

Empower grassroots people to strengthen local govt

Experts tell roundtable

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Democracy without representation of people at grassroots level remains fragile, said the experts at a roundtable yesterday.

So the present government, which has initiated reforms in local government, should ensure representation of grassroots people in local government institutions, they added.

The roundtable was organised by Local Government Policy Advocacy Forum (PAF) in association with DemocracyWatch, Democratic Local Government Programme, RTI International and USAID at Cirdap auditorium in the city.

At the roundtable, PAF also put forward recommendations for

reforms in the local government institutions that it prepared in consultation at the divisional level.

"If we really want reforms and create a true democratic environment in the country, we should go for participatory democracy and ensure representatives' accountability to people," said Prof Muzaffer Ahmad.

Many are talking about autonomy of the local government institutions, but it will not work if the backward people are not represented there, he said, adding that 40 percent people of the country are poor and it is 60 percent in case of rural areas.

Prof Ahmad said it is important to make clear how the local government will be financed.

The central government may collect all types of taxes and allocate a percentage of it to local govern-

ment, he noted.

Chairing the roundtable, Prof Ahmad said services like education, health and even land use plan of respective areas could be brought under the local government.

"Local government is not a mechanical issue. For its transformation, we need to change our mindset," he observed.

Local Government Strengthening Committee Member Dr Badiul Alam Majumder said strengthening local government means empowering local people, but unfortunately power has been centralised.

"Local government system should get a new shape," he said, adding that these institutions should be given functionaries and finance from the central govern-

ment and necessary autonomy to solve the local problems locally.

Vested interests of UP chairmen, lawmakers and political parties in the local government institutions should be curbed for the sake of the interest of people and democracy, he added.

Another member of the committee Prof Dilara Chowdhury said a mechanism should be there to elect honest people as the representatives in the local governments.

"Specific strategies should also be formulated to ensure transparency of local government institutions," she said.

Speaking as chief guest at the roundtable, Local Government Division Secretary Safar Raj Hossain said the government is interested in allowing the local governments to work independently for solving their problems at local level.

Gazi Khorshed Alam, chairman of Purnimagati union in Sirajganj district, and AKM Mozammel Haque, chairman of Gazipur Municipality, presented the recommendations on reforms of local government institutions.

They recommended cancellation of all the laws in the local government institutions that contradict the constitution and stop intervention of the lawmakers in the activities of the local government.

Democracywatch Executive Director Taleya Rehman, Dr Tofael Ahmed of Chittagong University, and Tongi Municipality Chairman Advocate Azmatullah Khan also spoke at the programme moderated by Prof Dr Salahuddin Aminuzzaman of Dhaka University.



A roundtable on reforms of local government was held at Cirdap auditorium in the city yesterday. Sitting from right are Prof Muzaffer Ahmad, Local Government Division Secretary Safar Raj Hossain, Prof Dr Salahuddin Aminuzzaman and Democracywatch Executive Director Taleya Rehman.

VOLUNTARY RETIREMENT SCHEME Biman starts making payments to staffs

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Biman Bangladesh Airlines Ltd. yesterday started making payments to its officials and employees who took voluntary retirement.

A total of 1,877 staffs took voluntary retirement under a scheme offered by Biman on June 5 before the national flag carrier was made a public limited company.

A total of 100 employees received 70 percent of the pension benefit yesterday, Biman sources said. The remaining amount will be given later in two phases.

But the retired employees alleged that the Biman authorities are paying less than the amount they promised to pay under the Voluntary Retirement Scheme (VRS).

They also threatened to stage an indefinite hunger strike in front of the Biman's head office if they

are not paid as per the VRS payment offer.

Biman officials, however, dismissed the allegations as false.

A total of 2162 officials and employees applied for voluntary retirement after Biman announced the scheme, but the authorities accepted the 1877 applications.

"They (Biman authorities) are paying us less than what they had offered to pay," Mohammad Solaiman, who took voluntary retirement, told The Daily Star yesterday.

"The authorities are depriving us of earned leave benefit as well as festival bonus and medical allowances," said Mazhar Uddin, another retired employee.

However, Biman administration assured the retired employees to pay leave and other benefits with the third installment.

Payment of the provident fund will begin on August 5, said a

Saarc technical body meet begins today

BSS, Dhaka

The second meeting of Saarc technical committee on women, youth and children begins at Hotel Sheraton in the city today.

This committee was formed in 2001 and Bangladesh is the current chair of the committee, said a press release.

Secretary of the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs Rokeya Sultana will inaugurate the meeting. Representatives of Saarc member states, including Afghanistan are joining the meeting.

The member states will launch a first-ever primer on gender initiatives within Saarc that was developed by the experts from the member states with support from UNIFEM.

The primer, for the first time, brings together innovative practices on gender mainstreaming and potential of such practices for replication across the region.

The meeting would also review progress in implementation of the decisions taken at its first meeting.

In 1996, the Saarc leaders had launched the 2001-2010 decade as "Saarc Decade of the Rights of the Child". The experts would evaluate the progress achieved by respective member countries as well as the region on realising various goals of the decade.

The meeting will also review progress in preparation of a Saarc gender database.

Bangladesh will brief on the first-ever Saarc Youth Camp in the meet. It was decided in the 14th Saarc Summit in Delhi to organise Saarc Youth Camp every year across member states to connect generations of South Asian Youth.

It is expected that the Saarc Youth Camp will be held in November in Dhaka, the release added.

Minor quake jolts Ctg

UNB, Dhaka

A minor earthquake, measuring 3.7 on Richter scale, occurred in Chittagong yesterday.

The distance of the epicentre was about 285 kms southeast of Dhaka Seismic Observatory and about 70 kms South-southeast of Chittagong Seismic Observatory.

The earthquake occurred at 02 hours 19 minutes and 56 seconds (BST), said a Met Office bulletin.



Candidates of 27th BCS examinations gather outside the Public Service Commission (PSC) office at Tejgaon in the city yesterday as the PSC started conducting viva voce anew after cancelling the previous one.

'Raise awareness about mass psychogenic illness'

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Health Adviser Maj Gen (retd) ASM Matur Rahman yesterday called on all to play an active role in raising awareness about Mass Psychogenic Illness (MPI) in order to prevent panic among people.

MPI should not be termed hysteria as hysteria is a disease, but people affected by MPI suffer from symptoms, which could be controlled easily, he said at a consultative meeting.

Directorate General of Health Services and the Institute of Epidemiology, Disease Control and Research (IEDCR) organised the meeting in the city for civil surgeons, principals and directors of medical colleges on how to stop outbreaks of MPI.

Several issues such as orientation on MPI in relation with epidemiology, outbreak response, clinical management and exchange of news for further actions by health service providers and academicians were discussed at the meeting.

The speakers said an outbreak of MPI is a time of anxiety and worry. The illness can be aggravated by other symptoms such as diarrhoea, malnutrition and lack of

tolerance.

Mostly girl students aged between 13 and 25 fell victim to the outbreaks MPI recently, but the symptoms do not have long term effect, they said, adding that everybody should work together to stop panic among the people.

The health adviser called on the media to disseminate more information about MPI to dispel wrong notions.

Referring to the flood situation, Matur said water-borne diseases

might break out within a short time. Necessary steps should be taken up to tackle such situation, he said, adding that the government is ready to tackle the aftermath of the floods.

Director of IEDCR Prof Moazzem Hossain, Prof Mahmudur Rahman, Director General of Health Services Shahjahan Biswas and Additional Director General Prof Hosne Ara Tahmin also spoke at the inaugural session.

7 lighter vessels fined

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Ctg

A mobile court here yesterday fined seven lighter vessels over Tk 2 lakh on different charges.

Sources said the court in a drive at the port channel fined MV Royal Star Tk 1 lakh for unloading cement clinkers without taking any preventive measure against environmental pollution in the area.

The court also ordered the owner of the vessel to take necessary steps with the help of the Department of Environment within a month to prevent air pollution

during unloading of clinkers.

The same court also fined six lighter vessels Tk 1.40 lakh for overloading.

The fined vessels are MV BB-1146, MV Shouharda, MV Safina A Makka, MV Samata STA-1, MV Akash-3 and MV Paira.

Of the vessels, MV Paira was found in most dilapidated condition and it was seized from Sadarghat area.

Chittagong Port Authority (CPA) Magistrate Mohammad Munir Chowdhury led the drives.

President's support for ailing Sabina

UNB, Dhaka

President Iajuddin Ahmed yesterday donated Tk 2 lakh for treatment of the ailing noted singer Sabina Yasmin.

The grant was given from President's discretionary fund.

Sabina Yasmin is suffering from a kind of cancer and now under treatment in Singapore.

LAID OFF JUTE MILLS Retired worker commits suicide

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, Khulna

A retired worker of the laid off Star Jute Mills in Khulna committed suicide on Saturday night as he failed to buy medicines for gastroenteritis due to severe financial crisis.

The victim, Sultan Sheikh, 50, hailed from Chandnimahal village under Digholia upazila of the district.

Sultan committed suicide by hanging himself with a rope from a branch of a mango tree a few yards from his house.

Dolna Begum, Sultan's wife, said her husband was given forced retirement in 2003 on the ground that he was unable to work properly in the mechanical section of the jute mill due to gastroenteritis.

She also alleged that her husband did not get any retirement benefit even after repeated appeals to the authorities concerned.



A policeman searches the bag of a passenger after intercepting an autorickshaw near the TSC as security has been beefed up on Dhaka University campus yesterday.



Lawyers for Awami League President Sheikh Hasina going to a High Court bench yesterday to take permission for filing a writ petition challenging the government move to bring the Tk 3 crore extortion case against her under the emergency power rules.