

# 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 benefitting 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 stood 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, this demand will rise to about 5,000 mw.

Short supply of gas that fires most power plants in the country will continue as Petrobangla does not have adequate pipeline network across the country to increase gas supply, say Petrobangla sources. A major pipeline project is underway but it will take more than a year to complete.

On February 13, Petrobangla wrote to the PDB that it is not in a position to provide any 'extra' gas for power.

"If you ask for my honest opinion, power sector had never been in such a deeper mess before. The government is least concerned and things move in the sector only when certain high ups are bribed or financially involved," an official said with annoyance.

Investors' interest in the sector has plummeted as never before. Even Indian giant Tata that last year announced it wants to set up a major power plant in Bangladesh is yet to finalise any proposal.

Industry insiders say other than

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 an 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 qualified 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.

Other than these excessive and confusing policy guidelines burdening the power sector, a power project now needs approval from the Power Cell, PDB, Power Grid Company, Petrobangla, power ministry, Private Sector Infrastructure Committee, law ministry, Cabinet Purchase Committee and the PMO.

Frequent transfer and posting of high officials in the sector add to the woes. In the last nine months, the government replaced the power secretary and the PDB chairman thrice.

## BDR, BSF

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agency reports said.

A tense situation has been prevailing between the BDR and BSF at various border points over the fence construction for one month, 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.

BDR 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.

# Saifur praised for result-based aid flow plan

BSS, Paris

British Secretary for the Department of International Development (DFID) Hillary Ben has appreciated Finance Minister M Saifur Rahman's call for the result-based aid flow.

Ben was discussing with Saifur at an exclusive meeting on Wednesday on the sideline of the second high-profile forum meeting ended here Thursday.

They discussed issues of mutual and bilateral interests.

The British secretary also assured Saifur of the DFID's support in promoting need-based aid flow and continued support for economic development.

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 Ashshaque 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 Bianibazar 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.

The Jamaat chief also refuted the report of two Jamaat Rokons' involvement in the bomb attacks at Brac office in Rangpur.

He said those who claim themselves as champions of human rights are continuing to trample basic human rights and democratic values across the world.

Jamaat Secretary General and Social Welfare Minister Ali Ahsan Mohammad Mujahid, and Assistant Secretary General Muhammad Qamaruzzaman also spoke at the conference.

# 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 rial (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 Bangladesh. He never received any

# 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.

IOJ 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 donor agencies and Western countries, on the other hand, are closely monitoring the government's move against the militants, which they consider to be an essential first step that needs to be followed up by sterner measures.

Against such a backdrop, Prime Minister Khaleda Zia on Wednesday discussed the prevailing situation with senior party leaders at her office, though the details of the discussion could not be known.

However, the same day, in reply to a question by Kader Siddiqui, the premier assured the House that she will elaborate her policy regarding the militants in her closing speech, which is likely to be on March 15. The BNP policymakers believe by that time the government will have brought the situation sufficiently under control and then the prime minister can speak on the future plans in parliament.

Meanwhile, the IOJ is contemplating steps to counter the clampdown, as the government has not responded to its demand to stop raiding on Kammi madrasas. It plans to hold a special meeting in Dhaka with the leaders of Kammi madrasas across the country on March 16 to decide on the party's policy after reviewing the ongoing crackdown on militants. Besides, the executive body of the IOJ will sit in a week to review the prevailing situation.

"We asked the government to stop raiding the Kammi madrasas. But it did not respond positively. Even today police are raiding the Kammi madrasas in Gazipur and Kapasia," IOJ chairman and lawmaker Fazlul Haque Amin told The Daily Star yesterday. "It's not fair to harass the students of Kammi madrasas in the name of police raid."

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

How important is the party's affiliation

## 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 Rakshi 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.

The EC should have a separate secretariat of its own and it should have financial authority, he said.

The AL lawmaker also said the country should come out of the existing confrontational politics for the sake of democracy.

Chaired by Joyнал Abedin, the roundtable was also addressed by Prof. Ataur Rahman of Dhaka University and Golam Sarwar Milon of Bangladesh Jatiyo Party.

## Rights abuse

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said referring to discussions at the seminar.

The seminar in its closing statement emphasised the urgent need to strengthen institutions to protect human rights, set up an independent national human rights commission and the office of an ombudsman, and separate the judiciary from the executive.

Amnesty International and scores of human rights defenders across the country jointly organised the event at Brac Centre.

Issues discussed at the seminar were harassment, arrest and torture of human rights defenders, and death threats and attacks on them. More than 10 journalists, who were human rights defenders, have been assassinated since 2000, it noted.

Responding to a question on the recent arrest of some alleged religious militants in the country, Abbas said only the arrests don't cover everything. The key thing is to conduct neutral probes into the cases and bring the criminals to justice.

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."

Replying 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 Shahir Kabir were among those present at the press conference.

## 8 killed

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30, Syed Ali, 40, and Banu, 16.

Motaleb and Lal Mia, injured in the accident, were admitted to the upazila health complex.

BDNews adds: A local doctor was killed when a Rangpur-bound picnic bus ran over him at about 10:30 Kachhikata on Sirajganj-Hatikumrul-Banpara highway yesterday.

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.

# UK warns Syria

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into the fold of the international community".

"It they don't," he said, "they really will be treated as a pariah."

Straw said members of the UN Security Council had discussed deploying more peacekeepers to Lebanon in the event of a Syrian pull-out.

"It is possible that as part of a phased withdrawal... there could be some more peacekeeping troops," he said.

Syrian President Bashar Assad will make a speech to parliament on Saturday on "current political developments", Syria's state news agency said.

Last week, Syria said it was "keen" to co-operate with the UN over implementing a resolution passed last year calling for foreign troops to leave Lebanon.

Meanwhile, Arab leaders grew increasingly impatient at Syria's resistance to a quick, complete withdrawal of its troops from Lebanon, with Saudi leader Crown Prince Abdullah sharply telling Syria's president to start getting out soon or face deeper isolation, according to a Saudi official.

The unusually tough message came when Syrian President Bashar Assad met Abdullah and other Saudi leaders in the kingdom's capital, the Saudi official told The Associated Press by telephone from Riyadh.

Arab League foreign ministers, meeting in Cairo on Thursday, added to the pressure, expressing support for the diplomatic push by Saudia Arabia and Egypt.

Syria has resisted Arab pressure to withdraw, saying in behind-the-scenes diplomacy in recent days that it wants to keep 3,000 troops and early-warning stations in Lebanon, according to an Arab diplomat in Cairo. The Syrian army already operates radar stations in Dahr el-Baidar, on mountain tops bordering Syria. Israeli warplanes have attacked the sites in the past.

But Egypt and Saudi Arabia feel those conditions are impossible, the diplomats said.

Abdullah told Assad the kingdom insists on the full withdrawal of all Syria's 15,000 troops and intelligence forces from Lebanon and wants it to start "soon," the Saudi official said, speaking on condition of anonymity.

Assad replied only that he would

## Prisoners hospitality

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2002 and sent to Dhaka Central Jail in March the same year. He was first admitted to DMCH and stayed for about a month. Later he managed to get admitted to Mitford General Hospital (MGH) and Banghabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University Hospital (BSMMUH) after allegedly bribing the chief physician of the central jail, Dr Mainuddin, and his associates.

"I fell sick soon after I was convicted. While being treated inside the congested jail hospital I persuaded the chief physician to let me receive treatment outside the jail. It cost me about Tk 9,000 to get the permission," said Anis.

Another convict, now under treatment at the National Institute of Traumatology, Orthopaedic and Rehabilitation (Nitor) for a fractured limb, has already spent five months outside the jail although some doctors at the hospital said he could easily be discharged as he has apparently recovered from the fracture.

There are 10 more prisoners undergoing treatment at Nitor and seven in Mitford General Hospital. The length of their stays range from at least one month to six months. Most of them have arranged extended stays through underhand dealings.

"We are often forced to prolong treatment under political pressure even if there is no genuine cause to do so," said a director of a city hospital seeking anonymity.

The majority of convicts under treatment prefer BSMMUH, as the self-governing hospital has a separate building to house them.

Jail authorities, prompted by an incident on February 8, 2005, have recently taken strict measures to limit convicts going outside of the jail for treatment. On that day, associates of notorious criminal Idul, infamous for gunning down two police personnel, made an abortive attempt to snatch him from jail police as he was being shifted from a Shyamoli clinic to Nitor.

The Daily Star recently contacted the Dhaka Central Jail authorities and requested for an official list of the prisoners now under treatment at various hospitals, but to no effect.

When the same request was made by Brigadier General Toufique Alam, IG Prison, he said, "The information is classified. I am not allowed to give you the list on security grounds."

## Long march

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with the sharing of river water.

Presided over by Atiqur Rahman Khan, the rally was addressed by Usuf Zai Salu, chairman of the International Farakka Committee (IFC), among others. Thousands of people from across the country gathered at the port chanting slogans, "save the country and save the rivers."

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

BDNews adds: A local doctor was killed when a Rangpur-bound picnic bus ran over him at about 10:30 Kachhikata on Sirajganj-Hatikumrul-Banpara highway yesterday.

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.

study the possibility of carrying out a partial withdrawal before an Arab summit scheduled for March 23 in Algeria, the official said.

The Syrian leader insisted he is doing everything he can to resolve the problem but that not everything is up to him, the official said.

Saudi officials replied that the situation was his problem and warned that if Damascus refuses to comply, it would lead to tensions in Saudi-Syrian ties, the official said.

In a further sign of their impatience, the Saudis rejected a Syrian request that the upcoming Arab summit officially ask Damascus to withdraw its forces, which would give any pullback an Arab endorsement, the Saudi official said.

Saudi Arabia is said to be angry with Damascus over the Feb. 14 assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, who also held Saudi citizenship and was close to the Saudi royal family.

Damage in relations with Saudi Arabia would deepen Syria's isolation after its traditional allies, Russia and France, joined the United States and United Nations in demanding a full pullout. Saudi Arabia, a close ally of Washington, often presents Syria's point of view to US officials.

Egypt and Saudi Arabia fear that unless Syria removes its troops quickly from Lebanon, where it has held control for decades, the United States and other Western countries will start taking concrete action to force it to do so.

The Syrian troops were originally deployed during Lebanon's 1975-90 civil war ostensibly as peacekeepers and Syria has held sway over Lebanese politics ever since.

Egypt and Saudi Arabia are trying to get Syria to carry out the 1989 Taif Accord, which called on it to gradually make a full pullout from Lebanon but to start it immediately and finish the withdrawal by April.

The Arab-brokered accord is named after the Saudi city of Taif, where it was signed, and Saudi officials played a key role in sealing it. It required Syria to redeploy troops to eastern Lebanon, near the Syrian border, and then negotiate a full withdrawal with the Lebanese government.

Syria never complied. But under growing pressure said last month it is willing to do so, promising to move troops closer to its border. But it hasn't yet acted.

Assad, in interviews with international media, has given varying estimates for the timing of a withdrawal, from less than two months to at least a year or not until Mideast peace is achieved.

Assad told Time magazine the troops would be out "maybe in the next few months. Not after that." In a separate interview published Monday in the Italian newspaper La Repubblica, Assad said withdrawal would require "serious guarantees. In one word: peace."

In Beirut, several hundred opposition supporters marched Thursday in the funeral of the 18th victim of the Feb. 14 bomb blast that killed Hariri and tore through his guards and bystanders. They said they were prepared to resume at any time the huge protests that brought the Lebanese government down.

## Train ride

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freight and 245 passenger trains, carrying about 40 million people a year.

Astonishingly, the Railways Department in its annual budget does not allocate any fund for repairs and maintenance of rail tracks.

A source said the government does not want to invest much in this sector, as the BR has been a losing enterprise for long. Every year it incurs a loss of over Tk 200 crore. In the last fiscal year, it earned Tk 415 crore while spending more than Tk 629 crore.

"If the government wants to run the sector properly, it must invest money for maintenance. Otherwise the situation will go out of hand," said a high-ranking Railway Department official wishing anonymity.

## Human savagery

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the locality from a hilly area four days ago apparently in search of food.

Meanwhile, a mother elephant died when it slipped into a canal from a hill with a three-month old baby at Kerutali in Teknaf upazila on Thursday morning.

Hearing the cry of the baby elephant, some seven or eight elephants came to its rescue and took it to the deep forest.

In the last three weeks, hunters killed three elephants in Ramu and nearby Naikhangchhari upazilas.

Killing of elephants is a regular feature in the hilly areas, but little action is taken against the culprits.

## Waterway

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service will begin. Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority (BIWTA) Director Syed Monwar Hossain admitted the service could not be launched due to incomplete procedures and contracts with operators - both government and private.

"Two private companies have been permitted to operate two launches on the route. But they're still to get prepared for operation," he said.

The BIWTC will also include a ship, he added.

When asked, he said the prices of the tickets are also yet to be fixed. "It'll be as per the government rule, which is Tk