

Summer holds dark

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A couple of questionable projects in the pipeline are the second phase 450 mw Meghnaghat plant and the 450 mw Rural Power Company Ltd (RPCL) Savar plant. The first project is being given to a company that lacks experience and does not qualify to be a bidder under the PDB criterion. The RPCL project is plagued with corruption and virtually aims at robbing rural consumers and benefiting a businessman. The RPCL project is already stalled and questions are being raised if the bidder of Meghnaghat-2 project can at all implement such a big scheme.

"As the government has been picking power developers under the influence of political and business lobbies, genuine developers have lost interest in bidding in Bangladesh," said a power company official.
Meanwhile, power project costs have gone up by about 35 percent in the last three years, he adds.

The country faced an unusual power supply crunch even in the winter when demand goes down to year's low. In February, load shedding shot up to 760 mw and yesterday, it was at 749 mw.

Short supply of gas coupled with shutdown of the 360 mw Haripur plant led to such load shedding. The PDB says Haripur plant will resume operation today and the 100 mw Tongi power plant will go into production by the end of this month.

In addition, the Barapukuria coal-fired power project might add 125 mw in October and another 125 mw in January next year. The country's power generation capacity will then rise to 4,400 mw.

The situation will temporarily improve this month and load shedding will come down to around 300 mw with power generation totalling around 3500 mw.

The Power System Master Plan (PSMP) forecasts that during the summer, the demand for power will go up to 4,500 mw. Next year, said a BBC Bangla bulletin last night quoting the BDR officials.

Meanwhile, eight Bangladeshi citizens were killed by BSF members at different Bangladesh-India border areas during the period, BDR sources said.

BDR officials, however, said they have strengthened their forces and the fence construction has been stopped.

A deputy director general level meeting between BDR and BSF will be held in Agartala of India on March 14, followed by a director general level meeting in Dhaka on April 12, they said.

The recent tension prevailing at border areas of the two countries will be the main issue in those meetings.

BSF will strongly urge the BSF to stop construction of anything like fence within 150 yards of zero point which violates the 1974 agreement between Bangladesh and India, they added.

Industry insiders say other than

Saifur praised for result-based aid flow plan

SSS, Paris

corruption, the government uses different policy documents and a series of approvals to manipulate bids or to linger a proposal. There are three policy documents - the Private Sector Power Generation Policy (PSPGP), Public Procurement Regulations 2003 and Private Sector Infrastructure Guideline.

The Prime Minister's Office (PMO)

last year cancelled the 450 mw Sirajganj project that was awarded to Summit Group apparently because a brother of the group's owner is a

Awami League lawmaker.

The PMO later explained to the power ministry that it was cancelled because according to the PSPGP, private projects should be handled by the Power Cell and not the PDB. The same reason was given for cancellation of the 15 small plants project, where again, Summit was found as a dominant bidder.

However, the PMO did not apply this rule for the Savar project (under RPCL) or the Meghnaghat-2 project (under PDB), both of which have allegations of corruption.

Meantime, the IDB vice-president called on the Bangladesh finance minister and congratulated him for his role as co-chair in one of the minister's forum meeting. He also appreciated Saifur's call for graduation from aid dependency to self-reliance that would mean effective use of foreign assistance.

The chief of USAID also met Saifur and reviewed the USAID assistance in Bangladesh.

Saifur also met Economic Advisor of the Ministry of Finance of Pakistan Ashraque Hasan Khan and Finance Minister of Nepal Madhukar Shunshere.

Thief 'lynched' in capital

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

A thief was lynched, allegedly by a mob, and another critically injured in Shyampur in the capital yesterday.

The dead was Karim, 22, son of Rafiq Miah and a resident of a colony at Dhaka Match Factory in the locality.

Karim and his accomplices - Dulal, 18, and Tuhin, 20, -- went to a machinery factory, known as Billal's Factory, to steal something at day-break yesterday, said police.

The labourers of the factory caught and beat up them and handed them over to police, they added.

Police admitted critically injured Karim and Dulal to Dhaka Medical College and Hospital (DMCH) at around 10:30am. Hospital sources said they were released after receiving treatment.

However, Karim was sent back to the DMCH as he fell sick on the way, said the duty officer of Shyampur Police Station. He was pronounced dead on arrival at the hospital, he added.

DMCH sources said Karim was brought to the hospital at around 12:30pm.

Police arrested Dulal and Tuhin.

Denmark waits

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wants to improve the efficiency of Danish grant assistance of \$50 million annually to support the poverty-reduction efforts as outlined in the recently issued policy document titled 'Unlocking the Potential - National Strategy for Accelerated Poverty Reduction'.

The planned aid will focus on agriculture sector (fishery, livestock, crops and rural roads), drinking water and sanitation and human rights, democratisation and good governance.

Denmark is also working with the government to establish one-stop crisis centres nationwide to help violated women and girls and provide support in training judicial officers, he added.

He said Denmark will build its own embassy on 3,500-square meter land in north Gulshan.

Businesses thru'

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at the land port in Bhanibazar upazila collapsed on Thursday noon.

An Indian worker was killed and another truck driver injured as an Indian truck carrying coal fell into a ditch when the bridge collapsed. The body of the worker, Madan Lal, was sent to his home in India.

A large number of trucks, used for carrying imported coal, remained stranded on both sides of the road after the collapse of the bridge.

Enemies using

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creating terrorist organisations using the name of Islam and thus harming the cause of Islam, the religion of peace and humanity.

He ruled out any link of militancy with a known Islamic movement organisation.

"We asked the government to stop raiding the Kawmi madrasas. But it did not respond positively. Even today police

raided some Kawmi madrasas in Gazipur and Kapasia," IOU chairman and lawmaker Fazlul Haque Amin told The Daily Star yesterday. "It's not fair to harass the students of Kawmi madrasas in the name of police raid."

Amin said such raiding must be stopped immediately. "If the government doesn't do so, we'll decide our strategy at the March 16 meeting."

The IOU has asked the senior faculty members of the Kawmi madrasas to attend the meeting. As of today, there are around 15,000 Kawmi madrasas across the country and the party backs all these institutions.

How important is the party's affiliation

Conned into penury

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"The reason behind his [Jahangir] high charge is the middlemanship and competition among the recruiting agencies," says a former agent and repatriate Bangladeshi worker who worked in Saudi Arabia from 1988 to 1998.

Unveiling the mystery of higher charges, he told these correspondents that local recruiting agencies have many agents in the villages who lure prospective migrants with false promises of higher salaries and brighter futures.

"Agents have a contract with the recruiting agencies and take a share of the money. Say I have to pay the agency Tk 1.5 lakh, but I can motivate one to pay 1.75 lakh. I will get Tk 25,000. It depends on the techniques of an agent how much he will profit," the agent said, requesting anonymity.

There are over 700 hundred recruiting agencies in Bangladesh. Many have agents throughout the Gulf countries, who buy visas from employers at a higher rate, ranging from 500 to 800 rials, or Tk 7,500 to Tk 12,000.

The recruiting agencies found that they could make more profit by sending more workers from Bangladesh. "So, a competition began among the Bangladeshi recruiting agencies to buy more visas, and the Saudi employers saw that they could do business by selling those visas to the agencies."

Employers used to give visas and airfares to the workers free of cost 10 years ago, the village agent said. But once the sharp competition set in, visa prices began increasing while salaries for workers went down. The agents, meanwhile, were compelled to devise new tactics for alluring more workers from Bangladesh.

"Even the agencies advise the Saudi employers to decrease workers' salary, and employers also consider the agencies which can pay more for a visa on the one hand, but provide them with the workers at a lower salary on the other," the middleman said.

Some agencies also give migrant workers fake contract papers, promising higher salaries and facilities like medical care, housing, and food. The real contract, however, stipulates a much lower salary and sometimes none of the promised benefits, the agent described. Workers are often unaware of the difference, since many are illiterate or not given access to both contracts. Some contracts are written in Arabic, which most Bangladeshi workers cannot read.

According to a Human Rights Watch report, many migrant workers never see these Arabic-language contracts in their home countries or are forced to sign the documents when they reach Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries.

Jahangir was one of the victims lured to Saudi Arabia on such false promises. His contract promised him a job as a driver, with the monthly salary of 1200 rials (Tk 18,000). In reality, however, he was sent to the desert and given a job rearing sheep. Working in the blistering heat was difficult, but he did not dare to return before making money to compensate the Tk 2 lakh he spent to get there, which he secured by selling land and borrowing from relatives at the monthly interest rate of 5 percent.

When, after passing 6 months in the desert, the skinny Alam strongly protested to his employer, he was handed over to the police, who put him in jail before finally sending him home to Dumuria thana.

Police arrested Dulal and Tuhin.

Strain within coalition

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agencies may again criticise us," a government policymaker told The Daily Star yesterday wishing anonymity.

Though the BNP-led coalition government launched the drive late last month against the Islamist militants following pressures from the donors including the US and the EU, internal tension has somewhat slowed it down in the last few days.

IOU leaders said if the government does not stop harassing its leaders and activists, their party is likely to take a strong stand against the ongoing drive.

The BNP is also working with the government to establish one-stop crisis centres nationwide to help violated women and girls and provide support in training judicial officers, he added.

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Govt's mobile

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"None of BTTB's engineers would work for that company," he said.

The prime minister Khaleda Zia soft-launched the BTTB mobile phone service on December 28.

Nobody knows the number of BTTB's mobile phone connections that continue to remain off limits to public.

The call tariffs of BTTB's mobile phone have already frustrated prospective customers, who had expected lower rates from the state-owned company.

The BTTB has proposed tariffs for its post-paid package of Tk 5 per minute in peak hours between 8:00am and 8:00pm and Tk 2 per minute in off peak hours.

The zonal call tariff would be Tk 3 per minute and inter-zonal for Tk 5 per minute, sources said. BTTB officials said that BTTB mobile subscribers would be able to call zonal fixed phones, adding that call charges for the prepaid segment would be Tk 4 per minute during peak hours and Tk 2.6 per minute during off-peak hours. These tariffs exclude Value Added Tax (VAT). Post-paid subscribers have to pay a monthly rent of Tk 350 plus VAT.

The BTTB would charge Tk 4,500 for a post paid connection and Tk 3,000 for a prepaid connection. Subscribers have to buy a handset separately.

How important is the party's affiliation

to these madrasas is indicated in this statement of Amin made in a rally on March 1 that an Islamic revolution would be brought about in the country through the Kawmi madrasas.

Talking to The Daily Star yesterday IOU lawmaker Shahidul Islam said police raided some Kawmi madrasas unnecessarily. "We've raised the issue in the parliament as to why such steps were being taken against Kawmi madrasas," he said, adding, "Our next steps will aim at stopping such unfairness."

The government on February 23 banned two Islamist outfits. Police later arrested a militant leader named Asadullah Al Galib and started raiding different madrasas.

It may be recalled that on February 27, four days into the launch of the crackdown, Amin in a joint statement with Allama Azizul Haq protested the move and demanded that prior consultation among the coalition partners should have taken place before any such move was undertaken.

There were many cases that the police stations refused to record as rape cases, Abbas said adding that this was a gross violation of human rights. "These issues must be investigated impartially and made public immediately."

Replies to another question, he said the seminar did not compare human rights situation in Bangladesh with that in any other South Asian countries.

The death of Prof Humayun Azad was shown as natural but there was an assassination attempt on him, Abbas mentioned. Similar threats on journalists and other intellectuals are a matter of grave concern, he pointed out.

Human rights defenders at the seminar resolved to better equip themselves with skills to support human rights of others, and broaden their alliance at national and international levels to support the victims.

The aim of the seminar, the first of its kind, was to bring Bangladeshi human rights defenders together to speak about the work they do, the problems they face and the action needed to be taken by themselves, the government and human rights organisations to protect their human rights so that they can protect the human rights of others.

Sakia Chilot and Sadia Hameed of Amnesty International, Justice KM Sobhan and journalist Shahriar Kabir were among those present at the press conference.

The speakers urged the Bangladeshi government to put pressure on its Indian counterpart to make it stop the river-linking project in order to save Bangladesh from disasters.

BONDNEWS adds: A local doctor was killed when a Rangpur-bound picnic bus ran over him at about 10:30 Kachhikata on Sirajganj-Hatikumri-Banpara highway between 8:00am and 8:00pm.

Angry local people torched the bus after the incident.

They took out to the streets demanding speed breakers and began to dig pits on the road, leading to clash with police.

AL reservation

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newly formed organisation.

Moudud was responding to some points regarding the caretaker government and electoral process raised by AL central leader and lawmaker Suranjit Sengupta, who was among the speakers at the roundtable.

On the service age limit for judges of the higher courts, the law minister said the age limit was increased with the objective of maintaining efficiency of the judiciary. "There is no relation between the increase of service age limit for the judges and appointment of a chief advisor of the next caretaker government," he said.

"If we had any bad intentions, we could have extended the age limit only for the Appellate Division (of the Supreme Court) judges. But we increased the age limit for High Court Division judges as well," he mentioned.

On allegations of extra-judicial killings by Rapid Action Battalion (RAB), the law minister said Rab has succeeded in creating panic among criminals. "Rab was formed not under separate laws unlike Rakhi Bahini. Rab shares the same code of conduct that is applicable to police," he said.

He also criticised the 11th amendment to the constitution, saying, "Shahabuddin should not have rejoined as chief justice after enjoying the status of head of the government for an interim period."

Suranjit Sengupta said, "The government increased the service age limit for the judges of higher courts only to have Justice KM Hasan as the head of the next caretaker government."

The caretaker government system and the Election Commission (EC) should be reformed to hold the next general election properly, he said.