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The Daily Star

Cash 24hr
 Standard Chartered
 12 PAGES : PRICE TAKA 5.00

VOL. V NO. 99 REGD. NO. DA 781 BAISHAKH 16, 1402 BS, DHAKA SATURDAY, APRIL 29, 1995 ZILQAD 28, 1415 HIJRI

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ROK gas explosion kills 109, including 56 teens

SEOUL, Apr 28: The death toll from a gas explosion in the South Korean city of Taegu today has risen to 109, state radio said, report agencies.

The radio said 230 people were injured in the blast at a subway construction site in the centre of the city, 240 km south of Seoul.

Rescue workers said many construction workers were underground at the time of the blast and they believed dozens could still be trapped in the rubble.

They said many of those injured were in critical condition and the death toll in what is one of the country's worst peacetime disasters was expected to rise.

The cause of the explosion is not yet known. State television said the blast was apparently caused by leaking gas from a supply pipe while welding was in progress but there was no independent confirmation.

"It was like a nuclear bomb exploding," high school student Kim Dong-duk said. "I thought it couldn't be real."

Officials said 56 of the dead were students in seven area middle schools during the morning rush hour. Rescue workers said more were still trapped under heavy steel sheets and beams being used for the completion of the city's first subway line.

"I would have been among the dead, if I hadn't overslept," said a stunned Song, a student at the all-boys Song Nam Middle School.

Thirty-six of his classmates were dead. A dozen more never showed up for school.

Parents rushed to the dusty school yard to check on their children's safety. Their screams soon filled the air. Song said.

When school closed early, most of the students, including Song, headed for hospitals to look for friends and teachers.

They found virtual morgues. Sounds of suffering and mourning echoed in the hallways. Relatives sat next to covered bodies, beating the floor with their hands. Volunteering to donate blood

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Rescue workers use a crane to remove a crushed car from the site of gas explosion in South Korea yesterday. — AFP photo

51 pc ADB loan utilised in 7 months

By Krishna P Roy

The government could utilise about 50.9 per cent of the projected ADB (Asian Development Bank) loans in different sectors under the annual development programme (ADP) during the first seven months of this fiscal (1994-95).

The allocation for ADB aided projects under the current ADP stands at 303.42 million US dollars, while 154.48 million was disbursed till January 31 this year, ADB sources said.

According to statistics available at the ADB Resident Mission in Dhaka, the percentage utilisation was 42.6 during the corresponding period of last fiscal (1993-94). The allocation for the year was 305.57

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SAPTA to be high on Delhi summit agenda

By M Anwarul Haq

A date for the launching of the South Asian Preferential Trading Arrangement (SAPTA) making way for a package of trade and tariff concessions and greater economic interaction among member states is expected to be set at the eighth SAARC summit beginning in New Delhi on May 2.

The forthcoming three-day SAARC summit is also likely to take up some new areas of regional cooperation, particularly the energy sector, and make recommendations for strengthening of the SAARC Secretariat. It will also review the progress made in the field of poverty alleviation.

According to available reports in Dhaka and New Delhi, fixing a date for the functioning of SAPTA will be a priority item on the summit agenda since the crucial issue of finalisation of commodity lists of the member countries, which was seen as a hurdle, has already been resolved at the inter-governmental meetings (IGG) held recently in Islamabad and Kathmandu.

The standing committee of foreign secretaries, now meeting in New Delhi, is learnt to be giving a final touch to the arrangement of tariff concessions. However, the list of commodities that would finally qualify for tariff concession under SAPTA would need review and final clearance bilaterally by member states.

It's however, learnt that a date for functioning of SAPTA is likely to be set in the first month of the next year, as envisaged by the SAARC leaders in the last summit. The member states of SAARC would have to give final ratification at the national level before SAPTA becomes operational.

Bangladesh is learnt to have

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BNP Dhaka div confce today

The Dhaka Divisional Representatives Conference of the ruling BNP will be held today at 30 Hare Road in the city, reports UNB.

BNP Chairperson Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia will inaugurate the conference at 10 in the morning.

Party sources said some 6,000 representatives from districts under the Dhaka division, thana, city corporation, pourashava, ward and union levels will join the conference.

Meanwhile, a meeting of the preparatory committee of the Dhaka divisional representatives conference of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) was held here yesterday with chairman of the committee Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan in the chair.

The meeting discussed all aspects to make the conference a success, a party press release said.

The meeting urged the participating delegates to take

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Saifur tells newsmen on return Donors lauded Dhaka's progress despite political impasse

By Staff Correspondent

Finance Minister M Saifur Rahman yesterday said that the donors were happy over macro economic stability and social sector reforms in Bangladesh but they noticed a slow progress in privatisation and administrative restructuring.

"We admitted that we are slow in reforms in some politically and socially sensitive areas like privatisation and restructuring of government ministries, departments and agencies," the minister told newsmen at the Zia International Airport (ZIA) on his return from Paris after attending the Aid Consortium meeting.

He said that the Bangladesh delegation informed the donors that reforms in the sensitive areas were under the current programmes which should be carried out through a political consensus among the parties.

"When we go for any rationalisation, the opposition parties spoke against it. So it is difficult to carry out sensitive reform programmes in a tension-ridden social environment. But we should not give up hope," Saifur Rahman said.

"They lauded our progress in social sectors and macro stability despite political impasse, so they pledged a little higher aid than we sought," said the finance minister, flanked by his delegation members at the VIP lounge of the ZIA.

Principal Secretary to the Prime Minister A N M Yousuf, Finance Secretary Nasimuddin Ahmed and Economic Relations Division (ERD) Secretary Lutfulah Majid were present at the press conference.

"Our performance is far better than most of our neighbouring countries. They (donors) are happy with our progress," he said.

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BNP wants to cling to power, says Hasina

CHITTAGONG, Apr 28: Awami League President Sheikh Hasina today asked the government to hand over power to a neutral caretaker government for holding immediate general election, reports UNB.

"The Prime Minister will have to resign 90 days before the election as per the Constitution," she said addressing two public meetings in Anwara and Pattiya on the third day of her week-long organisational tour to Chittagong and Cox's Bazar.

Hasina said the ruling party wants to hang on to power at any cost and also retain it through rigging by denying the people's voting rights. "Force them to step down and establish your right to franchise," she told the crowd at both the places.

The Awami League chief charged the government with

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How long this heat wave?

Star Report

April has proved to be a cruel month with its scorching heat and dryness, yet weathermen predict there are signs of improvement.

The lack of humidity is the main factor behind people's sufferings, they say. It has been the lowest in the last four years.

The city dwellers have been deceived even by the *kalbis-hakhi* which, besides its destructive features, brings about some showers.

The capital wears a dreary look during daytime as most of the people avoid being outside.

Only those who have very urgent businesses go out in the sun. But those, whose business is out on the roads such as the rickshaw-pullers or street vendors, suffer the most.

Sales of all kinds of fans and refrigerators have shot up and advertisements of aircoolers have lately been appearing more in the newspapers.

Every afternoon people's hopes soar with the north-western sky filled with clouds and distant thunders roar only to delude a welcome rain.

The distress is deepened with frequent power failures and shortage of water that seriously affects the daily household chores.

"Our readings show that temperature in the country is

As the heatwave persists, cold drink sellers in the city are doing a brisk business. — Star photo

going down," said Sazedur Rahman, Deputy Director of the Storm Warning Centre.

Yesterday, the country's average highest temperature was recorded below 40 degree Celsius, he said.

He, however, refrained from making any forecast on when the next shower is due in the capital or elsewhere in the country.

Asked why does this year's *Baishakh* seem so different from the previous year's the weather official pointed his fingers to "our heightened concern over climate".

Everybody is now talking about the searing heat everywhere and people care more about weather because now it affects them more, he pointed out.

Quoting data recorded by the Met office, he said the maximum temperature in Dhaka - 39.2 degree - was recorded in April, 1992.

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Guardian killed during clash at IU

KUSHTIA, Apr 28: Guardian of an admission seeker was killed and three students were seriously injured in bomb blasts during a clash between rival groups of students on the Islamic University campus today, hospital sources said, reports UNB.

Seriously injured Azam, 30, an elected ward commissioner of Kamarkhali pourashava and guardian of a girl student, was declared dead when he was rushed to the Kushtia Sadar

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38 Lankan troops killed in air crash

COLOMBO, Apr 28: A Sri Lankan Air Force plane carrying troops on leave from the rebel-held Jaffna province to Colombo, crashed shortly after take-off today killing all 38 people on board, the military said, reports Reuter.

It earlier said 38 people on board had been killed in the crash at the sprawling Palaly Air Base in the northern peninsula. It said it had ruled out rebel involvement.

Ground control radioed the pilot when they saw its port engine was on fire, shortly after a take-off made in driving rain, a military spokesman said.

Repatriation stalled for 9 months Chakmas now returning home voluntarily

From Nurul Alam

CHITTAGONG, Apr 28: Stalled repatriation and severe hardships in camp-life reportedly prompted many Chakma refugees to return voluntarily to their homes in Chittagong Hill Tracts, sources said.

According to official reports, a total of 1277 Chakma refugees belonging to 334 families, returned to their homes in CHT from the camps in Tripura state of India, on their own arrangements, between February last year and April 25 this year.

Officials said, the number of Chakma refugees returning voluntarily through the Rangbar and Panchhari border under Khagrachhari has increased in recent months. Around 600 Chakma refugees came back on their own arrangements during the period from January to April 25 this year.

Two to five families are returning home from Tripura every two days.

These refugees are also being welcomed by government officials and provided with the same financial benefits given to the refugees repatriated formally through the official channel.

The third phase of repatriation of Chakma refugees remained stalled for the past nine months due to negative attitude of refugee leaders and lack of proper response from the Indian government, sources said.

During the first and second phase, 5,195 Chakma refugees belonging to 1027 families returned to their homeland.

Among them, 379 families came back during the first phase repatriation between February 15 to 22, 1994 and 648 families during the second phase between July 20 to August 2, 1994, according to official reports.

Meanwhile, the Tripura government has recently replied to a letter sent by the Deputy Commissioner of Khagrachhari regarding re-suspension of the third phase repatriation.

According to a source, the letter has so far received no positive response.

The refugee leaders who accompanied the Indian government officials during the CHT visit on March 15 and 16, to see for themselves the condition of repatriated refugees, after their return had shown

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Nor'wester hits 3 thanas in Sylhet: 2 killed

From Staff Correspondent

SYLHET, Apr 28: A woman and a seven-year-old boy were killed and 80 others injured as severe nor'westers swept different villages of Gopalganj, Jaintapur and Sylhet Sadar thana at midnight Thursday.

Over one thousand thatched houses were damaged and many trees uprooted during the storm.

In Gopalganj thana, the badly affected areas are Fulbari, Dhakadakhin, Lashkimpasha and Lakshmenbond unions. Dhakadakhin High School, health centre and sub-registry office were also damaged.

Eight unions of Sadar thana including Lalabazar, Tetli and Silam were affected badly during the storm.

The nor'wester also caused serious damage to three unions of Jaintapur thana. These are Fatechpur, Darbast and Charkata unions.

Harassment of school teacher: ex-husband on 4-day remand

By Staff Correspondent

The police yesterday interrogated accused of forging judicial documents that had resulted into landing his former

Editorial on Page 4

Anybody can buy a passport!

By Morshed Ali Khan

On the New Eskaton Road, near the Passport and Immigration office in the city, makeshift rows of tea stalls on the pavements do booming business.

Casually dressed and cheap ball-points peeping out of their chest pockets, most of the customers of these tea stalls will show an extreme eagerness to serve you on your approach.

"Do you want a passport?" "In 24 hours? or probably you want a simple form."

"Or you want to renew your old passport. Can I do anything for you at all regarding passport?" The process will continue.

As you brush aside all the offers to confront the existing procedures for solving your problem, the trouble starts.

Hundreds of people wait in front of the two-storied passport office. The counters, a few windows on a ground floor room are swarmed with dozens of young people.

Some throwing wild fists into the crowd from behind, pushing with all their might, jumping over others and some holding onto the grills swearing at the few perspiring clerks inside.

"Give me an international form," shouted one with a ten taka note in his hand. As the clerk tried to hand him a form, a human wave pushed the man who helplessly tried to hold on to the grill.

"This situation prevails round the year," said an elderly man standing nearby and watching. "I have been trying to get a passport for my son-in-law, it is impossible, and I know I will have to get hold of a broker."

A broker usually makes a package deal with his client. He is reportedly well connected inside the office and with a 50 per cent charge on top of the official fees he will unhesitatingly guarantee you a passport.

What if a foreign national wants a Bangladeshi passport? According to a broker, who has been in the trade for over fifteen years, it should not be difficult at all.

"With money everything is possible here," he said with a grin on his bearded face.

People involved in the trade alleged that the police verification report can be arranged without much trouble.

At the entrance to the building, two policemen were busy handling a crowd. Everyone was trying to get inside the office on this or that excuse.

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Tonnes of records pile up in the overcrowded Passport Office. Five out of twelve rooms of the office are used for storage, but the requirement for storage facility increases everyday. — Star photo

NEWS BRIEFS

Khaleda shocked
 Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia yesterday expressed her deep shock at the tragic loss of valuable lives in a gas explosion in the southern city of Taegu in the Republic of Korea. In a condolence message to the President of the Republic of Korea Kim Young Sam, the Prime Minister said, "The people and the government of Bangladesh join me in conveying to your excellency and through you to the members of the bereaved families our deepest condolences. May their departed souls rest in eternal peace", reports BSS.

SSC examinee commits suicide
 By Staff Correspondent
 A female student, who was appearing at the Secondary School Certificate (SSC) examinations reportedly committed suicide in Lalbagh area in the city yesterday. The police recovered the body of the teenaged girl, Shahna Akhter, from her house in the morning.

DCC drive
 Dhaka City Corporation (DCC) has decided to intensify its drive against plying of rickshaws without licence and other documents for easing the problem of traffic jam, reports BSS.

Body recovered
 The city police yesterday recovered the body of a trader who was missing for the last four days. Alamgir, 26, son of Abdur Razzak of South Paikpara in Matuail in the city left his residence on April 23 afternoon, reports UNB.

Indian goods seized
 RAJSHAHI, Apr 28: BDR personnel of 20 Rifle Battalion seized Indian current net, saree, blouse-piece, radio parts, salt and imitation ornaments worth over Taka three lakh during a number of anti-smuggling drives at Nabaganga, Chhartar-Nagar, Hakimpur, Bonapara, Dearnanik Char and Shyampur today, reports BSS.

wife in jail last week.

The detective police arrested Mostafa the former husband of school teacher Hosne Ara Begum Shelley, from Debidas Ghat area in Lalbagh thana Thursday on charges of forging the seal and signature of a non-existent judge in Rangpur district.

Mostafa was taken to four days' remand yesterday.

The Chief Metropolitan Magistrate's court in Dhaka released Shelley on Thursday afternoon following police report that she was arrested on a false court warrant.

Shelley was picked up by Motijheel police on the midnight of April 22 from her North Shajahanpur residence and sent to jail.

Her false warrant of arrest showed her as an absconder in a murder case.

It also said she had been sentenced to life imprisonment and ordered to pay a fine of Taka 20,000.