

## Blasts blown out

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so brief that they hardly mattered. Strangely, these observations starkly clash with the Lawachhara forester's testimony. He said the "blasts" are so loud that once he even fell off on the ground. "They [Chevron] are disturbing the forest with loud bangs and I am afraid the does which are now pregnant may have abortion from the noise," he said.

Obviously, he was not telling the truth and he might have reasons to distort facts. But the survey was undoubtedly badly timed. This is the breeding and nesting time for birds and animals and the widespread infiltration of survey workers into the forest will disturb them to some extent. We saw at least three jacksals and a jungle cat, expecting babies any time and they looked frightened. It was also time for the hooded pitta to fly all the way from Southeast Asia for breeding at Lawachhara.

"When the explosion sites were chosen, we checked whether there were any bird nests around," said the IUCN zoologist, one of many who are constantly accompanying the blasting teams. "On many occasions we changed the sites because of nesting birds."

Phil Johnston, chief geophysicist of Chevron, said they have observed some "light movement" of birds after explosions and stated that the blasts never produce noises louder than 60 decibels.

"In fact, we wanted to start the survey in January to avoid the breeding season, but the permission came late and so we had no choice but to start it now," Johnston said.

Asked what Chevron would do if gas reserves are found inside the forest, Phil said they would "never dig well in the forest and would go for directional drilling from outside the forest". This means they would dig the well outside the forest and then bend the pipes to reach reserves inside the forest that would not affect the forest.

"This is a rare piece of forest and we do not intend to damage it in anyway," he said.

But the forest was damaged in a

small area of one acre anyway when a fire broke out in a hill. Chevron has denied its responsibilities, saying the survey was not a cause for the fire and that it did not have its people there when the fire broke out. Bangladesh Forest Research Institute has made an estimate that 900 plants of various species and at least 28 big trees were destroyed in the fire. The place still smells of ash and looks barren. Both the Forest Department and locals said Chevron workers were in the area and had lunch before the fire and they left the place just about 40 minutes before the flames leapt up. We found explosive sites, wires and equipment only about 15 feet from the fire spot. With all likelihood, one of the survey workers had callously thrown a burning cigarette butt to cause the inferno, but there are no witnesses and Chevron forbids its workers to carry any matches or cigarettes to the forest.

However, as we roamed the forest, we found a different kind of threat to the forest. Thousands of sawed-off tree stumps tell the story of the mass-scale illegal logging that is going on inside Lawachhara. And many would say it happens in connivance with the foresters. In the two days we spent in the forest, never had we met the famous hoolock gibbons that Lawachhara is so famous for. We once heard their loud cries though.

The 11 groups of gibbons that live in the forest will eventually vanish as illegal loggers are felling the tall trees. These primates live on the high canopies and once the tall trees are gone, they will go too. And more than the survey teams, "tourists" are causing disturbances to the wildlife. Blaring loudspeakers, thousands of people thronging the forest everyday and the forest authorities are just a silent spectator to the onslaught. The "picnic parties" litter the forest at will and scare away the birds and monkeys.

The natural forest that Lawachhara is supposed to be is today only a shade of what it was and is vanishing fast.

## Cuba lifts ban

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most had come just to look. The desktop computers cost almost \$800 (£400), in a country where the average wage is under \$20 (£10) a month.

But some Cubans do have access to extra income, much of it from money sent by relatives living abroad.

Since taking over the presidency in February, Raul Castro has ended a range of restrictions and allowed Cubans access to previously banned consumer goods.

In recent weeks thousands of Cubans have snapped up mobile phones and DVD players.

But only now have the first computer stocks arrived. Internet access remains restricted to certain workplaces, schools and universities on the island.

The government says it is unable to connect to the giant undersea fibre-optic cables because of the US trade embargo. All online connections today are via satellite which has limited bandwidth and is expensive to use.

Cuba's anti-American ally, Venezuela's President Hugo Chavez, is laying a new cable under the Caribbean.

It remains unclear whether, once the connection is completed, the authorities will then allow unrestricted access to the world wide web.

## 8 killed

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upazila during a nor'wester. The dead was identified as Hafizur Rahman Mukul, 45, of Senhati village under Digholia upazila of the district.

Two persons—Arabinda Das, 38, lecturer of Bagerhat Girls' College, and Alamgir Hossain, 32, field officer of an NGO, have been missing since the capsizing.

A general diary was filed with Bagerhat Sadar in this connection.

Reports received from different upazilas of Khulna, Bagerhat and Jessore said Friday night's nor'wester caused huge damages to IRR1-Boro crops and semi-pucca and thatched houses.

Meanwhile, our Benapole correspondent reported that a huge piece of hail fell from the sky on the ground in Goga village of Sharsha upazila on Friday afternoon although there was no cloud or rain.

Locals said the hail, which broke into hundreds of pieces, could weigh about 50kg but no one was fortunately hurt in the incident.

## Delwar

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would be allowed in the country, he said, adding, "BNP will not participate in any election keeping party Chairperson Khaleda Zia in jail."

Demanding release of the political leaders, he asked the government to hold a credible election as soon as possible and hand over power to the elected representatives.

The secretary general appointed by Khaleda accused the government of "hatching conspiracy" to divide the BNP.

He said those who do not help the party in bad times would not get any chance to lead the party.

BNP acting Office Secretary Rizvi Ahmed, former lawmakers Sohrab Uddin, Selim Reza Habib and Nurul Kabir Shaheen, Pabna district BNP President Sirajul Islam Sardar and General Secretary Habibur Rahman Tota, among others, were present during the meeting.

A delegation of Rajshahi Jatiyatabadi Ainjibi Samity led by its General Secretary Advocate Enamul Huq also met Delwar yesterday.

Delwar once again voiced his demand for "unconditional" release of detained former premiers Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina and urged the lawyers to play a strong role in overcoming the current crisis.

"An elected government must govern the country. A non-elected government cannot continue in power," he said.

Meanwhile, Maj (ret) Hafiz Uddin Ahmed, acting secretary general of the pro-Saiful faction of BNP, yesterday said unity in the party is now "a matter of time".

He, however, said both the factions of the party have to work to reunite the party.

"I can assure party leaders and workers that the party would be united before the death anniversary of late president Ziaur Rahman [on May 30]," Hafiz told reporters at this Banani residence.

## 2 schoolboys

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"My son wanted to study and do a respectable job when he grows up. But now, all our hopes are shattered," Bilquis Begum, the grief-stricken mother of Biplab, told The Daily Star.

Biplab was their only child. Bilquis demanded immediate arrest of her child's killers and exemplary punishment to them.

The bodies of Biplab and Jewel were taken to their village homes in Munshiganj and Mymensingh respectively on Friday evening and buried there.

## Hold public hearings

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member for a three-year term. He raised a question whether the press council can ensure a responsible role of those involved with newspapers by only warning and censoring them. He placed "equipping the council with more powers" on the table.

The programme saw lively discussion as some of the discussants underscored amending the Press Council Act, 1974 by giving it some "teeth" to punish breach of journalistic ethics while others said they do not want to see yet another regulatory body for journalists and rather want the council to remove obstructions and help journalists perform their jobs better.

The law adviser as the chief guest of the programme underscored the need for public consultations before broadening the jurisdiction of the press council.

"Massive public consultation is required to see if the reach of the Press Council Act needs to be broadened," he said adding that it should not be seen as the state's police power and it needs to be seen whether it reflects the people's hopes and demands.

The law adviser joined others to say that freedom of the press is a must but there should be restraint on its use.

"Journalists' freedom helps them in their professional work. But, in a democratic society, sense of responsibility is intertwined with freedom," he said urging journalists to be more responsible and honest.

Delivering the welcome speech, Justice Ebadul said there is a lack of people's trust on the press council as many think it has failed to fulfil the expectations of the people and the journalists.

He suggested widening the Press Council Act's jurisdiction to stop activities that go against journalists' code of conduct.

He said journalists' track records should be looked into during issuance of accreditation cards. It needs to be considered whether state facilities should be limited or withdrawn altogether for newspapers that publish false and objectionable news hurting the rights of the people or the state.

## Release of Hasina

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between the caretaker government and political parties as "they are actually ruling the country from behind the scene".

"It will be good to have dialogues with those [the army] who have been actually ruling the country, instead of the dummies, as neither the chief adviser nor any other adviser can take any decision independently," said Hannan Shah, an adviser to detained BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia, while addressing the BBC Bangladesh Sanglap in Bangladesh-China Friendship Conference Centre in the capital.

The pro-Khaleda BNP leader categorically said the army has been ruling the country with a government formed by them with people of their choice. "The entire nation is being ruled by the task forces and by a special intelligence agency, so we might reach somewhere having dialogues with them," said the former army official.

While Suranjit Sengupta said, "As the army formed the caretaker government led by Fakhruddin Ahmed, they should be present at the dialogues as a part of the government."

Oposing the views of the two leaders of traditional archrivals AL and BNP, two other panellists --- veteran journalist also cultural activist Kamal Lohani, and Country Director of Action Aid Bangladesh Farah Kabir --- said presence of the army at the dialogues will be improper. "It will not be possible to restore democracy by bringing in the army to the dialogues," said Kamal Lohani.

BBC Bangla Service in conjunction with BBC World Service Trust organised the Sanglap [dialogue] moderated by Kamal Ahmed.

Oposing the Election Commission's (EC) latest delimitation of parliamentary constituencies, both leaders of AL and a faction of BNP observed that the parliamentary election might be delayed "somehow", and warned that there might be incidents of cases being filed against the EC regarding the delimitation.

Replying to a query, all panellists said a design for delaying the holding of the next parliamentary election is at work in the name of holding local government elections first. They demanded that the EC holds the parliamentary election first. Suranjit suggested the commission to hold both local government and national polls simultaneously before December to ease public confusion.

The dialogues also asked the government to make a clear statement before the nation regarding the money recovered through the ongoing anti-corruption drive.

Responding to another query, Brig Gen (ret) Hannan Shah said the chiefs of BNP and AL --- Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina --- have been detained illegally in an effort to humiliate them politically.

Suranjit claimed that Hasina is innocent while false charges have been brought against her. He demanded that the government releases the AL chief and send her abroad for treatment immediately.

Both Hannan and Farah Kabir asked the government to allow law to take its own course, so the legal rights of the chiefs of two most major political parties in the country may be ensured.

It holds the annual meeting outside of Asia every two years. The fund provides grants and low interest loans to Asia's poorest countries to help them build roads, provide clean water and electricity and agriculture infrastructure.

Last year entire ADB approved 10.1 billion dollars in loans, 673 million dollars in grant projects and technical assistance amounting to 243 million dollars last year.

Pakistan was the largest recipient of ADB aid last year followed by Vietnam, India, China and Indonesia.

Established in 1966, the ADB is owned by its 67 member countries -- 48 from the Asia-Pacific region, and 19 from elsewhere around the world, including Spain.

The lender has grown from helping Asian governments develop infrastructure projects to promoting the role of the private sector in development.

Some 3,000 people -- business and government leaders, academics and representatives of non-governmental organisations -- are taking part in the ADB's annual meeting, which is being held in Spain for the first time.

## Code of conduct

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restrictions in carrying out their electoral activities during the pre-poll period once the code of conduct becomes effective.

The parties will not be allowed to bring out processions or hold rallies for election campaigns without prior permissions from proper authorities, according to the proposed code of conduct.

"Prior permissions from proper authorities will be necessary through informing them of the specific time, date, and place for holding any procession or meeting for any election campaign programme during the pre-poll period," the proposed code of conduct says.

"Authorities" has been defined as district magistrates or officials authorised by district magistrates, and police commissioners in metropolitan areas.

The proposed code of conduct also recommends imposing a ban on holding rallies and processions that might obstruct free public movement.

It also suggests severe restrictions on pasting posters on walls and establishments in city corporation areas. None will be allowed to paste posters and leaflets on buses, trucks, launches, or on any other vehicle, according to the proposals.

Violation of the code of conduct will be made an offence, which will be punishable with imprisonment, fine and cancellation of candidatures.

## Food crisis

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total demand. Despite the positive developments, prices of food grains are not going to come down anytime soon, food ministry officials and economists alike predict.

According to Trading Corporation Bangladesh (TCB) report, the price of coarse rice ranged between Tk33 and Tk35 a kg a week ago. It did the same yesterday showing that Boro harvest and import did not yet have an effect on the price situation.

The trend will continue, said a food ministry official. "It's because the production cost has shot up by 54 percent in one year," he added.

On the other hand, import price too has increased sharply due to a global food crisis. The price of rice on the international market is increasing on a daily basis with many countries resorting to restrictions on export of their rice.

Meanwhile, five major rice exporting countries including Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar have agreed in principle to launch a platform styled OREC (Organisation of Rice Exporting Countries) to control rice prices on global market.

Thailand, the biggest rice exporter, has already said it wants to form an Opec-style cartel comprising Mekong nations to gain more control over international prices.

Talking to The Daily Star last

night, Uttam Kumar Deb, head of research division at the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD), said if they really go on to create a cartel the price of rice will increase and at the same time availability of the staple will decrease.

"So, Bangladesh should try to increase the production to meet the deficit," he observed adding that a hard time is ahead as supply even in the international market will be limited.

He also said though the farmers are having a bumper Boro crop, the price would not mark any significant decrease as both production cost and scarcity of food grains in the world market have increased.

Uttam said how much the price of rice would decrease depends on whether the farmers would be able to gather the crop safely in the next few days.

About the food ministry estimates, he said there should be measures to have actual data regarding production and demand for food grains.

He said the demand should be calculated on the basis of an updated population census.

## Thai PM harasses reporters

Allege media group

AP, Bangkok, Thailand

Prime Minister Samak Sundaravej routinely harasses reporters and attempts to intimidate the media with his foul mouth, a coalition of Thai journalism groups charged yesterday.

The Organizations of Media Occupations, which represents three Thai journalism groups, said the tactics are aimed at giving the public the impression that the media is the source of all the country's problems.

"This is the new method of intimidation," the group said in a statement coinciding with World Press Freedom Day. "Samak has been using the state media, the state television to scolded the media with rude and dirty words with his intention to intimidate the media from reporting the news in a straightforward way."

It also accused the government of using criminal defamation laws to stifle the media, and the prime minister of using state-owned media outlets to counter stories that run in the privately owned media.

"This behavior reflects his intolerance toward different views, which entirely contradicts (the) culture of democracy," the group said of Samak.

The government's spokesman, Wichianchote Sukchotrat, refused to comment on the allegations.

Samak, who became prime minister in January after leading his People's Power Party to victory in the December general election, said Wednesday he would stop holding twice-a-week news conferences following strong criticism about the blunt and sometimes crude language he uses.

Samak said that a prominent figure in Thai society, whom he refused to name, told him to tone down his language. He said he was also asked to tone down the language he uses during his one-man Sunday television and radio talks.

The prime minister's long-standing bent for speaking bluntly has won him popularity with working-class and some middle-class voters during his four decades in Thai politics, but he is also disliked by many who find his style too provocative and crude.

## Musharraf ready

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While the PPP has been saying that it is willing to forge a "working relationship" with Musharraf, its coalition partner PML-N has been insisting that the President should quit. PML-N chief Nawaz Sharif made a fresh demand for Musharraf to step down yesterday while unveiling plans to restore the deposed judges on May 12.

Meanwhile, Musharraf may accept the reinstatement of judges he dismissed if the new government amends the constitution instead of simply passing a parliamentary resolution, a spokesman for his political party said Saturday.

Musharraf purged the judiciary of some 60 judges including Supreme Court Chief Justice Iftikhar Mohammed Chaudhry when he imposed a state of emergency in November to avoid any legal challenges to his election as president.

But the action angered many Pakistanis, who rejected Musharraf's allies in the Feb. 18 elections, paving the way for the formation of a coalition government, which on Friday set May 12 as the date to restore judges. The government's decision further threatened the US-backed president's already diminished grip on power.

Although the presidency has avoided comment on the latest move, Tariq Aziz, the spokesman for Musharraf's Pakistan Muslim League-Q party, said the president "may accept the restoration of judges if the government amends the constitution."

However, Aziz insisted that the judges could not be sent back to the courts by the parliament's simply approving a resolution. He provided no further details, and said the president was still consulting experts.

that the ruling party chief, Asif Ali Zardari, had agreed to restore the judges.

Restoring the judges has been a top priority for the two main parties in Pakistan's month-old government, but disputes over how to bring the judges back has threatened to break up the ruling coalition.

After marathon talks in Dubai this week, coalition officials finally came to a deal.

"I want to inform the entire nation that on Monday, May 12 all the sacked judges will be restored," Nawaz Sharif, head of the second-biggest party in the coalition, said at a Friday news conference in Lahore.

Farahnaz Isphani, a spokeswoman for Zardari's Pakistan People's Party, the largest party in the coalition, confirmed the plan.

Bringing the justices back bodes ill for the unpopular president, who seized power from Sharif in a 1999 military coup.

The judges could revisit Musharraf's disputed re-election.

Even if they don't, some argue the humiliation of the judges returning would prompt Musharraf to resign.

Musharraf would have to be "absolutely shameless" to continue as president if the judges came back, said Khawaja Asif, a key Sharif aide. He said Musharraf also risks impeachment.

Zardari, who has been leading the party of his wife Benazir Bhutto since she was assassinated on Dec. 27, told Pakistani Aaj news channel late Friday that he was maintaining a distance from Musharraf.

However, Zardari would not confirm the May 12 date for the judges' restoration as announced by Sharif, saying the question should be put to a committee of experts set up by Sharif to draft the resolution.

"Ask this question of that committee," he said, adding, "God willing, as soon as possible this will be done."

## High alert in 5 N-dists

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cartridges and some other evidences from the spot of Friday's attack.

**OUTLAW'S ADMISION**  
A man identifying himself as Nikhil Sarker, regional responsible person of PBCP, telephoned two local newsmen and claimed responsibility of the attack on police.

The two newsmen said the caller boasted about continuing their attacks on law enforcers and said they would also attack Rab and army personnel.

The Friday attackers sprayed leaflets while fleeing the scene. The leaflets narrated PBCP activities and called upon poor people to join the outfit. They hailed guerrilla attacks on law enforcers for what they said is establishing the revolutionary people's power in the country.

They also warned that 'sources' of law enforcers in villages must not to help them in any more.

**POLICE INDIFFERENCE**  
Local police blamed police for 'indifference' to outlaws' activities. There have been no regular police patrol and raids against outlaws and militants in the region since October last year.

One Afzal Hossain of Harmirkutsa said police took no action despite repeated complaints to them about activities of PBCP members in recent months.

A businessman unwilling to be named said he was threatened by outlaws over phone only a week ago. But police ignored his complaint saying the outlaws are no more able to conduct attacks.

Goalkandi union Parishad member Shefali Begum said police patrol decreased since the former officer-in-charge (OC) was transferred in October last year.

Asked about this, a police source said former Bagmara OC Mirja Golam Sarwar was transferred after he had arrested 106 listed outlaws and 56 militants in regular raids till October 2007. There have been no such raids since then.

The incident (on Friday) occurred at around 6.30pm and we reached the spot at around 8.00pm. But police took another half an hour to reach there. (18km from police station)," said Mamunur Rashid, a local newsman.

Minutes after the attackers left the scene chanting slogans, I found one policeman in a pool of blood. I took him to a nearby village doctor. The doctor advised taking him to hospital and informing police. I rushed to Taherpur police outpost in 15 minutes. But policemen didn't move to the spot which is only yards away," said Mokhlesur Rahman, a roadside shop-owner at Taherpur market.

Bagmara OC Fayzul Islam said

## Phulbari highway

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meeting to protest the development of the coalmine in Phulbari. Md. Aminul Islam Bablu and General Secretary of Phulbari unit of Oil, Gas Mineral Resources and Port Protection Committee ASM Nuruzzaman spoke at the meeting.