

# Govt making

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She said like the police had set fire to the Santal village in Gaibandha's Gobindaganj upazila, the police, with directives from the government, had also hurled petrol bombs at buses and killed people to confuse people and defuse the BNP-led anti-government movement in 2015.

Khaleda urged student leaders and activists to be prepared for waging a movement at the right time and asked them to refrain from chanting slogans for mere demonstration. "I was on the streets during the anti-Ershad movement. I have brought the BNP to power thrice. Inshallah, the BNP will again come to power after reorganising the party properly without any grouping, lobbying. Competent leaders will be given leadership."

She called upon JCD men to prepare themselves for saving the country and brining smiles to poor people's faces.

The BNP chief said she would announce a movement at the right time to achieve those targets.

Referring to her talks with President Abdul Hamid, Khaleda expressed the hope that he would take measures to hold the next general elections under a polls-time government for ensuring free, fair and inclusive polls.

"An impartial election commission is not enough for free and fair elections. That's why we have urged the president to take measures for an election-time government," she added.

Criticising the ruling Awami League's rigid stance to cling to power, she said it was passing laws frequently and destroying the country and its young generations to remain in power forever.

The BNP chief also slammed the Jatiya Party, opposition in parliament, saying it had turned into a slave of the government from the very beginning.

# Diaz's followers

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BCL activists of CMC unit attacked the demonstrators, leaving two of the protesters injured, said Md Mamun, vice-president of CU unit of BCL.

In another incident at the same time, some rooms of Diaz's followers at the Abdur Rab Hall in the CU campus were vandalised, said Mamun. Contacted, A K M Mainul Haque Miazi, provost of the hall, said he had come to know that three rooms were vandalised. On November 23, the first post mortem report, prepared by the doctors of forensic department of CMC, mentioned that Diaz had committed suicide. But Diaz's friends and family members have been demanding re-post mortem claiming the death as a murder.

On November 24, Diaz's mother lodged a murder case with a Chittagong court accusing 20 people. Diaz's body was exhumed following the court's order after the IO filed a petition with the court seeking fresh post mortem of the body. The primary report of second autopsy, carried out on December 11 conducted by the doctors at DMC, found bruises on Diaz's body. At that time, they had announced that they would visit the crime scene and prepare the report after getting viscera report.

# Laser walls

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activation of laser walls on the western front after the Pathankot terror attack. It was suspected that terrorists had breached the border in Bamiyal area in Punjab.

Meanwhile, the proposal submitted by BSF's South Bengal frontier to the West Bengal government for land needed for erecting fences in a highly sensitive 81.7 km area has been approved.

The state government has approved it and asked the district magistrates to procure land and hand it over to them, the BSF said.

# CORRUPTION SCANDAL South Korean leader denies involvement

AFP, Seoul

South Korea's impeached President Park Geun-Hye yesterday repeated denials of involvement in a snow-balling corruption scandal and said rumours have been "getting out of hand", Yonhap news agency reported.

"Rumours, stories and broadcasts have been distorted and false information has been getting out of hand," she was quoted as telling reporters at the presidential Blue House.

Parliament voted on December 9 to impeach Park over the scandal. She is accused of colluding with close friend Choi Soon-Sil to strong-arm big companies into handing over tens of millions of dollars to dubious foundations which Choi controlled.

# Afghans struggle to supplant poppies with fruit crops

AFP, Kabul

Frosty relations between Kabul and Islamabad have put a brake on Afghanistan's ambitious plans to boost fruit exports, seen as vital to providing farmers an alternative to poppy cultivation which fuels the Taliban insurgency.

Pomegranates and grapes have long been the pride of Afghan agriculture, but exports from the landlocked country have suffered due to poor air connectivity and frequent border closures by the country's regional nemesis Pakistan.

The sight of hundreds of long-haul trucks stuck along border towns became all too common in 2016, with tonnes of fruits and perishable items going to waste and forcing some farmers to return to the more lucrative cultivation of poppy.

"We invested huge sums of money on growing fresh fruits in our orchards," grape farmer Abdul Samad from Panjwai district in southern Kandahar told AFP.

"We are very frustrated that Pakistan frequently shut the border during harvest season. We have no choice but to return to poppy farming. It will fetch us a lot more money than fruits."

Pakistan sporadically shut the main border crossings as tensions flared due to firing incidents between the troops of both nations.

Pakistan announced last June it was planning more check posts and fencing along the 2,600-kilometre (1,600-mile) frontier to filter the flow of militants.

The move prompted consternation from Afghanistan which does not officially recognise the so-called Durand Line as the international border.

In 2015 around 52,000 tonnes of pomegranates were exported to Pakistan, the UAE and India. Last year the exports dropped to 15,000 tonnes, a small fraction of the total production. Other fruit exports also suffered.

"We were ready and hoping to export up to 40,000 tonnes of grapes

from Kandahar, but Pakistan closed the gate for 17 days (in October), not allowing our traders to export their produce," said Nasrullah Zaheer, head of the Afghan chamber of commerce in Kandahar.

Agriculture Minister Assadullah Zamir accused Pakistan of using border security as a pretext to sabotage Afghan exports and shield its own farmers from competition.

"This is not the first time that border closures have happened. We had exactly the same issue in 2015 during harvest time," he said, without stating the estimated monetary losses.

"But we are here to support our farmers and the government is willing to cover a part of alternate transportation costs such as air cargo," he added.

New Delhi recently announced it would launch an air-cargo link between Afghanistan and India that will help it bypass its border issues and open new markets for traders.

The plans, however, remain at initial stages, frustrating farmers.

For years, Afghanistan has tried to give farmers alternatives such as fruit crops and saffron to wean them away from poppy farming -- the lifeblood of the Taliban insurgency.

But those efforts are failing and opium remains an economic linchpin for many Afghans.

Farmers need not bother with exports as a sprawling network of drug smugglers picks up opium produce directly from their farms, offering lucrative prices that normally far exceed the income from traditional agriculture.

In 2016, Afghanistan saw a 10 per cent jump in opium cultivation compared to the previous year because of bumper harvests, collapsing eradication efforts and declining international aid to combat drugs.

"Even if the government arrests us we are determined to grow poppy," said Kandahar farmer Abdul Shukoor.

"Pakistan closes the border randomly and our government is doing nothing."

# Govt to revive

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Replying to a question regarding the cases on Grameen Bank pending with the High Court, Muhith said, "We have done nothing in this regard for long. Now we have decided that it cannot be let go this way."

The minister said Grameen Bank has to be given a proper shape.

He said the existing provision for weekly loan repayments was unnecessary. "It was necessary during its inception to make people habituated to paying back loans."

Muhith said this is not true only for Grameen Bank as one can see the improvement by looking at the overall performance of the banking system.

"When I became a minister in 1982, the default loan was above 40 percent. Now it has come down to 9 or 10 percent. It should be cut further but this [rate] is reasonable."

Muhith said he had already engaged some people to suggest how Grameen Bank could be strengthened further.

Shamsul Bari, a former United Nations human rights expert, is one of them.

The finance minister said Bari is a close friend of Prof Muhammad Yunus, and has known Grameen Bank since its inception.

In 2012, Prof Bari was appointed as the chairman of a search committee of Grameen Bank to find a full-time managing director for the microcredit pioneer. The process has stalled because of a writ petition in the High Court.

Talking to The Daily Star yesterday, Bari said he met the finance minister at his office a month ago when the latter raised the issue of Grameen Bank.

"He talked about Grameen Bank because I knew both Prof Yunus and the bank for a long time. The finance minister urged me to think about how Grameen Bank's borrowers can be scaled up to entrepreneurs from microcredit borrowers."

"The government is thinking this way. I think this is good thinking."

Bari, now the chairman of Research Initiatives, Bangladesh (RIB), said he had told the finance minister that he would provide suggestions whenever he comes up with them.

"I have talked about the issue with a number of people who know Grameen Bank very well. I told them to give their inputs directly to the finance minister."

Grameen Bank has been led by acting MDs since Prof Yunus stepped down in 2011 following his removal from the organisation.

# Crowd packs in for the 'ball drop' in New York

AFP, New York

Thousands of people crammed into New York City's Times Square in Saturday, in a raucous atmosphere with tight security, for the traditional ball drop.

At about 6:00 pm (2300 GMT), the giant sphere was hoisted to the top of the 43-meter (141-feet) post at the landmark crossroads with its towering buildings and huge neon lights.

Once lit, the ball glittered brightly and sparkled in the night sky just as some of the first fireworks crackled in the background.

At a minute before midnight, according to tradition, New York's mayor, Bill de Blasio, will press the button that starts the drop. He will be joined this year by outgoing United Nations chief Ban Ki-moon.

Then comes the confetti, and the cheers of people around the world.

More than a million people are expected in Times Square to mark this New Year's tradition, observed every year since 1907 except the war years of 1942 and 1943.

On the heels of recent bomb attacks

in Berlin and Nice, New York deployed some 7,000 police and dozens of garbage trucks to "strategic" locations to prevent vehicles from crushing the crowd.

The atmosphere seemed fairly relaxed and many police posed alongside tourists for "selfies" that visitors shared on social media.

"It's the best place in the world to be on New Year's Eve," said Alma Alanis, a lawyer from Mexico with her companion, Eduardo Chavarria.

They arrived at midday, wrapped up in coats, to hold out until midnight.

"We have wanted to come here for many years, because it has to be seen, it is magic," said Jerome Nicolas from central France.

"As soon as there is a crowd, we cannot help but think of the attacks," said his wife Sandrine, referring to a series of massacres this year around the globe.

Leann Krieger, who traveled from Missouri with several former colleagues, voiced some trepidation about the incoming American president, Donald Trump.

"I hope for the best because there's nothing we can do about it," she said.

# Getting worse

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Within a few months, the service was unpopular with passengers, mainly due to irregular schedule.

In a bid to improve the service, the government in July 2013 had introduced four more waterbuses, with capacity for 82 passengers each, at a cost of around Tk 3 crore. But the move did not work out.

In November 2014, the government added six new waterbuses, with 46-capacity each, to the fleet, spending about Tk 5 crore. With them, the total number of vessels rose to 12.

After failing to make the service popular, the BIWTC in June last year leased out the vessels to private firm Imran Traders.

Yet the service is getting worse day by day, said passengers and locals in Gabtoli.

"Very often the lessee operates only a single trip a day. Even there are days without any trip," said Babul Akhter, who travels the route regularly.

Ali Ashraf, proprietor of Imran Traders, said they cut the number of trips due to lack of passengers.

"A round trip costs us around Tk 3,000 against our earning of about Tk 500," he told The Daily Star.

BIWTC Chairman Mizanur Rahman said they already had several meetings with the leaseholder to improve the service.

He expressed optimism that the service would soon be improved.

A passenger has to pay Tk 40 for travelling from Badamtoli to Gabtoli.

Of the 12 waterbuses, seven are plying on the route, while the BIWTC has sent the rest of the vessels to other routes in Narayanganj and Rangamati, said BIWTC officials.

# Employers start

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However, the Malaysian employers reacted harshly over the government's new decision.

Malay Businessmen and Industrialists Association of Malaysia President Datuk Moehamad Izat Emir yesterday urged the government to explain the rationale behind the decision.

But Malaysian Agricultural Producers Association Executive Director Mohamad Audong said the changes in the levy payment under the EMC would not be a problem for the plantation sector.

He said Mapa member companies had been paying the levy for years although they had the option to deduct the foreign workers' wages. "We really need foreign workers ... it is our responsibility to look after them," he added.

Earlier, the Malaysian deputy prime minister said about 2.1 million registered foreign workers would benefit from the decision.

Malaysia suspended recruitment of Bangladeshi workers on February 19 last year, a day after the signing of a memorandum of understanding between Dhaka and Kula Lumpur.

However, the two countries are now in talks to resume the recruitment process for Bangladeshis in construction, manufacture and service sectors.

# Nasirnagar AL

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court rejected the prayer and ordered police to interrogate him at the jail gate.

On October 30 last year, unruly mobs and zealots vandalised many Hindu houses and temples in five villages of the upazila over a Facebook post.

Eight cases were filed in connection with the attack.

Law enforcers have so far arrested 108 people, including Ahad, in the cases.

Meanwhile, over 100 people of the Hindu community held a protest rally in Ghoshpara yesterday, demanding the release of Ahad.

At the rally, Bijoy Ghosh, a resident of Ghoshpara and clothes trader, said Ahad saved them during the October 30 attack risking his life.

Bijoy said Ahad was injured while he was trying to resist the attackers.

When Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan Kamal visited Nasirnagar on November 8, he informed the minister about what kind of role Ahad had played during the attack, Bijoy added.

Anil Das and Mohan Lal Das of Mahakalpara said the Hindu community people did not bring any allegations against Ahad.

# Some TV

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Moulvibazar. The building was constructed spending Tk 27 crore.

Noting that some 27 lakh cases were pending with courts across the country, the chief justice underscored the need for speedily disposal of those to mitigate public sufferings.

Law Minister Anisul Huq and Planning Minister AHM Mustafa Kamal also spoke at the rally.

# Fire, not Iceberg sank

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fire as the primary cause of the ship's demise.

Journalist Senan Molony, who has spent more than 30 years researching the sinking of the Titanic, studied photographs taken by the ship's chief electrical engineers before it left Belfast shipyard.

Maloney said he was able to identify 30-foot-long black marks along the front right-hand side of the hull, just behind where the ship's lining was pierced by the iceberg.

He said: "We are looking at the exact area where the iceberg stuck, and we appear to have a weakness or damage to the hull in that specific place, before she even left Belfast".

Experts subsequently confirmed the marks were likely to have been caused by a fire started in a three-storey high fuel store behind one of the ship's boiler rooms.

A team of 12 men attempted to put out the flames, but it was too large to control, reaching temperatures of up to 1000 degrees Celsius.

Subsequently, when the Titanic struck ice, the steel hull was weak enough for the ship's lining to be torn open.

Officers on board were reportedly under strict instruction from J Bruce Ismay, president of the company that built the Titanic, not to mention the fire to any of the ship's 2,500 passengers.

Presenting his research in a

Channel 4 documentary, Titanic: The New Evidence, broadcast on New Year's Day, Maloney also claims the ship was reversed into its berth in Southampton to prevent passengers from seeing damage made to the side of the ship by the ongoing fire.

Molony said: "The official Titanic inquiry branded [the sinking] as an act of God. This isn't a simple story of colliding with an iceberg and sinking."

"It's a perfect storm of extraordinary factors coming together: fire, ice and criminal negligence."

"Nobody has investigated these marks before. It totally changes the narrative. We have metallurgy experts telling us that when you get that level of temperature against steel it makes it brittle, and reduces its strength by up to 75 per cent."

"The fire was known about, but it was played down. She should never have been put to sea."

In 2008, Ray Boston, an expert with more than 20 years of research into the Titanic's journey, said he believed the coal fire began during speed trials as much as 10 days prior to the ship leaving Southampton.

He said the fire had potential to cause "serious explosions" below decks before it would reach New York.

An inquiry into the disaster, presented to Parliament in 1912, described the ship as travelling at "high speed" through dangerous icy waters, giving the crew little opportunity to avoid the fatal collision.

# Cops smell militant

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interrogation but no mentionable progress could be made.

A senior police official, requesting anonymity, said, "There were some feuds involving the lawmaker but we don't believe his killing is a result of those. The style of the killing indicates that it was the act of militants."

Liton had drawn widespread flak after he allegedly shot a 10-year-old boy in Gaibandha on October 2 last year.

Sourav Mia, son of Sazu Miah of Gopalcharan village in Sundarganj, was shot twice in the legs. Liton was arrested on October 14 in the capital's Uttara after Sazu filed an attempted murder case against him.

Meanwhile, the Awami League pointed the finger at religious extremists for the killing of Liton and also the attack on Khulna district AL leader ZA Mahamud Don.

Around 11:00am Saturday, unknown miscreants chased Don in Shitolbari Mondir area of Khulna city and shot at him. But the bullet hit a female pedestrian while the AL leader escaped, said police.

Following the two incidents, top AL leaders held an emergency meeting at the party president's Dhanmondi office with General Secretary Obaidul Quader in the chair.

AL leaders at the meet said fundamentalists remained silent in the face of law enforcers' drives but they are again making their existence known through such attacks.

The meeting also discussed security of party leaders and advised AL men to move cautiously, sources said.

# Deal reached to end DR Congo political crisis

AFP, Kinshasa

The government and opposition parties in the DR Congo on Saturday clinched a hard-won deal over President Joseph Kabila's fate, ending a political crisis that sparked months of deadly unrest.

Under the terms of the deal, Kabila will stay until the "end of 2017" but a transition council will be established, headed by opposition leader Etienne Tshisekedi.

In addition, a prime minister will be named from the opposition ranks.

The talks were launched by the Roman Catholic Church to ward off violence as Kabila's second and final mandate ended on December 20 with no sign of him stepping down and no election in sight.

The final deal was signed after 13 hours of negotiation on Saturday and only after several last-minute hitches nearly derailed an accord.

According to a working document for the deal previously seen by AFP, Kabila guarantees that he will not seek a third mandate.

In return, the opposition accepted the president remain in office until handing over to an elected successor.

The opposition had previously demanded his immediate departure from public life.

The Catholic Church, which plays a key role in the vast central African country of some 70 million people, launched the negotiations on December 8 and had initially hoped to see a deal before Christmas.

Voters in DR Congo were originally to have chosen a new president in 2016, but the authorities said the

electoral registers must be revised, a huge enterprise in a country almost the size of Europe.

And in a highly controversial ruling, the constitutional court said Kabila could remain in office until an election was held.

The ruling fed opposition fears that he planned to amend the constitution to allow him to run for a third term.

Kabila, 45, has been in power since the 2001 assassination of his father Laurent at the height of the Second Congo War.

He was confirmed as leader in 2006 during the first free elections since independence from Belgium in 1960, and re-elected for a second term in 2011 in a vote marred by allegations of massive fraud.

Sixteen representatives met on Saturday, comprising eight from the opposition coalition, called Rassemblement ("Gathering"), and eight from the government and groups which had signed a deal with the regime in October.

- No democratic transfer - dispute was over wording for the appointment of the prime minister -- the government side want the individual to be "drawn from the opposition," whereas Gathering want the premier to be "appointed by the opposition."

The opposition side also want the deal to allow a wealthy businessman and potential presidential candidate, Moise Katumbi, to be allowed to return to the country.

Katumbi has been sentenced to a three-year term in prison in an alleged case of property fraud and faces another trial in an alleged case of mercenary recruitment.