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Venue complexity takes reform talks back

HASAN IAHID TUSHER

The formal dialogue between the ruling BNP and opposition Awami League (AL) over electoral reforms will not start today as complexities arose at the last moment yesterday over settling a venue for the much-awaited talks.

But in a sudden move last night US ambassador in Dhaka Patricia A Butenis invited BNP Secretary General Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan and AL General Secretary Abdul Jalil at her official residence at 8:00pm today.

Accepting the invitation, Jalil phoned his counterpart Bhuiyan at about 11:00pm urging him to join the meeting at the US envoy's residence to settle the venue and time for the dialogue.

The US Ambassador has told me that she has invited me and

Mannan Bhuiyan to a tea. I have accepted her invitation. I hope Mannan Bhuiyan will also accept it. He will attend if they (government) want dialogue," Jalil told reporters after an emergency meeting of the AL Presidium last night at Sudha Sadan.

But the BNP secretary general kept mum over the invitation. Sources said Bhuiyan might not sit with Jalil at the envoy's house to discuss reforms.

Bhuiyan will formally make clear his position at a press briefing today at 12:30pm after discussing the matter with the BNP chairperson and senior party leaders.

The complexities over a venue have made the talks uncertain again.

The AL presidium meeting held last night with party President Sheikh Hasina in the chair endorsed

the US envoy's invitation to Jalil. Sources said the AL prefers to start dialogue at the ambassador's residence as the party leaders consider it as a 'neutral place' while the BNP policymakers think the talks should not take place at any envoy's house.

Bhuiyan had proposed yesterday morning that the dialogue could be held at State Guesthouse Padma at 11:00am today. But Jalil did not make clear his position whether he will accept Bhuiyan's proposal.

Asked about Bhuiyan's proposal, Jalil told The Daily Star at 11:52 last night that he would talk to Bhuiyan about settling the venue.

"This is a great opportunity for the two major political parties to move forward," AL Presidium Member Kazi Zafarullah told The

Daily Star about the US envoy's invitation for "starting the talks" at her residence.

The AL presidium meeting observed that the US wants a meaningful election in Bangladesh and it could facilitate a dialogue between the two parties, AL Joint General Secretary Obaidul Quader told The Daily Star.

He said they are hopeful about starting the talks. "If the dialogue does not take place, people will march to Dhaka with whatever they have to force the government to carry out reforms," Quader said.

However, as the two parties remain rigid on some crucial points there is fear that things could get even worse if the talks fail.

The opposition has decided not to budge on its objections to Justice KM Hasan taking over as the

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Unruly workers ransack garment factory, vehicles

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Unruly garment factory workers yesterday ransacked a factory and over a dozen vehicles at Mirpur in the capital after the factory staff beat up some workers.

Some 15 workers were also wounded during the half an hour-long clashes with factory staff and the law enforcers at the factory of Opex group at Mirpur Section 13.

The Opex workers alleged that around 50 workers from other nearby factories came to their factory at around 10:30am and asked the management to close the factory as yesterday was a public holiday for Durga Puja and the workers will not get overtime payment for the day's work.

"Without paying heed to their request, the factory authorities barred us from coming out and kept the gates locked which

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Cops maul gold medallist shooter Asif

Parking refusal to DIG's wife ignites police anger; Asif along with four arrested, 25 hurt in beating blitz

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Police yesterday severely beat up three shooters including Commonwealth Games Gold Medallist Asif Hossain Khan storming into the National Shooting Federation Complex in Gulshan following a trivial argument between a security guard of the complex and a police officer's chauffeur over parking of a car.

After the beating at the complex, police arrested five including the shooters and took them to Gulshan Police Station where they beat the arrestees some more before sending them to a court charging them with assaults on policemen.

Internationally acclaimed shooter Asif, who was preparing for the Asian Games to be held in Doha in December, and another shooter Shoebuzzaman were admitted to Metropolitan

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National shooters Asif Hossain Khan, left, and Shoebuzzaman bleeding profusely after police beat them up following a brawl with a police officer's driver yesterday.

BNP readies response to AL demands

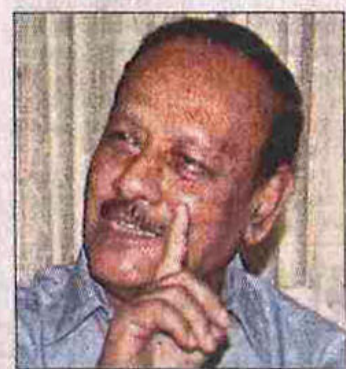
STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The ruling BNP has identified 42 points from the main opposition Awami League's (AL) proposal for the reforms in the caretaker government system and the Election Commission while their leaders are preparing replies to place in the talks with AL.

Meanwhile, Jamaat-e-Islami, the main ally of ruling BNP, finally gave its consent to BNP's sitting in dialogue with AL without their participation.

In a crucial meeting of the ruling alliance, BNP Secretary General Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan convinced Jamaat leaders that there is no alternative to sitting with the main opposition as the next election will not be acceptable to the international community without their participation, sources said.

As the Jamaat leaders reiterated their strong opposition to the proposed BNP-AL secretary general level talks on reforms in the caretaker government system and Election Commission that would exclude Jamaat, the BNP secretary



Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan

general assured the Jamaat leaders that he will hear the AL proposals during the talks while the decision on them will be taken after consultation within the coalition.

When an Islami Oikya Jote leader asked if any concrete decision had been taken on changing Justice MA Aziz as the chief election commissioner and Justice KM Hasan as chief of the caretaker government, Bhuiyan replied in the negative, meeting sources said.

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AL to place 31-point reform proposals

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Awami League (AL) General Secretary Abdul Jalil will place 31-point electoral reform proposals at the beginning of the much-awaited dialogue with the ruling BNP Secretary General Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan, sources said.

"We are awaiting government response to our proposals from the BNP secretary general at the talks," said a senior AL leader, asked about the party strategy at the one-to-one dialogue over reforms in the caretaker government system, Election Commission and electoral laws.

The leader said the government's response will make it clear whether they are sincere to make the dialogue a success or agreed to hold it only to kill time before handing over power to caretaker government after its tenure ends on October 27.

"We don't want to make the dialogue a lengthy process, rather want a quick outcome," he asserted seeking anonymity.

Meanwhile, in last minute preparations for the talks, the AL



Abdul Jalil

yesterday set its strategies after separate meetings of senior leaders of the party and its allies in the 14-party combine.

Leader of the Opposition and AL chief Sheikh Hasina last night chaired an emergency meeting of the party presidium, the highest policy-making body of the party.

At the meeting, the leaders said they would not compromise on a number of points that include reservations about Justice

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Ershad doubts success of talks

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Jatiya Party (JP) Chairman HM Ershad yesterday expressed doubt over success of the intended dialogue between secretary-generals of ruling BNP and opposition Awami League (AL) to resolve the political impasse centring opposition's electoral reform demands.

"The dialogue will not bring any result as it is going to be held only between two parties," said the deposed dictator, who leads the third largest political party in parliament, at a JP pre-lia discussion at a hotel in the capital. "I think the planned dialogue between the two parties will not be successful and it's too late now."

"It seems that no other party exists in Bangladesh except BNP and Awami League," Ershad observed. Any dialogue on electoral reforms should be held among the parties that have representation in the parliament, he suggested.

Ershad, who recently hinted at the possibility of joining the BNP-Jamaat-led coalition, yesterday apparently took a different stance and said he would decide about

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PRGF LOAN CONDITIONS

Automatic fuel pricing formula on cards

REJAUL KARIM BYRON

An automatic fuel pricing formula will be introduced by the end of the current fiscal.

At the same time ration cards for kerosene or direct cash transfer to the poor will also be introduced to mitigate the impact of energy price adjustments on vulnerable groups.

"The government will make commitments to International Monetary Fund (IMF) very soon about the fuel pricing formula and a policy commitment titled Memorandum on Economic and Financial Policies has already been drafted in this regard," said a high official of the finance ministry.

He said the government's policy measures are in line with IMF's conditions for getting the sixth

instalment of Poverty Reduction Growth Facility (PRGF) loan. The government is also going to pledge for another round of increase in fuel prices before introducing the automatic price adjustment mechanism next year, the official added.

IMF deferred the payment of around \$80 million sixth tranche of PRGF loan, which was scheduled for July, as Bangladesh had failed to fulfil the lender's energy and revenue reform conditions.

Upon a request of the finance minister an IMF mission recently visited Bangladesh and the government told the mission that most of the reform agendas are not possible to be implemented by the present regime.

The government side told the mission that they will bring the

reforms if elected for another term following the upcoming election. In a latest development, the loan proposal accompanied by the policy commitment paper is likely to be placed in the IMF executive board meeting in mid-October for approval.

Once the fuel pricing formula is introduced, prices of kerosene, diesel, petrol and octane will be determined automatically based on their prices on the international market.

Referring to last June's fuel price adjustments the policy commitment paper describes the government's measures to reduce Bangladesh Petroleum Corporation's (BPC) dependence on government-directed borrowing from

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