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## Emergency steps being taken to control fire : PM

MAGURCHHARA (Moulvibazar), June 17: Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina today visited the Magurechhara gasfield in Kamalganj thana, where the flame is still shooting up to a height ranging from 100 to 200 feet, reports UNB.

"The government is taking emergency steps to control the fire, which is destroying valuable natural gas," the Prime Minister said while witnessing the fire from a distance of about hundred metres.

Sheikh Hasina directed the authorities concerned to take necessary measures to cope with the situation arising out of the gas well fire.

The height of the flame got reduced and now varied from 100 to 200 feet, said the President of Occidental of Bangladesh Limited, a US-based company, that started drilling

See Page 12 Col 3

## KR Narayanan set to become Indian President

NEW DELHI, June 17: A Hindu 'untouchable' was today set to become India's president, coinciding with the 50th anniversary of the country's independence, officials said, reports AFP.

Kocheril Raman Narayanan, the incumbent vice-president, was proposed late Monday for the top post by the centre-left United Front coalition government and its major ally, the Congress(I) party.

The decision, announced after weeks of suspense, as expected to be endorsed by the Hindu nationalist and main opposition Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the officials said.

"There is no doubt that KR Narayanan will be the next president of India," said Vithal Gadgil, spokesman for Congress, the second largest

See Page 12 Col 8

## Security at BNP chiefs' cantt residence reduced

By Staff Correspondent

The strength of the police force guarding the cantonment residence of the Leader of the Opposition and BNP chief Begum Khaleda Zia was reduced yesterday, her party sources claimed.

The sources said all the 18 armed policemen, who were performing duties at Begum Zia's house in three shifts (six in each shift), were withdrawn without consulting her. Later, six policemen, two in each shift, were deployed. Under the new arrangement, one in the two-member team in each shift will carry arms, they added.

However, no official confirmation was available.

Earlier, the mobile police protection for the Opposition Leader was also downsized.

## BNP public rally in city today

Main opposition BNP will hold a public meeting in front of its central office at 3 pm today protesting the price hike of fertilizer and proposed national budget, reports UNB.

Leader of the Opposition in Parliament and BNP Chairperson Begum Khaleda Zia will address the meeting as chief guest.

Party central leaders will also address the meeting, said a press release yesterday.

## Inside Today

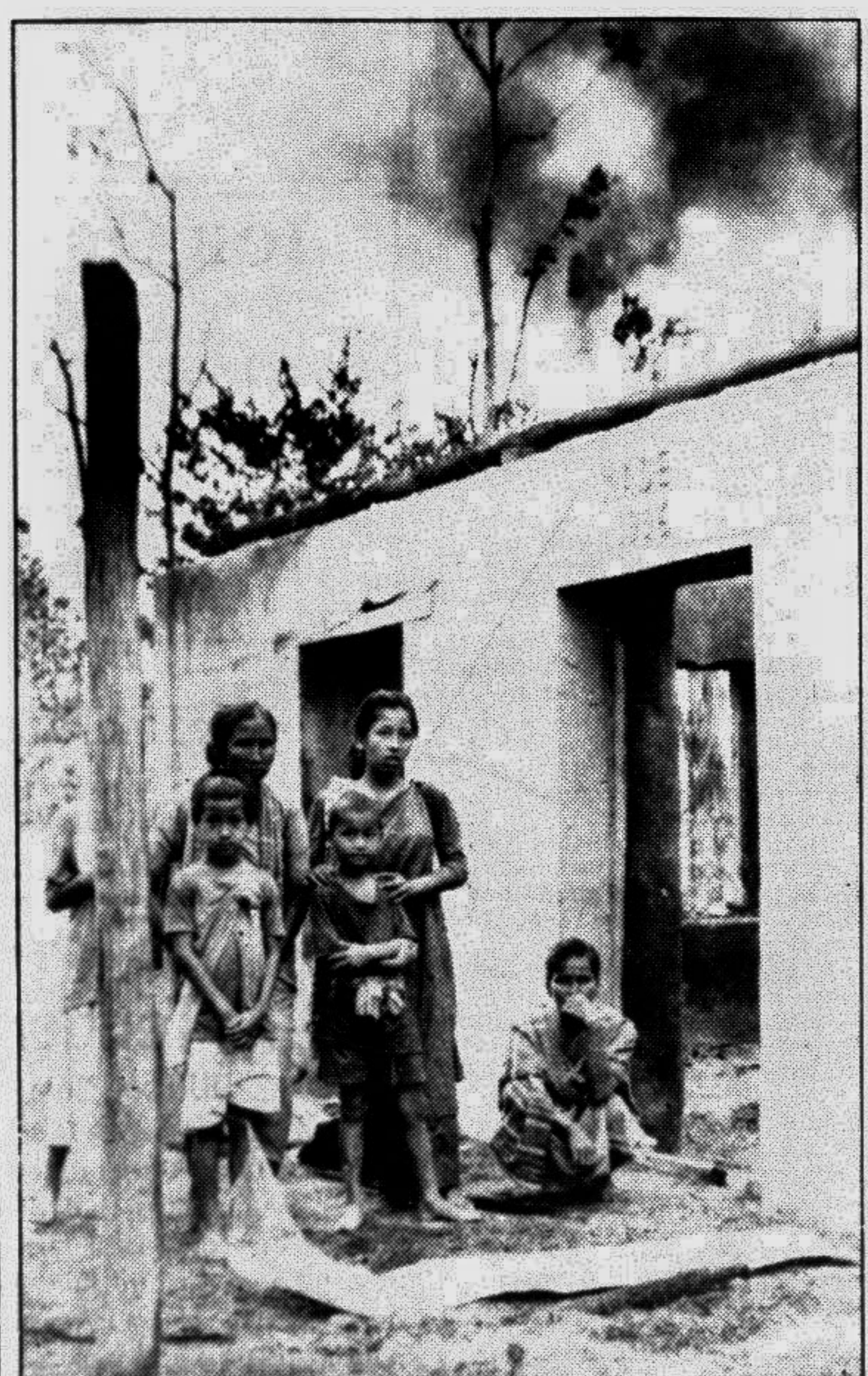
**Article**  
A Call for Monetary Cooperation  
by Dr A R Chowdhury  
Page 4

**Focus**  
Iodised salt: Are consumers getting the right stuff?; and City's farms' promise to humanize 21st century skylines  
Page 5

**Business**  
EU's condition to scrap 6910 certificates  
BGMEA demands compensation to off set loss in knitwear industry  
DSE price index continues to fall  
Pages 6,7

## Affected villagers to get compensation

# Blast due to undetected gas pocket, claim Occidental officials



An affected family standing in front of their damaged house near the burning gasfield at Magurechhara. -Star photo

From Morshed Ali Khan and Cameron Kennedy

SRIMANGAL, June 17: Officials of the government and the US company, Occidental, worked frantically today to arrange to cap the inferno as the huge gas fire at the Magurechhara gas well raged on.

The fire which started Saturday night has become smaller, but flames still leap up to 250 feet in the air, making it impossible for anyone to go within 200 yards of the well.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, Energy Minister Noor Uddin Khan, Foreign Minister Abdus Samad Azad, Finance Minister Shah AMS Kibria, Forest and Environment Minister Shahjeda Chowdhury visited the disaster area.

An Occidental engineer said there was no more danger of further explosion there because gas pressure was slowly diminishing.

"The fire you are seeing now is a baby fire compared to the first days", he said.

Busy officials at the site said well-capping equipment was on the way. A Canadian fire-fighting expert was already deployed to assess the extent of the blaze. Occidental officials, however, declined to comment on how long it might take to put out the fire and cap the well.

Mohiuddin Ahmed, an engineer and local consultant of Occidental said the explosion occurred because of an undetected sub-soil shallow gas pocket.

Explaining further, he said that the seismic survey conducted before drilling failed to detect the shallow gas pocket at the site. He noted that the pocket stretched over an area of 1000 acres beneath the surface.

"The actual gas field for which we were drilling here is situated about 1.5 kilometres

See Page 12 Col 1

## Fire fighting equipment arrive today

By Mizan Ali

Fire fighting equipment to extinguish the flames at the Magurechhara drilling site in Moulvibazar district is scheduled to reach the capital today, officials said last night.

As soon as the necessary equipment reaches Dhaka it will be immediately dispatched to the site, the officials added.

The equipment will be used to extinguish the fire through a system known as 'wild well control'. It is a highly specialised field and there are only a few experts in the area. The equipment and the personnels are both expensive.

The wild well control system of extinguishing oil well fires was adopted in Kuwait. The same system is expected to be used at Magurechhara exploration site.

In this system, a bomb is exploded to burn out the oxygen so that the flame dies down in the

See Page 12 Col 7

## Hundreds flock to see flames, others make brisk business

From Staff Correspondent

SRIMONGAL, June 17: Hundreds of people have arrived here to watch the billowing flames coming out from the gas well since last Saturday.

Many people are coming here despite a government order declaring the Magurechhara gas well area in Moulvibazar a danger zone.

Officials expressed concern about the security situation. In the explosion area, they said, police should keep people away.

Meanwhile, petty traders were taking advantage of the situation. They have set up a 'mini-bazaar' at the last police check-point on the road to the well, where they are selling fruits, ice-cream and other items.

Rickshawpullers also raised their fares while baby-taxis and tempos did brisk business ferrying curious onlookers to the

See Page 12 Col 7

## Discussion on suppl budget ends

# Heated debate, brief walkout by BNP

Former Finance Minister M Saifur Rahman during discussion on the supplementary budget in the Jatiya Sangsad yesterday blamed the present government for dismal performance of the economy marked by downward growth in all vital sectors, reports UNB.

On the other hand, Finance Minister Shah AMS Kibria castigated the previous BNP government for economic "mismanagement, corruption and indiscipline" that pushed the national economy into a severe crisis.

Meanwhile, Opposition BNP staged a brief walkout last night protesting the Deputy Speaker's decision allowing State Minister for Planning, Civil Aviation and Tourism Dr Mohiuddin Khan Alamgir to speak on the supplementary budget.

As Dr Alamgir took the floor to speak, the BNP lawmakers, led by Deputy Leader of the Opposition Dr AQM Badruddoza Chowdhury, stood up and demanded the Speaker to stop Dr Alamgir, who is not a member of parliament, from speaking on the supplementary budget.

The BNP MPs, led by Dr Chowdhury, walked out of the House at 8:55 pm, but returned within a few minutes.

Taking part in the discussion

See Page 12 Col 1

## Brawl between AL, BNP MPs averted in JS

By Staff Correspondent

A brawl between some Awami League and BNP lawmakers in the Jatiya Sangsad during the Magreb recess yesterday was averted by some senior party colleagues of both

See Page 12 Col 7

## 'ULFA insurgents ousted from Bangladesh on understanding'

NEW DELHI, June 17: The Chief Minister of Assam, Prafulla Kumar Mahanta, said here today that the outlawed ULFA insurgents were now camping in the jungles in Bhutan after they had been driven out by the law enforcing agencies in Bangladesh, reports BSS.

Speaking at a press conference, he said that Bangladesh authorities ousted the ULFA insurgents following an understanding

See Page 12 Col 1

## Bill proposing RI for medical malpractices

By Staff Correspondent

A bill proposing imprisonment and fine for medical malpractices and propaganda for such activities was placed in the Jatiya Sangsad yesterday.

Health and Family Welfare Minister Salahuddin Yusuf placed the bill titled The Drugs (Control) (Amendment) Act, 1997 amending the Drugs (Control) Ordinance of 1982.

See Page 12 Col 6

## Bangabandhu murder case HC rule asking for report on condition of undertrial prisoners

The High Court yesterday issued a *suo moto* rule calling for a report on conditions of the undertrial prisoners of the Bangabandhu murder case whether they were given divisions as ordered by the CMM and the Sessions Judge, Dhaka, reports UNB.

A Division Bench, comprising Justice Badrul Islam Chowdhury and Justice Mohammad Abdul Matin, directed the DIG Prison of Dhaka Central Jail to submit a report to the court by Thursday (June 19).

Advocate Mahbubur Rahman the counsel of Zubaida Rashid, moved for the accused of the case.

# Taming gasfield fire: Local experts hold opposing views

By Sharier Khan

Bangladeshi hydrocarbon exploration experts have opposing views about how to control the fire at the Moulvibazar gasfield.

"It will be very unwise to put out the fire of that well which has now turned into a crater," said a hydrocarbon exploration expert who retired from Petrobangla recently after more than 30 years of service. "Because, even if the fire is put out, the gas flow cannot be stopped from gushing out. This gas will cause serious health hazard."

Requesting anonymity, he emphasised on taking other precautionary measures to prevent the fire from spreading.

A hydrocarbon expert of Petrobangla, however, said that the fire should be controlled at any cost in order to implement any precautionary measure. He added that putting out the fire would not cause any noticeable health hazard.

The retired Petrobangla official, however, asserted that if a large quantity of natural gas is released in the atmosphere, it will be a health hazard of the highest degree. "Plus, there will be a risk of fire breaking out elsewhere later," he added.

The fire that broke out in the Haripur gasfield 30 years ago is still burning in a smaller scale, he noted. "Let nature take care

of this well. Let it burn till the reservoir becomes exhausted," he said.

"What we should do now is take precaution against spreading of the fire, investigate the cause of the explosion and demand compensation from Occidental for damaging our natural resources," he added, noting that the explosion was definitely caused by high pressure.

Occidental had reached a depth of 839 metres when the explosion took place. Occidental had a workplan for drilling upto 3000 metres.

He said all gas wells on the eastern side of the Jamuna

See Page 12 Col 8

## Family members allege Nuruzzaman died due to police torture

By Staff Correspondent

Family members of the Bangladesh Biman crew who died in police custody Monday yesterday, alleged that his death was due to torture by police during the two-day remand.

However, a senior police official claimed that the Biman crew, Nuruzzaman Sharif, 37, was not tortured while on police remand. He, however, added that they were waiting for the autopsy report.

Nuruzzaman died after he was taken to court custody in the city after the end of two days' remand Monday. He was

arrested on charge of illegal trespass into the Prime Minister's office at Tejgaon area in the city Friday afternoon.

Family members of Nuruzzaman said they came to know about his death after they moved a bail petition to the Chief Metropolitan Magistrate's (CMM) court Monday afternoon. The court granted the bail but Nuruzzaman, at the time, was taken to National Hospital from court custody at about 4 pm. Doctors at the hospital declared him dead.

See Page 12 Col 7

## Anybody found responsible to be punished, assures PM

By Staff Correspondent

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina told the Jatiya Sangsad yesterday that exemplary punishment would be given if any body is found responsible for death in police custody or inside court premises.

She told this amidst an uproar in the Opposition Bench over the death of Biman cabin crew Nuruzzaman allegedly in custody on Monday. Nuruzzaman was arrested on June 13 on charge of entering into the Prime Minister's Tejgaon Office without prior permission.

See Page 12 Col 4

## Load shedding for lack of transmission line

# 466 MW power in Ctg region to remain unused till Nov '98

By Rafiq Hasan

With the commissioning of the 210 MW second unit of the Raouzan Power Plant in July, total power generation capacity in Chittagong region will stand at 766 MW, of which, about 466 MW electricity will be surplus, says an independent study.

The study conducted by Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) noted that the surplus power would remain unused till November 1998 as there is hardly any possibility of installing a 230 KV transmission line to transfer surplus power to the main grid before that period.

According to the study, the loadshedding problem in the country was not due to lack of power generating capacity rather it was due to lack of power transfer facilities.

It said the peak hour demand for the Chittagong area, including Feni, at present is around 300 MW. There are five hydro-electric power plants at Kaptai, with a total generating capacity of 230 MW. Besides, there are three thermal power plants at Shikabaha, Chittagong with a total generating capacity of 116 MW, one 60 steam turbine unit and two 28 MW barge-mounted gas turbine units.

The large surplus power would thus need to be transmitted to the main load centres in the country through a 230 KV transmission line. This will, however, not be possible until the commissioning of the 230

See Page 12 Col 4

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