

Savar couple burnt to death after gas leak in kitchen

A couple was killed and four others were burnt when a fire engulfed a house due to a gas leak in the kitchen in Tarapur area of Savar on the outskirts of the capital early yesterday. The dead were Roushan Ali, 55, and his wife Khairunnessa, 45. Their landlord Tajul Islam, 45, Maherunnessa 38, Hajrat Ali, 32, and Fatema Akter suffered burn injuries when they tried to douse the fire. The injured were undergoing treatment at Savar Enam Medical College Hospital. But they are out of danger, said hospital sources. Two fire engines from Savar rushed to the spot and recovered the body from inside the house, said Palash Chandra, an inspector of fire service headquarters. The fire inspector quoting the landlord said the fire erupted when one of the residents of the one-storey house tried to light the gas stove

SEE PAGE 10 COL 4



Bullock-carts racing in Bahadurpur village of Jessore Sadar yesterday afternoon. After harvesting paddy, locals arrange the race in empty fields in different villages of the district every year and the winner gets exciting prizes like colour televisions and cash.

PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON

4 Bangladeshi inmates go on hunger strike in Indian jail

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi
Four Bangladeshis are among nine foreigners who have been on a hunger strike at a jail detention centre in the Indian state of Rajasthan for the last three days. They demand their immediate release, saying they have completed their jail term. "Nine persons, including five Pakistanis, began a hunger strike two days ago demanding their release, Rahul Prakash, SP of Alwar district told the local media in Rajasthan capital city Jaipur yesterday. "The process of seeking approval for their release from the Ministry of Home Affairs and Ministry of External Affairs is under way," he said. The medical tests of the foreign nationals were conducted today (yesterday), he said. There are 17 foreign nationals at the detention centre who are to be deported after necessary clearance from the ministries.

SEE PAGE 10 COL 3

Ansar members'

FROM PAGE 1
Visiting the hospital around 2:00pm, The Daily Star correspondent found at least 42 empty fire-extinguishing cylinders which the Ansar members had used. Brig Gen Abdullah-al-Harun, director (hospital) of BSMMU, appreciated the Ansar members' efforts. "They are trained and we are happy to see that they apply it," he said. Fires in hospitals often become deadly as many patients are incapable of vacating the building on their own. The BSMMU, like many modern hospitals, has an oxygen supply system built into the walls so that patients could receive oxygen through masks.

Bangladeshi

FROM PAGE 16
numbering 5/6 went to the border area early in the morning to bring cattle, a team of BSF chased them near main border pillar No 88 and caught Bakul while others managed to flee. Afzar Ali, an associate of Bakul, said the BSF members beat him mercilessly and left him along the border with critical injuries. He died on the way to Chuadanga Sadar Hospital. Lt CL Amir Majid said they sent a letter to BSF strongly protesting the incident.

BNP denied

FROM PAGE 1
office yesterday morning. Law enforcers barred all but a few senior BNP leaders and journalists from entering the party office. Speaking at the press conference, Rizvi said the BNP will hold protests and bring out processions in all metropolitan cities, district headquarters and thanas of the capital. Demonstrations will be staged protesting denial of police permission for the Dhaka rally and attacks on party men on January 5 during processions with black flags at different parts of the country, he added. The BNP leader blasted the government for deploying law enforcers in front of the party office and at Suhrawardy Udyan. "Law enforcers have surrounded our office. A war-like situation has been prevailing in Suhrawardy Udyan area since morning [yesterday]. It seems the government has declared a war against the BNP," said Rizvi. The ruling Awami League on January 5 held a rally and brought out processions in the capital to mark "democracy saving day". Referring to AL's rally and processions, Rizvi said if the AL can get permission, why the BNP won't be allowed to hold a rally. Sources at the BNP central office said the party was denied permission for organising programmes, including rallies and human chains, on at least seven occasions in the last three years. The last outdoor public rally under the BNP's banner was held on the May Day last year at Suhrawardy Udyan. The DMP granted the BNP permission to hold a rally on January 5 last year. However, it denied the party permission to hold political programmes on November 7 last year to mark the "National Revolution and Solidarity Day", said BNP sources. The party enforced a 99-day nationwide blockade of rail, road and waterways from January 6, 2015, after it was denied permission to hold a rally in the capital's Nayapalton on the first anniversary of the 2014 polls.

Economy resilient, but challenges stay

FROM PAGE 1
Areas of strength have been consolidated this year while weaknesses are seen in traditionally strong areas -- remittance, export and agriculture -- raising concern, he said. Citing signs of growing private investment, Debapriya suggested strengthening reforms for maintaining the trend. The GDP growth has exceeded 7 percent but to increase it further to 8 to 9 percent, reform is a must. The government needs to lower the interest rate of national savings certificates and adjust fuel prices and exchange rates to sustain the economic growth, as per the report. "People have not benefited from the cut in fuel prices," said CPD research fellow Towfiqul Islam Khan who presented the analysis. The benefits of fuel price cuts should be shared among consumers, Bangladesh Petroleum Corporation and the government in a balanced way. Reforms are also vital in the banking sector, local government management and public investment to ensure economic sustainability, CPD said in the report. Global environment has continued to pose a new set of challenges including slowdown in international trade,

tepid global recovery, Brexit, the possibility of the US opting out of the Trans-Pacific Partnership, renewed protectionism in global trade, and continued security and refugee concerns. Though political conflicts were limited at the national level, the fiscal year kicked off amid a rise in terrorist activities that might have serious medium- to long-term impacts on economic prospects. In regard to the downsides, declining trend of remittance inflow has remained a nagging concern. Divergence in the pace of urban and rural inflation has been on the rise in spite of the overall decline in headline inflation rate. Both revenue collection and public expenditure fell short of target, making implementation of the national budget of the current fiscal year more challenging. When the 2016-17 fiscal budget was proposed, CPD projected that there would be a major shortfall of revenue earnings. Referring to July-September revenue growth, it said the revenue collection would fall short of its target by Tk 40,000 crore by the fiscal end. "There should not be any projection of budget implementation, which are impossible. It can be simple and no big revolution is required," Debapriya said.

The annual development programme expenditure recovered to a certain extent but could not surpass the historical trend, according to Towfiqul Islam. "Indeed, both resource mobilisation efforts and efficiency of resource use need to be significantly raised in the remaining two quarters of the fiscal year if the growth momentum is to be sustained and further strengthened." The analysis termed the country's debt situation as comfortable and it will remain so in the next five years. "But the country should not be complacent," the think-tank said. While opting for financing mechanism for public sector projects, it is important to consider the maturity period, conditionalities, tied nature of debts, risk of currency mismatch, internal rate of return and quality of the project. The banking sector continues to suffer from inherent weaknesses. The main concerns are the rising amount of non-performing loans, growing excess liquidity and weak governance. CPD Executive Director Prof Mustafizur Rahman said talks were on forming a banking commission for the last few years to sort out the accumulating problems in the sector. The finance minister even spoke of forming such a commission in his last budget speech, Debapriya said. "But it has not been formed. We are waiting for it to happen."

About the remittance issue, CPD said that over the medium term, the sustainability of remittance inflow would not only depend on developing skilled workforce but also on governance issues such as dealing with money being transferred through informal channels. While Bangladesh battles against its immediate challenges, the policymakers should not lose sight of the reform and governance issues in hand. A set of institutional and policy reforms should be rigorously pursued in the areas of revenue mobilisation, public expenditure management, financial sector, and private investment, if needed, by taking bold steps. "We are seeing only sparks in the private sector investment. It has to be seen if it turns into a fire," said Debapriya on the growth of investment in the private sector. He also pointed out emerging weaknesses in Bangladesh's traditionally strong areas such as export, remittance and agriculture. Bangladesh has to go for exporting products and items in the service sector as its share in the global GDP is increasing, Prof Mustafizur said. The government also needs to move forward step by step in implementing the new VAT system, as the preparation at the field level has not completed yet, according to the report.

Hunt on for those next in line

FROM PAGE 1
hostages dead at Holey Artisan Bakery in Gulshan on July 1 last year, at least three dozen "Neo JMB" militants got killed in different police drives. Of the slain militants, 16 were directly involved in the attack, police said. Asked last night who might lead the group after the death of Marzan, DMP's Counter Terrorism and Transnational Crime (CITC) unit chief Monirul Islam said it could be Maynul Islam Musa. Musa has become a key leader of "Neo JMB" following the killing of its top leaders, including Tamim, Maj (ret'd) Jahid and Tanvir Kaderi, in separate operations in the capital and Narayanganj, according to the CITC unit. Some investigators, however, say it is also possible that Hasidur Rahman Sagor, brother-in-law of Marzan, would take the helm of the group, a faction of banned militant outfit Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB). Once a member of the mainstream JMB, Sagor has bomb-making expertise. He had good relations with JMB's executed leader Siddikul Islam Bangla Bhai.

According to investigators, Sagor was recruited to the faction, "Neo JMB" as law enforcers call it, by arms supplier Soheli Mahfuz. He made grenades using the detonator and explosives sent by Mahfuz from India, said officials. "To nab Musa and Sagor, we are conducting drives in different areas," Abdul Mannan, additional deputy commissioner of the CITC, told The Daily Star. Another high official of the CITC unit, wishing anonymity, said mid-level leader Basharuazzaman alias Abul Bashar and trainer Jahangir alias Rajib Gandhi would play the lead roles while Musa is possibly getting the charge of operations. Bashar, who escaped arrest during the Azimpur raid in September last year, has vast knowledge in information technology and he used to collect funds from different financiers as per the directives of Marzan. Rajib, 35, from Gaibandha district, was involved in over 30 secret killings and terrorist attacks in northern and south-western regions. He was quite young when he joined the mainstream JMB, which carried out

synchronised bomb attacks across the country in 2005. Rajib had close connections with Tamim, allegedly the mastermind of café siege. He is thought to be one of organisers of the Gulshan and Sholakia attacks. He sent two militants from Bogra to take part in the Gulshan attack and another from Dinajpur for Sholakia. "NO MORE INFO NEEDED" In Friday night's "gunfight" with police in Mohammadpur Beribadh area early Friday, Nurul Islam Marzan, 22, was killed along with his associate Saddam, who led the group's activities in northern region. Saddam was wanted in at least 10 murder cases, including that for the killing of Japanese national Kunio Hoshi in Rangpur and Jogeshwar Das Adhikari in Panchagarh. A day after the incident, Inspector General of Police AKM Shahidul Hoque said most of those responsible for the café attack were either killed or arrested. The police chief said the death of

Marzan and Saddam will not affect the investigation as police already know everything about them and their militant activities. "We don't need any more information. Now we will work to prepare the charge sheet," he said, replying to a query at a programme on Dhaka University campus yesterday. Asked about Major (sacked) Zia, military wing chief of terror outfit Ansar al Islam, IGP Shahidul said police are looking for him. Meanwhile, Dr Soheli Mahmud, head of the forensic department at Dhaka Medical College (DMC), said the bodies of Marzan and Saddam bear marks of multiple bullets. "We have collected viscera and DNA samples for various other tests," he said after conducting the autopsies. In another development, a case was filed with Mohammadpur Police Station regarding the "gunfight". In the case statement, police said two militants were killed in gunfight but another suspect, who was present on the spot, managed to flee.

AL wants EC to fund campaign

FROM PAGE 1
alphabetical order, AL sources told The Daily Star yesterday. The EC will also organise projection meetings at upazila level, inviting candidates, also in alphabetical order, to address voters from the same podium. "Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina is aware of the draft," said an AL leader, asking not to be named. The AL will place its proposals to the incoming Election Commission to be formed next month, and wants the EC to re-fix the campaign expenditure ceiling in the light of its proposals. Currently, a candidate can spend a maximum of Tk 25 lakh. The party will also propose bringing down the campaign period to "not more than 10 days" from 18 to 20 days at present. A 10-member committee of the AL is preparing the draft. The committee is also working on the party's proposal on the formation of the new EC for placing it before President Abdul Hamid during its talks with him on January 11.

"We have some proposals for electoral reform. We will submit them to the new Election Commission," AL Presidium Member Abdur Razzaque, also a member of the committee, told this newspaper yesterday. Many civil society personalities and organisations working for electoral reforms have long been making such recommendations to check the use of money to influence elections. It's an open secret that many candidates spend huge amounts in polls campaign. The use of unaccounted money in elections creates the ground for corruption, as the MPs try to recover the money after taking office, experts say. The issue had also been discussed during the electoral law reform talks organised by the ATM Shamsul Huda-led EC in 2011. "It sounds great. We have earlier proposed bringing similar reforms in the electoral system to put a cap on campaign cost," said M Hafizuddin Khan, president of SHUJON, a civil society platform.

But campaign is not the only source of expenditure, he pointed out, adding that a hefty sum was used to buy votes. "There must be a mechanism to investigate alleged uses of unaccounted money so that no one dares to influence elections by using black money," said Hafizuddin, also former adviser to a caretaker government. In the past, many candidates reportedly used unaccounted money to win, but the EC never investigated the allegations, he said. Appreciating the draft, former Election Commissioner Brig (ret'd) Sakhawat Hussein said they discussed such proposals during his time at the EC. Also, some small political parties placed similar proposals during talks with the commission in 2011. "We gave some proposals on campaign expenditure in the light of those proposals," he said. "The Awami League's proposal is good, but its implementation depends on the capacity of the Election Commission. Besides, if such a law is

made, the commission will have to strengthen monitoring to check over-spending by candidates during campaigns," said Sakhawat. Contacted, Transparency International Bangladesh Executive Director Iftekhazuzaman said, "These are good ideas and deserve serious consideration, though such measures will clearly add to the taxpayers' burden." "In an atmosphere of deficit of trust in the electoral process, adoption of such measures should be preceded by wider public consultation on whether people are ready for it." He also noted that campaign spending is only the tip of the iceberg when compared with the sums that change hands to "buy nominations" as well as to "buy votes". "Ways to control these are more important to ensure level playing field, and hence deserve much greater attention than ever before rather than simply shifting part of the election expenses to the already overburdened common people," he said.

Putin

FROM PAGE 16
the report yesterday, and the reaction of the country's media was low-key. The report, although it omitted classified details, was the US government's starkest public description of what it says was an unprecedented Russian campaign to manipulate the American body politic. Reports of Russian interference in the already divisive election have roiled Washington, even as the US Congress on Friday certified Trump's victory in the Electoral College. Clinton won the popular vote by nearly 3 million ballots. The report's conclusions, though lacking details of how the Russians may have relayed the material to WikiLeaks and others, will give ammunition to Democrats and Trump's fellow Republicans in Congress who want tougher action against Russia, setting the scene for a potential showdown with Trump. It could also give a boost to members of Congress seeking an independent, bipartisan investigation of Russian hacking. Trump, who has developed a rocky relationship with US spy agencies and at times disparaged their work, defended the legitimacy of his election victory after receiving a nearly two-hour briefing Friday on the report. The report neither assessed "the impact Russian activities had on the outcome of the 2016 election" nor did it provide details on the evidence underpinning its conclusions, a fact likely to keep alive the controversy over what Moscow may have done. In Moscow, state TV Channel One briefly covered the report, focusing on Trump's comments that the interference had no impact on the outcome of the election. The broadcaster, which led its news programme on Orthodox Christmas celebrations and unusually low temperatures in the Russian capital, also said the arguments used in the US report had been widely mocked by Internet users. The report said US intelligence agencies believe Russian military intelligence, the GRU, used intermediaries such as WikiLeaks, DCLeaks.com and the Guccifer 2.0 "persona" to release emails that it had acquired from the Democratic National Committee (DNC) and top Democrats as part of the effort. The release of the emails led to embarrassing media coverage for Clinton and triggered the resignation of the DNC's chief. WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange has said he did not receive emails stolen from the DNC and top Clinton aide John Podesta from "a state party." However, Assange did not rule out the possibility that he got the material from a third party. Russian actors were not found to have targeted US systems that are involved in tallying votes, the report said. The report was produced by the Central Intelligence Agency, the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the National Security Agency. Also on Friday, the US Department of Homeland Security designated U.S. election infrastructure as critical infrastructure, widening the options the government has to protect voting machines from cyber attacks. While the report found Russia had conducted cyber attacks on both the Democratic and the Republican parties, it made clear that the primary aims were to harm Clinton whether or not she won the election and evolved over time. "When it appeared to Moscow that Secretary Clinton was likely to win the election, the Russian influence campaign began to focus more on undermining her future presidency," it said. "We also assess Putin and the Russian Government aspired to help President-elect Trump's election chances when possible by discrediting Secretary Clinton and publicly contrasting her unfavorably to him," it said. The CIA and FBI had high confidence in this judgment and NSA moderate confidence, the report said.