

Time ticks away

FROM PAGE 1
evening and found only some packed cartons, not anyone dead or alive," Brigadier General Nizam Uddin, who is co-ordinating the massive rescue operations, told The Daily Star at 8:00 last night.

The rescue workers split the collapsed structure in three portions and were mainly cutting the slabs in small pieces, using vibrators and gas cutters and then removing them with cranes.

But, by yesterday afternoon they had succeeded in removing only three floors at the southern portion of the collapsed building. They were, however, still working hard to remove the top floor in the northern side.

"We'll not hurry the operation. We will cut slabs in small pieces and remove them to save any survivors there and to keep the bodies in good shape," Nizam said.

Around 400 trained rescuers from the Army, and Fire Service and Civil Defence were working round the clock on six-hour shifts. The Army yesterday took over the search for survivors, aided by around 100 day-labourers with shovels and baskets.

General Nizam expressed the hope that by today they will reach the bottom of the building through the

'inspection hole' after cutting through all the thick concrete slabs.

"The rescue work has slowed down for the last few days due to narrow space. By this time we have filled up marshy land around the collapsed building and we're well equipped. So, the pace of work should speed up," Nizam said.

"On the whole, we have removed 25 percent of the collapsed structure," Nizam said.

However, no-one could say for sure how many days it would take to entirely remove the debris.

Ambulances and coffins, meanwhile, wait only yards from the collapsed building.

Many distraught people continue to rush to the scene in search of their near and dear ones, crying out and frantically enquiring about their relatives.

So far, an information board at the site's army control room shows that 126 people are still missing since the collapse.

The Awami League, meanwhile, will observe a day of mourning across the country tomorrow to grieve for the 30 dead workers. Special prayers will be offered at mosques, temples, churches and pagodas.

Samad Azad still in danger

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The condition of veteran Awami League leader Abdus Samad Azad has slightly improved but he is still critically ill.

A doctor at the Birdem Hospital in the city, where the elderly leader has been undergoing treatment, said, "Abdus Samad Azad is not in a coma." He added an artificial breathing system is aiding him.

A series of tests carried out yesterday might decide his fate said an on-duty doctor at the Intensive Care Unit (ICU) of the hospital.

Samad Azad has been suffering from stomach cancer and diabetes, for which he has been undergoing treatment since February 21.

On Saturday, Samad Azad was moved to the ICU as his condition deteriorated.

"My father is not senseless or in a coma... he is in a deep sleep and doctors told us there are some signs of improvement," said Azizus Samad Don, son of the senior leader.

Abdus Samad Azad was the first Foreign Minister of Bangladesh and also served the previous AL government from 1996 to 2001 as a foreign minister.

He played a key role in the Liberation War.

Sweden Aslam gets second life term

COURT CORRESPONDENT

A Dhaka court Tuesday handed top criminal Sweden Aslam his second life imprisonment in a murder case.

Judge Mohammad Nazrul Islam of the Third Additional Metropolitan Sessions Judge's Court pronounced the verdict, for the murder of 22-year-old Bipul 12 years ago, in the presence of Aslam.

Aslam, now in jail, was in 2003 awarded another life-term for possession of illegal firearms and ammunition.

In the murder case, filed with the Tejoan Police Station, it was alleged that a group of miscreants led by Aslam and four others stabbed to death Mofazzal Hossain alias Bipul, son of Akhter Hossain at Tejturi Bazar in the city, on October 15, 1993.

The victim's father filed the murder case against Aslam and four others the same day.

The court also awarded a life-term to Ehsanul Haq alias Fox Rubel, son of MA Gafur of Alipur village in Noakhali district, in the same case. The court fined them each Tk 20,000, in default of which they have to suffer two years more in jail.

Fourteen other criminal cases filed against Aslam are still pending with different city courts, sources said.

Aslam was arrested from his DOHS home on May 20, 1997 after a case was filed with the Cantonment Police Station. Police seized a pistol, a shotgun, a revolver and six bullets from his possession.

Earlier, the prosecution and the defence completed their arguments and the court recorded statements of 12 prosecution witnesses.

The Detective Branch (DB) of police pressed charges against Aslam and Fox Rubel on September 23, 1995 and the court framed charges against the two on January 1, 1998.

Metropolitan Public Prosecutor Abdullah Mahmud Hassan appeared for the state while advocate Saidur Rahman Manik defended the accused.

We had approval

FROM PAGE 1
The manager's statement however goes against the statement of the factory authorities who claimed through advertisements in newspapers yesterday that they had followed all existing rules for building construction in the country.

"The building was constructed using standard materials," reads the advertisement. "Hundred percent standard has been ensured at every phase of the construction."

The advertisement also says the structural design of the building was made by an engineer who passed from the engineering university (Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology) and designed many multi-storied buildings of Dhaka.

Moreover, the construction was supervised by the same engineer, the factory authorities claimed.

"The building has been built on 60 feet plings with a strong foundation suitable for a 10-storey building after soil test on approval from the authorities concerned," the advertisement says.

But Rajuk Chairman Shahid Alam told The Daily Star on Monday that the building collapsed due to improper design and faulty construction.

On the quality of construction materials, the Rajuk chairman said the building was poorly built without doing tasks that are necessary for constructing a nine-storey building.

The columns are not strong enough for withstanding the load of a nine-storey building," he said, adding the building was constructed in a low-lying area without proper plings.

However, advocate Mahabubur Rahman MP, father-in-law of the factory and building owner Shahyaz Sayeed Hossain, brushed aside the Rajuk chairman's statement.

"They are making such assumptions without reviewing the design of the building," Mahabubur, who is a BNP leader and the chairman of the parliamentary standing committee on land ministry, told The Daily Star over phone Monday night.

Officer-in-Charge of Savar Police Station mentioned in a case filed after the disaster that the building have collapsed due to faulty construction.

Water board to carry

FROM PAGE 1
claiming it should get the contract as the 'lowest bidder' and the other opposing it, saying there is a cheaper offer.

Ebara, backed by a powerful minister's son, is the second lowest bidder.

The High Court disposed of both the petitions about three months ago, saying since the project cost is more than Tk 100 crore, the Cabinet Purchase Committee's decision on it is final.

According to a separate proposal from the Rural Development Academy (RDA) of the Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development (LGRD), the project can be implemented at an expenditure of Tk 80 crore.

LGRD Minister Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan strongly recommended this proposal noting that the RDA successfully implemented 70 projects for supply of water at low cost using its own technology. But the WDB brushed it aside.

Moreover, during the evaluation of the bid for this project, the WDB had cancelled a bid by a German company -- KSB-- that offered Tk 60 crore, Tk 72 crore less than Ebara's offer.

The German company lacked one document but was not given a chance to rectify the shortcoming although Ebara and another Japanese company Kanematsu -- were allowed to clarify over a dozen questions, sources said.

Industry insiders also say installation of three pumps under this project should not take more than Tk 50 - 60 crore.

The project is being implemented mainly by using a

Japanese Debt Relief Grant Aid of \$17.99 million.

The WDB had floated the tender for it in 2003 and selected Ebara. But conflict erupted soon when very influential ruling BNP lobbies wanted the WDB to award the contract to Kanematsu that had offered Tk 180 crore. The water resources ministry backed this move.

The ministry had been unsuccessfully pushing a Tk202-crore unsolicited deal with Kanematsu from 2001 through a tender evaluation committee that objected to awarding the contract to Ebara, saying there had been irregularities in the tender process and the WDB did not ensure wider participation. It however did not refer to the KSB bid.

The ministry on April 25 last year decided on its own to re-tender the scheme. But the move failed as a High Court order in June said there was no need to re-tender. Further legal tangles slowed down this project, which the ministry marked as 'very urgent'.

The installation of the new pumps will increase the irrigation coverage to 142,000 hectares from 100,000 hectares now.

The GK Project was implemented in the sixties by installing three pumps to increase crop production in the southwestern region. During 1981-93, the project was rehabilitated in two phases under Asian Development Bank loan but the original pumps were not replaced.

2 lynched at Khulna

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, Khulna

Two people were lynched by angry mob at Matamdanga in Khulna city early yesterday.

The victims were identified as Shahidul Islam (38) and Kabir Sarder (34) of the same village.

According to police and eyewitnesses, the incident took place at 4:30 am as the two were pouring poisonous insecticide into a shrimp enclosure owned by one Mofizul Islam. Their motive was to kill shrimps, police said. The angry mob also gouged out their eyes.

Police quoted local people as saying that Shahidul and Kabir also often used to loot shrimps at gun-point from different enclosures.

The dead bodies were sent to the Khulna Medical College and Hospital morgue.

Stakeholder

FROM PAGE 16
its regulatory order into a law.

After being tabled as a bill in the Jatiya Sangsad in August last year, the amendment proposal was sent to the parliamentary body for scrutiny, sources said.

The committee was given a one-month time for the task. Instead, eight months have elapsed, with the committee taking two time extensions, but the job is yet not done.

Talking to The Daily Star, the chairman of the standing committee, Mushfiqur Rahman said they are still scrutinising the bill and could not specify the time when the task would be completed.

Sources at finance ministry, central bank and private commercial banks said the directors of the banks got united for the cause and lobbied with government high-ups to stop the BB move for board restructuring.

Private bank directors loyal to both BNP and Awami League together assigned an influential pro-BNP bank director to lobby the Prime Minister's Office against the legal amendment, the sources said. The government opted for a go-slow strategy on the issue, they added, and it is highly unlikely that it will take a decision in this regard before the next general elections.

The BB in 2003 took some regulatory steps to strengthen corporate structure at private banks. Amending the bank company act, the BB restricted the tenure of a bank director to six years. The amendment also empowered the central bank to instate two directors in the board of every private bank from among its depositors.

After that, the BB issued a regulatory order directing all private commercial banks to downsize their boards to 13 members, limit board membership for a family to one, instate two depositors from among the depositors and comply with the ceiling of six-year tenure of directors.

After the directors had been issued in 2003, 20 banks complied with it. Then some bank directors and leaders of Bangladesh Association of Banks filed a writ petition with the High Court against the BB regulatory order and the court declared it illegal.

The central bank then appealed to the Appellate Division against the court order, which is still under trial.

Due to the legal knot, 11 banks -- Social Investment Bank, Al-Arafah Islami Bank, United Commercial Bank, The City Bank, Pubali Bank, Uttara Bank, IFIC Bank, Eastern Bank, Rupali Bank, BASIC Bank and National Credit and Commerce Bank Ltd -- did not comply with one to three of the regulations.

Due to the legal strife and absence of green signal from the government, the BB could not enforce its order to instate depositors' representatives in the bank boards, sources said. They also fear that the central bank may lose the legal battle, unless the amendment to the bank company act is made.

A National Credit and Commerce Bank director said they have invested a lot in setting up the bank and now if they are removed from the board it will be a violation of their fundamental rights.

A director of Pubali Bank said if the six-year ceiling for the tenure of a bank director is enforced, the director may transfer his shares to family members, resulting in inefficient directors joining the board.

ABB official said the business and functions of financial institutions like commercial banks are not similar to other companies and business organisations. He said, as the deposits of the masses constitute most of the bank's capital, the depositors' interests should be safeguarded.

Regulators in all developing and developed countries take restructuring measures, downsize boards and appoint directors from among the depositors to protect their interests, he said.

Two banking sector reform committees, both headed by Prof Wahiduddin Mahmud, found a range of irregularities in loan disbursement, insider lending and loans drawn in fake names from the commercial banks and in their reports also recommended restructuring the boards.

According to BB statistics, the central bank issued show-cause notices on 171 bank directors for taking Tk 728 crore loans illegally from their own banks in 1995 to 2003. Among them, 73 directors adjusted or rescheduled their loans and some 54 were either removed by the BB or resigned.

Apart from the show-cause notices and removal of directors, the BB took some other measures to reduce interference of directors in their banks' operations and to stop insider lending. And the measures succeeded in reducing insider lending from Tk 1,349 crore in 1998 to Tk 343 crore in June 2004.

In spite of the central bank's measures, sources said, banks are still far from adopting international financial standards, as is reflected in the recent Premier Bank scam.

'Asian flu' virus

FROM PAGE 16
people in the late 1950s.

"There's a slim but a real risk that this could spark a pandemic," said Maria Cheng, a spokeswoman for the UN's health agency, explaining that many people around the world would have no protection if the virus were ever released from the high-security labs.

The virus, known as H2N2, killed between one and four million people worldwide during the Asian influenza pandemic of 1957-58 before disappearing in 1968.

"As far as pandemics go, it (the event in 1957-58) was relatively mild. But if this were to recur it would have significant consequences for the public health system," Cheng told the news agency yesterday.

Security experts have also feared that a resurgence of ancient or stored viruses such as smallpox or past flu strains could be used by bioterrorists.

A US-based institution, the College of American Pathologists (CAP), distributed the flu samples to 3,747 laboratories by the private Meridian Bioscience Inc. of Cincinnati, Ohio.

The samples were to be tested as part of "routine quality-control certification."

The incident was detected by a Canadian laboratory only last month, though.

The WHO warned in a statement on Tuesday that people born after 1968 would probably have no or only limited immunity to the strain, which is not contained in current influenza vaccines.

"As a precautionary measure, WHO is recommending that all samples of the proficiency testing panel from CAP and other proficiency testing providers containing H2N2

NBR against

FROM PAGE 16
repeatedly for making untaxed money legal. It also increases the flow of black money in the society," the NBR chief told newsmen after a seminar on "Budget Proposal for 2005-06" at the NBR conference hall in the city.

The tax holiday given to industries also has been misused a lot, he noted, adding, an alternative facility will be offered to check this trend.

Tax Commissioners' Forum organised the seminar, presided by the NBR chairman, with NBR Member AS Zahir Mohammad as the chief discussant.

Tax commissioners will submit a set of proposals about the alternative package of tax holiday and the Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industry, the country's apex trade body, will come up with another set of proposals. The alternative package will be finalised after reviewing both the sets, the seminar was told.

Imposition of source income tax on leasing and other financial institutions will also be considered, the NBR chairman said, as the companies are earning a lot by financing commercially profitable projects. Presently, 10 percent of the income on interest in commercial banks is taxable.

Chowdhury said, like the Vat (value-added tax) officials, commissioners may be vested with magistracy power to enable them to take legal actions against tax defaulters.

Tax commissioners at the seminar pointed out that most of the educational institutions are running commercially and earning a lot, but all of them claim to be non-profitable. Tax officials are facing much problem in bringing such commercial and profit-making educational institutions under the tax net, for which, they said, legal changes are must.

To streamline revenue generation, Tax Commissioner Mostak Hossain on behalf of his colleagues also tabled a set of proposals including formation of a tax police unit and deployment of private security personnel in realising unpaid taxes. But these were not accepted.

Pahela Baishakh today

FROM PAGE 1
Batamul will be the centre of Pahela Baishakh celebrations in the capital and the police will not allow any makeshift stalls or holding fair in the area, he said.

The home ministry, expecting that there would be larger crowds of revellers this year, on Monday ordered to beef up security in all celebration points.

The Rab men will intensify patrol in the entire Ramna, Children's Park, Shilpakala Academy, High Court, Suhrawardi Uddyan, Shahbagh, Dhaka University and Kairali areas.

Sources said the law-enforcers will be ready with dog squads, explosive detecting units, metal detectors and sophisticated telecommunication system.

Metal detectors would be installed at all entrances to the Ramna Park. Besides, the law-enforcers will install video cameras at different points to take footages of the celebration.

DMP, meanwhile, suggested making certain roads off-limits to vehicles on the day such as the road from Shahbagh to Matsya Court, Suhrawardi Uddyan, Shahbagh, Dhaka University and Kairali areas.

The police also advised the revellers not to carry any bag, basket, briefcase, packets or gift boxes during the celebration. They will set up check posts at different points.

The government has directed the police to arrest liquor traders and take legal action against them. The Department of Narcotics Control has formed five teams to

and any derivatives be destroyed immediately," the agency said.

The US government on April 8 asked the College to instruct labs which had received the samples to destroy them.

A second message sent on April 12 further requested that destruction of the H2N2 virus be confirmed and that any case of respiratory disease among laboratory workers be investigated and notified to national authorities," it added.

Cheng said 90 percent of the laboratories were in North America. Another 61 laboratories were located in 16 countries in Asia, Europe, the Middle East and South America.

"If a laboratory accident were to occur, a person could become infected. If that happened, that person would likely fall ill and he or she could infect somebody else. And that could mark the beginning of a global outbreak," the WHO's top flu expert, Klaus Stohr, told The Washington Post.

"We are talking about a fully transmissible human influenza virus to which the majority of the population has no immunity. We are concerned."

The WHO said normally only circulating influenza A virus strains, that people had been exposed to in recent years, were sent out in proficiency testing kits.

US authorities and the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in Atlanta were investigating the incident at CAP, Cheng said.

The problem was first detected on March 25 by Canada's National Microbiology Laboratory, the WHO's said.

So far, there have been no reports of infection among laboratory workers associated with the distribution of the H2N2 samples, the organization said.

"While a few H2N2 laboratory acquired infections have been documented in the past," the WHO said, "the likelihood of laboratory-acquired influenza infection is considered low when proper biosafety precautions are followed. The risk for the general population is also considered low."

BSF

FROM PAGE 1
discussions in phases," he added.

The BSF DG termed the first day's meeting "very fruitful".

The BSF agreed to take steps to prevent phensidil smuggling into Bangladesh and to remain alert so that no innocent people are killed on the border areas, the DG of BDR said, adding that both sides are expected to exchange lists of criminals on the last day of the meeting.

Among the issues raised by BDR on the first day of the meeting were: killing and injuring of Bangladeshi nationals by the BSF and Indian citizens, smuggling of arms,

phensidil and other items, obstruction to development works in border areas, construction of roads and bridges, barbed wire fencing within 150 yards of the international boundary, harbouring of Bangladeshi insurgents and criminals in India and other security related issues, push-in of Bangla speaking Indian nationals into Bangladesh, trans-border crimes including kidnapping, cattle lifting, non-response to requests for a flag meeting, non-receipt of protests, baseless blaming of harboring Indian insurgents in Bangladesh territory, cutting of Bangladesh's embankment by Indian nationals, BSF's misinterpretation of facts to media and propagation by the Indian media.

BSF also raised similar issues against the BDR.

BSF proposed three confidence-building measures frequent meetings at different levels between BDR and BSF, joint check posts in the riverine areas and exchange in the fields of sports, culture and training.

Home and foreign ministry officials from both countries assisted the DGs during the meeting.

Fresh sedition charges

FROM PAGE 16
However, they exempted six others who had accompanied him in storming Boalia Police Station last November.

The exempted are Mohsin, a former convenor of Nachol upazila Jatiyatadabi Chhahra Dal, Mujib, a relative of a BNP leader, Ismail Hossain and Zakaria, Anwarul Islam and Sharif.

Rajshahi police delayed filing the case several times in the absence of a home ministry go-ahead.

Following directives from high-ups prompted by reports in The Daily Star, DB inspector Ranabeer Chakma filed the case with the chief metropolitan magistrate court under sections 123 (a) and 124 (a) of the Bangladesh Penal Code (BPC) for their alleged involvement in anti-state activities.

"There will be no need to file a charge sheet over the case as Sedition charges are treated as a charge sheet," said investigating officer Ranabeer Chakma.

He added, "Anwar and Sharif were the driver and helper of the microbus, which they hired. The others came with Kawsar in exchange for money, but did not support his ideology," Chakma said, explaining their exemption from the case.

Police alleged in the case that the twenty-year-old Kawsar founded Al Hiqma with the revolutionary goal of creating anarchy throughout the country.

"The right use of arms is the lone way to check injustice," was the motto under which Kawsar wrote statements against the government, the state and many sectors, including the police and newspapers, said the case.

Kawsar also threatened attacks

on the capital if the government 'misuses its power against Al Hiqma operatives'. "Beware," his statement said, "We have the capability of attacking the capital and facing armed forces like the police."

A sedition case against Kawsar and 12 of his accomplices was still under trial.

Kawsar and his accomplices were held after storming a police station when they were barred from holding a press conference at a local community center on November 6.

The Joint Interrogation cell interrogated Kawsar thrice and provided police with many clues about his patrons and sponsors and even named some of them, said the case.

His local patrons, Kawsar says, include several lawyers, doctors and businessmen of the Rajshahi and Chapainawabganj areas.

Kawsar began militant activities in late 2001, pasting posters at the Rajshahi University campus calling upon people to join his group to free the country from corruption and injustices "through a good use of arms".

One Shafiq took him to Dhaka in a night coach, where they met one Ayan Uddin near Shahbag, who advised him to start Al Hiqma, it was said in the case.

He later named Azhar Ali and Rashidul Alam as the group's vice-presidents, Abdul Hannan as general secretary, Rahmanat Ali as cashier, Nizam Akhtar and Shameem Uddin as assistant general secretaries and Rabiul Islam as his administrative officer.

Foundation failure

FROM PAGE 1
building, with a total floor space of about 81,000 square feet, sent story after story falling on top of one another tilting towards the canal.

Jahangir Alam, a structural engineer, said this collapse pattern strongly indicates the "falling force" was greatly inclining towards the canal on the eastern end of the building.

Sifting through the massive debris, where hundreds of innocent garment workers are still believed to be trapped, experts said it is also possible the lower story columns failed in the "joints and slabs". They pointed at some 'intact columns,' which were being moved by cranes yesterday, and said the intact columns clearly suggest they were detached from the joints and slabs.

"While collapsing, the building slid towards the northeastern side and the columns dislocated from the joints and fell sideways," said architect Iqbal Ahmed.

Experts added that extra measures must be taken to prevent a collapse before buildings are constructed on a canal or low-lying

area. And when it comes to a building as high as nine stories, architects and engineers are faced with a task of meticulous calculations.

In the case of the Palashbari tragedy, where several hundred people are feared crushed to death, it is probably "a case of utter negligence" on the part of the proprietor, the engineers and architects, experts said.

Md Aqbul Bari, the Deputy Commissioner of Dhaka, told The Daily Star they had conducted an investigation into whether the public canal was encroached upon or not.

"The Assistant Commissioner has just submitted in writing that the canal was not encroached upon by Spectrum Sweaters Ltd. when it built the structure that collapsed," Bari said.

A physical inspection on the eastern side of the building strongly suggests that the building was on the canal, however, while on the far eastern side, another building under construction has visibly encroached the canal.