

Govt to build permanent structure for trade fair

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Commerce Minister Abdul Jalil at the concluding ceremony of Dhaka International Trade Fair (DITF)-2001 yesterday said the government would build a permanent structure for holding trade fair every year.

"This government would start building a permanent structure on the opposite side of the existing ground before handing over power to the caretaker government," he promised while addressing the ceremony at Sher-e-Bangla Nagar.

The minister said the DITF would play a vital role in developing and diversifying our exportable goods. He hoped that the structure, if built, would benefit the business community.

The minister also distributed prizes among the participants who

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Abductors' only demand is to be exempted from all legal charges

MORSHED ALI KHAN AND ABDULLAH AL MAHMUD, from Rangamati

The three foreign hostages would be released within a day or two on one condition that the abductors would be exempted from all legal charges. Minister for CHT Affairs Kalparanjan Chakma said at a press conference at the Circuit House yesterday evening.

"All the three hostages are in good health and they will return within two days at the maximum," he said confidently.

The minister refused to give details, saying that might "jeopardise the positive developments".

"The only condition tagged with the release of the hostages is that all cases against them would be withdrawn," he said.

The minister who spent the entire day in Kalapahar area pursuing a negotiated end to the hostage crisis said there is no need for military action.

The results of prolonged efforts for release of the hostages in fact started to emerge on the 15th day of the crisis when Kalparanjan said on Friday that the three foreigners would be freed by Monday.

The minister on Thursday issued a two-day ultimatum to the abductors for release of the hostages and warned of a "massive military crackdown" for noncompliance.

Heavy presence of military and other security personnel were seen on the Rangamati-Khagrachhari road yesterday. Heavily armed and equipped with wireless sets, military personnel were seen patrolling the road. Many others have been stationed on hilltops since the hostage drama started.

Sources said the entire tribal population of at least four villages in the "red zone" in Kalapahar area fled their homes fearing army action. Sources said most of the abductors hail from the villages.

Jon Geddes, Press Officer of British High Commission, said the hostage crisis is at a "very delicate stage" now.

Hajj today

AP, Makkah

More than 2 million Muslims yesterday began trekking to a desert plain outside Makkah for the Hajj, an annual pilgrimage that fulfills one of the most sacred duties of the Islamic faith.

The Hajj chant of "here I am, oh Almighty, here I am" reverberated across Makkah as pilgrims from around the world made their way to the plain of Mina, five kilometers north of this holy city.

Many trudged on foot while others were packed into cars, buses and trucks, some even clinging to the roofs of vehicles.

Police were out in full force, directing traffic, which came to a standstill at several intersections leading to Mina's entrance.

With temperatures hovering around 34 degrees Celsius, Saudi authorities prepared to distribute millions of water bottles free of charge.

The pilgrims mingled in rituals

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Police recovered 15 dead sacrificial animals from the river Shitalakhya. The cattle drowned in the river when armed miscreants sank a trawler carrying those near Bandar thana in Narayanganj in the early hours of yesterday.

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An army helicopter dropping troops near a bus stop at Rangamati yesterday. The abductors promised to free the three hostages before the government's deadline ends at midnight tomorrow.

Hasina performs Hajj rituals

BSS, Mina

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, now in Saudi Arabia to perform the holy Hajj, reached Mina yesterday from Makkah by road.

The Prime Minister performed all rituals of Hajj here throughout the day.

Sheikh Hasina, after an overnight stay at Mina, will leave for Arafat this morning to perform Hajj.

BTV to telecast live Hajj

BSS, Dhaka

Bangladesh Television will telecast live the holy Hajj from Makkah in Saudi Arabia through satellite at 2:30 pm today.

BTV's programmes will start at 2:15 pm, said a press release yesterday.

Bid to loot cattle from trawler

OUR CORRESPONDENT, N'ganj

Fifteen cattle drowned in the river Shitalakhya near Bandar Thana ghat when a gang of armed miscreants attacked a trawler carrying the sacrificial animals in the early hours of yesterday.

The trawler was going to Siraganj carrying the cattle and some traders from Zimkhana cattle market in the town.

According to police and witnesses, the gang stopped the trawler near the ghat and tried to loot the cattle.

As the gang failed to do so in the face of resistance by the cattle traders, they beat up the traders, sank the trawler in the river and left the scene firing blank shots.

Police played the role of onlookers although the incident took place in front of Bandar Thana.

When contacted, Bandar Thana OC said the riverway is not under his jurisdiction.

Police recovered the dead cattle from the river in the afternoon. None was arrested in this connection till filing of this report last night.

South Asian tour from Mar 10 Annan mobilising support for his second term?

M ANWARUL HAQ

UN Secretary General Kofi Annan shortly begins a four-nation South Asian tour which many believe is for familiarising himself with the region and mobilising support for his election for a second term.

His schedule includes a three-day visit to Bangladesh from March 13.

A trip to Nepal has now been added to his schedule that earlier included visit to Bangladesh, India and Pakistan.

Annan will arrive in Dhaka on the third leg of his four-nation tour. He will fly to Islamabad on March 10, then go to Kathmandu and will come to Dhaka from there. He will

then proceed to the Indian capital.

The UN Secretary General will meet all the key leaders of the four South Asian countries. They include Pakistan's military ruler Pervez Musharraf, King Birendra of Nepal, Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, sources concerned said.

The visit is being seen by many diplomatic observers as part of Annan's campaign to win support for a second term as chief executive of the world body. His present term ends towards the end of this year.

A senior diplomat said some Asian countries may put up candidates for the post of UN Secretary

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Ershad being used as a pawn to split Opposition?

ZAYADUL AHSAN

Former president and chief of a faction of Jatiya Party H M Ershad has been detained by the government to pressurise him to play a role to create a rift in the four-party opposition alliance, a top Awami League (AL) leader said.

Requesting anonymity, he told The Daily Star that the ruling party has been trying to persuade Ershad since January to agree to 'such a plan.' In exchange, the former president, jailed in a graft case, would be released with an assurance that he would not be harassed by Awami League again.

"Ershad had once agreed to play his part in this government plan. But due to intervention by another top leader of Jatiya Party (JP), he changed his mind," the AL leader said.

On Thursday, after completion of all legal formalities for Ershad's release, he was detained for one-month, triggering political storms among leaders of both the ruling party and the opposition parties.

Leaders of the opposition camp realising the ruling party plan have worked out their own strategy to foil it. "It seems that Awami League would make Ershad strike a deal that would be harmful to the opposition alliance," observed a Presidium Member of JP. "But we will do our best to prevent it."

Seasoned politicians, irrespective of party affiliations, were surprised at the detention of a party chairman and former president under the Special Power Act (SPA).

Another AL policy planner contended that AL would sail well if the mainstream opposition parties participate in the coming general elections from separate platforms and do not field 'consensus candidates'.

AL thinks that fielding of common candidates by a united opposition would bring a poll debacle for

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Accused in BCL activist Murder Case shot dead in Khulna

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, Khulna

An accused in BCL activist Chhotan Murder Case was shot dead near 'Behari Colony' under Sonadanga thana in Khulna on Friday.

Revolver bullets were sprayed on terrorist Iqbal, 22, at 10.45 pm.

He was rushed to General Hospital where doctor declared him dead.

A group of five local youngmen attacked him with lethal weapons and later sprayed bullets on him, police and witnesses said.

Iqbal was one of the accused in BCL activist Chhotan murder case, police said.

Victim's father Mahfuzur Rahman lodged a case yesterday with Sonadanga thana.

He was murdered as a sequel to previous enmity over local leadership, police said.

Iqbal belonged to the group of armed cadres of Jubo League leader and ward commissioner Asaduzzaman Litu.