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Thailand to cut tariff on 128 items of 6 categories

Khaleda, Shinawatra hold official talks

REZAUL KARIM, From Chiang Mai

Thailand has offered Bangladesh a big trade concession and significantly reduced tariffs on 128 items under six categories.

This announcement of tariff reduction came when Prime Minister Khaleda Zia requested her Thai counterpart to take steps for reducing the existing trade imbalance with Bangladesh.

She made the request, at the beginning of the official talks held yesterday between Bangladesh and Thailand at the Westin Hotel in Chiang Mai.

Khaleda Zia also placed a number of important proposals to the Thai prime minister and sought increased Thai assistance and cooperation for socio-economic development of Bangladesh.

In reply, the Thai PM declared tariff reduction on 128 products of Bangladesh-- from zero to 5 percent. He also assured to reduce the tariffs on more items of Bangladesh soon in the second phase.

Bangladesh Prime Minister Khaleda Zia and Thai Prime Minister Dr Thaksin Shinawatra led their respective delegations in the official talks that lasted over one hour. Prior to the official talks, the two prime ministers had a half an hour tête-à-tête.

Khaleda Zia is now on a three-day official visit to Thailand and will return home tonight.

Briefing the accompanying reporters, Foreign Secretary Shamsheer Mobin Chowdhury termed the visit and yesterday's official talks most fruitful and said a new era of cooperation between the

two countries had begun.

The Foreign Secretary said that the Thai government has offered duty free access of Bangladesh's jute and jute products, leather and leather products, ceramic products and pharmaceutical products.

As per the new announcement, the tariff rate on frozen food and agro-products will be 5 (five) percent.

Speaking at the meeting, the Thai PM said that although Thailand exports its pharmaceutical items, but it would allow duty free entry of Bangladesh products as a gesture of goodwill.

He said Thailand would help Bangladesh to improve the quality of processing frozen foods, vegetable items, fish processing and other agro items so that Bangladesh can

attain export competitiveness in those areas.

"We have achieved a lot from Thailand...this visit of our prime minister is a great diplomatic achievement," said the Bangladesh foreign secretary.

The foreign secretary further said that the Thai PM, while making the

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Prime Minister Khaleda Zia and Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra lead delegations to official talks between Bangladesh and Thailand at the Westin Hotel in Chiang Mai, Thailand, yesterday.



Sangkritik Jote's programme begins at Shaheed Minar

Pattern of recent arrests Erosion of rule of law: Dr Kamal

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The Sammilito Sangkritik Jote (SSJ) inaugurated its scheduled Victory Day programmes at the Central Shaheed Minar yesterday.

Earlier on Thursday, police obstructed the SSJ from setting up a dais on the Central Shaheed Minar premises for its four-day "Victory Day" programmes, saying it needed prior permission from the Dhaka University authorities. The SSJ authorities later obtained the required permission.

Speakers at the inaugural function criticised the government for its alleged violation of human rights, saying that journalist Shahriar Kabir and columnist Muntasir Mamun along with opposition leaders were tortured in police custody in the name of interrogation.

They said law-enforcers under governmental instructions were tormenting opposition leaders, intellectuals, writers and journalists. They severely criticised the government for "patronising collaborators and torturing freedom fighters".

The speakers urged all pro-Liberation War forces to unite against the government's misrule and help establish the rule of law, human rights and a harmonious society.

Now is the time to unite ignoring

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STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Eminent lawyer Dr Kamal Hossain has called it "an erosion of the rule of law" the way the government has recently detained some people without showing any objective basis.

"The pattern of recent arrests reflects arbitrariness of the government and can be perceived as political victimisation," he said pointing to the arrest of some Awami League leaders and critics of the government.

In an interview with The Daily Star at his New Bailey Road residence in the capital yesterday, Dr Kamal said it is of grave concern that the rights of the arrestees were being curtailed by the government's extraordinary orders like detention also without any objective basis.

The detainees were denied constitutional rights to bail and legal counselling, he added.

"This negates the constitutional guarantee that none should be deprived of the liberty provided by the law. Law does not permit arrest on vague allegation or mere assumption or suspicion, which has no reasonable or justifiable objective."

"Impartial application of law is



absolutely essential. If law is applied in a partisan manner, the rule of law is undermined," said the lawyer of international repute when speaking about arrests on suspicion.

He said a sense of insecurity arising from the threat of arbitrary arrests and detention was creating a clear environment of fear.

Dr Kamal, head of the Gono Forum, has noted that the government is doing so, as the judiciary is yet to be separated from the executive.

"The Supreme Court order for the long-cherished separation should be made effective without

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BSF seals border with Rajshahi

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, Rajshahi

The Indian Border Security Forces (BSF) sealed off all the border points with the northern district of Rajshahi, Bangladesh, in the early hours yesterday.

Senior officials of the Bangladesh Rifles (BDR) in Rajshahi quoted their Indian counterparts as having said that the borders were sealed to check illegal entry of people to Indian Territory.

The BSF has also set up two additional camps at Lalgola and Bhagabangola in Indian Territory on the border with Godagatri upazila in Rajshahi sources said.

"They (BSF) asked people of Bhagabangola, Lalgola, Bahampur and Ziagan areas not to move after sunset and banned all types of gathering and movement of

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Judicial probe Justice Khan in Mymensingh

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Mymensingh

Justice Sultan Hossain Khan, chairman of the one-member judicial probe body formed in connection with Saturday's bomb blast incidents in four cinema halls in Mymensingh, arrived at Mymensingh at 6.30pm yesterday. Justice Khan is staying at the Mymensingh Circuit House and has held a meeting with the high officials of police and administration.

He will visit the spots of the bomb blasts and the injured persons admitted at hospitals in Mymensingh. Witnesses of the blasts and members of the public are being asked to furnish their statements relating to the incidents either in person or in writing.

Meanwhile, State Minister for Home Affairs Lutfuzzaman Babar, visited the bomb victims at Mymensingh Medical College Hospital (MMCH) at about 11:00am yesterday on his way to Netrokona.

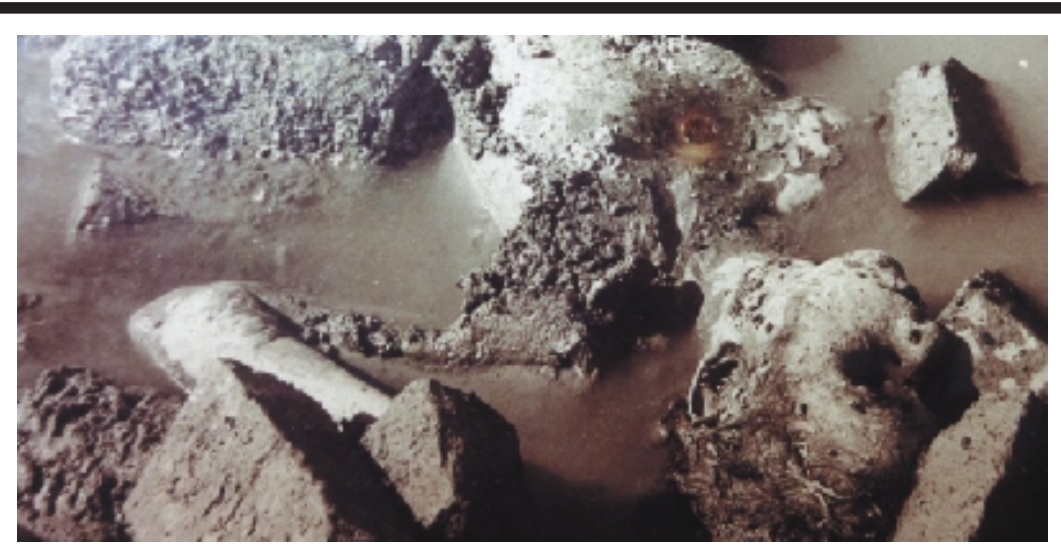
1472 FFs in Barisal not getting allowance

A CORRESPONDENT, Barisal

A total of 1472 poor freedom fighters (FF) of Barisal district have not received any FF allowance for the last six months.

Sources said during the tenure of the previous government, 1568 freedom fighters of the district were given a monthly allowance of Tk 300 each. But the present government has omitted 82 names from the list while 14 of the remaining FFs passed away, leaving a total of 1472 who have not received their allowance since July this year.

Nurul Alam Farid, joint convener of Muktiyoddha Sangsad, Barisal, admitted to the matter. He said the amount of the allowance was increased to Tk 500 per month, but that the finance ministry has failed to distribute the money due to some problem. He however said the allowance would be distributed in January.



This is how the illustrious sons of the soil were made to pay for independence on this day in 1971 at a Rayerbazar killing field.

Rekindling the memory of martyred intellectuals

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The nation observes the 32nd Martyred Intellectuals Day today, recalling the supreme sacrifice of the illustrious sons of the soil to free the motherland and pledging afresh to materialise their dream for a society free of exploitation and injustice.

Being sure of defeat, the

Pakistani occupation army and their collaborators -- Razakar, Al-Badr and Al-Shams -- kidnapped frontline Bengali intellectuals and professionals on December 14, 1971 and killed them to cripple the nation intellectually.

Intellectuals, academics, doctors, engineers, journalists and other eminent personalities were picked up from their residences in

the city as per a list and were massacred at Rayerbazar and other killing fields.

Country's political, cultural and civil-society organisations will reminisce about the great tragedy that took place only two days before the final victory of Bangladesh at the end of a nine-month war.

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Human sea at Tongi

Lakhs of devotees still streaming into the venue as Biswa Ijtema begins

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Biswa Ijtema, the second largest congregation of Muslims after Hajj, began at Tongi yesterday.

The three-day 38th annual Ijtema organised by the Tablig Jamaat formally began on the bank of Turag river with a Khutba (sermon) after the Juma prayer. Tarik Jamil, a cleric from Pakistan delivered the khutba.

The sprawling makeshift pandal on 150 acres of land was filled up with devotees, streaming there since Wednesday. Yesterday, all

roads were leading to the Ijtema venue, about 20 kilometres from the city.

The organisers said the pandal can accommodate about 25 lakh people. They estimate about 40 lakh devotees from home and abroad will take part in the Ijtema this year.

Several lakh devotees arrived from 42 countries till yesterday. Devotees from 30 more countries are yet to arrive, they said.

Police at the Ijtema venue said namaz-e-janjana of one Habibur Rahman, 42, was held there after Juma prayer yesterday. But they

could not confirm whether he died at the Ijtema venue or not. Some sources claimed that Habibur Rahman of Jhikorgacha resided in a nearby area and so the body was taken there for janaja.

On Thursday, one devotee -- Nazimuddin, 60, -- who came from Juniadaha village in Bheramara in Kushtia died at the Ijtema venue.

Fifteen people were admitted to Tongi Hospital yesterday for treatment of diarrhoea, sources said.

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A septuagenarian is helped to the venue for the three-day Biswa Ijtema, the second largest congregation of Muslims after Hajj, which began on the bank of the Turag in Tongi yesterday.

BSS newsman arrested in connection with Reuters report

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The Detective Branch (DB) of police yesterday arrested Enamul Haque Chowdhury, senior staff reporter of the state-run news agency Bangladesh Sangbad Sangstha (BSS), in connection with the filing of a report for Reuters, linking Al-Qaeda elements with the Mymensingh cinema hall bombings.

Plainclothes police arrested Enamul yesterday morning when he went to the DB office and surrendered.

Police and family sources said the detectives earlier raided the residence of Enamul at Sector-4 in the city's Uttara area in the early hours of Friday and took his wife Nahid Enam, along with Golam Mostafa, a relative, to the DB office.

Enamul, also a stringer for Reuters news agency was later sent to the CMM's court with a 10-day remand prayer, but the court granted three days for interrogation.

The Dhaka Metropolitan Police (DMP) in a press release said they have arrested Enamul as his report for an international news agency saying that Al-Qaeda was involved with the Mymensingh bomb attacks "tarnished the country's image internationally and threatened its relations with powerful and friendly countries".

The police press release also claimed that the journalist admitted during the primary interrogation that he had filed the report. His wife and relative were allowed to leave the DB office after signing an undertaking, as their involvement with the matter could not be proved.

The DB press release said that they are interrogating the arrested journalist to elicit more information about the report that tarnished the image of the country internationally.

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A child is having asthma aid to breathe at ease at the asthma treatment centre of the Chest Diseases Hospital at Mohakhali in the city yesterday.

Alarming rise in asthma patients

Dust in the city's air largely blamed

NAIMUL HAQ

The number of asthma patients in the city has almost doubled in the last two years largely because of dust in the air, doctors say.

Most of the patients are poor and go to the country's only public health centre for asthma treatment at Mohakhali. But they often do not get proper treatment and are asked to buy their own drugs, mostly expensive inhalers.

Bronchial asthma attacks all age groups. It is a disease characterised by recurrent attacks of breathlessness and wheezing. In Bangladesh, an estimated 70 lakh people have the disease.

Hundreds of patients queue up for treatment at the lone public asthma treatment centre at the Chest Diseases Hospital at

Mohakhali.

Suchanda Rani Biswas, 41, had had her first asthma attack this winter and could hardly breathe.

However, Rani's condition was quickly controlled as doctors at the centre advised her a combination of drugs to dilate her airways in lungs.

But a few are as lucky as Suchanda. Many do not get healthcare due to shortage of nebuliser machines. Most of the 250 patients who seek treatment at the centre on average every month go back home without any drugs because of short supply.

The Asthma Association of Bangladesh has been treating asthma patients for charity and treated 190 patients in November, who did not get any drugs from the Mohakhali asthma centre.

In October, 248 new patients

were registered with the association. It recorded 205 new patients in July, 192 in August and 199 in September.

Sounding alarm, doctors at the asthma centre said the number of patients has almost doubled this year.

This year, 205 patients were registered with the centre, while the figure was less than 95 two years back.

During winter when asthma attack is more frequent, the number of patients receiving treatment at the centre was less than 150 two years back.

"We are now receiving 30-35 per cent more asthma patients with the acute syndrome," said Dr Adnan Yousuf Choudhury.

Doctors say dust is now the common cause for asthma as evident in new patients. "We are finding

children with severe asthma attacks -- a very unusual phenomenon."

Meanwhile, the hospital has no arrangement to supply inhalers to patients. At the request of the Asthma Association of Bangladesh, a number of pharmaceutical companies regularly supply inhalers to poor patients.

"We are compelled to ask patients to buy their own drugs. But most poor patients cannot afford inhalers which cost Tk 100 to Tk 400 apiece on average," said a nurse.

Asthma cannot be cured but could be controlled. The strongest risk factors for asthma are exposure, especially in infancy, to indoor allergens like domestic mites in bed, carpet and stuffed furniture, cats and cockroaches and a family history of asthma or allergy.