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## Dancing with the *enfante terrible*

By Shehab Ahmed

It was like playing Russian roulette. Every time the River Brahmaputra changed its course, Abdul Quadir and his family had to move and rebuild their homes. They had to do it 13 times in 26 years at Char Harichandi of Gaibandha district, one of the many shoals that dot the world's most unpredictable river.

Lost people inhabiting this shoal on the threshold of the 21st century without electricity, roads, schools and doctors, the Quadirs are on their toes again, watching the river every morning along with 2500 neighbours.

Slashing through the landscape like a hot knife in butter, they are also facing the wrath of a power company trying to steer clear the place for their 60-megawatt barge-mounted power plant, nearby.

Two mechanical diggers mounted on a dumb barge and several dredgers have been trying to scoop tonnes of sand from the riverbed to make room for the power plant carrying barge to float down the old course of the Brahmaputra to Mymensingh.

The structure tried to raft down with the swelling Brahmaputra last year when the river rose to an all-time high, in a deluge the century had never seen before.

But it was already too late. The floods were on retreat and the Brahmaputra was shrinking, leaving the barge stranded.

It should wait a few more days. The floods would swell the river again and let it pass smoothly instead of cutting a passage at our cost," said Amir Hossain, a teacher and a quack at neighbouring Sanyasir Char.

As a rain-swept dusk cast its long shadow across the shoal, the landscape changed rapidly. Since the inundation, straw-roofed homes rose on elevated plinths to escape the next turn of the river's fury as diligent farmers rebuilt their lives and reaped a bounty from the silts.

Now the shining beacons of the barge and the sodium lights of the dredgers overwhelm the homes, reinforced by *Dhol Kalni* and *Helancha* to keep the silt compact.

Amir Hossain fears they might be washed away if the dredgers make a deep cut in one of the Jamuna channels, diverting the hydraulic pressure of the river towards their chars.

The shoals are still very fragile, he says, particularly after the three-month assault



Life is like that

They live with the floods. A peasant woman takes care of her bean vines (top) at a raised place near her house at Char Talpatty in Gaibandha.

— Star photo

by last year's flood. The chars may not be able to withstand ferocity of the river, this monsoon.

The river has already flashed danger signals. It rose two weeks ago. Though it came down later, the early monsoon rains indicate that floods may not be far away, the grey-bearded teacher apprehended.

How do you know?

He laughed, condescendingly. It is indigenous knowledge which has been validated by our personal experience. It is a knowledge that was passed

down the family from generation to generation, who lived with the floods and the changing moods of the river.

His family has been on the river, following its changing course, adapting lifestyles with the emergence and disappearance of the chars from Sirajganj and further upstream.

His worries were echoed by Imam Hossain, the stocky Union Parishad member, who described himself as a 'Loke from Sarkari Dal' (Man from the Ruling Party). But that statement and his burly figure failed to hide the concern re-

flecting upon others who had gathered at the Sanyasir Char flood shelter.

The shelter was raised just in time by the Gana Chetana (People's Awareness), an NGO aided by British NGO OXFAM before the floods had engulfed the Sanyasir Char. Designed to shelter 250 people and their cattle, it floated over the river reigning the vast swath of chars.

"We are going to protest the dredging," Imam said. Even the shelter may not survive if the river course is tampered, he observed. (Part Two, next week)

## Defence corruption cases ignored for years

By Nazmul Ashraf

Audit objections to major financial irregularities in the country's defence sector remain undisposed for many years, encouraging further financial crimes.

Shockingly, authorities could only dispose of six of the 530 objections recorded officially in 26 years since independence of Bangladesh. The six settled cases of financial fraud occurred in 1984-85. In the same year, there were 21 such cases.

The remaining 524 cases of fiscal crime have claimed a total loss of Tk 109.45 crore plus another US dollar 1 lakh 51 thousand to the public exchequer, according to the latest re-

port published by the office of the Auditor and Comptroller General (ACG) of Bangladesh.

The highest number of audit objections -- 70, involving Tk 2.71 crore was reported for 1985-86 while the lowest (one each) was reported for '72-73 and '73-74, showing the losses at Tk 38 thousand 6 hundred and Tk 42 thousand 9 hundred and 17, respectively.

In terms of losses to the public treasury, the highest amount was recorded for '89-90. Money involved was almost Tk 69 crore, while the lowest was of Tk 37,465 in the fiscal year ending in '72.

"Non-disposal of these major financial scams is creating

grounds for increased acts of financial irregularity and indiscipline in the relevant institutions. Besides, these cases are also losing merit with the passage of time," said the defense audit report submitted in parliament, yesterday.

Finance Minister SAMS Kibria also submitted audit report on a number of government offices.

The ACG report dealt at length only on the 1996-97 audit objections to the expenditure by the army, navy, air force and related institutions in the defence sector. But it contained a brief account of such cases for other fiscal years.

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## Ideal School captures 19 positions

Students of Ideal School and College have dominated the merit list of SSC examination, this year under Dhaka Board, reports UNB.

At least 19 students, the highest number from any single institute, found their names on the merit lists of two groups -- Science and Business Studies. But no student under Humanities group could secure position on the merit list.

Twelve of them came from Science Group while seven others belong to the Business Studies Group.

In the Science Group, one student secured fifth position, two got 11th and 12th positions, three got 13th, one got 15th, two 17th and another student got 20th position.

In the Business Studies Group, the students secured 2nd, 3rd, 4th, 5th, 9th, 12th and 15th positions.

Mirzapur Cadet College is also in the lead as its students secured 15 positions including the first and the second on the merit list.

The candidates from Vigarunisa Noon School, another famous institution, bagged nine positions on the merit list.

They secured 3rd, 8th, 10th, 12th and 15th positions of Humanities Group and 6th, 9th, 13th and 16th positions of Business Studies Group.



## A view from the Gully

From Page 1

For a hard battle in the final on Sunday at Lord's. As the Kiwis posted a modest total on the board on a bright sunny day contrary to forecast, many an eye-brow was raised about the capacity of Pakistan to overhaul that total and they had reasons to be skeptical because of Pakistan's three consecutive defeats, specially their failure to overtake the modest Indian total of 227/6 or Bangladesh total of 223/9. But at the end of the day it was not a contest.

The toss was important and the first use of the hard and bouncy wicket was an additional advantage for the Kiwis. Shoaib Akhtar hardly gave any respite to Horne and Astle, the latter was only relieved to see his leg stump flying. Razzaq surprised Horne with a delightful slower delivery as Fleming, Tiose and Cairns engaged themselves in the recovery work. But Shoaib came back again and again and each time disturbing the Kiwis with his express deliveries. It is always a great sight to see a fast bowler tearing down the ground under

a clear blue sky to hurl deliveries that reach an incredible speed of 96 miles an hour. He may have bear a little costly without being erratic and was mainly responsible for restricting the Kiwis to a moderate total. For a change it was good to see both teams appearing without any apparent signs of pressure at an important match that was a sudden death. Losing the toss must have upset Wasim's game plans but it was not on view. He was cool as a cucumber so was the rest of his team members. And it was a good omen for them.

The Kiwis must have been pleased with their performance until Pakistan started their innings and once Geoff Allott was neutralised the rest of the bowlers appeared like school cricketers. Nothing they did had any effect on the Pakistan openers who put up a new first wicket partnership record of 194 runs in the World Cup.

Into their second final of the World Cup in seven years Akram and his men will be a tough challenge for any opponent.

## Uproar in JS

BNP lawmakers yesterday created an uproar in Parliament after the chair allowed a state minister to give personal explanation on assaulting a traffic police, an allegation raised by an opposition BNP member, reports UNB.

Dr Dewan Salauddin (BNP-Dhaka), during his deliberation on the new budget, said State Minister for Textile AKM Jahangir Hossain assaulted a traffic police at Gabtoli and took him to Mirpur with his hands and feet tied. He demanded an inquiry into the matter.

As the state minister stood up to give personal explanation on the allegation, the BNP lawmakers present in the House sprang to their feet and shouted, asking the Speaker not to allow such personal explanation.

However, the state minister said that this (Thursday) morning he went to Gabtoli and got stuck in traffic jam for about 15 minutes. At this stage, a truck hit his car from behind.

Jahangir said he then looked for a traffic police and when he found a sergeant sitting a little distance away, he asked him why he was not performing his duty.

The state minister added that people present there got furious with the traffic sergeant for sitting idle without helping clear the traffic jam.

To save him from public wrath, the state minister said, he took the sergeant to Mirpur police control room, lodged a complaint and left him there.

On getting the floor, senior BNP lawmaker Saifur Rahman accused the chair of allowing the minister to give personal explanation violating a decision of the Business Advisory Committee that none would be allowed to speak on point of order or give personal explanation during budget discussion.

Deputy Speaker Abdul Hamid, who was in the chair, said he allowed the minister to speak as the incident occurred in the morning and he wanted to know if the minister had assaulted any policeman as alleged by Dr Salauddin.

Later, taking part in the budget discussion, another BNP MP Dr Mohammad Ali said the traffic policemen took to the street yesterday to protest the assault on their colleague.

## Local body polls

Mannan smells conspiracy to keep BNP out of race

By Staff Correspondent

BNP Secretary General Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan has alleged that the government is conspiring to hold city corporation and upazila polls keeping his party out of the race.

He warned that the conspiracy would be resisted at any cost and BNP would not allow the government to hold the polls leaving the main opposition party aside.

Addressing the biennial conference of Comilla District (North) BNP at Redwan Ahmed College Premises at Chandina yesterday, Bhuiyan said, "The Jatiya Sangsad would also not be allowed to continue if BNP is forced to leave it".

The BNP secretary general went on, "We had boycotted the farcical municipal elections but we did not call for resisting the polls. City corporation and upazila polls will be resisted at all cost if the government tries to hold those without accepting the demands of BNP".

He said the government is giving shelter to terrorists in the ruling party throughout the country and is using the police force for party purpose after being sure of its ouster in the near future. As a result, murder, dacoity, theft, snatching, repression on women, extortion and other criminal activities are increasing day by day, he added.

"It is not possible for this government to restore law and order as it is using police in illegal activities. Police have been made inactive while Awami League leaders and terrorists in the party are controlling everything," Bhuiyan said.

Referring to 'gradual increase of popularity of BNP', he said the party will win more than 200 Jatiya Sangsad seats if free and fair elections take place now.

Presided over by Redwan Ahmed, the function was also addressed by, among others, Dr Khandaker Mosharraf Hossain MP, MK Anwar MP, Rafiqul Islam Mia, AKM Abu Zahed and Advocate Ferdous Akhter Wahida.

## Real estate developers say 'no' to 127pc VAT hike

By Staff Correspondent

Real estate developers have opposed the proposed 127 per cent increase in Value Added Tax (VAT) and imposition of advance income tax on their projects in the national budget for fiscal 1999-2000 saying that these would greatly affect the sector and throw many developers out of business.

The developers were addressing a press conference at the office of Real Estate and Housing Association of Bangladesh (REHAB) in the city yesterday.

They said as per their calculation and in view of the disproportionate hike in land prices, VAT should have come down from 1.98 per cent. But the government has 'wrongly compared' the developers with the contractors and is proposing VAT on them at par with that on contractors, they said.

"But we are paying VAT on all our purchases and our liabilities are quite different from

that of contractors," said Iftekhar A Khan, managing director of Bay Developments Ltd. Iftekhar explained that in the last six years, prices of land have, on an average, jumped from Tk five lakh to 17 lakh per katha in the city whereas prices of construction materials have remained the same or gone down.

The government has now proposed to increase VAT on flat and house purchase from 1.98 per cent on the total value to 4.5 per cent. It has also proposed to impose advance income tax on the developers before they get their project plans approved. The tax would be calculated at a rate of Tk 200 per square metre, they mentioned.

"Does the approval of a project plan guarantee that the project would be a profitable one or it would be completed at all?" asked Mukarram Hussain Khan, director of Concord Con-

dominium Ltd. Tufiq M Seraj, managing director of SHELTECH, said when a developer gets his plan approved, he is already burdened with a huge cost. "And what happens when one developer is implementing a project at Gulshan or Baridhara and another at Shamoly. How do you calculate the income from these two projects?"

President of REHAB A H M Abdul Momen quoted a report published in The Daily Star and said all developers are paying their respective income taxes after the sales are concluded. "If the National Board of Revenue thinks there are tax evaders, it should strengthen the collection system".

General secretary of REHAB M S Alam, said that the proposed increase in VAT and imposition of advance income tax will put the small developers in great distress.

## Hearing of charges against Khaleda on July 21

By Court Correspondent

Dhaka Divisional Special Court yesterday fixed July 21 for hearing on charges against opposition leader Khaleda Zia in a corruption case filed by Anti-Corruption Bureau (ACB) with Ramna thana in January 1997.

An official of ACB lodged the case accusing Begum Zia and her PS Shabbihuddin Ahmed of misappropriating Tk 63 lakh for decorating and renovating her Dhaka Cantonment residence when she was in power from 1991-96.

Following a petition of the defence lawyer seeking time for collecting certified copies of relevant documents and records in connection with the case, the judge Sheikh Fazlul Karim deferred the date to July 21.

Shabbihuddin appeared before the court yesterday. Khaleda Zia did not appear before the court as the court had earlier allowed her to be represented by her lawyer.

## Dhaka wants to mediate Kashmir dispute

By Staff Correspondent

Bangladesh is willing to negotiate in the current dispute over Kashmir between Pakistan and India, if both countries agree.

"If both countries request us to do so, we might try to mediate," said Foreign Secretary Shaif Sami, yesterday, in response to a query if Dhaka would initiate a move to resolve the on-going shooting in Kashmir.

Citing Sheikh Hasina's anti-nuclear mission to Delhi and Islamabad, he said, any negative development that creates an adverse impact on Bangladesh "would not be welcome."

Bangladesh, he said, stood for peace and peaceful relation among nations and want resolution of all conflicts "through talks and negotiation."

The foreign secretary while holding a media briefing on the forthcoming visit of the Indian prime minister at the foreign ministry said that the agenda for talks between visiting Indian premier Atal Behari Vajpayee and Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina will be open ended, when they meet in Dhaka.

"There will be no structured agenda."

The two heads of government will discuss bilateral is-

sues, improvement of ties, balancing the trade deficit and regional and international matters of common concern.

Asked about selling of utility services to India, including providing transit and port facilities, he explained that several proposals from the Indian side had been suggested at different times and replied, "We will not make any decision before studying the feasibility and expected benefits."

Responding to another question, Shaif Sami said the question of opening bus service between Dhaka-Siliguri and

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## Rallies, processions in BTV area banned

Holding of rallies and processions and chanting slogans in the key installation areas are restricted and punishable offence, an official handout said here yesterday, reports BSS.

Bangladesh Television (BTV) is also a key installation.

So holding of processions and rallies and chanting slogans in the BTV area are punishable offence under KPI Act, the handout added.