

Blair's political troubles deepen

REUTERS, London

Speculation about the future of Tony Blair has intensified with an opinion poll showing waning support for the British prime minister and a newspaper saying top members of his cabinet have discussed his succession.

Mired in crisis over Iraq, Blair faces increasing calls to stand down, some from Labour party members worried that their leader and one-time best electoral asset, who has led them to two election victories, is now a liability.

An opinion survey found nearly half of voters thought he should go before the next election, expected around next May.

And support from key allies -- two senior ministers insisted on Sunday that Blair would stay put -- and his own vow to fight on have done little to quell speculation he may quit.

The Sunday Herald reported that Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott and Chancellor of the Exchequer Gordon Brown, who is favourite to succeed Blair, discussed the succession at length in a car in Scotland last weekend.

The Scottish paper cited sources close to Prescott as saying the two talked about prospects for a "peaceful succession" and how the deputy prime minister could help to arrange a leadership contest that would unite rather than divide their party.

Prescott said in the Times on Saturday that senior ministers had discussed a future without Blair, but he later played down the significance of his comments, saying there had been leadership speculation, but there was no race for the prime minister's position.

The Sunday Times, whose YouGov poll published on Sunday showed nearly half of voters think Blair should step down before the next election, reported that senior party figures were positioning themselves ahead of a possible leadership change.

It said Brown's allies had made detailed plans for a government led by him after a handover by Blair at Labour's party conference in the autumn.

Suffering the mid-term blues after seven years in power, Labour is braced for a trouncing in municipal council and European Parliament elections on June 10 -- hurt most by the crisis over Iraq.

Bridge on Padma

FROM PAGE 12
Following a direct road link through Jamuna Multi Purpose Bridge between Mongla Port and the capital. It now remains for bridging the last break, Rupsha River in Khulna, by building the Rupsha Bridge, to materialise that unbroke road link. Construction of Rupsha Bridge is reckoned to be completed by June 2005.

"The government has fixed a very reasonable toll rate for motorised vehicles to use Lalon Shah Bridge," a Roads and Highways department source said. It is estimated that around 2,500 vehicles, mostly lorries, would cross it every day, he added.

Opposition parties

FROM PAGE 1
Frontline leaders of the Workers Party (WP), Communist Party of Bangladesh (CPB), Gono Forum, Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal (JSD-Rab) and JSD (Inu), Samyabadi Dal, Jatiya Party (JP-Manju), Ganatantri Party, National Awami Party (NAP) and GonoAzadi League attended the meeting that staggered more than three hours.

Other issues that took centre stage in the discussion included the 14th constitution amendment bill passed in parliament yesterday, law and order downside, militant activities in the northwest, arms haul in Chittagong and price hike of essentials and closedown of mills and factories.

The opposition parties rejected the bill, saying the law is contrary to the spirit of the constitution and wishes of women leaders, who demanded direct elections to the reserved women's seats in parliament.

Sources said AQM Badruddoza Chowdhury, former president and chief of Bikalpa Dhara Bangladesh, talked to Jalil by telephone when the meeting was going on and agreed in principle with meeting resolutions.

The secretary general of the alternative political stream, Abdul Mannan, said his party did not attend the meeting only to avert controversy ahead of the upcoming by-polls, which is boycotted by the AL.

The meeting came a day after a rally at Paltan Maidan where senior leaders of the AL, left parties and Bikalpa Dhara underscored a broad-based unity of like-minded parties against the government.

Although the parties agreed that there was no alternative to ousting the BNP-Jamaat coalition, a disagreement surfaced over AL's proposal to initiate the oust-government demonstration from a common platform, a leftist leader said, asking not to be named.

The AL gained a great deal of sympathy and moral support from other opposition parties after the killing of Ahsanullah at a roadside rally in Tongji on May 7.

CPB General Secretary Mujahidul Islam Selim alleged that a serious misrule gripped the country and the parties decided to get rid of it,

While the party is still widely expected to win the next general election, commentators say the speculation swirling around Blair, which would have been unthinkable even a few months ago, makes him weaker than ever.

The fragility of his support was highlighted on Friday when the government amended a bill to defuse a major rebellion by members of parliament over plans to protect pensions.

Some analysts say choosing a replacement with no end in sight to Iraq's difficulties could constitute a poisoned chalice for Blair's successor and be no help to the party.

Others emphasise the prime minister's determination to resolve the difficulties of Britain's involvement in the US-led force in Iraq.

Top cabinet figures, including Foreign Secretary Jack Straw and Defence Secretary Geoff Hoon, said the prime minister would stay.

"He is determined to see this job through," Hoon told BBC television. "He doesn't seem to me to be a prime minister contemplating retirement, he's a man focused and engaged on the job, determined to sort out Iraq."

Many voters are still unconvinced by the reasons Blair gave for war and the scandal that has erupted this month over abuse of Iraqi prisoners has given Labour parliamentarians ammunition to call on the government to distance itself from US policies.

MK Alamgir

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ministry Rabul Alam Mohammad Obaidul Muktadir Chowdhury, former director of narcotics control department Syed Bazul Karim, former deputy inspector general of police Prokirti Ranjan Chanda and former president of the Secretariat Karmachari Sanjukta Parishad Syed Mohiuddin.

All the accused except PR Chanda were present in the court yesterday and pleaded not guilty after the charges were read out.

Mohammad Saifur Rahman, the then officer-in-charge (OC) of Ramna Police Station filed the sedition case with the Chief Metropolitan Magistrate's Court in Dhaka on April 8, 2002 accusing Dr Alamgir and six others of sedition.

The Criminal Investigation Department (CID) on December 26, 2002 pressed charges against Dr Alamgir and seven others and included 15 people as witnesses for the prosecution.

The name of PR Chanda was not in the FIR (First Information Report) but the investigation officer included him in the charge sheet citing his involvement found during the probe.

In the case, it was alleged that the accused had set up Janatar Mancha (people's dais) in front of the National Press Club in March 1996 and instigated the government officials and employees to join the agitation to dislodge the then BNP government.

intensifying their antigovernment efforts.

The CPB leader, however, did not make it clear whether his party forged an alliance with the AL and only said: "We all agreed to intensify the oust-government movement."

Questioning the promptness of a press note that indicated the killing of Ahsanullah was the result of AL's internal feud, the meeting demanded immediate withdrawal of the note and punishment to the killers through a neutral investigation.

RALLYING AGAINST COALITION

"We adopted a resolution calling upon people to unite against the government that allows such a barbaric murder of Ahsanullah Master," Hasina told the Shaheed Minar rally, organised by the Jatiya Sramik League (JSL), hours after the meeting with left parties in Dhanmondi.

"They (the government) allow armed criminals like Bangla Bhai and two killers to roam around instead of punishing them," Hasina said.

The CPB, WP and civil society members also attended the rally to mourn Ahsanullah.

The AL general secretary, addressing the rally, demanded release of arrestees who protested the killing of Ahsanullah and withdrawal of chargesheets against them.

Jabid Ahsan Sohel, the son of Ahsanullah, also addressed the rally and said: "I have come to you to demand justice for my father's death. He worked all his life for the rights of workers."

Rashed Khan Menon, WP president, doubted if justice would be delivered, saying: "The criminals are sheltered by the BNP-Jamaat alliance."

"We have to fight not for the change of power but for ideals and to relieve people of sufferings," Hasanul Haq Inu, JSD president, said.

Private spaceship almost in space

BBC ONLINE

A privately built manned spacecraft has reached a record altitude of 211,000ft (64km) over California on one of its final tests before officially entering space.

SpaceShipOne was built by aerospace pioneer Burt Rutan who hopes to win the Ansari X-prize of \$10m (£5.7m) for the first private flight into space.

The craft has to reach an altitude of 329,000ft (100km) twice in three weeks to win - and is expected to do so next month.

Twenty-five other teams across the world are competing for the prize.

In an impressive demonstration over Mojave airport, SpaceShipOne and its carrier aircraft White Knight moved a step closer to claiming the X-prize when pilot Mike Melvill took the vehicle closer to space than any non-governmental craft has been.

Its 211,000ft (64km) altitude was twice as high as SpaceShipOne had been piloted to previously, and is within striking distance of the height required to claim the X-prize.

To win, that altitude - 329,000ft (100km), the official boundary of space - has to be reached twice in two weeks by a three-man spacecraft.

SpaceShipOne's 13 shakedown tests have now put it into a position from which observers expect an attempt to be made within weeks.

Burt Rutan's company Scaled Composites has already become the first non-governmental body to be granted a launch licence when the US Federal Aviation Authority gave it one on 1 April.

The X-prize will mark a new era in manned spaceflight when private companies are able to make short sub-orbital hops for paying customers.

It is hoped that a market for space tourism can be developed but in reality only a very few rich passengers will be able to be carried into space by one or two companies for the foreseeable future.

It's raining

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While there was no break in the dance and music in the stands with the Guinness Posse and Trini Posse sections in full flow, you could clearly see the nervousness in the crowd when the home team required those last 12 runs.

The television and radio commentators, local journalists and the fans were all up on their feet.

The spectator who had joked in the morning that they could have played two matches on the same day was biting his nails and every West Indies run was being greeted by huge roars of relief.

When the last run was scored, the outpouring of passion was amazing. They were ecstatic that the West Indies had won. But they were happy for the Bangladesh team which had surprised everybody present.

"We respect your team maan. You gave us a hard time," or "You guys are fighters. We love you," came ringing in from every corner. The elderly bartender at the Colours Entertainment Centre, a popular hangout just outside the ground, announced the arrival of the journalists from Bangladesh as he personally congratulated all three of us.

The owner of the Crystal Heights Guest House, from where you can touch the Caribbean Sea down below it seems, went to the ground after lunch and was overcome with emotion with what she saw.

"Your boys made me so proud," said Virginia Phillips.

It was time to be proud.

Biman probe

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and tourism for suspension of its licence as a follow-up action, according to a Biman statement issued yesterday.

The probe committee was formed after The Daily Star ran a report yesterday on the nexus between Biman officials and travel agencies that cheated about 1,000 Hajj pilgrims and the national airlines out of over Tk 2 crore during the last Hajj season.

Headed by Director (Customer Service) of Biman Siddiqur Rahman, the three-member committee will submit its report by two weeks. Other members of the committee are SMA Wahab, general manager (administration), and Nurus Salam, deputy general manager (audit).

Biman Managing Director Akhtar Hossain Khan told The Daily Star yesterday that Biman's marketing and sales directorate had been doing an internal audit even before the newspaper report following similar allegations raised by different quarters.

"Now we have formed a committee for a comprehensive investigation with officials from other departments into allegations that a few officials of the directorate of marketing and sales are involved in the matter," he said.

The agencies charged a government-fixed rate of \$1,050 each as Dhaka-Jeddah return fare from these pilgrims under private management. But they deposited \$660 to Biman showing the tickets to be of Umrah group category, depriving the national flag carrier Tk 2.28 crore.

Meanwhile, Air Trip International Ltd. and Victory Travels Ltd. yesterday protested The Daily Star report on the cheating and said they were never involved in Hajj ticket sales in the Umrah group category.

JP's U-turn rankles

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protesting against the party's shift -- which was decided at its parliamentary party meeting Saturday night -- reportedly under government coercion.

Its 12 lawmakers yesterday voted for the bill amid allegations of ruling coalition's threat to arrest and put its Chairman HM Ershad behind bars.

Ershad, also former president, was embarrassed at the latest bickering that the move has kicked up in the party and refused to comment on the issue.

"The lawmakers who voted in favour of the bill violated the party's decision on the issue as it decided earlier to oppose the bill and it has not changed that decision," JP presidium member Kader told The Daily Star yesterday.

"I do not know of any new decision overruling the previous one. The party chairman also told me in the (Sunday) morning that the decision has not been changed," the apparently angry JP lawmaker, also younger brother of Ershad, added.

"According to the party decision, the chairman on May 13 at a press conference demanded withdrawal of the bill."

JP Parliamentary Party (JPPP) leader Rawshan Ershad, however, denied any pressure from the government to shift their position on the bill. "We decided to support the bill at a parliamentary party

meeting held on Saturday night. So it's our party decision and we also want reintroduction of reserved seats for women in parliament," the JP lawmaker, also wife of Ershad, added.

The government on Saturday asked the JP to support the bill when it would be placed in the House for passage. But, if its lawmakers opposed the bill, cases against its chairman will be geared up and he might be thrown into jail, alleged a top JP leader, wishing anonymity.

Ershad has more than a dozen cases pending against him.

Ruling coalition leader BNP, however, refuted the allegation of coercing the JP into voting for the bill. "The Jatiya Party lawmakers have voted according to their parliamentary party decision. There is no question of pressure from the ruling coalition," Whip Rezaul Bari Deena told The Daily Star yesterday.

Sources said the Saturday night decision of JPPP was not disclosed. Some of the 12 JP lawmakers who voted in parliament submitted notices for eliciting public opinion and amendment proposals on the bill, but did not participate in discussion.

Two senior ministers and the ruling BNP whips were visibly worried about the JP lawmakers' behaviour in the House and talked to them to make sure that things went as planned.

Ten shops robbed

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possibly of Half-Pant Bahini, an infamous gang of robbers, launched their operation at the Agrani Bank's Khairhat Branch at 1:30am. They broke into the bank, tying its guard Shipon, 23, and tried to open the vault.

Failed, the gang surrounded Daulat Khan area and locked the people of a bazaar in a nearby house at gunpoint for one and a half hours.

They looted 74 tola gold, 240 tola silver, cash Tk 50,000 and other valuables from three jewellers and seven shops of the bazaar.

Locals suspect the infamous Siraj Bahini might be involved in the robbery, as its men also wear shorts during act of robbery.

Superintendent of Police Motiur Rahman of Bhola visited the spot yesterday.

Constitution changed

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and women groups outside parliament.

A total of 226 lawmakers -- 211 from the BNP-led four party alliance, 12 from the JP and three independents -- voted for the bill.

Speaker Jamir Uddin Sirat presided over the division vote that produced only one vote against amid jubilant desk thumping by ruling coalition deputies.

It was the second constitutional amendment in eight years after the 13th amendment that incorporated the caretaker government system into the constitution in 1996.

The House sat on schedule after Leader of the House and Prime Minister Khaleda Zia led her deputies there in the wake of a brief meeting of the BNP parliamentary party at the Jatiya Sangsad Bhaban.

The second largest opposition, JP (Ershad), had been opposing the bill since its introduction on March 17 and its chairman HM Ershad demanded withdrawal of the law.

JP lawmakers submitted several notices, asking the House to send the bill to select committees for further scrutiny and to elicit public opinion on it.

But the JP deputies did not move their motions in the wake of the parliamentary party decision on Saturday night not to protest the passage of the bill under what a presidium member said was the government threat to arrest the JP chairman.

Leader of the Opposition Sheikh Hasina told reporters yesterday that her party rejected the bill.

On a question of joining parliament to protest the bill, Hasina, also the president of the AL, said speaking inside and outside the Jatiya Sangsad was virtually similar as parliament was ineffective.

Bangladesh scores lowest

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1,000,000 fixed telephone lines installed by the BITB, Sheba Telecom and Bangladesh Rural Telecom Authority (BRTA). The number of cellular phones provided by four operators in foreign joint ventures stands at about 2,300,000.

Bangladesh also holds the lowest position in terms of internet use, with only 0.34 per 100 people having access to the Web. The Maldives again tops the list with 7.12, Bhutan with 1.45 and Sri Lanka with 1.32. The figures for India stood at 0.72, Pakistan 0.42 and Nepal 0.37.

Absence of a competent implementation agency and proper deregulation of the sector has stymied Bangladesh's telecoms growth, industry sources said.

Among 44 ministries and divisions, which implement the Annual Development Programme (ADP), the Ministry of Post and Telecommunications was the worst performer in fiscal 2003-04 with only 14 per cent implementation.

The state telecoms monopoly, Bangladesh Telegraph and Telephone Board (BTB), could not implement projects due to improper tendering procedures and filing of cases by bidders, a senior BTB official said, asking for anonymity.

Girl abducted in Rangamati

BSS, Rangamati

A girl was allegedly abducted by an indigenous youth in Manikchhari under sadar upazila Friday night.

Majema Khatun was kidnapped when she was going to a neighbour's house to watch television at around 8:00pm, police said.

Abul Hossain, the victim's father, yesterday filed an abduction case with Kotwali Police Station against Mintu Chakma, 25, son of Hiru Chakma, of the same area, police said.

The alleged abductor used to tease Majema, the victim's father said.

Ahsanullah murder

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Police (ASP-CID) Khalequzzaman, who is currently leading the four-member CID team formed to probe the killing, said, "The accused have given us much information, but we don't want to act on that without verification."

He declined to disclose any details extracted from the arrestees.

Meanwhile, police managed to secure photographs of only two of the 14 absconding accused in Ahsanullah Master murder case last yesterday, the 10th day since the killing of the opposition lawmaker.

The Criminal Investigation Department (CID) dispatched the photos of the prime accused Nurul Islam Dipu and Kana Hafiz to different exits including the land ports and airports.

Some intelligence sources, however, said Dipu had already fled to India on May 8, the next day of the killing of Ahsanullah Master and a schoolboy near the Awami League (AL) lawmaker's house at Noagaon in Tongi.

Over the last week, the CID for several times raided houses of Dipu's brother Shahidul Islam Shipu and Ohidul Islam Tipu, Ratan Mia, Anowar Hossain Anu, Sohel, Shohagh, Jahangir, Al Amin, Faisal, Rony, Bulu Mia and Syed Ahmed Majnu -- for their photographs, but to no avail.

Police got the photographs of Dipu and Kana Hafiz from a newspaper office, a source said.

Kabr Hossain, owner of the North Badda house from where the FIR-named accused Mahbub, Monir and Dulal were arrested on Friday, was placed on a five-day remand yesterday.

The CID police produced him before the First Class Magistrate's Court in Gazipur yesterday with a five-day remand petition.

"He is responsible for harbouring the accused," said Assistant Superintendent of Police (CID) Khalequzzaman.

"Despite knowing that the three were involved in Ahsanullah's killing, he sheltered them, supplied food and employed 13-year-old boy Shohag at their service," the CID official said.

"We need to interrogate him intensively because he may have more information about the killers and the incident," said Khalequzzaman.

The investigators, meanwhile, are facing difficulty in quizzing Mahbub, Monir and Dulal, now placed on a 10-day remand. They are hard core addicts (Phensedyl) and physical torture might backfire, said sources.

Govt asks banks

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them, 47,679 cases involving Tk 7,512 crore were filed by the NCBs.

So far, the courts could settle 35,412 cases, recovering Tk 1,398 crore.

PM assures

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have declared the ICT a thrust sector and also have been implementing comprehensive programmes to ensure its highest level of utilisation in our national development," she added.

Khaleda hoped that being connected with Information Super Highway through submarine cable by 2005, the country would enter a new era in its ICT sector.

Three killed

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Dhuplata union parishad, died on way to Dhaka Medical College Hospital, they added.

The injured were admitted to different hospitals in Dhaka, Narayanganj and Narsingdi.

An angry mob blocked Dhaka-Shylhet highway for four hours and a half following the accident and damaged about 60 buses. Eight policemen were wounded during clashes with the crowd, police said.

Normal traffic on the highway resumed at 5:00pm.

WorldTel cleared

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meeting with the board (WorldTel) to decide on co-exclusivity with the BTB. "We would be able to reach a decision by next week," an official said.

The BTRC awarded the first PSTN licence to Bashundhara Communication & Networks Ltd. (BCNL), last week to operate in four zones, barring the central zone, in a bid to further open up the telecoms sector to private operators.

The immediate telecoms market for the new entrants in Bangladesh is about 1.2 million fixed lines, which can be fed by the private sector, says a recent study by Infrastructure Investment Facilitation Centre (IIFC), a government-owned company that facilitates private investment in the country.

Bangla Bhai gang

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brother Ataur Rahman Ibne Abdullah and 18 other militants.

A few days later, police released the militants and the higher authorities transferred several police officials involved in the Khetlal operation.

Rahman was born in Charshi village in Jamalpur Sadar Upazila. His father late Moulana Abdullah Ibne Fazal was a leader of an old Islamic organisation, Jamiatul Ahle Hadith. Fazal was accused of collaborating with Pakistani occupation forces during the 1971 Liberation War.

During his student life, Rahman entered his political career by joining the Islamic Chhatra Shibir and later its patron, Jamaat-e-Islami. In the early 1980s, he studied at Madina Islami University in Saudi Arabia and worked at the Saudi embassy in Dhaka for five years from 1985.

He travelled to many countries, including India, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Malaysia, with the latest visit to Pakistan last year.

Rahman said he set up a mosque and a madrasa with the financial help of well-known Islamic non-governmental organisation (NGO) Rabata-e-Islam and another Islamic organisation, Islami Oytijjho Sangstha.

Although he claimed the JMJB is headquartered in Dhaka, investigations show all activities of the organisation revolved around the mosque and madrasas in Jamalpur.

At the local union parishad chairman's office at Kacharikoalpara in Bagmara upazila of Rajshahi, the militant leader told The Daily Star that the JMJB aimed at an Islamic revolution through jihad.

In the face of questions on the source of JMJB's income and his foreign visits, Rahman said: "The government opened an investigation in 1986-87. But it found nothing wrong with me."

The other top leader of JMJB, Bangla Bhai, who gave his real name as Siddiqul Islam, was also involved in the politics of ruling alliance partner Jamaat-e-Islami.

Locals believe they are actually an "action force" of Jamaat under a

Rumsfeld 'backed

official told Hersh.

Hersh is an award-winning US journalist who broke the story of the 1968 My Lai massacre, when US soldiers executed Vietnamese civilians during the war in Vietnam.

Also Saturday The New York Times reported that the mistreatment of Iraqi inmates at Camp Cropper, near Baghdad airport, predates abuse of Abu Ghraib prisoners by US soldiers.

A prisoner told the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) that he had been beaten by interrogators, hooded, handcuffed, threatened with torture and murder, urinated on and kicked in the head, lower back and groin, the daily said.

He was also kept awake for four days and had a baseball tied into his mouth with a scarf, it added.

The ICRC lodged formal complaints with US officials in February, the Times said, and eventually documented 50 cases of abuse.

Bikalpa Dhara

FROM PAGE 1
They also tried to shoot BDB Central Committee Organiser Shahiduzzaman, who found refuge in a nearby market.