ical standoff would have some

are still in a dilemma on their

participation in the crucial

elections to the upazila

parishads and the city corpora-

tions as they are yet to resolve

intra- and inter-party disputes

on the polls issue, according to

not concerned about the fresh

hartal by the opposition. "Let

them call hartal. Hartal will

divert public attention from the

small failures of the govern-

ment to the miseries to be

caused by hartals," commented

to resist the January 23-25 mu-

nicipal polls brought debacle

for the opposition parties, es-

pecially the BNP, insiders felt.

And now the main opposition

party is facing mounting pres-

sure from within not to repeat

the practice in the case of polit-

ically significant elections to

the upazilas and the city corpo-

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 oust-gov-

ernment movement will come

later, depending on public sup-

port to those issues," he said.

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-elec-

But he made it clear that his

asking for anonymity.

tion," he pointed out.

Against this backdrop, said

Boycott of and abortive bid

The ruling Awami League is

insiders.

a top AL leader.

rations, they said.

But the opposition parties

impact on the Paris meeting.

PEOPLE Abdul Mannan Syed face to face with Ziaul Karim Razia Khan Amin talks about his childhood days to Sonia Kristy

the environment

PHOTO FEATURE AKM Mohsin's photo essay on the negative impact of brickfields on

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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 countrywide 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 industries minister Tofail Ahmed told The Daily Star yesterday. referring to the meeting with the prime minister April 4

"We don't like to see the donors interfere in local poli-

tics," 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 govern-

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

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-op-

position dialogue. But chances are slim for a meeting at Bangabhaban before the April 19-20 Aid Club meet ing in Paris. However, it is widely speculated that the polit-

Hartal again

Dawn to dusk on Apr 18

By Staff Correspondent

The BNP-led opposition alliance has called for a nationwide dawn-to-dusk hartal on April 18 to press home its fourpoint 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 Oikva Jote, and some other smaller parties at separate rallies organised in observance of the countrywide

Demonstration Day yesterday. To drum up support for the countrywide shutdown, the opposition parties will simultaneously hold rallies, stage demonstration and bring out processions in all thana head

quarters on April 15. The parties will also stage demonstration and bring out torch procession in all cities. divisional and district headquarters on April 17.

BNP Chairperson Begum Khaleda Zia announced the hartal programme at a public meeting at the Nabinagar High School playground in Brahmanbaria last afternoon.



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 par-

ticulate matters from hundreds of brickfields around the capital is not only causing serious health hazard. but also destroying vegeta-

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 increa-

sed 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 brickfileds 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.

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

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

The eight approved banks and their main sponsors are: Premier Bank Limited (sponsor AreoBengal 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 Fazle Hasan Abed, founder of BRAC), Bank One Limited (sponsor businessman Ashok Das Gupt) and

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

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 di-

verted 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 iden-

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 crore.

According to him, the BB has See Page 12 Col 8

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 consul-

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.

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

from a long list. All we have to do is justify the list by adhering to rules that the consultants be chosen from across the world and that they must be experienced," he said. The list needs to be approved by foreign development partners, he added.

However, the officials of LGED and DPHE were surprised that short listing of consultants could be done without any competitive bidding.

LGED chief engineer Quamrul Islam Siddique said government rules made open bidding mandatory for short listing of consultants. "Open advertisement with 30 days' time for international consultants must

be floated before any short

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 'nonprospective firms knowing it for sure those firms would never show up for the final bidding, it was also alleged. Only recently, one such alle-

gation was raised when only three out of six short-listed firms submitted tender for construction of Pakshey Bridge, sources said.

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 procedures 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 (mmcfd) from early

March, but for the most part of

the month, it supplied 60 mmcfd of gas. The country consumes 900 mmcfd of gas. Of this, British company Cairn supplies between 60 mmcfd and 140 mmcfd while Occidental supplies 60

Sources further said that since things were moving very slowly in Petrobangla, the foreign companies feared that they would have difficulties in get-

ting 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. These companies are aiming at fast recovery of their investment by selling gas to local or

international market. But, the foreign gasfield developers will not be able to supply more gas to the national grid even il Petrobangla needed it. *Because our current gas pipeline infrastructure would not support more gas supply. We are saturated now as long as the pipelines are concerned," said a

source. Petrobangla is neither hammering on building gas consumption infrastructure. On the other hand, the foreign companies and diplomats concerned are pressing for pipeline export of gas.

The Jalalabad gasfield has a reserve of 1.5 TCF of gas. Sources said that Occidental was more worried about the financial prospects as it is currently working on the Bibiyana gasfield, said to be the biggest ever find in Bangladesh.

Occidental has completed the final report on the Bibiyana gasfield and it is now conduct-

ing a three-dimensional seismic survey there to confirm the findings. Sources said it is believed to have between 3 and 5 TCF of recoverable gas. But there might be some geological problems which would need to be addressed before Occidental began development of the gas-

Superpower push for port projects in Patenga

By Rezaul Karim

Construction work for a private terminal at Patenga in Chittagong has been made uncertain by a dispute between the

Rain brings broad grins

Light drizzle it was yesterday morning, but enough to ins-

pire broad grins on these fresh faces. Star photo: AKM Mohsin

UK and USA. The war between the two super powers has put the government of Bangladesh, particularly the Ministry of Shipping. in a dilemma as both sides are fighting heart and soul to get the construction job that involves several hundred million dollars.

Though the government gave the go-ahead to US-based

Stevedoring Services of America (SSA), it was forced to postpone the project due to resistance from port workers and the Mayor of Chittagong City Corporation, and objection raised by an UK-led international consortium, Port Venture Limited (PVL). PVL claimed that it had car-

ried out a vigorous feasibility study and submitted a complete proposal to the Ministry of Shipping and other authorities concerned in March 1997 after getting the green signal from

the government side. Port of Singapore Authority (PSA) is one of the major partners of the UK consortium. Officials of the British Department of Trade and Industry and British High Commission in Dhaka submitted the proposal.

The SSA offered to construct two container terminals, one at Patenga and another at Pangaon in Dhaka with accompanying integrated barge services between the two facilities at a cost of 438 million US dollars on BOO basis and sought a

99-year land lease, renewable for another 99 years. On the other hand, the PVL

offered to construct and operate a new fully-equipped international standard container terminal at the mouth of the river Karnaphuli on BOO/BOOT basis at a cost of 290 million US dollars over 25 years. The PVL project cost also includes road and rail infrastructure development in Chittagong. There are allegations that

the government ignored the

proposal made by the PVL and

erting undue influence, and violating existing rules and procedures. The SSA and Orient Maritime Ltd Bangladesh formed SSA Bangladesh, a US-Bangladesh joint venture com-

gave permission to SSA by ex-

pany, with each side having 50 per cent ownership. Richard Finch, one of the directors of the PVL, said their proposal was submitted much earlier than the SSA, but the government approved SSA. which didn't carry out any

study on the project.

The PVL raised strong objection and lodged complaints to different government authoriincluding the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Ministry of Shipping after the government approved SSA.

The Ministry of Shipping and ex-Deputy Minister for Shipping Saber Hossain Chowdhury denied that the Ministry had received any proposal from the PVL for setting up a container terminal in Chittagong. It is suspected some

dishonest officials in collaboration with influential sections of the government party concealed the PVL proposal from the ministry. But the Parliamentary

Standing Committee after examining papers and documents of PVL recently asked the Ministry of Shipping to immediately submit a detailed report on the PVL proposal and other necessary papers to the com-mittee. But the Ministry is yet to submit the report.

Twenty-two trade unions at

all-out movement following the government approval given to SSA. The City Mayor also op-

posed the construction of the private port and expressed solidarity with the port workers. The workers demanded cancellation of the order, fearing that the private port would destroy the entity of the existing port and consequently their hopes of employment.

Though both the two bidders are private sector companies. See page 11

Chittagong Port launched an