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The Daily Star

SECOND EDITION

DHAKA THURSDAY APRIL 6, 2023

REGD. NO. DA 781 | VOL. XXXIII NO. 82 | CHAITRA 23, 1429 BS | www.thedailystar.net | RAMADAN 14, 1444 HIJRI | 20 PAGES PLUS SHOUT: TK 15.00

GOODBYE, GENTLE SOUL

MAHFUZ ANAM

On meeting Rokia Afzal Rahman for the first time, one would most likely be disarmed by her demeanour. But within minutes, one was also likely to be overwhelmed by the breadth of her views, the command over facts and the clarity of her arguments, especially those dealing with business and women's rights issues. An exceptional combination of charm and professional abilities made her a natural leader. She was a most sought-after collaborator for most business ventures. As her reputation spread, she was invited to join the board of many companies, but she chose the ones that gave priority to women and the socially disadvantaged. She was literally everywhere -- leading business groups, advising the youth on how to move forward, and helping struggling women entrepreneurs find their footing. She was the beacon of hope for women in business as a whole.

Then there was the Rokia Rahman who was relentless in empowering women. She knew that the most effective way to

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"Education and skill development should be top priority for the young generation. But I think the most important virtues are empathy and kindness. We should start doing good to people from a very young age.

ROKIA AFZAL RAHMAN (1941-2023)

A trailblazer for women in business

MAHMUDUL HASAN

A pioneering businesswoman, a champion of women's entrepreneurship, a mentor and guide -- Rokia Afzal Rahman's exit from the world has left a trail of bereft loved ones, friends, relatives and admirers.

She passed away at the Mt Elizabeth Novena Hospital in Singapore on Wednesday at the age of 82. She is survived by her two daughters Erum Mariam and Faiza Rahman, and son Imran Faiz Rahman.

It was Rokia's vision and

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Next budget to be 12pc bigger

REJAUL KARIM BYRON *and* MOHIUDDIN ALAMGIR

The government is set to present a 12 percent bigger budget for fiscal 2023-24, the last of the Awami League government's present tenure, as it looks to juggle austerity and growth ambitions.

"The proposed budget size for the upcoming fiscal year is not that big," Planning Minister MA Mannan told The Daily Star yesterday.

Were the economic conditions the same as in pre-pandemic years, the budget size would have been Tk 8-9 lakh crore.

"But we are in a tight situation. So, the budget size has decreased."

Besides, progressively bigger budgets are presented every year only for funds to remain unspent at the end of the fiscal year.

"We want to implement the budget fully," he added.

Of the total budget of Tk 759,955 crore, the highest allocations have been kept for interest payment and subsidy expenditure, The Daily Star has learnt from finance ministry officials involved with the proceedings.

Two separate meetings of the Fiscal Coordination Council and Resource Committee were held yesterday to discuss the upcoming budget. Both meetings were presided over by Finance Minister AHM Mustafa Kamal.

The targets for revenue earning, budget deficit and social spending would be set in line with the International Monetary Fund's prescription.

But the budget size and the others targets will be finalised by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina.

"They [IMF] have some recommendations as they are our friend and a think-tank. We think that what they are saying is for our good. They can ask us to reduce subsidies. But subsidy for some sectors like agriculture is very much needed for food security," Mannan said.

The target for GDP growth is likely to be 7.5 percent, much higher than the forecasts of multilateral lenders.

In the latest edition of the Asian Development Outlook, the Asian Development Bank said GDP growth is projected to slow to 5.3 percent this fiscal year and then edge back up to 6.5 percent in fiscal 2023-24.

Similarly, the World Bank in its latest publication 'South Asia Economic Focus, Expanding Opportunities: Toward Inclusive Growth' said real GDP growth in fiscal 2022-23 will decelerate to 5.2 percent and then bounce back to 6.2 percent next fiscal year.

"The GDP growth target is achievable. We know many learned people are not agreeing with us. But we will not argue with them. There are challenges, but I think we have enough economic strength to face those," Mannan said.

The inflation target for the next fiscal

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FY24 BUDGET IN A NUTSHELL

- Total budget Tk 759,955cr
- ADP Tk 263,000cr
- Revenue target Tk 500,000cr
- NBR target Tk 430,000cr
- GDP growth target 7.5%
- Inflation target 6%

WAR CRIMES IN UKRAINE

Bangladesh abstains from UN voting

16 other countries including India, Pakistan didn't vote

AGENCIES

A total of 17 countries, including Bangladesh, India and Pakistan, abstained from voting on a UN resolution for the extension of the mandate of the investigation into possible war crimes committed since Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

The resolution was adopted as 28 countries supported the extension of the mandate of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine by a year while only two countries -- China and Eritrea -- were against it.

After the voting, Sergiy Kyslytsya, the Ukrainian permanent representative to the UN, tweeted, "We salute delegations @UN_HRC that supported draft Res Situation of human rights in Ukraine stemming from the Russian aggression - Extension of the mandate of Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Ukraine. We note just 2 del's were against. War crimes accountability now!"

In a report published last month, the commission found that crimes committed by Russian forces in Ukraine, including the use of torture and attacks against

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Govt to help Bangabazar businesses recoup losses

Says PM

UNB, *Dhaka*

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has said the government will provide assistance to the Bangabazar businesspeople as much as possible after assessing damages caused by Tuesday's fire.

The PM was addressing a programme at the Gono Bhaban yesterday. The event

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BANGABAZAR FIRE RISK

Everyone knew but no one bothered

HELEMUL ALAM, SAJJAD HOSSAIN *and* DIPAN NANDY

A six-year-old city corporation initiative to build a 10-storey shopping mall at Bangabazar never saw the light of day because of disagreements between the shop owners and the corporation.

Despite the glaring lack of fire safety at the market filled with flammable goods, nothing was done about it.

After deciding to construct the building, Dhaka South City Corporation (DSCC) finalised a design and hired a contractor for the construction work.

But owners of shops at the three-storey building made of wood and corrugated iron sheets opposed the move because the then mayor Sayeed Khokon did not make a rehabilitation offer to them.

According to DSCC officials, the High Court issued a status quo order on the property after the traders filed two writ petitions in 2017.

Tuesday's devastating fire was not the first at Bangabazar Shopping Complex. It was gutted several times before, said Russell Sabrin, chief estate officer at the DSCC.

The city corporation's plan was to accommodate the traders in the new building, he said.

But the traders were not willing to forgo their business during the construction of the building.

Belayet Hossain, vice-president of Bangabazar Unit-Ka Owners Association, said the shop owners always insisted that they would not leave unless they were rehabilitated.

SMOULDERING DEBRIS

Firefighters were still working at the site yesterday to completely put out the fire.

Smoke was still emitting from the piles of clothes at the site. Many roads in the area remained closed to traffic for the second day yesterday.

The fire that originated around 6:10am on Tuesday burned down at least 2,931 shops full of clothes and ruined the livelihood of several thousand traders just weeks before Eid.

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Bangabazar Shopping Complex was still smouldering yesterday after a devastating fire gutted it on Tuesday. Many shop owners said they may slide into poverty after losing their investments. PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON