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## Constitution change gets cabinet nod

45 women's seats, display of president, PM's portraits; govt drops plan to add 100 general seats

REZAUL KARIM

The cabinet yesterday in principle approved a proposal for the 14th amendment to the constitution with a set of six changes, including 45 women's reserved seats, permanent provision for display of portraits of president and prime minister and speedy swearing-in of lawmakers-elect by the outgoing speaker.

The cabinet allowed the provision of the 45 reserved seats for women in parliament, up from 30, to

run 10 years with indirect elections and introduced proportionate distribution of the seats among the parties in the House.

The government however dropped its plan to increase general seats from 300 to 400 in the wake of flak from opposition parties and other quarters.

With Prime Minister Khaleda Zia in the chair, a cabinet meeting decided to make the provision for women's seats effective from the current parliament through an

interim measure in one of the changes that come after the 13th amendment in 1996.

The draft bill on the changes will be placed again at a cabinet meeting on Monday for final approval before it is placed in the current parliament session.

The parliamentary standing committee on the law ministry will scrutinise the bill that came up with the changes and send it back to the Jatiya Sangsad with recommenda-

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Equal rights remain a far cry for women like this day-labourer concreting a road divider under the hot midday sun even as activists of the Sammilito Nari Samaj holding a banner in the background assemble near the city's Shahbag to celebrate the International Women's Day yesterday.

PHOTO: STAR

## Doctors plan shifting Azad from ICU

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Doctors attending injured writer Humayun Azad at the Combined Military Hospital (CMH), Dhaka plan to shift him from intensive care unit (ICU) as his health improved.

Quoting review by eight senior specialist doctors of Armed Forces, a bulletin released by Inter Services Public Relations (ISPR) yesterday said, "His overall condition is improving and specialists are considering to shift him from the ICU."

"His condition has further improved," it said adding that his pulse, temperature, respiration and blood pressure were within acceptable limits.

Azad could sit and walk with assistance and was getting liquid food orally, the ISPR bulletin added.

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## Amendment move under fire

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Opposition political parties, women rights groups and civil society yesterday rejected the cabinet's approval of the 14th amendment to the constitution that proposes a set of six changes.

The amendment envisions proportionate distribution of reserved seats for women among parliamentary parties, mandatory hanging of the portraits of the president and the prime minister and speedy swearing-in of lawmakers-elect, among other things.

Terming the key proposals of the amendment 'as absurd, unnecessary, eyewash and farce', they said it

would not bring any good to the nation, but hinder women's empowerment, stoke political tension and plunge Bangladesh into chaos.

Awami League General Secretary Abdul Jalil dismissed the government plan to amend the constitution, saying it was a farce and exposure of an autocratic mindset of the coalition government.

"The ruling BNP-Jamaat coalition is dreaming of capturing all powers by making such an amendment. If they believe they will be able to do so, they are living in a fool's paradise," he said.

He accused the government of

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## JS RESERVED SEATS Rights groups see draft insult to women

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Women's rights groups yesterday condemned the cabinet's approval of a proposal for proportionate distribution of reserved seats for women among parliamentary parties instead of direct polls, pegging the approval as treacherous and an insult to the movement for women's empowerment.

The draft bill approved by the cabinet proposes to raise the reserved seats to 45, up from 30 nominated women lawmakers under a former law that expired just before the last general elections in

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## NCBs fail to rein in operating costs

REZAUL KARIM BYRON

The performance of the nationalised commercial banks (NCBs) in the last one year has worsened on rising operating cost and capital deficits that grew by 5.44 percent and 21 percent.

The rate of loan recovery has also plunged 37 percent and provision shortfall widened 15 percent, according to banking sources.

The banks were supposed to cut their operating costs 10 percent as per their memorandum of understanding (MoU) with the central

bank.

During the period, the four NCBs cut down on manpower, branches and loans and tightened control over lending to comply with the MoU that they signed to improve their performance.

As per the MoU, the 61,325-staff strong NCBs last year shed 1,284 staffs -- Sonali Bank 488, Janata 393, Agrani 193 and Rupali 210.

These banks did not make any extra effort to cut down on the employees, according to the sources. "Some of these staffs had retired and some were sacked on

poor performance," said a high official of the Sonali Bank. "But the vacancies were not filled up."

The four banks closed down 157 of the 3,482 branches last year.

The lending growth of the banks was limited to 1.16 percent to comply with a Bangladesh Bank directive that the growth should not exceed 5 percent. In terms of money, they gave over Tk 440 crore in loan during the period. This figure is not low as these banks have written off loans worth Tk 2,581 crore.

"In other words, the banks had

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## Biman plans to buy obsolete F28 aircraft

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Biman Bangladesh Airlines is at the final stage of buying two obsolete 26-year-old Fokker F-28 aircraft at the risk of incurring huge loss on account of heavy maintenance and frequent problem.

Interestingly, while it is pressing for the F28s of the Dutch Fokker, a company that is already defunct, Biman at the same time wants to sell

off its existing F28s on the ground that they are old.

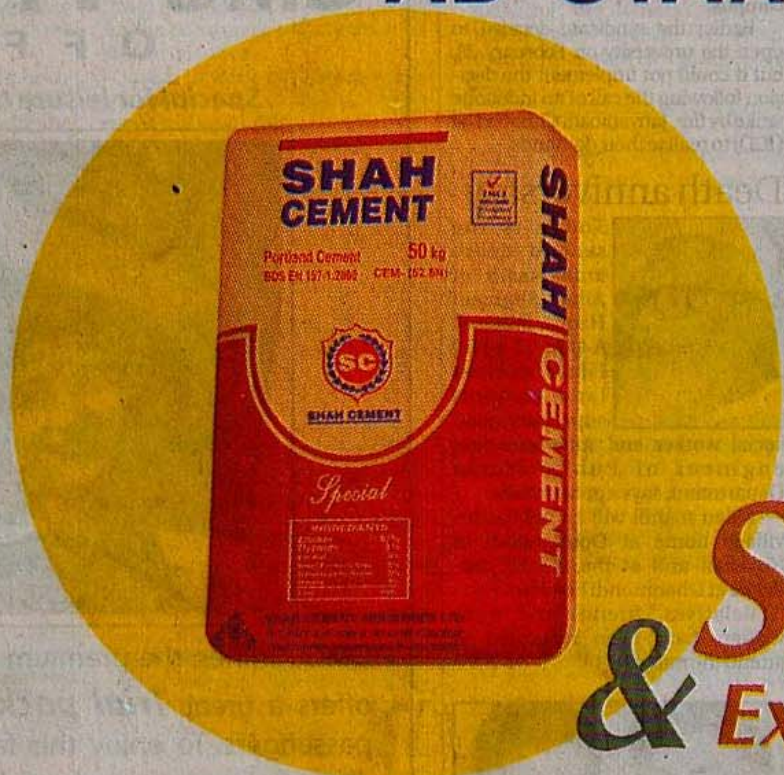
When Biman floated a tender to sell off the existing F28s last year, the highest bid it got is \$0.3 million for each aircraft. Now, the same make the national flag carrier wants to buy at \$1.485 million.

The technical and financial evaluation committees of Biman have accepted a proposal of Hiebert

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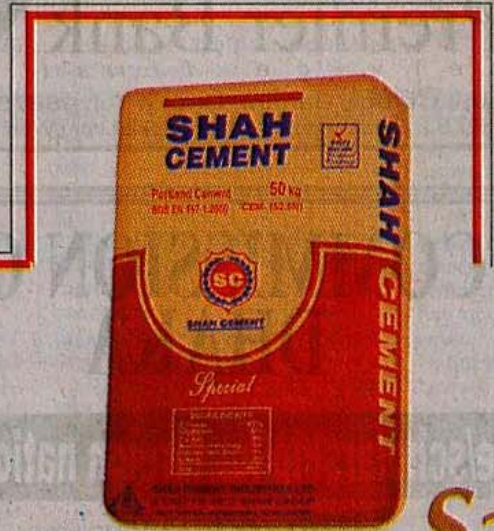
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