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Fireball leaps 300ft over Niko gas field

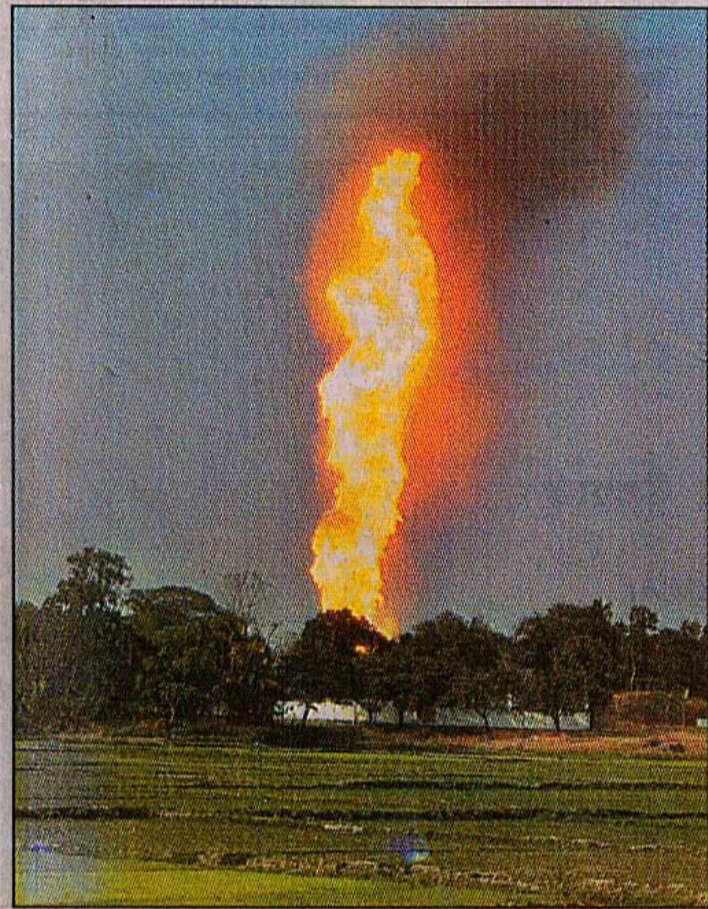


PHOTO: STAR

MAGURCHHARA REVISITS... A blazing fire at Tengratila Gas Field in Sunamganj continues to burn the valuable natural resources yesterday as the firefighters fail to douse the flame despite their frantic efforts since Friday night.

Repeat show of Magurchhara as company negligence alleged; flame to take month to be doused; each day damage estimated at Tk 40 lakh

SHARIER KHAN in Dhaka and IQBAL SIDDIQUI in Sylhet

A huge fireball leapt 300ft over a gas field in Sunamganj and forced about 10,000 panic-stricken people to flee their homes as a drilling well exploded with a big bang in the early morning yesterday.

The raging flames, which were visible from 30 kilometres away, at the Tengratila gas field in eastern Chhatak will take no less than a month to extinguish.

Operators of the Canadian oil company Niko ran into trouble when a sudden surge in natural gas pressure at the well was noticed on Friday at 7:30pm.

They desperately tried to tackle what they considered an impending disaster by diverting the rising pressure of gas to 500 meters away with a pipeline and burning it off. The operators claimed to the press on Friday night that the "major threat is over."

But the drilling well exploded at 5:00am yesterday with such a loud noise that was heard from areas 8km off the location. The raging fire devoured the expensive drilling rig, cracked the soil of the area and burnt

down 40 houses.

A Petrobangla expert, after visiting the site of devastation, pointed fingers yesterday at the sloppy handling of well by Niko.

He alleged that it was the result of 'inadequate monitoring' of exploration activities and of drilling too deep into the gas field without adequate structures.

"This was a repeat of the 1999 Magurchhara explosion," he said.

Experts say the inferno will take 30-45 days to control unless the gas from this well, estimated to have a 300 billion cubic feet reserve, burns itself out.

State Minister for Energy AKM Mosharruf Hossain, along with secretary in charge of the ministry Nazrul Islam, Petrobangla Chairman SR Osmani and Petrobangla Director (operation) Raihanul Abedin yesterday visited the spot.

The state minister indicated the inferno will burn 30 to 40 million cubic feet of gas a day-- worth about Tk 30 to 40 lakh.

A Petrobangla expert noticed monitoring flaws at the site.

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Workers blast owners, demand compensation

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Garment workers at a condolence rally yesterday at city's Muktangan condemned the owners for the Thursday night's fire at Shaan Knitting and Processing Ltd at Siddhirganj in Narayanganj and demanded Tk 2 lakh as compensation for each of the 23 workers burnt to death.

At the rally organised by National Garments Workers Federation (NGWF), speakers also blamed the government for negligence in enforcing safety rules in garment factories.

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OWNERS BLAMED FOR KNITTING FACTORY FIRE Search on, workers still missing

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

A police investigation has blamed Thursday's knitting factory fire in Narayanganj on the factory owners as the death toll in the tragic incident rose to 23 with one more body recovered yesterday.

Locals and factory staff believe more bodies might be buried under

rubble inside the gutted plant as a number of its staff still remained missing.

The police and firefighters were ploughing through the rubble in search of more victims.

Siddhirganj police in their primary investigation found the owners of the factory -- Shaan Knitting and Processing Limited -- responsi-

ble for the holocaust.

The factory did not have sufficient emergency exits and the situation worsened as power went off and the workers could not trace the exit points during the fire, the officer-in-charge (OC) of Siddhirganj Police Station told The Daily Star late last night.

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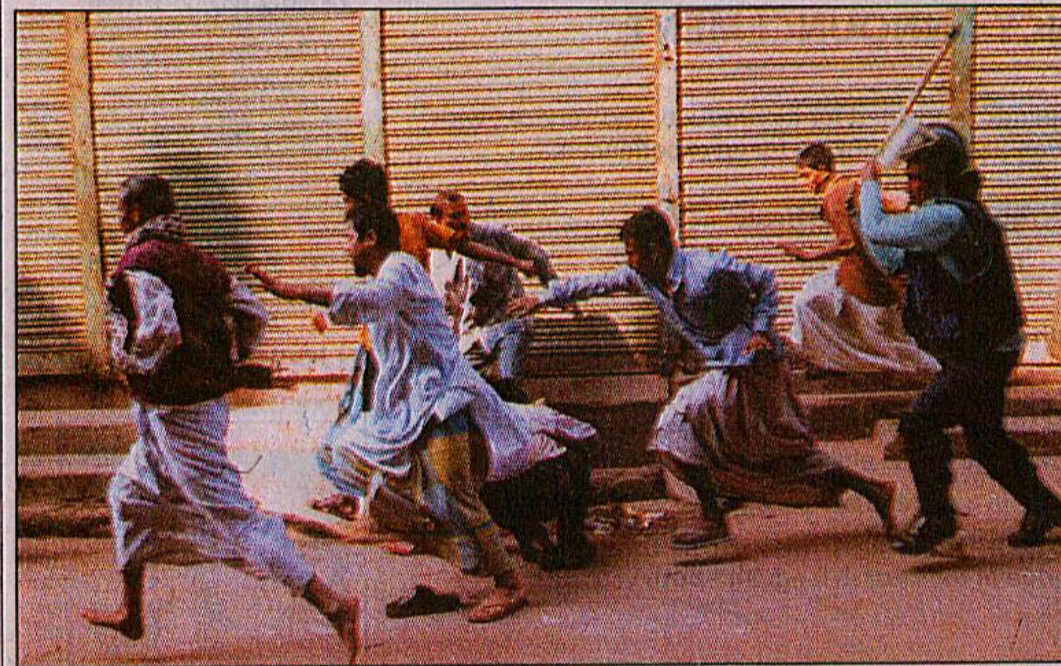


PHOTO: STAR

A baton-wielded policeman chases opposition demonstrators near Sowarighat in the capital during yesterday's dawn-to-dusk hartal enforced by the front organisations of Awami League.

Hartal loses its appeal

Says Mannan Bhuiyan

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Hartal has lost its appeal and is no longer a weapon to intensify any protest movement, as it obstructs development activities and brings suffering to people, said BNP Secretary General Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan yesterday.

"Hartal no longer stands as the yardstick of public support and is considered as an anti-people act," he told reporters at his official residence.

"I personally believe there ought to be a law against it. Though it's my personal view, I think a decision to ban hartal should be taken by a general consensus."

When asked, he said his party has not taken any such decision to this end.

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Talks fail to resolve govt-ACC stand-off

JULFIKAR ALI MANIK

The crisis at the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) deepened further as a problem-solving meeting between the commission and the cabinet secretary yesterday further complicated the issues and gave rise to fresh disagreements.

The major bones of contention at yesterday's meeting included the mode of staffing the commission, its organogram and interpretation of the ACC Act. The only thing agreed was to withdraw the government-appointed secretary to the ACC. The discussion took place at the commission's new office at Agargaon in the city.

The government and the commission have been at loggerheads since the latter launched its journey back in November 21. But, from last week, the ACC has virtually stopped functioning due to certain government moves.

Cabinet Secretary Saadat Hussain at the meeting suggested

that the ACC hire some of the officials of the now-defunct Bureau of Anti-Corruption (Bac) on a temporary basis to carry out the urgent tasks.

But, last week, the Cabinet Division had announced that the 1,107 Bac staff, who had been working at the ACC since its formation, are 'reserved employees' of the government and should not work for the ACC until they are selected on the basis of a yet-to-be formulated rule.

"Commissioner Maniruzzaman Miah opposed Hussain's suggestion saying a temporary hiring of some Bac staff will be a violation of law," said a meeting source. "Miah questioned the secretary on what basis the ACC will hire the temporary staff since there is no rule yet for doing that," the source added.

Besides, such a hiring is likely to anger the rest of the Bac staff, Miah pointed out. They also may question

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Police club hartal demonstrators

50 hurt, mostly women

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Police clubbed opposition demonstrators on the Dhaka streets yesterday injuring at least 50 people, mostly women, during a dawn-to-dusk hartal enforced by the Awami League's front organisations that disrupted life and economic activities across the country.

The law-enforcers swooped on the demonstrators in Dhanmondi, Motijheel and Lalbagh areas and picked up about 75 people, most of them were women activists of the main opposition Awami League (AL) and its wings.

Senior photojournalist of the daily Ittefaq Rashid Talukdar was also injured by brickbats during a pitched battle between the police and pickets in Lalbagh area. Rashid received medical assistance from a city hospital, his colleagues said.

Seven wings of AL enforced the shutdown to protest the price hike of diesel and kerosene and demand the trial of those involved in the August 21 grenade attacks and re-enactment of the law that would provide special security to the family of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

Twenty-one activists of Jubo Mahila League and Mahila Awami League were picked up in separate police actions in Dhanmondi in the morning. The police allegedly beat them up after detaining them at the Dhanmondi Police Station.

The police even refused to allow newsmen to enter the police station when the opposition activists were detained there.

As some of the women detainees needed medical treatment as a result of police beating, the poli-

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BGMEA ADMINISTRATOR Business leaders give 2 days for withdrawal

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Leaders of the country's three apex trade bodies yesterday issued a 48-hour ultimatum to the government to withdraw the administrator it had appointed as per a court ruling to oversee the upcoming executive committee election of Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA).

BGMEA leaders locked up the

association's office at Karwan Bazar and gathered in front of the building to prevent the administrator from taking charge as scheduled yesterday. They chanted slogans against certain 'conspirators' and set fire to a few of their effigies.

Luckily, the administrator did not show up, which might have ended up in a bloody brawl as the protesting business leaders vowed to prevent a public servant from

taking over an elected committee at the cost of their blood.

Standing on a vigil in front of the office from early morning, BGMEA President Annisul Huq said, "We are mandated to run the office for a two-year term. So, we will not allow any one to replace the elected executive committee. If an administrator were to take office here he has to walk past our dead bodies."

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PHOTO: STAR

FBCCI President Abdul Awal Mintoo, MCCI President Kutubuddin Ahmed and BGMEA leader Annisul Huq, among others, hold hands of each other at the BGMEA office in Karwan Bazar yesterday as a mark of the trade bodies' solidarity with a move against the appointment of an administrator at the BGMEA.

Concern over bigots' threat on Dr Kamal

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Two political parties yesterday expressed their deep concern over the threats issued by Islamist bigots against Dr Kamal Hossain because of his pleas in court against the ban on Ahmadiyya publications.

Bangladesh Samajtantrik Dal central convenor Khalequzzaman said in a statement that Dr Kamal Hossain performed his democratic responsibility by taking a stance in favour of the Ahmadiyyas. He called for an arrest of the religious extremists acting under the banner of the International Khatme Nubuwwat Movement of Bangladesh who threatened Dr Kamal and demanded that he be declared a non-Muslim.

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Yet another mild tremor shakes Ctg

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, Ctg

Another mild earthquake jolted the port city in the early hours yesterday. The tremor, measuring 3.21 on the Richter scale, hit the city at 12:53 am and lasted for nine seconds.

The epicentre was 73km off the Chittagong Seismic Observatory. However, no casualties were reported.

This is the second tremor that has shaken the port city in a span of 16 hours. The first one of medium magnitude was felt on Friday morning.

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Zim avoid follow-on

AL MUSABBIR SADI, Chittagong

Bangladesh's quest for a maiden Test victory suffered a hiccup when Zimbabwe led by their courageous captain Tendani Taibu avoided the follow-on on the third day first Test here at the MA Aziz Stadium yesterday.

Taibu struck a superb 92 and featured in an absorbing 119-run stand for the seventh wicket with

Elton Chigumbura, who hit a gritty 71, as the inexperienced Zimbabweans finished the day on 308-8 in reply to Bangladesh's massive 488.

Mluleki Nkala with 20 and Douglas Hondo, yet to score, were at the crease with Zimbabwe still 180 runs in arrears.

Resuming on 84-4, the tourists lost their first wicket in the third over

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While enjoying your team play you could choose to...



or



Freedom of choice