting on Ocean Sciences in Honolulu, Hawaii, according to the report.

A team at Boston University have implanted electrodes into the brain of a spriny dogfish in a shallow tank.

The implants, controlled by a small radio transmitter, stimulate either the right or left side of a brain area dedicated to smell, causing the fish to flick around in that direction in response to the signal.

The next step will be to take this device outside the laboratory. Blue sharks implanted with the gadget are to be released off the coast of Florida.

As radio signals will not penetrate the sea, communications with the fish will be made through US Navy acoustic towers capable of sending sonar signals to a shark up to 300 kilometres (187 miles) away.

Other DARPA-funded researchers are working on using implants to record brain activity in sharks in order

## US, Pakistan

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calls his "buddy," the US president stopped short of criticizing Musharraf on the pace of democratic advances, only gently calling for elections scheduled for next year to be "open and honest."

Musharraf seized power in a 1999 bloodless coup. Instead of giving up his military uniform as promised in 2004, he changed the constitution so he could hold both his army post and the presidency until 2007.

"I believe democracy is Pakistan's future," Bush said as the leaders stood side-by-side at their outdoor news conference at the marble presidential palace.

Musharraf defended his record on democracy, touting steps to liberalize Pakistan's press, usher in an elected parliament and empower women.

"Beyond 2007, this is an issue that has to be addressed and according to the constitution of Pakistan, and I will never violate the constitution," said the Pakistani leader, repeating similar reassurances made in the past. "Democracy will prevail."

The Pakistani government once supported the repressive Taliban regime in Afghanistan. But after the 2001 terrorist attacks on America, Musharraf aligned himself with Bush and the war on terrorism.

Pakistan's law enforcement agencies have arrested more than 700 suspected militants in the past four years.

"The intentions of Pakistan and my intentions are absolutely clear that we have a strong partnership on the issue of fighting terrorism," Musharraf said. "If at all there are slippages, it is possible in the implementation part... We are moving forward toward delivering and we will succeed."

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