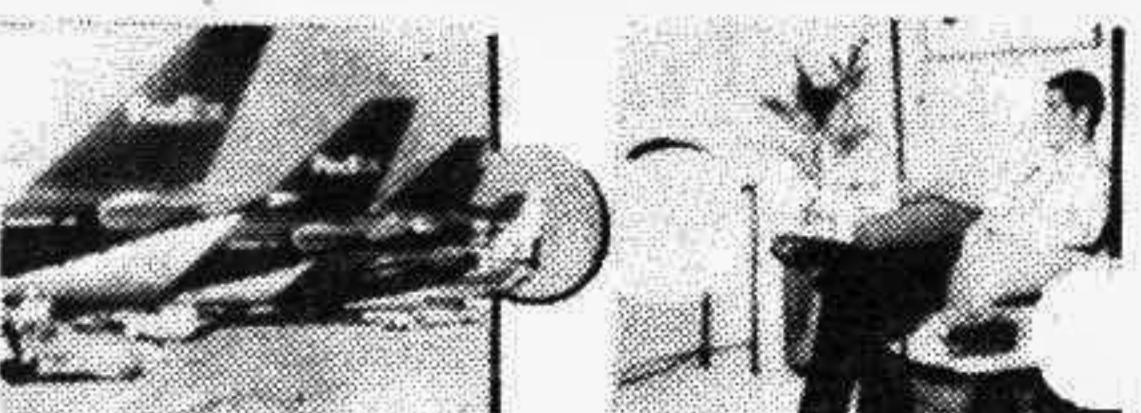


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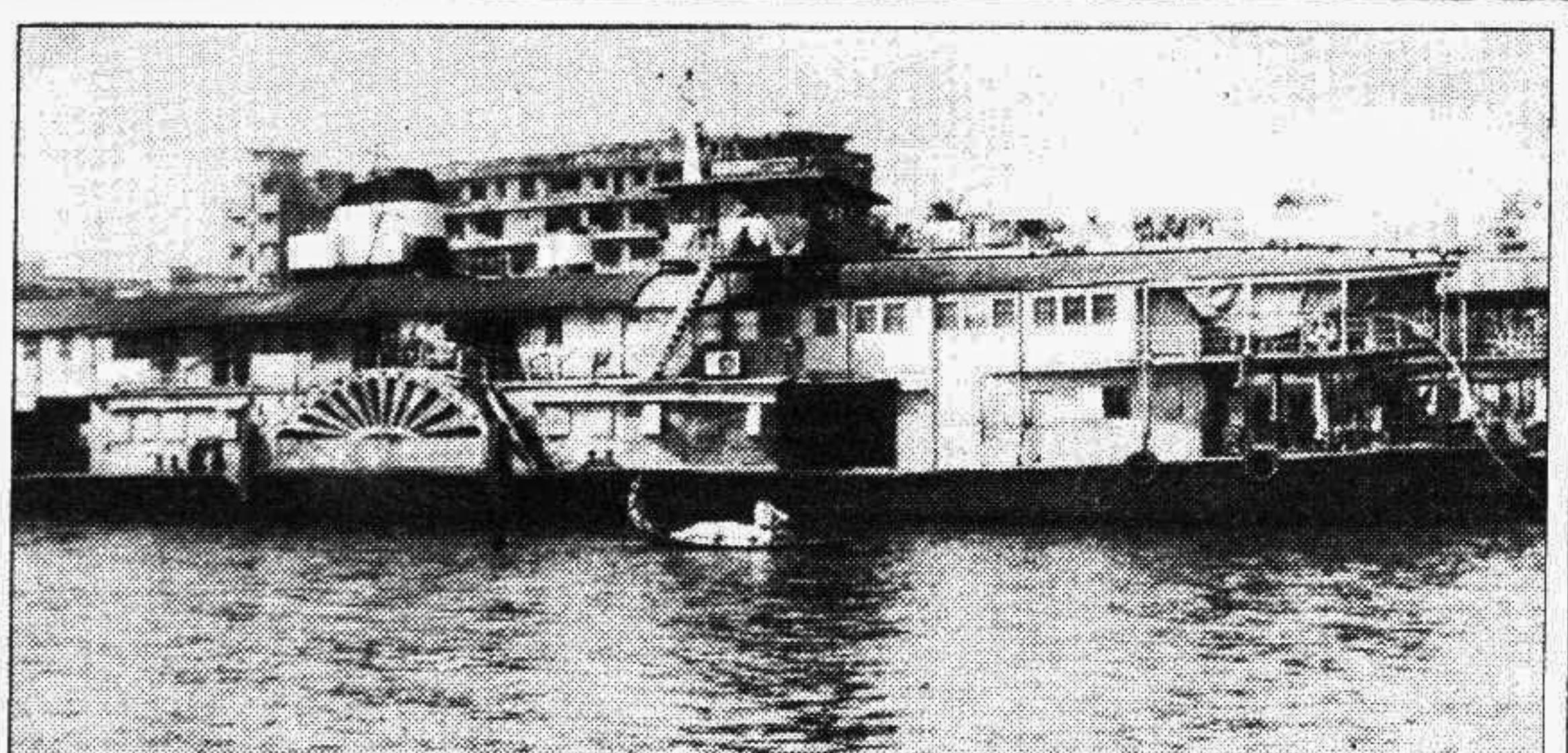
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The BIWTC steamers, one of the grand sites on the river ways, are crumbling rapidly. The authorities, however, are more interested in fixing them with air conditioners rather than carrying out the more urgent repairs.

— Star photo

Cold air in wet steamers

By Morshed Ali Khan

Most of the paddle steamers recently renovated by Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Corporation are crumbling. Yet the authorities have embarked upon an ambitious project to install air-conditioners in the first class saloons.

BIWTC officials admitted to the poor condition of the steamers but failed to account for the prioritisation of installing air conditioners over fixing roof leaks, engine failures and weak vessel structures. They also declined to comment on the cost of the air-conditioning project.

When approached about the issue, general manager Nurul Alam angrily replied, "I do not know anything about it. You better contact NK Poddar, Deputy General Manager of the Ship Repairing Services in

Narayanganj." Subsequently NK Poddar denied any knowledge and referred this correspondent back to the general manager.

Helpful officials on one of the four paddle steamers, however, were eager to give a guided tour of the crumbling roofs, railings, diesel engine and furniture that were all installed only three years ago at 'huge expense' in a project funded by the Belgian government. The officials, who shall remain anonymous at their own request, complained that the head office is ignoring urgent and essential renovations, while funding projects that could be postponed.

They said that while the private sector is doing booming business, the BIWTC is spite of

having its own dockyards, engineers, technocrats and bureaucrats is incurring massive losses. The officials blamed the 'corrupt officials' for the bad business and volunteered to tell tales of corruption involving 'crores of taka'. They further added that the corporation is surviving on the revenue from ferry services, since its passenger and cargo sections are both immensely unprofitable.

BIWTC chairman M Shahidul Islam Chowdhury, on being queried about the air-conditioning project, said that he could not immediately recall how much the endeavour was costing. He was, however, aware of the leaking corrugated tin roofs and promised to 'repair the roofs before the start of the rainy season.'

Amidst applause, she announced that a by-pass road would be constructed in Thakurgaon district so that the town was not disturbed by heavy traffic.

The Prime Minister went to Kochubari to inaugurate the Utar-Bangladesh Deep Tubewell Project, which will water vast croplands in Dinajpur, Thakurgaon and Panchagarh districts.

Under the project 1217 deep tubewells have been installed at a cost of Tk 18.33 crore for the irrigation of 56,000 hectares of land in North Bengal.

With the implementation of the irrigation project, additional 1.10 lakh tonnes of rice will be produced in the region.

The government is distributing Tk 3270 crore as farm loan to help the flood affected farmers of the country and trying to set up Agriculture Bank in every corner of the country.

She assured the peasantry that necessary steps had been taken to ensure adequate fertilizer supply and form an Agricultural Credit Foundation to help boost cereal output. 'It all is being done as the government's main target is to attain food autonomy.'

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