

Hamas to boycott polls

REUTERS, Gaza City

A Hamas leader announced yesterday that the militant group will boycott upcoming Palestinian presidential elections, the first sign of open tensions between the interim Palestinian leadership and the Islamic opposition group since the death of Yasser Arafat.

The announcement by Hamas leader Ismail Haniyah could undercut the legitimacy of the Jan. 9 election, though Hamas said it would honor the outcome. Hamas has tens of thousands of supporters and is particularly strong in the Gaza Strip.

"We are not calling on the Palestinian people to boycott the election, but Hamas members will follow the decision to boycott the election," Haniyah said.

Haniyah spoke as Egyptian and Israeli leaders met in Jerusalem to discuss Israel's planned withdrawal from Gaza next year. Israeli officials said the two sides agreed in principle to allow Egypt to deploy additional troops along its volatile border with Gaza to help ensure quiet after the pullout.

Since Arafat's death, the rival Palestinian factions have maintained a fragile calm, pledging to maintain peace during the current transitional period.

Haniyah said his group would boycott the election because it did not include legislative and municipal elections as well. The interim Palestinian leader, Mahmoud Abbas, is a frontrunner in the presidential race, but Hamas would likely make a strong showing in local races.

In the West Bank, Abbas played down Hamas' decision. "If they want to boycott these elections, it is up to them," he said.

Formerly launching his campaign, Abbas called for a renewal of peace talks with Israel and said the two sides would meet after the election.

"We must have a dialogue with the Israelis," Abbas said at his campaign headquarters. "After the elections, we will meet again" to discuss the road map.

The internationally backed peace plan calls for the establishment of an independent state next year, but has been stalled since it was signed in June 2003.

The Palestinians have failed to meet their commitment to crack down on militant groups like Hamas, while Israel hasn't kept its pledge to halt settlement construction and pull down settlement outposts.

Abbas indicated that he is ready to take action against the militants. "Every nation has opposition groups, but there are also laws and institutions," he said. "I am committed to having one authority and only one army and political pluralism."

Hamas boycotted the first Palestinian general election in 1996 because it was a result of interim

Ukraine parliament brings down govt

REUTERS, Kiev

peace deals with Israel. Hamas opposes peace talks and is committed to Israel's destruction.

With the road map stalled, Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon has pushed forward with his plan to pull out of the Gaza Strip and four small enclaves in the West Bank.

BTB

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found that BTB Chairman Mohammad Nurul Islam overstepped his authority and camouflaged multimillion-dollar overpayment provision in the name of "Post Guaranteed Maintenance Assistance" in the mobile telephone contract with Chinese Huawei and German Siemens on June 14.

Both vendors were originally bound to provide the service for maintenance of equipment free of cost. Accordingly, the government approved the \$76 million mobile telephone purchase proposal in favour of Huawei and Siemens.

The chairman, however, tampered with the approval and inserted a dubious clause in the contracts with Huawei (\$35 million) and Siemens (\$41 million) that relieves the vendors of rendering the free service, says a ministry probe report.

The national exchequer has to pay \$500 million to Siemens and \$2,353,820 to Huawei a year for maintaining BTB's mobile network for 13 years because of the newly inserted clause. The total payable now stands in excess of \$37 million, the report adds.

The BTB chairman "defied all evaluation reports, recommendations, confirmations, approvals and MoU" while exempting Huawei and Siemens from rendering free "Post Guaranteed Maintenance Assistance Service", according to the probe report.

The ministry has personally accused the BTB chairman of going beyond his jurisdiction and tampering with the official approval of the contracts. The ministry issued a letter on November 24 by name to the BTB chairman to immediately comment on the ministry's allegations. Nurul is yet to reply.

The Daily Star ran an uncontested report on October 30 exposing this scandalous multimillion dollars deal, which has evidently prompted the telecoms ministry to investigate the matter.

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RU controversial

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who got controversial appointment, and a worker of examinations controller section.

The Rab said Kairul, accused of several criminal charges, is a close associate of local Jatiyatabadi Chhatra Dal cadre Manowar Hossain Utpal.

Both the front-bench members except Abdur Razzak of the main opposition were absent yesterday.

AL'S COMPLAINT

Opposition Chief Whip Abdus Shahid yesterday complained in the House that three AL lawmakers nominated by the party were not co-opted as agreed in parliamentary standing committees on different ministries.

"Alaudin Ahmed, Bir Bahadur and Dabirul Islam were not included in the standing committees on education, Chittagong Hill Tracts and religion ministries respectively, as recommended by our party," Shahid said. He asked the Speaker to take necessary steps to include them in the committees immediately.

In reply, the Speaker asked Shahid to place the matter to him in writing and said if there is any irregularity it would be corrected.

The members in the House yesterday were mostly busy talking to each other and paid little attention.

AL raises DU

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"That is an old issue. It happened in August and now, in December, they are demanding a discussion on it!"

The main opposition members, without mikes, shouted to the Speaker asking him to expunge the minister's speech, as the rules of procedure do not allow it as a point of order.

It was AL lawmaker AKM Jahangir Hossain, who, in a point of order, told the House that over 500 DU students have been suffering from jaundice and the figure is increasing by the day.

"Though the disease is spreading like an epidemic the authorities are yet to identify its cause," he said adding that the university medical centre is too small to tackle the situation. He demanded the government to establish a 100-bed hospital for the DU furnished with modern diagnostic facilities.

Speaker Jamir Uddin Sircar allowed the point and urged the health and education ministers to take necessary steps to include them in the committees immediately.

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Shantu slams govt

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been implemented fully. If the government does not fulfil our demand, it will be responsible for any consequences there," Larma told the press conference held at the Jatiya Press Club.

The six-point demand includes full implementation of the accord immediately, removal of Wadud Bhuiyan MP from the chairmanship of CHT Development Board as, Larma said, he is the "mastermind" behind burning down Mahalchhari villages in Khagrachari last year.

Larma also demanded an end to 'Operation Uttaran', withdrawal of army from the CHT, appointment of an indigenous person as a full minister of the CHT affairs ministry, proper functioning of the CHT land commission and preparation of a voters' list comprising permanent residents of the CHT.

The other demands include election to the regional council and Hill District Councils and appointment of an indigenous to head the CHT Development Board.

The regional council has no powers and the local administrations do not naturally take it into account, Larma said. This shows how the government's how the government

views the council, he added.

After coming to power, the alliance government has slowed down implementation of the accord, and so far it has only appointed chairman of the Taskforce for Rehabilitation of Returnee Refugees. The government agreed to do many things at meetings but never implemented them, the PCJS chief said.

The CHT accord had ended two days of bush war and sought to make the indigenous people happy by involving them in the local administration, but their participation in the decision-making process remains negligible.

The hill people are unhappy that army presence in the region continued despite the peace accord.

After the signing of the accord, many Bangla-speaking people moved to the CHT and settled there with the support of the administration, Larma said.

The ratio of indigenous people and the settlers is now 55: 45, he pointed out.

The PCJS leaders present at the press conference included Mongal Kumar Chakma, Shaktipada Tripura, Shakmitan and Chakma. Yusuf Alam of Parbata Adi

Bangalee Parishad was also present.

Ukraine parliament brings down govt

REUTERS, Kiev

Ukraine's parliament has voted to sack the government of Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovich boosting opposition efforts to end a political crisis triggered by his contested election last month as president.

"This is a victory not only for the entire Ukrainian people," opposition deputy Roman Zvarych said.

Deputies also voted on Wednesday to create an interim "government of national trust".

The vote, passed at the second attempt through secret ballot, came just before the start of efforts by international mediators to help settle the crisis which threatens to tear apart Ukraine.

Earlier, outgoing President Leonid Kuchma made clear he would not easily yield in his battle with the opposition by rejecting its key demand that the November 21 presidential run-off his protege won be held again.

"Any rerun would simply be a farce. I cannot see it in any other way and I will never support it as it would be unconstitutional," he told a meeting of economic officials.

After Tuesday's talks collapsed between opposition and government factions, protesters clad in the orange-campaign colours of opposition leader Viktor Yushchenko marched to the assembly, hoping for a resolution to allow a new poll.

The opposition, which says Yanukovich won through fraud, pulled out of talks with authorities and vowed to use "People Power" to win demands for a new election soon.

The Supreme Court was sitting for a third day to decide whether the election was fraudulent.

If it rules in favour of the opposition, the Central Election Commission will have to revoke the victory it handed to Yanukovich and can then either set a repeat vote or a completely new election which would take up to three months to complete.

US President George W. Bush called for a peaceful resolution to the crisis that has triggered mass street protests and threatened to tear apart the former Soviet republic.

Bush said he had spoken by telephone to Polish President Aleksander Kwasniewski, one of the international mediators trying to broker a way out of a standoff that has paralyzed government and is beginning to hit Ukraine's economy.

The sides have been deadlocked, neither with quite enough power to deliver the final blow and aware that one false step could trigger mass violence in a country which has voted largely along linguistic and cultural lines.

So bitter has the political debate become that the losing side faces being completely shut out of power. "It's very important that violence not break out there, and it's important that the will of the people be heard," Bush told reporters.

Kuchma, who has warned the economy could collapse, was meeting officials to consider measures to stabilise the financial markets.

His 10-year rule tarnished by scandal and poor economic management, the president has suggested he might yield to pressure and a new election.

But he has suggested staging a new poll from scratch, a process which would keep him in office beyond his current term.

Analysts say he may hope by dragging out the crisis, opposition supporters will tire of spending day after day on the streets and night after night in tents in wintry weather.

Yushchenko, a liberal, wants closer ties to Western Europe but not at the expense of vital links with Russia.

Yanukovich represents the status quo which under Kuchma meant clear focus on ties with Russia, which has dominated Ukraine for centuries and is the major source for its energy needs. More exports, however, go to the European Union.

The lawyers carried placards reading demands for a judiciary free of partisan influence, appointment of honest and efficient judges to the courts and end to deaths in "crossfire."

The demonstrators demanded cancellation of the controversial appointments in August of 19 High Court additional judges and immediate implementation of the Supreme Court's 12-point directive for separation of the judiciary.

According to existing laws and the constitution, the extra-judicial killings in Rab 'crossfire' are culpable and tantamount to 'a contempt of humanity,' said former law minister Abdul Motin Khosru addressing the gathering. He demanded judicial probes into all the deaths in 'crossfire' while in Rab or police custody.

Labels the elite anti-crime force as a 'killing machine,' eminent jurist Amirul Islam said terrorism cannot be eliminated with yet another form of terrorism. "People don't know exactly at whose diktat the killing machine is running and to serve whose interest," he noted.

He demanded that the state be free of terrorism and the judiciary free of the party.

PUBLIC BANK-BADC LEGAL FEUD

The committee also directed to resolve a legal dispute between Pubali Bank and Bangladesh Agriculture Development Corporation (BADC) over the non-payment of loans amounting to Tk 71 crore by the corporation.

Pubali Bank has a court order in its favour to confiscate the property of BADC, sources said.

The cabinet committee however observed that Pubali Bank should sit with the finance ministry and resolve the issue.

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Money exchangers

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and said members of the elite force seized local and foreign currencies although they had valid documents and permitted amount of money. They are now planning an agitation against the Rab action, they said.

"We are thinking of an agitation against the raid on our authorised firms and seizure of legal currencies," said the owner of a money exchange firm seeking anonymity.

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