

Fires, stampede at Ctg

FROM PAGE 1
by a false fire alarm inside another garment factory building at Mistripara in the city yesterday morning.

Yesterday's fire broke out at the one-storey storehouse of the Base Textile Ltd at Kalurghat at around 1:00pm, fire service sources said. The fire spread fast and reduced to ashes chemicals, fabrics, raw materials and finished goods.

The fire might have originated from an electric short-circuit, the fire service sources added.

Thirteen fire-fighting units from different fire stations of the city rushed to the spot and managed to extinguish the blaze after a five-hour frantic effort.

The fire triggered panic among some 5,000 workers, who were working in the adjoining factory of Base Textile Ltd at the time. However, no casualty was reported.

Meanwhile, BGMEA leaders visiting the spot yesterday expressed suspicion over the repeated incidents of fire at different garments and textile units in the last few days.

While talking to The Daily Star BGMEA First Vice-President SM Abu Tayyab demanded an inquiry to find out if anybody or group is involved in the fires as part of any conspiracy against the garments sector, the highest revenue earner of the country.

Both the factories of Base Textile and Creaslan Sweater strictly followed the safety standards and compliance issues, he added.

The fire at the factory of Creaslan Sweater Ltd at Dewanhat on Tuesday night damaged properties worth around Tk 1 crore and left some 15 people injured.

40 HURT IN STAMPEDE

At least 40 workers, mostly women, were injured in a stampede caused by a false fire alarm inside the factory building at city's Mistripara yesterday morning.

The railing of the first floor stairs collapsed due to over pressure when the panicked workers from three floors rushed to get out of the building.

"One of the workers switched on an exhaust fan that created a big bang and triggered panic among the workers," Saiful Islam, production manager of the Tishun Fashion Ltd told The Daily Star.

Around 1,000 workers of Tishun Fashion Ltd and Eden Fashion Ltd

were working in the three floors of the building when the incident occurred at about 9:45am, officials said.

"We trained them (workers) how to escape safely in case of any accident, but the problem was that workers from all floors tried to escape all at a time today," said Chinmoy Pal, commercial executive of Eden Fashion Ltd.

The injured were rushed to Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association Health Centre and Chittagong Medical College Hospital.

Saifur rejects

FROM PAGE 16
question from an Indian journalist about India's concern over terrorism "emanating" from Bangladesh.

Termining the impression about Bangladesh harbouring terrorists or Indian insurgents "erroneous", Saifur told the Indian journalists, "As long as you have this erroneous impression, relations between the two countries cannot improve."

"Bangladesh does not believe in terrorism. Terrorists are nobody's friends. In the name of religion, there should be no terrorism," Saifur said.

He claimed that the economic situation in Bangladesh is "much better" in certain respects than in India and that it is "much better managed".

Bangladesh has controlled terrorism "much more effectively", said the finance minister, pointing to the recent arrest of top two Jama'at ul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) leaders Abdur Rahman and Siddiqui Islam alias Bangla Bhai.

Saifur said the visit of Prime Minister Khaleda Zia to India is rewarding from the point of view of pushing forward economic relations.

He said the economic content of the ties is going to play a catalytic role in shaping bilateral ties between the two countries.

Troops to stay

FROM PAGE 16
The White House believes that people appreciate Bush's plainspoken approach even if they disagree with his decisions.

"I understand war creates concerns," the president said. "Nobody likes war. It creates a sense of uncertainty in the country."

Bush has adamantly refused to set a deadline for the withdrawal of US forces from Iraq. Asked if there would come a day when there would be no more US forces in Iraq, Bush said, "That, of course, is an objective. And that will be decided by future presidents and future governments of Iraq."

Pressed on whether that meant a complete withdrawal would not happen during his presidency, Bush said, "I can only tell you that I will make what the opposition on force levels based upon what the commanders on the ground say."

White House officials worried Bush's remarks would be read as saying there would not be significant troop reductions during his presidency. They pointed to comments Sunday by Gen. George W. Casey, commander of US forces in Iraq, who said he expected a substantial troop reduction "certainly over the course of 2006 and into 2007."

The Pentagon announced last December that US force levels would be reduced from the baseline figure of about 138,000 to about 131,000 by the end of March. The total currently is 133,000. In late February the Pentagon told Congress that "it will be possible to consider" additional reductions as the political process moves forward and as Iraqi security forces gain experience. No timetable has been set for deciding on additional cuts.

Khaleda recalls

FROM PAGE 1
Khaleda pointed out that Rabindranath Tagore penned the national anthems of India and Bangladesh. "I believe there is no other instance where the national anthems of two countries have been composed by the same poet, as has been our case. Such is the strength of commonalities."

The Bangladesh prime minister said the two countries are bound by a common history, shared values of democracy, tolerance and an ethos rooted in pluralistic and moderate traditions.

Home heightens

FROM PAGE 16
five-member committee and ordered it to conduct an in-depth probe into the changing strategies of the car lifters who are using modern sophisticated equipment to change the engine and chassis numbers.

He said some dishonest car dealers are buying the stolen cars. The meeting ordered the law enforcers to arrest owners of car showrooms if found involved.

Asked about the police personnel's alleged involvement in stolen car business, he said, "I have not got any specific allegation. But if we get proof, we will not spare anyone."

The committee headed by Additional Commissioner of Dhaka Metropolitan Police Faruq Ahmed will submit its report in 15 days.

FIGHTING TRAFFIC JAM
Yesterday's meeting formed a four-member committee headed by DMP Commissioner SM Mizanur Rahman and comprising former deputy commissioners of traffic police to find ways for better traffic management.

Fine for crossing roads dangerously without using the foot over bridges is only Tk 5 that does not work as a deterrent at all, Babar said, adding that he asked the communications ministry to amend the law but to no avail.

The ministry will conduct some motivational works with owners and drivers of buses, trucks, taxicabs and three-wheelers about traffic rules, he said.

"We will try to make the security better during the Independence Day," Babar said, adding that they will take measures that the opposition's Secretariat siege programme on March 30 is held peacefully.

Two killed

FROM PAGE 16
When they reached near Lahinipara old graveyard, Momin's accomplices opened fire, forcing the law enforcers to retaliate.

Police said Momin was caught in the "crossfire" while trying to escape and died on the spot.

A light gun and four bullets were recovered from the scene.

Son of Khabir Uddin of Kalishangkarpur area of Kushtia town, Momin was an accused in 15 cases including seven for murder, police said.

In Comilla, a top criminal of the district was killed during a "shootout" between his cohorts and police at Salmanpur under Comilla Sadar (South) upazila, according to our correspondent.

Police arrested Alamgir Hossain alias 'Dakat' Alamgir, 35, at Barapara village under the upazila Tuesday noon.

On his confessional statement, a police team along with Alamgir reached Salmanpur hill at about 2:20am yesterday to arrest his cohorts and recover firearms.

Sensing the presence of the policemen, Alamgir's men opened fire, prompting the law enforcers to retaliate.

Alamgir was shot during the shootout. He was taken to Comilla Sadar Hospital where the doctors declared him dead.

Six policemen, including three sub-inspectors, were also injured. They are SI Shahjahan Kabir, SI Abul Kashem and SI Mostafizur Rahman, and constables Abdur Rashid, Shahbuddin and Sher Ali. The injured cops are undergoing treatment at the hospital.

Police seized one single barrel gun, four bullets and one dagger from the scene.

Alamgir was wanted in six criminal cases filed with different police stations of the district, police said.

AL sends letter to BNP

FROM PAGE 1
your proposal. Although the prime minister clearly said the committee could be formed comprising both the members of the parliament and people from outside the parliament, it was not mentioned in your letter," AL's letter to BNP Secretary General Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan read.

Termining Bhuiyan's letter a positive step towards carrying out electoral reforms, the letter stated that it is very important that the details are specific and clear for the sake of a meaningful discussion. "We can finalise the list of our representatives as soon as these details are specified," the letter said.

AL General Secretary Abdul Jaill after getting instruction from Leader of the Opposition in Parliament also AL President Sheikh Hasina, sent the reply at about 7:00pm yesterday to Mannan Bhuiyan, also the minister for local government and co-operative. Hasina is currently in the US for treatment.

Jaill also talked to Gono Forum President Dr Kamal Hossain and other senior leaders of the AL-led 14-party opposition coalition before sending the letter to Bhuiyan.

Earlier Jaill made a phone call to Bhuiyan at about 6:20pm and told him that AL had sent a letter to his residence. AL's Deputy Publicity Secretary Asim Kumar Ukil, Assistant Office Secretary BM Mozammel Hossain and SM Kamal carried the letter and handed it over to Bhuiyan.

After receiving the letter, Bhuiyan told journalists that he received the letter and will respond today. "If I see that I myself can respond to the letter then I will do so otherwise if necessary, I will talk to our party chairperson, who is returning home tonight."

In response to Jaill's query regarding the number of members in the proposed committee, sources in BNP said the maximum number could be nine. They however favoured a small committee.

Opposition sources said after talking to Hasina, the AL general secretary also the 14-party coordinator, and senior opposition leaders met at a hotel in the capital to finalise a

response to BNP secretary general's letter.

Thanking Bhuiyan for the proposal regarding formation of a committee to discuss the oppositions' proposed reforms in the system of caretaker government and the Election Commission, Jaill in his letter said the proposal will help realising the people's demand for a free, fair and neutral election though it came too late.

"Although the prime minister termed the oppositions' demands baseless and illogical for long the proposal to discuss the issue proved our demands to be justified. We will hope discussion and decision that will help strengthen the country's democracy, at the earliest," Jaill mentioned in the letter.

Free and fair election is an achievement of the peoples' movement and we are committed to protect that achievement and give them back the right to universal franchise, Jaill pointed out. "Unfortunately those democratic rights of the people have cruelly been repressed," he wrote.

He also reminded the BNP general secretary of the necessity to maintain a congenial environment for peoples' freedom of expression of opinions for the sake of a fruitful discussion.

On Monday, Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan sent a letter to Abdul Jaill seeking names of AL representatives for the committee to discuss the oppositions' proposal for electoral reforms. Hasina placed the proposal in the House on February 12.

Briefing journalists after a 14-party meeting chaired by Dilip Barua, Jaill said when the government is too intransigent to concede the victory of the opposition backed panel in the election of WASA's employees' welfare association, then it is clearly understandable that it will be very tough to realise the opposition's reform proposals.

Pro-BNP employees of Wasa attacked the supporters of an AL-backed panel after hearing that the pro-AL panel was going to sweep the election Wednesday night at Karwan Bazar in the capital. The ensuing clash between the two rival groups left ten

persons injured.

The meeting condemned the ruling party backed employees' attack on the pro-opposition employees of Wasa and said the government proved their cruelty by attacking the opposition.

"We are not demonstrating to oust anyone or to favour anyone or to go to power. We are demonstrating only to establish a peoples' government in the country," Jaill said adding, "Through our response, the people's fight for their rights will go forward a step."

Senior leaders of the 14-party coalition including Rashed Khan Menon, Suranjit Sengupta, Motia Chowdhury, Saifuddin Ahmed Manik, Syed Zafor Sazzad, Obaidul Quader, Bimal Biswas, Nurul Islam, Mainuddin Khan Badal, Prof Shamsul Huda Harun, Mofazzel Hossain Chowdhury Maya and MA Gani attended the meeting.

Couple rescued 2 hrs after kidnap in Sylhet

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, Sylhet

A gang of armed people led by a ward commissioner of Sylhet City Corporation kidnaped a man and his wife from the house of a former adviser to the caretaker government in the city's Housing Estate area on Tuesday night.

Police, however, rescued the couple from a house at Ambar-khana Bazar in the city within two hours of the abduction and arrested five people.

Police said a gang of ten led by Ward Commissioner Abdul Quadir Shomsu reached the house belonging to Imamuddin Ahmed Chowdhury, former secretary and adviser to the caretaker government, by two auto-rickshaws at about 11:30pm and picked up Abdul Majid and his wife Fatema.

They also beat up the caretaker of the house, Saiful Islam. He is now undergoing treatment at Sylhet MAG Osmani Medical College and Hospital.

Abdul Majid, a contractor who had been entrusted with renovation of the house, was staying there with his wife. The reason behind the abduction of the couple could not be known till the filing of this report last night.

A case has been lodged with the police station concerned against the ward commissioner and eight others.

Eden College

FROM PAGE 16
backed student organisations, enforced a students' strike at educational institutions in the country to press the demand for punishment of Jatiyatabadi Chhatra Dal (JCD) cadres involved in the attack on students and an end to the murky business over hostel seats.

The parishad brought out a procession and held a rally on Dhaka University (DU) campus yesterday morning.

General students of Eden College and different student organisations yesterday continued to demonstrate for realising the demands. They formed a human chain in front of the college.

Pritilata Sangsad, a platform of Eden College students, will hold a rally on the DU campus today.

Asked about the probe report, the acting principal said, "The probe committee worked independently and impartially, and you can trust its recommendations."

The authorities would try to implement the recommendations as early as possible, she added.

Probe body seeks

FROM PAGE 16
Jamuna bridge to see the reported cracks on the surface of the bridge and stressed the need for a thorough examination to ascertain the depth and cause of the cracks.

The operation of both broad-gauge and metre-gauge trains was primarily blamed for the cracks. The Bangladesh Railway officials, however, denied the allegation.

"I hope the railway will be cleared of the blame after the probe committee report is submitted," said a high official of the Bangladesh Railway.

BSF, BDR trade

FROM PAGE 1
BDR men returned fire that led to a four-hour long gun battle between the border guards of the two neighbouring countries at intervals, the sources said.

Commander of Mirgarh Company headquarters of BDR lodged a strong protest with his BSF counterpart of Goalgoach Company yesterday morning and sought explanation of such provocative action of the BSF.

While talking to the state-run news agency, senior BDR officials termed the BSF firing very 'unfortunate' and 'unacceptable.' 'We have lodged strong protest with the BSF and asked them to stop such provocative action along the peaceful frontiers,' they added.

Sources said BDR Sector Commander of Rangpur Colonel Lutfur Rahamn telephoned Deputy Inspector General (DIG) of Kishanganj Sector of BSF Ravi Kumar Punoth and BSF Inspector General of North Bengal Frontier (NBF) SR Tewari, asking them to take necessary steps to maintain peace along the borders.

A sector commander level flag meeting will be held at 4:30pm today.

Court does not accept

FROM PAGE 16
anticrime force at Khagan under Savar Police Station sometime between 12:15pm of March 8 and 6:30am of March 9.

Nazrul Islam, elder brother of the slain Iman Ali, filed the case with the Chief Metropolitan Magistrate's (CMM) Court seeking justice.

The accused in the case are State Minister for Home Affairs Lutfozzaman Babar, his maternal brothers Mirza Hafizur Rahman and Mirza Nurul Islam and Home Secretary Safarraj Hossain, Inspector General of Police (IGP) Abdul Quayyum, Additional IG (Headquarters) Anwarul Iqbal, Additional IG (Special Branch) Fakrul Ahmed, and Additional IG (Criminal Investigation Department) Khoda Baksht.

The other accused are Director General (DG) of Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) Abdul Aziz Sarker, its commanding officer, second-in-command, 16 unknown members of Rab-4, DIG of Dhaka Range Dr Sadikur Rahman, Superintendent of Police of Dhaka Baktiar Alam, Officer-in-Charge (OC) of Savar Police Station Mohammad Haider Ali, Sub-Inspector (SI) Murtuza and unknown six constables and 16 other people.

In his complainant, Nazrul said Babar's maternal brother Mirza Hafizur Rahman forcefully took possession of 11 acres land at Miton village of Savar on February 16. But thousands of local people led by Dhaka district unit Jubo League leader Iman Ali recovered the land from the grabbers.

The complainant also said Rab personnel took Iman Ali away from a Dhaka court on March 8 when he appeared before it in a criminal case against him and was killed on that night. The next day, the complainant

came to know that his brother was killed in "crossfire" and his body was lying at Khagan in Savar.

The victim was killed as he protested the land grabbing by Babar's brother and it was executed under the direction of high-ups including the state minister, the complainant alleged.

Sunny, Awal

FROM PAGE 1
accomplishes if they are interrogated intensively, said Detective Branch (DB) Inspector Shah Mohammad Moshir Rahman, the IO, in his forwarding report.

The case was filed with Ramna Police Station in connection with the August 17 explosion near the Dhaka University TSC.

On expiry of their eight days' remand in connection with the bomb blast near Dhaka Sheraton Hotel on the same day, Sunny and Awal were produced before the court of Metropolitan Magistrate Mamun AI Rashid yesterday.

The IO sought another seven days' remand for them for further interrogation in the case of Dhaka University campus blast. The court granted the remand. The magistrate asked them whether they would appoint any lawyers to defend them but they remained silent.

Earlier, Operations Commander of banned Harkatul Jihad (HUJ) Bangladesh chapter Mufi Abdur Hannan and JMB Gazipur Regional Commander Enayet Ullah were shown arrested in the case and placed on remand for interrogation.

Bangla Bhai confesses

FROM PAGE 1
The TFI source refused to disclose further information for the sake of investigation and operations the investigators intend to conduct.

ABDUR RAHMAN'S WIFE AND DAUGHTER SENT TO JAIL
A wife and a daughter of JMB chief Abdur Rahman along with two other JMB men were produced before the Sylhet sadar magistrate court yesterday afternoon on completion of their second term 10-day remand, reports our correspondent in Sylhet.

The court sent JMB leaders Moizul Islam Chowdhury alias Hridoy Chowdhury and Abdul Aziz Hanif on another three-day fresh remand each in connection with the August 17 serial bomb blasts in Sylhet.

The source said the interrogators are quizzing the JMB leader about his links with different bomb blasts, killings and subversive incidents across the country before August 17 last year.

Asked if Bangla Bhai named any of the ruling lawmakers and ministers believed to have patronised his activities, the source claimed that the authorities are yet to interrogate him in that line.

There has been a strong allegation that some ruling lawmakers and ministers had patronised the gang in conducting its so-called anti-outlaw operations.

The interrogators are now quizzing Bangla Bhai about his dens, militant training, supply of explosives and other related matters, the source said.

They also asked him about his Muktagachha hideout and the explosion that took place there during his arrest on March 6.

Bangla Bhai admitted that he shot two rounds at the law enforcers and that his aide Masud hurled the bomb to make way for him, the source said. The explosion injured the two JMB militants.

The investigators also asked Bangla Bhai about his operations in Bagerhat in 2002. The militant was arrested in Bagerhat and was later released. The interrogators quizzed him if he had been arrested and released on any other occasions.

Madrasa teacher Hazrat Ali, 28, of Hariwar village under Kaliganj upazila was arrested at Burimara outpost of Patgram upazila while homeopath doctor Abdul Gani, 35, was arrested at his chamber in Kakina Bazar of the same upazila.

LALMONIRHAT
The police arrested two JMB men in the border areas of Lalmonirhat in the early hours yesterday, reports our correspondent in the district.

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Indian High Commissioner in Dhaka Veena Sikri, Additional Foreign Secretary Tuhid Hossain, Minister (Press) of Bangladesh Foreign Commission in New Delhi M Anwarul Haq, Director General (EP) Zahurul Haque and Joint Secretary to the Commerce Ministry Elias Ahmed were present.

Around 40 leading business leaders from Bangladesh attended the meeting including FBCCI President Mir Nasir Hossain, MCCCI President Latifur Rahman, ICC President Mahbubur Rahman, President of Women Entrepreneurs Association, Bangladesh Rokia Afzal Rahman, Managing Director of Rahimafrozi Batteries Ltd Feroz Rahim, FBCCI Directors Aftab-ul-Islam, AKM Rafiqul Islam, Murshed Murad Ibrahim and Kamran Tanvirur Rahman, BTMA Chairman Abdul Awal, DCCI President Abdul Momen, former president of DCCI Sayeefullislam, JBCCI President Matiar Rahman, BKMEA President Fazul Haque, BGMEA Director Syed Mohammad Fazul Haque, BTMA leader Abdul Hai Sarker, Arab Bangladesh Bank Chairman Faisal Morshed Khan, Managing Director of Pran Group Maj Gen (ret'd) Amjad Khan Chowdhury, President of Bangladesh-Malaysia Chamber of Commerce Abdul Matlub Ahmad, Chittagong Chamber President Ershad Ullah, First Vice-president of FBCCI Mohammad Ali, and President of Women Entrepreneurs Association of Bangladesh Nasreen Awal.

A host of Indian leading business leaders and individuals including Managing Director of Tata Steel Limited B Muthuraman, Senior Vice-president of FICCI Habil F Khorakwala, Senior Vice-president of ASSOCHAM Venugopal N Dhoot and Anil Agarwala also attended the meeting.

Akbar moves to convince

FROM PAGE 16
PID conference room yesterday.

The main objective of our decision to privatise operation is to reduce the turn around time of the ships anchored at Chittagong port, he said, adding, "We want to reduce the turn around time to three days from existing five days."

The business community will be immensely benefited through reduction of the turn around time, as a ship has to spend \$15,000 per day for staying at the port, he said.

The whole aspects of the government's plan have been explained in the letter and I am ready to talk to him over telephone," the minister told journalists when asked what would be done if the mayor is not convinced by the letter.

The minister told the press that he had earlier called a meeting with the city corporation on the issue but the mayor left the meeting without discussion.

Addressing a press conference in Dhaka, Mohiuddin Chowdhury on Monday vowed to resist any attempt to privatise the Chittagong port. The Chittagong port is a key installation and the country's security and safety would be hampered if it goes to private operation, he observed.

Chowdhury termed the privatisation of services of the port as a violation of Chittagong Port Authority (CPA) Act.

The shipping minister, on the other hand, ruled out the "propaganda by a section of people" that the new terminal would be privatised.

"We want to appoint a competent firm through official tender to load and unload containers for a certain period," he said, adding that handing over the operating system would not change the ownership of the terminal.

The estimated cost for the New Mooring container terminal was Tk 737 crore and it has been reduced to Tk 400 crore as the private company would install the operating machinery, he added.

Akbar said the firm would be

appointed on the basis of government's Supply Operate and Transfer (SOT) rule. The minister also expressed desire to appoint competent operators for accelerating the operation of gantry crane installed at both new and old terminals.

"The port operators would get proper training from the private operators," he said.

The conference was told that the newly installed gantry crane was not giving the maximum service due to lack of efficient operators. "The crane is handling only 11 containers instead of 30 per hour."

The private operation would help to accelerate the speed of the costly crane through technology transfer, the minister observed.

Ruling out any misappropriation of money and property through the privatisation process, the minister said the operation period of the private company will be on the basis of their investment and machinery installation.

He also ruled out the apprehension of increasing handling charge by several times following the privatisation of services and said the CPA Act will not be violated as this type of arrangement is already operating in the port.

The Bangladesh Garments Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) at an executive committee meeting yesterday expressed concern over the conflict between the government and city mayor over the operation of Chittagong port.

They urged the government to keep the operation of the Chittagong port smooth and remove all the bottlenecks at the port for easy handling of export and import items.

The BGMEA also urged the government to formulate a policy guideline for operating the newly built terminal.

Dhaka, Delhi

FROM PAGE 1
for Preventing Illicit Trafficking in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances and Related Matters.

"While the revised trade agreement is expected to provide a framework for expansion of bilateral trade, the other agreement signals the joint determination of the two Governments to combat drug trafficking," it said.

Discussions between the sides led by the two prime ministers were held in a cordial atmosphere and there was a constructive and forward-looking exchange of views, said the statement. The discussions resulted in greater understanding and appreciation of each other's point of view.

It was agreed that meetings of the bilateral institutional mechanisms such as the Joint Economic Commission, the Joint Boundary Working Groups, the Joint Rivers Commission and the home secretary-level talks would be held more frequently to ensure movement in a positive direction and their outcome monitored by the political leadership on a continuous basis.

"Whether it is security,