

Boat purchase case

Ershad indicted for abusing power

A Special Judge's court yesterday indicted deposed president Hussain Muhammad Ershad on the charges of misusing his official position and influencing subordinates in awarding a purchase contract to a foreign firm, causing the state a loss to the tune of about Taka 33 crore, reports BSS.

Special Divisional Judge Anwaruddin Sikder, while framing the charges against Ershad, said the former ruler had disregarded the suggestions of the Ministry of Relief and Rehabilitation and issued directives with ulterior motive for purchase of rescue boats under a Japanese grant from the Marubeni Corporation, a Japanese trading company.

Ershad pleaded not guilty and stated that the charge of collusion between him (as president of the country) and the agent of Marubeni was simply 'impossible.' 'Please do not undermine the position of the President,' he told the prosecution.

The case relates to accepting the second lowest bidder (Marubeni Corporation) in the procurement of 520 emergency rescue boats of different sizes and 10 water purification units from Japan under the 11th Japanese debt relief grant amounting to 2.5 billion yen. The Relief Ministry procured the boats in 1989 at the directives of Ershad, ignoring the lowest bidder, the charge said.

Besides Ershad, I Inoyama, General Manager, Agro-Industrial Division, Marubeni, Japan has also been indicted in this case. Despite several efforts by the prosecution, Inoyama remained untraced and the trial began in his absence.

Ershad is accused of violating set procedures of the government either to derive benefit for himself or to favour others. He is also accused of not paying any heed to the recommendation of the technical committee on the specifications of the boats.

Because of Ershad's intervention, 275 boats (instead of 520 boats originally asked for) and 23 additional engines were finally procured and supplied to the country, thereby forcing Bangladesh to sustain a loss of Taka 32,90,80,854.70, the charge said.

The charge in this case was framed earlier in the court of the Divisional Special Judge Mohammad Ali Khan. On a prayer of the defence that the charge was framed in the absence of defence counsels, the High Court issued a directive to ensure that the accused was legally represented. The fresh charge was framed nearly three months after the previous one.

The corruption charge against Ershad said that he had influenced the Ministry of Relief and Rehabilitation in a way that they had asked quotations from only a limited number of manufacturers in Japan. Despite being defective and almost double the price quoted by the lowest bidder, Ershad ordered that the quotation of Marubeni Corporation be accepted, the charge said.

Accused Ershad kept the quotation confined to Japan only, although the grant was not tied. This was done intentionally to make him (Ershad) financially gainer or enable him to favour Inoyama, the charge added.

Judge Sikder said by his acts Ershad had committed a punishable offence under the Section 5(2) of the Prevention of Corruption Act 2 of 1947 and violated the said act's 5(1) Gha Section and Section 409 of the Penal Code. Inoyama was found to have committed an offence punishable under Section 5(2) of the Prevention of Corruption Act 2 of 1947 and Section 109 and 409 of the Penal Code.

The FIR in this case was lodged in 1992 and chargesheet submitted last year, when it first came up for trial. At least three ministers, who served under the deposed ruler, have been named as witnesses in the chargesheet, the prosecution told the court last month.

Ershad's principal counsel Khandkar Mahub Hossain objected to the charge framing, saying the prosecution has failed to show a scrap of paper to prove that his client had issued directives or influenced the purchase of the boats.

Disallowing Hossain's contention, Judge Sikder said he had found a prima facie case and accordingly framed the charge.

Special Public Prosecutor Ashraf Uddin Ahmed, in reply to the defence argument, said if the prosecution fails to prove its case, it would be discharged.

After the charge was framed, the judge fixed May 14 for recording the depositions of the witnesses, who included former ministers and top government officials.

Earlier the court heard two petitions from the prosecution seeking further investigations in Special Case No. 33 of 1993 and 34 of 1993 relating to the procurement of E N G equipment for Bangladesh Television and reinstatement of a government official respectively. Defence counsels seriously objected to the prayers, saying the prosecution had failed to cite specific legal grounds in support of the petitions.

Orders on the two prayers will be given on May 14, the judge said.

The Special PP was assisted by Md Samaulah Miah and M Masud Ahmed Talukder.

Yusuf Hossain Humayun, Advocate Fazole Rabbe, MP and a dozen others appeared for Ershad.



A Bosnian woman and other Sarajevans trying to force their way through a police cordon and enter the UN base in the city yesterday. Hundreds of Bosnians demonstrated in favour of continued UN bombing of Serb positions around the besieged Muslim enclave of Gorazde. — AFP photo

Serbs ignore

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were wounded in a single artillery attack on a school being used as a shelter.

A Doctors without Borders team in Gorazde reported Monday that the Serb assault had left 156 dead and 646 wounded over the last 12 days. They said the Gorazde hospital, located in an area targeted by snipers, was seriously overcrowded and short of medical supplies. Their casualty count apparently did not include the 200 wounded refugees.

Gorazde is on the main highway between Serb positions to the southwest and east. Its capture would solidify Serbs' hold on the region.

Meanwhile, relations between the United Nations and Bosnian Serbs deteriorated further.

The United Nations suspended the Sarajevo airlift and aid convoys through Serb-held territory Monday after Serbs prevented UN vehicles from passing checkpoints around Sarajevo.

Radovan Karadzic, head of the Bosnian Serbs, on Monday cancelled scheduled talks with US special envoy Charles Redman, the Yugoslav news agency Tanjug reported.

Bosnian Serbs accused NATO of hitting civilian targets around Gorazde and sharply protested the first NATO attack, insisting UN personnel in Gorazde were not threatened.

"There was no justification for the use of NATO air power," said the statement, carried by Tanjug. "By this act, the United Nations have sided against the Serbs."

The peace process is in danger and full responsibility lies with the UN," it said. "The Serbs will not be intimidated and will retain the right to self-defence."

In Geneva, Boutros-Ghali denied anti-Serb sentiments and said he was sure Bosnian Serbs would reject peace talks.

The safe areas designated by the United Nations must remain safe areas," said Boutros-Ghali. "It was for this reason and not as an attack on any one party that the NATO air power was summoned."

BDRCS Aid Consortium meet begins

Finance Minister M Saifur Rahman yesterday called upon the people to generously contribute to the Bangladesh Red Crescent Society (BDRCS) to enable it to be a vigorous service oriented humanitarian organisation, reports BSS.

The Finance Minister was inaugurating a two-day Aid Consortium meeting of the BDRCS.

Presided over by BDRCS Chairman Syed Shahidul Huq Jamal MP, the Consortium meeting is being participated by the representatives of donor Red Cross societies from the USA, the UK, Germany, Italy, Japan, Sweden, Canada, Norway and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC).

The meeting will review the progress of work of the on-going projects and programmes of the Bangladesh Red Crescent Society now being executed in various sectors and make fresh commitment for more funds.

The aid sector covers construction of cyclone shelters under disaster preparedness programme, relief for the refugees from Myanmar, community development project and health programme.

The Finance Minister said the present government had contributed Taka 25 million to the Red Crescent fund. As our resources are limited, the Finance Minister said, people should come forward to supplement government's efforts to augment the funds available with the Bangladesh Red Crescent Society.

He urged the Red Crescent officials to make the society self-reliant. Any help from abroad should be treated as supplementary, he said.

JMB foundation laying

PM's 'ill attempt' to exploit gains: Zillur

The Awami League general secretary yesterday said Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia had made an 'ill attempt' to exploit political gains by laying the foundation stone of the Jamuna Bridge for the second time, reports UNB.

"It's like slaughtering a hen twice," Zillur Rahman said in a statement amidst a Jatiya Party campaign that the foundation stone of the Jamuna Bridge was first laid by former President Ershad in 1988.

Giving a historical background of the Jamuna Bridge, Zillur said Sheikh Mujib, for the first time, felt the necessity of a bridge over the Jamuna for speedy transportation of goods, communication as well as industrialisation and economic development in the northern region.

In 1953, he recalled, Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani as the president of the Awami League, demanded the construction of the Jamuna bridge. Later this demand was incorporated in the 21-point election manifesto of the Jukta Front in 1954 and the election manifesto of the Awami League in 1970.

After the independence of Bangladesh, Zillur said, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib took pragmatic steps to implement this big project.

In 1972, he said, Mujib first sent a proposal to Japanese Prime Minister Kakuei Tanaka on the Jamuna bridge through a visiting Japanese parliamentary mission headed by powerful MP Takashi Hayakawa.

The AL general secretary said Bangabandhu visited Japan in 1973 when the proposal for construction of the Jamuna bridge figures prominently during his talks with Japanese Prime Minister Kakuei Tanaka.

As a follow-up, a mission of the Overseas Technical Cooperative Agency (OTCA) (now the Japan International Cooperative Agency) visited Bangladesh in 1973 under Ijchi and J Ebihara.

The mission conducted the pre-feasibility study on the Jamuna bridge. Later as many as 200 experts from Japan visited Bangladesh to conduct the feasibility study. Ijchi stayed in Sirajganj for near two years.

"Japanese Prime Minister Kakuei Tanaka gave firm assurance to Bangabandhu about the construction of the Jamuna bridge," Zillur said.

In 1975, Mujib laid tele-

phonic conversation with new Japanese Prime Minister Takeo Miki over the proposed Jamuna bridge. Besides, he also talked with the Japanese ambassador in Dhaka Takashi Oyama about the mobilisation of funds for the bridge.

As a result, Japan alone had agreed to finance the project but it felt discouraged after the assassination of Bangabandhu in 1975, said the AL GS.

"It's unfortunate that after coming to power Zia abandoned the Jamuna Bridge project as an impossible and absurd ambition," Zillur said, adding that neither the government nor any minister or MP raised the issue during that time.

He went on to say that although Ershad took the initiative for construction of the Jamuna bridge, yet he depended on the World Bank instead of Japan for financing the project, causing delay in implementing the project.

Zillur mentioned that Planning Secretary Syed Toufiq Imam, who was the Cabinet Secretary during the Bangabandhu government, advised that the cross-section of the people should be involved in this gigantic project. Bangabandhu also believed in that conception.

According to his advice, the government introduced the Jamuna bridge surcharge and in this way people got involved directly or indirectly in the Jamuna Bridge project.

The AL General Secretary said although Zia was not interested in the project, the present BNP government was forced to take the initiative in the face of popular demand.

Because of this historical reason, the Awami League made a commitment to construct the bridge during its last election campaign, he said.

General Ershad first laid the foundation stone on February 1, 1988 before signing of the loan agreement while Begum Zia laid the foundation for the second time before signing of the Award of Contract," Zillur said, calling their exercises "ludicrous."

The Awami League will extend all its cooperation in implementing this nationally important project as it is committed to the people, he said, asking the ruling party to refrain from trying to gain political interest by capitalising on the project.

Police raid JN Hall: one held

By DU Correspondent

Police recovered a pistol and arrested an outsider during a raid at the Jagannath Hall of the Dhaka University yesterday.

Some students fired blank shots while the police were searching for arms, ammunition and illegal occupants in the hall. They also brought out a protest procession on the campus.

A team of the Detective Branch (DB) led by Mohammad Abdul Quayyum raided the North House of the hall — a stronghold of the Bangladesh Chhatra League (M-I) — around 3:20 in the afternoon.

A police source said, "It was a surprise raid on a tip... We had information that there were some armed outsiders inside the hall."

Police arrested one Shah Jalal alias Niju, 24, from a room of the hall. He was detained in the DB office.

Police also arrested a student of the university while he was reportedly fleeing during the raid. But a group of students staged a demonstration and secured his release from the police van, witnesses said.

During the half an hour police operation, at least 12 gunshots were fired from inside the hall, according to some students.

Police recovered a foreign-made pistol loaded with four bullets from room No-16 in the North House.

Political situation worries GF

By Staff Correspondent

The Gano Forum at its emergency meeting of the standing committee yesterday observed that the political events were pushing the country towards uncertainty.

The net result of the present impasse will be bad for democracy in the country, the leaders cautioned.

The Forum urged all political parties to enter into immediate discussions among themselves to resolve the political stalemate.

The party also announced its decision to organise country-wide rallies and mass contact programmes on May 8.

BCL (M-I) observes token hunger strike

The Chhatra League (M-I) of the New Model Degree College yesterday observed a token hunger strike in front of the Jatiya Press Club demanding arrest of the killers of Paran and Milton, reports UNB.

Addressing a rally on the occasion BCL President Mainuddin Hasan Chowdhury charged the Jatiyatabadi Chhatra Dal (JCD) with the killings.

Afzalur Rahman Babu, Manjurul Islam Ashru, Ujjal and Joy also addressed the rally.

Earlier, the BCL brought out a silent procession from the college and joined the rally at the Press Club.

China trip

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possibility of setting up a trade centre in either Beijing or Shanghai.

During the trip, the two sides may look for signing a protocol on civil aviation for extending Biman's network to Shanghai.

The date for the next meeting of the Bangladesh-China Joint Economic Commission is also likely to be discussed.

Sources meanwhile, indicated that Beijing may discourage Dhaka's proposed support to Japan's entry into the United Nations Security Council. However, Dhaka is unlikely to revise its stand on the issue because Bangladesh 'values highly' its strong ties with Tokyo which has for quite some time been the largest single bilateral donor. Only recently Japan pledged US 200 million dollars for the Jamuna Bridge and the total Japanese annual aid package of 300 million dollars is likely to cross 600 million dollars in the current year.

Observers say, Dhaka has been 'rather dismayed' in not receiving an 'adequate response' on the water sharing issue with India during the Chinese Foreign Minister's visit.

"Bangladesh would still continue to look to China as its traditional friend and make every effort to further strengthen the existing relationship," a well-placed source in the Foreign Ministry said.

Beijing had been providing different forms of financial credits and has extended assistance to Dhaka in various sectors including agriculture, power, road communication and building of bridges. During the recent visit of Qian Qichen a further 8.5 million US dollar credit agreement was signed.

The Bangladesh Foreign Minister and his entourage will return to Dhaka on April 18.

The Midnight File

US to sell 25 F-15Is to Israel

WASHINGTON, Apr 11: The Clinton administration notified Congress today that it plans to sell 25 advanced McDonnell Douglas F-151 fighter jets to Israel for 2.4 billion dollars. The plan, announced by the Pentagon and expected to be completed without opposition from Congress, will be larger than the initial project announced by Israel in January under which that government would have bought 20 of the jets for 2 billion dollars, reports Reuter.

Rwandan terror spreading into countryside

"BUTARE (Rwanda), Apr 11: The terror that has gripped Rwanda's capital for days is spreading into the countryside, with new reports of savage butchery emerging Monday from the south of Kigali. "Hutus are killing Tutsis," said Herman Unglaub, 48, who fled to Butare from a German agricultural project about 40 miles (65 kms) to the south. "First, they burn and chase the people away," Unglaub said. "If they try to resist, they are slaughtered. Then they just loot the houses," reports AP.

Mizan's statement surprises Oli

Communications Minister Oli Ahmed has expressed surprise over a press statement issued by acting chairman of the Jatiya Party Mizanur Rahman Chowdhury regarding the foundation-laying of the Jamuna Multipurpose Bridge (JMB), reports UNB.

In a statement yesterday, the minister said although drums were beaten in the name of the Jamuna Bridge during the Ershad regime, in fact no concrete and effective measures had been taken in this respect, nor was it given an institutional base before April 1991.

"During the Ershad regime," he pointed out, "the project was not even included in the three-year core plan as a priority project."

Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia on Sunday unveiled the foundation stones of the long-cherished Jamuna Bridge at two ends — Syedabad in Sirajganj and Shyamsholi in Kalihati of Tangail.

Oli Ahmed, who is also the Chairman of the JMBA, said it is the government of Begum Khaleda Zia which approved the project proforma in the meeting of the Executive Committee of the National Economic Council (ECNEC) and subsequently took all measures for procuring funds from the donor countries and international agencies to implement the project.

Secondly, he pointed out, the government of Begum Zia was again the first to earmark Tk 2,250 crore in the three-year core programme after fixing the priority of the project.

The Communications Minister said: "It is simply ridiculous and a wilful ploy of certain identified quarters to mislead and confuse the people."

The statement (of Mizan Chowdhury) was a political stunt to, befool the people, he observed, saying that the people had not forgotten many unbelievable claims of Chowdhury's mentor regarding many personal matters and national issues.

"It is no wonder that followers of the convicted dictator will resort to such tactics even now," Oli said.

Oli Ahmed said, "It is an attempt to rehabilitate the discarded politics of a fallen autocrat who had usurped state power by dethroning an elected government."

Referring to the hartal call by two political parties on the historic day of the foundation laying of the Jamuna Bridge, the minister said this reflected the motive of the two organisations to thwart the country's ongoing development process under the leadership of Prime Minister Begum Zia.

The Communications Minister urged all quarters to rise above party politics and reach a consensus on vital national issues to create a happy and prosperous Bangladesh.

JCD demands arrest of Milton, Paran's killers

The Jatiyatabadi Chhatra Dal (JCD) at a rally in Dhaka yesterday reiterated its demand for arresting the killers of Paran and Milton, reports UNB.

It blamed the Bangladesh Chhatra League (M-I) and its parent organisation Awami League for the killings during the April 7 siege programme around the Bangladesh Secretariat.

The rally was addressed by JCD president Fazlul Haq Milton, general secretary Nazimuddin Alam, Shahiduddin Chowdhury Anny and Shahjahan Hawlader Sujan.

Earlier, the JCD held a militia at the New Model Degree College in the city.

Shawkat Osman improving

The condition of elderly litterateur Shawkat Osman, undergoing treatment at the Suhrawardy Hospital, is improving, family sources said yesterday. "He took normal food Monday morning and was also talking normally," they said. Osman was admitted to the hospital Saturday after a massive heart attack, reports UNB.

AL leaders determined

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As regards the AL's attendance in the next session of Jatiya Sangsad (JS) Tofael said, "personally I feel we should not attend a session chaired by a BNP vice-chairman (meaning the Speaker). However, a decision will be taken by the working committee." The AL leader was very critical about Speaker Shaikh Razzak Ali's appointment as a vice-chairman of the ruling party since, according to him, this affects the neutrality of the Speaker.

Mohammed Nasim, MP, Organising Secretary of the AL who is also the Chief Whip of Opposition in the Parliament, said the purpose of the present agitation is to mount pressure on the ruling party to accept the demand for holding elections under a caretaker government.

He mentioned that three separate bills for amending the Constitution to incorporate provision for a caretaker government have already been submitted. However, a common bill from the Opposition to this effect is being prepared, he said.

"If the BNP agrees with us, we will have no problem in ensuring its passage."

Replying a question, Nasim said the issue regarding the AL's joining of the next JS session will be discussed in the working committee and its extended meeting before a final decision is taken.

Jute spinning mills

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the remaining principal amount from thereon shall be only three per cent.

Those private mills which have opted to be included in the plan, will also get concessional interim financing until their restructuring is complete.

The spinners, on the other hand will, however, not get this benefit. Moreover, they will have to continue their payment of 14 per cent compound interest on their accumulated debts and present working capital to the tune of Tk 2399 million as of 1990.

The spinners apprehend an uneven competition from those composite jute mills which are illegally producing yarn and twine just like the spinning mills. Though the restructuring plan stipulates that the jute mills will not be able to produce yarn, spinners fear this will not be enforced, just as it has not been done before in the past.

As a result of the glut caused by over production of yarn and twine because of the composite mills' manufacturing of the same, yarn price has already dropped to about 700 dollars per metric tons from as high as 750 dollars. In contrast, the average cost of production remains at 800 dollars per ton.

In the past the jute spinning mills had been high performers. The industry experienced good growth from the mid-70s to the mid-80s. In 1985-86, jute twine and yarn export stood at 25,000 metric tons which increased to 55000

metric tons in 1986-87.

The industry started to face financial problems from fiscal 1988-89 when exports started to decline. This prompted the government to offer the jute spinning mills incentives similar to those offered to the other private mills and all losses from 1984-85 through 1988-89 were frozen in non-interest bearing accounts for a period of three years. Also, a cash subsidy of 20 per cent was allowed.

For some unknown reason, the financial problems of the spinners were being overlooked now although their debt is increasing at the rate of 14 per cent.

Industry sources said the spinners' problems are like those faced by other private problems. They, too, have a heavy debt burden and high wage cost.

But in comparison to the total amount of debt that is being restructured under the JSAC, the amount of outstanding debt of the spinning mills is quite small — only 7.48 per cent of the total. If this debt is not restructured the spinning mills will not be able to remain in operation, industry sources fear.

This will then lead to the loss of 25,000 jobs and the workers will be deprived of the golden handshake facility, retraining or any reemployment.

The closure of the spinning unit will benefit other jute spinning countries like India and Thailand, who will fill the gap in the international market, experts believe.

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Rift in Japanese coalition widens

TOKYO, Apr 11: The possibility of total gridlock in Japan's government rose Monday when leaders of the ruling coalition's conservative faction boycotted a meeting called by their more liberal partners, reports AP.

It was the clearest illustration yet of a split in the coalition that has widened since Villagers demand repair of a transformer

From Our Correspondent

Some 5,000 villagers of Chouddagram thana Monday demonstrated on the Dhaka-Chittagong Highway demanding immediate repair of an electric transformer which had been inoperative for a long time.

The demonstrators gave an ultimatum that if the transformer was not repaired within 48 hours, they would stop the movement of vehicles on the Dhaka-Chittagong highway for an indefinite period.

Leaders of four blocs in the anti-Ozawa camp met Monday despite a boycott by four other leaders sympathetic to Ozawa. They agreed to meet again Tuesday, said an official of the Democratic Socialist Party, but other details were not available.

While the squabbling was over procedure, the real dispute is over the ideas and personality of Ozawa, who wants Japan to take on the military burdens of a "normal country". In a clear reference to Ozawa, the New Party Sakigake (Harbinger) said Monday it would join a new government only if its partners "have the firm determination to reject the idea of becoming a military or political superpower."