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The Daily Star

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 Sujanagar, Bera, Saths and Iswardi thanas now.

All accommodations have been rented by members of parliament, high officials, mediapersons 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 mediapersons and observers.

Many guests who arrived today are now searching for private houses to spend the night anyhow. 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

Hajj 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 of 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

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 numbers 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 Dhopkhola 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. Helpless hungry mothers have reportedly compelled to sell babies.

Presided over by local BNP leader Abdul Hamid, the meeting was addressed by Khandokar Mosharraf Hossain, Faizur Rahman Patal, Kabir Hossain, Mizanur Rahman Minu, Mashru Rahman, Barrister Aminul Haq, Rafiqul Islam Bakul and Amarullah Aman.

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

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 "appraising 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.

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See Page 12 Col 2

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