

Rocca concerned

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and I hope that this global acclimation would be maintained," she said.

Rocca, now on a two-day official visit, spoke at a press conference at the American Centre in Dhaka yesterday afternoon after a series of meetings with government and opposition leaders.

"We want that all terrorists are prosecuted wherever they are, whether they are in Bangladesh or elsewhere. Essentially in Bangladesh, we will certainly encourage the government to go after those who would undermine the long tradition of tolerance, moderation and peace."

"These elements are not only a threat to the United States but also other countries where they are active." She hailed the government ban on two Islamist groups.

She said extra-judicial killings are not supporttable and the US obviously condemns the killings in so-called crossfire.

"I have talked about the issue during the meeting with the state minister for home and hoped that Bangladesh will uphold the democratic rights of the people so that they will be able to get justice."

Rocca said that like the international community, the US also does not support extra-judicial killings.

She called for thorough investigations into all incidents of political violence, including the attempt on the life of Leader of the Opposition Sheikh Hasina and the assassination of former finance minister Shah AMS Kibria.

During her talks with the government leaders, Rocca said she expressed the US government's concerns about the political violence in Bangladesh. She told them that political violence can be stopped if incidents like August 21 grenade attack aimed to assassinate the opposition leader and killing of Kibria are fully investigated.

"We want to see that those investigations are done completely, properly and in a transparent way. I also expressed US government's concern about security of the leader of the opposition..." she said.

The US Department of State official said that she had a very busy and productive day yesterday as she had meetings with Prime Minister Khaleda Zia, Foreign Minister M. Morshed Khan, the leader of the opposition, State Minister for Home Lutfuzzaman Babar and Foreign Secretary Hemayetuddin.

On a question about extremism in Bangladesh, Rocca said they have information about presence of extremism in Bangladesh and discussed with the government leaders about how the US government can assist Bangladesh.

"But we didn't have any detailed discussions about US assistance to contain terrorism and extremism. We will discuss it more in future," she said and pledged to assist Bangladesh for capacity building and extend technical support to deal with criminals.

She told reporters that she talked with the prime minister about the need for good governance and hoped that Bangladesh would improve governance. "I also talked (with her) about checking of political violence and investigations into the August 21 grenade attack and Kibria killing. I also expressed US government's concern about the security of the opposition leader."

Rocca said she spoke to the state minister for home about extra-judicial killings, full and proper investigation of political violence, August 21 grenade attack and assassination of Kibria.

She said that she had talks about free and fair election in the future, just concluded Chittagong City Corporation polls and August 21 grenade attack with the Hasina. "I also discussed about her security."

On her meeting with the foreign minister, Rocca said, "We discussed about the whole range of bilateral issues, continuation of democratic process, peacekeeping operations, possible cooperation between Bangladesh and US on global issues of common concern and how Bangladesh can play a role in global peace, democracy and peacekeeping."

Replying to a question about the opposition's movement to bring reform to the caretaker government system and strengthen the Election Commission for free and fair polls, she said, "It's entirely an internal matter of Bangladesh and the US government has not taken any position on this issue."

About press reports that she had talked about issues concerning Bangladesh and Nepal with Indian government officials, Rocca thanked the reporters for raising the matter. She avoided, however, a direct reply and only said the US government has a bilateral policy for each country.

About her meeting with the Indian officials, Rocca said the US government has very good relations with India and the ties are being broadened, as the US shares a lot of common interests with India.

"We want peace, democracy and development in this region. India is world's one of the largest democracies and we must develop our relations where there is democracy and thus our relation with India is growing," the US official added.

On another question about India's "big brotherly" attitude towards its neighbours including Bangladesh regarding sharing of waters of common rivers and withdrawal of waters, she said "I do not want to make any comment on bilateral issues and the US government does not want to get involved on bilateral matters of any country."

Speaking about international terrorism and extremism, the US

Assistant Secretary of State said it is the position of the US government to fight against terrorism and extremism anywhere in the world.

In this context, she said that Washington is happy to see the steps taken by the Bangladesh government to curb extremism as well as banning some Islamist groups in the country.

Asked whether she sees any improvement since her last visit to Bangladesh, she said, "I have seen some good steps...there have been steps in the right direction."

She said the US will continue its support for flourishing democracy in Bangladesh and is quite happy to see peaceful and democratic transition after the last three elections. She hoped this democratic atmosphere would continue.

About Bangladesh-US relations, she said both countries have been enjoying excellent relations for long and lauded Bangladesh's role in global peace moves and peace-keeping operations under the UN umbrella.

US ambassador in Dhaka Harry K Thomas and other high officials of the US embassy and the American Centre were present.

DHAKASKS FOR MCA INCLUSION

Bangladesh yesterday asked The US to include it in the Millennium Challenge Accord (MCA), a special US fund for the developing countries of good governance.

"We requested the US to consider including Bangladesh in the MCA or at least make it a member up to the threshold level so that the country would be at an advanced stage," the foreign minister told journalists after an hour-long meeting with Rocca.

Under the MCA, the US core development assistance would increase by 50 percent in three years resulting in an annual increase of \$5 billion by 2006. The fund will be "devoted to projects in nations that govern justly, invest in their people and encourage economic freedom".

Morshed said the US government emphasised continuation of the democratic process in the country and dialogues between the ruling and opposition parties to remove political disputes blocking further advancement of the democratic atmosphere.

The foreign minister said the US official praised Bangladesh's progress in the economic sector and appreciated steps taken to improve law and order.

On a question about the Ahmadiyya Muslim issue in Bangladesh, he said that the US official was informed about the government steps to ensure security of the Ahmadiyyas and that a recent court order allowed the community to publish its publications.

Turning to US assistance to Bangladesh, Morshed said he again asked for quota-free access of Bangladesh's readymade garments to the US market.

He told Rocca that the US government is aware that two million women are employed in the garment industries of Bangladesh and that it would create an adverse social effect in case these women went jobless.

He said Rocca has been informed that Bangladesh has strengthened its caucuses in the US congress and senate and continued hectic lobbying for inclusion in the US Trade Act 2005 so that Bangladeshi products get quota-free access.

The foreign minister informed Rocca that a number of business groups regularly visit the USA and pursue matters related to quota-free access. He told her that he would make a private visit to the US in the third week of this month and talk with the US officials and congressmen about the issue.

Morshed also told journalists Rocca informed him that top US officials in their recent meetings with the Indian government had no discussion about Bangladesh and termed the media report "absolutely false".

The foreign minister denied any discussion about Bangladesh's alleged connection with "international terrorism" as well as fundamentalist issues.

Earlier, Rocca held meetings with Advisor to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Reaz Rahman and Foreign Secretary Mohammad Hemayetuddin.

ASSURANCE FOR POLICE MODERNISATION

Rocca assured the state minister for home of extending all possible cooperation in modernising the police and other law-enforcement agencies.

She appreciated the progress in the investigation into the Kibria killing.

The border situation and the government steps to halt trafficking in women and children also came up for discussion.

India test-fires

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normally notify each other in advance under an agreement.

The 8.5-metre (28-foot) surface-to-surface missile, first tested in February 1988, is under trials before its induction into the army's arsenal, other defence officials said. The missile was last tested on March 19.

The missile is designed for battlefield use against troops or armoured formations, defence officials said.

Two other variants of the Prithvi, with a strike range of between 250 and 350 kilometres would be handed over to the navy and air force once tests were completed.

HSC exams

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expelled from different centres on charge of cheating.

He could not, however, provide any information on exams at seven centres in Chudanga as the officials concerned did not send their report to the board late in the evening yesterday.

Eight candidates were expelled under the Chittagong board while one candidate was expelled in Habiganj under the Sylhet board and 24 candidates were expelled under the Rajshahi board.

Deputy controller of the Madrasa board Qamrul Hasan said 47 candidates were expelled for cheating. He said reports from one third of the 333 centres under the board did not reach the control room even late in the evening yesterday.

Meanwhile, the secretary of the Gangni Mahila Degree College was released from his duty on charge of malpractice as he was caught in the act by State Minister for Education ANM Ehsanul Haque Milon, who went on a tour to Kushtia and Meherpur during the examination. Two candidates were also expelled from Meherpur Government College centre during the visit of Milon at the centre.

21 injured

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As the BDR men continued their search despite a resistance by a group of women, villagers gathered there and started pelting brick chips at the BDR personnel. In retaliation, BDR opened 35 rounds of blank shots to disperse the mob.

The agitated villagers then put up a barricade on Sathkira-Kaligonj road, disrupting traffic for about four hours. They also damaged the car of a magistrate who was going to the spot to bring the situation under control.

The villagers withdrew the barricade after the local administration assured them of taking action against the BDR men involved.

One of the injured BDR men, Alamgir, was admitted to Sathkira Sadar Hospital while the remaining five were given first aid.

The injured villagers are now undergoing treatment at different clinic in Sathkira town.

Hunger strike

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professionals, intellectuals, political leaders and cultural activists and others took part in the three-hour-long hunger strike that started at 3:00pm.

"I'll continue with the programmes till the last day of my life if the killers of my husband are not brought to justice," Asma said.

She reiterated her demand for international probe into the murder of Kibria.

Kibria and five others were killed in a grenade attack in Habiganj on January 27.

Eminent lawyer Barrister Amir-Ul-Islam at a rally following the hunger strike said the main accused in the Kibria killing case wanted to give a statement under Section 164.

But the government did not allow him to do so fearing revelation of the facts, he added.

Supreme Court Bar Association President Advocate Mahabubey Alam said the chargesheet in the case is unacceptable as the master-minds have been protected by it.

Samad Azad

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Sangsad began in the evening. The session will resume on Sunday.

The Business Advisory Committee, meanwhile, decided that the session will continue until May 17 after only four working days. This will be last session before the budget session that will begin early next month.

Besides the two lawmakers, the House also condoned the death of Pope John Paul II, former ministers AM Zahiruddin Khan and Abdul Mannan, and a number of former lawmakers, former advisor to caretaker government BB Roy Chowdhury and nine Bangladeshi peacekeepers in the UN mission killed in Congo on February 25.

Krishak Sramik Janata League lawmaker Kader Siddiqui, however, demanded inclusion of the name of Lt Gen Jagjit Singh Aurora, chief of the Eastern Command of India during the Liberation War of 1971, in the obituary reference.

The House observed one-minute silence showing respect to the deceased and offered munajat seeking divine blessings for eternal peace of the departed souls.

Speaking on the reference, Leader of the House and Prime Minister Khaleda Zia paid tributes to Abdus Samad Azad saying that he was an experienced parliamentarian.

Shas also paid homage to Shamsuddin Ahmed Ishaq and said the BNP lawmaker from Narsingdi was very popular in his constituency.

LGRD and Cooperatives Minister Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan, Law, Justice and Parliamentary Affairs Minister Moudud Ahmed, Sardar Sakhawath Hossain Bakul, Dildar Hossain Selim, Nazir Hossain, MA Zinnah, Shafi Ahmed Chowdhury, Ebadur Rahman Chowdhury and Kalim Uddin Ahmed of BNP, GM Kader and Fazle Rabbi of Jatiya Party, among others, took part in the discussion.

PM blows hot

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not idle away time at the MP hostels. "It's not a place for sleeping," she said, adding, "We are monitoring the activities of every one of you. He whose performance is not satisfactory... will not get nomination in the next general election."

Internal feud was the main reason why the ruling alliance has suffered the Chittagong City Corporation polls debacle, the BNP chief observed. She asked her party colleagues to resolve all factional conflicts and take preparations together for the next parliamentary elections in their constituencies.

On the opposition demand for reforms in the caretaker government system and the Election Commission, the prime minister said the opposition school has made an issue out of a 'non-issue'. Her government will not do anything not warranted by the constitution, she declared.

On the reform issue, BNP Secretary General Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan said, "We also want reforms in the Election Commission. But the opposition camp has to place its reform proposal in parliament."

Seventeen of the attending 151 lawmakers spoke at the meeting, with Khaleda in the chair. They also discussed the country's overall political situation and various organisational issues.

The prime minister asked the BNP lawmakers to face opposition movement politically by strengthening the organisation, Chief Whip Khandakar Delwar Hossain told newsmen after the meeting. However, he claimed Khaleda did not say any thing about internal feud.

BNP workers

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They gave more time to their 'men of choice' for ward commissioner posts in their respective areas, the activists alleged.

This must not go unpunished, they shouted.

No-one of the BNP ward commissioner candidates also sought vote for Mir Nasir, the activists said and demanded their ouster from the party.

They also blamed Dastagir Chowdhury but he refuted their allegations.

At the meeting, Mir Nasir also blamed his party men for his defeat. "Some top leaders of our party in collusion with the opposition parties had plotted my defeat," he was quoted as saying.

US religion panel

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State Condoleezza Rice seeking the inclusion of Pakistan as well as Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan in the government's list of "countries of particular concern."

The commission also sought the removal of India from the blacklist following "significant" religious freedom improvements in that country since the defeat of the ruling Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in 2004 polls.

Also this year, the commission included Bangladesh on a "watch list" of countries where conditions do not rise to the statutory level that requires blacklisting but are of enough concern to warrant close monitoring."

Those already on the watch list are Belarus, Cuba, Egypt, Indonesia and Nigeria. The commission said it was closely monitoring the situation in Afghanistan, India, Iraq and Russia.

The State Department annually blacklists countries for alleged religious freedom violations based on recommendations from the commission, whose 10 members are jointly appointed by President George W Bush and Congress.

In September last year, the department added Eritrea, Saudi Arabia and Vietnam to the blacklist, which already included China, Iran, Myanmar, North Korea and Sudan.

Countries face government sanctions on various fronts 180 days after being included in the blacklist but no decision has been made on what action would be taken against Eritrea,

According to meeting sources, BNP MP Syed Manjur Hossain in the meeting said only development work would not yield good results for the party, if the organisation were not strengthened. Alluding to the previous BNP government, he said the government then carried out huge development work but failed to win the election in 1996.

Rashiduzzaman Millat MP said 30 to 35 lawmakers would not be able to win in the next parliamentary election. But, as a number of participants interrupted Millat, he could not finish his speech, meeting sources said.

Taking the floor, Communications Minister Nazmul Huda accused the finance ministry of foot-dragging in releasing funds for the projects under Annual Development Programme. "The procrastination is hampering development projects," he alleged.

A number of participants of the over one-hour sitting, deliberated on ways to fortify the party 'politically'. To achieve this, Khaleda said, lack of co-ordination among the ministers responsible for the districts, lawmakers and local leaders must be removed. "You have to be more people-oriented and gear up development activities," she told them.

Intra-party

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made some mistakes in the polls. Lack of co-ordination among the ministers, lawmakers and local leaders caused the defeat of our candidate."

The meeting of the Jamaat-e-Islami said the alliance candidate lost due to feud among the BNP leaders. And Jamaat-e-Islami should not be blamed for it, a meeting source said.

"Mir Nasir is not popular compared to the opposition-backed candidate Mohiuddin Chowdhury," the source quoted Jamaat lawmaker Shajahan Chowdhury as saying.

"We had thrown our full weight behind Mir Nasir. Our party men cast vote for him. Rather it was many a BNP man, who did not cast vote for the party's candidate," said the lawmaker elected from Chittagong.

Referring to suggestions that about two lakh voters of Jamaat-e-Islami betrayed the alliance candidate, Jamaat lawmaker Abdul Aziz said at the meeting, "If we had two lakh reserved votes, we would have fielded our own party candidate".

Washington

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On Saarc, she said the US always thinks the South Asian multilateral body can do a lot more to utilise the untapped resources and potentials for regional development.

She said relations between Bangladesh and the US in broader perspective is always good for a long time and Washington has been active in the last few years for further consolidating it.

The prime minister said her government gives importance to the US relations with Bangladesh and values its assistance and cooperation.

She expressed the hope the US will extend its cooperation in various programmes, particularly poverty alleviation, women education and empowerment, and training of law enforcement agencies.

Rocca said the US is already involved in a number of programmes including police, peacekeeping and technical training and modernisation of agriculture system.

Responding to the prime minister's request for further investment, Rocca said Vulcan, a US-based company, has already decided to invest \$1.6 billion in Bangladesh.

Foreign Secretary Mohammad Hemayetuddin and US Ambassador in Dhaka Harry K Thomas Jr were present.

Italian cops

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He reported that members of a family called Khan had helped him reach Italy and wanted a cut of the profits of his business. The family allegedly smuggled in between 150 and 200 illegal immigrants each year for a price of 5,000 euros a head.

The journey could take up to two years, with the immigrants travelling to Greece by plane, transiting via Libya and crossing the sea to the Mediterranean island of Lampedusa south of Sicily.

Usually payment was made on arrival, with the immigrants forced to hand over half their earnings to the people-traffickers, the report said.

PM tours Ctg

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Both Khaleda and Hasina will visit the port city following the prestigious May 9 election to Chittagong City Corporation (CCC). In the CCC polls, the AL-backed candidate ABM Mohiuddin Chowdhury bagged victory defeating ruling alliance-backed Mir Mohammad Nasir Uddin by over 90,000 votes.

Hasina will address the victory rally of Mayor Mohiuddin in Laldighi Maidan in the city on May 15.

BDR boss

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border normal and tension free.

The BDR chief said there is no shelter of Indian terrorists in Bangladesh and urged the Indian journalists to refrain from spreading such propaganda for the sake of good relations between the two neighbouring countries.

Later, Jahangir Alam Chowdhury visited Dahogram and Angorpotha enclaves and talked with the local people.

In a memorandum to the BDR DG, the locals demanded to keep the Tinbigha corridor open round-the-clock instead of 12 hours from 6:00am to 6:00pm. They also requested the DG to initiate the withdrawal of the BSF ban on power supply to the enclaves.

The DG told the villagers that the issues would be raised at the government level meeting between the two countries.

Earlier on arrival at the corridor, the BDR chief was received by the BSF deputy inspector general (DIG) and given a guard of honour by the BSF men.

Ministry

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In March, Prime Minister Khaleda Zia okayed the project in principle, saying it should be implemented as per the 'existing policy' immediately.

The country's Private Power Policy does not allow unsolicited bids. In case there is any unsolicited negotiation over an attractive offer, the policy dictates that the government will have to seek matching offers from other interested parties through open tender. If there is a better offer, the first company will be asked to match that offer. If it fails to do so, the better offer will be accepted.

This policy, adopted in 1996, so far allowed different power plants with 1,290mw capacity through 'solicitation'. Unsolicited bids on the other hand can give way to gross corruption and unfair terms for the nation.

The Cadogan Manning proposal, being processed by the Power Cell, is flawed in several areas including power tariff and conditional bid bond.

Some powerful officials at the Prime Minister's Office (PMO), who are backing the unsolicited deal, have hammered the firing of the Power Cell director general and transfer of its technical director. Both had angered these officials by giving fair opinion on the shady negotiation.

European human trafficking ring broken up

AP, VIENNA, Austria

Austria broke up a major human trafficking ring led by Romanian, Moldovan and Ukrainian criminals who smuggled more than 5,000 East Europeans to the West, many enduring horrific conditions in tiny hiding spaces in cars, trucks and trailers, authorities said Thursday.

The Federal Criminal Investigations Office said it arrested 64 people in a large-scale operation that began last June and focused on the Alpine country's border checkpoints.

The traffickers charged immigrants \$5,125 to enter the European Union illegally, and thousands were successfully smuggled into Austria, many in small, cramped hiding places such as false floors built into vehicles, officials said.

Some of the immigrants were forced to squeeze their bodies into hiding spaces that measured less than 8 inches high, barely enough room to let them breathe, Maj. Gerald Tatzgern said.

"Only because of police intervention were many victims able to escape asphyxiation," he said, suggesting some immigrants may have been near death when authorities searching vehicles at Austria's borders found and rescued them.

Austrian state broadcaster ORF reported that four exhausted and emaciated Ukrainian women narrowly escaped death when they were rescued last month from a confined space built into a trailer after the vehicle hauling it was subjected to a routine inspection at a checkpoint near the border town of Nickelsdorf.

It quoted Andreas Kohs, a regional police official, as saying sophisticated video equipment found traces of human hair in the back of the trailer, leading to the discovery of the women. The small space had been welded shut and painted to conceal evidence of the work, and firefighters had to use torches to cut the bars and free the four, who required urgent hospitalisation, Kohs said.

Police arrested the Ukrainian driver on human trafficking charges, he said.

8 women held in Benapole border before trafficking

UNB, Benapole

Police yesterday held eight women at Chhoto Achra village before they were being trafficked across the Goga border.

Nazma, Monwara, Noorjahan, Salma, Nasreen, Aneza, Kohinoor and Pakhi, all aged between 15 and 30, told the police one Delwar brought them from Narayanganj with promise of lucrative jobs in Mumbai, India.

Delwar brought them in a night coach in exchange of a substantial amount for securing employment, they added.

The police said they could not nab Delwar.

Spectrum MD

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but because of the gross neglect of the petitioners, which caused an immeasurable loss to lives and property.

Advocate Khorsheed Alam, moving the bail petition, told the court that the MD is the husband of a sitting High Court judge and he would not flee if the court granted him bail.

Dhaka District Public Prosecutor (PP) Mohammad Mohsin Miah opposing the petition said the defence lawyer is influencing the court. He told the court that the accused did not show the structural design or work plan. They constructed the nine-storey building though they got approval from the Cantonment Board, Savar for four storeys.

Court Inspector Jatindra Narayan Saha told the court that the workers did not want to work at night but the owners forced them to work the night shift. Moreover, Detective Branch (DB) Inspector Khurshid-ul-Alam submitted a petition for taking the accused into remand.

The accused are directly responsible for the murder of 79 workers and injuries to 84 others, which adds

Section 302 (murder) of Bangladesh Penal Code to the present sections 338 and 304(A), the inspector added.

The court heard both sides for long before turning down the bail petition.

The two accused were produced before the court at 10:30am under tight security and later they were sent to Dhaka Central Jail.

Shahnari, also an owner of Savar Spectrum Sweaters Industries Ltd, and Director Abul Hashem Fakir on May 8 appeared before the court and sought bail.

In the case filed with Savar Police Station, Officer-in-Charge (OC) Inspector Mohammad Nazrul Islam alleged that at about 1:30am on April 12 he came to know on telephone that the nine-storey Savar Spectrum Sweaters Industries Ltd at Palashbari in Savar collapsed, trapping up to 400 workers. Later, he also came to know that the owner constructed the factory without an approved plan from the authorities.

Advocates Abdus Sabur, Sanaullah Miah and Masud Khan Khokon appeared for the accused.

AL wants elections

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At the meeting at Hasina's Sudha Sadan residence, the two sides discussed a wide range of issues, including caretaker government reforms, grenade attacks, arms hauls and extra-judicial killing.

"Rocca expressed her deep concern over the extra-judicial killing by Rapid Action Battalion (Rab)," AL General Secretary Abdul Jalil told reporters after the meeting.

During the meeting, she was informed about government's "failure" to investigate all the grenade attacks, including the August 21 attack on Sheikh Hasina, and attacks on AL leader and former finance minister SAMS Kibria and British High Commissioner Anwar Chowdhury.

"We want international probe, but the government didn't pay heed to the demand," said Jalil, who attended the meeting.

The US State Department functionary was also informed about the state of investigation into the ammo hauls in Bogra and Chittagong as well as other places in the country.

During the meeting, the Awami League leaders also apprised her of the importance of reforms of caretaker government and the Election Commission.

They said the recently held Chittagong City Corporation election once again proved that a powerful and independent election commission is needed for holding free and fair elections, ensuring neutral role of the administration.

"We also want to see healthy democracy in the country, which can be achieved through holding free and fair elections," Jalil quoted Rocca as telling the AL leaders.

During the meeting, the AL leaders said their party wants immediate election, and if the alliance government has the courage, it should resign and hold an election to let countrymen decide who comes to power.

The AL leaders also informed Rocca about the attacks on Ahmadiyyas, a religious minority group in the country.

During the meeting, the US assistant secretary handed over a condolence letter to Sheikh Hasina at the death of AL leader and former foreign minister Abdus Samad Azad.

US ambassador Harry K Thomas and AL leaders Kazi Jafarullah MP, Syed Abul Hossain MP, Saber Hossain Chowdhury and former Ambassador Ziauddin were, among others, present at the meeting.

AL