

Zero tariff tops PM's agenda for China trip

RAFIQ HASAN

China is expected to announce its decision on duty- and quota-free access of Bangladesh products during the upcoming visit of Prime Minister Khaleda Zia. Khaleda is scheduled to leave for Beijing on December 23 on a five-day visit.

Dhaka has been pursuing Beijing for duty- and quota-free access of 129 products under 15 categories over the last few months.

Sources in the Ministry of Commerce said a list of 129 products has already been sent to the Prime Minister's Office for inclusion in the Dhaka-Beijing official talks.

The list includes jute and jute goods, leather and leather goods, seafood, frozen shrimps, processed food, jam, jelly, ceramic and melamine wares, and camera accessories.

Earlier, it was handed over to the Chinese delegation at the 10th China-Bangladesh Joint Economic Commission meeting in July.

The list was prepared on the basis of a list of 34 categories of items for zero tariff access presented during Chinese Prime Minister Zhu Rongji's visit in January. Zhu had then assured zero-tariff access for jute and allied products.

After the visit, China also gave 10 to 50 per cent tariff reductions on around 700 items, according to sources.

Also, the JEC meeting discussed duty- and quota-free access of Bangladeshi goods to Chinese markets.

Economic Relations Divisions (ERD) Secretary Anisul Huq Chowdhury led the Bangladesh delegation at the meeting in Beijing.

The Chinese delegation told the meeting they could not allow duty- and quota-free access to Bangladeshi goods under bilateral agreement because other least developed nations would also seek similar facilities.

Instead of bilateral agreement, China assured that they would consider the tariff reduction in light of the Bangkok Agreement, a commerce ministry high official, who

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AI demands independent probe into deaths in army custody

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Amnesty International has urged the government to "initiate an independent investigation and give a credible explanation for the deaths" in army custody since the country-wide clampdown on crime began on October 17.

The human rights watchdog has also expressed concern over arrest and continued detention of journalists, human rights defenders and opposition politicians accused of 'anti-state activity'.

In a press release dated December 17, Amnesty said at least 32 people have died so far due to alleged torture by the army and there are reports of about ten more deaths in suspicious circumstances.

"There are strong and persistent allegations that they were caused by torture in army custody and not - as the authorities claim - 'mainly from heart failure or from injuries the victims caused themselves trying to escape'," the statement said.

Amnesty referred to the case filed

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BELLS OF WINTER



A boatman struggles up an almost dried-up canal of the Buriganga in Kamrangirchar on the outskirts of the capital yesterday. Many rivers like the Buriganga across the country lose navigability during winter largely due to continuous silt build-ups.

Delayed, devious DCC anti-mosquito drive

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

As city dwellers face an 'unprecedented' mosquito menace, the debt-ridden Dhaka City Corporation (DCC) has launched a mosquito eradication drive after about a year using 'ineffective' insecticide and without proper planning', sources said.

Field workers at the Mosquito Eradication Department and zonal offices of the DCC told The Daily Star that the insecticide melathione now being used to kill adult mosqui-

toes has proved 'totally ineffective'.

They mentioned that they have to mix 13 litres of kerosene with one litre of melathione before spraying it with fogging machines. The mixture has 'no effect' on adult mosquitoes whatsoever.

"The drive using melathione is a mere eye wash and it has rather earned the DCC bad name. Field workers who spray it are teased and harassed by city dwellers as it fails to kill the insects," said a senior DCC official requesting anonymity.

The so-called programmes cannot relieve the city dwellers of mosquito menace because the DCC does not have required funds and makes no coordinated efforts to control mosquito. The menace has become 'unprecedented' because all activities to combat it stopped in March this year due to 'lack of funds', the official added.

Mayor Sadek Hossain Khoka was under renewed pressure to r e s u m e

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Bangabandhu murder, jail killing cases SPPs sacked

UNB, Dhaka

Jobs of the Special Public Prosecutors (SPPs) appointed by the last AL government for defending the state in the Bangabandhu murder and jail-killing cases have been terminated.

The solicitor wing of the Ministry of Law, Justice and Parliamentary Affairs issued separate notifications to this effect on December 15.

"There is no justification to retain the appointments of the SPPs in aid to the Chief Special Public Prosecutor Senior Advocate Sirajul Huq as he died recently," said the marching orders.

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PDB in double trouble

Tk 37cr paid in taxes for 'rusted' Russian machinery

SHARIEF KHAN

The Power Development Board (PDB) has been forced to pay Tk 37 crore in tax and duty to release from the Mongla and Chittagong ports 1,400 tonnes of non-guaranteed power plant equipment.

The import of the equipment over 18 months ago was a unilateral decision by a Russian company.

As the equipment has been lying uncovered at the ports for long, many components have visibly rusted and are seemingly unusable.

To make the PDB "swallow" the tools, the power department of the energy ministry formed a five-member committee to inspect and certify the equipment at the Ghorashal Power Plant. Ironically, the committee has no 'mechanical' engineer to judge if the equipment is functional at all.

The PDB in a letter to the power department on November 23 objected to the structure of the committee and requested the energy ministry to include two mechanical engineers in it. But the ministry did not do so yet.

Technopromexport, better known as TPE, imported the equipment without any pre-inspection or government approval early last year for the Ghorashal Power Plants 1 and 2 Rehabilitation Project.

In addition, the company's contract with the PDB, signed on May 31, 2000, was not effective till date, as TPE did not pay up its first tranche.

As a result, the PDB never accepted the equipment. The equipment forcibly dumped by the TPE is valued at US\$11 million.

Under pressure from a political lobby, the PDB in October sought an allocation of Tk 37 crore for release of the 1,400 tonnes of equipment and the government gave it.

In its letter to the power department, the PDB suggested that to verify the genuineness of the TPE equipment, the committee should be able to carry out the following tasks: a. the committee should have a clear idea about the criticality and placement of spare parts, b. it should ensure the parts are used without alteration or modification, c. it should have ideas about the metals in the tools, the technology used, how to ensure quality control etc, and d. it should have the basic idea about the possible damage of the equipment caused by unprotected storage in a hostile and salty environment.

Such technical tasks cannot be done without hands-on experience.

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High-rises tower over Dhanmondi, a city residential area where only six-storey buildings are permitted. The buildings have been raised in gross violation of construction rules.

Rajuk crosses the limit again

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Rajuk has once again allowed construction of a 15-storey building at roads 13 and 14 in Dhanmondi residential area in violation of repeated commitments not to violate building height restriction in the city's residential areas.

Sources said this has been done on the plea that the large stretch of land owned by the Adel family is a freehold property, which has 'nothing to do' with the 'government restriction'. The government allows up to six-storey buildings in Dhanmondi and other residential areas.

The plots in Dhanmondi belong to the Ministry of Housing and Public Works and have been allocated to individuals on 99-year leases.

But during the acquisition of lands in Dhanmondi in the fifties,

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1,700 lawmen to keep rickshaws off Mirpur Road

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Some 1,700 policemen and ansars will be deployed along the eight-kilometre Mirpur Road from Gabtali to Kalabagan in the city this morning to implement ban on all non-mechanised vehicles, sources in the Traffic Department said.

As per the decision, the road will be off-limits to all non-mechanised vehicles from today.

The police will also be on alert to face "any trouble" from rickshawpullers.

Although leaders of rickshaw owners' and pullers' associations have assured the department of a 'trouble-free acceptance', police sources said they still fear protest.

On an average, more than 50,000 rickshaws ply the Mirpur Road.

According to DCC register, there are about 80,000 rickshaws in the city. But in reality the city has about half a million rickshaws, providing easy employment opportunities to millions of people.

Sources at the Traffic Department said that all non-mechanised vehicles would be banned on the main city streets from 6 AM to 10 PM in phases to rid it of

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Carriers of death

7.5pc people carry hepatitis B, often unawares

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

One in every 10 patients admitted to hospitals and clinics in the country suffer from liver diseases and 7.5 per cent of the population are carriers of hepatitis B virus.

The statistics was presented by experts at a symposium on liver diseases at a city hotel yesterday, organised by the Association for Study of the Liver in Bangladesh.

The speakers said liver diseases pose a major problem in the country and the number of trained doctors for their treatment is too insufficient.

Most patients are unaware of such diseases till their condition turns so critical that doctors can do little to help the patients. They further said prevalence of hepatitis B, one of the deadly liver diseases, ranges between 4.4 and 7.8 per cent in an 'otherwise healthy population'.

Referring to a study on the disease, one expert said about 2.3 per cent school girls, 9.7 per cent truck drivers and 5.4 per cent pregnant women suffer from hepatitis B. About 40.5 per cent of those suffering from liver diseases have "chronic condition of the disease which may lead to cancer", he said.

Health and family welfare minister Dr Khandaker Mosharrif Hossain in his inaugural speech said, every year about 150,000 new-born babies are infected with hepatitis B and at least 20,000 die due to 'chronic stage' of the disease.

Professor Mobin Khan, president of the liver study association, said the country has only one hospital, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University Hospital (BSMMUH) with 22 beds for treatment of liver diseases.

He underscored setting up of separate units at all medical college hospitals in the country for treatment of liver diseases.

Prevalence of chronic liver diseases such as chronic hepatitis, cirrhosis and hepatocellular carcinoma ranges from 18 to 56 per cent in different groups of people. The rate of hepatitis C infection is 0.01 to 0.91 per cent among the otherwise 'healthy population.' The infection rate among blood recipients (from commercial blood donors) is 24.8 per cent, according to survey conducted at 83 health centres across the country.

The symposium was also addressed by BSMMUH Vice-chancellor Professor MA Hadi, also president of the Bangladesh Medical Association (BMA) and BMA general secretary Dr AZM Zahid Hossain.