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Peaceful hartal observed

STAFF CORRESPONDENT
Barring a few stray incidents of violence, a half-day hartal in the city yesterday called by the Awami League (AL) passed off peacefully with police cordoning off the party's Bangabandhu Avenue central office from early morning till mid-day.
The city unit of the main opposition party called the 6 am to noon hartal in protest against 'arrest of and torture on' party leaders and workers and in demand for release of all political detainees and checking price hike of essentials.
As police did not allow any pro

Unocal refuses to pay blowout compensation

SHARIER KHAN
Unocal yesterday flatly rejected Petrobangla's compensation claim for the Magurchhara blowout.
In a brief letter, the US oil company has said there is no scope for discussion on the issue since it has already been 'resolved' through the signing of a supplementary agreement for blocks 13 and 14 in late 1998, sources said.
The supplementary agreement allowed Petrobangla five per cent additional share for gas discovered in the blocks.
Petrobangla sources said the compensation issue was never discussed with Unocal before, let alone its settlement.
"It is clearly leading towards a litigation," observed a Petrobangla official, "And this is an issue which Bangladesh must fight for. There seems to be no alternative since it is clear that Unocal would not pay wilfully."
The supplementary agreement was signed eight months after the original

contract with Occidental, which was later bought off by Unocal, was terminated for failing to fulfil minimum work commitment. The five per cent additional share was given to Petrobangla in return for allowing the oil company to work in those blocks even after its non-fulfil of work commitment. As such, the five per cent extra share cannot be considered as compensation for the damage of the Magurchhara gas structure, sources said.
Five years after the Magurchhara explosion, Petrobangla Tuesday sent Unocal its claim of US\$ 685 million for damaging the gas structure having over 245 billion cubic feet of gas.
This is apart from the Tk 612 crore environmental damage claim by the environment ministry, which was also never seriously pursued.
Now that Unocal has rejected the claim, Petrobangla would decide its next course of action in consultation with legal experts and the energy ministry, sources said.

Thugs-thick forestry

NAZRUL ISLAM
Underhand deals and corrupt practices rule over transfers and postings in the forest administration, leading the forest sector to ruins and faltering its administrative activities.
The forest sector, which contributes handsomely to the country's exchequer, is being ruined by an unscrupulous syndicate comprising of officials in both the Ministry of Forest and Environment, and the Forest Department, who through 'illicit deals' manipulate top posts within the two authorities, according to sources in the forest department.
Being informed of such practices, the highest government authorities in a letter on July 1, asked the forest and environment ministry to explain within two days the reasons for retaining the conservators of the Khulna and Chittagong regions despite the expiry of their tenure.
The letter also sought an explanation on the transfer of several rangers in Chittagong -- done contrary to the rules of transfers and postings, and the sending abroad of a forest officer on training just a month ahead of his retirement.
"In the case of transfers and postings, lower level officials supersede the departmental chief, as the minister is accessible to them through the vicious syndicate," an official requesting anonymity said.
"Such ill practices have long prevailed in the forest department, but this time involvement of the very high level is apparent," the official added.
Those who bribe officials to manipulate postings earn back their expenses in multiples by plundering forest resources.
The officials who are awarded the postings permit illegal timber trade and give unauthorised lease of the forest areas while helping illegal traders to smuggle out other forest resources.
Several studies have shown devastating mismanagement and corruption in this sector. The forest is losing its land areas and resources, causing deforestation and leading to a low revenue collection.
A top official at the forest and environment ministry claimed, since the new government assumed power, almost 250 transfers and

Book bungling

MUSTAK HOSSAIN
Govt staff, suppliers plan to siphon off Tk 2 cr
Some government staff and a section of suppliers are planning to siphon off over Tk 2 crore by supplying unnecessary and unfamiliar reading materials to a government-funded project, sources at the Directorate of Education said.
A project styled, 'Establishment of Language Laboratory at Six Divisional Headquarters', last week floated a tender for the supply of laboratory equipment, office equipment and training materials under three separate packages totalling Tk 6 crore.
The total cost of the project was estimated at Tk 9 crore for establishing six language laboratories at six division headquarters to teach English and Arabic languages for pre- and post- intermediate students and service holders to develop them for jobs abroad.
The package three of the tender sought a total of 458 books in English and Arabic, mostly unfamiliar and unnecessary for language learning, ignoring famous and familiar books, experts said.



DEATH IN AMBUSH......a 20-foot deep manhole in front of the Modhumita Cinema Hall at Motijheel in the city has remained uncovered for the last several days.

PSI and tax on newspapers and periodicals lifted

BSS, Dhaka
The government has exempted newspapers and periodicals from mandatory pre-shipment inspection (PSI) and lifted the existing three per cent advance income tax on their import.
A clarification issued yesterday by the National Board of Revenue on imposition of import duty on newspapers and periodicals revealed that considering the importance of newspapers and periodicals the government has withdrawn the existing three per cent advance income tax.

Rife reshuffle rumour worries ministers

STAFF CORRESPONDENT
Continued speculations about a reshuffle of the council of ministers have led to mounting tension among the ministers on the one hand and stagnated normal administrative activities on the other.
There have been strong rumours since Prime Minister Khaleda Zia's return home from the US after her treatment, but none could confirm when it would take place.
"Any reshuffle of the council of ministers, downsizing it or inclusion of new faces in the council entirely depends on the prime minister and only she knows when it will take place," said a top policymaker of the ruling BNP.
He however said there is 'a clear indication' from the prime minister that 'major changes' in the council will take place very soon. The changes have been overdue but the budget session of the parliament delayed it, he added seeking anonymity.
Talking to The Daily Star yesterday, some ministers said the administration is not functioning normally just because of the speculations. These are seriously hampering even routine activities of the ministries while the bureaucrats are not taking the risk of major decisions, apprehending that those might be reversed after the reshuffle.
One of them said changes in the council of ministers are likely next week after the return of Finance Minister M Saifur Rahman from Saudi Arabia. Some other sources however said a reshuffle might take place after the budget session of the House.
Sources said normal activities have been greatly affected in the ministries of Home Affairs, Environment and Forest, Shipping, Water Resources and Education

Printing error Declaration of Natore daily cancelled

ANWAR ALI, Natore
The declaration of 'Dainik Uttarbanga Barta', the only daily newspaper of the district, was cancelled by the deputy commissioner (DC) of Natore because the names of the country's president and prime minister were printed wrong.
In an official order yesterday, Sadar Uddin Ahmed, DC of Natore, cancelled the declaration of the newspaper under section 20(D) of The Printing and Publications (Declaration and Registration) Ordinance (PPO) of 1973.
The newspaper, in its March 26 issue, had printed the name of the country's president as Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed instead of Prof AQM Badruddoza Chowdhury and that of the prime minister as Sheikh Hasina instead of Khaleda Zia.
On March 27 and June 24, DC Sadar Uddin Ahmed and ADC (general) Ratan Kumar Roy issued show cause notices to the newspaper as to why its declaration should not be cancelled due to the wrong printing of names of the head of the state and the government and also due to the fact that the paper was not regularly published and supplied to the DC's office.
In a press conference yesterday evening, editor and publisher of the newspaper advocate Hanif Ali Sheikh strongly protested the cancellation and termed the order illegal.
"We will go to court over cancellation of the declaration as we did not commit any offence under the section 20(D) of the PPO ... and the order was issued intentionally because we published many stories about the irregularities of the present government," Sheikh said.
About the printing of wrong names, Hanif Ali Sheikh, who is also the general secretary of the district Awami League said that the error was unintentional.
"We apologised twice the very next day after admitting our fault which occurred due to a computer related error. We also dismissed the

