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Move on to grab Tanguar Haor defying govt plan

By Shehab Ahmed

The fate of Tanguar Haor in Sunamganj along the border is hanging in the balance as some local influential people are pulling strings in Dhaka to obtain lease of the 9725 hectare wetland, declared last April as an ecologically critical area (ECA) by the government.

After declaring the near-fresh water lake as an ECA, the Ministry of Environment and Forests (MOEF) sent a proposal to Prime Minister's Office (PMO) last week to declare it as 'Ramsar' site in compliance with an international declaration at the Iranian city of Ramsar to better conserve the world's wetlands. Bangladesh is a signatory to the Ramsar Convention.

MOEF also wrote letters on August 9 to the land ministry, ministry of local government and others concerned for retaining the wetland's status as ECA and not to renew a lease which expired in December last year. It pointed out in those letters that it was being considered to be declared a Ramsar site to preserve the wetlands in pristine forms and better manage their resources under an integrated plan involving the community.

On expiry of the lease the influential ones backed by political high-ups put pressure on the land ministry officials to get their files cleared on leasing the haor for a sum of Tk 45 lakh, highly placed sources told The Daily Star yesterday.

But land ministry officials who had considered the lease proposal declined to make any comment on the fate of the lake. The MOEF officials refused to say anything other than confirming sending of the proposal to the Prime Minister's Office to declare it as a Ramsar site.

The haor, a rich home to 250 species, including 17 endangered species of fish, yields at least Tk 10 crore annually from its resources. The resources include the country's lone surviving swamp forest of Hijal, Karach, Gunjikata and Chhon-grass, local sources reported.

"The lease, if given the franchise would be tempted to reap a quick harvest in the dry season, going for draining part by part the wetland and reap all the fish. He would be in a hurry to do so since he knew that the lake would soon be declared as a Ramsar site," an expert from the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) observed.

Anisuzzaman Khan, the expert who prepared a detailed study by the National Conservation Strategy along with five other experts including Wim Giesen from IUCN expressed the fear that the wetland would lose its natural character if it was leased out for indiscriminate fishing.

He said their study had identified the decline of fishery production due to over fishing, depletion of natural resources like reeds and swamp forest which threatened the birds like the Pallas's Eagle, having their last retreat in the lake.

Besides the study found that poachers had an annual feast of migratory bird including some of the rare ones like Black Net Stork, only a few hundred of whom are surviving in the world, living mainly in Tibet.

They also noted that a growing conflict between the local community and the leaseholders, who, as a practice, had always sub-leased it to groups of fishermen and brought cheap labour from outside. The practice was something the locals loathed.

They also despised the leaseholder for charging them even for using the water to raise their ducks. They normally paid Tk 200 for a flock of ten ducks for using the lake, the sources said.

Khan said the study had called for an integrated conservation and community management plan involving an estimated 25,000 poor people that lived in the 46 villages on the banks of the lake without the leasing it.



Indian elections: Vote counting starts today

From Pallab Bhattacharya

NEW DELHI, Oct 5: After the battle comes the countdown. A countdown for the counting of ballots which starts tomorrow. A countdown bristling with suspense, exit polls notwithstanding.

Anxiety, doubts and questions are the buzzwords at the headquarters of major political parties across India.

Top leaders, winding up a month-long frenzied campaign, are back at the headquarters and have begun stock-taking, assessing their parties' prospects in the just-concluded general elections and charting future course of action.

Although exit polls project a clear majority for the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance, anxiety continues to nag the ruling combine.

What happens if exit polls are wide off the mark? Will Uttar Pradesh, the key state from electoral arithmetic point of view, bring a greater setback for BJP than predicted by pollsters? Will anti-incumbency factor affect the prospects of BJP's key allies like Telugu Desam Party ruling Andhra Pradesh state and Akali Dal governing Punjab?

On the other hand, the edge-of-the-seat suspense appears to have gripped the main opposition Congress camp. The party hopes psephologists go awfully wrong so that it has a real chance to bounce back to power after four years.

The Congress looks forward with great hopes to its show in states like Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Punjab and Uttar Pradesh.

Suspense is also building up among smaller parties like Mulayam Singh Yadav's Samajwadi Party, Laloo Prasad Yadav's Rashtriya Janata Dal and ally of Congress Kanshi Ram's Bahujan Samaj Party and the Left parties.

The exit polls have not given these parties even 100 seats taken together. In the event of a hung parliament, however, these parties will play a role in forming government.

Both CPI (M) General Secretary Harkishan Singh Surjeet and Mulayam Singh Yadav claim that neither BJP nor Congress would get enough seats to form government in their own and a 'third front' dispensation would be in place.

Political observers are keeping their fingers crossed. They debate what will the performance of Nationalist Congress Party led by Sharad Pawar especially in Maharashtra, Pawar's home states.

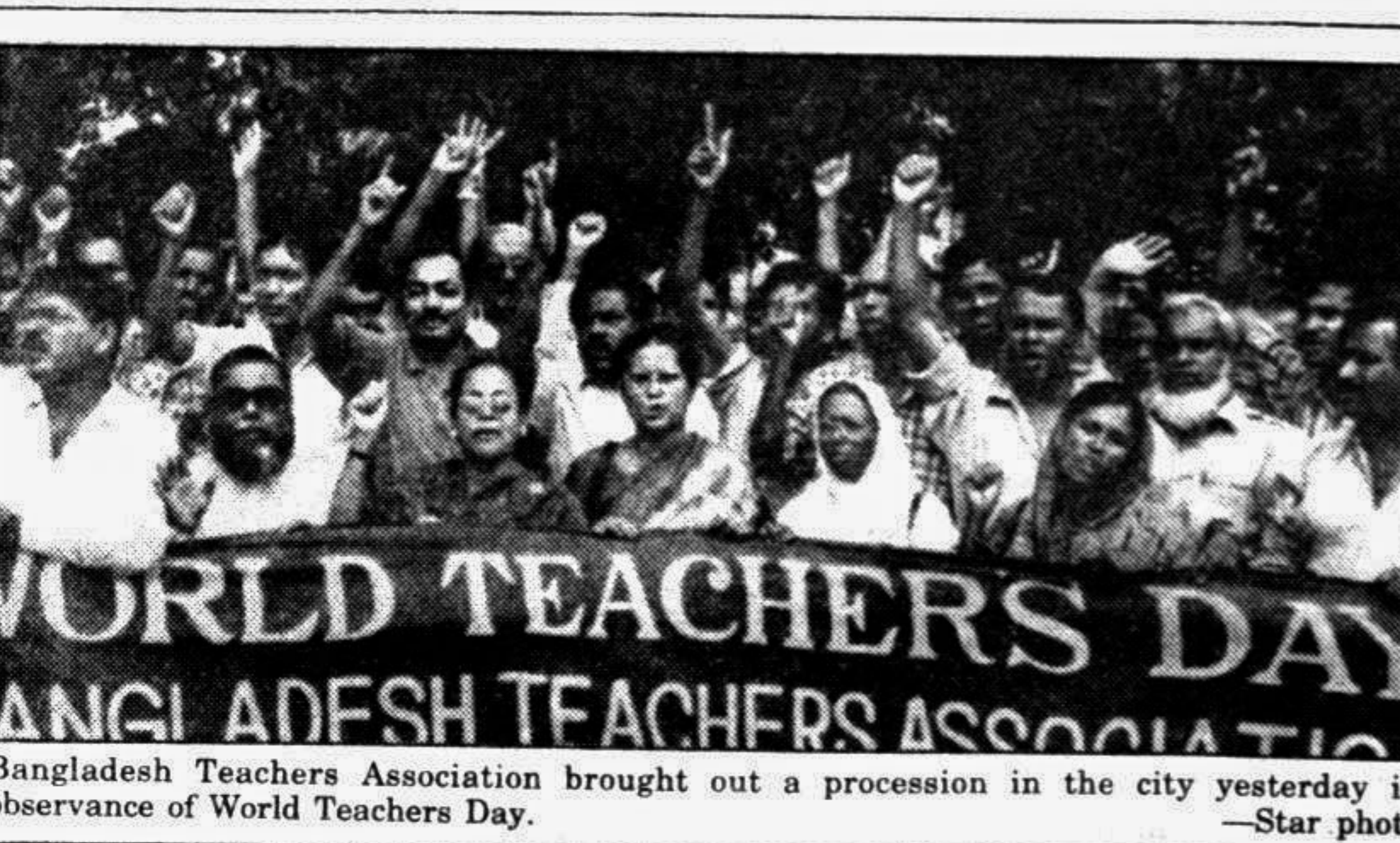
Will Mulayam Singh Yadav and Pawar support a Congress government without Sonia Gandhi as its head, as indicated by them in the party? Both Yadav and Pawar are opposed to Sonia becoming the Prime Minister because of her foreign origin.

Will Congress agree to forming a government sans Sonia just to keep BJP out of power?

Meanwhile, tight security arrangements have been made for counting of ballots for 537 of the total of 543 Lok Sabha seats. Of the six remaining, polling in five and partial re-polling in one will be held later.

The result of 45 constituencies, where electronic voting machines were used, will be available early tomorrow.

Among these constituencies are Lucknow, where Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee is in fray, Calcutta South, where Trinamool Congress leader Mamata Banarjee is contesting, and Gandhinagar (Gujarat) where Home Minister L K Advani is trying his luck.



Bangladesh Teachers Association brought out a procession in the city yesterday in observance of World Teachers Day.

Liquor tragedy: One more dies, 3 held at Lalmonirhat

LALMONIRHAT, Oct 5: Another victim of liquor tragedy died in Sadar Hospital here today raising the death toll to four, reports UNB.

Ten people were admitted to the hospital in critical condition after taking rectified spirit in the town Monday. Three of them died on Monday night.

Abdul Kuddus, 50, a labourer of Bangladesh Railway died in the hospital this morning.

Police arrested three culprits and sent them to the court. They are homeopath doctor Manjurul Alam, Aminuzzaman and Khorshed.

Hospital sources said two of the victims — Haider, 22, and Nannu, 30, might lose their eyesight due to adverse effect of the liquor.

JP, Jamaat tell NDI team Speaker lacks neutrality, ignores opposition

By Staff Correspondent

Parliament members from Jatiya Party and Jamaat-e-Islami during discussions with the visiting officials of the Washington-based National Democratic Institute yesterday alleged that the Speaker's lack of neutrality and the ruling party's tendency to ignore the Opposition made the Jatiya Sangsad ineffective.

Democracy will never be institutionalised and accountability and transparency ensured if the parliament is run in this way, they said at a workshop at Hotel Sheraton. The discussions were held in two sessions with JP MPs and Jamaat leaders.

The NDI officials held similar discussions with BNP MPs on Monday and will have a session also with MPs of ruling Awami League today. They are expected to make some suggestions to make the parliamentary system more effective in the country.

During yesterday's discussions, the NDI officials wanted to know from the MPs about the role of the Speaker, effectiveness of the parliamentary standing committees, scheduled debates in the House and discussed other related issues. They also sought suggestions for consolidating parliamentary democracy in the country meeting sources said.

JP MPs belonging to both Ershad and Manju factions joined the discussion.

The MPs told the NDI officials that the government was using the Jatiya Sangsad as a "rubber stamp" only to legitimise its activities.

The ruling party, by virtue of having majority in the House, gets any bill passed "hurriedly" without giving the Opposition "enough scope" for discussion, they alleged.

"In fact the parliament has no function after formation of government. Under the current system, it has become a rubber stamp after formation of the government," a JP (Ershad) MP told the workshop.

The MPs alleged that the Speaker was not neutral and he ran the Sangsad at the "dictate" of the Prime Minister, the sources said.

There should be detail discussion particularly on bills relating to public interest. But the Chair does not allow the Opposition lawmakers to speak on details about such bills, they alleged.

"The Speaker allows each member to speak for one or two minutes on important matters," said another JP MP.

Under the current system, the decision of the Prime Minister is final because there is no democracy even in the ruling party, they told the NDI officials.

They suggested change in laws to make the parliament and the standing committees more effective. They cited systems in parliaments in UK, Australia, USA and India.

The Jamaat team suggested resignation of the Speaker and the Deputy Speaker from their parties after election to the posts for ensuring their neutrality, representation of all parties in standing committees, equal distribution of posts of chairmen of standing committees between the ruling and opposition parties and a provision for posts of deputy chairmen in standing committees. If the chairman is from the ruling party, the deputy chairman should be from the Opposition, they suggested.

JP MPs who took part in the discussion were Ahsan Ahmed, Golam Mohammad Qader, Mohammad Tajul Islam, Mohammad Golam Hossain, Advocate Fazle Rabbi Anwar, Hossain Manju, Zulfikar Ali Bhutta and Abu Leis Mo h a m m a d Mobin Chowdhury.

The Jamaat leaders included Mizanur Rahman Chowdhury M P. Mo h a m m a d Kamaruzzaman, ATM Azharul Islam, Abdul Qader Mollah, Shaikh Ansar Ali, Barrister Abdur Razzak, Prof Mujibar Rahman and Latifur Rahman.

Nasim's statement baseless, says Mannan Bhuiyan

BNP Secretary General Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan blasted Home Minister Mohammad Nasim for implicating the opposition, including his party, in so-called plot to kill the Prime Minister, reports UNB.

In a statement yesterday he termed Mohammad Nasim's statement intentional and baseless. "It's a ploy to justify govt's fresh repression on the opposition parties, including BNP, and also to confuse the people."

Rebutting Monday's remarks by Nasim, Bhuiyan said the government being isolated from the masses was hatching these conspiracies.

"BNP was never involved in the politics of killing and conspiracy," he said.

The BNP leader cautioned that the government would not be able to hang on power through such media hype on so-called conspiracies involving the opposition parties.

22 exposed to radiation in ROK N-mishap

SEOUL, Oct 5: A nuclear leak at a South Korean power plant has exposed 22 workers to low-level radiation, officials said today, reports AFP.

Forty-five litres of heavy water leaked on Monday night during maintenance and safety checks at Wolsong, 260 kilometers southeast of Seoul, the Science and Technology Ministry said.

The reactors were not in operation at the time, it said.

Ministry officials said the leak appeared to have been caused by human error, stressing however that an official investigation was still underway.

"We cannot make a hasty decision yet but it looks like workers made a mistake," the ministry's Han Pung-U told AFP.

"The ministry now suspects that the heavy water might have leaked from valves of the moderator." The official declined to give details of the nature of the possible error.

But the official was quick to downplay the seriousness of the heavy water leak, the fourth such incident in South Korea since it launched its nuclear power programme in the late 1970s.

"This was a minor leak. The amount of radiation to which those workers were exposed to is equivalent to a patient undergoing four of five X-rays," he said.

The heavy water is used as a moderator at the plant to slow down the nuclear reaction and as a coolant.

But other officials said the leak was the first ever case of group contamination in South Korea, stressing however the exposed workers were not treated for serious contamination.

"All those exposed to radiation have now turned out to be safe," a ministry spokesman said. "None of them were hospitalized," he said adding all the men were currently resting at home.

Khaleda

From page 1

asked her about future programmes. "The BNP chief said the opposition parties have launched a one-day anti-government movement and will carry it forward," Holzman said.

Replying to a question, Holzman said that he also requested the Leader of the Opposition to avoid hartal for creating a favourable atmosphere for US investment in Bangladesh.

Begum Zia told him that BNP did not believe in the politics of hartal but the government forced it to call hartal, Holzman said.

He said the US wants to do business in different sectors and invest in power and gas sectors.

"I sought full co-operation of the Leader of the Opposition for US business and investment in Bangladesh," he added.

BNP Secretary General Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan MP, BNP Chairperson's Advisory Council members M. M. Rezaul Karim and Reaz Rahman were present during the discussion.

Barge with cement clinker sinks in Karnaphuli

From Staff Correspondent

CHITTAGONG, Oct 5: A barge loaded with 280 tons of cement clinker sank into the river Karnaphuli near the main channel this morning, port sources said.

The cause of the accident could not be known immediately, port sources said adding that it would be determined after the survey. Ship movement was not hampered after the incident.

The barge sank at 11 am today while lighterage imported cement clinker for a private cement company brought by a ship at the outer anchorage, port sources said.

BDR seizes Indian onion, sugar

By Staff Correspondent

Bangladesh Rifles (BDR) yesterday seized about 42.45 kilograms of smuggled Indian onion and about 76.61 kilograms of Indian sugar from its Kustia-Rajshahi sector yesterday, said a press release of BDR last night.

A special patrol team of BDR searched an engine boat in the river Padma in Chilmari area and recovered 5,800 kilograms of onion. The same team also recovered 7,900 kilograms of sugar from Char Chilmari area yesterday.

Besides, another patrol team recovered 68,714 kilograms of sugar and 36,650 kilograms of onion when they searched 14 engine boats in the river Padma at Uday Nagar.

Dealings with Shikdar

AL to take action against partymen

From Staff Correspondent

KHULNA, Oct 5: Leaders and activists of Khulna district and city Awami League and all its front organisations who had financial dealings with Ershad Shikdar will be facing organisational action soon.

The action will be taken as per directive of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina during her recent visit here, said a source in the city Awami League.

The source said that the Prime Minister was briefed by the Detective Branch about some party leaders who were the beneficiaries of Shikdar's wealth.

Meanwhile, businessmen of SMA Rob Shopping Complex decide to file cases against the mayoral candidate for realising money paid against possession of shops if any demolition drive is taken up.

Demolition of the shopping mall was scheduled to start today. But the Railway authorities have kept in abeyance as Rob has appealed for time till Monday next for showing necessary documents in support of its construction.

UNB adds: Police detected at least 20 institutions, established with the patronage of Ershad Shikdar.

"We got all information that these institutions were established with the help of Ershad and he was the direct beneficiary from these establishments," said a KMP official on condition of anonymity.

The establishments, including transport business and hotels, are either in his own name or his relatives or some of his henchmen.

The identified establishments are: Helal Transport, Jamal Transport, three shops in Jabbar Sarani, Shog Restaurant, Mamun Traders, Brothers Corporation, Nalsity Project, Sonali Traders, Darsh Chamber, Noor Transport, Khalifa Bhandar, Gaffar Foods, Star Trading, Taj Trading, Allar Dan Bhandar, Al-Madina Traders and Rakhi Traders.

Police also identified their owners and their connivance with Shikdar. Some other people having links with the Shikdar empire also have been unveiled.

Road accidents kill 9 in four districts

At least nine people were killed and 28 injured in separate road accidents in Dhaka, Feni, Sirajganj and Rajshahi yesterday.

UNB adds: Three men were killed and six others injured in road accidents at Sayedabad Bus Stand and in front of Mirpur 10 crossing in the city yesterday.

One of the dead was identified as Alauddin, 22, son of Khoka Mia of Mirpur Section-3. Hospital sources said one unidentified young man was killed when a tempo collided with a bus at the bus-stand at 5 am.

The injured, identified as Badal, 30, Nurul Islam, 22, Mintu, 26, Humayun, 20, Dilu, 30, and Rahim, 27, were admitted to Dhaka Medical College Hospital.

Another unidentified man was run over by a bus at the same bus-stand at 11 am.

Alauddin was run over by a bus while crossing the road in front of Mirpur 10 crossing at 9 am.

They were declared dead by the doctors on arrival at the DMCH.

Our Correspondent from Feni reports, at least four people were killed and 22 others injured in two separate road accidents on Dhaka-Chittagong highway and Feni-Majiddee Road yesterday.

Police said a Chittagong-bound microbus collided with a loaded truck at Mhuriganj on Dhaka-Chittagong highway in the noon, leaving two dead on the spot and eight injured.

In another incident, two people died on the spot and 14 others were injured when a Majid-bound bus collided with a truck at Bakar Bazar on Dhaka-Majiddee Road.

The injured were admitted to Feni and Daganbuyan hospitals and local clinics.

Of them, the condition of six were stated to be critical.

In Sirajganj, a pedestrian was run over by a speeding pick up van near the link road of Jamuna Bridge yesterday.

Witnesses said the accident occurred when the pick up hit Jahaboo, 55, at the Jamuna Bridge link road near Jhaoil over-bridge at 3:30 pm.

UCBL

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injunction to restrain Zafar Chowdhury and four others from continuing in the offices of chairman and directors.

Two days after, a higher court stayed the ad-interim injunction following a prayer from Zafar Ahmed Chowdhury and others.

Babu then went before the High Court seeking revision of the District Court's order. The High Court after hearing both sides fixed October 3, 1999 as the next date for hearing and stayed the order passed by the District Court. The court also directed the parties to maintain status quo.

The petition, however, came up for hearing yesterday due to hartal observed on Sunday.

Meanwhile, Babu yesterday called a press conference where he tried to establish his claim for the UCBL's chair and demanded Zafar's arrest.

He said that Zafar Chowdhury was illegally chairing the board meetings of the bank.

50 hurt as villagers clash near JMB West Station

From Our Correspondent

SIRAJGANJ, Oct 5: At least 50 people were injured, 15 of them seriously, in a clash between two groups of villagers near Bangabandhu Jamuna Bridge West Station today, police and witnesses said.

The clash erupted at around 3:30 pm at village Jawail over land dispute, snapping road communication between Dhaka and North Bengal for an hour, witnesses said.

Police dispersed the clashing groups and restored road communication.

The seriously injured were admitted to Sirajganj Hospital and Kamarkanda Health Complex.

No case was filed with the concerned thana and none was arrested in this connection till filing of this report at 7:30 pm today.

Owners of three jute mills asked to pay dues to workers by Oct 31

A high-level meeting of the government yesterday asked the managements of Kashem, Anwara and Mokbular Rahman Jute Mills to pay dues to workers and employees by October 31, failing which legal action will be taken against them, reports UNB.

Presided over by Industries Minister Tofail Ahmed, the meeting was attended by Labour Minister M A Mannan, Civil Aviation Minister Engr Mosharraf Hossain, State Minister for Jute Faezul Huq, ABM Abul Kashem MP, Managing Director of Kashem Jute Mills, Divisional Commissioner of Chittagong, deputy commissioner, police super of Chittagong and labour leaders of the three jute mills.

The meeting directed the administration to take legal action against the owners of the mills to realise dues of the workers.

Opposition mourns Bidyut's death at Sherpur

SHERPUR, Oct 5: BNP-led opposition alliance brought out a procession in the town today to mourn the death of BNP activist Bidyut Talukder, reports UNB.

Bidyut was killed in police firing in Sherpur town during countrywide hartal on Sunday.

Central and local leaders of BNP, JP, Jamaat and IOJ took part in the procession wearing black badge.

Black flags were hoisted atop most houses and business establishments in the town to mourn the death of Bidyut.

The five-day mourning declared by the opposition in Sherpur town will end with qulqhwani and milad mahfil in front of the BNP office on October 7.

The alliance leaders at a rally today vowed to oust the autocratic government through mass movement.

They called upon the people to attend the public meeting to be addressed by BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia at the municipal park in the town on October 9.

Proposed land policy reviewed

By Staff Correspondent

A high-level meeting at the Land Ministry yesterday discussed in detail the proposed National Land Use Policy.

On request from representatives of NGOs and farmers' bodies, the meeting decided to hold more discussions on it prior to its submission to the Cabinet for approval. The next meeting will be held on November 4, meeting sources said.

Besides high officials of relevant ministries, the three-hour meeting was attended by Dr Mohammed Selim, MP, experts and representatives of farmers' groups, UNDP and ADAB.

The meeting decided that suggestions on the proposed policy would be accepted for consideration till October 25. Some NGOs have already submitted their suggestions to the land ministry, the sources said.

Participants at the meeting felt that a national policy on land was an important one and should not be approved hastily. It should be framed in conformity with government's policies on agriculture, water, environment and related international rules.

The meeting also resolved to take views of some experienced persons like former land secretaries Abdul Mueed Chowdhury and Mokammel Haq.

Among others, Khushi Kabir of Nijera Kori, Harunur Rashid Howladar of Krishak League, Nurul Rahman Selim of Krishak Samity, Saiful Haq of Farm Labourers Union, attended the meeting.

Madrasah

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millicity.

Teachers of several religious schools opposed any move against religious schools.

"It is a United States' conspiracy against our madrasahs. They want to eliminate us because, we are friends of Taliban and raise our voice for the hero of Islam, Osama bin Laden," said Mufi Muhammad Usman whose Swad-i-Azam Ahle Sunnat party runs several religious schools.

"America knows only Islamic forces can offer resistance to its evil designs. We will keep on defending ourselves and the Muslim nation," a JUI leader, Qari Sher Afzal, said.

"We cannot be defeated as we are a force of Allah. We are here on the earth to hoist the flag of Islam," Afzal said.

Khulna clash

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they had come to remove the barricade.

The BDR personnel were going to Jessore.

The agitated workers and employees also pelted stones at the BDR men and damaged at least 30 private cars and buses.

BDR personnel opened blank shots in self defence.

Police rushed to the spot and fired at least 20 teargas shells and several blank shots to bring the situation under control.

The situation took a serious turn when police joined BDR men. The agitating workers used lethal weapons during the clash that continued till evening.

Transport service on Khulna-Jessore road remained stopped till filing of this report at 8 pm today.

Four people were arrested for their alleged involvement in attacking BDR personnel.

BDR has filed a case with Kotwali thana.

A tense situation is prevailing in Atrai Industrial Belt.

BDR and police forces have been deployed in the industrial area.

Cigarettes worth Tk 20 lakh seized in Ctg

From Staff Correspondent

CHITTAGONG, Oct 5: Anti-smuggling team of Chittagong Customs House in a raid this afternoon recovered 41 master cartons of smuggled cigarettes worth Tk 20 lakh under Port Thana, customs source said.