

DOWN TO EARTH



Shopkeepers' whims

By Khalilur Rahman

Disparity in prices of essentials in the city's fish-cum-vegetable markets has baffled the consumers for quite a long time. Any buyer visiting any such market will be surprised to see that the prices of most of the items sharply vary from shop to shop though the quality and size of those and the source of their supply are the same.

Take the case of the most popular vegetable, onion which now sells at Taka 11 per kilogram (kg) in Moulvibazar but at Taka 14 to 16 in Captain Bazar, New Market, Gulshan market and Fakirapool Bazar.

It is more interesting to note that one kg of onions in one shop at New Market is selling at Taka 14 and the same quality item just in the adjacent shop sells at Taka 16.

Both the shops have received the supply of the commodity from the wholesale market at Moulvibazar. And the Moulvibazar market has also sold the same product to the groceries in New Market at the same price.

When the shopkeeper is asked about the disparity in the price that prevails in two adjacent shops the reply often relates to the higher rate of procurement or higher charge of transportation. But on close scrutiny it will be found that the cost of transportation of the commodities from the wholesale market to the retail shops at New Market by rickshaws vans, push carts or rickshaws seldom varies.

So the discrepancy in price reflects nothing but the sellers' unreasonable attitude to make more profit.

Garlic which is widely known to have beneficial effect on the cardiac muscles at times can cause 'heart trouble'.

Last month the price of the item suddenly shot up to Taka 70 per kg from Taka 48 to Taka 50. There was no short supply nor any other reason for such abnormal price hike. Still there was rise in price which persisted for over a fortnight.

Then the price fell to its present rate at Taka 45 to Taka 52 depending on size and quality. The price of multi-cell garlic is Taka 32 while the single-cell is Taka 45 per kg. But this is not the problem to the buyers.

A survey on four retail markets at Gulshan, New Market, Moulvibazar and Fakirapool Thursday showed that both varieties of garlic having the same quality and size are selling at Taka 56 (single-cell) to Taka 30 (multi-cell) per kg in all those places. The price of the item is, of course, the highest in Gulshan market.

The price of salt like many other essentials of life has shot up after the devastating cyclone and tidal bore that hit the coastal belt of Bangladesh on April 29 last.

The price for a kg of salt at Gulshan market was Taka 12 on the day. But in a few shops at the same market salt was selling at Taka 10 to Taka 11. There was no variation in quality.

In Fakirapool the price of the item was Taka eight to Taka nine and in Moulvibazar — Taka seven.

The destruction of salt beds by the cyclone and tidal surge has caused the price hike, the traders said.

The price of soyabean oil has recorded a sharp rise in the city market during the last fortnight. Two weeks ago the price of four-kg soyabean oil in plastic container produced by

the Dhaka Vegetable Oil Industries, and enterprise in the public sector, was Taka 135. The price now varies from Taka 145 to Taka 148.

At New Market the price was Taka 145 in one shop while in another shop in the same market it was sold at Taka 148 per 4-kg packet. There was no explanation for the disparity from the sellers.

In almost all the city markets fish is in short supply. This has resulted in higher prices of all the varieties of fish on sale. A medium-size hilsha was selling at Taka 70 at Fakirapool. The price was not more than Tk 50 three weeks ago. 'Shing' and 'Magur' which used to dominate the fish market are now scanty in all the places. As a result the vendors are charging too high price for both these varieties of fish having high demand among the buyers.

In most cases doctors prescribe these two types of fish to the patients at convalescence stage. Such is the case with chicken. Per pair of medium-size chickens is now selling at Taka 130 to Taka 140. While the price was only Taka 110 to Taka 115 per pair of the same size in the last week of April.

The price of mutton and beef varies from market to market. At Captain Bazar and Fakirapool, the price of a kg of mutton is Taka 85 to Taka 90 and beef, Taka 50 while mutton sells at Taka 100 per kg in New Market and beef at Taka 60.

A disgusted buyer at Kawanbazar told me that previously the price of essentials showed changes in a month or two but now-a-days the changes take place every hour.

Islanders want embankment

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on a white banner just as we got off the helicopter at Kutubdia upazila headquarters. People of the island, battered by the April 29 cyclone and tidal surge displayed the banner to draw the attention of the US Task Force personnel, ferrying relief goods there from Chittagong Airport by copters.

The Task Force copters were also carrying journalists, from home and abroad, to various destinations at the off-shore islands.

The message on the banner was in English because, as the local people said, they wanted to communicate their prime need to the foreigners, who really wish their betterment.

The relief operations in the worst-hit island of Cox's Bazar was satisfactory, most of the locals said while some differed. During my visit to the island on May 19, I talked to people in different localities and bazaris. I was informed of a variety of problems confronting the islanders. But it was on one, which they stressed most, the immediate reconstruction of the 31-mile embankment washed away by the tidal waves.

'We don't want relief goods, protect us from the next disaster by rebuilding the embankment. If we are alive, means of living will be found', Abdul Gafur of Koterbill village made the appeal, while his companions supported him.

Abdul Gafur, no doubt, echoed the demand of lakhs of others passing fearful days in the off-shore islands and coastal areas. Small trader Abul Kashem of Baroghaj who appeared to be in a better condition, supporting Gafur said, the construction of the embankment would also employ most of the

unemployed population of the island.

With the embankment washed away, water often engulfs the low-lying areas during high tide. The cyclone-hit islanders were found afraid of a fresh tidal surge that, they thought, might cause more damage and casualties.

Reconstruction of the embankment, damaged fully or partially, has begun, officials claimed. But when we (journalists) flew aboard a Bangladesh Airforce helicopter almost touching the trees and houses of the islands, we did not find that any such work had begun. I also found no reconstruction work in progress when I visited the coastal belt of Patenga later the same day.

Some WAPDA officials, examining the damaged embankment at Patenga reported having seen a few people begin rebuilding portion of the embankment near the Export Processing Zone.

I received similar reports while talking to the people on the way to Kutubdia.

They said, reconstruction at one or two points of the embankment had started under the Food for Work Programme. But those came to a halt, they added.

We saw from the helicopter, waters engulfing Kutubdia's low-lying areas of Dhurag, Lemshikhali, Koterbill, Baroghaj and Akbar Ali Dail. These are the worst-hit areas of the island where people are living on the debris left by the disaster.

Unless the embankment is rebuilt, farming, salt producing and fishing, major occupations of the islanders, won't be possible to resume, concerned people said. Besides, they added, the government agricultural rehabilitation programme would and in papers if

the task was not done without further delay.

Other major demands of the local people, included providing of necessary equipments to resume their work, draining out of stagnant saline water, reconstruction of the destroyed houses, or supply of housing materials and loans of various kinds under reasonable conditions.

Life seemed normal at the upazila headquarters and its surrounding areas while in the remote areas life was far from normal.

Many distressed families were found residing in the island's educational institutions, community centres and cyclone shelters.

The families, affected but otherwise affluent, were learnt to have left the island for better living in Cox's Bazar, Chittagong and elsewhere.

The entire island of Kutubdia plunges into darkness at night since electric lines there are not yet restored.

Earlier, a generator used to supply the islanders with power for six hours everyday. But the cyclone rendered the generator inoperative and uprooted many of the electric poles snapping the wires.

Unlike other islands, Kutubdia was rich with its more educated and solvent people living on salt production, crop farming and fishing.

Disaster management

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Dhaka, Marilyn Quayle said her government would help in rebuilding the embankment against future natural disasters. The IDAC Chairperson also spoke of the need to construct cyclone shelters and coastal embankments. International guidelines to build up protective measures against such colossal loss of lives in future is urgently needed, she said. Mrs Quayle said she would recommend international help in facing natural calamities. She said there would be an office of IDAC in Bangladesh to help the country deal with natural disasters.

Communal politics will grow, fears Benazir

NEW DELHI, May 23 : Benazir Bhutto arrived here today for the funeral of former Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, voicing fears that his murder would introduce new uncertainties into Pakistan-India relations, report agencies.

Ms. Bhutto, on her first visit to India for 19 years, said Gandhi's assassination Tuesday had the potential of spurring the growth of "communal and ethnic politics" in the subcontinent.

The former Pakistan Prime Minister told reporters Gandhi had died at a time of "tremendous flux" in the region, citing "flamboyant" tendencies in India and "secessionist trends" in Pakistan.

She did not elaborate, but her remarks appeared to refer to a trend towards Hindu revivalism in India.

Such developments portended new uncertainties in the future course of India-Pakistan relations, said Ms. Bhutto, who is leading a Pakistani opposition delegation to attend Gandhi's funeral Friday.

Ms. Bhutto said Gandhi had risen to the challenge posed by his mother and predecessor Indira Gandhi's 1984 assassination by two Sikh bodyguards. Gandhi's death had left a void which was extremely difficult to fill, she said.

She last visited India 19 years ago when her father Zulfikar Ali and Gandhi's mother signed an accord on bilateral relations.

"I feel very sad that I have to come on such an occasion," she added.

Gandhi visited Pakistan for a SAARC summit in 1989 when he was Prime Minister soon after Ms. Bhutto assumed office.

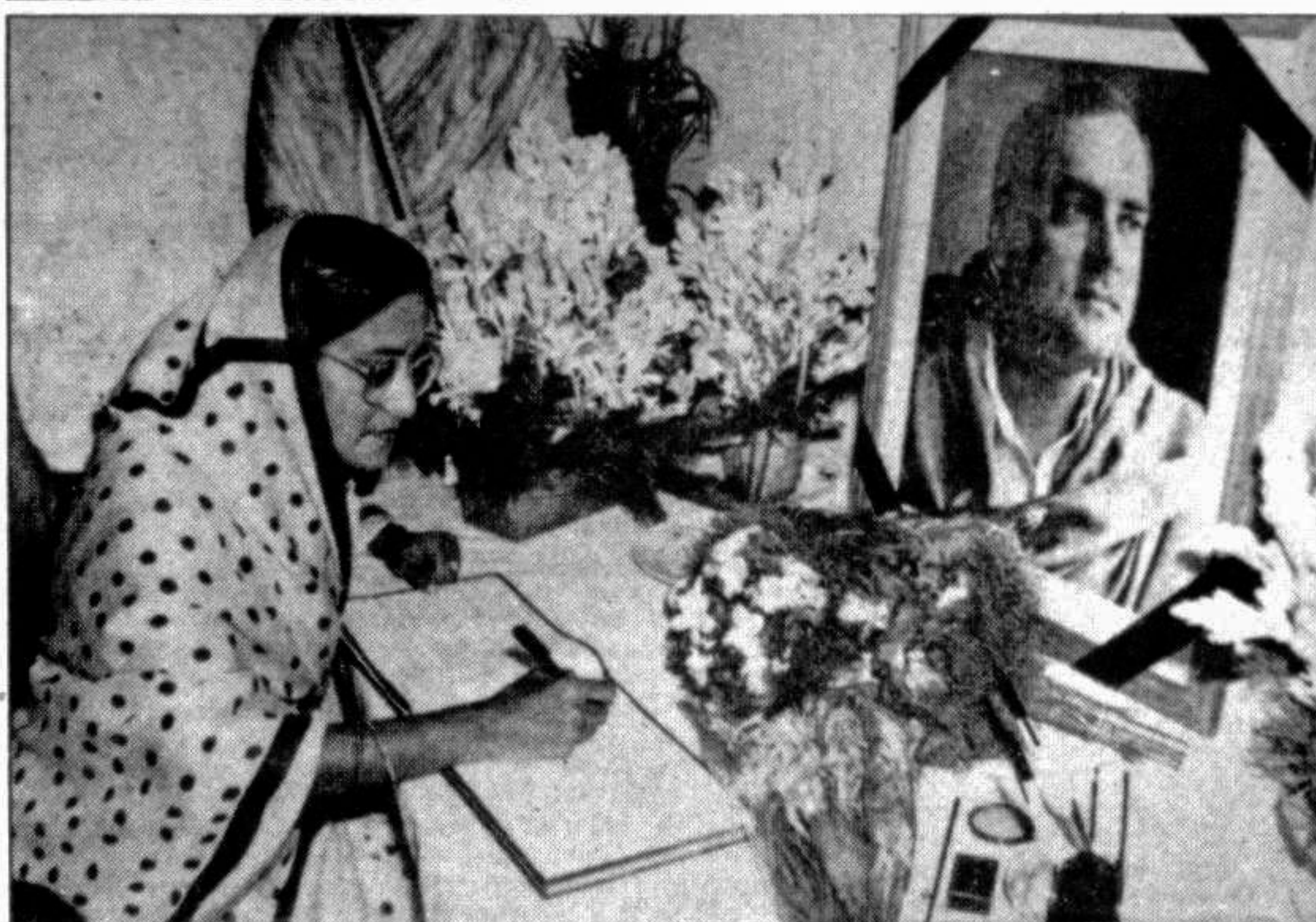
Ms. Bhutto is the first of dozens of foreign dignitaries expected to arrive for the funeral.

15 injured as BNP-AL workers clash at Tongi

DMCH Correspondent

At least fifteen persons were injured in a clash between BNP and Awami League workers at Tongi on Thursday at 1 pm.

About 50 to 60 persons led by Sultan Matbar (40) and his son Raushan Ali attacked Mitali Kalyan Samity an organisation of weaver. The attackers used sticks, ramsdoo and knife. About 40 to 50 members of the samity resisted attackers when they tried to ransack the Samity's office. The clash continued for about two hours.



Awami League chief and Opposition Leader in Parliament Sheikh Hasina signing the condolence book at the Indian High Commission on Thursday. —Star photo

Congress: Leadership crisis

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India. But Sarod Power, a senior Congress leader from Maharashtra is also a strong contender for the party leadership. With Rajiv's daughter Priyanka being only 20 and son Rahul 17, The Congress is stymied to pick a leader from the Nehru family. Arun Nehru and Menka Gandhi, two other Nehru Family members are also out of Congress now.

The senior Congress leaders wanted Sonia Gandhi to lead the party to overcome the present crisis. The political observers in Delhi said that if Congress could use Sonia Gandhi in the campaign, it could gain in the elections. Sonia's presence in election meetings could earn sympathy for the Congress candidates. The political commentators told the Daily Star that Congress would get sympathy votes even without Sonia Gandhi. But that might not give Congress a clear majority to form the government. So India is again seemingly heading for a hung parliament, they opined.

Meanwhile, the Indian President R Vankararaman's attempt to form a national government until the elections are completed has hit snags with major parties refusing to join it at this moment. BJP, the National Front and even Congress, albeit implicitly, are against such an idea. BJP is learnt to have declined to join a national government when the national elections will be completed in next four weeks time. The idea of national government was to show the determination of Indian people to stand together in hours of need. But BJP, the Hindu

revivalist party, is opposing the idea for simple reason that Lal Krishna Advani hopes to capture Delhi masnad when Congress is in crisis.

The National Front has also raised objection to the idea on the ground that it is not required when the country is in the midst of a poll, sources said.

The political instability in India has threatened the world's largest democracy. The killing of Rajiv in a bomb blast is the culmination of violence in Indian politics. The Indian politicians and newspapers were predicting violence in this elections. Calcutta based English daily Telegraph printed photographs of open arms bazar in an around Calcutta. In Bihar arms were on open sale which were being purchased by the candidates of different parties. These were the pre-elections scenario of violence in India. But the blast in Tamil Nadu has come as surprise to many as the south India is considered as the strong base of the Congress. None predicted major violence in the south and probably the killers of Rajiv Gandhi found the area safe for their operation.

The tenth Lok Sabha election is seen by many as the referendum to survival of Indian democracy. The emergence of BJP, which fared well with Hindu passion, has changed the Indian political arithmetic. None of the three major contenders for power—Congress (I), BJP and Janata Party, a left coalition, stands a chance of having absolute majority in the elections. Normally, in triangular fight, Congress gains as it controls

Phoebe Fraser

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the cyclone-battered areas, Ms Fraser appreciated the sense of courage of the survivors. She said people were beginning to get on their feet again they were rebuilding their houses and their lives.

Replying to a question, Ms Fraser said the affected people were trying to get on their feet instead of depending on foreign assistance.

Replying to another question, the daughter of former Australian Prime Minister said: "I have enjoyed very much serving the distressed humanity in one of the worst cyclone-hit areas of Bangladesh."

Regarding the extent of damage caused by the cyclone, she said she was 'struck up' with the wide coverage of the damage of cyclone by Australian television. But once she visited the cyclone areas she could see that the damage was really more colossal than its was projected by the electronics media, she said.

Giving a resume of relief activities of CARE-Bangladesh, Robin Needham said they had already spent 766,831 US dollars for carrying out emergency relief and medical services in the cyclone-affected areas.

In addition to this, he said CARE Bangladesh has allocated 304,333 US dollars. It had at received commitments for 352,762 US dollars from the donors.

The Midnight File

Koirala elected NCPP leader

KATHMANDU, May 23: Girtija Prasad Koirala, General Secretary of the Nepali Congress, was unanimously elected leader of the majority party in the 205-member House of Representatives here today. The president of the party, Dr. Krishna Prasad Bhattarai, presided over the meeting of the Nepali Congress Parliamentary Party (NCPP) at his official Bahuwat residence here this afternoon, reports PTI.

Former General killed in Ankara

ANKARA, May 23: Gunmen killed a retired Turkish Army General in Ankara today and wounded another and his driver in the southern city of Adana in the latest of dozens of political attacks. The shooting in Adana, carried out by three gunmen, was claimed by the extremist Dev-Sol (Revolutionary Left) group in a call to the Adana office of the Hurriyet daily, reports Reuters.

Syria hails Brotherhood pact

DAMASCUS, May 23: Syria hailed as historic the signing of a cooperation treaty with Lebanon, saying today that the pact paved the way for a brighter future for both countries. The Brotherhood, Cooperation and Coordination Treaty, signed by Syrian President Hafez Al-Assad and Lebanese President Elias Hrawi in Damascus on Wednesday, was met with dismay in Israel, reports Reuters.

183.5 tonnes relief sent

CHITTAGONG, May 23 : The Joint Task Force today sent a total of 183.5 tonnes of relief and rehabilitation materials to different affected areas of Chittagong and Cox's Bazar. Foodgrains, clothes, utensils, tubewells and power generators were among the materials carried by helicopter, naval ships and amphibian transports to Sandwip, Anwara, Banskhali, Kutubdia and Hatiya, reports BSS.

Credit recovery

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any new credit facility whatsoever. Such restrictions will be effective for all defaulters including directions of any bank and will also cover working capital funds.

The banking circles pointed out that the full list of defaulters was not yet available with them. Bangladesh Bank published so far the names of 170 'defaulters' with overdue credit liabilities exceeding Taka 2.5 crore in each case. The list is not yet complete and the commercial banks and other development financing institutions have not also published the full lists of 'defaulters'.

And again, another question, as some bankers pointed out, remains yet unresolved. Should restrictions on credits be applied to all the units under the ownership or sponsorship of any listed individual defaulter, irrespective of recovery performance of each unit? Meanwhile, the chamber bodies have decided to jointly take up issue about the credit recovery problem with the concerned authorities. Individual chamber bodies declined to comment on the issue and would like to watch the next course of developments after the publication of the full list of defaulters.

The publication of the lists of 'defaulters' however caused jitters in trade and industry circles. While none denied the need for restoring discipline in the financial sector in view of the huge amount of outstanding bank credits or funds lying 'overdue', some pointed out that the amount, showed as overdue loans or credits, did not represent the correct and updated statements of accounts. 'Overdues' have not been properly classified and cases, involving failures in repayment of a few instalments, have been taken as 'defaulters', some others alleged.

The head of a chamber body said, on condition of anonymity, that even rolling or revolving credits in the nature of working capital have been

Killer bomb

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LTTE as the suspect," he told reporters.

"I am not in a position to disclose the evidence at this stage when investigations are in progress, may be I will reveal it in a couple of days," he said.

But Sahay was more cautious about accusing the Tamil Tigers. "We are not saying that the LTTE is involved but they do have expertise in explosives and mines," Sahay said.

A spokesman in London for the Tigers said on Wednesday he was sure his group was not involved in the assassination.

AFP from Rawalpindi adds: The Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF) in Pakistan Wednesday denied any involvement in the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi.

To my knowledge, JKLF is not involved, Amanullah Khan, the Chairman of JKLF said, adding that such an action could be counter-productive.

Meanwhile, Sri Lanka security agencies offered help in the investigation into Rajiv's assassination as the island's Tamil Guerrillas were implicated as top suspects.

Defence Secretary General Cyril Ranatunga said he could not rule out involvement of the dominant Tamil Guerrilla group LTTE in Rajiv's assassination.

Zia's death anniversary

By Staff Correspondent

Bangladesh Nationalist Party has urged all to observe May 30, the death anniversary of late President Ziaur Rahman with due respect.

included as 'overdues'.

Meanwhile, blanket or across-the-board restrictions on credits for working capital to any units, owned or operated by any listed 'defaulters', will lead to closure of a large number of operational industrial or other concerns, many operators feared. Even some public sector corporations will face severe operational troubles as a result, they pointed out.

Banking circles said the amount of 'overdues' would be over Taka 10 billion in the overall outstanding loan or credit portfolio of about Taka 22 billion in the country's banking and financial sector. The amount included all kinds of credits — industrial or other term loans, working capital, trading credits (imports, exports and domestic trade), loans for services sector and agricultural loans. The share of public sector in the total amount of overdue credits will be about Taka three billion. Overdues in the agricultural sector will be over Taka four billion. The rest of the overdues are in the private sector and not necessarily all of it are in the category of industrial term loans, the sources added.

Mrs Quayle

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Sugandha office at the end of her three-day visit to Bangladesh.

The US dignitary arrived in Dhaka on Tuesday from Tokyo to see the extent of damage and relief operation being carried on by various organisations including the US Task Force.

Foreign Minister A S M Mustafizur Rahman, Foreign Secretary Abul Ahsan, US Ambassador to Bangladesh William B. Milam and the chief of US Task Force, General Henry C. Stackpole were present.

Mrs Quayle narrated her experience of the relief and rehabilitation work being carried on by the government, the non-government and other organisations together. She said things were improving there.

She said the members of the US Task Force were distributing medicines and pure drinking water to the survivors there. She said she had met the Minister and MPs who were coordinating relief work there.

Mrs Quayle said she was happy that the United States of America could participate in the reconstruction work of Bangladesh following the devastating cyclone.

She said she would report back to US President George Bush about the relief efforts being carried on in Bangladesh.

Begum Khaleda Zia thanked Mrs. Quayle once again for visiting Bangladesh to see the extent of damage and relief operations.

She also thanked the world community including the US government for responding generously to mitigate the sufferings of the cyclone-ravaged people in Bangladesh.

The Prime Minister expressed her confidence that Bangladesh would overcome this crisis soon and would concentrate on setting up of permanent facilities in the cyclone-prone areas in the country.

The visiting US dignitary had her lunch with Begum Zia at Sugandha.

Mrs Quayle left here Thursday ending a three-day visit during which she visited the cyclone-ravaged areas.

She was seen off at the airport by Foreign Minister A S M Mostafizur Rahman. State Minister for Relief Lutfur Rahman Khan, Foreign Secretary Abul Ahsan and the US Ambassador to Bangladesh William B. Milam were present at the airport.

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