

## New workers' wage low

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proposed by the Minimum Wage Board to be implemented in a phased manner since even this would be a 127 per cent rise from the erstwhile Tk 930 and would obviously require substantial adjustment on the part of the entrepreneurs."

However, proposed wage for the first year at Tk 1,604 is less even when only inflation-adjusted wage (about Tk 1,773) for FY2006 is considered, he said. "Also, the proposed wage for year 2 and year 3 at Tk 1,890 and Tk 2,117 comes to about Tk 1,750 and Tk 1,815 in today's value if an eight per cent per annum inflation rate is accounted for."

Once the quota on Chinese export to the EU and USA is phased out after 2008, the price of apparels, which has already been under pressure in recent years, is likely to be pushed down further, Mustafiz observed.

The government cannot absolve itself from the responsibility to help the sector remain competitive in view of the emerging uncertainties and competitive pressure, he said, adding that disruption in power supply, infrastructural bottlenecks and corruption account for a significant part of entrepreneur's cost.

"Concrete support measures will need to be put in place by the government to reduce the cost of doing business...so that this sector, so critically important for our economy and our country, could continue to survive and thrive," Mustafiz said.

Zaid Bakht, research director of Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS), said the minimum wage should be around Tk 2,000 considering the poverty line and the fact that there is no controversy over the need of the workers.

He, however, said, "The proposed pay structure is a partial one and I think a comprehensive study regarding wage for the garment workers and their productivity should have been done."

Qazi Kholiqzaman Ahmad, president of Bangladesh Economic Association (BEA), said the proposed minimum wage of Tk 1,604 for the first year has been closer to what the owners were offering. "So, the owners are less aggrieved and the workers are comparatively more aggrieved."

If the income of the poverty line is

taken into consideration, which is around Tk 1,100, the proposed minimum wage is a bit over than the benchmark, he noted.

On the other hand, prices of Bangladeshi products in the global market have gone down substantially. "As a result, profitability has also declined. So, higher wage increase will lead to factory closure," the BEA president observed.

But the total process of recommending a salary structure has been handled very poorly. Due emphasis should have been given to both the owners and the workers through close discussion, Kholiqzaman said. It was possible to minimise the difference substantially between what the workers were demanding and what the owners were offering, he added.

MA Razzak, associate professor of economics at Dhaka University, said the proposed minimum wage of Tk 1,604 in the first year for the unskilled workers has been lower than what should have been. If the minimum wage in the 1993-94 fiscal is considered as a benchmark, taking inflation into account, it should have been between Tk 1,725 to Tk 1,770.

If the inflation rate continues to be six per cent, the minimum wage in the third year should be Tk 2,109. So, the proposed wage of Tk 2,117 from the year 2008 is acceptable, he observed.

However, the wage hike in grades I and II is lower and has not been even adjusted with inflation, Razzak noted. "But, I am not worried about it because these grades are for the skilled workers and there is a good demand for them."

The wage is going to rise by Tk 700 on an average and a factory having roughly 500 workers will need to pay Tk 42 lakh a year, he said, adding that it would be very difficult for the factories depending on sub-contract to absorb this hike. If these factories cannot absorb the initial pressure, wage hike in the second and third years would be very difficult in that case.

"The role of the government will be very crucial because survival for the BGC exporters would be very difficult if port congestion, electricity problem and other infrastructural issues are not addressed properly," Razzak said.

The Minimum Wage Board at its 25th meeting on September 12 recommended a three-tier proposal to be implemented in three phases with Tk 1,604 as the minimum gross salary in the first year up to June 30, 2007.

The minimum gross salary would be Tk 1,890 in the second year and Tk 2,117.50 in the third year starting from July 1, 2008.

However, both owners and workers rejected the proposed pay structure. The employees thought it did not match their expectation while the employers feared factory closure if the proposed wage hike is implemented.

The board earlier held 24 meetings after it had been formed on May 31 but could not reach a consensus. Following a severe labour unrest in the country's premier export-earning sector, the government formed the wage board and asked it to recommend a pay structure for the workers within three months.

The government and leaders of garment owners and workers at a meeting on June 12 inked a 10-point memorandum of understanding (MoU) after a series of discussions, and decided to implement those in phases to address labour unrest and ensure labour rights and peaceful atmosphere in the factories.

## Mass arrest

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arrestees are being implicated in different cases where unknown persons had been made accused.

However, police said the arrests are part of their regular drive.

Sources said the authorities are shifting many prisoners from the Dhaka Central Jail to other jails to create space for the new arrestees.

Meanwhile, a team of four police officers led by Joint Commissioner of Detective Branch of Police Shahidul Islam met Awami League General Secretary Abdul Jalil yesterday afternoon at his Mercantile Bank office at Motijheel.

To instruct the police team requested Jalil to instruct his party activists not to carry sticks or explosives during tomorrow's rally. They also informed Jalil about the security measures taken for the rally, sources said.

## Ship alert system

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Immediately after the alert system failure, Captain AKM Shafigullah, director general (DG) of shipping, wrote to the Chittagong Port Authority (CPA) chairman asking him to restore the alert system by activating the mobile sets urgently.

"The continuation of the situation will make our ports and vessels non-compliant with the ISPS code, leading to major implication at national and international level," wrote Captain Shafigullah.

CPA Chairman AM Shahadat Hossain, on the other hand, termed the news of the security alert system collapse a 'rumour' and claimed that the ISPS codes have been 100 per cent maintained in the port.

Asked about the letter of the shipping DG, the CPA chairman said the port authority got the cell phones disconnected on the understanding that they were no longer required following full implementation of the ISPS code.

The collapse of security alert might be a conspiracy to tarnish the image of the port at the interna-

tional level, said a CPA official requesting anonymity.

The ISPS alert system at Chittagong and Mongla ports facilitates any ship having a piracy, security incident or any other unlawful activity while in port or at sea to contact the ISPS cell.

After implementation of the ISPS system in July 2004, Bangladesh was listed in 'white category' in International Maritime Organisation.

The shipping agents and many shipping companies are desperately inquiring of the port authority about the security system failure, said a source.

Two ships of HRC Shipping and shipping agents failed to communicate with the ISPS cell due to the system failure while none of the ISPS officials could be contacted, the source said.

The CPA stopped taking the services of those three vital cell phones without prior notice, keeping the shipping agents and others concerned totally in the dark about the security position of the ports.

## EU team

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The mission came to Khulna press club at about noon and wanted to know from local journalists if there would be any problem in gathering information on the polls day for correct reporting in newspapers. Some journalists told them they did not get easy access to polling centres in the last national elections despite showing their identity cards.

"We have come to your country only to listen to you and not to make any comments," Andrew Bruce said when asked if they have any suggestions for resolving the current political crisis to pave the way for holding peaceful elections. He agreed with the journalists that tolerance and patience of political leaders are crying need in a critical political situation as exists in Bangladesh now.

Earlier on Friday night, the EU team held separate meetings with local leaders of the BNP and its ally in the ruling coalition Jamaat-e-Islami, the main opposition Awami League (AL) and Jatiya Party

(Ershad). The closed-door meetings with the leaders at a local hotel lasted about three and a half hours from 7:00 pm.

When asked, leaders of the four political parties told journalists that the visiting mission wanted to know about electoral reforms, reforms in the Election Commission and caretaker government. Matters relating to law and order also came up for discussion.

"We have told them that a free and fair election is not at all possible with the defectively updated voter list," said General Secretary of the district AL Mostafa Rashidi Shuja.

City BNP Convenor and lawmaker Ali Asgar Lobi, and Nayeb-e-Amir of city Jamaat Shafigul Islam said they have informed the EU team that law and order is quite congenial for holding a peaceful election with 'properly updated' voter list.

The delegation included Ana Beatriz Martins, Hanna Roberts, Victor Perez, Pascaline Krone and Charles Whately.

## Hasina terms

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the president of main opposition Awami League (AL), claimed.

Speaking at different rallies in Tangal and Jamalpur yesterday the AL chief said immediately after the prime minister had called for a general secretary level discussion, the BNP secretary general was admitted to hospital with sickness.

She said President Iajuddin Ahmed was also sent to hospital after he had been 'made ill' the same way.

Former prime minister Hasina told the crowd at a rally that no election will be allowed to be held on the soil of Bangladesh under Justice KM Hasan and MA Aziz, the most likely chief of the next caretaker government and the current chief election commissioner respectively.

"We will participate in the upcoming election but not under Justice KM Hasan," she said.

She reiterated her belief that no credible election is possible under Justice KM Hasan and Justice MA Aziz as they are BNP partisans.

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She warned the prime minister that no election will be allowed to be held without the participation of AL.

She predicted that although the prime minister is not interested in carrying out electoral reforms, she will be finally forced to accept the reforms.

"She (PM) did not want to accept the opposition's demand for reforms in the system of caretaker government before 1996 election, but finally she was forced to accept it and this time also she will be compelled to meet the demand," Hasina said.

Accusing the prime minister of hatching conspiracies to deprive the people of their right to franchise in the upcoming election, the AL president said they proposed electoral reforms in order to ensure that the people can exercise their democratic right of voting freely.

She said her party always wants elections to be held in the country but the elections should be held in a free, fair and neutral manner so that every voter can vote according to his or her will.

"Why do you (PM) want to steal people's vote, when you claim flourishing development in the country?" Hasina threw a question to her counterpart adding that if the PM was confident then she would carry out the electoral reforms and accept the people's mandate in the next election.

Hasina instructed her party leaders and activist to check whether their names are on the voter roll. She also directed them to form vote protection committees to monitor the polls.

## Verdict

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The trial of the plot allotment case began in 1998. The court completed its hearing on August 13 this year.

The court framed charges against Ershad and acquitted the then Rajdhami Unnayan Kartipakha (Rajuk) chairman Rahamat Ullah on March 9, 1992 as no conclusive evidence was found against him.

Mohammad Sajjad Hossain, an official of the now-defunct Bureau of Anti-Corruption (Bac), filed the case against Ershad with Motijheel Police Station on April 22, 1991. The investigation officer (IO) of the case pressed charges against Ershad and Rahamat Ullah on December 9 the same year.

The prosecution claimed that the then president Ershad directed authorities concerned to allot plots in Gulshan, Banani, Baridhara and Uttara residential areas to 49 people during 1988-1990, violating the government and Rajuk provisions.

The court recorded statements of only four prosecution witnesses since the beginning of trial on April 23, 1998.

The court could not complete arguments of the case as the prosecution and the defence had sought time on different excuses since August 2002.

Ershad was acquitted in three graft cases last month amid speculations about his joining the ruling BNP-led alliance ahead of the next parliamentary elections.

## Jamaat

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Earlier on Thursday, Prime Minister Khaleda Zia proposed the dialogue that is seen to be an ice-breaker in the current stalemate in politics.

The PM's invitation to the opposition followed repeated pressure from the international community including National Democratic Institute (NDI), European Union (EU) exploratory mission and the latest move of US Ambassador Patricia A. Butenis.

The Jamaat leader castigated the foreign delegates for their interference in Bangladesh politics.

"They are interfering in our election, but what did they do in their turn? The 'Florida blunder' is yet to be forgotten," he said.

BNP must first talk to Jamaat regarding the dialogue, he said, adding that they will hold a meeting with the BNP policymakers when BNP Secretary General Mannan Bhuiyan recovers from illness.

## Doctor jailed

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and died on his way to a private hospital in Comilla two hours into the operation.

When the news of the kid's death spread, angry people brought out a procession accusing the doctor. Being informed, police rushed to the spot and brought the situation under control.

A case was filed by police, following which Dr Murtaza and three of his staff were arrested. Another accused staff Sajeda Akhter surrendered later.

## Nitun

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last glimpse of the legendary artist whose body was kept there for an hour from 11:00am.

The mourners stood in silence as bugles played the last post as a tribute to Nitun Kundu the freedom fighter. A police contingent presented guard of honour in reverence for his contribution to the country's liberation.

Floral wreaths laid by people on the coffin of Nitun Kundu turned it a huge shrine of flowers.

"We are grateful to the government that it has shown the honour to a freedom fighter he deserves," Animesh Kundu, son of the late artist, told The Daily Star.

"Nitun Kundu is no more today, but as long as the country will exist he will remain alive in the mind of people for his role in the Liberation War and his artistic works," said a mourner.

State Minister for Cultural Affairs Selima Rahman, Awami League leader Obaidul Quader, Workers Party President Rashed Khan Menon, Jatiya Samantantrik Dal President Hasanul Haq Inu, Communist Party of Bangladesh General Secretary Mujahidul Islam Selim, cultural personalities Ramendu Majumder, Ferdousi Majumder, litterateur Syed Shamsul Haque, artist Qayyum Chowdhury, among others, were present at the Shaheed Minar.

Earlier at 10:00am, the body of Nitun Kundu was taken to the Institute of Fine Arts on the Dhaka University campus where teachers and students paid their last tribute to the deceased artist.

From the Shaheed Minar, the body was taken to the Shyamapur factory of international-standard furniture maker Orobi where its founder fell unconscious on Tuesday following a heart attack.

Officials and employees of Orobi paid their last respect to Nitun Kundu, who founded the company in 1975.

Later, his body was taken to the Postagala cremation ground. Nitun Kundu's son Animesh and daughter Amiti torch the funeral pyre in a sombre atmosphere around 1:30pm.

Nitun Kundu, the famed sculptor of Shahab Bangladesh on the Rajshahi University campus—a tribute to the martyrs of the Liberation War, and the Saarc Fountain at Karwan Bazar, passed away on Friday.

## Pope 'sorry'

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Islamic faith, he (the Pope) hopes they will be helped to understand his words in their true sense."

Before the statement, the tide of Muslim criticism of the Roman Catholic leader swelled on Saturday.

Yemen's president became the first head of state publicly to denounce him and threatened to review ties with the Vatican unless he apologized. All Abdullah Saleh, campaigning for re-election, told voters at a rally Benedict had wronged Islam.

Two churches -- neither of them Catholic -- were fire-bombed in the West Bank, although no one was hurt.

But Chancellor Angela Merkel and other German politicians defended his comments, saying he had been misunderstood.

"It was an invitation to dialogue between religions, she told the mass-circulation Bild newspaper in an interview. "What Benedict XVI emphasized was a decisive and uncompromising renunciation of all forms of violence in the name of religion."

"He should apologize to Muslims," the president of the German Council of Muslims, Ayyub Axel Koehler, told the Neue Presse newspaper on Saturday. "That would be a contribution toward unwinding the tension and creating clarity."

Support for that view came from the New York Times, which said in an editorial on Saturday he must issue a "deep and persuasive" apology for quotes used in his speech.

"The world listens carefully to the words of any pope. And it is tragic and dangerous when one sows pain, either deliberately or carelessly," it said. "He needs to offer a deep and persuasive apology, demonstrating that words

can also heal."

The Pope on Tuesday repeated criticism of the Prophet Mohammad by the 14th century Byzantine Emperor Manuel II Palaeologus, who said everything Mohammad brought was evil "such as his command to spread by the sword the faith he preached."

The Pope, who used the terms "jihad" and "holy war" in his lecture, added "violence is incompatible with the nature of God and the nature of the soul."

Muslim figures continued to assail those comments.

"How can (the Pope) imply that Muslims are the creators of terrorism in the world while it is the followers of Christianity who have aggressed against every country of the Islamic world?" prominent Saudi cleric Salman al-Odeh said.

"Who attacked Afghanistan and who invaded Iraq? ... The Pope's statements are an attempt to put a religious cover on injustice and political aggression practiced by the American administration against Muslims."

Turkey's nationalist paper Vatan quoted Salih Kapusuz, head of the ruling Justice and Development Party's parliamentary group as saying: "The mentality of the Crusades has returned."

"(Benedict) will go down in history in the same category as leaders such as Hitler and Mussolini."

But Turkey's English-language Daily News, while deploring the Pope's comments, said: "We just disagree with this vendetta-like approach of continuing to abuse the Pope after his spokesman made a statement saying that he respected Islam and did not intend to offend Muslims."

## 6 Asian nations

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included in a "significant" list of violators of religious freedom in the US State Department's annual International Religious Freedom Report 2006.

John Hanford, US envoy for international religious freedom, said there was a possibility that one or more from the six nations could be added to a blacklist of "countries of particular concern" that includes China, Myanmar, North Korea and Vietnam. The blacklist is renewed annually and the State Department is expected to publish an update in coming weeks.

In this year's report, the State Department emerged with two categories of countries. The first list of eight "countries of particular concern" or "severe" violators of religious freedom comprised Myanmar, China, North Korea, Iran, Sudan, Eritrea, Saudi Arabia and Vietnam.

The other list of 20 countries, including the eight, where religious freedom was seen with "significant interest" were Afghanistan, Brunei, Cuba, Egypt, India, Israel and Occupied Territories, Laos, Pakistan, Russia, Sri Lanka, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.

"The list of 20 countries are ones that we just felt gave a good overview of some of the dynamics that constitute this past year of religious freedom issues in the world," Hanford said at a media briefing after Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice launched the report covering 197 countries and territories.

"Yes, I think generally speaking they reflect some of the more serious violators of religious freedom. I think it's fair to say that if we add any countries this year to the Countries of Particular Concern, probably they'll come from that list," Hanford said.

In Vietnam, overall, respect for religious freedom has improved, the report said. Hanford hinted the country could be removed from the department's blacklist.

The religious freedom report illustrates "the importance and the

salience of religion in all the big issues in Asia -- extremism, terrorism, democratic transition and integration of countries such as China and Vietnam into the international system," said Scott Flipse, a senior policy analyst with the US Commission on International Religious Freedom, a Congress-mandated panel.

"Policy makers and diplomats ignore religion at their peril," he said. "More and more the salience of religion is becoming an international relations strategic factor."

The commission each year recommends to Rice which countries should be blacklisted. In Afghanistan, the report this year cited "a conservative culture of intolerance, which at times manifested in acts of harassment and violence against reform-minded Muslims and religious minorities."

Oil-rich Brunei was accused of using laws to restrict the expansion of religions other than official Islam while in India "some extremists continued to perceive ineffective prosecution of attacks on religious minorities" as a "signal that they could commit such violence with impunity."

In addition, religious conversion remained a highly contentious issue and terrorists carried out deadly violence against religious targets in India, it said.

In Laos, the authorities were accused in the report of "intolerance" for minority religious practice, especially by evangelical Christians.

Pakistan was cited for having "discriminatory legislation and the government's failure to take action against societal forces hostile to those who practice a different faith."

This fostered religious intolerance and acts of violence and intimidation against religious minorities, the report said.

In Sri Lanka, the report highlighted "violent resistance" by some Buddhists to Christian church activity of particularly evangelical groups.

There also were sporadic attacks on Christian churches by Buddhist extremists, it said.

## Barapukuria

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able to perform without interruption soon, said Power Development Board (PDB) sources in Dhajpur.

However, the officials claimed that the plant would resume production within the next four to five days.

Negligence of the officials concerned and poor machinery provided by the supplier and their non-cooperation with PDB are the main reasons of the plant's recurring malfunction, alleged power plant sources.

Sources also alleged gross irregularities in procurement of a turbine where the design was changed without the approval of the authorities.

The consultant of the project deviated from the turbine design without consulting PDB and later argued that the changed design was "better". PDB, however, was not convinced.

Top officials of the plant were tight-lipped over the matter and did not disclose information on the plant's overall condition.

## Oli

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right to take action against him. He is determined to strike back if any action is taken against him.

The meeting is part of Oli's campaign to mobilise support to his move across the country.

## Citizens forum

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elected in the next election, it can hold elections (in future), and caretaker government will not be required," he told journalists.

Dr Kamal said the consultation has become ineffective. The people, who are the owners of the country, have become helpless, powerless and victims of political parties. The people should be made aware that they are the owners of the state, not the political parties. He added, "We have to work intensively on it."

He regretted that the perpetrators of many bomb attacks and killings have not yet been brought to book, and the use of money and arms in elections continues virtually destroying democracy.

Shujan proposed that honest and neutral chief election commissioner and election commissioners have to be appointed in consultation with the opposition parties.

The Election Commission (EC) Secretariat should be free from control of the Prime Minister's Office and have its own budget and authority to appoint its officials and employees, it suggested. "A separate service cadre should be created for the EC."

The EC should be empowered to cancel candidature if any candidate or his/her agent commits any serious crime during the election, the recommendations said.

The speaker should be appointed from the opposition, and he/she has to leave political party, the forum

stressed.

It also proposed formation of parliamentary committees on the first day of a parliament's session with the opposition lawmakers heading the committees to ensure their accountability.

Laws need to be formulated so that legislators do not get involved in local governments, the proposals said.

Political parties must get registered with the EC and the parties must have written constitution. President and general secretary of any party must not remain in the same posts for more than two terms, Shujan demanded.

Presiding over the convention, Shujan Central Committee President Prof Muzaffer Ahmed said, "We want to see democracy in our everyday life. Without financial clarity of the MPs, the reforms in the EC or caretaker government will not be effective."

Participants in the convention felt that there should be a citizens booth in each polling centre to observe elections.

Lawmakers should not be given any block allocation of funds as they use that for partisan interests, they said.

Speakers included Dr Hamida Hossain of Ain O Shalish Kendra, Muhammad Jahangir of Centre for Development Communication, Taleya Rehman of Democracy Watch, Dr Zafarullah Chowdhury of Gonoshasthya Kendra, Justice Ebadul Haque and Badre Alam Khan.

## Gloomy prospect

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formal initiative to sit with the opposition following the prime minister's latest proposal.

"The prime minister's offer of a dialogue itself is formal. Is any formal or written proposal necessary when the prime minister herself made the offer publicly?" Harris Chowdhury, political secretary to the prime minister told journalists on Friday.

On Thursday, at a public rally in Banchharampur Khaleda proposed a secretary-level dialogue between her party and the main opposition on the opposition's demand for reforms in the system of caretaker government and the Election Commission.

BNP Secretary General also LGRD and Cooperatives Minister Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan was admitted to a hospital with chest pain on the same day and he is likely to fly to Singapore for better treatment.

Political analysts predict that the possibility of starting the much desired dialogue might be delayed if the BNP secretary general remains in a hospital for more days.

Meanwhile, the opposition camp is now busy with the preparation to gather 'a million people' in the grand rally tomorrow at Paltan Maidan from where the coalition will announce its final round of agitation programmes to realise the reform agenda.

AL will hold a meeting of its central working committee (ALWC) today with its chief Sheikh Hasina in the chair. The 6:00pm meeting will discuss the

party's strategy ahead of tomorrow's grand rally.

After the ALWC meeting, its leaders will meet their 14-party coalition partners at 8:00pm.