

# Dhaka on thin ground as water table drops

**PINAKI ROY**

The city's groundwater level has dropped 20 metres over the last six years or more than three metres a year, according to a government survey.

"The decline in the water table could lead to contractions in the clay soil plate Dhaka is situated on and eventually subsidence," warned Dr Mollah Afzarul Haque, a geo-morphologist.

Dr Haque is an assistant director (geology) of the irrigation depart-

ment of the Bangladesh Agriculture Development Corporation (BADC), which conducted the survey.

The level went down 0.34 metres or about a foot over the last 29 days of last year, down to 46.24 metres below the surface on December 31 from 45.9 metres on December 2.

The survey finds the decline concentrated mainly to the city centre where concrete coating prevents recharging of the groundwater level from rainwater.

"The city is increasingly being covered with concrete. So rainwater cannot recharge the groundwater level that is being used every year," Dr Haque said.

In November last year, the water level was at 45.54 metres below the surface, down from 45.12 metres in October, according to the Survey and Monitoring Project for the Development of Minor Irrigation.

The water table was on average 42 metres below the surface in 2001, 39 metres in 2000, 33 metres

in 1999, 31 metres in 1998, 29 metres in 1997 and 26 metres in 1996.

The finds of the survey, conducted in the city and other parts of the country, are yet to be made public.

BADC officials say the decline of water table is inversely proportional to the city's population growth.

It was 11.3 metres below the surface in the 1970s and 20 metres in the 1980s, they said quoting a

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## CEC shifts view on UP polls

**STAFF CORRESPONDENT**

Chief Election Commissioner MA Syed has switched his position on the Union Parishad elections and said it would not be wise to evaluate the ongoing polls at this stage.

"It is not our duty to evaluate the elections. Ours is to conduct it in a free and fair manner," Syed told reporters at his office yesterday.

"We will review the polls once they are over."

But on February 3, he termed the violence-smearred elections "more or less a futile exercise". He said his previous remark was based on reports by the press and observers.

The chief election commissioner yesterday reviewed polls reports from observers and the press. So far, 30 people have been killed in election violence.

Syed said he has no authority to cancel the polls as demanded by the Awami League.

The Election Commission has so far held elections to 2,118 Union Parishad out of 4,228. The polls would continue till March 16.

## Dinajpur blasts AL walks out as demand for JS report rejected

**STAFF CORRESPONDENT**

An opposition walkout marked the Jatiya Sangsad session that resumed after Eid vacation yesterday.

The Awami League (AL) staged the walkout, protesting the Chair's disapproval to a proposal for formation of a parliamentary committee to report on the February 13 bomb blasts in Dinajpur.

The House heard a statement by Home Minister Altaf Hossain Chowdhury on the bomb blasts.

Police arrested 22-year-old Badal who was injured in an explosion inside a two-room tin-shed at Gurgola in Dinajpur, the minister told the House.

He also gave details on recovered arms, ammunition and documents including leaflets of the

## Gram Sarkar Bill placed in the JS

**STAFF CORRESPONDENT**

LGRD minister Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan piloted the Gram Sarkar Bill, 2003 in Parliament last night.

It is designed to set up an organisation for development at the grass-roots level through people's participation.

The proposed organisation, to be set up in every ward, would not be an administrative unit as defined in Section 152 (1) of the Constitution, rather it would be a supporting unit of the Union Parishad. The representatives of the organisation, however, would be selected.

The bill has its conceptual origin in the 'village government' introduced by the late President Ziaur Rahman in 1980, and it proposed to repeal the Village Council Act, 1997, which is yet to take effect.

"The aim of the bill is to include people from various segments of society in the country's overall development," Bhuiyan told the House.

Opposition lawmakers opposed the tabling of the bill, while the treasury bench members appreci

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PHOTO: SHAHIDUL ALAM

Bangladeshis carry an anti-war banner, which reads "Peace not war", as they join protesters in a London march on Saturday against US-led plans for a strike on Iraq.

# US gets lonely as peace movement peaks

**AFP, Brussels**

Massive peace demonstrations at the weekend slowed the momentum of the US-led drive for war on Iraq, bolstering diplomatic bids for peaceful alternatives, as Europe grappled with deep divisions over the Baghdad crisis.

Meanwhile, White House National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice yesterday said the United States would soon abandon a diplomatic solution to the crisis, revealing Washington's frustration with resistance to a possible war.

"We are in a diplomatic window, but it cannot last very much longer," she told NBC. "It will have to come to an end pretty soon."

Global anti-war protests on a scale not seen since the Vietnam War, coming after a majority of the

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UN Security Council backed further inspections in the bid to assure Iraq's disarmament, have left Washington increasingly isolated.

NATO, facing one of the most

serious rifts in its 54-year history, yesterday launched fresh talks amid continuing rancour notably between the US and France, which has opposed an accord along with Belgium and Germany.

And more acrimony is expected at an emergency summit here tomorrow of the sharply divided European Union, with the French- and German-led anti-war camp bolstered by the global protests.

Australia and Britain, the only two countries so far to deploy military personnel to the Gulf in support of the US build-up, both saw emphatic demonstrations of popular

resistance to war on Iraq.

More than 400,000 people demonstrated across Australia again on Sunday, after London saw its biggest protest yet, with at least 750,000 filling Hyde Park on Saturday.

Australian Prime Minister John Howard showed no sign Sunday of wavering in his support for US President George W. Bush, saying: "This is not something where you read each opinion poll or you measure the number of people at demonstrations."

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## Advani vows to deport illegal immigrants

**AFP, New Delhi**

Deputy Prime Minister Lal Krishna Advani yesterday pledged that India would deport illegal migrants, as Indian border guards said they foiled an attempt by 200 Bangladeshis to enter the country.

Advani's comments came a day after he met in New Delhi with Bangladeshi Foreign Minister Morshed Khan for talks on the illegal immigration dispute.

Without naming Bangladesh, Advani said illegal migration from a neighbouring country had increased and many of the "foreigners" had acquired valid identification documents.

"They all have to be sent back and it is the responsibility of police in all states to do it honestly, lawfully but firmly," Advani told a police function in New Delhi.

India's borders were "such that infiltration is possible even if security forces are there," said Advani, as quoted by the Press Trust of India.

Rudrapal Singh, deputy inspector general in India's paramilitary Border Security Force, said some 200 Bangladeshis tried to enter India at Sikarpur, about 130 kilometres north of Kolkata, around the same time Khan was wrapping up his visit to New Delhi.

"Local people alerted Indian border guards towards (Saturday) afternoon saying that (a group) of Bangladeshis had gathered near the border," Singh told AFP.

"Indian border guards rushed to the spot and foiled the attempt of the Bangladeshis to cross over the border."

The incident came a week after

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## Service of PDB engr extended on contract

**STAFF CORRESPONDENT**

The government has extended on contract the service of a chief engineer of the Power Development Board (PDB) for a year and initiated a process to extend the service of its Member, Generation, said sources.

This is for the first time the government has introduced contract service in the PDB.

The Chief Engineer, Aziruddin Ahmed, serving as the project director of Barapukuria 250 MW Power scheme, was given one-year contract service last month. He was due to go on Leave Preparatory to Retirement (LPR) from January 31.

The authorities are also processing a one-year contract service order for Dr. MAK Azad who is serving as Member, Generation, of the power board. He is due to go on LPR from tomorrow.

The government justified these contract services saying that these officials were "irreplaceable" as they had extensive experience.

A PDB source said the move actually came from a 'powerful' mid-level official at the Prime Minister's Office (PMO). The official and some of his colleagues at the PMO have been asserting undue influence in promotion and contractual appointments in the civil service. Now they have extended their influence to PDB, the source alleged.

Some policymakers and bureaucrats told The Daily Star that they were very much aware of the excessive interference and influence of one of the assistant private secretaries (APS) to the PM.

They further admitted that a section of officials at the PMO were involved in brokering appointments, transfers and postings in exchange of various benefits.

## JSD activist murdered in Kushtia

**OUR CORRESPONDENT, Kushtia**

An activist of the Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal (JSD) was murdered allegedly by the cadres of outlawed Biplobi Communist Party (BCP) at village Padmanagar in Kushtia sadar upazila on Saturday night.

Police said BCP cadres picked up Tayebuddin Mondal, 45, son of Sihabuddin Mondal from his house at gunpoint at about 10 pm.

They took Tayeb to Chapaigachi beel (waterbody) and stabbed him. Tayeb died on the spot.

On information, Police recovered the body and sent it to Kushtia hospital morgue for autopsy.

A case was filed with Kushtia Police Station.

# The poor bear the brunt of NGO fund blockage

**NAZRUL ISLAM**

Over six million people have been affected by the blocking of foreign grants worth Tk 370 crore by the NGO Affairs Bureau, sources in the non-government organisations said.

Designed to eliminate poverty and build social capital in Bangladesh, international donors sanctioned the funds for different projects of five non-government organisations.

Allegations of fund misuse by those organisations prompted the government to investigate the matter. But as the probe lingers, the

projects have failed to attain their objectives of poverty alleviation and women's empowerment.

Development experts said the government's decision to block funds went against its own policy of poverty alleviation and employment generation.

"The government can take legal recourse if it finds any proof of fund misuse, but it cannot hold back grants," Qazi Faruque Ahmed, chairman of the Association of Development Agencies in Bangladesh (ADAB), told The Daily Star.

He said donors would not sit idle with their money. "They could chan-

nel funds to some other poor countries if it was not utilised in Bangladesh."

Some 0.7 million children are deprived of their basic education as funds for a five-year project have been blocked. Proshika Manobik Unnayan Kendra undertook the project. Some 600 small NGOs were implementing the project.

Qazi Faruque, also president of Proshika, said the number might be doubled in the next two years if the government sticks to its position and blocks the Tk 324 crore project funds.

It might cause a rise in the coun

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# Kiwis fly on Fleming

**AFP, Johannesburg**

New Zealand captain Stephen Fleming hit a masterly century as his team pulled off an improbable nine-wicket win against South Africa in their World Cup match at Wanderers Sunday.

South Africa seemed to have made a match-winning total after a spectacular innings of 143 by opening batsman Herschelle Gibbs took them to a massive total of 306 for six.

But Fleming made a magnificent, career-best 134 not out off 132 balls as New Zealand reached a rain-reduced target of 226 in 39 overs with 13 balls to spare.

The Kiwi triumph was set up by Fleming in partnerships of 89 with Craig McMillan (25) and an unbeaten 140 with Nathan Astle (54 not out) which kept them the score moving so quickly throughout the innings that two rain breaks did not hinder them.

After the second break, New Zealand needed only 44 off 51 balls to complete their triumph.

The defeat was a bitter blow for hosts and second favourites South Africa, who are in danger of failing to qualify for the Super Six stage after previously losing to the West Indies.

South Africa will have to dispose of minnows Bangladesh and Canada, then beat Sri Lanka in Durban on March 3 to have a chance of getting through to the next stage.

South Africa's bowling, expected to be one of their strong points, was again disappointing with veteran fast bowler Allan Donald conceding 52 runs in 5.5 overs, although he took the only wicket when he had McMillan caught behind.

South Africa paid dearly for a missed chance when Fleming on 53 edged Jacques Kallis and wicketkeeper Mark Boucher put down a routine chest-height offering to his right.

They were also aggrieved when umpire Steve Bucknor failed to give Nathan Astle out for 19 when the batsman appeared to edge a catch to Boucher off South African captain Shaun Pollock.

Gibbs hit 143 off 141 balls as South Africa piled on the runs after winning the toss on a good batting pitch.

Gibbs had some luck early on, particularly against the lively swing

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PHOTO: AFP

New Zealand captain Stephen Fleming (R) rejoices after completing his century against South Africa in yesterday's crucial World Cup match at the Wanderers Stadium in Johannesburg.

## Confounded coach

**AL-AMIN, from Benoni**

Bangladesh coach Mohsin Kamal yesterday said he would talk about his team's debacle in the first two games after he reached Dhaka at the end of the World Cup.

"I do not want to talk about what went wrong in the games against Canada and Sri Lanka," the former Pakistan Test cricketer said. "I also

do not want to say anything against the players."

Kamal, however, admitted that things were getting worse with every game although the team had a reasonable build-up to the World Cup, that featured win against a South African provincial team.

"It is true that things are not going the way I expected. But I still

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