



Onus of life on her slender shoulder

Life has not been a rosy proposition for this woman, pushing her outdoors to earn for the family. Still, she has not forgotten her prime duty, to her child. With the child in her lap she goes about the struggle for survival.

Star photo: Sk Enamul Haq

Khaleda saying 'no' once again

By Nazmul Ashraf and Rezaul Karim

Leader of Opposition Khaleda Zia is highly likely to turn down yet another BTV invitation to appear on *Deshbahr Mukhomukhi* on the same grounds that she had refrained from featuring in a similar programme two years ago. The live programme is designed for the prime minister and the opposition leader to face direct questions from a panel of experts, invited guests at the auditorium and those from members of public received through phones and

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Prospects lie in going gas-based all the way

A US-supported study may also suggest export

By Sharier Khan

A US government-sponsored Gas Utilisation Study is likely to recommend a drastic increase in gas consumption to increase the contribution of this sector to Bangladesh's Gross Domestic Products (GDP) and ensure that investment in this sector remains profitable, sources concerned said. Reflecting the views of foreign oil and gas companies as well as experts in the sector, the study would suggest export

of gas to India to earn foreign currency, the sources added. All concerned with the energy sector, especially foreign oil companies, are worried over the low consumption of gas and lack of planning to increase it. In the absence of planning, the prospects of economic returns from new gas fields are getting bleaker, they mentioned. Bangladesh's internal demand for gas is rising by

around 10 per cent annually. But the government has no specific plan on how to handle this increase in demand. It also does not have any plan for proper utilisation of the gas produced under Production Sharing Contracts (PSCs). Currently the country is producing 900 million cubic feet of gas per day (mmcfid). Foreign oil companies work-

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Mysterious death sparks police row

DB men tried to defy CID investigators' call

Star Report

A row has broken out between DB and CID as six DB men refused to be interrogated at the CID office in connection with the killing of Jalal Ahmed Shafi.

Several DB men gheraoed the DC DB's office late Wednesday night after the investigating officials of CID formally requested DB to send six DB officials to the CID office for facing interrogation.

Shafi's decomposed body was found in the rooftop water tank at the Detective Branch office at Minto Road in the city on March 25. After much speculation, the body was identified seven days later March 31 after a driving license was found in the same water tank. The summoned DB officials were Inspectors Ziaul Ahsan, Rezaul Hossain and Farooq Rahman, ASI Sheikh Mahbub,

havidar Bellal and constable Abdur Rab.

According to sources, the DC, DB summoned the six DB officials in question at around 10-30 pm on Wednesday and asked them to report to the CID office. The officials immediately left the DC's room and rushed to ADC Nuruzzaman's office in the same building. The ADC said that the CID should come to the DB office for any interrogation.

the sources added.

The group joined by several other DB officials then went back to the DC DB's office and demanded that CID investigators come to the DB premises. The DC, DB then telephoned CID investigating officer Munsir Atiqur Rahman and offered him a separate room at the DB premises for conducting the interrogation. Atiqur Rahman apprised higher officials of the

development. Sources said that after negotiations throughout yesterday, the DB personnel agreed to go to the CID office today.

Asked whether the officials gheraoed his office, DC DB Altaf Hossain Mollah said that it was not true. "They only came to my office to lodge a protest."

Meanwhile, police have failed to gather the motive behind

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Peace seems elusive on political front

Dialogue looks a distant dream despite diplomats' efforts

By Nazmul Ashraf and Reaz Ahmad

The donors' on-going move to find a peaceful solution to the political crisis in the country is unlikely to result in a government-opposition dialogue with both sides still maintaining rigidity on their respective positions.

The main opposition BNP expects a "concrete proposal based on specific agenda" for a dialogue but the ruling Awami League refuses to make any such offer.

"At the moment, the government will not make any formal offer for dialogue. It is ready to sit for a discussion anytime and anywhere if the

course of anti-government agitation, apparently to see the outcome of the current negotiation move. The meeting is expected to be held later this month, sources said. On the Eid day, Khaleda Zia told journalists that her party could sit for a dialogue only if a "concrete proposal based on specific agenda" comes from the government. But she questioned the government's sincerity about such an arrangement and blamed it for not implementing the agreements reached in similar talks in the past.

In her March 25 meeting with the donor representatives, Khaleda Zia also said that the responsibility of a peaceful resolution to the political differences rested squarely with the government which, she said, should create a congenial atmosphere for this.

BNP has meantime postponed the April 7-8 meeting of its grassroots level leaders planned to discuss the next

While exchanging Eid greetings with the President, both the Prime Minister and the Opposition leader reportedly discussed the political crisis and the donors' move to resolve it.

Meanwhile, before the PM meets the donors on April 4, a meeting of the AL central working committee (ALCWC) is scheduled for tomorrow. AL sources told The Daily Star that the ALCWC meet to be held at the Ganabhaban would work out the party stand on the latest move for resolution of the crisis and take note BNP's statement made to the donors.

"Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina is expected to reaffirm to the donors that her government is very much for political and economic stability in the country", Suranjit Sengupta, PM's Parliamentary Affairs Adviser, said.

Sengupta, however, sees no merit in the BNP proposal for holding local government polls under a caretaker government. "To rid the country of confrontational politics, we'll extend all cooperation within constitutional limits," he said.

Deeply disturbed by the recent political developments, representatives of 16 donor countries and agencies issued a joint statement on March 9, calling for resolution of political differences peacefully in forums like Parliament, not through hartals and violent confrontations.

Later, the development partners sought with all the three. Accordingly, they met Khaleda Zia on March 25 and are due to have talks with Sheikh Hasina on April 4. Then they are also likely to meet President Shahabuddin Ahmed.

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Costly option for NAM summit

The Osmany Udyan becoming the casualty!

By Morshed Ali Khan

Ignoring at least three alternative sites, the government has chosen Osmany Udyan, one of the major city parks, to build a conference centre for the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) summit to be held in Dhaka in 2001, sources said.

The preliminary plan for the project has already been approved and a Chinese technical team will soon submit the structural plan for construction of the centre on around 14 acres of the park land. The centre would have a floor space of approximately 20,000 square metres, excluding a 600-vehicle capacity car parking space.

Bangladesh will host the 13th NAM summit sometime between August and September in 2001. The summit is expected to be participated by 114 member countries, 16 observer countries, 39 guest countries, seven organisational observers and 40 organisations. The government is now faced with a mammoth task of building infrastructure for over 3,000 foreign dignitaries.

The centre dubbed Bangabandhu International Convention Centre will cost an estimated Tk 120 crore and have all the necessary facility. The entire project will be implemented by Chinese experts, the sources said.

Architects, engineers, planners and university teachers said the Osmany Udyan project would not only destroy the green barrier between the old and the new town, but also worsen traffic jam situation in

an area already crammed with more than 30 large shopping centres.

According to official sources, the government had first decided to build the conference centre at Drum Factory area, adjacent to the Prime Minister's Office. The idea was to incorporate the proposed structure with the existing International Conference Centre at the Prime Minister's Office. But local experts were of the view that the 3.8 acres of land available was not good enough for the '1,670-seat' centre and other related facilities for such a grandiose summit, works ministry sources said.

They said the national and the sub committees formed to oversee preparations for the NAM summit then went for other options. In a meeting late last year, planners, engineers and architects proposed three sites -- a part of the old airport, the site for Military Museum by Bijoy Sarani and the stretch of land behind the Sonargaon Hotel.

Sources said for "one reason or other" the government did not go for the proposed sites at the old airport or the land reserved for Military Museum by Bijoy Sarani which, they thought, could be ideal for the purpose. Both the sites belonged to the Military Lands and Cantonments.

Some experts suggested that the site near Sonargaon Hotel would be an appropriate alternative, for most of the guests would be accommodated in the

vicinity. Another reason was that due to its prime location, the centre would not be lying idle in the future as in the case of several state guest houses in the city.

"But in the meeting, we came to know that a Chinese team with experiences of building similar centres has expressed its willingness to construct the centre," said a ministerial source.

By late January, Bangladesh had signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with China after securing a soft-term Chinese loan ahead of the NAM summit. In the first week of February, a Chinese technical team, along with local experts, visited the proposed site near Sonargaon Hotel.

Sources said the Chinese experts immediately poured cold water on the idea saying the site was low-lying and it would be too expensive and time-consuming to construct. They said that they would need a firm and level land to build the structure within the time frame, official sources said.

"After hours of explorations, it was then decided that Osmani Udyan would be the right place for the centre provided special emphasis is given on maintaining a green landscape around the structure," the official source said.

According to sources, there are less than 1,200 rooms available in different hotels and state guest houses in the city whereas at least 3,000 additional 'executive' rooms are

required in little more than two years to hold the summit.

Although plans are underway to build two five-star hotels in the city, complication arising out of land acquisition has almost stalled the move. The proposal for Airport Hotel is now lying at the law ministry for approval to acquire the land. Strong opposition from the BIWTC employees and officials has forced the government to float another international tender to build a hotel at the controversial Fairley House site at Bangla Motor. The entire workforce of the BIWTC has now got united under one umbrella to protest the government decision to 'take away' their 'Fairley House' which could be turned into a profitable welfare venture for the BIWTC employees.

According to sources, extension of Hotel Sheraton is not possible since there is no space left at its premises. Another reason, the sources pointed out, was that the contract between Star Wood, Sheraton's umbrella organisation, and the Bangladesh government ends in 2004. But a move is underway to extend Pan Pacific Sonargaon Hotel with an additional 250 beds for the summit.

Plans also include huge changes to the capital's infrastructure. Flyovers, ring roads and widening of existing roads -- all are in the scheme for a summit the importance of which, observers say, has significantly faded, with the end of the Cold War.

Fear of drought deepens

By Reaz Ahmad

Rain is long overdue but nowhere in sight. Movement in the troposphere has been quite erratic. Meteorologists wonder whether the country is heading for a 10-year-cycle drought.

Experts at the Space Resource and Remote Sensing Organisation (SPARRSO) prefer to wait until the first week of April before drawing any conclusion. However, the current sequence - long spell of drought came in 1979 and 1989, in the space of ten years - suggests the country is heading for another one.

"Quite anxiously we're observing the current dry spell and not certain yet whether this is going to be another drought after those in 1979 and 1989," said one source who prefers anonymity.

The long spell of drought in 1979 continued till May, while in 1989 it came to an end in April with a devastating tornado, recalled some experts. Experts fear that if the current spell of dry weather ends with hailstorms, tornadoes, it will certainly take a heavy toll on standing crops, the country's hopes of reducing food deficit following a huge crop loss in the last aman season.

There is another strong sign, too.

Usually, floods of big magnitude precede the 10-year-cycle droughts. The country experienced severe floods in 1978 and 1988. Last year, the country was hit by the worst flood of the century.

Still, the experts think it is rather premature to jump to a conclusion. "It would be a bit premature to call the dry spell a 'cycle-drought' at this stage," one weatherman said. "We prefer to call it 'non-rainfall' situation."

Weathermen are also worried about prospective IRRI-Boro crop and emerald-colour

standing wheat in the fields.

"We're noticing with quite a great deal of interest that rains could not form at the very last stage due to erratic behaviour at the top-biosphere," said one expert.

Over the period between November 25 last year and March 15 last, only one-millimetre rainfall was recorded in the country at Mongla on February 6. Besides, there were some traces at Rangpur and Dinajpur.

"That's been all till mid-march. Only on March 16, 17

and 18, Sylhet region experienced 21 millimetres of rainfall and that is more because of local effects and that should not be misunderstood as an end to the dry spell," explained one meteorologist.

However, over the last 10 days of March, Feni has experienced 41mm rainfall while there have been some sporadic rain in Sylhet, Srimongal, Rangpur and Shitakunda.

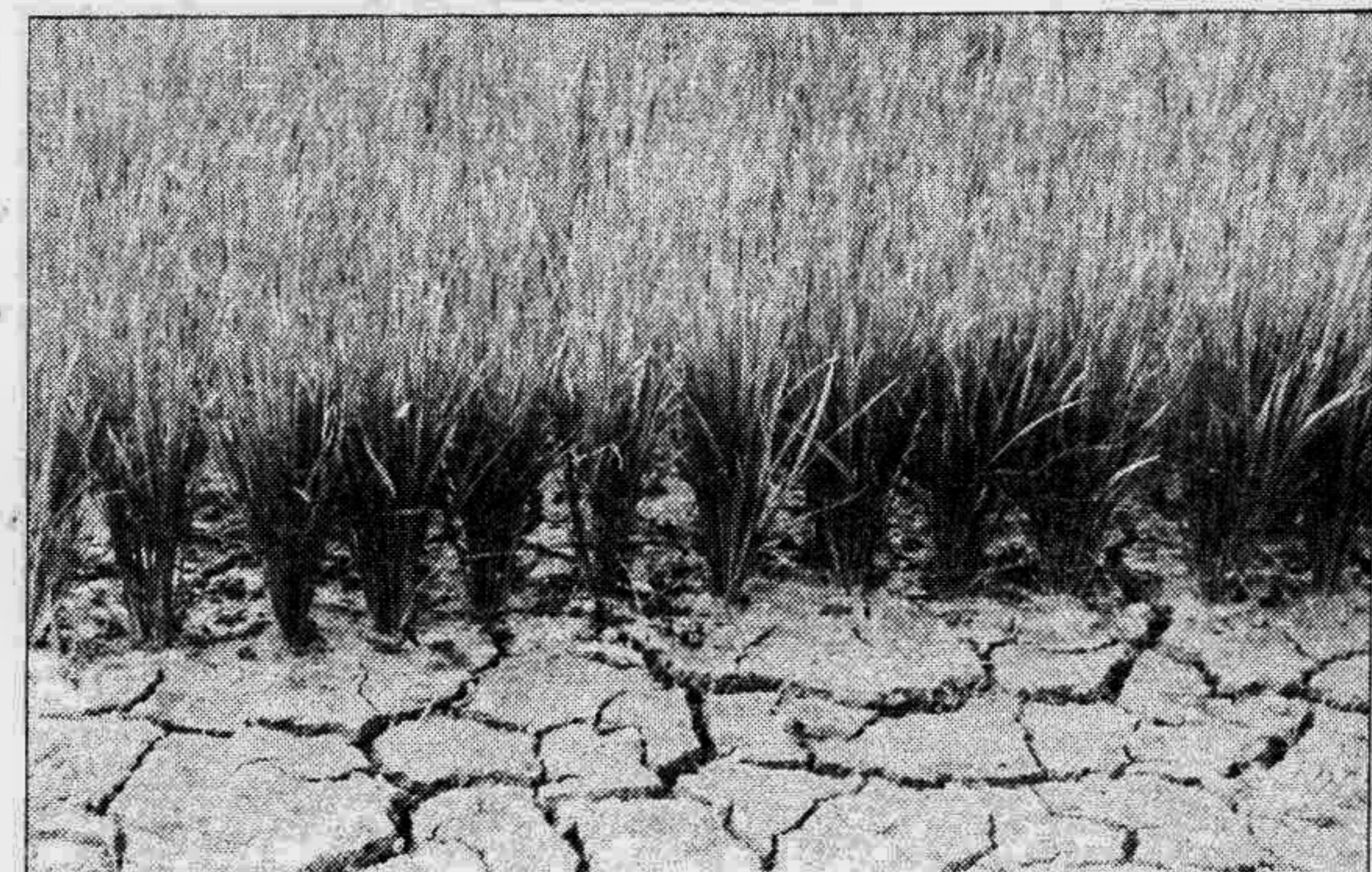
But, some experts attributed local effects for such welcome rains.

If the apprehension of the meteorologists proves right, the

country will find itself in rather too difficult a position.

Only two days back, Finance Minister Shah AMS Kibria told that the country's last hopes of economic recovery after the prolonged flood rested on successful harvest of IRRI-Boro. Food and Agriculture Minister Begum Matia Chowdhury shares a similar view.

Sources in various relevant departments now have a common feeling that a high-level meeting is the call of the hour when possibility of a 'cycle-drought' cannot be ruled out.



Cracks in hopes

Rain has stayed away, triggering off fears among meteorologists of a long spell of drought. If the dry spell continues it will wreak havoc on the IRRI-Boro production, serving a deadly blow to the hopes of an economic recovery.

Star photo: AKM Mohsin