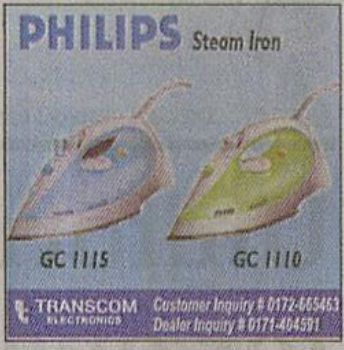




The Daily Star

SECOND EDITION

TODAY'S ISSUE 20 PAGES



COMMITTED TO
People's Right to Know

REGD. NO. DA 781

VOL. XVI NO. 31

DHAKA TUESDAY FEBRUARY 14, 2006

www.thedailystar.net

FALGUN 2, 1412 BS

MOHARRAM 14, 1427 HJRI

20 PAGES PLUS STAR LIFESTYLE PRICE: Tk 10.00

POLITICAL LINKS

HC bars judge Chunnun from judicial work for 2 weeks

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The High Court in an unprecedented move yesterday issued an injunction barring a divisional judge from judicial activities for two weeks following a writ petition alleging his involvement in politics.

The injunction came against Dhaka Divisional Special Judge Rezaul Karim Khan Chunnun who allegedly took part in several programmes of the ruling BNP and expressed his interest in contesting the next parliamentary elections. The High Court bench also issued a rule upon the government asking it to show cause in two weeks why it should not be asked to take action against the divisional judge for his alleged participation in political activities.

Supreme Court lawyer Khairul

SEE PAGE 11 COL 2

Top shots of Saarc central banks meet tomorrow

STAR REPORT

Top executives of the central banks of the Saarc countries meet in Dhaka tomorrow, when they will make recommendations on the utilisation of the 'Saarc Poverty Reduction Fund' that was formed in the 13th Saarc Summit held in Dhaka last year.

Saarc Finance, a platform of the central bank governors of the Saarc countries, is organising the meeting styled 'Saarc Finance Governors' Symposium on Microcredit'.

Professor Muhammad Yunus, managing director of Grameen Bank, the pioneer of microcredit programme, will present keynote paper in the symposium to be inaugurated by Finance and Planning Minister M Saifur Rahman.

SEE PAGE 11 COL 2

Fuel prices hiked by Tk 1 in North

Energy adviser terms surprise decision a compensation to traders

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

In a surprise move, the government yesterday hiked prices of diesel, petrol and octane by Tk 1 per litre in the fuel-hungry northern region to compensate traders due to increased carrying cost.

The decision was taken as traders are now carrying the petroleum products from Dhaka and Khulna instead of Baghabari in Sirajganj to the northern region in peak irrigation season.

The fresh hike will remain in force for 15 days and the govern-

ment will then review the situation.

"There is no scarcity of kerosene. But you bring diesel, petrol and octane to the northern region from wherever you can and charge Tk 1 more per litre," a desperate energy adviser Mahmudur Rahman asked fuel traders at an emergency meeting at his office.

The fuel price hike came at a time when the government is repeatedly assuring that there will be no immediate fuel price hike.

With reference to the government commitment to the IMF about adjusting petroleum prices,

Finance Minister Saifur Rahman told journalists yesterday that the latest government move did not mean raising fuel price from now. "Fuel price could be enhanced in six months or one year. It is not a static matter," he said.

Earlier, at a meeting in Moulvibazar late last month, Saifur had said, "We are not increasing oil prices at this moment."

Owners of filling stations and tank lorries and Bangladesh Petroleum Corporation (BPC) officials attended yesterday's

SEE PAGE 11 COL 7

Power-hungry people hem in Palli Bidyut office

UNB, Saikhira

About 1,000 people yesterday laid a siege to Patkelghata Palli Bidyut office protesting severe load-shedding and low voltage affecting irrigation to the Irri-boro fields.

Ignoring police barricade, the demonstrators held a rally in front of the bidyut office where peasant leaders demanded uninterrupted power supply for irrigation to the drying-up paddy plants.

Bidyut officials admitted they are supplying barely five to six megawatts against the demand of 30 megawatts.

The demonstrators said their pump machines were damaged due to low voltage. They also demanded withdrawal of General Manager G M Arif Ahmed of Patkelghata Palli Bidyut for re-imposition of the minimum charge

SEE PAGE 11 COL 6

Low gas supply downs RMG

UNB, Dhaka

Productivity of the readymade garment (RMG) industry has drastically gone down in the recent months due to inadequate supply of gas, industry sources said.

They claimed that the local products have been facing image crisis in the international market as the exporters are repeatedly failing to ship goods in time due to shortage of gas supply.

Amid such a situation, a delegation of Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) called on Energy Advisor, Mahmudur Rahman at his office yesterday.

The delegation requested the energy advisor to take immediate steps for uninterrupted supply of gas to RMG units.

"Productivity of our industry has been suffering badly due to inadequate gas supply and the crisis made our job difficult to complete export formalities in

SEE PAGE 11 COL 6



PHOTO: PID

Prime Minister Khaleda Zia speaks to her Pakistani counterpart Shaukat Aziz in a meeting at the Prime Minister's House in Islamabad yesterday.

Bilateral FTA to be finalised by Sept

Decide Dhaka, Islamabad; two PMs sign 4 MoUs

UNB, Islamabad

Pakistan and Bangladesh have agreed to finalise bilateral free trade area (FTA) agreement within the shortest possible time, by September at the latest, to create scope for easy access of Bangladeshi products to Pakistani market as a measure for reducing the existing trade gap.

Pakistan Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz disclosed the decision at a joint press conference immediately after official talks and the signing of MoUs at the Pakistan Prime Minister's House yesterday afternoon.

Both the prime ministers made press statements and answered questions

from reporters on the outcome of the talks.

Terming the bilateral meeting fruitful and effective, The Pak premier said they agreed to finalise the FTA soon, by the 30th of September, to increase trade relations between the two countries.

Replying to a question about duty-free access of Bangladeshi products to their market, Shaukat Aziz said Pakistan wants to take more goods from Bangladesh and the FTA will facilitate the process.

It was discussed at the bilateral talks that a Pakistani delegation led by its commerce minister will visit Bangladesh soon to make a successful FTA deal.

As Bangladesh side raised the matter of duty-free access of its

goods, the host side welcomes it, saying that now a number of items, including tea and jute, are being imported from Bangladesh.

About Safta ratification, Pakistan informed that they would soon ratify the Safta in their next cabinet meeting, likely this month.

Shaukat Aziz termed this bilateral visit of Bangladesh prime minister Khaleda to Pakistan historic as it took place after long 12 years. This visit is "really a turning point to take the existing friendly relations to a new height" in all sides of cooperation for wellbeing of the two peoples, he said.

During the official talks, Shaukat was quoted as saying: "Relation between Pakistan and

SEE PAGE 11 COL 7

A different scene in parliament

Treasury, opposition bench members show 'rare tolerance'

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The Jatiya Sangsad has not witnessed for a long time an atmosphere like yesterday's where the treasury bench and opposition members patiently listened to each other and shared views to make parliament more functional.

Instead of interrupting the opposite numbers as they usually do, lawmakers from either side contributed to the lively discussion.

There were allegations and counter-allegations but no one tried to stop others from speaking.

Referring to the speaker's performance, Deputy Leader of the Opposition Abdul Hamid said, "We are happy with the way you con-

ducted the House yesterday [Sunday]. We hope we'll get adequate time in future as well."

Both the ruling and opposition members requested the speaker to extend the current session to allow them more time in discussing the president's speech and other issues of national interest.

Deputy Speaker Akhtar Hamid Siddiqui, who was presiding over the sitting, told the House that the Business Advisory Committee (BAC) will meet on February 16 to make a decision in his regard.

Six Awami League (AL) lawmakers yesterday took the floor, raising points of order. They spoke without interruption by the chair or the ruling alliance lawmakers.

SEE PAGE 11 COL 6

Donors upbeat over AL's joining JS

UNB, Dhaka

Bangladesh's development partners, closely watching the pre-election political developments, feel encouraged to see the opposition party in parliament and hoped it would pave the way for free and credible general elections.

Spokesmen for the United States (US), the United Kingdom (UK) and the European Union (EU) in their separate observations to UNB said parliament is an excellent forum for dialogue and debate over policy issues.

A spokesperson for the US Embassy said, "We are encouraged by the decision of the Awami League to attend the current parliamentary session and to exercise, not surrender, their democratic rights."

In a similar observation, a spokesperson for the British High Commission said, "We welcome the opposition party's return to

SEE PAGE 11 COL 5

Resolve reforms issue during govt's tenure

Suggest 3 former caretaker govt advisers

SHAKHAWAT LITON

In the wake of the latest developments concerning the opposition's reform proposals, three former advisers of the caretaker government yesterday stressed the need for resolving the issue through discussion during the tenure of the present government.

The political climate will remain uncertain and the democratic process will be hampered if the crisis is not resolved before the next caretaker government takes office, they cautioned.

"We hope both the government and the opposition will reach a consensus on the proposed reforms in the caretaker government and electoral systems in the best interests of the people. Their failure to do so will pitch the coun-

try into a potentially explosive situation," SM Shajahan, former adviser to the caretaker government, told The Daily Star yesterday.

Alongside making suggestions on how to strengthen the Election Commission (EC) and electoral rules, the three former advisers—Major General (retired) Moinul Hossain Chowdhury, M Hafizuddin Khan and SM Shajahan—opposed the existing constitutional provision that allows the president to hold the defence portfolio during the rule of caretaker government.

Apparently responding to the government's call, Leader of the Opposition Sheikh Hasina on Sunday placed in parliament the reform proposals and said those are vital for the elections to be

SEE PAGE 11 COL 4

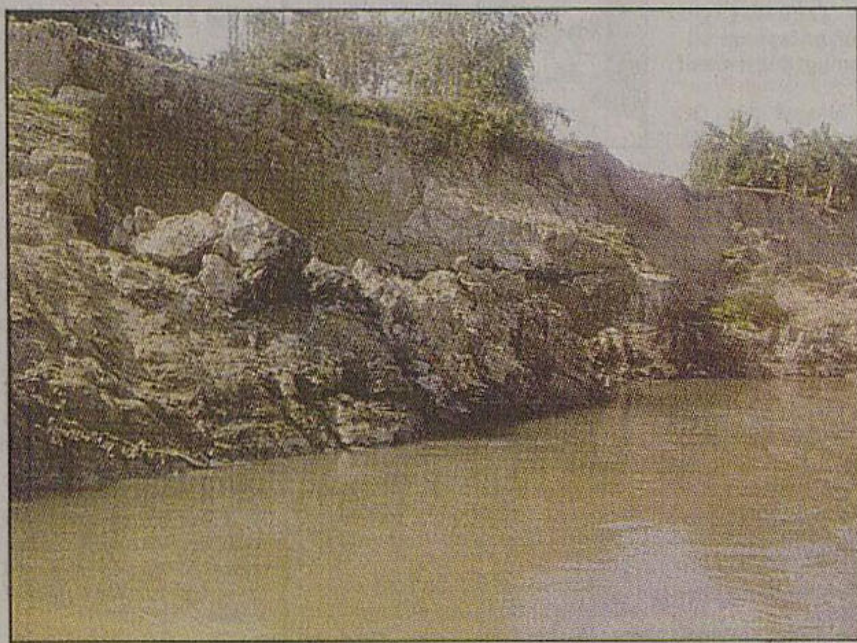


PHOTO: STAR

The Hakaluki haor in Sylhet lies only 200 metres from this eroding bank of the Kushiya. The river may merge with the haor, if erosion continues.

Hakaluki haor faces ecological disaster

Kushiya river just 200m away, posing risk of joining

IQBAL SIDDIQUEE, Sylhet

The Hakaluki haor in Sylhet is facing ecological disaster as the Kushiya river poses possibility of merging with the vast water body if it erodes just about 200m land at Kodupur and Basantapur in Golapganj upazila.

As the fallout of this possible joining, several thousand acres of Irri-Boro land may also be lost during the dry season.

Sources said the Bangladesh Water Development Board (BWDB) here sent a Tk 9.26 crore project to the water resources ministry last year to check the erosion, which continues even during

the dry season.

BWDB Executive Engineer in Sylhet Fokhrul Islam said the project to save some 1,600m riverbank in Kodupur-Basantapur area was sent to the ministry last year, but "the project is yet to be approved."

Privatisation Commission Chairman Enam Ahmed Chowdhury also sent letters to the secretary to the water resources ministry, the BWDB director general and other high officials after visiting the area in 2003, requesting for immediate steps to check the large-scale erosion.

SEE PAGE 11 COL 4



PINAKI ROY

ICT has proved a boon even for drug peddlers. A drug addict no longer needs to risk the hazards of going to drug dens to buy the stuff. One now simply calls a certain cellphone number, places the order, fixes a rendezvous and within a short while gets his daily dose delivered there. If one wants, he or she can get home delivery too. All is done in a neat, inconspicuous way, hard for law enforcers to detect.

Phensedyl is now available on

Drug running goes mobile

mobile-phone order in the city's Dhanmondi, Mohammadpur, Kalyanpur, Jatrahari, Gulshan, Uttara and Old Dhaka. In posh city areas like Dhanmondi, Gulshan, Banani, Baridhara and Uttara, drug abusers can buy Phensedyl, Yaba, Ecstasy, cocaine or any injecting drug from cellphone peddlers. Pool halls, snooker clubs and cyber cafes, where upper-class youths gather most, are among the most common delivery places, especially of Yaba tablets that mainly come from Thailand and Myanmar.

"Once Shahinbagh near Mohakhali was the hub of Yaba peddling. But, now you do not need to know the spot or go there, they will deliver you Yaba if you just phone them," said an addict, who used to take the pill quite often. "You also can buy the tablet from a few spots in Dhanmondi, Mohammadpur Geneva Camp and

Agargaon for Tk 200 to Tk 300," he added.

Last Thursday evening a mobile-phone peddler was seen in Dhanmondi delivering three bottles of Phensedyl carried in his socks. He came from Kalyanpur to deliver the bottles, a Phensedyl addict said, adding the usual price is Tk 350 a bottle.

Officials of the Department of Narcotics Control (DNC), the police, Detective Branch and Rapid Action Battalion claimed drug running in the city has reduced much after they made away with the notorious drug spots. But this correspondent visited and found more than 10 drug dens running smoothly, in some cases even in presence of the police.

"Law enforcers have destroyed most of the notorious drug spots in the city. Now they [drug lords] have become extra-careful and most of

SEE PAGE 11 COL 4

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