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AIDS-tainted blood in transfusions

Three former French ministers including PM stand trial

PARIS, Feb 9: Former Prime Minister Laurent Fabius appeared before a French court today on the opening day of the trial of three ex-ministers linked to a scandal involving the use of AIDS-tainted blood in transfusions, reports AP.

The trial of Fabius, former Health Minister Edmond Herve and former Social Affairs Minister Georgina Dufoix culminates the worst public health scandal in modern day France. But it ran into hitches moments after getting underway, with numerous people who have been charged in a related case refusing to come forward as witnesses.

The three defendants sat studiously at small tables before the Court of Justice of the Republic, convening in a austere makeshift courtroom at the International Conference Center near the Arc de Triomphe.

Three judges and twelve lawmakers wearing judicial robes dominated the sparse setting.

"I hope that this trial will serve truth and justice," Fabius said in a statement to the court. "I hope this necessary trial will allow us to establish that from what we knew, we acted in good conscience."

Fabius, Herve and Dufoix are charged with having a role in the deaths of five people from AIDS and the infection of two others in 1985.

The start of the trial, expected to last a minimum of three weeks was a long-awaited moment for families of the AIDS victims.

They're among some 4,000 people in France who contracted AIDS from transfusions in the early 1980s. An experts' report in 1991 showed that

some 300 cases were "avoidable."

Four health officials were convicted in previous trials, and 32 people, including some of those already convicted, are awaiting a new trial on charges of poisoning and complicity in poisoning. However, this is the first time ministers are being judged for their official acts.

The ex-ministers are accused of involuntary homicide and "attacking the physical integrity of others." They risk up to five years in prison and a maximum fine of 500,000 francs (90,000 dollars) on the first count and up to three years in prison and a maximum fine of 300,000 francs (55,000 dollar) on the second.

They are not charged with intentionally bringing on the infection but with "imprudence," "inattention," and "negligence."

1998 goes without success

PB draws up new list of 68 SOEs

By Rafiq Hassan

The Privatisation Board (PB) has revised the list of the state-owned enterprises (SOEs) for privatisation as none of the 56 companies listed for 1998 could be sold off to private entrepreneurs.

The new list of 68 companies includes six from the textile sector, 17 from jute, 12 from food and sugar, 14 from steel and engineering, seven from chemical industries and four from forestry. The rest eight are from different other sectors.

The previous list entailed 15 companies from the textile sector, seven from jute, nine from steel and engineering, nine from food and sugar, 10 from chemical industries, four from the forestry and two from other sectors.

None of the listed companies could be privatised since the end of 1997, prompting the Board to revise the list. Another reason for the revision was that the government had later made some changes in its decision about some SOEs, according to the PB officials.

The last privatisation took place in late 1997 when the board formally handed over the Royal Textile Mills in Bandarban to a private company. Since then the board could not sell off any more, the officials said.

The names of nine textile mills were dropped from the list after the government decided to hand those over to the workers and employees of the mills, they added.

On the other hand, two enterprises-Bangladesh Machine Tools Factory (BMTF) in Gazipur and Khulna Shipyard in Khulna- which had earlier been in the list under steel and engineering sector, were handed over to the army and navy respectively.

Twenty-three new mills and factories have been included in the revised list for privatisation-- ten from the jute sector, three from sugar and food, two from steel and engineering, two from chemical industries and

six from other sectors.

According to the board officials, resistance from the labourers, bureaucratic tangle and lack of political commitment were the main obstacles in the way of rapid privatisation of the loss making SOEs.

They said around 200 SOEs were responsible for draining out Tk 2,500 crore every year from the national exchequer.

The Board has been organising regular seminars and symposia for last few months for mobilising public opinion in favour of privatisation. It is also exchanging views with the political leaders, labour leaders, experts, journalists and economists, the officials added.

It even organised public dialogue in the divisional cities for augmenting the privatisation process. "But the result of the campaign is yet to be received," a source close to the board said.

Since the establishment of the Board, only 17 SOEs were privatised.

Around a dozen SOEs, however, are now in the process of privatisation as the letters of intent (LOI) have already been issued in favour of them. "Some of those will soon be handed over as buyers have already made the payments," a senior PB official said.

20 hurt as supporters of poura chairman candidates clash in Jhenidah

From Our Correspondent
JHENIDAH, Feb 9: At least 20 people were injured, five of them bullet-hit, when supporters of two chairman candidates for Kaliganj Municipality clashed twice here today.

Police fired 20 rounds of gunshots and lobbed same number of teargas shells to disperse the supporters of Alaaddin Ala of the ruling Awami League and an independent candidate when supporters of the candidates reached Bakulia under Kaliganj with separate processions at around 9 am.

Both the groups traded gunshots and used bombs. The supporters also fought another round of battle at Failla at around 1 pm.

Later, supporters of Alauddin Ala gheraoed local TNO and ASP (circle) when they rushed to the spot to bring the situation under control. Alauddin's supporters demanded arrest of MA Mannan.

Book fair

From page 1

of book enthusiasts went to visit the book fair yesterday evening. But they were disappointed finding the stalls closed.

"It is very painful that the Ekushey Book Fair has been halted due to hartal," said Lira, a student of Dhaka University, adding the fair should be spared from political programmes.

The authorities later took the initiative to open the fair as state minister for sports, youth and culture Obaidul Quader went to the Academy at about 5pm and asked them to open the fair, sources said.

The Academy authorities, at a press briefing in the evening, urged the political parties to keep the fair out of the purview of hartal.

Replying to a question, the Academy officials said that the fair could not be opened in time due to 'unavoidable reasons'.

Stalemate

From page 1

have any fresh dialogue with the opposition, while the latter remains determined to go ahead with its agitation campaign.

Amir Hossain Amu, leader of the governing Awami League who was assigned to open dialogue with the BNP, admitted that there had been no communication with the opposition for the last couple of days. "We communicated to the BNP a few days back that we were ready to have a dialogue with them, but the party is yet to respond. Our door is still open."

The AL leader also told the Daily Star that municipal elections would be held according to the schedule announced earlier.

On the other hand, BNP secretary general Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan told reporters yesterday evening that the party had so far received 'no specific proposal' for a dialogue. He said that the opposition was determined to resist the ensuing polls.

Meanwhile, the Election Commission has re-iterated its decision to hold the municipal polls in accordance with the schedule announced earlier.

"We are going ahead with the preparation for holding the polls on 23-25 this month," Chief Election Commissioner Mohammad Abu Hena told The Daily Star last night. "I have already asked the government to make sure that adequate security measures are taken for the purpose."

Cairn

From page 1

basically an exploration company and therefore it wants to limit its activities to exploration only," said the official.

"Such deals are common all over the world," he added.

Due to global economic recession and a chronic slide in world oil prices, oil companies all over the world were undergoing reforms to reduce overhead costs. Cairn was also doing that. "There will be job cuts in Cairn's headquarters in Edinburgh," he pointed out.

The Cairn official noted that the decision would also lead to more autonomy for the local office of Cairn.

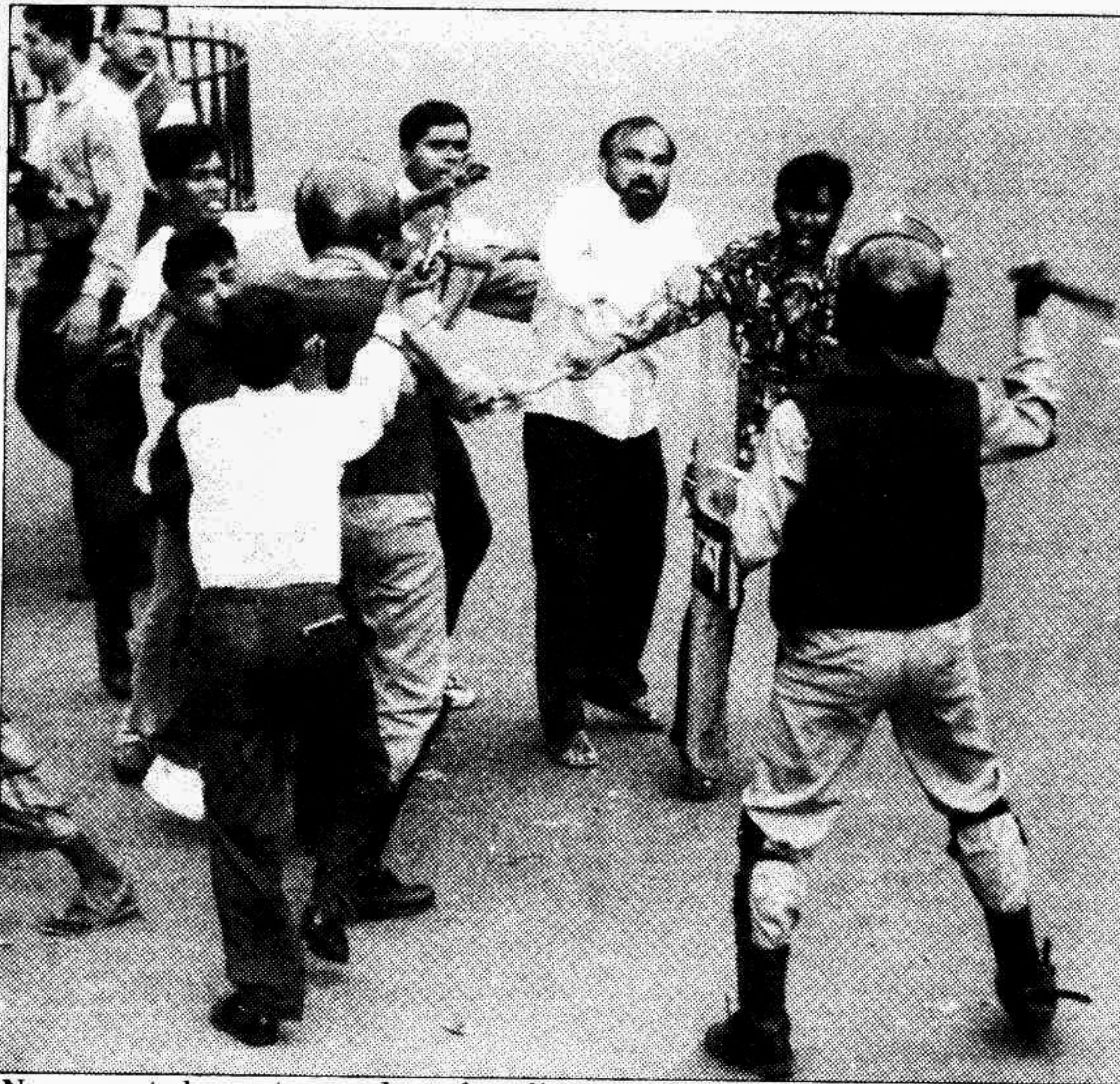
"We think, for Bangladesh, this deal would be beneficial. Shell would play a much better role than Cairn in investment in the oil and gas sector," he said.

Cairn's local Adviser, MR Islam, said the real reason for transfer was Shell's greater expertise in the energy sector and Cairn's switching on to exploration activities only.

Cairn signed two PSCs with Petrobangla for blocks 16 and 15 in May 1994 and early 1995 respectively. It discovered the Sangu gas field in early 1996 and started supplying Sangu gas from mid-1997.

Under these PSCs, Cairn had agreed to invest in Bangladesh over a 25-year period in a series of conditional short phases.

Petrobangla sources pointed out Cairn's deal with Shell over full transfer of operatorship was done without any government approval or knowledge and the British company was yet to inform anything about the deal officially.



No respect shown to member of parliament

Supporters try to protect their leader as policemen come charging towards BNP city chief Sadek Hossain Khoka near the Purana Paltan police box during hartal hours yesterday.

— Star photo by Amran Hossain

Hartal: One killed, 200 hurt

From page 1

rious head injuries after a bomb exploded and blew away one of his ears at Rai Shaheb Bazar crossing at 8-30 a.m.

Seventeen people were admitted to the Dhaka Medical College Hospital, mostly with bomb injuries they sustained in different city areas during the hartal.

Violence was reported from a number of city areas including North-South Road, English Road, Rai Shaheb Bazar, Malibagh, Mouchak, Shantinagar, Saidabad, Jatrabari, Mirpur, Pallabi, Manikagar, Tejgaon, Mahakhali, Joykaili Mandir and Rampura.

Paltan crossing and nearby areas had been the centre of trouble throughout the day, where opposition groups, anti-hartal activists and police were engaged in on-and-off clashes, chases and counter-chases.

Opposition MP Sadek Hossain Khoka was clubbed by police when a procession of BNP supporters were stopped by the law-enforcers at Paltan crossing at 5-10 p.m. where they wanted to stage a rally. Awami League activists were staging a rally at nearby Muktangan at the same time.

Police also did not allow the demonstrators to go towards the Press Club and charged batons to disperse them. At least 10 gunshots were heard and scores of bombs blasted around the area when Awami League supporters rushed down towards the BNP supporters led by Khoka who refused to retreat under police charge.

A young boy, seen lying on the street, was picked up by passers-by. But details were not available about his fate or the kind of injury that he had received.

Police kept the two sides at bay for sometime, with Khoka stubbornly refusing to go away from the Paltan crossing, shouting there with his supporters despite push and pull from policemen.

Tension mounted again when BNP supporters tried to gather around their leader. But unidentified elements from an under-construction market nearby hurled several bombs at the BNP pickets as dusk fell.

Some people were seen being hurried away in an ambulance. Khoka, his shirt stained with blood from a head injury of supporter who tried to protect his leader, still refused to move and stayed back at the Paltan crossing until evening.

Desperate police officials urged Khoka to move away as evening approached, fearing more trouble. He left the area eventually, but trouble broke out soon when his supporters were involved in another clash with police at Bijoynagar where an auto-rickshaw and two rickshaws were torched.

Police fired plastic bullets and used batons. A number of people were injured there including a press photographer, Masud Parvez Anis of Bhorer Kagoj, who received pellets from rubber bullet as police came charging through the dark streets and alleyways.

Earlier in the noon, opposition activists, Awami League supporters and police fought running battles at beehive-like alleyways in the Paltan area. The first sparks of trouble flared up when a Jatiya Party procession was marching down the Paltan crossing.

The JP procession was chased by anti-hartal activists who had rallied at Muktangan. Scores of bombs, teargas and gunfire rattled the city centre as a BNP procession arrived in the scene shortly afterwards. Police picked up quite a few, including

a Jamaat leader in a procession.

JCD president Habibunnabi Soheli was injured with rubber bullet, JCD leaders said.

BNP leaders alleged that police used batons even on women activists of the party who had taken shelter in an under-construction building.

At Bijoynagar, police boxed in the BNP activists led Major (ret) Abdul Hafiz MP at one stage. But no untoward incident took place as the activists retreated.

Purana Paltan reverberated again with opposition activists demonstrating denouncing death of Sajal. Former home minister Abdul Matin Choudhury and Khoka led them. But they moved away without a clash.

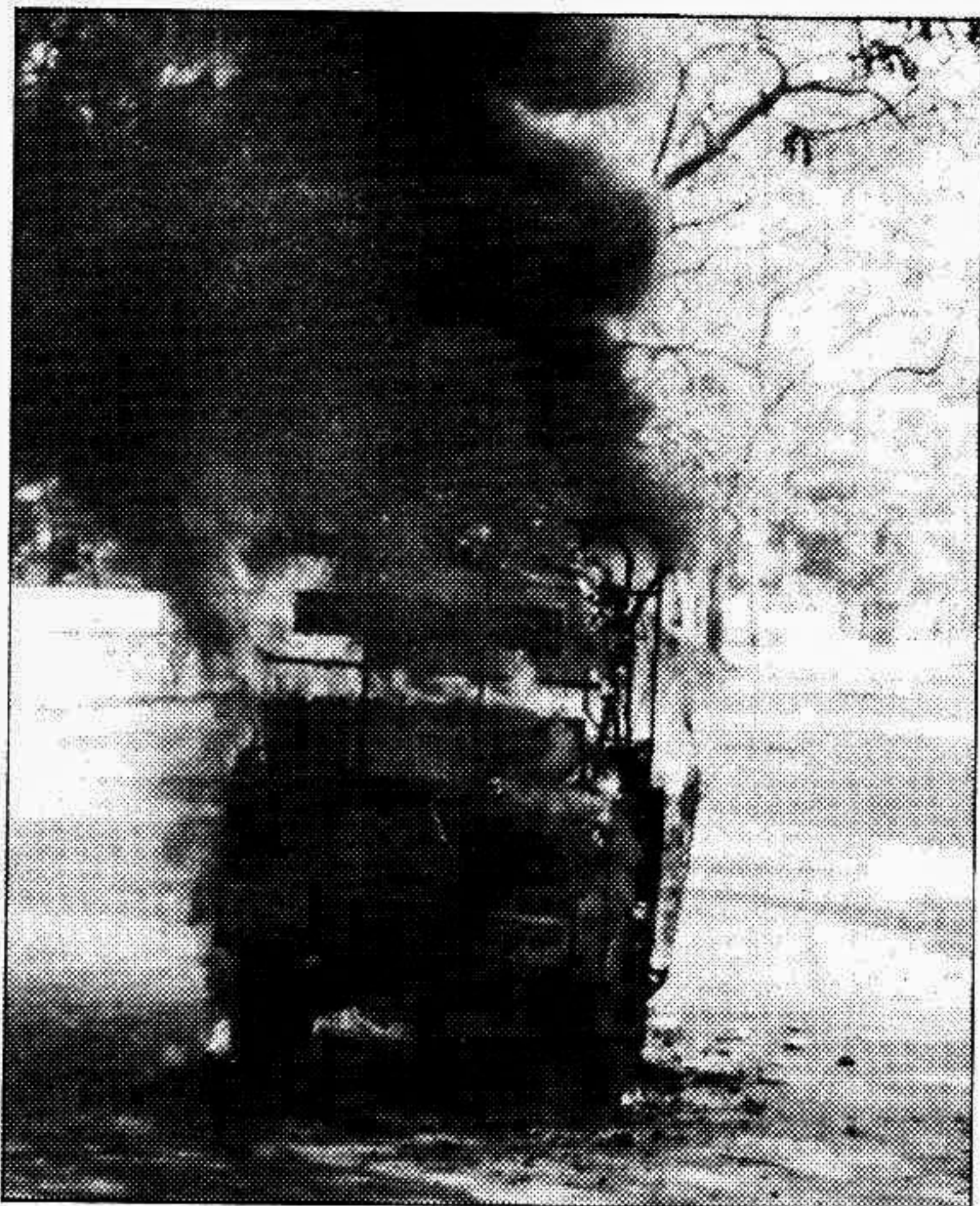
In another incident at Rai

Shaheb Bazar, police constable Tajuddin suffered critical injuries when he was hit by a homemade bomb hurled by pro-hartal activists from a rooftop. Doctors at CMH said he was in a critical condition.

Some 15 people also suffered injuries in the area earlier in the morning.

Police and witnesses reported sporadic incidents of violence, clashes, chases and counter-chases between pro and anti-hartal activists in the city late in the evening.

As people were hurrying home along deserted streets, many of which were without lights. By 7:30pm, an eerie silence descended on many parts of the city, with only policemen guarding the street corners and the homeless preparing for the night.



Freedom on fire

A Daily Star auto-rickshaw set ablaze by mobbing arsonists in front of the newspaper's office yesterday morning.

— Star photo

Hartal extended

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successfully in areas declared hartal-free by the ruling party," he commented.

The opposition parties will hold janaza of the hartal victim after Jumma prayers on Friday and bring out a mourning procession from Paltan Maidan at 3 pm on Saturday, Bhuiyan said.

He also condemned "armed attacks by the AL men including one led by Maqbul Hossain, MP" and police "repression" on the pro-hartal activists. "Numerous gunshots were fired from the Maqbul-led convoy in Science Laboratory area in the city."

"A Dhanmondi Chhatra Dal leader, Sajal died in the shooting-spre, but the victim could be anybody — (BNP MPs) Fazlur Rahman Patal, Ruhul Quddus Tahukdar Dulu or Abdullah Al Noman (a joint secretary general of the party)."

Describing such attacks in the city, in Narayanganj, Chittagong, Jamalpur and Joypurhat, Bhuiyan said, "the hartal was by and large peaceful in other parts of the country."

"More than 100 opposition workers were injured during

yesterday's hartal," he told a questioner.

Referring to the February 23-25 municipal polls, the BNP leader claimed the authorities had accepted all nominations without any scrutiny after opposition parties, representing 70 to 75 per cent of the votes, had boycotted them.

The opposition candidates did not file nominations for any major municipalities, he said. "This is going to be a farcical election and we demand cancellation of its present schedule."

Jatiya Party presidium member Kazi Firz Rashid blamed the government "for pushing the country towards a civil war". He claimed that the prime minister had declared award for occupying the streets during hartal.

Jamaat leader Quamruzzaman alleged the government was resorting to repression to cling to power. "It will be counter-productive for the government."

A RM Matin of IOJ, city BNP convenor Sadek Hossain Khoka, MP and Saifur Rahman of JP also spoke on the occasion.

Local Internet market caught in BTTB's net

By Mustak Hossain

The private Internet Service Providers (ISP) of the country are bracing for a tough competition with the launching of similar services by state-owned Bangladesh Telegraph and Telephone Board (BTTB) last month.

Both BTTB and private operators are calling it a price war.

To provide Internet access facility, Bangladesh Telegraph and Telephone Board (BTTB) has set up a network at city's Moghbazar. The Internet access of this network is being provided through an Intel-Sat satellite, which directly connects to Canada. A BTTB official told The Daily Star.

"The network gives subscribers a Backbone link speed of 128 kbps, which will be upgraded if there is an increase in users," the official said.

BTTB's World Wide Web (WWW), Electronic Mail, File Transfer Protocol (FTP) and Telnet services also provide user support and programs such as Internet relay Chat and Gopher Archie. Moreover, the BTTB subscribers enjoy a higher access speed due to server's higher bandwidth-subscriber ratio.

As most of the Web sites are operated from the United States and other nearby countries, the BTTB subscribers also enjoy higher speed in browsing on the Net, the official said.

BTTB's charges Tk 2,000 for registering a client, compared to the Tk 3,000 levied by some private operators. Some operators however are satisfied with a much lower start-up fee.

But BTTB's main strength may be its low usage rates.

For a minute at peak hour (6.00 a.m. to 12.00pm), BTTB costs Tk 1.00 and Tk 0.50 from 12:01 midnight to 5.59 a.m. On the other hand, the private operators vary between Tk 2.00 and 3.00 at peak hour.

The off-peak hour rates range from Tk 2.00 to Tk 1.00 per minute.

However, some ISPs offer packages such as a fixed Tk 500 (excluding VAT) for 10 hours.

The BTTB rates are worrying the private operators. "These rates threaten to beat us out of the market," admitted an official of a private ISP firm.

The private entrepreneurs see the BTTB move as an unfair competition imposed on them. "How do we survive?" asked one.

"The BTTB is definitely taking advantage of its infrastructure but we had to start from zero."

There may be some substance in the argument. In Bangladesh, the private Internet service providers had to fight a tough battle with the government and the BTTB to make them understand the necessity of Internet.

In many of our neighbouring countries, the initiative came from state-owned telephone companies but here we were the pioneers, the private operator said.

Today, there are 20 private ISPs, with about 30,000 subscribers, mostly in the capital. The number is increasing everyday.

BTTB plans to extend the facility to other major cities such as Chittagong, Khulna, Bogra and Sylhet.

Pak journalists protest govt 'assault' on press freedom

From Syed Talat Hussain

ISLAMABAD, Feb 9: Journalists came out in droves Monday morning to protest against what they called the government's "assaults on press freedom."

A big rally arranged by the national body of journalists, the Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists and the Rawalpindi-based Union of Journalists, in the capital was joined by workers of opposition parties who all then marched up to the heavily-guarded parliament building.

Similar protest rallies took place elsewhere in the country, particularly Lahore, the capital of Punjab, and Karachi, capital of Sindh, where many social and political activists have established hunger-strike camps as a mark of protest against government handling of its row with Pakistan's largest publication house, the Jang Group of Publication.

In the three-month long tussle with the Jang Group, the government took many drastic steps, including seizure of Jang's newspaper stocks, freezing of its bank accounts, which have enraged the journalist community. The government, which is now fighting a petition

DU campus

From page 1

They chased the pro-hartal JCD men and ousted them from the campus.

At about 12 noon, JCD brought out another procession on the campus in support of the hartal. But, they were again chased and ousted from the campus.

Later, JCD held a rally in front of VC's residence and alleged that the activists of BCL attacked their peaceful procession without any provocation.

JCD leaders demanded exemplary punishment to those responsible for the attack.

BCL also brought out an anti-hartal procession and held a rally on the campus.

At the rally, BCL leaders condemned the BNP for launching the hartal which causes immense sufferings to the common man.

They urged the oppositions to refrain from such "undemocratic" activities for the sack of country's economy.

Several rounds of shots were fired and crackers exploded on the campus during the hartal hours, campus sources said.

Potato growers fear

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number of other farmers agreed with Kabir Khan.

Farmers were also critical of 'improper handling' of potato seeds in cold storage. They alleged that many cold storage owners put power supply off to save consumption. As a result, potato seeds cannot be kept in the standard temperature of 35-degree Fahrenheit.

There are 68 cold storages in Munshiganj having an average potato preservation capacity of 6,000 tonnes each. Talking to newsmen, Hashem Dewan, managing director of Dewan Ice and Cold Storage at Muktarpur ferry ghat, the gateway to Munshiganj, acknowledged mismanagement in cold storage and said, last year's flood and repeated power failures cost the cold storage owners dearly.

Dewan said, for the sake of reducing preservation cost in cold storage, potato seeds are not adequately nursed inside the storage, resulting in poor germination.

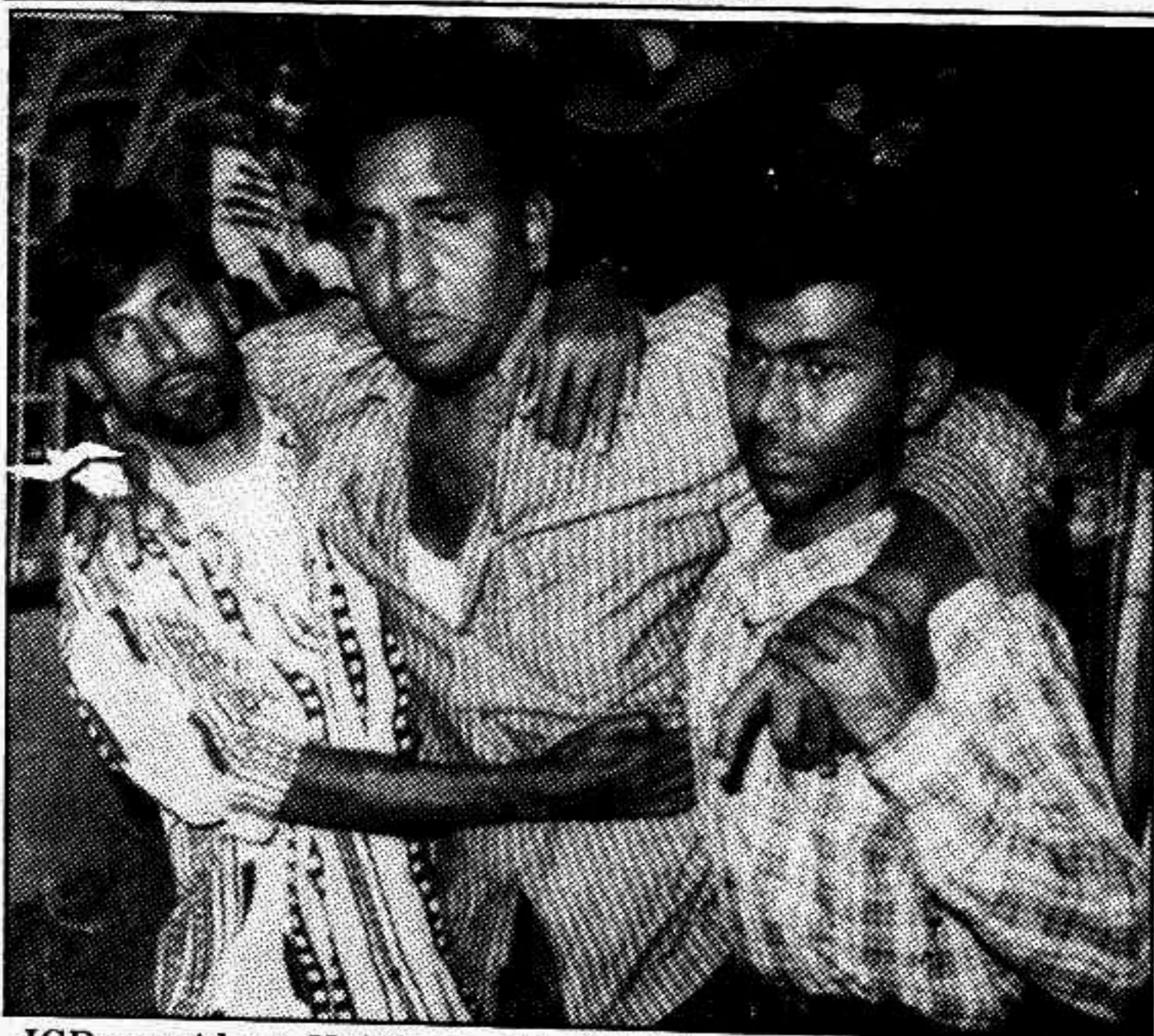
Munshiganj Sadar Thana

Agriculture Officer Md Hamid Hossain endorsed the farmers' fear of lesser potato production. He said that temperature in cold storage was not being properly regulated and that temperature outside this time around is also hot compared to previous years, specially in the Bengali month of Magh.

He also spoke of seed degeneration problem and said that he had written to higher authorities to look into this. There is a tremendous demand for quality potato seeds, he added.

To recoup the predicted shortfall in production, Hamid Hossain, an agronomist, said agriculture extension workers in Munshiganj were asking farmers to use urea as top-dressing and also fungicide if necessary.

Each year, potato worth Tk 50 crore is lost due to diseases. This time desperate growers are taking no chance. And this is evident in the huge sale of fungicides in local markets.



JCD president Habibunnabi Soheli being taken to hospital after bullet hit his leg during hartal hours in the city yesterday.

—Star photo

Editor: Mahfuz Anam

Published by the Editor from City Publishing House Ltd., 90 Kakrail, Dhaka-1000 on behalf of Mediaworld Ltd., 52 Motijheel C.A., Dhaka-1000. Editorial, News & Commercial Offices: House No: 11, Road No: 3, Dhanmandi R/A, Dhaka-1205. PABX: 866772-4, Commercial: 866771, Fax No: 88-02-863035, GPO Box No: 3257, Cable: DAILYSTAR, DHAKA. Internet edition address: http://www.dailystarnews.com and Email address: dstar@bangla.net