

## Come polls

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He was barred from contesting the 2001 national elections for corruption charges against him.

Ershad's coming to the fore again was best manifested by his rendezvous with BNP Senior Joint Secretary General Tarique Rahman and State Minister for Home Affairs Lutfozzaman Babar at his Baridhara residence on July 27.

And it's nothing new. In early 1996, when the movement for handover of power to a caretaker administration reached its peak with the AL-led opposition threatening to boycott the elections, the then BNP government had attempted to hold the polls with the help of Jatiya Party.

In line with the plan, JP presidium member and former foreign minister barrister Anisul Islam Mahmud held a meeting with the then home minister in the first week of January 1996 to negotiate the JP chairman's release from jail.

At the meeting, BNP proposed that all charges against Ershad would be dropped in return for JP taking part in the election. Besides, in case of the AL boycotting the polls, he would be the leader of the opposition in parliament.

On January 7, 1996, Raushan Ershad went to meet him at the central jail and briefed him on the outcome of the negotiations. Ershad then decided to have a discussion with his party leaders.

Barrister Mahmud, Kazi Firoze Rashid and Tajul Islam Chowdhury met Ershad in the jail the same day and suggested that he accept the BNP proposal.

When Ershad demanded guarantees before consenting to the BNP proposal, he was told that an ambassador would be his guarantor in the negotiation.

Still, the talks between them failed. After the June 12 election in 1996, JP extended support to AL in forming government on condition that Ershad would be released from jail.

At that time, several BNP and JP leaders met Ershad at jail, violating all rules and regulations, and asked him not to give any support to AL.

Later, Ershad told the press that BNP had offered him the post of prime minister. But he did not agree, because, he said, "It's them who had thrown me in jail."

But history repeated itself again in 2001. Before the election, BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia, who was uncompromisingly anti-autocrat in the 80s, went to Ershad's house to express sympathy for the dethroned tyrant after he was convicted in a graft case by the higher court. Ironically, it was Khaleda government (1991-96) that had filed the case.

Following the meet, Ershad joined BNP-led four-party alliance but later quit. After leaving the coalition, he said in reference to meeting Khaleda: "It is my success that she went to my house."

The deal between Ershad and the AL government in 2001 seems to have gone one step ahead. When the government assured JP that no more cases would be moved against him, JP parted from the BNP-led four-party alliance and rejoined parliament.

While describing it, Ershad said then, "It was a blunder to join BNP-led alliance."

The ongoing deal between the BNP and Ershad seems to have gone two steps ahead. The government reportedly assured him that not only the cases against him will be disposed of, he might as well be nominated for presidency.

Now he says, "I was the architect of the four-party alliance. I made a great mistake by quitting the alliance."

After this dramatic shake-up in the political kaleidoscope, it will not be an overstatement if anyone says opportunism has become the order of the day in national politics.

## Malaysia

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Briefing diplomatic correspondents about the outcome of the 13th Asean Regional Forum (ARF) meeting and his bilateral talks with his counterparts from Malaysia, China, Myanmar and South Korea in Kuala Lumpur, Foreign Minister M Morshed Khan said both Bangladesh and Malaysian governments would ensure that the certain vested quarters do not cause any misery to these workers.

The Foreign Minister said he had meetings with Chinese Foreign Minister Li Zhaoxing and Myanmar Foreign Minister U Nyan Win discussing the road connectivity. Although Myanmar had some reservations in the past but now they have agreed to the tri-nation road connectivity, he added.

Morshed said if this road could be built, trade and economic cooperation would increase among the three countries. Officials of the three countries would meet soon to discuss the project.

He said the Chinese foreign minister thanked Bangladesh for supporting China to become a South Asian Regional Association for Cooperation (Saarc) Observer.

Morshed Khan also had bilateral meeting with the foreign minister of South Korea discussing bilateral economic cooperation.

Referring to the outcome of the 13th ARF meeting, where Bangladesh was admitted officially as its 26th member, he said it is the success of the government's look east policy.

He said the ARF meeting discussed Middle East issue, terrorism, disarmament and maritime security issues. On Israeli aggression on Hezbollah, Morshed said most member states condemned the Israeli actions and called for immediate cease-fire in Lebanon.

Foreign Secretary Hemayetuddin was present at the briefing.

## Splintered dreams

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On their arrival at ZIA from the war-torn Lebanon at around 8:00am, the Bangladeshis told horrifying experiences of air strikes and bomb blasts that killed hundreds and injured thousands of Lebanese and other nationals, and damaged roads and buildings, and virtually threw their lives into utter uncertainty.

Quite a few employers in Lebanon died or left the country for safety while many foreigners working under them are passing uncertain days on the streets, they said.

"One fine morning, as I was working at my master's house, I suddenly heard a rocking sound. I ran out of the building and saw it was on fire. Later I heard that all of the six members of the family who had been sleeping on the first floor died in that bomb blast," said Shamin, 24, who had been in Lebanon for the last five years.

The lady who has a daughter and a son back at her house at Dohar of Nawabganj said her master was supposed to pay around 5,000 dollars as her salary of five years, but now there is no hope of getting that money.

"Surely I am lucky enough to return home. But I am empty-handed now. What shall I do for my children?" she said, adding that the war has snatched everything except her life.

Omar Molla, 34, from Singair at Sirajganj, who worked in a construction firm in Beirut, left the office along with some other Bangladeshis and other nationals and took shelter in an underground structure.

They stayed there for seven days and used to eat dry bread and pickle, he said, adding, "One day

some Bangladeshi leaders called us and asked us to write applications to the Bangladesh Consulate in Jordan that prepared our documents to come home."

Bangladeshi and other nationals who worked there ran in and around Beirut amid heavy bombings, the returnees said.

The Bangladeshis are facing greater troubles, as there is no Bangladesh embassy in Beirut.

Meanwhile, some of the returnees reported unconfirmed news of some Bangladeshi women's death in Israeli bombings in Lebanon. "I have heard that some Bangladeshi women died in Lebanon," said Mohammad Jamal of Kasba of Brahmanbaria.

Almost half of about 15,000 Bangladeshis working in Lebanon are women, he said.

An official estimate, however, puts the figure at 10,000.

Many of the Bangladeshis returnees had to leave a good amount of their earnings in Lebanon, as their employers either died or left for other countries.

IOJ's Media official Nahreen Farzana said 70 more Bangladeshis will arrive in Dhaka today while the rest of the 283 Bangladeshis, who registered for returning home from Lebanon and are now staying at different transit points of Syria, would be brought home soon.

Deputy Secretary of the expatriates' welfare ministry Amir Hossain said the returnees will be helped for their rehabilitation here or sent back to Lebanon or other countries if they want.

## Hasina

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"What's the mystery behind it?"

She said the BNP-led alliance government has failed to honour its commitments to the teachers' community and regarding separation of the judiciary.

"The government has ruined all the national institutions one after another and destroyed the country's social and economical environment," she alleged.

The opposition leader said the government has made Bangladesh dependent on smuggling and foreign assistance.

She alleged that the government has made scores of CDs containing propaganda against her party for telecasting before the coming national election through the private television channels launched by BNP leaders using their black money.

Hasina said the alliance government has looted crores of taka during its tenure and that black money would be used for buying votes in the next parliamentary election.

She urged people to remain alert against "the vote thieves."

The AL chief also accused the government of playing a "dirty game" with the updating of voter list, ignoring the High Court verdict and said it is not possible to hold a free and fair election under the supervision of the present Election Commission (EC).

She urged all Awami League leaders and workers to remain alert so that everyone having the age of 18 is enrolled in the electoral roll.

## Skop strike

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announcement and implementation of the national minimum wage, stopping privatisation, reopening all closed factories in the country, providing appointment letters to the workers working in industries which are not well organised and other facilities such as ensuring weekly holidays and maternity leave.

The government did not take any initiative to solve the problems permanently despite their repeated appeals, he added.

Wajedul Islam Khan, general secretary of Bangladesh Trade Union Kendra (BTUK), said Amanullah Aman, state minister for labour and manpower, on July 27, told them that their demands were 'under process' of being implemented and urged them to withdraw the strike.

"How can he [Aman] meet the demands at the twilight of the government's tenure when he failed to do that earlier," he added.

Different district bound buses from Dhaka will not be allowed to ply during the strike, he told The Daily Star last night.

The leaders said hospitals, ambulances, newspaper vehicles, restaurants, surgical instruments shops, dispensaries, vehicles carrying bodies and wedding entourages will be out of the purview of the strike.

Nurul Islam, president of BTUK, Ray Ramesh Chandra, general secretary of Jatiya Sramik League, Shafuddin Ahmed, general secretary of Jatiya Sramik Federation, Chowdhury Ashiqul Alam, general secretary of Trade Union Sangha were present at the conference.

The Skop leaders also held a rally at Muktangan in the city in the evening and brought out a procession.

## Robbers loot

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Zilani, warehouse guard Abdus Salam and sweeper Bhanu Chandra Das for interrogation. Police also formed four teams to hunt down the burglars and recover the loot.

"The gang of burglars entered the bank through a window by cutting its grills sometime Saturday night. They broke into the strong room, broke the locks and cut off the door-hinges of two iron-safes and then took off with Tk 10,02,000 in cash and the rifle," police said.

## Updated voter list

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On May 3 this year, the EC published the draft of a fresh voter list that showed 9.13 crore voters while the existing voter list prepared in 2000 has 7.64 crore voters.

The unusual rise in the number of voters triggered enormous controversy over its accuracy. The draft list was declared illegal by the Supreme Court as the list was prepared ignoring the High Court judgement.

The EC secretary said the finance ministry did not inform him anything on allocation of budget for the task of voter list update till yesterday.

He, however, expressed hope that the ministry will allocate the budget in a day or two.

About the progress of the ongoing task of updating the voter list through door to door visits, the secretary said the progress is on an average over 30 per cent while it is below 30 per cent in the capital.

**ELECTION PREPARATIONS**  
The EC have started preparations for holding the next parliamentary election, the secretary said, adding that the preparation has got slow pace due to various complexities.

"We are planning to purchase 20 thousand new ballot boxes to add to the present number," he said.

At present there are 1.95 lakh ballot boxes, a senior official said.

The EC secretary, however, rejected the demand for introduction of transparent ballot boxes.

## 52 killed in Lebanon

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of flattened homes and an underground shelter to find survivors while mothers hugged their dead children in a final hopeless embrace.

"At least 52 people were killed. They include 30 children," said Salam Daher, the local civil defence chief.

Lebanon's health minister said a total of 750 people had been killed, most of them civilians, and more than 2,000 wounded in Lebanon since Israel launched its air, sea and land assault on July 12.

"The bombing was so intense that no-one could move," said a distraught Ibrahim Shalhoub, 26. "I succeeded in getting out and everything collapsed. I have several members of the family inside and I do not think that there will be any other survivors."

In a separate attack, five members of the same family – including two children – were killed Sunday in an Israeli air raid on Lebanon, which destroyed their house in the border village of Yaroun, police said.

"The bombardments intensified on the village and a house two stories high collapsed completely, burying the five members of the Khanafer family who lived there," said police.

Israel, which has received staunch US backing since the conflict began on July 12, unleashed its firepower on Qana after flatly rejecting a UN call for a 72-hour truce to allow the delivery of humanitarian aid to Lebanon.

Senioria ruled out any talks on finding an end to the conflict until there was an immediate halt to Israel's offensive, signalling the likely failure of Rice's efforts to win support on both sides for the deployment of an international force in Lebanon.

"There is no place on this sad morning for any discussion other than an immediate and unconditional ceasefire as well as an international investigation into the Israeli massacres in Lebanon now," he told reporters.

Rice, on her second trip to the region in less than a week, refrained again from calling for an immediate truce after talks in Israel and a trip to Lebanon was cancelled.

"I think what it is time to do is get to a ceasefire, we actually have to put one in place," she said. "We want a ceasefire as soon as possible, I would have wanted a ceasefire yesterday if possible, but the parties have to agree to a ceasefire and there have to be certain conditions in place."

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert Sunday rejected calls for Israel to halt its offensive in Lebanon following an air raid in the village of Qana that left dozens of civilians dead.

"The state of Israel, the government and the IDF (armed forces) express deep regret for the incident," Olmert said at the end of a weekly cabinet meeting.

Israel needs 10 to 14 days more to continue its offensive in Lebanon, Olmert told visiting US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, an Israeli government official said Sunday.

Olmert told Rice that "Israel needed 10 days to two weeks to continue the operation", the official told reporters.

"This period of time is what we need to achieve the goals of the operation," the official quoted Olmert as telling Rice.

Olmert told her that Israel wanted a multinational force of at least 10,000 troops to be deployed in Lebanon.

"Despite the hard incident I will not request the defence establishment to stop the fire or change the type of operations," he said.

The army, while voicing "regret" for the civilian deaths, pinned the blame on Hezbollah, saying it used the village as a base to launch rockets, and that residents had already been ordered to leave.

But reaction was fierce across the Arab world, and even Britain, Washington's closest ally, condemned the Qana attack as "quite appalling."

The village, said by some to be where Jesus turned water into wine, was the site of an Israeli bombing of a UN base in April 1996 that killed 105 people during Israel's "Grapes of Wrath" offensive – also aimed at wiping out Hezbollah.

Dozens of other villages around the southern port city of Tyre were also bombed with fire from the Israeli navy, air force and artillery. Israeli planes also tore up the Masnaa border crossing into Syria, leading to the closure of the main Damascus-Beirut route.

Israeli ground troops also launched a new cross-border incursion and were engaged in fierce battles with Hezbollah guerrillas on the outskirts of the southeastern village of Taibe.

About 30 rockets fired from south Lebanon also landed across towns in northern Israel, without causing any injuries, police said.

The attacks came after defiant Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah vowed to strike cities in the centre of Israel if the Jewish state continued to attack civilians in Lebanon.

Israel has refused to set a date for ending its war on the Shiite Muslim group that has made hundreds of thousands homeless and destroyed much of Lebanon's infrastructure.

Israel has mobilised thousands of army reservists and says it plans to create a narrow buffer zone in Lebanon until the muddled international force is deployed.

Israel has lost a total of 51 people since the conflict erupted, many of them soldiers killed in combat.

Last week it lost nine soldiers in fighting around the key border town of Bint Jbeil in its biggest single-day death toll of the conflict, facing tougher-than-expected resistance despite its military superiority.

On Friday the Israeli military claimed to have hit a launch pad it suspected was used to fire a new type of missile that hit Afula, 50km south of the border, the deepest strike into Israel since the warring began.

US President George W. Bush had stressed in his weekly radio address Saturday that "militias in Lebanon must be disarmed, the flow of illegal arms must be halted, and the Lebanese security services should deploy throughout the country."

He said that during his meetings with British Prime Minister Tony Blair in Washington Friday they agreed that a "robust multinational force must be dispatched to Lebanon quickly".

Bush and Blair did not call for an immediate ceasefire, and warned Israel's archfoes Syria and Iran – supporters of Hezbollah – that they must become "proper and responsible members of the international community" or face "the risk of increasing confrontation".

Blair said world powers would meet at the UN Monday to discuss the possible deployment of a multinational force. But Syria said it would simply be an "occupation force" that served Israel's interests.

The British leader defended his siding with Bush on the Lebanese crisis, and brushed off mounting protests at home about the use of a Scottish airport by US jets carrying weapons bound for Israel.

Two Indian UN peacekeepers were wounded on Saturday in an Israeli air raid on their post in south Lebanon. Four UN military observers were killed last week in an Israeli strike on their observation post.

With 800,000 Lebanese displaced by the fighting, the International Committee of the Red Cross has criticised the "unacceptable" humanitarian situation and said Israel had to do much more to spare civilians.

## Road march ends

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Laboratory and Savar from 3:00pm to 7:00pm. The law enforcers also blocked different lanes and by-lanes of Mirpur Road until the marchers left Russel Square at about 7:30pm. Only a limited number of rickshaws operated on Mirpur Road during the march.

The opposition coalition had held a rally at Aminbazar before the march started from there. It also held rallies at Shyamoli and Gabtoli.

Senior opposition leaders including Amir Hossain Amu, Abdur Razzak, Abdul Jaill, Molla Chowdhury, Suranjit Sengupta, Hasanul Haque Inu, Mofazzel Hossain Chowdhury Maya, Bimal Biswas, Dilip Barua, Mainuddin Khan Badal, Nurul Islam, MA Goni, Hasina Doula, Murad Jong, and Maqbul Hossain addressed the rallies.

The leaders vowed to resist any election in the country before the proposed electoral reforms are implemented.

Saying that the people have now become united under the banner of 14-party coalition, Amu, a senior AL presidium member said the prime minister will not be able to destroy the unity of the people by forming alliance with anti-liberation war and autocratic forces.

Regarding Jatiya Party Chairman Hussain Mohammad Ershad's possible joining with the ruling alliance, AL General Secretary also 14-party Coordinator Abdul Jalil said Ershad will take only 30 seconds to say goodbye to the prime minister after the caretaker government takes charge.

After the rallies senior opposition leaders led the march.

The marchers also blasted the four-party alliance government for

price hike of essentials, rise of militancy and disruption of power and water supply. A government led by AL chief Sheikh Hasina will bring an end to the misrule and corruption, they said.

They also chanted slogans that turned into pre-election campaign in favour of several prospective opposition candidates from Mohammadpur, Mirpur and Savar areas in the next election. The candidates including Maqbul Hossain, Kamal Majumder, Hasina Doula and Murad Jong supplied a number of marching bands for their followers who rejoiced all through the march route by singing, dancing and seeking votes for them.

Lack of vehicles caused sufferings for homebound people from busy areas like Dhanmondi, Mohammadpur, Shyamoli, Gabtoli and other parts of the city. No inter-district bus left Gabtoli for different districts from 3:30pm to 5:30pm.

Senior leaders of the coalition will meet today to announce the next course of anti-government action programmes. Talking to The Daily Star some of the senior leaders hinted that similar programmes will be chalked out for different districts where ruling BNP has the upper hand.

AL presidium members met last night and discussed the next agitation programme, which is likely to be finalised today after discussing it with party chief, Sheikh Hasina.

## BNP's thorny

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grassroots level leaders to convince them in favour of his decision to side with the ruling alliance.

Besides, the grassroots leaders, many central leaders are also opposed to joining the BNP-Jamaat alliance, fearing that it might spell disaster for JP in the next election.

On withdrawal of the cases against Ershad, many legal experts said the process will not be so easy and neither it is possible to withdraw or dispose of all the cases within a month.

Besides, it is not the government, rather it is the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) that has the jurisdiction to withdraw a corruption case. If the government wants to withdraw cases against Ershad, it will have to interfere in the ACC proceedings, they observed.

About the cases under trial, legal experts said permission of the court is required to withdraw a case.

Considering the legal complexities, many senior leaders of the JP believe the party will not join the ruling alliance. "We are just passing time as the government is putting pressure on our party chairman," a JP presidium member told The Daily Star on condition of anonymity.

Ershad himself knows well about the complexities of withdrawing the cases. So, he has put forward the conditions," he said, adding that the conditions may be a tactic to refuse the ruling party proposal.

**VIEW-EXCHANGE WITH PARTY LEADERS**

The JP chairman yesterday held a view-exchange meeting with grassroots level leaders of Sylhet division and he will sit today with the leaders of Comilla unit.

"We won't get expected results if we should contest the election on our own and that's why I have taken this decision," Ershad told the leaders.

The former president said JP is now the focus of all attention in politics. Media and some quarters are blaming him. "If it's not wrong for me to join the 14-party coalition, then why couldn't I join the four-party alliance,"

he questioned.

Dismissing the Jamaat leaders' comment that he is unpredictable, the former president said a soldier could never be unpredictable.

"How much sacrifice do I have to make," he said adding, "It is easier for some people to be a lawmaker and make money, using my name. But this time I won't give anyone any chances."

"I did not get justice in last 15 years. The number of seats in parliament is not important for us, rather survival of the party is all that matters now," Ershad told the leaders.

Criticising his brother and JP Presidium Member GM Quader, he said he [Quader] speaks as if he is the only patriot in the country.

"I don't need any hero in the party, I need loyal workers only," he observed.

The grassroots leaders said they will back whatever decision the party chairman will take.

Among others, JP General Secretary ABM Ruhul Amin Hawlader, Kazi Zafar Ahmed, Kazi Firoz Rashid were present there.

**NO PLAN NOW: BABAR**

State Minister for Home Affairs Lutfozzaman Babar yesterday said the government has no plans now to withdraw the cases filed against former autocrat HM Ershad.

Talking on the move to have Ershad in the alliance, he said, "In politics, there are practices of this sort. There is no place for last word in politics and it is nothing new."

Asked whether it was ethical on his part to meet the former autocrat, Babar said, "I am not a bureaucrat. The post of a minister is a political one and I am serving here as a political figure. We're working with a political vision and it is the duty of the ministers to implement the vision."

He was speaking to the reporters after a home ministry meeting on smuggling.

## BB to probe

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suspect party, he said.

Earlier, the Bangladesh Bank collected vouchers of some big deals done by BD Foods. The bank's sources said details of 360 bank transactions, each involving over Tk 1 crore, will be sent to the CID today.

"We think these 360 vouchers will be important documents in the process of investigating BD Foods' heroin smuggling to the UK," the official said.

The central bank also found 83 bank accounts of BD Foods and its sister concerns in which transactions of TK 331 crore were reported in the last three years. Of these bank accounts, BD Foods has 30 in Islami Bank Bangladesh Ltd and 28 in Exim Bank Ltd.

The UK customs in May 2005 accused Bangladeshi business firms of smuggling heroin to the UK in the guise of exporting food, toiletries, cosmetics and floor tiles. A National Board of Revenue (NBR) investigation confirmed the validity of the UK customs' allegations and involvement of BD Foods Ltd in the racket.

## Govt starts talks

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ignoring the education minister's invitation over telephone for dialogues.

NFTE Chief Co-ordinator and Convenor Prof Quazi Faruque said they would not sit in dialogue with the government without government's assurance of fulfilling their principal demands including cent per cent basic salary from the government exchequer.

NFTE yesterday organised rallies and brought out processions in upazilas across the country.

Earlier, NFTE declared a series of month-long programmes including roads and waterways blockade in the districts on August 1, grand sit-in programme in Dhaka on August 22 and a half-day hartal in Dhaka on August 23.

Furthermore, NFTE will organise representative meets at organisational institutions from August 2 to 5, rallies and processions at districts on August 6 and at divisional headquarters from August 8.

Even though the striking teachers' organisations urged the government to hold a dialogue where representatives of all groups would be present, the government will have to sit separately with different platforms since each platform has different agendas to discuss, education ministry sources said.

Teachers and employees of non-government high schools, colleges and madrasas under four organisations have been on indefinite strike since July 6 demanding cent per cent salary from the government exchequer, increase in house rent and medical allowance, full festival allowance and implementation of relevant Unesco and ILO recommendations.

## PM likely

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