



Protesters display signs and flags during a civil disobedience rally Friday outside the State Department in Washington, DC, where about a dozen of them were arrested. US Secretary of State Colin Powell will leave Washington today for a tour of the Mideast in search of a solution to the current Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Dhaka's duty-free access demand pitted against Delhi's transit claim Secretary-level trade talks start tomorrow

SHAHRIAR KARIM

Postponed twice in the last four months, the Bangladesh-India trade talks begin tomorrow in the city against the backdrop of yawning trade gap against Dhaka.

With more than US\$1 billion trade gap with India, Dhaka wants to focus on reviewing the existing trade situation between the two countries at the two-day commerce secretary-level meet. And Bangladesh expects a 'goodwill gesture' from its next-door neighbour in accepting the long-standing demand of zero-tariff access of its 25-category products to the Indian market. Dhaka's demands also include removal of all non-tariff and para-tariff barriers.

On the other hand, Delhi wants to seize this opportunity to raise some unresolved matters like the transhipment and transit facilities and may press for a 'package deal' on the bilateral issues, according to highly placed sources.

As Dhaka recently banned yarn import through the land ports, Delhi wants to use the meeting to raise the issue. Bangladesh's knitwear exporters use huge quantity of Indian yarn.

According to sources, the Indian high commissioner in Dhaka earlier wrote a letter to Finance and Planning Minister M Saifur Rahman, mentioning that the ban would have an adverse impact on bilateral relation.

They said both the sides have also agreed to renew the Bangladesh-India trade agreement,

which will expire this month.

The agreement was signed in 1980 for three years and was last renewed in October 2001 for six months.

Earlier, Bangladesh wanted to have a new bilateral trade agreement with a wider scope as it felt that the existing one did not serve the interest of the country.

"We are focussing on trade deficit as a major issue. Once we reach a consensus on the zero-tariff access of 25-category items to India, we can discuss other issues at a later stage," a highly placed commerce ministry source told The daily Star yesterday.

Dhaka sent a list of 191 products under the 25-category to the Indian authorities in December 2001. The list is a changed version of the earlier one prepared about three years back, which contained 196 items.

"With the change of time, we felt the list (of products) needed some changes. We handed it over to the Indian authorities in December so that they can have time to discuss it internally," a commerce ministry official said.

Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee during his visit to Dhaka in 1999 pledged to offer zero-tariff access to 25-category Bangladeshi products. However, India is yet to live up to its commitment. Rather, it tagged the demand for transhipment with the offer. It also wanted tariff concession on a reciprocal basis and demanded duty concessions on 90 items to Bangladesh

market. It also indicated that Bangladesh could start off the process by allowing duty-free access to its 10-12 items.

However, Dhaka found the proposition untenable with over US\$1 billion trade deficit against it.

During tomorrow's talks, Dhaka will also raise

Delhi's imposition of anti-dumping duty on Bangladeshi lead acid battery.

With the adoption of anti-dumping measures in January last, the duty on Bangladeshi battery rose to 131 per cent. Earlier, Bangladeshi battery enjoyed some concessions under the SAPTA agreement and instead of the normal 64.21 per cent duty, importers of Bangladeshi battery had to pay only 38.33 per cent duty.

The country's trade experts and industry people think the Indian decision to impose anti-dumping duty was in violation of the WTO rules.

In their final findings, the Indian authorities found Bangladeshi's battery export 'de-minimis' as the volume of export was considered insignificant at less than three per cent of the total Indian battery import.

Under the WTO rules, once a party is declared de-minimis, all further proceedings have to be dropped. But the Indian authorities pursued their anti-dumping move even after repeated requests from Bangladeshi manufacturers. The Indian

SEE PAGE 11 COL 1

Israeli troops, tanks roll into more areas

Intense battles with Palestinians: 'Massacre' in Jenin camp feared

AFP, Nablus, West Bank

Israeli forces fought intense battles with Palestinian gunmen and pushed deeper into the West Bank yesterday despite US President George W Bush's call to stop the assault.

Fierce fighting raged in Nablus, Jenin and refugee camps as Palestinians battled troops waging a methodical campaign Israel calls a defensive action to stop a wave of deadly Palestinian suicide attacks.

The Palestinian leadership said a 'massacre' was under way in the Jenin camp and appealed for urgent international help.

The continuing push dashed hopes Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon would halt the nine-day-old blitz as troops and tanks rolled into more areas, Qabatiya in the north and Yatta to the south, residents said.

US President Bush promised yesterday to mount an all-out effort to settle the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but said he had "no illusions about the difficulty" of achieving that goal.

"The United States is strongly committed to finding a just settlement in the Middle East. That settlement must lead to two states, Israel and Palestine, living side by side in peace and security," Bush said in his weekly radio address from his ranch in central Texas, where he was meeting with British Prime Minister Tony Blair.

US Secretary of State Colin Powell announced he would arrive in the region tomorrow but the Palestinians said his trip was 'doomed' if he decided not to meet with their besieged leader Yasser Arafat.

The Palestinians also called on all Arab leaders to refuse to meet with Powell as Arab rage exploded over Sharon, seen as a war criminal by many in the Arab world since Israel's 1982 invasion of Lebanon, and the United States.

At least 13 Palestinians were reported killed, including two children. Local officials said many more bodies might be on the streets with ambulances unable to reach them. Israel said three soldiers were killed yesterday.

SEE PAGE 11 COL 4

Commentary

Where are our leaders leading us to?

Part 2: Who is maligning Bangladesh's image?

MAHFUZ ANAM

under his version of democracy, or, for that matter, Lee Kuan Yew's. Our democracy puts us above many otherwise attractive countries. We often forget that.

Yet our 'best face' - democracy - has been repeatedly defaced by our two supreme leaders. We have impressed the world through holding three sequential free and fair elections. This one act did more to raise our image abroad than anything else we have done since our birth. But tragically this singular achievement was, by turn, denounced, vilified and belittled by both Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina to serve their partisan ends. Their attitude that "Election is fair only if I win it" naturally led them to denounce the ones that they lost. Thus 1991 and 2001 elections were vilified by the AL and the 1996 election renounced by the BNP.

Undoubtedly, Bangladesh's best face is its **democracy**. It is our greatest achievement after winning the Liberation War. While so many developing countries have faltered, we have established democracy by defeating militarism and autocracy. We can teach the world a thing or two about pushing the military back into their barracks through peaceful mass agitation. We have always felt proud of the fact that no dictator was ever accepted by our people and they never lasted more than a decade and that too only by brutal oppression.

We can proudly say that we would never have had a Suharto. Bengalis would never accept a dictator for 36 years. Nor would we have a Marcos, or, for that matter, a Castro. The best leader in the world would need to get elected and re-elected to last here. Even then it is a fair question if we would have elected the same person so many times over. I am a great admirer of Mahathir Mohammed of Malaysia but would never like to live

CONTINUED ON PAGE 4

Death of residential areas

MORSHED ALI KHAN

Phenomenal growth of the city's population and lack of concern of the authorities are contributing to rapid commercialisation of residential areas in the capital.

Dhanmondi, one of the first purpose-built residential areas of the city, bears testimony to this. Thousands of offices, shops, educational institutions, community centers, hospitals, clinics and factories have cropped up in the area, each accommodating 20 or more families, Dhanmondi is also

set to become one of the most densely populated up market residential areas in the country.

SEE PAGE 11 COL 4

India, Myanmar, Thailand agree to build road links

AP, Yangon

Myanmar, India and Thailand agreed yesterday to build a major highway within two years to improve transportation links among the three countries.

Plans call for the highway to link Moreh in India to Mae Sot in Thailand, passing through Myanmar's ancient capital of Bagan in the central part of the country.

The project was approved Saturday at a meeting of foreign ministers of the three nations in Myanmar's capital.

A statement said that the participants also agreed to support construction of a highway from Kanchanaburi in western Thailand to the port of Dawei in southern Myanmar.

In opening remarks, a ranking member of Myanmar's military regime said that trade and development cannot proceed without transportation networks.

"It is in this light that India, Myanmar and Thailand should take the initial step toward a regional network of highways," Lt Gen Khin Nyunt said.

The foreign minister Surakirt Sathirathai, Indian External Affairs Minister Shri Jaswant Singh and Myanmar Foreign Minister Win Aung presided at the meeting.

Woman held from near Khaleda's residence remanded

COURT CORRESPONDENT

Biba Rahman, arrested on charge of claiming herself as daughter of late president Ziaur Rahman, was placed on a three-day remand yesterday for interrogation.

Kafrel police produced Biba before the Chief Metropolitan Magistrate's Court Dhaka at 3 pm yesterday with a prayer for 10-day remand.

After hearing both the sides, the court placed Biba on a three-day remand.

Biba, 40, a resident of Banogram under Boalia thana in Rajshahi district, had turned up at the entrance of Prime Minister Khaleda Zia's cantonment residence on Friday.

She tried to enter the house to meet Khaleda Zia, claiming that she is the daughter of Ziaur Rahman.

The on-duty special security forces arrested her and handed her over to Kafrel police.

One burnt alive, 25 shanties gutted in N'ganj

OUR CORRESPONDENT, N'ganj

A four-year-old girl was burnt alive and 25 shanties gutted in a fire at Chashara slum in the town yesterday night.

The dead was identified as Rezia, 4, daughter of Khokan Mia.

The fire originated from a shanty of Khokan Mia at about 9.30 pm and soon engulfed the adjacent shanties. At least 25 people were injured while extinguishing the blaze.

Two fire fighting units rushed to the spot and extinguished the blaze at 10.15 pm.

It curtails privileges of the press and even proposes restrictions on the existing freedoms.

SEE PAGE 11 COL 4

Hartal passes off peacefully

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The dawn-to-dusk hartal yesterday at the call of Awami League passed off by large peaceably but disrupted economic activities across the country.

Some stray incidents of bomb explosion and police obstruction to processions marked the hartal in Dhaka and elsewhere.

Two persons were injured in bomb explosions in the old part of the city while police lobbed a tear gas shell and picked up two persons following firing of a gunshot near Osmany Udayan. Police dispersed a pro-hartal procession in Motijheel area.

A total of 18 people were picked up from different areas of the city during the hartal hours, police said.

The government deployed over 5,000 police and paramilitary BDR personnel to maintain law and order in the capital Dhaka during the first full day hartal in its six-month rule.

The main opposition party gave the hartal call on March 24 to protest what it said repression on and arrest of party leaders and workers, removal and damage of Bangabandhu's portrait, deterioration of law and order and price hike of essentials.

From March 21 till yesterday, police foiled at least three scheduled AL programmes in the city and obstructed opposition processions. The hartal

SEE PAGE 11 COL 7

Saifur says Lack of good governance affecting projects

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Planning and Finance Minister M Saifur Rahman has said lack of good governance is affecting development projects.

As a result, full impacts of these projects are not felt in the economy.

The minister was speaking as special guest at the biennial general meeting of the Bangladesh Civil Service Economic Association (BCSEA) at the Bangladesh-China Friendship Conference Centre in the city yesterday. Prime Minister Khaleda Zia attended the function as chief guest.

SEE PAGE 11 COL 3



Riot police deployed in front of Awami League central office at Bangabandhu Avenue in the city prevented AL workers from bringing out procession during yesterday's hartal.

Proposed JS bill to infringe people's right to know

NAZRUL ISLAM

The private member's bill introduced in the Jatiya Sangsad Thursday seeking special privileges and powers for the lawmakers appears to be a tool to choke the freedom of press, thereby denying the people's right to know.

The bill also goes against the spirit of Article 39 of the Constitution that guarantees freedom of thought and conscience and of speech.

Although the press has long been considered as the fourth estate and an integral part of parliamentary democracy, the new bill titled 'The Jatiya Sangsad (Special Privileges and Powers) Act, 2002' identified working journalists as 'strangers'. It also proposed bars on carrying reports on certain issues of the parliament.

The proposed law sought the privileges and powers for the MPs and speaker matching those of the lawmakers and speaker of the House of Commons in the United Kingdom.

It curtails privileges of the press and even proposes restrictions on the existing freedoms.

Once this law is enacted, members of parliament would enjoy the status of a Supreme Court judge and as a result, become hardly accessible to the press and the

people.

Before the introduction of the bill in the House, Speaker Jamiruddin Sircar had passed a ruling in the House saying members would have to seek permission from the Speaker before they arrange press conference in the parliament. However, the speaker withdrew the order later.

According to sources in the parliament, ruling party lawmaker Mohammad Abu Hena tabled the bill in the House after informing the chief whip. "Before placing it in the House, the member concerned informed me that he was going to introduce a bill seeking special privileges for the lawmakers," Chief Whip Khandaker Delwar Hossain told The Daily Star last night.

He referred to a notice seeking enhancement of the privileges of the MPs which was moved by Abu Hena in the House and the law minister's subsequent call for introduction of such a bill. "There are scopes to improve the bill since it has been sent to the standing committee for scrutiny," said the Chief Whip.

The bill defined a 'stranger' as any person other than members of parliament and officials of the parliament

SEE PAGE 11 COL 7