

Launch strike Talks likely today as passengers' woes mount

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Negotiations between the authorities and the striking launch owners are likely today to end the indefinite launch strike that began on Tuesday.

The shipping minister has asked the Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority to sit with the launch owners today, ministry sources said last night.

Launch owners, however, said they were yet to get any offer for talks.

Earlier yesterday, the striking owners warned of a 'final decision' today if the government does not go for negotiations with them on their demands.

Leaders of the Bangladesh Inland Waterways (passenger carriers) Association, the association of launch owners, said they expected an initiative from the Prime Minister's Office to resolve their problem.

"If the government wants to avoid us and manage alternative vessels to carry passengers, we will take a final decision today. We will go back to our village homes with our launches," Chairman of the association M Kolimullah said.

He claimed that owners of cargo vessels will also join the launch strike if the government avoids talks to resolve the problem today.

On the fourth day of the strike yesterday, thousands of passengers were stranded at launch terminals across the country, including Sadarghat terminal in the city. Sufferings of the stranded mounted with children, women and old people being the worst victims.

About 300 launches were seen anchored in the mid-Buriganga at Sadarghat terminal.

Birshrestha Jahangir, a Ro-Ro ferry pressed into service as an alternative arrangement, sailed

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PHOTO: STAR

A woman struggles aboard a ro-ro ferry bound for Barisal, as hundreds of passengers jostle for space in the government craft at Fatullah in Dhaka yesterday. The fourth day of private launch owners' strike left southbound travellers in serious trouble.

One killed as bomb thrown from rooftop at Gulistan

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

An employee of a printing press was killed and another person was injured in a bomb explosion at Golapshah Mazar in the city's Gulistan area last night.

Abdur Razzak, 30, an employee of Khaza Offset Printing Press at Arambagh, received fatal injuries in the explosion that occurred at around 8:00am. Local people took him to the Dhaka Medical College Hospital (DMCH) where he died at 9:25pm.

The injured victim identified as Faruq, an employee of a cloth store at Sadarghat, was admitted to the DMCH with injuries on his right elbow.

Faruq told newsmen at the DMCH that the bomb was thrown from the top of a building.

The body of the deceased was sent to the hospital morgue for autopsy.

Trans-Jamuna train rolls on commercial trip

ANWAR ALI, *Rajshahi*

The 758-capacity Silk City Express, the newly introduced trans-Jamuna train, started its first commercial run yesterday with only 378 passengers.

The train with 96 air-conditioned shovon chairs and 24 first-class seats, kicked off its journey to Joydevpur from Rajshahi Station five minutes late at 6:05am and reached its destination after a five-hour run, rail authorities said.

On the first day of the train's commercial operation, Bangladesh Railway (BR) earned Tk 31,960 from the sale of 378 tickets at Rajshahi Station.

The first-trip passengers sounded unhappy with the train schedule, and many BR officials believe the timing is not proper.

A senior BR official showing documents said the morning trip was first scheduled for a 7:00am start but was changed to 6:00am upon an order from the authorities seven days ahead of the launch of the direct rail service between

Rajshahi and Joydevpur on Thursday.

The official blamed some high officials of the BR for the schedule change and alleged it was done under pressure from Rajshahi-Dhaka coach owners.

Another BR official said the current schedule is not passenger-friendly and the train will lag behind in competition with buses if the schedule is not changed.

The train stays seven hours at Joydevpur Station before rolling back to Rajshahi at 6:00pm, which the official called a waste of time.

SM Saju, staff reporter of the Manab Jamin, said by phone that it took him seven hours to reach Dhaka, as Silk City Express reached Joydevpur at 11:00am and a connecting shuttle train arrived in Dhaka at 1:00pm.

Shamsuddin Habibullah, general manager of the BR, Rajshahi, said the schedule would be changed, if need be.

Gas export a question of risk, says Stiglitz

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

If Bangladesh decides to export gas now, it will have to import 15 to 20 years later and ultimately be forced to pay two-way transportation costs, said Nobel laureate Professor Joseph E Stiglitz yesterday.

"It is better for Bangladesh to keep its gas reserve for the future, as exploring the resource fast (for export) is a question of risk. Gas reserve is your security against any volatility of energy prices on the international market. One should be very careful about the pace of extraction," the visiting economist told a press briefing at the Sonargaon Hotel in Dhaka.

One reason for gas export may be to convert the resource into

development, but money actually does not contribute to development, Stiglitz said, citing the example of Nigeria.

"So, it is difficult for Bangladesh to take a decision. If you explore your reserve quickly, you will have to be dependent on import later."

He felt the gas reserve should be part of a debate and the government may hire foreign experts to assess the reserve.

Stiglitz praised two non-governmental organisations -- Grameen Bank and BRAC -- describing them as the most innovative institutions in the world. He referred to the organisations as models for other countries.

Micro-credit is an impressive idea through which the poor are

financing and the Grameen Bank has made an important breakthrough to that end, he said. Also, the Grameen Bank continued expanding its innovative products as it recognised the importance of housing that made a big difference for the poor and ultimately improved their living standard, he went on.

Prof Stiglitz said corruption is a major impediment to development in developing countries. "Tax system is a major source of corruption. Some tax systems are more subject to corruption than others." Citing the example of import duty, he said two similar but one cheap and the other costly may encourage corruption.

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Joseph E Stiglitz

Tribal guerillas kill 36 in Tripura, Manipur

AFP, *Agartala*

Tribal rebels boycotting yesterday's national Independence Day celebrations killed 36 civilians in three separate attacks in India's troubled northeast, police said.

Heavily-armed militants in Tripura state attacked the village of Borolunga, 50 km northeast of the capital Agartala late Thursday, killing 15 people and injuring an unspecified number of others.

Around the same time in Daspara, 45 km northeast of Agartala, militants killed another 15 people, police said.

"All the victims were civilians,

including women and children, who were dragged out mercilessly from their homes and shot at from close range with automatic weapons," Tripura counter-insurgency police chief D. Gautam told AFP by telephone.

"We are yet to ascertain the identity of the militant groups involved in the two attacks as both the areas are dominated by Tripura's two frontline rebel groups, the outlawed National Liberation Front of Tripura and the All Tripura Tiger Force (ATTF)."

The Press Trust of India (PTI) blamed the attacks on ATTF, one of the 11 ethnic and tribal separatist

groups which have jointly called for the boycott of Friday's independence day celebrations in the seven northeastern states.

Officials said the militants shot residents of both the villages at close range.

Troops have been sent to both the areas.

Both militant groups are fighting for independent homelands and they stage hit-and-run operations on Indian targets, according to police.

Early Thursday, a powerful bomb ripped apart a bus killing six passengers and injured 15 others, including

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37 AL men indicted for vandalism in Barisal

OUR CORRESPONDENT, *Barisal*

Thirty-seven AL leaders and workers have gone into hiding to avoid arrest on charge of damaging vehicles following a case lodged with Barisal Kotwali Police Station under the Speedy Trial and other non-bailable acts.

Ismail Hossain, general secretary of the pro-BNP Tempo Samik Union filed the case.

According to police and party sources, the AL men have been charged with creating panic by damaging vehicles under Sections 4 and 5 of the Speedy Trial Act as well as possession and use of explosives under Sections 3, 4 and 8 of the explosives act.

Sub-inspector Nurul Amin has been made investigating officer of the case and the case is being personally supervised by Jahangir Alam, officer-in-charge of Barisal Kotwali Police Station.

Police have been tight-lipped

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Al-Qaeda top gun Hambali held

REUTERS, *Bangkok*



Hambali

Hambali, al-Qaeda's top man in Southeast Asia and suspected mastermind behind numerous deadly bombings, has been captured in Thailand, handed over to the Americans and flown out of the country, officials said on Friday.

Asia's most wanted man, now clean-shaven and his face altered by plastic surgery, was arrested with a woman by Thai and US officials in Ayutthaya, the ancient Thai capital 80 km north of Bangkok, a senior Thai general said.

"A special flight from the United States picked him up at Bangkok

airport on Wednesday morning," said the general, who declined to be identified.

Hambali, born Riduan Isamuddin, and his wife were flown home to Indonesia, a Thai government minister said. Indonesia's police chief said he was unaware of the transfer and a US official in Bangkok said Washington was unlikely to reveal his location soon.

Hambali is wanted in Indonesia as the suspected operational brains behind last October's Bali bombings that killed 202 people and in connection with many other attacks across the archipelago.

US officials said Hambali,

thought to be operations chief of Southeast Asia's militant Jemaah Islamiah (JI) network and the only non-Arab to sit on al-Qaeda's military committee, was being interrogated.

"Hambali is in US custody and that's all we can say for now," said a US embassy official in Bangkok.

Other al-Qaeda suspects have been held by US authorities at undisclosed locations, but are believed to have been questioned initially at bases in Afghanistan.

President Bush, who launched the war on terror after the 2001 September 11 suicide airliner

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An exotic, beaming ring forms around the sun that blazes through drifting summer clouds yesterday. People gathered at the Bangabandhu National Stadium in Dhaka to have a look at the solar spectacle.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN