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GLOBAL  
ESCAPEADE

Coaches may  
smoke

AFP, Tokyo

Fans at the upcoming World Cup will be banned from smoking in the stands but stressed-out coaches on the touchline look set to be allowed to carry on lighting up.

Organisers said Thursday that the tournament, which kicks off on world no smoking day on May 31, will be the first tobacco-free World Cup with no sales inside stadiums and smoking restricted to designated areas.

But they could not confirm that the ban would extend to coaches, many of whom chain-smoke their

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RANGS TOSHIBA

WORLD CUP QUIZ

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## Theft stalks Titas

Pilferage shoots up by 66pc under political patronage

ZAYADUL AHSAN

Political governments sponsor gas thefts. And it is evident from figures, even if one ignores what a few honest Titas gas officials would vouch for.

The level of pilferage, mainly by meter readers under blanket cover of trade unions, has hit through the ceiling after the BNP-led coalition took over in October last.

According to the figures of Titas Gas Transmission and Distribution Company Limited (TGTDL), systems loss, the official word for outright theft, has shot up by 66 per cent since the caretaker government relinquished power thanks to unwavering power support to the Titas unit of the ruling BNP-backed Jatiyatabdhi Sramik Karmachari Union.

The situation was not much better either during the tenure of the Awami League government. In the last year of the AL regime, systems loss was 8.12 per cent, only about two percentage point lower than what it is today.

The patronisation by politicians, covert or overt, of the dishonest employees is quite evident, as the caretaker government during its short stint did actually manage to bring down the 'systems loss' to 6.22 per cent, an outright 23 per cent improvement. Insiders put this down to the fact that the meter readers found no political platform to have their misdeeds patronised.

But as the coalition government took over, the unionists rose like the phoenix and drove the theft figure to 10.31 per cent during October-January period. Which means no less than Tk 18.86 crore are plundered every month

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## Unionism capped

ZAYADUL AHSAN and SHARIER KHAN

Following heavy pressure from the Ministry of Energy and Petrobangla, the Jatiyatabdhi Sramik Dal, the labour wing of the ruling BNP, yesterday restricted for six months the activities of three of its affiliated unions of Titas Gas Transmission and Distribution Company Limited, sources said.

The trade unions would be allowed to do 'normal' union activities like holding meetings and running office affairs. But they have been barred from getting involved with the administration and management of Titas in any way, added the sources.

Sramik Dal President and Food Minister Abdullah Al Noman instructed leaders of the three unions to leave "all administrative and managerial decisions up to the Titas board and the energy ministry".

The energy ministry would monitor whether these trade unions are working as pressure groups during this period.

The virtual suspension of the activities is expected to help improve

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PHOTO: STAR

HSC examinations at the Shibpur Government Shaheed Asad College centre in Narsinghdi being videotaped yesterday to identify examinees employing unfair means (left); an invigilator holds copy chits confiscated from an alleged cheat at the centre.

## Over 7,000 expelled on 1st day of HSC exams

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Over 7,000 Higher Secondary Certificate (HSC) examinees were expelled for cheating on the first day of examinations across the country yesterday.

Also expelled were 11 teachers for their alleged connivance in students' cheating during the English First Paper Examination.

This year, as many as 7,16,637 examinees from 6,690 colleges and madrasahs are sitting for the exams at 1,486 centres.

Surprisingly enough, the ten-

dency of cheating remained as high as before despite all efforts by the education ministry, including summary trial court, restriction on the people's movement and introduction of concealed video cameras.

Several sacks of copy chits were recovered from different centres. The board authorities could not implement the special measures for a cheating-free educational environment, as promised on different occasions.

One teacher at the Thakurgaon Salandar Centre was seriously injured, as an expelled student

along with his accomplices hit him on the head with a hammer. Abdus Samad, teacher of sociology at the Goria College, came under attacks on his way back home, as he expelled the student. The teacher now admitted to the Thakurgaon General Hospital was allocated Tk 10,000 for his treatment, said the Rajshahi board officials.

"As a reward for his courage, the board has decided to bear his full medical expenses," a board official said.

State Minister for Education

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## PM undergoes knee surgery at NY hospital

UNB, Dhaka

Prime Minister Khaleda Zia had her knee operated upon yesterday at the Manhattan Hospital for Special Surgery.

"Operation was successful," said PM's Press Secretary Tajul Islam from New York.

The operation took one hour and 40 minutes from 5:30 pm

Bangladesh time (7:30 am NY time).

The prime minister had been

suffering from severe knee pain for a long time.

She is now at rest in the post-

operative care unit. After the operation she also talked to her grandchil-

dren beside her hospital bed.

The prime minister sought "doa"

from the countrymen for early

recovery.

## Aid component dips in next ADP

INAM AHMED

A dwindle in foreign aid will reflect on the next fiscal budget to be placed on June 6 as the finance ministry has almost finalised the annual development programme (ADP) with a 21.35 per cent less project aid from this year's.

According to sources at the ministry, the ADP for the next fiscal is now set at Tk 19,000 crore, some Tk 500 crore up from what was originally envisaged when the budget exercise started. This includes Tk 11,460 crore in local currency and Tk 7540 crore in project aid. This year's project aid component is Tk 9590 crore.

But this would mean more internal resources mobil-

sation, making it even more difficult for the finance minister to make both ends meet, as the revenue collection this year has already dipped dangerously. Till April, collection was 2.50 per cent off the target.

As indications go, the finance ministry's salvage card would be to check tax evasion, and it is planning widespread tax reforms in the next budget. Reducing discretionary power of the tax officials is one of them. Cancelling tax holiday to stop abuse of the system is just another.

More tenacious will be the job of giving support to the agriculture, IT, and small and medium enterprises as Finance Minister M Saifur Rahman has already

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## Dhaka undecided on SOFA

M ANWARUL HAQ

Dhaka is undecided about signing of the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) with Washington, sources said.

Among other facilities, signing of the SOFA would allow entry of US troops "on missions" without passport and visas and without the requirement for declaration of military hardware.

Recently, the US ambassador in Dhaka hinted that Washington is

still interested in signing the SOFA with Bangladesh.

Four years back, Dhaka declined to sign the SOFA.

Sources indicated that a request to sign the SOFA may once be put forward to Dhaka when Foreign Minister M Morshed Khan holds official talks with US Secretary of State Colin Powell on May 20 and later visit the Pentagon.

The recent US move is seen as coming in the backdrop of strengthening anti-terrorism measures by

giving the American military and undercover personnel unrestricted entry into countries.

However, policy officials say that signing of the SOFA by Dhaka will not further simplify US access as the process is already "oversimplified." Military officials arrive carrying personal weapons and receive visas immediately on arrival.

The SOFA, US officials say, will eliminate the requirement for obtaining visas for their military

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