

Initial govt nod

FROM PAGE 1 take initiatives to buy four aircraft -- two long-haul planes for international routes and as many small ones for regional routes to meet the immediate needs.

He, however, told journalists, "This is not our final commitment."

After a meeting with the state minister for civil aviation and officials of Biman and Civil Aviation Authority of Bangladesh yesterday at the Secretariat, Saifur admitted to the waiting reporters that new planes are required for passenger safety and improving services of the national flag carrier.

"We were saved in Sylhet because of Hazrat Shahjalal's blessings and again in Chittagong perhaps because of Hazrat Shah Amanat's blessings, but how long will we be able to survive on the blessings of the pirs and fakirs (devishes)?" he asked.

State Minister for Civil Aviation and Tourism Mir Md Nasiruddin said, "I cannot sleep peacefully at night because of the 25-year-old planes. I am always anxious about whether or not Biman aircraft would land safely with the passengers. That is why we have sat with the finance minister to get rid of the anxiety."

Mir Nasir later told the reporters that they have been offered Airbus for \$90 million each and Boeing 777 for \$129 million apiece.

"Airbus and Boeing are the two companies in the world that supply aircraft. The cost will determine which company we will buy the planes from. However, steps will have to be taken first to make Biman profitable," Saifur said.

"Though Biman has made some progress over the last one or two years, it performance has never been quite satisfactory. There have

been no returns on the money spent in the past on purchase of aircraft," the finance minister observed.

Continued Saifur: "If the management is not made efficient and the organisational structure effective before the new aircraft are bought, it is possible that there will be no returns on investment this time too."

The minister asked the officials to seek out a strategic partner for Biman as is done all over the world and told them that Thai Airways and Singapore Airlines have grown this way.

He said after the recent crash-landing of a Biman flight in Chittagong, the authorities are struggling to keep the international flight schedule. "That is why the civil aviation ministry rushed to me with the proposal of buying aircraft, but there is no allocation in the budget for aircraft purchase."

The ministry officials told him that they would buy the planes either on credit or through other arrangements, but for that the government's guarantee is required.

Saifur explained that the government could give a guarantee of \$400 million at the maximum.

"(But) if the entire limit is exhausted for purchasing planes, how would the government provide guarantee for other purposes?" he queried.

Graft grips

FROM PAGE 1 become dilapidated by now."

The minister was optimistic that Bangladesh will become a mid-income level country after achieving the Millennium Development Goal by 2015 if the current trend of development continued.

Tax ombudsman bill

FROM PAGE 1 was appointed by this month. The government will consider appointing ombudsman for other sectors if the tax ombudsman functions properly, he added.

After the passage of the bill, the president will appoint the tax ombudsman for a four-year term. He or she will head a separate office with necessary staff. The ombudsman can deal with NBR related taxes including VAT, import duty and income tax.

The tax ombudsman will be independent in discharging his duties and he can only be removed the way a Supreme Court judge is removed.

The bill proposed for providing the ombudsman with judicial power to investigate any allegation filed by a taxpayer. The ombudsman himself can probe any complaint or authorise any official at his office to do it.

According to the proposed bill, the authorised official will have access to any official documents necessary for investigation.

The ombudsman can also issue warrant asking anybody to appear at his office.

The office of the ombudsman will be a recommending body. The government is obliged to implement its recommendations. The government will have to explain the causes if it fails to implement the recommendation, the bill proposed.

The ombudsman will receive complaints from the taxpayers and hear both the taxpayers and tax officials to resolve the disputes. If necessary, he or she can take help from an advisory committee to dispose of a complaint, proposed the bill.

The ombudsman can form an investigation team and direct the team to raid the house of the taxpayers or tax officials concerned when and if necessary.

If a tax official is found guilty, the ombudsman will recommend necessary action against him. If the NBR disagrees with the ombudsman's recommendations, it can

explain to the ombudsman the reasons of disagreement.

If the ombudsman continues to differ from the NBR on any particular issue, the ombudsman will seek the finance minister or the president's guidance.

If a taxpayer is found guilty of making false allegation against tax officials, the ombudsman can suggest punitive actions against him.

The tax ombudsman will regularly submit to the president an annual report within three months of completion of a calendar year.

Before filing any complaint against the tax officers with the ombudsman, a taxpayer will have to sign a declaration. If an issue is already dealt with by court or pending in court, the ombudsman's office will not deal with it.

The bill proposed the tax ombudsman has to be a person less than 67 years old. A retired judge or government official can be chosen for this post. The ombudsman will have experience in and knowledge of revenue and tax issues.

According to the NBR, only 17 lakh people in Bangladesh, with a population of 14 crore, have tax identification numbers (TIN) and less than five lakh actually pay tax. The taxpayers often complain of bribery and harassment.

VESSELS' WAIVER Shipping Minister Akbar Hossain yesterday placed in parliament a bill titled 'Bangladesh Flag Vessels (Protection) Ordinance, 1982' proposing another two-year extension of general waiver of taxes on the Bangladesh vessels for smooth handling of cargoes.

The two-year general waiver is due to expire on July 11 next.

The bill is likely to be passed on Thursday as the minister has asked the parliamentary standing committee on the shipping ministry to submit a report today after scrutinising the bill. The parliamentary body last night approved the bill.

lish direct contact with the buyers. Ruhul Amin, president, and Nasir A Choudhury, vice-president, of the BGCCI also spoke at the briefing.

Syed Feroze Ahmed, director of Siemens Bangladesh Ltd, Shah Syed Kamal, managing director of Anupam Infotek Ltd, Waqar A Choudhury, director of Nascom Pvt Ltd, Giasuddin Ahmed, chairman of Thai Poly Shawn (Bd) Ltd and Arif Chowdhury, general manager of Pan Aviation Ltd, among others, were the members of Bangladesh business delegation to Germany.

The BGCCI president said the purpose of the visit was to establish direct contact with German businesses and improve the image of Bangladesh in Germany, as it is the second largest trading partner of Bangladesh after the US.

Congestion on Dhaka-Chittagong highway as well as at the Chittagong port and poor infrastructure, particularly in the telecommunications sector, are hindering business between the two countries, he added.

The BGCCI president informed journalists that Bangladesh is organising "Bangladesh Business Day" on September 28 in the middle of the Asia Pacific Week 2005 scheduled from September 21 to October 2 at Berlin mayor's office.

Nasir Choudhury said the business delegation faced criticism in Germany because Bangladeshi businessmen do not visit there frequently.

Germany imported goods worth around 1 billion euro from Bangladesh in the 2003-04 financial year.

BNP cadres

FROM PAGE 16 the Natore Sadar Police Station accusing BNP cadres Maruf, Sohail and five unnamed.

The victim had an affair with BNP activist Mithu, locals said.

The BNP cadres (Mithu's friends) wearing 'burka' (veil) went to the school gate in a microbus on that day and called her out saying that Mithu was waiting for her.

When she came out at noon, they dragged her onto the microbus and sped away.

After taking her to an unknown place, Maruf proposed to marry her that she rejected.

At night they made her drink and at one stage, they all raped her one after another.

As she fainted, they dropped her in a ditch beside a road near Natore City College at dead of night.

The victim's family members recovered her from there the following day and provided her treatment at home.

As the victim's father was preparing to file a case, local Ward Commissioner Sajjad Hossain Sohad, who is affiliated with local BNP's youth front Jatayatadabi Jubo Dal, threatened him with dire consequences if any case is filed for the incident.

He offered the family Tk 20,000 for not filing a case.

He is also learnt to have told his friends that he collected about Tk 90,000 from the rapists to cover the incident.

The family denied the offer but did not file any case for fear of harassment.

Local journalists came to know the matter and informed the police who after investigation recorded the case.

Mithu and the alleged rapists were absconding till filing of this report.

The incident has created anxiety among local people.

AL's reform

FROM PAGE 16 participate in the next parliamentary election.

"Awami League will not be able to come to power if Jatiya Party goes to another side. That is why it (AL) now wants to save its prestige by boycotting the election on the plea of caretaker government reform," he noted.

Addressing a conference of Jatiya Jubo Sanghati, youth front of JP, at a city hotel, Ershad also criticised AL for rejecting the budget without joining parliament.

The JP chairman said any of the two major political parties [AL and BNP] can win the next election with the support of Jatiya Party.

"In the last election, the four-party alliance secured 47 percent votes and Awami League 40 percent. And Jatiya Party obtained eight percent," he explained and claimed that his party has gained more public support in the last few years.

"This is the last election for Jatiya Party to go to power," Ershad said. "We must share the power and go to power," he added.

About his estranged wife Bidisha, the former president said, "She was a curse on the Jatiya Party. Now we are free. Every member of the party is now happy."

"If you find your wife takes a passport showing another man as her husband, how do you tolerate it?" said the JP chairman.

He also said, "If I file a defamation suit against the woman [Bidisha] for filing a false GD (general diary) against me, she will definitely be arrested."

Ershad also blasted newspapers for making propaganda against him on the issue of Bidisha although he has shown the reasons for the divorce.

About the Rapid Action Battalion (Rab), the JP chairman said he has no question about its activities as a sense of security has been prevailing in the country. But he commented that Rab is not a permanent solution to tackle crime.

Ershad urged the government to look into the price hike of essentials.

JP president members Kazi Zafar Ahmed, ABM Ruhul Amin Hawlader, Abu Sufian, Golam Kibria Tipu, Mostafa Jamal Haider, Syed Abu Hossain Babla, Khandokar Mahtab Uddin and Jubo Sanghati Convenor Humayun Kabir also spoke in the conference.

The representatives of Jubo Sanghati from different districts joined the meeting.

MPs demand

FROM PAGE 16 supplementary question of BNP lawmaker Moshir Rahman.

Amid huge table-thumping from both the benches of the House, including even some ministers, Moshir Rahman said, "GrameenPhone has been plundering crores of taka. It charges Tk 7 per minute call which is the highest in the world."

In reply, Aminul Haq said the parliamentary standing committee on the ministry summoned both the B T R C [B a n g l a d e s h Telecommunications Regulatory Commission] and the private cell phone operators in a meeting to discuss the matter. "Both BTRC and the private operators have assured us that the call charges will be reduced," he said.

Jatiya Party (Ershad) lawmaker Tajul Islam Chowdhury asked the minister to take steps to cancel the incoming call charges imposed by different private cell phone operators.

Replying to another question, the telecommunications minister said contracts of interconnectivity between the state-run mobile phone company Teletalk and the private operators will be signed very soon.

On reduction of the charges of the Teletalk, he said the charges will be adjusted from time to time.

3rd-party to vet Niko

FROM PAGE 1 fresh relief well to tame the fire in the gas field in Sunamganj district.

Other stakeholders, especially the locals, who have to bear the brunt of the blaze--twice within six months--also were skeptical about the fresh drilling before checking its viability.

Advisor to the energy ministry Mahmudur Rahman said an international expert having vast experience in drilling relief wells and controlling blowout accidents will be appointed for the vetting.

"I have already asked Petrobranga and Bapex to seek an international expert's opinion about the work plan and design submitted by Niko Resources to drill a fresh relief well," he told reporters.

The latest blowout at Tengratila gas field occurred on June 24 during the drilling for a second well near the original production well that had blown out in January.

He said the government seeks the third party vetting since it wants to remove all sorts of uncertainty and skepticism over the fresh bid for drilling a third well in order to avert any further accident.

Mahmudur Rahman held a meeting with officials of the Petrobranga and Bapex to discuss the work plan and design the

Canadian company submitted last Thursday to the ministry for approval to start the fresh bailout drilling in the gas field.

The advisor said both the arrangements for new drilling and third party vetting would simultaneously run so that the preparation for controlling the flames could not be delayed or hampered.

Tata accepts

FROM PAGE 1 Bangladesh Railway. So no problem will arise in handing over the land to Tata," a land ministry official said.

The Tata negotiation team arrived in Bangladesh for the third round of talks on July 2 and had a series of talks with government officials of different levels.

Earlier on May 9, the government and the Tata Group agreed to kick off formal negotiations on May 25 and wind it up by August 31 to clear the way for signing the investment contract before November 30.

Tata on April 20 formally submitted a \$2.5 billion investment proposal for setting up a 1,000 MW power station, a steel mill with an annual production capacity of 420,000 tonnes and a one million-tonne capacity fertiliser plant.

Niko busy with gas

FROM PAGE 1 spoke in favour of gas exploration, even after the twin explosions at Tengratila. "We are not afraid. We know such fire can happen in any gas field," said Mizanur Rahman a local businessman. The area will not develop without gas exploration, he said.

A large number of people including women and children were coming every day from even far-flung areas to watch the inferno.

AGITATION OVER COMPENSATION Around 250 villagers under the banner of Tengratila Dabi Aday Sangram Parishad (Tengratila association to realise compensation) yesterday besieged the Doara Bazar UNO office, demanding resumption of application form distribution for compensation for the gas blowout damage.

The government on Sunday stopped distribution of the forms and on Monday handed out the compensation money for the damages caused by the first blowout in January.

But the locals alleged many genuine victims of the fire were excluded while many fake ones included in the list of compensation recipients. The villagers demanded compensation for the deprived ones and demonstrated on the UNO office complex and formed a human chain to drive their demands home.

In a press conference yesterday afternoon at Tengratila, the Songram Parishad leaders alleged irregularities in distribution of compensation money and demanded removal of the UNO and dismissal of the committee that had drawn up the list.

UNO Mohiuzzaman said the deputy commissioner of Sunamganj would come on Wednesday and re-assess the damages to the locals, adding the form distribution would not resume before that.

He said all the compensation money had been distributed on Monday, except that for 15 to 20, who did not turn up.

DEMONSTRATIONS AGAINST NIKO

At least three organisations including the main opposition Awami League staged demonstrations in Sylhet yesterday.

The Sylhet district and city units of Awami League (AL) jointly organised a one-hour human chain from 5:15pm at Court Point in the city, protesting at the irresponsible operation of Niko and demanding proper compensation to the victims of the January 7 blowout.

A brief rally followed the human chain, addressed by Sylhet City Corporation Mayor and City AL President Badar Uddin Ahmed Kamran, Sylhet District AL President ANM Shafique and General Secretary Iftekhar Hossain Shamim, and city AL General Secretary Misbah Uddin Siraj.

The speakers demanded a proper inquiry and tough measures to realise compensation for the gas destroyed and the blowout victims at the earliest.

At a press conference at Sylhet Press Club in the afternoon, leaders of the Sylhet-based Chhatak Samity and Dakshin Chhatak Unnayan Parishad demanded immediate scrapping of the contract with Niko.

They said it has been proven that the company did not maintain the minimum safety measures.

The two citizens' forums announced a four-point demand and a five-day agitation programme from today ending at a human chain on July 10 at the Central Shahid Minar in the city, from where a fresh agitation programme will be announced.

The demands include immediate publication of a white paper on gas extraction from the gas fields in Chhatak, scrapping of the contract with Niko and halting all of its activities in the country, and assessment of losses at Tengratila and realisation of compensation for those from the company.

Dhaka energising

FROM PAGE 16 is also looking to new dimensions including Russia, the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and Eastern Europe, Khan said.

Morshed Khan said to strengthen regional, inter-regional and multilateral cooperation, sustained efforts are being pursued on three fronts--bilateral, regional and global.

Bilaterally, Bangladesh's unwavering policy is to maintain close relations with all its neighbours on the basis of sovereign equality, mutual respect and non-interference in internal affairs as well as settlement of outstanding bilateral issues through dialogue and negotiation, he said.

On the regional front, Bangladesh is committed to maintain the positive momentum and credibility of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (Saarc) to promote its socioeconomic mandate, create a broad-based climate of confidence building and reduce tension in the region.

About global front, the foreign minister said a cardinal priority for Bangladesh is to play a leading role through concrete initiatives mixed with moderation and pragmatism in all socioeconomic forums to promote the cause of developing countries as a whole and the least developed countries in particular.

Bangladesh's commitment to strengthen the role of the UN as the central organ for the cooperative management of the world problems and our membership of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC), Commonwealth, and Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) have enhanced our representative capacity and contribution to the goals of peace, security, justice and development.

To keep pace with the circumstances, Bangladesh is seeking a new agenda and have identified two key factors--the impact of

'Mastermind

FROM PAGE 1 the sources mentioned.

State Minister for Home Lutfuzzaman Babar at a meeting on March 30 termed Dhira, a ward level Jamarat leader in Khulna, the mastermind and financier of Belal murder. If he is arrested, the mystery behind the killings of Belal and another journalist, Humayun Kabir Balu, would be unfolded, he said.

He ordered police to arrest Dhira. Acting on in a tip off that Dhira was moving about at Malibagh crossing in Dhaka, Detective Branch (DB) of Khulna Metropolitan Police (KMP) contacted the officer-in-charge of Paltan Police Station for arresting Dhira. A team of Paltan police rushed to the spot and nabbed him from a business firm at about 4:00 pm.

A seven-member KMP team immediately left for Dhaka to take the arrestee to Khulna by last night, said KMP Deputy Commissioner Akbar Ali.

Police sources said Dhira is an illegal firearms dealer and has close links to Islamic militants and extremists since 1992. He took training in a foreign country on handling arms and grenades.

He is a close associate of founder of Purba Banglaar Communist Party's Janajuddha faction Abdur Rashid Malitha alias Tapan and two other leaders, Shoabi and Shumon. He is one of the financiers of this outlawed party, the sources added.

Dhira had threatened Belal with death in January this year.

Belal, Khulna bureau chief of Dainik Sangram, was fatally injured in a bomb attack on the night of February 5 at Khulna Press Club and succumbed to injuries on February 11 at the Combined Military Hospital in Dhaka.

Dhira went into hiding soon after the incident.

5 outlaws

FROM PAGE 16 The convicts are Naldanga regional PBCP commander Aatur Rahman, group leader Ashraf Hossain and armed cadres Saiful Islam Ripon, Ashrafur Islam Raja and Abdul Jalil Shimul.

Rajshahi Divisional Speedy Trial Tribunal judge AFM Aminul Islam gave the verdict in a case from Natore district.

Public prosecutor Ketabuddin said police did not inform the tribunal about Saiful's killing till the judgement was delivered.

Of five, Saiful was kidnapped and killed on March 14 last year by Bangla Bhai's organisation Muslim Rakha Mujahidin Oikhya Parishad that was later turned into Jagrata Muslim Janata Bangladesh (JMJB).

Ataur was held with a bag of arms in Natore a few months ago and was given a 40-year jail term by a Natore court on Monday.

Ashraf and Ashrafur were held in Rajshahi while Jalil is absconding.

PBCP operatives had termed Majedur, Madhnagar union BNP president, a 'class enemy' and slaughtered him near Madhnagar railway station in April, 2003.

The murder of Gama, a nephew of the deputy minister, and repeated PBCP threats to him had sparked off an anti-outlaw agitation by local BNP that resulted in the vigilante action by Bangla Bhai's Jagrata Muslim Janata. The JMJB is blamed for 22 murders and torturing more than 100 people since April, 2004.

Meanwhile, with yesterday's judgment, the tribunal is now left with almost no cases.

The tribunal has so far awarded death penalty to 27 people, life imprisonment to 228, varying jail terms to 56 and acquitted some 356 others in 94 cases it disposed of since its inception in November, 2002.

Nine cases out of 104 that were sent to the tribunal are now pending with the High Court and only one case awaits judgement.

Dc-10

FROM PAGE 1 the aircraft 150 feet away from the runway, and later the state minister also agreed with the decision to bring the aircraft to the hanger, Airport Manager squadron leader Shahin Farhad said.

"We think we can say something about it tomorrow [Wednesday] only after monitoring today's progress of salvation work," said a ground engineer seeking anonymity yesterday afternoon.

Bangladesh Biman's BG-048 flight from Dubai with 215 passengers on board skidded off the runway after it was forced to make a belly-landing "due to technical faults" on Friday morning.

Bangladesh Army yesterday brought three 90-tonne trolleys, two breakdown vehicles and one armoured recovery vehicle to the airport to speed up the salvation work.

"We are now filling earth and constructing four makeshift brick-roads. After completion of this work, we will try to lift the aircraft by airbags and then place the trolleys beneath it to bring the aircraft onto the runway and finally take the aircraft to the hanger," commanding officer of 200-member army rescue team Col Masud told journalists.

Meanwhile, Biman officials are yet to give any decision about two flights each with 221 passengers scheduled for Abu Dhabi and Muscat at 8:45pm and 10:45pm today. "The final decision in this regard depends on the progress of salvation work," Biman's district manager Ahmed Hossain told this correspondent over phone yesterday evening.

On Monday afternoon the civil aviation state minister expressed optimism about reopening the airport for international flights by today.

Envoys under target

FROM PAGE 16 apparent kidnap attempt.

"I am safe but it was a very narrow escape," Khan told AFP by telephone from Baghdad.

As US President George W. Bush hailed the sacrifices made in rebuilding Iraq, violence continued to rage, with four women gunned down on their way to work at Baghdad airport.

Gunmen aboard a pickup truck opened fire on Hassan al-Ansari, the Bahraini charge d'affaires, while he was travelling in his car with diplomatic-license plates in the upscale Mansur district, an interior ministry source said.

Yarmuk hospital said Ansari was treated for a gunshot wound in his right shoulder before leaving with guards.

Witnesses said Ansari was ambushed by at least eight gunmen after leaving his residence. "Two men got out of their cars and screamed at him 'get out of your car and at the get back inside'," a butcher shop owner said.

Instead, the diplomat kept going, and two of the men shot at him with an assault rifle and pistol, he said.

Ansari's car slowed down, but when the men ran after him he accelerated and managed to get away.

Two hundred meters further on, Ansari stopped in a street called 14 Nissan near a policeman and cried out: "I am a diplomat, help me!"

The policeman named Adel said "he was bleeding a lot. His suit, case and gear were covered with blood. A short time later, a police patrol passed by and took him to the hospital."

A spokesman for the Iraqi government said Egypt's Hbab al-Sharif, who was appointed ambassador June 1 but was yet to present his credentials, may have contacted groups close to his captors, which compromised his security.

No group has yet claimed responsibility for abducting Egypt's Sharif, who was set to become the first ambassador from an Arab nation to Iraq since the fall of Saddam Hussein.

Sharif was also the first head of mission to be abducted since Iraq's hostage crisis began.

The Iraqi government's spokesman expressed surprise Sharif was travelling on Baghdad's perilous roads without much protection and said that his security may have been compromised by contacts he may have had with political groups with ties to insurgents.

"The only advice we give is that if a diplomat from this mission or another wants to contact political groups that may be close to armed groups then the least he can do is tell the government which can bear some responsibility," Leith Kubba told reporters.

"We do not know the circumstances (surrounding Sharif's kidnapping) but this is one of the possibilities."

Kubba said the targeting of foreign diplomats is part of a calculated effort by insurgents to discourage countries from dealing with the Iraqi government.

A western diplomat, who did not wish to be identified, told AFP that a Russian embassy convoy