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Bangladesh finally logs on to submarine cable

Dhaka signs deal with 12 other countries March 27

STAR REPORT

After four years of dilly-dallying, Bangladesh is finally signing on March 27 a submarine cable agreement with 12 other countries that will open a high-speed, low-priced internet and telecommunications gateway to the users from June 2005. Bangladesh's entry to the 13-member consortium, SEA-ME-WE-4 in acronym, will slash internet and long-distance telephone call costs and greatly boost browsing speed. The country will have a 10-gigabyte data transfer capacity a second, 68

GAINS AT A GLANCE

- Cheaper overseas call rates
- Faster internet access and data transfer
- More scopes for launching IT-enabled value-added services e.g. call centre, tele-medicine, distance education at overseas universities



times more than the current capacity. The capacity is considered adequate for the next 10 years and the submarine cable has a life of 15 years. State telecoms monopoly

Bangladesh Telegraph and Telephone Board (BITB) and over 100 internet service providers (ISP) between them now have a 150-megabyte data transfer capacity

each second.

"The BITB alone commands 83-megabyte capacity," said a BITB official, wishing anonymity. The ISPs will no longer have to depend on Singapore-based costly satellite data transfer, as BITB will offer them with lease facilities. The consortium -- South East Asia-Middle East-West Europe-4 -- seeks to begin the cable connection from Singapore running through Malaysia, Thailand, Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, a number of middle eastern countries and will

SEE PAGE 11 COL 4

Constitution change bill tabled in JS

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The much-talked-about bill seeking 14th amendment to the constitution was placed in the Jatiya Sangsad yesterday and subsequently sent to the parliamentary committee on the law ministry for scrutiny within two weeks.

Law, Justice and Parliamentary Affairs Minister Moudud Ahmed tabled the bill that proposes among other things, 45 reserved seats for women in parliament and display of portraits of the president and prime minister in the government offices. The bill was placed ignoring the demand of women rights' groups and mainstream opposition parties for direct election to the women's seats.

The proposed amendment also

SEE PAGE 11 COL 7

Business leaders worried, watching Mannan events

Apex bodies sit today, make public statement on the attacks on March 21

JULFIKAR ALI MANIK

Business leaders are watching with concern the wave of attacks on 11 enterprises of MA Mannan following his resignation from the ruling BNP and will take a position on the politically-sensitive issue after discussions at the highest business forum.

Representatives of the leading trade and business bodies however told The Daily Star yesterday their silence on the attacks and freeze on bank accounts of companies owned by the retired army major is not

because they are reluctant to register their protest, but because they want to have a better grasp of the recent events before they make statements.

"We are not avoiding the matter; we are trying to come to terms with reality and then we would like to deal with the matter seriously," said Abdul Awal Mintoo, president of the Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FBCCI), the country's apex trade body.

"We want to look at this matter separately from other incidents.

Politicians change parties thousands of times, this is natural, but when the attacks that followed after Mannan's resignation and even freeze on his accounts, we, the businesspeople, are trying to measure the state of democracy here."

Mintoo added businesspeople will soon make statements on the issue and the FBCCI is scheduled to sit with other apex business bodies today to discuss and share views on the present political climate, including the attacks on Mannan's enterprises.

SEE PAGE 14 COL 6

Bomb flattens Baghdad hotel

27 killed

AP, Baghdad



PHOTO: REUTERS

A powerful car bomb destroyed a five-storey hotel in central Baghdad last night, killing at least 27 people, wounding 41 and leaving a crater 20 feet across. Foreigners were among the hotel guests.

Rescuers were searching for other victims in the Jabal Lebanon Hotel, Army Col. Ralph Baker of the 1st Armoured Division said. Americans, Britons, Egyptians as well as other foreigners were staying at the hotel, resident Fahel

SEE PAGE 11 COL 7

Bangabandhu's 85th birthday celebrated

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The main opposition Awami League (AL), its front organisations and a raft of socio-cultural organisations celebrated the 85th birthday of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman yesterday.

In Dhaka, the AL hoisted national and party flags atop its headquarters in the morning.

The leaders and activists of the party placed wreaths at the portrait of the architect of the nation's independence at Bangabandhu Memorial Museum in Dhanmondi.

A rally of children and juveniles was held in front of the museum in the morning and a discussion was held there in the afternoon.

Leader of the Opposition Sheikh Hasina addressed a rally of juveniles at Tungipara Sheikh Mosharaf Hossain High School marking the day.

She also offered feteha and placed wreaths at the Bangabandhu Complex. A milad mahfil and a voluntary blood donation programme were also held on the complex premises.

SEE PAGE 11 COL 1



PHOTO: STAR

A decorator carries a generator and fans to his service-taker near Bahadur Shah Park in the old quarter of Dhaka. No host takes a risk but borrows alternative source of power in the frequent brownout-hit city.

PM terms CPJ comment sweeping

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Prime Minister Khaleda Zia yesterday rejected an international media watchdog's observation on repression on journalists in Bangladesh, terming it a sweeping comment.

A delegation from the New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), which came to Bangladesh on a week-long visit earlier this month, said at a press conference in Dhaka that Bangladesh was the most violent country for journalists in Asia.

Replying to a query during the prime minister's question time in parliament, Khaleda said the CPJ's conclusion on the condition of journalists after a stay of only five to six days here and comparing it with that in other Asian countries appeared to her a sweeping comment.

She said her government took no repressive measures against any journalists or newspapers. Sometimes journalists might have come under attacks but those were not for journalism but for other reasons. In such cases, she claimed, her government immediately

SEE PAGE 11 COL 3

Blame on ministries for agri inputs crises

JS body feels prime minister should not deny reports

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Finance and energy ministries' indifference to the proposals for agricultural subsidies has added to the miseries of farmers reeling under high input prices, a Jatiya Sangsad body observed at a meeting yesterday.

Committee members from both ruling and opposition parties called for immediate government action to rescue *boro* growers from rising

diesel, potash fertiliser and seed prices and felt that Prime Minister Khaleda Zia should not deny the inputs crises in her speeches.

Agriculture Minister MK Anwar told the meeting that his ministry repeatedly requested the finance ministry to grant more agricultural input subsidies, but the finance ministry showed indifference to the proposal.

Jatiya Party lawmaker GM Kader,

SEE PAGE 11 COL 4



Azad to be sent to Bangkok in a day or two

REZAUL Karim

Humayun Azad is likely to be sent to Bangkok's Bumrungrad Hospital for better treatment in a couple of days and the prominent writer is planning to pen his ordeal after full recovery.

The government took the decision after consulting physicians at the Combined Military Hospital (CMH) where Azad is currently undergoing treatment for stab wounds in the head, jaw and shoulder he suffered in an attack on February 27.

SEE PAGE 11 COL 4

Khaleda skips question over dissident affair

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Prime Minister Khaleda Zia yesterday skipped reply to a query on recent attacks on her political dissidents like retired army major Abdul Mannan and Mahi Chowdhury.

During the prime minister's question time in the Jatiya Sangsad, opposition lawmaker Kader Siddiqui queried why the government was deterring alternative political initiative taken by two

SEE PAGE 11 COL 5

Cab owner gunned down, wife injured

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Miscreeants yesterday gunned down a taxicab owner and shot and injured his wife as she tried to save her husband from the shooting before their Mohammadpur residence.

Led allegedly by Mohammad Ali, a gang of six on three motorbikes sprayed bullets on Alamgir Hossain Patwary, owner of two black cabs shortly after 11:00am when he was talking to his wife Rabeya Begum, sources said.

Rabeya suffered bullet wounds in the hand as she tried to safeguard the 35-year-old father of two sons and a daughter.

"The gang including Ali, Jabbar, Jafar, Bakar, Foyez and Kadir -- all were friends of Alamgir once -- opened fire when he was talking to

me after handing down the car key to one of his drivers," an injured Rabeya told reporters at Dhaka Medical College Hospital (DMCH).

"He ran towards the house to save himself from the bullets, but collapsed on the ground receiving bullets in the chest and stomach," she added.

They were rushed to the DMCH where doctors declared Alamgir dead at 12:00pm. Rabeya was later shifted to the Orthopaedic Hospital.

Ali threatened to kill Alamgir two days ago over a long feud on some of her husband's rented-out rooms at Bizli Mohalla in Mohammadpur, Rabeya alleged.

Ali also stabbed Alamgir and burnt his motorbike six months back when he went to collect rent

SEE PAGE 11 COL 1

Dhaka can up its GSP share to \$400m, says Wills

UNB, Dhaka

Bangladesh could raise its share of US GSP facilities up to \$400 million under an economic development programme, visiting US Assistant Trade Representative for South Asia Ashley Wills said while talking on the EPZ union issue yesterday.

The textile and apparel industry now receives the facilities equivalent to \$33 million, which could be jacked up to that extent by strengthening the textiles sector, he told a meeting with Bangladesh Export Processing Zones Authority (Bepza).

He said the US has an economic development programme for three least developed countries -- Bangladesh, Nepal and Afghanistan -- which will be implemented very soon.

SEE PAGE 11 COL 3

Dhaka, Washington agree to sign Tifa in 2-3 months

RAFIQ HASAN

Dhaka and Washington have agreed to sign the Trade and Investment Framework Agreement (Tifa) in two to three months.

"We had a very fruitful discussion with Bangladesh officials and we hope that Tifa would formally be signed within next two to three months," visiting US Assistant Trade Representative for South Asia Ashley Wills told reporters after the hour-long official talks at the commerce ministry in Dhaka.

"There are still some discord between us regarding the wording and phrasing of the text of the agreement which I hope would also be

sorted out very soon."

Wills, however, denied having any major dispute with Bangladesh over signing the agreement. "I would talk to my colleagues back in Washington and inform Dhaka about our position," he said.

The agreement is seen to expand manifold economic ties between the two countries and provide both sides the opportunity to hold periodical negotiations on trade- and commerce-related issues.

SEE PAGE 11 COL 1

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Strain on 11 parties over agitation plans

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Amid efforts to secure an alliance in the anti-coalition movement, signs of a divide have put the 11-party left alliance in disarray, as a difference of opinion surfaced over future out-governments strategies, including hartal, and an alternative platform.

The relations were strained by the opposition of Gano Forum and Bangladesh Samajtantrik Dal (BSD) to the hartal called separately on March 6 by fellow 11-party members, Communist Party of Bangladesh (CPB), and Workers' Party (WP) that threw their weight behind the main opposition Awami League.

Sources close to the Gano Forum and BSD said they opposed the hartal on separate grounds. The Gano Forum opposed the general strike at an 11-party meeting appar-

ently because of its anti-hartal stance.

The BSD was at odds with the CPB and WP; as it said the AL would reap most of the benefit of the hartal and calling the hartal the same day might mislead people into thinking of a possible alliance between the leftists and the AL.

The Gano Forum and BSD rejected proposals to call another hartal by the left alliance in late March or early April to protest what it said was high-handed repression of the opposition by the government.

Sources close to the CPB high-command said the launch of the National Platform for Unity by Dr Kamal Hossain, Gano Forum president, on March 14 and open support by the BSD and WP prompted CPB hardliners to question the commitment of the three to the alliance.

SEE PAGE 11 COL 6

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