

Contractors ask

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yesterday asked for government intervention to bring down the abnormally high MS rod prices.

"The government should take immediate steps to keep the prices of rod at a reasonable margin as construction works across the country are going to stop due to excessive rod prices hike," said Mir Zahir Hossain, convenor of the STSP, yesterday at a press conference at the National Press Club.

The STSP will submit memorandums to the deputy commissioners of all districts and chief engineers of all government departments from February 28 to March 3 demanding immediate steps to bring down the prices.

It threatened to stop all government construction works across the country if the demand is not met by March 10.

"If the prices remain so high for a few more days, contractors across the country would have to suspend their works, rendering about 10 million people involved with the sector jobless," he said.

Zahir said for the absence of real

competition, the rod-manufacturing sector has become hostage to a few manufacturers and they are fixing the price of rod according to their wish.

"Although government cannot determine price in a free market economy, yet when the prices of any essentials cross the logical limit the government should take steps to bring them down," said the STSP in a statement.

It blamed the rod price hike on the absence of a government control over the raw material import.

"Government always fixes an estimated price for any development work on the basis of the existing prices of construction materials, but the prices of rod have almost doubled, creating a huge gap between the estimated price and existing market price of rod," the STSP said.

The STSP also said the prices of per ton rod are increasing by Tk 2,000 to Tk 3,000 every day.

The prices of per ton 60 grade rod were Tk 35,000 in the second week of this month but now the rod is selling at Tk 43,000, the STSP leaders added.

Demonstration ban Speaker stands by his ruling

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Speaker Jamir Uddin Sircar yesterday told the Jatiya Sangsad (JS) that his recent ruling on ban against demonstration and procession at the chambers, lobbies and galleries of parliament was as per the rules of procedures of the House.

Referring to his ruling on Sunday, the speaker said it was out of any debate. Quoting the rules of procedures of parliament the JS, Sircar said, "Ruling of the speaker is final and it cannot be challenged and debated."

He said the rules of procedure and parliamentary convention allow the speaker to give such rulings that are also unquestionable.

The speaker's reaction followed a point of order raised by ruling BNP whip, Rezaul Bari Deena, who defended it quoting some references and criticising main opposition Awami League (AL) lawmakers allegedly for undermining the sanctity of the House as well as the democracy by opposing the ruling.

"AL lawmakers are bitterly criticising the ruling, which is unacceptable," Reza said standing on a point of order. He hoped such effort by the speaker would be continued to strengthen the country's democracy.

Backing the speaker's ruling, another BNP lawmaker Ebadur Rahman Chowdhury termed it as a historical event for the House and also parliamentary democracy in other countries.

WB okays

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teachers in schools. It is also anticipated to help attain higher competency rate and reduce gender differences in learning.

Bangladesh presently has nearly 18 million students in over 78,000 primary schools.

Other development partners contributing to the government-implemented programme include: Asian Development Bank, Australian Agency for International Development, Canadian International Development Agency, British Department for International Development, European Commission, Japan Development Cooperation, Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation, Swedish International Development Cooperation and the UNICEF.

Judicial Service

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directives the Supreme Court gave the government on December 2, 1999 to separate the judiciary from the executive.

The court had also directed that the SJC be established immediately with the majority of its members to be drawn from the senior judiciary of the Supreme Court and the subordinate courts.

Justice Mustafa Kamal, who was the chief justice when the Supreme Court gave the 12-point directive, told the BBC Bengali Service last night he finds no reason why the three secretaries have been kept in the commission. He added that the government is not following the court directives properly.

Law Minister Moudud Ahmed however told reporters yesterday that the SJC has been formed in line with the Supreme Court directives.

The Supreme Court had also declared that the creation of Bangladesh Civil Service judicial cadre is unconstitutional. Since then, a stall in the appointment of judges has plunged the lower courts into an acute crisis of judges.

As per the court order, the recruitment of the lower court judges was to be made through the JSC instead of the PSC. But the government repeatedly tried to appoint the judges through the PSC. On January 13, the Appellate Division slammed the government and dismissed the petition seeking permission for recruitment of assistant judges from the BCS (judicial cadre).

The president on January 29 promulgated the SJC rules that the government formulated on January 20.

Attack on Dr Kamal

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President Member Advocate Azharul Islam, Oikya Procheta Coordinator Shamsuzzoha, Krishik Sramik Janata League leader Sadek Khan, Bangladesh Krishik Sramik League leader Shahidul Islam and Oikyabuddha Nagarik Andolon leader Sharpa Reza.

Meanwhile, the Kaukhali police of Rangamati yesterday arrested - Abdul Kader, 25, and Abul Hashem, 27, in connection with the attack. Our Correspondent from Rangamati reports. The Magistrate Court then sent them to jail.

Additional Superintendent of Police Mohammed Fakhrul Alam said a team, led by Investigation Officer Mofizul Islam, raided a village near the place of attack and arrested the two.

"According to the Speedy Trial Tribunal Act, the investigation report must be submitted within seven days. But it is very difficult to nab hundreds of accused and finish the investigation within seven days," said Fakrul, coordinator of the case investigation.

Deputy Minister of the Chittagong Hill Tracts Affairs Moni Swapon Dewan, in a meeting at the conference room of deputy commissioner of Rangamati, expressed his dissatisfaction over the deteriorating law and order in the district.

Donors want audit

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NGO Bureau, the donor groups and Finance Minister M Saifur Rahman yesterday discussed various aspects of Proshika Manabik Unnayan Kendra, one of the five NGOs blacklisted by the BNP-led coalition government back in 2001.

Two years ago, the government suspended a foreign fund of over \$50 million meant for Proshika's development projects. And last year, the government blocked all funds from reaching Proshika before initiating an investigation into its alleged irregularities and political activities. A report of the investigation was sent recently to Proshika and the donors.

Government's handling of the matter irked the donors and yesterday's meeting discussed the investigation report. A six-member audit committee led by Abdul Kader Mia, director general of the BCS (Bangladesh Civil Service) Administration Academy, investigated the allegations against the five NGOs.

"The investigation found 55 types of irregularities involving Tk 100 crore," said NGO Bureau Director General Shahjahan Majumdar.

Some of the major alleged irregularities include use of funds without permission of the NGO Bureau, foreign visit by Proshika high officials spending donor money and personal use of Proshika funds.

"We have asked for Proshika's explanation before going for appropriate legal action," Majumdar noted.

The four other NGOs allegedly involved in irregularities are Prip Trust, Nari Pragati Sangha, the BNPS and the CDS. Of them, the CDS admitted its flaws and the NGO Bureau has 'pardoned' it, said Majumdar. The three others will face legal measures.

While discussing the Proshika issue, Saifur told donors, "(Since) you talk about accountability, we will monitor how your funds are spent. You should also monitor how the NGOs spend the money."

Talking to journalists, Esko Kentschynskyj, head of the EU delegation, said he had told the finance minister that the evidences were inconclusive.

Kentschynskyj said the allegations are not strong enough to stop funds and that hundreds of thousands of beneficiaries of Proshika's programmes suffered for that. "Yet the government talks about poverty alleviation. It has outlined the IPRSP (Intra Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper) that contradicts such action."

On allegations of Proshika's

political bias towards the Awami League, BNP's arch rival, the EU representative said, "We have not found any evidence that proves the basis of such an allegation."

Meeting sources said the donors criticised the investigation report as being politicised and thus lacking credibility; hence the demand for a re-investigation by an international auditor.

Speaking on the issue, Saifur said, "We have conducted the audit with competent officials of our accountant general's office. We trust them. If you feel the necessity, you can do your own auditing."

Christina I Wallach, country director of the World Bank (WB) that acts as coordinator between the government, donors and the NGOs, told the press, "The NGOs in Bangladesh are doing good work. I believe they should be allowed to work freely. On the other hand, there should be transparency and accountability in their works."

She told Saifur that there could be a regulatory framework for the NGOs, but that should be done in consultation with the stakeholders.

Proshika President Qazi Faruque Ahmed also rejected the NGO Bureau's allegations. Talking to The Daily Star last night, he said, "There was no mention of legal violation or misuse of funds in the audit report as claimed by the NGO Bureau."

There was no mention of punitive measures against Proshika, rather the report has recommended conducting a study by the BIDS (Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies) and similar organisations on the effect of Proshika's activities on micro-credit and poverty alleviation, he added.

It is now clear that the government made those allegations and stopped funds from being released to harass and destroy Proshika," Qazi Faruque said after yesterday's meeting.

He said the fact that the government refused to release the probe report indicated conspiracy on its part. "I had to go to court to get a copy of that report," he said, adding that hundreds of schools and micro-credit programmes were thrown in limbo following the government move.

He urged the government to release funds so that Proshika could continue its school and micro-credit programmes for the benefit of the millions of rural poor.

Double jeopardy

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procurement committee to ensure timely import of diesel due to irregularities in the bidding process.

"Nearly 2.5 lakh tonnes of diesel the government imported from Kuwait reached Mongla port several days ago but the consignment is still to be unloaded," one source said.

Normal supply of diesel is likely to be restored from February 28, he hoped.

Many petrol pumps allegedly hoarded diesel to raise prices taking advantage of the supply shortage.

A number of paddy growers were seen returning from petrol pumps in the city in despair hearing that there was no stock of diesel.

Haibur Rahman, a petrol pump owner, said they were getting supply much less than the demand.

Farmers and market sources said prices of different fertilisers rose by Tk 70 to Tk 110 per bag of 50 kg from mid-February.

Sources said there are 'sufficient stocks' of 6,370 tonnes and 6,000 tonnes of fertilisers in the buffer stock for Rajshahi and Rangpur for the last few weeks.

As per the court order, the recruitment of the lower court judges was to be made through the JSC instead of the PSC. But the government repeatedly tried to appoint the judges through the PSC. On January 13, the Appellate Division slammed the government and dismissed the petition seeking permission for recruitment of assistant judges from the BCS (judicial cadre).

Earlier, the committee had alleged widespread irregularities in the works. But at its yesterday's meeting, it observed there are minor irregularities.

Chairman of the committee Shahidul Islam chaired the meeting held at the Sangsada Bhaban. Committee members attended it.

Hasina alleges graft

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activists could not put up a dais at TB School grounds in Charfession.

The motorcade of Hasina ran into protests and was greeted by adverse graffiti, many of which demanded 'death sentence' to Tofail Ahmed and other leaders and activists of the AL, who hail from the district.

AL adherents Abdul Khaled and Md Shahjahan were assaulted in Charfession allegedly by BNP activists immediately after Hasina left the scene.

Addressing the rallies, the AL chief said when people would be aware of the 'plunder of public money' by the prime minister's family, they would force Khaleda and her sons to take shelter in the South East Asian countries where 'they are amassing wealth'.

They will be punished accordingly once the AL takes office, she told the crowds, asking them to prepare for fights against what she termed 'corrupt and criminal-harbouring' coalition government.

People are now buying kerosene at Tk 40 a litre, up from Tk 17 during the AL rule, she said.

The prime minister never understands the plight of buying dried chilli at Tk 100 a kg in Dhaka.

Alleged BNP activists injured Sohraward Bepari, a Juba League activist in Baghia union, and garment worker Khalil Howlader, elder brother of BCL activist Kabir Howlader of Barthi union under Gourami in Barisal, in incidents linked to Hasina's visit.

Bangladesh's name has been sullied for violence against the press and the home minister has emerged as 'the enemy of journalists' on the world stage, she said, adding it further dented the nation's image that figured at the top of countries with corruption records for three successive years.

Accusing BNP leaders of empire-building, she said their wealth was getting fatter while most development projects stood unimplemented.

Accusing the BNP of widespread repression of minority communities

Moreover, load shedding of power has also hampered boro cultivation.

Crop Production Officer of Agriculture Extension Department at Rajshahi Md Amjad Hossain said they received complaints from a number of growers about diesel shortage, high prices of fertilisers and power supply disruption.

The situation concerning boro cultivation has not gone beyond control to be termed a crisis but the farmers are certainly suffering a lot", he said.

"We are relieved after the looted money was recovered," Mokhslesur Rahaman, assistant general manager of the JB, told The Daily Star yesterday adding that he was trying to release the arrested bank officials whom he believed to be honest.

When contacted, Chowdhury Quamrul Ahsan, commissioner of Rajshahi Metropolitan Police, denied to comment on the incident for the sake of investigation.

On Sunday morning, three unarmed youths snatched Tk 8 lakh from the bank's cash room when the cashier was away for a while.

Dr Kamal

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now divided into two groups of the affluent and the poor, he said. "This gap between the haves and the have-nots must be removed at any cost once for all."

Dr Kamal said a national convention of the Oyikko Pracheshtha was called in Dhaka on March 14 in a bid to unite the people against terrorism, black money and corruption. He warned corrupt ministers and bureaucrats and black money-holders of severe consequences when the people would rise up.

PM reaffirms

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As many as 126 officers, including 24 overseas army, naval and air force officers from China, India, Indonesia, South Korea, Malaysia, the Maldives, Nepal, Nigeria, Pakistan, the Philippines, Saudi Arabia, Sri Lanka, Turkey and the USA, received certificates from the prime minister.

About 2,200 officers including 450 from 30 friendly countries have so far obtained PSC (passed from staff college) degree from the DSCSC.

Khaleda recalled the establishment of the DSCSC by late president Ziaur Rahman in December 1977 to train the officers of the armed forces and hoped the training of the institution would provide them with the ability to deal with any challenge in the profession.

She also reminded them of the changing world security dynamics that added new dimensions to the role and of their tasks. "There's a need for reflection of the impending changes in the training curriculum of the armed forces."

Khaleda told the overseas officers that she believes they will act as envoys of Bangladesh by extending goodwill after their return.

In reference to his Sunday's ruling, which Hamid and other senior AL lawmakers injured in attacks at different times and hospitalised.

"You've succeeded in reducing your self to a ruling party speaker," Sengupta told Sircar point-blank.

Hosts reach

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enable Bangladesh to avoid a semifinal clash against Australia, who are all set to top the other group.

Bangladesh bowled Uganda out for only 78 runs. But the boys of Richard Molneus suffered a familiar top-order collapse while chasing a parity target. They lost six wickets before scaring home in 19.5 overs. Uganda's Emmanuel Isaneez caused the damage claiming all the six wickets for 37 runs.

Ireland on the other hand posted a massive 265 for 9 and bowled the Canadians out for 110.

Meanwhile, in the more attractive Cup competition England captain Alastair Cook hit back-to-back centuries to lead his side to