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DHAKA FRIDAY APRIL 14, 2000

INSIDE TODAY

COMMENT

Rehman Sobhan explains why, he thinks, Dhaka should be the venue of Aid Club meeting, and why must the agenda be discussed in the Jatiya Sangsad.

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Kibria renews commitment for faster reforms

Two-day Paris Consortium meet begins

PARIS, Apr 13: As development partners sat here today to reappraise Bangladesh's needs and priorities, Dhaka renewed its commitment to accelerate socioeconomic and institutional reforms that the donors set as preconditions for increased aid, reports UNB.

Making his official statement at the beginning of the two-day Bangladesh Development Forum meeting, Finance Minister Shah A M S Kibria said the government was making all-out efforts to forge broad societal consensus and support to ensure institutional capacity building and durable reforms.

Detailing on the state of economy and development concerns in his 24-page presentation before the donors, the finance minister said, "The government can claim credit for achieving success in many respects, though a lot more needs to be done."

Kibria, who is leading a 10-member official delegation in the annual Paris Consortium meet, expressed his government's satisfaction over the donors' prior indication of aid commitment to the tune of US

dollar 1.8-2.2 billion for the FY 2001. He said the amount would be close to the country's estimated aid need to US dollars 2.03 billion.

The estimated development assistance, he hoped, can be realised through preparation of quality projects and programmes.

He however contradicted the World Bank paper on corruption, to be presented in the meeting, saying it rarely produces irrefutable evidence.

Citing some reforms initiated in tax and customs administrations, he said the government had taken a number of systematic measures to reduce chances of corruption in revenue collection.

He also mentioned the deregulation of government control on economic activities to reduce scope of corruption by public officials. Government permission is no longer necessary for setting up an industry or a business establishment, he said.

Kibria recalled the period of "administered credits" that led to corrupt practice and non-performing loans in NCBs and

DFIs, and mentioned measures taken to control the practice.

Terming parliament and its committees as the formal structure of accountability — an imperative for corruption-free administration — he said the most important element in the institutional structure of democratic accountability is opposition in parliament.

When the opposition ceases to perform its political and public function, the structure of democratic accountability gets weak."

Referring to the development partners' preference for sector-wise approach as the new mode for delivery of aid, he called for their assistance and a sufficient time-frame for institutional capacity building which is required for sector-wise approach.

Speaking on poverty alleviation, the central theme of discussion in the Development Forum meet, Kibria said, "Poverty alleviation is the overarching goal and remains at the centre of development approach of the government."

He cited the government's

"considerable success" in sound macroeconomic management to ensure high growth combined with low inflation, despite two adverse shocks — the Asian financial crisis and 1998 floods in Bangladesh.

In FY 1999, GDP grew at 4.88 per cent compared to 5.23 per cent in FY 98, and in FY 2000, the economy is projected to grow by 5.5 per cent as per newly-introduced national accounts series.

Macroeconomic indicators have shown encouraging trends with significant increase in both savings and investment in terms of GDP ratio. Fiscal deficit has been contained and inflation kept under control.

The revenue-GDP ratio was 8.97 per cent in FY 1999 and is expected to exceed 10 per cent in FY 2000, but overall fiscal deficit is poised to increase to 4.98 per cent in FY 2000 from 4.58 per cent of GDP last fiscal, Kibria said.

Overall balance of payments has improved and is expected to show a surplus of US dollar 317 million in the current fiscal.

Explaining the government's

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Festival fever

Dhaka University's fine arts students seem a little too eager to hit the streets in the multi-colour masks they made for the Pahela Baishakh (Bengali New Year's Day) rally

Star photo: Anisur Rahman

Pahela Baishakh today

By Staff Correspondent

The nation today celebrates Pahela Baishakh, the first day of Bangla New Year, with traditional festivities.

All are set to greet the Bangla year 1407 through various cultural programmes across the country.

People of all ages irrespective of caste, creed and religion will visit traditional fairs and join cultural functions in the capital and elsewhere in the country. Popular songs like "esho hey Baishakh esho esho" will be sung in chorus to welcome the New Year.

In the city, Ramna Green, the traditional spot for such festivals, will wear a colourful look with people in traditional Bangalee dresses pouring in with the daybreak. There, they will eat *panta bhat* (watered rice) with onion and green chilly, a food taken by people in rural areas in the scorching summer days.

At Ramna Green, the country's leading cultural organisation Chhayanot will organise the day's first cultural programme -- a musical soiree welcoming the New Year. Exchanges of New Year greetings will follow.

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TB takes ominous shape

Poor rate of detection leaves thousands vulnerable to the dreaded disease

By Naimul Haq

Tuberculosis (TB) kills one person every 10 minutes and infects one every two minutes in the country.

The annual death toll from the dreaded disease is about 52,000, the fourth highest in the world, according to a World Bank report.

Over 300,000 people are becoming infected with this preventable disease every year. The rate is 111 per 100,000, which is increasing "alarmingly", according to a health ministry report.

The rate of infection was

less than 40 per 100,000 ten years back, the report said.

It is a losing battle against TB in Bangladesh, mainly because of the poor rate of detection of infected persons despite trained manpower and continued technical assistance from WHO, experts say.

Since November 1993 when the National Tuberculosis Programme (NTP) was launched, only 313,800 TB cases have so far been detected, the WB report said. However, more than 80 per cent of those were treated suc-

cessfully, it said.

After WHO declared TB a 'global emergency' in 1993, Bangladesh, like other countries with high rate of infection, launched a programme for 'supervised intervention of drugs', popularly known as DOTS (directly observed treatment - short course), considered the most cost-effective measure.

Giving his view on the TB control programme in the country, Dr Ali Hossain, a senior chest specialist at the Chest Diseases Hospital said, "The main worry is with the large number of undetected cases which remain untreated and continue to spread the disease. The spread is silent". The high rate of infection is due to population density, he said.

The TB bacteria most commonly attacks the lung (pulmonary tuberculosis), and in absence of treatment, it slowly destroys it, leading to death. The TB bacteria most commonly attacks the lung (pulmonary tuberculosis), and in absence of treatment, it slowly destroys it, leading to death.

Zakir Hossain, Director, Disease Control, said as regards cure, Bangladesh's performance is "more or less satisfactory" with 83 per cent cure rate against the WHO target of 80 per cent. But the performance as re-

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Hartal halts civic life

By Staff Correspondent

The countrywide dawn-to-dusk hartal called by the BNP-led opposition alliance to press its various demands paralysed life and economic activities yesterday.

The hartal was by and large peaceful, barring stray incidents of violence in which at least 30 people were injured in different areas of the country.

The alliance demands include resignation of the government, cancellation of the Public Safety Act, an end to state-sponsored and Awami terrorism, release of all opposition leaders and activists, withdrawal of false cases against them and improvement of law and order.

In the city, unidentified persons exploded some bombs at different places and fired gunshots in Mahakhali area in the morning.

Police intercepted BNP processions in some areas and resorted to lathi charge that left more than 20 people injured, witnesses said.

BNP processions at Aga Sadek Road, Siddique Bazar and Osman Gani Road in old part of the city were 9intercepted by police.

The city BNP office at Naya Bazar Yusuf Market was virtually sieged by BDR and armed police yesterday. Opposition activists were not allowed to go

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Transport strike from Monday

IGP's comments irk federation leaders

The Bangladesh Road Transport Workers Federation has called for a countrywide indefinite strike from Monday after comments by the police chief, reports UNB.

A Y B I Siddiqui, inspector general of police, told a Bengali newspaper Wednesday the government would no longer abide by the compromise agreement that barred police from filing cases against any "killer driver" under Section 302 of CrPC.

Police used to file cases against killer drivers under Section 304 (Kha) of CrPC that allows a maximum punishment of three years in prison. Under Section 302, the maximum punishment is death.

The federation, at a hurriedly called extended meeting of its central committee yesterday, also gave its all-out support to the ongoing 72-hour strike of the Inter District Truck Drivers Union, called to

protest the demolition of "legal" union offices across the country.

Working president of the Federation Shahjahan Khan MP said the indefinite strike would continue until the IGP withdrew his comment and apologised to transport workers.

However, Khan did not rule out a possible meeting with the government leaders to reach a compromise.

"The only way to avert the strike is for the government to change its position," said Khan. "No driver will ply the road if there is a risk of being hanged."

"When you can't stop the indiscriminate movement of people on the roads and highways, how can you blame a driver alone for an accident?" asked Khan.

"We welcome the government's action against illegal

toll collectors, said Khan. But why are they demolishing the legal union offices?

"We were ready to extend help to the government to eliminate illegal toll collection. Earlier, it was decided that steps to eliminate illegal toll collection will be taken under a jointly formulated guideline."

The federation leader claimed the home minister agreed to hold a joint meeting of the Home, Communication and Labour ministries, and the transport owners and workers before launching police action.

"But, what we saw is that the home ministry took the initiative unilaterally."

The federation meeting demanded the release of their arrested leaders and workers and asked the government to compensate the unions for "illegally" demolishing their offices.

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