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Cairn gets the nod for sixth Sangu well

By Sharier Khan

Petrobangla has allowed British oil company Cairn to drill a sixth well in the offshore Sangu gas field to optimise gas production there, sources said.

The country is currently consuming 850 mcmcf (million cubic feet per day) gas. Of this, Sangu field is supplying around 100 mcmcf and Petrobangla is paying for it in foreign currency as per a contract.

Bangladesh's power generation and fertiliser production almost entirely depend on gas supply and the demand for gas will increase by a few hundred million cubic feet each year.

Cairn had drilled five wells in Sangu valley before starting gas supply to the national grid from mid '98. It had a target and commitment to supply 160 mcmcf gas from April last year, producing 30 to 35 mcmcf gas from each of the five wells.

But one of these five wells turned out to be dry and some technical flaws developed in the system in the automated gas field. As a result, Cairn had to start with supplying 60-mcmcf gas from June 8 last year.

Since then the British company had been insisting on supplying 160 mcmcf gas by augmenting production from each of the four wells. But Petrobangla rejected the idea of augmenting the gas production up to 40 mcmcf from each well.

Petrobangla said that for long term benefit, Cairn should not extract more than 30-mcmcf gas from each well. It maintained that Cairn could, at best, supply 120 mcmcf gas from the existing four wells.

For Cairn, extracting and selling more gas means quick returns from its investment. Therefore, it proposed to drill a sixth well at a cost of 8 million US dollars in Sangu to augment the supply.

Petrobangla approved the proposal and fixed a budget of 6 million dollars in the light of

declining cost of drilling. Earlier, Cairn had manipulated the approved budget for development of Sangu field. Although it had started developing the field with an approved budget of 178 million dollars, it ended up by submitting a bill of 264 million dollars in late 1997. The expenditure is recoverable from gas sales.

But Petrobangla, which is the owner and watchdog of Sangu field, refused to approve Cairn's enhanced budget. It also detected "reckless expenditure and irregularities" in Cairn's budget.

Petrobangla had also detected Cairn's "inefficiency" in drilling two more exploratory wells in Sonadia and Haida, both abandoned without any positive result.

Ever since, Petrobangla is scrutinising Cairn's expenditure, new work programmes and other activities.

Gas supply from the Sangu is also erratic, sources said. Since June last, supply from the field was interrupted at least 16 times, mainly due to technical flaws.

The British company also failed to fulfil the minimum work commitment to drill at least one more exploratory well in the Second Phase of exploration in Block 16 (which includes Sangu). Last month, Cairn was asked by Petrobangla to relinquish 25 per cent area of Block 16 as per contract.

The sixth well in Sangu, if turns out to be a success, would put Cairn in a better position in terms of getting returns from its investment, the sources added.

At the same time, it would help Petrobangla "stay even" with the ever-growing demand for gas.

This year, Bakhrabad, one of the major gas fields owned by Petrobangla, would go dry. Bakhrabad was said to have a reserve of 1.5 trillion cubic feet of recoverable gas. But due to bad design in development of wells and over-extraction in

short time, sand and water are coming out along with gas for the last two years.

Now, after extracting only around 45 per cent of the reserve, the authorities are counting the days of this gas field. Bakhrabad was supplying 90-mcmcf gas last year but now it is supplying around 60 mcmcf. Petrobangla must arrange fresh gas supply to meet the growing demand.

In addition to Sangu, Petrobangla is expected to buy from next month 100 mcmcf gas from Jalalabad Gas Systems, now being developed by Occidental.

School admission no child's play in Dhaka

By Mir A Zaman

The little boy tried desperately to keep pace with his mother. He stumbled on and off. The mother was apparently oblivious of her son's ordeal. She just held his hands and dragged him along. She had a deadline to meet. She must submit her son's application for admission before two in the afternoon. It was the last date.

"This is the fourth school I have submitted application for my son's admission," said the mother, probably in her early thirties, visibly relieved for being able to meet the deadline.

The first leg of the battle was won. The next step is getting the little boy ready for his war — the admission test.

The young warrior, if not ignorant of, what was going around. He wanted to go home.

Thursday (January 7) was the last date for submission of application for admission into 24 public schools in the capital. Distribution of application forms began on the second day of New Year. The admission tests will be held on 9, 10 and 11, at eight schools each day. Different test schedule has had the parents collecting as many application forms as possible for their children. The result was mad rush at the counters, sending signals there may be a dearth of public schools in the capital. Many disagree, though.

One student is submitting application for admission in two or three schools. It results in a rush at the counters and naturally people feel there is a dearth of schools in the capital," said M Abdus Sobhan, headmaster of Dhaka Government Laboratory School. "There are many public schools in the city but the parents throng at a handful which are traditionally rated among the top."

His school, which has over the years claimed the top slots

in the Secondary School Certificate (SSC) examinations, is definitely the best and therefore, attracts a huge number of application.

"For 240 seats on offer in Class I, we have already received more than 2,100 applications," said Sobhan. He planned sitting arrangement for the admission test with his staff.

A Ministry of Education directive ensures a 10 per cent quota in Class VI for the students, who have graduated from different public primary schools. The quota shields students from public in fight for a seat at the high schools against their private school counterparts. As per the directive, there are 24 seats in Class VI at Government Laboratory School.

"There have been about 250 applications so far for the 24 seats we have," said Sobhan, less than an hour inside the scheduled deadline for accepting applications.

At the Motijheel Government Boys' High School, there prevailed a similar scenario. Fifty seats in Class I, 100 in Class VI, fifteen in Class VII and ten in Class IX are there to be filled and more than 500 were distributed on the very first day.

Azimpur Government Girls' School, Dhanmondi Boys' High School, Motijheel Government Girls' High School experienced similar rush from day one.

The rat race for a seat in a good public school led to brisk business for people offering "admission guide" for the aspirants. Spread on a table at the main entrance of almost every school, in different colours and in different names, there were the guides.

"These guides are for Government Laboratory School only," cried out the young man to attract the desperate, and thus gullible, parents. The guides are compilations of



All this for me? A child looks bewildered as parents collect forms for his admission at a Dhaka school

Star Photo: Zahedul I Khan

Meantime, the private schools have had their own admission schedules going. When the public schools were distributing application forms, some private schools like Engli-

neering University School had already held admission test. For 50 seats in Class I, the school received 505 applications. Among them were 40 kids, who had graduated from the nursery section. As they were to be given preference, many parents felt their children had only taken part in a futile practice.

The private school that attracted the highest number of applicants is probably Willes Little Flower High School. They have started distribution of application forms from December 24. The forms will be scrutinised on January 8 and the admission test will be held two days later.

Residential Model High School and Udayan School have also had admission tests. There, too, the ratio between the number of applicants and the seats on offer hovered above seven to one.

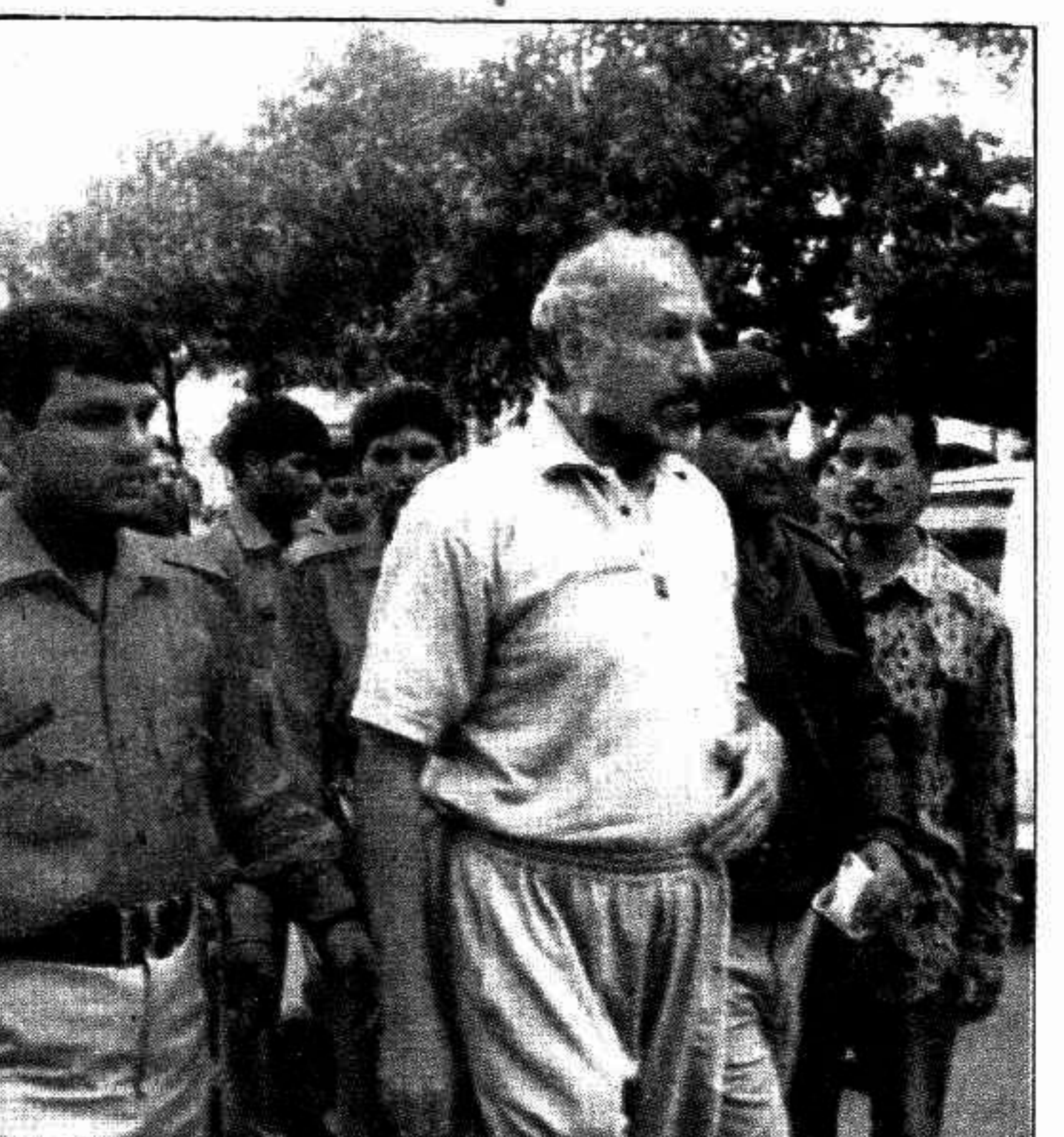
Public schools, the 'better' ones like Dhaka Government Laboratory and Motijheel Government High, are atop the parents' preference list. The reason is simple: they offer good schooling for less expense.

Expense for education in the government schools is far less than that in the private schools," said one teacher at the Government Laboratory School.

However, when their children fail to get admission to the public schools, especially the good ones, parents look for alternatives — from good private schools to English-medium kindergartens. The more options are eliminated from the upper half of their list of preference, the more inflated the budget for their children's education gets.

With the Eid-ul-Fitr just round the corner, the best gift the parents this year can envisage for their kids, and of course themselves, is admission to a good school. January is indeed the cruellest month of the year for parents.

Police to probe movie mogul



Facing the music Business tycoon and movie mogul Aziz Mohammad Bhai being taken to court by police yesterday — Star photo

Aziz Mohammad Bhai, an industrialist and film producer has been placed on a two-day remand for interrogation, reports UNB.

As defence counsel prayed for bail when he was produced before the CMM's court yesterday afternoon, the Court Inspector stood in opposition bringing the serious charges against the accused.

"There are allegations that Aziz Mohammad Bhai is involved in film actor Sohail Chowdhury murder, using beautiful women in smuggling and supply of secret government information and documents abroad," Inspector Nakib Zaman said.

Police prayed for a 10-day remand, but the magistrate granted two days. Aziz Bhai was arrested Wednesday evening from Gulshan area by Special Branch of police. He was taken to the court at 3.45 pm.

At one stage, he shook hands with his lawyer Barrister K S Nabi who opposed the remand prayer saying that all the allegations brought against his client are fictitious.

K S Nabi, the former Attorney-General, submitted that there were no specific charges against Aziz Bhai and no provision of police remand in the CrPC. "Police sought remand only to harass him," he said.

DU sex abuse report to be submitted Jan 12

By DU Correspondent

The probe committee report on alleged sexual harassment of a female student by a teacher of International Relations (IR) department of Dhaka University will be submitted before the Syndicate on January 12.

The DU Faribesh Parishad was informed of this at a meeting yesterday with Rice-Chancellor Prof. AK Azad Chowdhury in the chair.

Different student organisations reached a consensus at the meeting on solving the current crisis concerning the sex scandal on the campus.

The meeting also discussed a six-point demand placed by Students' Protesting Sexual Harassment (SPSH) and Bangladesh Chhatra Federation (BCF) and a four-point demand by Ganatantrik Chhatra Oikya (GCO).

It stressed the need for a code of conduct to prevent sexual harassment at DU and a cell to receive complaints regarding sexual offences.

The DU authorities will place the demands of the student bodies before the Senate and the Syndicate, a meeting source said.

Meanwhile, the left-leaning GCO and BCF brought out separate processions on the campus yesterday demanding immediate publication of the probe committee report.

The committee was formed on December 1 to investigate the allegation with a female student of Public Administration department on November 30 that Prof. Shahiduzzaman of IR sexually harassed her in his room on November 29.

The ruling party-backed Bangladesh Chhatra League and pro-BNP Jatiyatabadi Chhatra Dal urged the authorities to modify the existing proctorial rules for a education-friendly campus.

The meeting was attended by provosts, proctor, assistant proctors apart from the student bodies.

IRRI man sounds rice alert

By Rafiq Hasan and Reaz Ahmad

Bangladesh needs to watch out for belated fallout of the recent floods although it is doing well in recouping the immediate crop loss due to the prolonged drought, an international rice expert has said.

Dr Mahabub Hossain, Head of Social Science Division of the Manila-based International Rice Research Institute (IRRI), said the stopgap period in between the aman season that saw the deluge damaging crops and the next harvesting season is the most crucial period for Bangladesh.

"The impact of production shortfall during the last aman harvest might be felt till April this year," Hossain said while talking to The Daily Star on Tuesday at BIDS Bhaban in the city. He was here on an official visit.

"We cannot say that the crisis will have to remain alert about any sudden development in food supply for another three to four months," said Hossain who was a director general of Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies.

He said food crisis was not felt much during the last October-December period due to previous season's bumper production of boro and wheat.

However, crop damage could be minimised to a certain extent as cultivation of traditional aman on flood-prone low-lying land had been reduced substantially over the years.

"Low-lying aman hectareage has been reduced to 0.8 million from two million. Instead, those lands are used now more for lucrative HYV boro and rabi crops," he explained.

There are some areas which still remained underdeveloped because of land pattern. The specific areas where HYV (High Yielding Varieties) did not see substantial progress due to different land pattern are the low-lying haors in Sylhet, Fardipur and Tangail districts.

On the other hand, Hossain said, the farmlands in Barisal, Patuakhali and Khulna will never be suitable for HYV due to salinity in waters.

Bangladesh should not have a deficit in rice production with the current infrastructure in

agriculture sector, he noted.

Hossain mentioned that almost 60 per cent of agricultural lands in the country have come under irrigation, 80 per cent of which are used for rice production. And more than 60 per cent of the lands have already adopted HYV. So total production of paddy can be around 34 million tonnes if there are no natural calamities like flood and draught.

Low price was another factor for which rice production in the country did not increase.

Instead of maintaining a balanced price, successive governments have always tried to keep rice price within the reach of the urban middle class and the rural poor, those who matter much in general elections. That's why rice price in the country has often remained below the production cost, the rice expert said.

The government policy did not back the producers. "It never considered the interest of the growers."

If the growers do not get logical price for their product, why should they cultivate it the fol-

lowing season?" he asked.

The overall rice price did not increase compared that of other products. But the cost of labour increased substantially.

Rice consumption is very much related with economic condition of the people. "The government needs to work out certain mechanism to strike a balance between rice price and production cost," Hossain suggested.

He felt that the country should go for export to increase rice production side by side with taking up a number of quality improvement measures.

The measures include a balanced price in the domestic market and development of rice quality by modernising, processing and packaging system.

"Otherwise we would not be able to compete with other exporting countries like Vietnam and Thailand," he said.

Bangladesh should not depend on Indian rice market because that can only solve short-term problems. For a durable food security, the country should strive for self-sufficiency, stressed the expert.

Soil test for bridge

By Staff Correspondent

The Roads and Highways Department has taken up steps to examine sub-soil layer near the sunken pillar of the Dhaleshwari Bridge-1 on Dhaka-Mawa road to determine the cause of settlement and possible tilt of the bridge, chief engineer of the RHD said.

The steps followed suggestions from local and foreign construction consultants who visited the site, chief engineer Abdul Wadud said.

Experts will now collect samples of sub-soil layer around the sunken pillar and send those for laboratory tests.

"After getting the test report, we will be able to know whether the fault lies with structural design, pile design, pile driving with final stage of load distribution," he added.

Traffic movement on the road was threatened as a pillar of the bridge, some 17 km off the city, sank by six inches on Saturday.

The RHD has not yet taken any action in this regard against the construction firm concerned, Al-Amin Construction. But if it is found that the settlement took place due to construction fault, action will be taken against the firm, Wadud said.

Experts from BUET, Japan Overseas Corporation (JOC) and another foreign firm have initially identified three possible causes for the settlement. There might be huge scouring during the recent floods, wrong soil report leading to wrong pile design or fault in pile drive, Wadud quoted them as saying.

"The level of settlement is static now, we are closely monitoring it," he said.

To reduce traffic load on the bridge, especially during the forthcoming Eid, ferry service will also be arranged.

The bridge built from domestic resources at an estimated cost of Tk 27 crore was inaugurated by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina on October 23, 1997.

Armed police taken off ZIA

By Special Correspondent

Members of the Armed Battalion Police (ABPN) who were on duty at the Zia International Airport (ZIA) were withdrawn and replaced with a new batch yesterday for alleged negligence of duty on Saturday, APBN sources said.

Departmental proceedings were initiated against some of them, the sources said.

The action followed the death of a young Bangladeshi stowaway in the wheel carriage of a British Airways plane which took off from the ZIA on Saturday after an overnight halt due to some mechanical problem. The body was found in the wheel carriage when the London-bound plane landed at Delhi.

The sources said the measures were taken after the Civil Aviation Authority of Bangladesh (CAAB) wrote to the APBN to take necessary action against its personnel for alleged negligence in guarding the plane. CAAB sources claimed that some of the police personnel were absent from duty and alleged that there had been some lapses by them in guarding the airport perimeter also.

The two-unit Gas Turbine Power Development Board (PDB) and Aiston Gas Turbine company of France signed an agreement here yesterday for building the twin plant.

PDB Secretary M Monwar Hossain and General Sales Manager of the French firm Hugues Basia initialled the contract on their respective sides.

The two-unit Gas Turbine Power plant with a capacity of 30 MW each will be set up at the site of the 96-MW oil power plant.

PDB Chairman Nuruddin Mahmud Kamal, members of the board and higher officials were also present in the de-signing ceremony.

The PDB Chairman said work on the project would begin soon after down payment is made early next week and complete within 15 months.

New power plant to be set up at Shahjibazar

A new 60-MW power plant will be set up at Shahjibazar in Hobiganj district at a cost of Tk 108 crore from the exchequer, reports UNB.

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EC free to perform : PM

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has said her government ensured complete independence of the Election Commission and assured that all upcoming local elections would be free and impartial, reports UNB.

"The Election Commission is functioning with full freedom and the people in the past had cast their votes in union council polls and all by-elections in a free and fair manner under my government," she told an assembly of lawyers on the Dhaka District Court premises yesterday morning after inaugurating the Dhaka Metropolitan Sessions Court.

The Prime Minister's remarks came on the heels of a 30-day ultimatum issued by the opposition parties on Wednesday for the government to meet their 4-point demand that includes resignation of the Chief Election Commissioner and restructuring of the Election Commission for fair polls.

"As we have trust in the people and ballot, so also the people have confidence in us, we have ensured that the Election Commission perform its jobs neutrally and independently," she categorically said.

To substantiate her claim Sheikh Hasina said the present Election Commission had requested her not to take part in electioneering for the parliamentary by-elections, and she complied.

"It is rather in the past that such freedom had been denied and the previous Election Commission could not function freely."

She said the previous government declared the election results through "media coup" by misusing radio and television before the results were announced by the Election Commission.

Minister to talk incentive row with dock workers today

Turning to the forthcoming local government-body elections, the Prime Minister said her government believes in decentralisation of the administration to ensure people's participation in development work at grassroots level.

She asserted that the coming municipal, city corporation and upazila elections would be free and impartial as in the union council elections.

In an oblique reference to the opposition's planned agitation, Hasina said political stability is essential for healthy economic growth and steady development. She sought cooperation from all in running the country smoothly.

The invitation cards for the heads of government and state of D-8 (Development Eight) countries to attend the second summit of the group scheduled to be held in Dhaka on March 1 and 2, Foreign Office sources said, reports BSS.

The invitation cards for the leaders of the member countries were despatched through their diplomatic missions here, the sources added.

The D-8 came into being in June 1997 after leaders of Bangladesh, Iran, Indonesia, Egypt, Malaysia, Nigeria, Pakistan and Turkey met in Istanbul for greater trade and economic relations among the members.

The invitation to the Nigerian head of state will be sent via the African country's New Delhi mission or other means.

Foreign Office sources said all countries have agreed to attend the summit.

Meanwhile, preparations for the summit are going on in full swing.

Minister to talk incentive row with dock workers today

The Chittagong Port Authority (CPA) earlier had failed to introduce the scheme from January 1 in the face of strong opposition from dock workers and port-users' forums who threatened work abstention.

State Minister for Shipping Mofazzal Hossain Chowdhury Maya will arrive in the port city tomorrow and talk to all sides to facilitate introduction of the scheme from January 16, officials said.

He will meet separately with port-users' forum and dockworkers' groups to reach a consensus on the scheme, they said.

The incentive package contains maximum 25 per cent pay rise for some 25,000 port workers. But the port-users' forum opposed to it and prompted dock workers to stop work from December 30 night. Later the authority postponed the scheme for 15 days to avert the deadlock.

Meanwhile, Jatiyatabadi Sramik Dal and Dock Jati Sramik Party today demanded introduction of the scheme from January 15. The two port workers' groups, backed by two major opposition political parties, said they would go for movement if the authority failed to take a "positive decision" by tomorrow.