

# The Daily Star

## on Friday

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# Political parties get into top gear

Citizens fear clash of 'peaceful polls' and 'peaceful hartals'

By Nurul Kabir

All the major parties to the current political crisis, except the common man, are proceeding with their respective schemes for the municipal elections, causing fears and anxieties among ordinary citizens.

The Election Commission (EC) is going ahead with its preparation for holding the polls 'peacefully'. To make sure that the elections are held in a free and fair atmosphere, we have already made arrangements for deploying adequate number of security personnel, said a 'determined' Chief Election Commissioner Mohammad Abu Hena yesterday.

As announced earlier, elec-

tions will take place in 54 municipalities under 44 districts on February 23, the first day of the staggered polls. On the second day, February 24, elections will be held in 33 municipalities under 25 districts while on the third day - February 25 - polling will take place in 50 municipalities under 38 districts.

According to EC sources, some 35,000 personnel from army, police, armed police force, BDR, coast guards and Ansars will guard a total of 2091 polling centres of 137 municipalities under 57 districts.

About 32 lakh voters, including 14.3 lakh women, are supposed to exercise their franchise in the elections, estimated to cost Tk 7 crore.

Meantime, the mainstream opposition parties have not only decided to boycott the polls but also publicly announced that they will resist the elections - if held with the present CEC in charge. The opposition alliance, led by the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, says the CEC is biased towards the governing Awami League.

In a bid to drum up support for their campaign, the alliance partners have been holding separate public rallies across the country. They have even asked government officials not to co-operate with the government, which is determined to

# Hartal called amid confusion

By Staff Correspondent

The BNP-led opposition alliance yesterday called a 60-hour non-stop hartal across the country during the February 23-25 municipal elections. But confusion reigned within hours, as fellow alliance members Jamaat and Jatiya Party called for 72-hour hartals from separate press conferences.

When contacted later, BNP leaders clarified that the hartal would begin at 6 am on Feb 23 and end at 6 pm on Feb 25. But the other two parties maintained that their hartal would end at 6 am on Feb 26. Secretary of BNP, Jatiya Party, Okiya Jote spelled out the call for the general strike, latest in a series of agitation programmes aimed at resisting the municipal

polls, at press conferences held simultaneously in the city yesterday afternoon.

To drum up support for the countrywide closure, the mainstream opposition parties will bring out processions in the evening of February 22.

The BNP, which had earlier mulled over a 72-hour hartal finally went for a 60-hour one considering sufferings of the people," said the leaders.

Announcing the hartal at a press conference at Minto Road official residence of the Leader of the Opposition in parliament, BNP secretary general Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan said the government still has time to accept the demands to avoid the path of conflict. He asked the

government to cancel the municipal polls and announce fresh schedule. Otherwise, he warned, this current movement would turn into a one-point movement to topple the government.

The BNP leader asked the candidates in the municipal polls and other concerned to pull out from election activities and join the movement. He also asked them to persuade others to withdraw their candidatures.

To a question, Mannan Bhuiyan said the current crisis could be solved if the government accepted the four-point demand even a day before the polls. "The four-point demands will get redundant after completion of the polls and then we will launch one-point move-

ment to topple the government," he said.

Asked whether he is apprehending any loss of life during the three-day hartal, the BNP secretary general said: "The BNP is the most innocent and democratic programme. We want to observe the hartal peacefully. There will be no fear of casualty. If the government refrain from letting loose terrorism, do not open fire on opposition activists and try to obstruct us."

To another question, he said that all parties, including the BNP, had given their opinion in favour of Abu Hena to be appointed as CEC, but it does not mean that "we will abide by and tolerate everything Abu Hena does."

# Land mine peril

Death trap along border with Myanmar

By Shehab Ahmed back from Ukhiya, Cox's Bazar

Zainal Abedin watches the world go by, squatting on the bench of a village shop at East Dargabill under Ukhiya thana in Cox's Bazar. He cannot work anymore as his left leg had to be amputated three years ago after a landmine shattered it when he was gathering woods on the Bangladesh-Myanmar frontier.

Zainal, 21, and his cousin Tofail Ahmed were lucky to survive. But two of their friends, Adhir Barua and Abdul Gafur, another cousin, 30, died when the landmine planted by the Myanmar border guards blew them up in the thick forest-clad slopes of the Waladong Mountain, separating Bangladesh and Myanmar.

The doctors at Cox's Bazar hospital had amputated the leg from the knee. A hospital run by missionaries at Dulahazara provided him with a false leg and shoe to help him walk. "But I cannot work anymore," says the tall and strong young man. "I have become a burden to my family. Instead of helping my landless father and five brothers, I have to depend on his (father's) income who is a farm hand and an occasional wood-cutter."

He still writhes in pain as some splinters have still remained in different parts of his body. He alleges that doctors did not treat him properly since he had no money. His cousin Tofail, in his early twenties, corroborated him.

Tofail was fortunate not to lose any of his limbs. But he has had pains and finds his right arm and leg strong as it used to be before the mine blast. He believes there is at least four splinters left in his body causing pain that prevents him from doing normal work. He also says the doctors had not cared much for him as he could not give them enough money.

Both of their families are going through a very difficult time. Zainal and Tofail could earn Tk 20/30 a day selling



Victim of Myanmar land mine. —Star photo: AKM Mohsin

woods or bamboo they could gather from the hills. They did not know that mines had been planted in the area by the Myanmar border guards ostensibly to prevent the Rohingya refugees escaping from Arakan.

Mines still occasionally explode in the 'no man's land', killing the poor like Zainal and Tofail. Sometimes the fishermen on the streams and Naaf River become victims. There is no reliable statistics on the casualties. But dozens of people have died and hundreds been wounded along the border.

Even the animals were not spared. At least 22 elephants

were killed, local journalists said.

The mines have taken their tolls heavily on Dargabill and nearby Tulatuli village.

Sufia Khatun, 27 and Khurshida Begum, 21, lost their husband Zakir Hossain two days before the Eid-ul-Fitr last year. He left behind a son, Kabir, 6, and Monowara, 2. Both widows could not say what they would do. Zakir Hossain did not leave behind any property other than his homestead.

No one ever bothered to find out anything about us, Khurshida Begum said as she tried to comfort her daughter.

# High Court puts Kafco on hold

Star Report

While the government has taken a tough stance to protect national interests in the crisis-ridden Kafco, the High Court in a public interest litigation yesterday ordered that there be no decision in the next one month on the disputed commercial settlement proposed by the company's general contractor.

The "commercial settlement" deals with acceptance of the fertiliser plant supplied by the general contractor. The plant has been described as substandard and cheap equipment, forcing shutdowns for 37 times.

Two Japanese companies - Marubeni Corporation and Chiyoda Corporation - got the million general contract, which was eventually valued at US\$ 425 million inflating from US\$ 300 million in 1988.

The court adjourned the hearing till March 10 responding to a plea from the Attorney-General and said: "In the meantime, parties are directed to maintain status quo for a period of 1 (one) month."

Petitioner Mohammad Shahed Razmul Bari, a lawyer, had pleaded for a Court verdict directing the government and its agencies to "refrain from all steps to approve any compromise or settlement" between the Kafco management and the General Contractor (Marubeni and Chiyoda) "in relation to the construction and acceptance" of the plant.

The petitioner also wanted the court to "instruct" the representatives of the government and its agencies on the Board of Directors of Kafco "to vote against any such compromise or settlement."

The petitioner called it "an application for an injunction" against the government "in respect of certain sovereign guarantees given by it on certain loans made" to Kafco and "in respect of its approval of a proposed agreement" between the fertiliser company and the two Japanese companies.

The respondents were the government of Bangladesh (represented by the Industries secretary), the energy secretary, the Board of Investment (represented by its executive chairman), BCIC (represented by its chairman), Kafco (represented by its managing director), Haldor Topsoe A/S (sued at its local agents Oriol Limited), Marubeni Corporation, Transammonia AG (sued at its local agents Atlas Shipping Lines Limited) and Chiyoda Corporation.

Earlier this week, the industries minister told the Japanese aid agency, OECF, that the government being the largest shareholder in the US\$ 600 million joint venture would not accept the deal proposed by the general contractor. The agency and the two Japanese corporations are partners in a consortium that has a 31.29 per cent stake in the company.

# Holidays for municipalities on Feb 23-25

The authorities have announced public holidays on February 23, 24 and 25 in the municipalities to enable the employees of government, semi government and private offices to cast their votes in the Poursabha elections, an official handout said here today, reports BSS.

It said the 137 municipal areas in 56 districts would enjoy the holidays on their respective voting days.

The Election Commission has prohibited movement with weapons in the Poursabha areas from 6 pm of February 21 to 6 pm of February 26.

Meanwhile, with only four days ahead of the polls the Election Commission today said army would be deployed along with police and BDR in different Poursabha areas to ensure voters' security and enable them to exercise their franchise in a congenial atmosphere.

The Commission earlier decided to deploy army personnel along with the police and BDR members in some vulnerable municipalities following a report of the home ministry.

Prayer Timings		
February 19		
	Azan	Jamaat
Fajr	5-27	5-31
Zohr	12-15	1-15
Asr	4-30	4-35
Maghrib	6-00	6-03
Esha	7-15	7-20

Source: Islamic Foundation

# Reality of south-west's terror comes home brutally

From A Special Correspondent

KUSHTIA, Feb 18: The entire South western region of the country, where people are regular victims of violent incidents committed by some 14 outlawed parties, has finally caught the prime attention of the police administration. This was brought about by the brutal killings of five JSD leaders in broad day-light in Kalidaspur village under Daulatpur thana last Tuesday.

Last year alone some 93 people lost their lives in the hands of the outlawed parties' members.

Home Minister Rafiqul Islam along with Inspector General of Police, DIG of Khulna Range, Additional IG of CID arrived at Kushtia last night. The minister told local journalists this morning at the Circuit house that government is contemplating setting up 250 to 300 police camps, equipped with transport and modern weapons, in the South Western Zone.

The journalists present wel-

comed the suggestion and added that contingents of security men in plain clothes will be required to monitor whether the police force deployed in the camps have links with the terrorists.

After the meeting, the Home Minister left for the place of occurrence and visited the headquarters of those thanas where criminal offences such as abduction, hijacking, dacoity and rape are rampant. He was informed of frequent incidents of highway dacoity on Kushtia-Jhenidah, Kushtia-Chuadanga, and Kushtia-Pragpur roads. The minister however assured the police about allocation of more vehicles and adequate forces for regular night patrolling.

Meanwhile, Shamsur Ali's body was laid to rest at Aria village, that of Israil Hossain in village Pak-Kola of Daulatpur thana and Lokman Hossain at village Banakhoria of Mirpur thana. The body of Yakub Ali will be buried at Philipnagar

PM College premises.

Autopsy report said that Kazi Aref Ahmed was hit by three bullets. Advocate Yakub Ali received one bullet, district president, JSD, Lokman Hossain was hit by 3 bullets. Israil Hossain received three bullets and Shamsur Ali Mandol was hit by one bullet in his forehead.

People everywhere in the district are holding the police force responsible for their failure to contain the law and order situation. Questions are still arising in the minds of the people whether the leaders were killed by internal strife within the party or conflict between other outlawed parties.

At present about 14 outlawed parties are active in the whole of South Western Zone. Knowledgeable sources said these parties possess sophisticated and lethal weapons that are smuggled into Bangladesh from a neighbouring country. Among the parties operating in the re-

gion, the names of Biplobi Communist Party, Sramajibi Mukti Andolon, JSD Gonobahini, Purbabanglar Communist Party, Banglar Communist Party, Nantulu, Sonar Bangla Communist Party, Sarbahara, Workers Party, Bangla Desher Communist Party are the most prominent.

Many party leaders and workers have lost their lives during intra-party fights. Several have been slaughtered by their rivals.

JSD's internal strife surfaced seriously with the murder of militant freedom fighter Marfat Ali on February 17, 1991. The main accused in the murder of Marfat Ali is Siraj of Mirpur who is very influential in party activities. He, along with many others, was served with the death penalty in the judgement of Marfat Ali murder. However, Siraj is believed to be absconding.

Rivalry between Siraj and

Marfat Ali started when Siraj entrusted his then leader Marfat Ali to mete out justice in a case connected with the rape of Siraj's sister by their partymen and the latter failed to comply. Conflict began after Siraj, along with his follower, went underground and tried to extract revenge on Marfat Ali.

Later Siraj and Marfat resolved their differences mutually and Siraj visited the house of Marfat Ali during the parliament election of 1991. But when Marfat Ali visited the house of Siraj, he was killed by gun fire. Since then there are two groups of JSD operating in the area trying to extract revenge on one another by what looks like retaliatory killings among the two factions.

Recently Kazi Aref Ahmed, central leader of JSD came to Kushtia to attend the 8th death anniversary of late leader Marfat Ali, former upazila

chairman and valiant freedom fighter.

The killing of the five JSD leaders last Tuesday in the hands of gunmen might indicate that Siraj, who was convicted of death penalty and is now in hiding won over the allegiance of those men who apparently showed loyalty to open party leaders like Lokman Hossain, district president of JSD and secretary Advocate Yakub Ali and caused this tragic event.

Meanwhile, 11 political parties held a demonstration after bringing out processions at "Char Mathar Mor" near Kushtia police station today. Advocate Wahed, leader of Sramik Krishak Samajbadi Dal, chaired the demonstration held in protest of the dastardly killing of 5 leaders of JSD including Kazi Aref Ahmed. Among those who spoke were Shahidul Alam Dipu, general

secretary of district Communist Party, Abdullah Al Mamun Taju, district coordinator of BSD, Advocate Zahurul Islam and Abdul Karim - both leaders of Gonotantri Party and Nur Ahmed Bakul, central leader of Workers Party. Speakers bitterly criticised the present government for their failure to implement law and order. They demanded arrest of those armed terrorists and exemplary punishment for their brutal killings of the leaders. In a reaction to this killing Hasanul Huq Inu, general secretary JSD central committee said that this is not an isolated incident.

For want of political sagacity and correct decision these killings have taken a firm root and emergency political decision in this respect is the only solution. He said this while taking the body of Kazi Aref Ahmed in a helicopter at Kushtia Stadium yesterday.

# Access to credit holds key to growth of SMEs

## A Daily Star Roundtable

By Staff Correspondent



Participants at the roundtable yesterday.

— Star photo

Lack of access to credit and the absence of a level-playing field are the main obstacles hindering development of the small and medium enterprise (SME).

This was the consensus among speakers at a Roundtable conference on *Obstacles to SME Development in Bangladesh* jointly organised by The Daily Star, Job Opportunities and Business Support (JOBS)/ Institutional Reform and the Informal Sector (IRIS) programme USAID held in the city yesterday.

The conference was moderated by Mahfuz Anam, Editor, The Daily Star.

The speakers said credit could be made available to such entrepreneurs by creating "secured financing arrangements" against movable properties. Establishing credit information system to serve the needs of all business creditors

would also help.

The absence of a level-playing field for SMEs in Bangladesh, they pointed out, was due to low ceiling for VAT exemption, putting the SME products subject to the tax, which negatively contributed to price competitiveness.

High rates of duties coupled with inefficient utility services increase the cost of finished products, reducing their competitiveness against imports, they said.

Allen Welsh, a JOBS fellow, gave the background presentation on Secured Finance. He said that SMEs in most developed economies rely on business credit using movable property as collateral. "Movable property financing is responsible in large part for the economic success of developed economies. In these economies, movable property is considered as good or even better collateral

than a mortgage on land and buildings."

He, however, pointed out that before offering such credits against movable properties, a creditor must have the guarantee that such collateral will be protected by law.

Welsh also noted that two components were central to this essential "legal certainty" -- one being that a creditor must be assured that the law will back up the creditor's claim to the collateral upon default by the debtor, and that recovery will be fast and inexpensive.

The second is that the first creditor to give loans based on movable property "must be certain to prevail over others who may claim a right to the collateral."

"Enforcement of security interest should be simple, cheap and fast as a modern secured financing law must offer options

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