

LEADERS FACE OFF IN JS

Khaleda proposes body to discuss electoral reform



STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Prime Minister Khaleda Zia yesterday in parliament proposed forming a committee with representation of the ruling and opposition parties to reach a consensus on the main opposition's reform agenda on the caretaker government, Election Commission and electoral laws.

"If you [Awami League] are sincere, I hope you will discuss [the proposals] in the committee. We will also hold discussions and debates, and take a decision about their proposals if they place those in

parliament as a bill after removing the mistakes and inconsistencies," the prime minister said while participating in the thanksgiving motion on the president's speech.

Khaleda however strongly criticised Awami League (AL) for what she said was its delay in tabling the reform proposals in parliament, ignoring the rules of procedure.

"They could have placed the proposals much before if they really wanted the reforms. But they placed the proposals so late, because they were sure that they would not be able to go to power. What they want is to foil the elections by creating anarchy in the name of the reforms agenda," the prime minister claimed.

"However, what I say is let's form a committee to reach a point of agreement for holding fair elections. We'll nominate members to the committee, you [AL] nominate yours," she said.

She said people do not understand what the main opposition wants. "Does it want a government and an administration that would

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Hasina demands implementation of proposals

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Leader of the Opposition Sheikh Hasina yesterday in parliament wanted to know whether the prime minister would implement the opposition's proposals for reforms in the caretaker government and electoral systems 'for the sake of free and fair elections'.

Highlighting some instances of the government failing in different sectors in last four years, she said, "I would like to know from the prime minister whether she will resign in agreement with the tradition of democracy when the government under her leadership has failed miserably to deliver."

Hasina, president of the main opposition Awami League (AL), was addressing the House, taking part in a discussion on the motion of thanks on the president's speech.

In her 80-minute speech, she detailed what she said were failures of the alliance government to contain spiralling prices of essentials, rise of militancy, deterioration of law and order, crises of fuel, power, fertilizer, and unabated corruption by ruling alliance men.

Amid huge desk thumping by her



party deputies, the AL chief also placed a total of 10 questions for the Prime Minister Khaleda Zia to reply in the House.

The opposition leader said no one but the prime minister herself is to be blamed for the 'government's failure' in combating terrorism and corruption and improving the power situation as she has been the one in charge of those ministries.

She failed dismally to fulfil her party's election pledges to root out

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10 questions to Khaleda

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Leader of the Opposition Sheikh Hasina yesterday in parliament asked Prime Minister Khaleda Zia the following 10 specific questions:

1. What measures will you take to control the price spiral of essential commodities?

2. What will you do to resolve the existing power crisis?

3. Will you accept the reform proposals for the caretaker government system and the Election Commission?

4. Will you involve the United Nations in investigating the grenade attacks, including that on August 21 and which killed Shah

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Hasina missing on BTv

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The state-run Bangladesh Television (BTv) yesterday did not broadcast the speech of Sheikh Hasina in parliament but aired Khaleda Zia's.

The Radio Bangladesh, however, aired live speeches of both leaders from Sangsad.

The BTv slashed 15 minutes of its prime-time news bulletin at 8:00pm to accommodate the prime minister's speech. Khaleda took the floor at 7:55pm after the speech of her rival Hasina.

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Govt to go for \$211m dubious telecom deal

Political lobby active to get it done for Chinese company

SHARIEF KHAN

Under the influence of a top political lobby, the government is going for a \$211 million digital telecom exchange project with a so-called 'buyer's credit' from China.

Interestingly, the government is seriously considering an unusual plan to hold the tender bidding in China for setting up this telecom exchange and have the Chinese government evaluate the bid.

Sources in the massive project's implementing authority Bangladesh Telegraph and Telephone Board (BTTB) however said the government is yet to decide where the bid will take place. "Whether it will be held in China or not will be decided when we sign the loan agreement with China," one source said.

Unprecedented as the tender for the project might be, the idea is to ensure that the deal goes to a certain Chinese company. The local representative of the company has made an arrangement with the members of a top political family under which he will pay the lobby 10 percent of the total project cost as commission, the source claimed.

"This is one of the last big deals of this political lobby ahead of the next general elections," he added. The Cabinet Division on January

22 cleared a proposal to seek this loan from China for the project. The Economic Relations Division (ERD) is likely to formally write to China in this regard.

From 2003, when the project was conceived and exclusively tailored for China-based procurement, Finance Minister M Saifur Rahman has been resisting the project titled Setting up Digital Telephone Exchange in the metropolitan cities, important towns and upazila growth centres.

Prime Minister Khaleda Zia, during her first China visit in 2003, discussed the project with the Chinese premier, who had instantly agreed to provide funds for it under "Supplier's Credit" system.

But Saifur's resistance to Supplier's Credit system, which is a non-transparent financing mechanism that encourages corruption, shelved the project till recently. Now, the project's mode of financing has been converted into 'buyer's credit'.

According to the draft loan agreement between the two countries, interest rate has been fixed at two percent while Bangladesh will have to make a down payment of five percent of the total project cost or \$10.5 million. The repayment period is 20 years, management fee is 0.2 percent and loan disburse-

ment period is five years.

The sources said China Exim Bank submitted a loan proposal in this regard and the government's Hard Term Loan Standing Committee on August 8, 2005, identified the loan terms as "buyer's credit" as the terms are rigid.

Meanwhile, the government received a letter from China suggesting that contract for the project be awarded to a certain Chinese company without any tender. If it is not possible, the government may refrain from inviting an open international tender, and limit it only to Chinese suppliers.

"If there is no open competitive tender, the cost of procurement will be much higher. If the tender is limited only to Chinese companies, this would just be a set game in which one particular company will surely bag the deal and the cost of

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AUG 17 BLASTS, BOMB ATTACK ON SYLHET JUDGE

22 JMB cadres to walk gallows

STAR REPORT

A court in Jhenidah yesterday sentenced 21 members of JMB to death for taking part in the August 17 serial bomb blasts last year while a Sylhet court sentenced another member of the banned outfit to death for carrying out a bomb attack on a judge the same year.

Judge Anisur Rahman Khan of Jhenidah District and Sessions Judge's Court sentenced the 21 men to death by hanging after they were found guilty of carrying out bomb blasts in Jhenidah. Three of the convicts were tried in absentia.

All 21, aged between 20 and 25, are members of the militant group Jama'at ul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) and were sentenced under the Explosive Substances Act.

The convicts carried out bomb attacks at six places including the judge court premises in the district town. Russell, an eight-year old child, was injured in one of the attacks. JMB leaflets were found at the blast sites calling for imposition of strict Islamic laws in the country, says an AFP report.

The 21 sentenced to die in

Jhenidah are Tariqul Islam alias Rinku, Monirul Islam alias Mokhesur, Nasrullah alias Shanta alias Chanu, Rokonzaman alias Mithun, Abu Taleb Ansari alias Babul Ansari, Mohan, Mamunur Rashid alias Mamun, Muhid, Mozammel Haq alias Mozam, Tuhin Reza, Sabuj Ali alias Sabuj, Amirul, Faruk Hossain, Matin Mehedi alias Matinul Islam alias Mahabub Matin alias Mehedi Hasan alias Matinul Haq Mandal, Jahirul Al Mamun alias Chan, Billal Hossain, Sadruddin, Robjel Hossain alias Robjel, Azizur Rahman, Younus Ali and Azim Uddin.

Mohan, Tuhin Reza and Matin Mehedi are still in hiding.

After the blasts, police arrested JMB members Rinku and Mithun. Later, they gave statements to a magistrate confessing to their involvement in the blasts. On November 20 last year the police submitted a charge sheet to the court against the accused.

The court took depositions of 42 persons during the trial.

Meanwhile, District and Sessions Judge of Sylhet ANM Bashirullah yesterday sentenced a JMB cadre Akhtaruzzaman to death by hanging

for carrying out a bomb attack on Biplob Goswami, a speedy trial tribunal judge of Sylhet division.

The court however acquitted four other accused, Obaidullah alias Obaidur, Moulana Saifuddin, Moulana Jamaluddin and Habibur Rahman.

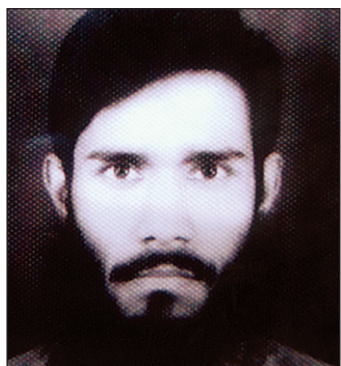
In addition to capital punishment, the court sentenced Akhtaruzzaman to 10 years rigorous imprisonment and fined him Tk 50,000 for hurling another bomb. In default on paying the fine, he will have to suffer another year in prison.

Akhtaruzzaman, who made the attack on Biplob Goswami on October 18 last year in Kumarpara area of Sylhet, was sentenced to another 20-year prison term and fined Tk 50,000 more for possessing a third bomb.

Abdus Salam, chauffeur of judge Goswami, filed the case with the Sylhet Kotwali Police Station the day after the attack.

Akhtaruzzaman, who hails from Sarishabari upazila in Jamalpur district, admitted his involvement with JMB activities in his confession.

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Another JMB Shura man captured

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Rapid Action Battalion (Rab) members yesterday arrested one more member of the Majlish-e-Shura, the top policymaking body of the banned militant outfit Jama'at ul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) from near Baitul Mukarram mosque in Dhaka.

Mohammad Rakib Hasan Russell alias Hafez Mahmud, 28, is an Afghan war veteran and also the Khulna divisional commander of the JMB. With his arrest, the number of the captured JMB Shura members reached three.

Rab arrested Shura members Ataur Rahman Sunny, military commander of the militant outfit and also the younger brother of the

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Survived, yet agonised

Brother's death in building collapse haunts 20yr-old mason

SHAMIM ASHRAF

Rinku finds no joy in his miraculous survival, not even that of his father, from death in the dreadful debris of the collapsed multi-storey Phoenix building.

"There is no consolation in surviving while leaving brother to die before my eyes," Rinku said, showing a photograph of his 18-year-old brother Nikhil. "I escaped death miraculously and came out of the debris but failed to bring my brother out."

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BUILDING COLLAPSE Another body found

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

With time ticking away, hope of finding any more survivors trapped in the rubble of the collapsed Phoenix building since Saturday is fading as rescuers could not trace anyone alive over the last two days.

The number of casualty rose to 21 with another dead body recovered yesterday. The victim was

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Suranjan, holding a photo of his missing son Nikhil, waits for a miracle at the collapsed Phoenix building in Tejgaon yesterday. Mason Nikhil was working in the building as it tumbled down on Saturday.

PHOTO: STAR



PHOTO: AFP

Mohammad Ashraful punishes an over-pitched delivery with a stylish cover drive as Sri Lankan wicketkeeper Kumar Sangakkara looks on.

Ashraful sends lions on cherry chase

BISHWAJIT ROY, from Chittagong

Mohammad Ashraful stood tall in Muttiah Muralidaran's hundredth Test match with a magnificent hundred as Bangladesh amassed record runs on the opening day of the first Test against Sri Lanka at the Chittagong Divisional Stadium yesterday.

The right-hander's 136-run classy knock guided the home side to 315-9 at stumps, the first time ever the Tigers scored 300 runs in a day in their 41 Test appearance surpassing the previous best of 289-8 against Australia in Cairns in 2003.

The 21-year-old produced the splendid innings after Bangladesh captain won the toss and decided to bat on a placid wicket. His second century against the Lankans also saw him winning a battle over champion off-spinner Muralidaran.

Although Murali had Ashraful finally caught in the dying overs to finish with 3-85, it was the Bangladesh little master who was at his belligerent best against whom he also scored his maiden hundred on debut in 2001.

In his 184-ball knock, the stylish batsman smote seven boundaries out of 15 against Muralidaran including some copybook cover

drives.

Ashraful never missed the chance to punish the lose deliveries and his four hour-plus essay featured by three massive sixes, two against leg-spinner Malinga Bandara and the other off pacer Dilhara Fernando over backward point.

Ashraful reached his third Test hundred in style, hooking paceman Lasith Malinga to the backward square leg boundary for four.

A veteran of 30 Tests, Ashraful also scored his second century an epic 158 not out against India -- in 2004 at the MA Aziz Stadium.

Ashraful now joined Bashir as the highest ton makers in the country.

Earlier, Bashir and Nafees Iqbal gave Bangladesh a reasonably good start when they put on 72 runs for the second wicket after opener Javed Omar fell in the first over of the Test.

Iqbal looked impressive with 34 before the local lad went for an expansive sweep only to his off-stump being knocked off by

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PM's India trip eyes warm ties

REZAUL KARIM

Seeking good neighbourly relations with India, Prime Minister Khaleda Zia is going to New Delhi next month on a three-day visit to find a common ground for resolving the outstanding bilateral issues, some of which date back to the partition of the subcontinent like boundary demarcation.

The visit is expected to break fresh grounds in not-so-warm bilateral relations and it will, overall, create a right atmosphere for further dialogue in resolving the long-standing issues as well as to further strengthen relations between the next-door neighbours.

Diplomatic sources said the Indian side is careful not to highlight the differences and problem areas, Bangladesh too will avoid raking up the issues that has divided both the countries so far.

This will be Khaleda Zia's first official visit to India in her last four years in power and it comes in the year her tenure winds up. Her government's term ends in October and the caretaker administration will take over in anticipation of national elections around January.

The visit by Khaleda ahead of Bangladesh's Independence Day is scheduled to start on March 20 at the invitation of the Indian prime minister.

Dhaka pins high hopes and is looking forward to this month's summit level meeting between Prime Minister Khaleda Zia and her Indian counterpart Manmohan Singh. The two leaders will discuss a range of bilateral issues including security, trade, transit, water and defence exchanges.

The official talk on March 21 is expected to be followed by the signing of a number of deals to enhance bilateral cooperation which the officials of the two capitals are now working on. Officials said the main focus of the visit is to enhance cooperation in trade, investments and the IT sectors.

High official sources said the two leaders will have a frank and candid discussion and Dhaka considers the atmosphere as perfect for the talks. The successful summit of 13th South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SARAC) is also expected to be held in Dhaka.

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