

CELLPHONE NETWORK MAINTENANCE

Tampering with BTTB deal to cost \$37m

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Bangladesh Telegraph and Telephone Board (BTTB) will overpay \$37 million (Tk 223 crore) for maintenance of its cellular phone network because of 'clandestine' late changes in contracts with the suppliers.

According to the original terms and conditions of the deal that the prime minister had approved, maintenance cost for 13 years after first two years of guarantee period were to be covered by the supplying companies, in this case, Siemens and Huawei.

In April, the cabinet purchase committee recommended BTTB's \$76 million purchase proposal for the cellular phone network with 250,000 lines. Later, the prime minister approved this largest telecoms project.

Once the mobile network is operational, BTTB gets free maintenance

service for two years of guarantee period. According to BTTB's internal documents, it also receives Post Guarantee Maintenance Assistance along with On Demand Maintenance Support for free during the network's remaining 13 years of lifetime.

But while signing contracts with Siemens (\$41 million) and Huawei (\$35 million), the BTTB authorities had 'mysteriously' dropped the provision for 13 years of free On-Demand services. They had signed contracts that compel BTTB to procure services through annual maintenance contracts.

This sort of changes in the final contracts contradict the deal that the prime minister had originally approved. The BTTB then said free maintenance services are the contractual obligations of the contractors.

According to an internal report of BTTB, Siemens had proposed an

annual maintenance fee of \$500,000, which will cost BTTB \$6.50 million to maintain the mobile network for 13 years. Huawei will charge, nearly five times higher than Siemens. In that case, maintenance cost for 13 years will stand at \$30,599,660 as Huawei will charge \$2,353,820 for annual maintenance.

Unauthorised changes made in contracts with Siemens and Huawei altogether will cost BTTB \$37,099,660 to maintain the mobile network from its third year of operation, said a BTTB high official requesting anonymity.

"The prime minister has been kept in the dark about the implications of these late changes in contracts," said the official. He alleged that the suppliers' local aides, who maintain a close connection with the government hierarchy, successfully lobbied to have these changes incorporated in the contracts.

BTTB's internal reports say Siemens and Huawei signed Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) affirming unconditional free service obligations on June 10. But both the companies had dramatically backtracked and proposed the changes.

Huawei said they will provide services for free only 'in case of engineering defect or such situation when system completely shuts down beyond recovery'. "We suggest BTTB go for maintenance contract as soon as guarantee period is over," wrote Wang Shengniu, Huawei's Project Manager, to BTTB's procurement office.

Khalid Shams, general manager of Siemens, echoing his Chinese partner's view said, "Siemens

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PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

A slum dweller wails beside her burnt down shanty after a devastating fire at a slum behind Sonargaon Hotel in the capital yesterday. The fire gutted at least 200 shanties, rendering some 2000 people homeless.

Iraq insurgents abduct Bangladeshi worker

AFP, Doha

The Islamic Army in Iraq has announced it abducted a driver from Bangladesh and another from Sri Lanka who work for a Kuwaiti company, Al-Jazeera television said, showing footage of the pair.

"The Islamic Army in Iraq has announced that it is holding two drivers, one from Bangladesh and the other from Sri Lanka, who work for a Kuwaiti company," it said.

The group "said in a statement that the two hostages were abducted before driving their trucks into a US base in Iraq," the news channel said.

They are being interrogated "in the religious (Islamic) court," the group said.

A video bearing the name of the

extremist group on Thursday showed each of the presumed hostages separately and a number



Abducted driver

of identification documents, including a Kuwaiti driving license.

Drivers have been a favorite target of extremist groups in Iraq, who have taken many trucks hostage over the past few months in a bid to force their companies out of Iraq, accusing them of ferrying supplies to US forces. In some cases, ransoms have been paid to secure the release of hostages.

The foreign office in Dhaka yesterday said it was trying to confirm the reported abduction of a Bangladeshi driver by a militant group in Iraq.

"The report has made us concerned and we are waiting for the details from the Bangladesh mission in Jordan," a foreign office

All for a fabulous fortune

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, Rajshahi

A youth has been fighting for life at a clinic here after he had gulped six iron spikes and some wires following the dictate of a dream that promised him Tk 2 lakh and fabulous wealth in a short time.

Shyam, a 30-year-old unemployed, who hailed from Bazaar village in Akkelpur upazila of Joypurhat district, was rushed to the clinic in Rajshahi on Thursday.

Family sources said he swallowed the metal spikes and wires on October 18.

Shyam claimed he dreamt that if he could take six spikes each six inches long, he will get Tk 2 lakh at

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200 shanties at Bangla Motors gutted

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Fire in a slum at city's Bangla Motors yesterday gutted around 200 shanties and rendered some 2000 people homeless.

No major casualties, however, were reported in the incident, though it happened when most of the adults were out to work and children were home alone.

The fire started from a hearth at the shanty of Abdus Salam, when his wife went outside to fetch water, said dwellers of the slum. They said Salam's three-year-old son reportedly kicked the hearth down and it resulted in a fast paced fire. And soon all the shanties, mostly built of thatch and polythene sheet on the one-bigha land, were engulfed in flames at around 12:30pm.

Firefighters reached the spot too late, alleged the slum-dwellers.

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Ahmadiyya mosque razed, 12 houses robbed in B'Baria

11 including 6 women injured

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Orthodox Muslim fanatics razed an Ahmadiyya mosque at Bhadughar in Brahmanbaria minutes before the Juma prayers yesterday.

In the latest incident of persecution of the minority religious sect, the hate-filled mob vandalised and robbed Ahmadiyya houses, injuring at least 11, including six women.

One of the injured, Shabju Mia, 52, president of Ahmadiyya Muslim Jamaat Bhadughar chapter and imam of the mosque, is in critical condition and undergoing treatment at Brahmanbaria Sadar Hospital.

Some 25,000 Ahmadiyya people live in the eastern district, where Ahmadiyat was first preached in 1912, before any other place in Bangladesh.

Witnesses said local BNP leader and former ward commissioner Abdul Quddus led the raiders who were carrying a banner of International Tahaffuz-e-Khatme Nabuwat Committee, Bangladesh.

Quddus, with two local businessmen -- Sobhan and Hossain - acting as his lieutenants, arrived with about 100 people carrying sticks in

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No plan to indemnify Rab : Babar

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The government has no plan to indemnify Rapid Action Battalion (Rab), said State Minister for Home Lutfozzaman Babar at a function yesterday.

"There is no question of indemnifying Rab as the elite force is engaged in encounter or crossfire for self-defence which the existing law permits," Babar said replying to a question at an Iftar party organised by Crime Reporters' Association of Bangladesh (Crab) at Dhaka Reporters' Unity auditorium.

A total of 39 people have been killed in Rab custody -- during 'crossfire' or 'encounter' since Rab swung into action on June 26.

He said training facilities for Rab members will be increased and the

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Arafat flies to France for treatment

Blood cancer suspected



PHOTO: AFP

Ailing Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat says goodbye to comrades prior to his departure for Amman by a Jordanian army helicopter from his office in Ramalla yesterday. Arafat flew to Paris from Amman for treatment.

REUTERS, Ramallah

Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, weakened by what doctors think may be leukemia, flew to France for treatment yesterday from the besieged West Bank headquarters where he had been pinned for over 2-and-a-half years.

The 75-year-old president and former guerilla leader, who has for decades symbolized the conflict with Israel for a Palestinian state, waved to crowds from the helicopter as he flew out of his shell-battered compound in Ramallah.

Arafat boarded the Jordanian helicopter wearing an olive military greatcoat and a furry hat. He arrived at Amman airport in Jordan soon afterwards and was carried by doctors on a wheelchair to a waiting French presidential jet.

"God willing, I will come back," Arafat, who was laid on a stretcher inside the jet, told aides shortly before the plane departed for Paris.

As he was placed aboard the helicopter in his West Bank compound, scores of tearful bystanders, bodyguards and officials chanted, using his nom de guerre: "We will sacrifice our blood and souls for you, Abu Ammar."

"The mountain cannot be shaken by the wind," they called out, repeating one of his favorite sayings.

Arafat is expected to land at the Villacoublay military airfield southwest of Paris. He will then go to the nearby Percy military hospital for treatment, a hospital spokesman said.

A senior Palestinian official told Reuters Arafat was believed to be suffering from leukemia, a blood cancer that can be fatal, though more tests were needed for a firm diagnosis.

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