

Process for 4 new banks stalled

STAR REPORT

The process to allow more new banks has been stalled, due to opposition from some government high-ups.

According to sources, the standing committee proposal for four new banks was not even raised in Monday's cabinet meeting on finance.

"Some members of the committee did not want to approve more banks at this stage and that is why the issue was not discussed in the meeting," said a finance ministry official.

Earlier, under strict secrecy, the standing committee on Wednesday recommended four new banks.

The main sponsor of Padma Bank Limited, one of the four banks cleared by the committee, is Abdul Mannan, a ruling party MP from Tangail. Another called Union Bank is unofficially backed by an influential minister.

The other two banks - Northwest Bank and Asia Pacific Bank - also have the blessings of ruling party loyalists, sources said.

Move today to lift stay on hearing of four cases against Khaleda

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

State attorneys are moving the High Court today to seek lifting of the ad-interim stay pending hearing on four cases of corruption and abuse of power by former prime minister and Leader of the Opposition Khaleda Zia.

Upon a move by Deputy Attorney General M Faruq seeking revival of two cases against her, a Division Bench of the High Court comprising Justice Ali Asghar Khan and Justice Altaf Hossain yesterday observed that the state should move before the Bench where the case on purchase of Airbus is pending.

The case is pending before the Bench comprising Justice Najmun Ara and Justice Hamidur Rahman.

On another case regarding renovation of the then prime minister's residence, the Bench said it should be moved before another Bench.

Two other cases against the former prime minister are regarding alleged abuse of power in appoint

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Babul Murder Case Manzur's brother on 4-day remand

COURT CORRESPONDENT

Mafizur Rahman Mostafa, younger brother of JP (Ershad) Secretary General Nazimur Rahman Manzur was "shown" arrested in the Obaidul Haq Babul Murder Case and placed on a four-day remand.

Mostafa was produced before the CMM's court, Dhaka at about 3.30 pm yesterday on completion of a two-day remand.

Barrister Andalib Rahman, lawyer for the accused, submitted a bail petition with cancellation of remand prayer. He stated that the IO of the case submitted a chargesheet against nine people on January 18.

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INSIDE TODAY

Article 4

Someone, please turn the page

Column: Byline

M J Akbar

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Privatisation of 8 textile mills: Workers to get units free of cost, govt to bear short-term liabilities

Political crisis may hit India: reform, investment

DSE, CSE price quotations

Prayer Timings

March 21

	Sun Rises	Sun Sets
Mar 21		6.10pm
Mar 22	6-01 am	

	Azan	Jamaat
Fazr	5-20	5-50
Zohr	12-45	1-30
Asr	4-30	4-45
Maghrib	6-13	6-18
Esha	7-30	8-00

Source: Islamic Foundation

No early polls if Opposition goes for ultimatum

Govt ready for dialogue, PM tells President

NAZMUL ASHRAF and REAZ AHMAD

Leading a 10-member ruling party delegation to the Bangabhaban, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina last night told President Shahabuddin Ahmad that her government was ready for a dialogue with the Opposition to settle all issues related to an early general election.

"We have conveyed to the President our sentiment that if the Opposition goes ahead with their plan for an ultimatum for us to quit, we will be left with no option but to abandon the idea of early polls," a minister attending the meeting told The Daily Star last night.

Preferring anonymity the minister pointed out that the Prime Minister had already spelled out her plan for handing over power to a caretaker government after April 17 to facilitate holding of polls by June 12. Therefore, there is no justification for the Opposition to issue an ultimatum.

"If they have any genuine issue to raise, they should come to the negotiating table," he said.

The PM met the President to discuss election-related issues for the second consecutive day yesterday.

Another minister in the team seeking anonymity quoted the President as saying that he would act as per the Constitution. Asked if the President agreed to initiate a government-Opposition dialogue, he said, "We'll be happy if he does so."

Referring to the talks at the Bangabhaban, he said the AL government prefers its resignation, dissolution of the Seventh Jatiya Sangsad and take-over by the caretaker government on the same day.

According to sources, the ruling party leaders expressed in the meeting that settlement of issues like formation of a caretaker government, recasting the Election Commission, recovery of illegal arms and changes in the administrative set-up, if required, would help smooth transfer of power.

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With teachers whiling away time at the lounge and classrooms under lock and key, Eden Girls College wore a deserted look yesterday. Teachers of government colleges and madrassahs skipped classes for the second consecutive day of the three-day boycott to press home their demands.

Move to revive 9 more cases against Ershad

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

The government has taken an initiative to revive nine more corruption cases against jailed former president and chairman of a Jatiya Party faction Hossain Mohammad Ershad, sources in the Attorney General's office said yesterday.

A Division Bench of the High Court comprising Justice Amirul Islam Choudhury and Justice Abdur Razzak yesterday set March 25 and 29 respectively for hearing of cases against Ershad.

Earlier on Monday Deputy Attorney General M Faruq moved the court for reviving the cases, which had been stayed in lower court following petitions by Ershad.

The cases are known as Japanese boat purchase case and appointment of an official of health ministry at Suhrawardy Hospital abusing his authority.

The same bench also directed the state attorney to move two other

cases - gold smuggling case and allotment of RAJUK plots - against Ershad to other benches.

Justice Choudhury said that since the gold smuggling case came up in 1995 when he was Deputy Attorney General the case should be referred to another bench. The rule for stay in the case on allotment of RAJUK plot was given by a separate bench, hence the state attorney should move it there, the court observed.

Ershad was implicated in 18 criminal cases after being forced to resign on December 6, 1990.

He was sentenced in two cases in the lower court - for possession of arms without permit and in Janata Tower Case. In the arms case he was subsequently acquitted by the High Court which, however, upheld the sentence on Janata Tower Case, reducing the sentence from

s e v e n

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Block 22 in CHT PSC extended for political reasons?

STAR REPORT

The government has extended the Production Sharing Contract (PSC) with UMC-Ocean Energy joint venture for one year for the second time for oil and gas exploration in Block 22 in Chittagong Hill Tracts.

The contract period with the US oil companies had expired in mid-February for "failing to fulfil minimum work commitment", sources concerned said.

Though there was no "valid reason", the PSC has been extended again on "political reasons", specially considering that the CHT might not attract foreign investors in near future, they said.

The Energy Ministry approved the extension last week and it will be sent to Petrobangla next week.

The sources said UMC's local office was lobbying at the Prime Minister's office for the extension. Petrobangla earlier "liquidated" UMC's bank guarantee of three million US dollars in mid-February.

The sources said the companies' venture in Bangladesh was suffering due to cash crisis. It had attempted to drill an exploratory well in Kasalong, but failed repeatedly due to lack of finance.

Just one month before expiry of the PSC period, UMC applied to Petrobangla for an extension of one year, saying it would complete drilling of an exploratory well in Patia within the period. Petrobangla did not approve any budget for this proposed well, saying one year is not enough for drilling an exploratory well.

Earlier, UMC's PSC period was extended for one year in January last year though it failed to fulfil its minimum commitment of drilling one exploratory well. The PSC period was extended on the understanding that it would drill one well

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Pro-Ershad MPs to join next JS session

Move to retain 'plough' as polls symbol: Kader Conspiracy to split alliance: Manzur

STAR REPORT

Jatiya Party lawmakers loyal to jailed former president HM Ershad have decided to join the upcoming session of the Jatiya Sangsad despite strong opposition from a faction led by the Secretary General Nazimur Rahman Manzur.

The decision to participate the next session, scheduled for a March 29 start, was taken at a meeting of the JP Parliamentary Party (JPPP) at the Sangsad Bhavan yesterday.

Nineteen out of 21 legislators loyal to Ershad attended the meeting. The rest of the JP MPs belong to

the faction led by Communications Minister Anwar Hossain Manju.

Raushan Ershad, a senior member of the presidium, briefed the newsmen about while the meeting of the party's parliamentary wing was still in progress.

She said that they would send a letter to the Speaker to ascertain which faction of the JP - one led by Ershad or the other by Manju - has the command over the majority of lawmakers. The target is to get 'plough' as election symbol and get Ershad out of jail, said Raushan.

"If Speaker ask us to join the parliament for a division vote, we'll

join the session," said Raushan. The Election Commission earlier suspended a decision on allocation of 'plough' to either faction, saying one of these would have to prove its majority first.

The JPPP meeting over, Ershad's younger brother GM Kader told The Daily Star, "Before we write to the Speaker, we would meet him first. We'll tell him that we have a leader (Ershad) of our parliamentary party and we're the majority. We'll go by his advice once the Speaker listens to us."

Asked when they expected the

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Opposition rally today No decision yet on ultimatum

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The BNP-led opposition alliance holds a public meeting at Paltan Maidan today to press for immediate resignation of the government and holding of general elections in May.

BNP Chairperson and Leader of the Opposition in Jatiya Sangsad Khaleda Zia is expected to give a one-week ultimatum to the government to resign and also announce fresh action programmes. The meeting is organised by the Dhaka City unit of the All-Party Action Council (APAC).

Acting Chairman of Jatiya Party Roushan Ershad, Ameer of Jamaat-e-Islami Matiur Rahman Nazami, Acting Chairman of Islami Oikya Jote Muhiddin Khan, secretaries-general of the four parties, and the city unit presidents and general secretaries and some top BNP leaders will also address the gathering.

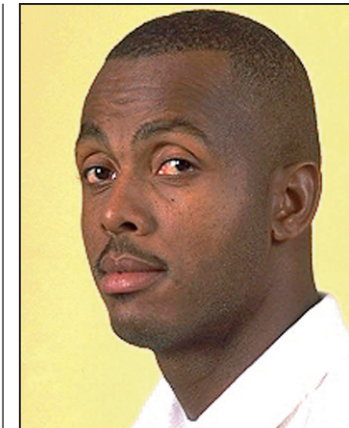
City BNP President and Convener of APAC Sadeque Hossain Khoka MP will preside over the meeting.

But, sources said the issue of giving an ultimatum to the government is yet to be finalised. The Central Liaison Committee of the alliance will sit this morning to finalise the future course of action.

However, there is a strong opinion among the parties for giving an ultimatum. BNP is thinking whether such a move would be wise.

The BNP chief, who had consultations with the party's highest policymaking body on Monday about the next course of action, also met with chiefs of Jamaat and IOJ. Khaleda Zia will also have talks with Jatiya Party's acting chairman Roushan Ershad and other party leaders concerned about opposition's future course of action.

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Walsh breaks 500 barrier

AGENCIES, Port of Spain

West Indies fast bowler Courtney Walsh became the first bowler in cricket history to take 500 Test wickets on Monday, the third day of the second Test against South Africa.

Playing in his 129th Test, the 38-year-old Jamaican accomplished the amazing feat trapping Jacques Kallis lbw for duck 25 minutes before tea.

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A diving Indian goalkeeper tries to thwart a Pakistan attack during yesterday's Prime Minister Gold Cup Hockey Championship final at the Moulana Bhasani National Stadium. India lifted the title, beating their arch-rivals 3-2 in penalty shootout after the regulation and extra periods ended 3-3. (Story on page 13)

Talks with Raushan Khaleda against JP decision to join JS

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

BNP chief Khaleda Zia opposed Ershad-led Jatiya Party's decision to join the ensuing parliament session, a BNP spokesman said yesterday.

But JP Presidium member Raushan Ershad after a meeting with Khaleda said JP's joining the session would not harm the opposition unity.

Following her 40-minute discussion with Khaleda at the latter's Minto Road residence last night, Raushan told newsmen that she informed the opposition leader about JP's decision to go back to parliament. "We will attend tomorrow's rally of the opposition alliance," she said.

But BNP leader Anwar Zahid while briefing newsmen on the outcome of the talks said the opposition leader asked JP not to join parliament session.

"JP will be held responsible for any consequence if the party joins parliament session. Such an act may create misunderstanding in the opposition alliance," Khaleda told Raushan, according to Zahid.