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20 die in blast outside US base in Baghdad

REUTERS, Baghdad

A suicide bomber detonated half a ton of explosives outside the US seat of power in Iraq yesterday, killing at least 20 people in the deadliest attack since the capture of Saddam Hussein.

The explosion in the heart of the Iraqi capital came a day before a key meeting in New York between the United Nations, Iraq's Governing Council and US and British officials

on the political future of the country. The bomb exploded at the "Assassin's Gate," the main entrance to the "Green Zone," formerly Saddam's Republican Palace complex and now the top-security, civilian and military headquarters of the US-led administration.

A US military spokesman said at least two American contractors were believed to have been killed in the blast, which also wounded more than 60 people, mostly Iraqis wait-

ing to enter the complex for work.

The blast shook the center of Baghdad and sent plumes of black smoke into the mist of the winter morning along the Tigris river. Cars blazed in the street and victims lay in pools of blood. A stream of ambulances ferried away the wounded.

Colonel Ralph Baker of the US Army's 1st Armored Division said a pickup truck packed with 1,000 pounds of explosives blew up outside the gate, where vehicles and

people were lined up waiting to enter.

US military spokesman Brigadier General Mark Kimmitt told a news conference in Baghdad that at least 20 people were killed and over 60 injured. It was the deadliest attack since Saddam was captured by US forces on December 13.

"Many of the bodies, because of the nature of the blast, we haven't been able to fully determine their

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Saifur says more JS seats won't worsen chaos

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Finance and Planning Minister M Saifur Rahman yesterday said increased parliamentary seats will not worsen political chaos, as sharp division in parliament is just part of the political culture and it has nothing to do with how many public representatives are there.

He was talking to the press at the National Economic Council auditorium on the occasion of submission of report by the Public Expenditure Review Commission (Perc).

Journalists argued with him that considering that the 300 members of the Jatiya Sangsad (JS) could

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Close down PMO to cut government expenditure

Perc report also calls for reducing the number of ministries, improving quality of government activities

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The Public Expenditure Review Commission (Perc) in a report yesterday suggested closing down the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) and reducing the number of ministries to cut government expenditure.

"In a presidential form of government, there can be a separate office for the head of the state," said Perc Chairman M Hafizuddin Khan, "But

there is no need for a big separate office for the prime minister in the parliamentary system."

The activities of the PMO, established during the HM Ershad regime as the president's office, could be carried out from the cabinet division without compromising the quality of work, a Perc member said.

"The running of the office involves a huge amount of unnecessary spending."

Perc that completed its term on December 31 submitted the final report to Finance and Planning Minister M Saifur Rahman at the National Economic Council office.

Pointing out that the government expenditure constitutes 15 percent of GDP, Perc recommended retaining or expanding the level of spending, but raising the quality.

Perc emphasised three aspects

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Commerce Minister Amir Khosru Mahmud Chowdhury, left, makes a point at a session of the International Business Conference in Dhaka yesterday, while President of International Chamber of Commerce President Jean-Rene Fourtoun and Secretary General Maria Livanos Cattani, centre, look on.

PADMA BRIDGE PM seeks wider Japanese help

UNB, Dhaka

The visiting governor of Japan Bank for International Cooperation (JBIC) agreed to provide possible assistance in all sectors of Bangladesh as Prime Minister Khaleda Zia sought Japanese cooperation on a large scale in building the planned Padma bridge.

The assurance came when JBIC Governor Kyosuke Shinozawa made a courtesy call on the prime minister at her office yesterday.

The JBIC governor said Japan provided huge cooperation and assistance to Bangladesh in building physical infrastructure and development, particularly in constructing the Jamuna Multipurpose Bridge and setting up power plants.

Besides, Japan helped

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NEWS ANALYSIS

Vital poll pledges caught in foot-dragging

ZAYADUL AHSAN

Separation of the judiciary, formation of independent anti-corruption and human-rights commissions and installation of ombudsmen -- the four instruments crucial to good governance and also key election pledges of the ruling coalition --

are not in sight although the government is almost halfway into its term.

The government repeatedly said it will honour the commitments it had made to people, but it is now clear that they are unwilling to do so. One can conclude that the ruling coalition

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Zia's 68th birth anniversary today

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Today is the 68th birth anniversary of late president Ziaur Rahman, founder of the ruling Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP).

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Int'l confce ends calling for equitable trade regime

STAR CORRESPONDENT

Trade ministers and experts from 37 countries ended two days of brainstorming at a high-profile international business conference yesterday with a call for establishing an equitable global trade regime benefiting the rich and poor countries alike.

They also aired concern at what they said are 'perceived security concerns' seemingly overtaking global economic agenda and felt that multilateralism is the answer to the future world economy.

Trade is not the only instrument to reducing poverty; the liberalised trade under World Trade Organisation (WTO) may

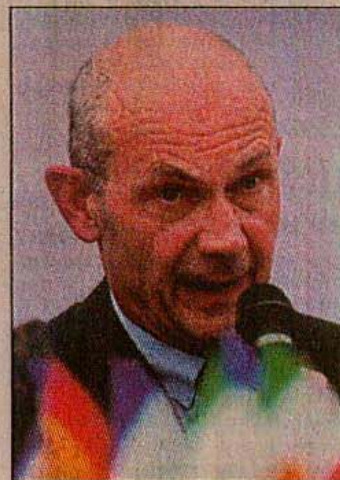
fail to cut poverty if the trade benefits are not equitably shared among poor and rich nations, they said.

The WTO and governments should ensure that trade benefits trickle down to the general people who should be the ultimate beneficiary of the outcome of trade agreements, said the speakers in a

business session on 'Multilateral Trade regime in Post Cancun Perspective' on the sidelines of the International Business Conference titled 'Global Economic Governance and Challenges of Multilateralism'.

The International Chamber of Commerce-Bangladesh (ICC-B)

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Conducive climate can up trade with EU: Lamy

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Visiting European Union (EU) Commissioner for Trade Pascal Lamy believes Bangladesh has ample opportunities to expand bilateral trade and economic cooperation with the EU countries.

"There are many areas where business between Bangladesh

and the EU can be improved," he said, adding "the EU investors are ready to increase investment in Bangladesh and volume of trade with it, provided good business environment and transparency in every deal are ensured."

Speaking at a press conference yesterday, Lamy said the European Commission (EC) was

actively considering relaxation of the rules of origin for the least developed countries (LDCs) including Bangladesh and would place a formal proposal on it to the EU policymakers in March this year.

Relaxing the rules of origin of the EU's Generalised System of Preference (GSP) will help

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Manik's killers still at large

AL hartal passes off

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Killers of journalist Manik Saha could not be nabbed even four days after his assassination in Khulna on Thursday, although Home Minister Altaf Hossain Chowdhury asserts that police will track them down soon.

"Detectives are working round-the-clock to arrest the killers. I hope the killers will be arrested in a short time. There is no way for them to escape," the minister told newsmen yesterday after a meeting of the parliamentary standing committee on home ministry at the Sangsad Bhaban.

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JS session starts, runs till Mar 4

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The 11th session of the Jatiya Sangsad that began yesterday amid boycott by the main opposition Awami League will run until March 4 with a 10-day Eid vacation from January 29 to February 7.

The decision was taken at a meeting of parliament's Business Advisory Council (BAC) with Speaker Jamir Uddin Sircar in the chair at the Sangsad Bhaban.

Leader of the House Khaleda Zia, also member of the BAC, told the meeting a bill seeking amendment

to the constitution to reserve 50 seats for women would be placed before the House in its winter session.

But the meeting did not focus on the other much-talked-about bill on increasing the number of general seats of parliament from 300 to 400.

Parliament Secretary Khandakar Fazlur Rahman told the BAC meeting that the parliament secretariat received the notice of only one government bill on arbitration law amendment, but no private members submitted any notice for bill

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Opposition rejects president's New Year speech

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The main opposition Awami League (AL) dismissed the president's New Year speech to parliament yesterday as nothing but a résumé of the ruling alliance's activities, which showed no future guideline for the country.

Other opposition parties also noted that the presidential deliberation did not reflect the socio-political situation.

All the major opposition parties took offence at what they said was distortion of history in the presidential speech where the credit of waging the Liberation War was given to late president Ziaur Rahman, over

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