

BJP chief, four top defence ministry, army officials quit over gun graft

AFP, New Delhi

India suspended yesterday four top defence ministry and army officials implicated in a damaging arms bribery scandal that has left the government battling opposition demands to step down.

The suspensions followed the resignation on Tuesday of ruling BJP party president Bangaru Laxman, who was filmed receiving 100,000

rupees (2,170 dollars) from journalists posing as arms dealers.

Laxman insisted he took the cash believing it was a contribution to party funds.

The scandal prompted the adjournment of parliament, as opposition MPs stormed the floor, demanding that Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee and his cabinet stand down.

But Vajpayee was in combative mood when he emerged later from a closed-door emergency meeting with Home Minister LK Advani, Defence Minister George Fernandes and National Security Advisor Brajesh Mishra. "Let there be a discussion. Let them make a case for the resignation," Vajpayee said.

"We are ready for discussion. We are ready for any inquiry," he said, adding that the allegations were "political" in nature.

"There is something fishy somewhere," he said.

The four suspended on Wednesday included additional director general of weapons and equipment Major General PSK Chaudhary, as well as three senior defence ministry officials.

"Strict action will be taken against any other officer or official if any delinquency of conduct is established in due course," the government said in a statement.

The move failed to appease opposition parties, who were scenting blood ahead of crucial elections in five Indian states next month.

"This government must accept its moral responsibility and resign," said Madhav Rao Scindia, deputy leader of the main opposition Congress party.

"The entire opposition is urging the president to press Vajpayee to hand over his papers."

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Bangladesh make India sweat

SPORTS REPORTER

Hosts Bangladesh gave the fancied Indians a run for their money before going down and out of the Prime Minister Gold Cup Hockey Tournament at the Moulana Bhasani Stadium on Wednesday.

The 2-1 outcome in favour of the Asian powerhouse meant the hosts finish their Group A campaign with one point thanks to two consecutive defeats and a tie with Japan in the opening match.

India, on the other hand, kept a clean sheet with three wins from as many matches.

The vastly experienced Indians confirmed their berth in the semi-finals even before playing their last group league match against the home side. They thrashed Scotland 5-1 and Japan 3-1.

Ace marks man Baljit Singh Dhilon put India on the scoreline in the 24th minute. But the hosts took only eight minutes to negate the lead.

Young centre forward SEE PAGE 11 COL 6



Bangladesh custodian dives full length to thwart an Indian attack during yesterday's Prime Minister Gold Cup hockey championship outing at the Moulana Bhasani National Stadium. The hosts lost 1-2.

News Analysis

Achilles heel exposed

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

The government of Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee is in the grip of a major crisis following the expose by an internet media company on corruption in fake defence deals with videotapes released by the company showing chiefs of BJP and Samata Party, two key constituents of India's ruling coalition, accepting or willing to take bribes.

The videotapes, shot by the spy camera of the web portal, figure BJP President Bangaru Laxman, the first head of the party from backward caste, Samata Party chief Jaya Jaitley, a former IAS officer, serving and retired senior army officers and middlemen talking about payoffs and defence deals that were never struck.

Millions of viewers across India SEE PAGE 11 COL 3

Annan meets Hasina, praises her efforts for development

UNB, Dhaka

UN Secretary General Kofi Annan last night met Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina at Ganabhaban and appreciated her efforts for sustainable democracy and improving socioeconomic status of commonman in Bangladesh.

He also expressed happiness to be in Bangladesh at the invitation of the Prime Minister and said he was happy to see many development efforts in the country.

The Prime Minister said she was successful in a struggle for restoration of democracy and people's voting right putting an end to an era of politics of coup, killing and conspiracy.

Narrating a grim picture of post-75 politics, Hasina said people's democratic rights were denied and vast majority of the people was deprived of development.

Later, the Prime Minister hosted a dinner in honour of the UN Secretary General at Ganabhaban.

Wife of Kofi Annan, Nane Annan and UN Under-Secretary General K Pender Gust and senior UN officials accompanied the UN Secretary General at the dinner.

BNP team to meet Annan today

BSS, Dhaka

A five-member BNP delegation led by Deputy Leader of the Opposition Prof Badruddoza Chowdhury will call on visiting UN Secretary General Kofi Annan at 8:30 am today at Hotel Sonargaon.

Other members of the delegation are Former Finance Minister Saifur Rahman MP, party Secretary General Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan MP, Chairperson's advisory council member Reaz Rahman and Enam Ahmed Chowdhury.

EC likely to resume dialogue on electoral reforms soon

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The Election Commission (EC) is likely to resume dialogue on the proposed electoral reforms with the major political parties soon, according to the EC officials.

The opposition parties are yet to respond to the EC initiative, but insiders said they have agreed in principle to sit across the table on the proposed reforms and other related issues.

However, sources said, the BNP is expected to sit with the EC on March 18.

The ruling Awami League had sounded positive on the reform proposals when a delegation met the EC officials on February 26 and said they would inform the EC about the party position later on.

"The fate of the proposed

reforms hinges on the goodwill of the political parties. If they are sincere about the electoral reforms, then their implementation is very much possible before the next general election," a top EC official, preferring not to be named, told The Daily Star.

Earlier in late February, the EC had invited nine political parties who had representations in the Fifth and Seventh Parliament and another party led by a Constitution expert to talks in a bid to reach a political consensus on the reforms.

The proposed electoral reforms are, registration of political parties with the Election Commission,

regulation of election expenses, shortening the time-frame for election tribunals to dispose of complaints and an amendment to the Constitution that will allow a person to seek election in not more than two

parliamentary seats at the same time.

Meanwhile, the Jatiya Party faction loyal to Communications Minister Anwar Hossain Manju and Ganatantri Party have informed the EC that they are ready for talks on March 27 and March 20 respectively.

Officials at the EC Secretariat said there is not enough time to go about the electoral reforms since the general election is a few months away. Even, they fear, the reform issues may die down amidst the hullabaloo of the very election itself.

But an EC spokesman said that the preparation for the general election and the talks would go simultaneously. "We can only propose the reforms, but a political consensus is a must for their imple

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Power crisis in city to continue as projects remain incomplete

RAZIUR RAHMAN

Despite DESA's plan to ensure smooth supply of power in the city by the middle of this month, no tangible progress in this regard has been made as yet with some of its projects under a crash programme still far from their scheduled completion, sources concerned said.

Earlier, top DESA officials had said suffering of the city dwellers due to power supply problem during coming summer would be within 'acceptable level' as the projects

would be completed by March 15 (today).

The projects include installation of 'capacitor banks' and at least two 132 KV transmission lines. But the two vital projects are still to be completed.

DESA had taken up the projects following directives from the Prime Minister's Office to take immediate measures to keep loadshedding in the city at the minimum possible level during the coming lean season.

The demand for power in the capital shots up to more than 700

MW a day during the lean season but due to infrastructural weakness, DESA can supply slightly more than 500 MW.

In addition to frequent power supply disruption, low voltage of power during summer worsens sufferings of the city dwellers. Low voltage also causes disruption in power supply as transmission lines sometimes trip due to this.

Installation of 2000 'capacitor banks' is needed to solve the problem of low voltage in the capital, SEE PAGE 11 COL 1

Interne docs call off strike

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, Sylhet

The interne doctors of Sylhet MAG Osmani Medical College Hospital called off their strike yesterday.

However, they would continue a 2-hour work abstention from today and will wear black badges today to press their demands.

The internees are expected to resume works this morning, sources said.

Earlier, a tripartite meeting of the hospital authority, college authority and the Sylhet unit of BMA was held at the Hospital Director's office yesterday morning.

President repeats call to uproot campus politics, terrorism

BSS, Gazipur

President Shahabuddin Ahmed yesterday said terrorism and anarchy at educational institutions, particularly at the universities, were not only impediments to the quest for knowledge, but were also forcing ordinary citizens to live in constant fear.

"As a result, the heroic role of the student community in different democratic struggles, including the Language Movement and Liberation struggle, is fading," he said while presiding over the first

convocation of the Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman Agricultural University here yesterday morning.

There is no stop to the deadly trend, although some universities showed signs of improvement, the President said. None could deny that terrorism at universities were connected with politics, he said, adding the pursuit of knowledge and terrorism could not co-exist.

The President reiterated his call to the students, teachers, guardians and leaders of political parties to keep educational institutions out of politics and terrorism and ensure

congenial atmosphere on the campuses.

Describing Bangladesh as a country of potentials, he called for using those potentials for increased production since the economy of the country was mainly based on agriculture.

"The establishment of this university is the reflection of the aspiration," he said, adding that he hoped the academy would carry out practical studies and research to this end.

The President highly praised the SEE PAGE 11 COL 8

Shazneen case ASP of CID cross-examined

COURT CORRESPONDENT

Mojibur Rahman, ASP of CID, first prosecution witness as well as complainant in Shazneen rape case, was cross-examined in the special court for Prevention of Women and Children Repression, Dhaka yesterday.

After cross-examination by lawyers for the accused Minu and Parvin, Judge M Shah Alam Miah adjourned the proceedings till April 10. Mojibur will be cross-examined again on the day.

During the cross-examination, Mojibur Rahman said he recorded statements of the witnesses and filed a rape case under the Repression of Women and Children Act, 1995.

Mojibur said that he did not know what Latifur Rahman and his wife did from April 1 to April 3 in 1998. He also said that he did not go to Latifur Rahman's office.

Mojibur further told the court that the case was filed not for personal interest. Minu and Parvin gave judicial statements before the court of Metropolitan Magistrate Abdul Hannan under Section 164 of the CrPC, Mojibur added.

Shazneen Tasnim Rahman, 15, youngest daughter of Latifur Rahman, chairman of Transcom Group, was raped and murdered at their Gulshan residence on April 23, 1998.

Latifur Rahman filed a murder SEE PAGE 11 COL 8