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NEWS BRIEFS

Woman killed in
road accident

A 60-year-old woman was killed in a road accident at Demra yesterday, police said. Somammati Ayetunesa was crushed under the wheels of a speeding truck while she was crossing the Dhaka-Narayanganj road near the WAPDA gate at Demra about 12 noon. Police sent the body to the Dhaka Medical College Hospital morgue, reports UNB.

Sit-in in Sylhet

From Staff Correspondent

SYLHET, Dec 23: To press the demand for immediate start of the functioning of Sylhet division, the greater Sylhet Ganadab Parishad, a non-partisan organisation would stage a half-day 'sit-in' at the Sylhet poura-point tomorrow. The organisation has also called a half-day hartal for the same demand on January 11 next, in Sylhet district.

20 dwelling houses
gutted in Ctg

CHITTAGONG, Dec 23: At least twenty thatched dwelling houses were gutted in a fire that broke out at a slum near Pahartali CDA market here in the early hours of today. According to fire service and police sources, the fire originated from a kitchen engulfed the entire slum soon. Five fire units fought for about one hour to extinguish the fire, reports BSS.

Shamsul Islam
returns

Commerce and Information Minister M Shamsul Islam returned home yesterday on conclusion of his visit to Saudi Arabia. The minister was leading a five-member trade delegation, reports BSS.

Dudayev's call for 'holy war' Major Russian assault to seal off Grozny

GROZNY, Dec 23: Russian troops backed by artillery and helicopter gunships today launched a major assault to completely seal off Grozny, amid continued intense bombing of the city by Russian warplanes.

Elite marine units and two motorised divisions arrived in the region today and sealed off the capital of the breakaway Chechnya republic, a Russian government spokesman in Moscow told AFP.

The official said the information had come from the command headquarters of the Russian operation in Chechnya, adding that the report had been 'verified'.

The Siberian and Urals motorised divisions and marines units have arrived around Grozny to reinforce troops already present on the ground, reported the Itar-Tass news agency, citing a government statement.

Earlier, fierce fighting was reported east of Grozny as Russian troops mounted a major attack against the strategic town of Argun about 20 kilometres away in a bid to complete their encirclement of the capital.

Argun stands on the road from Grozny to Gudernes in the neighbouring republic of Dagestan, whose border with Chechnya was closed by Russian troops today.

Correspondents at Argun reported that the Russians bombarded outgunned Chechen defenders with heli-

copters gunships and artillery. Warplanes roared overhead. Smoke poured out of Argun and two positions near the town.

Russian warplanes renewed bombing runs against Grozny early today, for the fifth

MOSCOW, Dec 23: A pro-democracy military group which once ardently supported President Boris Yeltsin today called on the Russian president to stop his 'unjust war' in Chechnya.

Military for Democracy also called on Russian pilots to follow the example of other officers who have either refused to attack Chechnya or resigned in protest, reports AP.

straight day, causing casualties and damage, the Interfax news agency reported.

The presidential palace of the Chechen leader Dzhokhar Dudayev was 'slightly hit' and windows shattered, Dudayev's spokesman Mussa Merzhev said. The raid took place

earlier story on page 5

around 11:00 am (0800 GMT).

The attack followed a night of bombing which left at least 10 people dead and 30 injured in the capital of the small Muslim republic, according to hospitals in Grozny.

AP adds: Chechen President Dzhokhar Dudayev, who has led his republic's drive for independence from Moscow, went on Chechen television Thursday night to urge his people to wage an 'Islamic holy

war'. He denounced Moscow's 'satanic' offensive against his southern republic.

Dudayev, reportedly directing his republic's military operations from a bomb shelter near the presidential palace in Grozny, said it was better to die with honor in a holy war than be enslaved.

Meanwhile, Georgian leader Eduard Shevardnadze ordered border security increased and troops put on combat alert today to block Abkhazian mercenaries from travelling to Chechnya to fight Russia.

The Shevardnadze decree came as a Russian general accused Abkhazia, a province which has declared independence from Georgia, of allowing the secret training of militants sympathetic to Chechnya.

Gen Georgy Kondratiev, Russian deputy defense minister, visited Abkhazia last week and said he saw and heard recruiting appeals in the media for mercenaries to join forces loyal to Chechen President Dudayev.

Another report says: The Speaker of Chechnya's parliament today sent Russia a telegram offering immediate talks.

Anhyad Idigov made the offer in a message to the federation council, or upper house.

He offered to begin talks on the basis of 'documents already set out concerning the share-out of power between the institutions of the Russian Federation and the republic of Chechnya.'

Earlier story on page 5

PM may address nation over radio, TV

BNP leaders hint at solution of crisis

Star Report

As the deadline for the threatened resignation by Opposition members of Parliament draws near circles close to the corridors of power hinted that the impending political storm may yet pass over with both sides relenting to spare the country the damaging consequences of an open confrontation.

Sources in the ruling Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) expressed guarded optimism that the current crisis may after all be resolved amicably given the will on both sides of the political divide.

A very senior member of Begum Zia's cabinet, talking to The Daily Star last night on condition of anonymity, said the Prime Minister may soon

address the nation over radio and television to make a fresh proposal to the Opposition regarding a solution to the political impasse.

According to another source, the BNP policy-makers have been working overtime to prepare a draft wherein the party's position regarding the Opposition demand for general elections under a caretaker government would be explained.

The draft may also suggest new ways and offer fresh concessions to the Opposition in a bid to avoid heading towards a point of no return, especially in the light of the Opposition's threat to resign from Parliament by December 28

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Tk 644cr project
to modernise
gas network

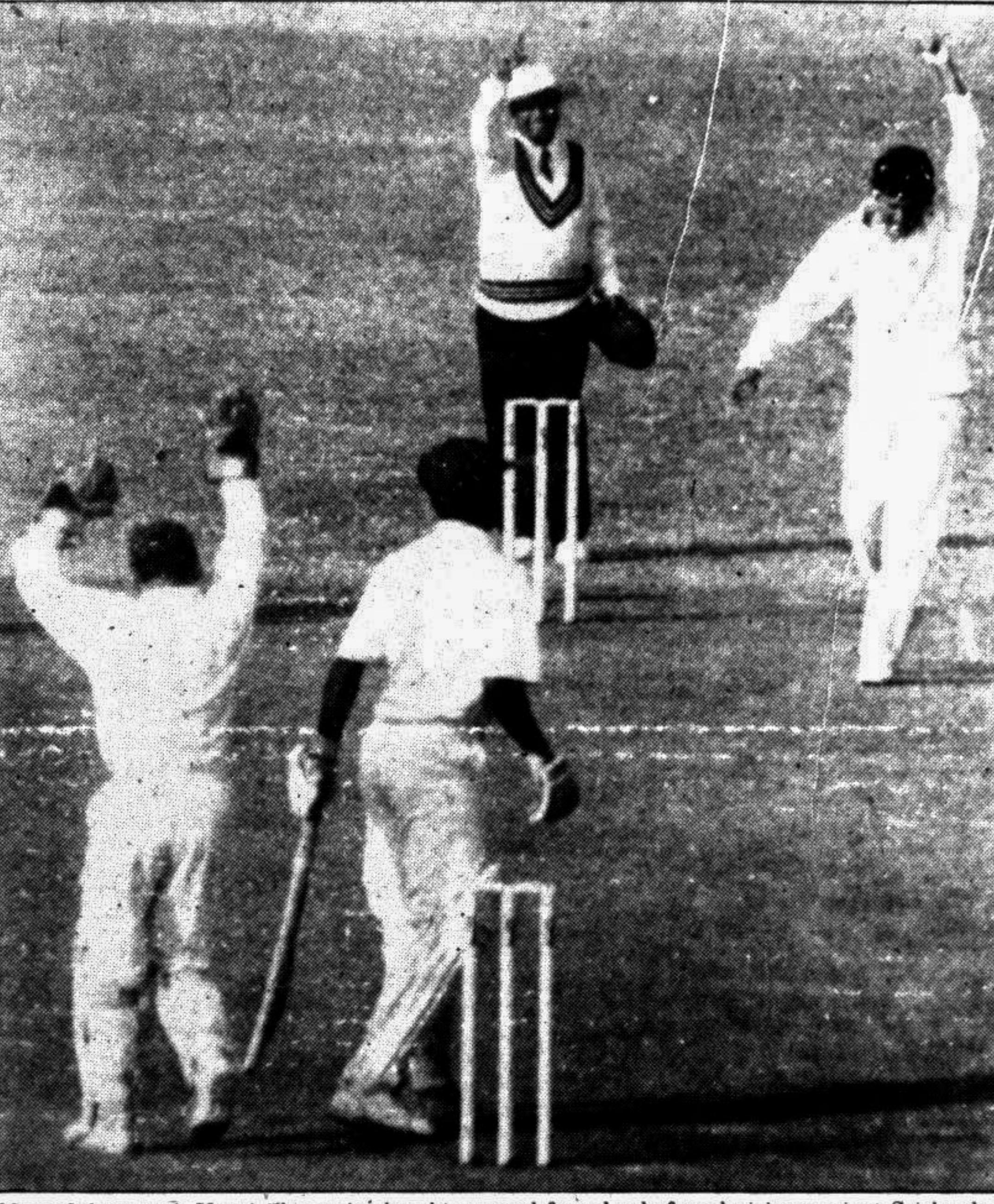
SYLHET, Dec 23: Government has taken up project at a cost of Taka 644' crore to develop and modernise the gas network system of the country, reports BSS.

The World Bank and Overseas Development Agency (ODA) will provide technical and financial assistance for the project — Gas Infrastructure Development Project (GIDP). The project is scheduled to be completed by the year 1999.

The project will bring country's gas network under a central computer system and will also help bring about a significant development in gas management.

This was disclosed by Energy and Mineral Resources Minister Dr Khandaker Mosharraf Hossain while visiting some installations of Kailash Gas fields under Sylhet Gas

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Man-of-the-match Utpal Chatterjee has his appeal for a leg before decision against Sri Lanka's Manjula Munasinghe most unhesitatingly endorsed by umpire Shakil Khan of Pakistan. Chatterjee's left-arm spin designed Sri Lanka's 44-run defeat to India in the SAARC cricket tournament at the Dhaka Stadium yesterday. Details on Page 10 — Star photo by A K M Mohsin

3 foreign firms propose to set up power plant in CHT

By Sharier Khan

Three foreign companies have jointly proposed setting up a 40 mega-watt (MW) gas-based power house in Semutang in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, according to sources.

The three companies —

Cairn plc of Scotland, Holland Sea Search of the Netherlands and Midland Electricity of England — submitted their proposal to set up the plant by utilising the Semutang gas field, which has not been used for three to four decades since its discovery.

Last month Cairn plc and Holland Sea Search initialled contracts with the government to explore hydrocarbon resources in Block 15 covering the Chittagong Hill Tracts. The Semutang gas field is within this block.

Sources say the Semutang

field has a reserve of about 100 billion cubic feet of gas. British

power house

Midland plc, has proposed to build the power house with the new equipment within 15 months after the signing of a contract.

Representatives of Midland, Cairn and Holland Sea Search have met the officials of the Energy Ministry as well as Petrobangla several times this month. When contacted over phone, a representative of Cairn plc, M R Islam, told The Daily Star yesterday that 'the discussions were very positive.'

Cairn plc has been playing a pioneering role in the exploration of oil and gas in the country and it will also play a pioneering role in the power sector,' Islam added.

Both Cairn and Holland Sea

Search have proposed to the government that they be allowed to conduct a survey of some of the parts of Block 15 which covers a portion of the Bay of Bengal. The two companies are also beginning a survey in the Bay near the Cox's Bazar-Sandwip region for hydro-carbon resources.

However, official sources said, the power sharing contracts (PSCs) signed by the government and Cairn and Holland Sea Search regarding Block 15 on November 15, have not yet been sent to the ministry for approval.

The 40-mw power plant cannot be set up unless the government signs final agreements with these companies on Block 15, the sources added.

3 killed in rice mill boiler blast

BAHRAMBARIA, Dec 23

Three people including two children were killed and three others injured seriously when a rice mill boiler exploded at village Shalgao in Bahrampur this morning, reports BNN.

The victims were identified as Habibullah, 32, a labourer of the mill, his younger brother Sharifullah, 8, and Umela Begum, 2, daughter of another labour Abdul Khaque.

Three other labourers —

Abul Bashar, 40, Saleha, 25, and Abdul Jabbar, 40, — were admitted to Bahrampur Sadar Hospital in critical condition.

Police sources said the accident occurred at about 7 am due to overheating, killing Sharifullah on the spot. Habibullah died on way to hospital while Umela Begum succumbed to her injuries at the hospital.

DCC won't raise holding tax, repeats Hanif

By Staff Correspondent

Dhaka City Corporation Mayor Mohammad Hanif yesterday reiterated his commitment not to raise any holding tax for the next five years.

Addressing a spontaneous rally in the city while visiting development projects in Ward No. 83, the Mayor said: 'This was my election pledge and I will fulfil all my pledges.'

The rally, chaired by a social worker of the Ward MA Sayed, was also addressed by ward commissioner Liyakat Ali and woman commissioner Nasima Mantu.

The Mayor said a community centre and a play ground would also be set up in the area.

Indian parliament adjourned sine die

Opposition trains gun on Rao

Earlier story on page 5

stormed the well of 80th Houses shouting slogans against Rao and his government. They also demanded personal explanations from B Shankar, Raneshwar Thakur and Kalipnath Rai, whose resignations were accepted last

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Gadgil also described Rao's Thursday night sacking of three ministers accused of corruption as a 'closed chapter.'

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