

Annan 'to propose UN reform plan'

REUTERS, Washington

Secretary-General Kofi Annan will propose on Monday sweeping changes to the United Nations, including expansion of the Security Council and changes to a human rights panel, the Los Angeles Times has reported.

The plan, aimed in part at preventing new scandals at the much-criticized world body, will be presented to the General Assembly, the paper said on its Web site on Saturday, citing a draft copy of the reform plan it had obtained.

UN officials were not immediately available to comment.

The proposals are intended to maintain the United Nations as the main setting for world security decisions and to keep it dominant in international development issues, the paper said.

The reforms must be endorsed by the General Assembly and by world leaders attending a UN summit in September. They are seen in part as an attempt to make the beleaguered organisation more relevant, the paper said.

GAS PIPELINE FROM IRAN High price holds back Indian project

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

After United States' objection to Iran-India gas pipeline project apparently due to Tehran's nuclear programme, the ambitious export project faces further stalemate over price.

India's Petroleum Minister Mani Shankar Aiyar Thursday said if Iran does not offer natural gas supply at an affordable price, India might be forced to look elsewhere to meet its energy requirements.

Iran's proposed pipeline gas price from the southern region field in Pars is equivalent to that of liquefied natural gas (LNG) although India's domestic natural gas is available at about half the price. Power and fertiliser companies in India are not willing to pay more than \$3 per million British thermal unit (BTU) of gas. But Iran is asking for a price equivalent to the price of LNG, which comes to about \$4 per BTU.

Taking into account the transportation and transit charges to be paid to Pakistan for the long pipeline that will pass through its territory, the delivered price of the gas to India will come to over \$4.50 per BTU.

Pointing out that India and Pakistan offer one of the most attractive energy markets in the world with a combined demand of nearly 200 million standard cubic metres of gas a day, Aiyar said Iran should offer special price for such big consumers.

"We will not buy gas from Iran if we cannot sell it in India. Our affordable price may be lower than available elsewhere but Iran has to be sensitive to our concerns. In our country, the paying capacity of big customers like power and fertiliser plants has to be taken into account for fixing the price of gas," Aiyar said.

Besides the high price of gas, Iran is also not willing to enter into a 'supply-or-pay' contract with India which will make it obligatory for Iran to deliver the gas at the Indian border or pay for the assured quantity. Iran, on the other hand, wants India to go for 'take-or-pay' condition under which India will have to pay the price of even if it does not take the delivery of the gas.

Meanwhile, India's reservations about Bangladesh's insistence on bilateral concessions in the triangular Myanmar-Bangladesh-India pipeline project stems from the fact that New Delhi itself had given up a similar stand with regard to Pakistan on Iran-India pipeline, official sources said.

India had initially wanted Pakistan to grant it transit for Indian goods bound for Afghanistan through Pakistani territory as also further liberalisation of bilateral trade.

It, however, later changed its posture on this.

Having done that in the case of Iran-India pipeline, it is difficult for India to agree to include bilateral issues in the trilateral project on its eastern front, sources said.

Jatrabari flyover

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The cabinet committee at its meeting yesterday also decided to add Vat (value-added tax) to the toll. But, at the same time, the committee asked the project authorities -- Dhaka City Corporation (DCC) -- to bargain with the joint venture to lower the tariff.

The joint venture will pay a certain amount annually to the government.

According to a World Bank (WB) survey conducted in 2000, 66,000 motor vehicles pass through the Gulistan area every day. The joint venture proposed that if the traffic flow is less than 66 percent of that estimate, the annual payable to the government should be lowered.

Presiding over the committee meeting, Finance Minister M Saifur Rahman said there will be a number of alternative routes created in the city in the near future. It is hard to guess the exact impact of these new routes on the traffic flow in Gulistan. In case the traffic flow becomes less than 66 percent of the WB survey findings, the government will not consider reduction of the fee, but may extend the 24 years of the BOO period as a compensation.

Sources said the joint venture sought tax exemption on import of raw materials for construction of the flyover, but the cabinet committee rejected the proposal.

The DCC and the local govern-

Woman found dead in hotel

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Police recovered the body of a woman in a hotel at Motijheel in the city last night.

The dead was Sufia Begum, 22, wife of Azam Uddin of Baharchhara in Cox's Bazar.

Sufia and Azam checked in at hotel Jonaki International on Inner Circular Road in the early hours yesterday, said police quoting hotel staff.

The hoteliers said they thought the couple had gone out as their room was locked from outside. But as they did not return until evening, they informed police.

Police found the body on the floor with marks on injuries in the head. They suspect she was strangled.

Azam is absconding.

Afghan floods kill 88

Raging waters leave thousands homeless

AFP, Kabul

Severe floods across much of Afghanistan have killed at least 88 people and left thousands homeless as houses were swept away by the raging waters, officials said yesterday.

The floods triggered by heavy rain hit the south-central province of Uruzgan, Farah and Ghor provinces in the west and Jawzjan in the north on Friday.

At least 88 people, most of them children, have been confirmed dead but more are feared dead in remote districts which have been cut off by the floods, officials said.

The interior ministry said 85 died in the provincial capital of Farah city, 680km west of Kabul, and a woman and two children were killed in neighbouring Ghor province.

"At least 21 elders and 64 children were drowned due to floods in Farah city on Friday," ministry press officer Dad Mohammed Rasa told AFP.

In Uruzgan scores of houses were destroyed in the capital Tarin Kot, in Khas Uruzgan district and in Chori district, said ministry spokesman Lutfullah Mashal.

"Around 600 houses have been destroyed in the Deh Rawood district of Uruzgan province. They are in severe need of food and tents," Mashal said.

US-led forces stationed in Uruzgan to battle the Taliban used a helicopter to evacuate around 200 people stranded in an island in the middle of a river, said US military spokesman Major Steve Wollman.

"It is almost impossible to send aid overland. Hundreds of people have been airlifted to safer locations," Mashal said.

In Ghor province some 266 families have been displaced due to floods, officials said.

"Some 63 families have been displaced in Chaghcharan, 40 in Charcharana district, 100 families in Kanda district and 63 in Shafarak district of Ghor province," Rasa said.

In Jawzjan 100 families -- around 600 people -- have been displaced in Khawaja Du Koh district and over 1,000 hectares (2,470 acres) of farmland has been washed away, he added.

Afghanistan suffered its worst winter for a decade after seven years of drought. Current heavy rains coupled with the melting of thick snow are washing away houses in the war-torn country, which has little infrastructure to cope with rising waters. At least 580 people have died from disease, avalanches and road accidents during the bitter winter months and many more were feared dead in remote parts of the country.

Health officials say they expected floods following the bitter winter and have already stocked enough medicine for three months in the provinces.

"As the state of emergency was announced a couple of months ago, we expected floods, which is why we decided to send enough medicine to all provinces for cases of emergency," said health ministry advisor Dr. Abdullah Fahim.

Rice finds Bangladesh

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surrounded by failing states and problems, you know, whether you look at Nepal or Sri Lanka or Bangladesh and, of course, Pakistan. What is the sort of role you think India should be playing in the region?" Rice said there are several ways in which India, and then India and the United States together, can help in this region.

About Afghanistan, she said, "We now have an opportunity in Afghanistan to actually have a stable, democratic Afghanistan in which its neighbours will not be inclined to interfere in Afghanistan politics to try to stabilize their own interests."

Fresh row at ACC

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convinced that there may be any legal complication," Miah added.

Miah noted that if the transfer order is implemented, he will not own the decision -- because it was not a decision taken by the commission. "I cannot figure out how the director (Mridha) got the power to do it."

Sources said Miah and the chairman had been having disagreements over different issues since the formation of the ACC. Accordingly, the former Bac staff are now divided in two camps. Sources said this new conflict is just a follow-up of the existing feud.

Talking to The Daily Star, Lt Col Mridha claimed, "There is nothing wrong with the order. Since all the Bac officials have been temporarily attached to the ACC and all of them are performing as per their Bac designations -- the transfer order is valid."

He termed the transfer order a 'normal routine work' and noted, "The commission does not have to take a decision on such order at its meeting."

Dumped

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Liton of Linkan Travels took Tk 6 to 7 lakh from each of the 24 assuring them of jobs in Italy. The two took them to Mali on tourist visa a year ago and kept them in Bamako, capital of Mali, for a month, immigration officials at Zia International Airport (ZIA) quoted the victims as saying yesterday.

Later, Monir and Liton took them to Sahara desert in a vehicle and left them in the deep desert. On information, local police air-lifted them by a helicopter only to send them to jail where they stayed from seven to 11 months for illegally travelling to that country.

On expiry of the jail terms, International Organisation for Migration (IOM) took steps to repatriate them.

The officer-in-charge at the ZIA immigration said Asma Akhter, operations assistant of IOM, Dhaka brought the 24 Bangladeshis by a Biman flight from Dubai at about 9:30am yesterday.

He could not however give details about the travel agency or the agents who took them to Mali.

In the third week of last month, 11 among 26 Bangladeshis who with the help of a travel agency left the country on December 23 died of hunger and thirst in a boat on the Mediterranean en route to Spain from Morocco.

They along with 15 other Bangladeshis ran out of fuel and supplies and went without food and water for 10 days on the high sea as the boatman lost his way and headed for Algeria instead of Spain.

Each of them paid Tk 6 lakh to two brokers -- Reazul Islam Raju and Mostak Ahmed -- of Dohar Travel Agency housed at Basundhara in the city's Baridhara area for the trip.

Expatriates Welfare and Overseas Employment Minister Mohammad Qamrul Islam told The Daily Star yesterday evening that he had asked the additional inspector general of Special Branch of Police to launch a probe and unearth who had sent the 24 overseas. He said he had also asked for proper actions against the unscrupulous travel agents.

The minister said there is an organised gang of travel agents who send people whichever country they get visa for. "We are looking for such gang of travel agencies," he said.

Galib denied bail

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bail hearing date on March 20.

Appearing sick and depressed, Galib appealed to the magistrate for three days of rest. The Magistrate denied, however, ordering him to submit a petition through the jailer.

Galib was brought to Gaibandha from the Joint Interrogation Cell (JIC) in Dhaka on March 19, ending a ten-day police remand as granted by the Gaibandha Magistrate court on March 9.

Sirajul Islam Babu, Galib's lawyer, met briefly with him in the court hazard to discuss the progress of the case.

Galib was also visited at the court hazard by his son, Ahmed Abdullah Najib.

Shamsul Alam, the former president of Ahle Hadith Jubo Sangha, Rajshahi University said, "He (Galib) is the victim of a conspiracy from his opponents and also incorporated in false cases."

Palashbari Thana police did not submit any remand prayer in the case against Galib on Saturday.

Galib was shifted at 3:10pm from Gaibandha to Gopalganj, where he will now face a nine-day remand as earlier allowed by the Gopalganj police.

He is currently facing ten cases, three in Gopalganj, two in Gaibandha, two in Bogra, one in Sirajganj, and two in Naogaon districts. All the cases are related to the bomb blasts, dacoity and murder, said police.

UNB adds that Galib yesterday sought the court's protection from media harassment, which he alleged is dishonouring falsehoods against him.

"Save me from the harassment of the press. They are embarrassing me by publishing false reports and my photograph," Galib, Head of the Arabic Department of Rajshahi University, told the court.

The court issued no response to his allegation against the media.

Injury marks found on elephant carcass

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Rangamati

The elephant found dead at Rajapara jungle in the district's frontier Langadu upazila on Thursday was possibly killed by poachers.

"Infection in finger deep injury marks on the right leg and the right part of the abdomen suggest that the elephant might be wounded by bullets or poison mixed arrow," said a forest employee who visited the carcass yesterday.

No veterinary surgeon examined the carcass till yesterday.

Pablakhari range officer and forest department employees are guarding it so that the ivory and trunk cannot be stolen, he added.

Meanwhile, this correspondent failed to contact any responsible forest official for comments despite repeated attempts till yesterday evening.

New foreign

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Thursday after serving as Bangladesh high commissioner to India, described the Dhaka-Delhi relation as "very good". And "We want to strengthen that relation in a spirit of cooperation and understanding."

"Bangladesh believes in strong bilateral relations with all her neighbours and our relation with India is based on that conviction," he told journalists.

In reply to a question, the new foreign secretary said the problems between Bangladesh and India will have to be addressed in a spirit of mutual understanding by perceiving each other's concerns and positions.

On holding the stalled 13th Saarc summit, the foreign secretary said the current Saarc chair Pakistan continued consultations with the member states to find suitable dates -- and Dhaka is awaiting announcement of the new dates from the chair.

PM flies to Singapore

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relations following a tete-a-tete between the two leaders.

Trade and investment, shipping and maritime matters, consular and visa services, manpower export, human resource development, science and ICT, membership in the Asean Regional Forum (ARF) and security will figure high in the talks between the two leaders.

"The visit will provide an opportunity to draw the attention of Singapore businessmen and entrepreneurs to the excellent investment-friendly environment and opportunities in Bangladesh..."

This, in turn, will help narrow down the trade gap presently in favour of Singapore and also generate employment opportunities in Bangladesh," the foreign secretary said.

Hemayet noted that Singapore has expertise in ICT and cutting-edge technologies, while Bangladesh has low-cost trainable labour force. The trip is expected to provide a scope to look for meaningful "matchmaking of Singaporean technology and Bangladesh labour and production facilities to the advantage of both."

About 40,000 Bangladeshi workers are employed in various service sectors in Singapore and contributing to its economy, he said, adding that the prime minister will raise with Singaporean leaderships the matter of recruiting more workers from Bangladesh and extending more facilities to send remittances to Bangladesh.

The prime minister will lead a 35-member entourage to Singapore. The foreign minister, the principal secretary to the prime minister, the foreign secretary and the Bot executive chairman will accompany her.

Besides, a 16-member business delegation comprising representatives from private-sector business organisations and chamber bodies will accompany the prime minister.

During her tour, the prime minister will call on Singapore President S R Nathan. She will attend a dinner to be hosted by the Singaporean prime minister.

She will deliver a lecture on "Bangladesh Economic Priorities and Challenges" organised by the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS) at Suncate Convention Center.

She will attend a luncheon hosted by the business community of Singapore where she is scheduled to deliver a speech on "Business Prospects and Opportunities in Bangladesh".

Rookie consortium

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change mysteriously, it showed German company Steag AG as the owner of BN Consortium.

But the whole exercise has no legal basis as Steag does not have any agreement with Belhassa or other bidders under the BN Consortium showing its stakes, PDB sources said.

The power division of the energy ministry is pushing the deal even harder in the context of acute load shedding. But industry insiders question whether this consortium is at all capable of setting up a power plant.

In addition to accepting such gross violation of rules and regulations, the PDB is giving Orion-Belhassa the opportunity of a lower bid bond compared to other bids attached to power projects of similar size. The Meghnaghat 1 and Sirajganj 450 mw power projects sought \$30 million bid bond while it is only \$10 million for Orion-Belhassa.

The Private Sector Infrastructure Guideline's Clause 6.4.4 clearly provides that the composition of bidders cannot be changed after pre-qualification.

Similarly, the Request for Tender Proposals (RFP) for Sirajganj power plant, as hammered by the Power Cell clearly, states that the lead sponsor cannot change at any stage of a bid.

"If a bidder can charge the names of its company at its wish, why do we have a tender bidding at all?" asked a PDB source.

The government last year cancelled, reportedly due to its anti-Awami League stance, the bid for Sirajganj project even though it reached a final stage and arranged finances with the participation of the World Bank. The government later told the power division the project is a private one that should be implemented by the Power Cell instead of the PDB.

This rule does not however apply to Meghnaghat 2 project that is being implemented by the PDB.

"The consortium repeatedly violated government rules but mysteriously it is going ahead," said an industry insider.

Belhassa showed Nissho as the leader of the consortium in September 2003 but Nissho had merged with another company named Nichimen Holdings and turned into Sojitz earlier in April, according to documents of Sojitz Corporation.

Nissho's experience in setting up combined cycle power plants in different countries helped the consortium qualify in the bid in which four parties participated, sources mentioned.

In the next phase, Belhassa submitted the final bid proposal. This time, it showed Nissho Iwai as the project's Financial Adviser and BN Consortium as the lead sponsor.

Later, during a re-evaluation of the bid, Belhassa suddenly replaced Nissho with Steag AG as the lead sponsor violating tender rules.

Pakistan to upgrade

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and a source of strength and security for Pakistan," Musharraf said.

Neighbouring states, particularly nuclear-armed rival India, were given prior notification of the test "as per existing practice, as a confidence building measure," the statement said.

Foreign ministry spokesman Jalil Abbas Jilani said the test would not affect the ongoing peace dialogue with India. "It is a routine test. It won't affect dialogue process," he said.

Pakistan conducted nuclear tests in May 1998 after rival India conducted similar detonations. Both countries have active missile programmes.

Pakistan and India have a bitter history of confrontation, mainly over the Muslim-majority state of Kashmir which is divided between the two and claimed by both in full.

Two of the countries' three wars since gaining independence from Britain in 1947 have been over Kashmir.

But the South Asian rivals have been engaged in a peace dialogue since January last year.

CJ refused

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passport of the chief justice when it was submitted for a visa.

The chief justice had planned to go to Sydney via Bangkok to visit his relatives living in Australia.

The embassy official declined to issue the visa in short notice, as the procedure is to submit the visa application at least 10 days before the visit, sources said.

70 Chinese

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city in Shanxi province, Xinhua news agency quoted local work safety authorities as saying.

Forty-nine miners were trapped in the shaft when the explosion occurred and 22 others were also trapped at the nearby Kangliayao mine when the blast caused a wall to collapse, Xinhua and China News Services said.

Xinhua reported earlier that a total of 70 were trapped in the two pits.

Xishui Colliery is a legally-operated mine, with an annual output of 150,000 tons of coal.

China has the world's most dangerous mines. Official figures show more than 6,000 miners died in accidents last year but independent estimates say the real figure could be as high as 20,000.

On Friday 19 coal miners were confirmed dead after an explosion the day before at the Sulongji mine in Fengjie county of southwestern Chongqing municipality.

In an attempt to tackle the industry's appalling safety record, the State Development and Reform Commission said 11 ministries and institutes under the central government have established a coordination office to oversee safety assessments for mines across China.

The country's mines work well over capacity as coal prices have skyrocketed while crucial parts of the country are facing power shortages exacerbated by 20 years of robust economic growth.

'Dead woman'

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Shahid and Rashid Ahmed of Tekpara under Cox's Bazar district have been living as wife and husband, police said.

And accused in the case for the 'murder' of this woman, Manik Sheikh, 35, of Chaturia village of Sirpur upazila under Magura district has been in jail since 1997 when Jhenidah District and Sessions Judge sentenced him to life imprisonment.

Tipped-off, police arrested Josna when she came to her father's home at Boyra village of Shaalakupa upazila under Jhenidah district.

Police issued chargesheet against Manik Sheikh, son of Atar Ali of Shaalakupa after a case was filed accusing him of abducting and killing Josna, daughter of Nayeab Ali of neighbouring Boyra village on November 9, 1996.

Since then Manik has been in jail. Talking to BDNEWS, Atar Ali, father of Manik Sheikh blamed the investigation officer (IO) for the fate of his son and demanded punishment of the IO.

"Who will return the lost seven years of my son?" he said, breaking down in tears.

Encyclopaedia

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Speaking at the launching ceremony held at the Liberation War Museum, Writer Shahriar Kabir said the volume should have contained separate entries on the contribution of women freedom fighters and indigenous people, and role of foreign countries like United Kingdom and Russia in the independence war.

Muntasir accomplished a mammoth task at personal initiative and without any formal institutional support, he mentioned.

Former army chief major general (ret'd) Shafulullah MP suggested formation of a cell to check authenticity and update each entry.

In making an entry on a particular episode of the war, the persons concerned particularly those still alive should have been consulted, instead of relying on secondhand information, he added.

Muntasir said all the entries are based on authentic records and writings, and received from reliable sources.

"The volume was completed rather hurriedly due to shortage of funds for the project," he said. "Many people speak of the ideals and spirit of the Liberation War but hardly anybody comes up with financial help for a project as this," he said.

Muntasir said the volume is open to any corrections, factual or otherwise, that will be incorporated in its subsequent editions.

Writer Muhammad Jafar Iqbal also spoke about the occasion.

Publisher of the volume Farid Ahmed presented a set to the museum.

The editorial team of the encyclopaedia included ASM Shamsul Arefin, Harun Habib, Hashem Khan, Dr AM Amjad, Monjuma Selim, Audrit Rahman, Ahmed Mahfuzul Haq and Mohammed Selim.

Prof Kabir Chowdhury chaired the launching ceremony.

Four killed by thunder

UNB, Thakurgaon

Four people were killed and at least four others seriously injured in thunderstorms in Thakurgaon and Nilphamari in the last two days.

Belal, Aminul, Moksed Ali died by lightning during the storm that swept a number of villages in sadar and Pirganj upazila in Thakurgaon on Friday night.

Four others were injured and admitted to Thakurgaon General Hospital.

More than 100 houses were damaged by the storm that lasted about an hour from 2:00am. Standing wheat and maize crops were partially damaged.

Another report from Nilphamari said Dular, 30, of Gamber village in Kishoriganj upazila died in a storm in the early hours yesterday.

Opposition

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programme has been taken up to protest the government's failure to ensure security of people's lives and contain spiralling prices of the essentials."

Awami League (AL) and its allies in the left 11-party were gearing up for the programme yesterday. "We have directed our leaders and activists to make the programme a success," AL General Secretary Abdul Jalil yesterday told The Daily Star.

Meanwhile, the ruling four-party alliance yesterday observed countrywide demonstrations against what they said were subversive acts and conspiracy by the opposition to tarnish country's image.

BNP and its allies yesterday declared that they will hold rallies at six divisional headquarters on March 30.

On the other hand, the opposition will announce a fresh spell of agitation programmes after March 27 to step up its out-governor movement, said the AL general secretary.

Earlier on March 13, thousands of opposition activists formed human walls in the capital, cities, and the district headquarters.

The opposition parties on March 2 announced some identical agitation programmes and a dawn-to-dusk hartal for March 27 demanding ouster of the government.

Besides, the parties will organise a programme styled 'hunger processions' throughout the country on March 23.

Dravid

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The stylish Dravid, 54 not out overnight, dug in for over six hours in sapping humidity with the 19-year-old Karthik after fast bowler Mohammad Sami had rocked the Indian innings.

Vangipurappu Laxman retired hurt two runs later after he was struck on his helmet by a rising Sami delivery but he returned to score 24.

Dravid steadied the innings, however, playing his patent cover drives and showing some excellent footwork against the dangerous Kaneria.

Sami and Kaneria claimed three wickets with medium-paceer Abdul Razzaq returning the best figures of three for 80.

The third and final Test starts in Bangalore on Thursday.