

# Away from prying parental eyes

Valentine's Day today

AFP, Dhaka

Young lovers around the world struggle to escape the watchful eye of their parents, but in countries such as Bangladesh the quest to find that perfect Valentine hideaway is even more difficult. Kazi Rokibul, a 23-year-old student, plans to buy flowers for his girlfriend this Valentine's Day. Then Kazi and Shurovy, also 23, will spend the afternoon meandering around Dhaka University's leafy campus. It's not a plan that would alarm many parents, but Kazi knows his mother and father would hate the idea.

"They really dislike Valentine's Day," he said. "They think it is part of some alien culture that is being imposed on us. It irritates them that my generation likes it so much."

Not so long ago, Valentine's Day was virtually unheard of in Bangladesh, the world's third largest Muslim-majority country. But in recent years, it has been enthusiastically embraced by teens and twenty-somethings.

Bangladesh's younger generation is highly receptive to Western culture, with interest partly fuelled by widespread access to satellite television channels.

Dhaka's many new cafes and restaurants have been a gift for dating couples.

Aimed at the burgeoning middle class, they also provide a safe haven for thousands of young people desperate to shake off the

attention of their ever-watchful parents.

"We only opened a few months ago but I'm sure we will be completely full on Valentine's day with couples having ice cream and cappuccinos," said Reza Karim, manager of a new Italian-themed cafe in Dhaka.

"They will come here for a fun, romantic time. In places like this they can be alone together without their families watching all the time, although of course they will probably tell their parents they are going to be with their friends."

At Dhaka's Asparagus restaurant, manager Kazi Nazrul says Valentine's Day is getting busier each year.

"It's getting more and more popular all the time. Young people like to mark it because they see it as a bit of fun. Plus, they like to have something for themselves, that has never been part of their parents' experience," he said.

"Rich families don't really mind their children meeting their girlfriend or boyfriend. But middle class and working class parents disapprove, so couples meet secretly most of the time, not just on Valentine's Day."

For those stuck for ideas this Valentine's Day, newspapers have been offering advice on the best places to meet. Suggestions include cafes, the roofs of apartment blocks, and parks.

Alternatively, they suggest couples go paddle-boating on a city lake or for snacks at Dhaka University.

# US State Deppt official due today

UNB, Dhaka

US Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for South Asia Michele Sison arrives in Dhaka today on a two-day official visit.

During his visit, Sison will meet officials of the foreign, home and finance ministries, and several other high government officials.

She is also expected to meet some leaders of the Awami League and members of the American business community in Bangladesh, said a release of US embassy.

Sison will hold talks with the Bangladesh representatives of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, and will speak at the opening dinner of Asia Foundation's "South Asia Regional Working Group on America's Role in Asia".

She visited Bangladesh in October last year and discussed with Bangladesh officials the issues like good governance, law and order, economy and human rights.

# BSF abducts 2 Bangladeshi fishermen

BSS, Thakurgaon

Indian Border Security Force (BSF) abducted two Bangladeshi fishermen from Betna border under Haripur upazila of Thakurgaon district on Thursday, official sources said yesterday.

Witnesses said the BSF men picked up Sultan Ahmed, 22, and Kalu Mia, 25, while they were fishing in the Nagor river near the border.

On information, Bangladesh Rifles (BDR) personnel of Betna Border outpost rushed to the spot and lodged a strong protest with the BSF.

# Ekushey Book Fair

FROM PAGE 1  
many as 126 books were shelved and more books will be brought on today, said Abdul Gani of Agami Publication. Books of poems as well as those featuring romance, which is the theme of Valentine's Day, are expected to top the list of today's sale.

Romantic novels and books of poems by Dr Humayan Azad, Imdadul Haque Milon, Shamsur Rahman, Sumonto Aslam, Humayan Ahmed, Dr Muhammad Zafar Iqbal and some new writers topped the list yesterday.

The crowd yesterday evening was so big it was difficult to go around without bumping into one another.

Popular writers including Imdadul Haque Milon, Pronob Bhatta and TV artiste Sawan were seen obliging autograph hunters.

A discussion on 'Centennial tributes: Contribution of Syed Mujtaba Ali in the Bangla literature of travel' was held at the fair venue followed by a cultural programme.

# Queen Sofia

FROM PAGE 1  
Palli Karma-Sahayak Foundation (PKSF) is organising the summit in collaboration with the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), Department for International Development (DFID) and the World Bank.

Prime Minister Khaleda Zia will inaugurate the four-day summit and Leader of the Opposition Sheikh Hasina will address the closing session on February 19.

The first such microcredit summit was held in Washington in 1997. More than 2900 delegates from 137 countries attended it and launched a nine-year campaign to bring 100 million ultra poor people of the world under microcredit programme.

The Dhaka summit will review the progress towards the campaign targets and discuss a range of issues including institutionalisation of microcredit.

The summit will also help formulate strategies to achieve the millennium development goals adopted at the millennium summit in 2000.

Sofia will visit some microcredit projects implemented by Brac, Asa and the Grameen Bank. She will stay at Hotel Sonargaon.

# WMD

FROM PAGE 12  
veeyed now believe Bush is "honest and trustworthy," down seven percentage points since late October and 19 points lower than the summer of 2002.

While almost 70 percent thought Bush "honestly believed" Iraq had weapons of mass destruction, 54 percent still insisted the president exaggerated or lied about prewar intelligence.

Reuters adds: The Senate Intelligence Committee on Thursday decided to expand its investigation into prewar intelligence on Iraq's weapons of mass destruction to determine whether statements made by US officials had been supported by the underlying information.

Democrats had been pushing for a broader scope to the inquiry to determine whether the Bush administration exaggerated the intelligence to make its case for war, but Republicans had resisted the demand.

[Details on page 9]



PHOTO: STAR

A bus goes up in flames in Dhaka yesterday, as it was set afire by arsonists with alleged ties to the main opposition Awami League that enforces a countrywide daylong hartal today in the wake of police action against demonstrators.

# Toll-takers thrive

FROM PAGE 1  
Rickshaw Spare Parts Merchants' Association and Nawabpur Shop Owners' Samity.

In the latest incident of businessmen killing, President of Pet Shop Owners' Association Shahadat Hossain Hiru was gunned down at DIT Market at Kathpotti in Karwan Bazar Tuesday night.

Mostafa Kamal, owner a travel agency, was shot dead and three others were injured at his office on Kazi Nazrul Islam Avenue on Monday for his refusal to pay Tk 2 lakh in toll. No-one was arrested till last night.

An unidentified caller telephoned businessman Anwar Hossain Babul, 40, treasurer of Mirpur Benarashi Tanti Samity, at his house at Pallabi on Monday. He then went out and his body was found on the Zoo Road in Rainkhola the same day.

Paper trader Billal Hossain Selim was killed in Nayabazar Shishu Park on Monday night.

On February 5, unidentified assailants stabbed vegetable trader Farhad at Gulshan and he died two days later.

Hide trader Mohammad Ali was gunned down at Shantibagh in Motijheel on February 2.

On January 27, clothes trader and police informer Rezaul Karim was shot dead at Sabujbagh for not paying toll.

Paper trader Humayun Kabir was chased and shot inside Progati Stationery in Kotwali for non-payment of toll on January 26. Businessmen enforced a strike in the locality the following day.

On January 20, machinery trader Shariful Haq Siraji alias John, owner of Siraji Home and Overseas in Nawabpur, was beaten dead at Tejgaon.

Earlier on December 25, Ismail, an old car trader, and one of his

friends were killed allegedly by a Jatiyatabadi Chhatra Dal (JCD) activist and his gang on refusal to pay Tk 2 lakh in toll.

On December 17, Khandakar Masudur Rahman, owner of Splinter Security Service, was shot dead at his office at Manipurpara in Tejgaon.

Nurul Haq alias Nuru, a fishery project owner, was shot at Mirpur on November 21.

Commissioner of Dhaka Metropolitan Police (DMP) Ashraf Huda says there are reasons other than extortion behind the killing of some businessmen.

"It's wrong to describe all killings as signs of deterioration of law and order," he told The Daily Star. "Some businessmen were killed due to personal enmity but the law enforcers were blamed for failure to combat extortion," he added.

The law and order is much better now, he said. "In 2002, 388 people were killed and the number was 323 last year," he mentioned.

But traders say otherwise. "The situation has worsened," said Habibur Rahman Kawsar, president of Bangladesh Gold Sellers' (Poddar) Association, Tantiabazar.

"Activists of BNP's wings, mainly Jubo Dal, control extortion here. We are getting less customers due to rising mugging in the area," he said.

"They demand Tk 5 lakh to 20 lakh and settle for Tk 20,000 to 2 lakh, and we have to pay it through a middleman," said a gold seller at Tantiabazar.

"We have repeatedly informed police about extortion but no action has been taken," said Gias Uddin Chowdhury, president of Bangladesh Agricultural Machinery Merchants' Association.

"Police know all extortionists but they do not arrest them," he alleged.

# US envoy's Barisal visit cancelled

UNB, Barisal

Despite strict security measures taken by the administration and exemption of Barisal from hartal by the Awami League (AL), today's visit of US Ambassador Harry K Thomas to Barisal has been cancelled.

Thomas was scheduled to inaugurate Mohiuddin Ahmed Asthma Centre and General Hospital in Mehendiganj upazila today.

The visit has been cancelled after GMG Airlines, in which the ambassador was scheduled to fly to Barisal, cancelled its today's Dhaka-Barisal flight, said Farida Mohiuddin, wife of late Awami League leader Mohiuddin Ahmed.

Additional Police Superintendent (ASP) Farid Ahmed, who was given the charge of security of the US envoy during his planned trip to Barisal, also confirmed the cancellation of his (Thomas) visit.

Apart from inaugurating the asthma hospital at the invitation of Mohiuddin's family, Thomas was also scheduled to attend programmes marking the first death anniversary of Mohiuddin Ahmed, former president of Barisal district Awami League.

The envoy's programme here also included a visit to a girls' school and meetings with Barisal City Mayor Mojibor Rahman Sarwar, and President of Barisal Chamber of Commerce and Industry Ebaiddul Haq Chand.

# Weaving

FROM PAGE 12

dren," Rahela said.

Rahela and her husband had to sweat on the looms for two or three days to make sure their children are in comfort.

After receiving training and microcredit, Rahela and her husband now own three looms and a land block. Rahela cheerily announces their social position has also improved. "We get invited to all weddings these days," she said.

The induction of these previously marginalised individuals, like Monzu and Rahela, has not only alleviated their poverty but also helped broaden the pool of Tangai weavers. This has broken the chain of exploitation, as the labourers are building funds through their own looms.

The weaving community has also been bolstered by the re-entrance of weavers who left the profession due to either better opportunities in urban areas at home or overseas. Some wished to return to the trade but found themselves having to pay high interest for small loans from mohajans.

Mohammad Dabiruddin, another weaver from Olowa-Borotta, found there was no opportunity to expand his single loom due to high-interest rates and left for Singapore to find better work. After he was deported due to visa restrictions, he found there was a new wave of weavers coming in and wanted to join as he could expand his looms with low-interest microcredit.

On crimes and corruption, Bhuiyan illustrated the government measures including passage of the speedy trial act, establishment of speedy trial tribunals and attempts at formation of the independent anti-corruption commission soon.

# Bhuiyan rules out

FROM PAGE 1

"The speaker, chief whip and I myself offered talks to resolve all issues what I think could be resolved through dialogues. But they did not pay heed to our repeated overtures."

"We sincerely want consensus on all major national issues. The offers are still valid."

Bhuiyan said the one-point demand of the AL was aimed at ruining democracy in Bangladesh.

He felt that the AL was still isolated from people and was unable to muster support for its causes.

"Even the Awami League is faltering to mobilise its supporters what was evident in Thursday's hartal when only a few picketed in less than 10 places in Dhaka."

He said the situation was entirely under the government's control, adding: "The BNP will get greater parliamentary seats if the polls are held right now."

"Instead of taking to the streets, the Awami League should concen-

trate on next polls."

On the AL demand of execution of the verdict in Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman assassination case, he said the AL failed to complete the trial in its five-year rule.

"The matter is entirely pending with the higher court and as believers in the rule of law, we don't want to interfere in court affairs."

On largely vacant opposition seats in parliament, Bhuiyan said the treasury bench would hold a dialogue with the Jatiya Party (Ershad) in a day or two to bring them back to the House.

"We still expect a dialogue with the Awami League and we want them to speak up their grievances in parliament."

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# AL hartal today

FROM PAGE 1

Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal (JSD-Inu) brought out a procession and then staged a rally protesting Thursday's police attack on AL leaders and workers. Addressing the rally at Bangabandhu Avenue, JSD (Inu) leaders called upon all to get united against what they dubbed as 'the present fascist government'.

News agency UNB adds: President of Fulbaria Bus Terminal Owners' Association, Akhtaruzzaman Babul, addressing a meeting at the association's office beside the Secretariat yesterday urged transport owners and workers not to respond to the call for today's hartal.

Saiful Islam Ripon, general secretary of the association, appealed to the transport owners and workers to ply their vehicles today for the interest of people. Ripon also urged the government to take effective steps to ensure security of transport workers during the shutdown.

After the meeting, the association took out a procession that ended at Fulbaria Bus Terminal, after parading the Secretariat and Gulistan areas.

Earlier in the day, the city unit of

# Bhasantek housing

FROM PAGE 12

cases, two of which are now on trial. But the bottom line is that after 10 years, the government is yet to reclaim the land from illegal occupants, slums dwellers and Rupashi Bangla, and hand it over to the developer.

"It's difficult to say exactly when the entire project land can be reclaimed from illegal occupation," said the land ministry source.

He said two land-grabbers alone have been occupying nine acres of the project land. Under the circumstances, the government has given the work order to the developer, which is carrying out soil test on whatever land is free.

"Two-thirds of the land Rupashi Bangla occupies is khas land," said a staff of North South Property Development Limited that has been awarded the contract to implement the project. "About sixty to seventy bighas of 50 acres of the project land is still under illegal occupation," he said seeking anonymity.

The former joint secretary (Development) of the Land Ministry Harunur Rashid Miah is the director (Marketing) of North South Property Development Limited. All other office bearers also reportedly used to be high government officials.

The incumbent joint secretary (Development) Sheikh Abdul Awal declined to comment. "I have nothing to say. Address your queries to officials concerned with the project."

Locals alleged that political considerations are also in the way of project implementation.

Land Minister M Shamsul Islam, however, ruled out any political complexities in land reclamation, although he did admit of encroachments and illegal occupation.

"It's a very big project and naturally there are some problems, but the problems are in the final stage of being resolved," the minister said.

Khureshd Alam, a security staff, and Faruq, the owner of a rickshaw garage, have been living in the area since 1974, and looking forward to getting a permanent house under the scheme. "We could get respite from the subhuman living conditions of the slum if the project were implemented," said Faruq. The residents of ward number 3 of Dhamalcot Mouja also echoed his sentiments.

"The slum-dwellers have been living in the land since 1974. During Ershad's regime, the land was allocated to Benarasi weavers and several groups of them have been trying to gain possession of the land," said Noor Mohammad, superintendent of Insanaiti Society Madrasah and School.

The past Awami League government called off an eviction drive in 1997 at the intervention of the then prime minister Sheikh Hasina, who instructed the authorities to leave the slum-dwellers alone, locals said.

A number of NGOs including Proshika, Urban Development Centre, Plan International, Shakti and Dustha Shasthya Kendra have been carrying out welfare activities in the slum area.

Proshika President Kazi Faruq expressed his reservations about the developer's role in the rehabilitation of the slum people. "It's a poverty alleviation programme, not a property development project. So a developer cannot achieve the goals of poor people's welfare," he said. "We will oppose any shady deal

between the government and the developers," he added.

Proshika designed the original rehabilitation project following the eviction drive in 1997. In spite of being the lowest bidder, Proshika was denied the contract as the then government resorted to duplicity and initiated a fresh bidding, Faruq alleged. But the move was stayed by the High Court on a writ petition by Proshika.

He said Proshika withdrew the petition following assurance that it would be awarded the contract in 1999, but was 'duped' by the then government. "This time around, the incumbent government awarded the contract in a non-transparent manner to North South Property Development Limited, the other bidder for the project," he alleged.

"The intention of both governments and the private developer in achieving the project goals is questionable."

He said the decision to realise a Tk 10,000 deposit from each slum family for flat allocation does not go in line with the original plan. "Deviation from the original plan means it has been altered to benefit a certain quarter rather than the slum-dwellers," he said.

Dhaka City Mayor Sadeque Hossain Khoka said encroachment and land-grabbing are 'practical problems', but that the Dhaka City Corporation (DCC) is always in favour of such humanitarian projects. He said no one has approached the DCC in any way for its help and cooperation in dealing with impediments to project implementation.

"If our help is sought, we will extend all-out support within the DCC's mandate and even go the extra miles," he said.

Khoka said the DCC has neither the functional scope nor adequate resources to undertake rehabilitation of slum-dwellers although it has programmes to render some basic civic amenities to them.

But the capital's slums cannot be dismantled altogether, as continued influx of the poor and land-less into the city is an unavoidable and persistent socioeconomic phenomenon, he added.

At a roundtable on October 22 last year marking the government's two-year in office, the land ministry presented details of the project approved by the Executive Committee of National Economic Council.

It said 15,024 flats on 47.90 acres of state land at Bhasantek would be built to house 9,024 slum and 6,000 low-income families.

Each slum family will be allocated a 215-square-foot flat with a kitchen, a bedroom and a bathroom in six-storey buildings with eight flats on each floor. There will be other such buildings for low-income groups with each flat having two bedrooms, a kitchen, a bathroom and a balcony on a 395-square-foot area.

There will also be two medical centres, a community centre, two high schools, a college, a post office, a bank, shopping facilities and a 500-line telephone exchange.

# Meet on bird flu

FROM PAGE 1

has emerged in Cambodia, China, Indonesia, Japan, Laos, South Korea, Thailand and Vietnam, from erupting within Indian territory."

Weaker strains of the flu have been reported in Pakistan, Taiwan and the United States.

The WHO has criticised Asian nations for putting economic concerns before public health in attempting to cover up outbreaks in a bid to protect their agricultural sectors and tourism industries.

Reuters from Bangkok adds: The United Nations issued a sharp warning yesterday to Asian countries not to relax in the war on a bird flu virus that has killed 19 people in the region because the epidemic was still spreading.

"The spread of the avian influenza virus in several Asian countries is still under control," the Food and Agricultural Organisation said in a statement, and governments had "to remain vigilant as further outbreaks continue to occur."

Cambodia, China, Indonesia and Laos had reported new outbreaks of the H5N1 virus, it said, despite the slaughter of 80 million chickens - most of them in worst-hit Vietnam and Thailand, which had each killed 30 million.

China has now confirmed cases in 14 provinces. The FAO also stressed that poorer Asian countries had neither the resources nor the organisation to eradicate the fast spreading H5N1 virus, reflecting the fears of experts that it could flare up again easily.

The World Bank said yesterday it will lend Hanoi \$10 million to compensate farmers in Vietnam, where about 30 million of an estimated 250 million poultry have been killed by the virus or culled.

The alarm was sounded as Vietnam and Thailand assured their people the epidemic was coming under control and the United States hastened to stress its bird flu outbreaks were of a milder strain which cannot, like the H5N1, leap the species barrier.

"The single take-home message is that the form of avian influenza in New Jersey is not a human health threat," said Health Commissioner Clifton Lacy as his state became the third in the United States to report an outbreak.

Officials said the H7 bird flu virus, which poses no danger to people, had also spread to Pennsylvania and more cases may be found in Delaware, where the first US outbreak occurred.

A dozen countries have banned all or some poultry imports from the United States, where the government estimates each person will eat 82.5 pounds (37.4 kg) of chicken this year.

But Thailand, the world's fourth biggest chicken exporter where at least five people have died of bird flu, was already looking beyond the epidemic and seeking to shorten bans crimping its \$1 billion a year chicken export industry.

# Healthcare

FROM PAGE 12

centres, particularly in rural areas, he added.

In his keynote paper at the roundtable, Dr M H Choudhury attributed misuse of funds to virtual lack of accountability. Although there is a full-fledged health economics unit of the health ministry, a lot of funds is misused in the name of foreign training of doctors, technicians and other staff of the ministry, he said.

Economist Atiur Rahman moderated the roundtable. Prof Abdullah Abu Sayeed, and Prof Zillur Rahman Siddiqui were present.

Those who took part in discussion included Prof Abul Barkat, Advocate Ziad Al Mamun, writer Selina Hossain, Ustad Mobarak Hossain, artists Mamunur Rashid and Ali Zaker, former BMA president Prof Rashid-e-Mahbub, Prof Nazmun Nahar, Dr Jahangir Alam and Dr Aminul Islam.

# DU Millennium

FROM PAGE 12  
Justice Mostafa Kamal, the DU VC, AKM Siddiqui, AKM Jakaria, Afia Dil and Delwar Hossain.

Prof Mozaffar Ahmed and Abdullah Hossain Siddique jointly chaired another session in the morning where language veterans Abdul Matin, Gazul Haque and Golam Mahbub spoke.

Leader of the Opposition Sheikh Hasina, Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal leader ASM Abdur Rob, former Public Service Commission chairman Mostafa Chowdhury, Dr Mizanur Rahman Shelley, ex-pro-VC of DU Shahadat Ali, Prof Hayat Munaim Sarkar, Justice Bazul Haq and Talea Rahman of Democracy Watch reminisced about their university days.

Justice Tafazzal Islam, Prime Minister's Principal Secretary Dr Kamal Siddiqui, former DU VC AK Azad Chowdhury, Prof AFM Khodadad Khan, The Daily Star Editor Mahfuz Anam, Workers Party President Rashed Khan Menon and Awami League (AL) leaders Motia Chowdhury, SAMS Kibria and Obaidul Kader were present.

Justice Habibur highlighted the achievements of the historic Language Movement while Justice Mostafa recalled the contribution of Dhaka University to nurturing enlightened people.

Prof Mozaffar recalled the idealistic teachers who taught at the university during his student life.

Hasina, also the AL president, called upon the former DU students and people in general to make the university unique by making its atmosphere violence-free.

"It was once called the Oxford of the East... Let's all make this glorious university more do better than Oxford where rattles of guns will never again be heard and a sound environment will prevail," she said. She observed that the pursuit of all should be development of Bangladesh, not satiation of political vendetta.

Hasina said she could not complete her master's degree because of various exigencies in her life and deep down she still feels a pain for it.

"But I'm very much grateful to the university for conferring an honorary degree on me... I have a cordial relation with the university."

# WHO

FROM PAGE 12  
and France were helping Bangladesh authorities with the probe into the outbreak, WHO said.