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GMG to fly to Kolkata daily

M ABDUR RAHIM

Private carrier GMG Airlines that made its international debut last year plans an overseas expansion this year taking advantage of open sky policies in neighbouring countries.

The lone private sector airline of the country now in operation will up its flight frequencies on Dhaka-Kolkata route to once a day from twice a week from February 18 as India offers unlimited frequencies to foreign airlines during peak tourism season from November to March.

The airline will also launch flights between Dhaka and Colombo soon as Sri Lanka recently accepted GMG

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2 hurt as JCD, Shibir clash over Quran lessons

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, Rajshahi

Two people were injured when activists of Jatiyatabadi Chhatra Dal and Islami Chhatra Shibir clashed over forced participation in holy Quran lessons at a college hostel in Rajshahi yesterday.

The injured -- Jewel and Wahidul -- belong to JCD, the student wing of the ruling Bangladesh Nationalist Party. They were admitted to Rajshahi Medical College hospital.

At least six rooms of the Shamsuddin Hostel of Rajshahi New Government Degree College were damaged during the half an

SEE PAGE 11 COL 8

HABIGANJ CARNAGE Asma worried about Rab's probe charge takeover

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Asma Kibria, wife of late SAMS Kibria, yesterday expressed concern over Rapid Action Battalion's (Rab) reported taking charge of the local investigation into the January 27 blasts.

Citing a Bengali national daily's unconfirmed report of assigning Rab to the investigation, Asma Kibria in a statement said, "We are afraid that some key local suspects and those already arrested might fall victim to crossfire before they could

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3 AL leaders picked up for quizzing

UNB, Habiganj

Police yesterday picked up three Awami League leaders, including central leader and ex-municipal chairman Shaheed Uddin Chowdhury, for interrogation for the Habiganj grenade blasts.

Two others are Habiganj Sadar AL president Ali Ahmed Khan and general secretary Abdur Rashid Talukdar Iqbal.

Shahid Uddin Chowdhury's family sources said he was picked up by police from his house. Habiganj AL sources said Ali Ahmed Khan and Iqbal were also picked up by police.

2 robbers killed in fight with coast guards

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Barisal

Two alleged robbers were killed and 50 people including two Coast Guard lieutenants were injured in a series of armed clashes between forest robbers and their aides with coastguards and forest guards at Chairman Bazar in Ramgati under Laxmipur district on Sunday afternoon.

Seventeen coastguards led by Lt Abdus Shahid and seven forest guards led by Aminul Islam Khan, ranger of Daulat Khan forest division under Bhola district conducted a joint-operation to nab forest dacoits led by Abdur Rahman

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Valentine's Day party at DU foiled by blasts

16 including females hurt in stampede as four bombs go off amid tight security

DU CORRESPONDENT

At least 16 people including 12 Dhaka University (DU) students were injured as four bombs exploded in a large Valentine's Day crowd in front of the DU Teachers-Students Centre (TSC) last night, creating panic on the entire campus.

Witnesses said three bombs went off one after another just behind the Swoparjito Swadhinata sculpture at the TSC road-island at about 7:45pm when several thousand people, mostly students, were enjoying a Valentine's Day function there.

Another bomb exploded at

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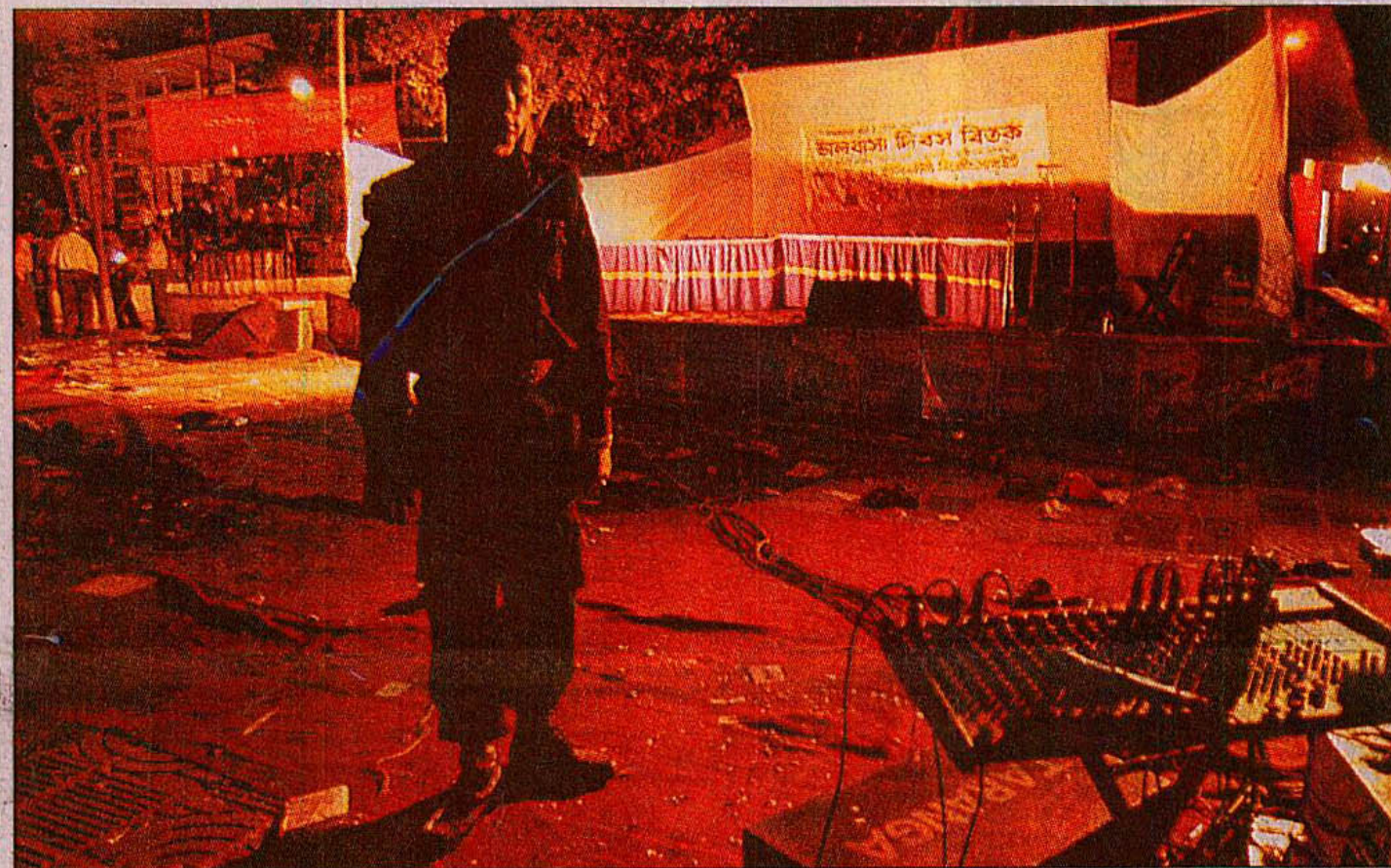


PHOTO: SK ENAMUL HAQ

(Top) A female student injured in bomb blasts on Dhaka University campus last night is being taken to Dhaka Medical College and Hospital; (Bottom) a Rapid Action Battalion member stands on the TSC road-island where the bombs went off in a Valentine's Day crowd.

Dhaka softens on graft, transparency in Tifa

Draft agreement almost ready

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Bangladesh and United States trade officials are close to finalising a draft for a trade and investment framework agreement (Tifa), as Dhaka softened its positions on key debated issues in the first day of the third round of talks that began in Dhaka yesterday.

Bangladesh budged from its earlier stance of excluding from the Tifa draft a clause related to transparency, bribery and corruption in international trade and investment, sources in the Ministry of Commerce said.

Betsy E Steelman, a senior US

trade policy advisor for Asia and the Pacific, is leading the US side while Elias Ahmad, the Joint Secretary of the commerce ministry, is leading the Bangladesh side. The two-day talks are being held at the commerce ministry.

Bangladesh, fearing that a 'bribery and corruption' clause might undermine Bangladesh's image, wanted to replace it with a 'prevention of malpractice' clause. The US side argued, however, that including the clause would not affect Dhaka's image as it is a bilateral deal.

In the draft, the US government proposed that under Tifa the two governments will establish a 'US-

Bangladesh Council on Trade and Investment', which will meet at least once a year. The Commerce secretary will lead the Bangladesh side in the council meeting while a designated official of the US Trade Representative (USTR) office will lead the US side.

Bangladesh accepted the US proposal for the joint council but insisted that an official of equal status from the USTR office lead the US side.

The US government originally proposed the Tifa to Bangladesh in 2002 to promote trade and investment between the two countries.

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3 children burnt to death

UNB, Noakhali

Three children of a family were burnt to death in a fire at Papua village in Sonaimuri upazila Sunday night.

The dead are Sabbir, 3, Kulsom, 3, and Tamanna, 5.

Locals said the fire originated from a lamp at the house of Khalilullah when his wife, Shirin Akther, 35, came out of the house to respond to a call of nature, leaving her three children asleep.

As Shirin cried for help, neighbours rushed to the spot, but failed to rescue the children. Khalilullah was at the local bazar during the incident.

Street show-off ends without confrontation

First day of hartal passes

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The Awami League-led opposition and ruling BNP activists came out on the city streets yesterday in an apparent show of strength but avoided any confrontation as a 36-hour opposition-called country-wide hartal began yesterday.

Clashes between political rivals however took place in Sylhet, Tangail, Bogra and Moulvibazar during the shutdown that disrupted life, affected economic activities and road communication, reports received in Dhaka said.

Pro-hartal pickets and anti-hartal activists clashed in Tangail during the shutdown leaving at least

15 injured. BNP workers attacked an AL rally in Sylhet and ransacked Bogra AL office. More than 10 people were injured as supporters and opponents of the hartal clashed in Moulvibazar.

The AL's student wing Bangladesh Chhatra League has called a dawn-to-dusk hartal tomorrow in Sylhet to protest the attack on AL's 'peaceful rally'.

In the capital, about 10,000 security personnel were deployed to ward off any violence on the first day of the shutdown which coincided with the BNP's rallies across the country against the opposition bid to create 'anarchy'.

BNP and its front organisations

brought out processions in different areas of the city denouncing the opposition for calling hartals frequently.

Pro-hartal processions were smaller yesterday than on the previous hartal days due to strict vigilance by police.

The opposition called the shutdown to protest the killing of former finance minister and AL lawmaker Shah AMS Kibria and four others in the January 27 grenade attack and to press the demand for resignation of the government.

Educational institutions, shopping centres and most private offices remained shut or operated

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Donors meet in Washington to talk sliding governance

INAM AHMED

Donors, worried over the worsening political and governance situation, will meet in Washington on February 23-24 to hammer out what could be done to improve the situation.

"It will be a functional level meeting," said an envoy of a western country. "The theme will be governance."

Diplomatic sources said donors will talk their heart out about the situation prevailing in Bangladesh. 'Crossfire' deaths, human rights situation, political volatility, grenade attacks and corruption will be put on the table for donors to find

ways to improve the situation.

"There is a general feeling among us that there has been a disconnect between the donors and the government of Bangladesh," said the envoy. "We are totally at a loss. We have been asking the government to do a lot for improvement of the general situation, it now seems nothing has any impact. This is leading to a dangerous situation."

According to sources in Washington, although the meeting is being organised by the World Bank, some bilateral donors mainly took the initiative to hold it.

The bilateral donors feel that the multilateral agencies should also

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Govt won't allow bid to create anarchy

Babar says in JS

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

State Minister for Home Affairs Lutfozzaman Babar yesterday said the government will do whatever is necessary to protect public life from troublemakers during hartals.

"We will not give any concession on the question of protecting life and property of people," Babar told the Jatiya Sangsad on a call attention notice from BNP lawmaker Mohammad Giasuddin.

"The law enforcers will not give any scope for creating anarchy in the streets," the state minister said.

Babar accused the main opposition of declaring a war against innocent people by enforcing repeated hartals, killing people and destroying property.

He once again told the House

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Ex-PM of Lebanon killed in car bomb

Bodyguards among 12 others die

REUTERS, Beirut

A huge car bomb killed Lebanon's former prime minister Rafik al-Hariri and at least 12 other people yesterday in Beirut's most devastating attack since the 1975-90 civil war.

Hariri's motorcade was blown up as it passed an exclusive section of the Corniche, soon after he left a meeting at parliament to discuss elections in May. Former Economy Minister Basil Fuleihan, riding in the convoy, was critically wounded.

Some of the others killed were Hariri's bodyguards.

The explosion outside the St

George Hotel gouged a deep crater out of the road, ripped facades from luxury buildings and set cars ablaze on streets carpeted with rubble and broken glass. Officials said at least 100 people were wounded.

Several of the vehicles from Hariri's convoy were torn apart and set on fire despite their armor plating.

"Everything around us collapsed," a Syrian building worker at the site said. "It was as if an earthquake hit the area."

Hariri, a billionaire businessman, had resigned from government in October but remained

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BB starts probe into Premier Bank scam

STAR REPORT

Bangladesh Bank (BB) yesterday launched an investigation into the Premier Bank public floating scam after being informed officially by the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC).

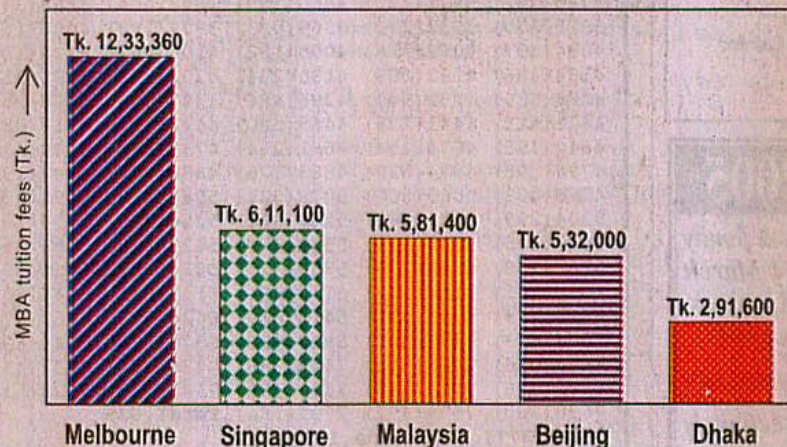
A six-member inquiry team of the anti-money laundering department of the central bank went to the Dilkusha, Motijheel and Mohakhali branches of the private bank for probing the matter.

The BB earlier received a SEC letter, which mentioned that around 15,000 beneficiary owners' (BO) accounts were opened by the depositor participant (DP) of the Premier Bank using a single address.

About 5,500 BO accounts did not have any address while another 3,000 accounts were opened using only one address, the SEC letter

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