

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 Hanieh 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," Hanieh said.

Hanieh 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 unity during the current transitional period.

Hanieh 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.

Formally 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

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.

BTTB

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found that BTTB Chairman Mohammad Nurul Islam overstepped his authority and camouflaged multimillion-dollar overpayment provision in the name of "Post Guarantee 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 \$500,000 to Siemens and \$2,353,820 to Huawei a year for maintaining BTTB'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 BTTB chairman "defied all evaluation reports, recommendations, confirmations, approvals and MoU" while exempting Huawei and Siemens from rendering free "Post Guarantee Maintenance Assistance Service", according to the probe report.

The ministry has personally accused the BTTB 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 BTTB 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.

RU controversial

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

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

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.

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

tion to the question-answer session, except during the queries to Communications Minister Nazmul Huda about dilapidated roads in various constituencies.

All 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.

"Alauddin 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.

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 Khagrachhari last year.

Larma also demanded an end to 'Operation Urtaran', 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 PCJSS chiefs said.

The CHT accord had ended two decades 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 PCJSS leaders present at the press conference included Mongal kumar Chakma, Shaktipada Tripura, Shaktiman and Chakma. Yusuf Alam of Parbatya 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 opposition, but 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 protégé 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 paralysed 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 that 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.

Adamjee lands

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an export processing zone on the Adamjee lands where foreign investors will get priority.

Infested with labour problems and corruption, Adamjee Jute Mills, the country's biggest factory, had become a big losing concern of the government until its closure two and a half years ago under donors' pressure.

Although the donors are hammering on immediate utilisation of the property, the government was going slow in taking a decision because of pressures from different vested quarters for selling out the land to individuals for personal gains, sources said.

BULLET-PROOF MERCEDES BENZ
The cabinet committee also discussed a proposal to purchase two bullet-proof Mercedes Benz cars for the VIPs of the upcoming Saarc summit.

The committee felt that the ministry concerned has the authority to purchase the cars on its own and does not need the committee's approval.

PUBALI 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.

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.

Hardly any transaction took place yesterday at the firms at Shokh Shopping Complex as only a small number of clients visited them. All the nine authorised firms remained open but two firms running business without licence were closed.

In a press release yesterday, Rab said during Tuesday's raid they seized about Tk 77 lakh, and out of it Tk 66 lakh while searching the bodies of money exchangers. Of the Tk 66 lakh, Bangladeshi currency is Tk 60,18 lakh, US \$ 4,397, Indian rupee 84,605, Dubai currency 1,419, Bahrain currency 57, Kuwaiti dinar 27.75, Pakistani rupee 500, Hong Kong dollar 140, Saudi riyal 8,678, Malaysian currency 724, Oman currency 12.50, Australian dollar 60, Singapore dollar 148, British pound 11 and Japanese yen 10,000.

Rab also seized Tk 3,68,770 and foreign currencies worth Tk 2,57,043 found abandoned in the firms.

The authorised money exchangers said the amount of money that Rab seized 'illegally' has been mentioned accurately in the seizure list.

Rab filed a case with Motijheel Police Station under the Special Powers Act against 12 people in connection with the seizure of currencies. Nine of the arrestees are Palash, Hanif, Jahangir Alam, Reazul Islam, Tutul, Zakir Hossain, Tobarak Hossain, Saifuddin and Abu Naser.

The three other accused now absconding are Chunni, Haque and Helal.

The Court of Chief Metropolitan Magistrate (CMM), Dhaka, yesterday placed the arrestees on a two-day remand each.

Motijheel police had produced the arrestees before the court seeking a seven-day remand for each.

In the remand prayer, police said the arrestees are international hundi operators causing the country huge losses. There are no valid documents for the seized currencies, they claimed.

Defence lawyers however said all the arrestees have licenses for their business and valid documents for the seized currencies.

Another arms

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The camps are within seven kilometres off the Bangladesh-Myanmar border.

BDR recovered another cache of seven AK47 rifles with 1,275 bullets, two M16 rifles with 90 bullets, one point 22-bore rifle, two 12-bore shotguns, two automatic rifles, 146 bullets of air rifle, 160 bullets of pistol and one rocket launcher from Tekchhari on November 23.

In three raids on October 16, 21, and 22, three AK 47 rifles, 169 heavy machine-gun shells, 2,945 bullets of M16 rifle, 99 bullets of sub machine-gun and 47 bullets of AK47 rifle, 37 high frequency wireless sets and nine binoculars were recovered.

On December 30 last year, 32 anti-tank mines, seven anti-personal mines, six 40mm rocket launchers, 10 charge rocket launcher cells, one GF bomb, 18 charge GF bombs and 14 ingredients of rocket launchers were recovered from the Lembuchhari Para, a few kilometres from the Bangladesh-Myanmar border.

Pvt offer held back

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the pipeline project.

This (proposal) needs discussions at the highest level before a decision can be made. This cannot be dealt at our level," he added, referring to the eight-year-old proposal pushed by Bangladeshi company Mohona Holdings Limited.

The proposed pipeline will transmit gas from Myanmar to Tripura, from where gas will join the pipeline flow and continue on to eastern Bangladesh through the Brahmanbaria border, exiting in western Bangladesh through the Jessore border and ending at West Bengal.

Mohona Holdings plans to form an international private consortium before seeking the government approval. After this stage, it will seek final approval from the governments of Myanmar, India and Bangladesh to implement the project.

A company jointly owned by the Gas Authority of India and the West Bengal Industrial Development Corporation will purchase the Myanmar gas from West Bengal near the border. The governments of West Bengal, Tripura and Myanmar, in principle, have approved the project.

The government of Bangladesh will not invest in the pipeline nor assume any risk involved in its construction. A recent cabinet committee brief prepared by the energy ministry, however, underscored the pipeline's benefits to Bangladesh.

"This project involves many aspects of the state. The project should first be discussed at the level of the ministries of foreign affairs, defence and energy. Then they should consult the prime minister to see if such a proposal is acceptable in principle, then we can discuss which company may install such a pipeline," Saifur told the reporters while briefing them on what the cabinet

committee members discussed at the meeting.

"But we may discuss this pipeline at the upcoming Saarc summit in January. But I cannot say for sure at the moment if this issue will be discussed there or not," Saifur added.

Meeting sources told The Daily Star that the cabinet committee members observed that the defence and foreign ministries do not know of such a private scheme and it cannot be approved right away.

"This project needs to be discussed at government level of all the three countries concerned before we pay serious attention to it," said a meeting source quoting the discussions.

"Then again, we may not accept Mohona as its (pipeline) builder. We can weigh other options. We can have government and private collaboration at different levels," he added.

"We may discuss the issue separately at the Saarc summit where we may also invite the ministers concerned for talks on it. We may also discuss it after the summit," the source pointed out.

A high official of the energy ministry told The Daily Star on condition of anonymity that the ministry would now seek the prime minister's guidance on the issue. "The finance minister will visit New Delhi Saturday and he may discuss the pipeline project with the Indian government," he added.

The energy minister will sit with his Indian and Myanmar counterparts in Myanmar in January and may discuss the project there.

Mohona's proposal has been rejected many times since 1996 when it pursued the project. In recent times, the state minister for energy discussed the proposal with the prime minister and placed a project brief at the cabinet committee for its approval in principle.

Rab Crossfire

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Parishad also to protest what they termed the government's procrastination in separating the judiciary from the executive and politicisation of the judiciary.

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.

Labelling the elite anti-crime force as a 'killing machine,' eminent jurist Amir-ul-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 of disgrace, and rejected the appointments of the 19 additional judges alleging political considerations at work behind those.

"It's a disgrace to the constitution that the country's highest seat of justice remains a silent spectator while the Rab carries out extra-judicial killings in guise of crossfire," lamented Ashabur Rahman.

Mahbub-E-Alam termed the killings human rights violations and said any one accused of a crime has to be tried at a court of law. If those are not human rights violations then there is no rule of law in the country, said Abdul Basat Mazumdar.

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'.

Senior lawyers Sirajul Haque, Subrata Chowdhury, Bashir Ahmed, Sahera Khatun, Abdus Salam Tanqueer, Azharullah Bhuiyan and Enayetur Rahim also addressed the demonstrators.

The Parishad expressed solidarity with the December 11 no-confidence human wall across the country called by the 14-party opposition combine.

Hartal in Ctg

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to ease some other programmes taken up by AL to form its country-wide mass no-confidence wall and facilitate the people intended to attend Bishwa Etejma in Tongi, party sources said.

BCL city unit announced the hartal at a press conference held at Chittagong Press Club on Monday following the death of Mohim, BCL central assistant library secretary and former VP of MES College Students' Union, in the early hours that day.

Mohim was killed in a 'crossfire' between Rab and a criminal group early Monday after his arrest by the elite force the day before.

6 satellite

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Barisal, and one more in Narayanganj.

State Minister Jafrul Islam Chowdhury, high officials and WB environmental specialist Jitendra Shah were present at the meeting.

Freedom fighters

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end to repression on religious and ethnic minorities and reinstatement of four fundamental principles of the constitution of '72.

They also demanded formation of a national commission to formulate a national policy to prepare a list of the FFs. They also called for introducing the title "National Hero" for the FFs.

The rally was addressed by, among others, acting President of Awami League Zillur Rahman, Abdur Razzak, Maj Gen (retd) CR Dutta, Rashed Khan Menon, president of Workers Party, and Hassanul Huq Inu, president of Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal.

The speakers said Rajakars, Albadars, war criminals and defeated forces of '71 have staged a comeback after the BNP-led alliance assumed power. These elements are out to eliminate the values and spirit of the Liberation War, they said.

Kamal demands

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out the sources of arms recovered from various areas and identify people responsible for bomb explosions in different places, he said.

He stressed the need of unity among the democratic forces for building up a progressive Bangladesh through implementing rule of law, and resisting corruption and communalism.

Advocate Zahurul Islam, Saifuddin Ahmed Manik, Abdur Rof, Pankaj Bhattacharya, Mostafa Mohsin Monto, Mofizul Islam, and Saiful Islam also spoke on the occasion.

50 injured

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asked them to quit the stage. The activists of the JCD, student wing of BNP, demanded popular songs instead of gazals, as many signers from in and outside the campus were waiting to perform.

Heated arguments between the JCD and ICS soon precipitated into a clash. Both sides used various lethal weapons during the clash that lasted for hours and left over 50 injured.

The IU vice-chancellor, proctor, student advisor along with police rushed to the spot and brought the situation under control.

Rejoinder

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headlined 'Govt interference led to Bac failure' published in The Daily Star on Monday. He said his speech was misinterpreted by saying that government 'interference' or 'hindrance' had resulted in the failure of Bac.

OURREPLY

The DG's speech was delivered before the ACC officials and staff on Sunday and the following day several national dailies carried similar reports on it. We, therefore, stand by our report.

WB objection

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worth up to Tk 25 lakh instead of Tk 10 lakh. 3. In case of emergency procurement, the offices can now float tenders within 14 days instead of 28 days. 4. In local retendering, bidders will be allowed to submit tenders within 21 days instead of 14 days. 5. In international retendering, bidders will have to submit quotations within 28 days instead of 42 days.

On November 3, a meeting of the Planning Ministry decided to change the process of procurement to accommodate a range of objections and demand of different ministries. One of the demands was for allowing 48-hour time to open tender boxes under multiple tender dropping system.

However, the WB vehemently objected to entertaining this demand, apprehending a rise in corruption in the procurement process. In a letter to the finance minister, the WB country director expressed deep concern about the proposed change, saying it might even affect the amount of foreign aid to Bangladesh.

Big rise in drug

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resident representative of the United Nations Development Programme, told the news agency yesterday.

"Injecting drug users have become a major factor in the Aids /HIV situation in Bangladesh and what is worrying is that every time we test them the number of infected users doubles," he said.

The study also found that in the capital Dhaka the percentage was 8.9 percent.

Government figures to be released soon put the number of HIV/AIDS infected people in the country at 465, said Sadiq. He added that the true figure was likely to be higher.

A study released in January 2002 by the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS found there were 13,000 people with the virus out of a population of 140 million.

Bangladesh shares a long border with India, which has the world's second largest number of people with HIV after South Africa.

Activists have warned that despite the relatively small number of people infected, Bangladesh remains vulnerable because of movement between the two countries and low awareness in the conservative Muslim country.

A recent survey found that only 20 percent of married women and 33 percent of married men had heard of the condition.

Authorities have in recent years begun allowing the broadcast of AIDS awareness advertisements but it is not enough, Sadiq said.

"In terms of awareness Bangladesh still now is in a backward position. We need to adopt a risk-taking attitude to awareness now."

Fast forward

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The exhibition features some rare manuscripts of the 17th century written in Persian and Arabic on the historic events of Karbala, rated as the most attractive collection.

Sylhet Sanskrit College, Central Muslim Literature Sansad Library of Sylhet, Woodburn Public Library of Bogra, Khawja Nazimuddin Muslim Hall and Public Library of Dinajpur, Jessore Institute Public Library, National Archives and Library Department, Archaeology Department, and Jatiya Grontho Kendra are also taking part in the show.

The visitors also have the opportunity to see many Bangla newspapers and magazines as early as the 18th and 19th centuries.