

KEPZ chief dies in Bangkok

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Commodore Golam Rabbai, managing director of Korean Export Processing Zone (KEPZ), died at Bumrungrad Hospital in Bangkok yesterday morning. He was 57.

Rabbani, also the former chairman of Chittagong Port Authority and ex-director general of shipping, came under armed attack in Muradnagar area of Chittagong while he along with five others was going to the KEPZ site at Anwara in a microbus on April 11.

A gang of five intercepted the microbus by putting up a barricade on the road and shot Rabbani after snatching valuables from him and others on board the microbus.

A bullet pierced through the throat of Rabbani. He was rushed to

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Farm credit nosedives

Banks' clench-fisted attempt to recover default loans cuts outflow

REJAUL KARIM BYRON

The lending flow in the agriculture sector has nosedived following a stricter stance taken by banks in order to check loan defaults.

On February 29, outstanding loans in the agriculture sector stood at Tk 11,069 crore, which is Tk 372 crore lower than the previous year's.

Loan recovery in this sector was also lower than the previous year's and, so, the amount of default farm loans remains as high as before.

The four nationalised commercial banks (NCBs) and the four specialised banks, that provide 99 percent of all agriculture loans in the country, are lagging far behind their targets in this case.

Farm loans disbursed by the

NCBs from July last year to February last range between only 19 percent and 33 percent of their targets. Only Krishi Bank, a specialised institution, has achieved a high rate of 63-percent lending, central bank data shows.

During the period, the eight public-sector banks have given out a total of Tk 2,053 crore in agriculture loan while recovering Tk 1,966 crore. "Considering the lending and recovery figures, the eight institutions have pumped in only Tk 87 crore additionally into the agriculture sector," noted a banker.

Explaining the decline, he said, "There is huge default loans in the agriculture sector. Plus there has been stricter control over the lending of the nationalised commercial

banks. The government also has focussed excessively on certain types of farm loans. All these have contributed to the slide in lending."

Out of the total outstanding agriculture loan of these banks, a staggering 57 percent or Tk 6,308 crore was overdue on February 29.

On the same date, 45 percent of their total loan or Tk 4,959 crore stood as classified loans. This figure makes agriculture one of the poorest performing sectors in lending, as the overall loan default rate stands at 23 percent.

Sixty-seven percent of the Sonali Bank's agriculture loan is classified,

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PHOTO: STAR

An overflow of sewage water from a busted manhole submerges part of the road on the eastern side of Gulshan-1 roundabout, posing serious hazards to pedestrians and vehicles.

13 Proshika staff held in midnight raids

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Police arrested 13 officials and employees of Proshika, a non-governmental organisation (NGO), in Khulna region and in Kishoreganj during midnight raids on Thursday and Friday.

Of them, 14 were arrested in Khulna region and the rest in two upazilas of Kishoreganj. Our Khulna Correspondent reported that police stormed Proshika office in Jessore town at midnight on Thursday and nabbed three employees named Soheli Chowdhury, Amiya Chakraborty and Nannu Gharami. The office was ransacked during the raid.

Three officials of Proshika Mongla office were arrested at midnight on Friday. The arrestees are Zonal Co-ordinator Shaikh Ahsanul Islam, Field Officer Shafiqul Islam and Assistant Co-ordinator Monirul Islam.

On the same night, the law enforcers picked up three officials of the NGO from its Morrelganj office. They are Area Co-ordinator

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INDIAN POLLS

2nd phase campaign comes to a close

FROM PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

The curtains came down yesterday evening on the campaign for the second phase of Indian parliamentary elections that will witness polling in 137 constituencies spread over 11 states.

Top leaders including Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee and top opposition leader Sonia Gandhi are making a last-ditch attempt to woo the electorate.

With the Election Commission's ban on poll rallies and meetings going into force at 5:00pm, 48 hours before polling on Monday, senior leaders switched to door-to-door campaign to do some last-minute mobilisation of voters.

The second phase will witness polling for the first time in 32 of the total 80 seats of the key state of Uttar Pradesh where Sonia and her son Rahul are in the fray in their family-pocket boroughs of Rae Bareilly and Amethi. The remaining 48 constitu-

encies of the state will go to polls in the fourth and fifth and final phases on May 5 and 10.

Among other prominent candidates whose electoral fates would be decided in the second phase are Bahujan Samaj Party's Mayawati, contesting from Uttar Pradesh's Akbarpur constituency, and BJP leader and prominent Muslim politician Arif Mohammed Khan in Kaiserganj, also in India's most populous state.

An opinion poll conducted by leading market research agency AC Nielsen on behalf of TV news channel NDTV projected BJP getting 13 of the 32 seats which go to polls in Uttar Pradesh on April 26, followed by the state's ruling Samajwadi Party (10) and BSP and Congress with four each.

Also in the fray in the second phase are Nationalist Congress Party leader Sharad Pawar in his traditional Baramati constituency in the western state of Maharashtra

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Malaysia seeks consensus on next OIC chief

THE STAR/ ANN, Kuala Lumpur

Malaysia still hopes to get a consensus for the appointment of the next secretary-general of the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC).

The country has named Tan Sri Hasmy Agam as its choice of candidate but at least two other OIC countries Bangladesh and Turkey are said to be also interested in the post.

The normal practice is for a consensus but if the three countries fail to compromise, OIC will for the first time in its 35-year history go for a majority vote instead.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi said if no compromise was reached, they would have to "use another mechanism" to resolve the matter.

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Ershad Shikder's bodyguard wants to be his hangman

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, Khulna

Condemned killer Ershad Shikder's former chief bodyguard Nur-e-Alam, now in Jessore Central Jail, has offered to become hangman of his former boss.

He gave the proposal to the jail authorities, reports received here said.

Ershad is scheduled to be hanged in Khulna jail on May 10.

Nur was Ershad's chief bodyguard from 1990 till his (Ershad) arrest on August 11, 1999.

He witnessed 40 murders, 24 committed by Ershad himself and the rest on his orders.

He surrendered to police on July 31, 1999 to save his life as Ershad threatened to kill him. He then turned a government approver in the cases against his former boss and made confessions to police as well as to court about the killings.

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Security beefed up at Secretariat

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Security was beefed up at the Secretariat from yesterday as two sweeping teams of Special Branch (SB) of police carried out a thorough search of the parking vehicles.

Additional security measures at the Secretariat have been taken ahead of main opposition Awami League's deadline to unseat the alliance government by April 30.

Deputy Commissioner (Protection) Abdul Mannan said two four-member sweeping teams of the SB will search vehicles inside the Secretariat with metal detectors and mirrors.

"If necessary, we'll assign another team," Mannan said, adding they have taken the step to ensure security.

Earlier, vigilance at the entrances to the Secretariat had also been increased to ensure that no-one could go in without a valid pass.



PHOTO: STAR

As much as 50 percent of all such Sundari trees in the Sundarbans that show signs of the top-dying disease could be felled as per recommendations of a government committee.

Axe hangs on sick sundari trees

Some smell a rat

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The government is considering cutting down a huge number of sundari trees in the Sundarbans, apparently to heal it of 'top dying' disease, which some quarters suspect to be a pretext for graft.

An expert committee formed by the environment and forest ministry recommended last month to fell all sundari trees of the mangrove forest that have lost 50 percent or more of the canopy to the persistent disease. The ministry is going to table the issue in the next cabinet commit-

tee meeting for approval, sources said.

But, some experts including top forest officials are of the opinion that the government should chart a clear-cut guideline before okaying the proposal. It also should ensure vigilance over execution of the decision, as some officials may find in it an occasion for making quick money, they added.

"The [forest] department fell dead sundari trees in 1994, too. That time, some officials made huge money by cutting down healthy sundari and other trees,

besides the sick ones. They are now sitting at the top positions [in the department] and are the ones that have made the same move, again," alleged a high-ranking forest official, requesting anonymity.

More than seven percent sundari trees that cover around 72 percent of the Bangladeshi part of the forest are suffering from 'top dying' disease allegedly due to increased salinity of water. Experts say trees are more affected in the forest's western region, especially by the Shibsa river, where salinity is the highest.

"It is necessary to cut down the trees, whose 50 percent canopy is already dead. Otherwise, the government will lose a good amount of revenue," Professor Abdur Rahman, director of the Centre for Integrated Studies on the Sundarbans and also a member of the expert body, told The Daily Star.

But, some other experts disagree with him. "The experts who recommend for felling should be attentive to health of the forest rather than to some revenue loss of the government. They are

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HC summons baby boy's father, complainant

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

A High Court division bench yesterday asked police to produce Anwar Ali, the father of the three-year old boy Iman Ali, who was granted bail earlier in an attempted murder case, before it on May 2.

The court ordered the Sutrapur Police Station's officer-in-charge to also produce the complainant of the case on the same day to settle the matter.

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Land allocated for hi-tech IT park in Gazipur

ABDUL KADER, back from Kaliakoir, Gazipur

A 231.68-acre land was allocated yesterday to set up the first information technology (IT) park to pave the way for the country's entry into the global IT market.

The land ministry formally handed over the land to the Ministry of Science, Information and Communications Technology (ICT) during a function at the upazila office of the district.

Speaking as special guest, Science and ICT Minister Dr Abdul Moyeen Khan said the park will house an ICT university and be equipped with the kind of infrastructure available at such facilities in the USA and Europe.

He said the park will run a helicopter service to fly foreign investors into the park from the airport.

The minister sought the private sector's involvement in the grand project to help Bangladesh gain a sure footing in the international IT market, saying it is the private sector that has made the most contributions so far to the IT sector.

To attract foreign investors, the hi-tech park will have a one-stop service including tax holidays, customs clearing and banking facilities, said Dr M Omar Faruque Khan, acting secretary of the ICT ministry.

He said the ministry will take steps to develop the necessary infrastructure in three years at an estimated cost of Tk 251 crore, adding that work on the mostly government-financed project will begin as soon as possible as per the prime minister's instructions.

The infrastructure will include a

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PHOTO: STAR

Heralding the doom

Two fishermen use a net to fish in the waters off a shoal in the Meghna river where indiscriminate netting of adult and small fish is commonplace.