



Iraqi security forces gather near Falluja, Iraq, yesterday. Iraqi forces faced tough resistance from the Islamic State group yesterday as they attempted to enter the centre of Falluja, where there were mounting fears for thousands of trapped civilians. PHOTO: REUTERS

JUTE GENOME PATENTS Over \$8m 'to be spent' on legal fees

STAFF CORRESPONDENT The government plans to spend \$8.25 million on legal assistance over a span of 15 years to take out patents on jute genomes decoded by Bangladeshi scientists. To gain an exclusive right to the use of the intellectual property, US law firm Foley Hoag was appointed in 2010, said a foreign ministry official. A foreign ministry proposal in this regard may be placed today before the cabinet committee on purchase for approval. Bangladeshi scientists led by Maqsoodul Alam decoded the genomes of two types of jute plants in 2010 and 2013. Maqsoodul and his team in 2012 also decoded the genome of a bacteria harmful to more than 500 crops. Applications have already been filed for seven out of 15 patents on the intellectual property. Preparations for filing the rest are underway. Several countries, including a neighbouring country, have been competing with Bangladesh for patent on jute plant genome, which is why the government was quick to appoint the law firm, the foreign ministry official said, preferring not to be named. Bangladeshi researchers have successfully decoded the jute plant genomes opening up a new vista in the development of varieties of the world's most adorned biodegradable natural fibre. Experts said this gene sequencing would help improve the fibre length and quality, including colours and strength, and develop high yielding and saline, soil- and pest-tolerant jute varieties through genetic engineering. With the successful sequencing of jute genome, Bangladesh becomes the second country after Malaysia, among the developing nations, to achieve such a feat. A genome sequence allows scientists to identify and understand how genes work together for the plant's different features like growth, development and maintenance as an entire organism. This in turn allows them to manipulate the genes and enhance, reduce or add certain features. Bangladesh is the world's second-largest producer of jute, after India, and the world's largest exporter of the fibre.

Shooting over school body polls leaves 7 injured

A CORRESPONDENT, Bagerhat

At least seven people, including two siblings, suffered bullet injuries as the president of a high school managing committee allegedly opened fire on his rival group over the school's managing body election in Morelganj upazila yesterday. Of the injured, the condition of two siblings Abu Hossain Sikdar, 33, and Abu Hanif Sikdar, 38, son of Sikdar Khalilur Rahman, was critical. They were undergoing treatment at Khulna Medical College Hospital. The other injured were admitted to different hospitals and clinics. Locals said there had been a long-standing conflict between the managing committee president, Sikdar Mahbubur Rahman, and his cousin Khalilur over establishing supremacy in the area. Mahbub is a former secretary of Putikhali union unit Awami League and Khalilur is the incumbent secretary of the unit BNP in the union. Mahabub was a member candidate in yesterday's election to the managing committee of Sonakhali Mahobbat Ali High School. Mahbub suspected that Khalilur was helping his opposition group in the polls, locals said. Eyewitnesses said some activists of Mahbub's rival group gathered at Sonakhali Bazar around 10:30am. Suddenly, Mahbub along with seven to eight people, including his younger brother Sikdar Mizanur Rahman, went there and fired bullets on them with his licenced shotgun, leaving seven people wounded. Contacted, Rashedul Alam, officer-in-charge of Morelganj Police Station, confirmed the incident and said police detained Mahbub and his brother.

Bangladesh rating

FROM PAGE 16 country's low economic development and limited fiscal flexibility owing to a combination of constrained revenue-generation capacity and the spending pressure associated with a significant shortage of basic infrastructure and government services. Bangladesh has received the same rating and outlook from S&P since it first rated the country in 2010. It said although Bangladesh's external debt is low, the country faces the vulnerabilities of a low-income economy, fiscal constraints, and heavy development needs. The country's volatile political setting combined with administrative and institutional weaknesses represent additional rating constraints, added the agency. "We weigh these factors against a relatively modest external debt burden, reflecting support from substantial donor engagement, and large remittances from the Bangladeshi diaspora." One of leading rating agencies in the world, S&P said low economic development, as represented by per capita GDP of \$1,370 for 2016, is the country's main rating constraint. "This income level offers a weak and narrow revenue base, in turn limiting the fiscal and monetary flexibility needed to respond to exogenous shocks." Nevertheless, the rating agency said, Bangladesh's real per capita GDP growth of about 5.4 percent is healthy and in line with peers' at this income level. Despite numerous structural impediments to growth, in particular the shortage of electricity, the economy has a record of steady growth with little fluctuation. That said, the high dividend payouts in comparison to foreign direct investments suggest little earnings are retained due to the difficult business operating environment. Combined with a weak institutional setting and infrastructure deficiencies, Bangladesh's foreign direct investment has remained persistently low. Economic activity has resumed since the last opposition party-led strikes in early 2015, said S&P. "However, the confrontational stance between the incumbent Awami League and the opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party harbors the potential for conflict, as highlighted in the government's recent violent crackdown of pro-opposition activists." On the fiscal front, Bangladesh tends to run moderate deficits. S&P forecast the change in general government debt will average 2.7 percent of GDP annually over fiscal 2016-2019. However, many basic social and infrastructure needs remain unmet, implying the need for higher outlays over the longer term. Although the government's debt burden is low, with net general government debt 23 percent of GDP as of the end of fiscal 2016, its high interest expense at 17.5 percent of revenues limits fiscal flexibility, the company said. The government's increasing use of a costlier national savings certificates scheme rather than commercial borrowings suggests that its debt-servicing ratio will not necessarily fall even if there is fiscal consolidation. In addition, almost half the total government debt is denominated in foreign currency. Nevertheless, the availability of official concessional funding tempers the negative effect of high foreign currency exposure. The rating agency sees moderate risk of contingent liabilities from public sector enterprises because of the

government's significant exposure to loss-making state-owned enterprises. The total debt of state enterprises stands at close to 10 percent of GDP. "Should this contingent liability materialise, it could add substantially to government debt," said the agency. It also stated that Bangladesh's narrow revenue base limits the government's flexibility to mitigate the effect of economic downturns or other shocks. The country has only 2 million registered taxpayers out of a population of 160 million. General government revenue was a low 9.8 percent of GDP in fiscal 2015. Numerous initiatives are underway to expand the tax base, most notably the plan to reform the complicated value added tax (VAT) system. The government has set a target to standardise the VAT rate at 15 percent by July 2016. However, the plan has been repeatedly delayed over the past years, said S&P. "We view Bangladesh's monetary assessment as below average. The central bank's limited independence, multiple mandates, and underdeveloped capital markets hamper monetary flexibility." It said Bangladesh's real effective exchange rate has been rising sharply, reflecting the currency depreciation of its trading partners. "Should this persist, it could strain the competitiveness of its export garment sector." Bangladesh's low external borrowings support the ratings. Remittance inflows averaging 8.8 percent of GDP over the past three years and an internationally competitive garment export sector generally ensure current account surpluses. Foreign exchange reserves as of end April 2016 stood at \$29 billion, equivalent to an estimated six months of imports. Bangladesh's external profile draws substantial donor support, ensuring that the bulk of public external debt is low-cost borrowing with long maturity. Additionally, donors and multilateral lenders condition policy formulation and provide direct budgetary support, the rating agency noted.

Four Moulvibazar

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One incident involved looting and arson in 132 houses, killing of 59 people and rape of six women of Panchgaon village in Rajnagar upazila between May 7 and 8. The other was over looting and arson in four houses and abduction, confinement, torture and killing of two people of Pashimbhag village between November 24 and 25. The four were involved with the politics of Muslim league, the agency said. During the Liberation War, Akmal was a member of a local Peace Committee, an anti-liberation organisation, while the others were involved with Razakar Bahini, an auxiliary force of the Pakistani occupation army. Afterwards, Akmal did not get involved with politics while the three are now involved with Jamaat-e-Islami's politics. NOAKHALI CASE Amir Ali, 70, Md Joynal Abedin, 73, and Md Abdul Kuddus, 84, are in jail while Abul Kalam alias AKM Mansur, 67, on the run. Prosecutors pressed the charges against five persons on October 5, 2015. Mohammad Yusuf died of old age complications on May 19, and his name was excluded, prosecutor Zahid Imam told The Daily Star yesterday.

15 lakh people

FROM PAGE 16 power or deception".

Australia-based Walk Free Foundation prepared the report after conducting surveys in partnership with American research company Gallup in 167 countries across the world. Bangladesh ranked 10th among the countries in terms of the prevalence of the curse. The 2014 report had put the number of Bangladeshis living in modern slavery at 6.8 lakh. The new report says 45.8 million people across the globe are in some form of modern slavery. North Korea has the highest portion -- 4.37 percent of its population in modern slavery -- followed by Uzbekistan (3.97 percent) and Cambodia (1.65 percent). India tops the list of the countries with most modern slaves -- 18.35 million. China (3.39 million), Pakistan (2.13 million), Bangladesh (1.53) and Uzbekistan (1.23 million) follow India. Bangladesh is the 11th most vulnerable country in Asia in terms of the population vulnerable to modern slavery. The report says endemic poverty, natural disasters, and corruption contribute to the vulnerability factor. Conflict such as inter-communal violence is also to blame. "Forced labour [exposed to 80 percent of the population] was more prevalent than forced marriage [20 percent] in Bangladesh." Furthermore, forced labour was particularly prevalent in manufacturing, manual labour, construction, drug production and farming sectors. According to the report, forced labour largely affected men (82.5 percent) as compared to 17.5 percent women, while forced marriage disproportionately affected women (88 percent) as compared to 12 percent men. "While forced prostitution is a problem affecting nearly 390,000 people, information about the age of victims subject to forced prostitution is not available," it said.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that children are also at risk of organ trafficking in Bangladesh. The Bangladesh government was ranked fourth in the region for the strength of its response to modern slavery. "Yet it must be borne in mind that the implementation of programmes and policies to combat modern slavery in practice are not cohesively implemented in Bangladesh," the report said. Andrew Forrest, founder and chairman of Walk Free Foundation, called on the nations to take urgent actions to end modern slavery. "The freeing of communities from slavery not only brings in the rule of law, it emphasises property rights, common decency and strength of family for each former individual in slavery," he was quoted as saying in the report. 4 DB men hurt in attack by 'drug peddlers' STAFF CORRESPONDENT, Cg Four members of the Detective Branch (DB) of Chittagong Metropolitan Police were injured in an attack by alleged drug peddlers in Anwara upazila yesterday. The incident happened around 6:00pm when a DB team was raiding Parki Beach area to arrest the criminals, said a DB official, wishing not to be named. Sensing law enforcers' presence, the criminals hurled brick chips and stones at them, leaving the four men injured, he said and added that the attackers fled immediately. Police were raiding different places to arrest them. Injured constable Mohammad Arman, assistant sub-inspectors Masud and Nurul Absar were admitted to the Chittagong Medical College Hospital, said Sub-inspector Pankaj Barua of the CMCH police outpost. The other injured, Mohammad Enam, took primary treatment at a local hospital.

Timeframe

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Abdul Hannan, and Rajshahi DIG Khurshid Hossain spoke among others. The anti-corruption committee of Bogra district was adjudged the best district committee in Rajshahi division, while Ullapara upazila committee of Sirajganj, Sherpur committee of Bogra and Bera committee of Pabna took the first, second and third spots among upazila committees. In Rangpur division, Panchagarh district committee was adjudged best, while upazila committees of Gangachara of Rangpur, Nabaganj of Dinajpur and Saghata of Gaibandha came out first, second and third. The prize distribution was followed by a cultural function depicting the importance of anti-corruption movement.

Electoral system

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their candidates," he added. The JP senior leader said 117 people were killed so far in election violence as a huge festivity of occupying polling centres, casting false votes and intimidating people were common. "After the first two phases... we called upon the Election Commission to improve situation in the rest of the phases. But the situation worsened gradually." Quader said people would lose their interest and confidence in election if the situation remained unchanged. "There will be no candidate available to contest in election except for the ruling party contestants if this farce goes in the name of election... Such a situation will not bring anyone any good."

Hindus feel

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to attend the "International Sanatan Religion Conference" in Madapur. The delegation also visited Jhalakathi, Patuakhali and Chittagong. Talking about the conference, Halder said the Hindus at the meeting raised the issue of their protection and said if protection was not ensured, they would migrate to West Bengal. He said India was concerned about attacks and repression on the Hindus in various places in Bangladesh. However, he did not blame the government for the situation. "The Awami League government always protects the interests of the Hindus. This information is well known in India too," Halder told the BBC. People who patronise militants and their attacks on the Hindus were trying to give the Awami League government a bad name, he said. Prime Minister's Political Adviser HT Imam told BBC that the government was committed to ensuring safety of the religious minorities. "Party-wise we are secular, and if you look at the government, you will see there are comparatively many people from minority communities -- and so is the case in workplaces or elsewhere," Imam said.

EC content

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to remind them (ministry) of their duties during election. Their support is very important to maintain a congenial atmosphere to hold a peaceful election. "We have asked them to conduct drives for arresting criminals and seizing illegal arms." Asked whether the EC has any special measure to curb violence in the next phase, he said, "We have taken sufficient security measures since the beginning. We consider all our measures special." Election to around 3,290 UPs was held in five phases from March 22 to May 28. At least 115 people were killed in violence over the polls. Holding a press conference on May 26, civil society organisation SHUJAN claimed that the death toll and irregularities in the ongoing UP polls had broken all previous records in Bangladesh. Previously the deadliest was the 1988 UP polls, when 80 lives were lost in violence. On May 27, Ektattor Ghatak Dalal Nirmul Committee visited the chief election commissioner and demanded effective steps to prevent attacks on minorities in polls. Talking to The Daily Star yesterday, several election experts blamed indifference of the EC and lax enforcement of law for the massive violence. "The commission should have played a strict role to check violence and irregularities since the start. But it did not," said eminent election expert Dr Tofail Ahmed. If the EC had thoroughly investigated violence and irregularities in the first phase and taken stern action, the next phases would have been less violent, he said. "Besides, the EC should have absolute control over administration at the field during election. But some incidents have proved that the EC lacks control over the local administration," Tofail viewed. Abdul Alim, director of Election Working Group, a platform of 28 civil society organisations, said, as the EC did not play a strict role since the beginning, it was now very difficult to check violence in the sixth and last phase of the election on June 4. Assessment of pre-election field situation, deployment of sufficient law enforcers, absolute control over local administration, dialogue with all stakeholders, and coordination with the press can play a significant role to reduce violence, he said.

Carriers start blocking

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Operators will block outgoing calls from the numbers immediately, the officials said. Mobile companies have already notified the Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission of their technical challenges. As of yesterday evening, the telecoms had re-verified some 10.85 crore SIMs out of the 13.19 crore connections currently active in the sector. Of that, market leading Grameenphone had re-verified some five crore against their 5.69 crore subscriber base, market sources said. Banglalink checked 2.72 crore out of its 3.2 crore total users; Robi verified two crore of 2.76 crore total clients, and Airtel re-registered 72 lakh of its 1.01 crore users. Teletalk is yet to register some 23 lakh out of its total 44 lakh active connections, while about 5.5 lakh of total 7.8 lakh SIMs of Citycell are still unverified. The telecom regulator on Monday declared that all blocked users can easily re-open their SIMs by completing biometric registration within the next fifteen months. After that, the operators can resell the still unregistered numbers after issuing a public notice for three months, reads an order signed by Mohammad Zulfikar, director of systems and services at

BTRC.

From now, all SIM re-registrations and re-sales will be subject to taxation, the BTRC said. Meanwhile, both the market leader and the smallest operator had sought more time from the regulator to re-register their data SIMs, but have been denied. In a letter on Monday, GP said they are yet to re-register 26 lakh data SIMs. Around 50 lakh of the total unregistered SIMs are designated data SIMs and blocking those will cause a big setback to the data business of the telecoms. Currently, there are 5.87 crore active mobile data connections in the country, according to the BTRC. Mobile operators are looking at about Tk 600 crore in revenue loss from blocking the active but unregistered data subscriptions, which will also cut into the government's revenue, they said. The government made biometric registration mandatory for all mobile connections on December 16 last year, with the first deadline set for April 30. The window was later extended by a month, and the process finally closed yesterday. Subscriber authentication will enable better security for mobile financial services and help to curb illegal call termination, which will benefit the telecommunication sector, analysts have said.