

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, convener 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

Crackdown

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hantals this month.

The meeting directed the law-enforcement agencies to file cases in a way so that the accused cannot be cleared of the charges and gather witnesses on the spot during the hantals.

Plans are underway to revive previous cases against opposition leaders to quell the anti-government agitation, sources at the home ministry said.

"The government high-ups at the meeting directed us to confine the pickets inside their house to avoid untoward incident," a police official who attended the meeting said on condition of anonymity.

The meeting also asked the law enforcers to keep an eye on the opposition leaders who may create trouble during the general strike. The police were also ordered to bar the opposition leaders and activists from holding meeting to decide strategies to enforce the hartal.

The meeting suggested deployment of additional strike forces in the strategic points across the metropolitan areas.

Filing of cases against opposition leaders who can stir agitation will be another strategy, another source at the ministry said. A list of activists and leaders organising anti-government agitation has been made to charge them, he added.

Home Secretary Omar Farooq, the inspector general of police, director general of Bangladesh Rifles, Dhaka Metropolitan Police (DMP) commissioner, all zonal and traffic DCs of the DMP, ADC and ACs were present in the two-hour meeting.

No more wild guesses

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Now, a much more reliable data can finally be expected as wildlife experts embark on the first-ever comprehensive tiger census in collaboration with India with the support of United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).

Minister for Environment and Forest Shahjahan Siraj will inaugurate the census at 2:00pm in Mongla today as part of the activities between the two countries under a cross-border initiative aimed at preserving the Sundarbans, the world's largest mangrove forest declared a World Natural Heritage Site by United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation.

West Bengal Minister for Forests Jogesh Chandra Barman will lead an 11-member Indian team to the ceremony.

Wildlife officials of both countries will scour tiger territory – the swampy jungles of the Sundarbans straddling India's eastern state of West Bengal and the southern tip of Bangladesh – in search of telltale signs of the elusive big cat, one of the most endangered species in the world.

Bangladesh National Cadet Corps, NGO (non-governmental organisation) activists and forest employees will also take part in the weeklong census targeting the Bangladesh side of the Sundarbans, which accounts for nearly 60 percent of the entire forest.

In 1969, British wildlife expert Guy Mountford of World Wildlife Fund (WWF) came to Bangladesh (then East Pakistan) to prepare a list of local wildlife and also visited the Sundarbans as part of his mission. But he was naturally skeptical about the number of tigers – more than 300 – reported by forest officials who relied solely on guesswork.

"We reluctantly concluded this figure for us was too optimistic. The maximum number is about 100. The total could be as low as 50," Mountford said in a report after the visit. But his report also was not based on any scientific survey.

After that Professor Ley Hossain of the WWF sent Heubart Henrich to conduct a tiger census in the Bangladesh part of the Sundarbans. Henrich came here in December 1970 but was compelled to call off the census and move to India due to the War of Liberation. He came back here in 1975 and submitted a report based on information gathered from forest officials. In his report, he said there were about 300 tigers. Till date, forest officials have stuck to that number.

Of the total 10,006 sq km of the Sundarbans, 5770 sq km including 1700 sq km of water falls into this side of the border. Over six million people live in these forest areas – 3 million in Bangladesh and 3.5 million in India.

National efforts to save this world heritage listed habitat have been on for a while but differing management approaches in the two countries have overlooked the fact that the Sundarbans is a single eco-system. In 2002, top officials from both countries

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.

RMG sector

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programme, an initiative to promote and support cooperation between the member states and the South, Southeast Asia and China.

Unlike Bangladesh, cotton-growing countries like India, Pakistan and China have inherent advantage in the RMG sector, he said.

"Vietnam, Cambodia and other countries offers tough competition to Bangladesh with cheap labour. But those countries also have an edge over Bangladesh as they have not faced any adverse political situation like us over the last few years."

BGMEA Vice President Zinnat Ali Mian, Second Secretary of Delegation of the European Commission in Bangladesh Hans Famhammer, and EC Economic and Political Officer Zillul Hye Razi also spoke.

Eco-huts

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non-development budget of the current fiscal for promotion of eco-tourism.

She said the project would also raise government's revenue earnings and create alternative employment opportunities for the people dependent on the Sundarbans.

She also told the House that tenders had been floated for the project and a policy was adopted to turn existing structures in the Sundarbans into eco-huts.

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

FROM PAGE 1
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 SJC 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

FROM PAGE 1
Presidium Member Advocate Azharul Islam, Oikya Prochesta Co-ordinator Shamsuzzoha, Krishik Sramik Janata League leader Sadek Khan, Bangladesh Krishak Sramik League leader Shahidul Islam and Oikyabaddha Nagarik Andolon leader Shapna Reza.

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

Additional Superintendent of Police Mohammed Fakhru 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 Fakur, 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

FROM PAGE 1
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 Kentrschynskyj, head of the EU delegation, said he had told the finance minister that the evidences were inconclusive.

Kentrschynskyj 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 (Interim 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 Wallich, 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.

Moreover, load shedding of power has also hampering 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.

JS body

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January this year, 74,701 tonnes of kerosene were sold."

The parliamentary committee also discussed the installation of gas pipeline on Jamuna Bridge approach roads. It asked the authorities concerned to ensure quality of the works.

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

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Hosts reach

FROM PAGE 1
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 McInnes suffered a familiar top-order collapse while chasing a paltry target. They lost six wickets before scarping 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 then bowled the Canadians out for 110.

Meanwhile, in the more attractive Cup competition England captain Alistair Cook hit back-to-back century to led his side to a six-wicket win over Zimbabwe at the BKSP ground in Savar.

Cook smashed 108, exactly what he scored in the previous game against New Zealand, as England topped Zimbabwe modest 218 for nine with six wickets in hand. The victory confirmed England's place in the Cup semifinals with a match in hand against Pakistan, who also stormed into the last four with an eight-wicket thrashing of New Zealand at the flood-lit Banga-bandhu National Stadium.

Opener Khalid Latif scored a blistering 90 off 86 balls and one-down Adnan hammered 72 as Pakistan topped the Kiwis total of 181 in 41.1 overs.

US chooper

FROM PAGE 12
In Baghdad, attackers fired a rocket-propelled grenade at a major Shia Muslim shrine overnight, officials at the shrine said. The RPG punched a hole in an outer wall of the Kazimiyah shrine in a northern neighborhood of the capital but caused no injuries.

The attack on the shrine came on the fourth day of the Islamic month of Muharram, a sacred period when thousands of Iraqi Shites and Iranian pilgrims have converged on Kazimiyah, where two Shiite saints are buried, and other Shiite shrines in cities of southern Iraq.

Bablu freed

FROM PAGE 1
Bablu only after joint forces encircled him on Tuesday.

According to Bablu, his captors, led by a Myanmar national, shifted him from one place to another but treated him well.

A 15-member gang broke into Bablu's family-owned Hillside Resort on the evening of Eid day on February 2, and forced him away with them to deep forest. He returned to Bandarban on Tuesday and was later brought to his residence in Dhaka.

Janata Bank

FROM PAGE 1
bank officials, 12 hours after three arrestees in connection with the robbery – cashier Abdul Kalam Azad and bank guard Abdul Majid and Abdul Huq-- were remanded on Tuesday.

Arshed who is also the investigation officer of the case said they also interrogated two other cashiers Isarul Islam and Abdus Sukur.

"We are relieved after the looted money was recovered," Mokhesur 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 Qamrul Islam, commissioner of Rajshahi Metropolitan Police, denied to comment on the incident for the sake of investigation.

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

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Dr Kamal

FROM PAGE 12
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 Oykko Pracheshita 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

FROM PAGE 12
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.

Construction work still

FROM PAGE 1
Industries and Re-rolling Millers, the government waived the duty on rod raw materials while retaining 7.5 percent in import duty.

But this could not lower the prices. "Till Wednesday afternoon, per ton 60 grade MS rod was sold between Tk 34,000 and 35,000. But mysteriously without any apparent reasons, it leapt up to Tk 42,000 per ton by Thursday morning," said Toufiq M Seraj, president of a leading real estate and housing association, Rehab.

Back in January last year, 40 grade and 60 grade MS rod would sell at Tk18,500 and 23,000 per ton, but the prices rose to Tk 38,500 and 42,000 per ton this month.

Rising further over two to three days, per ton 40 grade rod sold at Tk 39,000 and 41,000 and per ton 60 grade rod at Tk 45,000 yesterday, retailers said.

"The sale of rod has plummeted as the individuals and construction companies alike have put purchase on hold in the face of price hike," said a rod wholesaler and retailer on the Kazi Nazrul Islam Avenue.

"It's true that the crisis is partly due to the scarcity in ship scrap supply but a certain syndicate of manufacturers and wholesalers are making fortune overnight by manipulating the situation in the absence of government control over the market," he said seeking anonymity.

The entire industry, which is being ruled by this syndicate, is at stake," he said.

"Contractors have postponed buying rod for construction works because of the unprecedented price hike and are waiting for a fall in price," said Newton, a wholesaler-cum-retailer of Quality Traders on the Kazi Nazrul Islam Avenue.

"It's an exploitation of this particular situation by a section of hoarders at Naya Bazar, who are squeezing enormous profit by stockpiling much of the available MS rod," said an elderly trader of R.R Builders at Tejguri Bazar.

"I simply cannot afford to pay an additional Tk 10,000 to 12,000 to buy a ton of rod and have been forced to postpone the construction work of my house," said Abdul Baset, a resident at South Badda.

Over the past four to five days, almost all of the 126 Rehab members have either stopped or gone slow with rod-related work and no-one is going for fresh purchase, said its president.

The Rehab president said it was partly true that the prices of per ton ship scrap, raw material for manufacturing rod, went up by about \$100 in the international market over the past couple of months.

"But that should not affect the rod prices right now at such a pace and we believe a certain section has created an artificial crisis to make quick money on that pretext," he said.

Seraj said the price hike would leave an adverse impact in the entire construction industry and its linkage industries. Per square feet construction cost will now stand at Tk 1,200, which would previously cost Tk 1,000. This means that it would require one to pay an additional Tk 2 lakh for a 1,000 square feet ready-made flat.

"We want immediate government intervention to bring back stability in the market price, otherwise we will be forced to go for direct purchase from the international market," the Rehab president observed.

Recalling that he had been contesting elections since 1957 which he won and at times lost but never gave up hope, Vaipayee said he had never thought that he would become Prime Minister.

"This has happened because of the inherent strength of democracy which gives the voters to right to install a government or topple it," he said.

AL MPs wave black flags

FROM PAGE 1
black badges and proceeded towards the speaker's chamber for submission of the memorandum.

Standing at the entrance of his chamber, Speaker Sircar welcomed the opposition lawmakers and listened to their grievances for half an hour. He however failed to give any rebuttal, as the AL deputies rushed out in a procession declining to listen anything from him. They also regretted a tea offer from him.

Submitting the memorandum which contained their grievances to the speaker, the disgruntled opposition lawmakers expressed the hope that he would take steps in 15 days to redress those as well as uphold the dignity of parliament.

In the memo, the AL MPs described how their 3-point condition for rejoining parliamentary sessions went unheeded, several MPs attacked and some of their residences ransacked. The memo also illustrated how the government "misused" the Speedy Trial Act for political purposes by trying some AL lawmakers under it, after implicating them in "false" cases. It urged the speaker to take initiative in redressing the lawmakers' grievances and to allow them play effective roles in the Jatiya Sangsad.

The AL lawmakers then came down to the ground floor of the Sangsad Bhavan in a black-flag procession, marched out and sat on a staircase at the Sangsad Plaza giving photo-opportunities to the assembled press lens-men and electronic media, who were barred from getting inside the House. Only the state-run BTV was allowed to cover the event from inside the speaker's chamber.

Abdul Hamid, Opposition Chief Whip Abdus Shahid and AL Agriculture Secretary and lawmaker Abdur Razzaque addressed the gathering at the Plaza staircase.

Later, speaking to journalists, the speaker expressed his grievance at the AL lawmakers' attitude in not listening to him. On taking steps to redress the AL grievances, Sircar said he would make a call in parliament for the AL MPs to return to the House.