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Unmoved by hartal, CEC says polls to be held on schedule

Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) Mohammad Abu Hena yesterday said the upcoming municipal polls will be held as scheduled in view of legal obligations following a High Court order, report agencies.

"It is mandatory to hold the municipal elections by March 19 due to the High Court order and legal obligations. Considering all aspects, February 23, 24 and 25 have been fixed for voting," an EC press release quoted. Hena was telling a meeting with representatives of the law-enforcing agencies.

Hena said, "The Election Commission is pledged bound to carry out its duties."

Election commissioners Abdur Rahman and Mushtaq Ahmed Chowdhury, Home Secretary Safur Rahman, Election Commissioner Secretary Abdullah Harun Pasha, Inspector General of Police AYB Siddique, Director General of Bangladesh Rifles

Major General Azizur Rahman and Director General of Ansar and VDP Major General Khondokar Mohammad Nurunnabi, Additional Director General of Coast Guard Captain Motaleb BN and other officials concerned were present at the meeting.

The CEC said one magistrate will be on duty at every polling centre to be guarded by adequate number of law enforcing people.

Apart from police, members of the armed police battalion, BDR and Ansars will be deployed. One magistrate will be available for giving directives to all mobile and striking units.

Hena said voting will be stopped instantly if violence occurs in any centre.

He said independent local and foreign poll observers are being encouraged to monitor the election for the sake of its transparency and acceptability. Getting feedback from the

agencies in the meeting on law and order, he said good electioneering atmosphere is prevailing across the country.

Talking to journalists Hena said he had also taken feedback about the situation from the field levels, where the situation was reported in favour of election.

Referring to the reports of the law enforcing agencies, the CEC said there was no abnormal situation anywhere and contending candidates were campaigning for the upcoming polls.

Hena said although it is a non-party election, but as per reports of the agencies and reports coming from field levels, people associated with the boycotting political parties are taking part in the election in large number.

He, however, said to take stock of the field level situation he had called the Commissioners, DIGs, Deputy Commission-

ers and SPs for a meeting on Sunday.

Deployment of armed forces on election days yet to be discussed, Hena said.

The CEC was asked whether he had any talks with the Awami League delegation that met him in the afternoon, about deferring the polls. "No comments. Wait and see," he promptly said.

Earlier, emerging from the meeting Awami League leader Amir Hossain Amu told the reporters that they had assured the CEC of all-out support for conducting a free and fair election and abiding by the rules and regulations set by the EC.

When asked, Amu said they were still ready for a dialogue with the boycotting opposition. Amir Hossain Amu, Mozafar Hossain Paltu, Rahmat Ali MP and Abdul Mannan Khan had over an hour-long parley with the CEC at his office.

Tougher actions ahead, warns BNP

By Staff Correspondent

The BNP-led opposition alliance has threatened a tougher agitation to pull the government down if it does not shun the "path of confrontation" and accept its demands without further delay.

The opposition demands include restructuring the Election Commission with a new chief and rescheduling the February 23-25 municipal elections.

The alliance leaders thanked the people for "spontaneously observing" the 60-hour hartal across the country despite "repression" by the police and "terrorism" unleashed by the ruling Awami League.

Briefing newsmen at the Magbazar central office of Jamaat-e-Islami at the end of the three-day shutdown yesterday evening, they also warned of retaliation if the AL resorts to violence in case of opposition agitation in future.

Giving an account of casualties during the 60-hour hartal, especially yesterday, the opposition leaders also deplored the role of on-duty policemen and

asked them not to become "tools of the AL repression".

The leaders who spoke included M. Shamsul Islam, Sadek Hossain Khoka and Anwar Zahid of BNP, Kazi Zafar Ahmed and Safur Rahman of Jatiya Party, Matlur Rahman Nizami and ATM Azharul Islam of Jamaat and ARM Matin of IOJ.

"Police and AL goons have injured hundreds of our leaders and workers throughout the country during the three-day hartal and many of them are undergoing treatment at the hospitals," Shamsul Islam said. On the last day, he added, BNP men were attacked in Pabna, Meherpur, Myensingh, Bhola, Sherpur, Jessore, Faridpur, Bogra, Chittagong and Natore.

Anwar Zahid added that a Chhatra Dal worker, Yusuf, was shot dead at Banskhal in Chittagong yesterday.

Sadek Hossain Khoka referred to "government-sponsored terrorism" during yester-

day's hartal in different parts of the capital.

He also challenged the police statement that Chhatra Dal worker Mamun died while making bomb Wednesday night at the Government Kabi Nazrul College.

"Police gave the false news to the press. In fact, Mamun was killed in police firing," the victim's body was not handed over to his family members until yesterday as a "conspiracy was on to bury the body without autopsy," Khoka said.

Khoka also charged the police with arresting three of Mamun's associates and forcing them to admit the 'bomb story'.

Condemning the 'attacks' on pro-hartal activists, Kazi Zafar Ahmed said that he never saw such kinds of "government repression" in his long political career. He also accused the government of pushing the country towards a 'civil war'.

"People will no more remain silent spectator to the ruling

party's behaviour with the opposition. Their acts will be retaliated in the normal course of politics," he said.

Matlur Rahman Nizami said the three-day hartal was observed to foil the government "attempt to hold a one-party municipal elections under a blueprint. The rulers are conspiring to consolidate power, grabbing the local government bodies including those in the city, corporations and Upazilas."

Meanwhile, the opposition parties are due to hold gayebana janaza of Sohel Chowdhury, shot dead allegedly by AL activists, on the first day of the three-day hartal, after Juma prayers today at the Baitul Mokarram.

The parties have also planned to bring out separate processions tomorrow afternoon to mourn his death.

BNP's procession will start from Paltan Maidan, JP's from the Muktagong and that of the Jamaat from Purana Paltan crossing.

Food officials eat up Tk 10cr wheat, rice in 2 districts

By Gobinda Bar

Wheat and rice worth more than Tk 10 crore were embezzled by officials of five government food godowns in Nilphamari and the Food Controller's office in Gaibandha between 1980 and 1995.

An special audit into the 1991-92 accounts of Gaibandha Food Controller's office and 1980-95 accounts of Jaldhaka, Dimla, Domar and Kishoreganj LSDs and Koirami TPC under Nilphamari district revealed the massive corruption.

The audit report, prepared by the office of the Comptroller and Auditor General, was submitted to the President and presented to the Parliament in November last year.

The report said it "does not constitute the complete picture of the irregularities as it covers only selected massive irregularities".

"Analysing the irregularities, it is perceived that the huge loss was incurred due to lack of internal discipline, procrastination of authorities concerned to enforce government directives, authorities' indifference to government property and officials' tendency to gratify self interests," the audit report said.

The report suggested that administrative and legal actions should be taken against the persons responsible for the corruption. Steps should be taken to ensure accountability, enforcement of government orders and maintenance of internal discipline to stop recurrence of such irregularities, it said.

Audit of Domar LSD's 1980-95 accounts found that 1252 tonnes of foodgrains worth Tk 1.10 crore were embezzled showing that it was transferred to some other LSDs. "Officials showed that the foodgrains were shifted to LSDs in Kaunia, Pirgachha, Badarganj, Taraganj, Deviganj, Chilahati, Jaldhaka and Dimla. But documents of the said LSDs showed that the foodgrains did not reach there," the report said.

"Asked about action against the persons responsible for the embezzlement, godown authorities did not reply," the audit report said.

The audit found that officials at the Jaldhaka LSD embezzled 1583.27 tonnes of rice and wheat worth Tk 1.77 crore. It was shown in the godown document that the foodgrains

were shifted to LSDs in Dimla, Kishoreganj, Aditmari and Koirami TSD, but an on-the-spot investigation showed that the foodgrains did not reach there, the report said.

The officer in charge of Dimla godown, Khalibar Rahman, embezzled rice worth Tk 1.01 crore. "The godown documents showed that the rice was sent for crushing to five rice mills but did not record the crushed rice in the ledger book of the godown," the report said. The authorities failed to reply when asked about the matter during the audit in August 1996, it said.

Foodgrains worth Tk 66.62 lakh were embezzled from the Dimla LSD. A total of 442.556 tonnes of wheat was not taken into account as the godown though it was sent to Nilphamari and Domar godowns.

Foodgrains worth Tk 50.44 lakh were embezzled at the Dimla LSD by issuing fake delivery order (DO) and showing that the foodgrains were distributed. "During the investigation, it was found that the Thana Food Controller did not issue the DO," the report said. The fake DO was issued from a DO register which was illegally possessed by the officer in charge of the godown, Khalibar Rahman," the audit report said.

At Domar godown, rice worth Tk 38.40 lakh was misappropriated. The rice was shown to have been sent for crushing but it was not recorded with the milling register.

The government suffered a loss of Tk 31.39 lakh as the officials at Domar LSD stole stored foodgrains on different occasions between 1980 and 1995.

One Majbar Rahman, who was in charge of the Koirami TPC in Nilphamari, misappropriated foodgrains worth Tk 29.07 lakh. He received the foodgrains under 24 invoices but did not include those in the stock register.

The store officer at Kishoreganj LSD (under Nilphamari) misappropriated foodgrains worth Tk 15.54 lakh. The store officer misappropriated a total of 202.253 tonnes of wheat issued in favour of the LSD on different occasions. He also sent weekly receipt report to the district food controller though he

did not store the foodgrains at all, the audit report said.

At the Domar godown, 159 tonnes of rice were stolen. The rice was misappropriated by sending lesser quantities of rice to 26 mills than it was shown in the godown documents.

At the same godown, the officer in charge embezzled foodgrains worth Tk 9.08 lakh showing distribution of rice through fake DO. In this case, the same DO was shown twice for fake distribution of rice.

The government suffered a loss of Tk 9.04 lakh as 38.552 tonnes of crushed rice returned from mills were stolen at the Domar LSD. The rice was not recorded with the LSD register when those were returned from rice mills.

A total of 48.769 tonnes of rice worth Tk 5.72 lakh was embezzled at the Dimla LSD in the same way, the audit report said.

At the Jaldhaka godown, rice worth Tk 5.40 lakh was misappropriated by delivering 23,000 tonnes of extra rice more than the delivery order.

Rice worth Tk 4.58 lakh was embezzled at the same godown as 39.101 tonnes of crushed rice brought from rice mills were not deposited in the godown.

A total of 19 tonnes of rice worth Tk 4.45 lakh was misappropriated at the Dimla godown showing fake invoice.

At the Domar LSD, foodgrains worth Tk 4.24 lakh contained in 72,000 sacks were misappropriated by the officials. They did not record those foodgrains received from Syedpur godown, the report said.

A total of 50.612 tonnes of foodgrains worth Tk 4.16 lakh from Kishoreganj LSD "did not reach" different godowns. "No invoice was received at the receiving ends to which the foodgrains were sent," the report said.

At the Koirami TPC, 5643 empty sacks worth Tk 1.66 lakh were stolen. A total of 19,000 sacks of rice worth Tk 1.27 lakh was stolen from the Domar LSD. At the same godown, 30 tonnes of rice worth Tk 1.92 lakh were embezzled.

In August 1991, 200 tonnes of rice were procured by the LSD. Of the total quantity, 170 tonnes were sent to mills for crushing but no information about the rest 30 tonnes could be gathered by the audit team," the audit report said.

A total of 20 tonnes of wheat worth Tk 1.46 lakh, sent from Jaldhaka LSD to the Jaldhaka LSD, was missing. The official concerned did not register the wheat in the LSD and CSD ledgers though it was received on May 8, 1995.

Sajal's father accuses Mokbul

By Staff Correspondent

Shahidur Rahman Chowdhury, father of Sajal who was gunned down at Science Laboratory intersection on Tuesday morning by anti-hartal activists filled a GD accusing Al Haj Mokbul Hossain MP yesterday.

In the GD the father accused Mokbul, a ruling party lawmaker and his associates who took part in an anti-hartal procession that had encountered pro-hartal one at Science Laboratory crossing.

Two BNP legislators, Fazlur Rahman Patal and Ruhul Kuddus Dulu, local Ward Commissioner Abul Khayer Babul were named as witnesses.

When contacted Dhanmudi thana, the duty officer said father of the victim lodged a complaint but didn't accuse anyone. However, Shahidur Rahman said he had named suspects in the GD.

Bullets, not bombs killed Mamun: Police

By Staff Correspondent

Police yesterday admitted that the young man, who was killed at Kabi Nazrul Islam College during hartal hours Wednesday, did not die of bomb explosion, he was rather shot dead.

Earlier on Wednesday, police had claimed that the victim, Mamun, 24, son of Haji Jahangir Alam, was killed in an explosion while making bombs. But hospital sources said yesterday that the body of Mamun, a resident of Abdul Hadi Lane in the Old City, bore marks of bullet injury.

When contacted last night, a high official of Dhaka Metropolitan Police East Zone admitted that Mamun was shot dead. But he added that Mamun was killed when he and his accomplices were firing at police and that bullet of his own accomplices had killed him.

Asma on the road to life

by Naimul Haq

A month ago, Asma's hope for survival seemed minute. But that has changed now. Doctors are confident that she will make a full recovery. They are confident that Asma can lead a normal and healthy life.

After a major operation, teenager Asma Begum underwent a kidney transplant on February 2 at the Bangladesh Sheikh Mujib Medical Hospital. This was about five months after doctors had removed her sole functioning kidney at the Dhaka Medical College Hospital.

"Asma's kidney is functioning completely normally although the rate of her urine discharge is still high—about ten litres a day," said Professor Harun-ur-Rashid, head of Nephrology department of the hospital.

Asma told this correspondent yesterday from her transplant ICU bed, "I am so happy and feeling much better."

She looked through the ICU glass pane that isolated her from visitors. Her refreshed face along with a smiling appearance indicated that Asma was no longer in anguish.

Professor Rashid, who has a great contribution to Asma's recovery, also said, "Asma's electrolyte balance and other functions of her organs are normal—the sign of a healthy patient."

Referring to Asma's food intake, Professor Rashid added, "Asma's appetite has increased to quite an extent. For a speedy recovery Asma has to take food rich in protein."

Regarding Asma's recovery, doctors said that Asma is sure to recover faster than expected. "Asma's healing rate is very satisfactory," one doctor said.

Meanwhile, Asma's mother who donated a kidney for Asma is also recovering from the wounds of her operation. Doctors informed that Asma's mother is perfectly all right and

she would be ready to go home in about a week.

Asma would continue to receive cyclosporine in order for her body to accept the foreign tissue. Cyclosporine is a costly drug that would help prevent rejection of the kidney tissue. At the same time she would receive Prednisolone and Azathioprine—drugs that would assist the smooth functioning of her kidney.

During the five months of battle against acute kidney failure, Asma had lost more than ten kilograms as she lived on haemodialysis in the hospital. She has had to endure immense suffering waiting for the surgery while her mother, Zohra Begum, sought justice for the damage done to her daughter and herself.

Asma will be released from the hospital after a three month observation period. She will, however, have to return for regular check-ups after her release.

Raped child fighting for life

By Staff Correspondent

A two-year old girl is fighting for her life at the Dhaka Medical College Hospital after she was brutally raped and abandoned near her abode early yesterday morning at Taltala Basti of Mirpur section-1 in the city.

The rapist in 'white T-shirt and white lungi' could not be traced until writing of this report.

The girl was undergoing emergency operation at the DMCH at around 4-30 p.m. Dr Farzana of Ward-17, who had just come out of the operation theatre, told her distressed mother Mantaz that the condition of her daughter was "critical with all the internal and external tissues of her body badly damaged". She also confirmed that it was a brutal in-

cident of rape. Later in the night, DMCH sources said that the child had undergone a lengthy operation and her condition was out of danger but still critical.

Mantaz, who brought the unconscious girl to the hospital, told The Daily Star that after breakfast yesterday her daughter had gone out to play with a friend near their abode. After sometime, her friend came back to tell her that a man in white T-shirt and white lungi had taken her daughter away.

"I immediately raised a hue and cry in the basti (slum). Then someone brought my Rokeya (not her real name) totally soaked in blood. She was found on the eastern side of the slope near the graveyard," a crying Mantaz said.

"Then we took her to a

nearby doctor who treated her with bandages and asked us to take her to the medical (hospital)."

Mantaz said her husband, Anwar who is a rickshawpuller, was out at work at the time. While talking to this correspondent, she repeatedly expressed her fear about local hoodlums. Asked whether she suspected anyone with the description given by her daughter's friend, Mantaz said she would prefer to wait until her daughter got better. She said her daughter would be three-year old during the oncoming Eid-ul-Azha.

Police could not arrest anyone till last night. Mother of the victim lodged a case with Mirpur thana accusing unidentified culprit in this regard.

PM plans Amman trip

By Staff Correspondent

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina will shortly visit Amman to express Bangladesh's condolences at the death of King Hussein.

"She will leave at an early date. We are in touch with the Jordanian authorities," Foreign Minister Abdus Samad Azad told the press yesterday.

Replying to a question he said, "We were constantly monitoring the health of the King. But, when the end came later, it happened so suddenly that most world leaders could not attend the funeral."

He said that contrary to reports, heads of states and governments of only 28 countries attended the funeral of which 10 were from the OIC.

The foreign minister did not contradict a statement by a reporter that Bangladesh ambassador to Jordan Major General A M S Amin was not at his station in Amman without permission during the demise of the King, which was one of the reasons for Dhaka's failure to arrange the prime ministerial visit. The ambassador was in Bangladesh at that time, the reporter pointed out.

Azad said that there was no aircraft available for the Prime Minister to reach Amman within the stipulated time. The foreign minister proposed that the Prime Minister immediately procure an aircraft for her exclusive use.

Secretariat employees want more

By Special Correspondent

Bangladesh Sachibhalaya Karmakarta O Karmachari Sanjuktia Parishad yesterday submitted a memorandum to the Establishment Secretary demanding 30 per cent wage allowance and revision of other allowances for government employees.

The memorandum was submitted by Mohammad Nurul Alam and Mohammad Abdul Khaleque, president and secretary general of the Parishad, says a press release.

They demanded that employees whose monthly basic salary is Tk 1500-1875 should get 90 per cent of the basic as house rent, those getting Tk 1876-4300 should get 80 per cent, those getting Tk 4301-9500 should get 70 per cent and those getting Tk 9501 and above should get 65 per cent of basic salary.

They also demanded Tk 600 as medical allowance per month, conveyance allowance of Tk 500 per month, Secretariat allowance-10 pc of the basic, education allowance Tk 600 per month (minimum for two children) and dearness allowance—30 pc of basic salary.

All's fair in Ekushey book fair

By Ekram Kabir

JUST two years ago, every-day congregation at the commemorative Amar Ekushey Boi Mela at the Bangla Academy premises was nothing short of a celebration like Muharram or Eid. Last year, the chaotic character of the Boi Mela (Book Fair) was avoided with some inflexible measures. Now the sublimity of the Boi Mela is back in place. Still the political stench has not completely disappeared, as when Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina was inaugurating '99 Fair, gunshots from not-so-far-away Shahbagh were heart-sore.

Surely somebody didn't like her presence at the inauguration ceremony of the fair. Many felt uncomfortable with it and denounced the Bangla Academy for continuing the trend started in early '90s of propelling the greatest cultural carnival of the country by a political-somebody.

But what injury did it cause to the Mela? The prime minister happens to be one of the life-members of the Academy; and there were also non-political celebrities who carry significant literary weight after their names at the inauguration; and yes we have already conceived the concept of inviting literateurs from abroad," explained the director general of the Bangla Academy.

But for literature-enticed Ishrat Rahman, it didn't make any difference. She came to the fair site all the way from Mirpur accompanying her six-year-old son Nabil. On their way to the Bangla Academy Mela, there was another fair going on near Chandrima Uddyan, the Dhaka International Trade Fair. The six-year-old's eyes didn't miss the clamour of trade fair.

"Mother, let's go to that Mela that we passed by. I think it will be more fun there and more things to buy," asked Nabil to her mother who was busy looking for her favourite writers' novels and making her son understand the meaning of the Ekushey Boi Mela.

At first, the boy wasn't convinced; but when Rahman bought another set of Tona-Tuni and took him in front of the large computer screen, then the boy seemed to be enjoying the kernel, and for that matter the serenity around him.



Centre of the fair

A pavilion dedicated to the works of Rebel Poet Nazrul stands at the foot of the venerable banyan tree in the Bangla Academy premises

— Star photo: Zahedul I Khan

To the mother's surprise, the son listened to her with all his thoughtfulness when she told him that this Mela was meant for solemnising the martyrs' sacrifice during the Language Movement way back in '52 which set the milestone for Bangladesh's cultural independence following the country's Liberation in '71.

Regular caucuses of visitors in front of the screen, seeking information about new books, every evening is a quite happy sight. Fifty-six new book-covers, carrying writers' publishing houses' names were seen on first three days.

For Rahman, it was a smooth shopping, for the post-modernist wooders are not active trying to spitefully 'impress' the ladies.

So have the machos of Dhaka city suddenly turned gentle? "No," says Police Constable Ujjal. "We are anchoring the security with care so that no one is harassed while flocking through the Mela," he adds, walking leisurely at the huge white entrance. True, the blue-

dressed personnel, camped in a stall meant for Shammilito Sanskritik Jote, are making sure that no dopey episode by any scamp at the conjunction takes place.

Said Professor Syed Anwar Husain: "Alongside, the academy authority has fashioned some directions mandatory for everybody. Following so, visitors are not throwing polythene bags here and there, but in the well kept bins. Time-to-time water-sprays are helping the audience from inhaling dust, if they are hungry there are stalls in the Suhrawardy Uddyan, and if somebody wants to buy household items, the New Market is close to this place."

Indeed, it doesn't ring the bell of frailty as far as the "spirit" of the Boi Mela is concerned: one can set aside the feeling of being in the middle of a bazaar rather than a book fair this time. Abdul Latif in his mid-40s, sitting at the Shamay Prakashan, is also in favour of a fair where people come only to buy books, and nothing else.

In terms of selling books, no

particular publishing house is capping at this point of the fair, but on the fourth day, Onnya Prakash sold Humayun Ahmed's Rupa's Palka, Rahat Khari's Phur Asha and Netis by Muhammad Zafar Iqbal to a large number of university students. On the other hand, Saint Joseph's student Ruhul Alam at Agami Pakashani-published works by Kazi Anwar Hosain and Raquib Hassan.

The Mela was near-crippled on the first day of the Opposition-imposed 60-hour hartal; but that couldn't stop the flow, although thin, of booklovers from around the city. Increasing scramble, even during the strike, this year conveys the hope that Bangladesh's publishing industry is getting healthier. The Amar Ekushey Boi Mela truly leaves the impression that it is the right ritual for country's cultural heritage, and an emotional re-union of authors, publishers and bookworms of all age.