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12-hr hartal today

By Staff Correspondent
The countrywide 'blockade hartal' called by the BNP-led opposition alliance will begin at 6 am today.

The hartal was called to protest enactment of what it said 'black and repressive' Public Safety Act and attack on its mass procession on Sunday.

All-Party Action Committee (APAC) held rallies and brought out processions in the city yesterday afternoon in support of the 48-hour 'blockade hartal' in two phases — from 6 am to 6 pm today and 36 hours from 6 am tomorrow.

BNP secretary general Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan in a statement yesterday urged the people to make today's dawn-to-dusk hartal and the 36-hour-long hartal from Wednesday a success to accelerate fall of the 'unfit, corrupt and fascist government'.

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Many questions still unanswered, jurists say

By Staff Correspondent

Three leading jurists have expressed their reaction on the President's assent to the Public Safety Bill.

Barrister Syed Ishtiaq Ahmed and Dr Kamal Hossain, in a joint statement yesterday, said, "We have just been informed that the President's signature was obtained today (the fourteenth day, being the last day for such purpose) by ministers including the Prime Minister calling upon the President and extending an assurance that the unacceptably stringent provisions regarding bail would be rectified by an amendment to the law. Since Parliament is not in session, presumably such an amendment would be attempted by means of an Ordinance. It is thus clear that the Public Safety Bill as presented is admitted to contain unacceptable provisions at least with regard to bail."

"In our view there are other

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Prayer Timings

February 15

	Azan	Jamaat
Fajr	5:30	6:00
Zohr	12:45	1:20
Asr	4:30	4:45
Maghrib	5:58	6:00
Esha	7:30	8:00

Source: Islamic Foundation

President assents to Public Safety Bill

Provision prohibiting bail to be deleted thru' Ordinance: PM

Shortly before the deadline, President Shahabuddin Ahmed yesterday assented to the Public Safety Bill, despite opposition plea for him not to sign it into an act, reports UNB.

The President gave assent to the Bill after Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, along with Foreign Minister Abdus Samad Azad and Law Minister Abdul Matin Khasru, went to the Bangabhaban in the afternoon and parleyed with him for about an hour from 2:25 pm.

A press release from the Bangabhaban said during discussion with the Prime Minis-

ter, the President pointed out "certain objectionable provisions of the Bill, particularly the one that prohibits bail during pendency of appeal against conviction."

The Prime Minister assured the President — who had not signed the tough legislation until the eleventh hour of the stipulated 15 days time — that the provision as to bail would be deleted through an ordinance soon after the act would come into force.

"President Shahabuddin, on the assurance of the Prime Min-

ister, assented to the Public Safety Bill 2000," said the press release.

The President yesterday also assented to another tough legislation — the Women and Children Repression Prevention Bill 2000 — passed in Parliament the same day, January 30, with the Opposition staying out of the House for long.

The Public Safety Bill was brought by the ruling party to deal with rising crimes like snatching, hijacking, extortion, grabbing of tender, ransom, damage of vehicle and

other property and obstructing traffic.

Opposition leaders Khaleda Zia and H M Ershad had met President Shahabuddin Ahmed and requested him not to assent to the Bill. The President, however, apprised the leaders of his constitutional limitations and said he would do everything as per the Constitution.

The BNP-led four-party opposition alliance has called a three-day blockade hartal beginning today, demanding withdrawal of the Bill and resignation of the government.

President has lost his neutrality, says Khaleda

By Staff Correspondent.

BNP Chairperson and Leader of the Opposition in Parliament Khaleda Zia has said President Shahabuddin Ahmed did not want to assent to the Public Safety Bill but he was 'pressured' to sign it.

"He (Shahabuddin) was a judge and everybody knew him as an impartial judge. But he is not as people knew him and he has lost his neutrality if he signed the Bill under pressure from any one," she told newsmen at her official residence yesterday.

The former prime minister was giving her instant reaction on signing of the controversial Bill by the President.

Khaleda Zia said the President has done injustice to the people by assenting to the 'black law'. He had withheld the bill for long 14 days and didn't sign it because he realised that it is harmful and contrary to people's fundamental and human rights. Obviously there is 'something wrong' behind his signing of the Bill, she added.

"So far our knowledge goes, the President had received the Bill and also returned it, which meant that he did not want to sign it. He was pressured to sign it."

The Leader of the Opposition

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JS women's seats Bill seeking extension of tenure okayed

By Staff Correspondent

Cabinet yesterday approved a Constitution Amendment Bill seeking to a ten-year extension of the tenure of 30 reserved seats for women in the Jatiya Sangsad.

The approval came at a cabinet meeting held yesterday morning with Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in the chair.

Under Article 65(3) of the Constitution, the tenure of 30 reserved seats will be expired on April 14, 2001.

However, the Bill has not envisaged any change in the constitutional provision under which the female MPs in the reserved seats are being chosen by 300 legislators elected directly by the people.

The Bill — Constitution 14th Amendment Bill — will be placed in parliament during its next session. Law, Justice and Parliamentary Affairs Minister Abdul Matin Khasru told The Daily Star yesterday.

Passage of the Bill requires support of at least two-thirds of the 330-member Jatiya Sangsad.

"It is our constitutional obligation to make sure that the

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'Agitation to continue even during Clinton visit'

By Staff Correspondent

The BNP-led opposition alliance will continue its anti-government agitation even during the visit of US President Bill Clinton.

Clinton is scheduled to visit Bangladesh on March 25.

"Movement programmes cannot be stopped considering some one's arrival or departure," Khaleda Zia said when asked whether the Opposition would postpone its programmes during the visit of the US President.

The BNP Chairperson and Leader of the Opposition in Parliament was talking to newsmen yesterday after President Shahabuddin Ahmed assented to the controversial Public Safety Bill.

Giving her instant reaction, she said, "Our current programmes will continue and we will announce fresh programmes later."

IMF chief hurt during Sunday's procession

By Staff Correspondent

The International Monetary Fund's chief in Dhaka was injured and his vehicle was damaged during an opposition procession on Sunday evening.

"I have to report a security incident involving IMF staff and property in Dhaka," wrote Ronald P. Hicks in a letter he sent to headquarters after the incident.

Sources said the attack occurred just after the vehicle left the IMF's office in Dhaka. The opposition supporters shattered the car's windows, spraying the chief in the face with glass.

Police said they had no information about the incident.

Step to make up hartal loss EPB to keep textile cell open Saturday

By Rafiq Hasan

The Export Promotion Bureau's textile cell will be open next Saturday to make up for time lost during the opposition alliance's three-day hartal.

"I have talked to the vice-chairman of the EPB and he has agreed to keep the textile cell open next Saturday," said Anisul Haq, vice-president of the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association.

The announcement followed a recent meeting between officials from the association and the bureau. The association argued the cell should remain open because the garment sector had been seriously hampered by frequent hartals.

At first, M. Tazul Islam, director general of the textile cell, agreed in principle to the plan. However, he has assured association leaders since that the cell would remain open should the need arise.

Last month, the government ordered customs, ports, the export departments in state banks

and bureau's textile cell to remain open in principle on Fridays and Saturdays immediately after a hartal.

In a press release issued yesterday, the association expressed its grave concern over the opposition alliance's decision to call more hartals. It called on its members to work during the hartal and the subsequent holidays, since the government was keeping all export related offices open.

Otherwise, the association warned that garment factories won't be able to ship their goods and they will lose international customers. It also warned the politicians Bangladesh image abroad suffers during hartals.

In other business, association officials urged the bureau to finalise this year's distribution of garment export quotas for the USA and Canada by February 15.

The EPB started to distribute the quotas last October. About 75 per cent has been distributed

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Local body polls

We are just waiting for the schedules, says PM

By Staff Correspondent

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has said the government is ready to hold the Zila Parishad and Upazila Parishad elections, but the Election Commission is yet to announce the polls schedules.

"We are ready to hold the Zila Parishad and Upazila Parishad elections. But I don't understand why the Election Commission is not announcing the polls schedules... I don't know why they (EC) are shifting the dates for the elections repeatedly," she said.

Hasina was speaking at a reception accorded to her at Paltan Maidan in the city by Bangladesh Krishak League yesterday for being awarded the prestigious Ceres Medal by the FAO.

The Prime Minister said her government has introduced four-tier local government bodies for decentralisation of power with the objective of empowerment of the commonman and ensuring development at

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Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina plucked a guava from a tree at a makeshift peasant's house at Paltan Maidan in the city yesterday and gave it to a child. —Star photo

JS body's views surprise bankers, financial experts

By Inam Ahmed

Bankers and financial experts expressed surprise yesterday at the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Finance Ministry's comments on the Bangladesh Bank's jurisdiction over loan rescheduling.

They said they felt the committee wasn't familiar with the central bank's powers or the banking laws. It did not have all the information about the Rahman Group's down-payments, either.

In a statement released after its meeting on Sunday, the committee stated the Bangladesh Bank committed serious errors and violated the rules when it sent an application back to the Sonali Bank after 74 days.

The committee also expressed dissatisfaction with the central bank's refusal to implement the decision three months after Rahman Group followed Sonali Bank's advice and paid a down-payment of just over Tk 6 crore.

According to a Banking Control Division circular issued on December 11, 1995, a defaulter must pay 10 per cent of his outstanding balance as a down-payment before the bank will reschedule loans.

Normally, the down-payment is made after the bank announces its decision to

reschedule outstanding loans," explained a senior central banker associated with the restructuring of the financial sector. "Any payment made before the commercial bank's decision is considered to be a normal repayment and not a down-payment."

In this case, Sonali Bank verbally informed Fazlur Rahman about rescheduling in August 1998 and then acted on the decision in September. Since August 1998, the group has only deposited Tk 2 crore.

The rest of the over Tk 6 crore "down-payment" referred to by the committee in its statement was paid before the Sonali Bank's decision. This means most of the money could

Blatant lies, says Kibria

Finance Minister Shah A M S Kibria yesterday dismissed all the accusations made against him by the parliamentary standing committee on his ministry as 'blatant lies based on wrong information.'

The tussle between the Finance Minister and the parliamentary body heightened as the committee at a meeting on Sunday condemned what it called

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not be considered to be part of the down-payment, but as regular loan payments.

"So, the committee's view that the Rahman Group made a Tk 6 crore 15 thousand down-payment is not correct," said the official.

The expert also dismissed the committee's allegations that the central bank committed an error when it took 74 days to review the Sonali Bank's decision.

According to the Bank Company Act, commercial banks can sanction loans if the amount is below 15 per cent of its paid up capital. If it is more than 15 per cent, the bank must clear the transaction with the Bangladesh Bank, which is what happened in this case.

Usually, it takes the central bank 10 to 15 days to make a decision on a case. However, sources said Sonali Bank did not submit a loan repayment plan to the central bank, which it needs before any decision can be made.

As a result, the central bank had to initiate its own investigation into the Rahman Group, which took time to complete. The central bank is not bound by a deadline, which means the question of irregularity or violation of law does not arise, concluded the expert.

Second Round Block Bidding negotiations resume

By Staff Correspondent

The government yesterday resumed Second Round Block Bidding negotiations for oil and gas exploration in various blocks.

Unlike in the past, this time the Energy Secretary is heading the negotiators. Shell Oil yesterday held talks over blocks 5 and 10 at the Secretariat.

The government will also have a meeting with Irish company Tullow and American oil giants Chevron-Texaco on Thursday over Block 9. Due to a hartal called by the Opposition, the meeting may take place at the Petrobangla office.

This meeting is a follow up of the government's previous attempt to find Tullow a big partner for the block. Chevron-Texaco last sat with Tullow and the government early in '98 and then left Bangladesh.

By the middle of next week, US oil company Enron would sit with the Energy Ministry over blocks 3 and 6 and another US company, Pangaea, would sit over Block 8 at the end of this month. Negotiations with Enron and Pangaea are taking place after a year as these companies had earlier expressed their lack of interest for various

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Sumon murder Complaint case against 16 DB men, 9 others

By Staff Correspondent

Ahmed Hossain Sumon's relatives yesterday registered a complaint case with Chief Metropolitan Magistrate's Court, Dhaka, accusing 16 Detective Branch officials and nine local armed men of killing Sumon.

Haji Mozammel Hossain, brother of the deceased lodged the complaint case with the CMM's court yesterday.

The court ordered Shyamur OC to begin an investigation in connection with the murder and register a regular case in this regard. The Shyamur police earlier refused to register the complaint of Sumon's family on ground that the DB had already filed a case in this connection.

Sumon, 23, his elder brother, Shamim Hossain, and niece Tuli, 10, were shot during a DB raid at their Karimullah Bagh residence in Shyamur at about 3:30 am on Wednesday. The DB was accompanied by some masked men during the raid, the victim's family members alleged.

Sumon died at DMCH while two others are still under treatment there.

The 16 DB personnel involved in the pre-dawn raid on

Sumon's residence were charged with the killing.

The accused are AC Masum Rabbani and AC Tanveer Ahmed, Inspectors Mobarak Ali, Arman Ali, Lutfur Rahman, Jalil Ahmed, Wahab Khan, Rashedul Alam, Sis Mahbub Rahman, Wazed Ali, Nurul Islam, Mamun Khan, Morsalin Mahbub Rahman, Shamsuzzaman and Nurul Islam.

The nine armed hoodlums charged with the case are Abul, Zakir, Mohammed Ali Bhulu, Aban, Mona, Khokon, Ismail, Khairul and Noor Islam.

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37 Myanmar prisoners revolt in Sylhet jail

From Staff Correspondent

SYLHET, Feb 14: Thirty-seven Myanmar nationals, held for two years in Sylhet Central Jail after completion of their sentences, today revolted and threatened to commit suicide unless they were released immediately.

The situation was brought under control after a six-hour stand-off, jail and district officials said.

There are 79 Indian, Myanmar and Thai nationals in the jail.

Thirty-seven Myanmar nationals were imprisoned on charges of unauthorised entry and illegal fishing. Their jail-term ended on April 15, 1998. But, the Myanmar authorities refused to take them back despite repeated requests by Bangladesh government.

They were brought to the Sylhet Central Jail from Chittagong on March 16, 1999.

The Myanmar nationals came out of their cells at 7:30 am on the plea of taking bath and immediately climbed trees and on the roofs. They threatened to commit suicide if the jail authorities tried to get them down.

They also alleged they are given inadequate food and tortured by the jail police and Bangladeshi prisoners inside the jail.

Thousands of people surrounded the area and police condoned off the jail. Fire fighters were also put on alert.

The Deputy Commissioner, SP and other officials rushed to the jail and assured the Myanmar prisoners that the authorities would take necessary measures to send them back to their own country as soon as possible.

After DC's assurance of their

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Boro production likely to cross target this yr

By Reaz Ahmad

Winter rains should help this year's boro rice crop easily surpass the government's production target of 92 lakh metric tons, say experts and officials.

"Of course, there are a lot of ifs, ands or buts in predicting a good crop," said an expert. "Despite good weather throughout the season, occasional hailstorms and flash-floods can cause localised crop losses."

The unexpected rains that swept across the rice-rich north and north eastern districts provided plenty of water for boro. It was a blessing for farmers, since boro requires extensive irrigation otherwise.

Experts said the rain will help farmers cut their irrigation costs. This, coupled with reports of rising paddy prices, should ensure that farmers have enough money to invest in capital-intensive boro cultivation.

If the experts predictions are correct, then boro would become the third major crop to exceed the previous fiscal year's output.

Farmers produced 17 lakh metric tons of aus, compared to 16 lakh metric tons in 1998-1999, and 95 lakh metric tons of aman, 18 lakh metric tons more than last year.

Last year's boro harvest set a new production record as farmers reaped over 1 crore metric tons, helping Bangladesh recoup 1998 flood losses.

However, the government set this year's target at 92 lakh metric tons, since farmers tried to compensate for the 1998 flood by planting more boro, suggested a report published by the food ministry.

Officials said access to seed and fertiliser were key to maintaining production momentum.

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