

AL-bigots deal

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against Quranic values, initiation of steps for proper implementation of the initiative for government recognition of the degrees awarded by Quami Madrasas, and a ban on criticisms of Prophet Muhammad.

Following publication of the news item, people of all walks of life including leaders of AL and its allies, and different socio-cultural political parties reacted sharply. In the face of sharp negative public reaction, AL itself yesterday scrambled to come up with a range of explanations and excuses.

All the components of AL-led 14-party coalition --11-party, Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal (JSD) and National Awami Party (NAP) in separate news releases yesterday condemned the deal and demanded that AL cancels the deal immediately to maintain its conformity to the 23-point common national minimum programme of the coalition, which includes a promise to ban religion based politics.

But, AL, which was supposed to give a formal clarification regarding the matter, did not provide any till 9:00pm last night.

Abdul Jalil yesterday however admitted to signing the widely criticised 5-point deal with BKF and said, "It is not a contract. It is a memorandum of understanding," adding, "It is an understanding based on an election strategy."

Talking to a private television channel, Jalil said, "Ordinary people, especially villagers, are weak on the issue of fatwa. If educated alem-ulemas, who are knowledgeable on matters of religion, issue fatwas or directions, it will be better than the ones issued by uneducated persons."

Defining a fatwa, Jalil said, "A decision on any issue is a fatwa," adding, "There is a very wrong interpretation of it in this country. If we can escape that interpretation, then we can have control over fatwas so that no one can issue a fatwa on a whim."

"AL is against those rural fatwas that order whipping of people or public humiliation of women," Jalil said.

Talking to The Daily Star a number of AL presidium members, leaders of its central working committee (ALCWC), and its city, district and upazila level leaders expressed their utter shock over the agreement.

AL Presidium Member Tofail Ahmed rather angrily said he was not aware of the MoU.

Another Presidium Member Suranjit Sengupta said, "It's a hoax! What I have seen in newspapers is baseless."

AL President Sheikh Hasina's Political Secretary Saber Hossain Chowdhury said, "We have not and will not compromise our secular ideal and stance."

Many former lawmakers of AL also told The Daily Star yesterday that they feel ashamed because of the agreement. They also said they might quit the party if the MoU is not cancelled immediately.

"If our party allows Islamic fundamentalist practices like fatwas after 35 years of liberation then what is wrong with forging an alliance with anti-liberation Jamaat," one of the frustrated leaders of ALCWC told The Daily Star.

AL struggles

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members before deciding to take part in the polls, said highly placed sources.

Saber Hossain Chowdhury, the political secretary to the AL president admitted that it was not an easy decision to make.

"But we have taken the decision for the greater interest of the democracy," he said. "Our decision to submit nomination papers should be seen in a broader context as our continued struggle to restore democracy."

Most of the alliance leaders were sceptic about fair polls. They argued saying that a poll debacle is obvious as the voter list has not been properly corrected and published yet, election commissioners of their choice not appointed and field level administration not depoliticised.

They also believe the present caretaker government has become completely a partisan one following the resignation of the four advisers and appointment of their replacements. Along with the interim government, the 'politicised' Election Commission (EC) will undoubtedly favour the BNP-Jamaat four-party coalition during the elections, they feared.

"People believe that a free and fair election is still not possible under this caretaker government and the Election Commission," said a top-notch AL leader, preferring not to be named.

Some top leaders of the AL and allies told The Daily Star that it would be suicidal if they participate in the polls without a proper and complete voter list in place.

Police records statement of Abbas' sis-in-law

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

A week into the incident, police yesterday recorded the statement of bullet hit Masuda -- who is the sister-in-law of former housing and public works minister Mirza Abbas and wife of his brother Mirza Khokon.

Masuda received the injury on December 18 in their residence at Shahjahanpur in the capital.

Doctors at Apollo Hospitals finally allowed police to take her statement after two days of refusal as she was released from the Intensive Care Unit and transferred to a regular bed.

Sub-Inspector Wazed Ali of Motijheel Police Station took Masuda's statement. According to him, Masuda told him that the shooting occurred in the bedroom of their Shahjahanpur residence. "The single bullet" hit her in the stomach while inflicting injuries to her husband Khokon in the hand as well.

Masuda and Khokon went out that night. After the couple returned home and entered their bedroom, Khokon put a pistol on the bed. Masuda asked Khokon to "lock" it. "While Khokon attempted to lock the pistol, a shot was fired by mistake that hit both Khokon and me," Wazed Ali quoted Masuda.

When this correspondent asked Wazed Ali how one bullet could injure two people at the same time, he said he could not ask her further questions to clarify the incident since she looked ill.

However, Wazed said the statement recording is yet to finish and police will quiz her again today.

Abbas and his family primarily denied the shooting, but later gave several contradictory statements regarding the incident.

Man commits

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chased Mihir and his cohorts on Friday night. Mihir jumped into a pond to avert capture but failed. The locals handed him over to Harinakunda police.

During interrogation he confessed to having firearms hidden in a pond. Police recovered a sawed-off shotgun and four bullets following his information.

On contact, Officer-in-Charge (OC) of Harinakunda Police Station Golam Sarwar said Mihir went to the toilet around 6:00am yesterday. As he did not respond to the knockings on the door, the on-duty police officer informed him about the matter, the OC said. Sarwar then informed the upazila nirbahi officer (UNO) of Harinakunda upazila about the matter. The OC and the UNO knocked down the toilet door and found Mihir hanging from the ceiling.

The OC said Mihir was also accused in two arms cases filed with Harinakunda Police Station.

Ex-adviser

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government, election commission, or whatever bodies are there for holding election, must remain impartial for a credible poll." He urged the bodies concerned to regain the trust of the people, otherwise the effort to ensure democracy will be foiled.

Concluding, Sami lauded the champion and the runner up teams, Chittagong Government Girls' High School and Viqarunnisa Girls' High School, who debated on "The caretaker government is not capable of holding a free and fair election, only an independent and powerful election commission is."

Professor Dr Syed Manjurul Islam, who acted as the Speaker of the parliamentary type debate, expressed his hope that the political parties will reach a consensus and put an end to the prevailing crisis.

He urged the lawmakers of the country to follow the elegant language the young debaters used at the debate and their healthy arguments.

The USAID, Academy for Educational Development (AED), Management and Resources Development Initiative (MRDI) and Bangladesh Debate Federation jointly organised the debate on 'free and fair election for democracy in the eyes of future generation'. Three hundred and 50 students from 110 schools across the country participated in the programme.

Hasina

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chief and presented her Xmas and New Year cards.

Hasina cut an Xmas cake and offered greetings to the Christian community of Bangladesh and elsewhere in the world.

The Christians will celebrate Christmas, the biggest religious festival of the community, today to mark the birthday of Jesus Christ.

The Awami League chief alleged that the BNP-Jamaat alliance, after assuming power through the "rigged" polls in 2001, repressed and killed minority people as well as Awami League leaders and workers.

"The BNP-Jamaat alliance used religion as a tool of political gains, but Awami League believes in secularism," she said.

Grand alliance

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at his Gulshan residence.

AL Presidium Member Sheikh Fazlul Karim Selim said, "We have decided to join the polls on the commission's assurance that the time for nomination submission would be expanded and the voter list corrected."

Coming out of a meeting with the AL chief, JP-Ershad Presidium Member Kazi Firoz Rashid said they were going to contest the election as a grand alliance.

However, differences of opinion still remain within the alliance over the issue as many of the leaders believe that the situation is still far from being ideal for a free and fair election, sources said.

The AL president, who was authorised to take the decision, opted in favour of participation as a section of senior AL leaders backed her up to that end, added the sources.

After a consensus among the political alliances, the EC yesterday morning extended the time limit for submission of nomination.

The EC took the decision in line with the recommendations of the advisory council that went on a flurry of activity to bring the AL-led alliance in the polls within the 90-day timeframe.

In the rearranged polls plan, the date for scrutiny of the nomination papers is December 27, instead of December 26.

The other dates relating to the election however remain unchanged.

Announcing the changes in the timetable, Acting Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) Justice Mahfuzur Rahman yesterday said the commission hopes that all the parties will now participate in the polls.

"We will have nothing to do if this effort fails to ensure full participation in the election," Mahfuz told reporters at his office.

The EC that announced the election schedule first on November 27 is to conduct the upcoming election with its chief on leave. CEC MA Aziz and Election Commissioner SM Zakaria were forced to take time off work in the face of tremendous pressure from the political parties excepting the four-party alliance.

"Now we are hopeful that all the political parties will participate in the election. We are determined to hold a free and fair election," he said.

The AL led grand alliance has been calling for the election to be delayed by at least a month. They

then claimed that the time was needed for correction and publication of the voter list, depoliticisation of the civil and police administration and implementation of the package of proposals drawn up by the advisers.

They have also been clamouring for the president to stand down as the chief adviser.

Then a high-powered delegation of the 14-party combine on Saturday met the EC and asked it to seek opinion from the Supreme Court whether the time limit for holding the election could be extended.

The same day, some leaders of the AL-led alliance met the advisers and came to an understanding that they would go for the polls if the EC extends the time limit for submission of nomination papers.

Replying to a query yesterday, Abdul Jalil said hundred percent of their demands were not implemented yet.

"We'll go to the election under the present context if all the parties within the alliance agree," he added.

Sheikh Selim said the interim authorities have promised them a proper atmosphere and it helped them make up their mind to opt for the election.

"We will submit nomination papers tomorrow," Selim added.

BSF

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village under Daulatpur upazila in the district.

The BSF took the dead body and the injured farmer to Muradnagar camp and later handed over to Zalangi Police Station.

Bangladesh Rifles (BDR) in a letter to BSF protested the incident and asked them to sit in a flag meeting.

Bullet is being treated at an unknown place in India, sources said.

The BSF yesterday handed over Bulbul's body to BDR.

BSF shot dead a Bangladesh cow trader on Nitpur border under Porsha upazila in Naogaon district early yesterday, reports UNB.

The victim was identified as Faruk Hossain, 28, son of Ismail Hossain of Rukonpur village in Gomastapur upazila of Chapainawabganj.

Witnesses said BSF troops from Kedaripara camp gunned down Faruk and took away his body.

BDR sent a letter to BSF protesting the killing and demanded immediate return of Faruk's body.

5 leaders quit LDP

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the Adviser Committee Abu Mohammad Istihak Aziz Olfat, Assistant Joint Secretary Sadek Ahmed Khan, Assistant Secretary of Labour Affairs Shaheed Bablu and Vice President Syed Didar Bakht.

"LDP was launched on October 26 with pledges that it would not compromise with corruption, terrorism, nepotism and dynasty culture. But several party committees were formed ignoring these principles. Recently, the party formed grand alliance with former autocratic ruler Ershad. Protesting these irregularities, we quit LDP," Naim Jahangir said showing the cause of their resignation at a press conference at the Jatiya Press Club in the capital yesterday.

Claiming themselves as freedom fighters, the aggrieved leaders also said that over one hundred activists along with them have quit the party. Naim said that although the party was formed to protest against the corruption and dynasty culture inside the BNP, it now itself is practising these.

Zakaria's leave

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go on leave but spared another Election Commissioner Modabbir Hossain Chowdhury although the much talked about package proposal finalised by the caretaker government on December 4 decided to send both the election commissioners on leave.

Zakaria remained absent from the office from the next day following the request of the council of advisers while CEC MA Aziz took leave for three months from November 21.

The Election Commission (EC) is conducting the ninth parliamentary election after rescheduling the official polls plan for the fourth time and in absence of its two members including the CEC, which is unprecedented in the history of Bangladesh.

The EC first announced the schedule on November 27, setting the date of polling on January 23 while the last date for filing nominations on December 10, scrutiny on December 11 and last date for withdrawal of candidatures on December 19.

The Awami League (AL)-led 14-party alliance rejected the schedule and demanded

Tk 22cr goods gutted in Gazipur mill

UNB, Gazipur

A devastating fire gutted cotton and other valuables of a spinning factory in Sreepur upazila of the district early yesterday.

Sources said the fire that might have originated from an electric short circuit at the cotton godown of Jaber Spinning Factory at Nayanpur at about 1:00am burned down huge quantity of cotton.

Firefighters from Gazipur, Tongi and Dhaka rushed to the spot and doused the fire after eight hours of frantic efforts.

Factory sources said about 8,500 bales of cotton and some portion the factory were damaged by the fire. Factory authorities estimated the loss at Tk 22 crore.

Top businesses

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Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FBCCI) President Mir Nasir Hossain said in a reaction yesterday.

The FBCCI boss found it a very significant decision, as according to him an election without all-party participation would not be meaningful.

He also hoped all parties will accept the election results.

Welcoming the decision, President of Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce and Industry (MCCI) Latifur Rahman said it is a good news that all parties are participating in the election.

"Uncertainty in holding of an acceptable election will disappear now due to the decision," felt the MCCI president.

Echoing Latifur, International Chamber of Commerce and Industry-Bangladesh (ICC-B) President Mahbubur Rahman said, "We are very happy because we want a neutral, free and fair election."

2 lakh

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Adviser Justice Fazlul Haque, also chairman of the cabinet committee on purchase that took the decision.

The adviser said the decision was taken so that the farmers do not face fertiliser crisis in the upcoming Boro season.

The cabinet purchase committee also approved a total of Tk 517 crore for six different projects, of which Tk 463 crore is for fertiliser import.

Meeting sources said this time the government will have to spend US\$60 more to import each ton of fertiliser.

The price of a ton of fertiliser was \$267 during January-February period of 2006 while the government will now have to spend \$327 for per ton at the current rate.

The allocations of Tk 47 crore for import of 25,000 metric tons of wheat and another Tk 7 crore for recruitment of consultants in Bangladesh Water Supply Programme were also approved at the meeting.

30 injured

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BCL also enforced an indefinite strike on the campus demanding removal of Vice Chancellor Prof Dr Badiul Alam as the authorities turned a blind eye to the Shibir attack.

Shibir activists also critically injured a photojournalist on duty, Amran Hossain of the Daily Janakantha. He is undergoing treatment at Chittagong Medical College Hospital (CMCH).

Sources and witnesses said the clash between Shibir and BCL erupted at around 1:00pm near the CU Shaheed Minar over an altercation between two of their activists.

General students were panicked when hundreds of Shibir activists armed with truncheons, iron-rods and hockey sticks swooped on the BCL, SCF and BCU activists to avenge the altercation at the Shaheed Minar.

The university authorities took no action against the Shibir activists while they went on a rampage on the campus hurting rivals and damaging an ambulance as well as doors and windowpanes of the proctor office, added the sources.

Many of the injured were admitted to CMCH and Royal Hospital while others given first aid at different hospitals, sources said.

Home ride

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same route has been increased from Tk 250 to Tk 350 that is to be executed from December 26.

The fare on the same route fixed by the government is Tk 284 for a bus passenger and Tk 120 for a launch deck passenger, owners' association sources said.

Claiming that they carry passengers in less than the government approved rate throughout the year, Golam Mawla and Golam Salek, leaders of the launch and bus owners associations of Barisal, said they are charging the 'average government rate' for only twenty days on the occasion of two Eids to make up for the losses.

Giasuddin, Barisal depot traffic manager of BRTC, said they have shortage of vehicles.

The passengers demanded arrangement of special road and river transport under government supervision and vigilance on overloading and security matter.

Tibet's interest lies being part of China

Says Dalai Lama

REUTERS, New Delhi

It was in the interest of Tibetans to be a part of China as the Asian country was an economic giant, Tibetan spiritual leader, the Dalai Lama, said yesterday.

"It is in our own interest to remain with People's Republic of China. A powerful nation -- economically very powerful," he told an audience at a book launch in the Indian capital.

"So, therefore, being with the People's Republic of China is in our own interest provided they give us meaningful autonomy," the Nobel peace prizewinner, who lives in exile in the Himalayas in northern India with his followers, said.

"That's (autonomy) the safeguard of preservation of the culture."

He reiterated his "Middle Way" approach for autonomy but not independence for Tibet, sandwiched between China and India.

The Dalai Lama also said he was not against Chinese economic development of the Himalayan region.

"If you want, modernise Tibet," he said.

"Every Tibetan wants a modernised Tibet."

China bound itself closer to Tibet with a new railway link -- the world's highest such connection -- to Lhasa in July, the region's capital, which Beijing vows will bring greater economic development to the region.

But the train, with pressurised cabins to withstand high-altitude,

has been criticised by some Tibetans who say it will endanger the region's fragile ecology and undermine its unique cultural identity.

A nephew of the Dalai Lama has said the train would bring an influx of long-term Chinese migrants and "militarise" the region and likened the rail link to the "second invasion of Tibet".

Chinese troops first occupied Tibet in 1950. Nine years later, after a failed uprising, the Dalai Lama and thousands of fellow Tibetans fled to India.

Beijing considers the Dalai Lama as a "splittist" or a separatist and suspects his motives.

But the Dalai Lama said the problem lay elsewhere.

"The real threat of Tibetan separation... in China is the Buddhist culture."

He said that China did not respect Tibet's culture and was deliberately diminishing its religious traditions and language.

"Intentionally or unintentionally, some kind of cultural genocide is taking place in Tibet."

Limited contacts between Chinese officials and Tibetan exiles have resulted in negligible compromise so far. But the Dalai Lama said there was scope for more talks.

"We are fully committed for dialogue with China in spite of Chinese government's criticism and repression towards us."

Last month, the Dalai Lama was quoted in the Japanese media as saying one day he hoped to return to Tibet one day.

Faint hope for ME

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But while Israeli officials played up the importance of the encounter, observers on both sides said it lacked in concrete measures and warned against inflated expectations.

"It was a first step, but we won't know if it's important before we see the results on the ground," Ali al-Jarjawi, a political science professor at the Birzeit University in Ramallah, told AFP. "The Palestinian people are looking for results, not meetings."

"It was a bit more than a photo op," said Udi Segal, a journalist with Channel Two television, adding that the encounter was "a meeting between two leaders with their backs against the wall."

Among the measures agreed during the encounter, Israel agreed to release up to 100 million dollars in customs duties that it has been withholding from the Palestinian Authority since the Islamist Hamas movement formed a cabinet in March.

The Israeli cabinet voted unanimously to release the money during its weekly meeting on Sunday.

Hamas is considered a terrorist organization by Israel and the West, which froze all direct aid to the Palestinian government after it took power.

Observers said that the meeting was meant to strengthen Abbas at a time when he is facing off against Hamas in an intense power struggle, which boiled over into deadly armed clashes last week between rival Palestinian factions after the Palestinian president called for early elections.

Olmert said Sunday that he agreed to release the money "in order to help

in humanitarian aid to the Palestinian people who suffer among other things due to the failing conduct of their government which is not part of the international community."

But Israel did not agree to release prisoners -- an important gesture sought by Abbas.

"Olmert did not give Abu Mazen anything real," said Khani al-Masri, an analyst in Ramallah.

Wrote the Israeli newspaper Maariv: "The biggest achievement of Abu Mazen yesterday at the prime minister's residence in Jerusalem lay in the Palestinian flag that was raised in his honour above the entrance."

"He received a lot of promises and a little money... The only asset that Abu Mazen can broadcast to his people today is a little optimism."

Hamas likewise said the encounter did not amount to anything concrete.

"Israel has previously given many promises, both to this president and the previous one. They always quickly backtrack on their promises and try to forget the main point, which is the occupation and the aggression," the Hamas government said in a statement Sunday in Gaza.

And the radical Islamic Jihad group said it was a waste of time.

"This kind of meeting is wasting time... and is not helping the Palestinian interests," it said in a statement. "The time that went into planning this meeting could have been used to solve many internal problems."

Iran refuses to cease

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related to those programs.

If Iran refuses to comply, the council warned it would adopt further nonmilitary sanctions, but the resolution emphasized the importance of diplomacy in seeking guarantees "that Iran's nuclear program is exclusively for peaceful purposes."

Iran insists its nuclear program is intended to produce energy, but the Americans and Europeans suspect its ultimate goal is the production of weapons.

Ahmadinejad also downplayed the resolution, saying it would be the Security Council that regretted it, not Iran.

"This will not damage the nation of Iran, but its issuers will soon regret this superficial and nil act," he said, speaking to a group of war veterans from the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq war at the former U.S. Embassy in Tehran.

The United States has said it hopes the resolution will clear the way for tougher measures by individual countries, particularly Russia.

The Bush administration had pushed for tougher penalties. But Russia and China, which both have strong commercial ties to Tehran, balked.

To get their votes, the resolution dropped a ban on international travel by Iranian officials involved in nuclear and missile development and specified the banned items and technologies.

It says the council will review Iran's actions in light of a report from the head of the IAEA,

requested within 60 days, on whether the country has suspended uranium enrichment and complied with all IAEA demands.

It also says sanctions will end when the board of the IAEA confirms that Iran has complied with all its obligations.

The six countries trying to get Iran to curb its nuclear program Britain, France, Germany, Russia, China and the United States -- offered Tehran a package of economic and political incentives if it agreed to suspend uranium enrichment. But Iran refused and rejected an Aug. 31 council deadline to freeze enrichment.

Earlier Sunday, Iran's top nuclear negotiator Ali Larjani said the resolution made his country more "decisive in realizing our nuclear aims."

"From Sunday morning