

Bush orders

FROM PAGE 1
commander in Iraq, General David Petraeus, that he should bring some 5,700 troops home by Christmas and a total of 21,500 combat troops out by mid-2008.

That would leave about 130,000 troops in Iraq, roughly the number in December 2006, one month before he escalated US force levels in a thus-far failed effort to give Iraq's leaders room to reach key political compromises.

Bush also bluntly acknowledged he was not satisfied with the pace of Iraqi political reforms that Washington views as critical to forging national unity and quelling sectarian violence and urged leaders in Baghdad to do more.

"The government has not met its own legislative benchmarks," said Bush, who directed a message to Iraq's people that "you must demand that your leaders make the tough choices needed to achieve reconciliation."

And he warned that "efforts by Iran and Syria to undermine that government must end," while predicting that "a free Iraq will counter the destructive ambitions of Iran," which he accuses of trying to develop nuclear weapons.

The president's plan came as the US Congress was poised to take up Democratic efforts to end the war and as presidential contenders faced tough questions on what they would do if elected in November 2008.

Democratic Senator Jack Reed, giving his party's response, said it was "time to change course" and urged support for "a plan to responsibly and rapidly begin a reduction of our troops in Iraq."

Democrats lack the votes to set a timetable for ending the war, but hope to secure Republican support to limit the US role in Iraq to battling insurgents and Islamic militants, training the Iraqi army and protecting US personnel and installations.

They also hope to ensure that troops spend as much time at home as they do deployed in the

war zone -- an apparent bid to limit the numbers of troops available for deployment.

Democrats vying to succeed Bush swiftly criticised his announcement.

"I continue to implore the president to change course, bring our troops home faster, and end this war responsibly as soon as possible," said Senator Hillary Clinton, the Democratic Party's front-runner.

Republican leaders defended the president's strategy.

"Congress is faced with a stark choice: either rally behind the proven, responsible strategy set forth by General Petraeus and bring our troops home after victory, or demand an irresponsible, precipitous withdrawal that will force our troops to leave in defeat," said House Republican minority leader John Boehner, who has just visited Iraq.

Bush's announcement came after two days of testimony by Petraeus and the US ambassador in Baghdad, Ryan Crocker, before the White House delivers to Congress a progress report on the war on Friday.

Petraeus acknowledged in testimony to lawmakers that the draw-down reflected the end of the "surge" Bush ordered in January, but White House officials have couched it as the natural response to "progress" in Iraq.

"We've got a long way to go. It's very hard. We're realistic about it," Bush spokeswoman Dana Perino said.

Bush made only a passing reference to a setback to US efforts -- the bombing that killed a top Iraqi Sunni sheikh, Sattar Abu Reesha, who spearheaded a campaign against al-Qaeda in his restive home province of Anbar.

"In response, a fellow Sunni leader declared: 'We are determined to strike back and continue our work.' And as they do, they can count on the continued support of the United States," he said.

Australia, Sri Lanka

FROM PAGE 16
Bangladesh Time (6pm local time) with ESPN beaming live coverage.

Rival captain Graeme Smith and Herschelle Gibbs are making progress following the injuries they picked up in their opening day victory against West Indies, but Gibbs may not be risked.

Left-arm seamers Nathan Bracken and Mitchell Johnson took three wickets each as Australia kept it tight on the England batsmen.

Australian opening batsmen Adam Gilchrist and Matthew Hayden were back in their dominant form as they shared a stroke-filled opening stand of 78 in 8.1 overs before Gilchrist was caught at long-on off leg-spinner Chris Schofield.

Gilchrist made 45 off 27 balls. Hayden went on to make an unbeaten 67 off 43 balls.

Earlier, Bracken was taken out of the attack after conceding eight runs in his first over but came back strongly to finish with three for 16 off four overs, earning the man-of-the-match award.

Andrew Flintoff was England's top scorer with 31 off 19 balls but England were unable to put together any significant partner-

ships.

At the Wanderers, power-packed Sri Lanka's victory margin was a whopping 72 runs more than England's 100-run romp over Australia at Southampton in 2005 and firmly established them as a strong title contender.

Veteran Sanath Jayasuriya led the way with 88 off 44 balls and captain Mahela Jayawardene blasted 65 off 28 before Jehan Mubarak took away the limelight, smashing an unbeaten 46 from 13 balls at the end.

Left-handed Mubarak took 29 runs off the 19th over bowled by seamer Lameck Ngchoche.

Mubarak, who came to bat in the 19th over at 215-6, pounded Ngchoche for 6,6,6,4,6 with the first five balls he faced before ending the over with a single.

The heavy defeat sent Kenya home from the tournament after they had lost their first match against New Zealand.

Sri Lanka play the Kiwis here on Saturday with both teams assured of a place in the Super Eights round.

Benazir won't

FROM PAGE 16
She risks a backlash among the public and her party if she strikes an agreement with the US-allied military leader, who ousted Sharif in a 1999 coup.

On Friday, Sharif's party warned her against reaching terms with Musharraf.

"We welcome her coming back, but let me say that it will be an insult to democracy if she agrees to share power with a man who ousted the elected government of Nawaz Sharif and has caused irreparable damage to democratic institutions," said Sadiq ul-Farooq, a senior figure in the party.

Musharraf, a key ally with Washington, has been trying for months to reach an agreement with Benazir that would overcome legal obstacles to him seeking a new five-year term.

With less than five weeks before the presidential election, Benazir's party says time is running out, though with Sharif out of the way, Musharraf may be in a stronger position to dictate terms.

Azim said the schedule for the presidential vote would be announced in the next three or four days. General elections are due by January.

Azim confirmed reports that the chief of the ruling party, Chaudhry Shujaat Hussain, had suggested that Musharraf's wife, Seeba, could be a back-up candidate for the presidency if Musharraf was ruled as ineligible to run.

He defended the notion as "traditional" in Pakistani politics.

"I don't know if it would be acceptable to the president or his wife," Azim said.

Sangma remanded

FROM PAGE 16
house at around 4:15am and found the pistol bullets hidden in an underground water tank in the kitchen of the house.

The BDR men picked up Russell Sangma, 25, son of Khokon Marak, and later handed him over to Jhenaigati Police Station. They also deposited the seized bullets with the police station. An arms case was filed.

Officer-in-Charge (OC) of Jhenaigati Police Station Md Shahjahan Kabir told The Daily Star yesterday that he had visited the spot in the morning to investigate the case. The OC quoted local sources as saying Russell was involved in anti-social activities.

Police sources said Russell might have involved with arms peddling that prompted him to collect such a huge amount of bullets at his house.

They further said though no criminal report against Sangma is found with Jhenaigati Police Station, they will gather information from the adjacent police stations if he had any earlier connection with the crime zones of this frontier area.

Russell's father Khokon Marak had gone into hiding soon after the incident. The law enforcers are looking for him.

Suicide attack

FROM PAGE 16
killed or detained.

The slain soldiers belonged to the army's Karar commando group, which has participated in operations against militants in various parts of the country, according to officials who spoke on condition of anonymity because of the sensitive nature of their job.

Army spokesman Maj Gen Waheed Arshad, who on Thursday had suggested the blast may have been accidentally triggered by a gas canister, confirmed Friday a suicide attacker was suspected.

The force took part in the army raid against pro-Taliban militants in Islamabad's Red Mosque in July, which left more than 100 dead and triggered a spate of reprisals against security forces, Geo TV network reported.

Pakistan is under growing US pressure to crack down on Taliban and al-Qaeda fighters in its border regions. It reported Wednesday it had killed about 40 militants in the North Waziristan tribal region.

In fighting Thursday near Razmak, a town in South Waziristan, army forces repelled repeated militant attacks, and tribesmen informed officials that up to 50 rebels died in counter-strikes. Two soldiers were killed and eight wounded, Arshad said.

Fighting between Islamic militants and security forces has been raging across northwest Pakistan since the army assaulted the Red Mosque. Most of the combat has taken place in the rugged mountains along the Afghan border where the US fears al-Qaeda is regrouping.

The army says it has deployed 90,000 troops in the border region in an attempt to curtail militancy and stop guerrillas from crossing into Afghanistan to attack Nato forces.

Bhuiyan men

FROM PAGE 1
Naya Palan that has been kept locked even after partial withdrawal of the ban on indoor politics.

Meanwhile, Brig Gen (ret'd) Hannan Shah, who recently announced that they (pro-Khaleda group) would arrange a grassroots level leaders' meeting in the capital after the Ramadan, yesterday raised question about the source of money being spent by the Bhuiyan group in arranging the meet.

"Nobody can hold such a huge gathering using money from their own purse. I hope the Anti-Corruption Commission will look into the matter," he told reporters at his Mohakhali residence in the capital.

Identifying himself as the 'chief co-ordinator' of the BNP, Hannan said he hopes leaders and workers down to the grassroots level would be invited to any meeting to be held in the name of the party.

Blaming Bhuiyan for the ouster of former president Badruddoza Chowdhury from the party, he said B Chowdhury was expelled in line with Bhuiyan's blueprint, as he could not stand any senior leader in the party.

Asked about the meeting between Bhuiyan and Saifur Rahman, Hannan, also an adviser to the BNP chairperson, said the former finance minister would not join hands with the elements harmful to the party. However, things might be different for him now since his two sons stand accused of corruption.

Rangpur medical

FROM PAGE 16
Mahbubar Rahman was admitted to RMCH with cardiac problems on Wednesday. He died yesterday morning soon after a nurse had pushed an injection in his body according to the prescription of an intern.

As Mahbu's sons and their relatives wanted to know from the intern which injection he had prescribed for their patient, the doctor refused to say anything and locked in an altercation with them.

Eventually, they came to blows, resulting in injuries to RMCH Assistant Registrar Morshed Ali, Dr Milon, Dr Shrabon and Mahbub's sons Arefin and Rubel.

On information, police rushed to the spot and brought the situation under control. The dead body was then handed over to his relatives.

BTRC-Bangla Phone CA: No dual rule

FROM PAGE 1
On May 31, the BTRC in a notice told Bangla Phone that it was given a Public Switched Telephone Network (PSTN) Operator Licence on June 22, 2004 to operate only for fixed telecommunication services in the North-East Zone of Bangladesh.

"But you have installed optical fibre network outside your authorised zone and also leased out the optical fibre network to other Operators/Organisations, which are clearly in violation of the licence condition and also Section 40(1) of the Bangladesh Telecommunication Act, 2001," the letter said, asking the company to explain within 30 days why its licence shall not be cancelled for this reason.

Bangla Phone responded to this notice defending its case in details on July 28.

The company said as per the PSTN licence, "The Licensee shall have a duty to interconnect, directly or indirectly, with all other licensees. In order to carry out the overseas traffic through the international gateway and NLD traffic through the long distance network outside its licensed zone, the Licensee shall pass the same through its own long distance network or leased line from other licensed or authorised operators providing NLD services on mutual agreement." In other words, the licence encourages the PSTN operator to install its own network outside its licensed area to ensure connectivity.

Bangla Phone further argued that Section 40 (1) of the Telecommunication Act did not bar leasing out the optical fibre network, rather it restricted unauthorised leasing out, which is not the case with the phone company, as the BTRC permits it to share or lease it out.

The company also noted that from time to time, it has taken approval of the BTRC while expanding its trans-

mission capacity and leasing these out.

Meanwhile, the BTRC on July 25 notified Bangladesh Telegraph and Telephone Board (BTB) that under the telecom act, the BTB will have to take prior approval of the BTRC for signing any deal with Bangla Phone to take service from the optical fibre line.

Then on August 2, the BTRC appeared not to have taken Bangla Phone's reply into cognisance and issued yet another warning in the same language to Bangla Phone.

Perplexed, the company authorities gave another reply, explaining its position and apologising to the BTRC "if it had made any mistakes.

Sources said the BTRC is now thinking about imposing a financial penalty of several crore taka on Bangla Phone.

"The question is if installing the optical fibre line was such a grave crime that the BTRC would want to cancel Bangla Phone's licence, then why is it allowing the company to continue operating these lines? It is because there is nothing wrong in authorised installation of these lines," says an official. "There is no clear explanation why the BTRC and Bangla Phone remain stuck in a collision course."

Garment unit

FROM PAGE 16
from Dhaka Medical College and Hospital with injuries all over the body and a fracture in the right leg. Ali was being treated under police custody.

Rab in a press release said Ali and his unidentified companion hit the Rab men with iron rods and locals then beat Ali.

Ali, however, told The Daily Star that the Rab men, who were in plain clothes, called him names after the collision and beat him.

similar wrath again, the dissident leaders already started softening their public stance regarding bringing reforms to the party and Sheikh Hasina's release. Most of the outspoken dissident leaders including Mukul and Prof Sayeed already demanded release of Hasina following Wednesday's incident.

Mukul was forced by irate activists to make a public statement demanding Hasina's release as he went to the AL central office on Bangabandhu Avenue in the capital on Monday, following relaxation of the ban on indoor politics in the city.

While manhandling the four dissident leaders, the agitated activists demanded that the leaders publicly seek their party chief's release from jail.

Under the circumstance, the dissident leaders already started looking for an alternative approach and decided not to say anything publicly against Hasina. They also decided to seek Hasina's release in a bid to avert recurrence of such wrath.

"We might refrain from speaking in favour of our stance in the central working committee meeting. Can you assure that I won't be harassed if I suggest that the party should take part in the dialogues with the party chief in jail?" said an AL leader preferring anonymity.

A dissident leader said if Amu loyalists continue to be harassed, then there may not be any alternative to bringing in a number of their followers to face the pro-Zillur activists. "Which off course will make the situation more complex by broadening the division," said the AL leader.

Ramadan starts

FROM PAGE 1
announcing cautionary notes about not charging extra prices at Karwan Bazar wholesale market.

Traders at the city's retail markets said despite sufficient supply of essentials to the wholesale and retail markets, prices of a few items shot up at the retail markets since they had bought them on Thursday night at higher rates.

The price of cucumber leapt by Tk 10 in just one day. An essential item of iftar, it sold at Tk 60 per kilogram at almost all kitchen markets in the city including those at Karwan Bazar, New Market, Hatirpool and Kathalbagan, but the price was Tk 50 on Thursday.

The price of coriander leaf climbed up to Tk 300 per kg; it was Tk 150 a day back.

Puffed rice sold at Tk 40-50 per kilogram although the price was Tk 32-35 on Thursday.

The price of green chilli decreased at the wholesale markets but its effect is yet to be felt at the retail markets.

Many buyers meanwhile complained that the prices of iftar items are same as they were last year but their size has become smaller.

Shahjahan, a hotelier at the New Market kitchen market, said the prices of materials needed to prepare iftar items have doubled this year. "Keeping people's purchasing capacity in mind, we have kept the

last year's prices unchanged but made the iftar items a little smaller," he said.

Jaism, a jewellery shop employee at Chandni Chawk, said iftar items for 12 people cost him Tk 400. "The prices of essentials have gone beyond our buying capacity. I came here with Tk 600 and could not complete my shopping with the amount," he said.

The prices of other essentials including rice, flour, soya bean oil, chickpea, sugar, salt, egg, bashed (dust gram), lentil, and other spices and vegetables remained stable.

Gastright due

FROM PAGE 1
sources said the US state department official is expected to meet Chief Adviser Fakhruddin Ahmed, Foreign Affairs Adviser Iftekhar Ahmed and other high officials as well as members of the civil society.

Besides, Gastright is likely to meet Chief of Army Staff General Moen U/Ahmed.

It is not yet confirmed whether Gastright will meet political leaders of Bangladesh as the government relaxed the ban on indoor politics.

Gastright joined the Bureau of South Asian Affairs as a deputy assistant secretary on March 21, 05. Primarily his focus in South Asia is on Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan.

FROM PAGE 1
for discussing reforms of election rules and regulations.

Asked whether the ban on indoor politics was relaxed soon after the arrest of Khaleda Zia in a bid to expedite the reform process to remove both Hasina and Khaleda from their party leadership, the chief adviser said he does not think there is any element of truth in it.

He said the government had been contemplating the lifting of ban on indoor politics and it was done at an appropriate time to allow parties to discuss their own party reforms as well as cooperate with the Election Commission in reforming election rules and regulations.

Asked about the conditions imposed after lifting the ban on indoor politics, he said these are not conditions, but some explanations or parameters to give a clear idea about the indoor politics so those who would practise it would not face any confusion.

He mentioned that Awami League already held a meeting at its party office and they faced no problems.

Asked why the state of emergency is not being relaxed after eight months of its promulgation, the chief adviser said it was imposed against an extraordinary background. The government is moving ahead with a certain mission to hold a free, fair and democratic election acceptable to all.

For that, he said, it needs completion of certain tasks and certain reforms. The Election Commission is preparing electoral roll with voters' photographs, reforming certain election rules and regulations through discussions with political parties.

Fakhruddin said the ban on indoor politics has already been withdrawn and in this process the state of emergency would be lifted at an appropriate time. He, however, said the reasons for which the state of emergency was declared have not yet disappeared.

He said the question is whether

the emergency is creating any problems to general people. He asserted that the emergency is not causing any problems for general people, for the media in transmitting news or for the national economy.

He admitted that due to emergency some fundamental rights might be denied, but this is a temporary measure for long-term welfare of the nation.

This temporary arrangement, he said, would continue for some time more as the government is conducting the twin tasks of holding a national election and curbing corruption, which have been accepted by the people.

Asked whether he thinks evil forces or public grievances were behind the last month's student unrest on Dhaka University campus, the chief adviser said the DU problem was resolved and a judicial commission has been constituted to find out how and why this unrest had spread out. The government is waiting for the report of the enquiry commission, he added.

Asked what is the main challenge before him, the chief adviser said his prime challenge is to transfer power to an elected government by holding a free and neutral election.

"We're creating a level-playing field where all will participate in the election, especially honest and dedicated people who are willing to take up leadership at national level," he said.

About the closure of talk shows on private TV channels at the instruction of a government agency, he said the government believes in freedom of mass media and they had not imposed any restrictions on them.

Fakhruddin said the government accepted and was benefited by criticisms made at the talk shows. However, he admitted that an advisory was given to the TV channels after the Dhaka University incident last month, which he said is a temporary measure.

"We've given full freedom for last

seven-eight months. There is no dearth of goodwill or sincerity in ensuring freedom of the media," he said, adding that the criticisms are very important but those must be objective and constructive.

He said those who run mass media should have self-regulatory role. This is evident in many countries around the world. "I also made the request when I met with newspaper editors and chiefs of electronic media. The government will extend all cooperation."

Replying to a question, the chief adviser said restrictions are there under the Emergency Powers Rules over transmission of "provocative" news. "But despite the restrictions, we have accepted constructive criticisms. There are restrictions, but you will evaluate how those restrictions are being applied."

Asked what he did mean by not publishing any new list of corruption suspects, the chief adviser said he meant that the taskforce could complete the investigation within quickest time against corruption suspects. Curbing corruption is a continuous process and for that there are various institutions like Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC), which was strengthened and "we want to make the ACC independent."

Besides this, he said the National Board of Revenue and Bangladesh Bank have responsibilities to look into corruption or earning through dishonest means. Therefore, the institutions engaged in the jobs will function normally.

To a question, the chief adviser said the function of the National taskforce would gradually diminish. At one time, the taskforce was needed because the activities were in greater dimension.

Foreign firms may be invited to explore gas reserves

AFP, Dhaka

Bangladesh plans to invite foreign firms to explore for offshore gas reserves to meet the soaring demand for energy to sustain the nation's rapidly-growing economy, an official said on Friday.

The offshore bidding to explore for gas in the Bay of Bengal will open by the year end, the caretaker government said.

It will be the third offshore bidding in the history of the impoverished nation, which has extensive gas reserves.

"Both India and Myanmar have found gas in the Bay of Bengal and we're confident there will also be major discoveries in the Bangladesh part of the bay," Energy Secretary Nasir Uddin told AFP.

Bangladesh needs to urgently locate new sources of energy. The government forecasts that the nation's current gas reserves will run out by 2014-15 at the present rate of consumption.

Nasir said the country needs at least 7.7 billion dollars' investment in gas exploration and development to sustain the projected annual economic growth of seven percent until 2025.

Bangladesh's economy has been growing at more than six percent annually in the last four years, the highest rate of growth since its independence in 1971.

The central bank has forecast that the growth will hit seven percent in the current financial year, which ends in June 2008.

Bangladesh was divided into 23 blocks for hydrocarbon exploration after the government amended the country's Petroleum Act in 1993.

British oil company Cairn Energy won the first offshore exploration rights in June 1994. It struck gas in Sangu in the Bay of Bengal in 1997 and started production in 1998.

The government allowed a second round of exploration for onshore blocks in 1997.

Bangladesh has proven recoverable gas reserves of 15 trillion cubic feet, of which 7.1 trillion cubic feet have already been extracted from the country's 23 gas fields, according to official figures.

The energy secretary said foreign companies, which have been operating in the on-shore blocks, had stepped up their exploration drive to meet growing domestic demand for gas.

"Cairn Energy will drill a well near a southern Bangladesh island at the end of this year. French energy giant Total will also start exploration work in two blocks near the Bay of Bengal later this year," he added.

The government said as part of its drive to discover new energy it will immediately step up exploration and development work around the port city of Chittagong where some of the biggest gas-powered industries are located.

Chittagong has been facing a

daily shortage of 45 million cubic feet gas since early this year after production from the Cairn-run Sangu gasfield disappointed expectations.

The government said it will also strengthen the country's lone state-run exploration company, BAPEX, by financing development of its three gas fields and exploration of five wells.

The government says it plans to end the country's notorious corruption before new elections are held in late 2008.

Flood

FROM PAGE 1
Newly planted amon crop in about 50 thousand hectares and vegetables in some areas have been damaged due to floods.

The rivers Dhanu, Mogra, Kongsha and Someshwary were flowing under danger level, Netrakona WDB sources said.

Road links between the district town and Kalmakanda, Durgapur and Kendua upazila headquarters remain disrupted as flood waters damaged seven bridges and 21 culverts on three link roads.

A report from our Sirajganj correspondent says flood situation in the district deteriorated yesterday as the Jamuna continued to swell due to onrush of water from the upstream.

Suffering of the flood-hit is increasing day by day due to an acute crisis of drinking water and shortage of food.

Hundreds of people including women from flood-affected villages and shoal areas are crowding the district town in search of work food and food.

One such flood victim, Baku Shaikh, 55, of Satiantoli village said he had eight handlooms and all those are still under water. This is why he has come to the district town but due to inundation the town by floodwaters, he failed to get any work, even rickshaw pulling

Our Correspondent in Gaibandha reported that flood situation remained unchanged. Surging waters breached some roads at several points in Fulchhari and Shaghaha upazilas inundating fresh areas.

A nine-month daughter of one Azizur Rahman of village Purbo Badiakhali under Gaibandha Sader upazila drowned in floodwater in the early hours yesterday.

Floods badly damaged nine educational institutions and 246 more partially. Besides, one and a half km of embankments were washed away and 53 km damaged partially.

In Kurigram, fishermen at Dharla ferry ghat recovered three tiger cubs floating in floodwater from up steam. A resident of C&B ferry ghat area in the district is now keeping those.