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Verdict on Dhaka-10 stayed

By SC Correspondent
The High Court yesterday ordered a 10-week stay of operation of the Election Tribunal's judgement declaring void the polling at 51 centres out of 78 in Dhaka-10 parliamentary constituency.

A Division Bench of the HC comprising Justice Mahfuzur Rahman and Justice Md Rafiqul Rasool, after admitting the appeal preferred against the Election Tribunal's judgment, passed the stay order.

The Divisional Election Tribunal, Dhaka, in a judgment passed on November 26 last year declared the election at 51 polling centres void.

Dr H B M Iqbal of Awami League was declared elected a Member of Parliament from Dhaka-10 constituency comprising Tejgaon and Ramna areas in the polls held on June 12, 1996.

Md Abdul Mannan of BNP challenged the election of Dr Iqbal and filed a case with the Election Tribunal.

Returning Officer rules out any chance of rigging

PABNA, Dec 9: The Returning Officer of Pabna-2 constituency, where by-election is scheduled for tomorrow, ruled out any chance of rigging, reports APB.

Hedayetul Islam, the Returning Officer, expressed his firm determination to hold the by-polls in a free and fair manner. Islam, the ADM who has been made the Returning Officer as a replacement of the Deputy Commissioner, said this at a press briefing here today.

Referring to widespread allegations and counter-allegations of the parties involved in the fray, Islam said, "we are performing our duties neutrally and impartially."

He sought cooperation of all quarters, including the political parties, to hold the by-polls in a congenial atmosphere.

District Police Super Shah Alam Sikdar and Assistant Returning Officers were present at the briefing.

Alternatives

Due to some unavoidable circumstances, the issue on "Political Protest: Search for Alternatives" will come out on 14 January 1999 instead of 10 December 1998. The next issue will be on "State of Education," which will come out on 25 December 1998.

Scholars, researchers, activists and all other interested parties at home and abroad are requested to send their articles to Intiaz Ahmed, Executive Director, Centre for Alternatives, Room No 431, Lecture Theatre, Arts Faculty, Dhaka University, Dhaka-1000. Tel: 9661900-19, Ext. 4550; Fax: (880-2) 836769; E-Mail: intiaz@bangla.net

Inside Today

Article

Turkey's Ocalan Concern

Column: The Horizon
This Week
by Arshad-uz Zaman
Page 4

Supplement

A 3-page supplement on
BCS International
Computer Show '98 on
Pages 8, 9 & 10



Security personnel going to polling centres in Pabna-2 constituency yesterday.

—Star photo

Battle of ballots for Pabna-2 today

By Nurul Kabir with Ranesh Maitra from Pabna

The much-talked-about by-election to the Pabna-2 seat of the Jatiya Sangsad takes place today with a massive security cover provided by the Election Commission.

Voting will go on non-stop from 8:00 am to 4:00 pm in 402 booths of 81 polling centres in 15 unions under two thanas, 10 under Sujannagar and five under Bera.

The number of voters is 188,703 — 96,165 male and 92,538 females.

Four candidates from ruling Awami League, opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party, Jatiya Party and Bangladesh Krishak Sramik Mukti Andolan are in the fray.

But clear signs are there that it will be a two-way battle between the AL and BNP candidates. The seat fell vacant after ruling party MP Talifuddin Ahmed died last June.

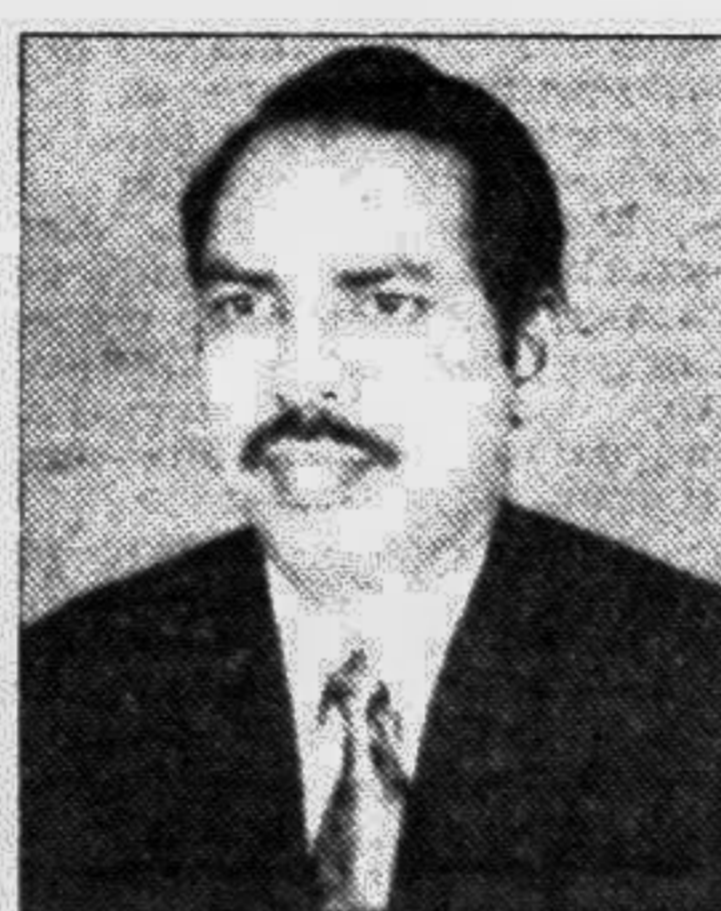
Air Vice Marshal (ret'd) A K Khandaker, the second-in-command in the nation's War of Liberation in 1971 and later a minister under General H M Ershad, is the AL candidate.

In 1996 general elections, Khandaker lost to a BNP candidate by a margin of 10 thousand votes in another Pabna constituency.

BNP has fielded A K M Selim Reza as its candidate. In the last parliamentary polls, Talifuddin Ahmed defeated Reza by



AK Khandaker, AL candidate



Selim Reza Habib, BNP candidate

some 1500 votes for the same seat.

Compared to his AL and BNP contenders, Jatiya Party's Sajjad Hossain Bachchu appeared less serious during the campaign, while Krishak Andolan candidate Sadek Mohammad Krishak was hardly visible.

The EC considers all the 81 polling centres "extremely vulnerable," in terms of the possibility of clashes between the supporters of main rival candidates.

But the administration is happy with the security arrangements and hopeful of a

peaceful voting. Speaking on the measures taken for the polls, Hedayetul Islam, Additional District Magistrate of Pabna who replaced the DC as Returning Officer on Monday, said, "So far so good. I am hopeful that the election would be held peacefully."

Thirty policemen, 20 of them armed and 10 equipped with lathi, would be stationed at most of the 81 polling centres, while in some others there will be 28 constables — 18 with fire arms and 10 with lathi.

Ansars — both male and female — will be present at the polling centres.

Code of conduct Khaleda, 5 MPs deny charges

PABNA, Dec 9: BNP chief Begum Khaleda Zia and five other party MPs have denied charges of violating code of conduct in Pabna-2 by-polls scheduled for tomorrow, reports APB.

Earlier, they were served with showcause notices by the Electoral Inquiry Committee.

All six opposition MPs, denied the charges through a representative to the Electoral Inquiry Committee here this noon.

Besides, BNP chief Begum Zia, the five other MPs who were served with notices are: Barrister Aminul Huq, Fazlur Rahman Patal, Rafiqul Islam Bakul, Harun-or-Rashid Khan

See Page 12 Col 8

Pabna JCD president arrested

PABNA, Dec 9: Police this evening arrested four activists of BNP-backed Chhatra Dal, including its district unit president, from Satharia in Sujannagar thana, reports APB.

Acting on a tip-off, a squad of police intercepted them at Satharia at about 7 pm while they were coming out of a mosque.

The arrested included JCD district unit president Modasser Hossain Sanju.

When contacted, Sujannagar police told the news agency that the JCD men were arrested as they were wanted in several criminal cases.

Trade talks end with Dhaka's call for duty-free access Delhi agrees to lift non-tariff barriers, reduce duties

India has agreed to withdraw all non-tariff barriers from Bangladesh exportables, reports UNB.

An agreed minutes to this effect was signed here yesterday at the end of two-day Bangladesh-India trade talks held after six years. The last meeting took place in 1992.

Meeting sources said India was yet to accept Dhaka's demand for providing zero tariff facility on some of Bangladesh products. The next round of talks will be held in New Delhi November 12-13 next year.

Commerce Secretaries of Bangladesh and India at a joint press briefing after the signing ceremony described the talks as extremely fruitful and useful.

Indian Commerce Secretary PP Prabhu said the talks would yield a bright future in trade and commerce as well as investment, especially joint ventures, in both the countries.

He said India has withdrawn non-tariff barriers from all Bangladeshi products and it is actively considering to provide zero tariff facilities to Bangladeshi products under SAPTA arrangement.

"India withdrew all quantitative restrictions from every single Bangladeshi product with effect from August last," he added.

Prabhu said his delegation, upon its return to India, would tell the Indian business community about the joint venture prospects in Bangladesh. "We are hopeful that they will come to Bangladesh considering the business environment."

About Dhaka-Calcutta bus service, the Indian Commerce Secretary said the issue is very much at the final stage.

He said the issue of extending easier visa facility to the business community of the two countries is being dealt with the

SAARC spirit.

Bangladesh Commerce Secretary Syed Alamgir Farouq Chowdhury pointed out the huge trade imbalance between India and Bangladesh and said that "we proposed for the zero tariff facility to reduce this gap."

But, India is yet to accept the proposal. "However, they have agreed to withdraw non-tariff barriers and reduce the duty slab by 50 to 60 per cent," he said.

The present average tariff percentage in India is about 35 to 40 per cent.

The items on which Bangladesh demanded zero tariff in India include tea, betel leaf, carpet, jute carpet, jute bags, toys, fruit juice and drinks, sanitary towel, ready-made garments and potato.

Bangladesh's export to India is worth about 65 million US dollars.

See Page 12 Col 6

Renewed business plea to bury hartal as political tool

By Staff Correspondent

Leaders of the business community have appealed to the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition to take initiatives to end the use of hartal as a political weapon.

"We appeal to all the political parties on behalf of the business community that the historic opportunity that has come to us to shun hartal must not be spoiled," they said in a statement yesterday referring to the prime minister's unconditional non-hartal pledge.

Heads of 10 top chambers and associations signed the statement. An almost identical statement came from the Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FBCCI) signed by president Abdul Awal Mintoo.

They reminded the two leaders that they both had expressed their commitments, directly or indirectly, to avoid hartal.

The FBCCI chief referred to the Opposition Leader's statements that her party was opposed to any programme affecting the nation's development and would keep the garment industry out of hartal. "All these are manifestation of anti-hartal sentiments," the FBCCI statement said.

The statement signed by the ten said the prime minister's

declaration would not bear fruits unless the main opposition BNP came up with a similar announcement.

Pointing to the BNP contention that hartals were an answer to political repression, the two statements said much of the responsibility lay with the ruling party to create an atmosphere of tolerance.

See Page 12 Col 5

Biggest-ever computer show begins today

A five-day international computer exhibition begins in city today with a view to promoting the country's Information Technology (IT) sector, reports APB.

Finance Minister Shah AMS Kibria will inaugurate the biggest-ever computer extravaganza at IDA Bhaban at city's Agargaon at 10 AM.

The BCS International Computer Show '98 organised by the Bangladesh Computer Samity, bears special significance as four international heavyweights — Apple, Intel, Novell and Goldkist — are participating.

See Page 12 Col 8

BNP alleges Permission denied to hold V-Day programmes at Paltan

By Staff Correspondent

The main opposition party BNP has accused the government of denying it permission to organise Victory Day programmes at Paltan Maidan area.

At a press conference at 29 Minto Road, official residence of the Leader of the Opposition in parliament, yesterday evening, the deputy leader of the opposition Prof Bodruddoza Chowdhury said that BNP had applied to the authorities concerned seeking permission to use the venue from December 13 to 19.

But the government has instead given permission to Joy Bangla Sangskritik Jote — one of its cultural wings, stating their submission of application before BNP, he alleged.

"This is nothing but political narrow-mindedness of the Awami League government," Prof. Chowdhury commented.

He said that though the ruling party always speaks for democracy and the spirit of liberation war, it is in fact working against it all the time.

The deputy leader, who is also the convenor of 101-member BNP's Victory Day celebration committee, strongly condemned the government and urged it to refrain from such narrow-mindedness and to show more openness towards the opposition.

After failing to get permission, BNP will hold its programmes elsewhere.

See Page 12 Col 8

Tale of vandals, votes and vibes

From Shehab Ahmed

PABNA, Dec 9: It was like any other day for Rajob at Bhitabaria village except that he stood before his ransacked shop.

The shop's shelves have been bared clean during the violence whipped by the electioneering for the by-election.

The young man was not at his shop that was vandalised during a clash between rival groups on December 5 as part of a seesaw between the two sides. Tension and violence marking the Pabna-2 by polling have put the otherwise quiet constituency under the national spotlight.

It brought in the high and the mighty, the minions and the tinkers in search of a little fortune, such as some boys

with unmarked motorcycles and a car that hurtled down the road near the Sujannagar thana centre where all vehicles other than law keepers and officials on poll duty are forbidden since midnight of Tuesday.

Scores of men in uniform — police, Ansars, border guards and troops from the army — were gearing up at the thana sadar, carting their loads on rickshaw vans or other vehicles, some escorting ballot papers and election materials destined for interiors of this thana.

But hardly anyone bothered the bikers, or a car without any licence plate that remained motionless near a police picket detailed to guard the vandalised shops at Bhitabaria at 12-45 pm

today as this correspondent spoke to Rajob, too terrified to identify his tormentors.

"They are all known to everyone", he whispered. Local Awami League leaders accused their opponents from the BNP of the doing.

BNP in turn accused the ruling party of terrorising their supporters in a dozen centres in Sujannagar ever since partisans fought running battles on December 5 in a number of areas not far from Bhitabaria and accused police of being partisan.

The BNP candidate filed a written complaint to the returning officer today and urged the Chief Election Commissioner to visit the centres they feel are too dangerous for their supporters to cast their ballots.

But Abdul Aziz, an additional SP, dismissed the allegations, particularly those raised by the candidate Selim Reza Habib.

The police official told The Daily Star at Sujannagar thana that there had been clashes on December 5 but things have been quiet for now. Police are working as per the regulations of Election Commission (EC), he added.

He said security blanket thrown by the EC was enough to deter any wrongdoers and help voters cast their ballots without fear.

Earlier, on the last day of campaigning on Tuesday, the leaders of Awami League and BNP blared through the dusty, See Page 12 Col 1

Ershad now pledges to scrap SPA, make law against hartal

From Staff Correspondent

CHITTAGONG, Dec 9: Jatiya Party chief and former president H M Ershad has said his party will not take part in any polls unless the elections held under a caretaker government and a supervisory body of judiciary.

"We want that parliament and upazila elections be held under a caretaker government and a supervisory body. Otherwise we cannot participate," he added.

Ershad was addressing a big public meeting at Lalbagh Maidan today for the first time since his release from jail.

Turning to by-election in Pabna-2 constituency the JP chairman said the fight for vote has turned into a 'gunfight' with the unleashing of violence.

Ershad pleaded making law against hartal. He said, "Parliament should be the centre of constructive politics, but now it has turned into a chaotic place marked by throwing of files."

Criticising the government, he said it is an incompetent government. It is a 'loadshedding government' which has failed to ensure power supply.

He alleged that free-style extortion of money has become a common phenomenon in the country now, making life miserable.

"During my tenure, such type of illegal toll collection did not take place," Ershad claimed. "After my departure from power, all development activities stopped. If I could go to power again, I will start a wave of development activities and scrap the Special Powers Act," he said.

Presided over by Mahmudul Islam Chowdhury, president of Chittagong city unit of JP, the meeting was also addressed by other party leaders including Nazim Rahman Monjur, Abu Jafar, Ibrahim Bin Khalil, Jahangir Alam and Mojaheerul Huq.

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