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Gas sector in a quagmire

SHARIEF KHAN

While the gas sector fetches the government over Tk 3,300 crore in revenue a year, its administration system is crumbling due to lack of manpower, frequent changes at the top level, disruption in the chain of command and external intervention.

As a result, Petrobangla and its nine revenue-generating affiliates are seriously under-performing, with their staffs increasingly losing the sense of belonging to the sector, admits a number of senior officials.

In the last three years, the energy ministry itself saw seven

secretaries. This demonstrates how volatile the position of a secretary is.

The past secretaries are Akmal Hossain, AR Khan, Khairuzzaman, MA Aziz, Khandker Shahidul Islam and Jafar Ullah, while AMM Nasir Uddin is the present secretary.

Moreover, Prime Minister Khaleda Zia has the charge of the ministry as the full minister, but energy adviser Mahmudur Rahman runs the ministry without having executive power.

Currently, the ministry along with Petrobangla and its affiliates is dealing with large-scale contract

negotiations or scrutiny.

These include the \$2.5 billion Tata investment proposal that heavily focuses on the energy sector and the \$2 billion Phulbari open pit coalmine scheme of development of Asia Energy. Experienced officials and experts are required to deal with these negotiations.

The sector's top operator Petrobangla had its seasoned chairman SR Osman replaced a couple of months ago. Energy Secretary Nasir Uddin ran Petrobangla for two months as an additional responsibility.

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4 hurt as bomb explodes near int'l trade fair

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

At least four people including a couple were wounded when a homemade bomb exploded on Mirpur Road near the venue of Dhaka International Trade Fair last night.

One of the wounded, Parvez, 22, told reporters at Dhaka Medical College Hospital that the bomb exploded when he was going to the fair along with his uncle and aunt.

Parvez sustained burns in his left leg while Abu Nesar, 20, a tea vendor, in his right leg and forehead. The other injured are Saleha Begum 28, and her husband Abdur Razzak, 38.

Parvez, a madrasa student of Magura, said the bomb went off on the Mirpur Road a few yards off Bangladesh-China Friendship Conference Centre.

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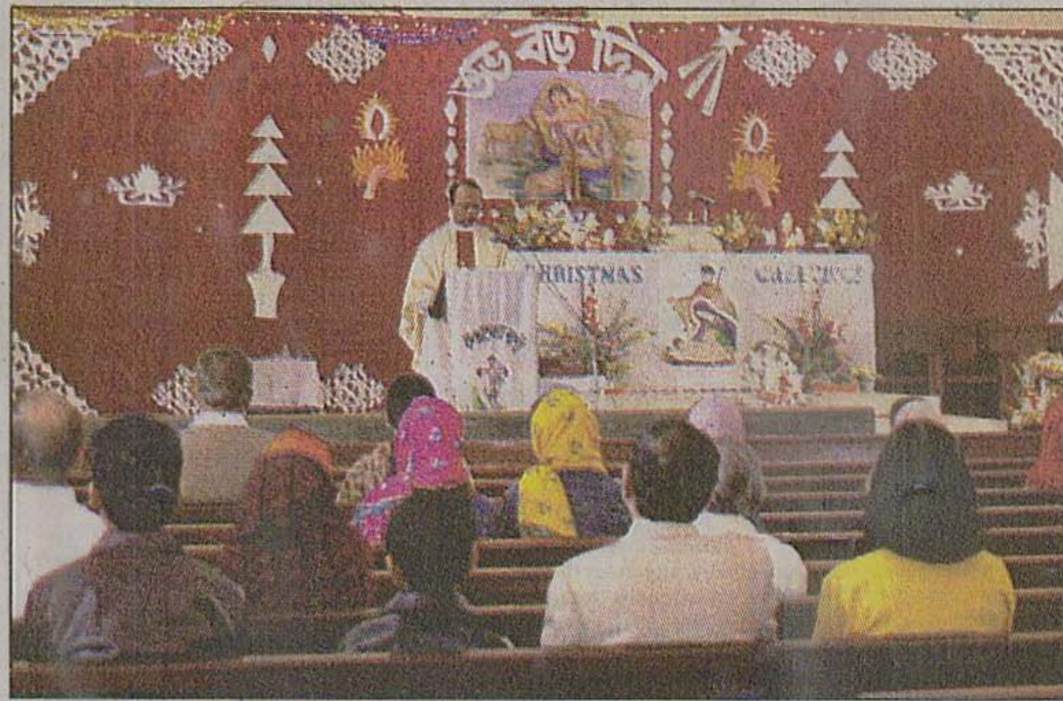


PHOTO: STAR

Christian devotees attend special prayers at Kakrail Church in the city yesterday on the occasion of Christmas, the largest religious festival of the Christians.

Xmas celebrated amid tight security

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Christian priests and leaders yesterday prayed for peace and social harmony as the community celebrated its biggest religious festival, Christmas, the birth anniversary of Jesus Christ, across the country.

The day was a national holiday. The government took stringent security measures, including deployment of additional law enforcers, in the capital and elsewhere in the country to ensure a peaceful celebration of the day.

Besides decorating and illuminating Xmas trees and churches,

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ASIAN HIGHWAY

Govt firm not to join it despite economic loss

RAFIQ HASAN

Despite the risk of losing the opportunity of huge economic benefit from the Asian Highway, the government is determined not to join the giant road network unless the proposal for including an alternative road through Myanmar is accepted.

Deadline for signing the agreement on UN sponsored Asian Highway is December 31.

In the existing map of the Asian Highway that will connect 32 Asian

countries with Europe, two roads enter into Bangladesh from Benapole and Banglabandha and exit through Tamabil in Sylhet, making both entry and exit points with India.

Bangladesh wants inclusion of the proposed Dhaka-Myanmar direct road via Cox's Bazar to be included in the Asian Highway route.

Dhaka will not sign the agreement unless the proposal for changing the highway route is

SEE PAGE 15 COL 1

Dhaka trying for Bush slot during S Asian tour

DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENT

The government began hectic diplomatic efforts to bring US President George W Bush in Bangladesh, even if for a brief time, during his tour to South Asia early next year.

A highly placed source at the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) yesterday told The Daily Star that the government has instructed the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Bangladesh embassy in Washington to persuade the US officials concerned to include Bangladesh in the US president's tour itinerary.

SEE PAGE 15 COL 4

Dialogue on militancy resumes today

Manju meets PM

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The national dialogue on militancy resumes today with the prime minister's sitting down with Anwar Hossain Manju led Jatiya Party at her office after a seven-day recess.

SEE PAGE 15 COL 3

Shibir man held with Laden CDs

JMB threatens to blow up RU music department

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, Rajshahi

A Rab team from Rajshahi has arrested an Islami Chhatra Shibir activist in Pabna with video CDs containing al-Qaeda chief Osama bin-Laden's speech and armed training.

SEE PAGE 15 COL 6

Violence erupts in Mirpur as trader shot by toll-takers

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Criminals shot a businessman at Mirpur yesterday sparking angry protests by locals who damaged several vehicles and shops and disrupted vehicular traffic in the area for an hour.

The victim, Aftab Uddin, 45, general secretary of Mukta Bangla Shopping Complex at Mirpur Section-1, was admitted to Dhaka Medical College Hospital with

bullet wounds.

Aftab's family members alleged that local criminal Shahadat and his gang had earlier threatened to kill him for refusing to pay them Tk 10 lakh as extortion.

The same gang shot and killed another business leader of the area Kazi Shahidullah on August 12 this year as he refused to pay them toll, locals said.

Witnesses said two gunmen

SEE PAGE 15 COL 6

FERTILISER TRADERS' STRIKE No sign to end crisis over subsidy bills

REAZ AHMAD

With the fertiliser strike entering into second week amidst misery of farmers in the peak boro season, Agriculture Minister MK Anwar expressed surprise at finance ministry's reluctance to release the subsidy bills.

An inter-ministerial committee that included representative of the finance ministry cleared the bills months back.

The committee that cleared these bills against the subsidy dues

to fertiliser importers had representative of the finance ministry. Even if the finance ministry got any objections now, it should have at least let us know about that," Anwar told The Daily Star yesterday.

Anwar said his ministry had repeatedly pursued the finance ministry and wrote a letter to it on December 15 for hurrying the subsidy payments but to no avail as of yesterday.

Earlier, when the Bangladesh

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For details please see page 4