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Free trade area
Dhaka needs more time, Hasina tells Chandrika
COLOMBO, July 28: Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina today sought Sri Lankan support to delay the transition of SAFTA to SAFTA due by 2001, reports UNB.

Hasina sought the support during bilateral talks with Sri Lankan President Chandrika Bandarnaik Kumaratunga at the President's office in the evening.

"Bangladesh is not yet prepared for the transition and we need longer time for the proposed free trade area," Hasina told Chandrika.

Briefing newsmen after the talks, Foreign Secretary Mustafizur Rahman said that Sri Lankan President appreciated Bangladesh's position and said the transition to SAFTA could be "delayed" but the process of formulating the legislation and other necessary steps could be initiated.

During the half an hour meeting, the two leaders also

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Spl tribunal
Home Ministry seeks legal opinion
By Staff Correspondent

The home ministry yesterday sought legal opinion of the law ministry on whether a special tribunal could be set up to try the Rubel murder case, official sources said.

When contacted over telephone last night, Law Secretary Aminullah told The Daily Star that it would take a week to examine the legal aspects of the proposition.

Different quarters including the Opposition BNP had earlier demanded trial of the Rubel murder case in a special tribunal.

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Tenth SAARC summit in Colombo

All eyes on today's Indo-Pak dialogue

COLOMBO, July 28: The three-day 10th summit of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) will begin amidst tight security here tomorrow, report agencies.

Heads of state and government of seven members of the SAARC that groups Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and host Sri Lanka are already in the capital for the summit.

"The theme of the conference is economy. It will focus on the impact of global economic situation," WTO, SAFTA and SAFTA," Sri Lankan Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar said.

The opening ceremony of the summit will be held at Bandarnaik Memorial International Conference Hall at 10 am when all the heads of government will make deliberations.

Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina is leading a 17-

member official delegation to the summit aimed at boosting economic cooperation among the SAARC launched in Dhaka in 1985.

President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom of the Maldives, current chairman of the seven-nation SAARC, is expected to hand over the chairmanship of the SAARC to President Chandrika Bandarnaik Kumaratunga at the opening session.

An extensive security net has been laid in Colombo and several thousand police personnel have been deployed in the city in addition to hundreds of plainclothesmen. The armed forces have been deployed to main security check points. Sniffer dogs have also been deployed by the police in their security check-ups.

Fearing attacks by Tamil separatists during the summit, police virtually shut down the capital today, closing offices

and schools, suspending trains and rescheduling international flights.

The summit coincides with the 15th anniversary of anti-Tamil riots in Colombo that marked the beginning of the war for a Tamil homeland.

The BMICH and other conference venues have been decorated with the flags of the member nations of SAARC.

All eyes will be on Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee and his Pakistani counterpart Nawaz Sharif when they meet tomorrow for the first time since the two neighbours exploded nuclear devices in May.

The two leaders are scheduled to meet at Hotel Taj Samadru in the afternoon. Vajpayee today said the stalled Indo-Pak talks would be resumed in Colombo and the modalities for the dialogue

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HELP US, PLEASE: Flood victims at a shelter on the premises of M R Tannery at Kamrangirchar yesterday. They said they are yet to receive any help after they came to the shelter about two weeks ago. — Star photo

AC Akram held

By Staff Correspondent

Assistant Commissioner of DB Police Akram Hossain was arrested last night in connection with Shamim Reza Rubel's death in custody. CID SP Hanan Khan said.

Khan told The Daily Star over telephone at midnight that Akram was arrested at about 10:45 pm and that the CID had already started interrogating him.

Earlier, the five remanded plainclothesmen who were under the command of AC Akram at the Detective Branch told the CID investigators that their boss knew everything about the incident, sources said.

When contacted over telephone before his arrest, Akram denied his involvement in the incident.

Quoting conversations with the DB team that had picked up Rubel on Thursday, he said: "They (the DB team) had neither any prior information from any source that Rubel was possessing illegal arms, nor had

Rubel's death

Form probe body headed by sitting SC judge: Khaleda

By Staff Correspondent

any specific allegation against him. They told me later that they had picked up Rubel on sheer suspicion on the spot.

The 5-day remand of the five detectives — SI Taherul Islam Thakur, ASI Abdul Karim, havilder Nuruzzaman, constables Parvez and Faruq — will end today. Police sources said they would need fresh remand of the five.

The sources said, CID is convinced that Rubel was severely tortured by the plainclothesmen in and outside the DB office, could not yet find out the reason behind Rubel's arrest under Section 54.

Besides, investigators were not sure whether Rubel was arrested following an information supplied by DB source.

CID officials said they did not get any record till last night that Rubel was involved in any criminal activities.

Meanwhile, CID received from the CMM's court the petition

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Thousands at city shelter need food, water

By Shehab Ahmed

It is midday but Rashida Begum, 35, is not cooking lunch for her family of seven, huddling among some 3,000 people taking shelter at a closed tannery with water all around it in Kamrangirchar at the western suburb of the city.

Rashida along with her five children and husband came here two weeks ago when the Buriganga river went in spate, flooding her bamboo and corrugated tin sheet hut.

"They are among the privileged who could manage to get shelter at the closed tannery's four floors.

But living and preparing meals for the family had become a desperate struggle.

When her husband Sona Mia, who pedals a rickshaw in the city for eight hours, returns

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Flood situation to worsen further in greater Dhaka

The flood, now sweeping the country, claimed 29 more lives yesterday, raising the death toll to 140, agencies quoting, officials said.

They said the flood situation in most of the districts deteriorated further with the rise of water levels in major rivers.

Nearly 1.50 crore people of 37 districts were affected by the flood as more areas were submerged by the on-rush of waters from across the border.

Of the 29 new victims, five died in Sirajganj. Four deaths were reported from Kurigram, four from Shariatpur, one from Madaripur, four from Manikganj, three from Munshiganj, one from Dhaka, two from Comilla, one from Brahmanbaria, one from Mymensingh and three from Sunamganj.

The officials said most of the deaths were caused by drowning, snakebite and house collapse.

There were also reports of deaths from water-borne diseases.

According to the officials, the flood situation in five thanas of Dhaka district, including the city, worsened further.

They said the flood situation aggravated in 19 districts while

improved in 12 and remained unchanged in six.

The overall situation may deteriorate further in the central part of the country, including the greater Dhaka district, experts said, adding that the situation in northern districts of the country and Meghna basin will improve.

The river experts in the Flood Forecasting Centre said the situation in Dohar, Nawabganj, Keraniganj, Savar and Dhanrai under Dhaka district will deteriorate.

The other vulnerable region includes Narsingdi, Sadar, Raipur, Belabo, Mofoljardi, Shibpur and Palash under Narsingdi district, Manikganj Sadar, Sibalayaa, Daulatpur, Harirampur, Satura, Singair and Ghor under Manikganj district, Narayanganj Sadar, Arahazar, Sonargaon, Bandar and Rugganj under Narayanganj district.

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Letters of intent issued to 9 foreign oil & gas cos

By Sharier Khan

The government has issued letters of intent (LOI) to nine foreign companies awarding them five blocks for oil and gas exploration in the country under the Second Round Block Bidding, sources said.

In these letters, signed on July 26, the government also congratulated the companies and asked them to be ready for signing Production Sharing Contracts.

These letters were sent to Enron-Okland, (awarding blocks 3 and 6), Shell-Cairn (Block 5), Unocal-Triton (Block 7) and Pangea-OMV (Block 8).

The letters further mentioned that the schedule for discussion between the government and the foreign companies would be announced soon.

Finally, the letters mentioned that representatives of the companies should be available at a short notice for negotiation with the government in Dhaka.

The government sent another letter to the chief of Tullow Oil saying that the company should be ready for finalising partnership negotiations with Chevron-Texaco in Block 9 and with Mobil-Petronas in Block 11. Tullow Oil officials have also been asked to be prepared to visit Dhaka at a short notice.

Meanwhile, different oil companies have reacted to the results of the Second Round Block Bidding.

Shell-Cairn and Chevron-Texaco have reacted negatively, saying that the results were "very frustrating", sources said.

Chevron-Texaco also noted that the government was non-committal and they "can not be excited."

The reaction of Mobil-Petronas was also "somewhat negative" as they felt that there was "no promise" for them in the decision. However Mobil-Petronas will be following a "wait-and-see" policy, sources added.

Shell and Cairn, which were offered two blocks during bidding negotiations in November-December last year, have been refused one of the two blocks. These companies, at a meeting with Petrobangla, reacted negatively and said that they were disappointed at the bidding result.

Sources said that Shell-Cairn might go to the extreme of walking out from the bidding procedure which they found "very opaque" and "contradictory."

Between January and July, when the bidding procedure came to a virtual halt, Shell-Cairn had submitted a number of additional proposals for Block 10 aiming at integrated development.

They did it as they sensed that another company — Unocal — was allowed by the government to modify its bidding document for the very block," said a source. The government has also initiated a Production Sharing Contract (PSC) with Unocal over the Shahbazpur

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Cracks detected in Biman's office bldg at Motijheel

Star Report

The Bangladesh Biman's old headquarters at the city's Motijheel that houses its sales section and offices of different commercial organisations have developed dangerous cracks in the ceilings and beam joints.

The cracks were detected last week by an interior decorator hired to refurbish Biman's sales counters.

As the workers pried open the false ceiling, they found the six-storey building, resting on concrete columns, had cracks leaving it on the verge of collapse.

It is suspected that the cracks developed after a partition wall was removed as part of the renovation, a Biman official said.

The panic-stricken decorator went to the Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (BUET) for advice. Experts suggested that further work could only be carried out if there was strong support.

Satkhira clash over Jalmahal

Death toll 3, three still unconscious

From Staff Correspondent

KHULNA, July 28: The bodies of two children, killed during clashes between landless people and police over the possession of a *jalmahal* in Satkhira, was recovered from a canal in Kaliganj thana today.

With these deaths, the number of people killed in the incident stands at three.

Three other persons admitted to Khulna Hospital with bullet wounds on Monday night were yet to regain consciousness, hospital sources said.

Abdus Sabur, 35, Noor Mohammad, 30, and Islam, 36, are all landless farmers of the Baburabad *jalmahal* area.

Earlier on Monday morning a woman, Zaheda Khatoun, 32, died as bullets pierced through her ribs during the fierce clash between police and hundreds of landless people over the possession of the Baburabad *jalmahal* in Kaliganj. The bodies of the two children are yet to be identified.

The Deputy Commissioner of Satkhira Deb Dutta Khisha, told this correspondent today that he was not sure as yet if the two children were killed in police firing.

"But I am quite sure that police and government officials came under severe attack from hundreds of people of Baburabad and in self-defence there was no other way but to go into action during retreat", the DC said.

The Police Super of Satkhira said, "I did not count how many rounds of gunshots were fired when unruly people attacked with arrows and brickbats at my forces who were called in to maintain law and order during demarcation of the *jalmahal*."

Leaders of 'The Bhumihin Uchched Protirodh Committee' (Landless Eviction Resistance Committee) said today that 15 people missing since the clash are yet to be traced.

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CHT body meet now Aug 7

KHAGRACHHARI, July 28: The third meeting of the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) Peace Accord Implementation Committee (Parbattya Shanti Chukti Bastabayan Committee) will be held on August 7, reports UNB.

The meeting will be held at the Chittagong Circuit House. It was earlier scheduled for July 23 and then shifted to July 31 for reasons unknown.

According to the source, the much-expected interim Regional Council is likely to be formed after the third meeting of the Implementation Committee.

Road accident in Comilla kills 11

COMILLA, July 28: At least 11 people were killed and 30 injured in a road accident on Dhaka-Chittagong highway early today, reports UNB.

Five of the dead were identified as Azeda Khatun, 30, Rafiqul Islam, 30, Nizam, 25, Tara, 22, and Sadequul, 25.

Police said the accident occurred when a Chittagong-bound night coach collided with

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Ctg court bldg may collapse any time

From Staff Correspondent

CHITTAGONG, July 28: Chittagong court building, built over one hundred years ago, is yet to be renovated or replaced, although being declared 'condemned' about 11 years ago, according to court officials.

The worn-out court building, at the city's Parir Pahar, may collapse any time, said an official.

Talking to The Daily Star, Chittagong District Judge Zahurul Haque said three court rooms used by a sub-judge, an additional judge and a senior assistant judge were closed after those found to be 'risky'.

The office of the three judges have been shifted to elsewhere to run the court functions alternately, the district judge informed.

"As a result, it has become difficult to run judicial and other court functions in this worn-out building," he said adding, "We fear that the building might collapse at any time."

Haque pointed out that a piece of concrete from the roof

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