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Don't talk politics

Donors told not to worry about projects

By Nazmul Ashraf and Reaz Ahmad

Diplomats' move for a resolution of the political conflicts seems to have been a futile exercise as both the government and the opposition have gone their own ways.

The opposition has stepped into yet another round of street agitation. Unperturbed, the government feels the people will once again frustrate the opposition move.

The BNP-led opposition alliance yesterday called a nationwide hartal on April 18 to protest government's "failures" and demand recasting the Election Commission.

Politicians are not willing to take it from the donors, now called development partners. We've advised them not to talk politics any more. Also we've told them not to be worried about the political situation. We assured them it will not affect foreign-aided development projects, commerce and industry minister Tofail Ahmed told The Daily Star yesterday, referring to the meeting with the prime minister April 4 night.

"We don't like to see the donors interfere in local politics," the minister said. The opposition BNP has not listened to the development partners either. "We can straight go for dialogue with the government if it accepts our demands. We've communicated our position to the donors," said BNP secretary general Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan. "And now it's the government turn to act."

Bhuiyan called the April 18 hartal the first step in a series of hartals to oust the government.

"They [BNP] don't mean dialogue. The Opposition leader attends neither Parliament nor the meeting of the Business Advisory Committee, represented by top Parliament leaders. Their activities will expose them to the people," Tofail said, not at all worried.

Representatives of the donor countries and agencies recently shuttled between the two camps, meeting prime minister Sheikh Hasina and opposition leader Khaleda Zia but failed to facilitate any understanding between them on contentious political issues.

In separate meetings, Khaleda preferred local elections under a non-party administration while Hasina rejected the idea outright. Apparently discouraged by the outcome of their talks with the two, the donors are learnt to have been trying to meet the President. But the ruling party sources ruled out a presidential intervention for a government-opposition dialogue.

But chances are slim for a meeting at Bangabhaban before the April 19-20 Aid Club meeting in Paris. However, it is widely speculated that the political standoff would have some impact on the Paris meeting.

But the opposition parties are still in a dilemma on their participation in the crucial elections to the upazila parishes and the city corporations as they are yet to resolve intra- and inter-party disputes on the polls issue, according to insiders.

The ruling Awami League is not concerned about the fresh hartal by the opposition. "Let them call hartal. Hartal will divert public attention from the small failures of the government to the miseries to be caused by hartals," commented a top AL leader.

Boycott of and abortive bid to resist the January 23-25 municipal polls brought debacle for the opposition parties, especially the BNP, insiders felt. And now the main opposition party is facing mounting pressure from within not to repeat the practice in the case of politically significant elections to the upazilas and the city corporations, they said.

Against this backdrop, said a BNP joint secretary general, the party has decided to revive the anti-government agitation with issues of public interests at the moment. "And a decision about the coming local polls and launching of the out-governments movement will come later, depending on public support to those issues," he said, asking for anonymity.

But he made it clear that his party would not contest any election under the incumbent CEC who he said had already proved his bias for the ruling party. "We're not participating in the May 4 Meherpur by-election," he pointed out.

The BNP-led opposition alliance has called for a nationwide dawn-to-dusk hartal on April 18 to press home its four-point demand; and to protest deterioration of law and order situation, spiralling price of essential commodities, and crisis of electricity and water.

The hartal call was made by BNP, Jatiya Party, Jamaat-e-Islami, Islamic Oikya Jote, and some other smaller parties at separate rallies organised in observance of the nationwide Demonstration Day yesterday.

To drum up support for the nationwide shutdown, the opposition parties will simultaneously hold rallies, stage demonstration and bring out processions in all thana headquarters on April 15.

The parties will also stage demonstration and bring out torch procession in all cities, divisional and district headquarters on April 17.

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Hartal again

Dawn to dusk on Apr 18

By Staff Correspondent

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Sacrificed

This is how environment pays the price. Greens go grey (right) as emission of pollutants from brickfields (above) coupled with heat, radiation retards vegetation in the radius of 30 kilometres. For decades, the environmentalist's concern has fallen on deaf ears.

—Star Photo: A K M Mohsin



Baleful billows from brickfields

By Morshed Ali Khan

Emission of toxic and particulate matters from hundreds of brickfields around the capital is not only causing serious health hazard, but also destroying vegetation.

This is dry season and time for the brickfields to work day and night. Once the rain comes the furnaces will be inundated and the mills will be closed. Bricks produced now will be sold then.

Operating day and night, these brickfields are spewing tonnes of waste into the atmosphere. They are indiscriminate in their use of cheap fuel sources.

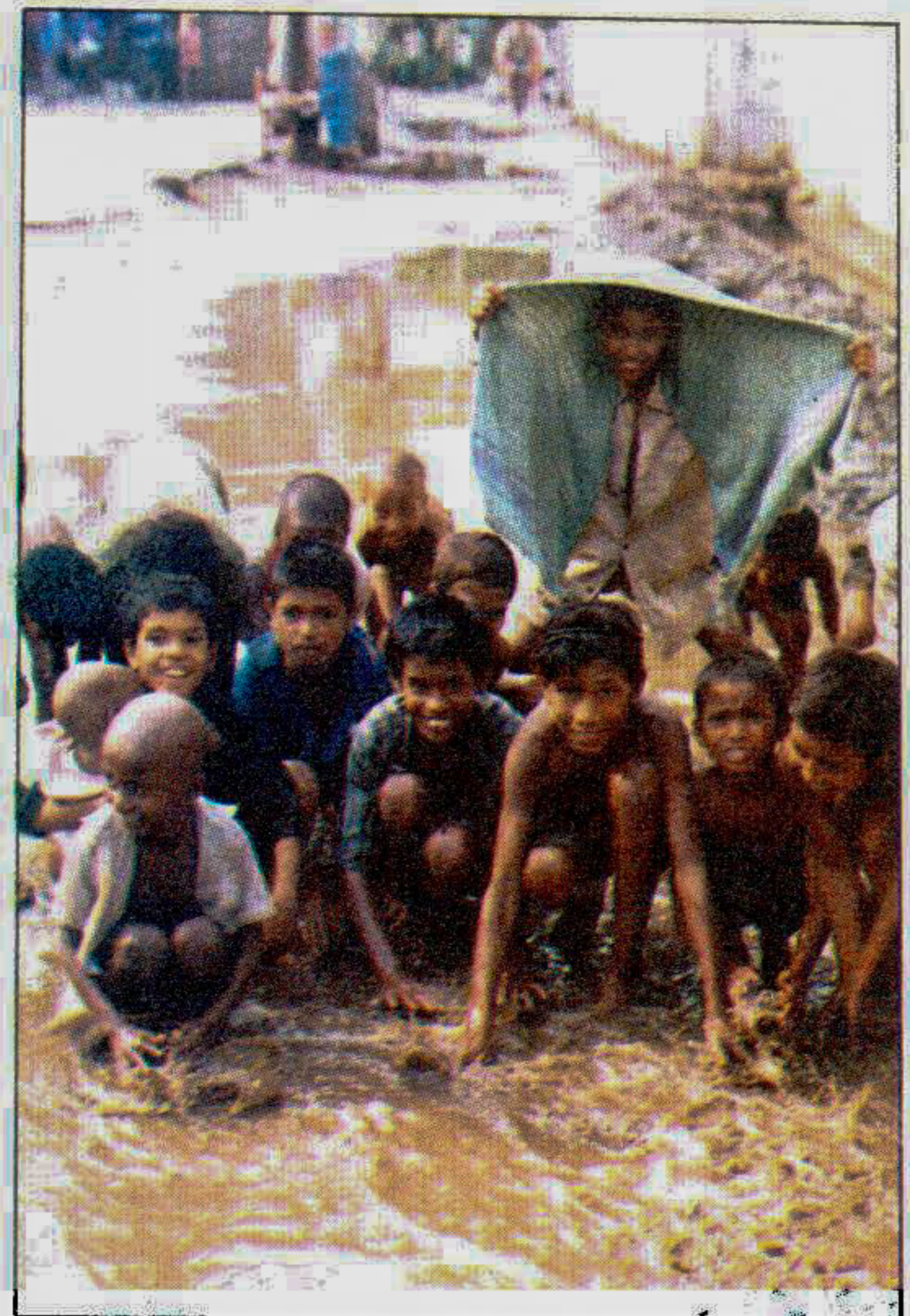
Though the exact number of brickfields is unknown, it is estimated that there are 3-5 thousand around the capital alone. A construction boom in Dhaka has increased the demand for bricks.

Law requires the chimneys to be fitted with filters and for them to be high enough to emit smoke in the air beyond human contact. But few follow the law.

"None cares for the existing law in this booming business. And we have almost no mechanism to enforce rules," said a frustrated Department of Environment (DoE) official.

In addition to particulate matters, these furnaces also gush out fluorine gas into the atmosphere. The gas results from burning earth and directly affects all kinds of vegetation.

There isn't any government effort to introduce gas in these brickfields either. A brickfield owner in Joydevpur, Jashimuddin, said he paid highly for coal, wood, tyres, etc. "If the government gives us an alternative such as industrial cylinder gas, we are ready to go for it," he added.



Rain brings broad grins

Light drizzle it was yesterday morning, but enough to inspire broad grins on these fresh faces. Star photo: AKM Mohsin

Business takes new proportions

On sale are seats on boards as sponsors of recently-approved private banks try to make money

By Rafiq Hasan

Sponsors of some newly approved private banks are allegedly selling equity shares at higher prices, offering directorship of the banks, sources said.

The government recently approved eight proposals for private banks.

Sponsors of these proposed banks are now mobilising money for paid up capital by offering seats on the board against payment of a 'premium' of 25 to 40 per cent over the face value of equity capital.

For example, if somebody wants to be a director, he can subscribe to equity worth Tk one crore by paying Tk 1.40 crore.

According to rules, a new bank requires an initial paid up capital of Tk 20 crore, where the number of directors can be up to 20.

The eight approved banks and their main sponsors are: Premier Bank Limited (sponsor AroBengal Chairman Dr. H B M Iqbal MP), First Securities Bank Limited (sponsor businessman Salauddin Khan), Bangladesh Trade and Investment Bank Limited (sponsor Kazi Akramuddin Ahmed), Managing Director of Eastern Engineering, Bengal Export Import Bank Limited (sponsor Enamul Huq, Managing Director of EnergyPack Limited), Bank of Asia Limited (sponsor A Rauf Chowdhury, Chairman of Rangs Group), BRAC Bank Limited (sponsor Fazeel Hasan Abed, founder of BRAC), Bank One Limited (sponsor businessman Ashok Das Gupta) and

Mercantile Bank International Limited (sponsor politician and jute trader Mohammad Abdul Jalil).

These were selected from among 61 proposals and the sponsors who will be able to mobilise the paid up capital will get licence for operation.

Each proposed bank has two or three sponsors. The remaining 16 or 17 directors are now being selected by collecting 25 to 40 per cent premium on the equity share offered to them.

The sponsors are justifying collection of the premium saying that they had to spend "extra money" for getting approval.

The money thus realised is either being used as the equity of the main sponsors or diverted to other purposes, the sources claimed.

The sponsors are also taking informal interviews in selecting directors, and examining their financial strength, business ability and political identity.

Many businessmen are believed to be buying equity capital of the proposed banks at higher prices to enhance their social status by becoming bank directors and to "extract financial facilities" from the proposed banks.

Deputy Governor of Bangladesh Bank Khondker Ibrahim Khaled however said he did not think that businessmen would agree to pay Tk 1.40 crore against the equity share of Tk 1 crore.

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RHD on a rash drive

Roads officials find problems with what others follow at ease

By Gobinda Bar

There have been allegations about widespread irregularities in the process of appointing consultants for different projects under the Roads and Highways Department (RHD).

Unlike other departments, RHD never adheres to open bidding for pre-qualification or short listing of consultants as per rules to ensure transparency, it was alleged.

Officials at the Local Government Engineering Department (LGED), Water Development Board (WDB) and Department of Public Health Engineering (DPHE) told The Daily Star that they hold open bidding for short listing of consultants.

Asked, RHD chief engineer Mohammad Abdul Wadud said it was not mandatory to advertise before short listing of consultants. "It entirely depends on us whether to advertise or not before making any short list

ing."

Agreed a World Bank official. "Open bidding is a must. We do not accept any proposal if it is not transparent."

RHD officials often tend to favour some sycophant firms, an allegation they denied. In favouring the firms, the officials often shortlist 'non-prospective' firms knowing it never show up for the final bidding, it was also alleged.

Only recently, one such allegation was raised when only three out of six short-listed firms submitted tender for construction of Pakshey Bridge, sources said.

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But the RHD officials said they do not follow the said "provision" of open bidding as "it is not required".

RHD appointed consultants for big projects like Road Rehabilitation and Maintenance Project, RRMP-1, RRMP-2, RRMP-3, Pakshey Bridge and Road Improvement Works (Dhaka Tangail Road) without any open bidding, creating discontent among both local and international consultants.

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Petrobangla defaults in payments

Not enough cash in the corporation coffer for Oxy's Jalalabad gas

By Sharier Khan

Petrobangla has not been able to pay for gas sold by Occidental from the newly developed Jalalabad Gas Field last month, sources said.

Although Petrobangla decided to pay for the gas supplied by foreign oil companies under Production Sharing Contracts (PSC) from last month, it is yet to finalise the financial procedure to pay the monthly bills in foreign currency to the companies, the sources added.

The finance ministry had earlier paid gas bills under PSCs. But as the ministry was facing fund crisis, it told Petrobangla to arrange and pay the bills.

Though Petrobangla is a profit-making organisation, sources said, it did not have the necessary funds in place to pay

the gas bills.

Occidental had started with supplying 100 million cubic feet of gas a day (mmcf) from early March, but for the most part of the month, it supplied 60 mmcf of gas.

The country consumes 900 mmcf of gas. Of this, British company Cairn supplies between 60 mmcf and 140 mmcf while Occidental supplies 60 mmcf.

Sources further said that since things were moving very slowly in Petrobangla, the foreign companies feared that they would have difficulties in getting their bills paid in time.

Jalalabad gas is comparatively cheaper than Cairn's offshore Sangu gas. The price of Sangu gas is now 1.4 dollar per

unit while that of Jalalabad gas will be around 1.2 dollars. Petrobangla sells this gas at 1.1 dollar in the domestic market.

But the RHD officials said they do not follow the said "provision" of open bidding as "it is not required".

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