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DUTY-FREE IMPORTS Probe body formed to look into Sinohydro's rules violations

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The government formed a five-member committee yesterday to probe the alleged illegal sale of construction materials imported duty-free for the Padma Bridge project by Sinohydro Corporation Ltd.

The National Board of Revenue's Customs Intelligence and Investigation Directorate (CIID) made Deputy Director Ayesha Siddiqa the head of the probe body which has been asked to submit its report within 15 working days.

CIID officials said the committee was formed after The Daily Star ran a report on Saturday.

Additional Director General Minhaj Uddin of CIID Chattogram told The Daily Star, "The probe committee has been formed in Chattogram as most of the goods were imported through the Chattogram Port."

Meanwhile, the NBR's department for customs exemptions and project facilities directed all customs houses to report on the current status of consignments imported by Sinohydro, said Neyamul Islam, first secretary of the department.

He said Sinohydro, a Chinese state-owned company, did not take back the

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IN LOVING MEMORY ... Anwara Begum, aged over 80, took a rickshaw with her niece and nephew to visit the Central Shaheed Minar yesterday. When her husband Abdul Aziz Sadek was alive, he would bring her to the Shaheed Minar once every month. Suffering from several old-age complications, Anwara doesn't know how much time she has left and so, she wished to get a glimpse of the structure in her husband's memory while she still could.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

Schools in festive mood as textbook distribution starts

UNB, Dhaka

The distribution of free textbooks among primary and secondary school students began across the country yesterday – the first day of the new year.

A festival was held at 10:00am in this regard on the premises of the National Government Primary School in the capital's Mirpur.

Zakir Hossain, state minister for primary and mass education ministry was present at the event as the chief guest, with Shah Rezwana Hayat, director general of the primary education directorate, in the chair.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina on Sunday launched the distribution of free textbooks for the 2024 academic year.

The distribution of textbooks continued till the afternoon, and all students got their books, the ministry said.

According to the National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB), all textbooks for students up to grade seven were earlier sent to the upazilas. The Upazila Education Office coordinated the book distribution as per the demands of the educational institutions.

Around 20-25 percent of books for students in grades eight and nine are yet to be printed. They will, however, be printed and delivered to students this month, NCTB said.

The ministries concerned have

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One in every four polling centres found risky

Says PHQ garnering nationwide data; half of 2,146 centres in capital risky

MOHAMMAD JAMIL KHAN and FM MIZANUR RAHMAN, Ctg

A quarter of all the polling centres are "risky", according to police.

"There are around 42,149 polling centres across the country and 10,300 are risky," Anwar Hossain, deputy inspector general (operations) of the Police Headquarters, told The Daily Star yesterday.

He said, "We described the centres as risky or important based on some criteria."

Polling centres which are near a candidate's home or in remote or hilly areas have been declared "risky". Besides, polling stations that are in poor condition are also called risky, the officer explained.

Anwar said that a day before the election day, January 7, police personnel and presiding officers will go and stay at the centres in remote or hilly areas.

Elsewhere, they would go in the morning of election day, he said.

The cops will stay until the announcement of the results of a polling centre. They will also take all the election materials to the returning officer's office.

Asked about the security for the "risky" polling centres, Anwar said additional law enforcers will be deployed there.

A home ministry circular, issued on December 21, stated that a maximum of 15 to 16 police personnel, Ansar, and village police members will be deployed at polling stations in metropolitan areas. In hilly and remote areas and in "risky" polling stations, 16 to 17 police personnel will be on duty.

There will be patrol teams, strike force, and mobile teams to ensure security too, said DIG Anwar.

SEE PAGE 6 COL 1

Israel's offensive in Gaza enters new phase

Military to draw down forces inside Gaza, ramp up targeted ops

AGENCIES

Israeli tanks pulled out of some Gaza City districts yesterday while remaining in others, residents said, ahead of a planned troop reduction in the offensive, but fighting raged elsewhere in the Palestinian enclave along with intense bombardment.

Israel says the offensive in Gaza, which has reduced much of the territory to rubble, killing thousands and plunging its 2.3 million people into a humanitarian disaster, has many months to go.

But Israel has signalled a coming shift in tactics, with an official saying yesterday that the military would draw down forces inside Gaza this month and shift to a months-long phase of more localised "mopping up" operations.

The official said the troop reduction would allow some reservists to return to civilian life, shoring up Israel's economy, and free up units in case of a wider conflict in the north with Lebanon's Iran-backed Hezbollah.

Artillery fire between Hezbollah and Israel has rattled the border since the start of the Gaza offensive and any new escalation carries risks for a wider regional war. Iran-backed fighters

in Yemen have meanwhile attacked Red Sea shipping.

Residents of Sheikh Radwan district in Gaza City, in the northern part of the enclave that Israel's offensive focused on first, said tanks had withdrawn after what they described as the most intense 10 days of warfare since the offensive began.




Tanks also pulled out of Gaza City's al-Mina district and parts of Tel al-Hawa district, while retaining some positions in the suburb controlling the enclave's main coastal road, residents said.

However, tanks remained in other parts of northern Gaza and health officials said some people trying to return to their homes in a southern district of Gaza City had been killed by Israeli fire on Sunday, reports Reuters.

Fighting in central parts of the enclave continued unabated yesterday, residents there said, with tanks pushing into al-Bureij and air strikes targeting al-Nusseirat, al-Maghazi and the southern city of Khan Younis.

Heavy artillery fire in central Gaza killed at least 24 people, health ministry officials there said, with attacks reported across the length of the territory.

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-  156 Palestinians killed in Israeli strikes in 24 hours
-  Israel pulls tanks from some districts in enclave
-  Signals partial redeployment to Lebanese border

Anti-election activities may stir up crisis

Warns CEC

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Chief Election Commissioner Kazi Habibur Awal yesterday said there will be a crisis if anti-polls activities descend into violence and voters are barred from going to polling centres.

"Universal franchise was desirable in the election, but a section of the country's political leadership has boycotted the election and is speaking against the polls. There is no problem with that. They can create public opinion peacefully, but if they oppose or prevent voters from voting in a violent way, then there will definitely be a crisis."

"But that crisis has to be dealt with. Because the election has to be held at the scheduled time and in the prescribed manner. Everyone will have to perform their duties even if there is resistance."

The CEC made the remarks while inaugurating a training programme for judicial magistrates, organised by the EC in the capital.

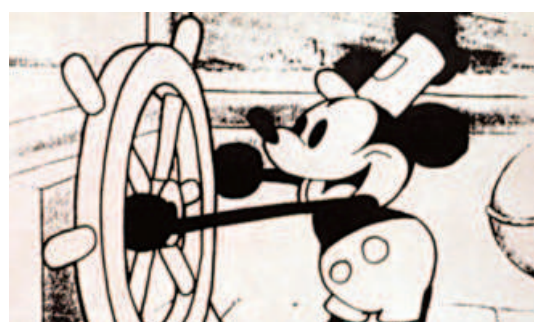
Sixteen political parties, including the major opposition BNP and its allies, are boycotting the polls after failing to realise their demand for holding polls under a non-party caretaker government. They have said that a free and fair election is not possible under the current government.

The BNP has been holding hartals, blockades, and mass contact programmes to have their demands met.



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Early Mickey Mouse now in public domain



CNN ONLINE

Mickey Mouse no longer belongs solely to the Walt Disney Company.

On January 1, 2024, an early version of the entertainment company's mascot, featured in Walt Disney's 1928 short film, "Steamboat Willie," entered the public domain for the first time.

The good-humoured rodent, which has been synonymous with the Disney brand for nearly a century, has grown into one of the most iconic characters in American pop culture. But since US copyright law, last updated by Congress in 1998, allows copyright to be held for 95 years, Disney's sole claim to the character has officially ended.

While we might start seeing more of Mickey, there are caveats.



People stand next to large cracks on a road in the city of Wajima after a major 7.5 magnitude earthquake struck the Noto region in Ishikawa prefecture in Japan yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

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7.6-magnitude earthquake hits Japan

2 feared dead; major tsunami advisory downgraded

REUTERS, Tokyo

A powerful earthquake struck central Japan yesterday, destroying scores of buildings, knocking out power to tens of thousands of homes and prompting residents to evacuate some coastal areas.

The quake with a preliminary magnitude of 7.6 triggered waves of about 1 metre along Japan's west coast and neighbouring South Korea, with authorities saying larger waves could follow.

The Japan Meteorological Agency (JMA) issued tsunami warnings for the prefectures of Ishikawa, Niigata and Toyama. A major tsunami warning – the first since the March 2011 earthquake and tsunami that struck northeastern Japan – was initially issued for Ishikawa