

The Daily Star

on Friday

YOUR 20-PAGE WEEKEND PAPER

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Mahfuz Anam: Politics of polarisation comes full circle

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Muhammad Yunus calls for a national convention to settle critical national issues. Interviewed by Sabir Mustata



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Shamsur Rahman talks about his childhood, his accidental journey into poetry, his first published poem of 1949, his biggest blunder and his hopes. By Sabir Mustafa and Navine Murshid. Ziaul Karim searches Alauddin Al-Azad's soul



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Renewal of life
As the Gregorian new year dawns, the people of Bangladesh are renewing their lives after the devastation wrought by the flood of the year gone by. Here, a farmer is seen working in his plantation, to reclaim his life and begin his journey anew.

—Star Photo: A K M Mohsin

Former foes searching for common ground

Khaleda-Ershad meeting on the cards despite uncertainty over poll strategy

By Nazmul Ashraf

The three major opposition parties do not see a formal alliance among themselves in immediate future, but the latest developments in Jatiya Party have added new dimensions to their plans.

A key player in the process has even suggested an electoral alliance among the three to face the next general election.

For the past few days, BNP, Jatiya Party and Jamaat-e-Islami have been in touch with one another, discussing a possible common agenda.

While they agree on such common goals as a mid-term election, there are still issues that remain to be sorted out. For instance, they do not agree on how to go about the local government elections.

BNP, according to indications so far, is willing to fight the four mayoral elections under the Awami League administration, but has reservations about the upazila polls under a

party government.

On the other hand, Jatiya Party wants all local elections under caretaker administration. Jamaat and other smaller groups in the Seven-Party Alliance support the BNP view on the issue.

"An immediate opposition coalition may not be the reality now but parleys are on to find out a formula on the local electoral battle," said a key player in the recent opposition developments.

"Yet, negotiation is also taking place to form an electoral alliance of these three leading opposition parties before the next general elections," said Kazi Zafar Ahmed, who returned to the mainstream JP only three days ago.

The JP leader is acting as a go-between in negotiations with BNP.

"If so happens," said Kazi Zafar, "there will be a liaison committee to steer opposition

agitation leading to the next general elections.

As an immediate result, according to insiders, the current polarisation may produce three separate groups — BNP and its small allies, JP and Jamaat-e-Islami. As regards already agreed common agenda, these three are expected to move ahead simultaneously on the streets.

Mid-term election aside, a new-look Election Commission is another common target, which they say is necessary to "ensure fairness in all future elections."

Is it possible that the three will form an alliance?

The now-defunct Zafar-led JP was part of the Seven-party combine, of which Jamaat is also a partner. But BNP is still undecided whether to welcome the stronger JP into the alliance fold.

"BNP has not yet decided on JP. But we welcome any party,

with similar objectives, to join our alliance. As the JP (chief H. M. Ershad) has promised to strengthen the current anti-government movement by participating in it simultaneously, so it can contribute to our movement," said Abdus Salam Talukdar, the BNP representative in the alliance liaison committee.

A BNP standing committee member, Talukdar said it was also a matter to be decided by the united JP itself.

With the departure of the JP faction from the Seven-Party alliance, he added, six other parties were now supposed to operate together.

Other BNP leaders are talking to Talukdar line.

"If JP goes by its words about anti-government agitation, then things will take its natural course. The party will have to find allies in the mainstream opposition parties to achieve the common goal of a mid-term

election," said Haris Choudhury, a BNP joint secretary general.

"In that case, Ershad will have to accept the leadership of Khaleda Zia, the Leader of the Opposition in Parliament," he said.

Meanwhile, according to JP leaders, the possibility of a Khaleda-Ershad meeting is also being examined. At least two close aides of Ershad see bright chances for such an event.

"Our leader has already made an indication to this end. And his indication is definitely based on some groundwork. Things are moving and efforts are on to bring the two leaders across the table," said one of them, Mainuddin Bhuiyan.

"Such a meeting may take place at home or abroad at a convenient time and place," said another aide of the former General.

Dock hands return to work today

From Staff Correspondent CHITTAGONG, Dec 31: Dock labourers at Chittagong Port declined to attend gang booking from this evening protesting postponement of the implementation of incentive scheme.

Later, after a meeting with the port authorities, they agreed to resume their activities from tomorrow morning, port sources said.

Authorities today postponed the implementation of incentive scheme for 15 days to hold negotiation with port users who opposed the scheme and threatened to go for work stoppage from tonight.

But the port users, including master stevedores in line with the decision of the authorities taken at a meeting at port office, postponed their work stoppage programme.

Earlier, the dock labourers demanded implementation of the incentive scheme from tomorrow and turned down the decision of postponement of it for 15 days.

As a result, the activities at the country's major maritime port came to a halt.

On December 25, an agreement was signed between the government and the leaders of dock workers on introduction of an incentive scheme.

Taxpayers' dollars go down diplomatic drain

Audit unmasks corruption in overseas missions

By Toufique Imrose Khalidi and Gobinda Bar

Diplomats are a different breed. They are, supposedly, apt at doing things discreetly. But auditors can go deeper.

An audit into their ways of spending taxpayers' money has detected huge sums gone down the drain. Illegally or wrongly spent, the figures together run into crores of takas.

More important, they have been found to have gone way beyond one can expect of a discrete community such as the diplomats are perceived to be.

The findings are startling in some cases and involve persons of high repute. Those at fault include ambassadors, high commissioners, ministers, counsellors and other officers.

For instance, their dependants did not go to a particular school the state paid the high fees for. A high commissioner is not entitled to his adopted daughter's education expenses, but as much as Tk seven lakh went from the exchequer.

An ambassador is not authorised to spend more than a certain amount but he spent much more than that.

Personal international calls are not paid for by the state, but there were cases detected.

All Bangladesh embassy staff — local recruits aside — are entitled to medical expenses, whatever is the cost. But there are rules to regulate the spending. In several instances, the

diplomats or their staff are found to have bent the system.

The Daily Star has obtained the report prepared by the office of the Comptroller and Auditor General which details at least 103 incidents of "serious financial irregularities" involving officers in 20 diplomatic missions. In all, there are 58 missions of different categories.

The report for 1995-96, released in July this year, deals only with the audited accounts of the financial years taken into account by the auditors.

"Therefore, the auditors' report and facts unveiled are only representative in character and do not constitute a complete picture of the transactions and the state of affairs," the report says.

The 20 missions are: London, Washington, Riyadh, Kuwait, Kathmandu, Nairobi, Hong Kong, Pretoria, Baghdad, Ottawa, Singapore, Bangkok, Brasilia, Manila, Bonn, Kuala Lumpur, Manchester, Rabat, Bucharest and Moscow.

Asked, the foreign secretary said the "misused" and "irregularly spent" money is recoverable.

"Whenever any irregularity is alleged, the individual concerned is asked to explain the matter. If the explanation is not satisfactory, he is asked to pay back the money involved." Secretary Mustafizur Rahman told

the Daily Star.

"If this process fails, the money is recovered from pension as a regular practice in this regard," he added.

The special audit report, submitted to President Shahabuddin Ahmed and placed before Parliament last month, also refers to unresolved audit objections since 1971-72.

The report says the authorities have failed to take "proper action" on as many as 4465 objections with different missions from 1971-72 to 1995-96. The amount of money involved is Tk 73.08 crore.

The CAG's office says the findings were conveyed to the concerned missions and the foreign secretary. But there has not been any response after repeated attempts by the office to draw attention of the missions and the top administrator to the irregularities.

Who did what

In London, one of Bangladesh's largest missions abroad, there have been irregularities galore.

An audit of the mission's accounts between 1987 and 1991 shows that former minister Golan Kader spent 2083 pound sterling and an accountant Mazharul Islam 3901 pounds illegally for acquisition of their wards.

High Commissioner Dr AFM

Yousuf (BNP leader) spent as much as Tk 23 lakh from the mission fund for his daughter's and his own treatment violating rules between July 1995 to June 1996.

The high commissioner overdrawn around Tk 9.80 lakh as his foreign allowance, audit of the mission's account from 1993 to 96 revealed.

He also received extra 2052 pounds as foreign allowance and for buying various materials during July 1991-June 1993 violating rules, the report said.

During July 1993-June 1995, Dr Yousuf "irregularly" spent Tk 7.76 lakh from the mission fund to buy "machinery and furniture" without approval from the Foreign Ministry.

Dr AFM Yousuf illegally drew an extra amount of Tk 13,000 as hotel charges during trips to different places between July 1993 and June 1995. He also paid another Tk 13,000 during the period for purchasing bulbs for his residence and for paying hotel bills though he had a home. In all these cases, government rules were violated, the report said.

He used extra telephones at his office and residence causing a loss of around Tk 6.5 lakh, according to audits of the mission's accounts from July 1993 to June 1996.

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Health chiefs caught stealing Tk 20 cr

By Naimul Haq

The Parliamentary Standing Committee on Health Ministry has detected massive corruption in procurement by six civil surgeons who are alleged to have misappropriated over Tk 20 crore in the last financial year.

They were in charge of buying medical equipment, furniture and fittings for Sadar hospitals and thana health complexes.

Price of a 25-taka 60-watt ordinary bulb was shown at Tk 17,000, a 3,000-taka steel rack at Tk 24,000 and that of a two-

taka blood testing slide at Tk 13.

These are some of the examples of glaring irregularities done in the purchase of equipment for hospitals in Kurigram, Lalmonirhat, Gaibandha, Naogaon, Chapainawabganj and Munshiganj districts, according to a committee report.

In some cases, equipment and furniture were purchased without any requisition from the thana health complexes concerned and vouchers did not tally with work orders in some others.

The report said that the civil

surgeons of the six districts gave the work orders, and that the irregularities were done by them in connivance with the suppliers and some officials of the ministries of health and finance.

Most surprisingly, funds were released from the finance ministry without delay. In many cases, funds were disbursed on the day bills were submitted. A deputy secretary and a senior assistant secretary of the health ministry and an assistant secretary of the finance ministry were involved

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Greetings

The Daily Star wishes its valued readers, well-wishers, patrons and advertisers a Happy New Year

KSA won't allow US to hit Iraq from its territory

RIYADH, Dec 31: Saudi Arabia has reiterated its public stand that it will not allow the United States to use its territory to launch military strikes against Iraq, reports Reuters.

The Kingdom, a key US regional ally, also urged Iraq to abide by United Nations Security Council resolutions over its 1990 invasion of Kuwait.

The comments, carried by the official Saudi Press Agency (SPA), were made by Second Deputy Prime Minister and Defence Minister Prince Sultan yesterday.

"Asked if in the future the Kingdom will allow the use of its territory by the United States to hit Iraq, he said first

we were not asked and (anyway) we will not agree," SPA said.

"If there is a misunderstanding we hope our brothers in Iraq will understand what their interest is and we hope our friends (an apparent reference to Saudi's western allies) will also look at the interest of Iraq," SPA quoted Prince Sultan as saying.

"We all call for protecting the Iraqi people, but we call on Iraq's leaders to implement Security Council resolutions to serve their country as well as the Arab countries."

Prince Sultan said "the appropriate solution to the current problem between America and Iraq is for everybody to go back to the United Nations charter," SPA said.

The United States has defence accords with Saudi Arabia and its Gulf Arab neighbours, which guarantee it access.

For more rice, experts suggest export

By Rafiq Hasan

It may sound unrealistic, but rice export from Bangladesh can help it attain food autarky and even bring an era of food surpluses.

Achieving self-sufficiency in food production is not a prerequisite for rice export. Rather, it would help increase production and make the country a food surplus one, a recent study by an international organisation observed.

Bangladesh suffered chronic food shortage over decades but the study, examining experiences of several countries, viewed that rice export from the country is not only possible but also necessary.

"The country which in the past supplied finest rice to the Mughal emperors and to the continent of Australia, needs no assurance that it can produce both quality and quantity," the study said.

Conducted by the International Food Policy Research Institute, the study examined the experiences of China, India, Thailand and Vietnam that faced food shortage for decades and have now overcome the problem.

"Production in Vietnam increased with increase of export." Starting in 1988, Viet-

nam has rapidly become the second largest rice exporter in the world. In recent years, her export figures are: 2.2 million MT (metric tons) in 1994, 2.3 million MT in 1995, 3.04 million MT in 1996 and 4 million MT in 1998.

"Whereas Bangladesh with the same population density per hectare agricultural land and same structure of farming is yet to export rice on significant scale," the study noted.

The United States Agency for International Development financed the study titled "Food Management and Research Support Project". The study report written by Mahfoozur Rahman will be submitted to the government very soon.

According to statistics provided by USAID, rice production in Bangladesh increased to around 27.63 million MT during the year 1997 from 25.25 million MT in 1995.

Rice export, increase in food production and stabilisation of food prices are inter-related issues. When a country exports surplus rice, prices can not fall below production cost, which keep the growers continue production the following seasons, the study pointed out.

Chinigura, kalizira, kataribhog and dadkhani rice produced in Bangladesh belong to special aromatic variety having tremendous demand in the international market because of their quality. Chinigura is produced in Mymensingh, Dhaka, Kalizira in Sherpur, Mymensingh; dadkhani in Natore, Rajshahi and kataribhog in Dinajpur.

These varieties are grown only in aman season. Their production totalled three lakh MT in 1996, an estimate by Bangladesh Rice Research Institute said.

Though the average yield of these varieties is 1 to 1.50 MT per hectare against the average national production of 2.7 MT, production of these is still lucrative for the farmers because of high price.

These varieties are better than basmati of Pakistan and India and Jasmine of Thailand which dominate the international rice market. The price of Bangladeshi aromatic rice in world market is also much higher than that of basmati.

Pakistani basmati prices range between 600 to 800 dollars per MT while that of Bangladeshi aromatic rice is as high as 950 dollars per MT.

Major buyers of aromatic rice are China, Middle East and EU countries and the United States.

Bangladesh now exports to US only 200 MT of this variety annually. It has demand for 60,000 MT in UK and US markets, the study said.

The country also produces High Yielding Variety (HYV) 'parboiled' rice that is considered a low priced, low grade product. But it is highly priced in many African countries and in Sri Lanka, the Maldives and places where communities of Indian origin live.

The study said that Bangladesh's HYV boro varieties have a market of one MT ready because African buyers import the only parboiled coarse rice considering the price. "Bangladesh's aman HYV varieties will also find ready market if efforts are made."

Contradicting the popular concept that rice export would threaten the country's food security, the study stressed "it would rather enhance the food security."

"If there is a national will like Vietnam now and China earlier, rice export will bring an era of food surpluses," it said.

Announcements

Due to space constraints, the regular Entertainment and TV Guide shortened. Other sections have also been repaginated, with international news going to page 8, national news to pages 8 and 11 and People on page 10. Any inconvenience to readers is regretted.

Today's The Daily Star on Friday introduces a new page on young entrepreneurs and professionals titled YEP Talk on page 20. This will be a regular feature of The Daily Star on Friday, focusing on success, problems and prospects of young entrepreneurs and professionals in Bangladesh.

Prayer Timings

January 1		
	Azan	Jamaat
Fajr	5-15	5-20
Zohr	12-45	1-15
Asr	4-00	4-15
Maghrib	5-23	5-27
Esha	7-00	7-15

Source: Islamic Foundation

Sehri, Iftar timings

Ramadan	Jan	Sehri	Iftar
12	1	-	5-27
13	2	5-17	5-27
14	3	5-17	5-28

Maggi বাটপট

রোজগাতে ছোটরা খুশি চটপট

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