

Sonia starts parley

FROM PAGE 1

Two days back, Karunanidhi had declared that his party would stay out of the new Congress-led government but could reconsider the decision. Congress sources said Sonia could succeed to bring Karunanidhi round to joining the government at a meeting between them slated for May 16.

Sonia is also likely to hold talks with other regional groups like Samajwadi Party and BSP on government formation and their possible participation in it. In a boost to her, BSP chief Mayawati, who till the other day has spurned Congress' desperate plea for pre-political alliance in the key state of Uttar Pradesh, said on Thursday night that her party is not averse to back a Congress-led government.

However, it remains to be seen if Samajwadi Party and BSP, which are bitter political rivals, would end up being on the same side of Congress-led coalition.

The big question is, however, if the Left parties, which put up their best performance bagging over 60 parliamentary seats, would join a government under Congress leadership.

The highest policy-making forums of CPI(M), which got the highest number of seats of 43 among Left parties, and CPI would meet here in the next couple of days followed by a meeting of Left Front partners including RSP and Forward Bloc to decide whether or not to join a Congress-led government.

Shortly after Congress' win in the elections Sonia told reporters at her residence here it was a normal practice for the leader of a parliamentary party with majority to stake a claim for premiership.

Asked by reporters at her residence amidst outpour of jubilation among party workers if the leader of the parliamentary party of Congress, which emerged as the largest single party in the 543-member Lok Sabha, would be the Prime Minister, Sonia replied "that is what normally happens."

This was the closest she came to acknowledge her being the front-runner for the post of the Prime Minister.

Sonia said after a meeting of Congress Working Committee, the highest policy-making forum of the party, that the Congress would stake claim to form a strong, stable and secular coalition government after a meeting of Congress parliamentary party meeting here today.

Her election as the leader of Congress parliamentary party today is a mere formality and a Congress-led coalition headed by Sonia appears inevitable.

However, the leaders of Left parties, whose support is vital for Congress to ensure majority in Parliament, have made it clear during their meeting with Sonia Thursday that the leadership of the new government could not be a fait accompli and has to be discussed with all secular front partners.

Left party sources said Sonia has been advised to meet President A P J Abdul Kalam Friday and seek a few days' time to firm up the loose ends of government formation.

Sources in Left parties said they are likely to insist on formation of a committee for the economic agenda of the new government, especially relating to certain sensitive aspects of economic reforms including wholesale privatisation.

But it is unlikely that Left parties would join a Congress-led government given the fact that they are rivals in states like West Bengal, Kerala and Tripura.

Nonagarian CPI(M) general secretary Harkishan Singh Surjeet, who emerged as the lynchpin of efforts to build a non-BJP alternative, said all those who contributed to the defeat of BJP in the elections should play an important role in the forming of a new government.

But analysts said this is not going

to pose much problem for Sonia as given the numerical strength of CPI(M) and CPI in Lok Sabha and their assured support for her leadership, Congress would not be at the mercy of backing from regional satraps like NCP, Samajwadi Party and BSP, which have the tendency for extracting their pounds of flesh in coalition politics, for the survival of a government led by it.

Besides, the stunning defeat of BJP and almost all its allies have altered the political landscape of India in a manner which would make it difficult for parties like Samajwadi Party and BSP to join hands with the saffron party at least in the foreseeable future.

Except for two key allies of BJP -- Akali Dal in Punjab and Biju Janata Dal, other key partners of the saffron party TDP and AIADMK suffered rout in the parliamentary elections. In fact, neither AIADMK led by Jayalalitha in Tamil Nadu nor BJP could manage to win a single seat in the southern state which has 39 seats. The TDP was decimated in Andhra Pradesh, both in parliamentary as well as state assembly polls.

Analysts said the most important message from the just-concluded parliamentary polls was the need for striking the right alliances. Congress' main weapon in the battle against BJP was the appropriate tie-ups it forged with regional parties like DMK in Tamil Nadu, TRS in Andhra Pradesh, NCP in Maharashtra and JMM in Jharkhand.

All these alliances worked perfectly, bringing handsome gains not only for the regional parties but also for Congress in states with sizeable number of parliamentary seats. The gain for Congress was so big that it neutralised BJP's near total sweep of the northern states like Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan.

By contrast, BJP found itself being increasingly deserted by allies like DMK and Indian National Lok Dal in Haryana leading to its decimation in those states. Adding to its predicament was the decision to forge new alliance with AIADMK. For both the AIADMK and BJP, it proved a double anti-incumbency whose weight crushed them and gave all the seats to their political rivals including Congress. This was something unprecedented in Tamil Nadu.

The bigger loser in Tamil Nadu was BJP as AIADMK has two more years to rule in Tamil Nadu before fresh state assembly elections are due, analysts pointed out. They said the BJP-led alliance's debacle in Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh mainly contributed to its ouster from power, unlike in the past when Hindi heartland states like Uttar Pradesh used to determine which party would rule India.

Nor'wester kills 3

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and lasted for 35 minutes, flattening at least 1000 thatched and tin-shed houses. It also damaged over a dozen educational institutions and uprooted trees and electric poles.

The injured people were admitted to Mymensingh Medical College Hospital, Netrakona Sadar Hospital and upazila health complexes.

US waits

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probing the case, appears to have failed to find out the leads regarding the gunrunning.

After recovery of four AK-47 rifles at Badda near the US Mission in the capital in November last year, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) of the US had proposed the government to probe the matter. That time, too, the government did not accept the offer.

Sunday.

Director General of Department of Shipping AKM Ahsanul Azim chaired the meeting, where CPA Chairman Shahadat Hossain and Chief Nautical Surveyor Captain Habibur Rahman were present, among others.

The committee members were to visit some important places of the channel and outer anchorage where ocean-going ships wait before entering the channel. The committee also would identify vulnerable points in the channel and two nautical miles area of the outer anchorage in the Bay of Bengal.

After the committee submits its plan of action, the ministry and the shipping department will monitor security arrangements on a regular basis. The government also will inform the IMO of its preparations and the steps taken.

If everything goes as planned, the IMO is unlikely to blacklist Bangladesh's premiere port on security grounds, a high official hoped.

Besides, most of the ships registered in Bangladesh have already developed their internal security measures in accordance to the ISPS code, he added.

JS body visits Savar to recover

encroached land

BSS, Dhaka

Members of the parliamentary standing committee on the land ministry yesterday visited different areas in Savar to recover encroached land of the Court of Wards Nowab Estate.

It has been reported that encroachers grabbed 1,800 acres of land worth about Tk 3,000 crore belonging to the Court.

Committee Chairman Mahbubur Rahman led the team comprising members Nurul Huda, Golam Habib Dulal, Land Ministry Secretary Azad Ruhul Amin, Chairman of Land Reform Board Golam Kibria and Deputy Commissioner of Dhaka Dr Momin and others.

In Savar, Amin Mohammad Foundation and Northern Holding have illegally occupied 150 and 176 acres of public land, which had earlier been detected. Process is on to identify how many acres of land have been encroached by housing estates and individuals in the area.

The Court of Wards Nowab Estate filed separate cases against Amin Mohammad Foundation and Northern Holding with Savar Police Station in presence of the committee members.

During the visit, the committee members expressed resentment at the Ansars providing protection to the encroachers by setting up camps. They asked the district Ansar adjutant to withdraw the Ansars.

Addressing a local assembly, Mahbubur said the encroached public land will be recovered at any cost.

He said four satellite towns will be established on the suburbs after recovering the occupied land to meet increasing population pressure on the city.

He called upon the people to take summary papers from the land ministry, the chairman of the Court of Wards Nowab and Vowal Estates, deputy commissioner and assistant commissioner of land before buying any piece of land from any housing estate.

He said they will take necessary steps soon to recover encroached land in Ashulia.

Savar Textile

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Investigation and scrutiny have approved as recently as on September 24, 2003 an additional load sanction for the new gas generator and boiler now under installation in the factory."

The Savar Textiles authorities said they have files of all relevant facts and figures and communications with Titas in their hand and expressed readiness to make those available for cross check and for further inquiry on the matter.

3 more accused

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Tongi Railway Station and in the adjacent areas.

Monir and Mahub are residents of Amtoli and Dulal of Morkut in Tongi.

During interrogation at the CID office last night, Dulal alleged AL members had named him in the first information report out of mere suspicion. "As my father was killed by AL men several months ago, they thought I might have been involved in the killing of Ahsanullah out of vengeance," a CID source quoted Dulal as saying.

Police will produce the three before the court today with a petition for a seven-day remand.

On their political affiliation, Ahsanullah's brother Motiur Rahman Moti said, "They belong to no specific political party."

"They are involved in all sorts of crime in the area and were angry with my brother [Ahsanullah] as he took steps to stop their drug-peddling business," he added.

Moti had named 17 people including the three as the killers in a case filed with Tongi Police Station on May 8.

The other accused on the run are Nurul Islam Dipu and his brothers Shahidul Islam Shipu and Ohidul Islam Tipu, Kana Hafiz, Ratan Mia, Anwar Hossain Anu, Sohel, Shohag, Jahangir, AL Amin, Faisal, Rony, Bulu Mia and Syed Ahmed Majnu.

With this latest arrest, the number of arrestees in the case now stands at seven. The CID arrested Nasiruddin, Suman, Oli Mian and Qaiyum Tuesday night and said they knew them to be the associates of some professional killers. They are now being quizzed under six-day remand.

SPECIAL PRAYERS

Special prayers were made after Salat-ul-Juma yesterday for the salvation of the departed soul of Ahsanullah at jam-packed mosques in Gazipur.

The Tongi unit of AL held a condolence meeting at Nolon Bazar AL office yesterday. The party will also hold a citizens' condolence meeting at Paltan Maidan at 3:00pm today.

THREATS CONTINUE

Unknown callers continued yesterday to make threats over phone to Ahsanullah's family members.

"Yesterday evening, one caller said I was pushing too vigorously for their trial and asked me to stop it," Moti said yesterday. "He said it would take very little time and effort to kill me."

Bangla Bhai

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Local administration and police officers claimed that such organisation as the JMJB or anyone like Bangla Bhai was not involved in outlaw cleansing. They say local people threw their weight behind the vigilante action that left five alleged underground operatives killed since April 1.

But a visit to three northwestern districts shows the anti-outlaw venture is led by the JMJB and directed by Bangla Bhai who gave his real name as Siddiqui Islam.

The presence of JMJB has brought a brief relief to local people from oppression and killings by underground parties. The same people are now frightened by vigilante action of the JMJB.

The fear factor is so intense that even the local administration refuses to talk about outlaw cleansing. Rajshahi Deputy Commissioner Aziz Hasan, contacted by The Daily Star, only said: "I don't want to say anything about it."

Villagers and local administrators said some lawmakers, ministers and other BNP leaders adopted a policy of "fighting fire with fire" and turned to the JMJB to combat the outlaws who killed their relatives. The police failure to check the outlaw activities played a major role in it.

Back in November last year, operatives with ties to the underground outfit, PBCC, killed BNP's Bagmara upazila president Abdul Hamid in Rajshahi city. Gunmen killed Sabir Ahmed Gamma, nephew of Ruhul Kuddus, in Natore's Naldanga upazila in February.

In a couple of weeks into Gamma's death, criminals killed Wahidul Haq Pakhi, an aide to Gamma, in Puthia in Rajshahi. In March, extremists killed Rajshahi's Durgapur municipality ward commissioner Anwar Hossain, a political aide to parliamentarian Nadim Mostafa from Rajshahi-4 seat.

Besides, the red-flag bearing extremist PBCC (Marxist and Leninist) published a leaflet in February, threatening Ruhul Kuddus, Nadim Mostafa and their relatives and aides with death.

Sources said the killings and threats have enraged the lawmakers who feel the banned outlaws are standing in the way of their political domination in the region. This apparently prompted them to turn to the JMJB for outlaw extermination. The police have accordingly been asked to cooperate with the JMJB and Bangla Bhai.

But JMJB's self-styled spiritual leader Maulana Abdur Rahman denies the ruling party links. "We did not launch this drive under any MP or minister's plan. When we formed this organisation in 1998, we never imagined we would ever launch such a drive. A Sura board meeting at our Dhaka head office decided on the anti-Sarbahara drive, as the outlaws killed some of our leaders and activists in these areas."

Rahman refused to name the leaders and workers who he said were killed by the outlaws. But he admitted to holding meetings with elected public representatives of Poursabha and Union Parishad and talking to some local parliamentarians by phone. "They supported our drive," Rahman claimed.

First ODI today

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game. Another ordinary display from the two and Faisal or Hannan Sarker could be called in. There is even the possibility of including Razzaq as an extra bowler sacrificing a batsman in the second ODI as it will be played on the same pitch.

"That victory gave us a lot of confidence as it was against a decent team. We would have loved to have won by seven or eight wickets but the bottomline is that we won. And I thought we looked very relaxed mentally," said Whatmore.

The Bangladesh coach also sent a message to those who doubt Tigers' status as an international side.

"People say all sorts of rubbish about the risk of getting complacent when facing Bangladesh. With all due respect, two years ago, this could have been true but now the other teams know that we are coming at them. We are pushing them all the way.

"We are making a statement that we have every right to be here. The boys walk with their chins up. They don't fear anybody."

With Brian Lara not playing the first two ODIs, Whatmore said that it could act in the Tigers' favour.

"He could have come here and made a zero but his mere presence would have lifted his side tremendously. So when I heard that Lara was not coming, I was happy," said the Bangladesh coach.

Although stand-in West Indies captain Ramnaresh Sarwan spoke of guarding against over-confidence, veteran wicketkeeper Ridley Jacobs had every respect for the tourists.

"I don't understand why they keep saying that Bangladesh are a weak side. They have fought against us the last time we played them and now they should be a much improved team," said Jacobs after the home team had their first practice.

TEAMS

"We are continuing this drive with the backing of local people who have united in anti-Sarbahara resistance," Rahman said. "The drive will go on until the monsoon."

Witnesses said the JMJB launched its drive in the Sarbahara-dominated areas of Rajshahi, Naogaon and Natore. They roamed Lalpur, Durgapur, Puthia, Bagmara, Naldanga, Atrai and Raninagar and shouted slogans "In the Name of Allah... Allah is Great".

In an attempt to establish a link with the slain relatives of the deputy minister, the JMJB introduced itself as "Gamma Bahini" in some places and "Pakhi Bahini". Elsewhere, JMJB leaders and activists claimed to be al Qaeda, Taliban and Mujahedin members. Bangla Bhai led processions and rallies of all groups.

In the wake of the JMJB drive, an environment of suspicion and mystery has engulfed the north-west.

"There is no one called Bangla Bhai, nor any party is called the JMJB. It's the local people who have forged resistance. I have come to know about Bangla Bhai through newspapers," Rajshahi Superintendent of Police (SP) Masud Mia said.

Later, Masud contradicted his statement, "Bangla Bhai's regime has ended. We have now complete control over the situation. We have isolated the Sarbaharas."

On the other hand, Bangla Bhai who has set up his den in Hamir Kutsa in Bagmara held a meeting with the JMJB amir and other leaders on May 9 at the office of Bhabaniganj Kachari Kotapara Union Parishad.

Later in the day, the leaders talked to The Daily Star correspondent at the union parishad chairman's office. Police were seen nearby at the time.

Bagmara Police Station Duty Officer Monirul Islam said: "There is no such person as Bangla Bhai in Bagmara. People have built resistance. I have never seen Bangla Bhai whom you are talking about." Officials at the local administration told The Daily Star that they were not interested in talking about it.

When Bangla Bhai roams the area in a microbus, people gather to see him and leave the scene with question in their eyes. The Daily Star correspondent asked them to share with him what they know about Bangla Bhai, but they were eager to know from the reporter rather than telling him.

Ruhul Kuddus denied right away the alleged links to the JMJB operation and said: "I have not deployed any JMJB or Bangla Bhai to fight the Sarbaharas. I don't know them. Nor did I contact them."

The deputy minister said that no outsider organisation entered his constituency to combat the outlaws but asked the people of the locality to resist them with the help of the superintendent of police and the deputy commissioner.

Advocate Nadim Mostafa similarly said: "I did not have any communiqé with any JMJB or Bangla Bhai. I don't know them."

"I have read about them in newspapers. I object to the claim that we have brought them to our area."

Posh Gazipur house

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case or lodging any complaint. Asked who directed him to file the case, Zakir yesterday avoided the question and told The Daily Star, "Police wait for some time after any property is damaged to see whether the owner files any case. And if the owner fears to lodge a case, police themselves do it."

Immediately after the assassination of Ahsanullah, home ministry and police termed the killing as an outcome of internal feud and Zakir filed a case under Speedy Trial Act on the same day for rampage at Khwab without waiting for Mamun or his men.

Most accused men are activists of main opposition Awami League and its front organisations.

Asked about pro-active police role in case filing, Officer-in-Charge of Joydevpur Police Station Akhtaruzzaman said, "We filed the case not only for vandalising Khwab, but also the BNP offices and 25 buses."

But the record shows otherwise: the case in question (number 10) is filed only for rampage at Khwab.

Asked about the probe, investigation officer of the case Badrul Alam said he arrested three people, all on Friday, but declined to give their names.

But AL President of Gazipur district Mozammel Haq said the police arrested over 200 AL members after May 7 and 16 for damage to Khwab.

Believed to be the second-in-command of ruling BNP's alternative powerhouse Hawa Bhaban, Mamun, locally known as Juboraj (prince),

said: "I used to go to Khwab occasionally to pass vacation and let my foreign delegates use the top floor."

"It is not the common man who destroyed my house, but a section of the mob protesting Ahsanullah's killing attacked my house in a planned way. We have filmed the attack and police have filed a case accordingly," he told The Daily Star last night.

"Nobody from Chhayabithi community was involved in the attack. The attackers came from other places and took away what they could before setting the house afire," Mamun said, said it cost him Tk 8 to 10 lakh in lost property.

"It was 5:30pm that day when around 50 men hemmed in our house, came in scaling the boundary wall and carried out the rampage," the caretaker said.

"While escaping through the back exit, I saw many others rushing in to join the destruction."

The attackers with wooden sticks, rods, brickbats engaged in the destruction for over half-an-hour and left the house setting fire to furniture after dousing them with petrol, he said.

The ritzy house on road No. 4 in Chhayabithi that engineers estimate has taken about Tk 8 crore to build still stands out in the posh area, outshining surrounding modern buildings.

The attackers could only damage its fragile decoration and furniture.

"I don't understand why sir (Mamun) has spent so much money on this imposing house. He and his friends come here only once or twice a month," a domestic help said.

A few hundred workers toiled one and a half years to complete the three-storey house on eight kathas, about 2 km southeast of Gazipur town. Its walls are covered with specially-made terracotta tiles and a large part of the first and second floors rest on two large steel-coated beams. The duplex house is centrally air-conditioned and full of foreign fittings.

"Entering through the wide entrance that displays awe-inspiring modern architecture, a visitor would be amazed to see two walls made of decorative glass, dazzling furniture in the drawing room and foreign fittings in the kitchen. All of them are now damaged," he said.

There is also a bedroom and a garage on the ground floor. A stone staircase with railings of steel and decorative glass leads a visitor to the first floor where there are four bedrooms, two kitchens and a large balcony.

Another stair runs to the second floor and the roof. There is a gallery and a small garden on the rooftop.

"The attackers vandalised and set fire to 20 sets of sofa, three refrigerators, two 34-inch television sets, fans and other furniture including almira's, dining tables and cots," Shamsuddin said.

Tarique's school friend from Pirojpur, Mamun, who stays at Mohakhali DOHS, did not visit the house after the rampage. Some officials are supervising the renovations to the building.

Accidents kill 12

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at about 9:30am when the car driver lost control over the steering and dashed a roadside tree just after crossing Aruamath Bridge in Chumuri Union.

The magistrate along with his wife and son was going to see his two daughters, students of Sarada Sundari College, from Gopalganj. One of his daughters is appearing in the HSC examinations from the college.

The car was badly damaged in the accident.

The magistrate and his wife were buried at their family graveyard at Kachhabill village in Rajoir upazila of Madaripur district.

A case was filed with Bhanga upazila in this connection.

In bogra, four people were killed and four others injured in three separate road accidents, according to the UNB.

Two people were killed and four others were injured in a collision between a bus and a truck on Noagaon-Bogra Highway at Boalia at noon.

The dead are Montaz Begum, 30, wife of Sakawat Hossain and bus driver Mofazzel Hossain, 25.

Sakawat Hossain, his two daughters, Sanjeeda and Taslima, and their relative Ismail were admitted to Mohammad Ali Hospital.

In another mishap, one Azhar Ali, 30, was killed in a road accident at Sherpur in the morning.

Yet in another incident, one Tofazzel Hossain, 35, was killed in a traffic mishap at Sariakandi in the morning.

Armed gang

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Local people alleged that upazila unit president of Jubo Dal Salahuddin brought Rafiq and Quamrul back to the village to rehabilitate them and to increase his influence in the locality. A case was filed with Mirer Sarai Police Station.

Sources mentioned that Army Khan Group was led by a local JCD cadre, Army Khan. A mob him on February 10 that led to his death on February 22. The locals then drove away all members of his group.

Trader shot dead

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Assistant Sub-Inspector Razzak of Dhanmondi Police Station rushed to the spot in front of the school at about 8:00pm and sent the twice-bullet-hit body to Dhaka Medical College Hospital (DMCH) for autopsy.

However, the duty officer of the police station said at 9:00 that they were not aware of any such incident.

Another student

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him out of the house and forcibly picked him by a motorcycle at around 10:00.

Meanwhile, Amitav Kundu Shah, 18, son of Dr Sukumar Kundu Shah, a second year student of Kushtia Government College, was released after his family members had paid his captors Tk 1.50 lakh. He was abducted on Wednesday night.

Nayan Rahman 17, son of Matur Rahman of Mohonpur in Kumarkhali upazila, is still missing.

At least 18 teenagers, most of them school students, have been abducted in the district since January 1. Of them, two were killed by their captors as their family members failed to pay ransom, three rescued by police, six still missing and the rest bought their freedom, paying Tk 50,000 to 2 lakh.

Cell phone operators

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necessary information pertaining to tariff reduction. They never had this alleged problem in the past and now have no cause to have it now, too."

Nurul Islam said the BTTB had been routinely reducing its NWD and ISD tariffs during the last eight years of mobile phone operations in Bangladesh. Pointing out the difference between the two parties' practices and attitudes, he said, "Our connection fees are much lower than those of the mobile phones and unlike the private operators we have been reducing the call charges considering public interest."

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