

ALERT!
Petrobangla that contributes over Tk 1500 crore to the national exchequer is facing a liquidity crisis as public sector enterprises owe it Tk 972 crore and the private sector another Tk 400 crore.

PDB under fire

Petrobangla warns of drastic measures for bill default, gas supply to plants may be snapped

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Petrobangla has warned of 'drastic measures' against the Power Development Board (PDB) if it failed to decide within this month on payment of Tk 512 crore in arrears.

"We will wait this month for a finance ministry decision regarding the arrears in the public sector," said Petrobangla Chairman Syed Sajedul Karim while exchanging views with journalists at his office yesterday.

"We have told the ministry that we might have to cut down gas supply to power plants if that is the only option left to us," he added.

Petrobangla is also planning steps to reduce gas systems loss of its distribution affiliates. "Annually, gas worth Tk 200 crore is stolen by a section of employees and some industrial and commercial customers," Karim noted.

Although a major earner for the country, contributing around Tk 1500 crore to the national exchequer in taxes and duty and another 100 crore as dividend, Petrobangla is faced with liquidity crisis due to non-payment by other state-owned clients as well as the private ones.

"Different clients owe us over Tk 1400 crore. As a result, we are unable to pay the international oil companies, Shell and Unocal, in time for purchase of gas from Sangu and Jalalabad wells," the chairman said, adding that Petrobangla was not a defaulter with any authority.

The PDB that consumes half the 1100 million cubic feet per day (mmcf) of gas produced, owes Petrobangla Tk 512 crore. This is equivalent to its seven months' bill.

The Bangladesh Petroleum Corporation (BPC) owes Petrobangla Tk 240 crore or equivalent to 14 months' bill.

"In total, the public sector owes us Tk 972 crore and the private sector the rest Tk 400 crore. Among the private sector, a handful of industries are the main culprits," Karim said at the discussion that was also participated by Director Finance SR Osmani, Director Planning Md Muktedir Ali, Director Administration Taher Uddin Akunji, General Manager of Petroleum Concessions Division (PCD) Jahangir Kabir, Petrobangla Secretary Kamrul Islam and others.

But this is not the only measure that Petrobangla mulls to streamline its financial system.

"We are aware of a section of unscrupulous employees who help some private and commercial clients steal gas. This is specially a problem with the Titas gas," he said, adding that the authorities would try to cut the level of systems loss.

Such measures have become mandatory not only for the sake of paying the oil companies, but also for funding future infrastructure projects. In addition to paying huge taxes to the exchequer, Petrobangla has to arrange payment of debt service liabilities, taxes of the oil companies (as per the production sharing contracts) and funds for some of its own projects.

The chairman said under the sixth five-year plan, an expenditure of over \$1 billion has been earmarked for gas exploration and infrastructure development, which includes setting up of 1794 km pipeline. Petrobangla now plans to take gas to Khulna by setting up a 30-inch pipeline.

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Three ICB subsidiaries to launch operation next week

MONJUR MAHMUD

The three unbundled companies of the Investment Corporation of Bangladesh (ICB) for merchant banking, asset management and stock brokering are going to launch their operations next week.

ICB officials said they have already obtained approval from the finance ministry and the proposal is currently lying in the law ministry for vetting.

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'History' remains unchanged

NCTB won't revise textbooks

MUSTAK HOSSAIN

The authorities are unlikely to take any steps to bring changes in the textbooks containing historical information, published by the National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB), a key official of the education ministry has said.

"There will be no change in the historical information given in textbooks in the latest version since specialists upgraded the books with historical evidence in favour of

those facts," Education Secretary Mohammad Shahidul Alam told The Daily Star yesterday.

He said the committee formed to produce a revised version of textbooks will mainly upgrade the curricula as many of the present books are outdated.

When his attention was drawn to some historical issues like proclamation of independence of the country by the then Major Ziaur Rahman from Kalurghat radio station on March 26, 1971, he said,

"Authors of the textbooks books have proved that it is a historical fact".

Since the independence, students witnessed changes for as many as six times as regards who had proclaimed it.

Textbooks published by the NCTB contained 'twisted facts' about the country's liberation struggle repeatedly mainly because of 'political influence,' sources pointed out.

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Colour of Bangla New Year
Students of the Fine Arts Institute, Dhaka University, work on traditional papier-mâché masks yesterday for the Pahela Baishakh celebration.

PHOTO: STAR

Changed gas demand outlook

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

While Unocal is pushing for gas export from the Bibiyana field citing a saturated local demand, Petrobangla predicts a changed scenario in three years' time when it might need to purchase gas from the American oil company to meet an increased demand for local consumption.

At a discussion between the press and Petrobangla chairman Syed Sajedul Karim, Petrobangla's director (Planning) Muqtadir Ali said that by June 2007, the peak demand for gas would reach 1824 million cubic feet per day (mmcf) and the

Budget session may see AL for a day

REAZ AHMAD

The Awami League (AL) may join the next parliamentary session on budget, at least for a day, before it resolves to finalise its March 14 decision on resignation en bloc, sources in the party told The Daily Star yesterday.

The new parliament has already completed two sessions with the AL, the largest opposition party, keeping away from the Jatiya Sangsad all along.

On March 14, a nine-hour crucial joint meeting of the AL Central Working Committee (ALCWC) and AL MPs decided, in principle, to resign en masse from the House.

Party leaders said the decision came in the wake of the government's move to remove Bangabandhu's portrait from public offices and 'unabated repression' on the opposition.

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Beware of Khaleda, says Hasina

UNB, Shariatpur

Branding the BNP-Jamaat government as terrorist, Awami League president Sheikh Hasina yesterday asked people to "beware of Khaleda Zia."

Hasina's sharp retort came in response to Prime Minister Khaleda Zia's blistering attack on the Awami League on Wednesday. The prime minister told parliament that if the AL continued to sponsor "information terrorism," people would start saying, "Beware of Awami League."

Addressing wayside meetings on her way to this district headquarters, Hasina alleged that Khaleda

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Little gains from trade talks

SHAHRIAR KARIM

A big question mark hangs over the outcome of the just concluded trade talks between Bangladesh and India that were dragged into an unscheduled and unprecedented third day after hiccups, stalemates and walkouts

during the first two days.

The talks ended without signing of any agreed minutes or a joint declaration. There was no effort to prepare any either. Only a joint press comment capped the talks.

Although a prime issue on the agenda, the bilateral trade agreement signed in 1980 that expired on April 4 this year, was not renewed.

The country's business community sees little gains coming out of

the talks, which Bangladesh attached great importance to in the context of a yawning trade gap with India.

Apparently there are reasons for the businessmen to cheer about. After all, India has offered duty-free access to 40 products, scanty it

may look though against Bangladesh's demand for 191 items.

However, a close look at the product list, prepared unilaterally by the Indian delegation, should not please them.

A joint statement issued yesterday by the country's two premier chamber bodies, the MCCI and the DCCI, aptly sums it up.

"There is a very slim chance of

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Sharon pours cold water on Powell's peace bid

4,000 Palestinians detained so far

AFP, Jerusalem

Prime Minister Ariel Sharon vowed again yesterday that Israel would not stop its assault on the Palestinians, pouring cold water on US Secretary of State Colin Powell's Middle East peace bid hours before his arrival.

The Israeli army said it had arrested 4,000 Palestinians and pressed ahead with its siege of the West Bank, rolling into more areas and keeping an iron grip on others in defiance of US calls to pull back.

Sharon is on a collision course with Powell amid boiling Arab rage and international anger over the onslaught, which has left hundreds of Palestinians dead and their leader Yasser Arafat trapped in his West Bank headquarters.

"I've warned the Americans that the Israeli army will not withdraw from Bethlehem, Jenin, Nablus and Ramallah until all the terrorists there have surrendered," Sharon said.

Foreign Minister Shimon Peres said Israel had no choice when it launched

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