

High Court asks govt to explain judges' non-appointment

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

A larger bench of the High Court Division yesterday issued a rule on the government asking it to explain why the non-appointment of additional judges should not be declared illegal.

The bench also asked it to clarify within six weeks why it should not be directed to confirm the additional judges "in accordance with

the recommendation, if any, of the chief justice".

The ruling followed the hearing of three writ petitions by as many former additional judges -- Md Shamsul Huda, Faruque Ahmed and Hasan Foyez Siddique. They were not given confirmation of service recently.

Two lawyers -- Idrisur Rahman and Farid Ahmed -- separately filed similar writs.

Last month, the petitions were submitted in quick succession to two Division Benches, each comprising two judges. When both benches felt embarrassed to hear the writs, the petitions were submitted to a third bench.

The bench forwarded the petitions to the chief justice for a decision on April 19.

On April 20, the chief justice

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Dhaka for UN to have central role in Iraq

UNB, DHAKA

Bangladesh would like the UN to have a central role in Iraq and the hopes and aspirations of Iraqis reflected in any matters of the war-ravaged country despite the Anglo-American plan to divide the country into three sectors. Foreign Secretary Shamsur Mobin Chowdhury said yesterday.

"Our position is clear... The UN must have the central role and wishes of the people of Iraq must be taken into consideration. Sovereignty and integrity of Iraq and its oil resources must be controlled by the Iraqis," he said.

Talking to reporters at his office on the latest development in Iraq, he

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Meet with donors to dwell on major reform agenda

Salvos expected on human rights issues; fund commitment to rest on manpower cut and NCB reforms

REJAUL KARIM BYRON

The focus of the Bangladesh Development Forum (BDF) meeting slated for May 17-18 will fall on availing anti-poverty loans and the government will have to commit time-bound reform measures to convince the donors.

If everything goes well, \$1.9

billion may be available under the interim poverty reduction strategy paper (IPRSP) -- \$600 million from the International Monetary Fund (IMF), \$300 million from the World Bank (WB) and the rest from the individual donor countries. The IMF and the WB may increase their contribution by another \$200 million depending on the outcome

of negotiations.

This is the second time that the BDF meeting is going to be held in Dhaka, the first being in 1997.

Typical issues like macroeconomic situation, corruption, law and order, formation of an independent human rights commission and social safety net will be discussed under the IPRSP.

So far, the government is in a comfortable position regarding the macroeconomic situation. However, it will have to sweat it out on the other issues. Specially, the European Union and the UNDP are likely to come down heavily on the human rights situation.

The IMF's major condition is to

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PHOTO: AFP

Boatmen wait on the bank of the Buriganga river littered with garbage yesterday. A cruise on the river is no longer a pleasant experience, as the air reeks of foul smells from massive pollution.

Four commit suicide in Rajshahi

BSS, Rajshahi

Four people, three of them housewives, drank poison in apparent suicide attempts and died at Rajshahi Medical College Hospital (RMCH) Sunday and Saturday, police and hospital sources said.

They said Pamela Begum, 30, wife of Abu Bakar of Beshpara village in Durgapur upazila in Rajshahi, took poison. She was rushed to the RMCH where she died yesterday.

The motive for the 'apparent suicide' could not be known immediately.

Another housewife, Sharifa Khatun, 27, wife of Badsha Mian of Borobangram village in Paba upazila, died at the hospital on Saturday night.

She drank poison following a family feud.

Fancy, 22, of Berabari village in Mohanpur upazila of the district took poison over a spat with her husband Abdul Hakim. She died at RMCH on Saturday night.

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Skinny food scheme eats up 2,000 jobs

REAZ AHMAD

Drastic squeezing of public food distribution system (PFDS) from July 1 has left at least 2,000 jobs under the food ministry on the line.

The ministry's food directorate will be running on 6,500 staffers, down from 8,500, after full replacement of food with cash in food for work (FFW) and food for education (FFE) programmes, two components of PFDS, according to a preliminary estimate.

The two programmes had drawn the biggest amount of grains. But the government replaced the total amount of grains under the FFE and the FFW's half the amount with cash.

The run of the programmes in the 2003-04 fiscal by cash instead of food makes jobs of many food officials, involved in food storage, supply and distribution, redun-

dant, say officials.

The issue was discussed at a pre-budget meeting between the finance ministry and the food ministry late last month. However, the food ministry has not yet formed any committee on workforce rationalisation.

The food ministry has 8,500 officials and employees on its payroll against sanctioned posts of 13,000. A further cut in jobs will lead to closure of some food warehouses and thana-level food offices, says an official.

Official statistics show the food ministry has 621 local storage depots, 13 central storage depots and five silos -- constructed between the 1940s and the 1980s -- with a storage capacity of 18 lakh metric tons (MT).

Officials at the warehouse-level apart, hundreds of food officials and employees are posted to the six

divisions, 64 districts and 640 upazilas.

Against the 18 lakh MT storage capacity, the government kept a minimum of 10 lakh MT as food reserve security. With the FFE turning into a cash-based programme last year, the government trimmed the minimum food reserve to 8.5 lakh MT.

The new move for the 2003-04 fiscal will threaten a new low in food security, says the official. In the 2001-02 fiscal, the government released 5.15 lakh MT of rice and wheat for the FFW, but the amount was slashed to 1.63 lakh MT in the first 10 months of the 2002-03 fiscal, as much of the work has been carried out on cash.

The government allocated 2.1 lakh MT of rice and wheat for the FFE in 2001-02, but the programme did not get any grains in 2002-03.

Donors partially suspend funding as health reforms stall

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The World Bank (WB) and its partner donors will suspend part of their joint support for the health and population sector programme (HPSP).

However, they will continue financing the purchase of essential commodities like contraceptives, drugs and vaccines, says a press release.

The WB yesterday announced the suspension following the government's failure to present a plan to complete agreed reforms, or an alternative reform agenda and plan of action.

The government's commitment to a plan was due by April 30 and the suspension will be lifted as soon as it is made.

In a letter dated March 30, 2003, the donor financiers urged the government to take immediate remedial measures to avoid the suspension of nearly US\$65 million intended to improve health services.

As such action was not taken on schedule, disbursements for the WB's International Development Association Credit for the HPSP and the co-financing trust funds have been suspended, except essential commodities and payments for contracts on special commercial bank commitments signed prior to the suspension.

The government adopted the five-year HPSP in 1998 with support

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Barisal interns continue with strike

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Barisal

Strike of the interns at the Sher-e-Bangla Medical College Hospital of Barisal went into the second day yesterday, much to the sufferings of patients.

The apprentice doctors, who enforced indefinite strike to realise their arrears of 3-month's salary, yesterday added two more demands -- restriction on outsiders to enter the campus and assurance of complete security for them.

They staged a sit-in in front of the hospital director's office from 11 am to 1 pm. The hospital authority sat with the agitating interns yesterday and assured them of fulfil their demands. But the interns decided to go on with their strike until those are met.

Six accused in SI Altaf murder case

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, Khulna

Chargesheet of Sub Inspector (SI) Altaf Hossain murder case was submitted to the Bagerhat court yesterday.

Six people have been accused of murdering SI Altaf Hossain of Fakirhat thana on the night of July 17 last year.

Two of the accused -- PBCP (Purbo Banglar Communist Party) cadres Khalil and Zahid -- are now in Bagerhat Jail while four others are absconding.

The SI was gunned down while he along with three constables of Chulka outpost was on patrol duty.

A case was recorded with Fakirhat thana in this connection. Officer-in-charge of Bagerhat Sadar Thana Ishaque Ali Dukhu Mia investigated the case.

Power-clipped Petrobangla

Empowerment of Hydrocarbon Unit leads to discontentment, duplicity of work

SHARIER KHAN

The energy ministry is virtually converting its Hydrocarbon Unit into a parallel of Petrobangla -- giving rise to duplication of work, and discontent among Petrobangla officials.

Created in 1998 as a donor-funded one-year project and a technical arm of the energy ministry, the Hydrocarbon Unit has now been given a much greater role than envisioned in the original plan.

In February, the energy ministry decided that the unit would have its say in eight major areas: negotiating a production sharing contract (PSC), approval of PSCs, monitoring activities of oil companies under a PSC, undertaking upstream regulatory functions, formulating policies concerning

exploration and PSCs, oil and gas resource assessment, data management and production and depletion forecasting.

In these eight areas -- which had so far been handled by Petrobangla on behalf of the government -- Petrobangla will have no say in approving PSCs, formulating policies concerning exploration and PSCs, and in production and depletion forecasting.

Moreover, Petrobangla and oil companies would have to provide the Hydrocarbon Unit all sorts of data and reports for resource assessment. Petrobangla would also provide data to assist the Hydrocarbon Unit in conducting its upstream regulatory functions.

Such assignments to the Unit, according to Petrobangla sources, contradicted the laws of the land. They argue that Petrobangla has

been given the responsibilities to handle all minerals including gas and oil and other natural resources underneath any land, territorial waters and continental shelf of Bangladesh under Article 143 of the Constitution and the Bangladesh Petroleum Act, 1974.

The Hydrocarbon Unit was in fact created to assist the energy ministry in analysing some aspects of the gas sector including the PSC and monitoring the activities in the sector.

In 1999, when the government undertook a project called "Strengthening of the Hydrocarbon Unit," Petrobangla had objected to its goals. A Petrobangla committee terming the Unit's certain tasks as "unnecessary duplication, redundancy and wastage" had been say

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PHOTO: STAR

Road digging is always on in Dhaka, come rain or shine, while people suffer. Workers have been digging the only road through Laxmi Bazar in Old Dhaka for nearly two months. Locals have no option but threading their way along the edge of the road.

2 outlaws killed in firefight with cops

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Kushtia

Two armed cadres of the outlawed Purbo Banglar Communist Party (PBCP) were killed and 15 others injured in a gunfight with police at village Khalisa Kundi in Daulatpur upazila in the district on Saturday evening.

The dead have been identified as Abdur Rashid, 35, of village Shirampur in Mirpur upazila in Kushtia and Kurban Ali, 30, of Khalisa Kundi.

According to police, some PBCP cadres abducted one Helal, 14, son of Mustafa Kamal of Mirpur Friday morning and demanded Tk 1 lakh in ransom.

The abductors also said the money was to be brought to the Khalisa Kundi village.

When the victim's family informed the police, they conducted a raid at the village. During the crossfire between the miscreants and the police, two cadres died. The others, however, managed to escape.

Later police recovered two rifles, two shutter guns, one air gun, five bullets and some other weapons.

The bodies were sent to Kushtia General Hospital for autopsy.

Vajpayee 'won't rush' for talks

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee has sent a reply to his Pakistan counterpart Mir Zafarullah Khan Jamali's formal letter on Saturday inviting him to visit Islamabad.

Vajpayee's reply Saturday night signalled India is not rushing into talks with Jamali immediately.

The Indian prime minister in his letter told Jamali that careful preparation must precede a summit-level dialogue between the two countries. Vajpayee also stressed that a conducive atmosphere for dialogue required an end to cross-border terrorism and dismantling of terrorist infrastructure.

Regarding Jamali's invitation to Vajpayee to visit Pakistan, the Indian prime minister had told parliament of his telephonic talk

with the Pakistan premier last Monday. "Pakistan's prime minister has invited me. I did not accept it. I don't want to say anything further."

Apparently, Vajpayee has neither accepted nor rejected the invitation from Jamali.

According to highly-placed sources, India was willing to make official-level contact with Pakistan on talks but an interaction at the highest level was right now out of the view. India, they said, would prefer to go in a cautious and step-by-step manner.

Within hours of receiving Jamali's formal letter, Vajpayee wrote back reiterating India's commitment to improving ties with Pakistan and hoped Islamabad would respond positively to his announcement of his decision to send back the Indian high commissioner to Pakistan

capital and reviving air links on reciprocal basis.

The Indian premier pointed out that following his telephonic talk with Jamali, he had announced in parliament that India would appoint a new high commissioner to Islamabad and resume civil aviation links with Pakistan.

Reciprocating Delhi's gesture, Pakistan also decided to resume full diplomatic ties with India.

"A decision was taken in the foreign office on Saturday to restore diplomatic ties at high commissioner (ambassador) level," a government spokesman told a news agency in Islamabad yesterday.

He said a formal announcement would be made early this week.

Jamali summoned ruling and opposition parties to devise a joint strategy for a possible dialogue

with arch-rival India, he told a rally in Pakistan.

Meanwhile, analysts in Delhi have noted Pakistan Foreign Minister Khurshid Karuri's remark in an interview to BBC that his country was ready to discuss trade and other bilateral issues with India ahead of the Kashmir issue.

Kasuri is also reported to have said his country is willing to talk to India on a gas pipeline in which Pakistan, Afghanistan, Turkmenistan and Iran are already involved. In a bid to assure India, he said Pakistan would give its own guarantee and international guarantee for the safety of these pipelines.

India has so far had strong reservations about any overland

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