

Dhaka set to sign Tifa with Washington

Talks today to sort out minor issues

RAFIQ HASAN

Bangladesh is set to sign a trade and investment accord with the US aimed to give bilateral trade and commerce a shape, as trade officials of the two countries sit at the commerce ministry today to thrash out some minor outstanding issues.

The draft of Trade and Investment Framework Agreement (Tifa) is now in the final stage and it

would be placed at the regular weekly cabinet meeting for final approval once the two sides agree on the terms and conditions of the deal, according to the ministry sources.

The agreement will be signed 'at a convenient time', the sources said.

Dhaka would seek duty-free access of its goods to the US market, an increase in the number of items eligible for generalised sys-

tem of preference (GSP) facilities and benefit from the US bill for Middle Eastern countries at today's talks, the sources said.

A seven-member high-powered delegation headed by Commerce Secretary Suhel Ahmed will sit for the talks. US Assistant Trade Representative Ambassador Ashley Wills, who arrived in Dhaka on a two-day official visit yesterday, will lead the US side.

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US mission worried at govt's B Chy handling

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The US mission in Dhaka has expressed serious concern over the ruling party's violent backlash against a new political platform launched by some of its dissidents.

Sources said the US embassy is closely observing the prevailing political situation after the public rally of the 'alternative stream' led by former president AQM Badruddoza Chowdhury was squashed and subsequent attacks unleashed on Major MA Mannan's business establishments.

Forming a political party is a fundamental democratic right provided for by the Bangladesh

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Mannan's five bank accounts frozen

'JCD' men lock his chemical factory in Ctg

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The government yesterday froze bank accounts of five companies owned by ex-BNP leader MA Mannan, as alleged Jatiyatabadi Chhatra Dal activists forced workers out of his under-construction Elite Chemical in Chittagong before they locked it.

The government froze the accounts of Delta Fashion Limited and Eastern Fashion Industries with Standard Chartered, a third of Sunpac Industries with United Commercial Bank Limited, another

two accounts of Sunflower Garments Limited and Quasem Sewham Company Limited with the Commercial Bank of Ceylon, aides to Mannan told The Daily Star.

Mannan confirmed the latest government action that came a day after armed activists apparently of the BNP went on the rampage at his beverage factory in Savar, injuring six workers with bombs and gunshots.

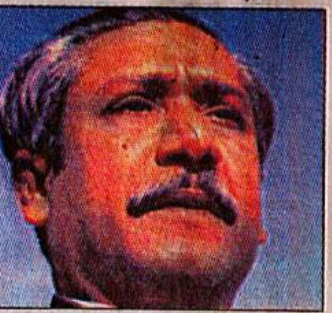
Mannan, a retired army major, resigned from parliament and the ruling BNP on March 10 in protest at what he said was a serious failure of

the coalition government.

Political observers described the bank account freeze as the ruling coalition backlash against Mannan who joined the alternative political stream of former president Badruddoza Chowdhury as its member secretary.

The move underlines the concern Mannan expressed at Monday's press conference in Baridhara that the government "let loose miscreants to close my factories down and launched a move to freeze my bank accounts."

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Bangabandhu's 85th birthday today

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The 85th birthday of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, architect of the nation's independence, will be observed today.

Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur

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A tree is in flower in front of the Supreme Court. The blooming of blossoms signifies the presence of spring and symbolises a bright future in many Asian cultures.

PHOTO: STAR

14th constitution amendment bill to be tabled today

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The bill seeking 14th amendment to the constitution with a provision of 45 seats reserved for women in parliament will be tabled in the Jatiya Sangsad today.

Law, Justice and Parliamentary Affairs Minister Moudud Ahmed would place the bill before the House, which will send it to the parliamentary standing committee on the law ministry for scrutiny, parliament sources said yesterday.

Parliament will pass the bill in the ongoing session.

The cabinet on Monday approved the proposal for the 14th amendment to the constitution with a set of six changes, including the 45

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Plan to waive loans of small farmers

REJAUL KARIM BYRON

The government plans to waive loans of defaulting small farmers in view of thousands of cases pending against them.

The finance ministry has asked the nationalised commercial banks (NCBs), Bangladesh Krishi Bank and Rajshahi Krishi Unnayan Bank to provide data on the amount of loans under Tk 5,000 and Tk 10,000 category.

The government however is still undecided about whether to waive agriculture loan or only crop loan, principal and interest or only interest or loan up to Tk 5,000 or Tk 10,000, sources at the finance ministry and state-owned banks said.

A finance ministry source said

interest on loans up to Tk 5,000 may be waived but no final decision has been taken as yet, adding that the finance division is doing the spadework now.

Until December 2003, the total outstanding farm loan stood at Tk 10,943 crore, of which 61 percent or Tk 6,683 crore remains overdue.

About five lakh certificate cases are pending against farmers for defaulting on loan up to Tk 10,000.

This time, said a finance ministry source, the government is considering a waiver to lessen the loans of the farmers and to cut down on bad loan, as well.

Banking sources said the government is considering the waiver to

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Only 12pc of public varsity budget spent on education

Pay and perks have lion's share

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Amere 12 percent of the total budget allocated in public universities is spent on educational purposes while the lion's share is used as payment of salaries and other allowances to university teachers and staff.

The University Grants Commission (UGC) placed its annual report on fiscal 2002-03 before parliament yesterday revealing the sorry situation.

According to the UGC report, salaries and other allowances to

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HC rule on BoI for cancelling Crown's registration

UNB, Dhaka

The High Court (HC) yesterday issued a rule upon the Board of Investment (BoI) to explain why its notice cancelling registration of Crown Beverage Limited (CBL) should not be declared illegal.

On March 4, the BoI cancelled registration of CBL on charge of violating its agreement.

A Division bench comprising Justice Shah Abu Nayeem Mominur Rahman and Justice Abdus Salam Mamun fixed March 21 for hearing on the petition seeking stay of operation of the notice.

The order came upon a writ filed by Shamim Islam, managing director of CBL, challenging the legality of the BoI action.

Barrister Rafiq-ul-Huq appeared for the petitioner, while Additional Attorney General Fida A Kamal for the BoI.

32 die in Pak drive against al-Qaeda

AGENCIES, WANA

Pakistani troops yesterday fought a ferocious gun battle with tribesmen close to the Afghan border.

At least eight soldiers were killed in the drive against fugitive Taleban and al-Qaeda members, a military spokesman said. He believed 24 suspects had died.

Local residents reported heavy gunfire from both sides throughout the day.

Pakistan has conducted several recent operations against suspects believed to be hiding in the area. A similar US operation is under way in Afghanistan.

"We believe that 24 suspected terrorists have been killed," military spokesman Major General Shaukat Sultan told the Associated Press.

He said most of those killed were apparently Pakistani tribesmen suspected of sheltering the mili-

tants, but several were also believed to be foreigners presumed to be al-Qaeda members.

It was the fiercest clash between the security forces and pro-Taleban tribesmen since October, when eight foreign militants and two soldiers were killed in the remote border area.

Officials say the fighting started soon after paramilitary forces moved into a village near the town of Wana in the South Waziristan region to arrest local tribesmen who had been accused of providing shelter to al-Qaeda militants.

But they came under attack from two directions as they entered the area and responded using light machine guns and mortars.

It resulted in a pitched gun battle that went on for more than four hours.

"We are not allowed to go out of

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Pakistan survive Tendulkar scare to level series

REUTERS, Rawalpindi

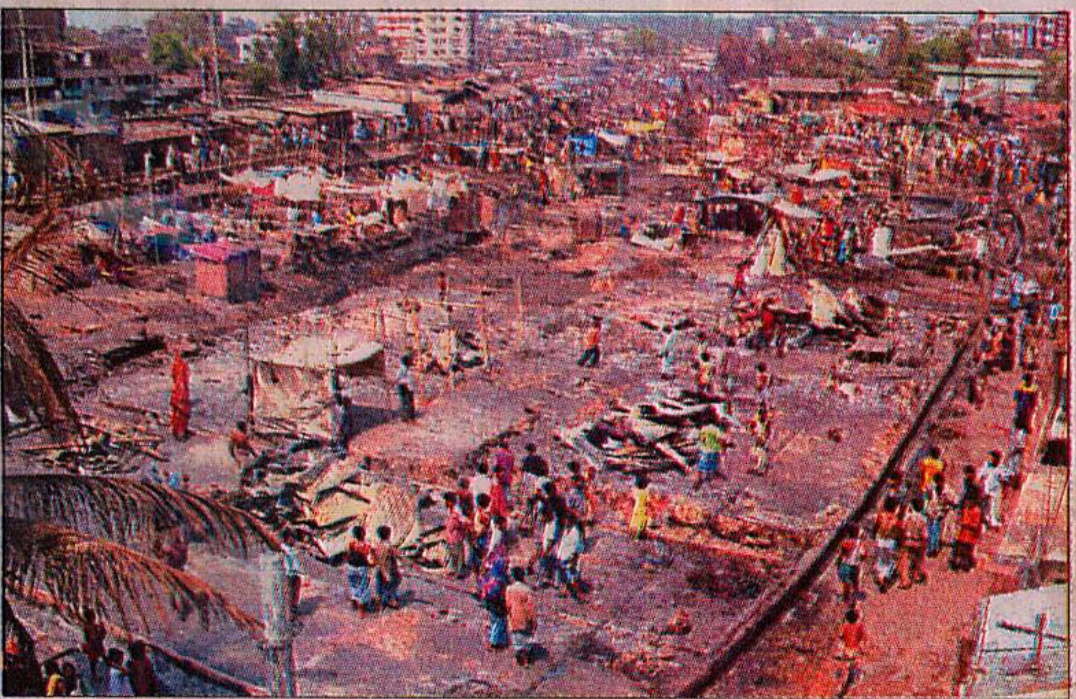
India's maestro Sachin Tendulkar crossed 13,000 one-day runs and struck his 37th century but could not prevent Pakistan from winning the second one-day international by 12 runs.

While the 30-year-old smashed 141, including 17 fours and a six, India were unable to chase Pakistan's imposing 329 for six from their 50 overs, set up by a quickfire 138-run partnership between openers Shahid Afridi (80) and Yasir Hameed (86).

India remained in the hunt right through with man-of-the-match Tendulkar blazing away from one end. However, the match started to slip away after his fall in the 39th over with the total 245.

Rahul Dravid (36) Yuvraj Singh (19) and Mohammad Kaif (7) fell in quick succession before debutant Ramesh Powar (18 not out) and

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Homeless people scurry through the remains of 2,000 shanties and more than 60 shops gutted in a fire at Madarbari in Chittagong early yesterday.

PHOTO: STAR

2,000 shanties, over 60 shops gutted in Ctg

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, Ctg

At least 2,000 shanties and more than 60 shops were gutted in a fire rendering around 4,000 people homeless at a big slum in the city's West Madarbari under Doublemooring thana in the early hours of yesterday.

Witnesses and affected people said property worth about Tk 2 crore was damaged and 10 people suffered minor injuries in the fire.

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Correction

The headline of our yesterday's front-page story which read "BNPPP meets Jan 21 on ways to head off opposition" should read March 21. We sincerely regret the error and the confusion, if any.

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