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EC fires returning officer

By Staff Correspondent

Less than three days before the crucial by-election in the Pabna-2 constituency, the Election Commission (EC) yesterday changed the returning officer, apparently responding to demands from opposition BNP.

The additional district magistrate of Pabna, Hedayetul Islam, replaced deputy commissioner Mahbubur Rahman.

The change in the key position in the by-election administration came yesterday afternoon, some 24 hours after BNP demanded of the Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) Mohammad Abu Hena to relieve the DC, the superintendent of police of Pabna and the Rajshahi range

DIG of police of their duties in the by-polls.

A top BNP leader hailed the EC decision.

"He (the CEC) has done the right thing," said BNP standing committee member Abdus Salam Talukdar, speaking to The Daily Star last night.

Asked if he expected fairness in the by-poll after the change, Talukdar, a former secretary general of the party, said, "It is difficult to say whether the election will be fair... Let's hope the new returning officer, who replaced the DC after he was accused of being partisan, plays a neutral role."

The EC move followed BNP's

allegations against the DC and other district officials of being partisan and the CEC's reported telephone chat with the DC and a top BNP leader.

A five-member BNP delegation had met with the CEC Monday afternoon and suggested that a district judge or a representative of the Election Commission be appointed as returning officer to "ensure a neutral and fair by-election."

"The EC has decided to relieve Mahbubur Rahman of his election duties after specific instances of lapses on his part were found," Abu Hena told reporters at his office last

evening. "But," he hastened to add, "Rahman will remain as the DC of Pabna."

But the CEC did not agree with suggestion that the change was made in view of the BNP demand. Nor did he agree with a questioner that the move was "politically influenced."

To a question if the EC would withdraw the DIG and the SP from their poll duties, Abu Hena replied they did not find any lapses in their election duties as yet.

Asked if there was any possibility of further changes, the CEC did not rule out the possibility.

No accommodation for 'guests' in Pabna

From Ranesh Maitra

PABNA, Dec 7: People coming to Pabna for overnight stay are now looking for private houses to rent and the administration is requisitioning transports from outside the district.

Two days ahead of the by-polls in Pabna-2 constituency, there is no accommodation in any hotel, guest house or rest house in Pabna town and in Sujannagar, Bera, Sathis and Iswardi thanas now.

All accommodations have been rented by members of parliament, high officials, mediamen and observers who have flocked in here in scores either for campaigning or for polls duty, or to cover the prestige fight between ruling Awami League and opposition BNP, sources said. The Pabna Circuit House was occupied much earlier.

At least five ministers are here now. All accommodations in the town and in the four thanas are packed with 150 MPs and their men, 131 magistrates, a large number of high civil, military and police officials, at least 50 journalists from Dhaka, foreign mediamen and observers.

Many guests who arrived today are now searching for private houses to spend the night. Local officials are begging pardon if anybody requests them for help in finding an accommodation.

Transport problem has become acute as all transports have been booked. The district administration is trying to requisition transports from other districts, officials said.

Cabinet decision

Haji expenses Tk 84400 for each pilgrim

The total expenses for performing Hajj next year under the government management will be Tk 84,400 for each pilgrim, reports UNB.

This was approved at a meeting the Cabinet yesterday with Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in the chair.

The Cabinet also approved the Hajj Policy 1999 stipulating arrangements for the devotees to make the next pilgrimage to holy Makkah.

Earlier, the Cabinet had approved a decision to allow 8,000 pilgrims from the country to perform Hajj under the government management.

Those wishing to perform Hajj under government management have been advised to deposit Tk 84,400 in the banks concerned by December 22.

Of the total amount, Tk 40,000 have been fixed for plane fare while Tk 16,000 for house rent and the rest as other expenditures.

According to an official handout, those who already deposited advance house rent of Tk 16,000 will now have to deposit the remaining Tk 68,400 by December 22.

Intending Hajj pilgrims who have not deposited the advance house rent are to deposit the total amount in the banks by that date.

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Join polls ignoring threats: Khaleda

From Our Correspondent

PABNA, Dec 7: Dispelling doubts about BNP participation in Thursday's by-election here, party chief Khaleda Zia today called upon the voters to turn up in polling booths in larger number ignoring "all threats, intimidation and attacks by the ruling party."

Khaleda's call came a day after her party threatened to "rethink" its participation in the crucial by-election if the returning officer and two top police officials -- the superintendent of police of Pabna and the Rajshahi range DIG of police -- were not relieved of their election duties.

Some 24 hours after the BNP demands were placed to the Chief Election Commissioner, the returning officer -- Pabna DC Mahbubur Rahman -- was replaced by Hedayetul Islam, the additional district magistrate.

"Vote for Selim Reza Habib, the BNP nominee in the by-election to Pabna-2 constituency, to prove that the Awami League government is tyrannical and dishonest and it has lost people's support," she told her first

public meeting as she arrived here today on a two-day campaign trip.

Also Leader of the Opposition in Parliament, Khaleda Zia threatened to "close down everything indefinitely" if the government played foul with the December 10 vote.

"In that case, we'll also compel the government to step down," she told the meeting at the Dhophkhola Coronation High School ground today.

Depicting a grim picture of the country, Begum Zia said people across the country are groaning in miseries. Prices of essentials have soared beyond buying power of the common man. Millions are jobless as there is no development work of the government. Hapless hungry mothers have reportedly resorted to sell babies.

Presided over by local BNP leader Abdul Hamid, the meeting was addressed by Khondokar Mosharraf Hossain, Fazlur Rahman Patal, Kabir Hossain, Mizanur Rahman Minu, Mashiur Rahman, Barrister Aminul Haq, Rafiqul Islam Bakul and Amanullah Aman.

AL complains to EC Khaleda violated code of conduct

Awami League yesterday alleged violation of code of conduct by Leader of the Opposition in Parliament Begum Khaleda Zia for using official privilege and facilities during the by-election campaign for Pabna-2 seat, reports UNB.

The complaint against the BNP Chairperson and other BNP leaders was lodged with the Chief Election Commissioner.

An application to the CEC signed by Awami League office secretary Abdul Mannan Khan said Begum Zia, taking the privilege of a minister, used flag in her car and special ferry of BWTC at Aricha ghat.

Enjoying the official facilities, she visited the Pabna-2 constituency with her party

leaders and addressed a public meeting at Natia High School ground in Bera thana in favour of her party candidate contesting the December 10 by-election.

Awami League said being Leader of the Opposition in Parliament, Begum Zia enjoyed the status and privilege of a minister, but she conducted election campaign for the BNP nominee, which is a complete violation of the election code of conduct.

The ruling party also alleged that BNP leaders Barrister Aminul Huq MP, Fazlur Rahman Patal MP and Rafiqul Islam Bakul MP along with their party's armed members went to

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Send observers, BNP appeals to 16 countries

By Staff Correspondent

BNP has appealed to 16 countries to send observers to monitor the parliamentary by-election in Pabna-2 constituency, scheduled to be held on Thursday.

BNP Secretary General Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan wrote letters to heads of missions of the countries in Dhaka on Sunday "apprising them the latest situation in the constituency and how the ruling party is violating the election code of conduct."

Bhuiyan in his identical letters to the missions including those of USA, UK, France, Japan, The Netherlands, China, Canada, Australia, Norway and Iran said, "You may wish to help this process as a watchdog by sending independent observers to this place during and even before the by-election." A copy of the letter was made available to The Daily Star yesterday.

He alleged that the code of conduct laid down by the Election Commission for holding election was being violated in this constituency.

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EC allows 271 observers

The Election Commission has permitted 271 persons, including six officials of three foreign embassies in Dhaka, to observe the by-polls in Pabna-2 Constituency on Thursday, reports UNB.

According to an official handout, 113 representatives from Fair Election Monitoring Alliance (FEMA), 85 from Bangladesh Human Rights Coordination Council (BHRCC), 10 from National Election Monitoring Council, 23 from Journalists' Association of Human Rights and 10 representatives from International Society for Human Rights will observe the polling.

The foreign missions are: USA, UK and The Netherlands. The Election Commission hoped that the presence of adequate number of observers would help hold a fair, transparent and neutral election.

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Runa has her hands repaired, but...

By Staff Correspondent

Runa and her mother face an uncertain future as the eight-year-old gets out of the hospital soon.

"By the grace of Allah, my daughter will get cured but where will we go? We have sold out even our home and now we are homeless," Fatema, Runa's mother, said at Dhaka Medical College Hospital yesterday.

Runa was admitted to ward number 33 of DMCH after one of her wrists was blown off and the other severely injured in a bomb blast during an opposition-led hartal on October 18. The bomb blasted in her hand after a picket gave it to her as he was being chased by police.

On Thursday, surgeons grafted skin in the badly damaged left hand to do the repairs, nurses said. The girl may be released from the hospital next week if she develops no further problem, they said.

Worse days are ahead for the mother.

"Our hospital days are rather happy times and whenever I look forward, it is totally dark. Brothers of my husband may provide shelter for their homeless brother, nephew and niece but, since I am a stranger's daughter and have no blood-relation with them, they will not bear my responsibility," an emotion-choked Fatema said sitting beside her daughter on the hospital bed.

An ailing husband and floods brought her to Dhaka to work as a housemaid. Fatema came to the city in September after she had failed to make a living in her village, Madhupur, Nandail, Mymensingh. "I will have to feed my husband as he cannot work because he is bedridden due to asthma and cardiac complexities. We sold everything," she said.

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Pabna put under security alert

In the run-up to Pabna by-election, the Election Commission put the authorities on 'alert' with tight security measures against any disturbances as CEC Abu Hena sounded strong optimism about a fair voting on December 10.

"I'm absolutely hopeful about free and fair election provided I get cooperation from all stakeholders of election," he told a group of journalists at his office yesterday afternoon.

The Chief Election Commissioner, who relieved the Pabna Deputy Commissioner of his assignment as Returning Officer for 'specific lapses' yesterday, said all possible measures had been taken 'to the best of our judgement and ability' to ensure fair ballot in the Pabna-2 constituency.

"We are working absolutely independently, free from any influence from any quarter," Abu Hena told a questioner.

He said the Commission had sent 'alert' to the concerned authorities in Pabna against any attempt of disturbance to disrupt peaceful voting through armed violence, rigging or by any other means.

"After reviewing the overall situation, we have beefed up the security measures" in the constituency -- Bera and Sujannagar -- deploying more than 3,500 forces including two companies of army.

The CEC said 370 armymen would be deployed today along with other forces of police, armed police battalion, armed Ansars. The paramilitary BDR personnel have already been posted.

To a question, Abu Hena said the Deputy Commissioner had been relieved after reports of 'some specific lapses' and replaced by the Additional District Magistrate. He, however, said the DC's lapses did not include any indulgence in political motivation.

The CEC admitted that some extra measures had to be taken

because of the 'peculiarity' of the constituency where all the 81 polling centres were identified either as extremely vulnerable or vulnerable. Of the total, 60 were identified as extremely vulnerable and 21 vulnerable.

About the alleged violation of code of conduct by leaders of major parties, Hena explained the pertinent points, saying that these are applicable for all -- the ruling party and the opposition.

The ruling party or the opposition leaders who enjoy the status and privileges of minister, state minister or deputy minister cannot use official facilities like car, flag or receive protocol during electioneering.

In reply to a question, the CEC said he drew the attention of the Prime Minister for restricting ministers from making any official visit to the constituency. He also gave an advice that even a minister should not visit there in his private car.

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Zarya, Unity come together

SPACE CENTER (Houston), Dec 7: Endeavour's astronauts have connected the first two building blocks of the international space station, creating a seven-storey tower in the shuttle cargo bay, reports AP.

It was the first time that the Russian-built Zarya control module and the made-in-America Unity chamber had ever touched. It looked to be a perfect and, hopefully, long-lasting fit.

"We have capture of Zarya," Commander Robert Cabana announced the moment the two pieces came together.

"Congratulations to the crew of the good ship Endeavour," replied Mission Control.

"That's terrific."

The 386-kilometer high construction job began two hours earlier with Nancy Currie's capture of Zarya (Russian for Sunrise) using the shuttle robot arm. "We're halfway home," Cabana said.

Then came the hard part: stacking the two giant cylinders in the cargo bay.

The two station pieces are so big -- 23 meters from the tip of one to the tip of the other with a combined mass of 31,750 kilos -- that Currie and her crewmates had to rely on a computerized vision system and camera views, rather than direct line of sight. This was the first time such a "blind" docking had ever been attempted.

OCs of 6 new thanas in city

The government has announced the names of Officers-in-charge (OCs) of the six new police stations of Dhaka Metropolitan Police to be inaugurated tomorrow, reports UNB.

The OCs are: Hazarihat Station -- Yunus Ali, Badda Station -- Ashrafur Haq, Khilgaon Station -- Ghiasuddin Chowdhury, Shyampur Station -- Abdur Razzaq, Kamrangirchar Station -- Sirajul Islam and Sakur Station -- Abdur Rashid Sikder.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina will inaugurate the new police stations at a function at the DMP Police Headquarters in the city tomorrow.

BNP activist shot dead in Chittagong

From Staff Correspondent

CHITTAGONG, Dec 7: A BNP activist was murdered allegedly by rival workers at Shaikhal village under Mirsharai thana today, police said.

A group of about 25 armed assailants attacked the house of Md. Shahabuddin, 42, at Jallapara at 10 am today and allegedly shot him dead. They then chopped the body of victim on the spot, police said.

BNP blamed the activists of ruling Awami League for the attack which AL denied.

Story of a boy kidnapped for camel race

DUBAI, Dec 7: A five-year-old allegedly kidnapped from his home in Dhaka and forced to work as a camel jockey in the United Arab Emirates is to be repatriated soon, consular officials say, reports AFP.

A Bangladeshi living in the Emirates is believed to have smuggled the boy into the country as his own son and named him Mubeen Qasim in his passport.

His plight was discovered only after he broke his leg falling off a camel and ended up in hospital for two months.

Bangladesh consular general in Dubai Golam Hussein told Friday's Gulf News he wanted to return the boy to his parents as soon as possible.

"But if they are not located within the next few weeks, we may have to send the boy to an orphanage in Dhaka," he said.

Alleged kidnapper Abul Qasim is in police custody awaiting charges of forgery.

The boy, whose real name is thought to be Rubel, was handed over to the consulate in October and has been fostered by a Bangladeshi family in the Emirate of Ajman.

Sayed's appeal dismissed

By SC Correspondent

The High Court yesterday upheld the Election Tribunal's judgement declaring void the election of Jamaat-e-Islami leader Moulana Delwar Hossain Sayeedi as a Member of Parliament.

A Division Bench of the HC comprising Justice Mohammad Abdul Mannan and Justice A K Badrul Hoque in a judgement also gave directives for holding fresh election in Barai Bania

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Madrasahmen swoop on NGO activists B'baria clash hurts 150

From Our Correspondent

BRAMHANBARIA, Dec-7: At least 150 people including 25 policemen were injured as a local fundamentalist group backed by teachers and students of a Madrasah clashed with NGO workers here today.

The clash ensued when the fundamentalist group, the students and the teachers of Yousufia Madrasah attacked the NGO workers at around noon while they were at a meeting at the Brahmanbaria College ground.

The fundamentalist group had earlier declared the activities of the NGOs "as anti-Islamic" when they had announced a five-day programme to celebrate the Victory Day.

The five-day programme was scheduled to be held at the Neaz Stadium but the district administration imposed Section 144 in and around the stadium fearing violence.

The NGO workers yesterday gathered at Ghatara from where they brought out a procession. They tried to march towards the

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Sexual assault on student DU probing allegation against a teacher

By DU Correspondent

A fact finding committee formed to investigate an alleged sexual assault on a female student by a male Dhaka University teacher started functioning yesterday, sources said.

Vice Chancellor Prof. AK Azad Chowdhury formed the four-member committee headed by Prof. Shahadat Ali on Sunday following an allegation by some female teachers that a teacher had sexually harassed a student.

The committee has been asked to submit its report

within 15 days. The report will be submitted to the policymaking Syndicate, the VC said.

Committee sources said that a list of the people who would be interrogated and a work plan had been prepared.

One of the committee members, speaking on condition of anonymity, said that such allegation against the same teacher was heard earlier. He said the victim is a student of the Social Science faculty of the university.

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A scene from the play, *Bou*, staged by Munshiganj Theatre at the Street Drama Festival at Central Shahid Minar yesterday.

December fever all over

By Staff Correspondent

Caught by the annual December fever as usual, Dhaka's cultural world is playing the spirit of the nation's glorious liberation struggle and the victory that came this month 27 years ago.

The traditional venues are bustling with activity, at the centre of which is the Central Shaheed Minar where a week-long patho natok or street drama festival ended yesterday.

The festive mood is evident at the Dhaka University Teacher-Student Centre, the hub of cultural activists, the island where *Shoparito Shadhinata* stands proudly, the Institute of Fine Arts and the Bangla Academy.

At Shilpakala Academy, an

on-going event marking the 50 years of fine arts movement coincides with the December celebrations.

At the Shaheed Minar, a huge turnout marked the concluding day of the drama festival that saw six plays enacted including *Gano Rai* (people's verdict).

The play deals with the 'trial' in the *Gano Adalat* (people's court) of the killers and collaborators when the Bengalis were fighting for freedom in 1971.

Other plays yesterday were

Deshar O Lagiya, Bou, Darl Khela, Informer and Bajlat.

Meanwhile, the Bangla Academy will organise a discussion meeting on the occasion of the *Shaheed Buddhijibi Dibosh* (martyred intellectual day) on December 14. This day in 1971, just two days before the Victory came, the defeated forces made their last attempts to eliminate the nation's top intellectuals.

This year's discussion is titled *The Evaluation of the Martyred Intellectuals Day* and will be chaired by Prof. Kabir Chowdhury.

The Bangla Academy will also organise a cultural programme on the Victory Day (December 16) at 6:00 p.m.

— Star photo