

FTA talks

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 what are we going to negotiate about? This has to be a starting point of negotiation. Otherwise, negotiations will not be useful," the commerce minister observed, indicating a tough stance of Bangladesh on having a square deal in bilateral trade with India.

Khosru said he would like to see India allow Bangladesh's 118 items duty-free market access as well as remove existing non-tariff restrictions that virtually blocked Bangladesh's exports like cement, CI sheets and lead-acid batteries to Indian market.

"We have to have the right condition to go on FTA... We would like to have these things resolved before the FTA negotiation. If not, we'll have to wait and see," he told the OCAB members.

As one example of what he calls early harvests, the commerce minister said Bangladesh would like to see India allow entry of some 100,000 tonnes of cement from Bangladesh.

"No measures have so far been taken from their part to reduce the trade gap," he told the journalists representing foreign media, on a note of disappointment over repeated road blocks to Bangladesh's exports to northeastern Indian states.

The minister appreciated the concept of the FTA, but, at the same time, stressed the need for effective measures to reduce the trade gap.

"We're, of course, looking forward to this," he said, relating the importance of FTA to trade. "Trade, trade and trade," he said, sequencing from first to third priorities with regard to the FTA. The minister in charge of trade would not like the other issues to be interpolated into the FTA negotiations.

OCAB President Golam Tahaboor chaired the briefing at the National Press Club while General Secretary Shamim Ahmed gave vote of thanks.

Asked if Bangladesh would go for countermeasures to retaliate India's non-tariff restrictions on Bangladeshi goods, the minister said, "If our trade partners follow the protectionist line, we'll have to follow the global practice and retaliate."

In an oblique reference to trade war on steel and banana between USA and EU, Khosru said there is always some retaliation in the global trade practice. However, he said, "Bangladesh is a very liberal country -- we are a reformist government and we will go by global changes."

The minister said India being the larger economy would be more benefited through allowing exports from Bangladesh, as USA did with Mexico. In their free trading arrangement, Mexico benefited enormously but USA, at the same time, derived higher yields from the smaller partner.

Asked if export of natural gas would be considered a way of reducing trade gap with India, he categorically said gas is not an

Runa murder HC upholds lower court's verdict

BSS, Dhaka

The High Court yesterday upheld the trial court's verdict in the sensational Rubina Akhter Runa murder case.

Rubina Akhter, a housewife, was killed on May 29, 1998 at her Shantinagar residence in the city. After the trial, Additional Metropolitan Sessions Judge Hrishikesh Saha sentenced Rubina's maid Sharifa and her friend Abdus Samad Azad alias Samad to death on October 31, 2002. Two other accused -- Arif and Emdadul Haque -- were sentenced to life imprisonment.

The case came to the High Court as death reference and appeal. After hearing, a division bench comprising Justice AK Badrul Haque and Syed Mahmud Hossain delivered the verdict.

4 Saddam allies

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 damage. Its roof was staved in, apparently by a missile.

US forces have announced the capture of 34 of the 55 Iraqis on a most-wanted list of members of Saddam's regime, but Saddam and his sons haven't been found.

US officials say Saddam is probably still alive and hiding somewhere in Iraq. Audio tapes said to have been made by the deposed leader have been given to Arab television networks, exhorting Iraqis to fight occupying US and British troops.

The death of the 39th US soldier to be killed by hostile fire since President Bush declared the war over on May 1 highlighted the continued pressure his forces are under. Bush said on Monday he would welcome military help from abroad.

But allies like France, Germany and Russia, which hotly opposed the US and British invasion, want a UN-mandated force before getting involved in a messy situation which they had warned Washington could be the result of going to war.

Iraq is on the agenda for yesterday's Security Council meeting where three delegates from Iraq's new Governing Council will ask the United Nations to recognise the US-

industrial product and it has nothing to do with bridging the trade gap.

In reply to another question whether transit or transshipment is in any way linked with trade negotiations, Khosru readily retorted that the matter is in no way linked with trade talks.

About Indo-Bangladesh border trade, he rejected the idea as redundant when the two countries are about to initiate talks on FTA.

About signing of the Trade and Investment Framework Agreement (TIFA) with the United States, he said the cabinet had approved the Agreement to deal with bilateral trade and investment issues.

On the proposed US Bill for signing trade accord with 18 Muslim countries including Bangladesh, the minister said a Bill was introduced in the Senate. "We will try to negotiate it in our own way," he said, adding that the question of recognising Israel is political that needs to be settled politically.

Regarding Accounts Trade Agreement, he said Bangladesh had started discussion with Thailand and would sign an MOU (Memorandum of Understanding) with Myanmar soon under the present government's Look East policy, which he said is "paying off."

The minister said Bangladeshi products are enjoying duty-free access to Canada, Australia, Norway, New Zealand, Japan, and limited access into the Chinese market. Bangladesh's export to Canada has increased to some extent following the duty-free access. Export to China would also increase as Chinese economy is growing fast.

In reply to a question, he said Bangladesh is trying to widen her export basket by emphasizing newer items including light engineering products. During the current fiscal, the country will export 2,00,000 bicycles to EU market -- and the figure is expected to double in the next financial year.

The commerce minister said the government is trying to increase negotiating capacity of all its trade departments as well as remove supply-side constraints to cope with the changing global trade scenario featured by free competition.

Blair under fire

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 ished none has been found.

The failure to find weapons has already dented Blair's popularity and undermined his government's credibility -- several ministers have quit since the war saying Blair misled them over the cease-fire action.

An ICM poll in the Guardian newspaper on Tuesday showed public trust in Blair -- once one of the most popular premiers in British history -- slumped by 12 points in the past month to 39 per cent.

It also showed Blair's personal approval rating had dropped to minus 17, down from plus seven on the so-called "Baghdad Bounce" immediately after the war.

But despite the fallout, Blair declared he had no regrets about joining Washington in the war.

"It was the right thing to do," he told a group of Chinese students during a visit to Tsinghua University in Beijing earlier on Tuesday. "I don't regret it. I've no doubt at all that Iraq was trying to develop these weapons."

Joint forces

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 The joint forces continued to raid strongholds of the outlawed parties -- PBCP, NBCP, BCP and newly floated Janajuddha Party -- in Rupsha, Dumuria and Terokhada upazila, said to be infested by activists of these organisations. However, the drive is yet to make any headway.

Meanwhile, ansar platoon commander Abdus Salam, who had fled with PBCP men after looting 20 rifles and 600 bullets from Daulatpur Jute Mills, was nabbed from Mohishaguni village of Rupsha upazila on Monday.

In Bagerhat, none was arrested under the joint drive till 4 pm yesterday.

Syria brushes off Bush 'terrorism' charges

REUTERS, Damascus

Syria yesterday dismissed President Bush's accusation that it was backing "terrorists" and insisted it was helping fight global terror.

"These (accusations) are not new and we in Syria are used to these statements and have no desire to respond to them because they are part of continuing pressure, new and old," Syrian foreign ministry spokeswoman Bouthaina Shaaban said.

She was speaking a day after Bush accused Syria and Iran of harbouring and assisting unspecified "terrorists." The U.S. president said any state doing this would be held accountable.

Syria is on a US list of states sponsoring "terrorism" for its backing of Lebanon's Hizbollah guerrillas and Palestinian groups, which Damascus says have a right to resist Israel.

The United States has acknowledged that Syria furnished it with intelligence on the al Qaeda network, blamed for the September 11, 2001 attacks on US cities.

Syria cites that cooperation and its campaign against its own militants in the 1990s as proof of its anti-terror credentials.

"The Americans know better than others what Syria's position on terrorism is, and how it cooperated in the fight against global terrorism," Shaaban told a briefing in Damascus.

Abducted boy

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 His father filed a general diary with the Shyampur Police Station, accusing five local youths. They include Soheb, Shahin, Yusuf and Sumon.

Police picked up and interrogated one Ramzan alias Jamai Ramzan, caretaker of the residence of Shobeb's brother-in-law Shahjahan. Ramzan said Mishel's body was dumped under water hyacinth in a ditch near Japanese Market at Rasulbagh, police claimed.

Police suspect the boy was strangled two or three days after his abduction.

Khasia villages

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 of the indigenous people on the way to the Khasia village found Shushila Sangma, 45, and her 12-year-old son Rupok coming out of a roadside bush on July 22. They took shelter in the bush after the grabbers intimidated them into leaving home.

Rowshon Ara Begum, Moulvibazar superintendent of police, said she only knew the Khasia people filed a case and claimed to have instructed the officials concerned to take action against the grabbers. "I don't know anything about the abduction," she said.

Sanjeeb Drong, general secretary of Bangladesh Indigenous Peoples Forum, told The Daily Star that the hoodlums took advantage of the laid-back attitude of the local administration. "Law enforcers should take care of the matter seriously," he said.

Khasia leaders Andrew Sholomar, Anil Young Yang and Phila Pothmi said the number of Khasia families in Sylhet, Moulvibazar, Sunamganj and Habiganj came down to 90 from 120 in the years before independence.

Johanal Khisa, former president of the Khasia Welfare Society, said the Khasia people in neighbouring Bairagi village appointed Lal Miaah to protect the villagers from toll takers.

"Appointment of a person from other religion as a guard in a Khasia village is unusual," he said.

Electricity has reached only seven of the 90 Khasia villages, home to 25,000 people. Only four villages have government primary schools, but none of them has healthcare service.

40,000 job cuts

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 the World Bank James D Wolfensohn on May 17 gave assurance that more people will be reduced from the Trading Corporation of Bangladesh, Bangladesh Agriculture Development Corporation and Bangladesh Shipping Corporation.

"The government has passed a revised privatisation policy signalling its commitment to reforms. All SoEs have been put on hard budget constraints and a well-designed performance contract will soon be in operation with appropriate system of rewards," Saifur wrote Wolfensohn.

Mentioning that 100 SoEs have been identified for privatisation, he further wrote: "SoEs identified for privatisation, if no buyers are found, would be closed down."

If the government can keep on track its divestment programme, it stands to get an additional \$350 million in development support credit. In addition, another \$180 million waits for reforming the nationalised commercial banks and capacity building of the Privatisation Commission and the Board of Investment.

Last fiscal, 40,633 staff were retrenched from 22 SoEs at a cost of Tk 718 crore.



PHOTO AFP

Liberian soldiers yesterday advance on rebel troops fighting to keep control of the old bridge in the waterfront port zone which gives access to Monrovia. At least 19 civilians were killed and many combatants were killed or wounded in heavy fighting between government and rebel forces.

Quake kills 15 in China

REUTERS, Beijing

An earthquake measuring 6.2 on the Richter scale has rocked southwest China, killing 15 people, injuring nearly 400 and leaving thousands homeless, officials and state media said yesterday.

The tremor late on Monday in a mountainous part of Yunnan province toppled 18,000 homes, damaged 328,000 others and affected around one million people, the official Xinhua news agency said.

But one official at the relief headquarters in Dayao county, the epicenter of the quake, said only around 5,000 homes had collapsed. She and another official said 46 of the injured were in serious condition.

"We are still counting the num-

ber of casualties," said the relief official, who gave only her surname, Shi. "It is likely to increase because there are still some people trapped in collapsed houses." The quake struck at 11:16pm on Monday in the area populated mostly by ethnic minorities, around 100 miles west of Kunming.

"Lots of houses fell down and those people were killed after the houses collapsed," said another Dayao relief official.

"Some villages are cut off from communications, and we have to send people down there to investigate losses," he said. Provincial authorities had transported 1,100 tents, 100 tonnes of food and a total of 7,000 quilts and clothing items to disaster victims, Xinhua said. It estimated direct losses from the quake \$75 million.

Barapukuria

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 dollars a ton," said a Petrobangla official.

The Petrobangla's cost included repayment of loan, overhead costs, VAT and other expenses.

Mosharrif Hossain said the CMC did not agree to reduce its production cost from around 30 dollars and that was the reason the government had to go for international tender.

Another reason the CMC could not be awarded the contract was that the Chinese company refused to accept all conditions of the turnkey contract.

"The CMC wanted to leave the risk factor on us," said a Petrobangla official.

He said according to the government tender, the control of purchasing consumable spares would be with Petrobangla. "The operating company will give the list of such purchases and we'll buy."

The one-million-ton per annum Barapukuria Coal Mine, country's first underground coal mine, is expected to go into commercial production in February next year. The best international bidder will be awarded an operational and management contract for six years.

One task of the selected international mining company would also be to train up the local officials.

"Our (local) officials should have been trained up already. Many have been trained up, but unfortunately, they didn't stay in Barapukuria and got transferred," said the state minister for energy.

He said he would ask for a list of such trained officials and take necessary action to ensure that "right people work in the right places."

The minister said Bangladesh coal, which is environment-friendly because of no ash and sulphur content, can open up new possibilities. "The entire northern region can be electrified by coal (by setting up thermal power stations)."

There are also offers for coal mines in Fulbari and Khalaspir, he added.

Meanwhile, the minister said that an Australian company has shown interest to extract titanium from Cox's Bazar sea beach. The company officials will visit Dhaka next week.

"There were some complexities over environmental issues for titanium extraction. But environmental clearance has been obtained," he said.

The Australian company is likely to form a joint venture with local participation.

Star, Alo editors

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 Affairs Advisor Salauddin Quader Chowdhury, MP, filed the defamation case with the Chief Metropolitan Magistrate's Court, Dhaka, on June 11 accusing AL General Secretary Abdul Jalil of making defamatory comments about him in a letter and the two editors of publishing the letter on June 3.

Judgement in Kamal murder case July 31

COURT CORRESPONDENT

Judgement in the Kamal murder case will be given on July 31.

Judge Sirajul Islam of the First Additional Metropolitan Sessions Court, Dhaka, fixed the date on completion of arguments from both sides.

Earlier, the court had recorded statements of 21 out of 22 prosecution witnesses.

The court framed charges against the accused on June 21, 2001. The trial of the case began on August 5, the same year.

Mohammad Kamal Hossain, 30, senior vice-president of Kotwali thana unit of Awami League, was gunned down by a gang of assailants led by Zobyed Mohammad Adel, son of former deputy mayor of the Dhaka City Corporation (DCC). Jahangir Mohammed Adel on August 15, 2000, when he (Kamal) protested the hoisting of Pakistan national flag atop the residence of Jahangir Mohammed Adel on August 14, the Independence Day of Pakistan.

Victim's brother Mohammad Nazir Hossain filed a murder case with Kotwali Police Station the following day, accusing Jahangir Mohammad Adel, his two sons -- Zobyed Adel and Tareq Adel -- and two others.

The investigation officer (IO) of the case submitted a charge sheet against the five on March 2, 2001.

Accused Adel, Tareq, and Pappu are now on bail while Zobyed and Nitya Sarker have been absconding since the incident.

Advocate AFM Abdul Wadud, Sahara Khatun, Abdullah Abu and Abdur Rahman Hawlader appeared for the state while advocates TM Akbar, Mahbob Ahmed and Mohammad Hanif defended the accused.

Road accidents

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 Rupan). The autorickshaw driver was admitted to Narayanganj Sadar Hospital.

Two separate cases were filed with Siddhirganj and Rupganj Police Stations.

In Rajshahi, two persons were killed and four others injured in microbus-truck collision at Binodpur Bazar in front of the Rajshahi University yesterday according to our RU Correspondent.

The dead were identified as Manjur Ahmed 45, and Abdul Kader of Manikchak, Singra. Both died on the spot. The injured were admitted to the Rajshahi Medical College Hospital (RMCH). Police seized the vehicles.

A case was filed with Mother thana police station.

Annan appeals for Iraq to run own affairs

REUTERS, United Nations

With an Iraqi delegation watching, UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan appealed yesterday for an end to US military occupation as soon as possible and for Iraqis to run their own affairs.

"We should listen to their needs, expressed by them in their terms and we should try to respond," Annan told the Security Council at the start of a meeting attended by three delegates from Iraq's new Governing Council.

But he said the establishment of the US-appointed Governing Council had to be followed by a constitutional process run "by and for Iraqis."

"Our collective goal remains an early end to the military occupation through the formation on an internationally recognized, representative government," Annan said.

"Meanwhile, it is vital that the Iraqi people should be able to see a clear timetable with a specific sequence of events leading to the full restoration of sovereignty as soon as possible," he told the council.

The Security Council meeting to debate reconstruction in Iraq was led by Spanish Foreign Minister Ana Palacio, whose country holds the council's rotating presidency for July.

While Security Council members are eager to see Iraqis take the reins in Baghdad, the 15-member body is not expected to make a quick decision on recognizing the Governing Council as the representative of Iraq with voting rights in U.N. bodies, an action the U.N. General Assembly must also approve.

The presence on Tuesday of Ahmed Chalabi, head of the Iraqi National Congress, an umbrella organization of groups opposed to Saddam who campaigned against him from exile, is bound to cause

some consternation.

Chalabi, an important player in the Governing Council, might belie the independence of the group because of his well-known ties to the Pentagon, diplomats said.

The delegation leader is Adnan Pachachi, 80, who was foreign minister before Saddam Hussein's Baath Party came to power in 1968. The third member is Akila al-Hashemi, a mid-level diplomat under Saddam who worked on UN issues at the Foreign Ministry. She is one of three women on the Iraqi council.

The Iraqi Governing Council has authority to appoint interim diplomats and ministers, approve budgets and propose policies but the US-led coalition which is occupying Iraq can veto its decisions.

Ctg snatcher

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 the district, a CMP press release said.

Acting on a tip-off, a team of detectives raided a restaurant in the area at around 8 am and arrested Azad with the pistol and explosives. Two of his accomplices managed to escape the scene sensing presence of the detectives.

Dhaka-Agartala

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 said Dhaka will operate buses seven days a week and Tripura six days a week except on Sunday.

Replying to a query Taimur Alam said a 16-kilometre stretch of the 150-kilometre Dhaka-Agartala road is not in good shape. The Ministry of Communications has been informed of this, he added.

The bus service is being introduced under an agreement signed by Bangladesh and India in 2001.

The recently held Joint Economic Council (JEC) meeting finalised details in this regard.

JS bodies

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One of them said he requested a senior minister to throw light on the matter, but the minister said: "I do not know how all these transpired."

A ruling party whip said several lawmakers expressed dissatisfaction to him.

BNP sources said senior lawmakers Kabir Hossain, Manjur Qader, Abu Hena, Monirul Haq Chowdhury, Shah Mofazzal Hossain Kaikobad, M Nurul Islam, Dr Rustam Ali Farazi, Abdul Karim Abbasi desired to be heads of various parliamentary bodies.

Their hopes were dashed as some junior deputies including Shamsul Alam Pramanik, Moshirul Rahman, KM Selim Reza Habib, Shajahan Chowdhury, Kazi Golam Morshed, Nazimuddin Alam and Abdul Mannan got chairmanship of some important bodies.

The main opposition Awami League (AL) has not yet submitted the names of its deputies for the committees and their slots, two in each body, still stand vacant.

Out of 14 lawmakers of the Ershad-led Jatiya Party, all but GM Kader, a vocal and skilled parliamentarian, were included in different committees.

Kader, who expressed his desire to be on the committee on the defence ministry, said he was ready to accept membership of any body.

"I am examining the legal aspects whether it is the right of a lawmaker to be the member of a committee. If my rights are violated, I will talk to the ruling coalition and if they do not redress, I will go to a law court," he told The Daily Star yesterday.

Meanwhile, Jatiya Party (Monju) legislator Anwar Hossain Monju has submitted his resignation from two committees, out of embarrassment.

Party sources said Manju, a veteran lawmaker and minister for 12 years, felt it disgraceful to work as member of the committees chaired by and formed mostly of juniors.

He was made member of committees on environment and forest and science, information and communication technology ministry.

Ministerial aspirant Fazlul Haq Amini, chief of coalition partner Islami Oikya Jote (IOJ), has rejected the chairmanship of the standing committee on the jute ministry.

Bullet-hit

FROM PAGE 1
 Police Station.

In another incident, an alleged criminal was shot by unidentified gunmen at Golapbagh in Sutrapur on Monday.

Sutrapur police said injured Sajal alias Mona is an accused in at least 20 cases including murders. Police suspect intra-gang rivalry might have led to the attack.

Shot in the abdomen, Sajal is now undergoing treatment at Dhaka Medical College Hospital under police custody.

Son of Ali Hossain Engrji, Mona was attacked at Madartek when he was returning to his Golapbagh residence at around 11:30pm Monday night.

Liberian fighting

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 violent fighting when mortars rained on the city, killing dozens of people.

Stray shots punctured the night but shelling abated after nightfall. Fighting however picked up at dawn and staccato bursts of fire started.

Rebels were engaged in pitched battles throughout Monrovia with forces loyal to embattled President Charles Taylor, who has refused to step down or leave the country despite an offer of asylum from Nigeria.

The rebels from Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD) vowed to carry their fight through to the finish, refusing to stop until they control the entire city, where hundreds have died in the last month.

"What we have to do is now to take over the whole town. It shouldn't take too long because too many people are suffering," Sekou Damate Conneh, the head of LURD, told AFP in Abidjan by telephone. "This time we will not withdraw," he added.

According to humanitarian sources dozens -- up to 100 according to some -- could have

died in Monday's savage combats. Shells rained near the US embassy and one landed in the compound but caused no injuries.

Earlier in the day, soldiers from a US naval "anti-terrorism security team" arrived to help guard the embassy, a move that only angered locals who have been waiting for weeks for the first of west African and possibly US peacekeepers to deploy.

The entire batch of the 41 soldiers, who were being flown in on helicopter, could not arrive due to the shelling.

"The message is clear: America is beefing up security so that we can remain in Monrovia in hostile conditions," Lieutenant Commander Terrence Dudley said.

Tens of thousands are living rough in Monrovia amid an acute shortage of food, water and medicines.

Taylor, a former warlord who ignited an earlier seven-year civil conflict, currently faces his worst challenge in a new four-year rebel drive and now controls only a fifth of the west African country.