

317 stranded pilgrims fly out at last

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

All the 317 non-ballottee hajis (Hajj pilgrims), stranded in the city's Uttara haji camp since January 28, flew off to Saudi Arabia early yesterday morning.

The pilgrims boarded a chartered aircraft hired by Air Bangladesh (AB) plane at about 5:00am after the government permitted the private operator on Tuesday to operate its flights.

The first flight was scheduled to take off at 8:00pm Tuesday but was delayed due to formalities at the Zia International Airport (ZIA).

The AB hired a chartered aircraft to carry the pilgrims on January 28. But the government did not allow it to operate its flight as it did obtain clearance from the Civil Aviation Authority of Bangladesh (CAAB).

Sources said the AB sold out tickets to as many as 7000 Hajj pilgrims through its twelve travel

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Dacoit killed in mob beating in Araihazar

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Narayanganj

A dacoit was killed in mob beating at village Dhandi under Araihazar upazila Tuesday night.

According to sources, a gang of 20 armed dacoits attacked the house of one Mokbul Mia of the village at midnight and started looting valuables.

As the inmates tried for help, the villagers rushed to the spot and chased the gang.

The dacoits hurled bombs on the villagers, leaving five injured.

At one stage, the villagers caught the gang leader, Sobhan 'dakait', 31, and beat him to death. Other members of the gang managed to flee.

A case was filed with Araihazar thana in this connection.

Police said, Sobhan was a notorious dacoit and accused in four dacoity cases.

Missing teenage boy found dead at Pongu Hospital

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

A teenage boy, who was missing from Agargaon BNP slum, was found dead at the Pongu Hospital in the early hours of yesterday.

One Hossain called Rimon Majhi, 13, son of Rafiq Majhi, out of his shanty Tuesday noon. Since then, he was missing.

A local shopkeeper, Monir, informed Rimon's father that his son was admitted to the Pongu (orthopaedic) hospital, sources said.

Rafiq went to the hospital at about 2 pm and found him dead. There body bore marks of injury, hospital sources said.

Police recovered the body from the hospital yesterday morning and sent it to the Dhaka Medical College (DMCH) for autopsy.

Sources said the young boy was allegedly involved in drug trading at the Karom Ali slum.

Following the murder, Mohammadpur police raided the BNP slum and rounded up at least 56 people. Police later released all but one.

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Prayer Timings

Feb 7

5:49 pm

Feb 8

6:36 am

6 nationalised banks asked to shut down 800 branches

INAM AHMED and BISWADIP DAS

The Ministry of Finance yesterday asked six state-owned banks to close down as many as 800 loss-making branches by the end of the year.

The 800 branches had been incurring losses for the last five years. The six include four nationalised commercial banks (NCBs) -- Sonali Bank, Janata Bank, Agrani bank and Rupali Bank -- and two Development Financial Institutions (DFIs), namely Bangladesh Krishish Unnayan Bank (BKUB) and Rajshahi Krishish Unnayan Bank (RAKUB).

These nationalised banks have as many as 4900 branches, and the NCBs alone have 3685 branches, of which 1300 are incurring losses.

Sources at the finance ministry said since these branches have been in the red for the last five years, they stand little chances of making profits.

The ministry has set a March 7 deadline for the six chiefs of the banks to inform it and the central bank, Bangladesh Bank, about their decision regarding the shutdown of branches and have it approved by their respective boards.

Also, the ministry made it clear that it would not tolerate any clemency to this end.

A highly placed source at the finance ministry said the ministry has

observed that the loss-making branches of the banks are concentrated in small areas, which shrink the market. They felt that only one branch in such areas could well make profits.

The ministry also said the banks should meet and decide on who will operate which branches in what areas. They have been asked to submit a status report to the ministry by March 7.

They have also been told to retain at least one loss-making branch in a five square kilometer area.

In 1996, the government initiated a policy to close these branches, but there was no follow-up action in this regard.

The bank reform committee headed by Prof. Wahiduddin Mahmud had also recommended closure of these branches to cut back on losses of the banks.

Donors have long been asking the government to close down the loss-making branches. The finance ministry sources said Bangladesh's chances of getting the much-needed loan from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) hinges greatly on the success of the scheme.



PHOTO: STAR
Theatre group 'Sanglap' staged a drama at the Centre Shaheed Minar yesterday as part of National Street Drama Festival 2002.

Prime minister discloses

Law & order improving in country but bad in city

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Prime Minister Khaleda Zia yesterday told the parliament that there had been 'enough' improvement in law and order in the country, but at a cabinet committee meeting earlier on the day, she expressed 'grave concern' over the incidents of crime in the city.

"We are monitoring law and order in the country on a regular basis and it would continue till normalcy is fully restored," Khaleda said in the House while replying to a question from Joynal Abedin Faruq of the ruling BNP during the half-an-hour Prime Minister's Question Time.

She also referred to a meeting of the cabinet committee on law and order held her office in the afternoon and hoped the situation would shortly improve further.

The prime minister informed the House that the ongoing anti-terrorism drive to arrest terrorists and recover illegal firearms would continue. "Terrorists

belonging to any party will be brought to book and illegal arms will be recovered," she said.

The BNP-led coalition government had pledged to curb terrorism and eliminate corruption from the society before the October 1 general election. Its 100-day priority programme which ended recently also included restoration of normalcy by curbing terrorism.

At the cabinet committee meeting, Khaleda expressed 'grave concern' over the recent incidents of crime in the capital and asked the law enforcers to further gear up their activities to ensure public security, meeting sources said.

A total of 1150 people were murdered and several thousand injured in incidents of crime across the country since October 1. Besides, there were 4000 cases of repression on women during this period.

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Embezzlement of Tk 1.74 cr from Agrani Bank in Khulna: One held

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, Khulna

Mohammad Sadequr Rahman, DGM at the corporate branch of Agrani Bank, has lodged a case with Khulna thana yesterday naming three persons as accused for misappropriating Tk 1.74 crore from Khalishpur and Daulatpur branches of the bank by forged means.

The three accused named in the FIR recorded yesterday are Lutfor Rahman, Md Manik Khan and Md Nazrul Islam.

Accused Lutfor Rahman is an employee of the clearing section of the corporate branch, while Manik Khan is his younger brother. Nazrul Islam happens to be one of close relatives of Lutfor Rahman.

The complainant has stated in

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Writ challenging white paper turned down

BSS, Dhaka

The High Court yesterday rejected the writ petition which challenged the legality of publication of white paper regarding corruption and irregularities of the immediate past Awami League government.

The court rejected the matter as it is not maintainable as per law.

The division bench comprising Justice M A Matin and Justice Mohammad Marzi Ul Haque passed the order upon the petition filed by former industries minister Tofail Ahmed and former education minister ASH K Sadique.

The same bench had sent the matter to the Chief Justice for

necessary order on February 4 when the counsel of the petitioners expressed his apprehension to get proper justice from the bench.

The Chief Justice sent back the matter to the same bench to dispose of the matter as per law.

Political Secretary to the Prime Minister Haris Chowdhury released the white paper at a press conference at his office on January 23.

The two-volume white paper contained forty incidents of corruption and irregularities of the previous Awami League government.

A cell headed by former secretary M Moniruzzaman prepared the white paper.

23 ward-level AL leaders held in city

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Police yesterday arrested 23 ward-level Awami League leaders under Section 54 of the Criminal Procedure Code (CrPC) in seven simultaneous raids in the city.

Officials of seven police stations pounced on the AL leaders and produced them before the Chief Metropolitan Magistrate's Court, Dhaka at the same time.

The police prayed to the court for detentions of 12 and remands of 11.

The defence submitted seven petitions for bail of all the accused and for denial of the remand prayers. The prosecution opposed the bail petitions and prayed for remands.

After hearing both sides, the court granted bail to two of the accused -- Mohammad Sarafat

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PHOTO: STAR
Indiscriminate dumping of industrial and household wastes through WASA's sewer pipes into Buriganga's three tributaries continues unabated, polluting the rivers and their surrounding areas. Decomposed body of cattle is sometimes seen floating in the water (left) and the toxic water spurted out by irrigation pumps actually kill crops.

Deadly pollution of 3 rivers endangers lives of thousands

MAHBUB ZAMAN

Contamination of water in three rivers flowing through Khilgaon and Sabujbagh thanas of the city has risen to such a level that more than 50 thousand people in 12 villages along their banks are finding life unbearable.

Millions of cubic metres of untreated sewage through sewers of Dhaka WASA flow into the three rivers -- Norai, Devdholai and Balupur -- their water far beyond the tolerable level. Numerous open pit latrines along river banks and other wastes have worsened the situation.

Local people said such unusually polluted water is not only causing health hazards but also contaminating cultivable lands and vegetables grown on those. Farmers who grow and supply vegetables mainly to the city markets have to use this water, looking like burnt lubricants and emitting extremely foul odour.

Only a few years ago, water of

these rivers was used for drinking and washing. The rivers were also rich in fish, but no fish can survive there now. Fishermen in the area have either gone unemployed or shifted to other professions to earn their living, local people said.

They alleged that untreated sewer flow into the rivers originates from two points -- one at Kamalapur and the other at Rampura. They

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More than due share of Ganges water in Jan

DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENT

Bangladesh continued to receive more than its stipulated share of the Ganges water throughout January in three ten-day cycles.

Meanwhile, people of the 12 villages formed an organisation -- Barogram Unnayan Sangstha (BUS) to realise their demand for an end to pollution of the rivers. In this

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According to the data recorded earlier, Bangladesh received 72,146 cusecs water at the Hardinge point in the January 1 to 10 cycle, as against the stipulated amount of 61,281 cusecs, as against the stipulated quantum of 57,673 cusecs.

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A team of experts of the Indo-Bangladesh Joint Committee formed under the water accord confirmed that the technical aspects

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English version of textbooks meets the same fate

MUSTAK HOSSAIN

The National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB) is yet to place its order for printing of English version of textbooks for the students in English medium schools.

Sources said the NCTB has failed to meet its deadline to print and distribute board textbooks among the students for the current academic year as it has given fresh print order of an additional 26.50 lakh books on January 30, just the day before the deadline expired.

There are several schools in the capital city and elsewhere in the country which give lessons in English under the NCTB curriculum.

But it is yet to take necessary steps to bring out English versions of about 38 kinds of books for Class VI to Class IX, which has caused enormous suffering to the students, who are already one month into the new academic session.

Guardians of these English medium schools students are being forced to photocopy the books, which burdens them financially.

Taking advantage of the non-availability of English version of the books, unscrupulous book sellers are asking three times the price printed on the books. In some cases, some book sellers are taking money in advance against supply of the English version books, the sources added.

English version of the books were last printed in 1997 and the NCTB stopped printing these books since there are only a few educational institu-

Time for unity of pro-liberation forces: Shahriar

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Eminent writer and columnist Shahriar Kabir, who reportedly escaped a bomb attack in Chittagong on Tuesday, said the only way to overcome the "present crises" caused by the rise and aggression of anti-liberation elements" was to unify all the pro-liberation forces under one banner.

Shahriar was addressing a press conference at the Dhaka Reporters Union (DRU) organised by Ektruter Ghatak Dalal N