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TRANSKOM ELECTRONICS

V-DAY IN PRISON
No room for top graft suspects

KAILASH SARKAR
Incarcerated top graft suspects and other VIP prisoners were excluded from Victory Day programmes inside jails yesterday.

As part of the Victory Day celebrations, the jail authorities arranged cultural and sports programmes in the prisons, but the VIP prisoners were excluded from those considering their influence on the general population of the prisoners due to their political career.

There are over 150 VIPs in different jails now.
Deputy Inspector General (Prisons) Maj Shamsul Haider Siddique said, "At least 25 VIP prisoners are in Dhaka Central jail."

He said, "We excluded them from the programmes to avert any untoward incident. They, however, were served special food."

Inspector General (IG Prisons) Brig Gen Zakir Hassan told The Daily Star, "The VIP prisoners were excluded from the programmes due to their political and other types of influence."

Meanwhile, 329 convicts were freed from 67 jails across the country through a presidential pardon on the occasions of Victory Day and upcoming Eid-ul-Azha.

Earlier, the authorities of 67 jails across the country provided the

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Prayer Timing		
December 17		
	Azan	Jamaat
Fajr	5-20	5-55
Zohr	12-45	1-15
Asr	3-45	4-00
Maghrib	5-22	5-25
Esha	7-00	7-30

Source: Islamic Foundation

POST-SIDR MONEY-LENDING
Loan sharks thrive on NGO inaction

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Patuakhali

Small entrepreneurs affected by Cyclone Sidr are now at the mercy of loan sharks, also known locally as 'mahajans', as the NGOs in the district stopped disbursing fresh loans.

In the absence of the NGOs, the moneylenders have been charging high interest rates -- 15 to 20 percent monthly -- for lending money to the affected entrepreneurs who desperately need financial assistance for reviving their businesses lost to the cyclone.

Many business owners, especially poultry and vegetable farm owners or small shop owners, whose businesses have been torn down by the cyclone now do not know where to turn to for the much-needed financial assistance that would help them get back on their feet, said locals.

Sobahan Gazi, 45, from Panpotti union in Galachipa upazila, said, "The small shop I had launched

with Tk 20,000 loan from Sap [South Asia Partnership] has totally been destroyed by the cyclone."

"I do not have any money to restart my business. Even though Sap is not currently collecting my loan instalments, they did not disburse any fresh loan to me either," said Sobhan adding that finding no other alternative, he had to get a loan of Tk 35,000 from a local mahajan named Mizanur Rahman.

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UK troops return Basra to Iraqis

AFP, Basra

Iraq formally took over security control of the southern oil province of Basra from British forces on Sunday paving the way for Britain to sharply reduce its nearly 5,000-strong troop presence.

The memorandum of understanding ordering the transfer was signed by Basra governor Mohammed al-Wailli and Major General Graham Binns, the head of British forces in Basra, Iraq's second city.

"The handover means victory for Iraq and defeat to its enemies," Iraq's national security adviser Muwaffaq al-Rubaie said at the handover ceremony.

Bids for rental power plants get nod today

SHARIER KHAN

The power ministry today seeks the nod of the caretaker government's purchase committee on seven rental power bids of 250 megawatt capacity with three local and foreign entities that submitted offers in October.

The ministry is not presently forwarding any proposal for another 50MW rental plant for Fenchuganj where two bidders submitted proposals last month.

Sources say the proposal evaluation committee (PEC) of the ministry's Power Cell has recommended in favour of a consortium named Energy Prima that did not produce documents substantiating its experience in at least 20MW rental power generation in the last three years.

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KHULNA JUTE MILLS LAY-OFF
Workers to block highway for arrears

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, Khulna

The laid-off workers of state-owned Alim Jute Mills at Atra Industrial Area in the city will put up barricades today at different points of Khulna-Jessore Highway demanding withdrawal of layoff notice and payment of arrears.

The workers who quit their jobs under Voluntary Retirement Scheme (VRS) will also join them. The dawn-to-dusk programme has been called as the deadline of an ultimatum given to government earlier to meet their demands expires today.

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Cattle supply sparse in Eid markets

SHAHNAZ PARVEEN

Sparse supply of cattle and huge losses of livestock caused by Cyclone Sidr might raise prices of cattle and other sacrificial animals at cattle markets set up on the eve of Eid-ul-Azha this year, said traders.

The largest trade of sacrificial animals in the country is set to kick off in the capital on December 18 at the permanent cattle market at Gabtoli and 12 other makeshift cattle markets organised by the Dhaka City Corporation (DCC).

Mojibur Rahman, general secretary of Gabtoli Gabadi Poshu Baboshayee Samity, said, "Cattle prices might increase as their supply is insufficient due to tough security measures on the Indian border this year."

Cattle are usually brought to the

markets from all over the country including Dhamrai, Manikganj and Tangail. But the largest supply comes from India and from bordering districts of Kushiya, Dinajpur, Chapainawabganj, Rajshahi, Jessore and Chuadanga.

"Another factor that will contribute to the price hike is the increased price of cattle feed. Besides, transportation cost has also increased in recent times, raising the prices higher than ever," said Rahman. "Cyclone Sidr, that left its mark all across the country, also destroyed the livestock population tremendously. This will also have an influence on the situation."

Preparation is going on at Gabtoli cattle market, the largest and the only permanent cattle

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Passengers heading home to celebrate the Eid with their near and dear ones throng Sadarghat launch terminal in the capital yesterday.

Pak parties kick off polls campaign

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan's election campaign began in earnest yesterday, a day after President Pervez Musharraf lifted his unpopular emergency rule and restored the constitution.

The election commission was set to release the final list of candidates for the January 8 vote for parliament, which Musharraf's critics say has been effectively rigged against them during the six weeks of the emergency.

In a televised address late Saturday, the president insisted emergency rule had saved the nation, alleging there had been a conspiracy by unnamed people to undermine the country's democracy.

"Against my will and as a last

resort, I imposed emergency rule and saved Pakistan from destabilisation," he said.

"I put my own reputation at risk, but I did it because I could not allow Pakistan to be in grave danger. It was painful and a most difficult decision."

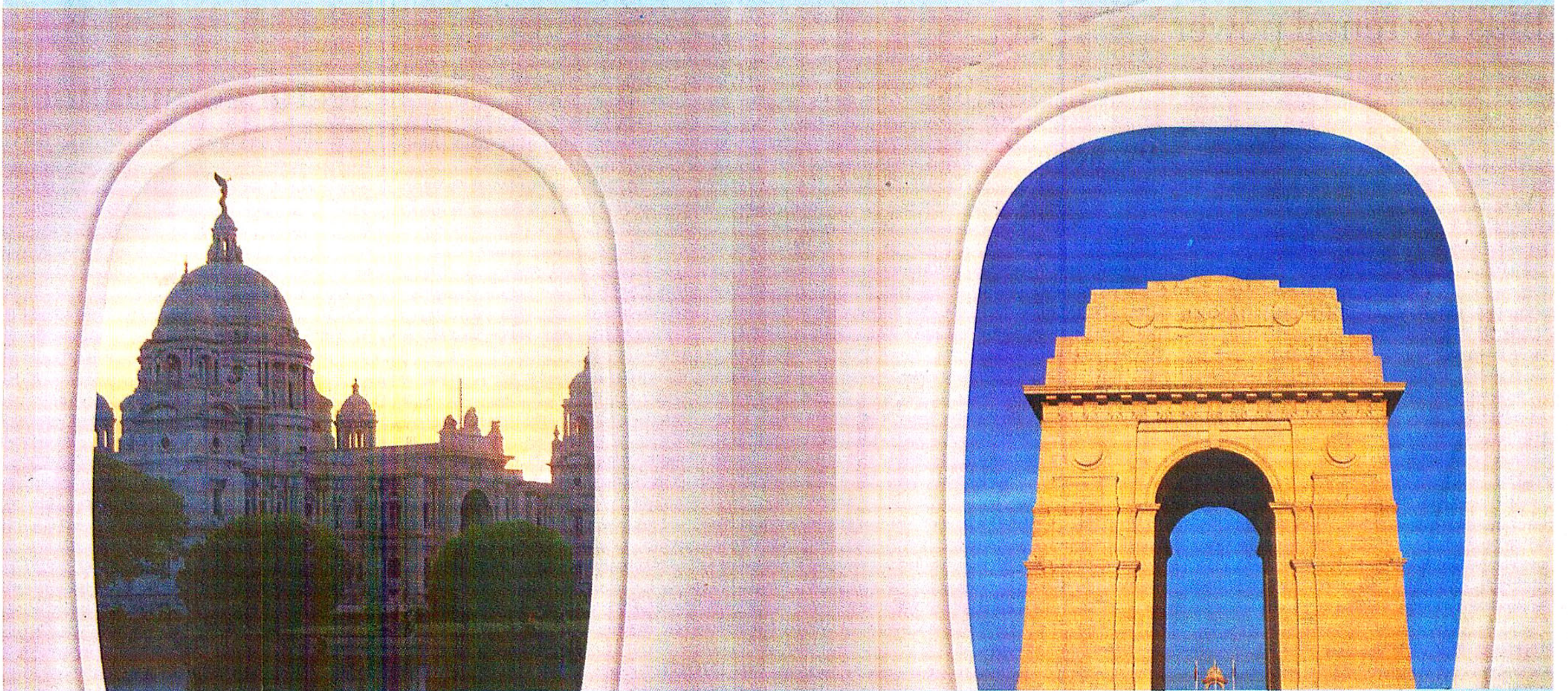
Former premiers Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif were criss-crossing the country on Sunday, drumming up support for their parties. They are taking part in the election after failing to agree on a joint boycott.

Benazir Bhutto alleged Saturday that there were "big plans" in the works to rig the elections, a charge the president denied in his speech to the nation.

He pledged the vote would be

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