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President 'pressed' for early polls schedule

EC planned to wait on announcement

STAFF CORRESPONDENT
President and Chief Adviser Iajuddin Ahmed made the Election Commission (EC) announce the schedule for the next parliamentary elections hastily on Monday against an EC move for declaring it upon resolving the political deadlock over the issue.

The EC had planned to wait a few more days before announcing the polls schedule to observe if the political situation improves. It also requested Iajuddin to initiate steps to break the political standoff over election schedule, sources said.

The EC was planning to announce the polls schedule early December, hoping that the political tension should defuse by then. Sources said a message was also

sent to different political parties informing them of this plan.

The EC also requested the president to keep the commission beyond any controversy over the appointments of new election commissioners so that the EC Secretariat can continue its preparatory work for the election smoothly.

"The president was informed of the overall situation so that participation of all political parties in the election can be ensured," EC Secretary Rashid Sarkar said at a press briefing yesterday. Sarkar met the president late Sunday night.

Asked if the EC requested the president to initiate steps to reach a consensus among the political parties before announcing the

election schedule, he only said, "On our part, we left no stone unturned."

The EC secretary, however, said there is still a scope for rescheduling if the political parties can reach a consensus on it. "But the Election Commission cannot take the initiative for a consensus. It should come from the caretaker government," Sarkar said, requesting the government to defuse the political tension.

In line with the EC plan, the EC Secretariat started sending election materials to field level offices of returning officers and assistant returning officers on Saturday. But because of early declaration of the polls schedule, the election materials, which generally reach the field level before announcement of the

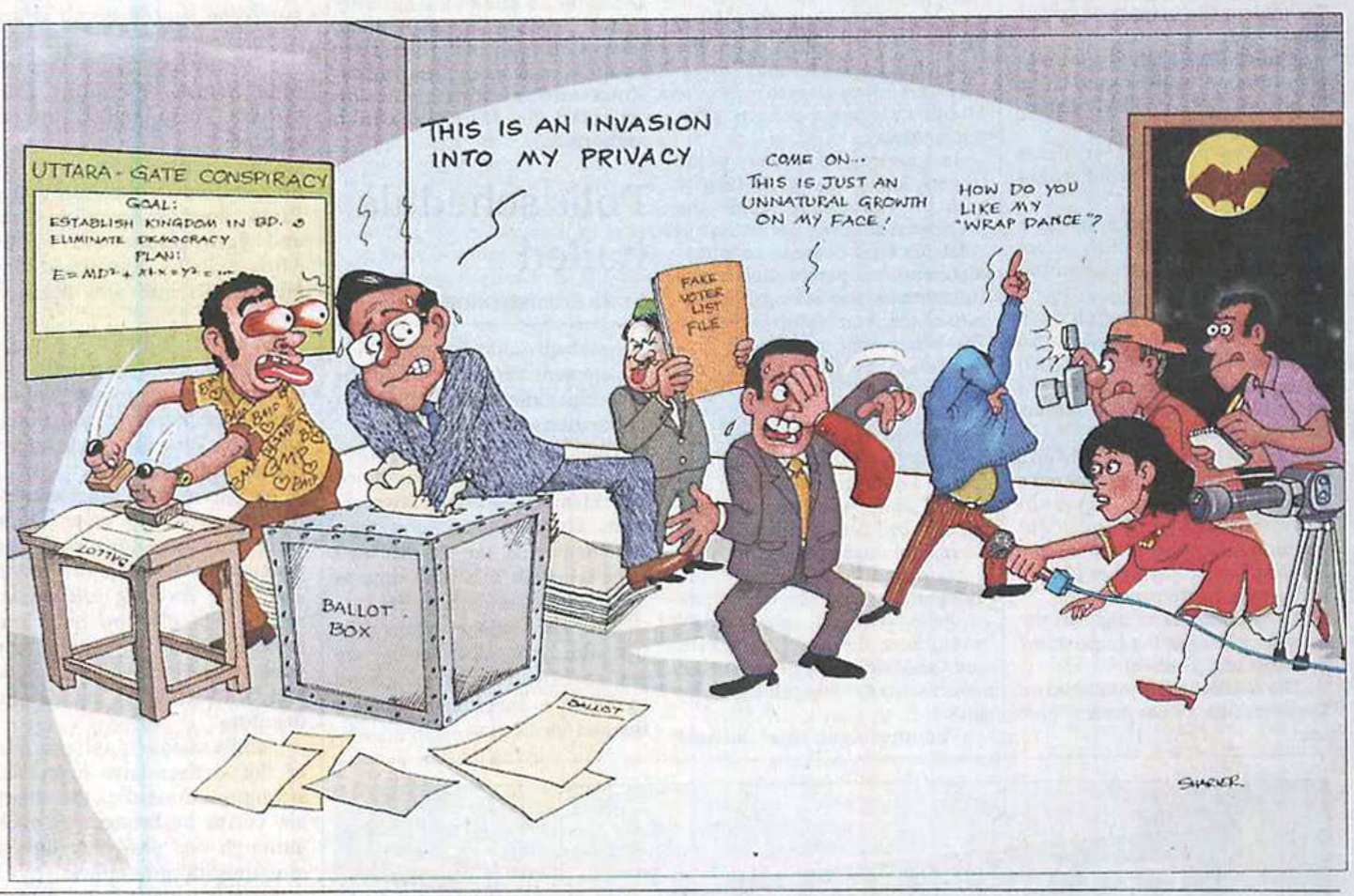
schedule, did not reach all their destinations as of yesterday, sources said.

A few returning officers also could not issue public notices on Monday inviting people to file nomination papers as they did not receive the EC Secretariat circular for announcement of the election schedule.

In the last few days, delegations of the Awami League-led 14-party alliance met the president and strongly opposed the EC move to announce polls schedule before correcting the voter list, while delegations of BNP and Jamaat-e-Islami demanded immediate announcement of the schedule.

Officials at the EC Secretariat yesterday expressed frustration

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Polls minus big parties won't be acceptable

Observe two advisers

STAFF CORRESPONDENT
Two advisers to the caretaker government yesterday said parliamentary elections without participation of any major political party like the Awami League (AL) will not be accepted either at home or abroad.

They also observed that the controversy surrounding the election schedule could have been avoided if it had been discussed with the political parties and had not been arranged hastily.

"Elections will not be accepted without the participation of a large and major party whether in Bangladesh or, as we have seen from unaccepted elections, in the Philippines and Thailand," Finance and Planning Adviser Akbar Ali Khan told reporters at his secretariat office yesterday.

Energy Adviser Hasan Mashhud Chowdhury also told reporters,

"Examples of general elections not being accepted for non-participation of a major political party like the Awami League can be found in the history of Bangladesh - as we have observed in the elections of 1986 and 1996."

On the announcement of election schedule on Monday, Akbar Ali said, "It is not mandatory to consult with the advisers about election schedule, but the Election Commission has always consulted with the council of advisers in the past."

"The past chief advisers also unofficially informed other advisers of the election schedule announcement," he said, adding, "But this time, the advisers were not informed."

Akbar, however, said, "The Election Commission can still change the election schedule by

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Only presidential mercy can now save JMB leaders

SC upholds death sentence



JULFIKAR ALI MANIK
The Supreme Court (SC) yesterday rejected the petitions of six of the seven sentenced to death Islamist militants seeking permission to appeal against a High Court (HC) judgement upholding the sentences, leaving the condemned with only the last chance of a final petition before the dates of executions are announced.

The seven had been convicted of killing two Jhalakathi judges.

With yesterday's rejection of the petitions for leave to appeal by the seven-member full bench of the Supreme Court headed by Chief Justice JR Mudassar Hossain, the HC verdict of August 31, which had upheld the trial court verdict of May 29 sentencing the seven Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) men to death, is now kept upheld.

The six now have only one chance left for getting any clemency or pardon by petitioning to the president for mercy.

If they do not submit any such petition within the stipulated time, the jail authorities will issue death warrants fixing dates for their executions.

Meanwhile, Rafiqul Islam, elder

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President's action adds fuel to the fire

Instead of being a problem solver he has become a problem creator

MAHFUZ ANAM
Slowly, surely and so very sadly, our President and chief of the caretaker government is becoming more and more controversial. In fact, so much controversial that it is becoming increasingly difficult to defend him, much less trust him. It is indeed a most troubling situation when the highest constitutional office becomes subject to so much of doubt and suspicion. Yes, some political parties had raised serious questions about his neutrality, but they couldn't have made him remotely as controversial as he has made of himself.

One inexplicable action after another, one surreptitious move following another, some strange inaction coupled with strange actions like a series of haphazard transfers that did not touch the real knobs that turn the election key have together put the man, we termed on several occasions as our "Last Hope", in the centre of the present controversy. Such a development cannot be good either for the coming elections or for democracy as a whole. But it has happened and the responsibility for it lies completely on the venerable Professor-turned-President-turned-Chief Adviser.

His latest appointments of two

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Worried Annan to send envoy to Dhaka

STAFF CORRESPONDENT
United Nations (UN) Secretary-General Kofi Annan expressed concern at unrest in Bangladesh ahead of the upcoming election and is sending a senior UN official as his envoy today on a three-day visit.

In a statement issued by his spokesman, the secretary-general said Craig Jenness, director of the UN Electoral Assistance Division, will hold meetings on his behalf with the chief and other senior officials of the caretaker government as well as election authorities, representatives of political parties, the civil society and the private sector, said a United Nations Development Programme Dhaka office press release.

Annan said he wanted to "underscore the importance of a peaceful and transparent environment so that this important election can enjoy the full confidence of the people of Bangladesh."

Earlier, the Secretary-General appealed to the major political forces in Bangladesh to work together and find a common ground for the elections in the interest of democracy and the welfare of the entire nation.



The 14-party activists try to break through the barricades put up by the police near Dhanmondi Road-27 yesterday as they march towards the Election Commission to lay siege to the office.

Peaceful sit-in asks for EC reconstitution

STAR REPORT
The sit-in around the Election Commission (EC) Secretariat yesterday passed off peacefully with the demonstrators renewing their vow to get the polls schedule cancelled and the EC reconstituted 'meaningfully'.

Hundreds of activists of the Awami League (AL)-led 14-party combine, Jatiya Oikya Front, Jatiya Party (Ershad) and Jaker Party attempted to march toward the EC Secretariat from three directions.

As police intercepted the processions, they held rallies at Russell Square, Mohakhali and Agargaon.

Tension mounted in Dhanmondi area when the demonstrators tried to break barbed-wire police barricade there. But clashes could be avoided as leaders calmed down the activists and police refrained from going into action.

Leaders of the 14-party and other parties warned the caretaker government that they would enforce a nationwide indefinite blockade from Sunday if it does not fulfil their demands for 'meaningful' reconstitution of the EC, cancellation of the appointment of two 'controversial' election commissioners, correction of the updated voter list and depoliticisation of the administration.

Suspending the recent indefinite nationwide blockade on November 23, AL President Sheikh Hasina had announced the sit-in front of the Bangabhaban on Monday and around the EC yesterday to realise the combine's 11-

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More arson attacks on election offices

Security stepped up

STAR REPORT
Security has been beefed up at election offices throughout the country following a spate of arson attacks that have triggered panic among field level election officers and staff.

Unidentified attackers yesterday set fire to five election offices in Barisal, Munshiganj, Khulna, Jhenidah, Chuadanga and Brahmanbaria damaging valuable documents and office equipment.

UTTARA SECRET MEET

Advisers disown probe circular

STAFF CORRESPONDENT
Two caretaker government (CG) advisers yesterday said Monday's establishment ministry circular ordering a probe into all political involvements by bureaucrats since 1996 does not correspond with the council of advisers' decision to specifically investigate the bureaucrats' secret meeting last Friday.

"This circular (from the establishment ministry) has not been issued in light of the council of advisers' decision. There is no relationship between this circular and the decision given by the

BDR, BSF trade fire on Thakurgaon border, 1 killed

Skirmishes in Satkhira too

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Dinajpur
Heavy gunfight took place between Bangladesh Rifles (BDR) and Indian Border Security Force (BSF) on Thakurgaon and Satkhira borders yesterday.

In Thakurgaon, the border skirmish took place on Dharmagarh frontier under Ranishankoil upazila following the death of a Bangladeshi farmer in BSF firing.

The dead was identified as Ershad Ali, 30, son of Murtuza of Shahanabad village under the upazila.

Meanwhile, the Indian border guards gunned down another Bangladeshi farmer near Nitpur frontier in Porsha upazila of

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Iajuddin blocking ways to fair polls

Alleges 14-party

STAFF CORRESPONDENT
The 14-party alliance yesterday alleged that the President and Chief Adviser (CA) Prof Iajuddin Ahmed has stopped all ways for peaceful and credible elections, made the ongoing political crisis more complicated and made the people head for demonstrations rather than elections, in a bid to implement BNP-Jamaat alliance's plot to rig the polls.

The Awami League-led 14-party alliance also demanded Iajuddin to step down from the post of CA to the Caretaker Government (CG) immediately to avoid untoward incidents and chaos in the country. They also demanded that the 10 advisers to the CG create a

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