

COMMITTED TO
People's Right to Know

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Shell, Unocal want overdue gas bills paid before polls

Failure to realise Tk 1,200cr in arrears with consumers puts Petrobangla in a tight corner

SHARIER KHAN

The government's inability to realise arrears with gas consumers as well as financial mismanagement has put Petrobangla that earns a yearly book profit of over Tk 1000 crores in financial woes.

Against such a backdrop, Shell Oil and Unocal are pressing Petrobangla to clear their gas bills in the neighbourhood of Tk 200 crores before the next national elections.

The pressure mounted when Petrobangla failed to keep its commitment to the multinational oil companies that it would clear all dues by March this year.

"With a view to clearing one-third of the outstanding due, Petrobangla had given Bangladesh Bank two months ago the requisite amount in taka to be converted into US dollars," said a source.

But till date, Bangladesh Bank has not been able to give Petrobangla the dollars, as its foreign currency reserves have hit an all-time low of 1.2 billion dollars. Bangladesh Bank sources said the situation may improve next month with the deposit of 150 million US dollars Japanese grant in the shape of debt-relief.

Sources said, Petrobangla which purchases gas directly from Shell and Unocal always falls three months behind the payment process.

Now, Petrobangla is facing severe cash crisis.

"This is happening because Petrobangla's gas marketing and distribution affiliates are failing to realise their respective arrears," said a government high official. "Different consumers owe Petrobangla affiliates over Tk 1200 crores for gas and condensate."

A big chunk of the arrear bills are outstanding with the government itself.

The Power Development Board (PDB) that purchases Petrobangla gas for production of power has arrears of over Tk 225 crores. PDB, on the other hand, is also having severe liquidity crisis as it has over Tk 3500 crores in arrears with various consumers, including government bodies.

The Bangladesh Petroleum Corporation (BPC), which purchases condensate from Petrobangla and sells it after processing, has arrears exceeding Tk 150 crores. The BPC used to earn an annual profit of over Tk 1000 crores till 1996, but it has become a loss-making concern after the 1997 global oil crunch.

To protect the BPC, the government doubled domestic petroleum prices in 1997 and then, despite a commitment to reduce oil prices, increased prices again last year. All this happened when the loss-incurring and poorly managed BPC is contributing over Tk 1000 crores to the national exchequer as oil import taxes.

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President Shahabuddin Ahmed addresses a function at the Osmani Memorial Hall in the city yesterday on the occasion of the World No Tobacco Day. National Professor Nurul Islam is on his right.

Dhaka assumes presidency of UNSC today

UNB, Dhaka

Bangladesh assumes the presidency of UN Security Council today for June when it will be addressing a number of key peace and security issues.

Bangladesh Permanent Representative Ambassador Anwarul Karim Chowdhury will take over the presidency from its current President US Ambassador Jim Cunningham, according to a message received here yesterday.

This will be Bangladesh's second presidency of the UN body responsible for maintenance of international peace and security since the beginning of her two-year membership from January 2000. Her earlier presidency was in March last year.

The council president guides its works and has the responsibility to speak on behalf of the council, the only UN body whose decisions are binding on all UN members.

Number of murders in May highest in 20 years

168 killed in first 5 months

SHAIKH NAZRUL ISLAM

Fifty-two people were killed in the city last month, the highest in a month in the last 20 years.

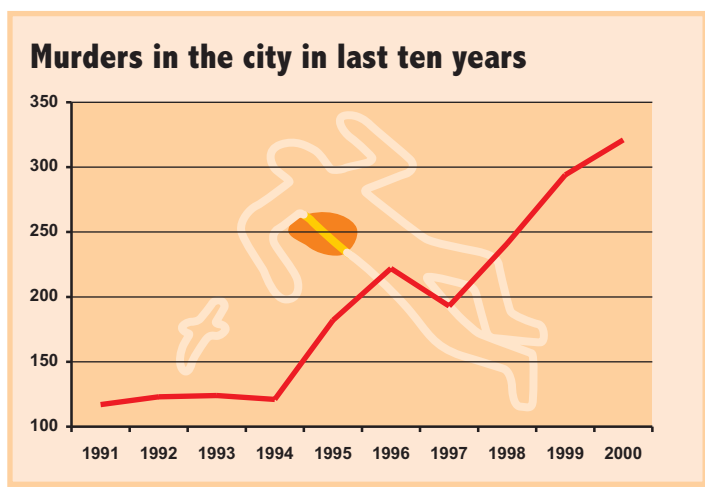
Of the victims, 18 were shot dead, five beaten to death, two raped and killed, 12 stabbed and strangled and five stabbed to death.

Besides, a doctor's wife, herself a nurse, was killed with a lethal injection. One was killed by pouring hot water on his body, one was slaughtered, one died when hit with a concrete slab. Bomb blast killed one.

Five others were found dead in different parts of the city.

The highest number of murders took place in Mirpur thana area where six people were killed during the month. Five people each were killed in Sutrapur and Demra thanas, four each in Shyampur, Khilgaon and Mohammadpur thanas and three each in Badda, Ramna and Motijheel thanas.

Two murders each took place in



Month	1999	2000	2001
January	19	19	33
February	20	26	22
March	15	24	31
April	26	26	30
May	28	29	52
Total	108	124	168

Global Forum II concludes Declaration calls for end to corruption in governance

SYED FAHIM MUNAIM, The Hague

The Global Forum II on Fighting Corruption and Safeguarding Integrity concluded here yesterday, adopting a Final Declaration on realising the common objectives of putting an end to corrupt practices and further developing systems based on good governance and integrity.

The declaration was adopted amid applause by participants who included ministers and senior officials representing 142 countries. The delegates at the four-day conference explored ways to realise the common objectives.

Law and Parliamentary Affairs Minister Abdul Matin Khasru of Bangladesh was also present on concluding day.

In their deliberations, the participants expressed their deep concern at the spread of corruption in govern-

ments, public institutions and private corporations, having a devastating impact on human rights and affecting the poor in particular.

They were convinced that examples would be set up by governments in ensuring integrity of officials, by political parties in promoting transparency in financing and by the private sector in applying high standards of accountability.

They emphasized that investigative and independent media have a vital role to play.

The participants also welcomed a decision of the United Nations General Assembly to begin elaboration of an effective international legal instrument against corruption.

An initiative by the Republic of Korea to host the Global Forum-III in Seoul in 2003 was acclaimed.

The delegates reiterated the need for involvement of

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PM's name misspelled!

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The Prime Minister's name was wrongly spelt on the plaque she officially unveiled on Wednesday inaugurating construction of Rupsha Bridge in Khulna.

Her name on the plaque read "Shaikh Hasina" instead of the official English spelling of "Sheikh Hasina", a mistake to remain for generations.

The Director of the Rupsha Bridge Construction Project, Mominul Haque told The Daily Star that the error would be corrected soon.

SQ Chowdhury sued under Arms Act

UNB, Ctg

A case was filed yesterday against Salahuddin Quader Chowdhury under the Arms Act following recovery of weapons from his residence.

The case was filed following investigation report placed before the CMM by investigation officer yesterday on Tuesday's incident.

Police said a Spanish pistol, five guns, over 500 rounds of bullets, four bulletproof jackets, five sharp

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Lawyer assaults HC official

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

A lawyer assaulted a Bench Officer at the High Court before the court took up its business yesterday.

Court sources said the lawyer struck a blow on the nose of the official during a heated exchange of words.

He asked the official about his case on the day's cause list and claimed that it had been pulled down and put at the bottom of the list while some other cases were pushed up. This led to the trouble.

The official lodged a complaint with the court authorities in this regard.

BNP working on a '91-style deal with Jamaat

NAZMUL ASHRAF and ZAYADUL AHSAN

Having been locked in a cold war with its allies over the perplexing issue of sharing seats in the upcoming general election, BNP may go for a deal with Jamaat-e-Islami as it did in 1991, opposition sources said.

Its own preparation to contest the polls aside, the main opposition party is now weighing the option of sharing certain seats with Jamaat, which has emerged as the second biggest component in the grouping following the recent split-up with former president HM Ershad's Jatiya Party. A faction of Jatiya Party and Islami Oikya Jote are the two other components.

Growing dispute over a four-party electoral alliance is brightening the prospect for an understanding between BNP and Jamaat, which will mean supporting each other in some strategic areas, according to opposition strategists.

In a secret deal during the 1991 election, BNP bagged Jamaat's support in the constituencies where it had comfortable positions and vice versa. A similar understanding may be reached this time, too if the negotiation for an electoral alliance falls apart, said a BNP source.

Nevertheless, a third option to settle disputes over the seat-sharing arrangement is also on the cards.

Explaining, sources in opposition alliance said BNP is

highly likely to opt for an agreement with Jamaat even after accommodating the JP and IOJ, the two smaller parties that may contest the polls bearing BNP's election symbol.

But the allies are not yet ready to give up hopes for an electoral coalition maintaining their separate identities.

"We do not find BNP unwilling to discuss the seat-sharing issue now. We hope for a negotiated settlement of the matter soon," said Jamaat secretary general Ali Ahsan Mohammad Mujahid.

Talking to The Daily Star last night, Mujahid denied having any talks on the outline of the proposed electoral alliance. He did not confirm an understanding with BNP similar to the one in 1991, however.

Kazi Firoz Rashid, a JP negotiator in the opposition alliance, preferred an immediate settlement of the seat-sharing issue. "The issue of forming a coalition government and not that of sharing seats should be discussed during the caretaker regime," he said opposing the BNP plan.

Rashid told the Star that his party was ready to contest the polls with BNP's election symbol (sheaf of paddy) since it does not have any symbol now. "Sheaf of paddy will rather help us."

Supporting the idea of such an understanding, an

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20 Bangladeshis detained in Turkey

AP, Ankara

Turkish paramilitary police discovered 65 illegal Iraqi immigrants hidden in secret compartments of a truck loaded with sand and pebbles, the Anatolia news agency said Thursday.

Police detained 24 other Iraqis and 20 people from Bangladesh in a separate operation near the Aegean town of Gumuldur, farther west. The immigrants were in two minibuses, Anatolia said.

Police stopped the truck at a toll booth on a highway near the city of Bolu, some 1,500 kilometers northwest of the Iraqi-Turkish border.

One of the immigrants, Fuat Ahmet Abdurrahman, was quoted as saying they had been travelling for three days and "were dreaming about going to Europe." Abdurrahman was riding in the cab, along with his wife and son.

Thousands of illegal immigrants from Asia and the Middle East pay smugglers to sneak them into Western Europe via Turkey each year.

ADP revision meant to 'influence voters' BNP delegation tells CEC

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

A four-member high-powered BNP delegation yesterday met the Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) including a massive wheat and rice distribution programme at the very end of the financial year is clearly to influence voters. The increased amount included a Tk 500-crore additional allocation at Prime Minister's instruction ignoring ECNEC approval.

It said such motivated spending of public money during the period immediately preceding a major election constitutes an electoral offence. Besides, ruling party men are also making commitments to the voters, it said.

In a separate memorandum, the BNP delegation submitted a memorandum in this regard to CEC MA Syed protesting government's allocation of huge quantities of wheat and rice among party leaders for distribution in their respective

parliamentary constituencies.

It said the government's purpose behind the enormous increase of Tk 700 crores in the revised ADP including a massive wheat and rice distribution programme at the very end of the financial year is clearly to influence voters. The increased amount included a Tk 500-crore additional allocation at Prime Minister's instruction ignoring ECNEC approval.

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Special drive: 2048 arrested on fourth day

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Police arrested 2048 persons during combing operation throughout the country on the fourth day yesterday, a police headquarters release said.

Of them, seven are identified criminals, 1379 wanted criminals and 645 suspects in different cases.

Police also recovered 44 firearms and 102 bullets during the drive yesterday. Sixteen persons were arrested for possessing arms and 14 cases were filed with different thanas in this connection, the press release added.

The identified criminals are Jasim Uddin and Md Bhutto of Dhanmondi thana, Quayyum of Motijheel thana, Hossain Ali of Tejgaon thana, Noor-e-Alam alias Selim of Mirpur thana and Md Khalilur Rahman of Magura district.

Emergence of adolescent gunslingers in city Pistols, revolvers, sawn-off rifles more affordable, accessible than ever

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Cheap and easily accessible, hundreds of pistols, revolvers and sawn-off rifles are now in the hands of at least 500 youths in the city, ready to be used for robbery, snatching or pre-planned killing.

According to police sources, in almost all the poverty-stricken areas of the city, boys as young as 14 years of age have access to lethal weapons. Gangs of youths in almost all the downtown areas not only indulge in street crimes, but also work as "hired killers" these days.

And whoever possesses a gun readily gets "employed" by drug dealers, political activists and also rich businessmen seeking protection from rival groups. Police said another group of people, who "patronises" this new breed of armed youths, are men engaged in "land piracy" - forcible occupation

of private and public lands.

"In addition to armed political party cadres, this new breed of armed youths poses a new threat to law and order in the city," said a police officer. "Without tightening the channels of arms supply it would be impossible to curb this trend."

In the city's illegal arms market, three types of small arms are on high demand. These are cheap and easily afforded by the young buyers. The most sought after firearms, among the city's new breed of criminals, home-made Indian revolvers, known as 'ghora', 'chabuk' or 'seep' depending on the locality.

These small firearms are smuggled through several border points in some western, north-western and north-eastern districts.

According to sources, most firearms from the northern borders come into the city with

consignments of phensidyl by buses, vehicles carrying government mails and emergency medicines and trucks carrying perishable items that pass highway check-posts on a priority basis. In most cases, law-enforcing agencies are 'aware' of the consignments of phensidyl as they 'receive' their 'fees' regularly. But, it is "physically impossible" for them to check "three or four" small firearms inside a vehicle carrying tonnes of merchandise.

In the city, the price of an Indian revolver ranges between Tk 3,000 and Tk 4,000. With proper connections to the 'local dealers' one can get hold of an Indian revolver within a day or two. According to sources, the local dealers are mostly based at places near bus stations and the Tejgaon railway station, where the "Akhaura Mail", widely known as the "smuggling train", makes long stops.

Areas around Gabtoli, Amin Bazar, Syedabad, Mahakhali and Tejgaon are the

places where 'imported' arms are kept before being distributed or sold.

Although it is quite simple to manufacture a firearm on the lathe machine, local arms are 'unreliable', a lathe machine operator in the city's Azimpur area said. Because, he said, not all manufacturers are able to master the technology of revolving the bullet chamber after every shot.

The biggest problem for one who possesses firearms in the country is to procure ammunition, he added. Recently, a 'party' who wanted to order a firearm for manufacture had to decide on its bore after obtaining half a dozen bullets from "a city police" sergeant.

"When half a dozen such revolvers arrive in the city from a border point, prospective buyers have to procure ammunition for them. A single 3.2 bore bullet could cost up to Tk

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A bunch of small children takes a break to appreciate the distant bushy mountain blanketed in cloud at Tamabil in Sylhet.