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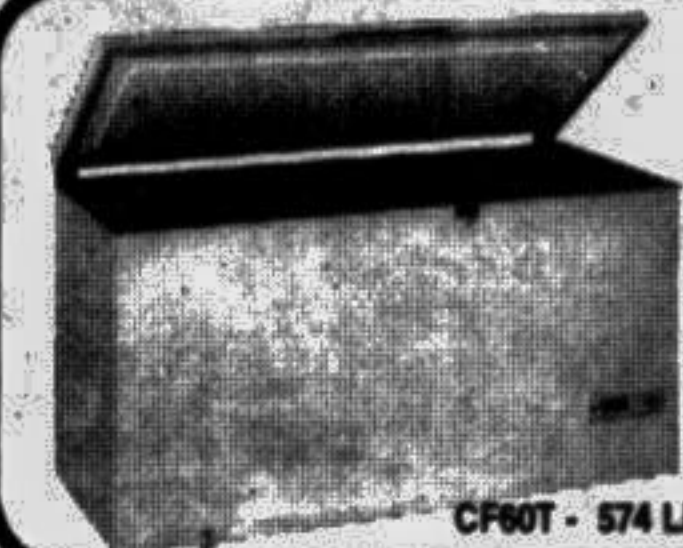
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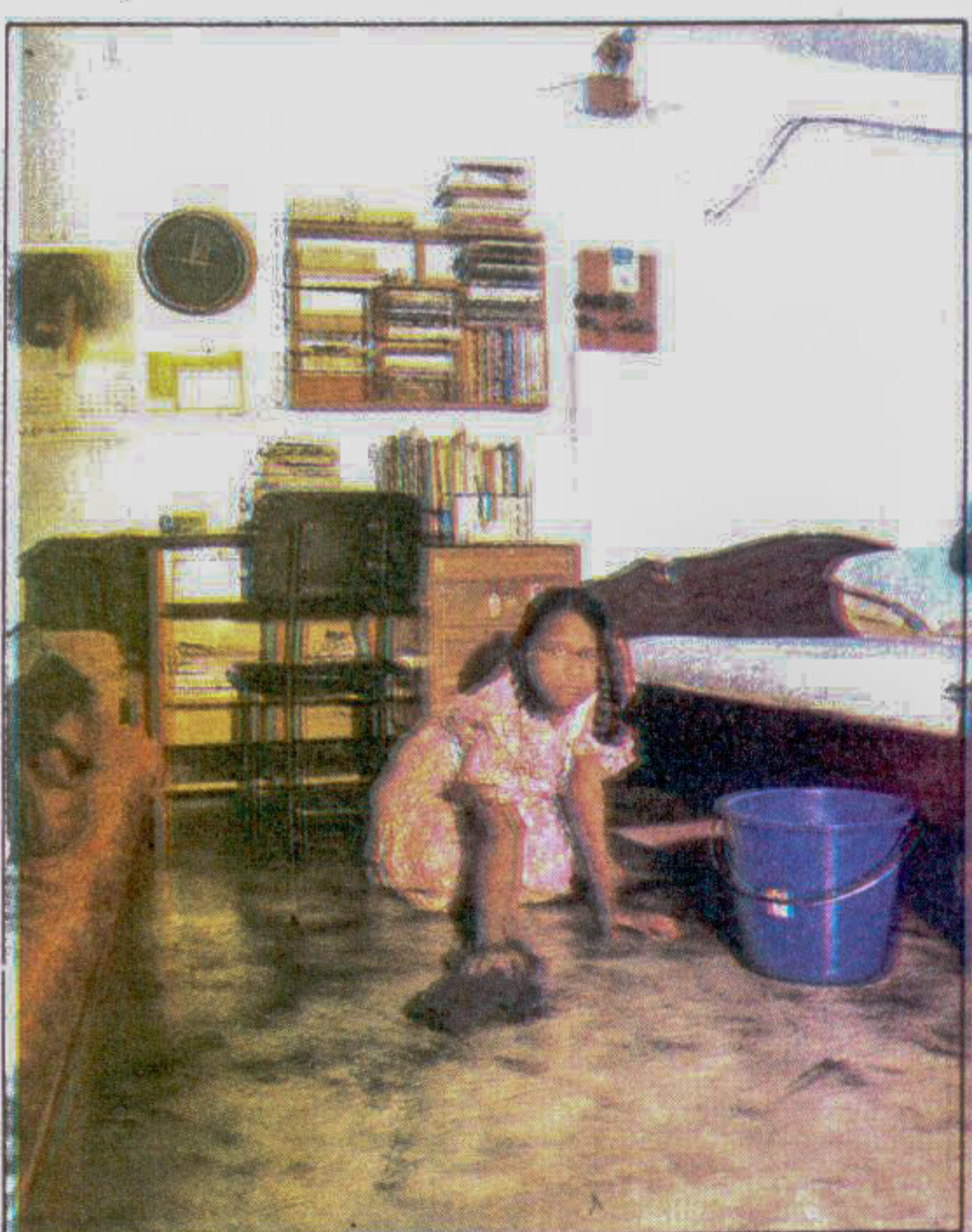
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Crying behind the domestic bars

By Mir A Zaman



Education not for her

While this girl keeps the study of her employer's daughter clean, she herself doesn't have access to education.

Abdi is only eight years old. At this age, she has already seen the darker side of life. She has already found out how cruel human beings can be. When a girl of her age is expected to go to school, Abdi started negotiating with the economics of existence. In the hope of two meals a day and a 'secured' life for her youngest daughter, Julekha sent Abdi to work as a domestic assistant at an industrialist's residence in Gulshan. At almost midnight Wednesday, her daughter came back home, her forehead swollen, eyes almost closed and bruises all over the body — evidence of brutal torture by Salma Azim, the mistress of the house. Abdi's fault was she refused to eat stale food for she was given for lunch. Salma couldn't tolerate such 'disobedience'. In a bid to 'discipline' the 'disobedient', she first tried to stash the rotten and stinking food into Abdi's mouth. When she threw up, it only fanned Salma's wrath. She beat her with a stick and, as if it were not enough, banged her head against the wall, and then she simply threw the little girl out of the house in the dead hours of night.

Abdi is now under treatment at the Dhaka Medical College Hospital (DMCH). She has already been to the operation theatre. The doctors had to remove pus and blood clots from her wounds. She cannot see anything with her left eye and the right eye is no better. The doctors are still uncertain whether she would ever get her eyesight back.

The sorry tale Abdi is nothing new. In this country, the Julekhas send the Abdis to work as domestic hands in the hope that they will at least have two meals a day and have new sets of clothes couple of times a year. Above all, they will be safe. In reality, more often than not, their expectations are cruelly belied. The children soon find out that benignity is the last thing their employers can show to them. They realise they have bargained freedom for two meals a day. Secured life becomes synonymous to being secured inside four walls.

"My employer never lets me

out of the house," said Yasmeen, a ten-year-old who has been working for a family in one of the capital's posh residential areas for more than a year now. "Even when they go out, they lock me inside the house, all alone."

Employers, however, think that is the wisest thing to do. "Never let your servant go out, not even for a walk," said one housewife, an 'expert' in handling child domestics. "They cook up stories about us and spread them around."

Seldom there is a happy employer.

"Whenever they get the chance, they cut corners," said

one 'experienced' middle-class home-maker. "I have to supervise every work she (the maid servant, a 10-year-old girl) does."

Everyday the girl sweeps and mops the floors, wash clothes, dishes and everything there is to wash. She gets only 300 taka per month. Abuse and occasional beatings are added incentives.

Hard work and harsh treatment, in most of the cases, are too much for the child domestics to bear and they quit the jobs. They escape from these prisons.

For some girls, like cases narrated in Therese Blanchet's

landmark study *Lost Innocence, Stolen Childhood*. It goes way beyond abuse and beating. In her book published in 1996, Blanchet narrates the story of Alea, a child maid who was first raped at the age of 1 by her master's 17-year-old son, and then by the employer himself. At the age of 14, she was raped again by her employer in a new home.

Just over a month back, a police constable was arrested in the capital for allegedly raping his eight-year-old maid servant. Certainly, there are more such cases behind closed doors.

Most child domestics receive little or no salary at all, with the average income of the lucky ones being less than 200 taka a month. They have no set working hours, and work continuously from dawn till everyone goes to bed late at night. Still, the employers believe they are doing these helpless children a big favour and assume the role of a demi god in their lives. The verbal abuse and occasional beating "is for their welfare," said a 'benign' housewife of the two little girls helping her in domestic chores. "Otherwise, they would go astray."

There are 'naive' employers as well, who treat the child domestics as part of the family.

"I am what I am for them," said Islam (not his real name), now an employee at a government establishment, of his former employer. "My mother used to work for the family and I helped her. They never treated me like a servant. Amma (the mistress of the house) made arrangements for my schooling."

More often than not, the employers forget that by hiring a child domestic they are violating her or his rights, defined by the Convention on Child's Rights. True, they give them two meals a day and new sets of clothes couple of times a year. But in return they are giving hard work. They are not doing the children any favour. Kind treatment could change the complexion of a child domestic's life. Most employers fail to understand this simple truth and as a result, in our country, Abdis' agony often offsets Islam's ecstasy.

Govt looks clueless, and BJP rudderless

By Kuldeep Nayar

The political scene in India has seldom been more uncertain as it is today. The government can fall at any time. Still that time can stretch to months. There is no viable alternative in sight. Nor does Congress president Sonia Gandhi, who emerged as the most important person after elections in Delhi, Madhya Pradesh, Mizoram and Rajasthan, seem to be in a hurry. It looks as if she will keep the threat hanging. Her statement that Congress is ready for a fresh poll is enough of an indication.

The tragic part is that the BJP, which leads the coalition, is so demoralised that it is functioning like a lame-duck government. The allies are in tact and they have reiterated their support to the BJP. But the party has lost nerves. It, like the allies, realises that it is a long journey cover the distance up to the general election in 2003.

In such a frame of mind, it is no surprise that the government should look clueless and the BJP rudderless. What to do and how to retrieve the image are the problems, which the party and the coalition face. They present a pathetic picture. As an activity of sorts, a whipsaw campaign has already begun against Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee. "He has not recovered from defeat," a top BJP leader says. This may well be a justification for the hush-hush demand that Home Minister L K Advani or Defence Minister George Fernandes should replace him.

Such a talk has only increased the uncertainty. The bureaucrats, who have a sensitive antenna, have already lengthened the red tape. The economy has crumbled. Businessmen and industrialists have thinned out in the BJP camp like rats leaving a sinking ship. And queues outside Sonia Gandhi's residence and the Congress office are increasing beyond proportion.

Will there be a mid-term poll? This is the question asked by MPs in the lobby, journalists

in the press gallery and others outside parliament. Nobody knows the precise answer. However, one thing is clear. No Lok Sabha member wants a mid-term poll. And whatever the permutation and combination discussed, the bottom line is that there should be no fresh polls. Yet most of them have a nagging feeling that they cannot avoid them for long. The BJP anticipates the next election sometime after the budget session that begins in February.

All eyes have turned towards Sonia Gandhi. But she has not yet decided whether to pull down the government or assemble an alternative. There is no doubt she wants to pick up the pieces if and when the coalition breaks up. But how to initiate the process without Congress coming into the picture is the problem. Reportedly AIADMK chief Jayalalitha was sounded on withdrawing support to the coalition. But she wanted to know: "Then what?" She believes that Congress wants to use her, but not to pay the price.

It seems that Sonia Gandhi is less and less inclined to accept a non-Congress government for the rest of the Lok Sabha term. Her advisers have succeeded in convincing her that even the support to the Deve Gowda and the Inder Gujral governments was wrong. Had Congress not done so, the party would have emerged by this time supreme. She has begun to believe this theory. But this may well be part of tactics. If she wants the BJP, a party that she hates the most, to continue to head the government, why should she be expressing regrets over the two Janata Dal governments, which were ideologically near to Congress?

Sonia Gandhi's immediate attention is reportedly focussed on how to cut Mulayam Singh of the Samajwadi Party in UP and Laloo Prasad Yadav of the Rashtriya Janata Dal in Bihar, to size. She realises that without bagging UP and Bihar, which have 139 seats in the Lok Sabha, Congress cannot go very

far. In fact, Sonia is said to be elucidating the thesis that the country should move towards a two-party system, no one coming in between.

If it is so, she is mistaken. Some regional parties have come to stay because they draw their strength from grassroots. The success Congress has achieved in the four states is because there is no regional party in the area. Moreover, she should not forget that people have voted against the BJP, not for Congress, which is yet to attain popularity.

Congress should not, however, make much of the success. The party will begin to be on test now. Sonia Gandhi will be under examination. At present, she is like the blank screen that many people have projected their fondest image on. Let down by Vajpayee and the BJP, they are increasingly pinning their hopes on her and Congress. She is the most important person on the Indian scene because she has seized the initiative from others.

Still very little is known about her and her views. Where does she stand on foreign affairs, economic matters or social problems? That she is not parochial is clear. But when she is mentioned as the country's Prime Minister if Congress comes to power, there is need to find out her opinion on different subjects. So far, the nation is familiar with her as the traditionally headcovered Indian *nari* (woman). She is a tactician and speaks in general terms. But what is her approach to the country's burning problems, like Kashmir, Assam and the Northeast?

In an interview she has expressed her views on Centre-State relations. She is in favour of taking over the state governments, a step from which the Janata Dal and the BJP have refrained. Asked whether the Centre under Congress would take over any state government, she said it would be decided on "case by case" basis. That means she is not opposed to Article 356, which gives the Centre powers to dismiss an

elected state government. This reflects the same old absolutism of Congress.

As the Congress president, she has spanned differences in the party. It is now coherent and has persons of different ideas and persuasions, accepting what she says. Maharashtra leader Sharad Pawar or Rajasthan's popular figure, Rajesh Pilot, are no exceptions. She has also proved to be a shrewd observer of Indian politics. Sensing the need of bringing back Muslims, Dalits and the backward to the fold of Congress — they were once the backbone of the party — Sonia Gandhi has gone about wooing them methodically. She has also announced reservation for women and a better deal for the Dalits and the backward. Recently, she wrote to Ali Mian, a leading Muslim theologian, regretting the raid at his residence. He is the one who gave the *fatwa* that Muslims should withdraw their children from the schools, which make the singing of *Vande Mataram* and *Saraswati Vandana* compulsory.

It was former prime minister V P Singh who had enticed Muslims, backward and the like from Congress. After his exit they have been a non-BJP force, siding with secular and regional parties. Some have even strayed into the BJP. Congress is beginning to win them back by giving them a platform in the party, which was theirs at one time.

Of course, this has been at the expense of the third force, which appears to have been decimated. Still it presents an alternative to both Congress and the BJP that the nation requires. Tomorrow when Congress comes to power, the BJP will be the alternative. The non-performance of Congress may bring back the BJP with a vengeance. Then the latter will know no compromise, no accommodation. It will be a pure *Hindutva*. Not a good proposition for a democratic country, which takes pride in its pluralistic society.

BNP agents differ with leaders

PABNA, Dec 10: Opposition BNP leaders and MPs who stayed at different centres during the by-polls in Pabna-2 constituency today brought allegations of widespread irregularities against the ruling Awami League, reports UNB.

But several polling agents of the BNP candidate differed with their senior leaders and said the voting at their respective booths were held without any problem.

"Voters came spontaneously and exercised their rights without any obstruction," said Tulujan, a BNP polling agent at the Sujanagar Pilot High School centre.

Another BNP polling agent at the same centre, Fatema Khatun, echoed Tulujan and called the voting at the school as free, fair and impartial — the popular slogan of the Election Commission.

But two BNP stalwarts, former ministers Abdul Matin Chowdhury and Barrister Aminul Haq, who were outside the centre accused the ruling party supporters of adopting unfair means.

At Dhopakhola Coronation High School in Bera thana, two other BNP leaders — Amanullah Khan MP and Khairul Kabir Khokon — alleged that supporters of Awami League

have cast 400 to 500 false votes at the centre.

However, M A Razzak, a BNP polling agent at the centre, contradicted the duo, said: "There were only four or five false votes. Perhaps, you've mistakenly figured 400-500."

Immediately before the voting ended at 4 pm, BNP leader Barrister Rafiqul Islam Miah, standing outside the polling centre at Char Govindapur School, charged the government with adopting unfair means in the election.

But the version of Shamsunnahar, a BNP polling agent at the school, was similar to her counterpart Rawshan Ara that

there was no problem and voting at the centre took place in a fair manner.

While visiting a number of centres, this correspondent found no serious irregularities in the election held amidst unprecedented security measures. The number of false votes was very few and some of the fake voters were arrested.

However, some people who would hardly be 16 years old were also seen standing in queues to exercise the right to franchise. Akwat Hossain at Char Bhabanipur School was one of them. Two others, Kamruzzaman and Salam Sheikh, at Manikdir High School admitted that they were below 18.

Bring Madrassahmen to book

NGO leaders demand

By Staff Correspondent

Brahmanbaria for his 'negligence of duty and support to the fundamentalists'. It demanded his immediate removal and legal action against him, an ADAB press release said.

In another resolution the meeting urged the government to stop all grants and cancel enlistment of those madrassahs whose teachers and students were involved in the attacks. It also demanded legal action against the principals and teachers of those madrassahs and issuance of show cause notices on their governing bodies.

The meeting called upon the

government to ensure law and order in Brahmanbaria district and security to NGO workers there. Otherwise, poverty alleviation, rural development and on-going post flood rehabilitation programs taken up by NGOs will be affected, the meeting observed. It urged the home ministry to take steps in this regard.

NGO leaders Rokeya Kabir, Arma Goon, Siddique Rahman, Syed Nurul Alam, Omar Farook Chowdhury, Mohammad Kamal Uddin, Fazilatunnesa, Thomas Decosta, Advocate Khat-e-Khuda, Mousumi Das Purkaita and Minar Monsoor, among others, spoke at the meeting.

For the old woman it was a different experience. "This could be the last exercise of franchise in my life, but it is quite important for every conscious citizen to cast his or her vote in an election," she told waiting journalists.

"I hope whoever is elected, will work for the people of the constituency," said the centenarian woman who appeared to be in a jovial mood despite all the hassles she had to undergo to come to the centre.

Akhterjan, wife of one Manik Sardar of Bhabanipur village, said she was quite satisfied to have been able to cast her vote.

"I encountered no difficulty in casting my vote," she said.

Transport strike called off

Bangladesh Road Transport Workers' Federation (BRTWF) has called off its indefinite strike scheduled to begin today, reports UNB.

BRTWF withdrew the strike after a meeting with Communications Minister Anwar Hossain at his office yesterday.

Federation president M G Islam, general secretary Abdur Rashid, organising secretary Hasibul Hasan Labib and vice-president Yakub Ali, Bangladesh Truck Drivers' Strikers' Federation president Mohammad Ismail, joint secretary Karar Mahmudul Hasan and BRTA Chairman A N Hossain were present at the meeting.

Two security guards of city trading house murdered

By Staff Correspondent

Two security guards were killed allegedly by dacoits and Tk 4.22 lakh was taken away from a trading house in the city's Kawranbazar area yesterday.

Police and hospital sources identified the victims as Mohammad Ali, 28, and Zakir Hossain, 24. Ali hailed from Savar and Hossain from Raipura in Narsingdi district.

Police suspect that in the early hours of yesterday, a group of dacoits entered the building, stabbed the two guards to death and took away the money from the cash box of HRC company.

Employees of the company first saw the bodies lying in a pool of blood on the first floor when they came to office in the morning. Both the victims were residents of Monipurpara in Tejgaon thana.

A case has been lodged with Tejgaon police by the executive director of HRC company. Police arrested one Asad in this connection.



Yet another promise not kept

Memorial for the martyred intellectuals won't be ready until end of 1999

By Gobinda Bar

Construction of the Martyred Intellectuals' Memorial at the Rayerbazar *Baddhyaburni* (killing ground) is less than half way through now although it was to be completed by this month.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina had laid the foundation of the memorial on December 14 of 1996 and directed the authorities to complete it by December this year.

Engineers at the site told The Daily Star yesterday that the construction work will take

one year more. They claimed that the recent floods had delayed work but other sources alleged that the pace of construction work was very slow.

The memorial is being constructed in memory of the intellectuals who were killed by the Pakistani army at the fag end of the Liberation War. Their bodies were dumped there.

PWD Engineer Manoj Kumar Das who supervises the work said the main components of the monument will be completed by April 1999 and that the whole work will be finished

by December next year. Construction of the Tk 15 crore project began in January this year after completion of site development work earlier.

Architects Mohammad Jami Al Shafee and Fariduddin Ahmed said the memorial will comprise a 29-foot 'mourning pillar' and a 52-foot back wall. The complex will be covered with a banyan tree and others including Palash, Shimul and Krishnachura. There will also be seating arrangements and a place for a small gathering in front of the 'mourning pillar'.

Engineer Saman Ali of Ruyayan Prokoushali, the construction firm building the memorial, said at least 200 workers were working there but the work was being hampered due to low voltage of electricity.

"We have to use generators," he said.

The engineers also said that roads leading to the *Baddhyaburni* are in bad shape and will have to be developed to make access to the memorial more easy and comfortable for visitors.

Communists leave Koirala in the cold

KATHMANDU, Dec 10: Nepal's Communist Party quit the ruling coalition today, depriving Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala of a parliament majority, reports AP.

The fate of Koirala's Nepali Congress government would be known tomorrow. It was not clear if the government would have to resign because the opposition appeared too divided to form its own majority to replace it.

All 13 cabinet members of the Communist Party of Nepal (Marxist-Leninist) gave in their resignations to Koirala at his official residence, party officials said. The communists had joined the government in August.

Koirala refused to accept the

communists' demand that the government sack the country's police chief, include at least five Communist Party members in the cabinet and appoint their supporters to head district administrations in some key areas.

But their main difference has been setting a date for the next general election. Koirala wants an early election in April 1999 while the Communist group wanted balloting in November next year as scheduled.

"The Nepali Congress showed no political honesty. We decided to withdraw from government after it showed no interest to fulfill our demands," Central Committee Member Kiran Gurung told reporters.

At Kadoa Primary School centre, some half a dozen kids, aged 12 to 16, were seen detained by police. According to their confession made before a group of journalists, they tried to cast false votes in favour of Awami League, Bangladesh Nationalist Party and Jatiya Party candidates. If their claims are true, all the minors were enticed by their 'political elder brothers'.

seemed to be liberal and the boy managed to flee in no time.

The Daily Star correspondents happened to meet him outside the centre. "I cast a false vote," Alam admitted following queries. "I was advised to do it by a Bara Bhai of the ruling party." Eventually he seemed to be repentant.

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