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UP chairman abducted in Rangamati

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Rangamati

A union parishad (UP) chairman was abducted allegedly by the armed cadres of the United People's Democratic Front (UPDF) from village Kurumara under Sadar upazila on Tuesday night.

Intelligence sources said a gang of 15 picked up Barun Kanti Chakma, Chairman of Bandukwanga Union Parishad (UP), while he was returning to the district town from the village at about 7:00pm.

Locals said Barun, who has been living in the district town for security reason, had gone to the village earlier in the day to attend a wedding ceremony.

According to them, Barun left his home in the same village following a death threat by a tribal terrorist group after he was elected chairman in the last UP election.

Train blast kills 200 in Iran

AP, Tehran

Runaway train cars carrying fuel, fertilizer and industrial chemicals derailed and exploded in northeastern Iran yesterday, killing more than 200 people, injuring hundreds more and devastating five nearby villages, the government news agency said.

Homes, largely small mud houses, collapsed from the force of the explosion in villages near the train tracks. Windows were broken within six miles of the blast.

Officials in the city of Neyshabur

-- including the local governor, mayor and fire chief -- were among the dead, along with 182 fire and rescue workers. At least 400 people were reported injured.

"The scale of the devastation is very great, and the damage appears more than initially thought," said Vahid Bakechi, a senior official at Khorasan Province's Emergency Headquarters.

The 51 freight train cars -- hauling sulfur, fuel oil and other industrial chemicals -- caught fire and blew up outside Neyshabur, 400

miles east of Tehran, IRNA reported.

"The whole city is shocked by this accident. Official vehicles mounted with loudspeakers are roaming the city, calling for volunteers to donate blood," Saeed Kaviani, editor of the local Sobh-e-Neyshabur newspaper, told the news agency by telephone. Dozens of people remain buried under the rubble of their homes in the villages, Kaviani said.

The freight cars were waiting at the Abu Muslim train station near Neyshabur when they were set in

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AL to probe govt corruption

Plans to form parliamentary body

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The main opposition Awami League (AL) has decided to probe alleged corruption of the coalition government of Prime Minister Khaleda Zia that has served half of its five-year tenure.

The AL Parliamentary Party (ALPP) at a meeting at the Sangsad Bhaban yesterday decided to form a parliamentary body with five to seven members to investigate what it said was corrupt practices since the BNP-led four-party alliance took office in October 2001.

"The Awami League lawmakers will be tasked with the investigation," Deputy Leader of the

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Hasina's no to talks with govt

Sticks to snap polls demand

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Refusing dialogue with the ruling alliance, Awami League (AL) President Sheikh Hasina yesterday demanded immediate resignation of the government and mid-term parliamentary elections.

"Awami League wants fresh elections immediately and we are ready for that," she said at a press conference at AL's Dhanmendi office.

"Their [ruling alliance's] days are



numbered and their barbaric attacks on our supporters during the recent hartals are but their last desperate bid to cling to power," the leader of the opposition said, adding the AL was the only force that could free people from what she said was misrule.

Women leaders and activists of the AL and its front organisations, tortured by police during the last three daylong hartals, accompanied Hasina at the conference. Senior

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Poet Shamsur Rahman, on the chair, talks to a fellow poet while others look on at the National Poetry Festival on the Dhaka University campus yesterday.

FREE ANTI-GRAFT BODY

Govt can still withdraw any case at will

ZAYADUL AHSAN

Although the new legislation, Anti-Corruption Commission Act, will allow independent investigation and prosecution of anyone involved in corruption, the government secretly kept its trump card: it can withdraw any case at will, even at the trial stage.

The act uses the Criminal Law Amendment Act 1958 as a base for prosecuting anyone. Section 10 (4) of the criminal law reads: "No prosecution under this act against any person on either generally or in respect of any one or more of the offences for which he is being tried shall be

withdrawn except under the order in writing of the government."

The clause erodes the power of the anti-graft commission awaiting approval of President Iajuddin Ahmed, as the government's authority to withdraw cases will take the steam off the commission's war on corruption, a senior lawyer said.

Despite the fact that formation of the commission was one of the key poll pledges of the four-party coalition leader Bangladesh Nationalist Party, the government was soft-peddalling on the issue described as a "black box" in a country rated the world's most corrupt country for three successive years by Transparency

International.

Hampered by donor agencies and the civil society, the government introduced the bill in parliament seven months ago, but came under immediate fire for designing the law in a way that would present a drag on the formation of a truly independent commission.

After seven months of discussion and arguments, the bill took a reasonably acceptable shape and the government hinted at approving it on February 17.

But on February 9, the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Law Ministry added a clause to

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ANTI-GRAFT BILL

Moudud surprised at TIB rejection

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Law, Justice and Parliamentary Affairs Minister Moudud Ahmed yesterday expressed surprise at the Transparency International, Bangladesh's (TIB) rejection of the Anti-corruption Commission Bill, 2004 hours before its passage by parliament.

He asked the TIB to withdraw its remarks on the bill. The TIB had rejected the bill alleging that it does not reflect people's demand for a free and neutral commission.

"This goes to show what attitude they (TIB) are working with in Bangladesh. TIB could have waited until its passage so that people could not become suspicious about their activities," Moudud said in a statement.

He added the government included many recommendations of various organisations including

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CUFL showcaused, gas leak probe starts

3 more cattle deaths reported, dozen others sick

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, Ctg

The Department of Environment (DoE) yesterday served a show cause notice on Chittagong Urea Fertiliser Limited (CUFL) concerning Monday's death of livestock due to toxic gas emission from its plant at Anwara upazila.

After visiting the plant and its surrounding areas on Tuesday, Director of DoE Mosharrar Hossain issued the notice yesterday, asking CUFL authorities to explain by Saturday why legal actions should not be taken against them for the large-scale water pollution causing loss of life.

About 100 domestic animals, mostly buffaloes, belonging to 38 families of Dudhkumra Park of Barasat Union in Anwara Upazila died after drinking water from a

canal poisoned by toxic industrial waste dumped there by the CUFL.

Three more buffaloes died yesterday and 12 others are still sick from drinking the toxic water, said sources in Anwara. They added the poison in the water has also killed fish.

Several of the families lost all their cattle, their lone source of income. "I have become destitute after losing all my five cattle," said Sheikh Mohammad.

A family of three brothers lost eight cattle. "We invested everything we saved over the years to buy those animals," said a tearful Mabu Ali, one of the brothers.

UP chairman Hasan Chowdhury said yesterday the local lawmaker promised financial assistance to the families -- all poor farmers and fishermen.

DoE Director Mosharrar Hossain

said, "I suspect the waste disposal system was improperly operated out of negligence. I have already collected some samples of the waste and will collect some more to examine the nature and extent of environmental damage the poison may have caused. Then, we will go for legal action against the authorities if necessary."

Mohsinuddin Talukder, managing director of the CUFL, however termed the incident an accident. "We are investigating the matter and administrative action would be taken against anyone found responsible."

The CUFL on Tuesday formed a four-member committee headed by its General Manager (Construction) Mohammad Shahjahan to investigate the incident and asked the committee to submit its report by Saturday.

NGOS IN MICROLOANS

Yunus wants free watchdog

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Grameen Bank Managing Director Muhammad Yunus yesterday demanded a regulatory framework and an independent commission for monitoring microfinancing by non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

He also suggested the formation of small banks in villages to streamline microfinancing.

Yunus was talking to journalists on the sidelines of the microcredit summit at Dhaka Sheraton Hotel.

"Without any regulatory framework and monitoring system, we cannot assess the actual situation in the microfinance sector," he said, adding no-one knows which NGO disbursed what amount of money.

In such a situation, any person or organisation could cause a serious disaster to the sector anytime through a big financial scandal, he feared.

Noting that although such a scandal did not take place in the past, he said, "We cannot predict it will not happen in future. The government should form an independent commission before anything like that happens."

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Legal framework needed to make MFIs efficient

Microcredit summit session says

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Speakers at working sessions of the regional microcredit summit yesterday described good governance and transparency as crucial to microfinance institutions that should be regulated through a legal framework to make them more efficient.

"Microcredit is an area that needs a regulatory commission. It is the NGOs that are suggesting to form a watchdog for them," said Professor Muhammad Yunus, managing director (MD) of Grameen Bank.

A watchdog is needed to facilitate developing the local economy with local money, he said, adding stocktaking was essential for transparency and efficiency.

Yunus was presiding over an associated session on "Experience of Grameen Replicators: Financing, Institutionalisation, Innovations and Achievements" of the four-day Asia Pacific Region Microcredit Summit Meeting of Councils that began at Dhaka Sheraton Hotel on Monday.

Speaking as a panellist, Harihar Dev Pant, executive director (ED) of Nirdhan Uthan

Bank Ltd of Nepal, said his organisation started its journey as an NGO. But Grameen Bank's success in reaching the poor encouraged them to transform it into a bank.

"Every financial institution needs supervision. Good governance and transparency are major issues in microcredit," he remarked. Udaia Kumar, MD of SHARE Microfin Ltd of India, observed that a proper legal framework was crucial for the growth of microcredit.

"Legal framework is needed for the MFIs to mobilise funds and give credits. Of the total 73 million clients in India, we have reached only seven million and the rest are waiting to get access to finance," he added.

Dolores M Torres, president and chief executive of CARD Bank of the Philippines, said holding meetings and collecting repayments were initial challenges for her institution, which was now partially owned by the borrowers.

Zahirul Alam, ED of Integrated Development Foundation, said his organisation started with only Tk 100,000 in a remote area where no other NGO was working.

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Business leaders ask Khulna chamber to call off hartal

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, Khulna

Leaders of 20 business organisations of Khulna yesterday asked the president of Khulna Chamber of Commerce and Industry (KCCI) to call off the half-day hartal on March 1 for the sake of greater economic interest of the people of the south-western region.

The KCCI announced the hartal to realise its 10-point demand.

Issuing a press statement under the banner of Baboshayee Samannoy Parishad, the business leaders called upon the KCCI to adopt other means to realise its demands.

The leaders, all signatories to the statement, voiced their strong opposition to the hartal programme saying it will further weaken the country's economic backbone, especially in view of the "economic crisis and growing unemployment".

They said the KCCI president had no right to act unilaterally without

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Nuke rivals agree peace roadmap

REUTERS, Islamabad

Nuclear rivals India and Pakistan announced a "basic roadmap" for peace yesterday aimed at ending more than five decades of hostility over the divided Himalayan state of Kashmir.

After three days of preparatory talks in Islamabad, the two sides agreed to hold a series of meetings over the next six months to tackle a wide range of disputes, with Kashmir and nuclear security topping the agenda.

"We do have before us now a sort of a basic roadmap for a Pakistan-India peace process to which we have both agreed," Pakistan's Foreign Secretary Riaz Khokhar told a news conference after meeting his Indian counterpart, Shashank.

"We hope that this road map will eventually lead to settlement of all outstanding disputes between India and Pakistan, and in the direction of

lasting peace."

The foreign secretaries will meet again in May or June to launch the "composite dialogue" and will discuss both Kashmir and measures to reduce the risk of nuclear and conventional war.

Officials from other ministries will meet in July to tackle a range of issues, including economic links, people-to-people contacts and disputes over water sharing, maritime boundaries and the Siachen Glacier, the world's highest battlefield.

Foreign ministers will then meet in August to review overall progress, a joint statement said.

The two countries have gone to war three times since gaining independence from Britain in 1947 -- twice over Kashmir, which they both claim. An insurgency by Muslim rebels in Kashmir since 1989 has worsened ties between the neighbors.

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Minister forecasts power shortage

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

State Minister for Power Iqbal Hasan Mahmud said the country might experience power shortage this summer due to lack of back-up facilities in case of repair or breakdown of power stations.

"Power scarcity can be expected during the summer months should any power station suspend generation for some reason as currently we have no way of producing additional power," the state minister told the BBC Bangla Service last night.

"The situation will be back to normal after the Irri season during which electricity consumption is very high due to irrigation," he added.

Quoting official sources, the BBC said the demand for power during summer would be 3800 megawatt. But experts believe the actual demand might exceed the government figure.

Power consumption during the Irri-Boro season from March to May is the highest.

Maiden bid to strike gas at Block 9 fails

STAR REPORT

Oil companies led by Irish Tullow have failed in their first attempt to strike gas at Block 9 despite high hopes that made this area most lucrative in the second round block bidding.

Tullow won the bid proposing to drill 10 wells, not just three, in the block.

Tullow, its partner Chevron-Texaco, which has sold off its concerns to Niko Resources of Cayman Islands, and Bangladesh Petroleum Exploration Company (BAPEX) began drilling at Kashimpur in mid December. The work began amid a lot of odds and disagreements between Tullow and Chevron-Texaco over the sale of the block's shares.

Disappointing results of the venture late last month clouded Tullow's enthusiasm. "The small company not only suffered a blow from this failure but the news also affected its share-prices back at its

home," said a Petrobangla high official, adding "but in oil and gas business such failure is only normal."

The world industry standard ratio of striking gas is 10:1 (or one discovery out of 10 wells drilled), he said, "whereas we have a 3:1 ratio. None should be too disappointed to see no gas in the first attempt."

This was the first exploratory well drilling under the second round block bidding that concluded three years ago and also the first venture for Bangladesh Petroleum Exploration Company (BAPEX) to work with foreign oil companies as a 10 percent stakeholder.

Disappointed or not, the oil companies are committed to drill a second well in Gumbi river area this month. As per the PSC (production sharing contract), signed on April 11, 2001, the oil companies will drill another well in Block 9 before April 2004.

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PGRF LOAN CONDITIONS IMF team arrives Saturday to review implementation

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The second review mission of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) will arrive in the capital on Saturday to monitor and review the implementation of conditions of the Poverty Reduction Growth Facilities (PRGF) loan.

The six-member mission, led by IMF's Asia Pacific assistant director Champen Puckattikom, intends to hold talks with government officials during its 12-day stay here.

The IMF disbursed the first instalment of the PRGF loan in June last year and the second instalment in the middle of last month.

The third instalment is expected to be disbursed by June 15 if the review mission reports positively on the implementation process according to the IMF conditions.

In its first review report, the IMF identified that the key risks to the

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U-19 WC CRICKET Nepal turn SA upside down

SPORTS REPORTER

The Fifth U-19 Cricket World Cup came to life yesterday when the underdogs stole the show at different venues across the country.

Nepal caused the biggest upset of

the day by pulling off an exciting one-wicket win over South Africa at the Chittagong Divisional Stadium.

Away at Shaheed Chandu Stadium in Bogra, the juniors of Zimbabwe did what their senior

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TOSHIN

AIR-CON WITH HEAT PUMP

RANGS GROUP