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KATHMANDU MEET Bimstec experts work out most of FTA issues

DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENT

The seven-nation Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (Bimstec) regional grouping is all set to implement the Free Trade Agreement (FTA) among the member countries by July 1, 2006 as scheduled, though a few issues are yet to be ironed out.

According to the officials of the foreign and commerce ministries, the Trade Negotiating Committee (TNC) of the grouping, which began a weeklong meeting in Kathmandu on December 21, has already worked out most of the issues, including rules of origin, sensitive lists and dispute settlement mechanism. The experts would be able to complete the negotiations before the conclusion of the meeting, they hoped.

"We look forward to an earlier conclusion of the negotiations for a comprehensive free trade area," said an important official of the commerce ministry.

The decision to implement the FTA as scheduled was reaffirmed at the eighth ministerial meeting held in Dhaka on December 19. The

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STORMY WEATHER 2,000 tourists stranded at St Martins

BDNEWS, Cox's Bazar

At least 2,000 tourists have been stranded at St Martins, the country's lone coral island, as the stormy weather hit the areas, making it impossible for the vessels to approach the island due to the rough sea.

The stormy wind started to blow over the Bay under the impact of Thursday's depression accompanied by drizzle. A portion of the jetty, built for the landing of the tourists in the island broke off and the pontoon was washed away that night.

A tourist ship carrying 350 passengers was compelled to return to Teknaf on Friday, as it could not land the tourists due to the broken jetty. Another 1,500 tourists boarding 15 big and small vessels also had to return the same day for not being able to land safely on the island.

Sources said tourists thronged St Martins alongside Cox's Bazar to celebrate Christmas vacation.

Abu Noman, the manager of Keary Sindbad, a tourist ship company, told BDNEWS that the pontoon of their own jetty has drifted

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Fuel price hike, weak taka spur inflation

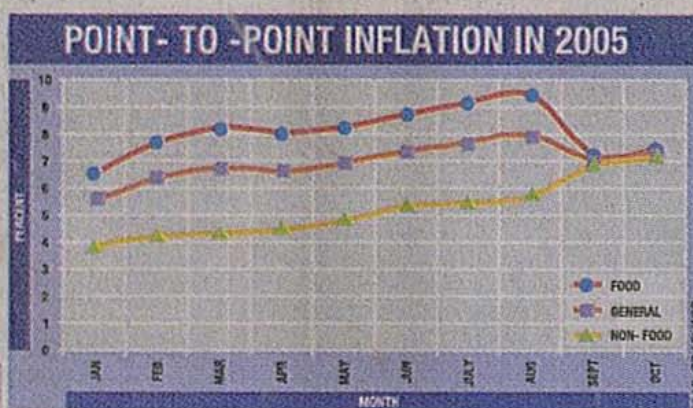
REJAUL KARIM BYRON

Fuel price hike and devaluation of taka were the main factors that pushed up the inflation rate by .27 percentage point in October. They also explain why the rate is higher in case of non-food items than in food.

A continued upward trend in inflation has been noticed during the last several months, except in September, when it dropped a little, only to resume in October.

The inflation rate hit a 6-year high of 7.93 percent on a point-to-point basis.

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UGC for uniform grading in public, pvt universities

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The University Grants Commission (UGC) yesterday proposed a uniform grading system with a chart of nine grades for both public and private universities in the country.

Seventy-five vice-chancellors (VC) of different public and private universities in a meeting with the UGC yesterday reached a consensus about introducing a uniform grading system in principle but

many of them disagreed with the details of the UGC recommendations. The meeting was organised by the UGC at the LGED Bhaban in Dhaka.

According to the recommendations, a student would have to secure above 90 marks for grade A or grade point average (GPA) of 4.0, above 85 for grade A- or GPA 3.75, above 80 for grade B+ or GPA 3.5, above 75 for grade B or GPA 3.25, above 70 for grade B- or GPA 3.0,

above 65 for grade C+ or GPA 2.5, above 60 for grade C or GPA 2.0, above 55 for grade C- or GPA 1.5 and above 50 for grade D or GPA 1.0.

"I feel the necessity for introducing a uniform grading system in public and private universities, but in case of Dhaka University, the final decision on how it will be introduced absolutely depends on its academic council," said

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Bigots ask Babar to quit over police action

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Anti-Ahmadiyya bigots yesterday demanded resignation of State Minister for Home Affairs Lutfozzaman Babar and passing of a censure motion in parliament for Friday's police attacks on its activists.

The International Khatme Nabuwat Movement, Bangladesh also demanded an unconditional apology from the government for the attacks. It has threatened to topple the government if its demand of declaring Ahmadiyyas non-Muslim was not met.

Meantime, an unknown caller on Friday night threatened to demolish the Ahmadiyya complex in Nirala Residential Area in Khulna.

"The main obstacle to our target is Jamaat-e-Islami," said president of the organisation Mahmudul Hasan Mamtazi yesterday. Some pro-Jamaat police officials were behind the Friday's attacks that left at least 50 activists injured, he claimed.

Mamtazi, who is leading the

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Indian firm gets Tamiflu licence

BBC ONLINE

Swiss firm Roche has licensed an Indian company to make a generic version of its anti-flu treatment Tamiflu for India and other developing countries.

The drug is widely seen as the most promising treatment for combating any future pandemic of bird flu in humans.

The previously little-known Indian pharmaceutical firm Hetero Drugs has been granted the licence.

The decision could make it easier and cheaper for poorer nations to acquire stocks of the drug.

The Swiss drugs giant developed, and has patent protection for, a product that is in great demand from governments around the world.

They all want to build up stocks of Tamiflu - known generically as oseltamivir - to cope with the anticipated spread of bird flu to humans.

This appears to be only the second such manufacturing licence Roche has awarded.

The first one went to a Chinese firm, the Shanghai Pharmaceuticals Group.

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Politics again on collision course

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Politics is set to generate much heat from the beginning of next year, the last year of the BNP-Jamaat-led coalition in office, as the ruling and opposition blocs are competing to take control of street politics ahead of the next election.

The ruling alliance has rejected the demands for reforms in the caretaker government system and electoral rules while the Awami League (AL) led 14-party opposition combine declared street agitation to force the government to meet the demands.

The possibility of any dialogue between the government and the opposition has diminished largely when the prime minister at a BNP rally on December 22 in Paltan rejected the opposition demand and said the next election will be held under the existing system.

Political analysts forecast a volatile political situation after the opposition programme to march towards Dhaka on January 22. The opposition combine has planned to mobilise people from different parts of the country to gather in the

capital on the day demanding reforms in the caretaker government and Election Commission to ensure free and fair polls.

They said the situation will take a dramatic turn if the main opposition lawmakers resign en masse from parliament. It will be a real challenge for the government.

If the Awami League lawmakers resign, the government will have to decide whether it will hold by-polls in 57 constituencies or move for an early election. And it will be very difficult to arrange by-polls in the vacant seats of the AL lawmakers, observers believe.

If the government goes for fresh election without reforms in the caretaker government system and electoral rules it will create another national crisis as the mainstream opposition parties have already declared that they will not participate in the next polls under the existing caretaker government system, rather they will resist it, a political analyst said.

An AL source said the party has a plan to resign from parliament en masse at a certain stage of the

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EC still in strife as fresh voter listing nears

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The chief election commissioner (CEC) and the two election commissioners have not yet reached a consensus about electoral roll, though the launch of preparing a fresh voters' list is just a week away.

CEC MA Aziz made move to resolve the discord since August. Besides, two writ petitions challenging his unilateral decision on voter list are pending with the High Court.

The Election Commission (EC)

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Tk 67 lakh looted from Ctg firm

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, Ctg

A gang in the city early yesterday robbed over Tk 67 lakh in cash and cheques for around Tk 12 lakh from a distribution firm of British American Tobacco Bangladesh (BATB).

The band of at least 12 robbers forced their way into the third-floor office of Macro Hunts Ltd housed

in a 10-storey building at Dampara near Wasa intersection at around 3:00am after tying up three on-duty Ansars on the ground floor, witnesses and sources said.

The robbers broke open a vault in the office and took away Tk 67,18,906 in cash and the cheques from it. Macro Hunt officials said the stolen cheques cannot be

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PHOTO: STAR

A Christmas tree at Kakrail Church in Dhaka.

Christmas today

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The Christian community of Bangladesh, as elsewhere in the world, celebrates Christmas today in commemoration of the birth of Jesus Christ. It is the most important holiday for the Christians of the world.

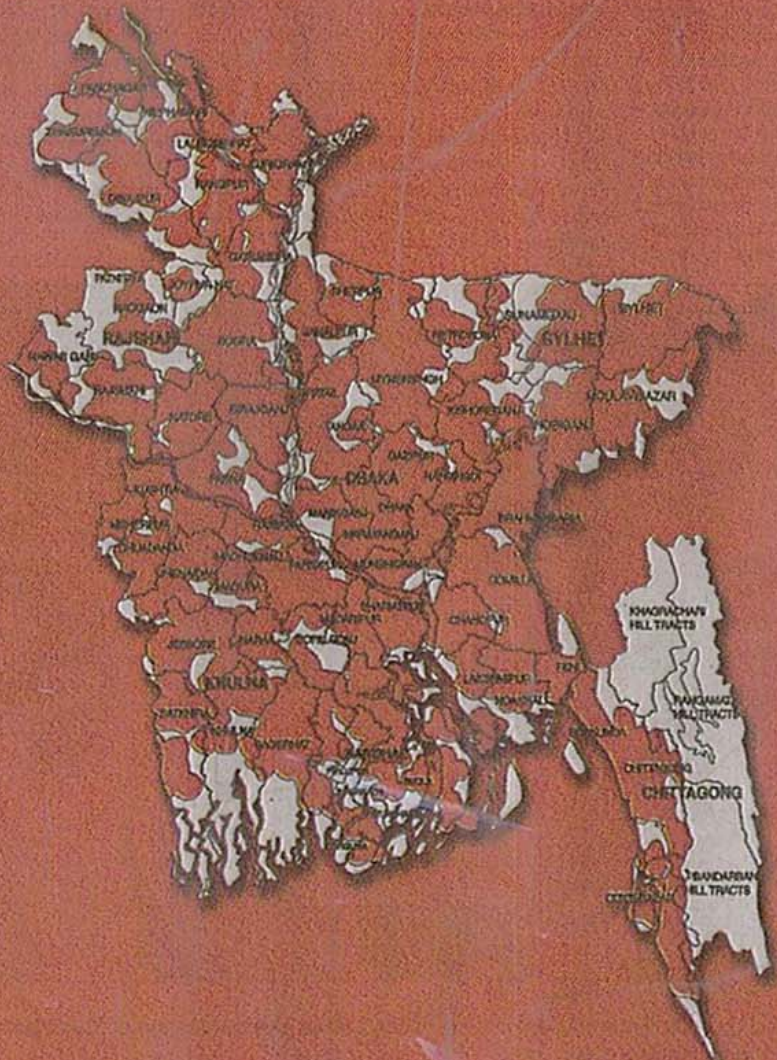
According to Christian beliefs the god entered the world of men through his son, Jesus Christ, on Christmas Day. But it is also a celebration of rebirth, new beginnings, forgiveness and peace as a new year approaches. It is an occasion for the Christians to renew their relationship with god and with their fellow humans.

Tight security measures have been taken throughout the capital and at divisional and district headquarters to ensure peaceful celebrations. Members of the police and Rapid Action Battalion have been deployed to ensure safety. Plainclothes policemen and other intelligence officials have been keeping their eyes on all the churches across the country.

The day's festive activities include decoration of Christmas trees, special church prayers, distribution of gifts by Santa Claus to children, family gatherings and

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