

# Caretaker system, political parties both need reforms

Partisan president may use forces in party's interest, discussion told

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Eminent jurists and other professionals at a discussion in the city yesterday said political parties have scope to manipulate elections under the caretaker government system, and that reforms in the system as well as within the political parties are needed to ensure free and fair elections.

They expressed fears that if the armed forces remain under the president loyal to a party when a caretaker government is in place, he could influence the elections. Reforms in the caretaker system are desirable to put the armed forces under caretaker government, they said.

The discussion on "Role of the Election Commission and the Caretaker Government in holding a free and fair election in Bangladesh"

was organised by Bangladesh Institute of Law and International Affairs (BILIA).

Presenting the keynote paper at the discussion, former election commissioner Justice Naimuddin Ahmed said, "The partisan president, if army is kept under him, can use the force in the party's interest."

The role of the non-party caretaker government and the president is to assist the Election Commission (EC) in holding a free and fair election. If they don't do that, the EC should refuse to hold the election, Naimuddin thought.

If the EC thinks an election has not been free and fair in any constituency, it can certainly refuse to accept the results submitted by the returning officer and order re-election, the former election commissioner said.

Referring to the introduction of

caretaker government system and demands for its reforms now, he said it is an 'irony'. "The then opposition parties accepted it as their greatest political victory, but before the lapse of less than two decades, the same parties have been demanding 'reforms' of the system realising the pinch of it."

He went on, "Our leaders do not think thousand times before taking a decision and do not stand by it as one man once it has been taken."

Naimuddin said, "Political parties themselves can bring about a really democratic government through a free and fair election by shunning all sorts of unfair means like bribing the officials, intimidating the electors, capturing polling booths and casting fictitious votes, by adopting the basic principle of a democratic polity."

Before demanding reforms in the

election process, the political parties should reform themselves first. Otherwise, no reform will succeed, he emphasised.

Barrister Amir-Ul Islam said introduction of caretaker government system became crucial when the EC did nothing despite massive rigging of polls.

The system raised a lot of hopes but now it appears to be destroying the judiciary. The government is appointing judges on political grounds so that they could head the caretaker governments as former chief justice, he said.

Coming down heavily on the EC's preparing a fresh voter list and defying the High Court order, he said, "The present EC has now become more powerful than any other institutions in the country."

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Children play cricket on the VIP road adjacent to the Bangla Motor crossing yesterday, as the road was made off limits to vehicles for Titas Gas pipeline installation.

PHOTO: STAR

# No river training plan yet to check erosion

3 major rivers leave over 1.5 lakh homeless every year

SURANJITH DEABNATH

In the absence of any long-term government schemes to prevent riverbank erosion, the country's three big rivers—Jamuna, Padma and lower Meghna—leave one and a half lakh people landless and millions of others to similar risks each year.

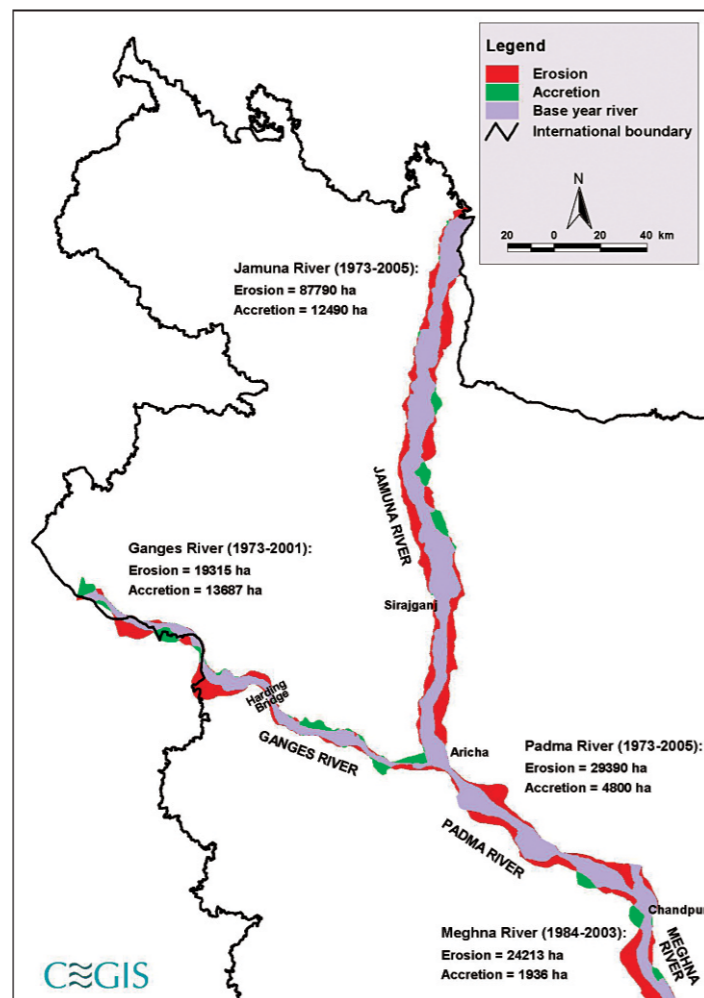
Official statistics show that around 8,700 hectares of land are eroded every year along the 2,400km banks on both sides of these three major rivers. Millions of people live in these erosion prone areas.

The Brahmaputra-Jamuna, Padma and lower Meghna annually devour around 7,000 hectares of floodplain, washing away properties, croplands and infrastructures worth around \$500 million, wrote Mahammad Z Mamun and ATM Nurul Amin in their book "A Strategic Plan to Mitigate Riverbank Erosion Disaster in Bangladesh".

"Erosion of riverbanks leaves 80,000 people living on the floodplains and almost an equal number of sandbank-dwellers homeless each year," said Maminul Haque Sarker, a morphologist at the Centre for Environmental and Geographic Information Services (CEGIS), in a research paper.

Experts said the situation is getting worse as a huge amount of silt from the upstream deposits on

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# Wasa men blame load-shedding, 'systems loss' for water crisis

ABDUL KADER

The capital is facing poor water supply due to what Water and Sewerage Authority (Wasa), Dhaka said was frequent load-shedding and decline in both underground and surface water levels.

Wasa officials also blamed the water shortage on the so-called "systems loss" through pilferage of water through illegal connections, involving a section of unscrupulous Wasa employees, and a few technical problems.

According to the Wasa, more than 50,000 of the 217,000 connections in its water supply regime in the city are illegal.

The average daily production of water reduces by more than 10 crore litre from its maximum capacity of 150 crore to 160 crore litre due to low voltage in summer, according to the Dhaka Wasa officials.

There is a demand of more than 200 crore litres of water in the capital per day of which almost 85 percent comes from underground reserve and the rest from the surface sources.

Besides the decline in underground water level and power disruption, water level of both the Sitalakha and Buriganga goes down during summer. This increases water pollution, causing the purification process to take more time, Wasa officials said.

The Wasa has 422 deep tube wells and four surface water treatment plants for its underground and surface sources of water.

Dr Kazi Ali Azam, managing director of Dhaka Wasa, admitting the prevailing crisis in water supply said with the load-shedding continuing, it goes beyond the capacity of the Wasa to keep up with the regular supply of water.

He said the Wasa has some 227 fixed generators and 25 movable generators to tackle the crisis period but these generators cannot run for more than two hours at a time.

Azam said the work of the second phase of the Sayedabad water treatment plant, with a capacity of 22.5 crore litre water daily, will start soon. He hoped that it would be possible to tackle the crisis after its completion.

whose former top nuclear scientist A.Q. Khan admitted in 2004 to trading nuclear technology with Iran, Libya and North Korea.

But the Pakistani foreign minister told the paper: "We demand equality of treatment and we'll continue to pursue it."

The Financial Times cited foreign ministry officials saying that the most likely supplier of nuclear reactors would be China. The paper quoted analysts as saying that a tie-up between Islamabad and Beijing could counter growing Indian influence in the region.

"The US should be conscious of the sentiments of this country," Kasuri said. "Public opinion sees things in black and white. They compare the US to China and feel it has not been a constant friend the way China has."

The US deal with India still must be ratified by the US Congress and the 45-member Nuclear Suppliers Group, which controls trade in atomic fuel.

Such fuel has been denied to India because it conducted nuclear tests but has refused to join the NPT.

# Biman's move to procure 2 aircraft hits snag

REAZ AHMAD

Biman's hasty move for leasing two wide-bodied aircraft disregarding the government's procurement guidelines hits a snag with authorities asking it to strictly follow the Public Procurement Regulation (PPR), 2003 and extend the bidding time.

The national airlines during February 20-25 floated an international tender through advertisements in newspapers seeking dry and wet lease of two Airbus or Boeing 737 family aircraft as the last day of bidding. The move came against the backdrop of grounding of four out of Biman's 13-strong fleet early last month.

The tender was floated in a hurried manner as Biman needed the craft very urgently to maintain its flight schedules, which were in total disarray upon grounding of three DC-10s and one Airbus.

But Biman's board on March 14 finally decided to extend the bidding

period by two more weeks fixing the last day of tender schedule dropping on April 6, official sources said.

The PPR, 2003 gives a 42-day time for international tender whereas, Biman had initially floated the tender giving less than a month's time for the prospective bidders.

Biman sources fear that with further time extension, the bidding process would be delayed and it is unlikely for Biman to get two wide-bodied craft before June this year. This would force the national airlines to walk on tight rope as far as maintaining flight schedules is concerned.

Last month's schedule chaos forced Biman Bangladesh Airlines to cut in international flights on Dhaka-New York, Dhaka-London and Dhaka-Jeddah routes.

Arbitrary handling of aircraft purchases and political decisions overtaking commercial fleet planning in recent years have affected Biman's reputation among airplane

manufacturers and suppliers. The airline is now failing to attract a single bidder in its attempts to purchase or lease wide-bodied aircraft, sources said.

Following the DC-10 disaster in Chittagong in July last year, Biman sought lease of two aircraft in a tender that closed with none taking part in the bid.

Similarly, Biman's tender seeking to lease three Airbus A320 family or Boeing B737 family airplanes also failed to draw a single bid late last year.

A proposal for procuring six new Airbus and four new Boeing at \$1.2 billion is lying with the cabinet committee on purchase since mid-2005. Biman in the meantime is struggling to operate between as many as 26 international destinations with a fleet of four 30-year-old DC-10s, five 10-12-year-old Airbus and four F-28s.

# Afghan bandits kill 22 in Iran

British, US security services blamed

AFP, Tehran

Afghan bandits with links to US and British security services have killed 22 people in Iran and seized an unknown number of others in an ambush that also left a senior official critically wounded, officials said yesterday.

Police said "a group of armed bandits who crossed the Afghanistan border killed 21 people and injured another seven innocent people driving in their vehicles" between the border city of Zabol and Zahedan, the provincial capital of Sistan-Baluchistan.

The southeastern province's deputy governor general for security, Mohsen Sadeghi, later raised the death toll to 22 and said that, "according to the reports we got, one of the seven injured people is in a critical condition."

A source in the interior ministry told AFP: "Hossein Ali Nouri, the governor of Zahedan and his dep

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# US rules out direct nuke talks with Iran

Top officials to meet Monday at UN

AFP, Washington

The United States on Thursday ruled out direct discussions with Iran on its nuclear programme after Tehran offered to negotiate with Washington on another thorny subject—Iraq.

On the same day a key study pinpointing Iran as the United States' biggest threat was released, the White House said any talks between Washington and Iran on efforts to stabilise Iraq would not take up the nuclear crisis or other disputes and that negotiators would

have a "very narrow mandate".

"The nuclear issue is being discussed at the United Nations among diplomats of the Security Council," spokesman Scott McClellan told reporters. "That's a separate issue."

White House national security adviser Stephen Hadley suggested that Iran's offer on Iraq was proof that the Islamic Republic was "finally beginning to listen" to criticisms about its policies in the region.

Hadley refused to rule out a preemptive military strike against Iran but said the White House study

released Thursday was not a warning to the hardline regime.

US Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs Nicholas Burns meanwhile said it would be fruitless to try to negotiate with Tehran on its nuclear programme considering the country's track record on the issue.

"The problem here is not the absence of discussions between the United States and Iran, the problem is what Iran is doing,"

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# Quake triggers small tsunami in Indonesia

Two killed

AFP, Ambon

An earthquake measuring 6.4 on the Richter scale rocked Indonesia's Maluku islands this week and triggered a small tsunami that killed at least two people and left three missing, an official and reports said Friday.

"What happened was a small tsunami," Maluku governor Karel Albert Ralalahu, who visited the tsunami-hit village on Buru island, told reporters. He did not elaborate.

The Republik daily quoted Buru deputy district chief Bakri Lumbeasy as saying that the quake Tuesday left three people dead

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# Road accident in city kills journalist

UNB, Dhaka

Eminent journalist and poet Yusuf Pasha died in a road accident in the city's Bangla Motor area yesterday.

A passenger bus hit Pasha, assistant editor of the Daily Janakantha, while he was crossing the road at about 6:00pm.

Critically injured Pasha was rushed to orthopaedic hospital where he succumbed to his injuries at about 7:00pm.

Awami League (AL) President Sheikh Hasina, now in the USA, expressed her deep shock at the death of journalist Yusuf Pasha.

In a condolence message, the AL chief prayed for the eternal peace of the departed soul and conveyed her sympathy to the bereaved family.

# PAKISTAN WARNS

# Indo-US nuke deal will 'unravel' NPT

AFP, Hong Kong

The main international treaty aimed at stopping the spread of atomic weapons will fall apart in the wake of the US civil nuclear deal with India, neighbour and rival Pakistan warned yesterday.

In an interview with the Financial Times, Pakistani Foreign Minister Khurshid Kasuri also said his country wanted equal treatment and that it would pursue its own options for nuclear power.

"The whole Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) will unravel," Kasuri told the paper.

"Nuclear weapons are the currency of power and many countries would like to use it. Once this goes through, the NPT will be finished," he said.

US President George W. Bush has agreed to give India access to nuclear technology in exchange for separating its civil and military atomic programmes and placing a majority of its reactors under international inspection.

The United States has not indicated it is willing to offer the same treatment to Pakistan,



Crushed microbus and truck after they collided head-on at Hijaltali under Kaliakoir upazila of Gazipur district on the Dhaka-Tangail highway yesterday. The accident killed seven people and injured four others.

PHOTO: STAR

# 7 killed as microbus hits truck in Gazipur

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

At least seven people, five of a family, were killed and two others injured in a road accident on the Dhaka-Tangail highway at Hijaltali in Kaliakoir upzila of Gazipur district yesterday morning.

Police said the accident occurred at about 6:00am when a Dhaka-bound microbus from Tangail collided head-on with a Tangail-bound sand-laden truck in front of Shilabrishti petrol pump, killing five microbus passengers on the spot and injuring four others.

Our Tangail correspondent reported that the injured were rushed to Mirzapur Kumudini Hospital where two died soon after admission.

The dead are Ripon, 16, son of Tota Miah, his daughter Ruma, 18, brother Lal Miah, 42, their mother Ammatunnessa, 55, uncle Hakim

Uddin, 55, and microbus driver Mamun, 22, and helper Sumon, 16.

All the deceased hailed from Bashail upazila headquarters in Tangail. They were going to Zia International Airport in Dhaka to receive Tota Miah who was supposed to return home from Saudi Arabia yesterday morning.

Officer-in-charge of Kaliakoir Police Station said the microbus was completely damaged in the collision.

Seriously injured Malek, 35, and Sohel, 13, of Basail upazila and also passengers of the microbus, are undergoing treatment at Kumudini Hospital.

Kaliakoir police recovered the bodies and seized the truck, but its driver and the helper managed to flee the scene.

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Prayer Timing		
March 18		
	Azan	Jamaat
Fair	5-00	5-35
Zohr	12-45	1-15
Asr	4-30	4-45
Maghrib	6-14	6-18
Esha	7-45	8-15

Source: Islamic Foundation