

Militancy overshadows

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 A series of 'crossfire' killings, death of 119 people in a launch capsized in the Buriganga and the collapse of a garment factory building in Savar killing 77 people also marked the just concluded year.

The government that had repeatedly denied the existence of the militants was forced to ban Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) and Jagrata Muslim Janata of Bangladesh (JMB) after several NGO offices in the northern region were attacked.

Taking the advantage of the laxity in government drive against extremism, the militants prepared themselves with powerful bombs and explosives and carried out the country-wide blasts on August 17 to prove their strong network.

When the militant activities reached the peak in the following months with the introduction of suicide bomb attacks, the government faced strong pressure and demand for national consensus against the menace.

On November 30, the prime minister offered a 'national dialogue' to find ways to stop bomb terrorism but the mainstream opposition parties including the newly formed 14-party alliance led by Awami League boycotted the talks.

The government high-ups on one hand urged all the political parties to join in the national dialogue on terrorism and on the other launched a campaign against the main opposition party labelling it as the patron of the militants.

The dialogue on militancy that began on December 12 is yet to end and nobody knows how long will the discussion continue with the small political parties and the pro-government professional groups.

Apart from the allegations raised by the opposition, the ruling BNP has also faced tremendous internal pressure when a number of senior leaders including a lawmaker categorically alleged that Jamaat is the main force behind militancy.

BNP lawmaker Abu Hena was expelled from the party for his outspoken statement about militancy involving Jamaat and some ministers.

Amid media reports on mismanagement and irregularities in dealing with hijacking, state minister for civil aviation and tourism Mir Mohammad Nasir Uddin had to quit while state minister for energy AKM Mosharraf Hossain resigned over receiving a luxury car from controversial oil and gas company Niko.

Bangladesh was branded as most corrupt in the world by the Transparency International for five consecutive years, but the government hardly took the matter seriously. The Anti-Corruption Commission is yet to start functioning effectively.

Despite the insecurity, soaring cost of living and confrontational politics, people observed a few successes. The successful holding of

Saarc Summit improved the government's image while people welcomed the drive against adulteration of food.

The nation celebrated Bangladesh cricket team's triumph over world champions Australia and the first test victory that came against Zimbabwe

CONFRONTATIONAL POLITICS
 With time running out fast, the ruling and opposition parties are now preparing for the polls and competing to take control of the streets ahead of the next parliamentary election, that many fear will overshadow the militant issue.

The 14-party opposition combine has come up with 31-point proposal for reform in the caretaker government and the electoral rules. They declared that they will resist any election if it is held without reforms while the government has rejected the demand saying that the election will be held under the existing system.

The 14-party held a 'grand rally' in Pallan Maidan on November 22 despite government obstruction and announced a 23-point common national programme with a pledge to establish a democratic country free from communal politics and extremism.

Within one month, the ruling BNP staged a similar showdown in Pallan.

Amid such a volatile situation, the Election Commission starts working today to prepare a fresh voter list for the next polls following a unilateral decision of the chief election commissioner, appointed by the government in a hurried move on May 23.

But uncertainty looms large over the fate of holding a free, fair and peaceful election in time as the ruling and opposition parties stick to their stances on the reforms in the caretaker government system and the electoral rules.

HRVOLUTIONS, ATTACK ON MEDIA
 The violation of human rights continued in 2005 with the killing of 396 people in so-called 'crossfire' during 'shootouts' between the lawbreakers and the law enforcement agencies, mainly Rapid Action Battalion and police.

Besides, the countrywide bomb blasts and grenade attacks left 62 people killed.

The zealots continued their attacks on Ahmadiyas across the country demanding that the small sect should be declared non-Muslim.

At the end of the year, the government promulgated an ordinance allowing the security agencies to bug telephonic conversations ignoring the protests of human rights organisations, political parties and the civil society.

The media was under tremendous pressures throughout the year. Senior ministers and the ruling party lawmakers in and outside of the

House repeatedly blasted the newspapers for "tarnishing country's image."

Two journalists were killed, 142 injured, 11 arrested, four kidnapped and 53 assaulted in more than 500 incidents across the country. Besides, 249 journalists were threatened with death and cases filed against 130 others, according to HR bodies.

When the journalists were facing such attacks, the Press Council submitted to the information ministry a draft law that suggests punitive measures against newspapers including cancellation of declaration at least for a day.

JUDICIARY
 The judiciary witnessed lawyers' agitation throughout the year on different issues including the militant attacks and threats on judges and the alleged manipulation in the LLB result-sheet of an additional judge of the High Court.

The High Court delivered a number of significant judgements last year -- one declared illegal the fifth amendment to the constitution through which late president Ziaur Rahman assumed state power and another declared Gram Sarkar Act illegal.

Another much talked about issue in the judiciary was the presidential clemency to a ruling BNP man who was sentenced to death in a double murder case. The lawyers demonstrated on the Supreme Court premises against the act.

INEFFECTIVE PARLIAMENT
 The House passed the year amid continued boycott by the main opposition Awami League and there was no move to resolve the parliamentary standoff.

The second largest opposition in parliament, HM Ershad's Jatiya Party that continued its participation in parliamentary proceedings failed to play its role, fearing the consequence of the pending cases against the party chairman.

However, 45 lawmakers, elected to women's reserved seats in an election boycotted by the main opposition, joined parliament and improved slightly its quorum crisis.

The parliamentary committee system failed to ensure accountability in the government expenditure and activities due to pressure from the ministers.

Safta

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 developed countries (LDCs) including a mechanism for compensation of revenue loss due to reduction in duties.

The LDCs to be compensated include Bangladesh and the Maldives. Indian cabinet ratified the agreement on December 29.

As per the agreement, trade liberalisation programme will not apply to the tariff lines included in the sensitive list.

India has finalised two separate lists -- a longer list for non-LDCs such as Pakistan and Sri Lanka containing 884 items and a shorter for other Saarc members with 763 items.

The LDCs will also be provided technical assistance in areas like capacity building in standard, protect certification, training of human resources, improvement of legal system and administration, custom procedures and trade facilitation.

The Saarc (South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation) includes Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.

Migratory birds

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 "This is obviously an uncommon but wonderful programme. I have brought my daughter so that she grows up with a love for nature," said Rashida Begum, mother of Pritha.

The Bangladesh Nature Conservation Committee (NCC) organised the festival. Green campaigner Prof Serajul Islam Choudhury inaugurated the festival by releasing house pigeons.

Describing the event as "social festival", Prof Choudhury said the human-bird relationship should be friendlier.

"Birds are not our guests. They are our darling," he said in his inaugural speech. "We should adopt more environment-friendly activities," he added, asking all to plant bird-friendly fruit trees.

Eight species of migratory and resident waterfowl have landed on the lake this year, the organisers said. There are 162 species of them in Bangladesh -- 46 of them resident and the rest migratory, he said.

The NCC members said the flock in the Ceramic Lake includes pin tail, lesser whistling till, ruddy shelduck, green winged till, comb duck, little egret, bittern and pond heron.

"As the adjoining areas are not safe because of random hunting of the migratory birds, they have been flying back to the Ceramic Lake for the last few years," said one of the organisers.

The Mirpur festival also included photography exhibition, art competition for children, cultural programmes and discussion-all about birds and nature.

The Civic Committee for Resisting Bird-flu in Bangladesh ran its campaign at the festival to raise awareness among people about not killing the migratory birds which might cause an outbreak of bird flu as these birds may carry the bird flu virus.

Sun also rises

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 Other port facilities also improved last year, but businessmen say the port still has miles to go.

Crime was another area that witnessed some improvement last year to the relief of the private sector. It reported fewer incidents of extortion and intimidation by organised criminals.

But still that did not make life easier for the private sector people. A spate of bomb blasts scared investors and foreign buyers off. Foreign buyers now do not want to fly in to negotiate deals. But, the garment owners did not let up; they now fly out to a third country for deal finalisation. The quota phase-out also jolted the readymade garment industry that feeds 78 percent of the export figure.

Last year also saw a big drop in apparel prices. In many cases prices eroded by as much as 30 percent. That had a big impact on the woven garment exports that plummeted by 8.10 percent in July to September last year (or the first quarter of the current fiscal year, FY06). But the loss in woven sub-sector had been made up by a spectacular 17.95 percent growth in knitwear during the same period.

And the construction sector bounced back from a year of depression. Demands grew although housing prices soared by almost 50 percent in the last one year. The last housing fair saw a record Tk 650 crore sales against a targeted Tk 500 crore.

The farmers also put in their best last year in both Boro and Aman seasons to churn out good yields. Despite flooding in some important northern pockets, the average Aman harvest was high. The crops sector that has witnessed dismal growth figures for the last five fiscal years, including two negative years of FY02 (-2.39 percent) and FY05 (-3.30 percent), is expected to contribute heavily to this fiscal year's GDP growth.

The mobility in the economy was also reflected in a high credit growth of 20.85 percent in July-September last year. Although a chunk of it was due to heavy government borrowing and state-owned enterprise lending, the private sector also had a pie of it and its credit grew by 17.2 percent. Imports also kept pace with the economic activities and grew by

38.95 percent in that quarter.

All this means the economy generated a lot of steams, creating new jobs. The better agriculture meant better income for the rural poor. And the rise of the SME sector meant more egalitarian pay. All these are healthy signs for the economy.

But dangers also appeared on the horizon and inflation was only one of them. What was only 5.52 percent in January inched up to 7.28 percent in October. Much of it was imported because of price rise of commodities on the international markets. Increase in fuel price also added to that upward trend in prices.

Without proper assessment of the causes of inflation, the government embarked on a contractionary monetary policy and applied its instruments to increase interest rates by around 3 percent. This made the business community jittery as their costs increased. If the trend continues in the new year, it may adversely affect investment, although many would argue that factors outside the cost of fund now affect investment more than anything in Bangladesh.

Because of high imports and pressure on exports, the balance of payment situation again turned fragile last year and the foreign exchange reserve dwindled to \$2.80 billion.

The course that Bangladesh economy can follow in the new year remains wide open. On one side, the election year may have some extra pressures on the economy in terms of rent-seeking, breakdown in governance, worsening of the law and order, and slowdown in reforms. In that case, Bangladesh may be flung into a growth retarding black-hole nadir. But a silver lining is also there; a new opportunity opens up through the Safta and Bimstec free trade agreement. Despite all the strains, Bangladesh's garments are still competitive and buyers don't want to shift orders from a stable supplier. Agro products have a good export chance. And the demand for domestic investment -- in infrastructure, in agriculture and in services -- is high.

The business community is ready to take up the challenge. What remains to be seen is whether the country's political leadership responds with an equal commitment.

WB wants

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 parliament as well as introduction of a public procurement law in order to make the public financial management more transparent.

The cabinet has already passed in principle a draft public procurement act to get the third DSC tranche. The WB now wants the law to get enacted by parliament.

It also prescribes putting a complaint mechanism including independent review panels into operation for public procurement and quarterly web-publication of findings of monitoring and inspection of procurements in infrastructure and the power sector.

One of the conditions is for strengthening the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) for neutral and active prosecution of serious acts of corruption. Another is for setting specific terms of reference and a fixed tenure for the managing directors of nationalised commercial banks with a view to corporatize the banks.

The government will have to formulate and adopt a least-cost plan for developing power generation and define its strategy for power generation investment, specifying the proportion of public and private sector financing in the sector.

The WB also wants the government to offer a bid package to qualified private investors for at least one new, base-load, power plant. It wants to see a transparent and competitive procedure, with a selection criterion based on technical competence and financial capabilities, in setting up small power plants.

Yet another condition is for restructuring the National Board of Revenue (NBR) in line with the NBR's Strategic Development Plan adopted by the government to ensure its effectiveness and accountability. The NBR will also have the flexibility to recruit from the private sector if necessary.

Sources at the Economic Relations Division (ERD) said the WB considers the upcoming national election as a major hurdle for steering ahead the ongoing reform programme. So, it will disburse the future development credits only upon the implementation of the agreed reforms. The amounts of the loans and timing of their disbursements will also depend on the government's express commitment to reforms, they said.

A finance ministry source said the fourth DSC tranche is included in the budget financing of the current fiscal year.

Bangladeshi

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 lookalike of any expensive brands. Unlike his earlier work, the Leepu F-21 resembles no vehicles on the road today.

The jet-black car raised a lot of eyebrows on Manik Mia Avenue when it was taken there for a press demonstration yesterday afternoon.

Leepu said he named the car after himself followed by F-21, which stands for February 21 -- Amar Ekushey and International Mother Language Day.

He plans to take 'Leepu Leniza', his brand name, on small-scale production. "Cars produced in cottage industries are quite common in some countries. I'd like to do something like that in Bangladesh," he said.

"I have received a lot of media coverage and am getting work offers because of that as well. But nobody seems to be willing to invest in a small automobile cottage industry," he added.

Sayed M Tanvir, director of Pacific Jeans Ltd, had asked Leepu to manufacture the car for him.

Replying to a question on why he had chosen Leepu, Tanvir said, "I heard a lot about him when I was in England. I wanted to get something from my home country."

Leepu took almost a year to manufacture the Tk 15.5 lakh car. The F-21 has a 77 Toyota Celica chassis, which was bought at only Tk 50,000, and a Toyota Townace 1.8 litre engine.

Lonely eyes

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 the Shahid, along with Rahman's colleague at Petrobangla MA Baset and his wife, and the driver.

A student of class V, Nahin is currently under treatment at the National Institute of Traumatology and Orthopaedic Rehabilitation (NITOR).

In another bed only a few doors down from Nahin's room was lying Baset's 23-year-old son Nihad Adnan. Amit. His intermittent bellows echoed through the hospital floors. They were not as much of pain as were of watching his pants burn to death before his very eyes.

Like Nahin, he too was fortunate to escape death in the crash and was rescued by the locals. But the horrors of the scene haunt him like a ghost and each time they get even more intense.

The microbus carrying Nahin, Amit, their parents crashed head-on with a speeding truck at Baghata in Narsingdi Sadar on Friday morning. On hearing a loud bang, villagers rushed to the scene and pulled out Nahin and Amit from the back seat.

But before they could get to the others trapped inside, the car went up in flames and all on board were burnt to death.

Amit gazes blankly as a sense of guilt arising out of his failure to save his parents overwhelms him.

Indonesia blast

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 on high alert for potential Islamic extremist attacks during the New Year period.

Mostly Christian shoppers had thronged the stall to buy pork, which is forbidden for Muslims, for New Year's Eve celebrations later Saturday night, police said.

National police spokesman Paulus Purwokoto told reporters that three victims died at the bomb site and four died later in hospital.

He said that the blast did not bear the hallmarks of on-the-run Malaysian militant Noordin Mohammad Top and his group "because they normally target foreigners."

Palu police officer Rawang confirmed the toll had risen from the earlier six to seven, and said the number of injured was at 48.

Television footage showed helmeted police along with survivors carrying the bloodied victims, many of whom were Christians, to cars amid the chaos. The injured were ferried to four nearby hospitals.

"We have sealed the area for fears of more unidentified bombs," Rawang said soon after the blast. "Most of the victims suffered injuries to their legs because of the shrapnel from the bomb."

Provincial police spokesman Rais Adam told AFP that a bomb squad unit had defused a second bomb near the site of the first blast.

Indonesia is the world's largest

Belal murder case

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 He made statement to the Metropolitan Magistrate Atiqul Haque under Section 164 on July 13 confessing to his involvement in Belal murder.

While in jail, Ekhas submitted a petition to the Chief Metropolitan Magistrate (CMM) through the jail superintendent to retract his judicial confession.

The investigating officer of the case forced him to make such statement under Section 164 threatening him with 'crossfire', he mentioned in the petition.

The CMM later forwarded the petition with case docket to the High Court.

Shaikh Belaluddin, Khulna bureau chief of the Daanik Sangram was injured in a bomb attack on February 5 last year and died on February 11 while he was under treatment at Dhaka CMH.

India goes for dams

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 Both Bangladesh and northeastern India fear complete choking and drying up of their river systems and also submersion of scores of villages inhabited by indigenous people in Manipur due to regulation of water at Tipaimukh dam at the confluence of the Barak river.

Participants from India at ITDC alleged that Delhi was up for generating 60,000 MW of hydropower by building scores of dams for marketing abroad.

"Projected power requirement of seven sisters (seven northeastern Indian states) is 1900 MW in 2020 while Delhi is up for generating 60,000 MW by building dams on rivers and tributaries, many of which are main sources of water for major Bangladeshi rivers. The 22-km chicken-neck dividing seven sisters and rest of India would not permit transfer of such high-velocity additional power that India decides to sell to Laos, Vietnam, Cambodia and Thailand," said the Coordinator of the River Basin Friends of Assam, Rabindranath.

"This power will not light our homes. If Tipaimukh (dam) is built, the Surma and Kushiara (in Bangladesh) will be choked in a year. Indian government is not considering preserving human livelihoods and ecology, it is considering the dam issue in the line of cement-mafia, iron-mafia and turbine manufacturers," said Rabindranath, well known in India for water rights activities.

The Dhaka Declaration of the ITDC-2005 called for coordinated peoples' campaign against Tipaimukh project and advocated a 'South Asian Regional Riparian Union' agreement within the framework of Saarc.

Prof Nazrul Islam chaired the third and last session of the two-day conference with politicians, academics and activists making a strong plea for basin-wide approach in harnessing waters of the common rivers. They stressed that co-riparian countries should have equal rights on trans-boundary rivers.

Writer and academician Prof Muhammad Zafar Iqbal inaugurated the meet on Friday, held at the Institution of Engineers.

The ITDC was held in the wake of last November's Indian decision of building the Rs 6,000 crore Tipaimukh dam and its assurance in September that there would be no

'cattle thieves'

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 suspecting them of cattle theft.

The dead are identified as Kashem Ali, 38 and Abu Sayeed, 36 of Sakhallya village in Phulpur.

Police said Sayeed along with Kashem came to his in-laws' house in the same village. They were roaming at about midnight arousing suspicion among the villagers that they are cattle thieves.

The villagers held the two and beat them up. At one stage, they slaughtered Sayeed and Kashem.

Muslim-populated nation, but Christians and Muslims live in roughly equal numbers in parts of the eastern island chain of Sulawesi and in Maluku.

President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono condemned the attack and immediately ordered an investigation, his spokesman Andi Marang said.

Yudhoyono had also asked top security minister Widodo to preside and national police chief Sutanto to "investigate whether this bombing is related to the previous attacks" in the region, Marang said.

National police deputy spokesman Anton Bahrul Alam told AFP that a special team of detectives had left for Palu from Jakarta to probe the blast, but said no fresh police reinforcements would be sent.

Meanwhile some 18,000 security forces on guard over the holiday period were "trying to prevent attacks such as the Palu bombing from taking place in other cities as people are gearing up for the New Year's party," he said.

Shahjalal newspaper

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 The price of local newspaper rose to Tk 45.00 from Tk 42.00 per tonne in July 2005. It became Tk 49, 000 per tonne in August, the Noab press release said.

The cost of imported newspaper stands at Tk 40,000 per tonne while the cost of locally produced newspaper becomes Tk 55,000 per tonne from today. However, the quality of the latter is much worse. Besides, the local mills are not able to supply newspaper as per demand, the release said.

On per tonne imported newspaper, the importers have to pay 25 percent import duty, 15 percent Vat, 4 percent surcharge, 3 percent advance income tax, 1 percent PSI, 0.13 percent DF Vat, port fee and charge of shipping agency, 2 percent insurance cost and Tk 23,000 for other costs. The final cost stands at Tk 63,000 per tonne of newspaper, according to the press release signed by Noab President Mahbubul Alam.

The statement said the recent situation proves that the local newspaper mills have been increasing the price, taking advantage of the imposed SRO, import duty, Vat and other excises on newspaper import.

Speaking at the conference, Awami League (AL) central leader and lawmaker Nurul Islam Nahid asserted that no state or government can have a sole stake on nature which is the common property of the mankind.

The main organiser of the ITDC and Angkor Bangladesh's Chief Director Muhammad Hilauddin felt pity that people are becoming captives of their greed and urged all to fight any move that goes against nature.

Former minister and AL leader AMA Muhiit expressed concern at India's dam-building spree in its northeastern states, having serious bearings on Bangladesh.

Indian authorities should not be captive of partisan interests, said JSD (Inu) leader Mainuddin Khan Badal.

CPB leader Shahidullah Chowdhury said while India is concerned at militancy in Bangladesh, it is unfortunate that building of a dam that could jeopardise millions of lives did not bother it (India) at all.

Citing integrated water resources management of common rivers like the Mekong, Zambezi and Lake Victoria, Prof Asif Nazrul said he did not find any reason why donors are not coming forward in case of India, Bangladesh and Nepal contemplating concerted efforts to harness waters of trans-boundary rivers.

JMB Khulna boss
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 at Daulatpur of the city on Friday. Sources said Mohammad Ziaur Rahman Sagor alias Shabbir was arrested at Tootpara in Khulna city on Thursday night.

A senior officer of intelligence agency of Khulna Metropolitan Police (KMP) said a vigorous investigation is going on to find out links between a ward level BNP leader and Shabbir.

Shabbir told police he used to come to Khulna frequently from Jessore to supply money, explosives and instructions from operations commander in the south-western region Hafez Mahmud to other JMB cadres. He said there are seven more 'Ehsars', the first tier of JMB and full-time JMB workers, at large who are trained for suicide bomb attacks.

A student of Dakhl madrasa in Natore, Shabbir failed twice in the Dakhl examination in 2000 and 2002. "I joined JMB last year at the call of Bangla Bhai," said the JMB deputy operations commander in Khulna. He said he along with some other JMB cadres stayed at the house of Abdul Hakim, a teacher of St Joseph's School in Bagmara of Khulna.

Deputy Commissioner Akbar Ali of KMP told The Daily Star yesterday the police and Rab are committed to crushing the JMB network in Khulna.

Meanwhile, security in Khulna city has been tightened ahead of New Year's celebrations following the arrest of JMB cadres and explosives haul.

Listing starts today

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 (CEC) tomorrow.

Alongside the petitions filed by its lawmakers, AL will stage demonstrations across the country to protest CEC MA Aziz's decision to have a fresh voter list, ignoring the opinion of the other two election commissioners.

The party will hold a protest rally and bring out a procession in the capital while its youth front Awami Jubo League will lay siege to the Election Commission (EC) this morning. Besides, different district and upazila units of the party and its front wings will demonstrate against the fresh roll move.

In another development, the Supreme Court Bar Association (SCBA) yesterday accused CEC Justice MA Aziz of violating the constitution by taking no account of the other election commissioners' opinion over the issue of voter list.

The CEC's move to 'stage-manage' the next election for the ruling alliance at the instigation of some 'evil forces' inside the commission secretary is suicidal for the future of democracy in the country, SCBA General Secretary M Enayetur Rahim said, reading from a statement at a press conference.

A total of 2,16,722 enumerators, who were appointed in last November despite objections from election commissioners M Munsef Ali and AK Mohammad Ali, will go from door to door collecting information on the would-be voters till January 7.

The two election commissioners had opposed the recruitment in writing. But the EC secretary on orders of the CEC went on to appoint 83 registration officers, 6,270 assistant registration officers, 55,684 supervisors and 2,16,722 enumerators for the listing job.

They will carry out the task of preparing the fresh electoral roll in line with the decision CEC took on his own on August 6.

According to the timetable declared for the task on December 6, also without consulting the two election commissioners, the supervisor will start checking the collected information from January 8 to January 21 while assistant registration officers will begin re-checking those from January 22.

A draft list will be published on February 28 while complaints about that will have to be submitted by March 16. The revising authorities will resolve the complaints by April 1.

On completion of these phases, the final voter list will be published on June 1.

CONTROVERSY
 Election Commissioners M Munsef Ali and AK Mohammad Ali have all

along been objecting to going for a