

Pak envoy meets Hasina

UNB, Dhaka

Pakistan High Commissioner Alamgir Babar yesterday called on Awami League (AL) President Sheikh Hasina at Suda Sadan and discussed the latest political developments in Bangladesh.

Emerging from the meeting that lasted for about one and half hours, the Pak envoy told reporters that they discussed the latest political developments.

Replying to a question regarding the timeframe of the general election, the high commissioner said the AL president talked about holding the election as soon as possible.

AL International Affairs Secretary Syed Abul Hossain, who was present at the meeting, told journalists that the high commissioner came to greet Hasina as her son Sajib Wazed Joy was nominated as one of 250 individuals for Global Young Leader-2007.

In reply to a query, he said it is good to have the election as early as possible. "In order to avoid an adverse public reaction, the election should be held before the positive reaction prevailing since the formation of this caretaker government takes a reverse turn."

Slum evictions slammed

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Different political and human right bodies yesterday condemned the caretaker government's initiative to demolish slums and evict hawkers without providing them alternative housing and earning sources.

Leaders of four organisations -- Ain O Salish Kendra (ASK), Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust (BLAST), Coalition for Urban Poor (CUP) and Bangladesh Environmental Lawyers Association (Bela) -- yesterday met the Law Adviser Barrister Mainul Hossain and jointly submitted a memorandum to him.

They said thousands of people have already plunged into plight due to the campaign, a press release said.

Sultana Kamal, executive director of ASK, and Taslimur Rahman, executive director of BLAST, met Mainul Hossain on behalf of the organisations.

They urged the caretaker government to stop the campaign and arrange for alternative rehabilitation for the slum dwellers and alternative income sources for the evicted hawkers.

In the memorandum, they expressed concern over the eviction of slum dwellers without maintaining proper procedure.

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Fire burns Tk 1.5cr mill goods

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Manikganj

A huge fire yesterday burned down a cotton mill in an industrial area at Golora in Manikganj and caused Tk 1.5 crore worth of damages.

The fire was started by an electrical short-circuit at around 5:30am. Three fire units from Manikganj, Ghior and Savar EPZ brought the fire under control at 10:00am, fire service sources said.

Cold claims 7 lives in Satkhira

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Satkhira

The cold spell claimed seven more lives in Tala upazila on Tuesday with hundreds of others suffering from the harsh conditions.

The victims were named as Anima Rishi, 75, from Khanpur village, Jalal Uddin, 65, Kamruzzaman, 88, Bhanu Bibi, 87, Amena Begum, 68, and Ayesha Khatun, 64, from Magura village and Santosh Chakraborty, 80, from Bhaira village in Tala upazila.

Prayer Timing		
January 25		
	Azan	Jamaat
Fajr	5-35	6-10
Zohr	12-45	1-15
Asr	4-15	4-30
Maghrib	5-46	5-50
Esha	7-15	7-45
Source: Islamic Foundation		

Japan calls Bush 'wrong' on Iraq policy

AFP, Tokyo

Japan's defense minister yesterday said US President George W. Bush was wrong to invade Iraq and warned that Tokyo could not automatically renew its air force mission to the war-torn country.

The rebuke from one of Washington's closest foreign allies came hours after an embattled Bush used his annual State of the Union address to plead for public support to send more troops to Iraq.

"Mr. Bush went ahead in a situation as if there were nuclear weapons, but I think that decision was wrong," Defense Minister Fumio Kyuma said of the 2003 invasion.

Japan's former prime minister Junichiro Koizumi, a close friend of Bush, strongly supported the invasion and took the landmark step of deploying Japanese troops to Iraq.

Koizumi withdrew the troops last year before leaving office. But Japan has continued to deploy its air force, which hauls personnel and goods into Iraq for the US-led coalition and the United Nations.

Kyuma, who has repeatedly criticized US policy over Iraq, said Japan had not decided whether to extend the mission when it expires in July.

"We must look very carefully at what the United Nations will continue to request from Japan. Just because the US decided to reinforce troops does not mean that

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Paribesh Bachao Andolan, an environmentalist group, organises a musical programme on a boat at Jinzira of Keraniganj yesterday, welcoming the recent government move to evict land grabbers from parts of the Buriganga.

Iran vows to crush any military threat

AFP, Tehran

Iran's defence minister vowed yesterday that the country's armed forces would "crush" any military strike or threat, the latest broadside in a standoff with the West over its nuclear ambitions.

"The Islamic republic's armed forces are in a state of complete readiness and are monitoring everything in order to give a crushing response to even the smallest aggression or threat," Defence Minister Mostafa Mohammad Najjar was quoted as saying by the ISNA news agency.

Najjar also urged the administration of US President George W. Bush to be "rational" with Iran, amid speculation that Washington could be planning a strike on its nuclear installations.

Jt forces seize 3,851 sacks of fertiliser

3 hoarders held

STAR REPORT

Joint forces led by the army during their drive against fertiliser hoarders in Thakurgaon and Khulna recovered at least 3,851 sacks of fertiliser, sealed off a warehouse and arrested three people.

The raids took place within 48 hours till last night, reports our Dinajpur correspondent.

After receiving information on fertiliser hoarding, the law enforcement agencies raided a warehouse owned by one Osman Gani at Hajipara under Thakurgaon Sadar upazila and recovered 50 kilogram sacks of at least 2,319 sacks of fertiliser, said police sources in Thakurgaon.

The owner of the warehouse fled the scene before the joint forces

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RAPE CHARGE

Israeli president urged to resign, asks for leave

AP, Jerusalem

Israeli President Moshe Katsav, facing charges of rape and abuse of power, asked parliament yesterday to temporarily remove him from office in an effort to blunt growing calls for his resignation.

Katsav has been under intense pressure to quit since Attorney-General Meni Mazuz notified him Tuesday that he planned to indict him on a rash of charges after a monthslong investigation into allegations by four women who worked for him.

The president, who has not commented publicly on the impending charges, stopped short of resigning, which would deprive him of the immunity he enjoys while in office.

Instead, he asked parliament's House Committee to grant his request for a leave of absence that could last up to three months, according to parliamentary spokesman Giora Pordes.

Under Israeli law, the parliamentary panel must approve such a

request. It will convene to discuss it Thursday, Pordes said.

The 61-year-old Katsav has insisted he is innocent of any wrongdoing. Mazuz said that before officially pressing charges, he would give the president an opportunity to plead his case.

Katsav, whose seven-year term is to end this summer, has previously said he would quit if indicted.

Legal authorities have said the charges could carry a sentence of more than 20 years in prison.

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US envoy for quick polls

DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENT

US Ambassador in Dhaka Patricia Butenis yesterday stressed the need for creating an atmosphere conducive to holding a free, fair and credible election as soon as possible.

"I stressed to the adviser that my government is counting on his government to establish conditions for free, fair and credible elections as soon as possible," she said.

Talking to diplomatic correspondents following a courtesy call on Foreign Affairs Adviser Dr Iftekhar Ahmed Chowdhury, the US envoy said the incumbent caretaker government took some encouraging steps so far, and added, "But ... I emphasise, I think Bangladesh has a proud tradition of democracy and no one wants to see that tradition interrupted or in any way damaged."

She said the caretaker administration has to remain focused on

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WORLD SOCIAL FORUM

Four Nobel winners echo demand for debt relief

SHAKHAWAT LITON from Nairobi, Kenya

Four Nobel peace laureates joined the ongoing World Social Forum (WSF) 2007 meet in Nairobi, Kenya and urged for equitable distribution of resources and allocation of more money in health and education, instead of military expenditure, to make the world a better place to live in.

Nobel peace laureates Desmond Tutu, Dr Shirin Ebadi, Prof Wangari Maathai and Jody Williams, who spoke at seminars on various issues in Moi International Sports Centre in Nairobi, promised to use their positions to fight for justice and peace in the world.

The Nobel laureates also demanded of the western countries and international financial institutions that they write off the debts of developing countries so that they can allocate more money to eliminate poverty.

They also said they will use their positions to highlight the plight of women and noted that women have been at the forefront of advocating peace in their countries.

Iranian rights activist Dr Shirin Ebadi, winner of the Nobel peace prize in 2003, said peace in the world will come only if the world put in more money into education and health.

"If we increase the sums that we spend on education and health rather than the enormous budgets that we have for military equipment, then the world would be a better place to live in," said Dr Ebadi.

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POLITICAL APPOINTMENT

19 directors still serve Petrobangla companies

STAR REPORT

At least 19 persons appointed on political considerations between 2005 and 2006 by the immediate past four-party alliance government are still serving as directors in nine different affiliates of Petrobangla.

In addition to this, there are five other directors on contract--also appointed on political considerations--who lost jobs after the caretaker government took over power.

There are 59 posts of director in the nine affiliates of Petrobangla, which annually fetches the government more than Tk 3,000 crore revenue.

Out of eight directors of Titas Gas Transmission and Distribution Co Ltd, the former government appointed five on political grounds.

Four of them are Md Shah Alam, director general of Prime Minister's Office, MA Momen, president of Dhaka Chamber of Commerce and

Industries, Emdadul Haq, an industrialist, and Abdul Hafiz Chowdhury, former vice president of Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce.

Recently, the caretaker government cancelled the contract of Maj Gen (retd) Imam Uz Zaman, chairman of Bangladesh Chemical Industries Corporation (BCIC), who was also appointed on political grounds.

In Bakhraabad Gas Systems Ltd, the alliance government appointed three of the seven directors. Two of them--Dr Salehuddin Mohammad Anisuzzaman, professor of public administration at University of Dhaka, and Abul Kashem Haider, vice president of Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FBCCI)--are still serving.

The third politically appointed person was M Nazrul Islam, former director (finance) of Petrobangla,

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Business leaders demand weekend on Sunday

UNB, Dhaka

Industries Adviser Geeteara Safiya Choudhury yesterday said she will convey to the council of advisers the business community's demand for shifting the weekend to Sunday.

"As I'm from the private sector, I do feel the necessity of the change," she told reporters after a meeting with a delegation of the Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FBCCI) in the conference room of the Ministry of Industries.

The delegation, led by FBCCI President Mir Nasir Hossain, argued that the businesses in Bangladesh remain virtually disconnected with the global business community by 2-3 days due to the differences of weekly holidays.

BDR pushes back 16 to India

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Satkhira

Bangladesh Rifles (BDR) pushed back 16 Bengali speaking Indian nationals including seven children into India whom Indian Border Security Force (BSF) had pushed into Bangladesh on Tuesday through the border village of Keragachhi in Kalara upazila.

BDR personnel picked up the Indian nationals in the nearby village of Kakdanga soon after BSF pushed them into Bangladesh. BDR then pushed them back into India through Charabari village at around 10:00pm, BDR sources said.

The Indians said they have Indian ration cards with identity and they had been living in Hassanpur village under Lalbagh thana in Murshidabad, India for the last 25 years.

BDR has been put on alert in the bordering areas of Kakdanga as tension was mounting. BDR has been ordered to "resist any further push in attempt at any cost," said Lt Col Asif Abdur Rouf, commanding officer (CO) of 41st Rifles Battalion.

Indian border guards are also on alert and they reinforced their strength along the border, said sources.

BB directs Oriental Bank to sue corrupt officials

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Bangladesh Bank (BB) yesterday, following instruction from government high-ups, sent a letter asking Oriental Bank Ltd to file criminal cases against the people found guilty in a BB investigation in connection with the misappropriation of Tk 595 crore.

On Tuesday, the central bank in a letter asked Oriental Bank to file criminal cases against Obaidul Karim, chief of the Orion Group, Koyes Sami, ex-managing director of the bank, and 21 other present and former officials of the bank.

Sources said the Oriental Bank management is consulting their

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A mobile court fines Candle Light Thai-Chinese Restaurant at Dhanmondi in the capital Tk 1 lakh yesterday for unhygienic kitchen environment.