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VOL. IV NO. 340 REGD. NO. DA 781 POUH 21, 1401 BS, DHAKA WEDNESDAY JANUARY 4, 1995 SHABAN 2, 1415 HIJRI 12 PAGES: PRICE TAKA 5.00

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A RARE SIGHT INDEED: Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia, and Awami League chief Sheikh Hasina (with back to the camera) exchanging pleasantries yesterday on the occasion of the wedding ceremony of Hasina's daughter Saima Wazed at the MP Club in the city. — Star photo

Dhaka, London talk investment, aid

The Foreign Ministers of Britain and Bangladesh are looking up there was scope to do much better.

He said that they discussed Bosnia-Herzegovina as both Bangladesh and Britain contributed troops to UN Protection Force.

He said that the two foreign ministers expressed the hope that a peaceful solution would be found in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

He said that the British foreign minister said that his country was keen to further develop trade and economic relations with Bangladesh.

Osmany said that the two foreign ministers exchanged views on Ganges water sharing issue, return of Chakma refugees as well as regional issues in South Asia including the security issue of South Asia and the Kashmir situation.

Osmany said that the Bangladesh Foreign Minister recalled the commitment of the developed countries made at the Uruguay Round to promote trade between

'Resolve political crisis to ensure economic progress'

British Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs Douglas Hurd said in Dhaka yesterday Bangladesh should find solution to its present political crisis to ensure economic development, reports UNB.

Bangladesh should address its own problems, Hurd told newsmen on his arrival at Zia International Airport beginning a three-day official visit.

He told a questioner that "it's not for the British Foreign Secretary to discuss domestic politics of Bangladesh," and added, "It's for Bangladesh to resolve its domestic politics."

"From the point of view of your economic development it is also important that the political uncertainty should be removed," he added.

Hurd described his visit as "important" to further strengthen relations between the two Commonwealth countries.

"Bangladesh is of increasing importance to Britain since you achieved your independence," he said.

President, PM attend wedding of Hasina's daughter

The wedding of Saima Wazed (Putul), only daughter of Awami League chief Sheikh Hasina and Dr M A Wazed Miah, was solemnized with Khandakar Mashroor Hossain at the Parliament Members' Club yesterday evening.

President Abdur Rahman Biswas, Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia, ministers, MPs, political leaders, diplomats, high officials, businessmen, scholars, journalists and party workers were among the several thousand guests who attended the wedding reception.

A huge canopy was put up on the lush green lawn of the MP Hostel. The guests, who started arriving from 5:30 pm, were received by Dr Wazed and central leaders of the Awami League.

Sheikh Hasina along with the bride arrived around 7 pm.

Russians driven out of Grozny

GROZNY, Jan 3: Russian troops, driven back from the heart of the Chechen capital by spirited rebel defenders, rained rockets and artillery shells down on the city today. The invaders, humiliated, appeared to be gearing up for a fresh assault, reports AP.

A Russian convoy of at least 20 trucks loaded with weapons and ammunition headed into the city and Sukhoi fighter jets and helicopter gunships buzzed overhead.

In Moscow, President Boris Yeltsin's closest aide, Victor Ilyushin, said Russia would "go all the way, to the end."

A member of the Chechen parliament, Gleb Bunin said the city was bracing for another massive tank attack.

It would be Russia's second attempt since New Year's Eve to take Grozny city and smash Chechnya's three-year-old independence drive.

Four days of ferocious street fighting pitting reluctant Russian soldiers against iron-willed but outgunned Chechens has left hundreds dead and wounded.

Russian tank and infantry forces pulled back late Monday to 'regroup,' stirring short-lived Chechen celebrations in the city center.

But the Russians began shelling again during the night. Heavy bombardment continued today in northern sections of the city. At least eight huge fires from oil depots and the Lenin refinery still burned.

"We are ready to fight anywhere, not only in the mountains, but even in Moscow. This is a jihad (holy war)," said Chechen Vice President Zelimkhan Yandarbiyev.

Chechen President Dzhokhar Dudayev, in a broadcast on local television Monday from a secret location, said Moscow should negotiate the withdrawal of all Russian troops from the city.

Dudayev said his forces have captured a large number of Russian soldiers and suggested they could be killed unless the Kremlin halted its military drive to oust him.

The Russian government insisted its forces had 'snatched the initiative' and controlled much of Grozny. It even said Russian relief workers were handing out food.

Opposition may announce fresh programmes today

By Staff Correspondent

Three mainstream opposition parties — the Awami League, the Jatiya party and the Jamaat-e-Islami — are likely to announce fresh programmes to realise the demand for elections under a non-party caretaker government.

The new programmes may be announced at separate rallies of the parties at the end of the half-day hartal in the capital this afternoon provided the respective party leaders can meet earlier in the day to finalise them.

Second day of 8-hr hartals passes off

By Staff Correspondent

The second day of a three-day series of half-day hartals called by a major opposition political parties in the capital passed off peacefully yesterday barring some stray incidents of clashes between police and pickets.

Police lathicharged a procession near Khilgaon level crossing early morning and chases between members of the law enforcing agencies and pro-hartal activists at places left a dozen injured.

Several bombs were also exploded at different points during the hartal period that began at six in the morning, but no casualty was reported. Police picked up at least eight persons.

All modes of transports went off the road and the Dhaka city virtually remained cut off with other parts of the country during hartal hours. But unlike hartal of other days, huge number of rickshaws plied through almost all parts of the city.

Classification of bank loans New system pushes bad debts to Tk 8000 cr

By Sobel Manzur

The new loan classification system introduced by the Bangladesh Bank has pushed the figure of bad debts to Tk 8,000 crore, up from only about Tk 2,500 crore, according to official sources.

Under the new system introduced in December last year, any overdue loan exceeding three months has to be classified as 'substandard'. The loan becomes 'doubtful' when it remains overdue for over six months and after 12 months, the loan will have to be classified as 'bad and a loss'.

The banks have to build up necessary reserves against the entire amount of classified loans, thereby curtailing funds from profits to meet the provisioning requirement as per the system, the sources said.

As instructed by the Bangladesh Bank, the scheduled banks have to cut 10 per cent of their substandard loans, 50 per cent of the doubtful loans and 100 per cent of the bad debt from their profits and build a reserve for keeping themselves prepared to face any crisis.

Under the previous system of classification, overdue loans exceeding 12 months were considered as substandard, those over 36 months as doubtful and 60 months as bad and loss.

According to sources in the central bank, the amount of total bad and loss loans was 12 per cent of the total disbursement of about Tk 25,000 crore under the previous system of loan classification; but under the new system the figure crossed 32 per cent of the total disbursement.

The amount of total classified loans was, however, 32 per cent under the previous system of classification, which was 10 per cent.

Vessel to explore oil, gas in Bay due Jan 6

A survey vessel for exploration of oil and gas in the Bay of Bengal is scheduled to arrive at Chittagong port in the morning of January 6, according to official sources.

The specially equipped survey ship, the 'Rosseal', hired by Cairn Plc of Scotland and Holland Sea Search of the Netherlands for US 30,000 dollars daily, will begin its operations upon its arrival.

This will be the first such survey in the Bay for discovery of hydro-carbon reserves since 1974.

Sources said, the Rosseal will use a 2.5 kilometre-cable equipped for seismic survey when it begins operation this Friday in the exploration area known as Block 16 covering the Cox's Bazar-Sandwip region.

The army, the navy and various organisations have been asked to keep the survey route clear.



Foreign Minister ASM Mostafizur Rahman received British Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs Douglas Hurd on his arrival at Zia International Airport on a three-day official visit to Bangladesh yesterday. — PID photo

Myanmar erects watch-tower on border

From Nurul Alam

CHITTAGONG, Jan 3: There is fresh tension along the Bangladesh-Myanmar border as the authorities in Yangon defying international laws have recently started construction of a watch tower and a helipad at Tumbuk about 100 yards from the Bangladesh side of the frontier.

Sources say according to international law no country can make any construction within 150 yards from the border.

The construction work of the watch-tower and the helipad has created panic among the people on the Bangladesh side of the border.

Bangladesh border guard officials last Sunday sent a protest note to the director of Myanmar border immigration.

Steps taken to strengthen armed forces: PM

CHAR BHATA (Narayanganj), Jan 3: Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia said here today that the present government had taken steps to further strengthen the country's armed forces, reports BSS.

The manpower in the Bangladesh armed forces has been increased and the quality of its weapons improved, the Prime Minister said while addressing the officers and members of the 14 Independent Engineers Brigade at the end of its winter exercises here.

Earlier, the Prime Minister witnessed the concluding part of the impressive winter exercises of the Riverine Engineers Brigade from this tiny island in the river Meghna.

Begum Zia expressed her satisfaction at the efficiently conducted exercises and said the skilful maneuvers had reflected the continued advancement of the Bangladesh armed forces.

The Prime Minister recalled the glorious contributions of the armed forces in the country's War of Liberation, their service during natural disasters, and in peace-keeping role in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. She hoped that similarly they would shoulder their responsibilities in the future.

Begum Zia mentioned that the 14 Independent Engineers Brigade has constructed the Fashikhali-Alkadam Road in the Chittagong Hill Tracts in a very short time.

She also mentioned that the 16 Engineers' Construction Battalion under this brigade constructed the Chimbuk-Thanchi and Dighinala-Marishya roads in the hilly areas.

Besides, she said men from the Bangladesh Army had been sent to the Chittagong Hill Tracts to help in the construction work.

Speaker may leave hospital today

By Staff Correspondent

Speaker Shaikh Razzak Ali may leave hospital today as the doctors have completed all investigations and given him necessary prescription, a family member said yesterday.

The doctors will give their decision tomorrow. He can now rest at home since the main treatment has been done," a member of Speaker Razzak Ali's family said by telephone.

The Speaker was admitted to the Subhrawaty Hospital last Friday with chest pain on his return from Khulna where he had addressed a public meeting.

His illness delayed the announcement whether the resignations of some 147 Opposition members were valid or not immediately after the submissions of the resignation letters last Wednesday. Razzak Ali had told newsmen that the letters should be scrutinised properly before official notification.

Legal experts and a section of political leaders believe a solution was still possible if the opposing parties reached a 'political consensus'.

However, some other legal experts, mostly belonging to the Jatiya Party, said that as per the constitutional provision, the resignations became effective once those were accepted.

Tongi poura elections: 35000 voters 'missing' in new list

By Krishna P Roy

The number of voters of Tongi pourashava, a city suburb, has declined by as many as 35,000 in comparison with the voters list of 1992.

The Election Commission (EC) recorded some 72,000 voters when it went to register the voters late last year for holding a model poll there, whereas there were some 1,07,000 enlisted voters in the densely populated township, according to the list prepared two years ago.

Following the successful holding of model election in the rural area of Dapunia in Mymensingh district on April 30 last year the EC is expecting to hold a model election in Tongi pourashava at the end of March under its pilot programme.

In the planned model election, the local people would play key roles in conducting the polls and the voters would be provided with identity cards to prevent false balloting, EC sources said.

An official of the commission told this correspondent that all preparations have almost been completed, for holding the Tongi elections.

A steering committee composed of local leaders and elite would be responsible for conducting the polls, while the EC would only supervise the election process.

The official, however, said the EC would give a final drive in the second week of this month to complete some minor details, including collection of photographs of a handful of voters yet to have their pictures taken.

Regarding the exact date of the municipal elections, he said the EC is ready to hold the elections before Ramadan beginning early February. But, the local leaders want the elections to be held after Ramadan since they would remain busy with the *Bisua Ujtema*, the second largest congregation of world Muslims scheduled to be held at Tongi, its traditional site, on January 7, 8 and 9.

When asked about the causes behind the fall in the number of voters, the EC official said Tongi is a very politically sensitive area where a huge floating population, mainly industrial workers of different districts reside.

In the past, he said, this floating population was enlisted in the voters list.

Cold wave persists

By Staff Correspondent

A sweeping bitter cold wave for the last few days has brought untold misery to the poor and homeless of the country.

While a number of people have died in the northern parts of the country in the past week, the moderate to severe cold wave is sweeping over Dhaka division and the regions of Pabna, Rajshahi, Kushtia, Jessore, Sylhet and Comilla, the Met office says.

In the capital yesterday, the temperature was as low as 6.5 degrees Celsius while the highest temperature was 22.5 degrees. In addition, the dryness of weather intensified the chill.

The country's lowest temperature of 4.4 degrees was recorded at Iswardi and the highest 25.5 degrees at Teknaf.

The Met office forecast dry weather for the next few days.

Govt, Tamil rebels agree to ceasefire

COLOMBO, Jan 3: The government and Tamil rebel negotiators agreed to a cease-fire Tuesday after peace talks resumed in northern Sri Lanka and rebels released four policemen they had held captive for over four years, an official said.

The cessation of hostilities will most probably be before Pope John Paul II's visit on Jan 20. We now need President Chandrika Kumaratunga's approval. Kusumtiri Balapa (abandi), one of the government negotiators, told reporters.

The peace talks, the first in five years, were suspended in October when rebels were blamed for the assassination of the top opposition presidential candidate by a suicide bomber in Colombo.

The policemen were handed over to the five government negotiators, a spokesman for the International Committee of the Red Cross in Colombo told the Associated Press.

ICRC officials had been present when the policemen were released in the rebels northern stronghold of Jaffna, 300 kilometers (185 miles) north of the capital.

The government team returned to Colombo after the one-day talks in which they also discussed rebuilding the battered northern province and allowing Tamils to fish once again in waters heavily guarded by the military.

The opening of a land route between the rebel controlled northern areas and southern Sri Lanka was also discussed. The Catholic Church has asked the government to allow the route to be used for humanitarian purposes.

NEWS BRIEFS

Indian fertilizer seized
JESSORE, Jan 3: Police seized Indian SSP fertilizer worth about Tk 2.5 crore from two rail wagons at Avaynagar thang on Monday. Police said one Nazrul Islam of Khulna imported the Indian fertilizer which is alike to the country's TSP fertilizer. The government banned the import of the SSP fertilizer from January 1, 1995 as it severely reduces the fertility of the soil, reports UNB.

Naga militants kill five
NEW DELHI, Jan 3: Suspected Naga tribal militants gunned down five members of a rival tribe in the far eastern Indian state of Manipur on Monday, a newspaper reported today. The killers, numbering about 30, opened fire on a group of Kuki villagers celebrating the New Year at a community centre in Senapati district and killed five, the Telegraph reported, says AFP.

Medicine worth Tk 47 lakh stolen
PABNA, Jan 3: A huge quantity of medicine worth Tk 47.88 lakh was stolen from Pabna Mental Hospital stores during the last three years. This was revealed by a seven-member committee formed in last August led by Superintendent of the hospital Dr Asaduddin for verification of the medicine stock. As per inquiry report the authority served a show cause notice to the concerned official who gave his reply on December 8, last year, reports UNB.