

Sonia Gandhi in Politics: Impact on Indian Scene

by Zaglul Ahmed Chowdhury

Arguably, Sonia did not jump on the political bandwagon when it appeared opportune, after the death of her husband, but waited for long six years. She needed this because she had to dispel whatever scepticism or even misgivings existed about her ability, to lead the Congress, as a foreigner who was not earlier in this milieu before Rajiv's death.



FINALLY, Mrs Sonia Gandhi, widow of Rajiv Gandhi, has set at rest all speculations of her formally joining politics. However, her joining the Congress has come as no surprise as the development was very much on the cards. It was only a matter of time when she would finally and formally join the political party of which her husband was the president. Rajiv Gandhi was not only the president of the Congress but also one of the charismatic prime ministers of India. But, possibly, his links with the politically illustrious Nehru family was the main factor in his becoming both leader of the Congress and head of the government. This is a long family chain that was abruptly ended with the death of Rajiv Gandhi six years ago by a suicide bomber while campaigning for the national elections in the southern Tamil Nadu state. Rajiv was the eldest son of Mrs. Indira Gandhi, the longest serving prime minister of India only after her father Jawaharlal Nehru, the first prime minister

of the country after independence in 1947. Nehru, his daughter Indira and her son Rajiv — all adorned the post of the prime minister-ship of India in great fashion and the death of Rajiv at a time when he was widely expected to become the prime minister again came as a bolt from the blue not only for the congress but also for the Nehru dynasty. There was none really left to carry on the historic legacy in politics of India and Congress because his daughter Priyanka and son Rahul were then relatively young and were not groomed up exactly in the political process. The only choice was then to fill the vacuum was obviously the widow of Rajiv Gandhi. Rajiv had no brother and sister as the only brother Sanjay had already died in a stunt plane crash in capital New Delhi. When younger Sanjay died, he was the general secretary of the Congress and a member of parliament. It was clear that he was being groomed up as a possible successor to his mother, who was then prime

minister of India for the second stint. Rajiv Gandhi, after the death of his brother, was initially hesitant to join politics as he was working as a commercial pilot in the Indian Airlines. He had also denied speculations that he would join politics and wear the mantle of his late brother. But he softened his stance mainly because of his mother's desire and also for the demands of the Congressmen that Mrs. Gandhi should now bring her only surviving son into politics both for linkages with the Nehru family and future leadership of the Congress. Needless to say, the Congress has always derived pride out of party's long association with

the Nehru family. Rajiv joined politics and became a member of parliament from his brother's Amethi constituency in the Uttar Pradesh and became general secretary of the party. Later, when Mrs. Gandhi was assassinated by her Sikh bodyguards, a fluid situation developed in the Indian political scene as there was hardly any second person in the line who could succeed her as the prime minister. Evidently, the choice was Rajiv, who rushed from Calcutta where he was on a visit. He remained in helm for both government and the Congress but lost power later mainly for speculations about his involvement in the Bofors

arms deal. He was expected to return to power in the 1991 national elections but was killed by the Tamil militants. However, his party did form the government at the centre, to an extent by riding the crest of sympathy wave caused by Rajiv's death.

But the removal of Rajiv Gandhi from the political scene of India triggered off speculations as to who would fill the void because the psyche of the Indian and more particularly Congress politics was rightly or wrongly to a great extent had become synonymous with the Nehru family. It sounds funny in a way because a country of so many people is unexpected to rely so much politically on a family. If the country did not, certainly the party did, and this has always been manifested in the character of the congress. When Rajiv died, he was the Congress president and most partymen immediately wanted Sonia, his Italian wife, to take up the legacy. But Sonia was lukewarm if not reluctant since she was not prepared for this situation. Not unexpectedly, she needed time to absorb the shock of husband's assassination, look after two children and,

understandably, assess the political scenario before taking a decision about her future strategy. She would have become the official key figure in the Congress and also could have catapulted herself to the zenith of power which is the prime ministership at that time since partymen were asking her to play that role. But Sonia in a matured demonstration of patience, checked her ambitions and let the party to deal with the situation by the experienced leaders without relying on her and fortunes smiled on P V Narasimha Rao, who emerged as the prime minister and was there for full five years.

But Sonia did not fully distance herself from the Congress affairs as often the senior party leaders looked for her guidance and blessings. Several leaders including present Congress president Sitaram Kesri, former strongman Arjun Singh and present general secretary

Golam Nabi Azad kept close contacts with her and sought her advice in party matters. But it was not the case with Mr. Narasimha Rao, whose ties with Sonia were not that cordial as Rao must have strived to rely more on his own abilities and project himself as the leader of the Congress. When Arjun Singh and Narain Dutta Tiwari left the Congress taking an anti-Rao posture, it was widely believed that Sonia had approval of such move. However, both the dissidents returned to Congressfold, but only after Rao was weakened and his ascendancy in the organisation was curtailed. Finally, Rao was removed from both the positions of the party presidentship and leader of the parliamentary party.

As the Congress lost power in the last elections and Rao had to relinquish two key positions, looked for charisma and prospects to return to power. But present leaders are unlikely to provide this as it was evident from the wrong strategy of Sitaram Kesri when he withdrew support from the United Front government of Deve Gowda but failed to bring the party to power. It is increasingly dawning on Congress circles that Sonia, whose patience and pragmatic approach to politics is admired by most partymen, can provide for the need of the hour to the vast organisation which has bickering over leadership while despondency has gripped it. Congress needs sound leadership when the new UF government also

faces instability as it again depended for survival on Congress support. Time is very much decisive for Congress and it has done what was expected. Arguably, Sonia did not jump on the political bandwagon when it appeared opportune, after the death of her husband, but waited for long six years.

She needed this because she had to dispel whatever scepticism or even misgivings existed about her ability, to lead the Congress, as a foreigner who was not earlier in this milieu before Rajiv's death. Sonia developed contacts with partymen during this interregnum and allowed an impression to gain ground that she was not desperate to become a Congress leader or prime minister. The time was good omen for her when she formally joined politics and Congress. She is expected to take up bigger responsibility of the party in the future once she is now in the game. Congress may look for revitalisation of the organisation with a new sense of inspiration since infighting and bickering is hardly possible with Rajiv's wife or Indira's daughter-in-law in the helm. The party may also look to a brighter future for governing the country again whether it will be through the next general elections after about four years or any snap election that may occur, and Congress can always make it occur because the survival of the UF government depends on it. Sonia factor will now weigh more heavily on Indian scene.

Dhonarkandi Resistance of 14 May, 1971

ON the 14th of May in 1971, the Pakistan Army entered a small village named Illah under Gaurnodi police station of the greater Barisal district. As soon as the news of the presence of the military personnel reached the villagers, many began to flee. Hearing the sound of the gunshots, some of the inhabitants of Dhonarkandi like Anil Chandra Mollick, Rajandro Chandro Baroi, Profullo Halder became cautious and determined not to run but face the Pakistan Army.

Twenty-two-year-old Anil Chandro Mollick appealed to his fellow villagers not to run away. Overcome by Anil's determination, the villagers gathered. Under his command, they took position at Dhonarkandi, to defend their village and chase the Pakistan Army out.

There were only a few rifles, that the patriotic Bangalee police and Ansars had. However, most of the villagers were armed with only home-made local weapons, such as machete, bows, arrows, shields and spears.

The MuktiBahini took defensive position on the road by the canal. At one point, the villagers and Army were face to face with a distance of just 200 yards, near the canal, and at a stand-off. The Pakistani soldiers decided to break the MuktiBahini's cordon by attacking from behind. To achieve this, four Pakistani soldiers were sent out and climbed the main road by the canal. Gokul and Koushik, with their group, had already taken position there. As soon as the soldiers got near them, they were ambushed with the hand-made weapons.

The surprised soldiers didn't even have time to cock their

weapons. Literally a first fight ensued. At one point, Profullo Halder snatched the SMG from one of the soldiers and killed him by hitting on the head with

the butt of the SMG. Anil Chandra Mollick was engaged with another soldier trying to grab his rifle. The soldier managed to press the trigger and a bullet

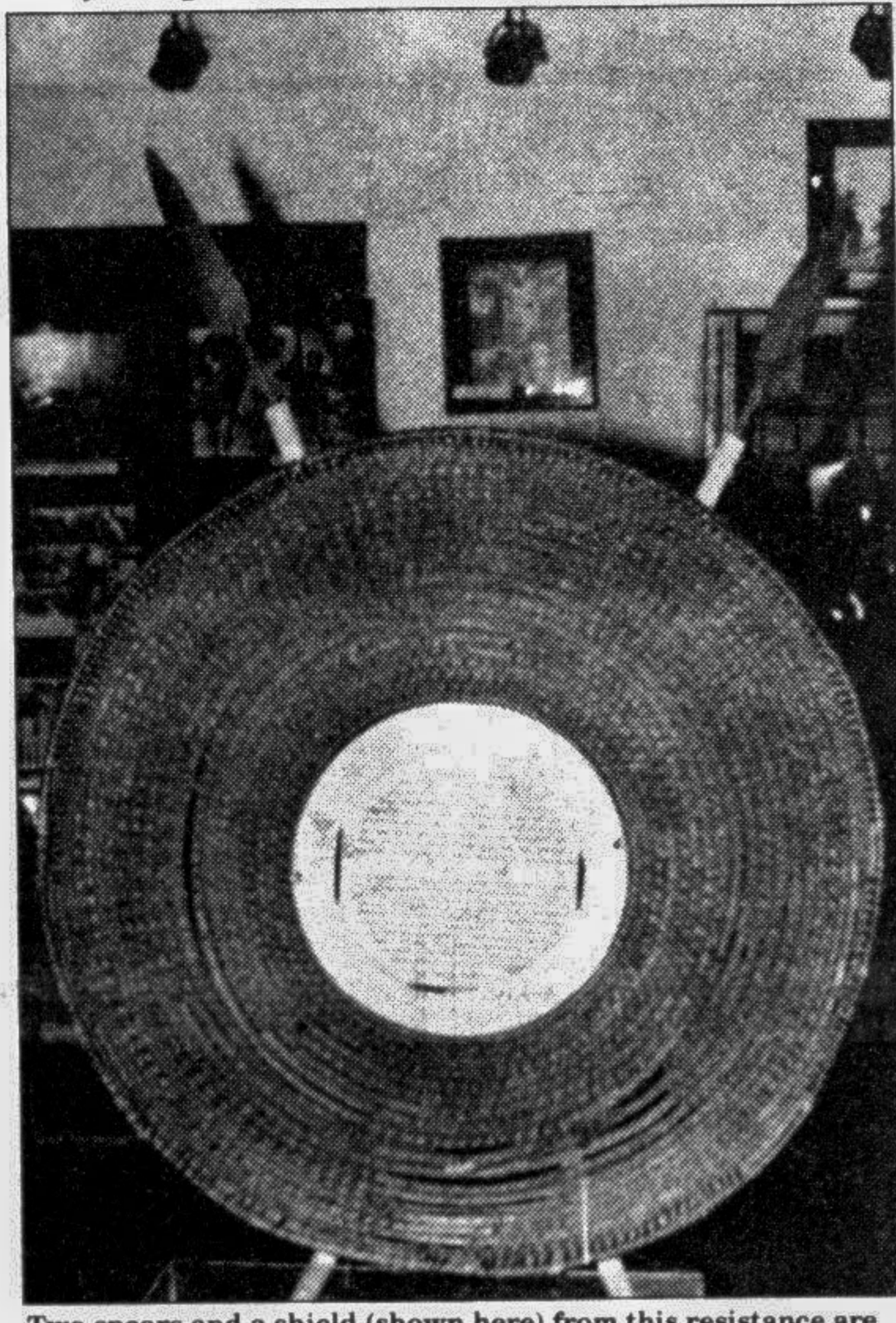
hit Anil's foot. Anil fell down, immediately but Deben attacked with his spear and the soldier was disabled. The other two tried to run by crossing the canal, but the villagers fell upon them with spears and machete killing them all.

The skirmish didn't last very long, but was a turning point for the villagers in their determination for freedom and liberty.

In this battle of Dhonarkandi, these villagers were literally inspired with the 7th March all of Bangladesh, "prepare yourself with whatever weapon you have..." They proved it by defending, successfully, their village from the heinous Pakistani military occupation. Although three members of the MuktiBahini — Anil, Porimol and Hashem — had to sacrifice their lives, the resilience of the people once again proved to the Pakistan Army that they were in for a losing battle in Bangladesh.

In 1971, many such battles occurred all over Bangladesh where just the ordinary people participated to fight against the barbarisms and atrocities of the supremely trained Pakistan Army. Our victory in the Liberation War was the outcome of the unity and determination of the people.

This write-up is prepared by Liberation War Museum Research Cell with information collected by Ajoy Das Gupta. The Museum honoured the freedom fighters of Dhonarkandi at a reception at the Museum on May 13, 1997. Seven of these brave liberators came from Dhonarkandi for this occasion. Two spears and a shield (shown here) from this resistance are on permanent display at the Liberation War Museum.



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TOM and JERRY



By Hanna-Barbera

James Bond



DRAWN BY JOHN McLUSKY

Metropolitan

Call for concerted efforts to combat drug abuse

Representatives of some 115 NGOs at a meeting in the city called for concerted efforts of government agencies, NGOs, civil society and local bodies to combat drug abuse across the country, reports UNB.

They pointed out that youths are being addicted to various drugs due to socio-economic problems like unemployment, poverty, lack of education and felt that drug addiction could be contained by solving these problems.

Rehabilitation programmes for the addicts could help control the drug menace, said Secretary-in-charge of PM's office Zakia Akhter Chowdhury, who attended the meeting as chief guest.

She said information, education and communication would create awareness against the adverse effects of drug abuse. The day-long first general meeting of National Coordina-

tion Council of Anti-Drug NGOs (NCCADN) was held at Voluntary Health Services Society (VHSS) with NCCADN president AKM Rafiqul Haq in the chair.

The meeting was also addressed by joint secretary of the Health Ministry Azizur Rahman, director general of NGO Affairs Bureau Giasuddin Pathan, additional director general of Department of Narcotics Control (DNC) Katebur Rahman, Director of Social Service Harun-ur-Rashid, VHSS executive director Dr Nasir Uddin and its director (programme) Raushan Rahman.

Khaleda leaves for Rajshahi tomorrow

BNP Chairperson and Leader of the Opposition Begum Khaleda Zia will leave for Rajshahi tomorrow to attend party programmes, reports UNB.

Sajeda at int'l convention in Beijing Threats of desertification affecting country's N-region

Minister for Environment and Forest Syeda Sajeda Chowdhury yesterday called upon members of the international community, specially the rich to pool their resources and technological know-how to combat desertification, a message from Beijing said, reports BSS.

Addressing the inaugural session of an international convention to combat desertification in Asia in the Chinese capital, Begum Chowdhury stated that threats of "creeping desertification" is affecting northern region of Bangladesh. She said that factors like global warming and population boom could have adverse implications on the country.

Sajeda Chowdhury, leader of Bangladesh delegation at the convention, said that the rise of water level in the Bay of Bengal due to global warming would submerge a sizable area of the country. While drawing attention of the conference on the pressure of environment caused

by increased population and other factors, Begum Chowdhury said encroachment of the natural resources by the ever increasing population stood in the way of attaining sustainable development.

The minister told the convention that various steps and action plans have been adopted by the government in this regard and that poverty alleviation remained as the core issue. She said the problem have to be tackled by ensuring the participation of people in all stages of development activities.

While recalling the spirit of Rio Conference, the minister expressed her confidence that the Beijing meeting would also provide a regional framework for collectively combating the desertification.

Later in the day Begum Chowdhury met Xu Youfang, Chinese Minister for Forestry and discussed matters of bilateral interests. She attended a reception in the evening hosted by Xu.



The Liberation War Museum accorded a reception to the freedom fighters from Donarkandi village of Barisal, at museum auditorium in the city yesterday.

HERE and THERE

Dhaka Imperial College

Dhaka Imperial College organised a farewell function for its first batch of students at the college premises recently, says a press release.

The welcome address was delivered by Vice Principal Mahfuzul Haq, who praised the hardwork and dedication of the students.

Syed Anwar Hussain, Director General of Bangladesh Academy, who was the chief guest, stressed on the importance of learning.

Principal of the college Prof Latifur Rahman, in his speech, emphasised on all round education.

Academy of Sciences

American Biographical Institute has nominated Dr S D Chaudhuri, president of the Bangladesh Academy of Sciences, for the institute's newly chartered Decree of International Letters for Cultural Achievement. Dr Chaudhuri

has already been accepted as life time Deputy Governor of the American Biographical Institute, says a press release.

Krishnakathi Kallyan Samity

Krishnakathi Kallyan Samity, a forum of the people of Krishnakathi, a 500-year-old village under Jhalakathi district, has been formed with retired joint secretary Muhammad Azizur Rahman as its founder patron, reports BSS.

A 23-member executive committee of the association has also been elected with Munsif Shahabuddin Ahmed and K M Shammudhah as its president and general secretary respectively, a press release of the samity said yesterday.

Syed Mohammad Anwar Hossain has been nominated as the chief patron while noted bankers Muhammad Hafizur Rahman and Mustafizur Rahman have been made patrons of the association.

Syed Abu Zahid Ziaul Haq, Syed Mosharraf Hossain and Syed Abdur Rab have been elected the vice presidents.

Father held for killing baby son

NARAYANGANJ, May 13: Police arrested a rickshaw puller for allegedly killing his seven-month-old son in Siddirganj thana here today, reports UNB.

Nurul Islam (21) reportedly poisoned his son Jewel with insecticide after quarreling with his wife Tahera Begum (18) on Monday night.

Tahera, who went out of their rented house at Shimulpara after the quarrel, returned home in the morning only to see her son dead. The couple hail from Masampur village in Daudkandi thana of Comilla district.

The body was sent to Narayanganj Sadar Hospital for autopsy.

Kayes Ahmed awarded

Noted litterateur, late Kayes Ahmed, has been given Bangla Academy's 'Sadat Ali Akhand Literary Award 1997' (posthumous), a Bangla Academy press release said Monday, reports BSS.

The award comprises Taka 10 thousand and a certificate, the press release said.

BNWLA survey reveals

Poverty forces 22 pc of sex workers to take up the profession

Only 14.57 per cent of sex workers opt to take prostitution as profession inherent and the rest come to brothels mainly to earn their bread and butter, and often, after being cheated in various ways, reports UNB.

An NGO survey revealed 22.19 per cent become sex workers due to poverty of their families and about 28.14 per cent after being trapped by pimps and others.

The survey also found that 8.94 per cent take up prostitution as a profession after being divorced by their husbands, 13.58 per cent to escape physical and mental repression by their husbands, having no other alternative, and 3.64 per cent after losing their virginity

before marriage. The other reasons behind women becoming sex workers are — polygamy by husbands (5.96 per cent), impotence of husbands (0.99 per cent) and death or missing of husbands (1.99 per cent).

Bangladesh National Women Lawyers' Association (BNWLA) conducted the random survey among 302 sex workers at different brothels in and around Dhaka city recently. Of them, 167 were 'authorised' and 135 unauthorised, and underage.

Among the respondents, there were 26 sex workers of Kandupatti of old Dhaka, which was demolished by a so-called action council on Monday. The evicted sex workers demon-

strated in the city yesterday. Nearly 67.22 per cent of those surveyed stated harassment by police and *mastans* as their main problem, while 18.59 per cent blamed collection of extra tolls by the *sardars*, pimps and owners of their houses.

Most of the sex workers (90.73 per cent) depend on private physicians for their treatment, while 5.30 per cent go to government hospitals and 3.97 per cent to quacks and *kabiraj*.

According to the survey, 95.36 per cent sex workers are illiterate, 22.52 per cent were married before coming to brothels and 40.40 per cent have regular contacts with their families.

BEPZA contradicts news item

Bangladesh Export Processing Zone Authority (BEPZA) has contradicted a news item on labour unrest in a factory at DEPZA, reports UNB.

BEPZA in a clarification yesterday stated that the news item relating to M/S Lenny Fashion Ltd at Dhaka Export Processing Zone (DEPZA) released by UNB and subsequently in a number of national dailies contained some misleading facts. "No clash occurred between Lenny Fashions Ltd's management group and the workers as mentioned," said the BEPZA statement.

It said that the workers of the factory had stopped their work, demanding some facilities including reappointment of eight terminated supervisors. "The management of the company cannot reappoint a worker once he is terminated giving financial benefits as per rules."

The demand of the workers to increase their salary is not true, the statement said adding that "Usually the workers are graded according to their efficiency and salary of a worker is being increased after one year". It further said that overtime is being given on the basis of two hours pay for one hour work.

10 get 'Journalist Akram Khan Gold Medal'

Journalist Mowla Mammad Akram Khan National Smriti Sangsad has announced the names of the recipients of the 'Journalist Akram Khan Gold Medal' for the year 1996 for their outstanding performances in their respective fields, says a press release.

Recipient are: Chowdhury ATM Masud — Justice & Administration, M Mahe Alam Administration, Dr Mirza Abdul Jalil Administration, Abul Kalam Samuddin Journalism, Dr Sadar Uddin Chowdhury Education, M Fazul Haque Management, M A Mannan Chowdhury Management, Dr M A Mannan Science, Barrister Tamizul Haque Industrialisation and M K Alam Banking.

Khaleda condoles death of partyman

BNP Chairperson and Leader of the Opposition Begum Khaleda Zia has expressed deep shock at the tragic death of a party leader, Moniruzzaman Monir, reports UNB. Monir, general secretary of ward no 14 unit of city BNP, died in a road accident at Farmgate Monday night.

Tender for forklifts: Show cause on govt, CPA chairman

The High Court yesterday directed the government and the Chairman of Chittagong Port Authority to show cause within six weeks as to why their decision regarding the international tender for supply of forklift truck should not be declared without lawful authority and are of no legal effect.

The Division Bench of the High Court comprising Justice Md Mozammel Haque and Justice Md Hassan Ameen passed the order upon a writ petition filed by Mahboob Zaman, local agent of Fantuzzi SPA Italy.

Barrister Amirul Islam along with Advocate Subrata Chowdhury moved for the petitioner.

CU Physics Deptt exam postponed

CHITTAGONG, May 13: The examination of paper number 203 of 2nd year BSc (Honours), Department of Physics, under University of Chittagong, scheduled to be held on May 18 has now been postponed due to unavoidable reasons, a university press release said, reports BSS.