

inside BUSINESS PAGE

Finance Ministry convenes meeting for a possible bailout package for frozen foods

RAFIQ HASAN

The finance ministry has convened a meeting of all the managing directors of the state-owned commercial banks next week to discuss a possible bailout package for the cash strapped frozen food exporters, who have been hit hard by the global economic recession.

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Bribe makes Rajuk go round

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Unless one is ready to bribe or exercise influence, one could never get a building plan approved by Rajuk despite clear provision in the Building Construction Rules 1996 for processing an application for approval of building plan within 45 days, it is widely alleged.

Some developers and individuals coming to Rajuk office with applications for approval of plans said that without persuasion, an applicant is not likely to get any response from Rajuk at all.

"If I manage to hand over 'speed money' through proper channel and pursue processing of the relevant file at every step, I can get the job done within a very short period," a private developer told this correspondent at Rajuk office requesting anonymity.

When a developer submits an application for approval of plan, he is required to make 'payment' at different levels through 'proper channel,' he said. The amounts could range from Tk 6,000 to 50,000 or more depending on the size, viability and other aspects of the project.

But top Rajuk officials attributed the delay to 'unplanned urbanisation' and said approval of a plan in 'unplanned areas of the city' takes time because invariably the roads are narrower than shown in the plan. If some one comes for approval of a plan in a Rajuk-allocated area, it is done very swiftly and without any hassle because Rajuk has all the first-hand information about the area, they claimed.

According to Clause-7 (Kha) of the Building Construction Rules, an application for plan approval must be processed within 45 days and the applicant should be notified of rejection or approval within the same period.

Members of the Institute of Architects, Bangladesh (IAB), said the developers are to be blamed partly for such malpractices in Rajuk. In many cases developers willfully resort to bribing to get the plans with various anomalies approved. For instance, a six-storey structure is required to have a road with a specific width in front of it. Whenever requirements like these are missing, a developer opts for an easy way out, which is bribing, several IAB members said.

One of them, Iqbal Habib, told this correspondent that the Building Construction Rules are 'so vague and incomplete that loopholes within those encourage irregularities.' The authorities concerned could interpret any clause in their own way and reject or approve a plan. Many law-abiding developers are sometimes subjected to unnecessary hassle due to lack of clarity in the rules, he said.

He felt that the rules should be revised immediately taking environment, plot size, city areas and landscape into consideration.

If normal procedure works at Rajuk, when an applicant pays required fees and submits his plan with land-use clearance, the file gets an official reference number and is sent to one of the four authorised officers, who is usually an engineer or architect. After initial scrutiny, the draftsman checks the file, verifies land-use clearance and sends the file to an inspector. Then it is up to him to visit the proposed site, check land documents, access road and compare the facts with the plan. With his report, the file is sent to the chief inspector, who refers it to the authorised officer for final scrutiny. One of the four Building Construction Committees finally approves the

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PHOTO: A K M MOHSIN

Smiles not compromised... life has not been too generous for them. When it should have been school time, these children find themselves carting away branches and twigs for use as firewood in the hilly region of Bhatiari in Chittagong.

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New air chief



Air Commodore Fakhru Azam

STAR REPORT

The government has sent Bangladesh Air Force Chief Air Vice-Marshal M Rafiqul Islam into retirement and made newly promoted Air Commodore Fakhru Azam his successor.

The Ministry of Defence issued a notification yesterday, bringing a change to the top post of the air force with effect from April 8.

In another notification, the newly appointed air chief, Fakhru Azam, was promoted to air vice-marshal with effect from April 8, said an ISPR release.

Sources said Air Vice-Marshal M Rafiqul Islam's retirement comes a few weeks ahead of schedule.

The newly appointed air chief is a cousin of former BNP lawmaker group captain (ret'd) Saiful Azam, the sources said.

Both the outgoing and newly appointed air chiefs were from the same batch, but Fakhru Azam is considered senior, the sources said.

However, M Rafiqul Islam was made the air chief denying Fakhru Azam, the sources added.

Hasina strikes back

'Khaleda trying to camouflage BNP terrorism'

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Leader of the Opposition and Awami League President Sheikh Hasina yesterday lambasted the government for approving a new law, which she said would curb the basic human rights.

"The BNP as the opposition party agitated against the Public Safety Act (PSA). But after scrapping the PSA they're now going to enact another law, undermining the fundamental rights of the people," Hasina said two days after the cabinet's nod to the proposed law titled, 'Ain Srinikhalha Bighnakari Aparadh (Summary Trial) Bill, 2002.'

She was addressing the newly elected office bearers and members of the Chittagong Bar Association at the AL central office in the city yesterday afternoon.

The opposition leader also accused the ruling coalition of attempts to shift its own failure on to the Awami League (AL) after it failed to maintain law and order in the country.

"They're (the government) resorting to terrorism. But to camouflage their offences, the government is putting the blame on the Awami League and filing false cases against our party men," Hasina said in rebuttal to the prime minister's statement made in the parliament Wednesday.

Prime Minister Khaleda Zia Wednesday accused the main opposition of resorting to massive criminal activities as part of a blueprint to tarnish her government's image.

The prime minister also warned the AL of stern legal action for, what she dubbed, launching propaganda at home and abroad to project Bangladesh as a state of Taliban and fundamentalists.

Referring to recent press reports, the AL chief noted that 'armed cadres' of the BNP and its allies were involved in various criminal offences across the country. But instead of nabbing them, the government is harassing the opposition leaders and activists and implicating them in false cases, Hasina said.

In this regard, Hasina mentioned the attack on the Chittagong Labour Court by a front organisation of the BNP, attack on a police station in Cox's Bazar by BNP men and beating of a government officer by the son of a BNP's district unit president in Jessore.

"Did the Awami League perpetrated these criminal activities? What reply has she (Khaleda) to these?" asked Hasina.

Hasina said such blaming of the opposition would

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50 BCL men arrested

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

About 50 leaders and activists of Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL), student wing of Awami League, were arrested from different areas of the city yesterday and the night before.

Sources said all of them were arrested under Section 54 of the CrPC. They were produced before the CMM's Court, which sent them to Dhaka Central jail.

A large number of BCL leaders and activists came to the city from districts to attend the 27th council of the organisation, held on Wednesday.

Plainclothes police also searched residences of some top BCL leaders in the city. BCL leaders including the top ones are hiding as the police drive is on, sources in the organisation said.

Twenty-three of the 50 leaders and activists were arrested from a hotel at Tejgaon, three from

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Commentary

Where are our leaders leading us to?

Part 1: The Blueprint Syndrome

MAHFUZ ANAM

"Blueprint" was one of Sheikh Hasina's favourite words as the prime minister. Unfortunately, it was not a blueprint to build the nation that she was talking about but one to 'destroy her government', as she saw it. The frequency of the use of this word rose sharply as her grip on governance loosened and the reason for her failure to control the law and order situation became known to all - that it was her party cadres who were mostly responsible. As the opposition gained support and the press became increasingly vocal she started blaming the media for her sliding popularity and condemned it for being part of a concerted plot to oust her. At this time another word became popular with her. It was "information terrorism", though she used the Bangla version of it - *tathya santrash*.

Last Tuesday we suddenly saw the reappearance of these two words. This time it was Khaleda Zia who uttered them. How ironic! The person and the party that were the beneficiary of Sheikh Hasina's version of information terrorism were suddenly up in arms and promising to "punish the information terrorists". What took all by surprise is that while Sheikh Hasina used these words towards the end of her tenure, the re-elected BNP chief was using them only six months into her term. In her speech to the parliament she was categorical in accusing the AL of plotting to create social unrest by resorting to massive criminal activities, and trying to malign her government's image abroad by a vicious disinformation campaign. All this was part of a "blueprint", she claimed. What really rings alarm bells among the free and independent press is her comment that "information terror

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Bill to block media access to JS info

Move also to raise MPs' status

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

A treasury bench lawmaker placed a bill in the Jatiya Sangsad yesterday aiming to restrict the media from publishing reports about certain matters of the parliament and to raise the status and privileges of the speaker and the MPs.

The proposed law defines publishing reports on documents, statements prepared for presentation in the house or debates of a parliamentary committee as punishable crimes. The publication of confidential decisions, reports, documents or proceedings of the

parliament has also been made a punishable offence.

Ruling BNP legislator Mohammad Abu Hena introduced the bill titled "The Jatiya Sangsad (Special Privileges and Powers) Act, 2002", which was later sent to the parliamentary standing committee on private members' bills and resolutions for scrutiny.

The bill suggests that an MP would enjoy the status of a Supreme Court judge and he or she would be entitled to use a flag inscribed with the monogram of the parliament for use in the car and residence, the bill said.

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Army to be deployed during city polls

UNB, Dhaka

Army will be deployed during the April 25 city corporation polls to prevent any trouble while mobile courts will hold spot trial for violation of electoral rules, including fake voting.

The Election Commission (EC) at a meeting with the chiefs or representatives of different law-enforcing and intelligence agencies and security forces yesterday outlined the strategies for maintaining a peaceful atmosphere during the election of Dhaka, Khulna and Rajshahi city corporations.

"It has to be ensured that none can cast any false vote," Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) MA Syed said, asking officials concerned to take punitive measures if anyone commits the crime.

He said steps would be taken for arresting fake voters and transgressors "on sight" and their instant trial. "Sufficient number of summary trial courts will be formed."

The meeting was informed that army would be deployed in aid of law enforcing agencies for maintaining peace. Mobile teams of army along with magistrates will be on patrol.

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Israel runs into resistance in Nablus

AFP, Nablus, West Bank

Israel vowed yesterday to keep Yasser Arafat in total isolation as it stepped up a seven-day army blitz across the West Bank, bringing more Palestinian towns under its heel.

A European peace mission headed for Jerusalem in a bid to quell the bloodshed but Israel dismissed its plea to meet with Arafat, who has been trapped in his West Bank headquarters since last Friday.

Tanks and armoured vehicles battled their way to the heart of Nablus after smashing into the city overnight, encountering heavy resistance from Palestinian fighters armed with rifles, grenades, mortars and rockets.

The Israeli army has methodically made its way through Palestinian cities since last week in what it says is a bid to crush a "terrorist infrastructure" that has killed or wounded hundreds of Israelis in an 18-month uprising.

The army said yesterday it had arrested 1,100 Palestinians and seized quantities of

weapons. The Palestinian leadership issued a statement calling on its people to brace for "a long resistance" against Israeli troops.

"We say to the Israelis, sincerely, that the behaviour of their government and their army will only separate our two peoples by rivers of blood instead of building bridges of peace between us," it said.

Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon said his forces would keep Arafat pinned down in his headquarters in Ramallah, one of seven major municipalities Israeli troops have taken over the last week.

"He will stay where he is. The target of the operation is to uproot terrorist activity in areas under Palestinian control. Only when this is achieved will peace be discussed," Sharon said.

His army chief of staff, General Shaul Mofaz, said: "Arafat is at the head of the Palestinian Authority, which encourages, finances and trains terrorists. In these conditions, it would be better if he were expelled."

Sharon caused a firestorm of controversy when he said this week that Israel wanted to give the Palestinian leader a "one-way ticket" into exile.

EU foreign policy chief Javier Solana and Spanish Foreign Minister Josep Pique left for Jerusalem on a peace mission, but Israel said they would not be allowed to see the Palestinian leader.

"The Europeans' only aim is to provide Arafat with a public platform and that we will not allow," said an Israeli official close to Prime Minister Ariel Sharon.

Top Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erakat said no Palestinian officials would meet with Solana and Pique if they were blocked from seeing Arafat.

"Whether we meet or not is now irrelevant if they cannot convince Sharon" to end Arafat's isolation, Erakat said.

The Palestinians say the real intention of the military campaign is to topple or kill Arafat, Sharon's long-time bitter foe, and reoccupy

the land it handed over under interim peace accords in the 1990s.

Moderate Foreign Minister Shimon Peres denied that was Israel's goal.

"We are not going to hurt Arafat or dismantle the Palestinian Authority, we are not going to re-occupy the places. In a couple of weeks we'll be out," Peres said.

But he added: "We are forced to do these things. We cannot begin to understand the Palestinians."

Palestinian gunmen in Bethlehem were still holed up in the Church of the Nativity, one of the holiest sites in Christianity, which is surrounded by Israeli troops.

Palestinian sources inside the church said the Israeli army had blown an iron door off a back wall leading to the gardens, but the report was quickly denied by Israeli officials.

Israel is trying to negotiate the surrender of the dozens of gunmen and wanted militants it claims are inside.

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