

Mystery disease

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Directorate of Health to coordinate information about the disease said yesterday many of their experts working with different teams in Rajbari, Manikganj, Tangail and Faridpur believed the disease is encephalitis, although they do not have concrete evidence to corroborate the notion.

"We cannot confirm as yet, but symptoms of the dying patients suggest the disease is encephalitis," said Prof Nazmun Nahar, head of the Department of Paediatrics at the DMCH.

However, she suggested carrying out autopsy on the patients who died of the disease. "We can easily figure out whether it is encephalitis once we carry out autopsy," she said. There are legal bars to do so here, as there is no practice of doing autopsy on the body of a patient who dies of diseases, she observed.

Parents of all the three children who died at the DMCH have taken the bodies home without autopsy.

"The government should take steps to carry out autopsy in such cases," Prof Nahar said yesterday, adding they have quarantined Shuvo, class one student of Principal Ataur Rahman Primary School, who was admitted to the DMCH yesterday morning.

"Since we know nothing about the disease, we have quarantined all patients as a precaution that it does not spread further," she said.

Prof Nahar said there is not enough space at the hospital to quarantine such patients.

Earlier in 1983, Japanese B Encephalitis broke out in the country. Doctors then had said pigs and female culex mosquitoes spread the disease.

"After primary investigations, we are sure it is a viral disease, but we haven't been able to identify the virus," said Jahangir Hossain of

International Centre for Diarrhoeal Diseases Research, Bangladesh, who is spearheading government efforts to combat the disease.

Dr MA Faiz, DMCH professor of medicine, is not so sure that it is encephalitis. "If it was encephalitis, only the brain tissues would have been affected, but two patients I have examined had multiple affected organs and other syndromes," he said.

"I'm not dismissing the disease to be a possible case of encephalitis, but we don't have proof."

Doctors are not sure whether it is a contagious disease, either, but apprehend it to have the potentiality to be so as the disease is spreading in a specific area, he said. "We don't know whether it is spreading through foods, water or air."

However, he disagreed to establish any link with bird flu that broke out in Thailand, Taiwan, Japan, South Korea, Cambodia, Indonesia, Vietnam, Laos, India and Pakistan in recent days.

Doctors said bird flu causes cold, fever, pain and headache.

News agencies said at least eight people have died in Vietnam and Thailand of the disease caused by H5N1 and H5N2 viruses. Millions of chickens have died of the disease or have been killed as authorities have struggled to stamp it out.

But there have been no reports of sick chickens in Bangladesh, government officials have said. Bangladesh Poultry Industries Association said checks had confirmed no bird flu is there in the country.

Some 20,000 chickens aged between 36 and 38 weeks of 15/16 poultry farms of Gazipur died till Monday, but it was learnt those died after they were administered RDV vaccine to prevent Ranikhet disease on January 19-20.

Graft charges

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The inquiry officer will submit his final report within 15 days of his appointment, official sources said. If the seizure charges are proved, the DG would be dismissed or terminated from service as per the rules. A corruption case will be also filed against him.

And in case he is found to have abused power, the government may cut his salary and demote him, among other measures. The DG enjoys the rank and status of a joint secretary.

The ministry, which formed a four-member inquiry committee headed by the joint secretary (development) last year, found that the DG committed corruption and initiated proceedings against him with the approval of the prime minister and president.

The information secretary recently served a show cause notice on the DG, asking him to explain why departmental action would not be taken against him under articles 7 (1) (A), 3 (B) and (D) of the "Public Servant (Discipline and Appeal) Rules, 1985.

The DG, replied to the notice 10 days after deadline, pleaded not guilty with the information secretary and requested him to relieve him of the charges and also to stop departmental proceedings against him.

The inquiry found that the DG embezzled a total of around Tk 36 lakh against fake bills for four documentaries, three video films and through tender manipulation and irregularities in 2001-2002 and 2002-2003.

According to the summary approved by the prime minister and the president, the DG undertook production of four documentaries and three video films without approval of the ministry and illegally obtained raw materials, causing loss to the exchequer.

The summary also states that the DFP cooked up four documentaries -- "Jibon Jemon Jebhabe", "Tourism", "Gonotontor Uttaran" and "Festival of Bangladesh" -- and three video films -- "Esho Sandorer Pathay", "Shishu Apabaran Rodh" and "Tomar Moto Bondhu Ke Achhey". But investigations revealed those films were not made

Kader Murder

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ruling after Iqbal ignored Monday's court order to appear before the court. He also did not show up on three other dates.

The court also cancelled the bail of Mohammad Abdul Kader (Mobile Kader), the principal accused in the case, for ducking court appearance on six times on the trot.

The court will deliver verdict tomorrow.

Earlier, the court recorded statements of 18 out of 28 prosecution witnesses in the case.

Abdul Kader, a leading entrepreneur of Munshiganj, was killed in front of his Motihel office by a gang of assassins on October 17, 2001.

His elder brother filed a murder case with the Motihel Police Station the same day.

The Detective Branch pressed charges against 'Mobile Kader, a business rival of the victim, and 10 others including the former MP on May 8 last year and the court framed charges against them on September 11.

Two accused are now on bail while two others are in custody. 'Mobile Kader, Iqbal Hossain and five others are still at large.

Land ports

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customs commissioner recently, sources said.

Nearly 800 trucks loaded with goods including perishable items have been stranded on the Indian side of Sona Masjid, Hili and Burimari land ports and other LCS for the last few days, a customs official at Hili land port told BSS yesterday.

Bangladesh is incurring Tk 2 crore revenue loss each day due to the strike, he added.

price hike

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Lawmakers belonging to the Awami League, who are on an indefinite boycott of parliament sessions, and Jatiya Party (Ershad) legislators submitted most of the motions seeking special disbursements on the floor of the House to resolve the problems.

Law ministry

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court-decrees on auctioning loan-defaulter's property were published in unknown newspapers.

"Consequently, poor participation of buyers at the auctions disturbs the process. The banks and financial organisations are bearing the losses," the order explains.

Article 33 of the Money Loan Court Law, 2003 also dictates for such advertisements to come out in leading Bangla national newspapers.

Sources said the ministry has made the move as it is irked by allegations of corruption by money loan courts. Allegedly, these courts not only order the banks concerned to publish advertisements in unknown newspapers but also issue show-causes if they choose to advertise the auction notices in leading newspapers.

Till September last year, 260,027 cases with a total claim of Tk 14,295 crore were pending with the money loan courts.

at all. Moreover, over Tk 18 lakh has been withdrawn against fake bills.

It further says the DG, who is also convener of the tender committee, caused a loss of Tk 16.73 lakh to the national exchequer through tender manipulation and irregularities in purchase of various raw materials for making films in 2002-2003 fiscal year.

It also states that such activities of DG Syed Mahbubur Rahman are punishable crimes under Article 3 (B) and recurrence of corruption under Article 3 (D) of the Public Servant (Discipline and Appeal) Rules, 1985.

However, the DG in his reply said the inquiry committee brought vague allegations against him which were contrary to natural justice. Regarding withdrawal of bill amounting to over Tk 18 lakh, he claimed that the allegation is 'undesirable'.

On causing a loss of Tk 16.73 lakh through tender manipulation and irregularities in the purchase of various raw materials for making films in 2002-2003 fiscal year, the DG claimed that the allegation is 'undesirable'.

Meanwhile, official sources said though the DG claimed himself innocent and not involved in any corruption or irregularities, the inquiry committee has found evidences of his corruption, irregularities, misconduct and abuse of power.

Cold wave

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Jessore, Kushtia and Sathkira.

Light to moderate fog may cover riverine areas of the country this morning with slight fall in night temperature, it adds.

Dhaka's highest temperature was 23.7 degrees Celsius yesterday while the lowest was 13.6.

Coupled with thick layers of fog and cold wind from northern direction, yesterday's freezing cold affected the people of Panchagarh, Nilphamari, Thakurgaon, Kurigram, Rangpur, Lalmonirhat, Gaibandha, Joypurhat, Naogaon, Bogra, Chapainawabganj, Rajshahi, Natore, Pabna and Sirajganj districts and adjoining char areas of river basins.

Blast kills

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randomly after the blasts. That could not be independently confirmed.

Mohammed described seeing a US military vehicle on fire after the first blast.

As more American forces came to the scene, another bomb went off, setting fire to a second vehicle, he said.

Mohammed said he carried several injured people to the hospital.

The last serious attack in Khaldiyah took place on Saturday when a car bomb killed three American soldiers at a checkpoint and injured six in addition to several Iraqi civilians. Two other American soldiers were killed in Fallujah the same day.

Khaldiyah and Fallujah are part of the Sunni Triangle, the area in central Iraq where most of the anti-US attacks by die-hard Saddam Hussein loyalists have taken place.

The US military says the attacks have reduced in number since Saddam's arrest on December 13.

World appeal

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In 10 Asian countries and killed eight people -- prompted the World Health Organisation and two other international organisations to ask for money and expertise to fight an all-out war against it.

"This is a serious global threat to human health," said WHO chief Lee Jong-Wook. "We must begin this hard, costly work now."

Health and economic experts fear bird flu has the potential to be more devastating than Sars (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome), which killed about 800 people and infected some 8,000 others worldwide in the first half of 2003.

Sars, spread by human contact, was concentrated in cities like Hong Kong, Taipei, Singapore and Beijing, as well as densely populated Guangdong province in southern China, causing heavy losses to tourism and related industries.

Bird flu by comparison is ravaging farming villages across a wider swath of territory but is so far suspected of being spread only by infected poultry.

China's Xinhua news agency said bird flu had killed ducks in the southern province of Guanzhi, where a senior Lao Agriculture Ministry official said the disease had struck the area around Vientiane.

Japan, which banned Thai chicken imports before the Bangkok government confirmed it was fighting a major outbreak,

promptly shut its doors to chicken from China's massive farms.

The spread of bird flu has emerged with a rapidity the WHO calls "historically unprecedented" and is proving difficult to stamp out despite the slaughter of millions of chickens, as a fresh outbreak in South Korea showed.

So did the announcement by WHO regional director Shigeru Omi in Hanoi that tests had confirmed another human case of bird flu in Vietnam and "there might be many more cases."

"We don't know how this virus is spreading and so it's safe to presume that nowhere can consider itself safe," Cordingley said. "The challenge is growing by the day."

The deaths of the Thai boys means all but one of at least eight confirmed bird flu victims have been children, leaving scientists trying to figure out why the young are so vulnerable.

Thailand also has 10 suspected cases, of whom five have died.

The FAO, WHO and other expert groups say the only way to win the battle against bird flu is to kill infected poultry and all others within five km (three miles) of an outbreak.

Thailand is leading the way by slaughtering millions of chickens, but Indonesia refused to follow, saying it didn't have the money to compensate farmers and would choose the cheaper option of vaccinations.

Essentials prices

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crude oil prices.

Though a litre of soybean oil was being sold at Tk 50 to 53 and a maund (37 kgs) of soybean oil at Tk 1,870, down from Tk 1,930 the day before yesterday in the city's Moulvibazar wholesale market, still the retail market price remained steady at Tk 58 to 60.

"International market price and poor stock of soybean oil are two principal reasons behind price hike," said Managing Director, Indent Farm, of City Oil Mills Mizanul Islam.

"Two to three months back a metric ton of crude soybean oil from the US would cost \$540 but now it costs \$670," he said.

The US stock of oil seeds depleted significantly due to low yield, he said. The US oil market is very volatile now, he added. Against the usual oil stock of 50,000 tons in the country, there is only 4,000 to 5,000 tons, Mizanul said.

He observed that the government control over retail market is very weak.

Mohammed Afsar of Kamal Vegetables Oil Mills agreed with

Mizanul. He said a ton of crude oil would cost \$ 580 three months ago, \$620 two months ago, but now it costs \$ 675.

"The government is well aware of soybean oil's imported price and it should intervene to determine a fair price in the retail market," noted the Karwan Bazar distributor of Rupchanda brand.

Bangladesh Edible Oil Industries Ltd. (Rupchanda) Coordinator Nasir said their Marketing Executive Monir Ali Khan could tell about the reason behind the price hike of their brand, but Khan was not available on cellphone and could not be reached on his office phone, either.

One Ibrahim at the computer section of Teer Oil Mills office said there was no-one in the office to comment on the issue as the owner was abroad.

Despite repeated attempts to reach Additional Secretary of commerce ministry Abdus Salam for government version, as the secretary was abroad, he could not be contacted till filing of this report at 7:45 last night.

Gas pipeline contractors

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But State Minister for Energy AKM Mosharraf Hossain, also member of the committee, will not accompany them, as the committee reasoned out that he holds an executive position.

Mosharraf told the meeting that he was in the dark about the allegations, but promised an investigation into the allegations, meeting sources said.

His claim of ignorance is a contrast to his comments on the issue The Daily Star carried in its report.

The parliamentary body also asked authorities to transfer 35 meter readers, including Mahbub and Mozaffar, accused of pocketing hefty sums from gas pilferage.

ANOMALIES

The contractors are laying the pipelines 1 to 1.5 feet underground instead of 4 feet -- the safe measurement.

The contractors should have used 300 tees to prop the pipelines, but used only 100 tees, alleged Bakul, also convener of the sub-committee on gas.

Bakul questioned the basic project profile of Titas that planned extending the two pipelines 210 kilometres long.

"The length could be much less

Bird flu

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through India-Bangladesh border.

The government banned import of chicken and egg from India, Pakistan, Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia, Taiwan, Malaysia and South Korea from January 15 after they reported bird flu outbreak.

The ministry also reviewed the situation in the country following the spread of Avian influenza virus among chickens in the neighbouring countries and found no such virus anywhere in the country.

"So far, we are in the safe side," said fisheries and livestock secretary Iqbal Uddin Ahmed Chowdhury. He said all precautions have been taken to deal with the situation if any such outbreak is reported.

The ministry officials said the government has also taken an initiative to test the chicken and egg imported before the ban was clamped.

Eco-park

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guard and police fire during an anti-ecopark demonstration of Garos in Modhupur on January 3.

Referring to the 1997 Chittagong Hill Tracts peace agreement during the AL rule, the former prime minister said: "We had formed a land commission after the agreement and one of its objectives was to establish land right of indigenous people."

Hasina supported the Garos' seven-point demand, including land records for the indigenous people, withdrawal of false cases against them and a judicial probe into the killing of Piren.

Leaders of the indigenous people vowed resistance to the controversial eco-park project, echoing the anti-conservation plan stance of Bangladesh Adibashi Forum President Shantu Larma, who spoke on Sunday at a protest rally in Modhupur, 50 kilometres north of Tangail town.

Lawmaker Promod Mankhin, Sanjeeb Drong, Albert Mankhin and Shanti Sangma spoke at the programme also addressed by Dr Abdul Razzak, AL lawmaker from Modhupur.

The AL chief offered financial help to Piren's family and Utpal Nakrek, who suffered bullet wounds during the January 3 demonstration.

Morshed

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On regional and international issues, the foreign minister said Bangladesh sought Indonesia's support to get membership of the Asian Regional Forum (ARF), which is needed to join Association of South-East Asian Nations (Asean) development partners.

Indonesia gave support to Bangladesh's candidature for the post of secretary general of the Organisation of Islamic Countries (OIC), he told reporters.

Khan said both Khaleda and Megawati expressed identical position on Iraq. The two leaders stressed the need for more UN role in war-ravaged Iraq and quick establishment of an elected government by the Iraqi people.

They also felt the urgency of early implementation of the roadmap for resolving the Palestine-Israeli conflict and establish peace in the Middle East, he said.

The foreign minister said Dhaka and Jakarta agreed to exchange intelligence and information at appropriate level to combat terrorism. The two sides also agreed to jointly resist the move to identify Islam with terrorism.

Khan said there is no scope for fundamentalist activities in Bangladesh and none should make irresponsible statement about the country.

Replying to a question, he said Dhaka is engaged in exchanging intelligence and information with different countries about the movement of terrorists and their activities.

"We firmly believe in precaution than cure; we're cautious... we don't want to close our doors for foreign visitors, we want to keep our doors secured," he told the questioner.

The foreign minister termed Prime Minister's visit to Brunei, the first by a head of government from Bangladesh, "a visit of a different kind" for warm hospitality shown by the Sultan of Brunei and his family.

Khan said the Brunei government has decided to withdraw the embargo on recruitment of Bangladeshi workers. This will open a new chapter in manpower export to that oil rich country, he added.

State Minister for Foreign Affairs Reaz Rahman, State Minister for Expatriates Welfare and Overseas Employment Qamrul Islam, President and Foreign Secretary Shamsar Mobin Chowdhury were present.

Judiciary: CJ

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retirement of Justice KM Hasan on Monday.

Earlier, President Iajuddin Ahmed administered the oath to the newly appointed CJ at Bangabhaban.

The new CJ said the Bench and the Bar should work together to uphold independence of the judiciary.

"The legal profession and judiciary now stand at a crossroads of our history, and it is a common perception that an independent judiciary is indispensable to impartial justice under law. In such a situation, the Bench and the Bar have no other alternative but to work together to uphold and exemplify judicial independence -- both its individual and institutional aspects."

Referring to the backlog of court cases, Justice Mudassar said mutual understanding and cooperation between the judges and the lawyers could expedite the existing process of disposal of cases and help reduce logjam.

At the felicitating meeting, held in the courtroom of the CJ, Mahmud applauded the new chief justice "for not knocking doors of the ministers or, filing false certificates or showing victory signs after delivering judgement in favour of the government to get appointment as chief justice."

"We (the Bar) are happy as such a person does not become chief justice," the SCBA president remarked in the jam-packed courtroom and expressed his hope that the felicitating meeting would narrow the gap between the Bench and the Bar.

Showing an empty chair on the right of the chief justice, the Bar leader said, "Empty chair is not a good sign. This chair remains empty as a judge could not join this happy occasion, and is empty on protest."

He urged the CJ to take step so that the judge could forget his sorrows and grievances. He, however, didn't name the judge who was absent.

Mahmud said the Bar was anxious about the newspaper reports on appointment of the chief justice, but the apprehension had been removed. "Justice is divine, but the problem is, it is dispensed by fallible mortal beings."

Seeking apology for the observations, the Bar president said he was just airing the grievances of 3,000 lawyers of the Supreme Court, taking the opportunity of presence of all judges of the highest court.

He said "political divisions" among judges are painful and benches are also being constituted on the basis of political affinity, which Mahmud termed very wrong.

JS body

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Mohammed Asaduzzaman as telling the committee's meeting yesterday.

The meeting held at the Jatiya Sangsad (JS) Bhaban decided to summon the authorities of all private universities to its meeting to enquire about the issue. Fifty-one private universities are now operating in the country.

"Universities should be service-oriented. But the private universities have turned into commercial organisations. So we have decided to look into the matter," chairman of the JS body, Shamsul Alam Pramanik, told The Daily Star yesterday.

The committee also decided to ask high-ups of all the boards of education to attend its meeting to discuss their problems. The parliamentary body will also exchange opinions with the UGC to ensure quality of education.

At yesterday's meeting a sub-committee formed earlier to probe allegations of irregularities and corruption at the National University sought more time to finish its task.

The National University yesterday submitted a report on its manpower and problems that the committee considered incomplete. It asked the university authorities to providing more details in another report.

Committee members and officials concerned were present at the meeting, presided over by the chairman.

IGP fined

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present, as the court earlier exempted him from appearing in person on the grounds of his preoccupation with the 'Police Week'.

Identifying the IGP as contemner, the court observed that it is beyond any reasonable doubt that the IGP was liable for gross misconduct against the judge as well as the court.

Referring to the clarification submitted by the IGP as asked by the court upon a suo moto rule in connection with a contempt case against five police sergeants, the court said that in fact, the IGP had supported the action of the traffic policemen who misbehaved with the judge.

The Court had issued the contempt rule upon the IGP for his written comments and remarks while replying to certain queries in connection with the contempt case against the traffic policemen in August last year.

The sergeants did not show due respect to a sitting judge of the High Court at Farmgate on his way to court in a flag car in June last year.

In his written reply to the High Court, the IGP had said that by issuing the contempt rule against

When people are looking for speedy completion of trial, senior and efficient judges are being left out or being kept on the sidelines, he alleged, calling upon the chief justice to constitute benches with the efficient judges.

Referring to a remark by a former CJ, Mahmud said frequent visit of the attorney general (AG) and of a particular group of lawyers to the chamber of the chief justice raises controversy over the constitution of benches.

The SCBA leader also pointed out that junior lawyers are being neglected and their cases piled up because hearing does not take place properly. He urged the new CJ to look into the matter.

Further, he regretted the submission of report against an accused judge by the Supreme Judicial Council at the last moment of retirement of Justice KM Hasan and of camera trial of the case.

The Bar president also expressed his resentment over the stay of order or creating obstacles to delivering judgement by the High Court and said constitutionally the Appellate Division has no power, "but to favour the government the Appellate Division is negating Article 102".

Police informer

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found Tk 3 lakh cash in Khalil's coat-pocket, which police seized and kept in their custody, family members said.

Sources said the informant might have been going to hand over the money to a senior officer of the East Zone of Dhaka Metropolitan Police.

Sabujbagh police said Khalil stands accused in several cases lodged with Sabujbagh and Demra police stations. They also claimed he had no links with any top official of the East Zone.

Khalil's wife Rokeya Begum said, "My husband and his friend went out of our house with the money to buy a reconditioned car."

"The attackers came just to kill Khalil, as they did not take the money kept in an