

## Campaign for honest

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The Centre For Policy Dialogue in collaboration with The Daily Star, the Prothom Alo and Channel i organised the regional dialogue as part of a civil society initiative for accountable development.

CPD Executive Director Debapriya Bhattacharya conducted the dialogue in Nanking Darbar Hall.

Prominent educationist and litterateur Hasan Azizul Haque presided over the dialogue. Former vice-chancellor of Rajshahi University Sadiqul Rahman Khan, Public Prosecutor Qasimul Monir and President of Shwacheton Nagorik Committee Rajshahi Golam Arif Tipu were special guests.

Former adviser to a caretaker government Hafiz Uddin Khan spoke on behalf of the Nagorik Committee formed for preparing a vision paper for the year 2021. The editor of The Daily Star also participated in the dialogue on behalf of the organisers.

The speakers said lawmakers should work in unison for the development of the northern region which is deprived of investment and commercial benefit. Entrepreneurs never come to the north due to lack of gas supply and other logistical support, they pointed out.

Demanding immediate disbandment of the present Election Commission (EC), Sadiqul Rahman Khan said the next EC must be acceptable to all political parties.

The EC also must be free from the influence of the government's executive body, he suggested. Khan also demanded reforms in the EC and the system of caretaker government.

He observed that black money is one of the major barriers to free and fair election.

Mafuz Anam, editor and publisher of The Daily Star, said it is our birthright to be citizens of this country and being citizens we have the right to know how our country is being run.

"We, who vote, suffer from mean-mindedness and are not cautious of our political rights, providing opportunities to bad politicians to deceive us. Raising voices against anomalies and problems is our political right."

He called upon all to be proud and feel high enough to be voters in a democratic and independent country. "We will play our political role without being partisans and our politics is not without our moral right," he said.

Prof Hasan Azizul Haque, who chaired the dialogue, said a general election under the existing condition would bring disaster in the society. He urged the civil society members to develop a mechanism so that the suggestions made in the dialogue could be implemented.

Describing the present socio-economic condition as dangerous, he said: "We want to come out of this situation. We want that our resources are distributed without any discrimination to any particular group."

Former minister Sardar Amjad Hossain pointed out that the northern region including Rajshahi has been deprived of industrialisation and adequate allocations for development.

Fazle Hossain Badsha, a politburo member of Bangladesher Workers Party, said voters should be assured of proper voting and results.

Proin Hitoi Sangsad President Dr Sultan Ahmed said lawmakers should be properly trained up on how they can play role as parliamentarian for the welfare of the people.

Advocate Rawshan Ara laid emphasis on discussions between politicians and common people. Accountability of the political leaders is necessary for development and checking corruption, she observed.

Rajshahi Bar Association General Secretary Hemidul Haque said "lawmakers' lack of knowledge and attachment with business have turned parliament into a trade body."

Dil Bahadur Chuni, Rajshahi chapter chief of Bangladesh Human Rights Lawyers' Association, demanded direct voting to elect women lawmakers, good governance and independent judiciary.

Ferdous Ahmed said intellectuals should care more for common people and promote only good ideas. He questioned the necessity of student politics.

Kazi Khan, convenor of Rajshahi Rakha Sangram Parishad, criticised governments for corruption and imbalance in development.

"Governments turn a blind eye to those who make huge money in a short time. Politicians do not love the country. We want a change to this situation," he said urging patriotic people to come to politics.

He said a timely and transparent budget execution is a must to get rid of conditions set by donors as per the Paris Declaration. The government will have to open up its budgetary operations for independent experts to monitor, he added.

He stressed the need for market driven implementation of the Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs).

The other speakers said donors often do not know what to do with their funds.

Citing an example, they said recently, the Australian Aid Agency expressed interest in providing funds for certain development areas but they got puzzled as the ministries allegedly could not help them to prioritise the use of funds.

About the flawed project-designs, the speakers said donor agencies tend to push the aid agenda of their headquarters or apply global templates in designing projects without adequate feedback about local cultural traditions and institutional characteristics.

Planning Secretary Akhtar Hussain Khan said the National Economic Council has already approved PRSPs, which means it's an approval by the government.

"As a result, the administration remains busy taking care of these officials," Mahmud said adding that there should be greater co-ordination between the donors and the government.

Though the Paris Declaration of the OECD prevents donor agencies from setting any prior conditions, no-strings-aid still eludes Bangladesh as it has failed to check corruption and come up with timely, transparent and reliable report on budget execution, he noted.

Mahmud also stressed on taking up development projects in light of the country's own experiences.

He said, "The projects planned by local experts are more effective than those by foreign consultants."

"PRSPs seem to have become more important in having loan disbursed from the donors and cutting poverty," CPD Chairman Rehman Sobhan said in his speech.

## Dr Wahiduddin says

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countries the right to monitor the donors' aid programs, Mahmud said adding, "If the government fails to work out a monitoring mechanism, the civil society should raise their voice in this regard."

He said, "We can plan the development programmes on our own and then seek aids from the donors following the project."

Around 250 missions of different donor agencies visit Bangladesh annually either to prescribe new conditions or monitor whether the preconditions are being properly complied with.

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## Machine readable passport

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spearheaded the project by making the home ministry ignore various rules and regulations till last month has also stopped hammering on the scheme.

Sources close to the lobby said it was very enthusiastic about the scheme not because it wanted implementation of the scheme, rather it was looking for hefty commission in advance from the German company that would have been awarded contract for the project. Moreover, the German company was striking a deal with a Singapore-based company to do most of the job.

Given the huge financial stakes, the lobby using various means tried to convince the prime minister late last month to overturn the Cabinet Purchase Committee's refusal. The committee on July 17 declined to approve the project and asked the home ministry to pursue only the MRP and visa scheme.

Sources mentioned that immediately after the purchase committee refusal, the home ministry at a meeting decided to exclude the NIDC component from the project and assign the passport directorate to float a tender on MRP and visa. The ministry also decided to form a committee on the tender but refrained from forming it.

Meanwhile, lobbyists argued with high officials of the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) and almost convinced them that this project should be re-submitted to the purchase committee without any changes and have it approved. Otherwise, the government will not be able to complete its tender process, and consequently the lobbyists will not be 'benefited' by the scheme.

When PMO officials sought the prime minister's decision on the matter last week, a top official gave her a different view. He told the PM that if such a huge project is approved in violation of rules and regulations, it will be yet another political issue for the opposition. At this point of time, the ruling BNP is better off not approving the deal.

The prime minister accordingly decided that only the MRP and visa project would be undertaken as per her previous decision and as per the purchase committee directive, the sources added.

### ANOMALIES IN THE MRP-NIDC PROJECT

A highly placed source said the home ministry has failed to handle the MRP-visa and NIDC scheme from the beginning.

The prime minister on October 16, 2004 approved in principle a proposal on MRP and visa only. She did not approve the NIDC component. NIDC is a very significant matter having deep political and

economic implications. But this component was added by the home ministry on its own without any policy decision backing it," the source said.

Following the prime minister's approval, the home ministry initially started off with the standard practice. In November 2004, it placed a proposal on MRP and NIDC before the secretary-level committee.

The committee remarked that the financial component of this programme will have to be approved either by the ECNEC or the home ministry, depending on how it is going to be financed, and the manpower component of this programme will have to be cleared by the establishment ministry.

The home ministry discussed the matters with the finance minister and establishment minister. When the ministries concerned started making various enquiries about the programme, the home ministry in January last year stopped all correspondence with them and started moving it in a different direction.

"The home ministry resorted to an unusual practice of pushing it (scheme) ahead on its own. The ministry started inviting officials of the finance, establishment or foreign ministries in its exercises for this programme. As a result, the scheme did not have a single opinion from an external committee," the source mentioned.

"The tender for MRP-NIDC was premature. A law is needed for the NIDC. The manpower component needs to be cleared by the finance ministry and finally approved by the national implementation committee (NICAR). The whole project, be it financed under the revenue budget or by some other means, needs to be cleared by the finance ministry. None of these issues was addressed," he said.

The Tk 1,500 crore tender did not ensure competition and proper evaluation. The tender did not involve reputed international consultants though it involves new state of the art technology around the world. Instead, the ministry hired an expatriate consultant for this job under the influence of a minister's son, who was initially disqualified by the home ministry interview board.

Though 34 international companies showed interest in the bid, only four were pre-qualified through questionable ways. Then only two bids were submitted amid allegations of bid manipulation. As a result, the home ministry bid failed to generate competitive price.

Consequently, the home ministry failed to give a clear breakdown of the project cost at the July 17 purchase committee meeting.

The ministry also inflated the demand for passport that ultimately inflated the overall cost. The present demand for conventional passport is 1.2 million copies a year. The conventional passport lacks certain security aspects, which allow individuals to obtain multiple passports. But when MRP comes into effect, no one can obtain more than one passport.

Experts say this will cut down passport demand by 5 to 7 per cent. Yet, the home ministry has arbitrarily estimated a demand of three million passport when MRP will be available.

### HOW A PROJECT UNDER REVENUE BUDGET SHOULD BE PROCESSED

"The scheme was given the status of a programme to place it under the revenue budget so that the standard financial scrutiny applicable to such huge procurements can be avoided. However, a programme under the revenue budget still needs to undergo a certain process, which the home ministry violated," a high official pointed out.

A programme under the revenue budget needs to be sent to the finance ministry with an estimated cost and a detailed breakdown. An inter-ministerial committee under the finance ministry then scrutinises the policy and budgetary aspects of that programme and make necessary amendments. This committee frames a summary and sends it to the finance minister for approval and the ministry then formally gives the home ministry go ahead informing it of the financial approval.

Besides, the home ministry has to clear its manpower component from another inter-ministerial committee of the finance ministry. This committee also scrutinises the proposal on manpower and approves it.

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## Voter listing

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without allocation of funds even for purchase of necessary materials for the job.

Officials at the EC Secretariat calculated that Tk 20.32 crore is needed for remunerations of the temporary staffs. They will also have to be paid an additional amount as they purchased some necessary materials with their money to start doing the job, sources said.

Besides, the EC will have to spend about Tk 1 crore for transportation and other expenditures of the 6,270 assistant registration officers and 83 registration officers.

"We are planning to allocate the money this week," a senior EC official said on condition of anonymity.

The EC in a couple of days will seek allocation of another Tk 15 crore by the finance ministry, in addition to the Tk 25 crore already allocated, for updating the voter list.

Meanwhile, many field election officials said proposed remunerations of the temporary staffs is inadequate. The staffs will not be satisfied with the money to be given for their job for 21 days, they feared.

They did not also get proper remunerations for preparing a controversial fresh voter list, which was declared illegal by the Supreme Court.

"Each of them was given only Tk 1,000 at that time. They became unhappy at this and refused to work for updating the voter list," a district election officer said.

School teachers, who usually do the job of preparing the voter list, were given over Tk 2,000 each for the task in 2000.

## BNP focuses

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MEET and they plan to give specific directives to the party rank and file on their course of action during the caretaker government's tenure.

Prime Minister and BNP chief Khaleda Zia will continue her views exchange meetings with grassroots level leaders and workers of the party. At the meetings already held, she asked them to go door to door to ensure the party's success in the coming election. She advised them to remain particularly alert after handing over power to a caretaker government, party insiders said.

"BNP leaders and workers will ensure its strong position at field level after power handover," party Secretary General Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan told a rally at Muktagon in the capital last week. "If the opposition wants to implement its proposals during caretaker government's tenure, it must have to discuss with us at that time also."

The next election will show which party has a strong footing among the people and which party has not, influential BNP leader Tarique Rahman said in a recent TV interview.

The BNP high command has meantime instructed party workers to step up mass contact in preparation for the next election to be held by January next year, party sources said.

The party has assessed that many of its candidates were defeated in the last election due to intra-party conflicts and wrong selection of candidates.

Meantime, the prison authorities sometimes do not have correct and updated information about the convicts' state of custody. "It happens mostly to the prisoners transferred from one jail to another and in the cases where the prisoners had been convicted after a period of being on bail," said a jailer.

Admitting it, Inspector General of Prisons Brigadier General Zakirul Islam said, "We now check whether a convict was in the custody earlier. If the court forgets to mention it, we bring it to their attention."

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He said, "The greatest fear of a victim of an atomic bomb is that the destruction of their humanity will continue throughout their lives even if they survive. Atomic bombs are absolute evils and are not morally tolerable."

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## Karnaphuli bridge

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was supporting the government-approving pillar bridge while Nagorik Committee was demanding a suspension bridge on the river Karnaphuli.