

Cold snap to stay for three more days

Heavy fog disrupts ferry movement since Wednesday

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The sky will remain overcast amid the cold snap sweeping much of Bangladesh including Dhaka for three days more, according to the latest weathercast.

"The cold feels intense because of fog," Samarendra Karmakar, director of the meteorological department, told The Daily Star.

Yesterday's lowest temperature in Bangladesh was recorded at 9.2 degrees Celsius in Jessore.

The lowest temperature in Dhaka was at 13 degrees Celsius, down from 13.6 Wednesday and the highest at 17 degrees Celsius, down from 20.1 the same day.

Temperature will dip further with the fog drifting away, Karmakar said, adding the blanket of fog is likely to keep covering the sky for the next few days.

The sun could be seen only for an hour after 3:00pm in the capital

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PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

Workers waiting for work near Bangabandhu National Stadium keep warm with tea and cigarettes in efforts to beat the cold snap that has swept the capital with chill winds and fog.

Parliaments seal Musharraf rule

BBC ONLINE

Pakistan's national and four provincial parliaments have voted to make Pervez Musharraf head of state with a five-year term.

The general declared himself president in 2001, having seized power in an army coup two years earlier, but the move lacked any constitutional backing.

The constitution was amended this week to enable him to be made "elected" head of state if he won 50 percent of the vote.

Opposition parties walked out, denouncing the proceedings as a sham.

The lower house of parliament and the assemblies of the North West Frontier Province, Baluchistan, Punjab and Sindh all voted unanimously in favour of General Musharraf, with scores of opposition lawmakers boycotting the vote.

The result in the Senate was 56-1.

Pakistan's main Islamist parties abstained after reaching a surprise deal with General Musharraf allow-

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Two murdered in Khulna

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, Khulna

Two persons were murdered in separate incidents at Paikgachha upazila in the district yesterday.

The dead are Dinesh, 48, of village South Kulkhali and shrimp trader Naser Ali Moral, 34, of village Char Moloy of the upazila.

According to police, Dinesh was hacked to death early yesterday by a gang of unidentified miscreants in front of his house. Locals said Dinesh was killed for refusing to give his daughter in marriage with one of the alleged killers.

Naser was gunned down by underground operatives belonging to Purbha Banglar Communist Party (PBCP) at about 9:00am at Hitampur village in the same upazila.

According to witnesses, the outlaws shot Naser point blank in the head and chest. He died on the spot.

Police said the outlaws had earlier demanded illegal toll from Naser, but he refused to give in to their demand.

Police recovered the bodies and

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Do your job right or quit

Attorney general criticises govt lawyers' performance

UNB, Dhaka

Attorney General AF Hasan Ariff yesterday came down heavily on government lawyers assigned to deal with criminal cases for their poor performance that resulted in granting of bail to hardcore criminals including those jailed for life.

"Do your job properly or quit," Ariff was quoted to have told the law officers at a closed-door meeting at his office.

The attorney general (AG) summoned them in the wake of serious concern expressed by Law Minister Moudud Ahmed that many persons convicted of heinous crimes and awarded life-term were enlarged on bail.

Apparently annoyed, the law minister on Monday asked the AG to inquire into any lapses on the part of the law officers and submit a report on their performances.

Recent media reports on the High Court's granting of bail to convicts with life-term evoked sharp criticism. Leading dailies ran editorials questioning the integrity of the persons involved in the

process.

The meeting said law chambers having close links with the government usually take the briefs of the accused seeking bail. Law officers in such cases feel shaky to oppose the bail prayers. Since they are appointed on the basis of party affiliation, they don't want to earn displeasure of their mentors.

The ministries concerned hardly supply the list of criminals and their criminal profiles to law officers to enable them to oppose the bail properly, it mentioned.

To get bail, the accused select those lawyers who can influence government policy-making. Court often grants bail without giving adequate time to oppose it, the meeting noted.

Law officers sometimes face question from court if they are empowered by the home ministry to oppose bail petitions, it noted.

There are many other factors, which influence granting of bail. Covert indications are often made

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Hopes high for South Asian trade bloc

AFP, Karachi

South Asia's regional forum, representing one fifth of the world's consumers and nearly half of its poor, is set to move a step closer to becoming a trade bloc if a free trade agreement is inked at its forthcoming summit.

The pact is topping the agenda of the three-day South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (Saarc) meet starting Sunday in the Pakistani capital.

"The Safta (South Asia Free Trade Agreement) framework treaty is high on the agenda to augment regional trade," Saarc Chamber of Commerce and Industry (SCCI) spokesman Waqar Ahmed told the news agency.

More than 40 percent of South Asia's 1.4 billion people live on less than one US dollar a day, making it home to nearly half of the world's poor, according to the World Bank's August 2003 report.

The combined external trade of its seven members Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka stands at over 66 billion dollars.

Safta calls for trade of 5,600 goods under a concessional tariff structure of 10 to 25 percent.

A draft agreement, drawn up in Kathmandu in November, envisions a commercial arbitration council, relaxation of visa require-

ments for businessmen, more flexible movement of goods and people, motor vehicle agreement for transport and possibly the establishment of Saarc as an economic union.

South Asian commerce officials are looking to the European Union (EU) and the Association of South East Asian Nations (Asean) for inspiration.

Some 61 percent of European Union nations' total external trade is conducted within the EU. One quarter of Asean states' external trade is within the forum.

The size of such trade among Saarc countries is a meager four percent.

"When the EU and Asean can make a trade bloc, why should we not follow the same pattern?" said Ilyas Bilour, president of the India-Pakistan Chamber of Commerce and Industry.

Bilour believes a South Asian trade pact could escalate inter-Saarc trade up to 60 percent "once we form such an economic union."

India, the market leader among SAARC states, has been the main supporter of inter-Saarc trade. But rival Pakistan has until now been reluctant.

Fears of cheaper Indian goods flooding the market compelled Pakistani planners to keep delay-

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NCBs look for new sectors to fund

BB to launch measures and packages to expedite investment, reform

REJAUL KARIM BYRON

Local commercial banks will open from this year their doors wider to investors seeking finance for projects in power, road construction, health and infrastructure.

Bangladesh Bank (BB), on the other hand, is going to launch a package programme to increase investment in small and medium enterprises (SMEs) and agro-based industries. The BB governor and senior bankers held an informal meeting recently on how to promote SMEs and agro-based industries. The central bank has decided to formulate a policy and float a fund for lending in those sectors, sources said.

As part of the ongoing reforms, the central bank will also begin exclusive monitoring of the poorly

performing banks. Besides, it is going to appoint 10 local and 22 foreign consultants to strengthen some of its departments including information technology and human resources.

The BB will also install a central information platform to establish an online network with its six divisional offices as well as the commercial banks. BB's Credit Information Bureau (CIB) that supplies information on creditors to other banks will also be part of this online network.

The central bank has already signed contracts with the commercial banks to this end.

The BB is also going to introduce some changes in its supervision and monitoring process of the commercial banks. Under the new procedure, the 'good' banks will be

treated separately from the five banks identified by the BB as 'problematic' ones, who will be placed under exclusive supervision. The central bank is also considering separate monitoring of the banks which are not performing well but have not yet turned into 'problematic' ones. The BB has identified four such banks.

BB Deputy Governor Mohammad A Rumi Ali explained, "We are introducing this exclusive supervision as a measure to stop the poorly performing banks from performing worse and also to help improve their performance."

On strengthening the banking information system, he said, "Without proper information at the right moment, we cannot take the right

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PHOTO: STAR

Work on the Pakshey Bridge on the Padma is close to completion.

Pakshey Bridge nearly complete

Expected opening in March next year

RAFIQ HASAN back from Pakshey

The Pakshey Bridge over Padma, the country's second largest bridge, is expected to be opened in March next year followed by another major bridge, the Rupsha Bridge over Rupsha (in Khulna) in June 2005.

Apart from connecting Dhaka and Mongla seaport through the

Jamuna Multi-purpose Bridge, the two bridges will also help establish uninterrupted road communication with neighbouring India, Nepal and Bhutan.

Sources said 16-km approach roads have already been built on both sides of the 1.8-km Pakshey Bridge running between B h e r a m a r a

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AL enforces daylong hartal tomorrow

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The main opposition Awami League (AL) enforces a dawn-to-dusk countrywide hartal tomorrow to protest what it said was infringement on democratic and political rights of the opposition and killing of its leaders and activists by the ruling alliance loyalists.

The decision to enforce 6:00am-6:00pm shutdown, also to protest the deterioration of law and order and price hike of essentials, was

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Salma Sobhan laid to rest

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Namaz-e-janaza of Barrister Salma Sobhan, a social worker and human-rights activist, was held at Gulshan Central Mosque after Zohr prayers yesterday.

Earlier, sons Zafar Sobhan and Babar Sobhan received her body from the BIRDEM mortuary. The body was brought back to her Gulshan residence and kept there for sometime.

Workers of Ain O Salish Kendra, family members, friends and admirers of the late human-rights activist

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SECOND ROUND

Dhaka-Delhi FTA talks postponed

UNB, Dhaka

The second round of Bangladesh-India talks on Free Trade Agreement (FTA), scheduled for January 7 in New Delhi, has been postponed, diplomatic sources said here yesterday.

They said another date for the meeting might be fixed after studying the development of current negotiation on the South Asian Free Trade Area (Safta) in Pakistan.

Saarc officials, now in Islamabad in preparation for the upcoming Saarc summit (January 4-6), are engaged in negotiations on the crucial economic issue.

Before departure for Islamabad Wednesday, Foreign Minister M Morshed Khan said he hoped that Saarc leaders would be able to reach a consensus on the Safta.

The first round of the Dhaka-New Delhi talks on the FTA and non-tariff barriers was held here October 21 last year.

Prayer Timings		
January 2		
	Azan	Jamaat
Fair	5-45	6-10
Juma	12-15	1-20
Asr	4-00	4-15
Maghrib	5-30	5-35
Esha	7-00	7-30

Source: Islamic Foundation