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BARAPUKURIA COAL MINE

Over 4km² area to subside up to 2m

SHARIF KHAN

About 4.2 square kilometre-area of the underground Barapukuria coal mine site will subside by up to two metres in the mine's 30 year-life, says a highly placed Petrobangla source.

Such a subsidence will create a large lake, the source pointed out.

Residents of three to four villages adjacent to the mine, which are not densely populated like most villages in the country, will eventually have to be relocated.

Though land subsidence is a natural consequence of underground mining, the issue was omitted in the planning and approval of the mining project in the early nineties under Khaleda Zia's rule.

As a result, the project does not have

any budget to address environmental and relocation issues. Consequently, the Barapukuria Coal Mine Company Ltd (BCMCL) has not compensated the affected people or relocated any village, and now increasingly facing criticism from the locals.

If the project had funds for addressing these issues, such subsidence would not have been a critical problem, the source noted.

The underground mine's design will allow the authorities to extract coal up to at least 2035 and tap around 30 million tonnes. But the mine has a proven reserve of 389 million tonnes of coal at a depth of 120 metres to 450 metres.

This mine was suitable for open cast coal mining, which is a method opposed by a section of intellectuals and activists

as it destroys arable land and necessitates relocation of communities. In open cast method, widely applied in Indian mines including those in West Bengal, it is possible to extract more than 90 percent of the 389 million-tonne reserve.

The central mining area spreads around a three square kilometre area. The entire area will gradually subside. "Besides, 40 percent additional area will also subside. In total, the present mine design dictates a subsidence area of 4.2 sqkm area," the source said.

The mine has on an average, a very thick 36-metre coal seam. According to its underground mining design, the mining company is slicing out three-metre thick coal seams. "For each such slicing, the land subsidence would eventually be two

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Deputy speaker from opposition, no chance for war criminals

Says *Abdus Shahid*
STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Abdus Shahid, who was picked to be chief whip by prime minister, said the nation would not accept any war criminal as the deputy speaker of the parliament if the opposition party proposes such name.

"The nation will not accept any war criminal as the deputy speaker as the nation has rejected them in the December 29 polls," Shahid said while briefing the journalists at his residence yesterday.

The opposition party will have to wait until the first day of the first session of the Jatiya Sangsad, called by President Dr Iajuddin Ahmed on January 25, he said.

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BRIBING DEAL IN BANGLADESH

Canadian cops open probe into scandal

STAR REPORT

The Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) is looking into allegations that Calgary-based energy company Niko Resources Ltd or its subsidiary made improper payments to public officials in Bangladesh to bag a joint venture deal with Bangladesh Petroleum Exploration Company (Bapex) to develop three marginal gas fields.

The Canadian press reported Friday that Niko authorities had confirmed rumours that a RCMP probe was underway.

Murray Hesje, Niko's chief financial officer, said, "They were simply willing to confirm that yes, there was an investigation under way and they were willing to name the country that was involved, being Bangladesh. But they provided no additional details to us," he said.

Niko said it would co-operate fully with the corruption probe.

The Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) in 2007 filed two separate cases against Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia and a number of offi-

cials and a Niko representative for the deal that inflicted millions of dollars loss on the state treasury.

Hesje said the company always operates within both Canadian law and the laws of the countries in which it operates.

"We have a code of conduct... We believe we behave ethically and are unaware of anything illegal that the company's been involved with," he said.

Niko has operations in India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Madagascar, the Kurdistan region of Iraq, Indonesia and other countries.

In its latest financial report, the Calgary company posted a second-quarter loss of \$24-million, compared with a \$19.4-million loss for the same period the previous year.

Niko's corruption got public attention in mid-2005, when the then state minister for energy AKM Mosharruf Hossain resigned from the cabinet after he was exposed to have received a Tk 1 crore sport utility vehicle from Niko.

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Dealers warned against selling fertiliser at higher prices

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The government will confiscate dealership licences and forfeit security money if any dealer is found selling fertiliser at a higher price than the government-fixed rate.

"Nobody can charge extra money for fertiliser. If anybody is found doing it, then the government will take stern punitive measure against the person concerned," said Agriculture Secretary Sheikh Enayet Ullah at a press conference at his Secretariat office yesterday.

He also said the deputy commissioners (DCs) have already been instructed to monitor stock of fertiliser and its prices at field level and send a report accordingly to the ministry concerned.

Besides, central monitoring cell on fertiliser set up in the ministry will also monitor the distribution and prices of fertiliser across the country.

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Palestinian civilians and medics run to safety during an Israeli strike over a UN school in Beit Lahia, northern Gaza Strip early yesterday. Inset, the body of a child, top, killed during the strikes at the school, is kept in the morgue of Kamal Edwan hospital in Gaza along with those of two other children killed in other strikes.

PHOTO: AFP

UN-run school struck in Gaza

Israel shells 50 targets ahead of truce vote

AFP, AP, Gaza City

Israel pummelled Gaza with new strikes yesterday destroying 50 targets, including a UN-run school sheltering hundreds of refugees in the north, hours before an expected unilateral halt to a 22-day war on Hamas.

The Israeli security cabinet was to convene later on Saturday to consider ordering a halt to its offensive, which has killed more than 1,200 Palestinians and left much of Gaza in ruins.

But even before any official announcement, Hamas said they would not be laying down their arms as Israel still planned to keep its troops in Gaza.

"This unilateral ceasefire does not foresee a withdrawal" by the Israeli army, Osama Hemdan, the movement's Lebanon representative, told AFP. "As long as it remains in Gaza, resistance and confrontation will continue."

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert was to address the press along with senior ministers following the security cabinet meeting, which is widely expected to vote in favour of a unilateral ceasefire in Israel's deadliest ever offensive on Gaza.

In the hours before the meeting, the Israeli army kept up its attacks, killing more than a dozen people, including a woman and a child who had taken refuge with hundreds of others at a UN-run school in the north.

The military said it struck some 50 Hamas targets. In one attack, a shell struck a United Nations school packed with refugees fleeing the fighting, witnesses and the UN said, killing two

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BNP to go for party revamp after upazila elections

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

BNP will start the process of overhauling the party from the ground up by forming, reconstituting and making active its committees at different levels after the January 22 upazila polls.

"Complete committees at the party's different levels would be formed through the councils," BNP Secretary General Khandaker Delwar Hossain told reporters at his Nam flat in the capital yesterday.

Delwar yesterday said the party's national council would be held soon in Dhaka.

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NAOGAON-6 CONSTITUENCY

Voter number was 4,091

EC admits error in figures, rules out BNP's rigging claim

SHAKHWAT LITON

The document the BNP recently came up with to substantiate its claim of rigging and irregularities in the ninth parliamentary election is not accurate as it mentions an incorrect number of voters at the polling station concerned.

At a press briefing on Friday senior BNP leaders presented erroneous figures in the result sheet of Gahelapur High School poll centre in Raninagar upazila of Naogaon-6 constituency as their evidence of poll rigging.

The result sheet of the polling station shows that 3,845 votes were cast at the centre while 3,768 voters were entitled to cast their votes there. Casting of 77 more votes means voter turnout at the polling station was 102.04 percent.

The BNP has based its allegation of poll rigging, which it

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Hasina to talk to SA nations for terror taskforce

UNB, Dhaka

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina said she would talk to other countries of South Asia to form Anti-Terrorism Task Force as her newly elected government wants to build Bangladesh as a peaceful country.

"I will talk to other countries to form a joint taskforce to combat terrorism as it is a big problem not only for Bangladesh but for many other countries," she said in an interview with international television channel Al Jazeera aired yesterday.

Sheikh Hasina, who

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CLASHES INSIDE BAITUL MUKARRAM

Perks, clout in khatib post led to ugly race

M ABUL KALAM AZAD

The government perks and other benefits for the khatib of Baitul Mukarram National Mosque, who enjoys the status of a joint secretary, seem to be the main reason behind the troubles brewed often centring the post.

Apart from getting a government car for use and home allowance, a khatib receives a handsome monthly salary and enjoys the chairmanship of Islami Bank's Shariah Council.

He also holds the posts of adviser or member of other Islami banks and insurance companies.

But the most attractive side of becoming a khatib is the gifts (hadiya) given by people at home and abroad.

"The main source of income of a khatib is

the gifts and in most cases he receives those in cash," said an Islamic Foundation official wishing anonymity.

He said the top position of the country's number one mosque itself is very attractive because of the respect it receives from the people.

"It has become more attractive because of the extra benefits, especially the gifts," he said, adding that the government perks and the 'extra benefits' are the main reasons behind the recent crisis centring the post of khatib.

The official said a Bangladesh expatriate in the United States gave Tk 5 lakh as gift to a former khatib. The person, whose family was in trouble, came to Bangladesh just to seek blessings from the then khatib.

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Pakistan must act against militants

Says *Indian PM*

AFP, Mumbai

India's premier said yesterday that Pakistan must "in its own interest" hunt down Islamic militants blamed for the attacks in Mumbai which have heightened tensions between the nuclear-armed rivals.

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh sought assurances that Islamabad would share the results of its probe into Indian allegations that Pakistani "official agencies" and militants based on its soil supported the attackers.

"Pakistan should act against the Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and other terrorist groups and their sponsors operating from that country in its own interest," Singh told a public function in Mumbai, India's financial capital.

Industrial pollution chokes people, crops alike

MIRZA SHAKIL AND PINAKI ROY

Ammonia mixed toxic gas and urea dust emitted from Jamuna Fertiliser Factory (JFF) in Jamalpur have allegedly been wreaking havoc on the local environment and causing debilitating illnesses among the locals.

The toxic gas of the largest urea producing factory, at Tarandani of Sarishabari upazila in Tangail, has also been harming crops, trees, livestock, poultry and fish resources for the last 17 years. Many trees around the factory do not have a single leaf.

Locals held protest programmes—forming human chains, barricading the

factory gate, submitting memorandums to the JFF authorities—but nothing was achieved. A number of locals have started moving out of their villages near the factory. Locals alleged that the factory officials paid no heed to their complaints over the years.

The JFF authorities claimed that they are releasing ammonia at a much lower level than the government set standards. However, officials concerned at the department of environment said they in the recent past did not conduct any test of ammonia concentration in the gas emitting from the JFF.

Since its inception the JFF has been producing 1,700 tonnes of urea per day,

5,60,000 tonnes a year. Urea is produced from ammonia and carbon dioxide gas. Chemical formaldehyde is also mixed with the urea to make it hard. Formaldehyde acts as a disinfectant and it kills most bacteria and fungi (including their spores).

Sources working in the factory said ammonia-mixed toxic inert gas is released into the environment through the vent stake. This has been going on every day since 1991, when the factory started its operation.

The factory has been releasing a large amount of urea dust that look like smoke through the blowers of the JFF plant, they said.

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Villagers near Jamuna Fertiliser Factory in Jamalpur claim that the factory has been emitting toxic gas that is causing environment degradation and health issues.

PHOTO: STAR

New VC Arefin pledges to hold Ducusu polls

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The newly appointed Dhaka University (DU) Vice-Chancellor (VC) Prof AAMS Arefin Siddique yesterday formally took charge of the office from former DU VC Prof SMA Faiz at around 10:30am.

He said he would take necessary steps for holding the Dhaka University Central Students' Union (Ducusu) elections after talking with the students' organisations.

"Personally I feel that the Ducusu should remain active since future leaders would be

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