

HR convention of 4-party now April 11-12

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Scheduled earlier for March 15-16, the planned convention of the BNP-led four-party alliance on "human rights violation" during the five-year rule of the previous Awami League government will now be held during April 11-12 at Paltan Maidan considering the ensuing SSC examinations and Bangladesh Games.

The decision to shift the date was taken at an emergency meeting of the senior leaders of the alliance with BNP secretary general and LGRD and Cooperatives Minister Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan in the chair yesterday evening.

Held at BNP central office, the meeting was informed that there were requests from all district and thana units of the party to shift the convention dates because of the SSC examination that begins from March 14.

Besides, the National Sports Council has also made a similar request in view of the Bangladesh Games to be held from March 11-18, citing that the Paltan Maidan would

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Bangabhaban clarifies

The Bangabhaban on Thursday issued a clarification on a news item published in The Daily Star on February 16 which said nine cell phones are now in use to strengthen the President's security.

The Prothom Alo also wrote an editorial on the news on March 5.

The clarification said two cellular phones were purchased on an emergency basis on April 24, 1996 during the period of the former President to develop the communication network and meet official needs.

Later, as per approval of the former President, six more cell phones were added to strengthen the President's security, one on November 11, 1999 and five on November 22, 1999. As a result, the number of cell phones rose to eight.

The clarification signed by the President's Press Secretary Abu Zafar further said that one more cell phone was purchased on November 24, 2001 and another on January 31, 2002 with the approval of the present President.

Out of five, connections of two

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30 more killed in Israeli incursion

AP, Bethlehem

Israeli tanks and troops, covered by attack helicopters, rolled into biblical Bethlehem early yesterday firing at refugee camps and advancing into the town from two directions, witnesses said.

In central Gaza, a senior Palestinian security commander was killed during an Israeli incursion.

The raging Israeli-Palestinian cycle of violence claimed more than 30 lives yesterday.

Two Palestinians were killed in Bethlehem, witnesses said. One died when Israeli helicopters fired on the Deheishe refugee camp, and the other was killed during an Israeli incursion into the Aida camp.

Two Israeli tanks moved into neighbouring Beit Jalla, where Palestinian gunmen have been firing at a Jewish neighbourhood across a valley. The neighbourhood, called Gilo, was built in a disputed part of Jerusalem claimed by both sides.

The Israeli incursion into Bethlehem followed three days of air strikes against the Palestinian Authority headquarters complex, where Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat has an office. Late Thursday, an Israeli F-16 warplane fired a missile at the compound, hitting a building already gutted by previous strikes. Arafat has been confined to his headquarters in Ramallah, 20 kilometers away, for three months by Israeli forces.

Palestinian security officials said Maj Gen Ahmed Mefraj, 55, was the highest-ranking Palestinian officer killed in a clash with Israeli forces in Gaza. He died during an Israeli incursion into villages east of the city of Khan Younis. Doctors said he was shot with several bullets.

Witnesses said a tank shell and machine gun bullets hit the car, killing Mefraj and one of his bodyguards. In all, at least 20 people were killed during the incursion into the Hozaa village, Palestinians said.

Israeli troops pulled out of the village at daybreak, and rescue workers searched for more victims, residents said. The Israeli forces destroyed seven police posts, they said.

Sami Abu Jama, a resident, said Mefraj bled to death in his car because Israeli soldiers would not let an ambulance take him to the hospital. He said other wounded Palestinians were bleeding and could not be evacuated.

As news of Mefraj's death spread, hundreds of gunmen converged on Nasser Hospital in Khan Younis, firing rifles in the air and calling for revenge against Israel.

Palestinian TV broadcast a picture of Mefraj with Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat and called on the people

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PHOTO: AFP

A Palestinian youth throwing stones at Israeli soldiers and tanks (background) is seen through the flame of fire during confrontations with Israeli forces yesterday in the West Bank town of Bethlehem.

Tullow gives up 2 blocks after spending \$30m

SHARIER KHAN

After spending some US\$ 30 million in oil and gas exploration, Irish Tullow Oil gave up two of its offshore blocks last month.

The production sharing contract (PSC) of these two blocks – 17 and 18 – expired on February 12 last after Tullow failed to fulfil its minimum work commitment.

Sources said the Irish company, which received the maximum attention from the government in the second round block bidding is now maintaining a low profile. It is now working in block 9 as an operator along with American oil companies Chevron and Texaco.

Tullow had 80 per cent interest in blocks 17 and 18 and another 30 per cent in block 9 that lies in the heart of the country having bright prospects of extracting oil and gas reserves.

The Irish company came to Bangladesh in 1997 to take part in

the second round block bidding. Though small in size and operation, the company could attract close attention of the government due to its local political connection. It was offered two blocks, including the most coveted block 9, apparently violating the government's own bid evaluation. This led to contentions among other bidders and as a result, the bidding, initially supposed to be concluded on December 15, 1997, has still been dragging on.

In 1998, Tullow secretly made a technical deal with Oakland, a US oil company in financial dire.

In 1999, Tullow applied to the government to become the operator in blocks 17 and 18, purchasing 80 per cent of Oakland's stakes. At this time, Tullow's local director, Kazi Shahid, also acquired five per cent shares of the blocks.

Signed in January 1997, the Oakland PSC for blocks 17 and 18 are considered to be one of the most

lenient contracts, requiring little fresh seismic data collection in the first two-year phase. The contract entered its second phase in February 2000 under which Tullow is required to drill only one exploratory well in two years.

When Oakland signed the PSC with the government, there were ready data for almost 10,000 line-km of seismic survey and seven hydrocarbon wells. Tullow-Oakland's main task involved analysing the existing data. In addition, a seismic interpretation of 1,353 line-km of Tullow's own onshore, marine and transition zones was undertaken.

By the end of 1998, Tullow claimed to have completed a comprehensive geological and geophysical evaluation of the entire 18,367 sq km area of the two blocks. Accordingly, it drilled a well in an offshore location named Reju and failed to strike oil or gas.

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Poor coordination among ministers hurts govt

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The sluggishness of the administration and its inability to arrest the deteriorating law and order is due to the lack of coordination among government ministers, their rivalry with one another and their reluctance in resolving matters of importance, according to many within the ruling BNP.

Sources said the BNP-led alliance government that came to power over a two-thirds majority, is now facing serious trouble due to lack of coordination among policymakers and government ministers.

They said although five months have passed, there has been no well-thought-out planning, systematic mode of operation or coordination among the government ministers.

According to BNP leaders, most ministers except a few senior members of the cabinet are virtually ineffective, not discharging their responsibilities properly and apparently busy humiliating each other and tarnishing each other's image by putting up various obstacles and making unnecessary delays in various matters.

BNP leaders said that in one hand the administration

has become stagnant due to ineffectiveness of ministers while on the other there has been virtually no party activities since the party assumed power in October last year.

They said a serious dissatisfaction has been brewing within the party rank and file over "wrong" choice of ministers, state ministers and deputy ministers, leaving out party's dedicated leaders from the cabinet. A number of senior leaders have also expressed their deep frustration as they were either not chosen for a ministerial job or didn't get their expected portfolio in the cabinet.

Sources said party leaders and activists had thought that the Prime Minister would bring changes in the cabinet removing ineffective ministers, but none has yet been dropped or no new minister inducted.

Some ministers have been playing the role of silent spectators while others with responsibilities of different district are not looking into the local problems. Besides, some junior ministers keep their local ministers busy with their protocol duty.

Leaders said almost all the dedicated leaders and

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PHOTO: STAR

The Acid Survivors Foundation and The Daily Prothom Alo jointly brought out a procession with a slogan 'Resist acid attack, Save Women', in the city yesterday on the occasion of International Women's Day.

Resist acid attacks, punish culprits

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

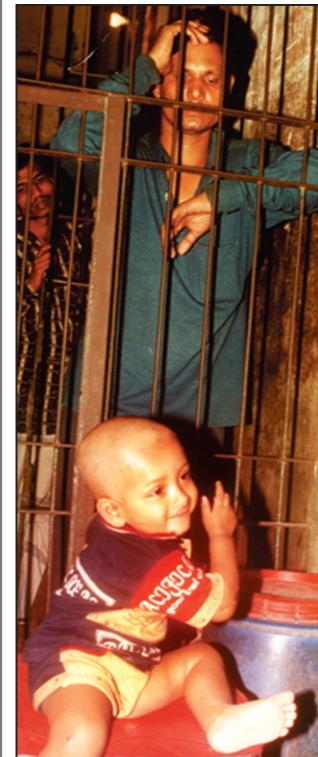
Speakers at a rally in the city yesterday stressed building up a social movement against acid attacks and other heinous crimes against women and demanded exemplary punishment of the culprits.

They also said men have to come forward to stop such crimes as most of the culprits involved in those men are.

The rally was jointly organised by the Acid Survivors Foundation (ASF) and the Prothom Alo to mark the International Women's Day.

It was a unique rally, the first of its kind in the country, as only men along with victims of acid attacks attended it. About 100 victims and more than 2000 men from across the country – politicians, intellectuals, academicians, businessmen, actors,

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Miraculously, this two-year-old boy escaped unhurt in the tragic road accident yesterday.

PHOTO: STAR

11 CA firms assigned to probe tax evasion cases

RAFIQ HASAN

For the first time in the country, the government has assigned 11 chartered accountancy firms to investigate tax evasion in six manufacturing and service sectors.

The NBR gave the assignment to the firms as directed by Finance and Planning Minister M Saifur Rahman recently, sources said.

The step was taken as the government thinks it is losing huge amounts of revenue from those sectors.

But the government had earlier cancelled a survey report in this regard prepared by NBR officials, the sources mentioned.

The main job of the assigned firms is to assess the amount of Value Added Tax (VAT) and income tax evaded by the six sectors and submit a report to the government.

The manufacturing sectors are cement, mild steel (MS) and cigarette and the service sectors are insurance, hotel and restaurant and community centres.

The assigned firms are: Baree, Peer Shafiq and Khan Company, Kazi Zahid Khan and Company, Ayub and Mahmud Chartered Accountant, Haque Shah Alam and Mansur and Company, M R Khan and Company, B B

2 fire incidents in city: One burnt alive

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

One person was burnt alive, three others were injured and more than 300 shanties were gutted in two fire incidents in the city's Lalbagh and Agargaon areas in the early hours of yesterday.

The dead was identified as Mohammad Lutfur Rahman, 30, manager of a rickshaw garage.

Fire Brigade sources said they recovered the charred body of the victim and handed it over to Lalbagh police. The injured were sent to hospital.

They said two biscuit factories, more than 20 shanties, two rickshaw garages, some rickshaw repair shops and a bamboo market were gutted in a fire at Raj Narayan Dhar Road in Lalbagh area. The fire broke out at around 2 am yesterday. Nine fire fighting units from Lalbagh, Palashi, Sadarghat, Headquarters and Mohammadpur rushed to the spot and brought the situation under

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Macroeconomic balances Growing weaknesses worry economists

STAR REPORT

The general weaknesses of the country's macroeconomic balances became more acute during the early months of FY02 and these trends may not only disrupt the macroeconomic stability but also undercut the growth prospects in the real economy, said a review of the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD).

"The fundamental question which is currently haunting Bangladesh is whether the present economic problems are a short-run phenomenon or will precipitate a situation which will threaten the achievements recorded in the 1990s, leading to an extensive loss in employment and income for a protracted period," the document said.

Prepared by CPD Executive Director Dr Debapriya Bhattacharya and his team, the document State of Bangladesh Economy in FY02: An early Assessment analysed the current problems of the economy and suggested some policy measures for recovery.

To tackle the downside, it said the measures so far announced by the government are in the right direction and comprise discrete steps in the areas of monetary, fiscal and financial sector policy.

"Notwithstanding these initiatives, a cogent and feasible recovery package, designed to effectively arrest the backsliding of the economy, with minimal costs to public welfare, is yet to take shape," Dr Bhattacharya said in the paper.

He suggested formulation of a comprehensive recovery package for the next 2-3 years which should be reflected in the revised Annual Development

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