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Police lobbed tear gas shells to disperse JCD activists demonstrating near BTV Bhaban at Rampura in the city yesterday. — Star photo

3 burnt alive

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fighters and local people frantically tried to control the flame from engulfing the whole locality.

Thirteen fire fighting units from four stations and the fire brigade headquarters took about three and a half hours to douse the fire.

A 'twin vehicle' of the Mohammadpur fire brigade station which was carrying pumps and hose pipes was damaged as some 'over enthusiastic' local people pushed it close to the fire thinking that it would be helpful in extinguishing it, a fire brigade official said.

As the fire broke out, the slum dwellers started running helter skelter through the narrow lanes that connected the slum with the main road in Rayer Bazaar. This caused minor injuries to about 30 people, local people said.

Fire brigade personnel or police could not ascertain the cause of the fire that broke out at about 1:15 pm at the southern portion of the slum known as Botola.

"We don't know from where the fire began. I went out of the house leaving all the household goods as neighbours started shouting fire... fire," said Rina who could manage to rescue her three children.

Most of the dwellers suspected that the fire originated from an earthen over or electric short circuit. When this correspondent visited the slum, some dwellers alleged that a number of houses in and around the slum had unauthorised power and gas lines. However, it could not be confirmed from the authorities concerned.

The slum, clustered with single-room shanties, were built on makeshift platforms of bamboo structures on a low-lying land near the town protection embankment. Most of the slum dwellers were garments workers, rickshaw pullers and labourers.

A five-storey building and some tin-shed houses adjacent to the slum were also affected in the fire.

The fire engulfed the slum as the fire fighting units found it difficult to reach the spot through narrow roads in Rayer Bazaar area, fire fighters said.

Mohammadpur police said they have no information about missing of any person other than the death of three persons. But they continued search in the debris till filing of this report last night. Police force were reinforced in the area following the incident.

Meanwhile, the three bodies were brought to Mohammadpur thana last night. Police said they were preparing to file an unnatural death case in connection with the incident.

Politics of defection is not healthy: Saifur

From Staff Correspondent

SYLHET, Feb 25: BNP central leader M Saifur Rahman today said Awami League government's 'picking up' of Opposition MPs is against political norms and ideology and a clear disregard to the constitution.

Politics of defection is not a healthy politics and it should not be encouraged in any way, he said.

Strongly criticising the ruling party's 'heinous' acts in this regard, the former finance minister said, such practice will positively hamper parliamentary democracy which is yet to be firmly rooted in the country.

Besides, it will widen the gap between the ruling party and the Opposition, Saifur said while talking to a group of newsmen.

When asked to comment on a news item published in today's issue of a Bangla daily which said 'Saifur wants to become finance minister', the BNP stalwart said, 'There is not an iota of truth in this news'.

Price hike of essentials

Review meeting ends without any decision

In the wake of price hike of essentials, the Commerce Ministry held a meeting in the city yesterday to review the latest price situation, but it ended without any decision, reports UNB.

Chaired by Commerce Secretary Syed Alamgir Farrouk Chowdhury, the meeting was attended by the officials of TCB, Food Directorate and other concerned agencies, and representatives of the trade bodies and the Consumers Association of Bangladesh (CAB).

The Commerce Secretary reportedly told the meeting that at the present age of free-market economy, the government has nothing to do to control the prices of consumer commodities.

The government can take necessary steps if the supply of goods is hampered, he was quoted as saying by the CAB representative who attended the meeting.

According to a CAB press release, its representative Emdad Hossain Malek said at the meeting that the government can at least ensure adequate supply of the daily necessities like rice and pulses, if it is unable to control the prices.

In this regard, he referred to

1956 law on the essential commodities.

The representative of merchants dealing in pulses claimed at the meeting that at present, the highest price of 'Masur Dal' in the wholesale market is Tk 28 per kg.

On the other hand, the TCB Chairman told the meeting that they have enough stock of 'Masur Dal' with a price tag of Tk 30 per kg, but there are no buyers.

However, the CAB press release said that the retail price of 'Masur Dal' is now Tk 36 to 38 per kg.

The representative of Badamali Rice Traders Association informed the meeting that rice price has fallen in the last three days by Tk 30 to 40 per maund.

He said the price of coarse rice is Tk 13.12 to 14.73 per kg in wholesale market and Tk 16 to 17 per kg in the retail market.

The official of Food Directorate told the meeting that there is no reason for the price hike of rice.

"Some 1.63 lakh metric tons of rice were imported only from India last month and import of another one lakh tons is under process," he was quoted as saying.

In this regard, he referred to

BNP may opt to join JS

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demands unrealised."

He said: "Parliament is not the personal abode of Sheikh Hasina, we'll go back to the House with our right as elected representatives."

About various preconditions put by BNP for its return to Parliament, he said, "We're not a trade union, it is futile to just raise these five-point or 10-point demands and sit back home."

"We must realise our demand in parliament putting continuous pressure on the government. It's all non-sense to stay outside the House and crying in wilderness," said Barrister Khan, son of former Chief Minister Ataur Rahman Khan.

He said "more than a majority" of the party MPs gave opinion at the BNP parliamentary meeting in mid-January to join the current session of Parliament. "It's really a mystery how that decision was changed and I don't know who had done that."

About Dr Alaudin and Swapan's defection, Khan said it must be examined what factors had prompted the two BNP MPs to join the government.

He indirectly blamed the in-

decision and inertia of the party leadership for leading to such a situation where BNP sits idle, leaving both the parliament and the street.

"Now we'll have to think positively and return to the House to ensure that yet others do not leave the party," he said.

In reply to a question, Barrister Khan hoped that all BNP MPs would take a positive decision on Saturday and agree to return to Parliament.

"It will be an act of real political courage to say yes in this situation," the BNP lawmaker said. "But we'll commit political suicide if we leave both the parliament and the street."

Former minister and a powerful BNP legislator Col (retd) Oli Ahmed told UNB: "We're going to take the decision on February 28 on joining or not joining the Parliament."

He said, "What we're thinking now is very transparent and is coming out in the newspaper."

When pressed to be more specific about BNP's joining the House during the current session, Oli said, "We're considering the options."

He mentioned Telecommunications Minister Mohammad Nasim's press statement that all the demands of BNP, including withdrawal of cases excepting those related to murder and fire arms, have been met.

Col Oli said, "If his (Nasim's) statement is true, then this'll certainly improve the situation and lead to a better understanding between the two parties."

To a question, he said, "We're in constant touch with Chairperson Begum Khaleeda Zia."

Talking to UNB, another senior BNP leader, MK Anwar, said the defection of the two MPs will not restrain them from taking a decision on the question of joining the parliament.

But he hastened to add that a condition should be created "so that our joining the Parliament is meaningful."

Anwar, however, said the party's policy-makers will take the final decision on this crucial point on Saturday.

The BNP mid-level leaders blamed the top leadership for playing the role of on-lookers, abandoning both parliament and the street.

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fled from the scene after opening fire on him.

Police informed that the attack on the headmaster was a sequel to internal feud in the school managing committee and local rivalry centring the recent union parliament election.

A case was started with Lohagara thana accusing eight persons including former UP chairman for killing. However, none was arrested in this connection so far, police said.

The Task Force also recommended that a clause to the effect that processions, rallies, slogans inside the branch or head office of banks will be

21,264 pethidine ampoules seized from Albert David
By Staff Correspondent

The Department of Narcotics Control (DNC) recovered 21,264 ampoules of 'illegally produced' pethidine injection and some raw materials used for manufacturing the drug from the godown of Albert David (Bangladesh) Ltd at Tejgaon on Tuesday night.

Two persons — Salahuddin Chowdhury, 60, and Mahbubur Rahman, 50 — were also arrested during the raid at the godown of the pharmaceutical company, said a DNC press release yesterday.

The seized raw materials include 10 kilograms of pethidine hydrochloride.

The DNC filed a case with Tejgaon thana against four persons including the owner of the company under the Narcotics Control Act of 1990.

Jamuna Bridge

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work.

He said, "Out of a total of 59 segments, only three are yet to be completed and these are expected to be in place by the end of March. We hope to open the bridge by the first week of June but we cannot specify the date as it depends on the decision of the Prime Minister".

Referring to some recent newspaper on 'cracks' in certain structures of the bridge, the minister said, "There are some misconceptions about the fundamental principle of construction of the bridge."

Quoting views of a panel of experts he said, "The hairline cracks in such a structure are very natural. Such cracks, measured to be about 0.25mm, are common. However, the cracks do not pose any threat to durability of the bridge."

The JCD processionists vanished from the main road and sheltered in the narrow lanes. Policemen removed the barricade and charged at the dispersing crowd. Some tear gas shells landed at houses nearby where several protesters were trying to hide.

After about 15 minutes police retreated to their previous position. Soon the JCD activists emerged from their hideouts and regrouped under the assurance of a police officer that they would not be chased any more if they stopped picking at the police.

The JCD activists, mostly young men and women, sat down on the road while their leaders delivered heated speeches condemning the government and the BTV for its role.

At one point several leaders led by Shahiduddin Chowdhury Annie, President of JCD, approached the police officers and asked them to allow four representatives to go to the BTV Bhaban and hand over a memorandum.

Out of total 1526 voters of Dhaka and Chittagong, 1421 voters — 1122 from Dhaka and 299 from Chittagong — cast their ballots.

Quddus needed seven members for his re-election out of the contesting nine.

Our Staff Correspondent adds: "I am happy. I will be more devoted now to boost garment exports and exceed the targets," Quddus said in his initial reaction at midnight.

"I need support from the finance ministry," he said promising "to bring the government and the opposition together for the growth of the Bangladesh economy, especially in the garments sector".

He attributed his panel's victory to the voters' desire to ensure continuity of his "unfinished tasks".

It has also been alleged that

A police officer, after discussing the matter on his walkie talkie, rejected the request and said, "You can give the memorandum to us, we will deliver it to the BTV."

Annie later told the reporters that at least two shots were fired from shot guns during the melee. "Several of our boys and girls received injuries from splinters," he said.

UNB adds, BNP secretary general Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan condemned the police attack on 'peaceful' procession of Jatiyatobadi Chhatra Dal near the Television Bhaban at Rayer Bazaar yesterday.

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