

Political blame game

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Communications Minister Nazmul Huda, political secretary to the Awami League chief Saber Hossain Chowdhury and filmmaker Tarek Masud were in the panel in Dhaka. The London panel comprised Baroness Uddin, the first Bangladeshi in the House of Lords and Editor of The Daily Star Mahfiz Anam.

BBC's Hardtalk presenter Stephen Sackur and presenter Nisha Pillai moderated the debate from Dhaka and London respectively.

A group of young people in Dhaka and a similar group in Diaspora community in London participated in the debate.

Issues like Bangladesh topping the corrupt nations in the world for five consecutive years, rising militancy, role of Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC), fair election, religion-based politics and education and condition of Ahmadiyya community mainly featured in the debate.

Nazmul Huda said the constitution of the country fully guarantees democracy and democratic rights of every citizen. Admitting corruption in the government, he alleged that corruption was also injected by the donor agencies.

The present government has formed the ACC for removing corruption, he mentioned.

Responding to a query on activities of the ACC, he alleged that its functioning is being disrupted due to frequent gatherings of journalists there.

Saber Hossain Chowdhury alleged that instead of admitting the problem of corruption, the ruling alliance always blames the opposition for it. Besides,

the government is not protecting the rights of the minority communities, mainly Ahmadiyyas.

Saber also said his party's claim of irregularities in the previous election is based on specific allegations of vote rigging.

On the role of Islam in Bangladeshi society, Mahfiz Anam said there is a mixture of Bangalee and Islamic culture in the country.

"We are proud of Islam as well as Bangalee culture, but to move forward we need democracy, industrialisation and modernisation of our society."

The Daily Star editor criticised the government for lack of accountability and oppressing the opposition parties.

Tarek Masud feared that if democracy cannot sustain in Bangladesh, it might be planted from outside. "We do not want to have such democracy".

Expressing concern over the rise of militancy in the country, he stressed addressing it quickly.

The debate would be broadcast on BBC world television on April 4 and 9. A radio version of the debate would be broadcast on BBC World Service radio on April 9.

Grounded Biman

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The passengers including 159 bound for overseas destinations boarded in time the BG-114 flight scheduled to leave Sylhet at 6:45pm. But it could not take off despite repeated attempts.

Engineers who were dispatched to Sylhet the same night repaired the aircraft that took off at 6:45pm yesterday, said an official of Biman Bangladesh Airlines.

14-party sit-in

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He hoped the opposition will observe its programme peacefully outside the security belt.

OPPOSITION PREPARATION
Leaders of the AL and its left allies held a number of meetings yesterday, discussing last minute preparations for their programme. The meetings also resolved to go through the peaceful way of protest.

"The government will have to bear all responsibilities for the consequences if law enforcers prevent us from practising our democratic rights to protest peacefully," 14-party

opposition combine Coordinator and AL General Secretary Abdul Jalil said yesterday at a meeting at the party office on Bangabandhu Avenue.

The meeting asked all thana unit leaders to mobilise a massive show-down to give an "appropriate answer" to the government ban on rallies and procession around the secretariat. It directed all opposition leaders to stage peaceful demonstration in front of every police barricade.

Meanwhile, an emergency meeting of the 14-party alliance took place yesterday evening at Jalil's residence. The meeting decided to plan next programmes after observing the government stand today.

RESTRICTED AREAS
The areas and roads that fall under the government ban include Osmani Udayan, Abdul Gani Road and from its west end to Bangabazar and Doyal Chatterji via High Court intersection, South GPO Link Road to House Building crossing to Matsya Bhaban roundabout via Tophkhana Road and Kadam fountain.

The restriction also includes the areas from Noor Hossain Square to the south gate of Baitul Mukarram Mosque, Tophkhana crossing to Kasturi restaurant at Bijoynagar, and the old diabetic association office in Segun Bagicha to Carpet Lane near Shilpaka Academy.

All roads, lanes and playgrounds in these areas are also under the ban.

Law enforcers will take position on the roofs of high-rise buildings around the secretariat. Besides, the police dog squad, fire brigade units and water cannons have been positioned at different strategic points. Plainclothesmen will also be on guard to ward off any violence attempted by the agitating opposition activists.

State Minister for Home Affairs Lutfozzaman Babar told The Daily Star last night that the secretariat is the nerve centre of the government and it is the government's responsibility to ensure its security.

Home ministry sources said restriction will be imposed on traffic movement in the area from Wednesday midnight.

Around 7,000 members of police and armed police battalion have been deployed in and around the secretariat. The Bangladesh Rifles (BDR) has also been kept alert as reserved force.

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Non-students vie

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allegedly arranging bus tickets, and board and lodging in the capital for the BCL district unit leaders.

One candidate even admitted to The Daily Star that he is spending money to woo councillors to support him.

But, BCL President Liaqat Sikder brushed off the allegation of bribing and said strict action would be taken against any one found guilty.

He blamed oppression by the 4-party coalition government for the delay in arranging councils and said, "But to ensure better leadership I think that it's necessary to hold councils regularly in the future."

Those whom the AL high-ups are reportedly considering as the next central president and general secretary of the BCL include Rafiqul Islam Kotawal, Marufa Akther Poppy, Ashrafuz Azim Rubon, Saifuzzaman Shekhor, Zakir Hossain Maruf and Qamrul Hasan Khokon.

Among other aspirants for the top two posts are Khan Mainul Islam Mostak, Delwar Hossain, Miraj Hossain, Jahir Uddin Mahmud Lipton, Mazhar Anam, Morshehuzzaman Selim, Salauddin Mahmud Chowdhury, Momin Patwari, Abdul Alim, Hemayet Uddin, Sheikh Reza and Gaffer Dewan Razib.

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US, Canadian soldiers die in Taliban attack

REUTERS, Kabul

The Taliban attacked a military base in Afghanistan yesterday, killing a US and a Canadian soldier and losing 32 of their own men, and declared a spring offensive had begun.

The two foreign soldiers and 12 Taliban were killed in the initial attack by a large Taliban force on the base in the southern province of Helmand, the US military said.

US-led forces, backed by aircraft, later attacked the Taliban forces as they were attempting to escape.

"In continuing fighting in Helmand Province, coalition forces killed 20 insurgents and destroyed two Taliban headquarters buildings," the US military said in a statement.

Large caches of munitions, including bomb-making material, were seized in the captured buildings and blown up, it said.

Despite the rising violence, the United States is planning to trim its force of more than 18,000 troops in Afghanistan by several thousand, while Nato partners, including Britain, Canada and the Netherlands are sending about 6,000 more.

Some British troops are already based in Helmand and up to 3,300 will soon arrive. A spokesman for the force said he had no information on whether British troops were involved in yesterday's fighting.

The Taliban, fighting to oust foreign troops and the Western-backed government, vowed more violence.

CONFLICT HEATS UP
"The weather is warming and Taliban attacks on coalition and Afghan forces have begun," Taliban spokesman Mullah Mohammad Hanif said by telephone from an undisclosed location.

Residents of the area, speaking by phone, said there had been civilian casualties in the fighting. A US military spokesman said he had no reports of civilians being hurt.

No power cut

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supply of gas to Rajshahi through pipeline for the sixth time yesterday at a rally led by the Rajshahi City Mayor Mizanur Rahman Minu MP.

The ruling alliance has fulfilled 17 out of 19 of its pledges made before the 2001 elections, Minu told the rally.

The demands for gas supply, setting up of full-fledged TV studio, introduction of three inter-city trains on Dhaka-Rajshahi route, restart of silk factories and setting up of test cricket venue were not yet fulfilled.

Outlaw killed

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a contingent of police along with Manju set out for Machpara at about 3:30am yesterday to arrest his cohorts and seize

When they reached Chapaygachi area of the village, Manju's accomplices opened fire on the law enforcers, forcing them to retaliate.

Police said Manju, son of late Afsar Mondol of Udaynagar village under Kushlia Sadar upazila, received bullets during the "shoot-out" and died instantly.

They said Manju was wanted in seven cases including three for murder.

Guardian sues

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After hearing, Metropolitan Magistrate Syed Mohammad Mujibul Haq directed the officer-in-charge of Lalbagh Police Station to take the case as first information report (FIR) on an investigation into the matter.

The sued JCD college unit leaders are Selina Sultana Nishita, Arifa Sultana Ruma, Taslima Akhter Rehana, Shawkat Ara Urmi, Afrin Jahan Sima, Sagar, Rosy, Rupali, Mitu, Jeny and Happy.

JCD leaders have been conducting shady 'seat dealings' in four residential hostels of the college with the help of college administration and BNP lawmaker Nasiruddin Ahmed Pintu, Hasina Mornata stated in the case.

The JCD leaders accused in the case evicted at least 20 legal students from Khodeza Khatun Hostel on March 6, the case statement said, adding that as the students informed the then principal Prof Ferzza Begum of the matter, she termed the students as 'street girls'.

General students of the college began demonstration on March 8 against the ruling BNP's student wing JCD's involvement in distribution of residential seats in exchange of money, it said.

To foil the students' movement, the college authorities directed the residential students to vacate the dormitories for indefinite period on March 13, the statement said.

As the students refused to leave the dormitories and continued protesting the college authority's decision by taking to street, the JCD activists launched an attack on the demonstrating students and forced them out of the dormitories the next day, it added.

Meanwhile, a press release signed by Eden College acting principal Jahan-e-Gulshan said the college academic activities will resume today.

The four residential hostels of the college — Hasna Khatun Hostel, Razia Hostel, Khodeza Khatun Hostel and Jebunnessa Hostel — will reopen on March 3, 4, 5 and 6, the press release added.

Dhaka University Teachers Association yesterday asked the Eden College authorities to open the four dormitories for the students before resumption of the academic activities of the college.

PDB to incur colossal

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that too at high prices. "We thought these plants are meant for emergency. But now the PDB is being forced to sign deals for 15 years. Officially we don't know why," a senior official said.

Spearheaded by the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) and pushed by the power ministry, the PDB has recently selected three skid-mount power projects on a 15-year rental basis. The PDB yesterday opened bids for two more skid-mount power projects and is set to go for another seven. In addition, the Rural Electrification Board (REB) is processing six such tenders and the Power Cells is evaluating 10 such tenders.

Sources said the idea of wholesale rental from skid-mount power plants is the brain-child of some high officials of the PMO. The motive is to raise power supply before the next election and giving the deals to businessmen close to the ruling BNP or even some influential party men.

Even though load shedding is set to hover between 1,000 MW to 1500 MW this summer because the government miserably failed in this sector, the vested interest groups have not given up bids to make fortune at the cost of the state," said a PDB official.

So far, the PDB has selected bids for three skid-mount power plants — Shahjibazar 80 MW, Bogra 40 MW and Thakurgaon 20 MW. It will face serious financial challenges to pay the power developers for power.

A senior PDB official however said bidders' response is good in some areas but not in all areas. "Yesterday, we have received four bids in Sylhet and two in Jessore," he said. "On April 4, we will open tender for three plants in Rajshahi, Sikkalaha and Sylhet."

The Thakurgaon plant will be oil-fired as there is no gas supply in that region. And this plant will charge an astonishing Tk 12 per unit for 15 years. PDB officials themselves are surprised at the selection of this site for a

Thousands march

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busiest junctions in Bangkok.

Organisers, taking their protests against Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra downtown after weeks of rallies elsewhere in the city, planned to use the trucks as a stage to address the crowd later in the evening.

Draped across the side of the mall hung a banner that read: "Thank, your time is up."

Traffic ground to a standstill for kilometres on a major road near the protest, as the city's public transport system added trains to the service to help the many commuters who decided to avoid driving downtown.

Protest leader Chamlong Srimuang said demonstrators would spend at least two nights on the street outside the mall, where police have warned that they could be jailed for disrupting traffic on already clogged streets.

"Police can go ahead and arrest and prosecute us," he said before the rally got underway.

Justice Minister Chidchai Vanasathidya had threatened to file criminal defamation charges against five protest leaders if they went ahead with the latest protest.

Thaksin, who was in his northern home town of Chiang Mai for religious services, said he had cancelled his own rally for Friday evening in a downtown park to avoid any clashes with the protesters.

"Their move to Siam Paragon is an attempt by protest leaders to incite violence, but government will still be open for political reforms after the election," he said.

Thaksin called Sunday's election three years early hoping to win another mandate and to end protests that intensified in February over his family's 1.9 billion dollar tax-free stock sale.

Demonstrators accuse him of corruption and abuse of power.

The self-made billionaire, who remains hugely popular in poor rural areas, is expected to win the vote — but opposition parties are boycotting

Criminal case

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In his complaint, Amirul Hassan Balu of Manikganj, now residing at Sutrpara in the city, said he went to Chief Whip Khondaker Delwar Hossain to show him some documents regarding his house on July 12 last year.

But the chief whip was not home at that time. His son Paban told him that he could solve the problem for Tk 5,000.

Balu and his relatives went to Paban with Tk 5,000 on July 15. But Paban and his accomplices at gun-point forced him to put his signature on two statements, Balu said.

He further alleged that on March 26 he was picked up and taken to Paban's house. They demanded he give them within a week Tk 2 lakh that he had received in advance from his tenants in February this year.

The complainant went to Kotwali Police Station to file a case but the police refused to take the case.

Paban told The Daily Star that the charges against him are false.

Claiming that he possesses the proper documents, he said the case was filed to tarnish his image.

Earlier on February 28 last year, he was held for firing on a fax-phone shop owner in the city's Kotwali area and a case in that connection is still pending with a Dhaka court.

Besides, four other extortion cases were filed against Paban, his brother Abdul Hamid Dablu in September the same year.

The investigation officers had submitted final reports in those cases as the charges brought against them were proved false.

power plant since this coal-rich region is expected to add thousands of MW of coal-fired power in the near future.

PDB sources said these three bids were selected through floating tenders for six plants. "There was no offer for three sites and the remaining three had six proposals," an official pointed out.

From August last year, the government tried to award small power plant deals to various BNP lawmakers, ministers and loyalists through a 'selection process'. However, as the World Bank took a tough stand on this issue, the blatant attempt to 'reward' party men stopped and the government then embarked on a tender process. But the process essentially remains focussed on 'rewarding' loyalists.

Sources mentioned that as per the private power policy, tender for such projects can only be floated by the Power Cell, and not the PDB or the REB. But this policy has been violated.

An executive of a power plant developer, requesting anonymity, says that after getting all confusing signals from the government, he has decided not to participate in any of these bids. "These bids will go to some pre-selected people. So, why should we participate?"

Chief of Summit Power Aziz Khan, who participated in one such tender, also says he would not participate in any other bids, for a different reason. "I would not like to submit bids as the prices are going to be at least 100 percent higher than that of any combined cycle power plant. It means that the PDB and REB will face serious financial challenges to pay the power developers for power."

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PM takes

FROM PAGE 1

position during the period of the caretaker government... there will be no chance to rig the poll," she said.

The prime minister said people will cast their votes again for those who have been doing politics of development and production to make the country prosperous and self-reliant.

Pointing to the arrest of JMB kingpins, the BNP chairperson said the opposition party was unhappy with the arrest of the top terrorists.

"Because they had an intention to damage the image of the government through unleashing terrorism and anarchism with the help of the terrorists," she alleged.

The rally was also addressed, among others, by BNP Secretary General and LGRD Minister Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan, Post and Telecommunications

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