

## Local govt roundtable

FROM PAGE 12 activities as people still want their involvement in those.

Moudud Ahmed said the government is examining the local government system as a whole and it is not thinking of any immediate and political gain. "We want to take some decisions about local governments keeping in view the future and welfare of the country and its people."

He went on, "I think at least five to ten years' time is needed for withdrawing the lawmakers from local activities. If the upazila system is implemented and it runs for ten to fifteen years, it will be the meeting point of the central and local governments."

BNP Secretary General and LGRD and Cooperatives Minister Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan stressed the need for continuation of major development activities and systems of successive governments.

"It is not true that all activities of a previous government are bad and it is not wise to cancel all the initiatives of any previous government. There should be working unity of both the ruling and opposition parties, which is seen in developed countries," he said.

Bhuiyan said local governments should be self-sufficient for strengthening the system.

It is witnessed that local government leaders usually do not increase taxes and refrain from collecting taxes at least a year before polls to win those. This conception has to be changed to strengthen local government system.

Referring to Dhaka City Corporation, he said the DCC has become ineffective as election to it was not held in the last eight years due to legal barriers. "Now there is no legal barrier, but doubts have been created whether the opposition will take part in the election although it is a non-political one."

Industries Minister MK Anwar said each lawmaker must be given office at the Sangsad Bhaban to enable them to concentrate on lawmaking and national issues.

Prof Muhammad Yunus urged the government to keep the Upazila system in existence and hold its election immediately. He said weaknesses and loopholes can be detected when a system continues.

Start functioning of the local bodies and bring amendments when necessary. Take urgent steps to hold upazila polls right at the moment, he suggested.

State Minister for Agriculture Mirza Fakrul Islam Alamgir said there should be proper coordination between the role of local government bodies and lawmakers.

Prof Rehman Sobhan said MPs are being involved in distribution of wheat as successive parliaments are not becoming effective due to abstention of opposition. He said effective role of lawmakers in parliament must be ensured.

Editor of The Daily Star Mahfuz Anam said the major political parties give utmost importance to lawmak-

ers because they are needed to form government. The history of ruling parties in the last ten years is that both Awami League and BNP failed to ensure development.

He pointed out that BNP defeated AL and AL defeated BNP in successive national elections as both the parties worked for partisan interests. The trend would continue until they refrain from this practice.

Strengthening of the local government system and bodies and such other steps for the benefit of the people would help reverse the process, Mahfuz Anam noted.

NGO activist Khushi Kabir said it is wise for the MPs to concentrate on formulation of pro-people laws and ensure good governance.

Dr Zafrullah said MPs should be given new responsibilities other than local development activities. The other speakers included AL MPs Faruq Khan and Rahmat Ali, Omar Khaiam MP of BNP, Binayak Sen, Dr Salahuddin, journalist Ataus Samad, NGO activists Mahbulul Karim and Shirin HUP, Barrister Swadhin Malik and UP chairmen Abdul Karim and Nazrul Islam.

## 3 murdered

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Suddenly, two young men approached them and said they were looking for a driver for appointment. They asked the guard, Hossain, to bring a piece of paper to write down their address. Hossain went inside the house and a little later, came out with a piece of paper only to find Salauddin lying in a pool of blood.

He was hit by bullets in the chest and throat. Police later sent the body to the DMCH for autopsy.

In yet another incident, Zamilur Rahman, 32, a private phone service provider, was shot in the head in front of his West Kafur residence on Saturday. He died at the DMCH yesterday morning.

According to sources, gang members of listed terrorist Kala Jalagahangir went to Zamilur's shop and demanded Tk. 50,000 from him. As he refused to pay the money, the gang members shot the businessman.

The body was sent to the DMCH morgue for autopsy.

## 5 minor girls

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district, was produced before the court of Chief Metropolitan Magistrate (CMM) with a prayer for five-day remand.

The court granted two-day remand after hearing the prosecution side.

Police said the arrested person is said to be the member of an organised gang of child traffickers.

A case was registered with Mirpur Thana in this connection.

## Chittagong murder

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charge of the institute, said Bakul Rani had no enmity with any body and dispute over any issue. "That has made us all the more perplexed and shocked," he said.

According to him and some local people, the incident came to light yesterday morning.

At around 8.00am, someone drew the attention of Pritam and one of his colleagues that Bakul Rani was absent from the routine assembly at the playground, which was unusual for her.

They immediately sent Sabuj Das, a student of class ten and some others to her residence at the eastern corner of the playground to inquire.

The front door of her residence was locked from inside. They entered into through the back door, which was found open. They found their revered 'didimoni' (elder sister) lying on the floor in a pool of blood.

"I was frightened seeing the body

of didimoni. I screamed and ran out in tears," Sabuj Das told this correspondent.

Police said, a sharp and deep injury mark was found on her forehead, which suggests that she might have been killed by the spade they recovered later. Injury marks were also found in her fingers.

"It could be a pre-planned and cool-blooded murder since everything inside her room was left untouched by the killers," the SP said while looking around in the room.

Bakul Rani, who lost her husband during the War of Liberation, joined the Social Welfare Department in 1973 as a junior nurse. During her long 29-year service which took her to different areas of Chittagong, she had promotions as recognition of her devoted service to orphans. She became assistant super on April 24, 2000.

## Bank robbery

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where the bank branch is located is on the border of Mohammadpur and Tejaon thana areas, police sources said.

Sources at Mohammadpur thana said yesterday evening that the case might be shifted to Tejaon thana. Later at night, the sources said Sub-inspector Abdul Rauf was hurriedly called and given the charge of investigation.

They also said the case would be investigated by the Detective Branch or the Special Branch of police, but it was not formally handed over to either of the two agencies till last night.

Meanwhile sources in DB said they are probing the incident of their own, and have picked up five persons for questioning.

Tejaon police said the place of occurrence is not under their jurisdiction. Moreover, senior officials asked Mohammadpur thana to probe the incident. "The question of sending the case to us does not arise", the duty officer at the thana told The Daily Star last night.

Masked armed bandits looted over Tk 17 lakh and prize bonds for Tk 5000 from the bank vault in a commando style 'operation', locked all its staff and clients in the vault and

## Treasury bench

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make way for Law Minister Moudud Ahmed and Communications Minister Nazmul Huda to tease each other, with the speaker adding fuels.

It all began when Huda raised a legal point rather sarcastically. Before he was done while answering to a call attention notice, the communications minister pointed out that Environment Minister Shahjahan Siraj used his (Huda's) microphone while replying to a question on Monday.

"I would like to know if his (Siraj's) statement has been recorded in the proceedings as that of mine," Huda asked the speaker.

"No, it won't be," the speaker said, admitting that the unauthorised act had slipped his attention.

This prompted the law minister to take the stage. Drawing a sharp contrast between Siraj and Huda, who sit next to each other, as regards their health, dress, voice and hair, Moudud concluded: "There is no scope to record one's statement as being the other's."

Speaker Siraj then drew a comparison between the two lawyers-turned-ministers exchanging humours though Siraj was not present.

"Mr. Huda's suit has been cut out by a tailor in Dhaka while Moudud's by a Jewish tailor in London," the speaker quipped before giving Huda the floor again.

Retorting to Moudud's comment that his hairs are grey, Huda wanted to know how come Moudud's hairs are black despite the fact that he was senior to him (Huda).

"I am senior to Huda only by a year. But he spoke in a way as if I am much older," Moudud replied.

As the tripartite fun held back the disposal of a call attention notice, BNP lawmaker Abdul Mannan later noted that the chair often allowed the front-runners in the treasury bench to speak in violation of the rules. This apparently offended the speaker and the two ministers concerned.

Defending himself, the speaker said, "Humours are missing from the proceedings of the House these days. The proceedings should be punctuated by such practice."

But Mannan appeared far from being convinced and noted that the rule regarding point of order was being misinterpreted in the parliament. "You are generous to allow the front-benchers as well as the back-benchers to speak, but we, sitting in the middle, are deprived of raising valid issues," he said.

## Shahriar

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The same court on March 3 assigned two lawyers Advocate Zead-al-Malum and Advocate Khondaker Abdul Mannan to watch the cassettes in absence of the accused Shahriar Kabir.

But the defence lawyers submitted the petition, seeking permission for screening of the video cassettes in presence of the lawyers and the accused Shahriar.

The Investigation Officer (IO) filed a petition with the court, seeking cancellation of the order for screening of the video cassettes in presence of the two lawyers.

In its petition the investigation officer said that the secret information would be leaked out if the seized video cassettes are screened in presence of the lawyers.

After hearing both sides, the court rejected the petition of the IO.

Shahriar Kabir was arrested at Zia International Airport on his return from Kolkata on November 22 last year. Police also seized some video cassettes from him.

Later, a sedition case was filed against Shahriar Kabir with the Chief Metropolitan Magistrate's Court, Dhaka on December 8 last year.

## Charsheet

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played photographs of the rape incident to humiliate Mahima's family, which drove her into suicide on February 19.

Asked about the forensic reports of the evidences, the investigation officer told The Daily Star that the report mentioned the signs of rape.

Police recovered trousers Mahima wore on the day and a photograph of the incident.

Forensic experts found sperm in the trousers. But they could not ascertain the identity of the rapists in the photograph.

Human presence was also found at the sugarcane plantation. But the man was beyond recognition.

Earlier, the postmortem report confirmed that Mahima was raped by more than two persons.

## Hedayetullah

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from the opposite direction jumped off his rickshaw, broke the flag stand guards of Hasina's jeep and damaged several vehicles in the motorcade. The security personnel of the opposition leader caught him. "The reason for such behaviour of the arrested person is obscure," it said.

The government has taken the matter seriously. Soon after the incident the government security personnel arrested the attacker. Later, a case was filed against him under the Public Safety Act, added the press release.

The attacker, Hedayetullah, pounced on opposition leader Sheikh Hasina's car on her way from Naogaon to Gobindaganj on Monday. She was unhurt.

## C'wealth summit ends

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by low-lying island states.

Zimbabwe dominated the summit, pitting black Africa against the "old" while Commonwealth led by Britain, and its future in the group remains unresolved after leaders decided to take no action against the strife-torn African country until after this weekend's presidential election.

"I hope we don't have another CHOGM like this one," said New Zealand Prime Minister Helen Clark at the end of the four-day summit.

"I think the Commonwealth has to get its act together for the future. It has failed to wrestle effectively with Zimbabwe."

**Credibility on line**

Britain, backed by New Zealand and Australia, had sought Zimbabwe's immediate suspension, saying President Robert Mugabe is using intimidation and violence to win the election.

But the move was blocked by African states, which forced the 54-nation group of mostly ex-British colonies to delay any measures until after the March 9-10 presidential ballot.

The leaders agreed to form a three-nation taskforce to take actions ranging from 'collective disapproval to suspension' if Zimbabwe's election was not free

and fair.

"The next two weeks are going to be very critical," said Canadian Prime Minister Jean Chretien, who also opposed Zimbabwe's immediate suspension.

A largely symbolic act, suspension would bar Zimbabwe from Commonwealth events. But it opens the door to states imposing sanctions, following the lead of the United States and the European Union.

The inaction over Zimbabwe highlighted the downside of one of the Commonwealth's most precious features -- its amalgamation of rich and poor under an umbrella representing 1.7 billion people, or almost a third of the world's nations.

While creating a unique stage for talks on poverty eradication, the spread of AIDS and the promotion of democracy, the very diversity of the Commonwealth makes its principle of acting only by consensus an often laborious hurdle.

"It is important (that the Commonwealth) passes this test of its credibility," said British Prime Minister Tony Blair, who still believes Zimbabwe should be suspended immediately.

## Islam Group: Phony loans

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waiver and the remaining amount would be placed in a block account with the unpaid principal amount, according to the proposal.

Following the central bank's unearthing of the fictitious accounts, stern actions could have been taken under the Special Powers Act 1974, Code of Criminal Procedure (CrPC) 1860 and Banking Company Act of 1991. But the central bank decided to be lenient and rescheduled the loans to be paid within a period of four years, according to a report sent to the secretary of the Finance Division by the deputy governor of Bangladesh Bank on January 29, 1994.

However, not only did the group dodge criminal proceeding but it also managed to get their loans rescheduled four times. And, every time the repayment amount was reduced and the time extended. Recently, the group applied for a fresh rescheduling facility that includes 50 per cent interest waiver.

A special inspection report of Bangladesh Bank said Islam Group illegally opened a large number of fictitious accounts with various branches of the banks and embezzled the money. None of these loans were secured, meaning the loans were given without any collateral.

After detecting the fraud, the central bank allowed the group to reschedule the loans in four years' time in instalments. However, the group secured the loan by mortgaging "little dead of 400 bigha of land" in and around Dhaka city, approximately value of which stands at Tk 200 crore. Moreover, the group also mortgaged 68,000 shares of Uttara Bank and 2,65,000 more of IFIC Bank.

Highly placed sources say the group this time used political connections to put pressure on the central bank and the government-nominated directors in the IFIC board to have the proposal endorsed. The group managed to have a letter issued by the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) to the Bangladesh Bank in this regard. Though the letter did not suggest any out-of-the-way action, the letter itself denotes an unusual interest of the PMO, which normally has nothing to do with it.

The central bank informed the group that any such proposal should come through the lending bank concerned after having it approved by the boards of the respective banks.

The proposal is now likely to be placed before the boards of the banks for their opinion, which, bank

## US report on human rights

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legislation and national issues.

Dwelling on judiciary, the human rights report appreciated that the higher levels of the judiciary displayed a significant degree of independence and often ruled against the government. However, lower judicial officers fall under the executive, and are reluctant to challenge government decisions, the US State Department noted.

On the issue of good governance, the paper says the Official Secrets Act 1923 can "protect corrupt government officials from public scrutiny, hindering transparency and accountability of the government at all levels".

Detailing the economic sector, the State Department noted that the government's commitment to economic reforms was weak.

"Efforts to improve governance and economic growth through reform have been unsuccessful, and were blocked by bureaucratic intransigence, vested economic interests, endemic corruption, and political polarization," says the US report.

The State Department found Bangladesh government's human rights record poor in many significant areas, and it "continued to commit serious abuses", although it respected citizens' rights in some areas.

The report was highly critical of the activities of the police administration saying that there was widespread police corruption and lack of discipline. "Police officers committed numerous serious human rights abuses and were seldom disci-

pled, even for the most egregious actions," it said.

Police committed a number of extra judicial killings. According to one human rights organisation, 44 people died as a result of the use of lethal force by the police during the year.

"Police committed a number of extra judicial killings, and some persons died in police custody under suspicious circumstances. Police routinely used torture, beatings, and other forms of abuse while interrogating suspects", the report said.

It criticised the police for frequently beating the demonstrators. "The government rarely punishes persons responsible for torture or unlawful deaths," the US report pointed out.

The Human Rights Report 2001 stated that the government continued to arrest and detain persons "arbitrarily", and to use the Special Powers Act (SPA) and Section 54 of the Code of Criminal Procedure, which allow for arbitrary arrest and preventive detention.

The Public Safety Act (PSA), enacted in early 2000, gives the police "even greater opportunity to abuse their powers", the US State Department says about the tough law enacted by the Awami League government to deal with rising acts of terrorism.

Dealing with "freedom of press", the State Department report said virtually all journalists practised some self-censorship. Attacks on journalists and efforts to intimidate them by government officials, political party activists, and others

## NBR

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But after the formation of the coalition government, Saifur upped the target by Tk 500 crore.

The minister said the government has no other option but to expand the VAT and income tax net as foreign aid has been declining.

The meeting also expressed concern over the falling revenue collection particularly in import duty.

The overall revenue collection till February this year is around Tk 200 crore behind the target, the meeting sources said.

According to available figures, the revenue earning till January this year was 1.45 per cent behind the target. It is however up by 9.35 per cent from the corresponding period of last fiscal year.

A total of Tk 10525.83 crore was collected during the period against the target of Tk 10,678.95 crore.

The NBR officials pointed out that the collection fell behind the target because of declining import duty.

## Spending in ADP

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agement and service delivery," it mentioned.

The WB also prescribed that the country needs to reduce its fiscal deficit by at least two percentage points of the GDP to avoid 'prejudicing' growth and financial stability.

The fiscal deficit was six per cent of the GDP in FY01, slightly reduced from 6.2 per cent in FY02.

"The current consolidated deficit of the public sector (about eight per cent of the GDP) is unsustainable and has already impacted the balance of payments and external reserves positions."

As a result of the increasing deficit, the World Bank said domestic borrowings has increased, interest rates for loans exceed 12 per cent in real terms and gross official reserves have fallen to slightly over one month of imports. The recent reserve position is slightly over US\$ 1.3 billion.

"To bring back fiscal sustainability, capital expenditures would need to fall to about four per cent of the GDP, which is unrealistic given the country's dire development needs."

The bank also mentioned that government spending in Bangladesh is one of the lowest in the world. "Current spending represented eight per cent of the GDP in 2001, by far the lowest in South Asia," it said.

"Unfortunately, even this low level of expenditure is financed primarily by the domestic banking system, which puts macroeconomic

stability in a vulnerable position," it observed.

Analysing the country's social sector spending, the bank said almost 35 per cent of the total budget allocation went to this sector yielding considerable results.

But the donor agency said, "Given the macroeconomic limits on deficit financing, and assuming unchanged levels of tax revenues, it will become increasingly difficult to maintain such high level of social sector spending, especially as demands for funds for debt servicing, infrastructure maintenance, and for reforms of the NCBs and the SOEs continue to grow."

## Khaleda

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important non-resident Bangladeshis (INRB) from those who would be doing and promoting investment in the country to accord special dignity.

The NRBs who would get the laurels of CIPs in the country would be selected by the Board of Investment and the Ministry for Welfare of Expatriates, she said.

Reiterating the contribution of the expatriates to the national economy, Khaleda said the government was also considering providing the NRB investors with facilities similar to those given to foreign investors.

The prime minister hoped that investment by Bangladeshis would come for promotion of the tourism sector in the bay resort town of Cox's Bazar, Kuakata, Saint Martin's Island and Inani.

## Raging inferno

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nearby areas went to the spot, creating problem for firefighters. "Even our teams were misguided by the people," alleged one of them.

Some people helped the firefighters but most of them were onlookers.

The fire fighters reached near the spot from two directions and started their operation. But it was not enough to tame the fire. As the fire was spreading quickly, reinforcements were called up.

Laibagh police and BDR personnel also rushed to the spot to help the firefighters. BDR men were seen controlling the crowds to make way for the firefighters.

The firefighters had to stop their vehicles far from the spot and connect additional pipes.

"Our effort was delayed by about 20 minutes due to the narrow lanes. The damage could be minimised if we could reach the spot in time," said a firefighter at the spot.

As the fire spread, people were seen frantically trying to save valu-

ables from their houses, shops and factories. Many of them were seen running with whatever belongings they could carry on heads.

Black smoke and flames were seen billowing in the sky from far away places. Many panic-stricken people broke into tears, losing everything.

The fire, the most devastating in the recent past, was brought under total control at about 4:30pm.

Most of the victims of the slum have taken shelter at the nearby playground.

Neither police nor the Fire Bridge could say anything how the fire originated. Some people of the area said it might have originated from an electric short circuit at a shanty while some others said it could be from a spark at a plastic factory.

Hafez Mozammel Haq, a businessman of the area, said he did not see such a devastating fire in the last 30 years. "There were some fire incidents, but those were not as severe as this."

## Revenge attacks

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siles at Palestinian security headquarters in the town of Khan Yunis in the Gaza Strip, causing severe damage. One man was wounded.

Yesterday's violence began at around 2:15 a.m. local time when a Palestinian gunman armed with grenades, a knife and an M-16 assault rifle opened fire on the Seafood Market, an all-night restaurant and nightclub in a commercial district of Tel Aviv, where a group of women was attending a bachelorette's party.

Meanwhile, US President George W. Bush condemned the surge in violence in the Middle East, calling on Palestinian President Yasser Arafat to do more to stop the attacks.

"Chairman Arafat must do everything he can to convince those Palestinians who want to derail any possible peace to lay down their arms," Bush told reporters.

He said the violence must be reduced before peace talks can resume.

President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt brought a mixed message to the Bush administration yesterday. He is urging caution in considering any attack on Iraq while supporting the U.S. campaign against terrorism.

Mubarak met first with Secretary of State Colin Powell and had a series of high-level meetings on tap leading up to a White House meeting yesterday with President George W. Bush.

For three decades the United States has looked to Egypt and a handful of other Arab countries for support in peacemaking. Mubarak's help is even more vital now because the region is in the throes of violence and many Arab governments consider the Bush administration tilted in Israel's favour, as many Egyptians privately do.

## Defence attaches

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