

Shahpara arson

AL demands judicial probe after visit

UNB, Dhaka

Deputy Leader of the Opposition in Parliament Abdul Hamid yesterday demanded immediate formation

of a judicial inquiry commission to probe what he said was recent unprecedented brutality on innocent people at Shahpara village in Natore.

Hamid, who visited the village on February 17 with a five-member parliamentary team of Awami League, said the "savages acts, including burning of houses using gun powder, rape and torture of local journalists, eclipsed all brutalities of the Pakistani army."

Villagers of Shahpara came under attacks following the killing of Gama, a nephew of Deputy Minister Ruhul Quddus Talukdar Dulu.

The deputy opposition leader said that although some underground party claimed the responsibility of the killing, Awami League leaders and workers were implicated in the murder case and innocent villagers were tortured.

"Young men and women have not yet returned to the village, fearing fresh attack. Only some elderly people now live in the barren village," he told reporters at the opposition's conference room at the Sangsad Bhaban yesterday evening.

Hamid also narrated how torture was meted out to local journalists, including Janakantha correspondent GM Iqbal Hasan who was beaten up in front of his wife and children. The attackers hit Hasan on the head by revolver, causing damage to his eyesight. He needs better

treatment in Dhaka, Hamid said.

He said district unit of the Awami League distributed relief goods among the affected people on February 13 and there was no relief from the government before that. On February 14, the administration gave one blanket and 16 kg of rice to each family, which is quite inadequate.

"After visiting the village, I only asked myself if we are living in an independent country?" the Awami League leader said. "It seemed to me that after assuming power with the support of Jamaat, the BNP-Jamaat alliance government is taking revenge of their defeat in 1991."

Hamid said Dulu's name was in the list of 101 "godfathers" released by Awami League. "Dulu's activities proved that our list of godfathers is not irrelevant," he said.

Hamid criticised the Natore district administration for not making any convincing efforts to nab the culprits responsible for burning down the Shahpara village.

He demanded a permanent police camp at Shahpara, compensation for the affected families and arrest of those involved directly or indirectly in the incident.

Hamid called for trial of the culprits on the basis of inquiry report by the judicial inquiry commission as he proposed.

Awami League MPs Suranjit Sengupta, Sheikh Fazul Karim Selim, Rahmat Ali, Opposition's Chief Whip Abdus Shahid, Amanullah, Panchanan Biswas and Rezaul Karim Hira were present at the briefing.

Top PBCP boss, 5 others held

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, Khulna

Law enforcers held six cadres including a regional commander of outlawed Purbo Banglar Communist Party (PBCP-ML Janajuddha) in the south-western region on Wednesday.

Being tipped-off, a team of the joint forces nabbed Abdul Gaffar Tusher, a regional commander of the PBCP, at the rented house of local BNP leader and Jugikhal Union Parishad Chairman Rabiul Islam at Kalaroa in Satkhira at about 2:00am, sources said.

The team recovered a mobile phone from his possession and took him to an army camp for quizzing, they added.

According to police, Gaffar, son of Abu Jafar of Danga Naita village in Tala, is an accused in various criminal cases including those of murder, rape and abduction.

Law enforcers held five armed cadres of the PBCP (M-L) in Gopalganj and Bagerhat on Wednesday.

Locals handed over Alim Mollah, Firoz Khan and Jamal at Tungipara in Gopalganj to police after their failed robbery bid, sources said.

They were operatives of the PBCP and involved in the murder of fish trader Alim of Chitalmari on November 4, 2003, police said.

Joint forces arrested alleged PBCP cadres Subhankar Biswas and Hiramon Biswas at Chitalmari upazila in Bagerhat.

Police said they confessed to their involvement in the killing of ansar Naik Alamgir Hossain on January 12 at Ujalpur village under Bagerhat.

GHORASHAL GAS LEAK

Bela serves legal notice on 2 secys, BCIC chairman

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Bangladesh Environmental Lawyers Association (Bela), an NGO, yesterday served legal notice on the secretaries of the industries, environment and forest ministries, and chairman of the Bangladesh Chemical Industries Corporation (BCIC) against the hazardous operation of Ghorashal and Palash Urea Fertiliser Factories.

The Bela held the two state-owned enterprises in Narsingdi district responsible for causing pollution of surrounding environment, inflicting perilous impact on health, soil, fish ponds, cattle, poultry and vegetables.

It urged the authorities to demonstrate higher degree of responsibility and care for people and environment.

The Bela also threatened to take legal action against the authorities concerned on behalf of local people if they failed to respond.

Previously, following the Bela legal notice, the state-owned enterprises paid compensation to locals when the factories polluted the area in 1999, the notice said.

Still, the factories had failed to take measures to prevent further pollution causing damage to public health, environment and property, it added.

"Pollution level exceeded beyond all acceptable limits in the last few days and more than 70 inhabitants of the area have approached the Bela for legal assistance," it said.

The Bela asked the authorities to take adequate measures to compensate or rehabilitate the affected people.

Nepal continue

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an premature exit.

The southern Africans first restricted their lowly opponents to 180-9 with Prosper Utseya capturing 4-41. Zimbabwe then got home in 36.2 overs thanks to 84 not out by James Cameron.

The result sets up a mouth-watering clash between Australia and Sri Lanka at the Rajshahi Divisional Stadium today.

The Australians must now win that game to ensure they have a better net-run-rate than either Sri Lanka or Zimbabwe to make it through to the Super League.

Away at the BKSP, New Zealand kept their hopes alive of making it to the main competition from Group C after hammering winless Scotland by 240 runs.

The young Black Caps, put into bat, amassed 389-2 with a pair of centuries by Bradley-John Watling and Brad Wilson. The Scottish whipping boys lasted only 33 overs before being all out for 149.

New Zealand's second win means they will have to wait for the outcome of today's big match featuring Bangladesh and India at Bangabandhu National Stadium, to know if they progress.

Ireland finished their Group D campaign with a 70-win over Papua New Guinea. The Irish scored 212 the dismissed their opponents in 38.2 overs.

Both Ireland and PNG will now compete in the Plate Championship in Chittagong while Pakistan and West Indies -- who face each other today -- are already through to the Super League.

Privatisation of oil

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Padma Oil Company, the Meghna Oil Company and the Jamuna Oil Company -- by the end of this month. Standard Asiatic Oil Company, a liquefied petroleum gas plant, and Eastern Lubricants, a lubricant blending plant, was also to be privatised by then.

"The decision was taken in line with the government's policy to help the private sector flourish and get rid of those losing state-owned concerns," said an official with the Privatisation Commission.

The Bangladesh Petroleum Corporation (BPC), which is the sole importer of petroleum products and distributes those products through the three oil distribution companies, incurred a loss of Tk 1,400 crore in fiscal 2002-03, although it deposited about Tk 3,000 crore to the national exchequer in duty and tax during the same time.

The government owns 50.35 per cent of the shares in Padma Oil Company, 65.92 per cent in Eastern Lubricants and 50 per cent in

Standard Asiatic Oil Company. The Meghna Oil Company is fully owned by the government.

During fiscal 2001-02, Padma Oil's net profit dropped by 32.73 per cent to Tk 87.91 million while Eastern Lubricant's net profit rose by 1.39 per cent to Tk 3.64 million.

The BPC distributes imported petroleum from its 18 depots, including the main one at Chittagong Port. An average of about 11,000 tonnes of petroleum products are consumed daily across the country.

Bangladesh imports 15 million barrels of oil products annually at a cost of around \$550 million.

Yakooob said the government buys crude oil at Tk 9.33 per litre and sells it at a price between Tk 18 and 35 per litre. The main subsidy is given to kerosene which sells at Tk 18 per litre, he said.

The loss incurred by the BPC could be minimised if the government lowered the tax and increase the price of kerosene, he added.

Farm subsidy

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high as 28 percent of total per unit production cost of paddy in Bangladesh. The ratio is as low as 6 percent in Vietnam, 8 percent in Thailand and 13 percent in Punjab, the rice-bowl of India, according to ministry records.

Bangladeshi farmers bear a 62 percent higher production cost compared to the farmers in Thailand for paddy, said the ministry sources, attributing such disparity to high irrigation and fertiliser costs in Bangladesh.

To close the gap between the cost for irrigation by diesel-run shallow pumps and electricity-run pumps, the ministry first decided on August 11 last year to develop a subsidy proposal giving financial relief to the farmers using diesel-run irrigation pumps.

It calculated that out of 7,86,004 shallow pumps now in operation for irrigation across the country, 7,31,612 are run on diesel and the remaining 54,392 on electricity. The cost difference between the two systems for per acre irrigation stands as high as Tk 600, according to the ministry.

The ministry prepared the Tk 310 crore subsidy proposal to give the majority of farmers deprived of electricity and power subsidy a fair chance to irrigate their croplands at par.

But, the finance ministry recently informed the agriculture ministry that since the diesel-run pumps have many other usages than

facilitating irrigation in croplands and since there is no way to identify the pumps being used exclusively for irrigation, the government would not be able to provide the proposed Tk 310 crore subsidy.

Officials at the agriculture ministry were far from convinced of the finance ministry's reason for the arbitrary rejection. They said a list of the farmers using diesel-run pumps could easily be prepared and strict monitoring could be put in place if the finance ministry agrees to provide the subsidy.

Sources at the ministry and also in the parliamentary standing committee said another letter would be sent to the finance ministry for a review of its decision.

Agriculture Secretary of the main opposition Awami League Md Abdur Razzaque, MP, expressed utter dismay at finance ministry's no to the subsidy plan.

"The cost of irrigation is the highest in Bangladesh and our farming community falls in the most economically vulnerable segment of society. There should be no point for the government not to provide the irrigation subsidy," said Razzaque, who was an agriculturist before taking to politics.

Bangladesh provides as farm subsidy only 3.3 percent of the aggregate value of its annual farm produces though WTO rules permit a country to extend a maximum 10 percent.

Cops seal AL office

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An AL's bid to set up a stage there on Wednesday night for the three-day programme fizzled out in police resistance.

"We are just carrying out the orders of government high-ups," said an on-duty police official.

Armed police forced shopkeepers and hawkers to close their businesses and leave the place at about 1:30pm. Locked were the gates of Ramna Bhaban Market in an area that reverberated only with the slogans of anti-coalition demonstrators lining the roadblocks.

Mizanur Rahman, acting commissioner of Dhaka Metropolitan Police, told BBC Radio the AL did not seek permission for the programme -- an allegation the main opposition party denied.

Leader of the Opposition Sheikh Hasina, who walked a few yards to the venue because of police barricade, flayed the government for hindering the programme of the United Nations.

"I will write to UN Secretary General Kofi Annan and all heads of state and tell them we were not allowed to observe International Mother Language Day here," Hasina said, blaming violence, corruption and repression of women on the coalition.

Threatening to call more hartals in the event of fresh resistance, Hasina said: "We have tolerated enough and we will not let them go unchallenged. Never forget we polled half of the vote in the last election."

BARBED WIRE Senior AL leaders had to leave their cars outside the cordon to find themselves in heated arguments with police on the way to the meeting venue.

Hasina's motorcade screeched to a halt at the wet barricade to the venue at about 4:25pm as police took time to clear way for her party workers shouting slogans in a small procession against Prime Minister Khaleda Zia.

Police also barred singers for the programme, who sang the national anthem with some senior AL leaders in the street in symbolic protest.

"It's a shame," Hasina said in a blistering criticism of her arch-rival Khaleda, who faces an oust-the-government agitation of the opposition party that the ruling BNP accused of fanning violence.

"The ruling coalition is making its last desperate bid to stick to power, as its outer is nearing," said Hasina, who lost power to Khaleda in 2001.

On the prime minister's speech asking BNP workers to confine opposition activists to homes, Hasina said: "She (Khaleda) instigated police and alliance cadres to beat up our leaders and activists, especially women."

"I can't believe how the prime minister, being a woman, ordered police to hit women," Hasina said, describing police action as the result of Khaleda's alliance with the Jamaat-e-Islami.

The AL chief dismissed the prime minister's oft-repeated "roadmap for development," as the roadmap for corruption.

Playwright Syed Shamsul Haq and actor Moinaz Uddin Ahmed took part in the discussion, which virtually escalated into the protest rally, addressed by most top leaders of the opposition.

The AL holds the second day programme at the same place this afternoon.

Coalition dismisses

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Information Minister and BNP Vice-president Tariqul Islam also dismissed the quit demand and said the political stalemate could be resolved through discussions. "We favour dialogues because we believe in democracy."

Prime Minister's Political Secretary M Harris Chowdhury termed Hasina's demand for mid-term polls "ridiculous." "We are rejecting the ridiculous demand as the government just passed only two years (in office)."

Acting Secretary General of the Jamaat-e-Islami, the key coalition partner, Muhammad Kamaruzzaman also echoed Mosharraf and said no such situation has arisen in the country that necessitates a mid-term election. People want Hasina and the opposition to rejoin parliament and discharge their responsibilities for which they have been mandated.

Chairman of the Islami Oikya Jote Fazlul Haque Amni, MP, said the AL demand is extra-constitutional. "Hasina is living in an Utopian world." He also observed that hartal is a democratic right but the Awami League is abusing that right. "That's why people are not supporting opposition-sponsored hartals."

Kazi Firoz Rashid, secretary general of Bangladesh Jatiya Party, said, "The general elections will be held on schedule and Hasina has to be patient." He added that when the Awami League was in office, "we also demanded general elections but they did not relinquish power even an hour before the completion of their term."

JP returns

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inviting the JP to return to House.

He said other demands raised by the JP, boycotting parliament since February 9 in protest against stopping its chairman from going abroad on February 6 and derogatory remarks against him by key treasury bench legislators.

The JP lawmakers made a stormy walkout from parliament on February 8, saying they would not return until an end to the harassment of remarks about him by BNP front-benchers including Communications Minister Nazmul Huda.

They also demanded an end to discrimination against opposition lawmakers and allocation of membership to them in parliamentary standing committees as nominated by the JP.

The ruling BNP initiated the process to bring the JP to the House at a time when the AL was agitating for snap polls boycotting parliament and was casting for allies in the anti-government agitation.

Chief Whip Khandaker Delwar Hossain called JP leaders several times to a fence-mending meeting and sat with them in talks on Tuesday what turned out to be a failure.

In the wake of the failure, Bhuiyan, also secretary general of the BNP, talked to the JP lawmakers in an hour-long meeting at the Sangsad Bhaban yesterday.

The JP lawmakers demanded a statement by the government in the House, spelling out fulfillment of their demands before their return.

Pro-BNP staff

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Many transfers take place in exchange of bribes or on political consideration."

Meter readers, supervisors and other staff of the organisation who have been systematically eating away the Titas revenue through illegal connection, bill tampering and other means are being protected by these trade unions, sources said.

Democratic Lawyers'

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Amir-ul-Islam said the executive organ of the state is now under the command of one person and a house, which means totalitarianism in governance.

He was critical of the government for seeking time on 18 occasions to implement the Supreme Court recommendations for separation of the judiciary from the executive.

The president of Law-Asia, a regional lawyers' group, said, "Separation and independence of the judiciary are two preconditions for rule of law. It's better not to have any judiciary at all than having a dependent one."

Dr Kamal Hossain said, "We have to churn out a regionalism in South Asia on the basis of amity and peaceful coexistence to achieve the democratic goals collectively in an age of globalisation."

The conference, chaired by Shafiq Ahmed, paid tributes to late justice Debesh Bhattacharya, senior lawyer Shawkat Ali Khan, advocates Mosharaf Hossain, Abdur Razzaq and Ismail Hossain Khan for their contribution to the struggle for protection of human rights.

Madrassah edn

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transparency to their income and expenditure.

The committee chairman said all general board chairmen appealed to the committee to remove pressure created on them by powerful local employees' unions the leaders of which in collusion with outsiders and brokers were engaged in wrongdoing and held the board authorities virtually hostage to whims.

"It happens as some officials and employees of the boards work in the same place for over 18 years without transfer," the committee chairman quoted a board chairman as saying.

The standing committee members asked the board chairmen to make special arrangements to check copying in the upcoming Secondary School Certificate Examinations, beginning on March 4.

Pointing out widespread copying in examinations under the madrasha board, which supervises all madrashas across Bangladesh, the meeting asked its chairman, who was also present, to take help from general boards in the war on cheating in examination.

The committee asked board authorities to form vigilance teams to make the board premises free from touts, who cheat visitors, with support from local police, lawmakers and ministers responsible for their districts.

The committee backed the proposal of general board chairmen for inter-board transfer of officials and employees to free the boards from corruption and irregularities.

The committee asked the secretary of the education ministry to prepare a report on the inter-transfer formula.

The parliamentary body members underlined the need for introducing central auditing in addition to internal auditing to maintain transparency in income and expenditure of the boards.

The board chairmen asked the committee to settle the problems stemming from continuation of service by some board employees up to age 60 despite the government rule of 57 years.

Iran train death toll

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derailed on Wednesday in the northeast of Iran. The subsequent explosion engulfed a swarm of firefighters, local officials and curious bystanders who had dashed to the scene.

The grim stench of unclaimed bodies pervaded the cemetery in nearby Nishapur, where limbless torsos and scraps of flesh scorched black by the blast were laid out on Thursday on plastic sheeting.

The thunderous blast was felt 70km away. It disintegrated mud brick houses nearby and forced many villagers to move into camps, the official IRNA news agency reported.

Through the night, Revolutionary Guards had maintained a one-km cordon around the disaster site, fearing three unexploded gasoline wagons could still blow up.

But at dawn, with thin plumes of white smoke still rising from the wreckage, officials said the danger had passed.

President Mohammad Khatami demanded a full inquiry as the dead were to be buried in Nishapur.

"There are 320 dead and 460 injured so far," said Ali Hosseini, head of the Khorasan province Red Crescent. "But many are still under rubble and we are expecting the death toll to rise."

Engineers began lifting the wreckage of the runaway wagons

from the main Tehran-Mashhad railway. Reports of what had happened were confused, although it appeared that the wagons had rolled, downhill, for perhaps as much as 20 km (12 miles) before derailling and catching fire.

Some initial reports said the wagons had been detached by earth tremors, but officials said the explosion was so massive that it might have been confused with an earthquake. Some newspapers said strong winds had set the wagons rolling.

Roads and Transport Minister Ahmad Khorram told the local Khorasan daily the cause had not yet been determined. Repairs to the line were expected to take three days.

Officials said a lethal cocktail of gasoline and fertilizer had polluted the nearest village, Deh-e No Hashemabad. Three other villages were devastated by the blast.

Iran is still recovering from an earthquake in December that killed over 40,000 people in the ancient city of Bam, some 650 km (400 miles) to the south.

On Friday, Iranians vote in a parliamentary election that has been overshadowed by a bitter dispute over the mass disqualification of reformist candidates.

Two more GIs killed

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emerging that elections are essential and everyone would want elections. But at the same time, there seems to be a general acceptance of the fact that it is not going to be possible to arrange an election between now and the end of June," Annan said in the interview published Thursday.

Rather than hold elections, the United States proposed choosing members of a new legislature by regional caucuses. The lawmakers would then select a government to take power by July 1. However, the caucus idea has little support among Iraqis, who fear the Americans could manipulate the process to ensure their favorites were chosen.

With Washington standing firm on the date for transferring power and dwindling support for the caucuses, a senior US official said Wednesday in Washington that the Bush administration was considering a plan to extend and expand the US-appointed Governing Council so it can take temporary control of the country on July 1.

The council would then rule the country until a legislature could be elected, the US official said on condition of anonymity.

Yesterday, Ahmad al-Barak, a Shia council member and coordinator of the Iraqi Bar Association, said after meeting with al-Sistani in Najaf that the Shiites were hoping for an early election but would be willing to wait a few more months if Annan recommends against a vote before June 30.

"I think that elections can be held after five months from now and in SC judge

It was the latest in a series of superseding cases in both the divisions of the Supreme Court, including the appointment of the chief justice twice after the four-party coalition government took office.

Sources said the Supreme Court Bar Association would not organise any programme to welcome the judge.

The government yesterday also appointed Justice Mohammed Sirajul Islam, a retired judge of the High Court, as the member of the Law Commission for three years.

His appointment will take effect from the date of his joining, an official handout said.

AL rejects

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corruption.

Sengupta also brought charges against Speaker Zamiruddin Sircar for conducting the House proceedings without a quorum, which, he said, is a gross violation of the constitution and the Rules of Procedure. An impeachment motion could be brought against the speaker for this, he said.

Briefing newsmen at the opposition's conference room at the Sangsad Bhaban in the evening, he said the proposed Anti-corruption Commission cannot function independently if constituted with the Public Service Commission chairman, comptroller and auditor general, cabinet secretary and two judges from the High Court and the Appellate Divisions.

"How could the commission be independent with the personalities who are appointed by the government?"

The AL leader said although the president would appoint the chairman of the commission, he would act on the advice of the prime minister.

The commission would not have any financial freedom like the Election Commission and the Supreme Court, as the government is to allocate fund for its functioning, he noted.

regrets that chamber presidents do not help maintain law and order in their own areas although they are on district committees on law and order.

"From my experience as Chittagong chamber president, I can say they (chamber presidents) know about the miscreants in their areas," he added.

The minister also urged all district chamber presidents to identify potential sectors in their areas and help formulate development plans.

He mentioned the government has decided to make it compulsory for businessmen to become members of their respective chambers before obtaining trade licence. This will help chambers become financially sound, he thought.

Immediate past president of the CCP and former FBCCI president Yusuf Abdullah Harun, who has been elected vice-president of the BIMST-EC Chamber recently, said

BIMST-EC has greater economic prospects than Saarc as the latter has become weak because of conflict between India and Pakistan. CCP President and FBCCI First Vice-president Kamaluddin Ahmed and CCP General Secretary Abul Kashem Ahmed also spoke at the meeting.

Microcredit summit

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and microcredit programmes will become one additional instrument in the arsenal for politics of exclusion and partisan patronage," she said.

Hasina also called for taking prompt steps to reduce interest rate on microcredit.

"Microcredit has earned flak for charging high interest from borrowers...two credit markets cannot be segregated impermeably. Besides, microcredit has very low default risk -- almost zero compared to loans provided by commercial banks," she said.

Hasina said the issue of interest charged for microloans did not receive any attention and failure to reduce the rate would be "cynical indifference" in needs of the poor.

Education Minister M Osman

Polls after occupation ends in Iraq