

14-party, allies

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upholding the constitution, the election should rather be delayed for the sake of fairness and credibility.

Similar views have been expressed by civil society members and different socio-cultural organisations in the last few days. They have observed that the country still lacks an atmosphere congenial to a free and fair election.

Alongside the 14-party combine, Liberal Democratic Party (LDP)-led Jatiya Oikya Front, Islami Oikya Jote, Zaker Party, Islami Oikya Front and several other Islamic political parties have been demanding that the election be put back to March. They have already started preparing themselves for the polls, bearing in mind that those who for sure be delayed for some days.

EC Secretary Abdur Rashid Sarkar however maintains that there is little scope to hold the election on a date beyond the timeframe stipulated by the constitution.

The 14-party coalition and its allies will soon make a formal announcement from a common platform that they will not participate in the election according to the present timetable and ask the CG to put off the date until March.

The planned grand alliance led by AL will also formally ask President and Chief Adviser Iajuddin Ahmed for complete reconstitution of the EC and appointment of a new CA on grounds that both the EC and the current head of the interim government have failed to hold election as per the constitutional provisions.

The AL Parliamentary Board that met formally after four years on Thursday observed that they will not take part in the election if it is to be held according to the current schedule.

After the meeting, AL General Secretary Abdul Jalil said it would be tough for them to participate in the election within the stipulated 90 days. Alleging that the CG has wasted 47 days, he called for a fresh schedule after correction and publication of the updated voter roll.

Besides, AL Presidium and Central Working Committee have noted that an election debacle is inevitable if they go to polls under Iajuddin Ahmed-led CG.

They believe the CG has become a body loyal to BNP-Jamaat alliance following the appointments of four new advisers.

On this issue, LDP, Jatiya Samajtatrik Dal (JSD) and National Awami Party (Nap) have already held meetings and decided that they will not participate in any election under Iajuddin.

"As long as Iajuddin holds the post of chief adviser, we will not participate in any election," LDP Joint Secretary Firoz M Hasan told The Daily Star last night.

According to the constitution, election is supposed to be held under a non-partisan and neutral CG and EC, but the present ones are anything but neutral, he added.

In parallel with agitation for reforms, the AL-led alliance has been gearing up for the elections. Its allies have also begun negotiating with Hasina over seat sharing.

The ALPB board sat last night to finalise the dates for distributing nomination forms and interviewing the aspirants.

The 14-party will hold a grand rally in the capital on December 18

Printing press

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the processed data in CDs by December 25.

Earlier, an agreement was signed between the Election Commission and the printing press with November 30 as deadline to complete the printing job of the voter list. The deadline was extended at the request of the printing press.

Hajj still uncertain

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government had not issued 'tasria', fitness certificate for the rented houses where the non-ballottee pilgrims are supposed to stay.

A vast number of non-ballottee pilgrims could not get visas on time as the Saudi embassy in Dhaka enforced a strict tasria regulation for issuing visas.

The civil aviation ministry alleged that the private hajj agencies failed to get tasria because they had rented substandard houses in violation of rules.

Later, the tasria problem was managed after Information and Religious Affairs Adviser Mahbubul Alam, and erstwhile textile and jute affairs adviser Sultana Kamal had flown to Saudi Arabia to settle the issue with the authorities there in the first week of this month.

"The problems of tasria and visas for non-ballottee hajj pilgrims are over but all pilgrims will not be able to perform the hajj this year if foreign airlines do not agree to fly additional four thousand pilgrims," said Mohammed Ruhul Amin, a member of Hajj Agencies' Association of Bangladesh (Haab). He also said hajj performance of

where the AL president will clarify the stance of her party and allies on participation in the election.

To build up pressure on the caretaker government to hold the election as per the present timetable, the immediate past ruling coalition will hold a grand rally at city's Paltan Maidan on December 19, a day after the 14-party rally.

Ershad

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truncheons to bring the situation under control. The law enforcers picked up five people during the clash.

Later, the police raided the JP Tophkana office and arrested around 45 leaders and activists.

JP Presidium Member Kazi Zafar Ahmed said Thursday's High Court verdict that sentenced Ershad to two years' imprisonment was "designed" to take the former president off of politics.

The High Court on Thursday rejected Ershad's appeal against a trial court verdict in the Japanese boat purchase case.

"We will launch a larger movement to prevent holding of the election if we do not get justice in the Appellate Division," Kazi Zafar told a rally in the capital.

JP Secretary General AM Ruhul Amin Howlader said a conspiracy is being hatched against Ershad and the JP to destroy the party. The JP will launch programmes against the conspirators, he added.

Ershad's brother GM Quader said, "Everything has been politicised. Ershad is facing trouble as he refused to join the four-party alliance."

The JP observed hunger strike yesterday on the Rangpur Press Club premises and called the hartal in five northern districts for tomorrow.

Thousands of supporters and workers of the party brought out a procession in the town. They also burnt an effigy of President Iajuddin Ahmed. Kurigram district JP also brought out a procession and held a rally to express support to the party chairman and protest the High Court verdict.

EU concerned

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European Parliament adopted a resolution on the situation in Bangladesh on 16 November 2006, expressing its appreciation for the democratic traditions of your country. The elections held under the unique system of a non-party caretaker government, we believe, have contributed to this development," the letter reads.

"Therefore the recent deployment of the army to assist the civil administration despite strong opposition from the other members of the Advisers Council is a matter of serious concern for us. Progress in dialogue made very recently between the two political alliances is currently at stake," it reads.

"We are concerned to learn about the resignation of almost half the cabinet of the caretaker government," the letter says.

"There is concern that the deployment of the armed forces will undermine the progress made in the past towards strengthening the democratic institutions. We fear that further use of the armed forces on a national level may be inconsistent with Bangladesh's participation in international peace operations."

The European Union has recently decided to send an Election Observation Mission to Bangladesh to monitor the forthcoming general election. "In this regard it is our sincere hope that the elections are prepared and implemented in a peaceful climate in which eventually all members of the electorate will feel genuinely free to use their right to vote," the letter says.

2 major alliance's tug-of-war over Ershad on

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The tug-of-war between Awami League (AL)-led 14-party coalition and BNP-led four-party alliance over getting Ershad-led Jatiya Party (JP) into their folds is still on.

BNP leader Ruhul Quddus Talukdar Dulu yesterday said they are trying to convince HM Ershad to join their alliance while AL said it is waiting for a decision from the former military dictator.

"Earlier, Jatiya Party was with four-party alliance, and we hope that the next election will be held with it in our alliance again," Dulu told BBC Bangla Service yesterday.

Admitting that four-party alliance and JP had negotiations for nearly two and a half months regarding allocation of nominations for the upcoming election, Dulu said some distance was created between the parties centring formal announcement from Ershad about joining the alliance. He, however, expressed hope that the distance between them will soon be eliminated.

While asked about Ershad's recent comment on the possibility of his joining 14-party coalition, Dulu said, "He did not say that he had joined an alliance."

Meanwhile, AL leader Tofail Ahmed said the whole nation is waiting for Ershad's decision.

Kamal's counsel

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informed the court that Advocate Ramzan Ali Sikder had inquired whether the court would sit the next day (Dec 7) and had not spoken about granting the application.

It said on Thursday (Dec 14), Barrister M Amir-Ul Islam, president of the Supreme Court Bar Association, and Advocate Salahuddin Ahmad appeared before a division bench of the High Court Division, presided over by Justice M Abdul Wahhab Miah.

It further said they sought permission to be allowed to move an application that day for Dr Kamal Hossain not to be harassed by arrest or otherwise on his return home in connection with the pending sedition case against him and other lawyers.

Japan creates

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Previous attempts to create a defence ministry stalled over political sensitivities in light of Japan's past aggression and fears of upsetting neighbouring countries.

Despite its official pacifism, Japan has one of the world's biggest military budgets at 4.81 trillion yen (41.6 billion dollars) a year.

While public opinion is divided on how far to veer from Japan's half-century of pacifism, the bill to create the defence ministry had wide support, with only the small opposition Social Democratic and Communist parties opposed.

Japan has steadily been assuming a more visible military presence to counter its post-war image as solely an economic power.

In a groundbreaking move, Japan sent troops on a reconstruction mission to Iraq, the first time since 1945 that it had deployed to a country where fighting was underway.

The troops suffered no casualties and never fired their weapons, relying on Australian, British and Dutch forces to protect them.

It also sent close to 1,000 troops to Indonesia to assist with relief after the December 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami.

Besides symbolism, the bill would also give the defence ministry more power in internal wrangling by letting it submit its own budget requests.

The bill changes the status of troops to list overseas activities as one of their missions. Until now, deployments abroad were considered "extraordinary", leading the government to seek parliament approval.

The bill also scraps the Defence Agency body that manages facilities after employees were arrested for alleged bid-rigging. Former prime minister Junichiro Koizumi's government cited the scandal to delay the creation of the defence ministry.

Yunus

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cultures and towards a nuclear weapons-free and non-violent world.

The presence of Prof Yunus, winner of Nobel Peace Prize 2006, is being considered significant in view of the fact that poverty and peace are inseparable and he has given voice to the marginalised sections of society through his unique micro-finance network.

Congress chief Sonia Gandhi, who also heads the ruling alliance, and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh will address the conference.

"The conference has generated global interest and this is reflected in the impressive response extended by world leaders and heads of major political parties," said Indian Minister of State for External Affairs and senior Congress leader Anand Sharma.

Satyagraha is the philosophy of non-violent resistance famously employed by Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi in forcing an end to the British colonial rule in India and also during his struggles in South Africa.

Hasina again demands

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in front of the Bangabandhu Memorial Museum.

The AL chief accused her political rival of hatching conspiracy to be the president of the country through a unilateral election. "She (Khaleda) does not want participation of any other party in the election as she wants to become the president and make her son the prime minister of the country," she said.

Hasina urged the people to remain alert so that President and Chief Adviser Iajuddin Ahmed would not be able to "rig the election under the directive of his mentor Khaleda Zia."

"BNP-Jamaat alliance knows they will not be able to return to power through people's support. So, they are conspiring to implement their election engineering to capture the state power," she said. "If the BNP-Jamaat alliance returns to power, they will destroy the history of the Independence and achievements of the Liberation War."

Referring to the resignation of the four advisers to the caretaker government, the AL president said Iajuddin Ahmed has driven away the advisers as they had spoken the truth.

She bitterly criticised the immediate past BNP-Jamaat government for what she said was destroying the country's judiciary, alleging that the judiciary is being influenced with remote control by the BNP-Jamaat coalition.

About the Thursday's High Court verdict awarding two years' jail to Jatiya Party Chairman HM Ershad, Hasina said Ershad was earlier relieved of many cases, which were pending with the courts, visualising the possibility of his joining the four-party alliance. "But he now faced jail as he refused to join the alliance."

AL leaders Zillur Rahman, Syeda Sajeda Chowdhury, Amir Hossain Amu, Tofail Ahmed, Abdul Jalil, Suranjit Sengupta, Motia Chowdhury, Mofazzal Hossain Chowdhury Maya and Asaduzzaman Noor, poet and columnist Rashid Haider, and Touhid Reza Noor, son of martyred intellectual Serajuddin Hossain, also spoke at the discussion meeting.

JU students

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capital in critical condition while others released after first aid.

Immediately after the accident, another Dhaka-bound university bus with students aboard reached the spot. The students got down from the bus and set two trucks ablaze. Their action infuriated the transport workers, leading to a clash between the two sides. At least 10 JU students were injured in the clash.

On information, fire fighters rushed to the spot and extinguished the fire. Traffic on the Dhaka-Aricha highway remained halted from 9:30am to 11:00am.

Police seized the bus and the truck. But no case was filed with Savar Police Station as of 5:00pm yesterday.

Bhuiyan criticises

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have no shortage of sympathy for Ershad.

Bhuiyan was addressing a discussion meeting organised by the BNP at Ramna Batamul in the capital to mark the National Victory Day.

"Ershad changed his mind several times in the last two months, so it's not final, this is not the end," he said on the issue of Ershad joining the 14-party alliance, adding that the 14-party leaders should not be too happy about Ershad's current intentions to join 14-party.

On the alleged political influence in the verdict against Ershad, Bhuiyan said, "How could BNP influence the High Court when we did not influence the court even when we were in power?"

Urging the AL-led 14-party to participate in the elections, Bhuiyan said, "Trust the people and participate in the elections as the people will decide who will rule the country."

"There is no alternative to elections, if we all want to save democracy," he added.

The BNP secretary general urged the leaders and activists of his party to continue their fight against people who are trying to destroy the image of the country.

He said a few people termed Bangladesh a failed state due to the militant attacks. India had a terrorist attack in its parliament and it is still dealing with terrorism, Pakistan is facing almost a civil war and Nepal is at war. So, if terrorism is used to determine if a state has failed or not then these countries have failed more as a state than we have, he added.

Blasting AL leaders, he said the AL government had Azizul Haque and Mufti Shahidul arrested and tried to accuse them of fundamentalism but now they are with the AL.

BNP standing committee member Khandaker Mosharraf Hossain said the AL is involved in a conspiracy to foil the elections and destroy democracy.

KM Obaidur Rahman said all political parties should join the elections to ensure the continuity of the democratic process.

BNP standing committee member Khandaker Delwar Hossain, Vice-chairman Tariquul Islam, MK Anwar, Shahjahan Siraj and Hafiz Uddin Ahmed, Joint Secretary General Ashraf Hossain and Mirza Abbas also spoke at the meeting.

V-Day back

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government, semi-government and other important establishments.

The day will be heralded by 31 gun salutes at dawn.

Tributes will be paid to the Liberation War heroes by placing wreaths at the National Memorial at Savar in the morning. President and Chief Adviser Iajuddin Ahmed will lead the nation by laying a floral wreath there.

The government, major political parties including the Awami League (AL) and BNP, and different socio-cultural organisations have chalked out elaborate programmes to mark the Victory Day.

The president in a message stressed the need for united efforts to consolidate the country's independence and make the hard-earned achievement meaningful.

"We can further strengthen the process through exercising and expanding democratic culture and values and showing respect to each other, at individual and national levels," Iajuddin said.

Despite differences of opinion among the political parties in the system of democratic pluralism, "we must all make concerted efforts irrespective of party affiliations to solve all our national problems," he said.

Emphasising the importance of the upcoming ninth parliamentary elections in continuing constitutional and democratic advancement, the president called upon the citizens to elect Members of Parliament of their own choice in the elections and contribute towards advancing the democratic process.

AL President Sheikh Hasina in her message urged the people to sharpen the spirit of the Liberation War and jointly face the evil forces and establish a genuine democratic framework in the country.

She said this year's Victory Day will be marked by the victory of the people's movement for protecting their voting rights.

BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia in her message sought people's cooperation to ensure benefit of the independence for all by safeguarding democracy and maintaining the trend of development.

President Iajuddin will accord a reception at Bangabhaban at 4:00pm. Similar receptions will be accorded to freedom fighters at district and upazila levels.

Special prayers will be offered at

Ban promises to restore trust in UN, work to resolve conflicts

AFP, London

South Korea's Ban Ki-moon, due to take over as the next UN secretary general in the new year, promised on Thursday to devote most of his attention to solving the immediate problem of regional conflicts around the world, in an interview with the BBC.

Speaking on the same day he was sworn in as Kofi Annan's successor at a General Assembly ceremony, Ban reiterated comments he made at the ceremony, promising to be a "harmoniser" and a "bridge-builder".

Asked which issue he would devote the most attention to after assuming his duties on January 1, Ban told the broadcaster: "Most immediately, we have many regional conflicts, including situation in Middle East, Lebanese situation and crisis in Darfur."

"If we look at middle, long-term affairs, we must take urgent action to address this climate change issue otherwise our future generations will suffer from this issues," he continued.

The former South Korean foreign minister also said it was a priority of his to restore trust in the organisation, which he said had been "criticised for its inefficiency, ineffectiveness" and was plagued by "widespread mistrust".

"As Secretary General, I will try to be a harmoniser and bridge-builder to reduce the gap," in trust among member states, and between member states and the UN Secretariat, he said.

He also encouraged the United States to continue to play an active role within the UN, because he described its participation in UN activities as "essential".

"I hope that the United States will continue to participate actively," Ban told the broadcaster.

"At the same time, the United States can find the United Nations as a good forum where we can work together to enhance... the objective goals of human right protection, peace and security, and development."

Ban will become the UN's eighth secretary general and the first Asian UN chief since U Thant of Burma led the organisation from 1961 to 1971. He will lead a staff of over 15,000, drawn from more than 170 nations.

Bombs

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In his confessional statement, Bachchu told the police that he carried out the attack on instructions of Asif, who, he said, had business rivalry with Raju.

Raju Alim denied knowing anyone named Asif. He told The Daily Star that he sometimes used his microbus for professional purpose.

When contacted, the Channel i authorities said the incident has no connection with the private TV channel.

Police recovered one pistol and five bullets from Bachchu.

Altaf Hussain, driver of the microbus, filed a case with Ramna Police Station.

US wants

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charge of South Asian affairs at the State Department.

"Perhaps it is the moment to watch and see what they decide. We are watching very closely to see what they decide."

The interim government said Thursday it was making a last-ditch attempt to meet opposition demands for electoral reforms and ensure the polls can go ahead.

But President Iajuddin said he would not bow to mounting pressure to resign.

He told US Ambassador in Dhaka Patricia Butenis that his quitting was "unrealistic and impractical" and "will not happen," his adviser Mukhlesur Rahman Chowdhury said Wednesday.

Boucher said he had talked to the president and "I think he is trying to manage the situation as best he can.

"He is certainly trying to do this in a way that meets the needs of his constitutional responsibilities well as the needs of the current situation."

Asked to comment on some of the president's "controversial" decisions and calls for his resignation, Boucher said, "if he resigns, what next?"

The US official then said "the best thing" is for all parties to cooperate and ensure that the elections were held in a fair, non-violent and credible manner.

The country, long plagued by poverty, corruption, natural disasters and political feuding, has been in turmoil since the BNP's five-year mandate expired in October.

The South Asian nation is also no stranger to coups -- although government officials have dismissed the possibility of yet another one.

Nepal parties, Maoists near constitution deal

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's ruling coalition and Maoists said they were nearing a deal on an interim constitution paving the way for the rebels to join the government as they resumed new rounds of talks yesterday.

The discussions were expected to settle the thorny issue of whether King Gyanendra would continue as head of state during the interim period before elections are held for a special assembly that will rewrite the constitution permanently and decide the monarchy's ultimate fate.

"Friday's informal discussions between top leaders of the seven parties and the Maoists have been very progressive," said Jhalanath Khanal, a senior leader of the Communist Party of Nepal-Unified Marxist Leninist (CPN-UML), the second largest party in the present government.

"All the parties have shown more flexibility in dealing with the pending issues including the debate about who should be the head of the state," said Khanal.

The Maoists have said they want to strip Gyanendra of his title immediately and name a temporary head of state such as Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala.

Koirala is the respected octogenarian architect of last month's peace deal that officially ended a decade-long civil war that claimed 12,500 lives.

Some members of the interim coalition, however, would prefer to see the position left open or the king -- still revered by many in the impoverished nation as a Hindu deity -- retain a ceremonial role.

Earlier today, one of the Maoists said that all the parties were very

EC men yet to show up

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correspondent yesterday. Asked how authentic his claim is, he said he has come to know this from many residents of the housing project who are acquainted with him as he has professional contacts with them.

A number of locals including Abul Kalam Azad, Amena Khatun, Mohammad Mohsin and Baby, who gathered around this correspondent at the time, supported his claim. They said about three fourths of people living in the project area, mainly low income groups like rickshawpullers and day labourers, have not been enrolled.

Asgar said he along with his family has been residing in the area for the last 10 years and cast vote in the 2001 elections, but this time he and his wife were deleted from the list.

Abul Kalam Azad said 32 families having at least two eligible voters each have been residing in a slum on his four-katha plot on Road No 2 in the area for the last few years, but none of them has yet been enrolled.

The locals also said the EC staff are yet to visit their locality.

A frustrated Mohsin, residing the area for the last 12 years, said neither he nor his wife was ever enrolled as voters.

Our Gazipur correspondent reports: Some residents of Baimail village having voter serial Nos 1701, 1733, 1702, 1635, 0099, 0018, 0094, 1409, 1262, 0078 and 0018 noticed that their names

Hamas accuses Fatah

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had fired on the convoy, did you not say to yourself, 'too bad they missed it?'"

"Emotionally, it was indeed my feeling," Sneh responded. "But upon coldly reconsidering it, I do not believe that that would have solved the problem."

The Rafah closure had prompted dozens of Hamas gunmen to storm the terminal, firing guns, smashing windows and furniture and sending travellers and European Union observers scrambling for cover. Thirteen Palestinians were wounded.

The clashes erupted after Israel accused Haniya of attempting to smuggle "tens of millions of dollars" into the Gaza Strip, which it alleged would be used to finance terrorism.

The Palestinians are desperately short of funds because of an aid freeze by the European Union and the United States, which consider Hamas a terrorist group.

Haniya was finally allowed to cross after a compromise was hammered out between Israel and Egypt, in which the 35 million dollars Haniya was reportedly carrying would be deposited in a Cairo bank to be transferred to a Palestinian Authority account.

Haniya had cut short his first foreign trip to deal with the mounting infighting after a series of killings, including the drive-by assassination Monday of three young sons of a Palestinian intelligence chief.

near to reaching a consensus on finalising the interim constitution.

"We are very close to giving final shape to the interim constitution despite some minor differences among the seven (ruling) parties," said Maoist negotiating team coordinator Krishna Bahadur Mahara.

"We're hoping to reach a consensus on the draft interim statute today (Friday)," he said.

Under the terms of the peace deal, elections are to be held next June for the assembly that will write the final version of the constitution.

The king, however, has already been stripped of most of his authority and has been tainted by allegations of abuse of power.

The two sides have been holding talks since Wednesday.

"The talks on the interim constitution are in the final stage and it's taking time because all the parties are seriously engaged in sorting out differences," said Arjun Narsingh KC, a leader of the Nepali Congress, the largest party in the present government.

The future of the monarchy, electoral procedures for assembly elections and some basic fundamental rights, including employment guarantees, were among issues being settled.</