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## Clinton keen on Kashmir talks

### US President doesn't rule out Pakistan trip

WASHINGTON, Feb 17: President Bill Clinton offered on Wednesday to mediate between Pakistan and India in their dispute over Kashmir and left open the door to visiting Pakistan during a trip to South Asia next month, reports Reuters.

The president said at a news conference he had not yet made a "final decision" whether to make a stop in Pakistan, whose military government has angered Washington by failing to set a timetable to restore democracy after its coup last October.

Clinton said the decision would hinge on what would advance the US interest in averting a nuclear arms race between the two countries, which staged tit-for-tat nuclear tests in 1998, as well as generally easing tensions in the region.

A conflict between India and Pakistan not contained is one of the most significant security threats to the interest of the United States in this new century, and I might say, a tragic

situation," Clinton told reporters.

He said the conflict over Kashmir, the mountain region that has sparked two of the three wars between India and Pakistan, would likely have to be resolved by the two on their own and said Washington could only step in if asked by both sides.

India has long opposed outside involvement in the dispute.

But asked if he was willing to mediate in the Kashmir conflict, Clinton replied: "Absolutely, I would. Why? For the same reason we've been involved in Northern Ireland and the Middle East. Because, number one, and most importantly, it is a hugely important area of the world."

The president stressed that he would seek to mediate only if both sides sought this. "If they don't want us, it won't do any good," he said. "We'd just be out there talking into the air, and I'm not in for that."

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US President Bill Clinton listens to a reporter's question on Wednesday during his first official press conference of the year in the East Room at the White House in Washington, DC.

— AFP photo

## NCB inertia irks Kibria

### Letters sent to bank chiefs to investigate default cases and punish culprits

By Inam Ahmed

As the balance sheets of the Nationalised Commercial Banks (NCBs) continued to deteriorate, Finance Minister S A M S Kibria has sent letters to all the NCB chiefs to investigate the defaulted loan cases and punish the officials concerned.

In his letter sent this week, the minister said the critical loan portfolio status of the four NCBs proves that there had been significant lapses on their part which must be addressed immediately.

At the same time, Kibria asked the banks to improve the quality of their internal control to check lapses in loan monitoring and supervision and appoint expert people in important positions to improve supervision by the banks' head offices.

He said the managements and boards of the banks should

run the administration strictly. Kibria pointed out that the amount of classified term and agriculture loans have crossed 50 per cent while the situation of trade advances and loans against imports and merchandises is even more alarming as of September 30, 1999.

The rate of classification for trade advances is 38 per cent while it is 31 per cent for loans against imports and merchandises.

The minister observed that since mortgages are taken against trade financing, there was no other reason but the prevailing laxity of the banks for the alarming classification rate.

Meanwhile, sources concerned said the central bank is also worried about the high default rate of the NCBs and is trying to find a way to stop further

escalation of the situation. The finance minister's letter has once again brought to the fore the need for exploring the reasons for the continued slide of the NCBs while the position of the private commercial banks is improving.

Explaining the probable reasons for the deterioration of the NCB's portfolios, Dr Debapriya Bhattacharya, who is on the Board of Janata Bank, said the latest figures show that the rate of default has grown faster than the rate of advance, leading to the present situation.

The consequences of the credit boom of 1994-95 are now affecting the banks. The ageing of these loans are now reflected in the default rate, he pointed out.

Dr Bhattacharya said the claim regarding improved-quality loans given in the sec-

ond half of 1990s are now being suspected.

The banks are witnessing a weak investment demand and are unable to recover advances. However, the performances of these loans cannot be assessed in isolation from the overall economic condition of the country, he noted.

Dr Bhattacharya mentioned three aspects of the worsening financial position of the banks.

"The weak internal corporate management and loan supervision are impacting the balance sheets," he said. "At the same time, the financial sector is unable to enforce the legal measures due to time consuming process."

But most importantly, it reflects the feeble general competitiveness of business activities, he said.

## India rules out US mediation

NEW DELHI, Feb 17: India today ruled out any US mediation in its bitter dispute with Pakistan over Kashmir, following an offer by President Bill Clinton to try to broker a solution to the long-running impasse.

Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh told AFP that Clinton's precondition that both countries would have to agree to mediation effectively ruled out any such role for the United States.

"Clinton has said that he would be involved only if the two countries are agreeable to the idea, and the two countries are not," Singh said.

While Pakistan is keen to internationalise the Kashmir dispute, India is adamantly opposed to any third-party interference, insisting that it is a purely bilateral issue that touches on issues of national sovereignty.

Another senior foreign ministry official expanded on Singh's comments, saying Clinton's remarks were an implicit recognition of New Delhi's opposition to outside mediation.

"What Clinton has said is that the US will not intervene unless both countries ask for it," said the official, who declined to be identified. "He has shown sensitivities to our concern that there is no scope for third-party involvement of any kind in Indo-Pakistani issues," the official said, reaffirming that India had "no plan" to request US help.

Clinton made his remarks at a press conference in Washington on Wednesday where he was asked if he would intervene to broker a solution to the long-running Kashmir crisis that has sparked two wars between India and Pakistan.

"Absolutely, yes, I would," Clinton replied.

However, the president also stressed that without requests from both sides any intervention by a third party would be useless.

## Adulterated food items flood markets

### Public health monitors' hibernation continues

By Morshed Ali Khan

Adulterated food items have flooded the city markets as officials of the Public Health Laboratory (PHL) responsible for testing foodstuff and prosecuting offenders are almost inactive for over two years due to alleged negligence of DCC's health department, investigations revealed.

Since the beginning of the year, DCC's Public Health Laboratory (PHL) tested only about half a dozen samples collected by field level sanitary inspectors of the health department, sources in the DCC said.

Last year, the PHL tested 273

samples which included food items from Chinese and other posh restaurants, different brands of edible oil, sweets, and packet foodstuff and found that 203 of those (74.32 per cent) were "highly adulterated".

Absence of monitoring is not only encouraging unscrupulous traders but also taking its toll on public health.

Experts say, gastrointestinal diseases, diabetes, heart ailments, liver and kidney problems among people are increasing due to consumption of "highly adulterated" foodstuff now flooding the markets.

Technical staff at the PHL are now lazing about amid expensive testing equipment inside a recently renovated three-story facility near Bangabazar. With the resources available, the PHL could conduct as many as 500 tests a month. But the inspectors who are supposed to collect samples "mysteriously" fail to do their job properly.

DCC's health department officials claim that only two inspectors are working and 13 others will join them soon after completing their two-and-half-year probation.

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## Irish-American deal nears finalisation

By Sharier Khan

US oil giants Chevron and Texaco agreed yesterday to a government proposal to tie up with Irish oil company Tullow to explore oil and gas in Block 9, the most prospective block offered in the Second Round Block Bidding.

Sources said the government proposed an equity sharing formula that was originally made by Chevron-Texaco back in early 1998. Under this proposal, Chevron-Texaco and Tullow enjoy 30 per cent share each and Bangladesh exploration company BAPEX gets 10 per cent as "carried over" interest.

Tullow would be the main operator of the block. In financial operations, Chevron-Texaco and Tullow would be joint operators, according to the pro-

posal.

However, Chevron-Texaco would continue to negotiate with Tullow and the government for a few more days before they officially agree to the proposal and sign any deal, sources added.

Aspects regarding the drilling programme of Block 9 were not discussed during yesterday's negotiations. Tullow won the bidding for Block 9 by offering to drill 10 exploratory wells in the first three years at a cost of 56 million dollars.

Typically, oil companies propose to drill two or three wells in the first three years and track records show oil companies often fail to drill a single exploratory well in that time-frame in Bangladesh.

Other oil companies in recent negotiations are trying to defer their well drilling proposals saying there was a lack of gas market in Bangladesh. They have proposed to sign Production Sharing Contracts (PSCs) outlining seismic survey operations only.

Though Tullow was originally selected for the drilling programme, it may be deferred now on the ground that much had changed in the energy market scenario since 1997," observed a source.

Although Chevron-Texaco had earlier proposed the same equity sharing formula, the government and Tullow did not accept it for nearly two years and kept the decision on Block 9 in limbo.

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## Another hartal on Feb 28

By Staff Correspondent

The BNP-led opposition alliance has called a countrywide dawn-to-dusk hartal on February 28 to press home its demands for resignation of the government and withdrawal of the Public Safety Law.

The fresh hartal programme was announced by BNP Secretary General Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan at a press briefing at the end of the three-day hartal yesterday evening at the official residence of Leader of the Opposition in Parliament.

The government would face a tougher movement shortly if it does not accept

The alliance's demands, he warned.

Bhuiyan also announced a countrywide "Demonstration Day" on February 24 demanding release of all arrested leaders and activists of the alliance.

The component parties of the alliance will bring out torch processions and demonstrate in all the cities, district and thana headquarters on February 27 in support of hartal next day.

The BNP secretary general alleged that as in the past, the ruling Awami League yesterday tried to foil the hartal and police prevented alliance leaders and activists from bringing out processions and staging demonstrations. He asked police to "act neutrally".

Bhuiyan further alleged that AL terrorists exploded bombs in different parts of the city to put the blame on opposition activists with the motive of charging them under the Public Safety Law.

He said people observed the three-day hartal spontaneously and thanked all for making it a complete success.

## 50 injured on the last day

By Staff Correspondent

The three-day countrywide hartal called by the BNP-led opposition alliance to press its demands for resignation of the government and scrapping of the Public Safety Act ended yesterday evening without any major incident of violence.

Stray clashes between activists of the ruling Awami League and opposition parties and police action yesterday left about 50 people injured, 20 of them in the city, 10 in Khulna and three in Netrokona.

Police also arrested two alleged terrorists from Purana Paltan area in the city and recovered a foreign revolver and eight bullets from their possession.

Motijheel police said, acting on a tip-off, they arrested the terrorists, identified as Shamsur Rahman alias Mona and Wahidur Reza. Sources said they belonged to the gang led by notorious criminal Imron.

Opposition BNP at its post hartal press briefing in the evening claimed that the two alleged terrorists were arrested when they were preparing to attack opposition activists.

Over a dozen BNP activists were injured when police fired several tear gas shells and resorted to baton charge to disperse their rally near the Science laboratory police box at 11:30 am. Senior BNP leaders Khandaker Mahbubuddin Ahmed, Abdul Mannan MP and Gayeshwar Chandra Roy were present at the rally.

Witnesses said that police went into action after they received a message that a truck procession led by AL MP and acting Mayor Hajj Mohammad Selim would pass through the

area soon. As the BNP rally was dispersed, AL activists mounted on 32 trucks passed through the area, the witnesses said.

Activists of Awami League and opposition BNP exchanged gun shots and chased each other at Laxmibazar at about 9 am and at Dholaipara at about 11:30 am. None was injured.

Three persons including a police constable were injured in a bomb explosion at Swarnibagh at about 12:30pm. They were treated at a hospital. Pro-hartal activists also damaged at least 6 rickshaws in Jatrahari area.

Naya Paltan, Kakrail and Bijoynagar areas, known as BNP strongholds, were calm as both police and the party activists avoided confrontation. Though police kept party activists in front of BNP central office at Naya Paltan cordoned all the time, they did not go for any action, witnesses said.

Other areas of the city were by and large peaceful yesterday.

BNP, Jatiya Party, Jamaat-e-Islami, Islami Olkya Jote, Jagpa and Democratic League brought out separate processions in Naya Paltan, Mouchak, Shantinagar, Bijoy Nagar, Dhanmondi, Kalabagan, Tejgaon, Elephant Road, Jatrahari and Purana Paltan areas.

Senior BNP leaders Abdul Matin Chowdhury, Khandaker Mahbubuddin Ahmed, Shahjahan Siraj, ZA Khan, Abdullah Al Noman, party MPs Sadek Hossain Khoka, Abdul Mannan, Amanullah Aman, Zainal Abedin, Faruq, Nazimuddin Alam, Ehsanul Huq Milon and Shamsul Alam Pramanik, cen-

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## 21 more die in Feni tragedy

From Our Correspondent

FENI, Feb. 17: Death toll from the Feni liquor tragedy rose to 43, as 21 more consumers of toxic liquor died in different hospitals last night and today.

Besides, 50 others fell sick from consumption of toxic liquor in different thanas of the district, according to police and villagers.

The latest dead were identified as Gofaruddin, 45, Alam Hossain, 42, of village Pongela, Abul Bashar, 46, of Lamua, Abdul Jaiil, 30, of Sonapur, Abdur Rob, 35, Mohammadullah, 32, and Obedur Rahman, 32, of Kajibag, Bazul Rahman, 34, Abul Khair, Bijoy Sing, and Mahabubul Hoque, 40, of Daulatpur, Kabir Ahmed, 34, and Abu Bakar, 32, of Mohipal under Sadar thana.

The dead also included Shahidul Islam Dulal, 35, of village Char Shah Bokhari, Miah Dhan, 40, and Ayub Ali, 40, of Awarkhill, Dhan Miah, 50, of Bogadana, Korban Ali, 42, Golam Rahman, 33, and Abu Bakar Siddik, 45, of Pikepara under Sonagazi thana, Moku Miah, 25, of village Narayanpur, Minaz, 30, of Shahabnagar under Daganbhuiyan thana.

Police handed over 21 bodies to the members of the families of the victims after post mortem today.

Scores of people fell sick after consuming poisonous liquor, suspected to be rectified spirit, in Feni town and different villages in the district on Monday last.

Till yesterday 22 of them died, while another 21 died today. Meantime, dozens other were being treated at different

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## Reprieve for rogues

### Nat'l Environment Council shelves decision on disciplinary measures for two weeks

By Shehab Ahmed

The National Environment Council's executive committee has delayed plans to discuss the impact of high-rises, prepare environmental guidelines and discipline 1,176 rogue factories for two weeks.

The decision followed a meeting on February 13, where the executive discussed river pollution, encroachment on the Buriganga, reducing pressure on the city's rivers and inter-departmental co-ordination.

According to sources, the Department of Environment has identified 1,176 industries and factories flouting environmental guidelines.

Some of these include the tanneries in Dhaka's densely populated Hazaribagh area, which still dump untreated waste into the Buriganga River, and the factories that are slowly transforming the Dhaleshwari River near Savar into a sewer.

Officials threatened to cut off

the power, gas and water to over two dozen factories in Karnapara, Savar. However, their threats turned out to be empty due to a lack of co-ordination between the department and the government's utilities.

The executive decided to focus on co-ordination in the next meeting in order to address the issue, sources said.

In other business, the Ministry of Environment and Forests had been asked to prepare a detailed plan that would link the Buriganga with the Balu, Turag, Shitalakhya and Dhaleshwari to form a grid around the capital.

The plan, estimated to cost a staggering Tk 600 crore, envisaged the city surrounded by waterways, which would encourage an efficient ferry system for commuters.

Circular roads, flood-protection embankments and parks would reduce pressure on the

city's roads and improve the environment.

The plan would also improve navigation on the Buriganga and crackdown on encroachers, who are turning the river into a "wide box culvert."

On the high rise question, the executive asked departments, such as Rajuk and the DCC, to co-ordinate conformity with the city's earthquake code and environmental guidelines.

It also asked them to look at other issues affecting high rises, such as road use, garbage disposal, and water and power supply.

The Department of Environment would automatically clear high rises that conformed to checks lists submitted by concerned departments in order to streamline the environmental impact assessment.

The issue had been a bone of contention between developers and the department.

## Public Safety Act in action

By Court Correspondent

Police yesterday began interrogating for the first time an accused arrested under the Public Safety Act in the city.

The accused, Selim, 18, charged with mugging was produced before the Chittre Metropolitan Magistrate's Court, Dhaka, at about 7:00 pm yesterday and was placed on a two-day police remand.

He was arrested by Khilgaon police on Wednesday night, police told the court.

Another person, Jahangir Hossain Manik, arrested by Kafilur police under the PSA on Wednesday night was produced before the CMM's court yesterday. He was placed on a three-day police remand.

Manik would be interrogated from today, police said.

He was arrested following a

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## Our new numbers

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