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PM leaves for London today

BSS, Dhaka

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina will leave Dhaka for London this morning en route to Belgium to attend a special summit for the least developed countries (LDC) scheduled to begin in Brussels on May 14.

Hasina will lead a high-powered delegation to the Third UN Conference on LDC which will be held jointly by the European Union in cooperation with the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD).

Top leaders of 49 LDCs are expected to attend the week-long conference.

The Prime Minister will be accompanied by Foreign Minister Abdus Samad Azad, Finance Minister Shah A. M. S. Kibria, Commerce Minister Abdul Jalil, State Minister for Foreign Affairs Abul Hasan Chowdhury, Principal Secretary to the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary.

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Attack on newsmen Charge sheet against Mamun submitted

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Ctg

The terrorist Ward Commissioner Mamunur Rashid Mamun has been charged in a case filed with Panchaish thana under Public Safety Act (PSA) for assaulting four senior journalists of the daily Purbokone on April 18.

The case was filed on April 20 by one of the two victims, Md Iskander Ali Chowdhury, chief sub-editor of the daily, accusing Mamun and his four accomplices.

The Investigation Officer (IO) of the case S I Arman Hossain submitted the charge sheet against Mamun as the lone accused to the CMM's court, Chittagong yesterday morning with evidences of 14 witnesses.

The Chief Metropolitan Magistrate (CMM), Abdul Malek accepted the charge sheet and sent the case to Public Safety Tribunal for hearing on charge-framing.

Export sector feels the chill of global recession

RMG, shrimp on a downslide, leather set to follow

INAM AHMED

The global recession has finally lashed the country. The export sector, which depends on the US and EU for 80 per cent of its earnings, is now in the midst of a global economic storm.

Readymade garment (RMG) and shrimp exports have become the major victims of the meltdown. According to industry sources, RMG exporters are forced to do with 20 per cent lower cutting and making (C&M) charges for most categories, while shrimp exporters face 25 per cent price slump.

Although the leather sector is yet to feel the heat, thanks to the foot and mouth disease, exporters fear that the price crash is just round the corner.

This might not be the end, however. The worse is yet to come, many predict. The global recession is sure to set exporting countries to go for competitive devaluation and the real crisis will start then.

Some major RMG importers like C&A and Bugle Boy have already scaled down their orders. The latter is headed for Chapter 11. Other chain stores like JC Penny, Marks and Spencer and Gap are clipping their businesses by shutting down stores.

Although different authorities like the IMF, World Bank, G-7 and ECB differ on the degree of global growth prospects, they are unanimous about one thing - the world economy is hurtling towards a major slowdown. The World Bank expects global GDP to grow by 2.2 per cent in 2001, which is lower than its earlier estimate of 3.3 per cent, and indicates a significant slowdown from last year's four per cent. The IMF has also revised its estimate from 4.2 to 3.4 per cent. These figures spell out the grim warning - global economy will grow at half the last year's rate.

However, the bright side for Bangladesh is that it does not compete in either the hi-tech or the high-end common product market. As such, it would not face the major jolt the Southeast Asian economies are poised to receive because of their heavy dependency on the export of hardware products to the US and Japan. These products are highly income elastic. Even in its export basket, highly skewed toward readymade garments, fashion items, demand for which would shrink remarkably due to the recession, is almost nil.

The hope will live only up to that assumption. In all likelihood, Bangladesh will feel a jolt as a fallout of the global recession. Even if RMG is set aside as a 'safe item', it has two other major items - leather and frozen foods - which are actually quite susceptible to income elasticity. Both these sectors have

already reported order dearth and price slides in recent weeks, sending a chill through the investors' spine.

The current export boom, although looks quite extraordinary at 17 per cent growth, leaves no room for complacency against the fact that the World Bank expects world trade to grow at 5.5 per cent this year, less than half of what it was last year.

Dr Mustafizur Rahman, noted economist in the country, however feels that the time has not come yet to pass the final judgement.

"The world community is working together to overcome the recession. If the slowdown turns out to be short-lived because of concerted actions, then the impact would not be that hard," he said. "Moreover, our export items are not demand elastic and so, the dent will be less compared with other Asian countries."

But others point out that the Southeast Asian meltdown has, in fact, mauled Bangladesh badly. The tiger's crisis hit the country not on the demand line, but actually gave a body blow to the country's competitiveness. As the crisis- ridden Asian nations devalued their currencies, Bangladesh faced tough competition even in RMG and exports went on a tailspin.

"That is exactly what we should anticipate now," said Dr Mustafiz of BIDS. "The most shattering impact would be the price pressure this recession is set to make. Low-end RMG would not be spared from this."

True to his anticipation, RMG exporters have been already reporting about 20 per cent price depression.

"We are already under pressure to squeeze our cutting and making charge. This price slide will force many of us go out of business," said M Abu Taher, a former chairman of the BGMEA quota committee. "We are getting hardly any order for hot items like the 347 and prices are down by 20 to 30 per cent."

The international market meltdown has also hit the domestic quota market hard. Price for 347 items, which was around 70 to 90 dollars earlier, has now come down to as low as 30 dollar.

Golam Mostafa, former president of the Bangladesh Frozen Foods Exporters Association, said black tiger shrimp of size 16/20, which was sold at US\$7.80 a pound at the end of the season in September-October, has now gone down to US\$5.70. "In a single consignment that I sent last night, I

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Caught red-handed... an examinee at a Daudkandi centre begs mercy from the invigilator after being caught while adopting unfair means on the first day of the HSC examinations yesterday.

Massive construction on Muhuri by India Diverted watercourse breeds further border bickering

NAZRUL ISLAM, back from Feni

Massive construction by India on the Muhuri river in the country's southeastern border has drastically diverted the watercourse, giving rise to a complex and seemingly never-ending dispute between the two neighbours.

Due to the diversion of the stream, the Muhurichar islet on the river has become the bone of contention. India, referring to the 1974 Indira-Mujib agreement, claims ownership of the islet which Bangladesh brushes aside.

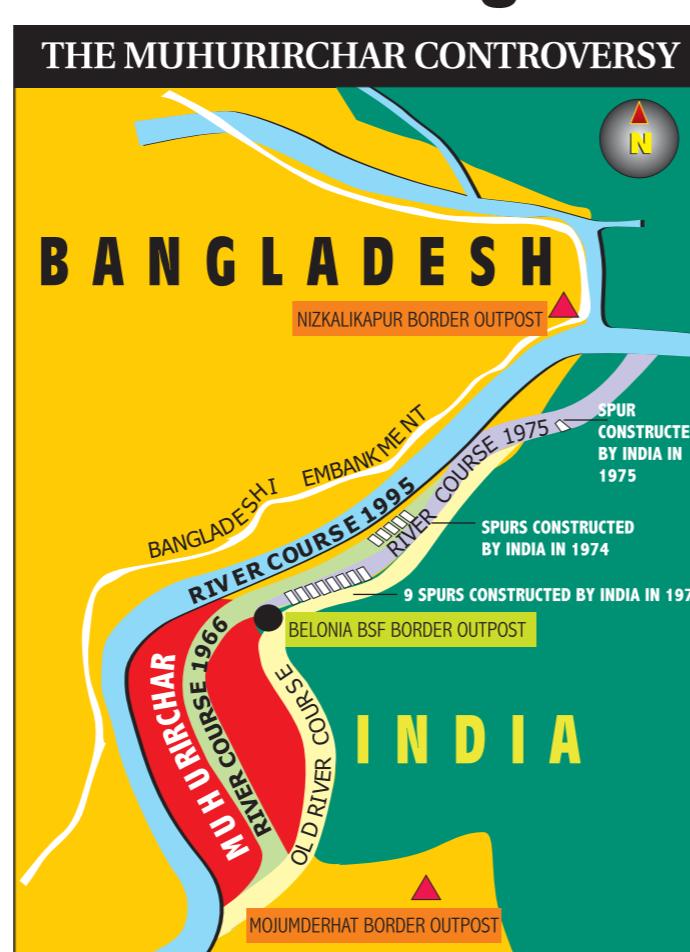
According to the Chakla Rowshanabadi Survey Map of Bengal in 1892-94, the Muhuri river was inside the then East Bengal. With the emergence of the islet on the river in the early 1960s, the Indian authorities claimed its ownership and the dispute started.

In addition to the diplomatic crisis it has created, the diversion of the river course has also taken away Bangladeshi farmlands and homesteads worth scores of taka, according to local people, border security and Bangladeshi Water Development Board (BWDB) officials.

"Construction of spurs and revetments upstream has been resulting in continuous loss of Bangladeshi land and expansion of the disputed Muhurichar," an official told The Daily Star.

The Chief Metropolitan Magistrate (CMM), Abdul Malek accepted the charge sheet and sent the case to Public Safety Tribunal for hearing on charge-framing.

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7,257 expelled on first day of HSC exams

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Massive copying and widespread violence marked the first day of the Higher Secondary Certificate (HSC) examinations yesterday. As many as 7257 examinees were expelled from different centres on charges of copying and adopting unfair means during the test on English first paper.

At least ten persons were injured, two of whom seriously, in a clash between two groups of people at Daudkandi Degree College HSC examination centre under Durgapur upazilla in Rajshahi, our

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CEC calls for arrest of listed criminals before polls

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) M A Syed yesterday called upon the law enforcers to nab the wanted criminals, extortionists and armed cadres irrespective of their political affiliation well before the next general elections.

The CEC made the call at a meeting with the senior members of the law enforcing agencies while reviewing the existing law and order

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SQ Chowdhury, Zahid expelled from BNP

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

BNP yesterday expelled Salahuddin Quader Chowdhury and Anwar Zahid, two of its senior leaders, on charge of acting against the party interests and breaking its discipline.

Choudhury is a member of parliament elected from Chittagong while Zahid was recently removed from the post of BNP chief's press adviser.

A meeting of the BNP's highest decision-making body the National Standing Committee made the decision last night in the wake of growing discontent in the main opposition party over the recent remarks the two leaders had made against top party leaders.

The meeting took the decision unanimously as per the party's constitution, according to a BNP statement issued after the nearly

two-hour meeting ending at 10.15 p.m.

It also issued two separate notices for the expelled leaders, which would be sent to them shortly, meeting sources said.

Held at BNP's election office at Banani with party Chairperson Khaleda Zia in the chair, the meeting was attended by all but two members of the standing committee. The absenteers are Abdul Matin Chowdhury, who is out of the city, and KM Obaidur Rahman now in jail.

The action against Choudhury followed his "adverse comments" against the BNP chief, her eldest son Tareque Rahman, Secretary General Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan, BNP President Sadeque Hossain Khoka MP and other mainstream moderate leaders.

Zahid, who has been blamed for the debacle in the BNP-led alliance

owing to Ershad's desertion, had also subscribed to some of the comments Choudhury had made.

Meeting sources said the decision to expel the two top hardliners was arrived at following a detailed discussion on their recent anti-party activities.

SQ Chowdhury, who joined BNP on the eve of June 12, 1996 parliamentary polls, at a recent discussion in the city made an oblique reference to Khaleda and her son and said, "Nowadays, the dog is not wagging the tail, rather the tail is wagging the dog."

The discussion was organised by Swadhinata Forum, an organisation of the ultra-right-wing and anti-liberation politicians, at the Jatiya Press Club.

His remarks drew flak from the

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Menacing BSF manoeuvres on at northern frontiers

Residents in bordering areas still panicky

NAIMUL HAQ, back from Northern Borders

'mutual ground rules,' BSF personnel frequently come up to the 'zero line' on the plea of patrol and cross over to Bangladeshi villages to carry out 'operations' especially at night. This makes frightened villagers to leave their houses. The troops use searchlights to pinpoint 'targeted houses' mainly in Tin Bigha enclave in Lammonirhat.

In many border observation posts, BSF has substantially increased its strength and deployed many troops in recently dug bunkers, 'civil informers' told this correspondent.

"We are scared by BSF move-

ments at night. They threaten us if we go near the border even to harvest paddy from our ancestral crop lands", said Abdul Latif of Barabari at Roumari border. His house, about 60 yards from the Indian border observation post (BOP), was set ablaze during the recent skirmishes.

"BSF threats come almost everyday. We cannot stay in our houses after nightfall because it is not safe. So we left the village and moved to Roumari for the time being," said

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Bullet marks on the BDR camp (left) and completely damaged homesteads bear testimony to the April 18 skirmishes on the Roumari border in the country's north.

14 killed in polls violence in five Indian states

AFP, New Delhi

At least 14 people were killed yesterday as five Indian states held elections seen as a crucial test for main opposition leader Sonia Gandhi as well as the communists who appeared in difficulty.

More than 132 million voters were eligible to choose among 5,000 candidates in 823 constituencies in West Bengal, Assam, Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Puducherry.

The eastern states of Assam and West Bengal witnessed the most violent incidents.

In West Bengal, at least six people were killed, police said.

A driver was killed at Tutagarh, 30 kilometres north of Calcutta, when a bomb that he was transporting in his car exploded. Unidentified assailants in Bishnupur, in southern West Bengal, killed two supporters of the resurgent opposition leader Mamata Banerjee. Another man

was killed in Mainkitala, north Calcutta, when a bomb exploded during clashes between supporters of the communist party and the Banerjee-led Trinamool party.

A youth died when he fell off a bridge in south Calcutta while being chased by security personnel while the body of another unidentified youth was brought to the Calcutta central hospital.

India's Election Commission has ordered fresh polls in at least 75 polling stations in Assam and West Bengal where polling was stalled due to violence.

In Assam, at least six people were killed. Suspected tribal militants ambushed a security patrol killing two soldiers and a civilian and injuring two others in Karbi Anglong in southern Assam, a police spokesman said.

In the southeastern former French colony of Pondicherry, a 55-year-old voter was trampled to death by a mob at a polling booth, witnesses said. An election officer said the man died of a heart attack.

In southwestern Kerala violence led to the death of one ruling communist party supporter in the Kannur district.

A local politician and 35 of his supporters were arrested in Madras. DB officials with

Classic DB operation Bid to commit robbery foiled at Karwan Bazar; two held

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

It was