

## Niko dealings

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cancellation of the contract with Niko, realisation of compensation from its share of gas that it gets from the Feni gas field, and immediately bringing all responsible for the agreement process with Canadian company under trial.

As 270 billion cubic feet (bcf) gas reserve of the Tengratria gas field may be inaccessible due to Niko's blunders, Tk 3500 crore asset is damaged, while with the environmental damage counted, the amount stands at Tk 8,000 crore, said the six-member committee that visited Tengratria on Friday.

"Even the negligible compensation of Tk 1 crore that the government collected from Niko has not reached the victims. The government should have resigned after the repeated blowouts in Tengratria if it had minimum sense of responsibility," said AL Joint General Secretary Obaidul Kader who was present at the press conference.

The AL sub-committee noted that the BNP-Jamaat coalition government did not award the Joint Venture Agreement (JVA) with Niko through any bidding process, neither did it keep the option of Swiss Challenge in it, as was originally planned. Under the Swiss Challenge, the offer of an unsolicited partner is put on a bid to seek matching or better offer from other parties.

The government deliberately resorted to signing the faulty JVA while a High Court rule barred signing fresh Production Sharing Contracts (PSCs), the committee observed.

"The draft joint venture agreement mentioned awarding only the marginal Chhatak West gas field, but the final agreement included the Chhatak East gas field, a new field with huge potentials," sub-committee Secretary Dr Hasan Mahmud said.

"This is a gross irregularity by the government as any new gas field, if given to foreign companies, should be awarded through bidding process," he added.

The JVA does not have any clause for realising compensation while the PSCs with the foreign companies should have it, the committee noted.

"The Jalalabad gas field PSC gives Bangladesh 80 percent share and Occidental the remaining 20 percent. But in the Bapex-Niko agreement, Niko gets 60 percent and Bapex only 40 percent," Dr Hasan Mahmud mentioned.

"Whose interest has been served through the contract then?" he questioned.

The AL leaders alleged that the alliance government declared the Tengratria gas field with 275 billion cubic feet (bcf) of gas reserve "marginal" to give Niko the contract.

Besides, it gave Niko Feni and Kamta gas fields in an unholy way, they said.

The government signed the contract with Niko so that the minister concerned and officials involved in the process could share the commission, he commented.

Criticising the government for appointing a bureaucrat as the advisor to the energy ministry, Hasan Mahmud said, "The energy ministry advisor has begun working in favour of the Canadian company just as the former state minister AKM Mosharraf Hossain did."

"He [energy advisor] has expelled two Bapex officials though they had no faults and has already hiked the price of octane and petrol," he added.

Dr Hussain Monsur, former chairman of Petrobangla said the soil in a large area of Tengratria and its surroundings has been seriously damaged and it is uncertain if or when cultivation in that area will be possible.

Besides, the rate of arsenic also increased in the underground water, making it undrinkable.

Sub-committee assistant secretaries Md Anisul Haque Mintu, Aktar Hossain, Sujit Roy Nandi, Ajoy Kar Khokon and Gasuddin, member, were present at the press conference.

## Fiscal council sits at last

*First meeting today after 28 months*

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

A high-powered fiscal co-ordination council at last holds its first meeting today, two-and-a-quarter years after its formation, with some pressing issues including inflation and dollar crisis on the agenda.

At the meeting, Bangladesh Bank (BB) is slated to table a report on the country's economic state and some crucial issues like inflation.

The council was formed on March 10, 2003 by amending the Bangladesh Bank Order, 1972. The amended order gave limited autonomy to the BB and assigned the council with co-ordinating fiscal issues between the bank and the government so that corrective measures could be taken whenever needed.

Headed by the finance minister, the council is manned by the commerce minister, the BB governor, secretaries of the finance ministry and the Internal Resources Division, and the member (Programming) of the Planning Commission.

The high-profile body approved by parliament was supposed to sit at least once a quarter to review the consistency of macroeconomic policies and also to revise the limits and targets set in the budget during formulation.

But, although exchange rate of dollar against taka has been rising steadily and inflation marking a crazy upward trend, the council failed to find time to sit and devise measures to address the issues.

A BB source said the central bank in its report would ask the government to adopt some non-economic steps to check inflation. The BB also will request the government to allow it to follow the tight monetary policy it has been pursuing for a while.

## London bombers

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forward with information. "Find them," screamed the huge-type headline in the tabloid Daily Mirror Saturday.

"The four most wanted," said The Independent, like every newspaper carrying pictures of the casually-dressed men in subway station tunnels or on a bus, one with a rucksack believed to have held his bombs.

Police, who were already gathering forensic evidence from the rucksacks and bombs that failed to explode, said they had received more than 400 calls following their appeal for help from the public.

Nerves were on edge in the British capital Saturday. Mile End Underground station in east London was briefly evacuated and closed after an unspecified alert, police said after they received information.

On Thursday, exactly a fortnight after four British Muslim men killed themselves and 52 others in a co-ordinated series of blasts on three London subway trains and a bus, the new attackers attempted a repeat attack.

Their detonators appeared to work but the explosive mix in their rucksacks failed to go off. No-one was injured and the bombers fled the scenes.

On Friday morning, police cornered a man of ethnic Asian origin inside a subway train at Stockwell after a frantic chase. Screaming at onlookers to get out of the way, they pinned him down in a carriage and shot him at point-blank range.

Police refused to say whether the dead man had been carrying any explosives at the time.

Soon after the Stockwell shooting, police arrested a man under anti-terrorism laws after an armed raid on a nearby apartment block, and another was arrested around midnight.

Both men were being held in a high security police station in central London in connection with the investigation into the attempted attacks on London's transport network, police said.

The first man was being held under a section of Britain's 2001 anti-terrorism law relating to the "commission, instigation or preparation of acts of terrorism", a police spokeswoman told AFP.

According to Saturday's edition of The Sun newspaper, one of the detained men is one of the suspected bombers, whose device partially exploded Thursday lunchtime on a Number 26 bus in east London.

"One down... three to go," was the headline on the tabloid's front page, above a picture of the arrested man being driven away wearing a paper suit to protect potential evidence on his clothes.

Saturday's newspapers noted the "deadly dilemma" now faced by British police in tackling suspects

who might be carrying a suicide bomb.

Britons, who have only become accustomed to seeing their police armed in recent years, appeared to be torn between a sense of necessity and disquiet about the shooting by police.

Some papers likened the police tactics to those used by Israeli security forces in dealing with suicide bombers.

London Mayor Ken Livingstone said a "shoot-to-kill policy" was necessary for those suspected of carrying a bomb, and he had strong support from some quarters. The Daily Express newspaper headlined: "Shoot all bombers".

But the Muslim Council of Britain demanded police explain their actions and said Muslims feared reprisal attacks. Friday's shooting at Stockwell will be automatically investigated by the Independent Police Complaints Commission.

The four men named by police as the July 7 suicide bombers were all Muslim Britons, three of Pakistani origin. The fourth was a Muslim convert born in Jamaica.

A survey of British Muslims in Saturday's Daily Telegraph newspaper found that only six percent thought the July 7 attacks were justified.

However, when asked whether they had sympathy with the "feelings and motives" of the bombers, 13 percent said they had a lot of sympathy and a further 11 percent had a little.

## 7 Indians

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said the Indian border guards pushed the eight Indians into Bangladesh by breaking open the barbed wire fences near pillar no 144 early yesterday.

A BDR patrol team caught the Indians while they were roaming around the Madhuil bus stand under Sapahur upazila in the morning, the sources said.

They said the Indian police picked up them from Nizampur area in Delhi on Monday and brought them to the border at midnight on Friday.

Security has been beefed up along the Noagaon frontier following the push-in incident.

## BRTA accused

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officials were proved, the meeting was told.

The meeting decided to cancel the system of revenue collection from vehicles through the postal department and introduce the system of collecting tax directly through banks.

Five vehicle inspection centres of the government has become very inactive due to corruption and mismanagement, the meeting was told.

It was alleged that the regional transport committee does not play any role to bring discipline in the road transport sector.

Keeping FM band radios in trucks and other vehicles has been made mandatory for getting information from the recently introduced radio traffic channel that gives information about traffic situation in the city time to time.

Communications Minister Nazmul Huda who chaired the meeting asked the BRTA chairman to send him a report on the officials and employees who are responsible for irregularities and corruption.

It was disclosed in the meeting that many three wheeler CNG auto rickshaws bearing the same number ply in connivance with a section of BRTA officials.

Nazmul Huda asked the BRTA officials to identify those vehicles and take punitive actions against the officials who issued certificates against them.

Communication Secretary Shaiful Islam and high officials of the BRTA were present at the meeting on transport sector development and BRTA activities.

## Dhaka slates

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strongest terms." Khaleda said assuming that Bangladesh would continue working with Egypt and the international community in the war on terror.

She prayed for the eternal peace of the departed souls and conveyed her deepest sympathy to the members of the bereaved families.

"These savage attacks on innocent lives must be faced with united efforts globally, and the attackers should be considered terrorists. These terrorists have no religion because they are acting against humanity," said Foreign Minister M Morshed Khan.

Talking with reporters at his office yesterday, he said the terrorists should raise its voice against terrorists irrespective of their religion or caste.

"Terrorists who in the name of Islam resort to such heinous acts are basically the enemies of Islam. Because Islam is the religion of peace and allows no room for such brutal actions," he added.

Morshed asked the Islamic world and the Muslim Ummah to be united against those involved in terror attacks. The terrorists in the name of Jihad are in fact weakening Islam and making the lives of the Muslims miserable, he said.

"Muslims anywhere in the world are scared today, as others point a doubtful finger at them," he observed.

The minister also condemned those, who blame wholesale the Muslims after any acts of terrorism. "Terrorists should be considered terrorists... they may be Muslims, Christians or from any sects; no-one should generalise only the Muslims."

The British leadership should consider the attacks on London as acts of terrorism, but not single out any particular community or religion, he added.

Referring to mounting tension among the Muslims in London following the killing of an Asian, he expressed the hope the British government would face terrorists patiently and find out the real culprits.

## PM leaves for Beijing Aug 17

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Prime Minister Khaleda Zia will leave Dhaka for Beijing on a four-day official visit at the invitation of her Chinese counterpart Wen Jiabao on August 17.

This is Khaleda's return visit to China after Jiabao came to Dhaka on a two-day visit on April 7, said Foreign Minister M Morshed Khan yesterday.

He said the visit will mark the 30th anniversary of establishment of diplomatic ties between Dhaka and Beijing.

He expressed the hope the visit will further strengthen the unique relations between Bangladesh and China.

On Indian External Affairs Minister K Natwar Singh's visit, Morshed said his Indian counterpart will come to Dhaka on a two-day goodwill visit on August 6.

Asked about the issues to be discussed during Singh's visit, he said, "It's not a structured meeting. We'll discuss various issues of common concern."

"We'll also discuss the agenda of talks between Prime Minister Khaleda Zia and Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh on the sidelines of the Saarc Summit in Dhaka on November 12-13."

## Patel assures

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Patel referred to big foreign investment proposals to Bangladesh and expressed the World Bank's keenness to facilitate the country in this regard by developing infrastructures.

He termed Bangladesh's economic performance, GDP growth rate and macroeconomic management "excellent".

Patel said Bangladesh, in many sectors, has not only done 'very well' but also emerged as leader in some sectors, including gender equality in primary and secondary education where girls are performing better than the boys.

He expressed eagerness in assisting the construction of Padma Bridge along with other donors. He said Bangladesh has a good track record in implementing big projects.

Progress in health and education sectors also came up during the discussion.

During the meeting, the prime minister sought WB assistance in expansion and improvement of drainage, sewerage and drinking-water supply in major cities, including Dhaka and Chittagong.

The WB executive assured the prime minister of bank's support for mitigating arsenic problem in the country.

World Bank Country Director Christine I Wallich, Prime Minister's Principal Secretary Kamal Siddiqui and ERD Secretary Ismail Jobiullah were present.

## Independent

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mechanisms to monitor the implementation process of its directives.

For this, the credibility of the EC has been questioned, he added.

"The secretariat must be independent and free from government control to ensure transparency of the Election Commission," Ali asserted.

If independent, the Election Commission would be able to train its officials properly, which will pave the way for full implementation of all its initiatives, he observed.

He agreed with former chief election commissioner MA Syed's proposal for an independent secretariat, saying there is now no move in this regard.

"During the last two years of his (Syed's) tenure the secretary to the Election Commission Secretariat did not attend any meetings, showing different causes.

"But the secretary started attending the election commission's meetings after appointment of a new chief election commissioner," he added.

## WB warns

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situation, the WB said the government's interest payment against debt is low because most of the public debt is multilateral or bilateral and is on highly concessional terms. If prospects of concessional lending diminish and Bangladesh is pushed toward market-based rates, the cost of financing could increase significantly, which would worsen the budget balances and the debt situation, it pointed out, adding a large depreciation in real exchange rate can also add additional pressure.

The note also explained that since foreign debt is to be paid off in dollars, the depreciation of taka would add to the cost of debt servicing.

It said lack of adjustment in energy and oil prices increased the loss of SOEs sharply, consequently the consolidated public sector primary deficit is likely to have been around 3.5 percent of the GDP and the total deficit over 5 percent.

On economic growth the policy note said despite a mild rise in the recent years, a credible strategy to lift growth rates to a steady 6 percent is still lacking.

WB Country Director Christine I Wallich in her forwarding letter said, "The medium-term budgetary framework envisaged in the PRSP is broadly consistent with public debt sustainability. But it hinges critically on the growth, primary deficit and external financing assumptions underlying the framework. Stronger domestic resource mobilization, continued prudent management of public spending and a reduction in the level of contingent liabilities are needed to protect fiscal sustainability."

Hotel receptionists said many

## World enraged

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a trip to the region.

UN Secretary General Annan expressed his "sorrow and anger" at the bombings, which were claimed by an al-Qaeda linked group and which follow blasts in London this month which left over 50 dead.

"Once again, in this tragic month, he condemns the use of terror and indiscriminate violence against civilians, which no cause or belief can possibly justify," said a UN spokesman.

The near-simultaneous bombings early Saturday struck at the heart of the Egyptian resort, which as well as a top tourist resort is also regularly used for high-level summits and international conferences.

In Europe, from where many tourists travel to Egypt, French President Chirac stressed the world's "absolute determination to fight this scourge," in a statement which voiced France's "profound solidarity" with the Egyptian people.

In Berlin, Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder said that German tourists were among the casualties.

"Through blind and fanatical hatred terrorists want to create fear and horror in place of peaceful cohabitation," said Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer in a statement. "This aim must not be fulfilled."

Russian President Vladimir Putin on Saturday called on countries which have suffered terror attacks to stand united against "international terrorism" in a telegram of condolences to his Egyptian counterpart Hosni Mubarak.

"The only response to these challenges to mankind is solidarity and unity of action against this barbaric threat," he said.

In Rome Italian President Carlo Azeglio Ciampi called the attacks "tragic," Spanish Prime Minister Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero said they were "barbaric," while EU commission chief Jose Manuel Barroso described them as "cowardly."

In Tokyo a foreign ministry official

said the government was "gravely shocked" by the attacks.

"Terrorism cannot be justified for any reason, and the government of Japan firmly condemns atrocious terrorism that victimises many innocent people," he said.

Closer to Egypt itself, Israel offered to send army rescue teams to the Red Sea resort on the tip of the Sinai peninsula to help emergency crews deal with the carnage, which it described as "inhuman acts of terrorism."

But Yuval Steinitz, the chairman of parliament's foreign affairs and defence committee, said the attacks appeared to represent a major intelligence failure especially so soon after the 2004 attacks in another Sinai resort, Taba, which killed 34 people including Israelis.

"At first sight, it looks like a failure on the intelligence and security front of the first degree," he told public radio.

Iran - long criticised by the United States in particular for sponsoring Islamist terrorism - said it firmly condemned the bombings but called on the United States to change tack in its war on terror.

"We appeal to Western countries not to impose restrictions on Muslims as these attacks have nothing to do with Muslims and placing restrictions on Muslims is the best way of helping the terrorists," foreign ministry spokesman Hamid Reza Asefi told reporters.

Even bomb-weary Iraq condemned the bombings. "We wish the Egyptian armed forces success in fighting the cancer of terrorism which threatens the peace of the entire world," said Prime Minister Ibrahim Jaafari in Baghdad.

## 99 political parties

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candidates in substantial number of constituencies.

Of the parties, 33 had declared candidature for one seat, 10 for two and five for three seats out of 300 constituencies across the country in the election.

The situation was the same in the 2001 general election. Of the 96 political parties granted election symbols, 41 have failed to field a candidate in the election.

The EC has decided to seek opinions from the political parties mainly out of a discord between the chief election commissioner (CEC) and two election commissioners on the issue of voter list.

CEC MA Aziz is in favour of a fresh voter list for the next parliamentary polls while the two Election Commissioners - AK Mohammad Ali and M Munser Ali - want to revise the existing one.

The decision to invite such a huge number of political parties has drawn criticism from the EC secretariat officials. They fear that discussion with so many parties in such a brief period would only plunge the meetings in disorder. The EC in previous elections had invited only the major political parties and the number was between 20 and 22, said a source at the EC secretariat.

Except Jatiya Party (Manju) and Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal (JSD-Rab), the 65 political parties invited to participate in the discussion on July 26 in three separate sessions are considered minor parties. They hardly had any activities over the years.

Apart from AL, Jatiya Party (Ershad), left 11-party alliance, JSD (Inu), Bikalpa Dhara, and Krishak Srarnik Janata League, the 30 political parties, which were invited to sit with the EC on July 27 in three sessions, are considered minor parties.

According to the schedule, BNP, Jamaat-e-Islami, Bangladesh Jatiya Party, and Islami Oikya Jote were invited to hold talks on July 28 in two separate sessions.

## EC OFFICIALS FACE DIFFICULTIES

Inviting the political parties was a troublesome task for the EC Secretariat officials as most of the parties exist on paper only while official addresses of many have been changed.

"It's been a kind of trouble for us to communicate with the minor political parties," a senior official in the EC secretariat said.

The EC secretariat officials had great difficulty collecting the

addresses of minor parties. They are not certain whether all the invitations have reached the destinations. They are afraid that some of the letters may return to the EC without finding the addressees.

The EC had originally decided to sit down with the 96 political parties that were allocated symbols in the last parliamentary elections, but the number was raised to 99 yesterday and letters were sent accordingly.

Meanwhile, on learning about the EC initiative for dialogue, leaders of Peoples Party, seven-party alliance (Mirpur), Muslim League (Jamir), Muslim League (Yousuf), Bangladesh Jatiyatabadi Palli Dal, and Republican Party yesterday rushed to the EC secretariat to confirm their invitations.

**AL REJECTION**  
AL has rejected the EC proposal, saying that they would not sit down with the CEC as they along with its allies have rejected MA Aziz's appointment to the post.

"We have already proposed a set of proposals for reforms in electoral and caretaker government systems and it includes also the one for a fresh voter list. If there is any dialogue it will be with the government," AL general secretary told The Daily Star last night.

The AL leader, marvelling at the huge number of parties invited to the EC dialogue, asked, "Where do these parties come from? Do they have any existence at all?"

He alleged that the CEC is out to prove the government's statement that it is not possible to make a consensus appointment to post of caretaker government chief as the political parties cannot reach a consensus on the voter list.

The mainstream opposition parties' reform agenda proposes for an appointment of the caretaker government chief by consensus among all parties.

Workers Party General Secretary Bimal Bishwas echoed the AL general secretary's view and said there must be an ulterior motive behind the EC's move.

"By-passing all our reform proposals regarding the Election Commission and electoral laws, it has all of a sudden initiated discussion on the issue of voter list with all parties," he said.

Biswas, also the left 11-party convenor, said the left alliance has not yet received any invitation from the EC and the decision whether to join the dialogue will be taken on receiving the letter.

JSD President Hasanul Haq Inu also rejected the EC proposal and said his party would not sit with the CEC as it has already rejected his appointment to the post.

## No trace yet of missing PBCP leader

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, Rajshahi

The whereabouts of the missing outlaw leader, who was in the custody of Rapid Action Battalion (Rab), was still unknown until yesterday evening.

Purba Banglar Communist Party (PBCP) leader Abudus Samad alias Lal Samad did not return home or contact anyone after his 'release,' said family sources.

Sources said the Rab released him on Friday night in Rajshahi city after it picked up him following his release on bail from Naogaon jail on Thursday.

The commanding officer Rab-5, however, denied arresting Samad. On previous Rab acknowledgment of the arrest, he said, "We were not sure of his name as since he has many names."

Speculation was rife in the city that Samad was in Rab custody and the elite force has handed him over to Bangla Bhai men.

He is accused of 17 charges, mostly murders, and a listed top criminal. Samad was arrested in July last year, but freed on bail.

## Bangladeshis

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All 25 migrants had requested asylum in Slovakia, police spokeswoman Magdalena Fecova said.

Slovakia, one of 10 mainly eastern European countries to join the European Union last year, hopes to join the EU's open-borders Schengen zone on January 1, 2007.

Last year, police in Slovakia arrested more than 8,300 illegal migrants - 40 per cent of them near the 98-kilometer border with Ukraine - and 272 suspected human traffickers.

## Anti-personnel

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The BDR, however, did not mention the name of the manufacturing country of the mines.

Earlier in 2003, security forces seized 40 anti-personal mines from this area.

In another incident, during their routine patrol the jawans of the Madak border outpost under Bolipara BDR zone found two large rocket shells, two SBBL guns, five cartridges and 12 rounds of bullet of several firearms from a hut in the deep forest of Bor Modak area.

Earlier on Friday, Bandarban region army recovered two SBBL guns, eight empty magazines and one high power antenna from the Chakma Jhiri area of Roangchhari upazila.

## Owners

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(amended) Act-2003. It also filed a case against him under the section 272 of the Bangladesh penal code. In absentia, he was instantly sentenced to six months in prison. Besides, the court sent two workers of the factory to jail for a month.

In South Shajahanpur, the court fined Anisur Rahman, the owner of Asia Mineral Water Company, Tk 50,000. It also sentenced him to six months' rigorous imprisonment in absence of him.

## VoIP not legalised