

Arson alleged

FROM PAGE 1
arsonists was "to start construction of a multi-storied shopping complex through eviction of the traders, as the High Court has stayed it until April next year".

Abul said, according to a census conducted jointly with Dhaka City Corporation (DCC) and the deputy commissioner of Dhaka in 1998, the market committee had 1,345 member shopowners.

"But, after taking over as president of the committee by force in 2002, Chowdhury Alam enrolled 301 new members in it," he alleged. Chowdhury, also the local DCC ward commissioner and president of BNP Ramna Thana unit, took Tk 80,000 from each of the 301 new members promising them to allot shops after the shopping complex is built, Abul said.

Of the sum received from a member, Chowdhury paid Tk 20,000 to the DCC, which owns the plot and the complex to be built, as booking money for a shop and appropriated the remaining Tk 60,000, he alleged.

A group of businessmen claimed Abul Khair and Abul Kalam are the elected and genuine president and general secretary of the committee. They alleged, at a meeting at the National Press Club on August 22, 2002, Chowdhury declared himself president after snatching the loud speaker and intimidating the members present by his armed musclemen.

Asked why he is opposing the

construction of the shopping complex, Abul said it is because the rules and procedures that the DCC followed in construction of other markets are not being followed in this case.

"I came to know that as developer the DCC will own 75 percent of the complex and the rest will be distributed among the shopkeepers," he said, maintaining that to be quite contrary to the DCC norms.

Abul and his son Mohammad Rana filed a writ-petition with the High Court on June 29 against the ownership scheme, acting on which the court issued the stay order on construction of the building.

ALLEGATIONS DENIED - Chowdhury Alam however denied the allegations claiming those to be made by go-getting people who want to trouble the water for their own gains.

He termed the fire an accident saying no body can set fire to a market in broad daylight. "Many people told me the fire was caused by an electric short circuit," he added.

On allegations of his presidency, Chowdhury said, "I did not want to be the president of the market committee. But the businessmen insisted and made me the president, dissolving the previous committee."

He also denied receiving money from members promising shops in the new complex.

According to him, New Bangabazar Market has 1,673 shops.

New Bangabazar

FROM PAGE 1
Local traders also blamed the firefighters for neglect of duty in taming the flames sweeping through the Dhaka City Corporation-owned market that houses small, often makeshift shops, selling mostly cheap clothes, shoes and accessories.

Hundreds of traders, employees and their families rushed to the spot on hearing the news and burst into tears counting losses that they said made them 'worse than beggars'.

"Thick, black smoke blanketed the southern sky and filled the air of the capital for just about all day long.

The fire, originating from 'an unknown source', broke out in the southwestern corner of the market and the flames engulfed the surrounding shops at about 9:10am, said Nurul Amin Master, a witness. The fire raged to the other end within half an hour.

"I was opening my shop when I saw a blaze at the top of an adjacent store," said Nurul, who owns Mary Fashion in the second lane of the market standing on a wooden frame.

Another shop-owner, Mohammad Hossain, however, said firefighters from the nearest station reached the spot at about 9:15am and put out the blaze in a couple of minutes. He added that smoke was still emitting from the debris.

"I requested the firefighters to pour more water on the smoke but they did not listen to me," he alleged. "The fire then began again from the smoke and the blaze spread quickly into the whole market."

The firefighters did not have enough water at that time to douse the fire, which was fanned by the breeze blowing since morning, said other witnesses.

Only 10 to 15 percent of the shop-owners had opened their shops in the morning after the Eid vacation and they burst into their shops to save whatever valuables they could lay their hands on.

All the 1,673 tin-shed shops and around 200 warehouses, mostly of garments and blankets, were reduced to ashes. The blaze also burnt down a five-storey building

adjacent to the market. LOOTING SPREE Some shop-owners and employees alleged that cash and clothes of the shops were looted during the incident.

"My cash box and clothes were looted from the shop before I had reached the spot," said Abdus Sattar, owner of Urmi Garments, who reached his shop at about 10:00am.

"I was in the shop when the fire broke out but I could not recover a single piece of cloth," said Mithu, an employee of Nasima Fashion. "As soon as I brought out a bundle of clothes from the warehouse onto the road, people looted them," he said.

"I had no-one to look after the goods and there was no-one either to stop the looting."

GATES CLOSED Another owner, Mohammad Solaiman, told reporters that he could not save merchandise worth around Tk 12 lakh since all the 30 collapsible gates of the market were closed during the fire.

The five guards -- Abdus Sattar, Abul Kalam, Haider Ali, Haris Miah and Lokman -- quickly put off the main electric switch of the market and closed all the gates fearing looting, said one of the guards.

Police and members of the Rapid Action Battalion (Rab) reached the scene half an hour into the incident and restored order in the area. They blocked traffic in the surrounding streets and sealed off the entire area to make way for the firefighters to get to the spot in time and to prevent looting witnesses said.

Traders having shops in the northern side of the market, however, managed to save some of their merchandise from the inferno.

ALL GONE RIGHT BEFORE THEIR EYES

Abul Hossain Khoka, owner of eight shops, told reporters he lost valuables worth around Tk 50 lakh and managed to recover goods worth some Tk 8 lakh. Like him, Abdul Halim of Mukta Fashion, Kanai Lal Banik of Mugdho, Shanta and Soma Saeeq Bitan and Mohammad Hossain of Janani Enterprise managed to

recover a little of their valuables. The flames also latched onto the five-storey 1/1 Bangabandhu Avenue building that houses 12 film-making and distributing offices at about 11:00am. It burnt to ashes around 50 films of the offices on the first and third floors and garment shops on the other floors.

"I lost around 20 films along with their negatives and they are lost forever since I do not have copies of the originals," said producer Shaker Ahmed Chhoton, owner of AZ Films, who claimed to have incurred Tk 25 crore in losses. Gazi Mazharul Anwar, director of Desh Chitratkha, also lost around 30 films, Chhoton added.

FIREFIGHTERS FIASCO An army of over 100 firefighters from most units of the fire brigade, armed with around 27 vehicles, failed to douse the fire until 4:30pm. They could not cut off the gas line of the 1/1 Bangabandhu Avenue building that was burning until 7:00pm.

At least five firefighters, an employee of Titas gas and 45 others suffered from minor burn injuries in the incident.

Selim Newaj Bhuiyan, assistant director of Dhaka unit of the Fire Brigade and Civil Defence, told reporters that they are yet to find out what caused the fire and make an estimate of the damage.

Chowdhury Alam, president of New Bangabazar Hawkers Market Committee, however, said the inferno damaged valuables worth around Tk 100 crore.

Local Government, Rural Development and Co-operatives Minister Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan, Environment and Forest Minister Tariqul Islam, Dhaka City Mayor Sadeque Hossain Khoka, Home Secretary Omar Faruq and Dhaka Metropolitan Police Commissioner Ashraf Huda visited the scene.

Main opposition Awami League's General Secretary Abdul Jalil, its Joint General Secretary Obaidul Kader, Workers Party of Bangladesh President Rashed Khan Menon and Communist Party of Bangladesh General Secretary Mujahidul Islam Selim also went to the spot.

Elderly woman in Mirpur found slaughtered

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

A septuagenarian woman was found slaughtered in her house in Mirpur yesterday.

Jamila Khatun, 75, was killed sometime between 5:30-6:30 yesterday morning, said her relatives. They, however, could not say anything about the motive for the murder.

Her granddaughter Sabina Akhter discovered her dead when she went to wake her up at 6:30am.

"I called her for several times but she didn't reply," she said. "Feeling she might have fallen ill, I pulled the kaniha (blanket) and found her lying slaughtered in a pool of blood."

Later police recovered the body at 9:00am.

Sabina with her husband lives in a room adjacent to Jamila's at their seven-room house at North Bisil in Mirpur-1.

Jamila's nephew Almas said he met her at around 5:30am when she was returning home after saying the Fajr prayers at Mirpur Shah Ali Mazor.

Mixed reaction

FROM PAGE 12 and grassroots-level ruling coalition leaders brokered for recruitment in their areas for Tk 1 to 2 lakh a job in the least.

Against such a backdrop, a section of ruling party leaders and high officials think by cancelling the recruitment the government has done the right thing, as the corrupt recruitment might have brought a curse for the BNP.

A deputy commissioner told The Daily Star on condition of anonymity that many ministers, MPs, political appointees at the Prime Minister's Office and senior civil servants recommended names for recruitment at the district administration heads.

Sources said a section of local officials were also involved with the graft and irregularities in the recruitment process and the money they took from job seekers was shared among the district level officials concerned.

An influential minister on condition of anonymity said the middlemen may now face trouble as the people who secured appointments by paying them will start asking for their money back.

"The decision cancelling the recruitment will definitely hurt those poor people who got the jobs by spending large sums of money, though the brokers may escape the harm," the minister surmised.

A high official, who wanted not to be named, said if the people, who already have received appointment letters, go to court it would be a tough legal battle for the government to face.

He lamented the fact that, though reports were coming from all over the country about irregularities and corruption in the recruitment process, the government did not take step then to stop the malpractice.

He said it was an unwise decision to cancel all the appointments, because the people recruited are not responsible for the graft, adding it was for the government to intervene and ensure a proper recruitment.

66 Maoists

FROM PAGE 12 bodies of the rebels or to continue our operation against them," he said.

The injured troopers were flown to Kathmandu for treatment.

The clash is the biggest since the ending on October 28 of a nine-day temporary truce between Maoist and government forces to allow people to celebrate the Hindu festival of Dashain in peace.

US banks

FROM PAGE 12 Earlier in 2003, Chase Bank wanted to close Sonali Exchange's accounts. But Sonali convinced Chase to keep the accounts running.

But in recent times, the US banking regulatory authorities fined a bank \$25 million for violation of rules. This prompted other banks to become cautious, leading to the decision to close the remittance accounts.

China faces

FROM PAGE 1 provision of the special safeguard clause for textiles and apparels worked out when China entered the WTO.

China had the taste of this clause first when three of its categories -- ladies undergarments, dressing gown and knit fabrics -- faced quota with ceiling for annual growth fixed at 7.5 percent or below.

"We welcome this step. This is the only protective measure for us after the multi-fibre agreement (MFA) phases out in January," said Anisul Huj, President of the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association. "We are also demanding for similar measures on category 645 (sweater). We also want the European Union to go for similar measures on China."

"Bangladesh needs to carefully monitor these developments in the post-MFA regime and look for increased orders," said Dr. Mustafizur Rahman, research director of the Centre for Policy Dialogue. "This safeguard clause will be applicable till 2008 and renewable every year. This will give us some breathing space once the quota regime is over. But we must keep up our pressure on the US to allow us zero tariff access."

55 killed

FROM PAGE 12 and several yachts were scorched.

A propaganda department official in Baotou told reporters there that everyone aboard was killed, Xinhua said.

There was no immediate word on what caused the crash.

The plane was a CRJ-200 aircraft, Xinhua said.

CPB won't share power

FROM PAGE 12 CPB would not share state power with the Awami League," said CPB General Secretary Mujahidul Islam Selim at a press conference at its office.

He however said formation of a left democratic alliance through 11-party and joining anti-

incumbency movement with the AL on certain issues are not contradictory.

The CPB general secretary dismissed the notion that their simultaneous anti-government movement with the AL will change the course of the ongoing efforts to forge an alternative left democratic front.

Selim also said the CPB will continue protesting against any government if their activities went against the interest of the people.

"Awami League and CPB are not like-minded parties and the Awami League during its tenure failed to resolve basic problems of people," he added.

On Bangladesh Samajtantrik Dal's (BSD) opposition to a joint movement with the AL, Selim said he does not think the BSD's stance on the issue is right.

The CPB also declared its joint and separate political programmes for December and January at the press conference. Apart from its Independence Day programmes, the CPB will observe December 18 as the 'anti-grenade and anti-bomb attack day' and demand trial of the perpetrators of the dastardly attacks. The party will observe December 23 as 'anti-communalism day' across the country.

Acting President of CPB Shahidullah Chowdhury, president member Abu Zafar, central committee members Ruhin Hossain Prince and Mahub Alam were also present.

Iraq sets Jan 30

FROM PAGE 12 Muslim stronghold from insurgents.

The conference was originally aimed at winning more international backing for the much-anticipated elections, which are due to be held in January.

"The vote will not be perfect, but the response I am getting from the electoral commission is that the enthusiasm for the elections is tremendous," Zebari said.

Despite US-Iraqi offensives to reclaim lawless enclaves across the country, an intense security threat looms over the elections and several radical Sunni Muslim organisations have urged citizens to boycott them.

Human wall

FROM PAGE 1 human wall would touch two divisional headquarters -- capital Dhaka and port city Chittagong -- and 48 upazilas.

The opposition leaders will meet again at the central office of the Communist Party of Bangladesh (CPB) tomorrow morning to finalise the preparatory visits of the opposition leaders to the districts through which the human wall will be formed, he said.

"We have already begun activities at our party level and also under the banner of 11-Party to make the no-confidence human wall a success," said CPB General Secretary Mujahidul Islam Selim who attended the joint meeting.

The opposition leaders will visit the 18 districts before December 11 to prepare their leaders and workers for the human wall and mobilise common people to join it. The visits are expected to start at the end of this month.

The leaders however could not finalise the tour programmes as there are still some discords

between the opposition parties on how the preparatory visits will be made.

"Some leftist parties are in favour of making the visits separately while the Awami League and others want a joint move of top leaders of all the parties," said a source.

The left leaning parties under the 11-Party alliance meet today to settle the dispute over the tour and it will be finalised at tomorrow's meeting of all parties, sources said.

Abdur Razzak, Tofail Ahmed, Obaidul Kader and Saber Hossain Chowdhury of the AL, Rashed Khan Menon of the Workers Party of Bangladesh, Hasanul Haq Inu of JSD, Dilip Barua of Samyabadi Dal, Pankaj Bhattacharya of Gono Forum, and leaders of Ganotantri Party, Gano Azadi League and Ganotantrik Majdur Party and NAP were present.

The opposition parties on Thursday announced the human wall programme along with their common nine-point demand from separate press conferences.

Musharraf

FROM PAGE 12 South Asian Free Media Association (Safma) Conference.

He said a piece of land will be allocated to launch South Asia Media Development Center and Multimedia University in Lahore.

Earlier, Safma Secretary General Imtiaz Alam sought Pervez's support to adoption of Safma's protocol on Free Movement of Media Persons and Media-products Across the South Asian Region by the upcoming 13th Saarc summit in Dhaka.

He also demanded appointment of a committee comprising representatives of media bodies by the Saarc to review current media laws and to incorporate necessary amendments to ensure right to know, freedom of expression and a free press.

Safma President of Pakistan chapter Ziauddin gave welcome address, the Safma secretary general explained the theme and objective of the conference and its Bangladesh President Rezauddin Ahmed gave the vote of thanks.

The opening session was followed by two working sessions. Indian journalist KK Katariala chaired the session on Reconciliation in the Subcontinent. Editors and Columnists Dr C Raja Mohan of India, Iqbal Sobhan Chowdhury of Bangladesh, Sharmila Boyle of Sri Lanka, Dr Mohammad Waseem of Pakistan and Gokul Pokhrel of Nepal took part.

Ishad Haqqani, editor of Daily Jung, chaired the second session on Independence of Media after 9/11. Director of the World Editors Forum Bertrand Pesquerie and President of IJF Christopher Warren and Dr Anne-Christine Hubbard of FIDH were the panel discussants.

Dhaka loses

FROM PAGE 12 Sabihuddin Ahmed asked the persons concerned to deposit the contributions to the IUCN, the officials said, adding that the decision was not ultimately implemented following bureaucratic tangle.

Mohammed Valli Moosa, former minister for Environment and Tourism of South Africa, and Dr Parvez Hassan, a prominent lawyer and environmentalist of Pakistan, are vying for the post of president.

Sven Sandstrom of Sweden is the lone candidate for the post of treasurer.

Mahfuz Ullah, current chair of the IUCN Bangladesh National Committee and Secretary General of Centre for Sustainable Development, is contesting for councillor from South and East Asia region.

Although the Bangladesh government is not a voter State Minister for Forest and Environment Jafrul Islam Chowdhury sought vote for the lone Bangladesh candidate Mahfuz Ullah at a roundtable of ministers at the Third World Conservation Congress at the Queen Sirikit National Convention Centre.

Three other contenders of Mahfuz Ullah are incumbent councillors -- Japanese government-nominated Nobutoshi Akao, Chinese government-nominated Dr Han Xingguo and Thai government-nominated candidate Dr Monthip Sritarana Tubacan.

Dhaka's role

FROM PAGE 12 bilateral intentions.

Pakistan President General Pervez Musharraf, opening the Safma conference here Saturday, gave a broad hint that Saarc should play a role in resolving the disputes in South Asia alongside making efforts to increase cooperation in trade and commerce.

Earlier at the conference yesterday, Foreign Minister Kasuri in his written statement called for making Saarc a symbol of peace, stability and development by transcending the differences in South Asia.

"We believe that cooperation within Saarc is not only desirable but also a vital objective. We must transcend the differences in South Asia and make our earnest contribution to uplifting the quality of life of the people of South Asia," he told the Safma conference on "Media and Reconciliation in South Asia" on the second day of the moot.

He noted Saarc has made certain progress since the Islamabad summit, saying that the 12th Summit "reinvented the Saarc." Many important decisions were taken and major developments took place at the last summit which have a positive impact on the atmospherics in the region.

Kasuri reaffirmed Pakistan is committed to making peace with India by resolving the Kashmir

disputes through a win-win situation. "No war, no peace" cannot help resolve the issue -- there must be a genuine peace by making the current composite dialogue with India on all issues a complete success.

He said Saarc could be made an effective forum like Asean if the India-Pakistan dispute was gone to the satisfaction of all parties -- Pakistan, India and the Kashmiris.

"What we need in South Asia is an effort to bring the hearts of the people together," he said, appreciating the role of the Safma in strengthening the reconciliation process and promoting cooperation and understanding.

Freedom fighters

FROM PAGE 1 Armed Forces Day, 2004 to honour those given gallantry awards for their sacrifices in the Liberation War in 1971.

Khaleda who is also the minister in charge of the defence ministry had invited the freedom fighters and their families to accord them the formal reception.

She handed gifts to the families of the seven Bir Shreshtha and recipients and families of Bir Uttam, Bir Bikram and Bir Protik designated freedom fighters.

Some 48 freedom fighters including Col (ret'd) Oli Ahmed Bir Bikram and their family members were invited to the reception.

Bangladesh government gave away gallantry awards to 676 freedom fighters in four categories for their sacrifices and heroic contributions to the Independence War. Of them, seven got posthumous Bir Shreshtha awards, 68 Bir Uttam, 75 Bir Bikram and 426 Bir Protik.

Earlier in the morning, President Prof Iajuddin Ahmed and Khaleda placed wreaths at Shikha Anirban at Dhaka Cantonment to pay tributes to the memory of the members of the Armed Forces who sacrificed their lives for independence.

They stood in silence for sometime when the bugle played the last post. A guard of honour was also presented by a contingent drawn from the three services.

Also present were Chief of Army Lt Gen Hassan Mashud Chowdhury, Naval Chief Rear Admiral Shah Iqbal Muztaba and Air Force Chief Air Vice Marshal Fakrul Azam.

At the reception, the prime minis-

Anticorruption body

FROM PAGE 1 Born in Jhalakati, Sultan was appointed High Court judge in 1979.

The two other members of the Commission are M Maniruzzaman Mia, former vice-chancellor of Dhaka University and Maniruddin Ahmed, a member of Pay Commission and former chairman of Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC).

Known as a pro-BNP intellectual, Maniruzzaman Mia served as DU vice-chancellor during the past BNP regime, which also appointed him ambassador to Senegal later on.

The Commission members have been appointed for a four-year term. They can be removed in the same way a judge is removed. However, unlike the judges, their posts have not been made constitutional.

The chairman will enjoy the status of a judge in the Appellate Division of the Supreme Court while the members the status of High Court judges.

Speaking on personal capacity, anti-corruption watchdog Transparency International Bangladesh's Trustee Board Treasurer Prof Muzaffer Ahmad said the selection of the Commission members could have been better.

"When Sultan Hossain Khan was the CEC, the performance of the Election Commission was not great. And Maniruzzaman Mia was a failure as a vice chancellor. Finally, Maniruddin could not perform independently at the SEC," Muzaffer pointed out.

"The government has made these appointments under donor pressure. But I still wish the Commission members will now prove their credibility and efficiency," he said.

The main opposition Awami League in an instant reaction yesterday termed the appointments 'political' adding that the members of the Commission have been appointed on merely political consideration.

Earlier on August 12, a selection committee working for three months nominated six persons including Justice Sultan for the post of chairman of the Commission and recommended their names to the president.

The other five were former vice chancellor Aminul Islam, former advisor to the caretaker government Mainul Hossain Chowdhury, former secretary Syed Alamgir Farruk Chowdhury and Abdul Karim, and former inspector general of police Golam Kibria.

But later the selection body dropped two names because they were 'controversial,' said a member of the selection body. "These two new names along with Sultan Hossain Khan were picked by the prime minister," the member said requesting anonymity.

A bill to form the anti-corruption watchdog was placed in parliament on July 10 last year and after seven months of discussions and arguments, the bill was passed on February 17 and gazetted on May 9 this year.

The five-member selection body was formed on May 9 with Justice MA Aziz as its chairman. Other members were Justice Nazrul Islam Chowdhury, Comptroller and Auditor General Asif Ali, Chairman of the Public Service Commission ZN Tahmida Begum and former cabinet secretary Akbar Ali Khan.

The demand for the independent anti-graft body was being pushed from 1991 election campaigns. Although both BNP and Awami League had included the issue in their election pledges, they had been reluctant to act when in power.

However, in the recent years, as

Bangladesh has been rated as the most corrupt country in the Berlin-based anti-corruption watchdog Transparency International's index, donors and civil society have been pushing hard to make it happen.

When the government enacted the law for constituting the Commission earlier this year, all opposition parties including the Awami League rejected it fearing that the Commission would not be an independent one.

As the Baw worked under the Prime Minister's Office (PMO), corruption cases against favoured politicians and ministers have hardly been ever pursued. The newly formed Commission, which will work independently, is expected to free anti-corruption activities from the influence of the PMO.

The Commission will conduct inquiry into corruption, file and conduct case, institute suo moto inquiry or on the basis of application from aggrieved person, perform duty to be vested by anti-corruption law, review existing anti-corruption arrangement and make recommendations to the president for its effective implementation.

It will be able to serve summons and interrogate witnesses, reveal any document, collect deposition on oath from witnesses, ask for public records or its copies from any court or office, issue warrants for interrogation of witnesses and examine documents.

The Commission will also be able to ask any person to furnish with any information relating to investigation or inquiry and the person concerned will be bound to give that information.

Sunken ferry, 2 vehicles not yet salvaged

3 people remain missing

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Barisal

The ferryboat that had capsized in Kirtankhola river Saturday morning near Char Kawa Ferry-ghat on Barisal-Bhola highway is yet to be recovered.

Out of the four vehicles that had slipped into the river before the boat sank, the salvage crew retrieved the night-coach of Meghna Paribahon Saturday noon and a truck in the afternoon.

Salvage vessel Hamza and tug-boat Agrodot of Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority (BIWTA) and a team of fire service frogmen continued their joint salvage operation to recover the boat and the remaining two vehicles -- a pickup and a truck -- till filing of this report yesterday afternoon.

Abdur Razzak, a frogman of BIWTA salvage vessel Rustam, said the ferryboat is lying 80 feet under water at 200 yards south of the wharf.

No dead body has been found and, so, three people are still missing. A three-member inquiry committee headed by Yusuf Ali, additional chief engineer of Roads and Highways Department, Khulna division, has been formed to investigate the accident.

After crossing the river in a dense fog, the reportedly decrepit ferryboat banged into the jetty at Char Kawa Ferryghat at about 5:30am Saturday, lurched to one side, the four vehicles on board slipped into the river, and the boat sank a few yards away from its cargo, witnesses said.

The ferry service was resumed at the point early hours yesterday with a new boat replacing the capsized one.

Reduced to nothing

FROM PAGE 1 "We've lost everything, fire has left us dirt-poor," wailed one of the garment retailers.

"We couldn't save even a thread," lamented one shop-owner, who claimed to have lost merchandise worth about Tk 5 lakh.

The timing of the fire was even more shattering as the shopkeepers were approaching peak season for retail sales. They have already built up a bulk stock of woolen and winter clothes.

Many went to work yesterday only to find their workplaces already consumed by fire.