

Mass death of snails DoE probe finds no scientific cause

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

Investigators of the Department of Environment (DoE) have submitted their probe report on the mass-death of snails washed ashore in Cox's Bazar.

The report found no scientific explanation for the death of snails identified as epitonium SP. The samples were analysed at Dhaka and Chittagong laboratories of the DoE to find out if there was any trace of toxin -- a heavy metal suspected to have caused the death of the snails.

Some speculate that the snails died on the shallow bottom of coastal waters due to pollution caused by dumping of oil waste from the ships and fishing trawlers frequenting the coast.

The suspicion mounted after a Shipping Corporation ship Banglar Mamota was fined by the authorities for discharging waste into the bay off the Chittagong Port on April 8.

A heap of 50 to 60 tons of dead snails has been found on the beach. Some people gained a windfall from the 'sudden gift' from the Bay of

Bengal, as poultry farmers buy the dead snails as a cheap source of feed.

Secretary of the Ministry of Environment and Forests Sabihuddin Ahmed ordered the investigation on April 11 after reports on the dead snails, said the DoE sources.

On April 12, the DoE investigators collected samples of the dead snails and water from the estuary of the Bakkhali River from where they were washed two kilometres ashore eastwards during the high tide in the bay.

Although the DoE carried out the preliminary tests to detect physico-chemical elements at its Chittagong laboratory in cooperation with the BCSIR laboratory and also at its Dhaka laboratory, the sources said further studies are required to detect the cause of the mass death.

The sources said proper tests are not possible in the country and the samples must be sent abroad. If there was any toxic material responsible for the death, it might get into the food chain through the poultry farms, the sources cautioned.

Bangladesh will send 50,000 to perform Hajj next year

BSS, Dhaka

Bangladesh will send at least 50,000 Muslims to Saudi Arabia to perform Hajj next year under the government and private management, an official handout said yesterday.

An inter-ministerial meeting on the holy Hajj at the ministry of Religious Affairs with State Minister Mosharraf Hossain Shahjahan in the chair yesterday decided to send 50,000 pilgrims including 15,000 under the government arrangement.

The meeting reviewed the Hajj 2002 management and discussed different relevant issues to make Hajj management more effective.

The meeting discussed hiring of houses in Makkah and Medina, transportation of the pilgrims and medical check-up of the Hajjis. It also discussed issues to make the Hajj performance more easier, appointment of agencies to locate the Hajjis and IT services.

The IT services would be used for the welfare of the Hajjis next year. Houses will be hired in two slabs considering the age of the pilgrims and their communications.

Young man

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Mainuddin for killing his son. Police arrested the three and another youth --Monir -- in connection with the incident.

Khilgaon police recovered the body of a newborn from a dustbin in front of Khilgaon Girls High School on Monday night. There were marks of injury on the head of the baby.

Police sent the body to the DMCH morgue.

Ganges Treaty

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He, however, said Bangladesh had requested holding the fifth meeting of the Joint Committee of Experts (JCE), which is to convene in New Delhi, but the date has not yet been finalised. The fourth meeting of the expert body was held on January 3, 2000 in Dhaka.

In reply to a question about sharing of the waters of other common rivers, Sethi said the next JCE meeting would discuss the sharing of flows of six other common rivers.

About the last Joint River Commission (JRC) meeting in Dhaka, the minister said the meeting agreed on joint flood forecasting, reducing the intensity of floods and combating arsenic problem.

Floods and arsenic, a new phenomenon, are major common problems with disastrous impacts that both the countries faced as they are situated in the same Himalayan river system. As many as 54 common rivers and rivulets flow down the two countries.

In reply to a question about a regional approach to the use of water resources jointly by Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Bhutan, he disagreed on grounds that it is easier to resolve any problem bilaterally. He, however, said that if necessary, the matter could be discussed with other countries on a bilateral plane.

"There is no need to go for involvement of a third country, India wants to resolve all problems with its neighbors on a bilateral plane," he said underlining the catchphrase of India's policies.

Water Resources Secretary BN Navalwala was present at the meeting between the minister and the visiting journalists.

On-arrival visas

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came as the government felt that visitors were misusing the on-arrival visa option.

Sources added the recent report of the Far Eastern Economic Review (FEER) that observed that a silent revolution of armed fundamentalists backed by international terrorist groups was taking place in Bangladesh prompted the government to make the move. The government rejected the report and felt that it was a part of a conspiracy to portray the country's image negatively in the eyes of the international community.

The on-arrival visa was mainly open to visitors from countries where Bangladesh does not have a consulate. It was also meant to encourage investors to make unscheduled visits to the country.

However, the immigration authorities observed increasing numbers of visitors coming from countries where Bangladesh has a consulate had been seeking on-arrival visas.

Now, the immigration authorities have decided to issue on-arrival visas to such visitors who could not avail themselves of Bangladeshi consulate services. Such visitors will have to provide information about their local business contacts or clients, however.

Business sources said that most of the on-arrival visa seekers come to Bangladesh to do business with the ready-made garment units that fetched US\$ 5.1 billion last year and accounted for 76 per cent of the country's export earnings.

Scientists expect to complete human genome in 2003

REUTERS, Shanghai

Scientists expect to publish next year the complete sequence of the human genome, a development that could revolutionise medicine, the head of a leading genome research organisation said.

"It will be completed in 2003," Lap-Chee Tsui, president of the Human Genome Organisation (HUGO) told reporters on Sunday. "Everybody is trying very hard to meet that deadline."

London-based HUGO is the largest international non-profit organisation involved in human genome research.

The Human Genome Project, a consortium of scientists from the United States, Britain, Japan, France, Germany and China, will establish the complete human genome sequence by spring of 2003, a HUGO statement said.

In a breakthrough in early

2001, the team published the initial sequence of the human genome in the UK-based scientific journal Nature. A similar sequence compiled by rival Maryland-based Celera Genomics Group was also published in the Science journal, another scientific publication.

The sequence of 3.1 billion letters of DNA showed humans are made up of about 30,000 to 40,000 genes, far below previous predictions of 60,000 to 100,000.

Tsui said the team's complete sequence, like its initial sequence, would be available publicly.

When Celera published its draft last year, scientists had limited access to it with some information requiring subscription.

"It is quite clear that Celera will not be doing any more sequencing and (for) the public project of course, by definition, we are going to release it to the public," said Tsui, who was in Shanghai for a four-day human genome conference.

Tsui also said China was actively involved in the human genome projects in hopes of finding answers to treatment of common ailments found in the country.

"In China, they will probably concentrate on the diseases that are affecting the Chinese population most. For example, liver cancer, and a lot of the infectious disease that are more (commonly found) here than other places," he said.

Tsui said Chinese scientists were also delving into plant genetics and bioengineering research to improve the quality of its key crops such as rice, widely regarded as a basis for studying other grains.

Scientists said earlier this month they were publishing a draft genome sequence of rice, the staple food for Chinese and a third to a half of the world's population, but Tsui said it would take years before its complete sequence could be set in place.

Dutch govt quits over report on Srebrenica massacre

AFP, The Hague

The Dutch government resigned yesterday after a report on the 1995 Srebrenica massacre in Bosnia blamed leaders in The Hague for sending Dutch UN peacekeepers on a "mission impossible" to protect the enclave.

"I will go to the Queen and offer the resignation of all my ministers and ministers of state. After that, I will return to parliament to explain the decision," Prime Minister Wim Kok said.

The five-year inquiry into the July 1995 massacre of 7,500 Muslim men and boys pointed the finger at the Dutch government and military leaders as well as the United Nations for setting up a mission that was doomed to fail.

Dutch troops were serving on a mission to protect Srebrenica, which had been declared a UN safe haven, when Bosnian Serb forces seized the town.

Unseen over the Dutch role in the massacre, considered the worst atrocity in Europe since the end of World War II, has permeated politics in The Hague for the last decade.

The government-commissioned

report on the fall of Srebrenica, published last Wednesday, concluded that "humanitarian motivation and political ambitions drove The Netherlands to undertake an ill-conceived and virtually impossible peace mission".

Following the release of the report, two ministers have publicly said they were considering stepping down which sparked the government crisis.

After holding a crisis meeting for several hours with all ministers, Labour Prime Minister Kok announced the resignation of his centre-left cabinet.

While the resignation of the full cabinet sent a powerful political message, it was not expected to severely disrupt Dutch political life as elections are planned for May 15.

Kok already said last year that he would not run again.

Meanwhile, The United Nations yesterday unveiled a 12.5 million dollar (14 million euro) recovery programme for Srebrenica.

The three-year programme presented by the UN Development Program (UNDP) will help develop the local economy, governance projects, housing and infrastructure

and give support to civil society and social welfare, Moises Venacio, a spokesman for UNDP said.

Venacio said the aim of the project was to "leave behind an international legacy of hope... and not one of destruction and desolation."

Srebrenica remained largely cut off from international aid until 1999, it having remained under the Serb part of Bosnia, the Republika Srpska, under the Dayton peace accord which ended the 1992-95 Bosnia war.

Although Muslims dominated the region before the war, Muslim survivors of the massacre, mainly women, fled the area and displaced Bosnian Serbs occupied the remaining housing there.

The aid started to trickle back after 2000 elections resulted in a Muslim majority in Srebrenica's municipal assembly and a Muslim mayor, and a pick-up in returns by the Muslim population.

An international donors' conference for the UNDP project will be held in New York on May 13 under the aegis of the UN Secretary General, Kofi Annan.

Modi issue rocks Indian Houses for second day

AP, New Delhi

Opposition parties demanding the ouster of Gujarat's chief minister for failing to stop Hindu-Muslim violence in the state forced adjournment of both houses of the national Parliament for a second day yesterday.

Opposition members shouted slogans from their seats and some squatted in the well of the lower house, the Lok Sabha, housing to allow government ministers to respond to previously submitted questions during "Question Hour."

Members of the governing Bharatiya Janata Party shouted "Down with Sonia Gandhi," directed at the Congress party chief and leader of the opposition.

She has said no Parliament business will be allowed until the government sacks Narendra Modi, chief minister of Gujarat, where at least 833 people, most of them Muslims, have been killed since Feb 27.

In the upper house, the Rajya Sabha, the opposition members repeatedly ignored the pleas of the chairman, Vice President Krishan Kant, to take their seats. Finance Minister Yashwant Sinha's reply to a question on foreign investment could not be heard, and the house was adjourned until Wednesday.

In a significant development, members of the Telugu Desam Party, an ally of the government, joined the opposition in both houses in shouting demands for the ouster of Modi, appointed to the top elected

post in the state by the government of Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee. Modi was appointed after the ouster of the state's previous chief minister, accused of incompetence after the Jan. 26, 2001 earthquake.

The Telugu Desam Party, with 28 seats in Parliament, supports Vajpayee's National Democratic Alliance, but is not a member of it. The party's withdrawal of support in the 545-seat lower house could not bring down the government, but could start a trend.

The party has objected to members of the Cabinet engaging in Hindu nationalist rhetoric and causes such as the recent effort to build a Hindu temple on the ruins of a mosque destroyed in 1992 by supporters of Vajpayee.

ADB forecasts dip in GDP

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2002 fiscal.

The ADB has also suggested that revenue mobilisation efforts should be strengthened, expenditures checked, and restructuring and privatisation of the state-owned enterprises (SoEs) accelerated.

The report shows a slight deceleration of growth in domestic credit from the corresponding period of last fiscal.

The ADB has attributed the slowdown to marginal decline in credit to the SoEs and moderation in credit growth of the private sector that reflects tighter expenditure controls, high real interest rates and a slower pace of economic activity.

It feels that the government should immediately implement its decision to set up a public expenditure review commission for suggesting ways of improving public resource management.

Besides, a revenue commission should be set up for providing recommendation on improving domestic resource mobilisation, the report says.

The report also forecasts subdued activities in agricultural and manufacturing sectors. "The declining imports of industrial raw materials and stagnancy in private sector credit growth suggest that large and medium scale manufacturing is unlikely to see a significant turnaround in the immediate future."

Food grain production is not

likely to see any significant growth, it says.

Meanwhile, rise in domestic borrowing during the first seven months of the current fiscal coupled with stable level of foreign borrowing suggests increase in government expenditure, says the quarterly update.

There has been a change in the composition of higher domestic borrowing, it notes. "The government has substantially increased its borrowing from the central bank while it has reduced the borrowing from commercial banks."

Higher borrowing from the central bank, the ADB report apprehends, could generate inflationary pressure in the future. "Lower borrowing from the commercial banks has yet to translate into higher lending to the private sector." Inflation has picked up in January this year from last December due to price increases in both food (mainly rice) and non-food items such as fuel and transport cost, it observes.

Despite some improvement in January 2002, merchandise exports have indicated a sharp decline during the first seven months of this fiscal, the ADB report points out, saying that much of this decline has been attributed to readymade garments and frozen foods.

Global recession as well as

access to Caribbean and Sub-Saharan countries by the United States have been pointed out in the ADB update as the reason for the decline in the RMG sector.

Decline in frozen food has been attributed to higher freight and insurance costs after September 11.

The quarterly report says that although the year-on-year imports also declined, it was not enough to keep the trade deficit from widening further during the first six months of this fiscal.

Gross international reserves have been held up in recent weeks by the spurt in remittances and lower imports, it observes.

The deficit in the current account narrowed due to higher inflows of remittances and due to greater efforts to increase the share of remittances coming through official channels.

However, the ADB fears that the high growth rate in remittances would not sustain due to declining number of Bangladeshis working abroad.

Deputy Resident Representative of the ADB Omkar Shrestha, who was also present at the press conference, said that there was a need for ensuring good governance, efficient use of resources and transparency. "When one third of your loan is doubtful you need reform in the sector."

Palestinians reject Powell's claim of progress in talks

AFP, Nabulus

Israeli tanks backed up by helicopter gunships yesterday rolled into the town of Tulkerem in the West Bank from which Israeli troops had withdrawn a week ago, Palestinian witnesses said.

Meanwhile, a Palestinian minister yesterday rejected US Secretary of State Colin Powell's comments that progress was being made in the Middle East, saying none was possible without an Israeli withdrawal from West Bank cities.

"Before talking of progress in any talks... there has to be an implementation of the UN resolution calling for an immediate withdrawal from all towns, villages and refugee camps occupied by the Israeli army," information minister Yasser Abed Rabbo said.

Powell, who ended a third round of talks with Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon yesterday, earlier claimed he was making "progress" in hashing out an elusive Middle East ceasefire.

The US secretary of state, expected to leave the region today after a meeting with Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat in the morning, also acknowledged that any final deal could fall short of an actual truce to stop 18 months of bloodshed, and end up as a looser, less-formal agreement.

"I don't want to get into specifics as to what I'll be able to achieve and not be able to achieve," he told reporters. "I think we're making

Janatar Mancha

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Awami League government Dr. Mohiuddin Khan Alamgir is now in jail custody, while other accused, former police officer Syed Bazul Karim, did not surrender before the court till yesterday.

Meanwhile, the sedition case was shifted to CID police from Ramna thana yesterday.

The Criminal Investigation Department (CID) has received the case dockets from Ramna police and already appointed ASP Munshi Atiqur Rahman as its investigation officer.

Graft charges

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tions were rife that the shipping minister might be asked to resign. Akbar's absence in the office yesterday only fuelled the rumour.

Meantime, many in the ruling BNP view that instead of trying to defend the minister the government should probe the charges.

"Even in the West it has been observed that whenever such allegations arise the government launch an investigation and if anything is proved it comes out stronger by taking corrective measures," a BNP standing committee member, preferring anonymity, told The Daily Star yesterday.

Speculations are also there that the prime minister might reshuffle and trim the jumbo-jet cabinet on her return from a probable trip to the USA. Some ministers, against whom allegations of corruption are there, may be on the hit list, according to sources.

Meanwhile, the minister in question spent the whole day at his official residence.

"I was a bit tired. So I spent the day at my residence. But I was not out of touch with the ministry. I monitored everything from my residence," Akbar told The Daily Star last night.

CU Medical Centre

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inoperative for 12 years. There is no room for the X-ray machine. One official seeking anonymity told The Daily Star that the machine could not be used only due to carelessness of the authorities not for financial crisis.

The advisory committee of medical centre placed a proposal to the syndicate, the highest decision making body of the university, to take measures to operate the machine. But the syndicate rejected the proposal saying that it as an 'ambitious plan' and asked the officials not to propose such plan again. The university authorities are now planning to sell the X-ray machine, sources said.

There are two drivers for three ambulances in the centre. So one ambulance is always kept out of use for shortage of driver. Moreover, most of the time some senior influential teachers of the university used the ambulances for their personal purpose denying the emergency needs of the centre.

Seeking anonymity a senior official of the centre said it is very unfortunate that there is no plan to set up a full-fledged hospital in the master plan of the university.

"But if the authorities try they can easily turn it into a full fledged hospital by a minimum cost," he added.

He said if the law faculty and the department of bio-chemistry are shifted to the newly built social science faculty the authorities could

progress and I look forward to furthering that progress over the next 24 hours."

A senior State Department official said Powell was expected to end his peace mission to Israel and the Palestinian territories today, and stop off in Egypt on the way home.

His comments came as Israeli troops stormed into a refugee camp in Nabulus and made a lightning in-and-out incursion in Tulkerem, a West Bank town Israel withdrew from last week, in early-morning raids.

They also moved into two villages near Bethlehem and arrested a number of Palestinians, residents said.

Sharon said Monday he would pull out of most of the reoccupied areas within a week, but the announcement fell well short of the total withdrawal the Palestinians have said must take place before they will sign a truce.

Gana Mukti Fouz cadres clash with police in Kushtia: 15 hurt

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Kushtia

At least 15 people, including five police men were injured with bullets in a gunfight between police and armed miscreants at village Mollickpur Mathpara in Mirpur upazila of the district yesterday.

Witnesses said the clash began at about 3 pm when police raided the house of one Ansar Ali where alleged members of Gano Mukti Fouz (GMF) were holding a meeting.

Sensing the presence of police, the cadres of the outlawed party opened fire. Police returned fire. Both sides exchanged fire for an hour, leaving 15, including one ASI and four SIs injured.

Police arrested regional leader of GMF and four other cadres along with four guns and 40 bullets.

DCC polls

FROM PAGE 12 rallies, meetings and processions on a regular basis. They have to spend huge amounts to make such programmes a success," said one of the campaigners requesting not to be named.

On the other hand, incidents of violence, killing and intimidation centring the polls are dampening the enthusiasm of voters. It is alleged the ruling party backed candidates, ward commissioner candidates in particular, are threatening their rivals in different areas of the city.

Participation of many 'wanted criminals' in the election is believed to be a major threat to law and order. According to available statistics, of the 1,000 ward commissioner candidates in the capital, 278 have criminal records. This has caused frustration among the city dwellers.

According to local people, the candidates with criminal records are more interested in 'suppressing' their rivals by using muscle power.

They noted that many of the candidates' election campaign is still limited to street rallies. Despite commitments to meet leading people in the localities, the candidates do not turn up in due time.

Annoyed at such failure to keep commitments," a group of leading people in Kalabagan area has decided to abstain from casting vote for the post of ward commissioner.

Mujibnagar Day

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Bangabandhu after the Pakistani military government arrested him on his proclamation of Bangladesh's independence on March 26, 1971.

The Mujibnagar government with Tajuddin Ahmed as its prime minister led the country's War of Independence for nine months until the Pakistani occupation forces surrendered on December 16.

The Awami League (AL) and its front organisations have taken up elaborate programmes to mark the Mujibnagar Day.

It will hold a discussion at Mahanagar Natyamancha in the capital at 3:00pm. AL chief Sheikh Hasina will attend it as chief guest, said a party release yesterday.

At 8 in the morning, Hasina and other central AL leaders will lay wreaths on Sheikh Mujib's portrait at the Bangabandhu Bhaban at Dhanmondi in the city.

The AL will also hoist the national flag and the party flag atop the Bangabandhu Bhaban and all its offices across the country, the release added.

In a message yesterday, Hasina said the exiled government's contribution in the emergence of Bangladesh will never be forgotten.

She also paid tribute to Syed Nazrul Islam, Tajuddin Ahmed, M Mansur Ali, AM Quamruzzaman and others who led the revolutionary government. Also, she recalled the contributions of civil and military officials of that government, and the political leaders, freedom fighters and the martyrs for the cause of Bangladesh's independence.

"The Mujibnagar Day has returned to us with a new perspective and requiring a fresh pledge. Distortion of the national history is going on in its worst form," she said.

Hasina added that the distortion that began after the Bangabandhu's killing in 1975 had continued barring the 1996-2001 period (when the AL was in power).

"In fact, the practice of distorting

Miss-adventure!

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Later, they were handed over to the Khilgaon police.

Police found out that they were students of Goran Ali Ahmed High School and contacted their relatives. Later, they were handed over to their guardians at about 2:30pm.

Vajpayee: Transit

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border trade and transit.

"That decision did not progress because of lack of response from the Bangladesh side for an early meeting of the joint experts group," the high commission alleged.

The decision of forming a joint expert group was taken during the visit of Bangladesh's commerce minister to New Delhi in May, 1999, the press release said.

"The main objective of the expert group was to consider the issues of border trade, transit and duty-free access of goods," it said.

The clarification further