

# Bush, Blair talk Iraq options

AP, Washington

President Bush, facing urgent pressure to find a fresh strategy in Iraq, met with British Prime Minister Tony Blair yesterday, a day after a bipartisan commission report said his war policies have failed and that "time is running out."

The Iraq Study Group's report, which said the situation in Iraq was "grave and deteriorating" after nearly four years of bloodshed, was among topics of Bush's talks with Blair.

Their meeting began as one of the leaders of the study group said that a new US approach to Iraq war cannot be unrealistic and must be a bipartisan effort between Bush and Congress. Leaders in Europe, who have been sharply critical of the Bush administration's occupation of Iraq, welcomed the US advisory group's report on Iraq as a necessary course correction and a first step in a more realistic American view of the conflict.

Bush, possibly with counsel from Blair, could embrace some or all 79 of the Iraq Study Group's recommendations. The president also could ignore them and chart his own new course based on internal reviews being done at the Pentagon, State Department and the White House.

"It's clear that the present situation is not one that could be sustained or accepted," White House press secretary Tony Snow said Wednesday.

The panel's recommendations ranged from gradually withdrawing US combat forces during the next year to ramping up the training of Iraqi security forces to enlisting diplomatic help from Iraq's neighbors not only to resolve problems in Iraq but to find an end to the long-running conflict between Israel and the Palestinians.

The White House was cautious not to specifically reject any of the group's ideas outright and vowed that Bush would entertain suggestions from all political circles before charting a new way forward.

But the president already has rejected the idea of direct talks with Iran and Syria. The administration continues to insist that Iran verifiably suspend uranium enrichment before the United States would start direct talks, although Snow left the door open for discussions through an outside group.

"There's some very good ideas in there," Bush said about the report after meeting Wednesday afternoon with lawmakers. "Not all of us around the table agree with every idea, but we do agree that it shows that bipartisan consensus on important issues is possible."

When a reporter asked whether Bush was capable of making dramatic changes in his war plan, Snow said: "Well, you're assuming that the president has to pull U-turns. I'm not sure I agree."

Democrats, meanwhile, clamored for change.

"I'm encouraged," said Rep Jane Harman, D-California, "and I feel the stay-the-course strategy is officially dead."

"The American people have spoken," said incoming Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid. "The Baker-Hamilton Iraq Study Group has spoken. They have all demanded a change of course in Iraq, and the Bush administration must listen."

## Meghnaghat-3 Project

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undermines national interest. Several high officials of the Power Cell lost their jobs because they were resisting the Cadogan-Manning bid. At the same time, the 'alternative centre of power' had strategically placed ANH Akhtar Hossain, a former deputy secretary level official of the Water Development Board (WDB), as power secretary to pursue this project and deal with other issues.

But still the project could not be approved or sent to the purchase committee for its approval due to silent resistance from former state minister for power Anwarul Kabir Talukder. Sources said one of the reasons why Talukder lost his portfolio was his resistance to the Cadogan-Manning scheme.

Before Talukder left, the power ministry however drafted a summary for this project and revised it many times. The summary contains misleading information so that the purchase committee could approve it without much questions.

"This is the very summary that the president's office collected from the power ministry earlier this week," said a source.

The summary tried to show that awarding the contract to CMG, which has zero experience in power projects, will be cheaper than that for the first AES Meghnaghat power project.

The CMG's 22-year levelised offer is US 2.78 cents per kilowatt hour, which is one cent lower than that of the 1998 AES Meghnaghat project. But the summary did not mention some vital financial aspects of the AES power project such as AES paid the PDB \$ 37 million up front instead of giving free electricity of equal amount, plus \$ 5 million for land and \$12 million for building an inter-connection transfer facility (ITF). These make the AES deal much cheaper while the ITF built by AES will be used by the Meghnaghat-2 and 3 power plants in future.

Till date the government has not floated any tender for this power project but the summary tried to justify this unsolicited deal.

The proposal itself admits that the

## Benazir, Sharif must be barred from polls

Says Musharraf

REUTERS, Islamabad

Hardline Islamic groups must be defeated in Pakistan's next election, President Pervez Musharraf said, but at the same time, he vowed to keep the leaders of two main moderate parties out of the polls.

Musharraf, who seized power in a bloodless military coup in 1999, is widely expected to preside over a general election that he said would be held between November next year and January 2008 – the second under his rule.

He is also expected to secure another term in office next year. The president is elected by the national parliament and provincial assemblies and Musharraf has said the current assemblies, where his supporters hold a majority, can vote for president.

In an interview with the India's NDTV, to be broadcast on Wednesday, Musharraf – a major ally in the US-led war on terrorism – said moderate forces must win the election.

"Moderate forces, enlightened forces, must win against these religious elements ... obscurantists ... I call them," he said, according to a transcript of the interview obtained by Reuters on Wednesday.

But he also said the leaders of the two main moderate parties – former prime ministers Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif – would be barred from the polls.

The two exiled politicians want to return but Musharraf has refused, accusing them of corruption, which both of them deny.

Sharif was sentenced to life in prison on a hijacking charge in 2000 but Musharraf commuted the sentence and sent him into exile in Saudi Arabia.

Bhutto has been convicted of failing to appear in court to answer corruption charges.

"No," Musharraf said when asked if the opposition leaders would be standing in the vote. "Firstly, one of them is convicted. The other is also convicted. Both of them are actually convicted."

Pakistan's Islamist groups have traditionally fared poorly in elections. Prior to 2002, they had never won more than a dozen seats.

But they made spectacular gains in a 2002 election, partly because of widespread anti-US feeling after the US-led invasion of neighbouring Afghanistan the previous year.

The Islamist parties won power in one province and a share of power in another, and became the main opposition bloc in the national parliament.

Musharraf said the time had come for the those gains to be reversed.

"They must go down to the level where they were before. They never had more than three to four percent. Now they have about 17 or 18 percent in the assemblies. They are running one of the provinces. They must be defeated."

But an analyst said Musharraf's efforts to marginalise the Islamists without allowing the two popular leaders back into politics was a contradiction.

"By sidelining the leadership of the mainstream political parties he would create a vacuum that is most likely to be filled by the hardline groups, as it was in the past," said Talat Masood, a former army general and analyst.

"This is a big contradiction."

## Ershad

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Ershad's earlier announcement about her joining the four-party, Ershad said he would take all decisions on the JP.

"It was my personal visit but political pressure is a usual matter," he replied when asked if there was any political pressure behind his 12-day UK visit.

JP sources said the party chairman has agreed to electoral understanding with the 14-party, and he will announce his 'new decision' after his visit to Rangpur from today.

In the last few months, Ershad repeatedly changed his mind regarding his joining any alliance. After a meeting with BNP leaders Tarique Rahman and Lutfozzaman Babar, he said he would join the four-party. But later he changed his decision and said his party would contest the election separately.

Meanwhile, JP leaders have concluded their bargain with the 14-party high command over seat-sharing for the election. The 14-party will support JP candidates in about 45 constituencies, sources said.

Earlier, a group of JP leaders repeatedly tried to reach an understanding with the four-party alliance. Even Roushan Ershad was much interested to join it. But most of the party lawmakers protested the initiative and requested Ershad not to join the BNP-led combine, saying the four-party would face a debacle in the next election for its misuse in the last five years.

JP sources said Ershad will withdraw the expulsion of his brother GM Quader from the party. He was expelled during Ershad's UK visit as most of the party leaders and lawmakers backed his stance of supporting the AL-led alliance.

## Iajuddin puts

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implementation of the package proposals.

According to the proposals, the interim government is supposed to send two controversial election commissioners on leave, transfer some high level secretaries, and have the polls rescheduled and voter roll corrected.

The advisers' team comprising Dr Akbar Ali Khan, CM Shafi Sami, Mahbubul Alam and Sultana Kamal rushed to the Bangabhaban and apprised the president of the outcomes of the talks with the two major political alliances.

On knowing from the advisers that Zakaria might not be sent on leave, the 14-party leaders said they had trusted the advisers' move, but the interim government's efforts in the last couple of days have not lived up to the expectations.

"The council of advisers has yet to recast the election commission in line with its proposals. The president has made the situation even more complex now," said AL President Sheikh Hasina last night, urging the party leaders and workers to get ready for a sit-in around the Bangabhaban.

Meanwhile, the advisers who had prepared the package of proposals through hectic negotiations with the two major political camps were surprised to come up against the president's opposition to the proposal for recasting the EC, sources said.

Talking to The Daily Star, an adviser said, "It has in fact taken us by surprise. The package of proposals was finalised at the meeting with president in the chair. He did not oppose any of the proposals then."

The president had also consented to initiate steps to send the two controversial election commissioners on leave, sources said.

Election Commissioner Modabbir Hossain Chowdhury who was appointed on November 27 has already agreed to take a leave of absence, added the sources.

However, in public the advisers

are still expressing hope for a resolution of the current political stalemate. After the meeting with the political parties, Adviser Sultana Kamal told some reporters that things are going in the right direction and it is still possible to hold a credible national election within the 90-day timeframe.

"The ray of light that was seen at the end of the tunnel would spark soon," she quipped.

Against this background, speculations were rife at the EC Secretariat yesterday. Acting CEC Justice Mahfuzur Rahman expressed his ignorance whether or not any election commissioner is going on leave.

"I don't know if any of the election commissioners is going on leave or not," he told reporters while leaving the office after a meeting with the commissioners including Zakaria and Modabbir.

Secretary to the EC Secretariat Abdur Rashid Sarkar, who earlier claimed that CEC MA Aziz had informed him before going on leave, yesterday said he is not aware whether any election commissioner is going to have leave of absence.

The 14-party leaders meeting the advisers at Padma yesterday welcomed them for their initiative to create a level playing field before the election.

"The package of proposals set forth by the caretaker government will have to be implemented in its entirety," AL Presidium Member Tofail Ahmed who attended the parley with the advisers told The Daily Star last night.

They must make SM Zakaria go on leave to create an atmosphere congenial to holding of a free and fair poll, he added.

Coming out of the meeting, 14-party Coordinator Abdul Jalil told reporters that it is not possible to say anything until the talks are over. "There is a need for more discussions," added Jalil, also AL general secretary.

## TI survey

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followed by assemblies, and then the business sector.

"Corruption has infiltrated public life and burrowed in," said Robin Hodess, police and research director at Transparency.

"Legislatures are elected with a precious mission: to place the interests of their citizens above their own," Hodess said. "This trust is being violated, at great cost to the legitimacy of elected officials in many countries."

The poll, conducted by Gallup International for Transparency and released in Brussels, showed that only 22 percent of people thought their government was effective or very effective in combating corruption.

The report said that the perception of parties and parliaments as most corrupt reinforces the view that governments are ineffective in this area.

"Rather, they themselves are seen to be a part of the problem, creating a dynamic in which they actually encourage corruption in a country," the report said.

"The challenge remains for political leaders to prove that they

are not actually fuelling corrupt practices, but are a genuine part of efforts to enhance transparency, accountability and integrity in societies around the world," it said.

However of the one in 10 people who had personally experienced corruption in the last year, most said it usually involved bribery and the police, which ranked as the fourth-most corrupt institution overall.

"Citizens rely on the police to protect them, and on judges and the judiciary to punish the criminals," said Transparency chairwoman Hugette Labelle.

"When these guardians are for sale, some people simply lose faith, others take the law into their own hands," she said.

Bribery for access to services was most common in Africa, with registrations and permits requiring on average a 50-euro (66-dollar) back-hander to be processed.

Bribes to utility companies amounted to an average six euros, which Transparency said was still enough to push electricity out of the reach of the poor.

## Election on Jan 23

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on it after recasting of the EC is done.

"The Election Commission officials showed us a revised schedule and we have agreed with it," BNP Secretary General Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan told reporters after a meeting with a team of advisers.

A meeting of the AL was going on at the time of filing this report at 8:30pm yesterday and AL Joint General Secretary Obaidul Quader told The Daily Star that the party will not formally say anything on the new election schedule before the meeting ends.

According to the new schedule published through a gazette notification, December 21 is the last date for filing nomination papers, December 22 for scrutiny of the nomination papers by returning officers, and December 28 for withdrawal of candidature.

The previous schedule announced on November 27 had set December 10 for filing nominations, December 11 for scrutiny, and December 19 for withdrawal of candidature.

The EC has kept only two days in the new schedule for re-polling in case voting is stopped on grounds of violence at any polling station. The time in the previous elections had been at least 10 to 12 days.

On this time constraint, the EC secretary said, "We hope the election will be completed in due time as all political parties agreed to participate in the polls."

In the previous schedule, the EC kept a 32-day gap between the last dates for withdrawal of candidature and the polling day to utilise the time for printing a huge amount of ballot

## BNP interviews

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Bogra from where BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia and Senior Joint Secretary General Tarique Rahman will contest in the next election, party sources said.

BNP Joint Secretary General Nazrul Islam Khan told The Daily Star that Speaker Jamir Uddin Sircar and Deputy Speaker Akhter Hamid Siddique did not appear before the board as per a direction of the party high command.

Abu Hena, once expelled from the party for accusing a few BNP leaders for their alleged links with militancy, also faced the parliamentary board.

Later, at a press briefing, the BNP joint secretary general quoted Khaleda Zia as saying that her party will come to power again as people are enjoying the fruits of development by the immediate past BNP government.

"BNP gains popularity due to the recent series of blockades by the Awami League-led 14-party combine as people suffered a lot during the programmes," Khaleda Zia was quoted.

She hoped the upcoming election would be held peacefully in time.

Khaleda Zia also told the party members to extend necessary cooperation to the Election Commission in updating the voter list.

However, the BNP changed the interview schedule of the nomination seekers from Natore, Pabna and Sirajganj, which will now be held at 11:00 am on Tuesday. Interviews of the aspirants from Barisal division will start at 3:00 pm on the same day, said a party press release.

The candidates of Meherpur, Kusthia and Chuadanga districts of Khulna division will be interviewed at 11:00 am on Wednesday while the interviews of the nomination seekers from other districts of Khulna division will start at 3:00 pm on the same day.

On Thursday, the BNP parliamentary board will interview the aspirants of Tangail, Jamalpur and Sherpur districts at 11:00 am and the candidates of Mymensingh and Netrakona will be interviewed at 3:00 pm on the same day.

The interviews of the aspirants of Kishoreganj district will be held at 11:00 am on December 17 and the nomination seekers of Manikganj, Munshiganj, Gazipur and Narsingdi districts will be interviewed at 3:00 pm.

The aspirants from Rajbari, Faridpur, Gopalganj, Madaripur and Shariatpur districts will be interviewed at 11:00 am on December 18 and the interviews of the candidates from Dhaka and Narayanganj districts will start at 3:00 pm on the same day.

## Abu Solaiman

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administration, sources said.

The outgoing establishment secretary AFM Solaiman said he felt embarrassed and insulted for transferring him under a package deal.

He was even thinking not to take over his new assignment in the National Board of Revenue as he has only 15 working days before going to leave prior to retirement (LPR).

The outgoing home secretary SM Jaharul Islam, now environment and forest secretary, said such practice to bring changes at the top-level of the administration under a package deal will remain as a bad example in bureaucracy. "This is like realising ransom after abduction," Islam viewed.

However, he said he will be happy if a neutral election can be ensured due to the changes.

The newly appointed Home Secretary Abdul Karim opposed his predecessor's view saying the government can bring changes any time at any level of the administration.

Karim vowed to assist the Election Commission to hold a credible election acceptable to all.

He found recovery of illegal arms and resisting musclemen from creating anarchy during the election as two major preconditions to ensure a fair election.

Regarding the reshuffle, Chief of Advisory Council for Administrative Affairs Dhiraj Kumar Nath said the caretaker government is trying to bring neutrality in the administration to ensure a fair election.

The newly appointed Cabinet Secretary Ali Imam Majumder said he did not think that tension is brewing over the ongoing administrative reshuffle. He also disagreed with the view of administrative division due to the changes.

## Voter roll

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non-government organisations.

Observation of the draft list by general voters as well as the political leaders is needed for its correction, they said.

A flawless voter list is a prerequisite for holding a free and fair election, but a great opportunity for this may be lost as there is now initiative for only omission of names, Secretary of Sujan Dr Badiul Alam Mojuder said.

Criticising the talk of incorporating new names in the voter list even one day ahead of the election, Syed Abul Moqsd said, "What will happen if a dropped out voter goes to contest in the election?"

Hamida Hossain suggested the Election Commission to engage the NGOs and form a national committee to monitor the progress of voter list updating activities.

The Sujan leaders also suggested using the government and private electronic and print media and all other agencies for massive publicity to create awareness for preparing a corrected version of voter list before the election.

Among others, Zakir Hossain and Badre Alam Khan spoke on the occasion.

## Hasina accuses CA

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list updating initiated afresh by the Election Commission (EC). She asked the party leaders to form a committee for every unit of the party to monitor the process.

"You have to monitor that names, age, address, parents' or husbands' names are registered properly, and that all people eligible for voting including leaders, workers and supporters of Awami League are included in the voter list," she said.

Hasina also asked them to remain alert so that not a single name is excluded from the list on political grounds.

"Besides helping the field level voter registration staffs in the updating task, you will have to watch their activities and go door to door with them to prevent inclusion of fake names in the voter list," she said.

Hasina, however, did not say anything on the revised election schedule.

She expressed her resentment as the voter list has not yet been published. "There must be a big conspiracy centring the voter list," she said.

"The people will not tolerate any conspiracy," she said, adding, "Once the people get a chance to vote, they will give an apt reply to the misuse of the BNP-Jamaat alliance."

Hasina also directed her party leaders to make all-out preparations for the upcoming parliamentary elections alongside the ongoing movement.

On the package proposals of

## 2 cops killed in Jeddah fire

AFP, Riyadh

Two Saudi police officers were killed by gunmen holed up in the commercial capital of Jeddah yesterday, an interior ministry statement said.

"Guards on duty around Al-Ruwis prison came under fire from a nearby building leading to the death of two security force members," said the statement carried by the official Saudi Press Agency.

Ministry spokesman General Mansur al-Turki said earlier that the violence erupted when gunmen trying to evade a checkpoint sought refuge in a building under construction in the central Al-Ruwis district of the Red Sea city.

Security forces surrounded the building and exchanges of fire were continuing, Turki said, adding that it was not known how many gunmen were involved.

State television said at least three "terrorists" were holed up in the building.

Al-Arabiya, the Saudi-financed and Dubai-based satellite television station which broke the story, said ambulances had been sent to pick up an unspecified number of casualties.

Helicopters were also circling the scene, it added.

Security forces are waging a campaign against suspected sympathisers of Al-Qaeda, which has claimed responsibility for a spate of attacks in the kingdom since 2003.

Thursday's firefight comes hot on the heels of an announcement by the interior ministry on Saturday that it had detained 135 Al-Qaeda suspects, mostly Saudi nationals, in raids over the past three months.

## 11 US soldiers killed

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winning" in Iraq. He warned, however that "we need to be very careful about letting dates direct when a campaign should be concluded."

Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki's office said he would study the US report in the course of the day. It will make worrying reading for the Iraqi leader, who is struggling to hold together a shaky coalition.

Against the backdrop of what it called a "grave and deteriorating" situation in Iraq, the Iraq Study Group urged Washington to increase pressure on Maliki to meet the political challenge of reunifying the country.

"If the Iraqi government does not make substantial progress toward the achievement of milestones on national reconciliation, security and governance, the United States should reduce its political, military or economic support," it said.

The Iraqi leader has bridled before at American pressure, and specifically rejects the notion of a timetable for reform imposed from abroad, but his response to the report was cautious and he promised to look at it.

Bassim Ridha, a senior political advisor to Maliki, warned the White House not to back away from supporting the national unity government.

"If they do not support the government then it will look as if they do not do what they preach," Ridha said. "We need their support to go forward."

The report by a 10-strong panel of policy experts headed by former secretary of state James Baker will

the caretaker government. Hasina said the caretaker government will have to implement the proposals completely in order to create a level playing field for a fair poll. She reiterated the demand for removal of the "controversial" election commissioners from the EC in the interest of a fair election.

Commenting on the chief adviser's move to keep Election Commissioner SM Zakaria in the EC, Hasina alleged that Zakaria became "an expert of poll rigging by holding a 'farical' election on February 15, 1996." Now they [the chief adviser and the BNP-Jamaat alliance] want to keep him to steal votes and rig the next election," she said.

She warned that any move to rig the next election will be resisted by the people.

Hasina asked the caretaker government to take measures so that no voter is harassed on political considerations.

She accused the BNP-Jamaat alliance of completely failing to run the country, control skyrocketing prices of essentials, unbridled corruption and rise of militancy, and solve acute shortage of power.

Senior AL leaders were present at the meeting.

## EC starts

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level task in updating the voter roll without checking the authenticity of information with the same manpower.

Around 1.4 lakh staffs, mostly temporarily recruited, who worked for updating the electoral rolls, will visit door to door to detect fake and duplicate names in the updated list. They will also collect information with the prescribed forms about the prospective voters.

The EC Secretariat has already directed the field level election officers to start the task while EC Secretary Abdur Rashid Sarkar yesterday sought cooperation from all political parties and non-government organisations to properly complete the task.

The EC secretary yesterday afternoon held a meeting with the senior officials of the ministries of education and primary and mass education and Dhaka City Corporation (DCC) to gear up the field level task for correcting the mistakes in the updated voter list.

The EC Secretariat also assigned its 90 officials to monitor the field level task at 90 wards under the DCC.