

JS draws

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that the dialogue will be meaningful and thus able to break the political stand-off over the electoral reforms.

The first day's discussions between BNP Secretary General Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan and AL General Secretary Abdul Jalil took place in the standing committee room of the JS Bhaban and lasted for 70 minutes.

Seeking to end the long stalemate over reform issue, the two parties yesterday sat for the first time in 11 years.

In 1995, the BNP and AL sat at the state guesthouse Padma amid a deadlock over the then opposition AL's demand for introduction of a non-party caretaker government system to hold a free and fair election.

At that time, the then BNP government ignored the opposition demand and held the sixth parliamentary election on February 15, 1996 that was boycotted by all opposition political parties.

The then BNP government was forced to step down on March 30, 1996 in the face of opposition's movement and introduced the caretaker government by amending the constitution.

This time, Bhuiyan and Jalil are at the negotiating table to discuss reforms in the caretaker government and electoral systems.

Accompanied by party lawmakers, BNP second in command Mannan Bhuiyan entered the standing committee room at 11:29am. Shortly afterwards, he was joined by his counterpart Jalil.

Deputy Speaker Akhtar Hamid Siddiqui received them amid huge camera clicks. The security personnel at that time were having great difficulty managing the crowds of journalists and party leaders.

The two leaders allowed 15 minutes for a photo session when scores of press photographers and TV cameramen recorded the historic event. For the first time, private TV cameras and photojournalists were allowed inside the parliament building during the current parliament.

Different private television channels broadcast the event live from the JS Bhaban.

After the photo session, Bhuiyan and Jalil got down to business in the standing committee room amid heavy security measures.

The two secretaries general emerged from the meeting venue and went to the cabinet room at 12:54pm to address a joint press conference, also

for the first time in the history of Bangladesh politics.

The room was crammed with reporters, photographers and camera crew and was in a state of chaos before the two leaders called upon the crowd to keep quiet.

"We will be forced to leave the room if you (crowd) don't keep silence," said Bhuiyan, visibly annoyed. As the noise faded out, the two leaders began to speak.

The yesterday's festivity reminded many of the scenes at the parliament secretariat at the beginning of current parliament on October 28, 2001.

"But the festivity at the beginning of the current parliament was one-sided as the main opposition Awami League boycotted the inaugural session of the House," a senior official of the JS Secretariat told The Daily Star.

HOPE FOR A CONSENSUS

"We wouldn't have come to the dialogue, had we thought it won't be meaningful," AL lawmaker Asaduzzaman Noor told reporters at the JS Bhaban.

Ruling BNP Whip Shahidul Haque Jamal said the two leaders have started the discussion with an open mind. "It is expected that the talks will be successful."

The 14-party opposition combine leaders termed the dialogue an outcome of their long campaign for reforms in the caretaker government system, Election Commission and electoral laws.

"The beginning of the dialogue was fine. We hope the government will accept the proposals sincerely. If they do not carry out the electoral reforms, the country will head towards confrontation," AL Joint General Secretary Obaidul Quader said.

Rashed Khan Menon, president of the Workers Party, said a positive result must come out from the talks to avoid confrontation.

"We are optimistic that the two leaders will reach a consensus to break the deadlock," Nazrul Islam Khan, joint secretary general of BNP, said.

Abdus Salam, general secretary of Dhaka city unit BNP, said if the two leaders agree, there should be no complexities over implementation of the reforms agenda.

AL focused

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electoral reforms before the BNP secretary general.

"I explained to Bhuiyan our proposals for reforms in the caretaker government system and Election Commission," he told the crowded press conference.

The AL-led 14-party opposition combine has been agitating in the streets for the last one and a half years to press home the demands for reforms in the caretaker government system and the Election Commission.

The Jatiya Sangsad Bhaban were a festive mood yesterday with the presence of a good number of lawmakers from both the ruling and opposition sides before the start of the dialogue at 11:45am.

Later, at an emergency meeting of the AL Presidium at 2:00pm at Sudha Sadan, Jalil informed the party policymaking body of the outcome of yesterday's discussion with the ruling BNP secretary general.

Jalil informed the meeting that he told Bhuiyan that they want to resolve first the issue of appointment of the chief adviser to the caretaker government while the other reform proposals will be discussed later, sources said.

"I argued for the necessity of appointing a person acceptable to all as the chief adviser to the caretaker government. Bhuiyan told me that he will discuss the issue with his party high command and let me know their position tomorrow [today]," Jalil told the presidium meeting chaired by AL President Sheikh Hasina.

Hasina, who cancelled her scheduled visit to Tungipara yesterday, asked the AL senior leaders to get prepared for the next course of actions no matter whatever the outcome of the dialogue, sources said.

Later at a meeting, leaders of the 14-party opposition line-up emphasised continuing the dialogue to press home their reform demands to ensure a free and fair election.

"I have tried to make him [Bhuiyan] understand the necessity of the reforms to ensure a free and fair election under a non-partisan neutral caretaker government according to the constitution," Jalil said at a press briefing at the Dhanmodni AL office at 2:45pm.

Mannan Bhuiyan, who informed BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia over telephone of his discussion with Jalil, held a meeting last night with his party policymakers on the opposition's proposals for reforms, sources said.

The BNP high command, who had held a series of meetings to fix party strategy before sitting in the dialogue, consulted within themselves last night to respond to the opposition's proposal.

Following the 14th amendment to the constitution that extended the retirement age of the Supreme Court judges, the AL on October 12, 2004 demanded appointment of the chief adviser to the next caretaker government in consultation with the major political parties.

The amendment confirmed appointment of Justice KM Hasan as the next caretaker chief, but the opposition combine declared to resist his appointment on grounds that Justice Hasan was involved with BNP politics.

Party insiders, meanwhile, said the ruling BNP may not budge on the

crucial issue of appointing Justice KM Hasan the chief adviser to the caretaker government.

The opposition also came up with proposals for appointment of the chief election commissioner (CEC) and other election commissioners in consultation with the political parties.

But ignoring the opposition demands, the government appointed Justice MA Aziz the CEC on May 23, 2005, and two other election commissioners on January 16, 2006 and another one last September.

Pressure builds

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negotiating track. We have to leave that path open because in the long term it is the only way of resolving this problem."

According to a European diplomat in London, the talks including US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice – on her way back from a Mideast trip – will begin late afternoon, followed by an evening session over dinner.

After the meeting, British Foreign Secretary Margaret Beckett is expected to sum up the conclusions on behalf of the so-called P5-plus-1 group – the five permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany, the source said.

The meeting was expected to agree that Iran "does not want to negotiate and draw conclusions from that," the source told AFP.

Rice, who is pressing for sanctions on Iran, warned this week that the credibility of the international community is on the line and time is "running out."

Iran insists its nuclear programme is solely for peaceful energy needs and has vowed it will not suspend uranium enrichment, defying warnings of sanctions from world powers.

Iran's chief nuclear negotiator Ali Larjani and EU foreign policy chief Javier Solana have staged four rounds of talks on Iran's nuclear programme but have failed to make a breakthrough.

According to the diplomatic source in Brussels, the Europeans are willing to talk about sanctions, but insist they must be "proportionate, progressive and reversible."

"If we decide to start to introduce sanctions, they must be very specific sanctions, very concrete, on technologies which can be used in the nuclear sphere," he added.

Solana's spokeswoman Cristina Gallach underlined that the current diplomatic efforts were different from a European initiative in 2004-2005, which ultimately failed.

"The offer of November 2004 was only one and a half pages long and only had the Europeans' signature, while the June 2006 offer has the signature of the whole Security Council and Germany.

"The Americans are very much on board, it is a truly robust international offer."

German Ambassador Frank Meike, who chairs the presidency of European Union for Finland, said the EU hoped that the dialogue would lead to a successful conclusion for free and fair elections.

"We hope both the parties will successfully prepare the way for free and fair elections," Meike told the news agency.

10 killed in 26-hour Kashmir gunbattle

REUTERS, Srinagar

Ten people, including seven policemen and two militants, were killed in a 26-hour gunbattle as security forces fought gunmen holed up in a hotel in the heart of Kashmir's main city, police said yesterday.

At least 12 people were wounded, eight of them police officers, in the stand-off which began when a group of militants lobbed a grenade at a security camp and then entered a hotel opposite and began firing at the base on Wednesday.

"The operation is over now (but) we are still searching the area for abandoned ammunition and explosives," Gopal Sharma, director-general of police for Jammu and Kashmir, told reporters near the site of the encounter.

Police dressed in military fatigues swarmed the area around the hotel, cordoned off since Wednesday morning.

The militant group Al-Mansurian said a three-member suicide squad attacked the camp, which lies close to a congested residential area of Srinagar, summer capital of the troubled state of Jammu and Kashmir.

The group said they had killed 11 policemen and that one of their members had escaped.

"One of our mujahid has returned to base and two were martyred in the attack. Our mujahideen killed at least 11 policemen," a caller, identifying himself as an Al-Mansurian spokesman, told newspaper offices in Srinagar.

The attack is the most serious in recent months in Srinagar, which has seen almost daily street protests over the past week after a Delhi court fixed Oct. 20 as the date for hanging Mohammed Afzal, convicted for a 2001 attack on the parliament.

Mohammed Afzal's wife has since appealed to the president for clemency.

The Himalayan region has been rocked by a separatist insurgency since 1989 in which more than 45,000 people have been killed, but violence has eased since India and Pakistan launched a peace process in 2004.

Kashmir is split between the nuclear-armed rivals but is claimed in full by both. Last month, leaders of the two nations decided to set up a joint agency to fight terrorism.

Rockets

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bloodless coup in 1999 and has survived two assassination attempts in Rawalpindi, both in December 2003.

In the first, suspected Islamic militants blew up a bridge as his motorcade passed but Musharraf was saved when electronic jamming equipment in his car delayed the blast.

The second attempt on Christmas Day was a suicide attack linked to Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda network that left 14 people dead.

In 2004 Pakistani authorities said they had busted a plot to fire rockets at Musharraf from the hills overlooking Islamabad during a national day parade.

Musharraf has blamed the attempts on Islamic militants, who are infuriated by his anti-extremist drives and for abandoning Afghanistan's Taliban after the September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States.

He is also hated by tribal insurgents in southwestern Baluchistan province.

"Musharraf is not short of enemies," said a Western diplomat.

US, EU, UK

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"We are very pleased that the dialogue is taking place; the national parliament house is the right place for such talks-it is the symbol of democracy and unity," he noted in his instant reaction to the press.

The Bangladesh-born British diplomat said, "We are also very pleased to hear that the dialogue will continue for a few days until a consensus is reached. Our good wishes go to both the parties in their search for finding a way forward."

The United States also welcomed the dialogue between the ruling and the opposition parties and said the US would continue to support a negotiated resolution of any obstacles to broad participation in the forthcoming election in Bangladesh.

"Dialogue will reduce tension and strengthen prospects for a successful, peaceful and fair election," a spokesman for the US embassy here said.

He said, "As we have stated on many occasions, the US does not favor any party or candidate in the election but supports a peaceful, fair and free electoral process."

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Ecneec rejects

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meeting in January and Ecneec meeting last Wednesday.

Following the January meeting, Saifur told the press, "We have reviewed the report of the independent review committee, it was not proper. The purchase committee has rejected the report. The company [Harbin] that got the deal will do it for Tk 86 crore lower than the next bidder – why should we pay more?"

Following Wednesday's meeting, Saifur told the press, "We have not approved the project and have asked the authorities concerned to re-tender it."

The power ministry Wednesday proposed a 144 per cent hike of project cost of the Chandpur plant. As per the original project profile, the budget was set to Tk 282 crore, and the revised proposal sought Tk 688 crore. Harbin's faulty proposal outlined the cost at \$45 million or Tk 288 crore.

The original project profile sought project implementation between July 2001 and June 2004. The revised budget extends the time up to June 2009.

The ministry in its proposal tried to justify the revision proposal that under the present cost structure, the contractor will install 100MW component. The additional fund will be required for installing combined cycle technology. The cost of other components has escalated as well.

Sources said through the events related to the Chandpur power plant project, the BNP led alliance government once again failed to deliver the nation anything in the power sector.

"If the government had listened to the review committee decision and brushed aside blatant favouritism for Harbin, the nation could have skipped one full year of delay. Favouritism always leads to complication beyond control," an official noted.

The Daily Star in various reports exposed how Harbin deliberately hides cost of equipment to lower its price in different power bids, and then resort to imposing the cost on the government. In addition, inexperienced and incompetent Harbin has so far failed to deliver a single power project as per the contract – though it is the only company to have bagged two power deals under the present government.

Harbin has been blacklisted by the Eastern Refinery Limited (ERL)

in August for its failure to install and run a small three megawatt power plant. The Tongi 80MW power plant built by Harbin has tripped nearly 90 times since it started operation in May last year.

Despite its poor performance, Harbin has received blind support from the government until now. The Chandpur 150MW project remains a shining example in this regard.

The flawed bid of Harbin for the Chandpur project had no technical offer, although it made a price offer of \$41 million, which the PDB termed as the lowest bid.

Another Chinese company CMC had filed the other bid of \$51 million. Aggrieved by PDB's arbitrary handling of the bid through accepting Harbin's flawed offer, the CMC filed a complaint to the government review panel as per the provision of the PPR, 2003.

The review panel under the Central Procurement Technical Unit of the Implementation, Monitoring and Evaluation Department (IMED) found PDB's acceptance of such a bid highly irregular as the price offer was made against a 'phantom technical offer and does not deserve any merit in evaluation'.

Official sources said during the October 2005 review of the Chandpur tender, the three-member IMED panel headed by former law secretary Mohammad Asaduzzaman received informal calls from Harbin's business lobby. They were later pressured to refrain from announcing Harbin's bid invalid.

Jubo League man

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Later, they (police) found the bullet-hit Jubo League activist lying in an unconscious state near a pond at the same village. He was rushed to Choudhagram Upazila Health Complex where he died.

Outraged by the killing, local unit of the Awami League (AL) and its front organisations put up barricades on the Dhaka-Chittagong Highway at Choudhagram, disrupting traffic for two hours from 9:00am to 11:00am.

The AL local unit also demanded arrest of the killers within the next 24 hours, otherwise, it threatened to block the Dhaka-Chittagong highway for three days from today.

RMG workers

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limitations," said Annisul Huq, representative of Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) on the board, after finalising the draft.

Around 95 per cent leaders of different workers' organisations in the RMG sector expressed their opinions favouring a minimum wage that would range between Tk 1,650 and Tk 1,800 although they were demanding Tk 3,000 earlier, he said.

Asked, whether BGMEA leaders managed the leaders of different organisations through bribing, Huq said it is just a rumour.

"The final recommendation did not protect the interest of the workers. But as there would be uncertainty about the wages for the workers, I accepted the final draft after a hard negotiation," Zafrul Hasan, permanent representative of the workers on the board, said.

The owners are relatively in an advantageous position, he said, adding that if the board failed to make a final recommendation the workers' interest would have been seriously affected in the long run.

Nazma Akhtar, representative of the garment workers on the board, who had earlier declined to sign the draft proposal on September 12, said around 40 organisations including several big ones sup-

ported the minimum salary ranging between Tk 1,650 and Tk 1,800 and that is why she did not have any option.

Neutral member Iqbal Ahmed and permanent member of the employers on the board Kazi Saifuddin Ahmed also took part in yesterday's meeting.

Following serious labour unrest in the country's premier export-earning garment sector, the government formed the wage board on May 31 and asked it to recommend a pay structure for the workers within three months. The minimum wage for workers in the RMG sector is now Tk 930, which was fixed about 12 years ago.

Meanwhile, Garments Sramik Sangram Parishad, an alliance of 11 organisations of garment workers, strongly opposed the final recommendation immediately after its announcement.

Terming the final recommendation 'unrealistic' and 'a betrayal' with the garment workers, Rof Ramesh Chandra, general secretary of Jatiya Sramik League, said it is a farce as the minimum wage for the workers of the state-owned enterprises is Tk 2,450 but export-oriented garment industry will give a basic salary of Tk 1,100 only.

Bangladesh closes

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the northeastern India earlier could not open letters of credit (L/Cs) for imports from Bangladesh, discouraging the potential importers. But now they can open L/Cs, which is a step forward in facilitating trade between the two countries, he noted.

Besides, EPB had organised several exhibitions in India and received a good response from the Indian importers and buyers, observed the EPB vice-chairman adding there are demands for Bangladeshi products including toiletries, cosmetics, melamine, fish, leather and ceramics in these Indian states.

Some non-tariff barriers like mandatory testing required by India, inadequate banking facilities and poor infrastructure at the land ports are hindering Bangladesh's export growth to India, local exporters said.

India deliberately tries to stall import from Bangladesh, as its land customs officials are not informed about the preferential market access given to Dhaka by New Delhi, according to a study jointly carried out by a Bangladeshi and an Indian chamber.

"It is almost impossible to export products to India if the exporters have to undergo cumbersome and cost-incurring certification procedures," the study styled "Enhancing the Trade and Investment between Bangladesh and Northeast India" pinpoints how difficult it is to export

Criminal killed in 'shootout' with Rab

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

A listed criminal was killed in an 'encounter' between his accomplices and Rapid Action Battalion (Rab) at Alamganj Ghat of Sutrapur in the capital early yesterday.

The dead, Bijoy Hossain alias Kalu, 25, was a cohort of infamous criminal 'Dakat' Shahid and accused in a number of cases for murder and other crimes, police and Rab sources said.

Rab arrested Kalu at Nayabazar on Wednesday and took him to different places in the city to recover hidden firearms following his statement.

After the Rab men took him to Alamganj Ghat area at around 2:00am yesterday, Kalu's accomplices opened fire, forcing them to fire back, Rab said.

Kalu was bullet-hit when he was trying to flee the scene, said a police official.

He was taken to Dhaka Medical College Hospital at 3:15am where doctors declared him dead.

A single barrel gun and three cartridges were seized from the spot.

Kalu was an associate of slain Jubo Dal leader Sagir Ahmed, Kalu's maternal uncle Mobarak Hossain said.

He claimed his nephew to be 'innocent' as he came out of jail 15 days ago after serving three years in cases against him.

Mobarak said they would file a murder case against the Rab personnel concerned.

PM accuses

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The prime minister accused the opposition of lacking patriotism, saying that instead of responding initially to the government's call for dialogue, it (opposition) preferred foreign intervention on the issue.

"We had earlier invited them to the dialogue but they did not turn up. They wanted that the dialogue to be held at the residence of a foreign envoy...this is the example of their patriotism," she said.

She urged people to vote for the BNP-led alliance in the coming general election to make the country self-reliant in all sectors.

Khaleda said people don't want to support and vote for those who want to destroy public property and resort to destructive activities.

The prime minister said the opposition has gone mad sensing that they have no chance in the future because of the massive development in all sectors across the country done by the BNP-led alliance government in the last five years.

She alleged that the opposition has taken the path of indiscipline and anarchy to halt country's forward march towards self-reliance in all sectors.

Presided over by local MP Kazi Alauddin, the meeting was also addressed, among others, by Communications Minister Nazmul Huda, Prime Minister's Political Secretary Harris Chowdhury, Habibul Islam Habib MP and Dr Shahidul Alam.

Earlier, the prime minister laid the foundation stone of Jessore Science and Technology University at Ambottala on 35 acres of land. The project, involving over Tk 33 crore, will be completed by 2008.

She also inaugurated the newly constructed Khan Bahadur Ahsanullah Bridge over the Kakshiyah and Kaliganj-Ashashuni approach road.

She distributed documents of land among some landless people under a rehabilitation project.

Khatme Nabuwat

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"Since the government did not take any steps in this regard, lovers of prophet Mohammad will continue to lay siege to Ahmadiyya dens across the country," a Nabuwat press release said yesterday.

2 major power units

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The Power Development Board (PDB) sources said that unit 1 of the Meghnaghat plant will start running again from October 15 and the second unit from November 1.

The third Ghorashal 210MW power unit and the Baghabari Westmont 45MW unit will also go into production again from October 15. In addition, a 20MW Baghabari unit is expected to resume operation from October 7.

Power Development Board (PDB) sources said that the level of load shedding was hovering around 2,200 megawatt (MW) yesterday as the country's power plants generated a maximum of 3,000MW against a demand of 5,200MW.

As many as 21 power units out of around 100 have remained shut for several weeks now.

The prevailing power crisis in the country resulted mainly due to the BNP-led alliance government's failure to set up new power plants in the last five years. While corruption and bid tampering have driven away competent power companies, the favoured ones like the Orion and the Harbin, failed to deliver a few projects awarded to them.

Assault on shooters

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boycott sports and go for tougher programmes if the government does not put policemen involved with assaulting shooter Asif Hossain Khan and others on trial before Eid-ul-Fitr.

The speakers at a human chain organised by the Sammilta Kiria Paribar, yesterday also demanded an apology from the state minister for home and Dhaka Metropolitan Police (DMP) commissioner for giving false statement, and punishment for the policemen responsible.

"It is not only a matter of shame that the state minister and DMP commissioner supported the brutal deeds of the policemen, but they also gave false statements to hide the truth," said a speaker at a protest rally yesterday.

Protesting the police atrocities, the sportsmen of the body held an hour-long human chain at Mukhtangin in the capital where present and former sportsmen and officials of football, cricket, volleyball and hockey teams expressed solidarity with the shooters.

Citing instances, the speakers said the sportsmen, as well as the journalists, are continuously becoming the victims of police atrocities and none of the culprits were tried. This makes them feel insecure, they said.