

SAARC SUMMIT OPENS IN COLOMBO TODAY

Quest for roadmap to face series of challenges

UNB, Colombo

South Asian leaders sit for a summit meeting here today to chart a roadmap to address the challenges of soaring food and fuel prices, trade imbalances and climate change, and improve the socioeconomic condition of 1.5 billion people in the region.

Amidst extraordinary security measures, heads of state and government arrived in the Sri Lankan capital to attend the 15th summit of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (Saarc).

Afghanistan President Hamid Karzai, Bangladesh caretaker government's Chief Adviser Fakhruddin Ahmed, Bhutanese Prime Minister Lyonchen Jigmi Thinlay, Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, Maldives President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, Nepalese Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala, Pakistan Prime Minister Syed Yusuf Raza Gilani and host Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse will join the two-day summit at Bandarnaike Memorial International Conference Hall.

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PHOTO: PID

Sri Lankan Prime Minister Ratnasiri Wickramanayaka, right, welcomes Chief Adviser Fakhruddin Ahmed to Colombo yesterday as the latter reached Lankan capital to attend the 15th Saarc Summit.

CA holds talks with Saarc leaders

UNB, Colombo

Bangladesh and Sri Lanka have agreed to revive Joint Economic Commission (JEC) to boost trade relations between the two south Asian countries.

The identical views were expressed while Chief Adviser (CA) Fakhruddin Ahmed and Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse had bilateral meeting on the sidelines of the 15th Saarc Summit in Colombo. The meeting was held at the President's Secretariat yesterday morning.

Responding to the Sri Lankan president, the CA said he will ask the foreign ministry to start process to revive the Joint Economic Commission.

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Dhaka on good track towards poll: Boucher

UNB, Colombo

US Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia Richard Boucher yesterday said Bangladesh is on "a good track" towards holding general election by the end of this year.

Boucher made the comment when he called on Chief Adviser Fakhruddin Ahmed at his hotel suite here. They discussed the issues relating to the upcoming national election in Bangladesh, food security and counter-terrorism.

The CA told the US assistant secretary that preparation for holding national polls is at final stage. He especially mentioned

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AL may change stand in case of 'invisible' interference in polls

HASAN JAHER TUSHER

Awami League (AL) might change its electoral strategies after evaluating the August 4 polls to four city corporations and nine municipalities in which party leaders apprehend interference by 'invisible government forces' in favour of candidates of their choice.

The AL had decided to take part in the polls on June 27 after a crucial meeting of its Central Working Committee (ALWC), the party's highest decision-making body. But at the ALCWC meeting on Wednesday last, some of its mem-

bers expressed doubts if it would be proper to participate in the polls if there is invisible interference.

According to senior AL leaders, the future course of politics would also depend on the polls results.

One of them said if the August 4 polls are held in a free and fair manner, then they might take part in the coming upazila parishad elections.

"We have told the Election Commission that invisible forces have been making remarks about who are honest and who are dishonest candidates ahead of the

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Reconciliation move as Bhuiyan, others freed

RAKIB HASNET SUMAN

After a period of lull, a fresh move is underway to reconcile the BNP factions following the release of some senior leaders including expelled secretary general Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan.

While most of the BNP leaders loyal to detained Chairperson Khaleda Zia want the party to unite without further delay, a group led by Secretary General Khandaker Delwar Hossain still prefers settling the issue after the chairperson's release.

Insiders said efforts are on to have the expulsion of Bhuiyan, ex-joint secretary general Ashraf Hossain and ex-office secretary Mofiqul Islam Tripti withdrawn.

In exchange for a dignified

return, Bhuiyan-led leaders will endorse all decisions made by the chairperson including Khandaker Delwar's appointment as the secretary general, they continued.

According to the reconciliation plans, once a consensus is reached there would be no formal announcement or declaration from the party. Instead, Bhuiyan and his followers will hold a press conference to announce cancellation of all their decisions including those taken at the controversial standing committee meeting at Saifur Rahman's residence on October 29 last year.

A former BNP lawmaker close to Bhuiyan said they are ready to do everything necessary for unity, which he said is a must for the

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UK minister Hazel Blears

'Election under emergency difficult, not impossible'

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Visiting UK minister Hazel Blears yesterday said holding a free and fair election under the state of emergency is very difficult but not impossible.

She said the caretaker government should gradually lift the emergency before the general election, but at the same time it must consider public safety as well.

The British secretary of state for communities and local government, Blears made the observations at a press conference at the residence of British high commissioner in Dhaka.

Replying to a query, she said, "I don't think a free and fair election is impossible if there's a state of

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Engr Mosharraf, Sayeed rearrested

Alal freed on bail

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Police yesterday rearrested former Awami League (AL) minister Engineer Mosharraf Hossain and HRC Group Chairman Sayeed Hossain Chowdhury soon after they came out of jails on bail.

Meanwhile, former BNP lawmaker Moazzem Hossain Alal was released on bail yesterday morning.

Joydevpur police said they arrested Mosharraf around 2:30pm at the Kashimpur Jail gate on charge of violating the Emergency Power Rules (EPR).

Earlier, Mosharraf was arrested on February 25 last year when he went to the Anti-Corruption Commission office to submit

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PHOTO: ZOBAER HOSSAIN SIDDER

A stool and a piece of a tree trunk hold one end of the operation table in place at the casualty department of Chittagong Medical College Hospital as a doctor operates on a patient yesterday. The surgeon and his aides are not even wearing any surgical garb.

Campaign climaxes as elections near

STAR REPORT

Campaigning for the candidates backed by Awami League (AL)-led 14-party combine and BNP-led four-party alliance has reached fever pitch with only two days to go before the polls to four city corporations and nine municipalities.

Local chapters of Jamaat-e-Islami and Jatiya Party (JP) yesterday endorsed Ahsan Habib Kamal, expelled city BNP president, as a mayoral candidate for Barisal City Corporation (BCC) while Jamaat activists and supporters in Khulna have been asked to vote for BNP-backed candidate Moniruzzaman Moni.

HM Ershad's Jatiya Party (JP) has already pledged support for three AL-backed mayoral candi-

dates in August 4 polls. The contenders having JP on their side are Talukder Abdul Khaleque in Khulna, Shawkat Hossain Hiron in Barisal and Badar Uddin Ahmed Kamran in Sylhet.

JP acting chairman Anisul Islam Mahmud told The Daily Star that as per the presidium's decision they are rooting for AL candidates except the one in Rajshahi.

With the polls approaching fast, more and more breaches of electoral rules are reported across the four city corporations.

In Sylhet, law enforcers yesterday held Aftab Hossain, a councilor candidate of ward-7, on charge of violating election rules.

A team of Rapid Action Battalion (Rab) picked up him, also

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Rahul Gandhi arrives on 5-day visit

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Rahul Gandhi, an Indian parliament member also one of the general secretaries of National Congress, arrived here yesterday on a five-day visit to gather first-hand knowledge of rural development models in Bangladesh.

Nobel Peace Laureate Prof Muhammad Yunus who is also the founder of Grameen Bank received Rahul at Zia International Airport (ZIA) on arrival by a Jet Airways flight around 3:30pm.

Brac's Chief of Protocol N Hossain, and senior officials of the government and Indian High Commission were also present.

Rahul is visiting Bangladesh on invitation from Brac and Grameen Bank.

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Acacia, a species alien to Bangladesh and harmful to the local eco-system, is grown on large scale on hill while new trees, inset, are planted after clear-felling of trees in the area.

VANISHING FORESTS-2



INAM AHMED

Years ago, we had seen it in Lathitila. On a second visit to the forest in a span of three months, we were appalled by the sight.

What had been a beautiful sprawling forest over a range of curvy hills was reduced to nothingness. It was an eerie sight that made us shudder. A little

Clear-felling, foreign variety lead to destruction

further on the hilly road, we met the casualties -- hundreds of thousands of freshly felled trees. Some already transformed into logs ready to be shifted off to Dhaka and elsewhere. The air was still pungent with the smell of freshly shredded leaves.

The same scene we encountered this time too, and not only in one place but on numerous hills, across Khagrachhari and Rangamati. The forests, supposed to be reserved -- meaning no human interventions should have

occurred there, were clear-felled for miles by the forest department. Trees which were not ready to be timber of any economic value also could not escape the forest department's axe.

The department which is supposed to conserve and protect forests has adopted a mindless forest management system namely clear felling on short rotation that is now causing most of the deforestation in the country.

The forest department's existence today is based on a wrong

policy. It is given an annual revenue earning target, and to meet that the department engages in massive logging. Such actions totally ignore the existence and fate of the wildlife.

The department follows two types of clear felling -- short rotation and long rotation. In short rotation, trees aged about twenty years or below are felled. Long rotation method targets trees over 30 years. But the forest department, often in its scurry to meet

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Loose edible oil prices falling

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Prices of non-brand edible oil started to come down on both the wholesale and retail markets in the city in the last three days.

Coarse-rice prices also slid on the wholesale market in the same period, but the fall did not see any impact on retail prices till yesterday.

Wholesale prices of non-brand cooking oils dropped by Tk 200-500

per maund in the last ten days. Yesterday a maund of non-brand palm and soya bean oils was selling at Tk 3,360-3,400 and Tk 4,150-4,180 respectively. Better quality, but non-brand, palm oil sold for Tk 3,460-3,500.

The retail market saw a fall of Tk 2-8 per litre in non-brand cooking oil prices in the last three days. Palm oil of this category was selling for Tk 94-100 per litre while soya bean oil cost Tk 116-118 a litre yesterday.

Recently prices of crude palm oil on the international market came down to \$1,070-1,080 per tonne from \$1,360 two weeks back, said Fakhru Alam, country manager of Malaysian Palm Oil Council.

He said recent prices of soya bean on the world market have been \$1,290-1,310, down from \$1,400 plus two weeks ago.

But there have been no change in the prices of branded edible oils

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