

# Hajj pilgrimage to peak Jan 9

AGENCIES, Riyadh

Saudi Arabia said the climax of this year's hajj pilgrimage, in which more than 2 million Muslims will retrace the footsteps of Prophet Hazrat Mohammad (SM), would be on January 9.

The most important day of the pilgrimage will see believers climb Mount Arafat, the site of Hazrat Mohammad's (SM) last sermon 14 centuries ago.

The Eid al-Azha holiday will start on Jan. 10, one of the country's religious bodies said in a statement on the Saudi Press Agency yesterday.

The pilgrimage takes place in the 12th month of the Islamic year, which began on Sunday. Islamic years are lunar and thus dates depend on sightings of the moon.

Every able-bodied adult Muslim who can afford the trip must perform hajj, one of the five pillars of Islam, once in his or her lifetime.

Meanwhile, more than 1.1 million Muslims from around the world have arrived in Saudi Arabia for the annual pilgrimage.

The hajj pilgrimage, which has drawn two million Muslims in recent years, officially begins this year on January 8.

It kicks off in the early hours when pilgrims who have assembled at Islam's holiest city of

Makkah in the western part of the oil-rich kingdom will set off on foot or by bus to Mina, an arid valley about 10 kilometers away.

Then the devout will spend the day in prayer and contemplation in the valley, where a massive number of fireproof tents are erected for shelter.

The next day at dawn, pilgrims will make their way toward Mount Arafat, where they assemble on the hilltop to pray and ask for the Almighty's forgiveness.

The act of reaching to summit symbolises the Final Judgement at the scene of the Prophet Mohammad's (SM) last sermon 14 centuries ago and marks the climax of the pilgrimage.

The faithful then return to Makkah for the first day of Eid al-Azha, which will be celebrated on January 10.

Most will sacrifice an animal, generally a sheep, in remembrance of Prophet Ibrahim (AS) readiness to sacrifice his son to Allah.

Then the pilgrims will return to Mina to stone the "Jamarat," or three pillars symbolising the devil - the final ritual.

All Muslims who have the means are required to complete the rites of the hajj, or pilgrimage, at least once in life.

## Ahmadinejad has an empty bank account and an old car

AFP, Tehran

Iran's hardline President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has an empty bank account and a 30-year-old car, according to a list of his worldly possessions published in the local press yesterday.

The list of his assets includes a 40-year-old 175-square-meter house in a lower-middle class district in eastern Tehran, a white 1977 Peugeot 504 and two checking accounts.

One account was used to receive pay checks from his old job as a university professor and the other is empty, dating back to the time when he was governor-general in the western province of Ardebil.

Ahmadinejad, 48, who won an election in June pledging to be a "people's president" and friend of the poor, had to provide the list to the head of the judiciary in accordance with the country's constitution.

The basic law stipulates that the head of the judiciary must examine the assets of top officials including the supreme leader, cabinet ministers and their immediate families to ensure that no one has become richer through illegal means while in office.

Information about the assets of the other officials has not yet been made public.

Ahmadinejad, a political unknown since he became Tehran mayor in 2003, is a religious conservative who has never lost an opportunity to emphasize his humble lifestyle.



Enumerators enlist voters at a Sabujbagh house in the capital as the Election Commission started preparing a fresh voter list yesterday.

## Caretaker govt

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Another former adviser to the caretaker government, Maj Gen (ret) Moinul Hossain Chowdhury said the interim government's only task is to hold elections. "How can the caretaker government do it (reforms) in such a short time," Moin told The Daily Star.

Asked about the government position against electoral reforms, Moin observed, "The present government is passing the buck on the caretaker government, which is not acceptable. The government should not do it."

Both the former advisers observed that reform in the electoral rules is essential to make future elections free from black money and muscle power and to strengthen the EC. They said electoral reforms should be done by an elected government.

"The elected government should bring such reforms and the Election Commission can take initiatives in consultation with the political parties," Moin suggested.

Hafizuddin said the Election Commission should initiate the move for reforms much before the election.

On the other hand, Law Minister Moudud Ahmed on Saturday made it clear again that the government has no plan to bring reforms in the electoral system.

"If the next caretaker government thinks that the electoral system needs changes, it may bring reforms through ordinance," the law minister said speaking at a publication ceremony of a book in the capital.

Echoing the former advisers, former chief election commissioner (CEC) Abu Hena said the issue of electoral reforms should be considered seriously and the political government should bring the reforms.

"The process of bringing reforms in electoral rules should start immediately as time is running out. The matter should not be left for the caretaker government," he said.

The former CEC said: "If the government does not take any step, then the Election Commission should take the initiatives."

Another former CEC MA Syed, who initiated a set of reforms in the electoral rules before the last general election and some of them were introduced during the tenure of

2001 caretaker government, said reform is a continuous process.

"Reforms in the electoral rules should be brought much before of the election to make the amendment well known among the people, political parties and the contenders in the polls," he told The Daily Star.

ANOTHER FEB 15 POLLS?

Awami League-led 14-party alliance, which has been agitating for electoral reforms, has already declared that they will boycott the election if it is held without reforms in the caretaker government system and the electoral rules.

The opposition leaders said they will realise their demand for reforms through street agitation. But the ruling party high-ups said they will face the opposition in the streets and the election will be held on time.

Amid such a situation, uncertainty looms large over the fate of the next election and it is also being discussed that another February 15 election is likely to be held.

"It is difficult for a neutral caretaker government to conduct any parliamentary election keeping some major political parties out of the race," Hafizuddin said.

The BNP government conducted the February 15, 1996 election boycotted by all major opposition parties and the parliament formed through the polls lasted only 11 days.

But this time a non-party caretaker government will be in charge and question has been raised whether the interim government will take the risk of holding national election keeping the major opposition parties out of the race.

Another former adviser to the caretaker government said the caretaker government will not dare to hold any controversial election.

"The only task of the interim government is to hold a free and fair election. Neutrality of the caretaker government will be seriously questioned if the election is held amid boycott by major parties," said the former adviser wishing anonymity.

Besides the routine work of administration, the caretaker government will have to create a level playing field for holding fair election and a suitable atmosphere by controlling law and order and reshuffling the administration.

CEC MA AZIZ

CEC MA Aziz has repeatedly been

saying since last May that he will send a set of proposals to the government to bring reforms in the electoral rules including setting up of an independent secretariat for the EC.

But the CEC has not yet sent the proposals to the government. He neither discussed the issue in the EC meeting nor shared his ideas with the two election commissioners.

Before the last parliamentary election in 2001, the EC initiated reforms in the electoral rules and held a series of dialogue with the political parties over the reforms. But then the Awami League government did not bring reform in the electoral rules.

In a hurried move the last caretaker government amended some provisions of the electoral rules through promulgating two ordinances.

## Ershad

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want a fair and peaceful election, which will, in fact, remain a far cry and under this situation, the JP has to come to power to fulfil the hopes and aspirations of the people."

"I was compelled to take over power in 1982. I did not want to take the responsibility," the former military ruler said.

If the political parties had joined the parliamentary election declared in 1984, the history would have been written in a different way, he noted.

People of the country did not get anything over the past 15 years, apart from terrorism, deprivation and humiliation, he said.

## JMB man

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also told police of his taking up the responsibility for monitoring JMB affairs and activities in Khulna, Bagerhat and Gopalganj from 2005.

He was assigned to conduct the August 17 serial bomb blasts in the region on instructions of JMB kingpin Abdul Rahman and under the supervision of the Hafez Mahmud, JMB operations commander of south-western region.

Police sources claimed Shabbir admitted he along with other Eshars stayed at a schoolteacher's house in Khulna to make plans and to select spots for the August 17 bombings.

The JMB leader told police he married an 18-year-old 20 days before his arrest. "Rab (Rapid Action Battalion) arrested me just when I was trying to quit JMB, I rented a house at Tootpara and I was trying to establish a business there," police sources quoting Shabbir said.

## Robber killed

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Health Complex. A revolver, three rounds of bullets, six cartridges and three machetes were recovered from the spot.

Two SIs and four constables were also injured during the shootout.

According to police, Moti was on the run for a long time. He was accused in 10 cases including two for murder.

## India, Pakistan

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After coming close to another war in 2002, in January 2004 they began talks to resolve all their disputes including the Kashmir issue.

They are scheduled to begin the next round of official-level peace talks from January 17-18 in New Delhi.

The peace process has so far produced a number of largely symbolic steps, including cross-border bus services and the resumption of sporting ties, but progress has been sluggish on central issues.

Last year in October the two countries formalised an agreement on pre-notification of ballistic missile tests. They have also set up a telephone hotline to prevent accidental nuclear conflict.

## JP, CPB men lock

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rickshaw around Paltan Crossing and Bijoy Nagar during the sporadic bursts of violence between 4:30pm and 6:30pm, CPB sources alleged.

The violence was triggered when a JP procession celebrating the party's 20th anniversary tried to march towards the Baitul Mukarram and came face-to-face with a CPB rally in front of the CPB office. An argument ensued between the two groups.

Witnesses claimed that the JP activists started to hurl chairs and strike the CPB activists with sticks. The latter also hurled chairs and brickbats at the JP activists.

However, the CPB with its 200 activists was largely outnumbered by some 7,000 activists strong JP procession. The injured CPB activists were confined within their office as the JP activists caused havoc and set fire to several book-shops on the footpath in front of the CPB office.

When CPB President Manzurul Ahsan Khan approached the JP leaders to clear up the misunderstanding, its workers pounced on him with sticks.

Manzur said, "The JP activists blocked the way for the ambulances

to come to our office. The ambulances finally reached us under police escort."

JP leader Meher Negar told The Daily Star that the CPB activists dragged a number of female JP activists, including herself, into their office and tortured them for half an hour.

CPB Dhaka committee member Sajedul Haq Rubel, who was also injured during the violence, said, "We were attacked by the JP activists because our rally was marking the World Anti-Imperialism Day and they were offended because they might have identified themselves with the imperialist cause."

Five CPB activists and three JP activists were later taken to DMCH for treatment.

Both the parties claimed that at least 50 activists each were injured in the incident.

The police and Rapid Action Battalion (Rab) were present during the violence and sporadically charged baton on the rioters. The two parties in separate statements, however, condemned the police inaction.

The CPB announced country-wide protest today and tomorrow.

## Enumeration starts

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apprehension is widespread about the fairness of the list to be prepared.

A number of competent candidates have reportedly been declared disqualified for the job because of allegiance to the opposition parties. The EC have all along stayed mum about the allegations.

The High Court is scheduled to hear the two writ petitions challenging the legality of the preparation of a fresh roll today. The petitions were filed on December 11 by AL lawmakers Rahmat Ali and Asaduzzaman Noor and AL General Secretary Abdul Jalil.

Meanwhile, enumerators yesterday broke with the long tradition of including the names of the president, prime minister and the leader of the opposition in the list on the opening day. Officials at the EC secretariat declined to say anything.

A total of 2,16,722 will continue going from door to door to collect information on the would-be voters till January 7.

Although the two of the three election commissioners had opposed the recruitment in writing, the EC secretariat on orders of the CEC went on to appoint 83 registration officers, 6,270 assistant registrars and 2,16,722 enumerators.

According to the timetable declared for the listing task, the supervisor will start check the collected information between January 8 and January 21 while assistant registration officers will begin re-checking those from January 22.

A draft list will be published on February 28 while complaints about that will have to be submitted by March 16. The revising authorities will resolve the complaints by April 1.

On completion of these phases, the final voter list will be published on June 1.

RECRUITMENT CONTROVERSY

Our correspondents from across the country report: Former Ameer of district Jamaat Abdul Khaleque has been appointed to supervise the voter roll process in Kurigram.

In Santhya of Pabna, Abul Hossain, a cousin of Jamaat Ameer and Industries Minister Motiur Rahman Nizami, has been assigned with supervision though he had retired from teaching 10 years ago.

But Hafizur Rahman, headmaster of Nandanpur High School of the same upazila, has been deprived of the job because of his involvement with the local chapter of Bangladeshu Parishad.

In Chittagong, around 300 madrasah teachers, mostly supporters of ruling coalition partner Jamaat, have been given the task to collect primary data about eligible voters.

Jamaat Ameer of Dhanat upazila in Bogra Rezaul Karim Bachchu and Jamaat Rakan in Sariakandi upazila Motiur Rahman have been appointed supervisor.

In the district, Gopalganj union BNP President Joyal Abedin and Dhanat BNP's local ward unit President Anwar Hossain, Sadar union BNP President Sanwar Hossain too have been recruited to collect information.

In Khulna, headmasters of two schools Probr Kumar Mondol and Biswas Sumon Chandra have been disqualified for the job of supervising enumeration on suspicion that they might be supporters of opposition AL. Similarly, eight people recruited as supervisors of the enumeration task in Durgapur of Rajshahi have been axed.

JUBO LEAGUE ACTIVISTS CLASH WITH POLICE

At least 25 people were injured in the capital in clashes between the riot police and Jubo League activists over laying siege to the Election Commission yesterday.

The clash began when the activists of Awami Jubo League, youth front of the main opposition Awami League, broke a police barricade put up at Shukrabad on their way to the EC secretariat to protest against the Chief Election Commissioner's (CEC) unilateral decision to prepare a fresh voter list.

Police charged batons on the demonstrators and fired tear gas shells when the latter retaliated by pelting stones at the law enforcers.

Chases and counter chases between the police and Jubo League activists for more than 20 minutes from 12:00 noon created panic among the people along the Mirpur Road.

Ten of the injured were admitted to different clinics in the city, Jubo League leaders said.

Among the injured are central

Jubo League leader Omar Faruk, the organisation's Dhaka City (South) unit General Secretary Mainul Islam Nikhil, photojournalists Firoz Ahmed of news agency BDNEWS, Mizanur Rahman Khan of the daily Independent, and Iqbal, a personal photographer to the Leader of the Opposition Sheikh Hasina.

Prior to the march to the EC secretariat, several hundred Jubo League activists joined a rally on Russell Square from 11:00am that AL General Secretary Abdul Jalil MP, Senior Secretary Obaidul Quader, joint Jubo League leaders including Jahangir Kabir Nanak and Mirza Azam MP addressed.

Protesting yesterday's police action against the Jubo League, AL's student wing Chhatra League, Jubo League, Swachhasebak League and Mahila League will bring out protest processions and hold rally on the party's central office premises today.

AL REJECTS FRESH VOTERS' ROLL

Addressing a rally in front of the party's central office, the AL leaders once again rejected the move for fresh voter list and said there will be no election in the country on the basis of this list.

"BNP-Jamaat ruling coalition has conspired to deprive people of their voting rights in the name of fresh voter list," AL General Secretary Abdul Jalil said.

He blasted the EC's starting the work with two writ petitions against the process pending in the High Court.

Pointing to the CEC, the AL general secretary said, "You are making a fresh voter list favouring the government, but no election will take place based on this voter list."

"The CEC took the decision unilaterally ignoring two other members of the commission and this is absolutely illegal," he said, adding, "We already rejected your appointment, and will reject everything you do."

He suggested updating the voter list rather than making a new voter list.

AL Joint Secretary Obaidul Qader said government is making a new voter list using BNP's "official and non-official cadres" to hold another election like that on February 15, 1996.

Dhaka City Awami League Joint Secretary Qamrul Islam urged party workers to resist those who may come to make fresh voter list.

Later a party procession paraded different city streets.

## Textbooks

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by the prime minister tomorrow.

Book publishers and sellers of Bangla Bazar in the capital have also given assurance to supply the secondary school books by January. They said most of the major publishing work has already been completed.

Bangladesh Book Publishers and Sellers Association Vice-president Tajul Islam said they have a stock of last year's books, which will meet 25 percent of this year's demand.

The government had given the work order to the last year's bid winners to publish this year's books, he said. "Otherwise, we won't be able to supply the secondary school books before March," he added.

Leaders of the association had feared the same to happen when the government postponed the controversial uni-track education system on December 5.

They urged the government to compensate the publishers, who invested for publishing new books for uni-track system.

Meanwhile, professional bookbinders in Bangla Bazar have recently decided not to bind textbooks of above 10 formats through piercing method.

Bangladesh Books Binding Traders Association member Secretary Monir Hossain Khan said, "10 formats become sub-standard."

"The book publishers are practising this employing unprofessional binders for extra profit," he alleged.

He said a large number of professional bookbinders become jobless every year because of induction of unprofessional workers.

The bookbinders staged demonstration on Saturday when State Minister for Education ANM Ehsanul Haque Milon visited Bangla Bazar to see the progress of textbook publishing work.

## Chandpur plant

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plant if the committee approves it.

But, sources said the Harbin offer looks cheaper by \$11 million from that of its nearest competitor, another Chinese company CMEC, because it has not quoted the full price of spare parts for the plant. They reckon Harbin will impose an additional price of \$7 to 8 million on the PDB once the project is cleared.

"Besides, Harbin's first power plant in Bangladesh, the 80 MW Tongji plant, is a fine demonstration of the company's technical handicaps. Since its launch in May to this day, the plant has kept on tripping time and again due to technical glitches," an official pointed out.

In mid-October, a three-member PPR review panel of the Central Procurement Technical Unit (CPTU) of Implementation, Monitoring and Evaluation Division (IMED) declared Harbin's \$41 million offer for the plant informal and void, as it lacked any technical offer.

As per Regulation 59 of the PPR, the decision of such a review panel is final. Nonetheless, the ministry and the project implementation authorities, the PDB, ignored the panel's judgement and went ahead with the project.

But, as there has been much pressure from the World Bank for upholding the decision of the review panel, they resorted to gathering legal opinions in favour of the Harbin bid and the tender process of the PDB.

The PDB obtained a lawyer's opinion that the PPR review panel cannot take the final decision on the tender. The power ministry also got hold of a similar opinion from the law ministry.

The power ministry also sought a favourable opinion from the IMED, but the latter upheld the review findings.

## MISLEADING PROJECT SUMMARY

The project summary to be placed before the cabinet committee today itself reveals many self-contradictions by the ministry and the PDB.

It says the PDB floated a two-stage international tender for the Chandpur plant on July 26, 2004, in which five companies were found technically qualified. In the follow-up process, two of the bidders were dropped.

Between April and May 2005, the PDB's Technical Evaluation Committee (TEC) on the tender discussed with the bidders and the PDB then decided that the second stage of the bidding will need a complete set of technical and price proposals. Accordingly, the three short-listed bidders -- Bhel of India, Harbin and the CMEC -- were asked to submit both technical and financial offers by June 28.

However, the ministry's brief to the cabinet body has conveniently forgot here to mention that Harbin's bid did not include any technical offer. Instead, it reported that the TEC on July 7 decided to ask Harbin to "submit detail of specification including scope of supply, service and work and acceptance of arithmetic correction as per tender document"

The PDB on July 9, after the bidding had been closed, sought a 'clarification' from Harbin, which practically was seeking the whole technical offer. By August, the TEC marked Harbin's offer as the lowest one.

Meanwhile, the CMEC lodged complaints with the PDB, the ministry, the Prime Minister's Office, and finally, as per the provi-

sions of the PPR, with the IMED.

The government review panel found the actions of the PDB as violations of tender rules and regulations. It said the PDB's tender evaluation reports were based on wrong interpretations of rules, deliberately biased and therefore unacceptable.

The power ministry also contradicts itself when it says in the project summary, "in a two stage tendering process... there is no need to ask for a technical proposal at the second level and the Review Panel could not properly understand this point."

"Practically, the PDB asked for a technical proposal as an additional precaution. This is not legally mandatory," it said. Yet, in the earlier part of the summary, the ministry said 11 days after the end of bid submission, the PDB felt the urgency to have the technical offer from Harbin.

The ministry made a wrong interpretation of the Regulation 39 of the PPR by saying it gives no scope for asking for a revised technical proposal and so the PDB asked the Harbin only to submit the "priced best and final" tender. The review panel marked this act as a modification of tender "after" bid-closure, a serious violation of the PPR.

The business lobby for the Harbin bid has been trying very hard to have the flawed offer approved by the cabinet's purchase committee. It also lobbied the Chinese government to silence the CMEC in Bangladesh.

## Safta

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"Implementation of Safta will further strengthen our trade relations with the Saarc countries," Commerce Minister Kamal Nath said.

The Safta agreement was to come into force from January 1, 2006, but due to the ratification process delays and other issues now the individual member countries will be announcing their enforcement dates during January to June 2006, reports Pakistan-based newspaper the Daily Times.

Pakistan will enforce Safta agreement from July 1, 2006, a commerce ministry official told the daily on Saturday.

The process of ratification of the agreement from the federal cabinets, report to the Saarc secretariat and notification by the secretariat would be completed before June 30, 2006.

Pakistan and Sri Lanka are in the process of ratification of the agreement, the official said, adding that Pakistan and India are still negotiating on some issues relating to tariff and non-tariff barriers that were being faced by Pakistani exporters in India and these negotiations would be finalised before June 30, 2006.

As per the agreement, Saarc member countries India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka will bring down their customs duties to 0-5 per cent by 2013 while the least developed members Bangladesh, Maldives, Nepal and Bhutan will do it by 2018.