

Unfit CNG cylinders

FROM PAGE 1
The CNG conversion workshops the company designated.

The workshops verify cylinders' integrity, submit reports and give new dates for checkups but there is no authority to monitor if the CNG-run vehicles plying on the streets are following the instructions or have fit cylinders, businessmen concerned said.

There are many unauthorised CNG conversion workshops that do not follow proper procedures in converting vehicle fuel system, said Navana CNG Ltd General Manager Sumit Kumar Saha.

"Oxygen and other gas cylinders are used for CNG-run vehicles and the genuine cylinders are not maintained properly... all these add up to high risk of explosions of cylinders endangering lives," he told The Daily Star.

According to him, half the CNG conversion workshops are unauthorised but the government does not monitor conversion workshops or if the cylinders had the periodic checkups.

Bangladesh CNG Filling Station and Conversion Owners' Association Vice-president Manoranjan Bhakta, however, said there is a small chance of genuine CNG cylinders exploding even if they had no periodic checkups.

"The performance will drop but surely all cylinders must be timely verified for integrity for safety reasons," he added.

He said he has doubts whether the around 10,000 CNG-run autorickshaws that were imported from India in 2001 had their cylinders verified. He said it was an alarming issue.

He said in 2001 the RPGLCL

converted around 1,500 vehicles for running on CNG while private workshops converted around 100 vehicles. The use of CNG as automobile fuel started in Bangladesh in 1985 but it became popular in 2001. Now, there are over 1 lakh motor vehicles running on CNG, he claimed.

Referring to a CNG cylinder explosion in Narsingdi where three people died, Akhtar Hossain Babu of SUEP said 87 percent of the cylinders that exploded had faulty designs or were sub-standard counterfeit cylinders.

The placement of cylinders in vehicles is sometimes incorrect which increases the risk of an explosion when the vehicle had a small bump. The issue must be addressed, he said, adding, "Each cylinder blast has the power of a 500-pound bomb and can cause serious damage."

Even though RPGLCL is responsible for licensing the CNG conversion workshops and monitoring and supervising their work, it never goes to the workshops to see if they were working properly or fitting correct kits to vehicles, he claimed.

RPGLCL Director (operations) Shafiqul Islam said a discussion is going on between the ministries of communications and energy on how to monitor CNG cylinders.

Engineer Humayun Rashid Khalifa, director of Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA) that checks vehicle fitness every year, said they do not check the CNG cylinders.

"In a meeting with RPGLCL, we asked it to provide officials at major CNG conversion workshops to monitor their activities," he said.

Demo at RU

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silent procession at 11:00am from Rabindra Arts Building.

The procession of students marched about the campus before gathering at the grave of martyred RU teacher Prof Dr Shamsuzzoha to observe a one-minute silence in remembrance of his supreme sacrifice for the students in 1969.

In February 1969, Dr Shamsuzzoha, the first martyred intellectual, sacrificed his life to protect the students from the atrocities of the then regime of Ayub Khan.

At the grave the students took an oath to continue their protest until the 10 convicted students and the employee of RU are released.

Calling on the RU authorities to withdraw the case filed on August 23, the students said they would otherwise launch tougher programmes against the university authorities.

The students also demanded immediate release of the detained teachers and the student of Dhaka University.

A huge number of police and intelligence personnel were present on the campus to avert any untoward incident.

In a case filed for torching a DGFI vehicle on RU campus, a Rajshahi court on December 12 last year acquitted two teachers and an official of RU, but sentenced 10 students and an employee of RU to three years' rigorous imprisonment and a fine of Tk5,000 each.

Sohul

FROM PAGE 1
hampering the EC's ability to maintain its course in line with its own electoral roadmap announced on July 15 last year.

Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) ATM Shamsul Huda, who last week announced the EC's plan for redrawing the boundaries, is likely to announce the commission's next course of action today at a scheduled media briefing, officials in the EC Secretariat said.

Talking on the matter, Sohul however said during the electoral reform talks between the EC and political parties, that took place over the last three months, the commission informed them about its plan to redraw the boundaries of the constituencies, and none of them opposed it back then.

"Now they are opposing it. We will discuss the issue with political parties again when we will sit with them again with the electoral reform proposals," Sohul said.

In defence of the EC's plan, he said one of our constitutional tasks is to redraw the constituencies following every population census.

"We have to do it now since the Census Report 2001 was published recently," the election commissioner said adding that the issue was included in the electoral roadmap at the time of its announcement.

The political parties argued, once the EC would begin the field level activities for redrawing the boundaries, it would be swamped by a large number of litigations which would end up delaying holding of the poll.

Earlier, the constituencies were redrawn in 1973, 1979, 1984, and in 1995 on limited scales. During some of those endeavours the EC had to face a significant number of cases filed by many aggrieved persons.

Referring to her visit to America last April, she said the government, which sought to prevent her from returning to the country, was forced to lift the ban on her coming home as world opinion and the people of the country were in her favour.

"Even the advisers asked me not to return home, proposing that all cases against me would be withdrawn if I stayed abroad. The case was filed only because I did not want to stay abroad and wanted to return home," Hasina said, adding, "Later, cases were filed one after another. I do not even know who Azam Chowdhury is."

Hasina said, "If I had any plan or did anything to take bribe or extort money by delaying work of power generation, then how was I able to reduce power crisis during that period?"

She asked the judge what could be the procedure to cancel the judicial statement taken "forcibly" from Selim.

In reply, the judge said, "I cannot do anything beyond rules."

Referring to article 35 of the constitution, she said the constitution has been violated by bringing the case under speedy trial.

According to the article, a trial should be going in accordance with the existing law.

The former premier also raised questions over bringing the case under the Emergency Power Rules and objected to the setting up of the court on the Sangsad Bhavan premises.

Quoting the chief adviser saying recently that an accused would be tried under existing laws, Hasina said, "His speech is false. What he said is not happening in reality. This trial is being held like a camera trial, which is motivated and conspiratorial."

"Politicians are being undermined and the anti-graft drive is being conducted against them.

"But after that export has been increasing," he added.

Hasina, Rehana, Selim

FROM PAGE 1
ensure justice, you would be in trouble the following day," she told the court adding, "I know I won't get justice here and so I look to Allah and the people of this country for justice."

Hasina made the comments when the judge asked her and Selim to say if they were guilty or not.

As both the accused kept making statements the judge said all he needed to know was if they pleaded guilty. He observed they would have plenty of scope to defend themselves once the trial begins.

Sitting at 9:30 in the morning, the court said the day's business would be confined to delivery of its orders on charge-framing.

"I find sufficient grounds to frame charges against all three accused," the judge said in his ruling based on submissions by the defence and prosecution, Selim's judicial confession, evidence and documents produced by the prosecution.

The charges were brought under sections 384 and 385 read with section 34 of the penal code for extorting money, making threat of injury, and committing the extortion in connivance with one another.

If convicted, a person would be sentenced to three years' imprisonment or fined or both under section 384 while his/her sentence would be imprisonment not exceeding 14 years and less than five years, or fine or both under section 385.

Hasina and Selim were brought to the court minutes before the judge took his seat.

Dressed in a violet sari, the AL chief exchanged greetings with her party leaders and workers and others thronging the court set up on the Jatiya Sangsad Bhavan premises.

She said, "I have never asked for or received a single penny in bribe from anyone."

"The case is an attack on those who have survived the brutal killings on August 15, 1975."

She said she believes it was filed since they had failed to kill her also in the August 21 grenade attacks in 2004.

"It's all because they want to undermine the family members of the father of the nation. They know people are on my side and will vote for me if there's an election. How can I stand such false allegations against me," said a visibly irritated Hasina.

"Had I been offered Tk 100 crore I would have turned that down," she said referring to the charge that she had received Tk 1 crore from Selim at Gonobhaban. It was allegedly her share of the money extorted.

The complainant alleged that Selim gave Tk 1 crore to Rehana as well.

"I am daughter of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, why should I need to take Tk 1 crore extortion. None of our family has ever been involved in graft or bribery. There is no property in the name of my brothers--Jamal, Kamal and Russell," said Hasina.

"If I had greed for money I could have made a lot when my father was a prime minister," she continued.

Even the house at Dhanmondi where their parents had stayed has been kept in trust to provide stipends for the children, Hasina said.

Referring to her visit to America last April, she said the government, which sought to prevent her from returning to the country, was forced to lift the ban on her coming home as world opinion and the people of the country were in her favour.

"Even the advisers asked me not to return home, proposing that all cases against me would be withdrawn if I stayed abroad. The case was filed only because I did not want to stay abroad and wanted to return home," Hasina said, adding, "Later, cases were filed one after another. I do not even know who Azam Chowdhury is."

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"Politicians are being undermined and the anti-graft drive is being conducted against them.

"But after that export has been increasing," he added.

Democracy has been in danger in the country many a time and military dictators have assumed power," she said.

Hasina mentioned that in the last four/five months she was not allowed to talk to anybody, not even her lawyers. "I was kept in total confinement," she said.

The judge told Hasina several times that elaborating the statement at this stage of the case is unnecessary and at one stage stopped Hasina from talking.

Counsels of the AL chief then became excited and shouted for allowing her to speak. During the chaos a lawyer called the court "illegal".

Before Hasina started speaking, Selim maintained his innocence, saying the allegation againstis not true.

He said, "The cheque produced as a piece of evidence of extorting money does not corroborate with the status of my bank account at that time."

"I did not receive any money. And the allegation that I shared the extorted money with Sheikh Hasina has no proof. Going to Gonobhaban means going through numerous checkpoints of different law enforcement agencies and areas with CCTVs. And no evidence that I went there with the money could be produced against me," Selim said.

Reading out from the constitution, he said, "No accused or offender can be forced to give statement but I have informed the court of the circumstances under which I gave the judicial statement and later retracted from that."

"I was threatened with crossing and electric shock, and was even tortured blindfolded to give the statement," he said, telling that even the prosecution lawyer would also give such judicial statement against head of the state if they are put in similar circumstances.

"The statement given under section 164 must be withdrawn," he pointed out.

Hasina's chief counsel barrister Shafiq Ahmed filed a petition with the court seeking "enough" time before the trial begins. The court rejected the petition.

Syed Rezaur Rahman introduced himself as the counsel for Selim and told the court that his client is "aggrieved at the order and wishes to move to higher court". He appealed to the court to adjourn the trial for 21 days.

Chief Public Prosecutor ABM Sharfuddin Khan Mukul opposed Shafiq Ahmed's prayer and sought fixing of the date for taking deposition of the witnesses.

The court fixed January 17 to begin the trial.

Cops beat up

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some vehicles prompting the police deployed in the area to club the workers.

Several workers and passers-by were injured in the police action, witnesses said.

A pregnant worker named Rubi suffered serious injuries when she fell on the stairs on the seventh floor of the building that houses the factory in the rush of workers as police also charged batons inside the factory, alleged a number of workers seeking anonymity.

Rubi was taken to a city hospital unconscious. For a while, rumour spread that she had died. However, Rubi was released from hospital after treatment.

The agitating workers went back to work at noon after a deal was struck in a meeting among the representatives of the workers, owner, the joint forces and the Bangladesh Garments Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) at the factory building.

Yesterday's agitation is third such incident in the area since January 2. Earlier, workers of SQ Sweater Ltd staged demonstrations on January 2 and 3 while workers of three other factories of the group barricaded the busy Rokeya Sarani on Saturday in support of similar demands.

Additional police were deployed at the entrances of all garment factories in the area following the demonstration to avert any untoward incident.

WORKERS' AGITATION IN NARAYANGANJ
Our Narayanganj correspondent adds: Workers of three factories of Partex Group barricaded the Dhaka-Chittagong Highway at Dewanbagh area in Bandar Police Station in the district demanding hike in salary and bonus.

The blockade caused severe traffic gridlock on both sides of the highway. Later, police went to the spot and brought the situation under control.

Police and workers said that the workers of Partex Star Particle Board Mills Ltd, Partex Plywood Factory and Partex Furniture Industries stopped their work at around 8:00am and barricaded the Dhaka-Chittagong Highway at around 10:00am.

The workers, however, returned to work after a successful meeting between the Partex group management, police and the workers.

Corruption case

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accused are former energy secretary Dr Towfiq-e-Elahi Chowdhury, former Power Development Board (PDB) chairman Noor Uddin Mahmud Kamal, Managing Director of Summit Industries and Mercantile Corporation Private Ltd Aziz Khan and Director Farid Khan, United Group Chairman Hasan Mahmud Raja, Director Abul Kalam Azad and Bangabandhu Memorial Trust (BMT) curator Sayed Siddiqur Rahman.

In addition to the seven accused in the FIR earlier, name of the BMT curator was also included in the charge sheet, as the investigators found he was involved.

ACC Deputy Director Sabbir Hasan filed the case with Tejaon Police Station on September 2 last year. He accused Hasina and the six others of helping a foreign company and its local partners win a deal for setting up the power plant, depriving the lowest bidders.

NIKO CASE
The same court passed the order following a petition by the investigation officer (IO) of the case, ACC Deputy Director MM Sabbir Hasan, for showing Rafiqul Islam arrested in the case.

The case was filed with Tejaon Police Station against Hasina and six others on December 9 last year on charge of causing a huge loss to the state through awarding gas exploration deals to Canadian company Niko through abuse of power.

On December 31, Hasina was also shown arrested in the case.

Other accused in the case are former principal secretary to the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) Dr SA Samad, former energy secretary Dr Towfiq-e-Elahi Chowdhury and M Akmal Hossain, former Petrobangla chairman Mosharraf Hossain, and Vice-president (South Asia) of Niko Research Bangladesh Ltd Kashem Sharif.

Babar

FROM PAGE 16
last year. The army-led joint forces also recovered four firearms -- a shotgun, a rifle, a pistol and a Brazil-made revolver -- two magazines, and 297 rounds of ammunition.

He has already handed down 17 years of rigorous imprisonment for possessing the arms and ammo illegally.

The joint forces recovered Tk 20 crore, which he received from Bashundhara Group in exchange for not implicating the conglomerate's boss' son Shafiat Sobhan in a murder case.

In July 2006, Humayun Kabir Sabbar, a director of Bashundhara Group owned by Ahmed Akbar Sobhan, was murdered and his body was found lying outside an apartment building in Gulshan. Sobhan's son Shafiat was the main suspect in the killing.

Sobhan cut a shady deal with Babar that he would pay the latter Tk 20 crore in exchange of sparing his son of the murder charges.

Tigers face

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the second and last Test, Bangladesh were 51-5 in their second innings, still 199 runs behind.

To add to their woes, key batsman Tamim Iqbal, is unlikely to bat because of a broken thumb, leaving veteran Habibul Bashar to lead the resistance.

New Zealand took command of the match in an inconsistent innings which saw a mixture of authority and indiscipline.

Fleming was out for 87 -- his 43rd half-century in Tests and 13 runs short of his 10th century -- while Vettori fell for 94, only six runs from his third Test century after compiling his 13th 50.

After Fleming had revived the innings, which was in difficulty at 35 for two on Saturday, Vettori led a late-order charge which made New Zealand's lead substantial.

Bangladesh staggered when faced with New Zealand's heavy first innings lead Sunday, losing five quick wickets and showing little determination to stave off a sixth loss in six Tests against New Zealand.

New Zealand quickly got amongst the Bangladesh batsmen as they batted again.

Shahriar Nafees, opening in place of Tamim, Zunaed Siddiqui, Mohammad Ashraf, Aftab Ahmed and Mushfiqur Rahim were all out before stumps.

ACC's plea

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year, the High Court, following a writ petition challenging the legality of the ACC action had stayed the operation of the notice.

It had also issued rule asking the ACC to explain why the notice should not be declared to have been issued without lawful authority.

On July 17 last year, the ACC served notice to Khaleda Zia to submit her wealth statement as part of its initiative to find out whether there is any ground for filing graft case against her.

AL asks govt

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He said the government should follow the Election Commission in arranging dialogue with political parties as every party has its own stand and ideology. The EC sat separately with the parties on electoral reforms.

Zillur Rahman said the release of Awami League President Sheikh Hasina would be high on the agenda during the proposed dialogue, with Tofail adding that the issue of keeping war criminals out of the elections and bringing them to trial would also be on the agenda of the AL.

Tofail, however, said the agenda for the proposed dialogue would be finalised at party forum which will be convened after getting the date for the talks.

Replying to a query, Zillur said they want early polls and would move ahead with Sheikh Hasina's demand for elections by March-April this year.

He said there should be no problem in holding the elections early because the country is now witnessing stability, adding that voter registration is a continuous process and the government could hold the polls right now if they want so.

Giving the AL's formal reaction to the speech of Chief Adviser Fakhruddin Ahmed, Zillur said the only positive side of his address was that he assured the nation that the elections would be held according to the announced electoral roadmap.

Zillur expressed frustration as the chief adviser did not say anything about the release of state prisoners and university teachers, labour unrest, closure of mills and factories, leakage of question papers of National University and sixth wage board award for newspaper employees.

"Although the chief adviser admitted to rice crisis, he failed to give any permanent solution to it," Zillur said.

On whether the AL would only demand the release of Hasina or would also call for the release of other political leaders including Khaleda Zia, he said their party wanted the release of all state prisoners but added that Hasina's was more logical and it would get priority.

Asked whether the AL supports what Hasina said in court on her arrest, another president member Motia Chowdhury said Hasina's statement was a clear reflection of the feelings of the whole nation because people have no doubt about the trick behind her arrest.

REACTION TO CHARGE FRAMING AGAINST HASINA

The acting chairman of Jatiya Party (JP), Anisul Islam Mahmud, said the trial of Sheikh Hasina should be transparent. "The law should take its own course and if she is not convicted, she should be freed," he told The Daily Star.

Workers Party President Rashed Khan Menon alleged that despite their repeated request, due process of law has not been followed in Hasina's trial.

"The entire anti-corruption drive will be questioned if due process is not followed," Menon, a key leader of the AL-led 14-party combine, told this newspaper.

Saying confusion has already been created over the legal process of the charge brought against Hasina, he urged the authorities concerned not to further deepen it. Menon hoped that Hasina would be exonerated if due process were followed.

Termining the issue as legal one, Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal President Hasanul Haque Inu said the matter should be resolved legally. He urged the government to follow due process in Hasina's trial.

US ELECTION

Minority vote moves centre stage

AP, Washington

With nomination contests in lily-white Iowa and New Hampshire settled, minority voting power now moves into the spotlight.

Historical realities suggest that blacks and Hispanics won't play much of a role in determining the Republican Party presidential nominee. But this year's Democratic primary and caucus schedule was designed specifically to give increased influence to minorities, particularly Latinos.

Voters in both groups are energized: Blacks by the early successes of Illinois Sen. Barack Obama, Latinos by the intense, sometimes xenophobic debate over immigration. But it's far from clear how those influences will play off each other.

Nevada's caucuses on Jan. 19 will give an early showcase of Hispanic voting. However, observers say the true impact of Latino influence might not be felt until the general election, notably in Western states like Colorado, New Mexico and Nevada places where George Bush's margin of victory in 2004 was razor-thin.

When South Carolina Democrats hold their primary on Jan. 26 the state GOP contest is Jan. 19. The choices of substantial numbers of black voters will be tallied for the first time in this election.

Wazed Miah

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His condition is serious but not critical, Dr Sohrabuzzaman added.

Wazed Miah fell seriously ill a few months ago. At the time he was taken to Square Hospital and recovered after about three months.

Dr Wazed had been suffering from diabetes, high blood pressure and psychiatric problems for a long time. He underwent a bypass surgery in 1997.

Rice prices up

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price of rice US\$ 425 in importing per metric tons of rice was maintained and

They said when the government took initiatives to import rice and launch open market sales, the price of rice in the wholesale market went down making the wholesalers to incur loss.

"When the price of rice soared significantly, we made a profit of Tk 40-60 per maund. But we usually get Tk 5-10," said a wholesaler at Mohammadpur Krishi Market.

He said the wholesalers are now incurring loss as they are forced to sell rice at a reduced price.

"We sold rice at lower price as sale went down in the last few days. We have to incur heavy losses if we have to sell rice at a reduced price," he said.

Meanwhile, potato was sold yesterday at Tk 11-12 per kg which was Tk 10 just two days back in the wholesale markets.

Indian and Bangladesh onions were sold yesterday at Tk 13-15 per kg which were Tk 12-13 three days back.

Bush asks Tehran

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released of a voice threatening to blow up the US vessels may not have emanated from the Iranian vessels.

The Navy Times reported that US naval experts now believe the threatening voice may have been that of a local hecker known as the "Filipino Monkey" who frequently interrupts ship-to-ship radio traffic with insulting interventions.

Tehran accused Washington on Sunday of distorting the incident "to fool the region" during Bush's visit and called on US officials to apologise.

"They tried to bring it up at the same time as Bush was travelling to the region to paint Iran in a bad light. But their plans fell flat," foreign ministry spokesman said.

Mohammad Ali Hosseini said Bush had also used his speech in Abu Dhabi to urge Israelis and Palestinians to have faith in the renewed peace negotiations launched in Annapolis outside Washington in November and to shun the alternative of armed struggle and war.

"To the Palestinian people,