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HUMAN TRAFFICKING

US team in city to assess situation

5 days to go for improvement or sanctions

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

A US team arrived in Dhaka yesterday to re-assess relegation of Bangladesh as one of the worst performers in preventing human trafficking, five days to Washington's deadline for Dhaka to make significant efforts or face possible sanctions.

The three-member US assessment team, led by Mark Taylor, a senior US State Department official, met Home Secretary Omar Farooque at the home ministry yesterday. The secretary briefed them on preventive measures Bangladesh authorities have taken since Washington issued the 60-day deadline ending on August 14.

The ratings are based on the

prosecution of traffickers, protection of trafficked people and prevention of trafficking in persons.

A letter sent in May from the US embassy in Dhaka to the foreign ministry gave a six-step work plan for Bangladesh to follow in response to the US State Department's 'Human Trafficking in Persons Report 2004', launched on June 14.

Emerging from the meeting, Taylor told reporters he felt the current prosecution of traffickers is strong and they would re-assess the situation after flying back to Washington.

Farooque told the reporters it is an interactive process that would continue while the re-assessment takes place.

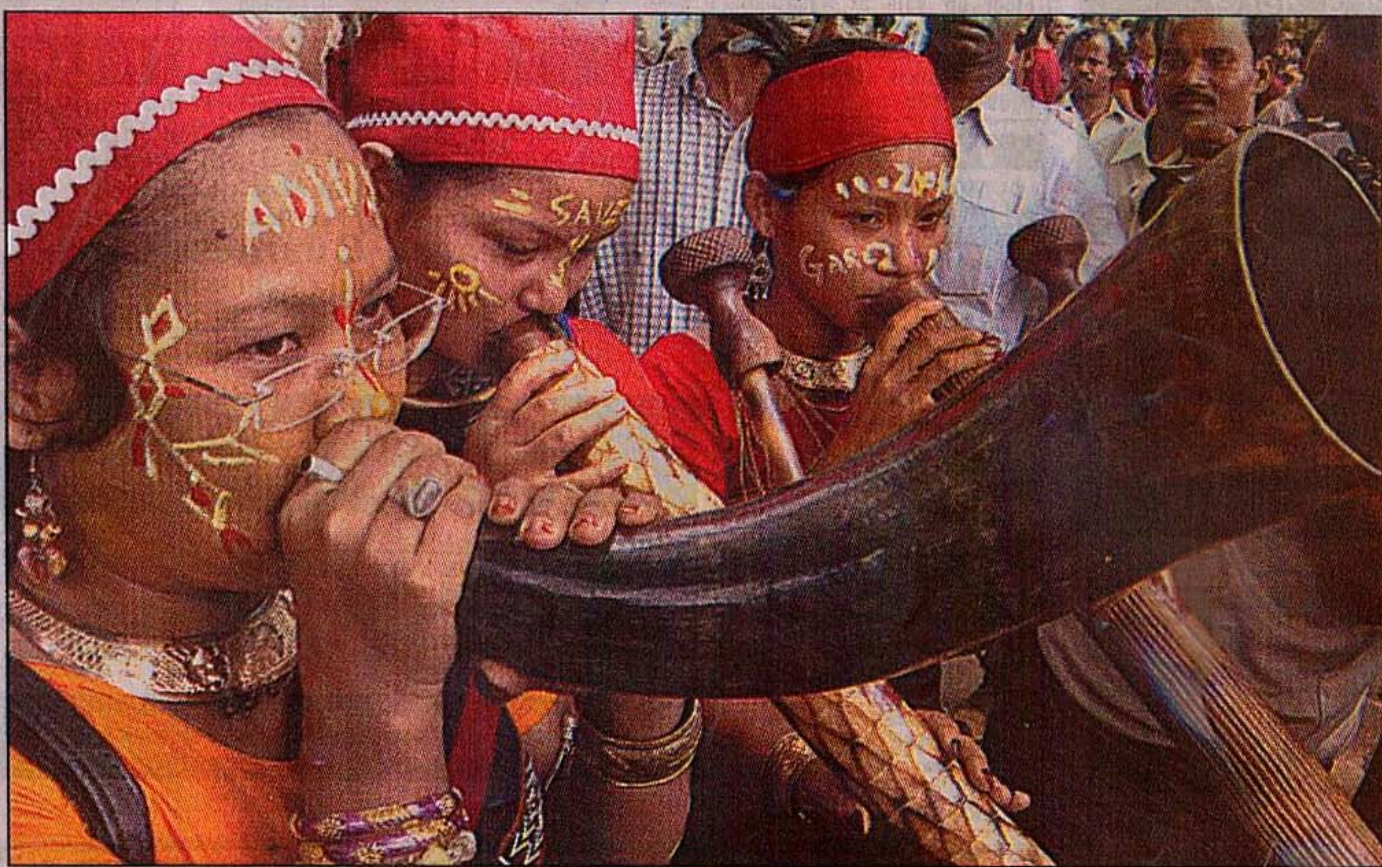
The May letter to the foreign

ministry warned if the steps did not produce any significant improvement in the human-trafficking situation, US would impose statutory restriction on non-humanitarian and non-trade related assistance and withhold educational and cultural exchanges, said a foreign ministry spokesman.

The six-step work plan includes suggestions to reduce vulnerability of trafficked victims, strengthen implementation of laws, increase border surveillance and monitor Bangladeshis trafficked abroad.

Foreign Minister M. Morshed Khan, meanwhile, was optimistic about a positive re-assessment. "I think they will be satisfied with the

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Indigenous people blow horns at a cultural event at the Central Shaheed Minar to mark World Indigenous Peoples' Day yesterday.

Indigenous people rally for rights

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Indigenous people yesterday demanded their constitutional recognition that was not implemented even 33 years after independence, an issue that surfaced on World Indigenous Peoples' Day.

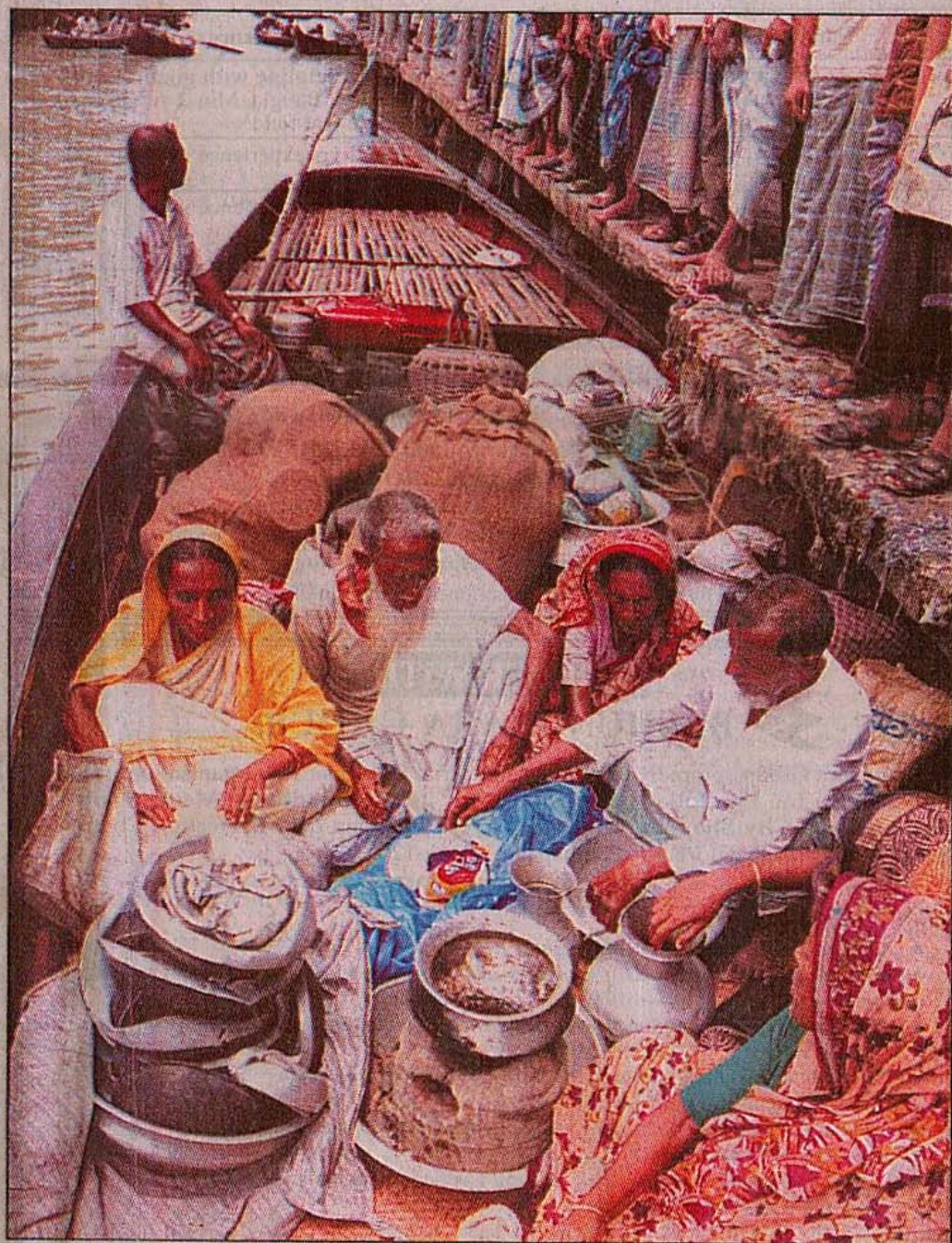
Ethnic groups from across Bangladesh came up at the Central Shaheed Minar with a theme 'Our Land Our Life', turning their centrepiece event into a rallying point for their right to land.

Dressed in ethnic clothes, people from Chakma, Marma, Garo, Khasia, Tripura and Santal communities sang and danced as part of a daylong cultural programme.

They demanded that the government scrap an eco-park project, as they see it as a new threat to their movement and access to land and forest resources - a contention that turned explosive in Modhupur, about 100km north of Dhaka, on January 3 killing Garo youth Piren Sian.

Jyotindra Bodhipriya Lama, president of the Indigenous Peoples

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Displaced by river erosion in Munshiganj in the wake of raging floods, a family rows its way to safety out of West Bidhuail village that has lost all but three houses to the Padma river.

Draft of consumer rights law okayed

Up to 10 years in prison for selling adulterated products proposed

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The government yesterday approved in principle the draft law to protect consumers' rights that proposes up to ten years in prison

for selling adulterated and inferior quality products.

The draft law titled 'Protection of Consumers' Rights' proposes a special tribunal to try the accused responsible for selling and produc-

ing fake commodities injurious to public health.

The cabinet meeting with Prime Minister Khaleda Zia in the chair yesterday sent the draft to the law

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Sylhet halts in hartal, suspects quizzed

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, Sylhet

The Awami League (AL) enforced a daylong hartal in Sylhet yesterday protesting the car bomb blast that killed one of its leaders as law-enforcers tightened security and investigators grilled the arrestees for leads to the crime.

The four-party ruling alliance and the main opposition AL exchanged blames for the explosion that killed Sylhet City AL Publicity Secretary Mohammad Ibrahim and injured 30 others on Saturday night.

Quoting army explosive experts, the superintendent of police in

Sylhet said the attackers exploded a hand grenade on Saturday and the explosion was dissimilar with the twin cinema blasts in the city a few days ago.

Top AL leader and prominent businessman Shaokat Ali, who suffered critical injuries in the explosion was flown to Dhaka from Sylhet MAG Osmani Medical College Hospital by helicopter yesterday.

Security personnel from the paramilitary Bangladesh Rifles, Rapid Action Battalion and armed police patrolled the city and the

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Agri ministry decides seed distribution modality

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The government will reach seeds and fertilisers free of cost among 25 lakh listed small and marginal farmers until end-November through block supervisors of the Department of Agriculture Extension (DAE).

A meeting yesterday of the agriculture ministry presided over by Agriculture Minister MK Anwar set the deadline for distribution of seeds and fertilisers for six crops at

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ARMY IN BY-POLLS

HC warns govt for seeking more time to rule hearing

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The High Court (HC) yesterday sounded a note of warning against the government for seeking untimely extension to the hearing on a rule on army deployment during Dhaka-10 by-polls and asked the counsel of the executive not to ignore the court.

The court however extended time and slated the hearing for August 16, asking the government to be ready on schedule.

Justices Abdul Wahab Miah and Zinat Ara were scheduled to hear the rule issued on June 29 that asked the government to explain in two weeks why it should not be directed to deploy armed forces at all polling centres in line with an Election Commission (EC) decision.

The rule was issued after Bikalpa Dhara candidate Abdul Mannan filed a writ petition for a court directive to implement EC's recommendation to dispatch the army to each polling centre in Ramna-Tejgaon constituency.

The HC warning came after Additional Attorney General AJ Mohammad Ali sought time for the government to take part in the hearing that was to begin at 11:00am yesterday.

The court criticised his appeal and said he should not seek time a few minutes short of the hearing and directed the additional attorney general to come back later in the day after consulting with the attorney general.

The court sat again at 2:00pm and Justice Abdul Wahab Miah pointing to the additional attorney general said: "We are sorry to say... don't ignore us. You should have sought time in the morning."

Senior counsels of the petitioners were waiting in the courtroom to take part in the hearing, the justice pointed out, adding the issue will be easy to understand if the court hears both sides together.

Barrister Amir Ul Islam, counsel of the writ petitioner, told The Daily Star that they were ready to participate in the hearing, but the government was not.

Another case, contempt of court, filed by Abdul Mannan against four senior government officials accusing them of violating the court order by not deploying the army to each polling centre during the by-election is scheduled for hearing on August 22.

UN sends draft aid appeal to HQ for approval

UNB, Dhaka

A draft "flash appeal" prepared by a visiting UN (United Nations) team for assistance to the flood victims of Bangladesh was yesterday sent to the Office of the Coordinator for Humanitarian Assistance (OCHA) in Geneva.

A United Nations source here said that the draft of the appeal would be sent to all the UN headquarters in New York and Geneva. And after approval, the appeal to the international community through all the multilateral and bilateral donors is likely to be launched tomorrow (Wednesday).

"The appeal would be for basic assistance to be utilised over the next six months," the source said.

He said the "flash appeal" has been made for international assistance to meet immediate needs of some 3 million flood-stricken people in Bangladesh.

However, the UN team maintained confidentiality about the amount it plans to seek from the

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Hunger-weary farmers find homes ravaged

MORSHED ALI KHAN, back from Koizuri, Sirajganj

Gripped by hunger, diseases and misery, peasants, weavers and day labourers in the remote flood-hit areas of Sirajganj are now returning to their ravaged houses and infrastructure.

Relief work in Koizuri union of Shahjadpur upazila is so insignificant compared to the devastation left by the deluge that thousands of people in this area are now starving.

Taking advantage of the desperate situation of the flood victims, loan sharks have started lending money at a phenomenal interest rate of 104 percent. Many weavers and peasants of Koizuri said they took loans of Tk 2,000 to Tk 3,500 from local moneylenders in the last two months.

Thousands of weavers, who work on daily wages at home-based

handloom industries, were forced to take loans and many said they sold their labour in advance to repay those.

Majeda Banu and her husband Shahidul Islam, both weavers, said they borrowed Tk 3,500 for food and are now paying every week Tk 70 as interest.

"As we have no other way to pay off our debts, we're working 'without wages' for one week every month until the loan is repaid," said Majeda. Shahidul said many of his friends did not even 'qualify' for the loans and are passing days 'half-starved' with their children.

Ahmed Ali, former member of Koizuri Union Parishad (UP), said diarrhoea and other waterborne diseases in Bharodi Golia and Charia Pachil villages have spread in an alarming rate. "You will find patients in every house there," he said.

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