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Govt won't allow trade unions at EPZs

Commerce minister tells US Ambassador

By Rafiq Hasan

Despite pressure from the United States and unrest among workers in different factories, the government is determined not to allow trade union activities in the country's export processing zones (EPZ) now.

Commerce Minister Abdul Jalil, at a meeting with US ambassador John C. Holzman on Monday, told him that the country was not in a position to allow trade unions in EPZ factories at this moment, sources concerned said.

The government would send a delegation to participate in the hearing in the office of US Trade Representative in Washington on August 15 to explain Bangladesh's position in this regard.

The AFLCIO, the largest platform of trade unions in US, submitted a petition to the office of the Trade Representative in June last year appealing for

cancellation of Generalised System of Preference (GSP) facilities provided by the US to Bangladesh.

The government has no alternative but to face the hearing as the notice for it has already been served. We have to face the hearing even if we allow trade unions at this moment," said a high official of the commerce ministry.

He thought that Bangladesh would not suffer much if GSP facilities were cancelled because it used only 30 million dollars worth of GSP facilities annually.

Asked about workers' agitation in US factories in Chittagong EPZ, the official said that the problem was linked with 'politics' and not with industry.

A group is working behind the movement of the workers to create a situation in favour of

them," he added.

Meanwhile, investors at the EPZ at Savar appreciated the government's position regarding trade unions. "The government has taken a good decision and it is very courageous position for a country like Bangladesh despite pressure from the mighty US," said an investor.

He however said, "No new investment is coming and the previous investors are in a fear because of the agitation in Chittagong EPZ."

Workers of some foreign factories at Chittagong EPZ have been agitating for reinstatement of some terminated workers.

In the EPZ at Savar, two persons were killed in police firing on agitating workers. The workers were protesting termination of a number of employees of Ring Shine factory.



Inquisitive eyes of tiny tots watch a white parrot yesterday at the Pet Guest Birds Exhibition 2000 at Engineers' Institution, organised by Bangladesh Cage Bird Breeders' Association. — Star photo

Opposition's demonstration day on July 5

By Staff Correspondent

The BNP-led opposition alliance will observe a country-wide "Demonstration Day" on July 5 demanding resignation of the government and protesting "politicisation" of administration including Election Commission.

The programme was announced at a meeting of the Central Liaison Committee (CLC) at 29 Minto Road with BNP vice chairman M Shamsul Islam MP in the chair.

As part of the programme, the BNP, Jatiya Party, Jamaat-e-Islami and Islami Qukya Jote will hold separate rallies and bring out processions.

The meeting strongly protested and condemned appointment of former secretary Shafiqur Rahman as Election Commissioner and said the credibility of the EC has been lost through appointment of a "most controversial" person, who joined the Janata Manch violating service rule and discipline of the government.

The meeting said the ruling Awami League appointed Chief Election Commissioner unilaterally and later posted a "controversial" person as Election Commissioner to rig future elections.

It said the people of the country will foil all "conspiracies" against democracy, rule of law and fundamental rights of the people. The meeting called upon the countrymen to intensify the current one-point movement.

BNP leader Anwar Zahid, JP leader Kazi Firoz Rashid, Jatiya Party leaders Shaikh Ansar Ali and A T M Asharul Islam and 100 leaders of the Janata Manch attended the meeting.

Dhaka to gain from gas export to Delhi: Schaffer

By Staff Correspondent

Former US ambassador to Sri Lanka Teresa C. Schaffer suggested yesterday that Dhaka could benefit immensely by exporting gas through pipeline to India.

Delhi and its neighbourhood require gas which could be exported through pipeline, if Bangladesh desired, she said.

Speaking to newsmen on the fringe of the two-day International Conference on Gas and Development: Learning from Experience at the Sonargaon Hotel, she felt that Bangladesh needs to take the decision on gas export in its own interest. She said Dhaka could earn a huge foreign exchange by the gas export.

Asked which region in India requires gas, Schaffer said it was Delhi and its neighbourhood. West Bengal has surplus electricity, so Delhi is the place that could be prospected, she said.

Schaffer said current estimates showed that Bangladesh possesses one billion cubic feet of gas a day and an additional one billion was surplus, which could be "immediately exported."

Two Latin American experts who were also present narrated how their countries benefited from gas export through pipeline.

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Budget passed

Opposition motions on cost cuts not moved

By Staff Correspondent

The Jatiya Sangsad passed the new budget for fiscal 2000-2001 yesterday amid continued abstention by the mainstream opposition lawmakers.

The House adopted the Appropriation Bill, 2000 granting a total of Tk 52,186.79 crore to meet expenditures in the next fiscal, beginning tomorrow.

Placed in the House on June 8, the new budget amounts to Tk 42,859 crore with an overall deficit of Tk 18,661 crore. Finance Minister SAMS Kibria revised on Wednesday some of the tax proposals he made in the original budget while wrapping up a general discussion on it.

A few lawmakers of the pro-government faction of Jatiya Party were present in the House during the passage of the new budget, but understandably they did not oppose the move. Only

two JP MPs in Fazle Rabbi and Golam Faruk Obhi suggested reduction in the allocation for certain sectors. Their suggestions however were rejected in the voice vote.

They criticised performances of the ministers of home, foreign affairs, defence, law, health and women affairs while seeking expenditure cuts on those ministries. The ministers concerned refuted the JP lawmakers' criticism.

Some BNP legislators also submitted motions to cut costs in several areas, but those were not moved due to their absence.

Earlier, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and her colleagues in the council of ministers raised as many as 94 demands for grants under different heads to allocate for revenue and development expenditures

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DCC banks on state support, foreign aid

Hanif unveils fiscal plans for 2000-01

By Staff Correspondent

Mayor Mohammad Hanif announced yesterday a Tk 546.82 crore budget for Dhaka City Corporation (DCC) for fiscal 2000-2001, of which Tk 280 crore is expected in government grant and foreign aid.

No new tax has been proposed, the mayor said in his budgetary speech at the auditorium of Mahanagar Natya Mancha auditorium.

The foreign and government aid have been tagged to facilitate DCC spending in different development projects aided by the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank and the government, while Tk 115.38 crore

would be generated from DCC's own fund.

The mayor also presented the revised budget for fiscal 1999-2000 during the presentation, which was also attended by the city ward commissioners. The proposed budget was unanimously endorsed earlier during a meeting of the ward commissioners on June 26.

Mayor Hanif said no new taxes are proposed in the new budget and it earmarked a development expenditure of Tk 395.38 crore, which is more than 72 per cent of the total budget.

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Bacteria lurks in WASA water!

By Raziur Rahman

A large number of city dwellers are taking bacteria-infected water due to WASA's failure to properly maintain the purification system at its pump houses, sources in WASA said.

Chlorination system to purify water is yet to be installed in about 100 out of its 330 pump houses. Chlorine kills disease-producing bacteria.

Out of the 230 pump houses having chlorination system, 124 are using chlorine gas and the rest are using bleaching powder to purify water.

But supply of chlorine is often disrupted due to the cumbersome process while bleaching powder supplied to the others is often sold in the market by some unscrupulous operators of the pump houses, the sources alleged.

Chlorine is brought from the Chemical Complex at Barakunda in Chittagong. Four separate divisions of WASA are involved in supply of the gas, provided in 50kg cylinders, the sources said. These are Procurement Division, Store Division, Operation and System Control Division and MODS Division.

"Proper coordination among the four divisions is needed for smooth maintenance of the system," a WASA official said preferring anonymity.

The official said a project for installation of chlorination system in rest of the pump houses is under implementation.

Admitting the allegation, another official said chlorination equipment at some pump houses are not functioning properly. The equipment is sophisticated and is damaged if not operated properly, he added. WASA officials claimed that the groundwater that is pumped out by WASA is 'safe'. But it is contaminated when it is supplied through the distribution system.

Experts and a number of WASA officials observed that responsibility of maintaining the chlorination systems should be handed over to the private sector for one or two years on experimental basis.

CEC sure of opposition participation in all polls

By Staff Correspondent

Chief Election Commissioner M A Syed strongly believes that the BNP-led opposition alliance would eventually participate in all the elections to be conducted by him.

"I can bet on the opposition taking part in all the polls I am going to hold," the CEC told a group of reporters at his office yesterday afternoon.

Reminded that the opposition demands reconstitution of the Election Commission, the CEC said, "Take it from me that the opposition would change its decision and participate in all the polls, national or local government, the present commission is going to conduct."

His ability to "offer fair elections," Syed said, would "inspire confidence in the opposition."

The CEC told newsmen that he had already had "some discussions with certain opposition leaders over telephone. He didn't, however, disclose any name."

"I have sought an appointment with BNP chairperson Begum Khaleda Zia last week," the CEC said, adding that he was yet to receive any communication from her secretary.

Asked whether the government had consulted him before appointing Shafiqur Rahman as an election commissioner, the

CEC evaded a direct reply. "I knew that his name was being considered. However, I am very happy that a competent person like him has joined the Commission. He is an asset to the Commission."

On Upajila elections, the CEC said that the Commission has not yet decided on a schedule. "We have to hold the Upajila elections. The schedule would be prepared following discussion with all political parties and other interested groups."

Asked whether he expects a positive opposition response to an invitation for a dialogue on

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Slow climb up HDI ladder

Bangladesh still ranks lowest among South Asian nations in UNDP report

By Staff Correspondent

Bangladesh ranks the lowest among South Asian countries and 146th among UN members as regards human development and human rights.

Sri Lanka is on top of list in South Asia, followed by the Maldives, India, Pakistan, Bhutan and Nepal, according to UNDP's Human Development Report 2000, released here and elsewhere in the world yesterday. Their positions are 89th, 128th, 135th, 142nd and 144th respectively among the UN members.

Bangladesh's position was 150th in the earlier report released in 1998.

State Minister for Planning Dr. Mohiuddin Khan Alamgir ceremonially launched the report at the LGED Bhaban. Former chief justice Kemal Uddin Hossain, eminent lawyer Dr. Kamal Hossain, and economist Debapriya Bhattacharya also spoke on the occasion.

Dr. Alamgir said, for human

development, the main focus should be on poverty eradication and ensuring rights to all.

He said the government is committed to human development through increasing social investment particularly in education and health sectors, empowering the poor and the women, strengthening local government bodies, encouraging savings and investment and giving priority to agriculture development.

Dr. Kamal Hossain said abuse of power is the most formidable obstacle to human development. Politicians and bureaucrats must accept the discipline of transparency and accountability to ensure human development and fulfill people's expectations, he said.

Justice Kemal Uddin Hossain said human development and human rights are interdependent. "It depends on a government how it treats the people," he said. The position of

minority communities in a society is also a benchmark for human rights and human development, he observed.

Dr. Debapriya Bhattacharya said the report made three references on Bangladesh -- good, bad and ugly.

The good thing is that Bangladesh is among the 25 countries whose export growth is more than 10 per cent annually. The bad thing is that there are more than 5,000 cases pending with each judge, which reflects the serious inability of courts to provide timely remedy, he said.

The ugly thing is that 47 per cent women are assaulted by their 'intimate partner'.

He however said Bangladesh is progressing in every field, but the rate is not enough.

He stressed on independent assessment of human development and human rights in the country.

Dhaka loses out on OIC race

Another Moroccan at the helm

KUALA LUMPUR, June 29. The Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC) on Thursday chose another Moroccan, Abdelouh Belkiz, as its next chief despite private protests that it was Asia's turn for the job, reports AFP.

After two days of wrangling, OIC foreign ministers unanimously agreed on Belkiz as next secretary general, Malaysian Foreign Minister Syed Hamid Albar told reporters.

Belkiz, a former Moroccan foreign minister, will replace Morocco's Ezzeddine Laraki whose term expires December 31.

Bangladesh and Turkey also vied for the post, with Ankara lobbying especially hard in an attempt to burnish its Islamic credentials.

The Bangladeshi candidate was Speaker of its parliament Humayun Rashid Choudhury.

One delegate said the contest eventually boiled down to Morocco or Turkey, with Iran objecting to Turkey for "traditional political reasons" — an apparent reference to its close military ties with Israel.

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Cargo handling at Ctg, Mongla ports resumes

CHITTAGONG, June 29. Gang-hooking of dock workers at Chittagong port resumed at 4 pm today after the stevedores called off their strike.

The stevedores went on strike at Chittagong port at 4 pm yesterday demanding withdrawal of the bill in the new budget for forcing them to take licence from customs authorities.

Cargo handling activities remained paralysed for 24 hours from 8 pm yesterday, port sources said. However, the cargo handling resumes at 8 tonight.

The stevedores called off their strike in line with government's today's decision to keep the bill in abeyance.

The decision taken by Finance Minister and State Minister for Port and Shipping today, was communicated to the chairman of Chittagong port through a fax message, port sources said.

The port chairman then held a meeting with the leaders of Bangladesh Master Stevedores Association (BMSA) today to inform the decision of the ministers in this regard.

BMSA chairman Monjur Alam talking to his correspondent said that the strike programme of stevedores was postponed till July 15.

The stevedores said they will go on strike from July 16 if the bill is not scrapped by July 15.

Meanwhile, congestion of vessels at Chittagong port began.

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Juba Dal leader gunned down in city

By Staff Correspondent

A Juba Dal leader was shot dead by a gang at East Goran in Khilgaon area of the city yesterday.

The victim was identified as ABM Mahbubul Huq, 30. He was secretary of Juba Dal unit in Ward No 25 in Khilgaon thana.

Huq's family members said three persons, his business partners, killed him. Earlier, they had a discussion at the victim's house over a dispute with him.

Without giving details, the family members also said earlier they had advised Huq to file a CD in this regard.

Police also suspected involvement of his partners in the killing.

Some sources however said previously Huq had close relations with an intending candidate for the post of ward commissioner of the area but the relations turned sour recently. The killing might be a sequel to that, they added.

The gunmen came in two rickshaws, shot the victim who was in another rickshaw and fled immediately. The incident occurred within 200 yards of his house.

He was rushed to Dhaka Medical College Hospital where doctors declared him dead soon afterwards, hospital sources said.

Khilgaon police confirmed the killing but said a case was yet to be filed in this regard.

Public opinion, debate in JS needed on gas export

International conference in the city on gas and development told

By Staff Correspondent

A decision as crucial as the one on gas export through pipelines should not be taken without seeking public opinion and open discussion in the parliament, said Dr. Kamal Hossain at an international conference in the city yesterday.

The nation has to know in the first place the actual gas reserves of the country by conducting a credible study before thinking of exporting gas. US experts may assist such a study, but local geologists must be included for the sake of credibility, he said.

Dr. Kamal Hossain, Dr. Debapriya Bhattacharya, Executive Director of the Centre for

Policy Dialogue and Bruce McMullen, Senior Energy Adviser, USAID participated in a panel discussion at the concluding session of the two-day International Conference on Gas and Development: Learning from Experience, yesterday.

The advantages and disadvantages of exporting gas through pipeline were discussed at the high profile conference organised by Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), USA and Bangladesh Centre for Advanced Studies (BCAS).

Executive Chairman of the Board of Investment M Mokammel Haque was present

as chief guest, while it was moderated by Director, BCAS, Dr. A Atiq Rahman. Director for South Asia, CSIS and Ambassador Teresa C. Schaffer delivered the concluding speech.

Representatives from Petrobranga, BUIT, Dhaka University, oil companies and research organisations took part in the conference.

A number of speakers including Bruce McMullen said a little gas export would help the growth of the country's gas market and provide the incentives to the private investors to expand their activities. Some said due to technological advancement in the future, gas

might soon become an obsolete source of energy.

However, some others disagreed saying the current gas reserve of 10 trillion cubic feet (tcf) does not go along with the notion of gas export since it is too little for Bangladesh's own development. Some of them also said gas was unlikely to become an obsolete source of energy for the next 60-70 years.

But most speakers agreed that such decision depends on how much gas Bangladesh has. Dr. Debapriya Bhattacharya maintained that any study on gas reserves must be made credible from the very beginning. Why do we have to share

the outcome of a study without knowing how the study was made? What was the parameters?

He said Bangladesh's economy was benefited by two major foreign exchange earners in the past—the garment sector and the remittance from people working abroad. "Unfortunately, none of the earnings through these two sectors have backward linkage or integration with our economy."

"From these lessons, this time we want to integrate gas with our economy," he added.

Bruce McMullen, focusing on the Latin America's experience

in the energy sector, said regional economic integration typically results in improved political relationship.

He maintained that a lot needs to be done in Bangladesh to develop its energy sector. "Bangladesh has no alternative but to develop its energy sector, and the private sector will have to play a role."

However, it is unlikely that the Bangladesh's energy sector would be privatised very soon. "There will be reforms and unbundling which might be painful but necessary at this stage," McMullen added.

Sharing Bangladesh's 40