

Many from minorities

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seven families out of the 10 were not included in the voter list updated in August.

Of the remaining three families with four eligible voters on an average, only one or two members of each were listed in the updated voter roll.

According to Dinajpur chapter of the Human Rights Congress for Bangladesh Minorities, members of the minority communities in the town total 2.25 lakh, and 1.5 lakh of them are eligible voters. But around 70 thousand of them were not listed.

Many people were visiting the EC offices voluntarily to get enrolled as voters since the EC field staffs were unable to cope with listing such a huge number of voters through door to door visits. But many of them had to return frustrated due to acute shortage of voter registration forms. Local EC staff feared they might not be able to list many of the minority people as voters due to lack of forms.

MOHAMMADPUR, MIRPUR IN DHAKA

Following allegations of wholesale registration of madrasa students in the voter roll, The Daily Star correspondents visited Jamia Rahmania Arabia Madrasa at Mohammadpur and found that a student of class VII was included in the updated list.

A teacher of the madrasa, Nazrul Islam, said more than 800 of the 1,500 students and teachers are on the updated list.

Until yesterday afternoon, no EC staff visited the madrasa for correcting the list.

Some students said many of the fellow students aged under 18 were registered as voters. One such under aged student, Ismail Hossain, said he was enrolled during the previous voter list updating.

At Mirpur, staffs of Shakkiamuni Buddhist Monastery and indigenous community-run Bonoful Adivasi Green Heart School and College, said enumerators had earlier listed only four out of the 30 staffs as voters.

"It is only yesterday (Monday) that the EC staffs gave us the forms to be filled up," said Real Dewan, assistant director of the monastery.

Many of the EC staffs however said they are deleting the names of the voters who moved to other houses in the same areas or to other localities recently. But they could not say if those people were now getting listed as voters at their new addresses.

PALLABI
A number of residents of different areas of Pallabi in the capital, not yet listed as voters, yesterday said EC staffs are yet to visit their houses.

"The EC staff are showing utter negligence to listing new voters," alleged Shahabuddin Khokon, of DCC Ward No 5. He said he had requested an EC staff to visit a six-storey house with 12 flats where only five women out of about 12 were enrolled as voters.

But EC staff Wahabul Islam

refuted the allegation.

However, a number of enumerators said they are often facing humiliation, as they cannot list new voters due to a dearth of forms.

The locals alleged two teachers of Baunia Bandh D Block Alia Madrasa, assigned to correct the voter list, are yet to start work. The teachers were not in the madrasa while this correspondent went there for their comments.

NILPHAMARI

Our Nilphamari correspondent also reported severe forms crisis, for which an EC staff could not register 12 voters of three families in ward no.1 of the town.

Meanwhile, 14-party alliance activists manhandled Azmal Hossain, a Jamaat activist, as he allegedly excluded the names of a few AL supporters from the list.

Around 22,000 stranded Pakistanis out of 62,000 were enrolled as voters earlier at Saidpur upazila of Nilphamari, sources said.

BOGRA

A large number of stranded Pakistanis have been listed as voters in several camps of Rajshahi division including Bogra.

Bogra district election officer admitted that the names of around 1,500 out of 6,000 stranded Pakistanis were entered as voters in Bogra in the previous voter list.

CHITTAGONG

The field level officials faced resistances from the AL-led 14-party supporters during the correction work in different areas of the city.

City AL Joint General Secretary Afsarul Amin alleged though the enumerators are entitled to correct the updated list as per the EC circular, they are working with the voter list of 2000.

He also alleged the BNP and Jamaat activists are assisting the field level officials in correcting the voter list.

NETRAKONA

In Netrakona, the BNP and Jamaat men are threatening the EC officials so that they could neither include the names of AL supporters nor delete the fake names.

"The BNP-Jamaat leaders and activists are visiting the houses of EC staffs at night and threatening them not to include the names of AL supporters and delete fake names," said an assistant registration officer of Khaliajuri upazila seeking anonymity.

KHULNA

The district election officer Monday withdrew five assistant officers, allegedly aligned to the BNP and Jamaat, for not performing duties properly. The officials are Oliullah, Asma Jamila Shima, Shahabuddin, Sonia Akhter and Shamsunnahar Munni.

B Chowdhury

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advisers of the caretaker government as the resignation of four advisers yesterday [Monday] has proved the total failure of Prof Iajuddin Ahmed in running the governance," he said while speaking at a joining function at a local community centre.

Three former lawmakers -- Muhammad Aminul Islam of BNP, Prof Emdadul Haque Mukul of Bangladesh Jatiya Party and Delwar Hossain Khan of Jatiya Party -- along with more than 500 leaders and activists, including former chief engineer of Roads and Highways Division, joined the LDP.

Badruddoza urged the caretaker government to arrest the corrupt political leaders and the terrorists with the help of the army within seven days to prove that the decision of deploying the military was logical.

The former president heartily welcomed the newcomers to the party and said, "The name BNP will not exist in the political history of Bangladesh if the current trend of leaders of BNP joining the LDP continues."

LDP Executive President Col (ret'd) Oli Ahmed, Secretary General Major (ret'd) Abdul Mannan, presidium members Sheikh Razzak Ali, Redwan Ahmed, Abdul Karim Abbas, Joint Secretaries General Nurul Amin Bepari and Shadat Hossain Selim were also present.

Col Oli hailed the four advisers who resigned yesterday and said they had in fact realised that this caretaker government is completely ineffective to hold a free, fair and acceptable election in the country.

"The newly appointed advisers have done a great mistake by joining the caretaker government as two-third political parties are saying that the chief adviser has miserably failed to create a congenial atmosphere for a credible election in Bangladesh," he added.

EC may extend

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They also made some more suggestions yesterday, along with complaints and demanded extension of time for carrying out the corrections in the voter roll.

The AL team, however, hailed the activities of the EC so far in this regard.

"We got complaints about severe shortage of inclusion forms in different areas," MA Mannan said alleging that there are plenty of voter forms at the EC storerooms, but not in the hands of these officials. The delegation also alleged that as there is no clear direction about inclusion of the eligible voters in the EC's circular, the field level officials are leaving out many of them.

"The EC secretary has admitted these problems and assured us of taking proper steps in this regard," Mannan said adding that the secretary also assured them of extending time for one or two more days for the ongoing process of correcting the voter list. They also suggested the EC secretary to list the voters who have been left out, including the newly eligible ones and to delete the duplicate names, he added.

About the allegation of not including the prospective voters, the EC secretary said, they (EC) have given necessary directions for both exclusion and inclusion. "We are putting more emphasis on deleting duplicate names, as the NDI and different quarters raised this issue," he added.

CA refused

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But President and Chief Adviser Iajuddin Ahmed refused to send any letter of request, arguing that he had already talked to the advisers over the telephone, Dhiraj said.

Dhiraj said the new advisers have already taken oaths and the advisory council will sit today to discuss "whether it needs further talks with the political parties" to break the political impasse.

On the new advisers' appointment, Dhiraj said the president has appointed them on his own and he has all jurisdiction to do so.

"The matter does not require endorsement of the advisory council or any other adviser," he said.

Dhiraj expressed his frustration over the transfer of his secretary, saying he came to learn about it after the circular had been issued. He said the chief adviser is also the adviser to the establishment ministry, which controls transfers, and can transfer anyone on his own accord.

Dhiraj did not give a direct reply when asked whether he will remain in the office if the army deployment continues or the situation is unchanged. "Time will tell," he said.

Meanwhile, Information Adviser Mahbubul Alam dispelled speculation over his possible resignation. "Speculation is speculation...I cannot comment on it," he told reporters yesterday evening while leaving his Eskaton residence to attend a function.

Mahbub did not attend his office or the oath taking ceremony of the three new advisers at the Bangabhaban yesterday.

"I did not feel well and so I did not attend the office," he said.

On being absent from the oath taking ceremony, Mahbub said, "When I was informed of the function, there was not enough time to make preparations."

Iajuddin picks 4 advisers

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Dr Shoeb told The Daily Star, "I have taken the charge in an hour of crisis. When I was invited, I was hesitant but I thought the country is ours and somebody must take the responsibility. I will exert my utmost effort to ensure holding of free and fair elections."

The resignation of the four advisers on Monday was prompted by differences of opinion with the president and chief adviser on several issues, including the failure to implement the proposals of the advisory council to resolve the political crisis and the deployment of the armed forces.

The resigning advisers said they decided to quit as they were not allowed to perform their task of creating a congenial atmosphere for the holding of a free and fair election.

Meanwhile, the president and chief adviser failed to initiate any move yesterday to improve the prevailing situation within the council of advisers where other advisers have also expressed their discontent with the president's methods.

Bangabhaban sources said the president was more interested in appointing new advisers than in bringing the resigning advisers back, although he had sent Adviser Dhiraj Kumar Nath to see the four to verbally request their return.

As the move failed, the president accepted the resignation letters of the four advisers.

Dhiraj told reporters, "They [the advisers] wanted an official written invitation from the president for meeting. But the president refused to send a letter. The president

argued that he had talked to the advisers over the telephone."

Adviser to the president Mokhlesur Rahman Chowdhury claimed that before administering the oath to the new advisers, the president had waited to meet and discuss with the four advisers.

"Since they did not turn up by 1:00pm, the president administered the oath to three new advisers in accordance with the constitution," Mokhles told the press.

Talking to The Daily Star on condition of anonymity, another adviser said he was considering a "drastic decision" if all the major political parties do not agree to participate in the election.

Monday's resignations were the first ever since the institution of the caretaker government was introduced in 1991.

PORTFOLIOS

The president and chief adviser last night distributed portfolios among the newly appointed advisers.

Dr Shoeb Ahmed replaces Dr Akbar Ali Khan as adviser to the ministries of Finance and Planning, Commerce, and Post and Telecommunications.

Maj Gen (ret'd) Ruhul Alam replaces Hasan Mashhud Chowdhury as adviser to the ministries of Power, Energy and Mineral Resources, Food and Disaster Management, Communications and CHT Affairs.

Shafiqul Haque replaces CM Shafi Sami in the ministries of Agriculture, Cultural Affairs, and Youth and Sports.

Prof Moinuddin replaces Sultana Kamal in the ministries of Industries, Science and ICT, and Textiles and Jute.

MA Aziz

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At the end of November, the CGA office had requested the EC Secretariat for documents clarifying the CEC's leave that took effect from November 22, said sources.

It also informed the EC Secretariat that it would not disburse Aziz's salary for November until it receives the documents.

On request from the CGA office, the EC secretary had asked the secretariat officials to certify that the CEC was on a three-month leave with pay. But the officials concerned could not do so as they did not have any relevant documents at their disposal, the sources added.

"We cannot give a clearance to disburse his salary unless we receive documents rationalising his leave with pay," a senior officer in the CGA office told The Daily Star yesterday.

Former comptroller and auditor general M Hafizuddin Khan said according to the laws regarding SC judges' remuneration and privileges, Aziz does not qualify for a three-month leave with pay.

Currently, the remuneration and privileges for the EC members are regulated in line with the rules regarding those of the SC judges.

"The existing laws will have to be amended to grant Justice Aziz salary during his leave," he added.

When contacted, EC Secretary Abdur Rashid Sarkar yesterday told The Daily Star that the EC Secretariat will soon issue a circular seeking to ensure the CEC gets his salary.

MA Aziz went on leave in the wake of a volatile political situation. President and Chief Adviser Iajuddin Ahmed in his late-night address to the nation on November 22 made an announcement to that effect.

Aziz agreed to take time off work on conditions that during the time he will stay in the country and will remain entitled to full security from the government and all other privileges.

Rejoinder

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Development Board in the rank of additional secretary prior to his appointment as secretary of the Power Division.

He had also served as the chief engineer of Bangladesh Water Development Board in the National Pay Grade-II, the pay grade of additional secretaries to the government.

OUR REPLY

Our sources confirmed that an official from the president's office had visited the Power Division, collected the said documents and directed the officials concerned to maintain secrecy. We stand by our story.

Sami reasons

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as there had been no progress on one of its components." Sami said adding they decided to step down because they felt they could not or there is no scope to contribute towards creating an atmosphere for a credible election.

Asked why the package proposal failed, Sami said, "I don't know why the package failed and who is responsible for this. The goalpost has been shifted and I certainly didn't do that."

Apart from the failure of the package proposal for resolving the political impasse, Sami said, the army deployment despite opposition from all the advisers was also a reason behind his resignation from the caretaker government. "In principle, I'm not opposed to army deployment, but the problem is with the timing for that."

He said with a mandate given by an unanimous decision of the Council of Advisers he and his colleagues tried hard to have a consensus of the parties on holding the elections within 90 days, updating the voter list, rescheduling the election, reshuffling the administration and reconstitution of the Election Commission.

About the other advisers still in the government, Sami said, "I hope and pray they will be able to create an environment for a free and fair election with their wisdom."

On the neutrality of the President and chief of the caretaker government, the former diplomat said it would not right for him to comment at this time. "I pray and urge him to take decisions boldly and quickly. If it can be done, there is still a possibility of getting out of the crisis."

Asked about the initiative to bring him back to the government, he said once a decision has been made it cannot be altered.

Sought comments on the new advisers, he hoped they would take decisions and implement them quickly.

EC keeps eye

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Bangladesh for a free, fair and peaceful election are fulfilled," a spokesperson for the EC Delegation told the news agency yesterday.

The spokesperson said, "The imminent deployment of the EU's Election Observation Mission (EOM) is one focus of our concerns and we trust that our election mission stands as a strong indicator of the EU's commitment to a free and fair electoral process in Bangladesh."

A 10-member core group of the EOM will arrive here on December 15. The European Union will deploy some 200 observers to monitor the January

23 general elections. Of them, 150 will be coming from outside Bangladesh as long and short-term observers.

Israel has atom bomb

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"nuclear slip" of the tongue. Aides to Prime Minister Ehud Olmert deny any change in policy.

Either way, Israel's decades-long position of nuclear weapons ambiguity appears to have crumbled after Olmert implied the Jewish state has the Middle East's only nuclear arsenal in an interview broadcast on German television.

It is less than a week since incoming US Secretary of Defence Robert Gates, speculating at a Senate confirmation hearing on Iran's possible motives for trying to build nuclear arms, suggested that Israel had the bomb.

Olmert's remarks led Israeli news bulletins on Tuesday.

Both mass circulation Hebrew-language newspapers had front page headlines: "Olmert's nuclear slip of the tongue."

Speaking in English in the interview, Olmert said:

"Iran, openly, explicitly and publicly threatens to wipe Israel off the map. Can you say that this is the same level, when they are aspiring to have nuclear weapons, as America, France, Israel, Russia?"

Arch-foe Iran, whose president has called for the elimination of the "Zionist regime," has denied seeking nuclear arms. It says its nuclear programme is for civilian use.

Israel has long declined to confirm or deny having the bomb as part of a "strategic ambiguity" policy that it says fends off numerically superior Arab enemies.

This reticence is a major irritant for Arabs and Iran, which see a double standard in US policy in the region.

By not declaring itself to be nuclear armed, Israel skirts a US ban on funding countries that proliferate weapons of mass destruction. It can thus enjoy more than \$2 billion in annual military and other aid from Washington.

Opposition politicians in Israel

Election mood

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On the possibility of the two controversial election commissioners' going on leave, Saiful said, "In the high-ranking post like election commissioner, the person concerned himself takes the decision whether to take leave or not. If he takes leave, he informs his higher authority about it."

Saiful, however, admitted the mistake on the Election Commission's (EC's) part that it did not check whether the election date of January 23 coincided with Saraswati puja, a festival of the Hindus. The EC on November 27 set the poll date on January 21, which was later revised.

He said, "We had no calendar for the year 2007 when we were fixing the date." He, however, hinted that the poll date might be changed as it coincides with the religious occasion.

Annan

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everyone, including the most powerful is subject to legal restraint."

"Its current moment of world supremacy gives it a priceless opportunity to entrench the same principles at the global level."

Though he neither mentioned Iraq nor the Bush administration by name, his remarks appeared to include criticism of the US drive to war to topple Saddam Hussein in 2003, and the Bush doctrine of preemptive action.

But in a question and answer session following the speech, Annan denied targeting the Bush administration.

"Nothing could be further than the truth," Annan said. "To appeal for cooperation and leadership should never be seen as an attack."

In the speech, Annan also argued that states who used military force must convince other countries it was legitimate and for shared aims.

An age of terrorists seeking weapons of mass destruction and health threats like Sars, requires nations to stand together.

"Against such threats as these, no nation can make itself secure by seeking supremacy over all others. We share the responsibility for each other's security," he said.

"None of our global institutions can accomplish much when the US remains aloof," he said, adding he prayed for "far-sighted American leadership."

Annan also demanded action from global states with "military muscle" to stop the humanitarian crisis in Darfur, and called for action on climate change, an area where the Bush administration has also attracted stiff criticism.

He also said the world needed leadership to break the deadlock in the stalled global trade negotiations, and called for an expansion of the UN Security Council to better reflect the distribution of global power.

Annan's remarks came less than a week after he was feted at a White House dinner by Bush to mark his retirement on December 31.

Bush spokesman Tony Snow said last week the event for Annan, who recently raised hackles among US officials for branding the conflict in Iraq a "civil war," showed "the president is somebody who does not think that, because you disagree with somebody, you can't be hospitable to them and thank them for their service."

Annan will step down after 10 years as the world's top diplomat and be replaced by South Korea's Foreign Minister Ban Ki-moon.

on Tuesday rounded on Olmert, who has seen his personal approval rating plummet since the summer war against Lebanon's Hezbollah guerrillas.

"This causes great harm to Israel. We are in the midst of a huge (diplomatic) onslaught against Iran's attempts to make a nuclear bomb," former Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom, a member of the right-wing Likud party, said on Army Radio.

"We always face the same question which our enemies ask: 'Why is Israel allowed to (have a bomb) and not Iran?'"

Yossi Beilin of the left-wing Meretz Party, which is also in opposition, questioned Olmert's fitness to lead.

"The prime minister's amazing statement regarding nuclear capability indicates a lack of caution bordering on irresponsibility," the Yedioth Ahronoth newspaper quoted Beilin as saying.

Olmert's aides have gone into frantic damage control.

His spokeswoman, Miri Eisin, who accompanied the prime minister on a trip to Germany, said he did not mean to say that Israel possessed or wanted to acquire nuclear weapons.

"No he wasn't saying anything like that," she said.

Writing in Yedioth Ahronoth, Israeli security analyst Ronen Bergman asked whether Olmert had deliberately dispelled the policy of ambiguity or just made a mistake.

"It could be that Olmert wanted to hint at Israel's capability as part of the aggressive statements he has recently been making, with the goal of warning the West that if they don't take care of Iran, Israel will," Bergman wrote.

"On the other hand, this may have been a slip of the tongue."

Israel's main atomic reactor, officially for civilian use, became operational in the early 1960s.

Most AL leaders

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adjourned until yesterday evening, when they sat again at the same venue to finalise strategies.

The meeting however failed to reach a unanimous decision of not to participate in any election under Iajuddin Ahmed, and decided instead to discuss the issue with the central working committee, and with the leaders of all front organisations and district and upazila level units of the party.

Sources said Adviser to the AL Chief Salman F Rahman, and Presidium Member Sheikh Fazlul Karim Selim took a stand against refraining from the election.

The meeting was highly critical of the CA's hurried move to appoint four new advisers. The meeting observed that Iajuddin appointed 'completely' partisan persons as new advisers.

Talking to The Daily Star AL Joint General Secretary Obaidul Quader said the CA has blocked all the ways of holding a free and fair election in the country. So no election can be held under his leadership, he firmly said adding that there is no alternative to resignation of the CA before holding of any fair poll in the country.

At the news briefing Jaiil announced programmes of laying siege to all district and upazila election offices tomorrow to press home the demand for a corrected voter list.

Suicide bomber

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A new poll has shown that most Americans support a quick withdrawal of US troops, putting Bush under strong pressure to shift course in Iraq, where 2,931 US troops have died since the 2003 US-led invasion.

A week after the bipartisan Iraq Study Group gave Bush 79 recommendations for changing direction in the unpopular Iraq war, Bush did not appear to be warming to some of its major conclusions as he prepared his own plan.

He will hold a video teleconference on Tuesday with US military commanders in Baghdad, then meet Iraqi Vice President Tareq al-Hashemi, a Sunni. He visits the Pentagon on Wednesday.

The bipartisan report called for direct talks with Iran and Syria and for US combat troops to be out of Iraq by early 2008, but Bush has declined to embrace either recommendation.

He has not ruled out a regional conference to help Iraq, involving Iran and Syria, but the White House indicated Iraq would have to set it up.

A new USA TODAY/Gallup poll published on Monday said 55 percent of the respondents wanted most US troops withdrawn within a year, but only 18 percent believed that would happen.

A record high 62 percent said the war in Iraq was not "worth it," and a record low 16 percent said the United States was winning, USA Today said.

Bush met Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and other top officials at the State Department on Monday, with an eye to announcing a change of course to sceptical Americans next week.

Maliki, whose coalition government of Shias, Sunni Arabs and Kurds has failed to curb the violence, will hold a national reconciliation conference on Saturday, and has announced plans to call a meeting of Iraq's neighbours.