

INSIDE TODAY

South Asia4

Ekram Kabir's
Yankees against the LTTE?

Zaglul Ahmed Chowdhury's
Containing the Maoists

Asia5

Hokkaido targets tourism to help
economy, Monzurul Huq writes from
Tokyo

Comment6

Hasnat Abdul Hye's Project Europe

Mohammad Badrul Ahsan's
Rigmarole

Environment8

Smothering the wellspring of life, writes
Md Asadullah Khan

JU students block traffic on Dhaka-Aricha road for 4 hrs

JU CORRESPONDENT

Agitated students of the Jahangirnagar University (JU) yesterday put up a barricade on Dhaka-Aricha highway following a road accident.

An admission seeker, identified as Sohag, was injured in the accident when a Dhaka-bound bus hit him from behind near Dairy Farm gate at about 1:30 pm, leaving him seriously injured.

Hearing the news, students of the university rushed to the spot and blocked traffic on the road for about four hours.

Local MP Dewan Mohammad Salauddin reached the spot at about 3:20 pm and assured the students of building two speed-breakers on Dhaka-Aricha road near the campus.

Following the assurance, students withdrew road block at about 6pm.

Sohag was admitted to a clinic at Savar.

Three BCL leaders arrested in two murder cases

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Three leaders of the Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL) were shown arrested in two murder cases yesterday, although they were not FIR-named.

The arrested persons were placed on a two-day remand in the Kamal murder case.

The leaders are central unit members Nazmul Hasan Anik and Nazmul Islam Tuhin and Dhaka College unit Vice-President Swapon Kumar Karmakar.

Police arrested them in front of the Dhaka Central Jail Wednesday night along with four other central leaders immediately after they were released on a High Court order on March 24 after a one-month detention.

The High Court declared the arrests of the seven leaders illegal.

The other four are central unit Joint-Secretary Liakat Sikdar,

SEE PAGE 11 COL 7

Govt offers talks, Hasina agrees on conditions

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The government yesterday invited the main opposition Awami League (AL) to a dialogue to resolve some contentious political issues including the one over display of the portrait of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

In a swift response, the AL has agreed on the government offer but asked it to meet three conditions.

These are revival of the law for preservation and display of the Bangabandhu's portrait at public offices, allowing the opposition to practice its democratic right to agitate and an end to political persecution of the opposition activists.

General Secretary of the AL Zillur Rahman disclosed the conditions to reporters at a hurriedly-called press conference at the party central office in the city last night. Party President Sheikh Hasina was also present.

"But we don't find the government sincere about holding a meaningful dialogue. It's ridiculous that the government invites us to a discussion on one hand and mounts its repression on our activists on the other," Hasina said.

AL wants display of Bangabandhu's portrait, right to agitation and end to persecution

The dialogue offer lacks sincerity; it's a political stunt, says Hasina

Mannan Bhuiyan won't comment on AL position now

She referred to the police action on the AL protesters in the city only hours after the government made the dialogue offer. "It's nothing but a political stunt aimed to draw press coverage."

Earlier on the day, LGRD Minister and BNP Secretary General Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan phoned Zillur to invite the latter's party to the proposed dialogue. The cabinet assigned him on March 24 to initiate a dialogue with the main opposition party.

Confirming his offer, Bhuiyan told The Daily Star last night that he requested his AL counterpart to sit across the table to discuss some disputed issues including the pro-

positional Prime Minister Khaleda Zia made in the parliament last week.

The PM had proposed display of portraits of the Bangabandhu as well as late president Ziaur Rahman along with that of the head of the government at public offices and institutions. The AL rejected outright the proposal and launched a country-wide protest against the repeal of an act providing for mandatory display of the portrait of the Bangabandhu.

No-one can be a parallel to the Bangabandhu, who is the Father of the Nation, the AL argued.

Asked for his comments on the AL's conditions, Mannan Bhuiyan said he is yet to receive an official

response to the government proposal and will talk about the matter once he gets it.

Since the parliament scrapped the portrait law the AL has been in continued street protests amidst police pounding. Police also clubbed and teargassed the AL leaders and activists during its latest agitation in the capital.

Briefing reporters after a meeting of the Awami League presidium, Hasina further said police arrested seven leaders of Bangladesh Chhatra League, the AL's student front, from the Dhaka Central Jail gate on March 27 defying a High Court order to release them.

"What can we expect of a government that does not go by laws or court orders? Where do they want to push the country to?" Hasina accused the government of pushing the country towards lawlessness and destruction.

"They are, in fact, conspiring to destroy the hard-earned democracy."

Referring to the repeated police actions against her party's agitation,

SEE PAGE 11 COL 1

Magurchhara blow-out claim finalised

Petrobangla awaits energy ministry's comments

SHARIER KHAN

Petrobangla has finalised a compensation claim of around US\$600 million from US oil company Unocal for damaging the gas structure of Magurchhara in a blow-out in 1997.

It has sought the energy ministry's comments on the claim prior to placing it before Unocal.

"We have finalised the compensation amount, considering the significant damage done to our natural resources by Occidental [now Unocal] through its negligence," said a top Petrobangla source.

"However, we want to settle the compensation issue amicably because Unocal is our partner too. We have to deal with the issue in a manner so that the government does not face any awkward situation," he said, quoting the discussion of the Petrobangla board, which met Wednesday to finalise the claim.

The board of directors of Petrobangla held the meeting to decide on the nature of the compensation claim after it got the green signal from the ministry to seek compensation for damaging 240 billion cubic feet (bcf) of gas of the Magurchhara gas structure.

A probe committee headed by a joint secretary of the energy ministry assessed the loss in gas in 1997 following the blow-out. The four-member committee also included an expert from Occidental.

Petrobangla sources said the amount of loss was arrived at by fixing gas price at around \$2.6 per thousand cubic feet or mcf of gas. It is the price at which Unocal sells gas to Petrobangla from the Jalalabad gas field. As per this calculation, the claim stood at \$600 million.

Wednesday's board meeting also discussed Unocal's arbitrary claim that till August 31, 2000 it had paid Bangladesh a total of Tk 332.32 crore in compensation for the Magurchhara blow-out. But, no such payment was ever made.

Besides, the board discussed various audit objections regarding Unocal's expenditure estimates and the issue of gas export.

Though the blow-out took place back in June 14, 1997, Petrobangla could not demand the gas damage compensation as the past Awami League government shelved the official probe report on the Magurchhara blow-out and kept it as a 'classified' document.

Occidental was allowed to work without paying any compensation. The government also extended its Production Sharing Contract (PSC) and finally allowed it to sell its Bangladeshi concerns to Unocal and get out of Bangladesh in 1999.

In late 2000, the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Energy raised the issue of the report of the Magurchhara probe committee formed with energy ministry and Petrobangla officials. A tug of war followed between the then energy secretary Toufiq-e-Elahi Chowdhury and standing committee head former AL lawmaker Imran Ahmed after the secretary refused to submit the probe committee report.

Ultimately, under the pressure of the standing committee, the probe report was submitted and then disseminated to Petrobangla.

Occidental began the drilling in Magurchhara on June 2, 1997; its first since it signed a PSC on January 1

SEE PAGE 11 COL 8

Police club AL men, mar rally

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Police fired teargas shells and charged batons indiscriminately to prevent Awami League (AL) leaders and activists from gathering in front of the party central office at Bangabandhu Avenue in the city yesterday.

A front organisation of the ruling BNP forcibly occupied the venue allocated for a scheduled AL rally.

Former minister and AL central leader Motia Chowdhury and around 20 other leaders and activists of the main opposition party were injured in the police action.

In a bizarre move, police in riot gear backed by paramilitary BDR protected activists of the Jatiyatabadi Bastuhara Dal as it held an unscheduled meeting in the afternoon at nearby Muktangan. The AL was earlier permitted to hold a rally at the same venue.

While a police contingent protected Bastuhara Dal meeting, additional police and BDR personnel were kept stand-by on board riot cars and jeeps parked on different sides of the Secretariat.

As the AL leaders and workers started moving towards Muktangan at around three in the afternoon, police forcibly took away loud speakers from them and asked them



PHOTO: STAR

Dhaka Mayor Mohammad Hanif and other Awami League workers duck for cover behind a car when police fired teargas shells on party men in front of its office at Bangabandhu Avenue in the city yesterday.

SEE PAGE 11 COL 1

Eleven years on, JS remains practically inoperative

NAZRUL ISLAM

Eleven years on since the parliamentary system of government was reintroduced in the country, the Jatiya Sangsad remains practically 'inoperative' due to combative stance of the political parties.

Leading intellectuals believe that confrontation between the mainstream political parties has retarded the growth of democracy and stood in the way of national interest.

"I see no sign of progress in parliamentary democracy. The parliament is not even functioning properly," said Professor Serajul Islam Chowdhury.

And parliamentarians, of both the ruling and the opposition, do not disagree.

"We have achieved very little progress in democracy over the last decade," said Advocate Abdul Hamid, a former speaker of the Jatiya Sangsad and now deputy leader of the opposition.

"Today, we see parliamentary democracy only in theory, not in practice," former BNP lawmaker Major (ret'd) Akhtaruzzaman said.

Both the intellectuals and the lawmakers maintain that mistrust has overshadowed democracy, with ineffective parliament making the government disproportionately

powerful.

There have been regular elections all right; however, people's representation has never been ensured. Opposition lawmakers have shrunk away from their prime duties - to debate and legislate on national issues - in the fifth, sixth and seventh as well as in the pres-

Both had the same excuse - "absence of conducive environment" in the House.

In the fifth parliament, the AL started boycotting parliamentary proceedings on March 1, 1994 and stayed away until President Abdur Rahman Biswas dissolved the Jatiya Sangsad on November 24, 1995.

At one stage, the AL lawmakers, 145 of them, resigned en masse, demanding resignation of the government and introduction of a non-party caretaker government to conduct neutral elections.

The sixth parliament, which was elected through a controversial election and lasted for only 11 days with three working days, passed the thirteenth amendment to the constitution providing for a non-party caretaker government.

After the electoral debacle in 1996, the BNP walked out from the very first sitting of the seventh Jatiya Sangsad without citing any reason.

Within 15 months, it started abstaining from the parliamentary proceedings on August 30, 1997 when the House was progressing into its sixth session, and stayed away until March 8, 1998. The BNP placed a 14-point demand before

SEE PAGE 11 COL 4

CHT caught in a crime warp

SHEHAB AHMED

Kidnappings, killings and extortion are going on unabated in the three districts of Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), affecting law and order.

In the last two years, at least 46 people were kidnapped and a number of them killed as ransom was not paid for their release, according to statistics available from various sources.

Of the kidnappings, the most-talked-about was the abduction of three European engineers in February last year in Naniarchar upazila of Rangamati district.

They were freed by the army in March after an exchange of fire with the kidnappers whose identity is yet to be known. Although police had filed a case with Naniarchar thana, no progress was made in this regard, sources in the CHT said.

Though the kidnappers had demanded Tk one crore as ransom, the money was not paid. The authorities had promised 'no action' against the kidnappers if they had freed the foreigners.

Besides, there was an attempt to kidnap an Australian at Kaukhali on February 28 this year.

The abduction of three foreigners 'encouraged' the kidnappers, sources in the CHT believe. They feel that lack of police action against these criminals and rumours of ransom being paid to them worsened the situation.

Unidentified gunmen shot a fish trader, Mizan, 40, at Dewanchar on Kaptai lake on Tuesday night, according to reports received from Rangamati yesterday.

The gunmen first waved at a fishing trawler, signalling it to stop at Dewanchar on way to Rangamati from Barkal. They opened fire when the boatmen tried to speed away. The injured fish trader was admitted to Rangamati hospital and later shifted to Chittagong Medical College Hospital as his condition deteriorated.

This was one of the many such incidents in the CHT region. Different groups of gunmen are involved in these criminal activities, creating a reign of terror.

There are reports that if ransom is not paid, the body of an abducted person is later found somewhere. Many of those abducted remain missing, leaving their relatives in great tension and police facing bitter criticism for their inefficiency and inaction.

As the peace accord between the government and the former Shantibahini was signed on December 2, 1997, about 2,000 insurgents laid down their arms and they were rehabilitated with government help. But a section of the insurgents reportedly did not surrender arms.

The political wing of Shantibahini, Jana Sanghati Samity (JSS), was later split on issues

relating to the accord.

Young members of the JSS particularly students, women and other activists regrouped under the banner of a new organisation, United Peoples Democratic Front (UPDF), demanding 'full autonomy' for the CHT. They accused JSS supremo Jyotirindriya Bodhipriya Larma of betraying the cause of CHT people.

Larma strongly denied this and accused them of trying to harm the peace accord at the behest of vested quarters opposed to it. But the UPDF rejected his accusations.

The mud slinging between the two sides saw worsening of relations between the two sides and frequent clashes between them. A spate of kidnappings and killings followed. Estimates put the death toll in the clashes at nearly 100. Not all the kidnappings were reported.

In the meantime, bands of gunmen in 'camouflage fatigues' appeared in different parts of the CHT, setting up camps. They also clashed with the military and police several times. One such clash took place at Kaukhali in Rangamati district on March 7.

The latest clash took place at Kaukhali earlier this week, leaving one tribal youth shot dead in an exchange of fire with the army and police. Police also recovered sev-

SEE PAGE 11 COL 3

Case under PSA Charges pressed against Motia, Nasim, 2 others

COURT CORRESPONDENT

Former home minister Mohammad Nasim, former agriculture minister Motia Chowdhury and two others have been chargesheeted in a case filed under the Public Safety Act (PSA).

Two other accused are Awami League central leader Dr Mostafa Jalal Mohiuddin and city Sramik League general secretary Israfil Alam.

They were accused of obstructing traffic in the city during the Awami League-called a half-day hartal on January 9 protesting price hike of oil, gas and electricity.

Sub-inspector Moinur Rahman filed the case against the four with Motijheel thana under the SPA the same day.

SI Mohammad Abdul Matin, the investigation officer (IO) of the case, submitted the charge sheet to the chief Metropolitan Magistrate's Court, Dhaka yesterday afternoon.

In the charge sheet, 21 people were shown as prosecution witnesses.

Meanwhile, Nasim, Motia and Mostafa Jalal Mohiuddin were granted anticipatory bail in the case by the High Court on January 12. The court granted bail submission of the police report in connection with the case.

BNP nominates 84 for ward commissioner

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The BNP-led ruling alliance yesterday finalised 84 nominees for ward commissioner posts for the ensuing Dhaka City Corporation elections. The candidates for the rest six wards will be decided upon within a day or two, party sources said.

According to the list, Jamaat-e-Islami, the key component in the coalition, has been allowed to field six candidates while Islami Oikya Jote, another component, will field one. Jatiya Party of Nazimur Rahman Manjur did not get any nomination.

In the 30 seats reserved for women ward commissioners, the alliance also finalised the candidate list without giving any seat to alliance partners.

Munshi Bazul Basit Anju, Mirza Khokon, Abul Khair Bablu, Chowdhury Alam, Khaza Habib, Golam Morshed, MA Mazid, Kazi Abul Bashar, Sharmila Imam, Runu Akther, Mohammad Mohan, Anwar Hossain and Monowar Hossain Dipzal, were among the prominent figures who got the BNP tickets.

In the reserved seats, Salheha Begum, Moni Begum and Mahmuda Islam Marzina were given party nominations, among others.