

EC preparing for polls

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"It would not be wise to specify the date of the election before having discussion with the parties concerned right now," Syed said adding that past practices and conventions would be followed in announcing the poll schedule.

Yesterday's review meeting discussed progress of various pre-election activities with printing of the fresh voters' lists topping the agenda. It expressed dissatisfaction over the performances of the printing firms, who were scheduled to submit the printed list by December last year.

At its meeting, the Commission asked EC's Tasks Forces, commissioned last year to monitor preparation and printing of the electoral roll, to submit their progress reports immediately.

Presided over by the CEC, the meeting was also attended among others by Election Commissioners Abidur Rahman and Safur Rahman, and senior EC officials.

The Commission would sit Tuesday next to evaluate performances of the Election Commission secretariat, sources said.

According to official record, 77 printing firms have completed only 44.97 per cent of voters' list so far. Voters' list for Joypurhat, Meherpur, Pabna, Sherpur and Rangamati has already been printed. Printing of the list for 32 districts is halfway through. For the rest of the districts, progress has been very slow.

Some 20,000 additional ballot boxes would be needed this time around, with nearly 1.5 crore new voters enrolled. The EC has suggested that the work order for the boxes be given to the Bangladesh Machine Tools Factory. In 1996 election, 150,000 boxes were used.

The meeting also discussed establishment of new polling centres, renovations of polling booths and other issues. The commission would soon invite the deputy commissioners and officials concerned to chalk out early preparations in the remote areas.

Asked about preparation, the CEC said necessary work for holding the next general election would be completed well before June. He was talking to a group of journalists at his office yesterday about the EC's preparations and plans to deal with the coming election.

About the electoral reforms, the CEC said that "the entire matter depends on the sincerity of the political parties." "If they want reforms, time is not a factor."

The EC proposes four specific reforms - registration of political

parties, constitutional amendments to impose a bar on candidature of not more than two constituencies at a time, strengthening of the Election Tribunals and raising of election expenses for a candidate.

Earlier, the EC had a meeting with the ruling Awami League on the reforms issue. The EC has invited the opposition BNP and eight other parties to have a discussion on these issues. The BNP is likely to meet the EC on March 1.

C'wealth Day today

UNB, Dhaka

The Commonwealth Day 2001 will be observed today in the country.

All the 54 Commonwealth countries observe the day on the second Monday of March every year to concentrate on their common interests.

The theme of day this year is 'a new generation'.

The date was chosen so that it would be a school day in almost all the Commonwealth countries.

Queen Elizabeth in a message on the occasion said the Commonwealth would depend on its success in addressing itself to the new generation.

Commonwealth Student and Youth Organisation has chalked out elaborate programmes to observe the day.

The programmes include a colourful procession to be brought out from the National Museum at 9 am and a discussion meeting at the organisation's Mirpur Road office at 4 pm.

In her message Queen Elizabeth said today's youths are the future of the organisation as more than half of the 1.7 billion people of Commonwealth countries are under the age of 25.

Nandipara

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rather than depending on the rivers," Islam said.

He however said WASA has limited resources and it could take time to find a remedy to the problem.

Prof. Badul Alam Majumder, Country Representative of Hunger Project, Bangladesh called upon all to be united under an umbrella to solve the problem.

Noted cultural leader Prof. Abdullah Abu Sayeed said decreasing life expectancy of residents and fertility of farm lands, and death of aquatic animals every day are all due to this terrible water pollution.

Dr. Iqbal Hassan Mahmood, a local physician said people of the area have been suffering from various types of skin diseases and stomach ailments as a direct effect of the polluted water.

Noted economist Dr. Anisur Rahman, Chairman of Janata Bank Dr. Atur Rahman, General Secretary of Paribesh Rokkha Shapath (POROSH) Abu Naser Khan and BTV producer Rafiqul Islam Sarker also spoke on the occasion, expressing solidarity with the movement of local villagers.

Representatives from different villages also spoke.

Bushra murder

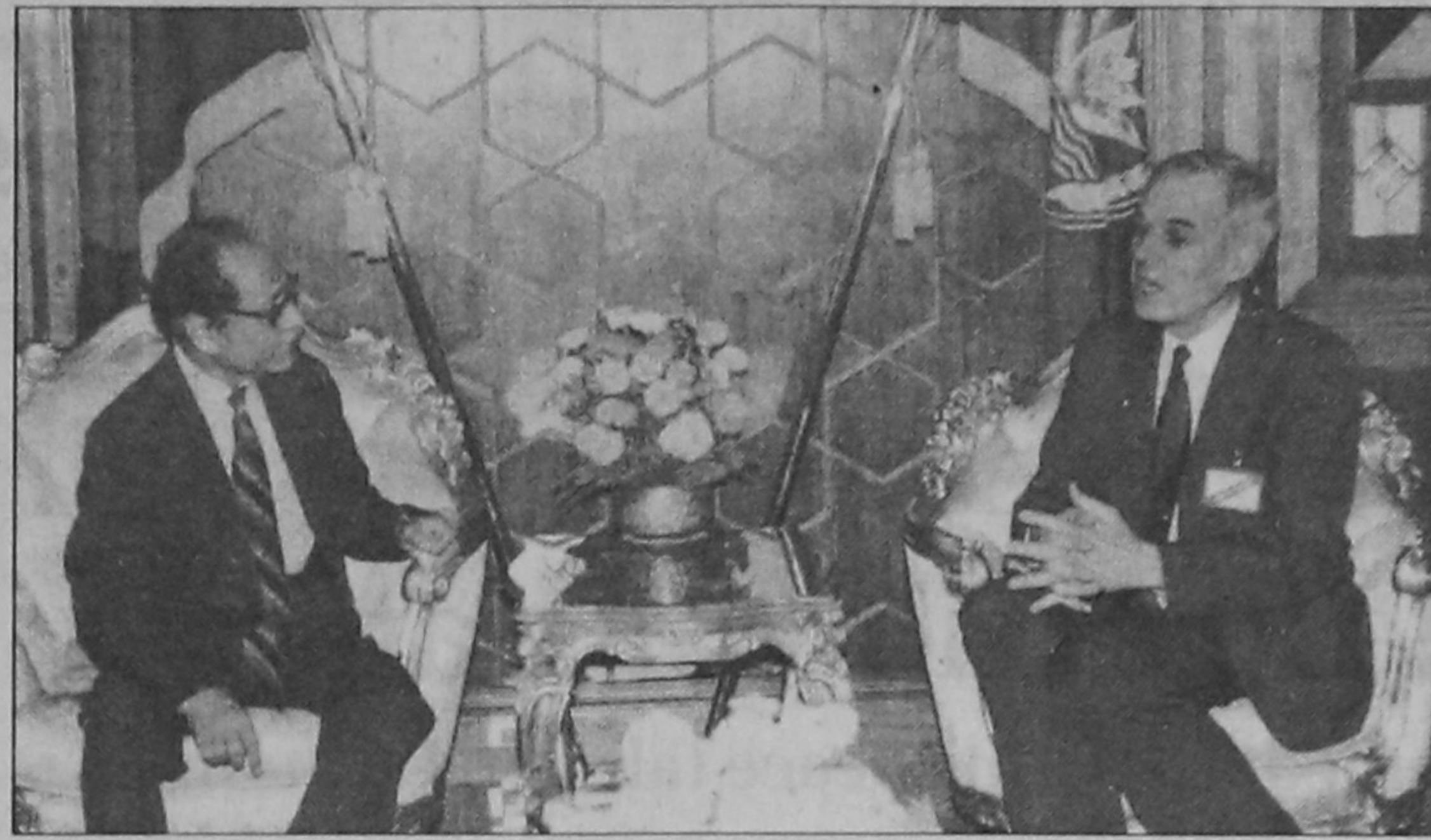
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However, a bail petition for the accused was submitted before the court. But the court fixed March 29 for hearing on the issue.

Accused M A Kader, Kaniz Fatema Hena, Sheikh Shawkat Ahmed Ruhul, and Sufia Begum were produced in the court while Sheikh Kabir Ahmed remained absconding.

Special public prosecutors M A Bari and Abdur Razzak Khan appeared for the state while Advocate Mahubub Ahmed, Moslehuddin and Shamim Ahsan for the accused.

Rushdania Bushra alias Phool, 18, a college student and daughter of a retired police officer, was raped and murdered at their Hazirapa residence in the city's Rampura area on the night of July 1 last year.



Dr Konrad Raiser, general secretary of World Council of Churches called on President Shahabuddin Ahmed at Bangabhaban yesterday.

Army chief, Larma hold talks

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yesterday, seeking people's cooperation for release of the hostages.

BSS adds: Army troops widened their cordon by another 30 square kilometres overnight as the tribal abductors were feared to have shifted their hideout taking with them the three foreign captives.

Security officials said the troops extended the cordon up to Lakhichhari area under Khagrachhari where the kidnappers had reportedly shifted their base last week when the cordon was eased for talks.

Army chief Lt. Gen Harunur Rashid who arrived here yesterday

flew over the suspected hideouts of the hostage-takers in the hills.

Initially the army cordoned off nearly 30 square kilometres covering the Kalapahar area of Rangamati.

Official said they believed the kidnappers and the hostages were still within the cordon.

Meanwhile, Chittagong Hill Tracts Affairs Minister Kalparanjan Chakma, who was leading the official rescue initiatives, apparently quit the scene as he left here for Dhaka. He refrained from joining the routine official briefing over the last two days.

Head of the political section of

British High Commission Graham Clough who joined the press briefing at the Circuit House said, "We are satisfied with the initiatives of the government."

CHT Refugee Affairs Taskforce Chairman Dipankar Talukdar, MP, later told journalists that a senior minister was likely to arrive here to monitor the rescue initiatives.

Asked to comment on Shantu Larma's allegations that "a section of the government leaders" masterminded the abduction drama, Talukdar said, "Then why he (Shantu) sent two representatives to help the government initiatives?"

Annan arrives tomorrow

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Shahabuddin Ahmed, meeting with Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and talks with key officials of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs are the highlights of Annan's four day itinerary.

A meeting with Leader of the Opposition in Parliament Khaleda Zia is likely to be included in the schedule.

The full programme is still being firming up, said a foreign office spokesman.

The secretary-general is scheduled to deliver a lecture on the importance of Sustainable Development at the International Conference Centre in the city on March 14. He will also lay wreath at the National Memorial in Savar and visit the International Peacekeeping Institute, Asrayan and the Bangabandhu Museum. Annan will

also inaugurate the Mother Language Institute at Segun Bagicha in the city.

Annan schedule is yet to include visit to any UN development project or meeting with the Resident Representatives of UN bodies in the country.

Bangladesh is the second major contributor to UN peacekeeping missions worldwide besides being a non-permanent member of the Security Council. There is a strong presence of UN in the country with organisations such as UNDP, UNICEF, UNISCO, ILO, WHO and UNFPA engaged in different development activities.

Annan's visit to India and Pakistan has already whipped up a degree of international media attention and is viewed as an attempt to convince both countries to sign the

comprehensive test ban treaty (CTBT) and thus reduce the nuclear competition. However, many believe that the secretary-general's efforts, nearly three years after the nuclear blasts, are "too little too late."

Many South Asian diplomats see the trip to South Asia as part of his campaign to be re-elected for a second term.

Many Asian nations believe it is the region's turn to have its own candidate for the United Nations, whose current membership stands at 188. The only Asian to serve as the secretary-general was U Thant from neighbouring Myanmar.

Annan hails from Ghana, formerly known as Gold Coast. His immediate predecessor Boutros-Boutros Ghali was from Egypt.

Eid cattle markets

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biggest kitchen market in the city.

Two days into business, the lessee, who is also the general secretary of Teigan thana of Awami League, illegally expanded the market on to the streets which effectively blocked all kinds of movement.

Officials and employees of BGMEA, Philips, Petro Centre of Petrobangla, Dhaka WASA, BGMEA, Textile Mills Corporation, Summit Corporation, The Daily Star, The Prothom Alo, a number of commercial banks, other business establishments in the area found it very difficult to move to and from their workplaces. The pavement along the Kazi Nazrul Islam Avenue, a VIP road, was also occupied.

Similarly, as soon as the cattle market at Doyaganj Truck Terminal started this year, trucks were seen indiscriminately parked on Doyaganj Road causing suffering of road users.

Despite repeated complaints

and requests from the affected establishments, all the DCC did was serving a notice to the lessees of Karwan Bazar and Bannai Playground cattle markets, requesting them to remove the illegal expansion. It also sent a copy of the notice to the thanas concerned requesting necessary steps in this regard.

However, some DMP officials expressed their surprise over DCC's decision to lease out spaces that resulted in obstruction to movement of vehicles in a city beset with traffic congestion.

"It is very natural that the cattle market expanded to the surrounding areas of the designated place when the number of cattle from outside Dhaka was high," DMP DC (West) Sajjad Hossain said.

Karwan Bazar and some other places were not at all suitable for cattle markets, he said.

Khaleda

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June 12.

Khaleda said it is essential for the government to resign after the return of the Prime Minister from Hajj to give the caretaker government the required time to reorganise the Election Commission, correct the voter list and take other measures to hold the election during the dry season.

The caretaker government needs time to take these measures as well as to curb terrorism and arrest/return party backed identified terrorists in order to hold the polls in a free and fair manner, she added.

She refuted the PM's allegation that BNP government had killed 140 AL workers. She accused the AL government of unleashing oppression on BNP workers and of killing many of them during its rule.

The opposition leader who will return home on March 14 asked the ruling party to refrain from spreading false propaganda against BNP and resign immediately to pave the way for holding fresh elections.

No immediate plan to revive ME peace talks

AP, Jerusalem

Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat have no immediate plan to meet and revive peace negotiations that lie in shambles after close to six months of fighting, aides to the two leaders said Sunday.

Behind-the-scenes contacts were ongoing between the sides, though they do not deal directly with renewing negotiations, said the director of Sharon's office, Sharon, who assumed power last week, has held firm that talks will not take place as long as the violence continues.

The Israelis and Palestinians both blame each other for the violence that has claimed more than 400 lives since last September.

The army tightened its blockade Sunday on the West Bank city of Ramallah as part of its blanket secu-

city closure on Palestinian areas that has been imposed to varying degrees since the beginning of the hostilities.

On roads leading into Ramallah, drivers were blocked off by tanks and a series of new roadblocks set up around the city. The small number of Palestinians who had permission to pass the roadblock said they had to wait in lines for up to three hours.

Ramallah, in the hills north of Jerusalem, has been a hotbed of activity in the latest Palestinian uprising, and the army said it was focusing its crackdown on the city in an attempt to end attacks.

The army spokesman said that overnight four Palestinians were arrested by Israeli security officials on suspicion of carrying out attacks against Israeli citizens.

Despite ongoing tensions on the ground, officials said political contacts continued.

BNP: 7-pt demand

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BNP is always ready for election," added Bhuiyan.

The opposition, he said, in fact wanted the general election between December and March, for this time span is suitable for holding election, but the government disagreed.

That's why BNP has demanded election in May as the rainy season will begin after May and it would be difficult to hold election in the rainy season.

About the unity of the four-party alliance, the BNP secretary-general said the mainstream opposition parties are committed to participating in the polls according to an understanding.

He also said there is no conflict in the combine and there should not

be any doubt about the unity.

Bhuiyan said BNP and its allies would sit soon to thrash out sharing of seats and hoped that the issue of seat-sharing would be settled peacefully.

He, however, would not disclose the modality through which the sharing will take place.

The BNP secretary-general said AL has totally failed to run the country, and its incompetence is quite evident in its nearly five-year term. It seems there is no government in the country as overall law and order situation has deteriorated drastically.

Bhuiyan asked the government to quit immediately and hand over power to caretaker government to pave the way for general elections in May.

Dispute settled forcibly?

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Shikder's daughter for ransom.

None of Shikder's family members was willing to talk to newsmen later. When this correspondent went to Shikder's residence, none of the family members appeared. A messenger said none was at the house.

Shikder is vice-president of BGMEA. Officials of BGMEA told The Daily Star that the matter had been 'settled' and that there was no more complaint regarding this.

Gulshan police neither arrested Sadek nor seized his gun. They said the matter was settled between the parties 'amicably'.

Special Branch of police has been asked to investigate the incident, they said.

Witnesses and sources said that being chased, the driver drove the jeep into the cantonment area where military police managed to stop Sadek's car at the Jahangir Gate.

Sadek and two of his associates with firearms were confined for about eight hours at the Gate. Later the OC of Gulshan thana went there and brought them to the police station. They were later released from the thana following pressure from high-ups, they said.

Witnesses and sources claim that Sadek moves in the city with firearms and gunmen, whom he claims to be his 'bodyguards'.

Last year, Sadek had forcibly occupied a fifth floor flat and some shops at the ground floor of a building at Kalabagan in the city. He however vacated those when a sister of the landlord filed a General Diary (GD) with Dhanmondi thana.

Three persons were arrested in this connection. But Sadek, the main accused, was not arrested. Later, all of them were released on bail.

BNP rallies

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Paltan with Sadeque Hossain Khoka in the chair. The meeting took up a series of programmes to mark the March 21 joint public meeting of the alliance a grand success.

City BNP general secretary Abdus Salam, JP city president Saifur Rahman and general secretary Taibur Rahman, city Ameer of Jamaat ATM Azharul Islam and Jashimuddin Sarkar and IO leader Shaikat Amin were present at the meeting.

They also demanded immediate release of all arrested leaders and activists.

The APAC will hold a meeting at 4pm at 29 Minto Road tomorrow. APAC convener Sadeque Hossain Khoka has requested all members to attend the meeting in time.

Jamaat activist

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which Munna was killed on the spot and BCL activists Jasim, Shah Alam, Sajahan and Munir Ahmed were shot.

Other injured BCL activists were taken to private clinics to avoid police, sources said.

Meanwhile, Jatiya Party's central vice-president Ibrahim Bin Khalil called a day-long hartal in greater Chittagong on the same day (March 13) demanding release of JP Chairman HM Ershad.

Khalil announced the hartal programme at a press conference at the press club yesterday evening.

JP city president Jahangir Alam, however, differed with the programme and said hartal was called to create confusion in the opposition alliance.

JP: consensus

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take place tentatively on March 17 after her return from China on March 15. The delegation would comprise JP Secretary General Nazim Rahman Manzur and presidium members Dr MA Matin, Shamsul Haq and Sunil Gupta.

They would remind the BNP chairperson about taking united decision on major issues like fielding of common candidates in the coming general election, formation of caretaker government and reform of the Election Commission, the press release said.

Earlier on the Eid day, Khaleda met President Shahabuddin Ahmed and demanded general elections in May. JP and Islami Oikya Jote resented that she took the move 'alone'.

Sources in JP said that without approval of the Central Liaison Committee (CLC) of the alliance, no component party should launch election campaign on its own.

The JP presidium called for immediate formulation of policy for fielding common candidates. It stressed that no one should declare oneself as an alliance candidate before getting its nomination.

DHAKA TODAY

DUI EC meeting

A meeting of the Executive Committee of Dhaka Union of Journalists (DUJ) will be held. Venue: Jatiya Press Club. Time: 11 am. Members of the EC and chiefs and deputy chiefs of all the affiliated units have been requested to attend the meeting.

Workshop

Dhaka Electric Supply Company Ltd in association with E7 Network of Expertise for Global Environment will hold a workshop on distribution of electricity. Venue: Surma Hall of Hotel Sonargaon. Time: 12.20 pm.

Rally, discussion

Commonwealth Students and Youth Organisation (CSYO) will bring out a colourful rally from the National Museum at 9 am to mark the Commonwealth Day. A discussion meeting will also be held. Venue: CSYO office, 43, Mirpur Road, Dhanmondi. Time: 4 pm.

Seminar

Working women of transportation sectors have organised a seminar to mark the World Women's Day. Venue: Hotel Sunderbans auditorium. Time: 10 am.

Discussion

Bangla Academy has organised a discussion meeting on Bangabandhu's Historic March 7 Speech. Prof. Sardar Fazlul Karim will preside over while Santosh Gupta, Shamsuzzaman Khan and Prof Hanun-Rashid will take part in the discussion. Venue: Academy's seminar room. Time: 11 am.

DHAKA TOMORROW

Seminar

Association for Medical Education (AME), Bangladesh will hold a seminar on 'Health Policy and Human Resources for Health'. Venue: Sasakawa Auditorium ICCDR, B. Mohakhali. Time: 9 am.

Seminar

LEADS Corporation Limited and CR 2 of Ireland will hold a seminar on 'Internet Banking Bangladesh Perspective'. Chief guest: Finance Minister Shah A M S Kibria. Venue: Sonargaon Hotel Ball Room. Time: 9 am.

Cabinet meets today

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projects, especially those related to Awami League's election pledges prior to handing over of power to a caretaker government. She is also likely to seek suggestion from her cabinet colleagues as to the timing of election suitable to the party, they hinted.

Most of the ministers who were contacted, however, preferred not to comment on delicate issues such as the tentative timeframe for the government to quit or the election date AL prefers. They all said it is the prime minister who will finalise the matters.

Nevertheless, they gave strong indications of the election taking place in mid-June. One influential minister, however, said the election date might cross the deadline because of the HSC examinations scheduled to run through June 13.

Another minister said BNP chief Khaleda Zia's demand for elections in May came suddenly and that again without any pre-conditions she had set earlier such as resignation of the Chief Election Commissioner, recasting of the Election Commission and revision of the newly prepared voters' list.

Therefore, the minister noted,

before relinquishing power the prime minister would like to be certain that BNP had dropped such pre-conditions and would not revive those once the caretaker government takes over.

If the latest developments in the ruling party are anything to go by, then the prime minister has several options to announce the government's resignation and specify the preferred timeframe for the election. Insiders said she may disclose her plan at the AL public meeting at Paltan Maidan on March 30 or the day after when she is due to inaugurate the Swadhinota Stambha (independence monument) at the Suhrawardi Udyan in the city.

Such a disclosure can also be made in session on March 29 or even in an address to the nation through the electronic media, sources said.

As per the constitution, the president will appoint the Chief Adviser to the caretaker government in 15 days beginning from the date of resignation of the prime minister and dissolution of the parliament. However, the prime minister will continue to be in the office until the Chief Adviser takes over.

Constable murder

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businessman. He was not present in the procession on February 13 during hartal. So he prayed for bail cancelling the remand prayer of DB police.

Court sub-inspector Mohammad Monir opposed the bail and prayed for remand for the accused. After hearing, the court rejected the bail petition and granted one day remand.

Constable Abu Naser was shot dead at Razarbagh Police Line by a group of armed men on a procession of Mirza Abbas on February 13 during hartal.

Petrobangla

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In October 1997, the government offered Tullow Blocks 9 and 11 while refusing to give more than one block to other companies saying that it was following a "one block one company" policy.

Tullow proposed to drill 20 wells at a cost of 132 million dollars in the first three years of exploration in these two blocks, a proposal dismissed by local and international experts.

However, as criticism of favouring Tullow for its local political connection grew, the government brought in US oil giants Chevron and Texaco to tie them in a partnership with the Irish company. But Tullow and Chevron and Texaco never reached an agreement over the partnership.

The abduction of three foreign engineers

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But the four foreign consultants did not know that the dilapidated Rangamati-Khagrachhari road was infested with armed criminals extorting money by stopping vehicles, kidnapping men for ransom or even killing commuters. These continued despite hill top army installations along the road to ensure security there.

Since the signing of the CHT peace accord in 1997, the number of army personnel and their activities in the areas have greatly decreased. Only when police needed to enter hill areas, they sought help from the army.

Forest covered hills along the road are dotted with tribal hamlets running miles into forests, towards the virtually inaccessible Kalapahar range stretching into the Indian state of Tripura.

At about 4-35 PM on February 16, the four engineers travelling in a chauffeur driven four-wheel-drive pick-up with two passenger cabins were waylaid by half a dozen armed Chakma men barricading the road with two small bundles of bamboo, about 35 km from Rangamati. Torben asked driver Mostafa to stop

the vehicle. David Weston and Mostafa were asked by the gang to return to the authorities to convey their demand for a ransom of Tk 9 crore (equivalent to around 1.8 million US dollars) to be paid at a bus stand nearby. The abductors then walked the hostages into the mountains through a small village named Dozapara.

As the police and officials concerned were alerted within 90 minutes of the abduction, Naniarchar police activated their own sources to reach the abductors.