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NEWS BRIEFS

EC's complaint box

The Election Commission (EC) has set up a complaint box at its Secretariat to receive allegations on the forthcoming parliament election. The EC has urged the concerned people, who have specific allegations, to drop their written complaints in the box, said an EC press release yesterday. The concerned people can also inform their allegations over telephone. No 329375, set up at the EC's control room. The control room will remain open for 12 hours from 8 am everyday, reports UNB.

37 arms seized, 423 arrested

Law enforcing agencies till 6 pm yesterday the 14th day of country-wide illegal arms-recovery drive, seized 37 fire arms of various types, 79 bullets and 26 explosives. According to Election Commission law and order Coordination Cell, some 423 people were also arrested on various charges, including for possessing illegal firearms, during the period, reports UNB.

Blast at Sirajganj post office: 3 hurt

SIRAJGANJ, Jan 3: A bomb explosion at Sirajganj Head Post Office premises today left its three employees injured. Police said the bomb left at the downstairs of the office went off at about 1 pm when the employees were searching some old documents there, reports UNB.

Digital telephone lines in Sylhet

From Staff Correspondent
 SYLHET, Jan 3: The Sylhet telephone exchange will be converted into digital one from Friday afternoon. The new system will have provisions for 15,000 lines. With the change, all the existing 7500 telephones will be made digital while 7500 new phones will also be allotted to new applicants soon.

Readymade garments

Bangladesh risks losing market to neighbours

Bangladesh risks losing its readymade garment market to its South Asian neighbours in the post-MFA (Multi-fibre Arrangement) quota-free textile trade unless the sector attains further competitiveness, reports UNB.

The signal came from a World Bank review of the country's trade policy reforms, which revealed from studies that unit values in the readymade garment (RMG) sector in Bangladesh is rising faster than in India and Pakistan.

For a comparative assessment of the competitiveness of the sector in the South Asian region, the World Bank review, a draft copy of which was made available to UNB, analysed unit values of 22 major RMG items exported under quota to the USA using data between 1990 and 1993.

Of the 22 items, 16 from Bangladesh experienced a more than 10 per cent increase in their unit values during the period. In contrast, only 8 Indian and 10 Pakistani RMG export products registered the same increase.

The review observed that despite upward trend in unit values, Bangladesh had not lost market shares primarily due to quotas. "To maintain this market after 2005, Bangladesh must ensure that the RMG industry is competitive."

According to the World Bank, RMG exports from South Asia will increase to the tune of 254 per cent by the year 2005 following the dismantling of MFA system. "Bangladesh's share in this gain will be largely determined by the competitiveness of its exports relative to its neighbours, namely India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka," said the review.

The World Bank review was critical of the high level of protection being given to the local textile industry, ar-

Wazed-Talukdar closed door meet

By Nazmul Ashraf

Dr. Wazed Mia, husband of Awami League chief Sheikh Hasina, had a 70-minute closed door meeting with BNP Secretary General Abdus Salam Talukdar last night.

Information and Commerce Minister M Shamsul Islam was also present at the meeting held at the LGRD Minister's Bailey Road official residence between 9:00-10:30 pm.

"I proposed to resolve the crisis and it is absolutely on my own. I have neither been sent by any party or any individual nor I carried anybody's briefing", Dr Wazed said in reply to a question after the meeting.

Talking to some waiting newsmen, he further said, "I have come to explain my own idea as to how to resolve the crisis since I love my country."

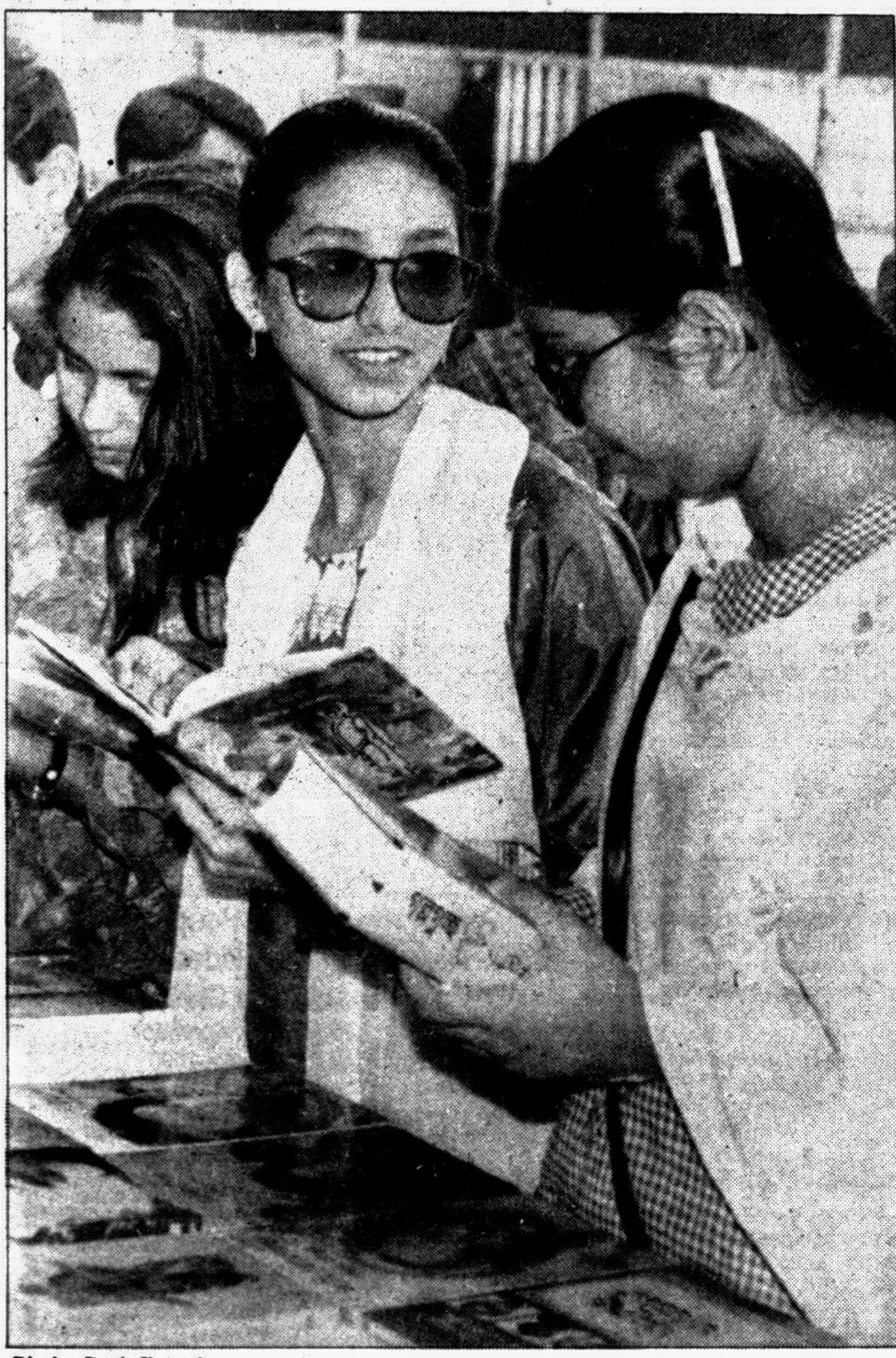
Asked what was the response to his proposal, the BAEC scientist said, "I just made my suggestions and I did not seek their response".

Khaleda files nomination for Rajshahi-2

RAJSHAHI, Jan 3: Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia today filed her nomination for contesting the forthcoming election from Rajshahi-2 constituency, reports UNB.

Emran Ali Sarker, Chairman of Rajshahi Krishi Bank and former Minister, submitted the nomination papers on behalf of Begum Zia at the District Returning Officer's office at noon.

This is one of the four constituencies from which the Prime Minister is contesting the parliament election. Three other seats are in Sirajganj, Bogra and Feni.



Dhaka Book Fair that opened at Bijoy Sarani in the city on Monday is drawing more and more crowd everyday. - Star photo

Ban on raw jute export thru' land route goes

By Staff Correspondent

The government was withdrawn the restriction on raw jute export through land route.

A gazette notification in this regard was published on Tuesday.

The restriction was imposed on October 9 last year.

Official sources said the main objective of the restriction was to check smuggling and give protection to local jute industries.

Jute goods-producers at the beginning of the season had apprehended that raw jute price would go up sharply and many jute mills might face closure due to heavy production shortfall.

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Myanmar detains repatriated Rohingyas

Movement of many Rohingya refugees who were repatriated to their homeland in Myanmar has been restricted to certain areas, according to information received in the city yesterday, reports UNB.

Many of the returnees were not allowed to go back to their hearths and homes from where they were evicted. They are detained in camps.

The Myanmar government in collaboration with the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) has been looking after them.

Various international NGOs who are trying to penetrate into the Rakhine state of Myanmar are yet to receive permission from authorities to do the rehabilitation work.

Commentary

Now is the time for a historic compromise

By Mahfuz Anam

Even the sweetest song becomes totally distasteful when repeated a thousand times. So is the case with the two political slogans - one of saving the constitution, and the other of free and fair election. Every sensible citizen wants to protect the Constitution, and also a free and fair election. But frankly, we are now sick and tired of hearing about them, and like the overplayed sweet song, we want to switch off, whenever we hear these two phrases.

After all the twists and turns of a tortuous negotiating process over the last two years, we now stand at the very edge of endurance and patience (not to mention time). We want a solution to this protracted political crisis - and we want it now.

What divides us today are not the fundamentals which the two sides stood for at the outset. At this late stage, what has scuttled the discussion, and is preventing a solution, are two things demanded by the opposition: a) the agreed upon advisory council is to have a neutral 'chief' with executive power; and b) there has to be 90 days time, before elections are held.

The ruling party's position on the first demand is that the advisory council will have to be headed by the President. On the second question, BNP appears to be amenable if sufficient legal cover can be given to it through a reference to the Supreme Court. This point is important as there exists a constitutional limit of 90 days.

The issue of substance is that of the neutral chief of the advisory council. What miracle or mischief will that chief be able to perform, that makes him so important for both sides to make it the 'Battle of Waterloo'?

What is there for the ruling party to lose if there is a neutral chief? There will be five members of BNP in the advisory council, who can cry foul, and raise hell in case the chief behaves in a partisan manner. After all opposition's five will have to be distributed between different political parties, whereas BNP's will be one solid bloc. The PM can put the opposition's challenge to a supreme test and go for elections with a "Neutral chief advisor". Such a daring move will show

Hasina's one-point demand

Khaleda must go

By Staff Correspondent

Awami League (AL) Chief Sheikh Hasina yesterday said her party will "not only boycott a unilateral election but also resist it to stop another vote rigging by the ruling party." "If the ruling party tries to hold the polls unilaterally, the Opposition workers will resist the move as well as those who are planning to take part in it," Hasina said addressing a party rally at the Bangabandhu Avenue in the city.

Hasina also reiterated her call to the President to advise the Prime Minister to step down immediately to pave the way for a solution to the lingering political crisis.

The Awami League president said that from now on the Opposition's campaign would concentrate on the resignation of Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia.

"Now, all our demands will concentrate on one-point Khaleda must go," she told the slogan chanting party workers. "The nation will not forgive the Prime Minister for betraying the blood of martyrs of the pro-democracy movement," Hasina added.

The comments of the AL Chief came amid a faltering back-stage negotiation with BNP for striking a deal to end the 22-month-long political crisis.

Hasina also charged the Home Minister for what she called harbouring people possessing illegal weapons and harassing opposition workers in the name of recovery of illegal arms.

The AL Chief also advised the armed forces to maintain neutrality in the on-going arms recovery drive.

"We expect that the armed forces personnel, who are the employee of the republic, will never become a party to BNP's blue print to rig votes in this elections," she said.

Hasina told the rally that there were numerous anomalies in the present voters list and that voters identity cards were seen in the hands of likely BNP candidates for the elections.

She recalled her telephonic conversation with Khaleda Zia and claimed: "The BNP leaders don't want

Manju sees 'meaningful' polls ahead

By Staff Correspondent

Secretary General of Jatiya Party Anwar Hossain Manju is still optimistic about the on-going back-stage parleys between the ruling party and the Opposition, saying "we are probably heading towards meaningful elections The nation cannot afford otherwise."

"That is why all concerned are trying to chalk out a formula to resolve the stalemate, within the framework of a non-party, non-partisan caretaker government", the JP leader told The Daily Star last night.

In reply to a question whether the JP is going to participate in the forthcoming elections, Manju said that his party was always prepared for elections provided the 'issue of vote stealing was taken care of'.

Meanwhile, JP will hold a rally today at the south gate of Baitul Mukarram mosque to drum up support in favour of the caretaker issue and the release of its jailed leader HM Ershad.

Malaysian retirees to occupy migrants' jobs

KUALA LUMPUR, Jan 3: Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammad reportedly said on Tuesday retirees would be asked to rejoin the workforce to replace migrant workers so as to curb the influx of foreign workers, reports AFP.

The proposal was not meant to create jobs for the retirees, Mahathir was reported saying by Bernama news agency.

"This is a different way, it is not our intention to create work for them (retirees), but we want them to take up jobs currently held by foreigners," he said.

The statement clarified his new year call to hire retirees and housewives, which prompted suggestions that the retirement age for workers should be raised.

Raising the retirement age is a different matter altogether from the government proposal, he explained.

"The objective is totally different, sometimes we don't make it clear, and that is our fault," he admitted.

Mahathir said raising the present retirement age of government workers from 55 to 60 — a move that would be followed by the private sector — would lead workers to stay in their jobs longer and deny other staff promotional opportunities.

"This will only increase the number of government workers, but our idea is to control the size of the civil service," he said.

Mahathir said raising the retirement age would not curb the inflow of foreign workers, whose numbers were expected to increase to 2.3 million by the end of the decade if the influx was not checked.

Eight straight years of robust economic growth surpassing eight per cent a year has brought about an acute worker shortage in Malaysia.

But Mahathir on Sunday announced government plans to re-employ retirees and train housewives for suitable jobs to prevent over reliance on foreign labour.

The manpower department said on Tuesday there were about one million retirees and housewives that could be hired to implement the government's proposal.

Details on page 8

Nine killed in Delhi bomb blast

NEW DELHI, Jan 3: At least nine people were killed and 35 injured when a powerful bomb exploded in the heart of the Indian capital's busiest commercial district today, police and hospital sources said, reports AFP.

Raizada Kishore, a doctor at the Ram Manohar Lohia Hospital where many of the victims were killed in the blast. Eight of the 35 injured were in critical condition.

Deputy Police Commissioner Quamer Ahmed said the initial investigation had determined that the explosion, which occurred at around 3:15 pm (0945 GMT), was "most probably caused by a bomb."

The explosion took place outside a shop selling automobile parts, shattering window panes of nearby building. There was no immediate claim of responsibility.

Reuters quoted the Press Trust of India (PTI) as reporting that a Kashmiri separatist organisation, the Jammu and Kashmir Islamic Front, claimed responsibility for the explosion.

The news agency said a man identifying himself as a spokesman for the group called PTI, saying the blast was to protest against "atrocities" by Indian security forces in Jammu and Kashmir.

Residents who helped carry away victims said they counted seven dead, while United News of India said at least six were killed.

Jamaat wants advisory council under President

The Jamaat-e-Islami yesterday demanded immediate resignation of the Prime Minister to pave way for appointing a council of advisors by the President to hold free and fair elections, reports UNB.

"After discussing with the political parties, the President will decide whether there would be a chief advisor or not in the council," See Page 12 Col 6

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