

# Govt's money gobbled up

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neither deposited the collected money nor recorded the information with the police.

The probe also found that the companies realised Tk 1.32 crore as toll from overloaded trucks between July 2011 and March 2013 using the two yards, where overloaded trucks are sent and charged Tk 50 for using the yard.

After paying salary of the yard employees, the rest of the money was supposed to go to the BBA. According to the probe report, the companies paid Tk 37.56 lakh in salary, deposited Tk 8.93 lakh to the BBBA account and kept Tk 85.49 lakh.

The probe report, a copy of which has been obtained by The Daily Star, detects the companies have hidden data of 8,906 overloaded trucks that used the yards, on both ends of the bridge, and had paid over Tk 4.45 lakh in toll. The probe, however, contradicts the Bridges Division's claim that there was no corruption or irregularities regarding the Bangabandhu Bridge.

The probe body headed by Deputy Director (admin) Moniruzzaman of the Bridges Division has also found long queues of trucks due to an improper system in place that creates scope for truckers to use manual weighing machines and the readings of those machines were questionable. "A tendency of using manual machines is very clear. Evidence is there that the employees of the operator companies and yards are involved in allow-

ing overloaded trucks to cross the bridge without being fined," says the report. As per the deal, the contract of the companies could be terminated and both the local and Chinese firms could be blacklisted for indulging in corruption and violation of contract. Asked whether action would be taken against the companies, Chief Engineer Kabir Ahmed of the Bridges Division said another investigation was going on to determine the actual transactions. However, sources in the second probe body claimed that the BBA was trying to bury the findings and come up with excuses as to where the money had gone. A BBA enquiry had earlier discovered embezzlement of Tk 11.93 lakh toll money. Officials through random scrutiny of toll records of January and February in 2012 and December in 2011 found the money missing. The money was stolen by hiding real data on computers and by duplicating money receipts.

Corruption cases were filed against 12 toll collectors, but no action was taken against the companies.

Shamim Enterprise and UDC did not have previous experience but got the bridge operation and maintenance job by virtue of their joint ventures with two Chinese firms -- Scientific Institute of Communications (GSIC), and Meteorological Construction Company (MCC). However, no officials of the Chinese companies were seen working there.

# Diplomacy in rescue act

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On the other hand, the BNP will explain to the US official the reasons for opposing Hasina as head of the election-time government.

The BNP decided not to enforce any hartal during Biswal's visit, as the US is against such programme. But there would be shutdowns again after her visit if no progress was made in holding talks to resolve the crisis, said BNP insiders.

Senior BNP leader Mahbubur Rahman said they eagerly waited for the US official's visit with a hope that she would take steps to see a dialogue between the two sides.

"She visits Dhaka at a time when the country's situation is not good. We hope she will take initiatives to help resolve the ongoing political crisis," Mahbub, member of the BNP standing committee, told The Daily Star yesterday.

He, however, said the possibility of talks between the two camps was thin.

Diplomatic efforts, including UN chief's phone calls to Hasina and Khaleda and the US secretary of state's letters to the two leaders, to bring the two sides to the negotiating table are yet to yield any result.

Besides, foreign diplomats in Dhaka have been trying to help find a solution to the crisis by engaging the AL and the BNP in talks.

Amid such a situation, Biswal's visit may add pace to their efforts for a while, but any breakthrough in the current political impasse is very unlikely, observe political analysts.

As the US official arrived in the capital yesterday, Indian High Commissioner in Dhaka Pankaj Saran told reporters that his country is having discussions with the US and other countries about Bangladesh's political situation.

Meanwhile, politics over dialogue took a new twist, as the BNP suddenly intensified its move to sit for talks with the ruling AL.

Acting BNP secretary general Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir on Friday claimed he tried several times to contact AL General Secretary Syed Ashraful Islam over the phone for last few days but he got no response from the other side.

Talking with a private TV channel the same day, Ashraf said, "I know his [phone] number and he knows mine. I didn't receive any call from his number."

On Ashraf's statement that he didn't get any call from the BNP leader, Fakhrul said he was not interested to comment on it.

"I don't want to get into a debate over the issue. We want to engage in dialogue over a non-party polls-time government," he said.

Speaking to The Daily Star on condition of anonymity, an AL leader said Ashraf told some of his party colleagues that the prime minister herself was dealing with the issue, and he didn't receive any instructions from her in this regard.

"Ashraf has nothing new to say to the acting BNP secretary general," said the ruling party leader.

# US for free polls

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Biswal, US assistant secretary of state, said yesterday.

She was talking to civil society representatives at the residence of US Ambassador to Bangladesh Dan Mozena in the evening.

Biswal also said the US does not have any preference for any particular party in Bangladesh, according to meeting sources.

She said Bangladesh is a country of immense possibility and it would go a long way if it could resolve various problems.

Former foreign secretary Farooq Sobhan, Odhikar director Adilur Rahman, Shujan secretary Badiul Alam Majumder, Manzoor Hasan of Institute of Governance Studies (IGS) of BRAC University, journalist Mahfuzullah and Dr Fauzia Karim attended the meeting.

The US official arrived in Dhaka at 12:30pm yesterday from Tokyo on a three-day official visit.

Civil society members stressed the need for a permanent solution to Bangladesh's political problems. They also underscored the importance of a free, fair, credible and participatory election.

Coming out of the meeting, Badiul Alam

Majumder said they did not discuss any specific issue. "It was a social gathering. We discussed all issues."

"She [Biswal] wanted to know about the prevailing situation in Bangladesh and its future. We've given our opinions. Everyone expressed their individual views," added Majumder.

Biswal also met US embassy officials and young entrepreneurs yesterday.

She is scheduled to meet Nobel laureate Prof Muhammad Yunus and a labour delegation of Bangladesh Centre for Workers Solidarity (BCWS) this morning.

She will attend a luncheon meeting with the BGMEA leaders.

She will join a reception to be hosted in honour of a select group of politicians, civil society members, eminent citizens and editors at the residence of Ambassador Dan Mozena at 6:30pm.

Tomorrow, she will meet the secretaries of ministries of foreign affairs, commerce and labour and employment over lunch. Later, she will meet Commerce Minister GM Qader and Foreign Minister Dipu Moni.

Before leaving Dhaka for New Delhi tomorrow night, she will meet the press.

# Ershad not trusted

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about his move.

Reiterating his intention to form a separate alliance, the JP chief yesterday said his party had "almost no relationship" with the ruling grand alliance after his brother GM Quader, a presidium member of JP, had resigned from the cabinet.

He will soon make a formal announcement in this regard and form a new alliance, he said at a meeting of Jatiya Jubo Sanghati, a youth forum of JP, in the Institution of Diploma Engineers, Bangladesh in the capital.

But on Friday at a meeting in Tangail, Janata League President Kader Siddique said Ershad was still with "the big thief", alluding to the ruling Awami League.

"I did not invite him [Ershad] to come here [Tangail] to join this meeting,"

Kader added he would not talk to Ershad until he left "the alliance of big thieves".

Meanwhile, sources in Bikalpa Dhara Bangladesh said its chief AQM Badruddoza Chowdhury also did not trust Ershad and was

not clear about his motives behind forming an alliance comprised of these three parties and others.

"Maybe he has some other political agenda," said the source last night, quoting Badruddoza as saying to him.

Yesterday, Ershad also said his party did not want to be labelled as a betrayer by participating in the next national elections if the other parties did not take part.

"I don't want to die as a betrayer."

He also said elections must be held for a continuation of the democratic process.

"We are in such a position that we don't know what to do regarding the next polls," Ershad noted.

Ershad sat with top leaders of Bikalpa Dhara Bangladesh, Janata League and Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal-Rob at Badruddoza Chowdhury's Baridhara residence on Tuesday.

At a meeting the following day he said he would make an announcement within a day or two on JP cutting its ties with the ruling alliance to form a new alliance.

# A refreshing festival ends

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The rest of the sessions on the Bangla Academy premises were engaging, with recitation of poems not only in English and mainstream Bangla but also in other languages and Bangla dialects.

Noted Bangladeshi writer Muhammed Zafar Iqbal ruled the Imagination Tent, which was part of the children's programme for the day, talking about how to write a story. Children and young adults joined the session spontaneously, spinning stories with the writer orally.

The audience was equally engrossed by Indian essayist and novelist Pankaj Mishra's analysis of the rising powers of Asia -- India and China -- on the main stage with Bangladeshi poet Ahsan Akbar.

In another afternoon session on the main stage, authors Fakrul Alam, Niaz Zaman, Arunava Sinha and Ahmede Hussein discussed the limitations of translating from Bangla into English.

Shahid Alam and Firoz Mahmud analysed the new and old Bangla folklores and talked about the theoretical aspects of this literary genre in a session chaired by noted folklorist and Bangla Academy Director General Prof Shamsuzzaman Khan.

The last session of the festival, held in the evening, was dedicated to Kazi Nazrul Islam and Rabindranath Tagore, whose works cropped up every now and then in almost all literary discussions.

Earlier on Friday, the festival had lured the weekend crowds who relished political discussions by British-Pakistani writer, journal-

ist and filmmaker Tariq Ali in the morning and Egyptian activist Ahdaf Soueif in the afternoon.

Tariq took the audience to a global ride discussing the politics of South America, Asia, Europe and the US. Ahdaf gave a presentation on the evolving political situation in Egypt, which seemed uncomfortably similar to that of the present-day Bangladesh.

Two eminent Bengali writers, Syed Shamsul Haq and Hasan Azizul Huq, talked about the loneliness of an author as well as his or her hopes and frustrations in a witty and active conversation on the main stage on Friday.

Sharbari Ahmed and Farah Ghuznavi's discussion on their short story anthologies, "The Oceans of Mrs Nagai" and "Fragments of Riversong" published by Daily Star Books, was delightful.

Friday's attractions included a performance titled "From Finite to Infinite" by Lubna Marium's Shadhona dance group presenting the journey of one thousand years of mystical thought in the deltaic region of Bengal.

The Daily Star's Hay Festival had started on Thursday with spiritual songs and ended yesterday evening with Lalon songs.

More than 75 sessions were conducted in the festival, where 50 foreign guests from 11 countries and about 200 Bangladeshi writers and artists participated.

The festival, which was held for the third time in Dhaka, saw the launch of about 19 new books.

# Afterlife? It's there

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existence beyond the grave - and it lies in quantum physics.

Professor Robert Lanza claims the theory of biocentrism teaches that death as we know it is an illusion created by our consciousness.

Professor Robert Lanza claims the theory of biocentrism, also known as the theory of everything, teaches death as we know it is an illusion.

'We think life is just the activity of carbon and an admixture of molecules - we live a while and then rot into the ground,' said the scientist on his website.

Lanza, from Wake Forest University School of Medicine in North Carolina, continued that as humans we believe in death because 'we've been taught we die', or more specifically, our consciousness associates life with bodies and we know that bodies die.

His theory of biocentrism, however, explains that death may not be as terminal as we think it is.

Biocentrism is classed as the theory of everything and comes from the Greek for 'life centre'.

It is the belief that life and biology are central to reality and that life creates the universe, not the other way round.

This suggests a person's consciousness determines the shape and size of objects in the universe.

Lanza uses the example of the way we perceive the world around us. A person sees a blue sky, and is told that the colour they are seeing is blue, but the cells in a person's brain could be changed to make the sky look green or red.

Biocentrism is classed as the Theory of

Everything and comes from the Greek for 'life centre'. It is the belief that life and biology are central to reality and that life creates the universe, not the other way round.

Our consciousness makes sense of the world, and can be altered to change this interpretation.

By looking at the universe from a biocentric's point of view, this also means space and time don't behave in the hard and fast ways our consciousness tell us it does.

In summary, space and time are 'simply tools of our mind.'

Once this theory about space and time being mental constructs is accepted, it means death and the idea of immortality exist in a world without spatial or linear boundaries.

Theoretical physicists believe that there is infinite number of universes with different variations of people, and situations taking place, simultaneously.

Lanza added that everything which can possibly happen is occurring at some point across these multiverses and this means death can't exist in 'any real sense' either.

Lanza, instead, said that when we die our life becomes a 'perennial flower that returns to bloom in the multiverse.'

'Bottom line: What you see could not be present without your consciousness,' explained Lanza. 'Our consciousness makes sense of the world.'

Lanza cites the double-slit test to backup his claims. When scientists watch a particle pass through two slits, the particle goes through one slit or the other. If a person doesn't watch it, it acts like a wave and can go through both slits simultaneously. This means its behaviour changes based on a person's perception.

# Hasina lashes out

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She said, "The BNP does not believe in democracy, it believes in terrorism."

About her dialogue offer to the opposition leader, the prime minister said she requested her to sit for talks in the interest of the people.

"The way she turned down my proposal is not decent and the language she used is not political. She told me that she won't sit with me," the PM said.

She said Bangladesh was turned into a haven for terrorists and militants during the last BNP-Jamaat rule. "They want to take the country back to that dark chapter," she added.

**PARLIAMENTARY BOARD MEETS**

Our correspondent reports: The ruling Awami League will hold a meeting on November 24 with everyone seeking its nomination for the 10th general election.

The AL's parliamentary board took the decision at its meeting with party president Sheikh Hasina in the chair.

# Mayhem in Sitakunda

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Chittagong Medical College Hospital as their condition deteriorated, she added.

The clash started when hundreds of BNP-Jamaat activists blocked the Dhaka-Chittagong highway after emerging from a protest rally held in the Sadar area around 4:30pm, said SM Bodiuazzaman, officer-in-charge (OC) of Sitakunda Police Station.

They went berserk, pelted the police with brick chips, and blasted several crude bombs as police tried to disperse them from the road, said police and eyewitnesses.

Police had fired rubber bullets and tear gas shells in response, leading to the clash, he added.

Iqbal Ali, assistant superintendent of police of Sitakunda circle, said some of the police personnel were also injured in

the clash. He, however, could not ascertain the number.

OC Zakir Hossain of Highway Police's Bar Awlia outpost in Sitakunda said nearly 52 kilometres of the highway was blocked, suspending vehicular movement on the road.

Sporadic clashes were going on, Shahin Imran, upazila nirbahi officer (UNO) of Sitakunda, told The Daily Star over the telephone around 7:30pm.

Meanwhile, railway communication between Dhaka and Chittagong became normal around 8:30pm, according to the control room of Bangladesh Railway's East Zone.

It said five trains to and from Chittagong had stuck at different points as BNP-Jamaat supporters took position on the rail track at Barabkunda in the upazila. They, however, left the area around 8:00pm.

# Arsenal-free Syria

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Five rebel commanders have been killed since Thursday, including two chiefs of rebel battalions who died fighting loyalist forces near the international airport outside second city Aleppo.

The army has been pressing a campaign to retake rebel-held areas in Aleppo and jihadist fighters have called for mass mobilisation to counter regime advances.

A Syrian media report said that a long-delayed peace conference could be held in Geneva on December 12.

The international community has been trying for months to convene a peace conference dubbed "Geneva II". But proposed dates have come and gone with no progress.

The regime has said it is willing to attend, provided Assad's departure is not on the table. The opposition, though, insists on Assad's departure and exclusion from the transition process.

The talks at OPCW headquarters in The Hague broke off twice before agreement was reached around 2000 GMT, a delegates thrashed out the final draft.

Under the deal, Syria's weapons will be taken out of the war-ravaged country, where an estimated 120,000 people have been killed during the uprising, to ensure their destruction in the "safest and soonest manner", the OPCW said in a statement.

Almost all of Syria's chemicals and precursors, except for isopropanol which can be used to make sarin nerve gas, must be removed from the country by February 5, 2014.

The "most critical" chemicals must be removed by the end of the year, the OPCW said.

Declared chemical weapons facilities will be destroyed between December 15 and March 15, 2014, "according to a risk-based criterion", the watchdog said.

Likewise, "priority" chemicals will be destroyed outside of Syria by April 2014, and all other chemicals by the already agreed deadline of June 30, 2014.

Sigrid Kaag, who is coordinating the joint UN-OPCW mission in Syria, told the meeting: "I am currently reaching out to others to consider joining this international effort".

Despite a US request of its staunch ally, Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama said earlier that he would not help destroy Syria's arsenal in his country after a string of domestic protests against the move.

"It is impossible for Albania to take part in such an operation... as it has no capacity" to carry out such a task, Rama told reporters.

His statement was broadcast live on giant television screens on Tirana's main square, where thousands of demonstrators erupted in cries of joy.

Malik Ellahi, political adviser to OPCW head Ahmet Uzumcu, said that he could not yet say where Syria's chemicals would be taken for destruction.

"But the Executive Council has adopted a decision and has confidence that there are alternatives and that this material will be shipped out of Syria," he told journalists.

"The target dates have been set with the confidence that there will be alternatives for destruction," he said.

The focus of Syria's chemical disarmament is increasingly on how the world can help, and it was not immediately clear which country could receive and destroy the lethal chemicals and precursors after Tirana's refusal.

Norway has also said no, citing time constraints and inexperience, while France and Belgium are also believed to have been asked for possible help by Washington.

Norway and Denmark have said they would provide ships to help take the chemicals out of Syria, with Denmark saying it would also provide a personal protection team for international inspectors.

A team of UN-OPCW inspectors has been on the ground since October checking Syria's weapons and facilities, but security remains a concern.

OPCW head Uzumcu wrote to Kaag on November 11 laying out a tentative plan for the destruction, a diplomatic source told AFP, with all chemicals leaving Syria via Latakia, Syria's main port on the Mediterranean.

Uzumcu said that the Syrians had requested equipment to help the process, including armoured 4x4 vehicles and electronic counter measure (ECM) equipment.

Western nations refuse to supply them as they could be used against rebels. Syria's ally Russia could, however, supply such dual-purpose equipment.

The joint Russian-US Syrian chemical weapons disarmament plan was endorsed by the UN Security Council in September to head off military strikes in retaliation for the regime's alleged use of the weapons against its own people after a chemical attack against a Damascus suburb in August left hundreds dead.

# END-ulkar

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Akhtar and bested bowlers of the calibre of Curtly Ambrose, Courtney Walsh, Glenn McGrath, Wasim Akram, Waqar Younis and more recently, Dale Steyn? Will it be as a batsman who reserved his best for the best team of the era -- Australia? Or will it be as a cricketer who never shied away from taking the effort to reinvent and reorganise his game to create a self-styled template for run-scoring even as times changed, as they must over 24 years?

Perhaps it is time to take off the lens of cricket followers and examine what he might have meant to those whose interest in cricket and Tendulkar borders on indifference. His retirement has seen an unprecedented outpouring of sentiment on the online social networks of Facebook and Twitter, and not just from Indians. Why this universal appeal? What has ended for them as Tendulkar's career ends?

By playing 200 Test matches and 463 ODIs over 24 years and being at the top of international batsmanship almost throughout, Tendulkar has tapped into that one universal urge among all sentient beings -- that of defeating time. Of course he has not in fact defeated time but he did hold off time's grip on his shoulders for longer than anyone has managed. His inexorable march from one run-scoring record to the next reassured people that it is possible to extend oneself beyond previously imagined boundaries if there was will and above all, love for one's profession. Beneath these qualities were many others -- his humility in the face of insane hero-worship and his undying respect for the craft at hand, which he strove painstakingly to elevate to a state of near perfection. In this Tendulkar's influence and inspiration transcends not only cricket, but all of sport.

With his retirement that inexorable march has stopped. The number will remain 34,347 -- not a single run more. Just as when his great rival and the other modern batting colossus Brian Lara retired, cricket and its followers lost the opportunity to aspire. With Lara's departure perhaps there would be no more reaching for new realms of human achievement -- his 400 in a Test innings is the final word. So with Tendulkar's exit ends the story of the boy who at the age of 16 embarked on a battle with time and pummelled that cruel taskmaster for the best part of a quarter-century. We should be thankful that he fought, and that too with such integrity.