

B'ban hotelier Bablu still missing

OUR CORRESPONDENT, *Bandarban*

Joint forces, until yesterday, failed to recover the abducted Bandarban hotelier Hasan Mahbub Bablu, a week after an indigenous outfit kidnapped him from his resort.

"They could not track the whereabouts of Bablu," a top police official said on condition of anonymity.

When contacted yesterday, Bablu's relatives seemed hopeful of rescuing him.

"We are bargaining with his abductors as they lowered the ransom to Tk 1 crore from double the amount previously demanded. And, we are expecting him released soon," said a family source.

Some local indigenous leaders were mediating the process, he added.

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Police yet to find rest of looted money
Look for city ward commissioner

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, *Sylhet*

Police could recover no more money after recovering Tk 5 lakh of Tk 22 lakh looted from a Pubali bank's vehicle Saturday evening in the city's Kodomtoli area.

Teams from Sylhet Kotwali and South Surma police stations looked for the robbers and their cohorts in the different villages throughout Saturday night but failed to arrest them.

However, police officials yesterday said they are now almost certain about the involvement of the city Ward Commissioner Ashique Ahmed in the incident. His mother

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PHOTO: STAR

Hide traders wait out a steep fall in prices and lack of buyers for their stocks worth about Tk 10 crore in Natore.

Hide traders face huge loss from 'artificial crisis'

Tk 10cr rawhide stockpiled in Natore attracts no major buyer

ANWAR ALI, *Rajshahi*

Hide traders in Natore despair following steep fall in prices and lack of buyers for their stocks of rawhides worth about Tk 10 crore.

Traders said they bought cowhides at rates ranging from Tk 1,200 to Tk 1,800 and goat-hides at Tk 300 to Tk 325 during the Eid-ul-Azha. But, a standard cowhide is now being sold at Tk 1,000 to

Tk 1,200 and a goat-hide at Tk 250 to Tk 290.

A prominent member of the several hundred traders who operate at Natore hide market, the largest in the north-western region, described the situation as 'an artificial crisis'.

He alleged tannery owners, the main buyers of the market, were deliberately delaying purchase in order to force traders lower hide price. "They also

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CHT ROAD BLOCKADE
First day passes off quietly

OUR CORRESPONDENT, *Bandarban*

The first day of the 48-hour road blockade in the three hill districts called by Parbatya Chattagram Jana Sanghati Samity (PCJSS) passed off yesterday without any violent incident as the army and police patrolled trouble-prone areas as well as major highways.

Our Bandarban correspondent reports: A large number of armed police were deployed at various points of the town to avoid any untoward incident.

Although non-motorised vehicles plied in the town, inter-district communication remained snapped as buses, trucks and other commuter motor vehicles stayed off the

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MURDER CASE
Home ministry moves to drop BNP leaders' names

OUR CORRESPONDENT, *Bogra*

The home ministry yesterday directed the district administration to drop the names of four BNP leaders from the Latif murder case.

A letter signed by Mohammed Mainuddin, senior assistant secretary of the home ministry, asked authorities to withdraw the names of Tozammer Hossain Tozam, president of BNP's Dupchachia municipal unit, his brother Rafiqul Islam, Golam Rabbani and Shahin from the case.

The letter said the four were implicated in the case for political harassment and directed the district administration to report back to the ministry after the names are dropped.

Axe to fall on 2,741 BJMC staff

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

State-owned Bangladesh Jute Mills Corporation (BJMC) will axe 2741 of its personnel by the end of this month if they refuse to stand down accepting a golden handshake scheme, State Minister for Jute Lutfar Rahman Khan Azad said during a meeting with BJMC officials and staff yesterday.

The job cut is intended to bring government jute mills first to a break even point so that they can eventually go on to a profit, he said.

The 29 government-owned jute mills incurred a loss of Tk 70 crore till December 2003 and the layoffs would cut the loss by Tk 30 crore during fiscal 2003-2004, the minister told the meeting.

He called upon all to work honestly to make the jute mills profitable, warning that workers at any jute mill failing to generate a positive return would be subject to layoffs.

The government has a plan to axe 5690 BJMC personnel during the current fiscal. Till January, 2994 officials and employees have

already resigned under the golden handshake scheme.

Also, 48 of the state-owned 77 jute mills have already been shut down.

Azad vowed to uproot corruption in the jute sector which he said is beset with irregularities. "There's a vested quarter in this sector, which I will eliminate, no matter what the situation may be."

He said there is no accountability in management and marketing of

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KEROSENE SHORTFALL

Kuwait responds to crisis, sending fuel

UNB, *Dhaka*

Kuwait Petroleum Corporation (KPC) will dispatch emergency consignments of kerosene and jet fuel to enable Bangladesh overcome a sudden fuel crisis.

Officials at the Energy and Mineral Resources Division yesterday said Kuwait government owned KPC showed positive response about sending the fuel consignments immediately.

Initially, a shipment of 30,000 tonnes of fuel, including 22,000 tonnes of kerosene and 8,000 tonnes of jet fuel, is expected to reach Bangladesh by February 25, while another freight of 2.10 lakh

tonnes of diesel is scheduled to arrive on February 12.

State Minister for Energy AKM Mosharraf Hossain told newsmen that the Board of Bangladesh Petroleum Corporation (BPC) contacted the KPC through Bangladesh Embassy in Kuwait and received an assurance of meeting its demand of next three months.

Besides, the state minister said a re-tender has been initiated for supply of petroleum fuel for nine months commencing from April this year.

"We are also going to do away with rationing of supplies from depots after the KPC assurance,"

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Biman averts accident in Sylhet

UNB, *Sylhet*

A Bangladesh Biman Airbus averted accident at the MAG Osmani International Airport in Sylhet yesterday just before take-off.

Detecting a mechanical fault, the pilot of Dhaka-Sylhet flight immediately aborted the take-off and brought the capital-bound aircraft with 220 passengers including nine children abroad to the terminal at about 2:00pm. The flight was suspended.

However, 82 passengers were flown to their destinations by another Biman flight in the evening while the others were scheduled to board another flight last night, said airport sources.

Local officials informed the higher authorities of the matter and sought assistance.

COMPUTER SUPPLY FIASCO

Govt baffled over Dutch court fine

MUSTAK HOSSAIN

The government is in a fix over payment of a Tk 31 crore fine sentenced by a court in The Hague for cancelling a contract with a Dutch company for supplying computers.

The computers and accessories were intended to be used for implementing an education ministry project funded by a grant of the Netherlands.

The Dutch court has asked Bangladesh to pay the amount as fine and compensation to the plaintiff, Tulip Computers International NV, immediately, a senior diplomat of the Netherlands Embassy in Dhaka confirmed.

The diplomat, who talked to The Daily Star on condition of anonym-

ity, however, refrained from commenting on the possible consequences of the fine on bilateral relationship. "The matter is now being dealt by the court, so no comment," he said.

The Netherlands embassy has informed the Bangladesh government that if the court order is not followed then ocean- and air-liners carrying Bangladesh's flag would become liable to confiscation in European Union countries, according to EU laws.

Bangladesh can't even appeal, as the case was settled about four months back.

In December 2000, the Netherlands government had agreed to provide about Tk 49.95

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EKUSHEY BOOK FAIR

30 new books make way to shelves

DU CORRESPONDENT

The Amar Ekushey Book Fair 2004 was abuzz with bookworms who thronged the venue at the Bangla Academy premises yesterday on the second day of the three-week fair.

Thirty new books made way to the shelves at fair yesterday, said a Bangla Academy organiser of the annual event who works at the publication department of the academy.

Of them, Miazi Publications published six books, Agami Publication five books including three books of Humayun Azad and Press Institute of Bangladesh five books.

Hundreds of book connoisseurs, mostly youths, flocked to the academy premises to have a first-hand feel of the fair. They went around

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Resist 'chaos-creating' opposition: PM

UNB, *Senbag, Noakhali*

Prime Minister Khaleda Zia yesterday called for resisting 'those trying to unleash violence' to create chaos in the country.

"We want development, peace and an educated nation which only the four-party alliance government can give," she told a huge public rally at Senbag Pilot High School ground in the afternoon.

Responding to threats issued by the main opposition Awami League to bring the government down, the prime minister warned, "It's not the alliance government that will fall but you yourself will fall down if you try to go for a push."

"When the popularity of the alliance government is growing, the opposition is creating chaos," she said.

The prime minister's warning came just four days before the

Awami League is set to enforce a countrywide hartal, which it is touting as the beginning of a one-point anti-government agitation.

Accusing the AL of sowing the seeds of violence during its regime, she said their politics means violence, killing and extortion.

"The opposition that is talking big now had provided illegal licences and arms to the youths during that period," the PM said.

Calling for increasing production and reducing dependence on imports, Khaleda pointed at the scope for planting coconut and betel nut trees along the coastal belt.

These, she said, will not only reduce imports but also be helpful for improving the environment. She also stressed growing more herbal plants and trees.

The prime minister announced that the demand for a stadium in

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PHOTO: STAR

Newspersons form a human chain at Muktangan in Dhaka yesterday during a demonstration against the killings and intimidation of journalists.

Rover makes drilling debut on Mars

AP, *Los Angeles*

Fresh from being given a clean bill of health, the Spirit rover drilled its first tiny hole in a rock on the surface of Mars, Nasa scientists said Saturday.

"We made some history here. We put the first planned hole on Mars," said Stephen Gorevan, a scientist handling some of Spirit's workload.

A tool equipped with small, diamond-shaped heads cut 2.7 millimeters deep into a small area of a sharply angled rock dubbed Adirondack. The circular hole, measuring about 45 millimeters wide, could give scientists clues to Mars' geologic past.

"The rock gave us a lot of resistance," Gorevan said. "We needed three hours to go this deep."

The football-sized rock is believed to be made of basalt, a volcanic material. An image of the rock shows depressions that resemble the eye and open mouth of the "Pac-Man" video game figure.

Spirit has spent more than a month on Mars as part of an \$820 million mission that includes its twin, Opportunity, which is exploring the opposite end of the planet. They are looking for evidence that water -

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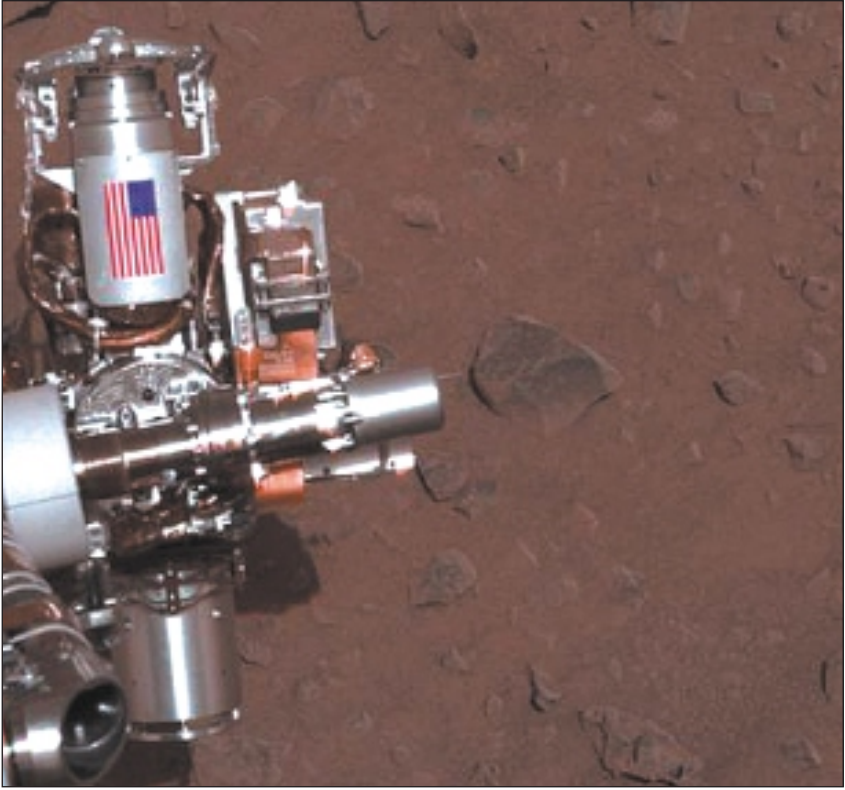


PHOTO: AFP

This image released on Friday shows the Mars Exploration Rover Spirit's 'hand,' poised in front of the rock nicknamed Adirondack, since developing communication problems.

Kerry rolls to big wins

REUTERS, *Detroit*

Democratic front-runner John Kerry yesterday rolled to decisive wins in Michigan and Washington state, extending his domination of his party's presidential race and moving a step closer to the nomination.

Kerry, a Massachusetts senator and decorated Vietnam War veteran, cruised to easy double-digit victories in both states on Saturday, the two biggest to vote so far, giving him nine wins in the first 11 nominating contests.

With three more states voting in the next three days, Kerry's growing momentum threatens to swamp all five rivals vying for the right to challenge President George W. Bush in November.

Kerry sounded like he was already looking ahead to a match-up with Bush during a campaign swing through Tennessee and Virginia, which vote on Tuesday. He promised voters he could win in the South and stand up to the president.

"George Bush's days are numbered, and change is coming to

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Lankan parliament sacked, April 2 snap polls called

AFP, *Colombo*

Sri Lanka's fragile peace bid and reconstruction from war were plunged into uncertainty yesterday after the president sacked parliament and called elections nearly four years ahead of schedule.

President Chandrika Kumaratunga dissolved the 225-member legislature with immediate effect and set April 2 polls Saturday after months of wrangling with the prime minister over how to end ethnic strife that has claimed over 60,000 lives since 1972.

The dissolution came in an apparent bid to end a bitter power struggle with her arch rival Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe that has threatened to take the country back to war, officials said.

Her calling of the third parliamentary election since 2000 came despite international pressure on her to compromise with Wickremesinghe.

The two are from different parties and were elected separately in bloody campaigns that have become a trademark of Sri Lankan elections.

Kumaratunga sacked the government nearly four years before its six-year term was to expire in December 2007. It will be the third parliamentary election in under four years.

Wickremesinghe's party yesterday asked elections chief Dayananda Dissanayake to invite foreign poll observers in a bid to

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DEATH THREAT TO JOURNOS

Rajshahi press club under police watch

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, *Rajshahi*

Rajshahi Metropolitan Police have taken security measures at Rajshahi City Press Club (RCPC) following an outlawed organisation's letter pronouncing death of 11 local journalists.

Three policemen led by a sub-inspector were posted there from Saturday night after the general secretary of the RCPC filed a GD (general diary) with Boalia Police Station.

On Saturday, Purbo Banglar

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| Prayer Timings | | |
|----------------------------|-------|--------|
| February 9 | | |
| | Azan | Jamaat |
| Fajr | 5-40 | 6-10 |
| Zohr | 12-45 | 1-15 |
| Asr | 4-15 | 4-30 |
| Maghrib | 5-55 | 6-00 |
| Esha | 7-15 | 7-45 |
| Source: Islamic Foundation | | |