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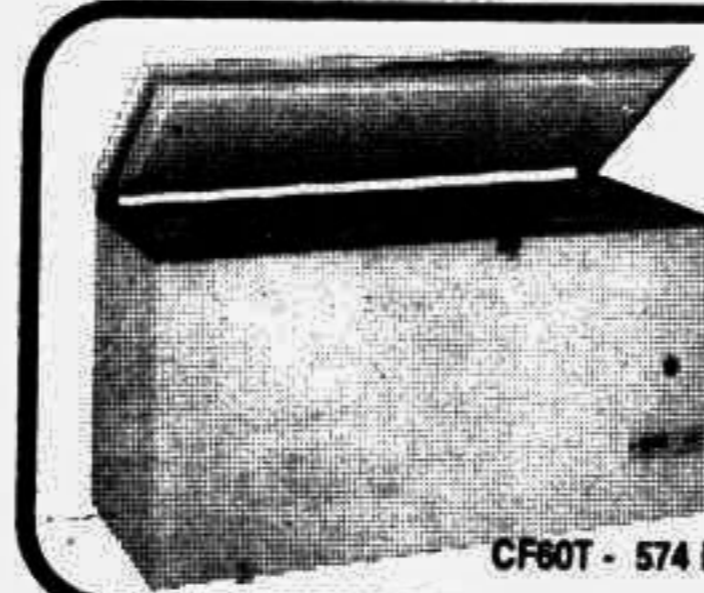
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Leather tries to leap for a bigger stake

By Monjur Mahmud

Hoping to attract more foreign buyers, Bangladesh's leather exporters have taken up a major marketing exercise. An international fair, the first of its kind, kicks off in the city tomorrow to prop up an industry that fetches a thousand crore taka annually from exports.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina is expected to open the three-day gala exposition, dubbed

Dhaka International Leather Fair '99 (DILF), at Sonargaon Hotel.

Promoting their products aside, the exporters and manufacturers are also bringing to the fore the problems they face in stiff competition with countries like India and Pakistan.

"Lack of a proper policy has left us with multi-faceted problems. The country can easily earn over Tk 2000 crore in a year if the industry is given proper policy attention," says head of the exporters' group, Bangladesh Finished Leather and Leather Goods Exporters' Association (BFLLEA).

"India and Pakistan are our main competitors. They are enjoying alternative benefits for exporting leather products," he said. "In addition, they have been in a better position due to currency devaluation."

The BFLLEA chief told The Daily Star that the exporters had recently appealed to the Prime Minister to formulate a policy for this trouble-torn "thrust" sector.

Leather follows garment, frozen food as the biggest ex-

porters for Bangladesh. But unlike garment, the industry boasts more than 85 per cent value addition.

As many as 60 local companies have registered for the show, co-sponsored by the Export Promotion Bureau (EPB).

At least 13 foreign firms are already here with plans to sell their high-tech manufacturing options. They came from Australia, Germany, India, Italy, Pakistan and Singapore.

"We are expecting more than 400 foreign buyers. It will also help local consumers to get a glimpse of the quality of Bangladeshi products that are not usually available in the local market," said M A Satter Bhuiyan, Chairman of BFLLEA, who hopes to make the international exposition an annual affair.

There are some companies which produce quality products and need exposure," he said. "The fair will give them the opportunity."

But the target is obviously the foreign buyer. "We have arranged visits for them to different factories."

Last year's export revenue from leather and leather goods reached US\$ 238 million or roughly Tk 1081 crore. In the first four months of the current fiscal, the revenue was to the tune of US\$ 61 million including about US\$ 12 million from footwear.

Bangladesh's major buyers are Italy, Brazil, Germany, France, Japan, Russia, China, USA, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, the Netherlands and Spain.



Well done, my boy ... My pleasure, madam

(Above) The Leader of the House has all the reasons to be happy about him. The communications minister has delivered. As many as 11 MPs defied the whip of the former general, the Jatiya Party chief, to hear the President speak yesterday. (Below) The minister (right) leads the defiant members to the House. From left are his wife Taslima Hossain MP, Zeenat Hussain MP, an unidentified MP and Sharfuddin Ahmed Jhantu MP.

— Star photos by Sk Enamul Haq



Jalalabad Gasfield likely to go into production in a week

From Iqbal Siddiquee

SYLHET, Jan 25: The Jalalabad Gasfield is expected to go into full-fledged production within five days.

The gasfield in the suburb of Sylhet town, after several changes, was scheduled to start production from mid-January. Preston Howard, Field Manager of the Occidental here told The Daily Star this afternoon that, "we are expecting to start production from January 29 or 30."

The delay is mainly due to further checking of all machinery and equipment including the 15 kilometre-long supply line to ensure adequate safety measures, he said. The Eid holiday was also one of the reasons for the delay, he added.

The company officials and technicians from home and abroad are now busy testing the pipeline. The hydro test of the 14-inch pipeline is at its final stage, he said.

The 15 kilometre pipeline connecting the gas processing plant at Alurtal and the Kailashita point in Golapganj thana has already been installed to supply dry gas to the National Grid.

"We have got the official 'clearance' regarding the gas processing plant from the Department of Explosives, said Howard. But, the department would issue another clearance for the rest of installations including the pipeline after a thorough checking, he said.

As per the existing legal provisions, the Department of Explosives has to issue clearance certificate after a thorough testing of all the instruments and equipment including pipeline of all the wells in and around the gasfield.

Sources informed that, Petrobangla would not allow Occidental to start production unless it (Petrobangla) gets the appraisal report of the gasfield. It will take few days more to prepare the report, they added. But, when asked, Howard could not say anything about it.

The Jalalabad Gasfield will be the first success story for the US company Occidental in Bangladesh since it signed two PSCs on January 11, 1995 covering the greater Sylhet region, except a very small area given to the Sylhet Gasfield Limited.

The Occidental had already completed drilling of three new wells while work over and de-

velopment of another well had also been done by the company in the Jalalabad structure which falls in the Block 13. All these are ready for production. Test production in the wells began November 19 last year and continued for weeks with a view to testing the ability of the wells.

The approximate reserve in the four wells of the gasfield is one trillion cubic feet, company officials say.

If everything goes well, the company will initially start producing from two wells about 50 million cubic feet gas per day (mmcf) for the National Grid. It will rise to 100 mmcf when the rest two goes into production within the next 4 to 5 weeks, sources said.

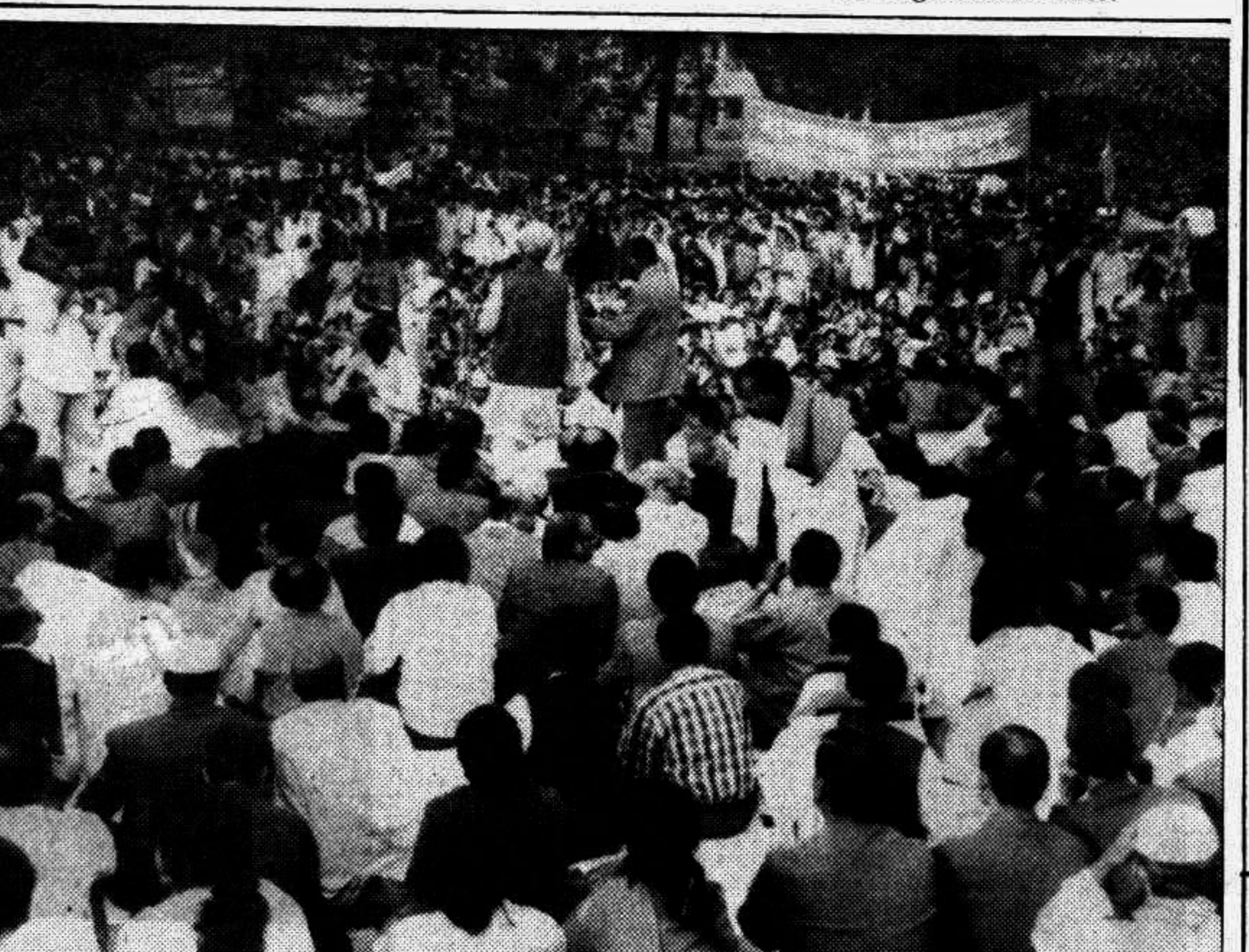
The Occidental is also taking preparations for drilling another well—Jalalabad 5— in the same gasfield within a shortest possible time, company source informed.

The 'Jalalabad 1' well was first discovered and drilled by the Canadian company 'Scimitar' in the year 1988, but it was plugged subsequently in the face of mass agitation. The company had to leave Bangladesh that time. After signing of the PSC in 1995, Occidental got the right to explore oil and gas in the greater Sylhet region. The UNOCAL is its partner for operations in the region while German company 'Deutag' is the drilling subcontractor.

6th unit of Ghorashal power station opens Jan 31

The sixth power unit of Ghorashal Power Station with a 210-megawatt capacity will go into operation on Sunday (January 31), reports UNB.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina is expected to inaugurate the unit.



Citizens of all walks of life attend a rally at the central Shahzed Minar yesterday to protest the attempt on the poet who penned Swadhinata Tumi, Asader Shirt and many more that have inspired the nation to fight for freedom.

— Star photo

Manju leads

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slaves of anybody that we have to obey undemocratic decisions.

Claiming that the JP does not subscribe to negative politics of hartals and shut-downs that stands in the way of the country's social and economic development, he said: "JP would continue to remain an opposition party."

Replying to a question, Manju, flanked by the party's dissident MPs, said that they had not challenged the JP leadership. "But we feel it necessary to resist negative politics with whatever strength we have. We should do it for the sake of national interests."

When asked to comment on the rumour that a couple of JP dissidents would be inducted into the Sheikh Hasina's Cabinet soon, Manju quipped: "According to the Constitution, the Prime Minister is empowered to make anyone (minister) from among the members of parliament."

Tajul Islam Chowdhury, whose name is rumoured in this regard, said: "I have no intention to become a minister. What I feel is that the government should be allowed to run the affairs of the state for a full five-year term."

Zinat Hossain preferred to keep mum when she was asked who was now the leader of the JP's parliamentary group.

Police, BDR

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Yousuf Market of the capital where the BNP central and the city offices are located.

The police headquarters sent directives to the districts to take appropriate measures to ensure security of those intended to submit nomination papers for the municipal elections.

Draft of Dhaka-KL science, technology cooperation accord okayed

The cabinet yesterday approved draft agreement on science and technology cooperation between Bangladesh and Malaysia, reports BSS.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina chaired the meeting held at the Cabinet Hall of the Jatiya Sangsad.

According to the agreement, the two countries will exchange scientific information, documents and researchers.

Polls in Raozan Pourasava postponed

From Staff Correspondent CHITTAGONG, Jan 25: Election in Raozan Pourasava has been postponed following a high court order, election office here said.

The court stayed the election responding to a writ petition filed by a voter over delimitation of the Pourasava area, the election office added.

The election in Raozan Pourasava was scheduled to be held on February 23.

JS session adjourned

The Jatiya Sangsad session was adjourned till 4.30 pm on January 31, reports UNB.

Speaker Humayun Rasheed Chowdhury adjourned the session immediately after the inaugural speech of president Shahabuddin Ahmed at 8 pm.

Asma may undergo kidney transplantation Sunday

By Staff Correspondent

Asma Begum, whose only functioning kidney was 'mistakenly' removed by the gynecologists during an operation at Dhaka Medical College Hospital (DMCH) about five months ago, is expected to undergo kidney transplantation on Sunday.

"The surgeons have decided to perform the operation on Sunday," said Professor Harunur-Rashid, head of the Nephrology Department at the Bangladesh Sheikh Mujib Medical University Hospital (BSMMUH).

Prof Rashid said, "Asma is fit to undergo the surgery. Her blood pressure is under control. She has no infection and she is healthier."

Meanwhile, Asma's mother Zahura Begum, who has agreed to donate one of her kidneys, was admitted to BSMMUH yesterday.

Zahura Begum would undergo a thorough medical checkup including X-ray, ECG, blood pressure and infection if any, in her body prior to the surgery. Any indication of infection both in recipient and in the donor is likely to end in postponement of the surgery. Both have to be fit for the transplantation," Prof Rashid informed.

Asma's kidney transplantation would cost around Tk two lakh. The surgery will be followed by application of cyclosporine, a drug that helps prevent rejection of kidney for at least three months.

Talking to this correspondent yesterday evening, Asma said, "I am prepared for the transplantation. Hope everything would work out well and I

will have a normal life again."

Asma's mother, however, is unhappy over donating her kidney. Referring to the alleged negligence of the DMCH gynecologists, she said, "They have crippled the life of my daughter for which I am paying the price. Why should I? I want justice. I want action against the doctors responsible for the negligence."

So far, the government is yet to take any action as per the recommendations of the probe bodies against the doctors who allegedly removed the only functioning kidney of Asma Begum while operating upon an ovarian tumour at the DMCH on August 11 last year.

Deal fails

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to consider the question of attending the inaugural session or calling off the countrywide hartal.

Later, Bhuiyan regretted the President's proposal, and then the President entered the House at 6:00 pm to deliver his address with most opposition benches empty.

The president's office could not be contacted last night.

Meanwhile, Telecommunication Minister Mohammad Nasim told The Daily Star that the ruling party had so far made no communication with the opposition for a dialogue. He was rather optimistic that the opposition would join the session when it resumes on January 31.

"I see no reason for the opposition to stay away from parliament. Besides, the opposition only said that it would boycott the presidential speech — not the entire session."

BNP called hartal

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The meeting strongly demanded that the government meet the four-point demand to pave the way for participation of opposition parties in the polls.

In another resolution, the meeting urged the countrymen irrespective of party, religion and cast to reject the municipal polls and observe the 6am-midnight hartal today, ignoring threats and provocation by the government.

Presided over by Jamaat secretary general Matur Rahman Nizami, it was attended by BNP leaders M Shamsul Islam MP and Anwar Zahid, JP leaders Kazi Firoz Rashid and ABM Golam Mustafa, Jamaat leaders Kamaruzzaman and ATM Azharul Islam, IOJ leaders ARM Abdul Matin and Masud Khan.

Meanwhile, addressing a party meeting at 29 Minto Road in the city yesterday, BNP secretary general Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan declared that if BNP was voted to power, the first thing the party would do is "dissolve" the municipal councils to be formed through the ensuing "farical and controversial" elections.

The BNP secretary general warned of punitive measures against those who would violate the party decision and take part in the municipal polls.

BNP vice-chairmen, joint secretary-generals, office-bearers and members of the central executive committee, members of the Chairperson's Advisory Council, MPs and former MPs attended the meeting.

Meeting sources said senior BNP leaders urged the central leaders and MPs to rush to their

respective areas to persuade the party men not to participate in the polls. They also told them to ask the local administration to refrain from carrying out any "illegal order" of the government.

If voted to power, the leaders said, BNP will compensate the officials and employees of the Republic who will become victims from not carrying out the 'illegal orders' of the government.

They promised compensation for those partymen who despite having bright prospects of winning would boycott the ensuing "farical" elections.

"Today is the date for submission of nomination papers for the February 23-25 municipal elections. The hartal, designed to thwart the process, is also backed by other BNP allies — Jagga, Democratic League, PNP and NDA.

The hartal, announced on January 15, was originally planned for 12 hours, from 6 am to 6 pm. It was later extended for another six hours after the Election Commission had extended time for submission of nominations up to 10 pm.

To drum up support for the 18-hour shutdown, the opposition parties yesterday evening brought out separate processions in the city.

Hospitals, food and drug stores, vehicles carrying pressmen, ambulances, firemen, utility services such as water, electricity and gas and law enforcing agencies will be exempted from the hartal. Cars of diplomats in city's Gulshan area will also enjoy exemption.

Opposition

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Choudhury said BNP was yet to decide on participation in the discussion on the President's speech.

The BNP leader also explained why BNP representatives did not attend yesterday's meeting of the JS Business Advisory Committee that decides the duration and agenda of a session.

"We don't find any justification to attend. In the past, the government had rejected our proposals for general discussions on burning national issues," he said and added the Leader of the House herself rejected such proposals during the last session.

He said the opposition was expected to raise different problems and government's failures and suggest ways to deal with them. But, he regretted, the present government never allowed the opposition to play its proper role that could have helped make parliament accountable.

Dropping the 'zero hour' from the day's business was another reason for BNP's abstention from the BAC meet, he said.

"Under such a situation, we find our participation in the BAC meeting as humiliating and disgraceful," Chowdhury said.

Asked to comment on some JP lawmakers' presence in the House, M. Shamsul Islam replied: "It's an internal affair of the JP. We had talks with Ershad (the JP chief) on boycotting the President's speech. But we don't know what happened later."

BNP, JP and Jamaat had jointly decided to boycott the President's address. But the two other opposition parties did not explain the reasons for their absence.

Asked how they felt having allied with their long-time foe JP, Chowdhury quipped, "We feel the same way as Awami League did while it was allied with that party against the BNP government."

ALPP meeting

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Hasina also warned against any intra-party bickering over candidatures in the municipal polls, reminding party deputies that local government bodies were AL's power bases for a good sail in an early general elections in 2000.

Some 20 AL legislators who spoke briefly at the ALPP meeting portrayed a "positive picture" of their respective constituencies as regards participation of people in the municipal polls. They said, contrary to BNP's much propagated claim of boycott, party-BNP candidates are in election fever in the countryside now.

Ruling Party lawmakers also drew the party president's special attention to "wide-ranging disparities" made between MPs and ministers in allocating wheat under various rehabilitation programmes, the sources said.

Some of them spoke of frequent power failures and rise in fertilizer price during the current Boro season. One lawmaker also pointed out bank officials' "reluctance" in providing farmers with agricultural loans.

Those who spoke at the meeting include Chief Whip Abul Hasanat Abdullah, Sultan Md Mansur Ahmad, Kader Siddiqi, Anisul Haq Chowdhury, Shahjahan Khan, Fazlul Haq, Abdul Latif Biswas, Abdus Sattar, Jalaluddin Talukdar, Abdur Rouf Chowdhury and BM Qasem.

BNP: Paura polls

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The present government, the meeting alleged, has been "trampling" the democracy by running the country in BAKSAL style, and at the same time, ruining the institutions, including parliament, election commission and the judiciary."

The BNP Working Committee said none of the elections was free and fair under the present government during its two and a half-year rule.

The ruling Awami League had "hijacked" the genuine verdict of the electorates through vote dacoity, rigging and terrorism," it said.

"And in all such acts, the subversive Chief Election Commissioner and Election Commission had helped the government," the meeting alleged.

It said EC implemented the government's design without scrutinising the specific complaints lodged by BNP about vote dacoity, rigging, terrorism and violation of the electoral rules.

In this context, the BNP working committee meeting referred to two verdicts of the Election Tribunals. In Dhaka-10 constituency, results of 51 centres out of 78 have been cancelled and in Narayanganj-2 constituency, the BNP nominee was declared a candidate after recounting in two centres.

All these prove that the Election Commission has been working under the directives of the government, it said.

Under such circumstances, the opposition parties have put forward the four-point demand for ensuring a transparent and fair election, the BNP working committee said.

The committee urged the party leaders and workers to make the today's countrywide hartal a success and be prepared for a greater movement.

Foreign nationals

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CID officials and Doublemooring thana police during the raid at around noon.

But nothing significant was seized during the operation, police said. The team was scheduled to return to Dhaka yesterday.

The team led by CID (Dhaka Zone) ASP Munshi Atiqur Rahman conducted the raid during which it also interrogated some students and teachers of the madrassah reportedly run by Harakat-Uz-Jihad.

The team seized the institution's budget document for 1997-98 having an estimate of Tk 31,26,981 as income and Tk 34,15,076 as expenditure. The madrassah's total budget for 1998-99 is Tk 51.85 lakh.

ASP Kadir Khan of CID (Chittagong Zone) told APB that no arms and ammunitions were recovered during the raid.

Some teachers and students of the madrassah said that Mufti Mohammad Ijharul Islam, its Superintendent, was away on a tour in the Middle East for fund raising.

Meanwhile, nine persons arrested in connection with the attempt to kill poet Shamsur Rahman at his Shymoll residence on January 18, were produced in the court yesterday. CID sought fresh remand for seven more days. The CMM's Court, however, granted five days' police remand for further investigation.

An official of the CID told BSS that they have sent necessary papers to Barisal police through the CMM, Dhaka, for shifting Rinku, a co-accused arrested in connection with the case.