

Formulate policy to end discrimination

Female ward commissioners urge govt

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Female pourasabha ward commissioners have called upon the government to formulate policies specifying their duties and responsibilities alongside male commissioners to put an end to 'discrimination' against them.

They made the call at a workshop on 'Gender and Development' in the capital yesterday, organised jointly by Bangladesh Water Development Board (BWDB) and Local Government Engineering Department (LGED).

The women commissioners said although they represent three wards each, allocation of development funds for them is one third of that given to a male commissioner, who represents one ward.

"We won direct election overcoming many social hurdles. But the discrimination is discouraging us to take part in the next election," said Fatema Johora Rani, a ward commissioner of Mymensingh Pourasabha.

Anjuman Sarkar, another ward

commissioner from Mymensingh, said their duties and responsibilities are stressed only at seminars and discussions. But these are not materialised, she regretted.

"We won the polls race pledging a lot to voters. But now we cannot do anything for them. If we ask our pourasabha chairman about this, he says the government has not given any guidelines for you," she said.

Salma Akhter, a ward commissioner from Munshiganj Pourasabha, said "The problems we are facing can be resolved if the government gives a guideline specifying our work."

Ward commissioners Shamima Akhter and Hamida Begum from Brahmanbaria and Saida Akhter from Jamalpur Pourasabha also expressed similar views.

Asian Development Bank (ADB) consultant Saiyid Musharrif Hussain, Christine Pomerleau, a social development expert, and Ferdousi Sultana of the ADB presented papers at the workshop chaired by Khaleida Shaharior Kabir of the BWDB.

India, West Indies

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Lanka at the Bangabandhu National Stadium.

Dark horse West Indies also thrived on a Marshall hundred to post a 34-run win against South Africa at the Fatullah Stadium to join India in the semifinals from the same group. It now remains to be seen whether India and Pakistan set up a clash in one of the two Cup semifinals.

Pakistan, who are already through from the other group, can only avoid a semifinal meeting with arch-rivals India provided that they beat former champions England in their last group league game to be held at the Fatullah Stadium today.

West Indies will play the second semifinal against the winners of the England-Pakistan game at the Bangabandhu National Stadium on March 2. The first semifinal is billed at the same venue on February 29.

Meanwhile, Australia moved into the last four of the Plate championship with a shaky six-wicket victory against tournament's surprise package Nepal at the Chittagong

Divisional Stadium.

Scotland piped Nepal to the post of last four when they thrashed Papua New Guinea by seven wickets at the MA Aziz Stadium.

Both Australia Scotland will know their semifinal opponents after today's match between Ireland and hosts Bangladesh. The home side will be desperately look forward to beating Ireland at the Chittagong Divisional Stadium as it will allow them to have relatively easy opponents in Scotland rather than the might Australians.

Rod Price Hike

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The acute raw material supply crisis has put the entire steel industry with over 300 re-rolling mills and 100 steel mills at stake, they said.

The price of per ton MS scrap rose from Tk 16,000 to Tk 32,000 and Garda iron from Tk 12,000 to Tk 24,000 over a short span, they said. The C & F (clearing and forwarding) price of per ton ship scrap in the international market rose from \$180 to \$400 while per ton melting scrap rose from \$150 to \$300, virtually hiking the price of MS rods.

As a result, the government's import duty waiver on scrap did not make much difference in checking rod price hike, the association leaders said.

Traditionally, steel mills and re-rollers depend on ship breaking for at least 70 percent of the raw materials, they said.

They called upon the government to facilitate re-rollers' import of melting scrap, re-rollable scrap and sponge iron as substitute raw materials to reduce dependence on ship-breaking instead of encouraging MS rod import.

They also called for government control over the iron raw material market.

Clarification

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A parliamentary sub-committee is probing corruption charges against its officials who worked in two DSW projects between 1996 and 2000, it added.

Regarding overdraw of funds from a project in financial year 2002-03, it further claimed flawed interpretation of government orders at the end of the fiscal year led to such overdraw.

The letter said depositing money at different branches of a government bank from the treasury caused the mistake and the excess amount was later returned to the Bangladesh Bank.

No DSW officials ever handled the overdrawn cash and the matter was reconciled with the office of chief accounts officer, it added.

Govt, AL seem

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against any violent political move. "[Confine] those inside their houses who want to block the roadmap for development," she told the government loyalists.

Leader of the Opposition and AL President Sheikh Hasina refused to sit with the ruling alliance to end the stand-off and turned down the appeals, even by the US envoy, to return to parliament.

She has demanded immediate resignation of the government and a mid-term parliamentary election.

Observers fear a violent flare-up on the political front tomorrow as a scheduled public meeting of the BNP in the city's Bashabo playground coincides with the countrywide dawn-to-dusk hartal called by the AL.

Sources said there is a good chance of confrontation between supporters of the two biggest parties in Bangladesh over holding the rally and enforcing the hartal. There has been no move yet from any side to either shift the rally or defer the shutdown to avert a possible conflict.

The BNP claimed that the public meeting is one of eight such meetings to be held in Dhaka, which was announced much ahead of the hartal call. Prime Minister and BNP chief Khaleida Zia will address the meeting.

However, AL sources claimed the BNP announced the rally after the

Privatisation

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government of Bangladesh and generally has found an overall commitment by the government to the ultimate full closure of all the loss making SOEs – a total of 130 in all (including 28 which have already been closed in 2002/03).

The mission, however, recommends that "there will be a definite need to obtain government's firm written commitment to 'a no revolving door strategy' and the subsequent early sell off of these downsized enterprises immediately after the elections."

Security beefed up ahead of Kushtia-1 by-poll

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Kushtia

The Election Commission (EC) has taken strict security measures ahead of Kushtia-1 by-poll on February 29.

According to district election office, 650 army and paramilitary Bangladesh Rifles personnel with police would be deployed at various points of the constituency from today.

Some 50 magistrates, 6 upazila nirbahi officers and 25 officers-in-charge of police would be kept on duty to ensure a free and fair election, sources said.

Amidst the main opposition Awami League's boycott of the election, eight candidates including an independent one are contesting the poll. The AL stood off the by-election saying it would not be fair.

The contestants in the by-polls are ruling alliance nominee BNP candidate Reza Ahmed Bachchu, Abdul Halim (JP-Manju), Nazrul Islam (NAP-Bhasani), M Korban Ali (JP Nazur-Firoj), Azibur Rahman (JSD-RB), Nazrul Islam (Muslim League), Abdul Khaleq (Freedom Party) and Shahidul Islam (Independent).

A total 2,68,334 voters would vote at 101 polling centres under 14 unions of the constituency while 101 presiding officers, 535 assistant presiding officers and 1070 polling officers would conduct the election, EC sources added.

Unite against unhealthy politics

Urges Dr Kamal

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Bogra

Gano Forum President and Convenor of Oikya Prochesta Dr Kamal Hossain has said there is no rule of law in the country and people want an end to such a situation.

The eminent jurist called upon all sections of society to stand united against violence, corruption and unhealthy politics.

Addressing a public meeting at Shaheed Khokon ground here yesterday, Kamal said, "Democratic practice is absent as black money holders are ruling the country sitting in parliament."

Organised by the district unit of Oikya Prochesta, the meeting was also addressed by Zahirul Islam, Pankaj Bhattacharya, Saifuddin Ahmed Manik, Abdur Rouf and Mostafizur Rahman.

Earlier, Kamal had a meeting with local lawyers.

Businessman robbed of money, pistol

OUR CORRESPONDENT, N'ganj

Miscreants stabbed a businessman and snatched Tk 3.5 lakh and a licensed pistol from him, while extortionists mugged a shop owner at Kayumpur in Fatullah yesterday.

Police said Manir, 40, a garment owner, went to a re-rolling mill to collect the dues when hoodlums led by municipal member Abul attacked him with sharp weapons and took away the money and arms.

A case was filed with Fatullah Police Station.

In the other incident, extortionists beat up shop owner Ahid and took away Tk 23,000 from him at 10:30am when he asked them to pay off their dues.

Meanwhile, 21-year-old Humayun Kabira, a college student, died at Isdair in the city at 12:30pm when a Narayanganj-bound truck ran over him.

New centre

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UK visas of the British High Commission, told reporters at the high commission auditorium in the city yesterday.

Visa applicants will have to pay extra Tk 400 for the new system, in addition to the existing visa fees.

A commercial organisation will run the centre representing the high commission. However, Ross did not name the organisation.

The new centre will host waiting lounge, snacks, photocopy and other facilities to end visa seekers' hassles, who currently wait in long queues for several hours.

The high commission will set up the centre in Gulshan-Baridhara area, and might launch another in Sylhet later.

"These new improvements will be for the convenience of all our visa customers," said Nick Bostin, entry clearance manager of the high commission, who was present at the press conference.

"But it doesn't mean that we're making any changes to our UK immigration regulations," Ross clarified, "UK immigration regulations remain unchanged."

Visa applicants will be able to arrange interview schedule convenient to them through the new centre. Applicants not requiring interview will get visa from it the next day they apply, said high commission officials.

Application for the UK visa has been steadily increasing over the last few years, said the officials. The high commission received 18,000 visa applications three years back, while it got 38,000 applications last year.

The number of overall applications rises by 30 percent every year, they observed.

Macedonian president killed in plane crash

REUTERS, Near Stolac, Bosnia

Macedonian President Boris Trajkovski, hailed in the West as a peacemaker who averted civil war, was killed yesterday when his plane crashed into a Bosnian mountainside in thick fog, officials said.

His death was confirmed by Irish Prime Minister Bertie Ahern, who was to have held talks in Dublin with Macedonia's prime minister on the day of the country's formal application to join the European Union.

A Bosnian official said the wreck had been found and there were no survivors among the nine aboard. A Reuters reporter said at least one convoy of NATO and Bosnian police vehicles and ambulances had yet to reach the site four hours after the flight disappeared from radar screens in the morning.

"Most probably he is dead," a senior Macedonian official told the news agency in the capital, Skopje. A Trajkovski aide said there would be no confirmation "until a body is identified."

Macedonian radio and television broadcast only solemn music. The 47-year-old Trajkovski had been on a short flight to the Bosnian town of Mostar for an economic conference.

A Methodist Christian preacher and career lawyer, he made his name internationally during a crisis with ethnic Albanian rebels that brought the former Yugoslav republic to the brink of civil war in 2001. With NATO help, he oversaw a peace deal.

Macedonian officials described the president's plane as an aging Beechcraft 200 Super King Air twin-engine turboprop with two crew and six aides on board in addition to the president.

Bosnian officials, who earlier gave a later crash time, said it seemed to go down south of Stolac, inland on the Croatian port of Dubrovnik, a treacherous zone for aviation in winter.

In April 1996, a member of US President Bill Clinton's cabinet, Commerce Secretary Ron Brown, was among 35 people killed when a U.S. Air Force passenger jet got into trouble and crashed into a mountain in the same vicinity.

The official Macedonian Information Center said Trajkovski's plane had "several times" nearly cost

officials their lives. A Bosnian official added that "weather conditions were very bad with heavy fog and rain" yesterday morning.

Helicopters of the US-led NATO peacekeeping force in Bosnia, helping rescuers and police, were spotted hovering over a steep mountainside but no wreckage was visible and access was restricted. Local people said the area may still be mined from the days of the Balkan wars in the 1990s.

Macedonian Prime Minister Branko Cervenkovski was already in Dublin when news of the crash was announced, on a mission to formally deliver his country's application to join the European Union, of which Ireland holds the presidency at the moment.

Journalists traveling with him were told to pack up and be ready for an immediate flight back to Macedonia.

From his election in late 1999, Trajkovski's term was marked by tensions between Slavic-speaking Macedonians and the former Yugoslav republic's large ethnic Albanian minority.

Although his powers were limited and his role largely ceremonial, he presided over a NATO-brokered peace deal in 2001 that ended months of armed clashes and prevented a full blown civil war in the mountainous state bordering Kosovo.

Prime Minister Cervenkovski will retain the main powers. Mark Lalita, a NATO official who worked as an adviser to Trajkovski during the 2001 crisis, said he was devastated.

"In 2001 no Macedonian was more important to stopping that country having a civil war. He was controversial and people often attacked him, but in the end he was a person who could always be relied on to do the right thing," Lalita said.

In early 1999 he was appointed Macedonia's deputy foreign minister. During the Kosovo crisis that year he accused NATO of paying too little attention to the ethnic tensions brewing in Macedonia and the influx of 300,000 ethnic Albanian refugees.

Trajkovski was married with a son and a daughter.

Defy hartal, drive vehicles

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more crops and increase food products taking loans and other facilities offered by the government.

Blasting the main opposition party for not attending parliament sessions and disregarding the speaker's ruling, she said the Awami League has opted for hartal and destructive politics as it doesn't want people's welfare and development of the country.

Communications Minister Nazmul Huda, Post and Telecommunications Minister M Aminul Haq, Rajshahi City Mayor Mizanur Rahman Minu, Shamsul Alam Pramank and Rajshahi Krishi Bank Chairman Ruhul Kabir Rizvi addressed the meeting presided over by local MP Shamsuddoha Khan.

The prime minister described some of the present government's development programmes and said the BNP believes in the politics of development. On the other hand, she added, the Awami League always resorts to destruction, and plundering of people's assets.

Referring to the past five-year rule of the AL, Khaleida said they killed people, grabbed property,

created godfathers and flooded the country with arms. She said it (AL) is also trying to tarnish the country's image abroad through orchestrated propaganda.

She said the AL dishonoured mosques, looted Hindu temples, and blasted bombs at churches when it was in power.

She made some development pledges to the locals that included construction of a bridge over the river Atrai, upgradation of Dhamaihat Upazila Health Complex to a 50-bed hospital, construction and development of roads, rural electrification and development of educational institutions.

Earlier, the prime minister formally inaugurated the development work of Naogaon-Patnitala-Joypurhat Highway. The 57.50 km road will be developed under a Tk 15 crore project to be completed by March, 2005.

She also gave away an ambulance to the upazila health complex and distributed goats and spray machines among the poor people under poverty reduction programme.

Stop using religion

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said, adding different parties are posing as protectors of separate groups, aggravating the problem.

Religious intolerance cropped up recently with the advent of modern politics and for so-called democratic role of political parties, Ariff said. "Rectify your ideology and strategy," he asked leaders of political parties.

"The issue is a disgrace for the country and the authorities should publish findings of their probe that found organised effort by some groups to create religious disharmony after the last general election," said the attorney general, who was the chief guest at the discussion.

Dr Asif Nazrul of Law department of Dhaka University presented the keynote paper on 'Legal Aspects of Religious Freedom in Bangladesh' at the discussion organised by rights body Odhikar.

"The necessity of a vigilant civil society for overseeing the implementation of constitutionally guaranteed religious freedom.

US Ambassador Harry K Thomas Jr, who attended the programme as a guest of honour, spoke on how Article 41 of Bangladesh's constitution deals with religious freedom and how to strike a balance between law, public order and morality and citizens' religious rights.

"Since the definition of law, public order and morality in the article is open to broad interpretation, it is important to clarify its content and application," he said. Any potential abuse of the provisions in the article would provide an opportunity for the state to infringe on rights of religious minorities, he added.

Despite general communal harmony, there are continuing reports of violence and intimidation involving members of various religious minority communities, the envoy said.

Northern region running dry of diesel fast

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Rajshahi

The northern region of the country is running dry of diesel fast.

A Bangladesh Petroleum Corporation (BPC) official at Baghabari depot yesterday said the corporation would be forced to completely suspend diesel distribution in the region in case it failed to secure a fresh supply by last night.

Of the three state-owned fuel distribution companies run by the BPC, Meghna Oil Company has already stopped diesel distribution since Wednesday last. The same fate looms large over the other two companies – Padma and Jamuna.

The acute diesel crisis, due mainly to lack of timely supply, poses a threat to severely damage the region's irrigation-based Boro cultivation.

Injured fish trader dies at DMCH

Shops closed for three hours after police club agitating traders

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

A fish trader died at Dhaka Medical College Hospital (DMCH) yesterday, 12 hours after armed assailants killed his landlord in an attack which also left three others including him wounded at a kitchen market at Ahmed Nagar in Mirpur on Wednesday night.

Ameer Hossain, a fish trader and a tenant of Sikder Market owner Rashid Sikder, died at about 8:00am, sources said.

Earlier, Rashid, also the president of a local unit of BNP, died soon after an armed gang sprayed bullets on him apparently over land dispute.

Buyers Narayan and Zunayed, who also suffered bullet wounds during in the attack, were undergoing treatment at the DMCH, sources added.

Meanwhile, local traders and shop owners in Ahmed Nagar area kept their shutters down for about three hours in the afternoon after police chased their procession in protest of the killings, locals said.

The demonstrators pelted bricks at police after police clubbed them, they added.

Rashid's son Mujibur Rahman lodged a case with Mirpur Police Station late Wednesday accusing

11 people including Rahmat, Rabi, Jasim and Baten.

Mirpur police held one Nurul suspecting his involvement in the killing.

Locals said Rashid had a long dispute with Rahmat over the ownership of the 52-katha market land, which houses 60 shops.

Hamid blames

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confine opposition activists to their houses and Altaf Hossain Chowdhury echoed the same voice at Patuakhali rally on Wednesday.

"I must say today's attack was carried out at the directives of the prime minister. The hoodlums (of the ruling BNP) in league with the police are unleashing attacks on the opposition."

Protesting the attack that left several AL activists injured, Hamid warned the government of dire consequences for which 'Khaleida Zia will be held responsible'.

"By attacking the opposition, they're (ruling coalition leaders) riding for a fall. Now people of the country would get more actively involved with our anti-government movement," he said.

Hamid also came down heavily on the government for using law enforcers to block opposition processions or agitation.

"This goes totally against our fundamental democratic and constitutional rights. A government cannot quash people's rights to assembly and hold peaceful programmes."

AL lawmaker for Khulna Panchanan Biswas was also present.

Strip Mustafiz

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chairman of the committee, who is also a former army chief, told newsmen after the meeting.

Mahbub said the meeting, held at the Jatiya Sangsad (JS) Bhaban, condemned such 'unprecedented appointment.' High officials of the ministry and the armed forces attending the meeting also judged the appointment as illegal, he added.

Referring to Mustafiz' joining in politics after retirement, Mahbub said though the existing organogram of the country's army did not support the rank of a four-star general, the promotion too was given from political interests.

Asked what public interests did the decision to strip Mustafiz of his rank carry, Mahbub said it would correct a wrong done by the previous government. "We don't want repetition of such wrongdoing in future," he added.

The meeting was originally scheduled to discuss some alleged irregularities in construction of the central mosque and the Heroes' Gate at Dhaka Cantonment during Mustafiz' tenure, on which the committee earlier asked the army chief to report back.

The committee reviewed implementation of some of its earlier recommendations and, in course of the meeting, it was informed that the Armed Forces Division was preparing a compatible defence policy in line with the changed world order.

US lifts travel ban on Libya

AP, Washington

The United States lifted a long-standing ban on travel to Libya yesterday and invited American companies to begin planning their return, after Moammar Gadhafi's government affirmed that it was responsible for the bombing of Pan Am flight 103 in 1988.

The administration also encouraged Libya to establish an official presence in Washington by opening an "interests section," a diplomatic office a level beneath an embassy. The United States also will expand its diplomatic presence in Tripoli.

The White House announcement rescinded travel restrictions that have been in place for 23 years against Libya, a country which the United States had long branded a sponsor of state terrorism.

Allowing U.S. travel to Libya would give American corporations an opportunity to do lucrative business legally in Libya's rich oil fields. It also would help Gadhafi emerge from semi-isolation.

US firms which had holdings in Libya before sanctions were imposed were authorized to negotiate the terms of renewing their operations, the White House said. However, the companies will be required to obtain U.S. approval of any agreement, if economic sanctions remain in place.

N Korea offers

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said at a briefing. "As for the details and nuclear arrangements for stopping the nuclear activities, it is still being discussed among the various parties," he said.

His comments came just after the official Xinhua News Agency cited Alexander Losyukov, head of the Russian delegation and his country's deputy foreign minister, as saying North Korea showed "readiness" to abolish its nuclear weapons program.

According to Losyukov, the North would retain its nuclear program related to "peaceful purpose," Xinhua said. That's a major step but one somewhat less than what China described.

Losyukov said verification was a key part of the discussions.

"No one will agree to move forward without inspections. Such an approach is quite justified," he said at a news conference.

He added that disagreements still remain between Washington and Pyongyang over exactly what will be eliminated. "Agap remains," Losyukov said. "We have certain doubts that it will be possible to remove it during this session of talks."

The announcement came during a second round of Beijing-based talks on the North's nuclear program. Participating in the talks are the Koreans, the United States, China, Russia and Japan.

The United States has demanded an immediate dismantling of the North's nuclear programme. Pyongyang demands aid and security guarantees before it begins to do so a position backed by China, which has always included the North's security in the equation.

Liu said China "agreed with North Korea's requirement for reasonable security guarantees and to give North Korea a normal development environment."

A US Embassy spokesman in Beijing said he had no information.

The second day of meetings followed a rare, lengthy one-on-one session Wednesday between high-level officials from Washington and