

Govt works

FROM PAGE 1 Meanwhile, the cabinet sent back to the industries ministry a draft proposal on Development and Protection of Capital Investment under bilateral arrangement between Bangladesh and India terming it incomplete.

Hasina asked the industries ministry to submit a complete report on the proposed agreement at the next cabinet meeting after finding out the similarities and dissimilarities between the proposed agreement and those signed with other countries.

"The prime minister has asked the authorities concerned to submit a comprehensive report on it at Wednesday's cabinet meeting in line with the trade and investment with other countries," Agriculture Minister Matia Chowdhury told The Daily Star after the meeting.

Various issues including infrastructure development for smooth functioning of land ports and measures to reduce trade imbalance are likely to figure prominently in the talks between Pranab and Hasina.

Besides, duty and quota-free access of Bangladeshi goods to India and removal of tariff barriers will also come up in the bilateral talks with India.

Sources said two agreements on bilateral trade, and promotion and protection of investments are likely to be signed during Pranab's visit to Dhaka between February 8 and 9.

Bangladesh and India signed a trade agreement in 1978 keeping the option of road, rail and air transits for trade with a provision to renew it after every three years.

The two countries renewed the treaty in March 2006 allowing India to invest in Bangladesh. Talking to The Daily Star Commerce Minister Faruk Khan said, "The three-year bilateral trade agreement, which was signed in 1978 will be renewed giving utmost priority to the country's interests and people's welfare."

He said they would make decisions on the matter after having discussions in the cabinet.

Commenting on the issue of transit with India, the commerce minister said trade is not seen as means of national development, but rather a weapon in politics.

"We have often failed to understand the people's requirement," he said at a regional seminar on Sunday.

India has long been pressing for transit through Bangladesh to reach its northeastern states.

On Wednesday, Chief Minister of Tripura Manik Sarkar told a Bangladeshi business delegation that transit and transshipment facilities can help both India and Bangladesh promote business and invest-

ment enormously, especially in seven northeastern Indian states, including Tripura.

Treasury bench

FROM PAGE 1 Discussing the president's speech, delivered on the inaugural day of the ninth parliament, the lawmakers blasted President Iajuddin Ahmed for "failing to discharge his constitutional duties".

They said the president kept mum during the five-year "misrule" of the BNP-led alliance government and Fakhruddin Ahmed-led caretaker government's "unconstitutional activities".

Now the question is whether the parliament will pass the thanksgiving motion or a censure motion. It will be an unprecedented incident if the parliament passes a motion censuring the president for his activities.

Talking to The Daily Star yesterday a number of senior AL lawmakers said they could not recall any instance of treasury bench lawmakers criticising the president in such a way.

Awami League (AL) lawmaker Noni Gopal Mandal during the discussion in the House said he could not thank the president considering how far he has moved away from his ethics.

"I could have thanked the president if he had spoken about the dark episodes of the BNP-led government's regime," AL lawmaker Mustak Ahmed said.

AL lawmaker Kamal Ahmed Majumder, who was detained by joint forces during the caretaker government rule, said the president failed to discharge his duties. "They had me detained without trial violating the constitution. But the president remained silent," Majumder said in an oblique reference to the president's constitutional jurisdiction to ensure accountability of the caretaker government.

Two ruling party lawmakers including Fazle Rabbi Mia, however, appreciated the president's address as he mentioned Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman as father of the nation. "For this, the president deserves thanks," Rabbi said.

Mostaf Faruk Mohammad thanked the president for administering the oath taking ceremony of ministers. AL lawmaker AKM Awal Sayedur Rahman questioned the election of Iajuddin Ahmed as president. He said Prof Badruddo Chowdhury was forced to step down from presidency and then Iajuddin Ahmed was elected president.

A number of ruling party lawmakers criticised former speaker Jamiruddin Sircar for "creating the trouble over seating arrangement in the House".

The House was adjourned around 9:30pm and is scheduled to resume at 4:45pm today.

Free dorms

FROM PAGE 16 Programme at 11:30am at Central Shaheed Minar under the banner of JNU Hostel Recovery Movement and Protection of Students' Rights.

The JNU students also formed a human chain to realise their eight-point demand, including withdrawal of the case filed against them by police and shifting of the office of Bangladesh Bank from the university campus.

They also formed a 25-member committee with Bakul Munshi as its convenor and Masud Rana as member secretary to achieve their goals.

Witnesses said students first chanted slogans in favour of their demands and then formed the human chain.

Speaking at a rally, they also threatened to go for a tough agitation if their demands are not met.

The JNU authorities closed the institution on January 27 following a violent clash between general students and police. The students were demanding immediate recovery of their hostels.

During the clash, police picked up nine students of the university and filed a case against several hundred students.

Sources said former Awami League lawmaker Haji Selim, Dhaka City Corporation, some police personnel and some local criminals occupied all the 12 dormitories of the university for years.

Shake-up

FROM PAGE 1 Sheikh Saiful Alam of Chittagong-Sylhet division to Dhaka division and Fazlur Rahman of Khulna-Barisal division to Chittagong-Sylhet division.

The transfers were made as some senior jail officials brought allegations of irregularities against them.

Earlier, on January 27 the army headquarters called Inspector General (IG-Prisons) Brig Gen Zakir Hassan back instantly and Additional IG-Prisons Col Dr M Ashrafur Islam Khan was appointed as the acting IG-Prisons.

Contacted, acting IG-Prisons Col Dr M Ashrafur Islam Khan admitted that those three DIGs had been transferred.

He, however, said Maj Haider was transferred as he had been serving in Dhaka for over four years and the transfers of two other DIGs were also part of routine works.

Replying to a question, the acting IG-Prisons said, "A two-member internal committee has been formed to probe into the irregularities in allowing visitors of Dipzal in the prison in violation of the jail code."

Commander Zakaria Khan, a DIG of the jail directorate, heads the committee while deputy jailer AG Mahmud will assist him in the investigation, sources said.

Jail sources said the probe committee was asked to investigate how the photograph of smiling Maj Haider and Dipzal along with some visitors inside the jail had been published in Bengali daily Prothom Alo.

BNP revamp

FROM PAGE 1 my role," he told The Daily Star last night.

Another joint secretary general, Abdullah Al Noman, who has been made head of the committee for Dhaka division, told The Daily Star that his team will meet the thana BNP leaders from Sherpur district at 4:00pm today.

Mirza Abbas, who leads the team for Rajshahi division, said his team will have talks with thana leaders of Sirajganj district today. The meeting will start at 10:30am at BNP central office in Naya Palta.

Discussions between the central teams and thana-level leaders from Khulna, Sylhet and Barisal divisions might begin tomorrow as the teams concerned will sit today to draw up their schedules.

"We will start meeting the grassroots level leaders tomorrow," Shamsuzzaman Duda, a member of the committee for Sylhet division, told The Daily Star last night.

Selima Rahman, leader of Khulna division team, said they will sit today to finalise the schedule for meetings that might get underway tomorrow. Barisal team chief Prof MA Mannan said, "We are meeting at the party headquarters at 11:00am today. There, we'll prepare a schedule for talks with the district and thana level leaders."

Earlier on Sunday night, national standing committee, highest policy-making body in BNP, formed the committees for dialogue with thana or upazila level leaders. It gave the teams less than a month to come up with reports.

According to previous announcement, the standing committee will convene tomorrow to discuss the issue with Chairperson Khaleda Zia in the chair.

Tac blames

FROM PAGE 1 much less than ACC findings.

Controversy rose because Tac awarded clemency to 452 people out of 492 graft-accused allegedly without entertaining some provisions of the Voluntary Disclosure Ordinance, 2008 that empowered it to reject dubious disclosures.

The report also blames the police and ACC for filing cases based on false allegations and keeping stalled the investigation over the allegations.

The Tac report also blames now-defunct military-led taskforces in obtaining confession from Titas Gas employees, which were mostly "incorrect".

Although Tac was declared unconstitutional and illegal by the High Court, the report strongly suggests reviving a commission of same nature in a larger scale modifying the law, rule and functions.

Identifying some weakness and flaws in police and ACC investigation the report observes it had created difficulties for the commission to decide about the matter.

The report says, "It was found that investigation, even primary investigation, did not begin against graft-accused in most cases forwarded to Tac. As the commission was not entitled to investigate on its own, many clemency seekers tried to take the opportunity."

The report adds in most cases the taskforces' enquiry about Titas Gas meter readers was "not correct". It also terms it "mysterious" as to why Titas high-ups did not seek clemency.

The report however admits that it could not achieve the main goal of getting confessions from politicians and businessmen as only two politicians and a very few small businessmen sought clemency.

It observes that the targeted group have not availed the opportunity due to the changed political situation.

It says the commission deposited Tk 34 crore after holding hearing of 452 graft-accused in 92 workdays since August 3 last year.

The report points at potentiality and efficiency of such a commission but concludes: "The commission is more appropriate for the distressed rather than the rich and affluent."

The commission however

pleaded in the report for recognising its function legally as a matter of "past and closed transaction".

It said the High Court verdict declaring Tac illegal and unconstitutional is still stayed by the Supreme Court. If Tac does not get legality the government will be in a complicated situation as much as the graft-accused, who disclosed ill-gotten wealth voluntarily, it added.

Govt moves

FROM PAGE 1 review committee.

In reply to another query, Muhith said the government has planned to provide soft loans for farmers.

He also said the Karma Sangathan Bank would open 30 new branches in the current fiscal year and it would gradually open branches in all upazilas in the country in the next five years.

Muhith also said the present government is eager to curb corruption and it has taken steps to obtain the wealth statements of ministers and lawmakers.

"In phases the government will take measures to obtain wealth accounts of all people," he said, adding that wealth statements of all government officials have already been taken.

The finance minister told the House that as of January 15, 2009, the country's foreign currency reserve stands at \$5,434.69 million.

In response to another query, he said there are laws to consider expatriates who send home more than \$1 lakh a year as very important persons (VIPs) but now the laws are not being enforced. He said the government will enforce the laws.

During the session, Posts and Telecommunications Minister Raziuddin Ahmed Raju said the government at the moment has no plans to provide licences to new mobile phone operators to ensure competition among the operators.

As AL lawmaker Fazle Rabbi Mia asked how competition would be ensured if new operators are not given licences, the minister said now there is no plan but in future new operators will be given licences.

Govt to saw legal

FROM PAGE 16 operate. If we are to save our last remaining forests, we must stop issuing permits."

Besides, he added, general people are not benefiting from this.

The stocks at forest department depots consist mainly of illegally felled trees seized at check posts across the country. They are sold at auctions and to permit holders.

Currently, the government earns Tk 60-70 crore a year from sales of wood and honey. Its annual proceeds from timber sales under permits and open auctions total Tk 50 crore, said a source working in the forest department.

Forest Secretary Rezaul Kabir said, "As per the existing practice, prices of wood for the permit holders are fixed by averaging out the rates at last three auctions."

People are eager to get permits because the government rates are way below the market prices.

Industry sources said one cft chg costs around Tk 3,000 on the market, whereas the rate under a permit is not more than Tk 2,000.

"Worse still, a forest official said, most of the permit owners choose the best-quality wood but pay the worst rate."

"If we could auction that wood, the department would earn three times what it is earning now," added the official who would not be identified talking about the issue.

Log permits were introduced in the late 90s. Since then, the ministry issues permits for more than one lakh cft wood every year. The sales at Firingibazar depot in Chittagong alone were over 30,000 cft last year.

Many take out permits just to sell those to loggers, sawmill owners or timber traders. If somebody gets a permit for 200 cft, he can sell it for an amount ranging between Tk

40,000 and Tk 100,000, depending on the variety of wood and situation, said a forest depot official.

After a major seizure of valuable wood, some forest officials arrange permits in different names and buy the timber only to sell outside at higher price, he added.

Even a couple of years ago, earning from backdoor deals over illegal logging was so high that many officials would readily pay several lakh takas for posting at key forest zones like Rangamati, Chittagong, Sylhet and the Sundarbans, said ministry sources.

Now that logging is completely prohibited, the scrapping of permit system would make transport of illegal logs difficult as there would be no legal documents to be used.

In the long run, it would be of great help in containing denuding of the country's forests that have already been reduced to five to six percent of the total land.

In Bangladesh, per capita forestland is 0.02 hectares, which is one of the lowest forest-to-man ratios in the world.

Lessees get

FROM PAGE 1 activists of Airport police station unit of Awami League (AL) took control of the cab service counters after driving out the three lessees of CAAB.

Nurul Islam, chief security officer of CAAB told The Daily Star that they handed over the offices to the authorities of the three firms at about 11:00 am in the presence of its chairman.

Earlier, police drove out the AL men who locked the offices of the three firms.

Officer-in-Charge of the Airport police station Khan Mohammad Sirajul Islam said additional police have been deployed in front of the airport terminal to avert any untoward situation.

The AL men locked the rooms of the three firms, owned by Samik League leaders and workers, and took the possession of those offices on Sunday claiming that they have obtained a court ruling recently in favour of them.

Earlier on Saturday, some Juba League activists swooped on lessees' men at the airport to take control of the cab service counters there, leaving three people injured.

The three firms won the bid last year, but the previous holders, a consortium of 14 firms, filed a writ petition alleging irregularities in the tender. Recently, they obtained the court ruling in their favour.

Ershad

FROM PAGE 1 Dhaka Division Golam Mortuza Majumder delivered the verdict saying investigations into the allegations against the Jatiya Party chairman were inadequate and erroneous.

"The prosecution could not prove the charges brought against Ershad. So, he is acquitted of all charges... I found no evidence of misuse of power by him," the judge said.

The court also acquitted proprietor of Expo Company Ltd Abdul Majid Chowdhury, former T&T deputy managing director Anwarul Kader and former T&T general manager Shamsul Islam on the same ground.

The case filed with Tejgaon Police Station alleged, defying the authorities' decision, Ershad directed the authorities to take loans from France for setting up 'microwave telephone lines' in 89 upazilas despite the grant from Finland.

Due to Ershad's unilateral decision, the government had to pay an interest of Tk 28 crore to France, as the plan was not implemented, sources said.

Stating investigations into the case had many flaws, the judge said the investigation officer (IO) did not probe the allegations properly and did not seize any alibi (evidence).

Earlier, the court recorded statements of 12 prosecution witnesses, including complainant of the case.

The IO of the case submitted the charge sheet against Ershad and five others on July 31, 1995. Among the alleged former minister Kazi Firoz Rahsid was later cleared of charges and former T&T chairman died during the trial of the case.

Ershad expressed satisfaction over the latest verdict, saying the case was filed on false grounds to harass him.

Charged in dozens of criminal cases following his ouster in 1990, Ershad was earlier cleared of four graft cases in August and September 2006, soon after he consented to join the then ruling BNP-led four-party alliance.

Afterward, he was acquitted on three more cases filed on graft and gold-smuggling.

Pranab visit

FROM PAGE 16 government leaders will prominently raise the issue.

However, officials of the ministries concerned said that Bangladesh government is yet to decide whether it will respond positively or not to India's transit both through land and waterway for the movement of goods from Kolkata to India's northeastern states.

Foreign ministry sources said India handed over a draft proposal in August 2007 proposing a 5-year deal on passenger and cargo traffic between the two countries.

According to the draft, Indian goods vehicles and container cargos will enter Bangladesh territory through Benapole land port and again enter Meghalaya, Tripura and Mizoram in India through the Bangladesh border points at Tamabil, Bibirbazar and Khagraghari.

Foreign ministry officials said they sent the draft proposal to the ministries concerned, including commerce, finance, communications and home seeking opinions as per instructions by the caretaker government but they are yet to receive any such concrete response from the ministries.

The present government is yet to instruct the ministries to give feedback of the India's transit proposal. The Foreign Ministry is not working on the technical aspect of the transit issue, as there is no instruction from the government.

When asked about India's proposal for setting up a joint anti-terror mechanism, a high official of the home ministry said Bangladesh prefers regional taskforce to combat terrorism.

In this context, the official referred to present government's election manifesto where Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina categorically said about taking necessary steps to form a "South Asian Anti-Terrorism Taskforce".

During the visit, Pranab will attend a lunch meeting with his Bangladesh counterpart Dr Dipu Moni. He will also meet with the prime minister, ministers for commerce, communications, finance and home.

Rejoinder

FROM PAGE 1 propaganda is going on against Jamaat Ameer Maolana Motiur Rahman Nizami, Secretary General Ali Ahsan Mohammad Mojaheed and Assistant Secretary General Muhammad Kamaruzzaman to confuse people.

OUR REPLY In the rejoinder Jamaat did not refute the contents of our report. They have only denied Jamaat's involvement in some historical events of 1971, most of which remain as evidence in many documents.

We, therefore, stand by our report.

Israel bombs Gaza after new rocket fire

One Palestinian killed as Tel Aviv threatens more airstrikes

AFP, Gaza City

Israel carried out a deadly air raid in Gaza yesterday after warning of a harsh response to renewed fire from the enclave, where the Hamas rulers spoke out in favour of a conditional one-year truce.

One Palestinian was killed and four others were wounded in the strike on a vehicle carrying militants in the southern town of Rafah, medical sources and witnesses said.

An Israeli army spokesman said the raid targeted militants who had fired several mortar rounds against southern Israel that caused no injuries.

The action came after fighter jets launched air strikes across Gaza late on Sunday in response to renewed militant rocket fire that shook the January 18 ceasefire that ended Israel's 22-day war on the coastal strip.

There were no reports of casualties in Sunday's strikes which hit a Hamas police station and tunnels used for smuggling weapons and goods from Egypt into the Gaza Strip, which is reeling under a punishing Israeli blockade.

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert on Sunday vowed to deal "a severe and disproportionate Israeli response" to the new rocket fire.

More than 15 rockets have been fired from Gaza since the end of Operation Cast Lead, wounding one civilian and two soldiers, Israel said.

Israel's onslaught on Gaza left more than 1,300 Palestinians and 13 Israelis dead.

Defence Minister Ehud Barak said that although most of the rockets were not fired by Hamas, the Islamist movement which has controlled Gaza since June 2007 bore responsibility for the attacks.

"We are responding and we will continue to retaliate. We know that most of the fire was not carried out by Hamas but by other small organisations, but Hamas is responsible. Hamas must act to stop this."

"We need calm in the south, and that is the test... If there is no calm we will have to act again," Barak warned on public radio.

The latest violence comes just over a week before Israelis go to the polls in a February 10 election expected to return the right-wing to power.

Meanwhile, Israeli soldiers shot dead a Palestinian gunman who opened fire at an army patrol in the south of the

occupied West Bank, rescue services said.

The flare-up came as Egyptian officials were set to hold separate talks with Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas and representatives of Hamas in a bid to broker a lasting truce.

Climate change

FROM PAGE 16 AK Khandaker to prepare strategies for combating climate changes as early as possible.

The committee members include ministers for agriculture, and food and disaster management. The secretaries of those ministries will assist the committee.

Prime minister's economic adviser will head the other committee, the fund operation committee.

The committee members are civil aviation and tourism minister, state ministers for environment, foreign affairs, and housing and public works. The secretaries of those ministries will assist the committee. "The cabinet okayed the climate change policy in principle," prime minister's press secretary Abul Kalam Azad told reporters at the press information department's conference room.

"At the meeting the prime minister asked all to put in their best efforts to utilize Tk 300 crore climate change fund so that people can get maximum benefits from the fund," Azad said.

Bangladesh is one of those countries that are highly vulnerable to the climate change. Floods, tropical cyclones, storm surges and droughts in Bangladesh are likely to become more frequent and severe in the coming years.

At the meeting Agriculture Minister Matia Chowdhury stressed the need for immediate steps for dredging rivers and removing water logging to reduce the effect of the climate change.

"We will prepare strategies on climate change soon. As per our electoral pledges, the prime minister endorsed the proposal for river dredging to mitigate the impact of climate change," Matia told The Daily Star at her office after the meeting.

She said the prime minister assured her of taking prompt initiatives in this regard.

The government, earlier, set up a secretariat on climate change under the environment and forest ministry to monitor the activities for combating climate change and deal with the climate change fund.

BNP MPs sit

FROM PAGE 1 seats in front row, the BNP-led opposition lawmakers remained absent from the House proceedings since Wednesday.

Speaker Abdul Hamid contacted the opposition chief whip over telephone yesterday and assured that he would try to allocate one or two more seats to opposition lawmakers in front row in the next session of the House. And he urged them to return to parliament.

Following the speaker's assurance, the opposition lawmakers yesterday adjourned their meeting till 4:30pm today without making any decision on the issue.

"Our parliamentary party will sit again tomorrow (today) to make a decision, and Leader of the Opposition Khaleda Zia will chair the meeting," Opposition Chief Whip Joyal Abedin Faruq told journalists at the Sangsad Bhaban complex.

On the speaker's contact with him, Joyal said, "We did not get any satisfactory answer from the speaker regarding our demand for three more seats in front row."

The then (immediate past) speaker Jamiruddin Sircar had unilaterally allocated all the 10 front-row seats on his left to opposition lawmakers, including one to lone LDP lawmaker Oli Ahmed.

On the treasury bench demand, Abdul Hamid later changed the seating arrangement allocating four seats in the front row to opposition lawmakers, including one for Oli Ahmed.

On a point of order, the LDP legislator yesterday said in parliament the row over seating arrangement is shameful for the nation, and it should be resolved.

In response, Ali Ashraf, who was in the chair at that time as a member of the panel of chairmen, said, "I hope, the speaker will make a decision to resolve the problem."

Accusing the ruling party of creating problems by changing the seating-plan in parliament, BNP Secretary General Khandaker Delwar Hossain yesterday said it is the responsibility of the ruling party to bring BNP back to the parliament.

"We want to go back to the parliament and participate in constructive discussions but it depends on how quickly the ruling party solves the problems," he said.

He was talking to reporters near the grave of late president Ziaur Rahman. He went there with barrister Nazmul Huda to offer feteha. Nazmul Huda was released on Sunday.

"The seat allocation issue was created as the government does not want an opposition in parliament," the former chief whip said, adding that actions and words of the ruling party are contradictory.

"If this goes on, we will have to consider alternatives. Even though the matter could easily be resolved by the government," the BNP leader said, adding that the speaker changed the seating order now it is his duty to restore it.

11 killed as SL

FROM PAGE 16 separate clashes on Sunday, but did not say if security forces suffered any casualties.

Artillery shells slammed into an overcrowded hospital for the second day in Sri Lanka's northern war zone, bringing the death toll to at least 11 people, officials said Monday as the army claimed it found an abandoned luxury hide-out of the elusive rebel leader.