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US polls go down to the wire today

Opinion polls show a close race; presidency could be decided in the courts

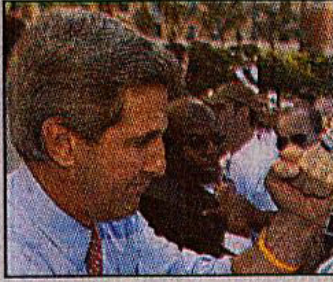
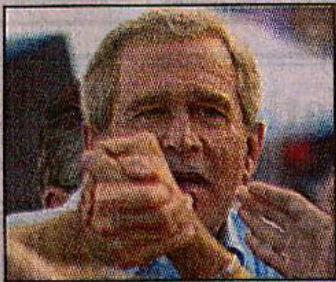
AGENCIES, Tampa, US

President Bush, sucking lozenges to save his voice, and John Kerry, at risk of losing his, swung into the last day of campaigning hoping an election too close to call will end with every-one knowing who won.

The Republican president and his Democratic rival blitzed battleground states as the hours narrowed to today's election showdown, pitching their plans to win the war on terror and to stabilise Iraq.

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JS witnesses debate on death threat to Hasina

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The Jatiya Sangsad yesterday witnessed a noisy debate on the recent death threats to Leader of the Opposition and Awami League (AL) chief Sheikh Hasina and the formation and development of the armed forces.

Taking floor on points of order, both the treasury and opposition bench members engaged in the hour-long unscheduled debate that hampered the day's business.

The AL lawmakers demanded discussions on the alleged certificate tampering by a High Court judge, killings in the Rapid Action Battalion (Rab) custody, and the atrocities on the students of Rajshahi University by the police and pro-government student activists.

The ministers and other ruling party lawmakers however refrained from making any comments on the issues of certificate tampering and custodial deaths.

THREAT TO HASINA

AL lawmaker Sheikh Fazul Karim Selim raised the issue of the opposition leader's security referring to a report of The Daily Star on an e-mail sent by one S Ahmet threatening to

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Direct funding to UP okayed

Move seen to reduce graft, political interference

REZAUL KARIM

In a major policy decision, the government has approved a proposal for direct funding of union parishads (UP) aiming to strengthen the second lowest tier of local government and keep it free from political interference in fund allocation.

From now on, all the UPs will receive the annual block allocation at a time directly from the government, which the policymakers think would also reduce corruption and delay in project approval and implementation process.

To make the new measure effective Tk 89.74 crore has already been allocated for the remaining period of the current fiscal year. The fund will be sent directly to around 4,500 UPs soon. Each UP will get around Tk2 lakh.

The UPs at present get funds from the annual development programme (ADP) through the upazila parishads, which often delays implementation of develop-

ment programmes due to political interference.

The ministries of finance and planning approved the proposal of the Local Government Division of the LGRD and co-operative ministry on Sunday.

"It's a major breakthrough towards empowerment of local government," LGRD and Co-operatives Minister Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan told The Daily Star yesterday.

"We truly want to strengthen the local government institutions and run the bodies by the elected representatives of the grassroots people," he said.

Bhuiyan said, "It will also ensure timely implementation of projects and reduce project costs. Planning and implementation processes will be easier. Accountability of UPs will be enhanced substantially in respect of utilisation of fund."

Officials said the initiative would facilitate people's participation in local level expenditure,

polycymaking and budgetary processes. This will develop participatory planning and budgetary system to prioritise development schemes.

They said that usually each UP gets around Tk4 lakh a year from the ADP for development work. The ministry has a plan to enhance the allocation.

Officials said the direct funding arrangement would reduce scope for political interference in the fund allocation for UPs as the UP chairmen would not need to convince the lawmakers or upazila officials for getting funds on time.

The funds are allocated usually on the instructions of the members of parliament (MPs) who are the ex-officio advisors to the upazila parishads.

The direct funding was a long-standing demand of the UPs, donors, and the civil society but this could not be implemented in the past due to strong opposition from the MPs and a section of officials involved in

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JUDGE'S RESULT SCANDAL

Bar sends documents to CJ

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The Supreme Court Bar Association (SCBA) yesterday sent to the chief justice some documents in support of the allegations of tampering with the examination results by Additional Judge of the High Court Faisal Mahmud Faizee.

The documents were sent as Chief Justice Syed JR Mudassar Husain in a meeting with the SCBA

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Millions face months without basic food, livelihood support

WFP calls int'l community for reassessment of their post-floods assistance commitment

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The UN yesterday said millions in Bangladesh face months ahead with no guarantee of stable food supplies after floods between June and September devastated swathes of the country and left thousands homeless.

The World Food Programme (WFP) of the UN said many communities hit by the floods still lack basic food and livelihoods support even three months into the devastating floods.

"Until the boro (winter rice) harvest next May, the overall food security in Bangladesh will continue

to remain uncertain," a WFP statement said.

The WFP yesterday renewed its appeal for international assistance for Bangladesh.

The new appeal came as Disaster and Emergency Response (DER) Group of the Bangladesh Local

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Bangladesh won't allow its land for anti-Indian campaign

Morshed assures Natwar

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

Bangladesh yesterday assured that its territory would not be allowed to be used for activities prejudicial to India's interests.

The assurance came from visiting Bangladesh Foreign Minister M Morshed Khan during his talks with his Indian counterpart K Natwar Singh on a range of bilateral issues including concerns related to better border management and insurgency.

Morshed, now on a three-day visit to India, called on Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and extended an invitation to attend the 13th Saarc Summit to be held in Dhaka from January 9 to 11.

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PHOTO: AFP

Foreign Minister M Morshed Khan, left, meets Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh at the latter's residence in New Delhi yesterday. Morshed is now in India on a two-day official visit.

No trading on DSE as glitch bugs systems

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Trading on the Dhaka Stock Exchange (DSE) could not be held yesterday because of a technical glitch in the automation systems.

Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of the DSE Salahuddin Ahmed Khan blamed the debacle on a major bug attack in the systems since introduction of electronic transactions on August 10, 1998. The DSE witnessed technical troubles of such a magni-

tude only in the initial period of the system's introduction.

Hundreds of brokers and thousands of investors kept waiting on the DSE premises hoping for trade to resume, but officials could only restore the system in the evening.

The DSE CEO said the system was generating 'text file errors' in the pre-opening session in the morning.

"We immediately contact the maintenance company. The site

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FM may appeal for driver's release thru' Al-Jazeera

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Foreign Minister M Morshed Khan is likely to make an appeal through Al-Jazeera Television to the abductors to free the Bangladeshi truck driver Abul Kashem Faruk.

Al-Jazeera, a Qatar-based Arabic news channel, contacted the foreign

ministry yesterday seeking appointment with Morshed Khan. But the foreign minister could not be reached yesterday as he was on a visit to New Delhi. The television channel, however, was given the phone number of the hotel he is staying, foreign ministry sources said.

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PHOTO: STAR

Relatives of Bangladeshi driver Abul Kashem, abducted Friday in Iraq, appeal yesterday to the government in front of the High Court in Dhaka to take initiative for his release.

Work for better results in next elections

PM asks party men

UNB, Dhaka

Prime Minister Khaleda Zia yesterday asked her party men to work unitedly for yet better performance in the next general elections, countering the smear campaign launched by the opposition at home and abroad.

She announced that meetings and mass contacts would start all over the country after the Eid to mobilise public support in favour of the BNP and rebut the "propaganda" being carried out by the main opposition party.

It has to be done because the opposition will always try to create "chaos" and spread propaganda. "They do not enjoy the confidence

of the people and that is why they are spreading falsehood in foreign countries," the prime minister, also chairperson of the BNP, told her party's grassroots leaders at a meeting at the International Conference Centre (ICC).

"BNP is a democratic party and the main target of any democratic organisation is election," she told them.

She accused the opposition of creating chaos in parliament besides spreading propaganda at home and abroad.

"You have to tell the people about the achievements of the government and the opposition's propaganda through public meetings,"

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