

14-party rally at Paltan today

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The Awami League (AL)-led 14-party combine holds a 'grand rally' today at Paltan Maidan in the capital amid tight security with some 6,500 police personnel, including the Armed Police Battalion, deployed to avert any violence during or after the rally.

The Dhaka Metropolitan Police (DMP) also announced an indefinite ban last night on carrying sticks, oars or any substance that threatens the security of the public to any rallies or public meetings, says a DMP press release.

The ban has been imposed under the DMP ordinance to "ensure peace and protect public property" ahead of the 14-party grand rally, the press release adds.

Bangladesh Rifles will be on alert and the Rapid Action Battalion (Rab) will also keep a close eye on the proceedings, with plain-clothes police personnel taking video footages of the rally to later identify any attackers in case of any violence.

The BNP-led 4-party alliance is also scheduled to hold a 'grand rally' at the same place tomorrow.

Potato farmers feel blockade pinch

RAFIQ HASAN, back from Munshiganj

Munshiganj potato farmers face a tough time this winter as seed prices have almost doubled because of frequent blockading of ports, roads and railways by the 14-party alliance since October. Seeds are also difficult to get.

"We bought a 50 kg box of imported seeds at Tk 5,500-6,000 compared to Tk 3000-3500 per box last year," said Mohammad Afazuddin, a farmer in Alpara union of the district.

Farmers have had to resort to moving from door to door to find seeds. They have also been forced to pay whatever price was required for quality seeds, according to sources said. The price of imported seeds, however, fell drastically at the end of the 20-day sowing period, which lasts from mid

November to the first week of December, the farmers said.

The Bangladesh Agriculture Development Corporation (BADC) supplied 18,750 tons of seeds, which makes up fifty per cent of the districts total requirements. The remainder are imported from abroad. A syndicate of 20-22 importers import potato seeds from mainly the Netherlands who have this year charged exorbitant prices.

The BADC has no potato seed farms in the district and most of the seeds come from Northern districts like Rangpur, Dinajpur and Kushtia. The transport of local seeds was also hampered this year due to road, rail blockade programme, the farmer said. Although the district produces 40 percent of the total potatoes produced in the country, it also lacks adequate preserving facilities and seed producing farms.

Considering that the price for potatoes in 2006 was the highest in

30 years, farmers were extremely enthusiastic about cultivating potatoes this year, with the expectation of a good profit. Talking to journalists from numerous national dailies on Sunday, the potato farmers in the Munshiganj district said they had cultivated more land this year than in previous years in the hope for a good price. Yet the scarcity in potato seeds has frustrated farmers efforts to produce a large yield.

"This years potato price was the highest it has been in the last 30 years, as we sold it at Tk 500 per pound," Afazuddin said. "But to recover the losses from previous years, we need a good price for at least another five years," he pointed out. "Earlier, farmers never got more than Tk 300 by selling per pounds potato", Abdus Sobhan, another farmer from the

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FALL IN WATER LEVEL

50 vessels stuck in Jamuna shoals

UNB, Sirajganj

About 50 cargo vessels carrying coal, fertilisers and clinkers have remained stranded on the Jamuna river in the northern region since Friday due to a sharp fall in its water level.

Fuel-carrying tankers are finding it extremely difficult to approach Baghabari river port due to the navigation problem, official and local sources said.

Rivers and rivulets in the region are getting dry before the advent of the dry season, disrupting communications between Baghabari and other river ports, a port source said.

At least 47 vessels have run aground and remained stuck-up on underwater shoals at various points along the Jamuna route, including Nakalia and Koitola in Pabna.

These water vessels include 35 fertiliser-laden and five clinker cargoes and seven fuel-carrying tankers.

These vessels had left for

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PHOTO: STAR

BNP brings out a victory procession from Bijoynagar intersection in the capital yesterday.

Vegetables traders start 3-day strike to protest price manipulation

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Vegetables retailers of Dhaka metropolitan area yesterday started a three-day strike protesting "weight and price manipulation" by wholesalers.

"We have stopped buying goods from wholesalers in the metropolitan area from today [yesterday] as they sell goods at a high price, force us to buy rotten products and assault us if we refused to buy those or protest weight and price manipulations," said Anwar Hossain Sikder, president of Dhaka Metropolitan Fish and Perishable Products' Small Business Association, which enforced the strike.

Retailers will not buy products from any of the five to six large wholesale kitchen markets during the strike, he said.

The members and leaders of the association, which has 60,000 members, staged a protest rally in front of Karwan Bazar kitchen market yesterday in a bid to realise their five-point demand. The members of the association yesterday allegedly prevented retailers from buying vegetables from Karwan Bazar. They also threatened to go one an indefinite strike from December 25 if their demands were not met by then.

Their demands include the end of retail selling of goods from storages, end of selling fish that have chemicals in them and only BSTI approved weight bars be used for weighing goods.

The association also enforced a similar strike against fish wholesalers yesterday and stopped buying

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PHOTO: STAR

Karwan Bazar kitchen market in the capital looks deserted yesterday as retailers go on a three-day strike protesting the wholesalers' weight and price manipulation.

Air pollution kills 5 lakh a year in Asian cities

Reveal ADB studies

AFP, Manila

Air pollution is killing more than half a million people in Asian cities each year and shows no sign of improving as urban centres expand, studies by the Asian Development Bank show.

A recent ADB conference in Indonesia, was told that air pollution had reached "serious" levels in several Asian cities, with the problem worsening due to increased urbanisation and motor vehicle use.

World Health Organisation (WHO) expert Michal Krzyzanowski said that the esti-

mate of premature deaths caused by urban air pollution has been revised upwards to over 750,000 globally, including more than 530,000 in Asia.

Experts cited the increase in an air pollutant known as fine particulate matter or PM10 that "enters the lungs and stays there."

PM10 is a result of burning fossil fuels and much of the PM10 in Asian cities is emitted by motor vehicles, the experts said.

"The concentration of the fine particulate matter is serious in Beijing, Dhaka, Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City, Jakarta, Kathmandu, Kolkata,

New Delhi, and Shanghai," the ADB warned in a report.

"There is a strong association between fine particulate matter and health issues in Asia as there is in Europe and the US, but in Asia the concentrations of particulates are much higher," said the report's author, Dieter Schwela.

In many cities, the concentration of PM10 exceeds 70 micrograms per cubic meter. New WHO guidelines say this should be lower than 20 micrograms per cubic meter.

Bringing the level down to the guidelines could lower the number

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UAE to spend \$8.3m to rehabilitate camel jockeys

AFP, Dubai

The United Arab Emirates said yesterday it has set aside more than eight million dollars for the rehabilitation of children used as camel jockeys, under an accord with the UN children's fund.

The UAE government has allocated 30 million dirhams (8.3 million dollars) "to assure that all underage jockeys who were employed in the UAE receive salaries and severance compensation," an official statement said.

It said the funds would also be used "for health care, education and other services as appropriate through partners in their home communities" over a two-year period to allow their reintegration

into the family and society.

More than 1,000 underage camel jockeys have been repatriated since an accord was signed with the United Nations children's fund UNICEF in May 2005 that has been extended to May 2009, according to the statement.

The accord banned the use of children under 16 or weighing less than 45 kilograms (100 pounds) for camel racing, a national sport in the oil-rich Gulf Arab monarchies.

Most cases involve children from Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. Dire poverty and lack of jobs back home drives millions of Asian nationals abroad each year to send money back to their families.

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Nizami blames TVs for boosting 14-party movement

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Jamaat-e-Islami Ameer Matiur Rahman Nizami yesterday blamed the electronic media for helping "shape" the 14-party alliance's movement into the present form by broadcasting different incidents live on TV.

He said Bangladesh has immense potential and has achieved a lot but broadcasting negative news is putting those aside.

Speaking at an exchange of views meeting with journalists at a city hotel, he said the present political crisis was created to bring a particular party to power.

He also expressed his resentment towards eminent citizens of the country saying they have put the caretaker government under question.

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Tarique to run from Bogra-7

UNB, Dhaka

A few parties are conspiring to thwart the election as they have no trust on people. Even they have no faith on the government, administration, Election Commission, police and the army," said BNP Secretary General Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan at a rally in front of the party's central office.

Following persistent request from party activists, BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia yesterday declared nomination of her elder son and party's Senior Joint Secretary General, Tarique, to contest the polls from Bogra-7 constituency in his paternal place.

A good number of leaders and

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Derailed train snaps links with Sylhet for 7hrs

UNB, Sylhet

They threatened to paralyse the northern region with tough programmes if Ershad is barred to participate in the coming parliamentary election.

All commercial complexes in Rangpur town and seven upazila headquarters of the district remained closed while vehicles remained off the streets. Attendance at all offices was thin and transaction at the banks remained suspended.

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JP enforces hartal in N-districts

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Rangpur

The dawn-to-dusk hartal imposed by Jatiya Party (JP) in five northern districts passed with a few untoward incidents as party activists burnt several motorbikes and a truck in Rangpur and Lalmonirhat towns yesterday.

JP leaders of Rangpur district unit at a rally in the afternoon protested Thursday's High Court verdict that sentenced JP Chairman HM Ershad to two years' imprisonment in a Japanese boats

purchase case.

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