

2 commissioners

FROM PAGE 1 assurance that two more commissioners would be appointed in no time, the EC Secretariat on Sunday afternoon sought directives from the commission on the voter roll in light of the High Court's January 4 directives.

After the appointments, officials at the EC secretariat said the CEC, who has been avoiding convening a meeting, is likely to call it in a couple of days as he now has two members on his side.

Law Justice and Parliamentary Affairs Minister Moudud Ahmed yesterday termed the prevailing situation in the EC a deadlock.

"The appointments were made to break the deadlock," Moudud told the BBC radio last night.

Noted jurist Dr Kamal Hossain said controversial persons have been appointed through a controversial process.

"One of the appointees is highly controversial," he said, hinting at SM Zakaria. Complainers are rife about his activities, Kamal added.

Giving reference to the BBC Bangla Service yesterday evening, the Gono Forum president also said the appointments seem to have been made, ignoring the High Court's January 4 ruling. "I may even be a strategy to do what the High Court's order," he observed.

After taking oath as the election commissioners, Justice Mahfuzur and Zakaria went to the CEC's residence and talked to him for about 40 minutes. CEC Aziz has been absenting from his office for less than a year.

After meeting with the CEC, Zakaria went to the EC in the evening while Mahfuzur returned home.

About the talks with the CEC, newly appointed election commissioner SM Zakaria told journalists that they went there to enquire about the condition of the CEC. "He [CEC] will join the office in a couple of days. He is not taking rest on doctor's advice," he added.

In an oblique reference to the recent statements by Munsif Ali and Mohammad Ali opposing the preparation of a fresh voter list, Zakaria said some unfortunate developments have taken place of late. "These are not fair. Taking any whimsical move centring this institution [EC] is unjust," Zakaria said.

He however said whatever have been said are their personal opinions. On the much-averted EC meeting to decide on the voter list in line with the High Court's directives, Zakaria declined to comment.

Justice Mahfuzur said he did not know anything about the appointment before it was made. "SM Zakaria gave me the news at 12 noon," he told journalists at his residence.

Zakaria who joined as the secretary on April 1, 2002 was given a one-year extension, which was supposed to expire on February 6 this year. The government cancelled the extension on Sunday and appointed him yesterday as the election commissioner.

Despite the cancellation, SM Zakaria yesterday worked as the secretary of the EC secretariat till 2:30pm and examined a number of officials files, sources said.

On taking the oath Zakaria sat at the office of the EC secretariat and talked to journalists.

Joint Secretary to the EC Secretariat Mohammad Zakaria was given the charge of acting secretary.

Reacting to the new appointments, Election Commissioner Mohammad Ali told reporters that they have nothing to comment if the president has given the appointments.

Referring to the vacant post following the retirement of Safur Rahman on June 24 last year, Election Commissioner Munsif Ali said the appointments were made as required.

Sources said tenure of the incumbent election commissioners Mohammad Ali and Munsif Ali will expire on April 19.

Thousands stuck

FROM PAGE 16 International Airport (ZIA) said departures and arrivals of several international and domestic flights were delayed by at least two to three hours due to dense fog.

Launch operators said all launches plying the southern routes were delayed in reaching Dhaka by at least six hours.

Dhaka bound traffic coming through Maowa ferry terminal was stretched for miles yesterday stranding some passengers on the road overnight. A traffic jam of private cars and buses stretched at least five kilometres into areas where there was no shop or place to rest.

Angry passengers set upon the bus drivers to take them to restaurants as children and the elderly became hungry and were getting sick from cold. A number of elderly passengers were reported to be severely ill as temperatures dropped inside the un-heated buses. A number of flights broke out throughout Sunday night and yesterday morning.

Fish trader killed in city

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Unknown assailants shot dead a fish trader in the city's Pallabi area yesterday.

The victim, Nesar Ahmed, 36, came under attack when he was talking to a fellow businessman in front of Dhaka City Corporation kitchen market at Mirpur Section-11 around 7.30pm. A gang of three goons appeared at the scene and shot him three times from a close distance.

Nesar was rushed to the Dhaka Medical College and Hospital where duty doctors declared him dead.

Pallabi police could not arrest anyone in this connection.

Pluto mission protested

AP, Cape Canaveral

More than eight years ago, hundreds of protesters chanted anti-nuclear slogans before NASA launched a spacecraft to Saturn carrying 72 pounds of plutonium fuel. The noise before this week's launch of a craft with a similar payload has been more muted.

Only 30 anti-nuclear protesters showed up recently to oppose a plutonium-fueled mission to Pluto. The most raucous it got was when protesters tied colorful origami birds to the fence of the Cape Canaveral Air Force Station.

"Folks tend to forget," said protest organizer Maria Telesca of the Global Network Against Weapons & Nuclear Power in Space.

But Telesca and other protesters said the threat of a nuclear accident is no less real with the New Horizons mission to Pluto than it was with the launch of Cassini to Saturn in 1997.

14-party

FROM PAGE 1 Samajtantrik Dal (JSD) and the National Awami Party attended yesterday's meeting.

The meeting cancelled the coalition's planned march towards the Election Commission Secretariat on January 19 and decided to stage demonstrations across the country instead on the same day. In Dhaka, the coalition will hold a rally on the central Shaheed Minar premises, Jalli said.

The meeting also discussed preparations for a rally at Paltan Maidan in the capital on January 23 and a 'long march' towards Dhaka on February 5 demanding an end to BNP-Jamaat's regime.

The meeting decided to shift a scheduled divisional grand rally to be held in Sylhet to February 1 from January 31.

Briefing journalists, Jalli said appointments of the two election commissioners are part of the ruling alliance's conspiracy to manipulate the next poll.

Meanwhile, AL's youth front Jubo League will demonstrate across the country today to protest the appointments and hold a rally at Muktangan in the capital at 3:00pm.

"This is unconstitutional and done with an ill political motive...we don't accept it. We reject the appointments," Jalli said.

"The government made SM Zakaria an election commissioner, who is an expert in poll rigging," he added.

Earlier on May 23 when Justice MA Aziz was appointed as the CEC, the opposition coalition rejected him by branding him as loyal to the BNP-Jamaat-led ruling alliance.

The AL has been demanding appointments of election commissioners, including the CEC, based on consensus among all political parties.

Jalli said the appointments would hinder flourishing of democracy in the country. "The government ventured into such an ill move when people of the whole country are engaged in a movement and united around the demand for reforms in the Election Commission for a free and fair election. This step is a bid to foil people's demand," he said.

BSF kills 2

FROM PAGE 1 cane from the forest adjacent to the border demarcation pillar near Kailashar in Indian state of Tripura on Sunday noon, said relatives and BDR sources.

At about 5:00pm that day sounds of shooting were heard.

Later when the Bangladesh bamboo and cane collectors except the two returned, the family members of Koysoy and Haris contacted with their relatives living at Indian town Kailashar and came to know that bodies of the two youths were kept at Kailashar Hospital.

Commander of BDR 31 Battalion at Srimangal Lt Col Shahid Musaddiq Ahmed confirmed the killing of two Bangladeshi youths by the BSF, and said they are discussing with BSF to get back the bodies.

PBCP leader

FROM PAGE 1 Dadpur village in Chougachha upazila with his two accomplices on Sunday noon. After interrogation, Jessore police handed him over to Chuadanga police the same day.

Following his confessional statement, a team of Jibonnagar police set out for Purondrapur village with him to retrieve illegal firearms. But the outlawed cadres ambushed the police team when it reached Hasdad village at about 4:40am. Police fired back triggering a gunfight between police and criminals.

Sonu tried to escape during the shootout and died when he was caught in 'crossfire' while the outlaws fled, police sources said.

EC Secretariat seeks

FROM PAGE 1 immediately, sources said.

As of yesterday, the CEC has neither convened an immediate meeting of the EC nor communicated with the two other election commissioners although 12 days have passed since the HC in its ruling asked the commission to revise the existing roll and put particular stress on holding immediately a meeting of the commission.

The EC Secretariat sought the directives in a dramatic move, forwarding files to the commissioners on Sunday afternoon, said sources.

It sent the file to CEC MA Aziz's residence at 8:00pm while similar files were forwarded to Munsif Ali and Mohammad Ali after 4:00pm when the two had already left their offices.

After receiving the files yesterday morning, the commissioners said they will give the opinion that an urgent meeting should be convened to decide on the voter list in line with the HC directives.

"We will continue our efforts for a meeting to decide on how to implement the High Court's directives. But it is not clear when the chief election commissioner will call the meeting," Mohammad Ali told journalists at his office yesterday.

Echoing the view, Munsif Ali said the decision must be taken at a meeting of the commission.

CEC MA Aziz has already put a note in the file, asking the secretariat to return it after perusal of the other members of the commission. But he did not give the secretariat any instruction to arrange any meeting.

MA Aziz has remained absent from work since January 9. His personal secretary Mostafa Faruk said he does not know when the CEC will join the office. "His joining depends on doctor's advice," Faruk told journalists.

The two election commissioners yesterday afternoon sat and discussed how to respond to the file forwarded to them by the secretariat.

DRAMA OVER FORWARDING FILE On his last workday as the secretary to the EC Secretariat, SM Zakaria on Sunday initiated the move to send files to the commissioners. The EC Secretariat dispatched the files containing the certified copy of the HC directives on voter list Sunday afternoon.

Personal secretary (PS) to the EC secretary Sirajul Islam took the file to the office of Election Commissioner Mohammad Ali at 4:40. But the election commissioner left the office at about 4:15 after waiting for the CEC's response to their call for an immediate meeting.

Islam asked the personal officer (PO) to Mohammad Ali to put a note in the file saying that the election commissioner is not at his office. Following the office, the PO wrote in the file: "Sahib [sir] has gone out."

But he did not inform the election commissioner of the file right away. Mohammad Ali learnt about it on coming to office yesterday morning.

Similar file was sent to the office of Munsif Ali at about 5:00pm, whereas the election commissioner left office at about 4:15. Similar note was taken from the staff of the office.

Foreign secy to visit Russia

FROM PAGE 1 Jan 18-22

DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENT

Foreign Secretary Hemayetuddin will pay an official visit to Moscow for annual bilateral consultations between Bangladesh and the Russian Federation on January 18-22.

The annual bilateral consultations are held in the capital of the two countries alternately under a protocol signed between the two countries in 1992. The last consultation meeting was held in Dhaka on February 9-10, 2003, foreign ministry sources said.

During the visit, Hemayetuddin will discuss the entire gamut of bilateral relations between Bangladesh and the Russian Federation with his Russian counterpart Alexeev Alexander Yurievich, deputy foreign minister.

The agenda of the discussion include review of the bilateral political relations, promotion of trade particularly seeking duty free access and GSP facilities for Bangladeshi exports to the Russian market, inviting Russian investment in Bangladesh in sectors like power generation, infrastructure development, gas exploration etc.

The two foreign secretaries are also expected to exchange views on regional and international issues that may include cooperation between Saarc and Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), Asean Regional Forum (ARF), UN and UN Reforms, combating international terrorism etc.

Official sources said the existing close friendly relations between Bangladesh and Russian Federation is based on strong foundations and historical links since Russia played a crucial role in support of Bangladesh's Liberation War in 1971.

Apart from the bilateral consultations, the foreign secretary is also expected to meet with Russian Federation Foreign Minister Lavrov Sergey Victorovich and other dignitaries.

The foreign secretary will be carrying a letter from Prime Minister Khaleda Zia to the President of the Russian Federation.

The foreign secretary level consultation may also identify new areas of cooperation and lay the ground for higher level meetings.

Ministry in dark

FROM PAGE 16

formation of the new upazila, sources in the LGRD ministry said.

After learning the matter from newspapers yesterday, LGRD Minister Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan asked ministry officials about it, but none could inform him about the matter.

Govt set to accept

FROM PAGE 1 committee headed by the communications secretary will send a final summary on the negotiation to the ministerial committee and the cabinet for final approval.

The government will discuss crucial issues like guarantee of 20 years of gas supply, gas tariff, a 10-year tax holiday and other related matters to finalise agreements for Tata's investment.

Petrobangla is not in favour of providing a sovereign guarantee of gas supply or giving Tata highest priority because its terms go against the interest of the people, sources pointed out.

The National Board of Revenue (NBR) is also unwilling to give a 10-year tax holiday as the existing policy does not allow more than six years of such tax benefit.

The negotiations with Tata were going very slow for the last few months as the government landed in a very difficult situation over Tata's conditions. The company's whole investment plan for fertiliser, steel and coal-fired power plants depends on these conditions, which are now being negotiated.

Tata Group on April 20 last year formally submitted its proposal for setting up a 1,000 MW power plant, an export oriented steel mill with 420,000-tonne annual production capacity and an export oriented fertiliser unit with a production capacity of one million tonnes a year.

Tata was also seeking 20 years of tax holiday. As there is no such provision, the government suggested it to separate its proposal for power plant and place it under the government's Independent Power Project (IPP) policy so that it can be given 15-year tax holiday.

For steel and fertiliser factories, Tata has lowered its expectation for tax holiday down to 10 years. The NBR however says it can give such benefit for six years as per the present policy.

ADB REPORT ON TATA INVESTMENT IMPACT Meanwhile, the consultant recruited by the government and the ADB -- David Paris -- submitted its primary report on the impact of the Tata investment proposal.

The report warned the government to handle the entire negotiation very cautiously to avoid major losses. It suggested keeping in view the rising petroleum price in the international market.

The Tata investment will pave the way for other giant and multinational investors to come to Bangladesh, it pointed out.

The consultant will submit its final report in the next 10 days.

Hearing not

FROM PAGE 16 ammunition, are kept in Chittagong Cantonment for security reasons.

Sources said Bangladesh Army has taken steps to produce the evidence before the court. The bits of evidence were produced before the court in the arms haul case but it was not done in the smuggling case.

Two prosecution witnesses of the case, police constables Mohammad Yusuf and Muzammel, were present yesterday for their depositions.

Police on April 2, 2004 seized 10 truckloads of sophisticated weapons and huge quantity of ammunition from Chittagong Urea Fertiliser Limited (CUFL) jetty.

Two cases were filed after the haul, one under the Arms Act and another under Special Powers Act. The Court of Metropolitan Sessions Judge on October 24, 2004 framed charges against 44 people including Hafizur Rahman, Mas Hafez, Din Mohammad, Abul Kashed Madhu, Hajee Sobhan and Hajee Yakub as the prime accused.

Of the accused, 10 including the prime accused Din Mohammad and Hajee Sobhan are still on the run and 22 others are on bail. Only 12 accused are in jail now.

Road mishaps

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CHAPAINAWABGANJ In Chapainawabganj, at least one person was killed and 15 were injured as a bus lost control and overturned on the road in Jamtola in the sadar upazila.

Four injured were rushed to Chapainawabganj Hospital and one to Rajshahi Medical College and Hospital in critical conditions.

Another road accident left two people injured in Palsha in the district.

In Jessore, 22 people including three women were injured in separate road accidents in Chhapra Babatala and Simakhali.

NBR probes

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"The search is being conducted on a random basis and majority of the suspects may not be found guilty of tax dodging," an official involved with the CIC said.

He said the Bangladesh Bank, as part of its drive against money laundering, has also been asking the NBR to keep watch on some affluent business persons who made frequent foreign trips.

Officials claimed that a section of unscrupulous business persons have long been involved with money laundering through credit cards and dollar endorsements on their passports.

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Pakistan likely

FROM PAGE 16 has opened its border for all kinds of trade items with all Saarc member countries including India, the sources told Pakistan Dawn daily.

Pakistan's ratification of South Asian Free Trade Area (Safta) would automatically grant the most favoured nation (MFN) status to India.

However, Pakistan's longstanding position on trade in tandem with progress on Kashmir question would stand dissolved, they said.

The federal cabinet in its forthcoming meeting is likely to take up the issue of ratification of the agreement.

Out of seven Saarc member countries, India, Bangladesh, Nepal and Bhutan have ratified the treaty.

Pakistan currently allows imports from only 773 categories of items from India under an approved list, while all other goods outside the scope of the list are banned for import.

The Safta agreement covers negative lists of items, which means that duty on these goods would not be reduced but their trade would be allowed at normal duties applicable in member states.

Kuwait emir buried

FROM PAGE 16 affairs to the veteran prime minister, and no major policy shifts were expected.

Sheik Jaber, who was restored to power by American forces after Saddam Hussein invaded the tiny, oil-rich country in 1990, was 79 when he died after 27 years in power. He was one of the few Arab rulers who supported the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq to topple Saddam. He allowed his country to be used as a launching pad for the American drive to Baghdad.

The new emir, who suffers from a colon condition and must travel abroad periodically for medical treatment, watched from a wheelchair as the body of his distant cousin, wrapped in a Kuwaiti flag, was carried shoulder-high through a crowd of 10,000 mourners lowered into the grave after a brief Muslim prayer.

Members of the ruling family, including Prime Minister Sheik Sabah Al Ahmed Al Sabah, stood for hours at the Sulaibikat public cemetery to accept condolences from dignitaries and ordinary Kuwaitis. Sheik Sabah is the former emir's half brother.

Abdul-Rhida Asiri, head of the political science department at Kuwait University, said the prime minister will become the "de facto ruler" for now, and the ruling family could make further leadership decisions after the mourning period.

The close alliance with the US is not likely to change under Sheik Saad. Washington named Kuwait a major non-NATO ally in 2004.

Kuwait signed a defence pact with Washington after a US-led coalition fought the 1991 Gulf War that liberated Kuwait from a seven-month Iraqi occupation under Saddam Hussein. The small state's strategic significance lays mainly with its oil reserves, with some estimates ranking it 5th overall.

The emir was buried in an unmarked grave, a custom among Sunni Muslims in the Gulf area intended to convey humility. The Al Sabah family has ruled Kuwait for more than 250 years, and enjoys the respect and approval of Kuwaitis.

Among the heads of state who arrived to pay their respects were King Abdullah II of Jordan, King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia, Iraqi President Jalal Talbani, and Hosni Mubarak, the president of Egypt. Arab League Secretary-General Amr Moussa said Sheik Jaber was a "wise leader."

UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan said that under the emir Kuwait "made progress towards more political freedom, women's rights and social justice."

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