

42 lakh students to get stipend

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The Executive Committee of the National Economic Council (Ecne) yesterday approved the "Secondary Education Stipend Project" Phase-2 involving Tk 791 crore under which some 42.44 lakh poor students studying at secondary level would get stipends.

For the first time, poor male students at the secondary level are going to get the stipend.

Briefing reporters after the meeting, Planning Minister AHM Mustafa Kamal said the Directorate of Secondary and Higher Education will implement the project by June 2017 covering some 217 upazilas of 53 districts.

Under the project, students of class VI and VII will receive monthly Tk 100 as stipend while class VIII students will get Tk 120, and students of class IX and X will get Tk 150.

Besides, the students from class VI to VIII will get monthly Tk 15 as tuition fees while those in class IX and X will get Tk 20.

The students will also get Tk 750 at a time as fees for SSC exams.

The minister said 30 percent of female students and 10 percent of male students in each class will get the stipend.

He also said there are some conditions to be followed while giving the stipend. The annual income of the parents must

be below Tk 50,000 and the amount of their land property should be less than seven decimals. Also, the student must have at least 75 percent class attendance.

Besides, the students must get minimum 33 percent marks in annual exams in class VI and VII while those in class VIII and IX must get minimum 40 percent marks.

Another condition for availing of the stipend is that the students will have to be unmarried till appearing at the SSC or Dakhil exams.

The minister said the stipend will be provided to eligible students through completely digital method like mobile banking or bKash or any other suitable method.

The Ecne meeting also approved another project titled "Installation of Prepaid Gas Meter for TGTDC" worth Tk 719 crore under which some 2 lakh prepaid gas metres would be installed in some 12 areas of the capital. The areas are: Badda, Gulshan, Tejgaon, Cantonment, Mirpur, Kafrul, Khilkhet, Uttar Khan, Dakhkhin Khan, Uttara, Prabachal and Jhilmel.

Titas Gas Transmission and Distribution Company Limited would implement the project by December 2018.

Yesterday, the Ecne okayed four other projects involving Tk 3,887 crore.

Tanneries to be shut down if not relocated in time

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Industries Minister Amir Hossain Amu yesterday said the government will shut down tanneries in the capital's Hazaribagh if any of them fails to relocate to Savar Tannery Estate by June next year.

Allotment of plots to those factories will also be cancelled, he told parliament replying to a question from an Awami League lawmaker.

The government will take tougher measures to improve the environment in the capital, added the minister.

The new tannery estate, said Amu, has been set up on 199.40 acres of land in Savar and Keraniganj. The construction of all the infrastructure except for a Common Effluent Treatment Plant (CETP) and a dumping yard has already been completed.

The construction of the CETP will be completed by next June. Efforts are

on to relocate Hazaribagh tanneries by then as well. The project will be fully implemented by June next year, he mentioned.

Bangladesh Small and Cottage Industries Corporation (BSCIC) has approved the layout plans of 152 industrial units out of the total 155 in the tannery estate. Of them, construction of 148 units has started, Amu told the House.

Nasrul Hamid Bipu, state minister for power, energy and mineral resources, informed the Jatiya Sangsad that the government has no plan to lay gas lines in new areas due to a deficit in gas supplies.

"There is a deficit of at least 500 mmcf gas against the daily demand in the country," he said.

The government, however, has decided to install some gas connections to households in phases where gas lines have already been laid, mentioned Nasrul.

Act tough even before ruling

FROM PAGE 1

Zia, to explain in four weeks as to why political activities, blockades and hartals which are detrimental to education and people's lives and properties should not be declared illegal and unconstitutional.

The court on that day had also ordered the government to immediately take measures to prevent violence, terrorism and other subversive acts in the name of hartal and blockade.

In its written order, released on Monday, the HC asked the home, foreign and education secretaries, the inspector general of police, the director generals of BGB and the Rab and the commissioner of Dhaka Metropolitan Police to take action to prevent such deadly political programmes.

It also asked the authorities to take all required measures to hold the SSC exams and keep all the educational institutions open and ensure security of the students.

"Take all necessary actions against anyone who is in the name of any political activity either oborodh or hartal tries to disrupt the SSC examination and/or keeping the educa-

tional institutions open," said the HC in its written order.

Meanwhile, the BNP-led alliance yesterday extended its ongoing 72-hour hartal by another 48-hour, compelling the education ministry to reschedule today's test for Friday.

The latest spell of hartal will now end at 6:00am on Friday.

The opposition combine has been enforcing the ongoing nonstop blockade since January 6, demanding, among other things, a fresh election under a nonparty administration. In addition, it has frequently been calling countrywide shutdown, forcing the education ministry to postpone SSC and equivalent examinations.

Against this backdrop, two writ petitions, both filed on February 12, challenged the legality of the deadly blockade and hartal.

Speaking to The Daily Star, Attorney General Mahbubey Alam yesterday welcomed the HC order.

"Such an order from the High Court was necessary at this critical juncture," he said.

Law enforcers will now feel mentally strong in tackling homicidal activities and coercive political

programmes, said the top law officer.

"It is now binding on the government functionaries concerned to take necessary steps in line with the court directives," said Advocate Khurshid Alam Khan, editor of Dhaka Law Report.

Asked, Supreme Court Bar Association President Khandker Mahbub Hossain, also an adviser to Khaleda Zia, said the government had to prevent violence and subversive acts as per the court order.

He added the HC did not order the law enforcers to prevent peaceful hartal and blockade, because the Appellate Division of the Supreme Court has ruled in 2007 that calling hartal is a legal and democratic right.

"The people across the country, particularly in the rural areas, are spontaneously responding to the hartal and blockade called by BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia to establish people's right to vote," he claimed.

The HC said it was a fundamental right guaranteed by the constitution that every citizen has right to freedom of speech and conscience and to invite others to join his/her political activities.

KHALEDA'S OFFICE

Curb on food supply continues

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Police for the seventh straight day did not allow food from outside for Khaleda Zia's Gulshan office staff yesterday.

Though on the previous days, police barred food delivery at the office gate but yesterday they did it some 50 yards away, presumably to evade media eyes, according to eyewitnesses.

A rickshaw van carrying lunch boxes and water was stopped on Road 86 around 2:20pm and sent back. Also, a CNG-run auto-rickshaw carrying dry foods was not allowed to enter the office.

Khaleda along with some 50 staff has been staying at her office since January 3. Police on February 11 curbed food supply for all others, except for Khaleda.

'BROOM' RALLY AGAINST KHALEDA

A group of women under the banner of "Amra Mirpurbasi" demonstrated wielding brooms at Gulshan-2 intersection around 12:40pm.

Ruling party lawmaker Sabina Akhtar Tuhin, also a leader of Jubo Mohila League, led the programme and said if Khaleda Zia does not withdraw hartal and blockade immediately, they would bar water supply to the office of the BNP chairperson.

But it does not authorise anyone to force others in any coercive manner to join his/her activities or threaten others to implement his/her desires as it is prevailing all over the country since January 5, including blocking of free movement of citizens, the court added.

"The education of the children, the business sector, transport sector, agriculture and all sectors of the country has almost come to a standstill and above all no person feels safe to come out of home even, sometimes not even at home."

In Sunday's ruling, the HC bench of Justice Quazi Reza-Ul Hoque and Justice Abu Taher Md Saifur Rahman had also asked the respondents to explain why they should not be directed to compensate the people who have become victims and suffered losses in the ongoing hartal and blockade.

In Monday's written order, the court asked the respondents, including the governor of Bangladesh Bank and the chairman of the National Board of Revenue, to show causes as to why they should not be directed to collect the compensation amount from the BNP-led alliance's leaders.

Solution to crisis

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Responding to a volley of questions, the US envoy said, "We stand ready to help if that help is requested since Bangladesh's friends are concerned over the current political situation."

In her first press conference since arriving in Dhaka on January 25, Bernicat said she had focused on the "broader and deeper" Washington-Dhaka ties and was to "look ahead and move the relationship forward".

The new US ambassador presented her credentials to President Abdul Hamid on February 4 and paid her first call on Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina on February 15.

Responding to another question about the US government's current position on January 5, 2014 election, which she termed "undeniably flawed" during her hearing in the US Senate, Bernicat said the US government's views on the election "is well known and it is on the record. What I want to emphasise is our intent to move forward with our bilateral relationship".

In her written statement, she said the US does not back any particular political party but will work with

everyone in Bangladesh.

"Our intention is to work with all Bangladeshis, including a government that is receptive to a broader and deeper bilateral relationship with the United States," her statement added.

The US envoy condemned the use of violence for political objectives in the strongest term in her statement and said, "There is simply no justification for such actions in a democratic Bangladesh."

Responding to a question, she said when violence takes place, it causes injury and deaths, creates all kinds of instability. "People can't travel, can't work and it disrupts life," she said.

Bernicat said the US strongly believes that Bangladesh is a democratic country. "I heard a wonderful thing when I was in Washington... somebody characterised Bangladeshi people as having democracy in their very DNA."

"I thought that was a very truthful way to characterise. I think we have that in common," she said, adding, "This is a democratic society and there are many means by which people can address these [political] issues."

She hoped Bangladeshis would use that "space created by democratic process to address all the issues in a peaceful manner that allows everyone to express their views".

Mentioning that the US-Bangladesh relationship is one of America's most important partnerships, she said, "I am eager to work with the government, the opposition, and civil society on our vital and common interests over the coming years of my tenure."

Referring to her meeting with Hasina, a questioner asked whether the democracy in Bangladesh is endangered. Bernicat in her answer said the prime minister and she talked about wide range of issues including progress that Bangladesh made in so many areas.

"We will work together to strengthen the democracy and democratic institutions," she added.

On the war crimes trial, the US envoy said they wish to see strong rule of law prevail in Bangladesh. "Our desire is to help Bangladesh strengthen its rule of law, make sure that this process is transparent and they are fair according to your law."

Democracy for the dead?

FROM PAGE 1

Those killed in violence during the ongoing blockade have been denied their most fundamental constitutional right -- the right to life. For them, democratic or voting right turned out to be meaningless.

It is obvious that if there is no right to life and liberty, other democratic rights like freedom of association and assembly, and freedom of speech bear no meaning.

So, how can the ongoing movement that is causing deaths be an agitation for democratic rights?

This question must be thought over by the BNP that assumed powers thrice since the restoration of parliamentary democracy in 1991.

Amid such a situation, the High Court, which has the constitutional jurisdiction to protect people's fundamental rights guaranteed by the constitution, on Sunday questioned the legality of the ongoing deadly blockade and hartal.

In the past, the same issue had been raised before the apex court.

In 1999, the HC declared hartal as a political and constitutional right. It, however, held that committing acts of

violence and coercion for or against hartal is a criminal offence.

The judgement was challenged before the Appellate Division of the Supreme Court.

The Appellate Division agreed partially with the HC's decision that declared hartal as a political and constitutional right. It, however, overturned the other part of the HC verdict that declared violence and coercion for or against hartal a criminal offence.

In neighbouring India, the judiciary has already set some examples in efforts to protect people's fundamental rights from destructive political agitation.

It was the Kerala High Court that first rang the bell in a landmark verdict in 1997 by declaring forced bands (similar to hartals in Bangladesh) illegal. The Indian Supreme Court upheld the decision in 1998.

The Indian SC in 2002 declared illegal all forms of forced stoppage of public activities.

The Bombay High Court in 2004 imposed on Shiv Sena and the BJP a fine of Rupees 20 lakh each for organising the Bombay Bandh in 2003.

In 2004, the Kolkata High Court declared illegal and unconstitutional the

Bangla Bandh called by the Trinamool Congress, and directed the party to withdraw it and publish a withdrawal call in the media.

In January 2010, the Gauhati High Court also declared that bandh is illegal and unconstitutional as it violates citizen's fundamental rights.

In February 2013, the Kolkata HC took strong stance against forcible shutdown when 12 trade unions called a two-day strike.

An HC division bench led by then Chief Justice Arun Mishra directed the director general of police to deploy adequate force at all points in the state -- roads, railway tracks, railway stations, schools, colleges and market places -- to remove blockades.

The Kolkata HC also wanted the administration to make sure that no one, willing to work on these two days, was prevented from joining work.

It also held the strikers liable for disruption or damage, and observed that organisations calling the strike would have to compensate for the loss.

In Bangladesh, indiscriminate street agitation by political parties continues to cause huge losses to the economy and people. But who is to compensate for that?

Common people left in miseries

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He has three school going children, and he sends Tk 6,000 every month for their education. Sadly, he could not arrange the money this time.

"How can people run families under such circumstances?" asked Matin.

Zobaer Ahmed, 30, a farmer in Chapainawabganj, had invested Tk 4 lakh in palm cultivation, but he had to count a loss of Tk 50,000 as he faced difficulties in shipping his produce to other places due to the transport blockade.

"I could have made a net profit of at least Tk 2 lakh, but that didn't happen," he told The Daily Star over the phone.

Besides, the transport cost had shot up in the wake of arson attacks and crude bomb blasts on vehicles.

At least 71 people died in such attacks since January 6.

The latest victim of firebombing is Mohammad Idris, 17, of Cox's Bazar, who died at Chittagong Medical College Hospital yesterday. The auto-rickshaw carrying Idris and four others came under attack at Patiya in Chittagong on February 11.

On top of the ongoing blockade, frequent shutdowns have also put some 1.5 million candidates of SSC and equivalent exams in uncertainty.

Today's exams will now be held on February 27 from 9:00am. So far, SSC and equivalent exams were rescheduled seven times.

Meanwhile, alleged pickets set fire to at least four vehicles in different places while police arrested 35 BNP-Jamaat activists in connection with violence and arson attacks from across the country.

In Dhaka, miscreants torched a bus of Tanzil Paribahan in front of Jagannath University around 6:45pm, fire service officials said.

Two people, including a school-teacher, were injured in a