

Govt offers talks, Hasina agrees on conditions

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The government yesterday invited the main opposition Awami League (AL) to a dialogue to resolve some contentious political issues including the one over display of the portrait of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Rahman.

In a swift response, the AL has agreed on the government offer but asked it to meet three conditions.

These are revival of the law for preservation of the portrait of the Bangabandhu's portrait at public offices, allowing the opposition to practice its democratic right to agitate and an end to political persecution of the opposition activists.

General Secretary of the AL Zillur Rahman disclosed the conditions to reporters at a hurriedly-called press conference at the party central office in the city last night. Party President Sheikh Hasina was also present.

"But we don't find the government sincere about holding a meaningful dialogue. It's ridiculous that the government invites us to a discussion on one hand and mounts its repression on our activists on the other," Hasina said.

AL wants display of Bangabandhu's portrait, right to agitation and end to persecution

The dialogue offer lacks sincerity; it's a political stunt, says Hasina

Mannan Bhuiyan won't comment on AL position now

She referred to the police action on the AL protesters in the city only hours after the government made the dialogue offer. "It's nothing but a political stunt aimed to draw press coverage."

Earlier on the day, LGRD Minister and BNP Secretary General Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan phoned Zillur to invite the latter's party to the proposed dialogue. The cabinet assigned him on March 24 to initiate a dialogue with the main opposition party.

Confirming his offer, Bhuiyan told The Daily Star last night that he requested his AL counterpart to sit across the table to discuss some disputed issues including the pro-

posal Prime Minister Khaleda Zia made in the parliament last week.

The PM had proposed display of portraits of the Bangabandhu as well as late president Ziaur Rahman along with that of the head of the government at public offices and institutions. The AL rejected outright the proposal and launched a nationwide protest against the repeal of an act providing for mandatory display of the portrait of the Bangabandhu.

No-one can be a parallel to the Bangabandhu, who is the Father of the Nation, the AL argued.

Asked for his comments on the AL's conditions, Mannan Bhuiyan said he is yet to receive an official

response to the government proposal and will talk about the matter once he gets it.

Since the parliament scrapped the portrait law the AL has been in continued street protests amidst police pounding. Police also clubbed and teargassed the AL leaders and activists during its latest agitation in the capital.

Briefing reporters after a meeting of the Awami League presidium, Hasina further said police arrested seven leaders of Bangladesh Chhatra League, the AL's student front, from the Dhaka Central Jail gate on March 27 defying a High Court order to release them.

"What can we expect of a government that does not go by laws or court orders? Where do they want to push the country to?" Hasina accused the government of pushing the country towards lawlessness and destruction.

"They are, in fact, conspiring to destroy the hard-earned democracy."

Referring to the repeated police actions against her party's agitation,

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Magurjhara blow-out claim finalised

Petrobangla awaits energy ministry's comments

SHARIER KHAN

Petrobangla has finalised a compensation claim of around US\$600 million from US oil company Unocal for damaging the gas structure of Magurjhara in a blow-out in 1997.

It has sought the energy ministry's comments on the claim prior to placing it before Unocal.

"We have finalised the compensation amount, considering the significant damage done to our natural resources by Occidental [now Unocal] through its negligence," said a top Petrobangla source.

"However, we want to settle the compensation issue amicably because Unocal is our partner too. We have to deal with the issue in a manner so that the government does not face any awkward situation," he said, quoting the discussion of the Petrobangla board, which met Wednesday to finalise the claim.

The board of directors of Petrobangla held the meeting to decide on the nature of the compensation claim after it got the green signal from the ministry to seek compensation for damaging 240 billion cubic feet (bcf) of gas of the Magurjhara gas structure.

A probe committee headed by a joint secretary of the energy ministry assessed the loss in gas in 1997 following the blow-out. The four-member committee also included an expert from Occidental.

Petrobangla sources said the amount of loss was arrived at by fixing gas price at around \$2.6 per thousand cubic feet or mcf of gas. It is the price at which Unocal sells gas to Petrobangla from the Jalalabad gas field. As per this calculation, the claim stood at \$600 million.

Wednesday's board meeting also discussed Unocal's arbitrary claim that till August 31, 2000 it had paid Bangladesh a total of Tk 332.32 crore in compensation for the Magurjhara blow-out. But, no such payment was ever made.

Besides, the board discussed various audit objections regarding Unocal's expenditure estimates and the issue of gas export.

Though the blow-out took place back in June 14, 1997, Petrobangla could not demand the gas damage compensation as the past Awami League government shelved the official probe report on the Magurjhara blow-out and kept it as a 'classified' document.

Occidental was allowed to work without paying any compensation. The government also extended its Production Sharing Contract (PSC) and finally allowed it to sell its Bangladeshi concerns to Unocal and get out of Bangladesh in 1999.

In late 2000, the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Energy raised the issue of the report of the Magurjhara probe committee formed with energy ministry and Petrobangla officials. A tug of war followed between the then energy secretary Toufiq-e-Elahi Chowdhury and standing committee head former AL lawmaker Imran Ahmed after the secretary refused to submit the probe committee report.

Ultimately, under the pressure of the standing committee, the probe report was submitted and then disseminated to Petrobangla.

Occidental began the drilling in Magurjhara on June 2, 1997; its first since it signed a PSC on January 1

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Police club AL men, mar rally

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Police fired teargas shells and charged batons indiscriminately to prevent Awami League (AL) leaders and activists from gathering in front of the party central office at Bangabandhu Avenue in the city yesterday.

A front organisation of the ruling BNP forcibly occupied the venue allocated for a scheduled AL rally.

Former minister and AL central leader Motia Chowdhury and around 20 other leaders and activists of the main opposition party were injured in the police action.

In a bizarre move, police in riot gear backed by paramilitary BDR protected activists of the Jatiyatobadi Bastuhara Dal as it held an unscheduled meeting in the afternoon at nearby Muktagan. The AL was earlier permitted to hold a rally at the same venue.

While a police contingent protected Bastuhara Dal meeting, additional police and BDR personnel were kept stand-by on board riot cars and jeeps parked on different sides of the Secretariat.

As the AL leaders and workers started moving towards Muktagan at around three in the afternoon, police forcibly took away loud speakers from them and asked them

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PHOTO: STAR

Dhaka Mayor Mohammad Hanif and other Awami League workers duck for cover behind a car when police fired teargas shells on party men in front of its office at Bangabandhu Avenue in the city yesterday.

Eleven years on, JS remains practically inoperative

NAZRUL ISLAM

Eleven years on since the parliamentary system of government was reintroduced in the country, the Jatiya Sangsad remains practically 'inoperative' due to combative stance of the political parties.

Leading intellectuals believe that confrontation between the mainstream political parties has retarded the growth of democracy and stood in the way of national interest.

"I see no sign of progress in parliamentary democracy. The parliament is not even functioning properly," said Professor Serajul Islam Chowdhury.

And parliamentarians, of both the ruling and the opposition, do not disagree.

"We have achieved very little progress in democracy over the last decade," said Advocate Abdul Hamid, a former speaker of the Jatiya Sangsad and now deputy leader of the opposition.

"Today, we see parliamentary democracy only in theory, not in practice," former BNP lawmaker Major (retd) Akhteruzzaman said.

Both the intellectuals and the lawmakers maintain that mistrust has overshadowed democracy, with ineffective parliament making the government disproportionately

POWERFUL

There have been regular elections all right; however, people's representation has never been ensured. Opposition lawmakers have shrunk away from their prime duties - to debate and legislate on national issues - in the fifth, sixth and seventh as well as in the present parliament.

"The main opposition parties were not in the parliament to debate issues and question government actions to ensure accountability and transparency of the executive," said Professor Chowdhury. "Even the parliamentary committees were, and still are, non-functional."

He said that the opposition should be an inseparable part of the government. "The opposition have to debate the issues raised, form shadow cabinet and question the government actions."

Both the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and the Awami League (AL), while in opposition in the fifth and seventh Jatiya Sangsad, boycotted the parliamentary proceedings for substantial periods of time.

The BNP walked out from the very first sitting of the seventh Jatiya Sangsad without citing any reason. Within 15 months, it started abstaining from the parliamentary proceedings on August 30, 1997 when the House was progressing into its sixth session, and stayed away until March 8, 1998. The BNP placed a 14-point demand before

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ENTERTAINMENT

the election.

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SHEHAB AHMED

Kidnapping, killings and extortion are going on unabated in the three districts of Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), affecting law and order.

In the last two years, at least 46 people were kidnapped and a number of them killed as ransom was not paid for their release, according to statistics available from various sources.

Of the kidnappings, the most talked-about was the abduction of three European engineers in February last year in Naniarchar upazila of Rangamati district. They were freed by the army in March after an exchange of fire with the kidnappers whose identity is yet to be known. Although police had filed a case with Naniarchar thana, no progress was made in this regard.

Though the kidnappers had demanded Tk 1 crore as ransom, the money was not paid. The authorities had promised 'no action' against the kidnappers if they had freed the foreigners.

Besides, there was an attempt to kidnap an Australian at Kaukhali on February 28 this year.

The abduction of three foreigners 'encouraged' the kidnappers, sources in the CHT believe. They feel that lack of police action against these criminals and rumours of ransom being paid to them worsened the situation.

CHT caught in a crime warp

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Unidentified gunmen shot a fish trader, Mizan, 40, at Dewanchar on Tuesday night, according to reports received from Rangamati yesterday.

The gunmen first waved at a fishing trawler, signalling it to stop at Dewanchar on way to Rangamati from Barkal. They opened fire when the boatmen tried to speed away. The injured fish trader was admitted to Rangamati hospital and later shifted to Chittagong Medical College Hospital as his condition deteriorated.

This was one of the many such incidents in the CHT region. Different groups of gunmen are involved in these criminal activities, creating a reign of terror.

There are reports that if ransom is not paid, the body of an abducted person is later found somewhere. Many of those abducted remain missing, leaving their relatives in great tension and police facing bitter criticism for their inefficiency and inaction.

As the peace accord between the government and the former Shantibahini was signed on December 2, 1997, about 2,000 insurgents laid down their arms and they were rehabilitated with government help. But a section of the insurgents reportedly did not surrender arms.

The latest clash took place at Kaukhali earlier this week, leaving one tribal youth shot dead in an exchange of fire with the army and police. Police also recovered several arms.

The political wing of Shantibahini, Jana Sanghati Samity (JSS), was later split on issues

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The BNP-led ruling alliance yesterday finalised 84 nominees for ward commissioner posts for the ensuing Dhaka City Corporation elections.

The candidates for the rest six wards will be decided upon within a day or two, party sources said.

According to the list, Jamaat-e-Islami, the key component in the coalition, has been allowed to field six candidates while Islami Oikya Jote, another component, will field one. Jatiya Party of Nazirul Rahman Manjur did not get any nomination.

In the 30 seats reserved for women ward commissioners, the alliance also finalised the candidate list without giving any seat to alliance partners.

Munshi Bazlul Basit Anju, Mirza Khokon, Abul Khabir Babu, Chowdhury Alam, Khaiza Habib, Golam Morshed, MA Mazid, Kazi Abdul Bashir, Sharmila Imam, Runu Akther, Mohammad Mohan, Anwar