



Airtel and the daily Prothom Alo, in association with Berger Paints, organised "Alpona-e Baishakh" -- a street painting, stretching across Manik Mia Avenue -- to celebrate Pahela Baishakh, for the third consecutive year. The programme began in the late hours of yesterday and went on deep into the night, leaving one of the main streets of the capital exploding into bright, joyful colours on the dawn of Pahela Baishakh.

PHOTO: STAR

New book's

FROM PAGE 16
"The statement being attributed to a former media adviser to the prime minister that PMO files were seen by the Congress president, Smt Sonia Gandhi is completely baseless and mischievous. It is categorically denied that any PMO file has ever been shown to Smt Sonia Gandhi," PMO spokesman Pankaj Pachauri said in a statement here.

He was responding to the claims by Baru in his book "Accidental Prime Minister — The Making and Unmaking of Manmohan Singh" and comments to media that the Prime Minister's principal secretary Pulok Chatterjee would seek "instructions" from Gandhi on important PMO decisions.

The book, written by a former media adviser to Manmohan, hit the bookstores this weekend and hands ammunition to Modi's Hindu nationalist opposition during a bitter, marathon election campaign under way.

It portrays Manmohan as subservient to ruling Congress party president Sonia Gandhi who called the shots although she holds no official government position.

Modi, who has campaigned on a platform of being a strong, decisive leader who can turn around the flagging economy, brought up the book while campaigning in the south, calling the government "remote-controlled."

"Two days ago a book has come out, an official who used to work in the Manmohan Singh government and his confidant has written this book. He has said this government is not being run by Manmohan Singh Ji," Modi told a rally in Haveri.

Manmohan, 81, credited with leading India through radical reforms in 1991 when he was finance minister, is retiring at the elections after 10 years at the helm. Sonia Gandhi chose Manmohan to become premier in 2004 when Congress won elections.

Traditionally, the president of India's ruling party is also premier. But Gandhi, who led Congress to power in 2004 and 2009, turned down the job, fearing her Italian birth would become an explosive political issue as Hindu nationalists said her foreign origin made her unfit to rule India.

Critics have long charged that Sonia held the real reins of power in the Manmohan administration but Baru's book is the first by a close advisor to the prime minister to make that claim.

Manmohan's spokesman Pankaj Pachauri said on Saturday the book "smacks of fiction" and alleged Baru misused a "privileged position" for "commercial gain". Baru, who left as media adviser in 2008, replied he was "amused" by the reaction.

The book's release comes as India's six-week election is in full swing, with Modi's BJP expected to win the largest number of seats and sweep Congress from power. Results are due May 16.

In the book, Baru said Manmohan decided early on to "surrender" to Sonia and quotes the premier as saying he had "to accept the party president is the centre of power".

The author added that Manmohan had little authority over his cabinet and a senior bureaucrat would seek Gandhi's "instructions on the important files to be cleared by the PM".

Teesta woes for farmers

FROM PAGE 1
This is a sharp fall in the water flow, which hovered around 3,000 cusecs last year.

The dried-out Teesta is badly affecting the lives of around 9 million people in 5,427 villages under 35 upazilas of five northern districts -- Gaibandha, Kurigram, Lalmonirhat, Nilphamari and Rangpur.

"If we don't buy irrigation water from the commercial shallow pump operators, all our crops will die," said Majibor Rahman, a farmer of Chapanirhat in Dimla of Nilphamari. The extra cost of irrigation will push up the production cost, and farmers are worried that they will not be able to make any profit.

Last year, production cost of Boro was Tk 25,500, excluding irrigation cost, per acre. The high irrigation cost this year makes the crop's production "very challenging," said experts at Bangladesh Rice Research Institute (BRRI).

"The land rent is not included in this cost. If farmers rent land from other people, the cost will increase further and they will not be able to make any profit," said Abdus Salam, senior scientific officer at BRRI.

Like Majibor Rahman, tens of thousands of farmers who are cultivating on around 14 percent of the country's cropland in the northern region, are in a dire situation, as they depend on Teesta water.

The Teesta barrage irrigation scheme covers 60,500 hectares (151,250 acres) of cropland in four northern districts -- Kurigram, Lalmonirhat, Nilphamari and Rangpur. It requires about 4,500 cusecs of water in the Teesta to irrigate the land.

"Today, we got only 650 cusecs, which was between 1,500 and 2,000 in January [this year]. It was around 3,500 cusecs during this time last year," Mir Sazzad Hossain, member of Joint Rivers Commission (JRC), Bangladesh, told The Daily Star on Saturday.

On an average, Bangladesh got 4,670 cusecs of water in February from 1967 to 1997, says water board records. Before India started to intervene in the 1980s, the flow was around 10,000 cusecs in lean period.

Bangladesh raised the issue at a JRC meeting with India last month and wrote two letters to the Indian authorities since February. The foreign ministry sent a separate note to the Indian government, requesting it to resolve

the issue. But the issue is yet to be addressed, said Sazzad.

"There might be some progress after the elections in India, but it will be too late as farmers are already facing problems," he added.

But even after the election, the Indian government will have its internal issues to be resolved. Mamata Banerjee, the West Bengal chief minister, at an election campaign on Saturday urged voters to teach the centre a lesson through ballots, as the centre wanted to "deprive India's North Bengal people of drinking water by giving away water to Bangladesh."

It is because of Mamata's last-minute opposition that the Indian government could not sign the Teesta water sharing deal with Bangladesh in 2011 during Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's Dhaka visit.

And while India is diverting the water of the trans-boundary river to meet its own demand, farmers in Rangpur have turned to buying shallow pumps. But they cannot get adequate water even with these pumps, as the ground water level has been steadily falling.

Firoze Ahmed, Rangpur division director of the Department of Agriculture Extension, said around 80 percent areas of the northern districts are being irrigated with the shallow pumps.

Shallow pumps can usually lift water from 26 feet deep. But the water level has dipped to 36 to 40 feet in most areas.

"So the farmers have to first dig around 10 feet before they start lifting water with shallow pumps," said Firoze.

But it is not only about farmers. People of other communities like fishermen and boatmen are also dependent on the Teesta, and they are all suffering as they have lost their livelihoods, said Faridul Islam, convener of Bangladesh Teesta Bachao Andolon.

"Even a hen can now walk across the Teesta, as the river is completely dried up," he added.

A fishermen from Nohali under the Gangachara upazila said they had no income as they could not catch a single fish in the last two months.

The Teesta, the fourth largest trans-boundary river of Bangladesh, merges with the Brahmaputra at Teestamukh Ghat in Rangpur, after travelling about 414 km through India and Bangladesh.

Indian national

FROM PAGE 16
Sub-Inspector Enamul Haq of Mirpur Police Station filed a case against him with the police station under Section 54 of the Criminal Procedure Code.

Meanwhile, Rab Media Wing Director Habibur Rahman said law enforcers on April 6 picked up Atanu from Gabtali as he was trying to escape from Bangladesh during the ongoing World T20.

Rab later handed him over to police. The Rab official added that Atanu had admitted to them that he was involved in betting on cricket matches outside Bangladesh but he had come here as a spectator.

He was reportedly detained by members of the law enforcing agencies on March 21 as well.

Asked about the arrest of Atanu and his probable involvement in match-fixing, Nizamuddin Chowdhury, acting chief executive officer of Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB), said it was a matter of the International Cricket Council (ICC). The BCB had no part in it.

"The World T20 was an ICC event and Bangladesh was just the host

nation. We don't know anything about his arrest," he said.

Chowdhury further stated that the BCB was yet to communicate with the ICC regarding the details of a report published in the Bangla daily Prothom Alo.

According to the report, law enforcers spotted the Indian while he was talking over the phone suspiciously during the India-Pakistan cricket match on March 21.

It also said the law enforcers later let Atanu go after Dharambir Singh, who works with the ICC's Anti-corruption and Security Unit, had requested them to do so.

Dharambir claimed that Atanu was working as their source to collect information on match fixing.

Rab, however, kept an eye on him for leads to any betting activities or match fixing move, which resulted in tracking a phone call conversation.

The conversation revealed that Atanu had informed Dharambir he was under surveillance.

Dharambir then advised him to leave Bangladesh since "it would be difficult to save him [Atanu] a second time".

Negotiators of Israel, Palestine set to meet

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli and Palestinian negotiators were to convene yesterday in the latest attempt to save teetering peace talks, a Palestinian official told AFP.

Chief Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erakat would meet his Israeli opposite number, Justice Minister Tzipi Livni and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's special envoy Yitzhak Molcho during the afternoon, the official said, speaking on condition of anonymity.

There was no confirmation from the Israeli side.

The teams last met on Thursday in a session presided over by US envoy Martin Indyk, who has since returned to Washington for consultations while Israel observes the seven-day Passover holiday starting at sunset today.

But following that meeting the peace process suffered a new blow when Israel said it would freeze the transfer of duties it collects on the Palestinians' behalf, in retaliation for their diplomatic offensive against Israel at the United Nations.

The monthly 80 million euros (\$111 million) in taxes collected by Israel represents about two-thirds of the income received by the Palestinian Authority.

Israel was also suspending its participation with the Palestinians in developing a gas field off the Gaza Strip and putting a cap on Palestinian deposits in its banks, the Israeli official said.

The decision sparked concern in Washington.

"We've seen these press reports, but we have not seen an official public announcement by the Government of Israel," state department spokeswoman Jen Psaki briefed reporters on Friday.

CEC returns

FROM PAGE 16
premier, told the media that the CEC had sought leave from work.

He left Dhaka on March 3 for around one and a half months. The CEC left the country at a time when the EC was struggling to hold the upazila elections in a free and fair manner.

Activists of the ruling Awami League adopted violent and unlawful means, including taking over polling stations and stuffing ballots, in the first two phases held on February 19 and 27 when Rakibuddin was heading the EC.

The violence and excesses by AL men annoyed him, said sources in the commission. He reportedly sent a message to Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, seeking her assistance in controlling violent AL men. But the CEC did not get any proper response. Then he decided to leave the country, allowing Election Commissioner Abdul Mobarak to oversee the next phases of upazila elections, according to a source close to Rakibuddin.

Rakibuddin was scheduled to reach Dhaka by a Turkish Airlines at 5:00am, an official of the EC told The Daily Star last night.

Son tells of mother's

FROM PAGE 16
enough space for a child to curl up beside a low commode in Shobho's house in Mohammadpur.

"Ammu made her sleep in the bathroom because he often used to wet his bed," stated Shubho.

Even the child's bed was nothing but a flimsy mattress on the balcony floor unprotected from sun and rain.

Mother would lock Masum in the bathroom so that he could not steal food, said Shubho, a first-year student of a public university.

Masum, who was so malnourished that he weighs only 14 kilograms, was admitted to Dhaka Medical College Hospital (DMCH) yesterday in an appalling condition with numerous welts crisscrossing his diminutive body, a bad-looking laceration in the head and scabies in hands and feet.

Dr Tasneem, a medicine specialist at the DMCH, said the child suffers from scabies caused from sleeping on the bathroom floor.

"The webs of his fingers and toes have sores that itch, and only an unhygienic environment could have caused them," she said.

The laceration on the back of his head was so infected that the doctors could not even stitch it up at the moment, she told The Daily Star.

The laceration was caused by Khurshida's first grader son, who once hit his head with an iron rod.

The son, whose name is being

withheld, told this correspondent that he had hit him without any reason.

"Masum was bleeding. So, Ammu scolded me a bit," said the boy, who is about the same age as Masum, and with his plump frame stood in stark contrast with the malnourished Masum.

When asked about the scars on Masum's body, Shubho said, "Mother flogged him with bundled-up steel wires".

Even the second son confessed that he too used to beat Masum.

"We only would beat him up sometimes. However, I swear that we never abused him like he is saying," said the eleventh grade student, who apparently was unaware that ever laying a finger on a domestic help is deemed unacceptable.

Masum's cousin Sadek Ali, who sits by his side in the hospital, told this correspondent his parents back in Kishoreganj have not yet been informed.

"They are poor. They had no choice but to send their children for work. Why increase their suffering?" said Sadek Ali.

Khurshida Islam was arrested yesterday following a case filed with Mohammadpur Police Station by Masum's cousin, said Officer-in-Charge Azizul Huq.

"We have no doubt that she has abused the house help," he said.

So, what's next?

FROM PAGE 1
be the new spokesperson. "I read out the press statement as a senior to [pro-AL activists]."

Even the five student bodies which raised allegations of undemocratic practices by Imran through a press conference on April 8 did not agree with the decision on his removal.

Saturday's announcement to relieve Imran of the post came amid a rift between his supporters and pro-government organisations.

Allegations of fund embezzlement and "undemocratic" practices have been made against Imran by individuals and groups linked to the AL-led 14-party alliance.

Imran was the convener of Bangladesh Online Activist Network (BOAN), one of the groups of bloggers and online activists who initiated the Shahbagh protest that began on February 5 last year after notorious war criminal Quader Mollah walked out of court, flashing a V-sign, after being sentenced to life imprisonment.

The verdict triggered widespread outrage, drawing thousands of youths to the capital's Shahbagh intersection to protest what they deemed a sentence too lenient for a man nicknamed the "Butcher of Mirpur" for his brutalities in 1971.

To steer the movement, the Gonojagoron Mancha was formed. It was initially comprised of pro-liberation student bodies, individuals, cultural organisations and online activists and Imran was made its spokesperson.

Since then, it has been pressing for maximum punishment for war crimes trial and a ban on the Jamaat-e-Islami on charges of war crimes committed during the Liberation War in 1971.

On Saturday, without specifically referring to Imran, the press statement read out by Kamal said cracks had appeared in the platform because of decisions made by a certain person who also created barriers for those who demanded transparency.

Against this backdrop, The Daily Star talked with Imran and Kamal Pasha Chowdhury regarding the movement's future, if there is any.

"I was chosen spokesperson of the Mancha through a consensus of different student and cultural bodies and bloggers-activists after the February 8 grand rally," said Imran, who was publicity secretary of the BCL Rangpur Medical College unit from 2003 to 2004.

Kamal Pasha, a former member of the Awami League media cell's sub-committee and also general secretary of Paribesh Bachao Andolon, said he was also present at the meeting. It may be noted that he had earlier said Imran too was in the AL media cell's sub-committee.

Interestingly, Imran said he could not recall Kamal's presence at the meeting. He knew the senior activist from social media activism.

He also denied being a member of the AL sub-committee. "I helped them at different times with developing web contents but I was not officially with the Awami League's media cell."

Regarding the future of the Mancha, Imran said such factions would continue to emerge but the Mancha would not budge on realising in a non-violent way its six-point demand, including a ban on the Jamaat.

"People would know the real Mancha from the partisan one from its demands and activities."

Imran agreed that the spontaneous participation of the masses in the movement had declined. "To bring people back, we will arrange programmes such as public dialogues, rather than seminars with fixed speakers."

According to Kamal, discontent ensued in the Mancha from mid-February last year when many activists involved with the Mancha were kept out of the decision-making process.

"Many of us then stopped attending the programmes," he said, admitting that he had not been in touch with the Mancha over the last six months.

So why then did he suddenly announce Imran's removal?

"Imran gave media false information about the identity of the attackers of the April 3 clash among Gonojagoron Mancha activists," he said, without giving a direct answer. "He falsely accused some BCL and Jubo League men of carrying out an attack."

Imran has taken an anti-government stance since he wants to form a political party, he added.

Kamal Pasha also alleged that Imran has come under the influence of the left parties who are trying to cash in on the movement by pushing forward their own political agenda through the Mancha's programmes and statements.

He also said, "I personally want to bring the two factions together for the sake of the movement. If that does not happen, Imran should step down because he has become controversial."

But Imran said, "I have no plan to launch a political party as yet, but anything can happen in the future."

"Some pro-ruling party factions within the Mancha are trying to taint my image to destroy the movement because I criticised the government on a number of issues."

He noted that the government's gap has narrowed with Hefajat-e-Islam but widened with the Mancha.

Hefajat, a Qawmi madrasa-based Islamist organisation, vehemently opposed the Shahbagh movement and launched a propaganda against it, terming the Mancha activists, especially the bloggers, as atheists.

At a gathering on Saturday, a Hefajat leader said they were enjoying Imran's "consequences". Earlier, its chief Ahmed Shafi said the Hasina government, AL and BCL are the Hefajat's friends.

About allegations of fund embezzlement, Imran said, "The groups and individuals who could not make money from the movement had brought such allegations."

"These allegations were also brought by people with partisan agendas."

Imran, who left his job at Dhaka Medical College Hospital, claimed that his family provides for him. He plans to present within a week accounts of the funds he himself received or those received by others on his behalf.

So what happens now? Will he quit?

"If everyone involved with the Mancha wants me to step down I will, but not under pressure from this group," said Imran H Sarkar.