

**ALERT!**  
Groundwater arsenic contamination may be more widespread in Bangladesh than thought previously. A new study found 28 more towns and cities including Chittagong to have arsenic above the allowable level.

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**Too hot to handle!**

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Police arrested a burglar on charge of attempting to steal a car of the state minister for energy and mineral resources from the transport pool yesterday morning.

The burglar was identified as Mohammad Jahurul Islam alias Jhony, son of Mohammad Ismail.

A resident of 14 Folder Street at Wari, in the city's Sutrapur area, Jhony tried to steal the car away. Some employees of the car pool intercepted him before he could leave the spot. Later, they handed the burglar over to Ramna police.

After checking the car's documents, they came to know that the car was issued for the state minister for energy and mineral resources. Sources said Jhony is an accused in the Bidu murder case. Bidu was killed at Sutrapur in October last year.

The duty officer of Ramna Police Station said last night that the emergency officer dispatched to the spot did not return to the station till then. He said that no case was filed in this regard.

**Case against ex-AL MP: Police yet to nab 2 others**

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Pallabi police were not able to arrest till yesterday the two persons accused along with former AL MP Kamal Ahmed Majumdar in a case of attempted rape.

Kamal Majumdar was arrested Wednesday following a case under the Prevention of Women and Children Repression Act, 2000, filed with Pallabi police by Yasmeen Sultana, 35, where she accused the ex-MP of trying to rape her at his political office at Mohana in the city's Pallabi area on Sunday.

The complainant also named Kamal's brother Anwar Majumdar and one Nazma Hossain as accused in the same case.

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**No bail for Pintu**

COURT CORRESPONDENT

The petition of ruling party MP Nasiruddin Ahmed Pintu, seeking ad-interim bail in a criminal case, was rejected by the Metropolitan Sessions Judge's Court, Dhaka, yesterday.

Pintu was arrested on December 26 last year on charge of attempted snatching of auction documents of a bankrupt company's property on December 23. Judge Ahmed Jamil Mostafa passed the order following a criminal appeal, seeking ad-interim bail, by the defence lawyers.

Advocate Masud Ahmed Talukder submitted the appeal to the court against the rejection order of the CMM's court. He stated that Pintu was implicated in the case as part of a conspiracy to harass him politically.

"The charges brought against Pintu was not proved. So, I pray for his bail," the defence lawyer told the court.

Court inspector Shah Alam and SEE PAGE 11 COL 8

## Blair requests Dhaka for troops to Afghanistan

Bangladesh prefers 'blue-beret' participation

DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENT

British Prime Minister Tony Blair has reportedly asked Bangladesh to expand its peacekeeping role and contribute troops to the international stabilisation force in war-ravaged Afghanistan.

The request was made during talks between Blair and Prime Minister Khaleda Zia yesterday evening, sources said.

The Bangladesh side is learnt to have said that it would look into the British request but would have to take all options into account. While normal peace keeping is under Article VI of the UN Charter, the stabilisation force in Afghanistan has been created under Article VII of the charter.

Dhaka also said its participation will depend on the developments of the UN Trust Fund. It said it prefers to participate under the UN's 'blue beret umbrella'.

"We would like to see that Bangladesh take part in the stabilisation force in Afghanistan", Blair told foreign reporters accompany SEE PAGE 11 COL 1



Prime Minister Khaleda Zia receives British Prime Minister Tony Blair and Mrs. Blair on their arrival at International Airport yesterday. PHOTO PID

## Saifur flays foreign banks for 'profiteering', threatens slapping extra tax

INAM AHMED

Finance Minister M Saifur Rahman yesterday flayed the foreign commercial banks (FCBs) operating in the country for 'high profiteering' and threatened fresh taxes on them if they did not lower interest rates by April.

He also asked the FCBs to operate within the country's framework to support development or quit.

Saifur was holding a meeting with the chief executives of the FCBs and the Nationalised Commercial Banks (NCBs) at his office yesterday.

He came down heavily on the FCBs, accusing them of not supporting the government's vision for growth, and said behaviours of the foreign banks may force him to revert to regulated banking system may what come.

"Your charges are exorbitantly high; your bad debt is only two per cent and yet your lending rates are no less than any other NCBs," the finance minister was quoted to have said. "I am a propagator of deregulated market, but the situation is



asking me to fix interest rate."

He also accused the FCBs of working in cartel in fixing interest rates in the band of 11-13 per cent.

He asked the FCBs to correct themselves by April or face action.

"You are supposed to migrate the best banking practices and offer new choices to investors. Instead what we see? You are simply here to make money," he was quoted by the sources as saying.

He pointed out that the five to six per cent interest rate spread the

FCBs get is unrealistically high and said although they migrate huge profits from the country, hardly do they play any role in bringing in foreign investment.

"There is no reason why you should charge more than 10 per cent in interests," he was quoted to have said.

However, the FCBs projected their situation and most of them said they invest in industrial projects like garment units as well. But Saifur was somewhat agitated by this statement and said if 'tailoring' is an industrial undertaking, then the term has to be changed.

At this stage, a FCB said it is not correct that they are profiteering, as the return on their equity in Bangladesh is 15 per cent while the global rate is 25 per cent.

Another chief executive said the FCBs account for only six per cent of the country's banking sector and as such, they should not be solely blamed for the industrial backwardness.

But the finance minister said the FCBs should be the trend-setter in forcing others to help investment.

## FUEL PRICE HIKE

# AL calls half-day hartal January 9

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The Awami League (AL) will enforce a half-day countrywide hartal on January 9 in protest at the government's decision to hike fuel prices.

The mainstream opposition party also announced a series of agitation programmes across the country at a rally organised at Muktangan in the city yesterday, including ward-level demonstration in the capital on January 8, district-level demonstration on January 7 and upazila-level agitation programme on January 6.

Party's Acting President Abdus Samad Azad who presided over the rally and outlined the agitation programmes, denied the government's claim that it had executed the immediate-past Awami League government's decision to increase the fuel prices.

"If the present government executed our decisions on the fuel price rise, why does it eliminate our other decisions?" quipped Azad, the former foreign minister. The BNP-led coalition government of Khaleda Zia was lying and imposing an additional burden on the people to run its large cabinet.

Because of the price hikes of electricity, gas, water and petroleum products, the sufferings of the common people have multiplied, said the senior AL leader.

The rally was addressed by, among others, party presidium members Amir Hossain Amu, Abdul Jalil, and Suranjit Sengupta, General Secretary Zillur Rahman, Organising Secretary Mohammad Nasim, Agriculture Affairs Secretary Matia Chowdhury, Dhaka City Mayor and the party's city unit president Mohammad Hanif,

General Secretary Mofazzal Hossain Chowdhury Maya. Several thousand leaders and activists of the opposition party attended the rally.

Zillur Rahman called upon the party men to gear up for a greater movement against the 'repressive and autocratic' government. "This government has nothing to do but to unleash repression on the country-



The Awami League brought out a procession in the city yesterday protesting price hike of electricity and gas. The government recently increased utility service charges triggering widespread protests.

## Khaleda calls for expanding economic coop with UK

BSS, Dhaka

Prime Minister Khaleda Zia has said there is wide scope for further expanding economic, trade, investment and development cooperation between Bangladesh and the United Kingdom.

"Our bilateral cooperation developed in many areas and we are also benefiting from British technical assistance," she said and expressed satisfaction at the increased bilateral trade between the two countries.

Khaleda was speaking at a dinner she hosted in honour of the visiting British Prime Minister Tony Blair at SEE PAGE 11 COL 6

## Biman makes new plan for grounded ATPs

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

Biman Bangladesh Airlines is working on a plan to either sell off or put into use two of its Advanced Turboprop (ATP) aircraft, grounded for nearly three years.

The exercise has been taken up after Biman failed to dispose of the ATPs despite floating a tender in November 2000. The lone bidder offered US\$3.5 million, but it could not be accepted due to lack of any other prospective buyers.

This time, Biman has decided to make another effort to sell out the ATPs and buy one F-28 aircraft to bolster its three-F28 fleet flying on the domestic and regional routes, sources said.

Biman officials are now conducting a through inspection of the two SEE PAGE 11 COL 8

## JS session begins Jan 31, AL likely to skip

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

President AQM Badruddoza Chowdhury yesterday summoned the winter session of the Jatiya Sangsad on January 31.

The ensuing session, second of the eighth parliament, would be an important one on many accounts, as it would deal with many issues, according to political insiders.

The chance of opposition Awami League's joining the session is still bleak although it has softened to its earlier stance. AL has been boycotting parliament proceedings since its maiden session.

Although Speaker Jamiruddin Sircar earlier asked the Chief Whip of the Jatiya Sangsad to initiate a move, no official communication has been made yet to bring the main opposition party to parliament, sources said.

Talking to The Daily Star last night, the Speaker however expressed his optimism that the main opposi-

tion party would attend the next session.

He said, the Chief Whip is maintaining contact. He would initiate another move once the present level of communication fails.

"I shall try to maintain impartiality in running the House," the Speaker said.

Deputy Leader of the Opposition Abdul Hamid had indicated at a press briefing during the Ramadan that AL would join parliament sitting "from the next session". He had however said that the government was yet to create an atmosphere for AL's joining.

AL General Secretary Zillur Rahman earlier alleged that the government had unleashed attacks on AL supporters, activists and those who voted its candidates in the October 1 general election. "So, how can we join parliament keeping them on the street?"

However, he had indicated that the matter would be discussed by the party hierarchy after AL chief Sheikh SEE PAGE 11 COL 3

## SAARC summit starts today

Security blanket over Kathmandu

UNB, Kathmandu

A three-day SAARC Summit starts here today ending long dilemmas over the meet, overshadowed by warlike situations between India and Pakistan.

The conference of heads of state or government of the seven-nation South Asian forum, being held after a gap of three years, will be inaugurated at 2:00 pm at the Birendra International Convention Centre (BICC).

Meantime, President of the Maldives Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga, Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee and Bhutanese Prime Minister Lyonpo Khandu Wangchuk have arrived in the Nepalese capital to attend the Summit. Bangladesh Prime Minister Khaleda Zia and Pakistan President General Pervez Musharraf will fly in here today.

The Summit, originally scheduled for year 2000, is now being held after a lapse of three years because of strained relationship between two major players in the bloc, India and Pakistan. The last summit was held in Colombo in 1998.

At the end of a two-day foreign minister-level meeting, the SAARC Council of Ministers yesterday recommended economic issues, focused more on SAFTA, and reviewed various activities.

The Council wanted to finalise the SAFTA treaty and suggested a time frame and discussed the process of the planned South Asian Free-trade Area. SEE PAGE 11 COL 4

## India, Pakistan say no request yet for meeting

AFP, Kathmandu

Indian Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh said Thursday that Pakistan had not requested any meeting with him on the sidelines of a South Asian summit in Nepal.

"There is no such request and we have received no such information," Singh told reporters in Kathmandu.

"It has not been the convention of SAARC to hold bilateral affairs," he said, noting that the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation had seven members. SEE PAGE 11 COL 7

## Arsenic found in ground water in 28 municipalities!

NAIMUL HAQ

Thousands of people of 28 municipalities of the country are drinking arsenic contaminated water from pipeline water supply system, a recent study has revealed.

Earlier, it was believed that the wells including the deep tube wells in the municipalities posed no threat to public health since they were safe.

The tests carried out by the Dhaka Community Hospital (DCH) in cooperation with The Daily Star were done between January and September 2001.

The municipalities include the hill district of Rangamati where, until now, experts rule out possibilities of finding arsenic even at low concentration.

Laboratory tests of water samples collected from the municipalities revealed that all of them including those from privately-owned wells contained at least 0.03 milligram per litre arsenic or three times the acceptable level (0.01 mg/L) for human consumption. For Bangladesh, the highest level of arsenic in drinking water is 0.05 mg/L.

Atomic absorption and spectro-photometry, two of the world's best and most reliable methods, were used to test the samples. Two separate tests were carried out for each of the 324 water samples. One set was tested at the laboratory of the DCH while the other was sent to

Jadavpur University in Kolkata, India for a second opinion. According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), long-term consumption of arsenic can cause various skin diseases. Experts studying some arsenic patients have concluded that long-term exposure to arsenic through drinking can lead to cancer in the bladder, intestine and even lungs.

So far, official surveys in only 500 villages have found some 10,000 arsenic patients suffering from various forms of ailments including cancer related to arsenic poisoning.

The DCH study found the highest concentration of 0.199 mg/L arsenic in a deep tube well in Gopalganj town that supplies water to more than 12,000 inhabitants.

The second highest concentration was found in another Gopalganj town deep tube well supplying water to more than 10,000 people. This one has an arsenic concentration of 0.177 mg/L.

In Chuadanga town, a 170-foot deep tube well, which is shared by some 20 families, has a concentration of 0.42 mg/L of arsenic. The users have been drinking from the well for the last six years.

In Kishoreganj and Laxipur district towns, similar concentrations of arsenic were detected. In Kishoreganj, a privately owned well showed presence of arsenic at 0.183 mg/L while in Laxmipur 0.267 and 0.140 mg/L SEE PAGE 11 COL 1