

WEST BANK Israel to expand settlements

AP, Jerusalem

Israel said yesterday it will build more than 200 new homes in Jewish West Bank settlements – a blow to peace efforts despite word that Ariel Sharon's new party plans a major push for Palestinian statehood if it wins upcoming elections.

In a separate sign of accommodation, Israeli officials said they will likely permit east Jerusalem's Palestinians to vote in next month's Palestinian election. Israel had recently threatened to bar east Jerusalem residents from voting.

The latest settlement construction, revealed in newspaper ads published Monday seeking bids from contractors, would violate Israel's commitments under the U.S.-backed "road map" peace plan.

The plans include a total of 228 homes in the settlements of Beitar Illit and Efrat both just outside Jerusalem.

The road map calls for a freeze on all settlement construction in the West Bank, which the Palestinians claim as part of a future independent state. Since accepting the plan in June 2003, Israel has continued to expand settlements. The Palestinians also have not carried out their road map obligation to disarm militant groups.

Raanan Gissin, spokesman for the prime minister, said plans for the latest construction began more than five years ago and would take place in existing communities. He also noted that the construction would be in settlements that Israel plans to retain after a final peace settlement with the Palestinians.

"These are the large settlement blocs, they will be strengthened," he said.

Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat condemned the expansion and urged the U.S. to intervene. U.S. Embassy spokesmen in Israel were not immediately available for comment.

The settlement plans came as Sharon's new political party, Kadima, signaled it is ready to hand over West Bank territory to the Palestinians and work toward an

Bangladesh

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pre-qualifying return-leg match at the People's Sports Complex Stadium in Karachi.

The first-leg in Dhaka on December 22 ended in a goalless draw.

Bangladesh also defeated Pakistan by an identical margin in the SAFF Championship semifinal at the same venue on December 14 before being dethroned by India.

Bangladesh's Argentine coach Diego Cruciani, banned by the Asian Football Confederation to sit on the bench for his argument with Indian referee Rizwan Ul-Haque after the first leg match in Dhaka, watched the match from the stands but was allowed to visit his charges during half-time in the dressing room.

Manager Sayeed Hassan Khan told The Daily Star Sport over phone that Bangladesh played better in the second half.

"Both sides played tough in the first half with very little chances created. But we dominated the second half and could have won by a wider margin had not Alfaz wasted a sitter and Abul missed a good chance," Kanan told after the match.

Bangladesh, who return home today, join Palestine, Sri Lanka, Chinese Taipei, India and debutant Australia in Pot D for the lowest seeded teams in the 24-team qualifiers.

Australia, who formally join the AFC on January 1, have been given the lowest rank as newcomers.

One team will be drawn in each of the six qualifying groups from each Pot at the draw at AFC House on January 4.

The qualifiers will begin on February 22. Top two teams from each group will make it to the finals.

The Asian Cup 2007 is scheduled to kick off on June 23 in Malaysia, Vietnam, Indonesia and Thailand, who all qualified automatically.

Bangladesh team: Aminul, Hassan Al Mamun, Rajani, Sujat, Titu, Abul (Kanchan), Joy, Munna (Parvez Babu), Ujjal, Alfaz (Arman Aziz) and Emily.

JMB's Rajshahi top

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the outlaws in Rajshahi region.

"He has never been involved with us (Jamaat). He is known as a Jamaat man because all the people in Bagmara in fact belong to Jamaat out of their love and dedication for Islam", said Joint Secretary of Bagmara Jamaat Abdul Halim.

Lutfar led the march of several thousand armed JMB cadres in Rajshahi on May 23 last year. He addressed a number of wayside meetings and handed over memorandums to Rajshahi DC, SP and DIG after the march.

He also chaired several meetings attended by Bangla Bhai at Bagmara and Atrai.

According to sources, Jamaat leader Lutfar along with Jatragachhi Fazil Madrasa teacher Abdus Sattar, owner of Bhawaniganj Clinic Dr Abdul Bari and former outlaw leader Mahtab Khamaru had been aiding and abetting Bangla Bhai in JMB's vigilante operations against Sarbarahas (out-lawed parties) since April last year.

The drives led by JMB chief Abdur Rahman and Siddikul Islam Bangla Bhai from their camps at Bheti Siddikia Madrasa in Atrai and house of Ramjan Kaya in Bagmara left some 22 people

independent Palestinian state after the March 28 elections. Opinion polls forecast a strong victory by Sharon's bloc.

Sharon left the hard-line Likud Party last month to form Kadima, saying he would have more freedom to negotiate a peace deal. Many Likud members remain furious with Sharon following his withdrawal from the Gaza Strip in September.

A draft of Kadima's election platform published Monday calls for conceding more land to the Palestinians as part of peace talks culminating in a Palestinian state. The talks would be based on the road map, which endorses a Palestinian state but says its borders must be reached through negotiations.

"The basic tenet of the peace process is two national states," says the platform. Party spokesman Lior Chorev said the draft, detailed in the Maariv daily, was expected to be approved by next week.

With the Gaza withdrawal, Sharon became the first Israeli leader to turn over captured territory to the Palestinians. Since leaving the Likud, the former patron of the settlement movement has made it clear that giving up more land, including parts of the biblical Land of Israel in the West Bank, is necessary to maintain a Jewish majority in Israel. More than 2 million Palestinians live in the West Bank.

The Kadima platform, which reflects views Sharon has expressed in the past, says Israel's existence "requires giving up part of the Land of Israel."

Still, the platform would fall short of Palestinian claims to all of Gaza, the West Bank and east Jerusalem territories captured by Israel in the 1967 Mideast war. The platform rules out any withdrawal from Jerusalem, which Israel claims as its eternal capital.

In a separate development, Israeli officials said the government may drop its opposition to allowing Palestinian residents of east Jerusalem vote in next month's Palestinian elections.

Israel threatened last week to bar voting in east Jerusalem since the Islamic group Hamas is participating a warning that infuriated the Palestinians.

Control of Jerusalem is one of the central disputes in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. An Israeli official said the government is now considering ways to allow the thousands of Palestinians living in east Jerusalem to vote, without infringing on Israel's sovereignty over the city.

The plan would probably allow some Palestinians to vote in post offices or outlying neighborhoods as they have in the past. The official spoke on condition of anonymity because the plan has not been approved yet.

Primary teachers

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conspicuously did not attend it.

They leaders warned that they will elect another president replacing Maifukul.

Meanwhile, Bangladesh Shikhhak Karmachari Oikya Parishad at a press conference yesterday announced a 17 point-demand, and 48-hour abstention from work in all educational institutions on January 18-19 to press its demands.

Akkas said told the rally 20 teachers wearing shrouds will lead the procession towards the PM's office. "They will not retreat even if law enforcers open fire on them."

A few thousand non-government primary school teachers from across the country attended the rally.

Akkas mentioned that the government did not meet their demand although the ruling BNPs election manifesto committed to nationalise the jobs of non-government primary school teachers.

Vice presidents of the association Solaiman Babul, Abu Bakar Siddique, Abdul Kader, Joint Secretary General Mahiuddin Khandoker and district unit presidents also spoke at the rally.

dead and scores of others mimed.

The killings and tortures would usually be planned by Rahman, Bangla Bhai, Lutfar, Sattar and Bari and executed by Rahman's brother Sunny, his [Rahman] son-in-law Abdul Awal, Abu Isa Enamul, Sheikh Enamul Haque Moni, Bangla Bhai's nephew Shahid, Mustak, Omar Faruk and many others.

Bangla Bhai had passed a number of judgments at the 'courts' run by Lutfar, said locals adding that even if someone was pardoned, he had to join the JMB.

After the August 17 countrywide blasts, law enforcement agencies have listed some 300 people including Lutfar, Sattar Master, Mahtab Khamaru and Abul Member as involved with the militant outfits. But later the names of those mentioned above were dropped from the list reportedly on orders from the home ministry.

A Rab team picked up Khamaru on November 27, but released him within hours following dictat of a deputy minister and BNP high-ups.

Militant

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JP Secretary General Sheikh Shahidul Islam said, "We don't have any specific information, but the government has. So they [the government] must act to curb the militants.

"We suggested that those who have been accused of militant links should resign from the government and the administration. A free and fair investigation is possible only if they stand down."

JP leader Sadek Siddiqui told the prime minister that the government should probe whether the political parties who are local chapters of international organisations are responsible for the rise of militancy.

On the first day of the dialogue, which began on December 12 amid boycott by the 14-party opposition alliance and pro-opposition professional bodies, Krishak Sramik Janata League suggested the prime minister purge ruling coalition partner Jamaat-e-Islami Bangladesh both from the government and the alliance for 'patronising the militant outfits'.

HM Ershad led Jatiya Party, the second largest opposition in parliament, on December 13 proposed a judicial probe commission headed by the chief justice be formed to probe the allegations of militant links against some quarters, be they inside or outside the government.

Besides Jamaat, allegations have been levelled against a number of cabinet members of having links to the militants.

SC Bar asks

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by the BNP-Jamaat leaders under the banner of a local madrasa committee at Fatikchhari upazila in Chittagong on September 9, he further commented that the incident of receiving reception by a judge from political elements is unprecedented.

"Faizee's involvement with political leaders and disputed activities have tarnished the image and dignity of the judges and judiciary. Running judicial functions by a person who has no certificate is tantamount to contempt of court," he added.

Reiterating the demand for Faizee's resignation, he also said there is no other alternative for protecting the dignity and image of the Supreme Court.

The lawyers' body of the apex court, on September 12, sent a letter requesting the president to rescind the order by which Justice Faizee was appointed an additional judge of the High Court and also requested the Chief Justice not to allocate any bench to him for his 'disputed activities'.

The SCBA has also been boycotting Justice Faizee's bench from October 30, 2004.

Bangladesh Bar Council, on April 24, cancelled the enrolment certificate (Advocate ship certificate) of Justice Faizee "for providing false information to the Bar Council".

Justice Faizee did not hold any hearing till April 10 this year from October 2004 as the Chief Justice had not allocated him bench following the SCBA's agitation programmes against him.

Tata investment

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bargaining, sources said.

The Tata team will sit with the government negotiation committee on January 7 and 8 to finalise the schedule and modalities of the fourth round negotiation.

The team will talk with the Ministry of Energy and Mineral Resources, Power Division, National Board of Revenue (NBR), and Petrobangla on January 15, 16 and 17.

The Tata team will again sit with the negotiation team for wrapping up the fourth round on January 22 and onwards.

The Board of Investment (BoI) finalised the schedule yesterday after consultation with the Tata representatives.

Communications Secretary Shafikul Islam will lead the government team while Tata Sons' Executive Director Alan Rosling will lead the Tata team.

The government earlier appointed five consultants to examine the pros and cons of different sub-issues in this connection.

The consultants will help the government determine gas and coal prices for the industrial giant's plants, investment incentive, process of land allocation, policy on open cast mining, power purchase and infrastructure development.

Tata Group on April 20 this year formally submitted a \$2.5 billion investment proposal for setting up a 1,000-MW power station, a steel mill with 4,20,000 tonne annual production capacity and a fertiliser unit with one million tonne capacity.

The Bangladesh 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 this year.

25 police stations

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lanes. Financed by Japan debt relief grant, the project is expected to complete by 2010.

The Ecneec meeting decided to conduct a study by foreign consultants to decide whether the existing two-lane road will be expanded to four lanes or a separate two-lane road will be built beside the existing highway.

"As we have no experience on this type of big project, huge money will have to be spent on foreign consultancy to conduct the study of the project," Saifur said.

Another project involving Tk 192 crore for expansion of renewable energy and solar home system was also approved by the meeting. Under the German-aided project, 1 lakh solar home systems will be installed in the remote areas.

The meeting also approved a project of Tk 37 crore for establishment of diabetes, endocrine and metabolic hospital for women and children at city's Segunbagicha.

The other projects include construction of a road from Zia Colony to Mirpur Cantonment at a cost of Tk 74 crore, completion of work on the incomplete bridges under upazila connecting road project at a cost of Tk 182 crore, and improvement of meteorological radar system at Cox's Bazar and Khepupara spend-

ing Tk 129 crore.

LGRD and Co-operatives Minister Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan, Health and Family Welfare Minister Khandaker Mosharraf Hossain, Communications Minister Nazmul Huda, Education Minister Osman Farruk and high officials of the ministries concerned were present at the meeting held at the National Economic Council (NEC) auditorium.

Boy kidnapped

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arrested three are all residents of Mirpur in Dhaka.

Police sources said Imtiaz, son of an expatriate in Japan Abdul Hasem Talukdar, was kidnapped from opposite his home at Mirpur Palash Nagar. The kidnappers later demanded Tk 20 lakh ransom from his mother Yasmin Talukdar.

The kidnappers took Imtiaz to the bus counter to take him to Dhaka and release him after receiving the ransom money which the mother had promised, police sources said.

Nilphamari police later yesterday handed Imtiaz over to Sub-inspector Jahangir Alam of Pallabi Police Station, investigation officer (IO) of the case. Imtiaz's uncle and cousin received him.

Illegal VoIP operators

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ministry not to award VoIP licence without having a national level common platform or bypassing its (BTB) national Internet gateway.

Without a common platform, the government cannot "watch over" the telecommunication network in the context of the world-wide rise of terrorism, the BTB argued to the telecoms ministry.

The BTB last month floated a Tk 25 crore tender for setting up the common platform. Three Chinese companies have submitted bids.

Sources however said the BTB is already facing some hitch over the tender process as a technical sub-committee for the bid has recommended re-tendering of the scheme. "If the Technical Evaluation Committee (Tec) for this tender can hold a meeting, we can expect a decision over the existing tender within a month," said a BTB official.

A top BTB official strongly argued against legalising VoIP before setting up the common platform. "The government's ICT Task Force in May had decided to operate VoIP through a common platform. The BTRC suggestion ignores that decision," he says.

He claimed that the BTRC suggestion also violates the telecom policy, 1998 and Bangladesh telecom-munications act, 2001 as those provide that through the BTB, the state will enjoy monopoly of international circuits.

Saifur denies

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that the committee that gave clearance to Tk 60 crore subsidy bills against imported fertiliser sold in the last fiscal year had representation of the finance ministry.

Both the agriculture ministry and strike enforcer Bangladesh Fertiliser Association (BFA) remained in dark as the finance ministry so far officially informed them about no objections regarding the long overdue subsidy bills.

As 3,000 fertiliser dealers across the country are running the risk of fast depleting stocks due to supply stoppage by BFA since December 19, an inter-ministerial meeting scheduled for tomorrow will try to resolve the deadlock, sources hinted.

Meanwhile, a meeting at agriculture ministry held to bring under 25 percent subsidy provision two lakh tonnes of recently imported (in October-November) non-urea chemical fertiliser -- triple super phosphate (TSP), murate of potash (MoP) and di-ammonium phosphate (DAP) ended inconclusively.

It seems that things would not improve until a solution comes from the finance ministry, BFA Chairman Kofluddin Ahmed said yesterday.

The current strike is in force at a time when the farmers apply 80 percent of their yearly fertiliser requirement to their boro, potato and other winter crops.

As the government introduced a 25 percent subsidy on imported fertilisers including TSP, MoP and DAP in the last fiscal year, importers started selling their imported stock at a 25 percent rebate with refund guarantee from the government.

The importers received Tk 171 crore of the allocated Tk 271 crore rebate. The rest has remained unpaid since last June.

As stocks of some 3,000 dealers across the country are depleting fast due to serious demand in this boro season, it is feared that supply stoppage for a few more days will cause a serious shortage of fertiliser, leading to the farmers' losses in yields.

Market sources said due to non-realisation of the subsidies, importers may stockpile nearly four lakh tonne of imported TSP, MoP and DAP in the warehouses and start

selling those without giving the 25 percent rebate.

Twenty five percent rise in fertiliser prices means that the farmers would have to pay Tk 850 for a 50-kg bag of MoP instead of Tk 595 that they pay now, for DAP Tk 1250 instead of Tk 841 and for TSP Tk 940 instead of Tk 700.

O U R S T A F F
CORRESPONDENT ADDS FROM CHITTAGONG:

Around two lakh tonne of imported fertilisers, some 25 percent of the country's total requirement during this peak season, have been lying at some forty godowns of Majhrihat in the port city for one week as the importers and dealers stopped delivery demanding payment of Tk 97 crore as subsidy.

Non-delivery of the fertilisers including TSP, MoP and DAP, which are carried to different areas of the country, already triggered the price hike of fertilisers in the wholesale market.

Heaps of imported fertilisers are also lying under the open sky due to non-availability of room in the godowns.

Bengal Biscuit

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babyfood, chocolates, mineral water, crisps and juice. Officials of the department store alleged two journalists had demanded that Pricelub should give them two free air tickets. "They threatened to send a mobile court to raid the shop if the demand was not met," said an official of the store.

They claimed two reporters of Bangla dailies showed up last week and demanded tickets for Dhaka-Singapore-Dhaka and Dhaka-Kathmandu-Dhaka flights.

The newsmen, who had left their visiting cards, had allegedly named a senior reporter of a renowned Bangla daily, as their leader.

The senior reporter, who was present during yesterday's drive, is very popular after publishing a series of reports in his daily.

He suggested that Pricelub authorities should catch and turn the reporters in to police if they come back again.

"I don't want to make a comment on this incident," said Magistrate Rokan Ud Doulah.

Remittance

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local people in a number of sectors where foreigners earlier got job in large number," State Minister for Expatriates Welfare Mohammad Quamrul Islam said.

He, however, said some other countries including Sudan, Nigeria, Jordan and Fiji islands, have recently opened their doors for Bangladeshi workers.

Many Bangladeshis went to work under the multinational companies in Sudan and more are in the process, he said.

The minister attributed the increase in remittance earning to new system for sending money quickly through official channels and increased number of skilled workers' going abroad.

The Expatriates Welfare Ministry also hopes that the number of workers going abroad will further increase as United Kingdom has agreed to hire seasonal workers from Bangladesh that has agreed on the terms and conditions set by the former, said a high official.

Besides, Malaysia is taking back those workers who once worked in that country and 1,500 such Bangladeshi workers already left for Kuala Lumpur.

Japan will recruit 28 trainee workers from Bangladesh, the official said, adding that South Korea has also agreed to hire 200 fresh workers from here.

Defence policy

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policy, Chief of Army Staff Lieutenant General Moeen U Ahmed said the officers' council has already channelled a lot of input into the work.

"It has had eight meetings and the draft will soon be completed," the committee chairman quoted the army chief as saying at the meeting.

The AFD informed the parliamentary body that the task has been taken in earnest. But it did not specify when it would be completed.

In a report submitted to the committee yesterday it also said the council is taking into consideration, among others, the constitution, foreign policy, international war policies, threat analysis, existing structure and the capacities of the armed forces, the parliamentary body chairman told reporters.

The operations of the country's armed forces are being hampered in absence of the defence policy, observed the parliamentary watchdog on defence ministry on December 17, 2003 and asked the AFD to initiate steps in co-ordination with the army, navy and air force to finalise a defence policy.

On having the consent of the prime minister, who also holds the defence portfolio, the AFD formed the 11-member council headed by a major general on February 14, 2004 to prepare the policy.

The council comprises an AFD representative equivalent to brigadier general, a brigadier general from the army, a commodore of navy, an air commodore of air force and representatives of the ministries of defence, foreign affairs, information, home affairs, law, justice and parliamentary affairs, sources said.

Cops taking

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But at Ameen Bazaar, where dozens of vessels were anchored and being unloaded, workers said that between Meghna river sand extraction point and Ameen Bazaar they are forced to pay the police at Munshiganj, Taltala and finally at Adabar point.

"Adabar is a new collection point of the police, which they set up after incidents of several robberies. They told us that if we do not pay, the police could not be held responsible for any robbery committed," said Jahangir Mia, master of a large vessel, adding that for each trip they make, they have to give the police Tk 300.

The Officer-in-Charge (OC) of Adabar Police Station, Nurul Amin said that he was completely unaware of such practices of his force. "I shall look into the matter and take action against the men," Amin said.

14-party

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Ahsanullah Master MP, judges, journalists and others.

The opposition's programmes will end with the Dhaka long march on January 22.

At the Paltan grand rally, Leader of the Opposition Sheikh Hasina warned that the opposition would enforce a series of tougher programmes, including indefinite hartals, if the alliance government stays in power after the current spell of street agitation.

3,422 acres

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directed the district administration to gear up the recovery rate."

He expressed the hope the encroached land could be recovered in a year if the district administration properly conduct the recovery drives.

Meanwhile, land ministry sources named some of the illegal occupants from whom the government recovered the land.

Government recovered several hundred acres of land from Partex Group and Rahat Real Estate in Gazipur, 560 acres of land from Orion Group in Mymensingh, and a slum in Gulshan.

Gas sickens 78 in Russian store

AP, St Petersburg, Russia

More than 70 people at a home-supply store were sickened yesterday as employees at three other outlets of the chain found gas-filled containers and timers hidden in boxes. Police said they believed a commercial dispute or blackmail attempt was behind the incidents.

A custodian at a branch of the Maksidom home-supplies chain found a suspicious box before the store's opening and saw ampules attached to wires and a timer when she opened it, said Vyacheslav Stepchenko, a spokesman for the St. Petersburg police. The woman inadvertently broke one of the ampules and noticed a bad smell, but was not sickened, he said.

Similar boxes with glass containers attached to timers were found in two other stores by employees, who carried them outside and covered them with buckets; police defused them, he said.

All the people who sought medical care were from a fourth branch of the chain, Stepchenko said. It was not immediately clear if a similar box had been discovered there, or if they had been affected by the same gas found at the three other branches.

A spokesman for the Emergency Situations Ministry, Viktor Beltsov, said 66 of 78 people who sought medical care were hospitalized, none with life-threatening conditions.

Stepchenko said 15 people were hospitalized. The discrepancy could not be immediately explained.

Officials of the store, which only has outlets in St. Petersburg, told police that they had received letters in recent weeks threatening to disrupt sales during the holiday gift-buying

period, Stepchenko said.

New Year's Eve is a traditional gift-giving day in Russia, the equivalent of U.S. Christmas celebrations.

Stepchenko said the gas appeared to be methyl mercaptan, a gas that smells like rotten cabbage. Methyl mercaptan is both naturally occurring and manufactured for use in plastics and pesticides, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry.

The agency's Web site said little is known about the gas's health effects. One person exposed to very high concentrations of the gas went into a coma and died, the Web site said.

Bombing kills 2 in Baghdad market

REUTERS, Baghdad

A parked motorbike loaded with explosives blew up in a market in a Shia neighbourhood of Baghdad near a funeral yesterday, killing at least two people and wounding 23 others, police said.

Police had initially reported the explosion as a suicide car bombing. It was unclear if the attack was aimed at the funeral, but bombers in Iraq have frequently targeted such events.

The attack followed at least four car bomb explosions in the Iraqi capital earlier on Monday, which left four people dead and 17 others wounded.

Violence has flared in Iraq in recent days after a lull in attacks during parliamentary elections nearly two weeks ago.

Safta accord

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this year, so that the accord comes into effect in due time and its enforcement is not hampered.

Official sources said the ratification of the agreement will be sent to the Saarc Secretariat, which will take further measures to complete its technical matters by next July.

The signing of the agreement two years ago was the culmination of a clear commitment the Saarc member states expressed in the Kathmandu Summit held in 2002 for the creation of the South Asian Economic Union.

The South Asian leaders at the 13th summit in Dhaka reaffirmed their commitment to implement the Safta on schedule. As part of the Dhaka Declaration, the Committee of Experts finalised the deal in its meeting on November 29-December 1.

The member states laid importance on Safta as the South Asian region is a big market of 1.3 billion people, which constitutes one-fifth of the world population.