

V-Day celebrated

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31-gun salute at dawn. All government and semi-government offices and public and private buildings hoisted the national flag and special prayers were offered at mosques, temples, churches and other places of worship, seeking divine blessings for peace and progress of the country.

State-run and private televisions and radios aired special programmes while newspapers carried special supplements highlighting the significance of the day and contributions of the common people in the Liberation War.

Main streets and road islands in different cities including Dhaka were decorated with miniature flags and bunting while some government buildings were also illuminated. Improved diets were served in jails, hospitals, orphanages and vagrant homes on the day.

Thousands of jubilant people thronged the national mausoleum since early morning on the anniversary of the country's emergence.

After paying homage, President Iajuddin Ahmed attended a colourful rally of children and juveniles staged at Bangabandhu Stadium as part of state-level celebrations. He inaugurated the programme by releasing balloons and hoisting the national flag in the morning.

The president took salute and witnessed spectacular physical displays and exercises by school-goers. A total of 31 schools and institutions participated in the programme.

Addressing the function, he called for a concerted contribution to maintaining the continuity of the constitution and advancing of the democracy for building a prosperous nation.

Urging for united efforts to make the national independence and

democracy meaningful, the president observed that the nation is now in a 'great war' that is to build a happy and prosperous country, reports UNB.

He hosted a reception at Bangabhaban in the afternoon. Similar reception was accorded to freedom fighters at district and upazila levels.

A weeklong exhibition of military hardware that began Friday at National Parade Square to commemorate the victory against the Pakistanis is on.

Reports said navy ships were kept open for public at Chittagong, Khulna and Mongla ports, Sadarghat in Dhaka, and Narayanganj and Barisal BIWTAjetties.

Bangla Academy and Shilpakala Academy arranged cultural functions on their premises in the afternoon. Bangladesh Shishu Academy arranged cultural function, film exhibition and painting competition.

Bangladesh missions abroad also organised discussions and cultural functions on the occasion.

The AL that chalked out a two-day celebration took a victory procession from 'Shikha Chirantan' in the afternoon that ended at Bangabandhu Memorial Museum. Sheikh Hasina met freedom fighters, artists of Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendra and intellectuals at Sudha Sadan office in the morning.

BNP took up elaborate programmes to celebrate the occasion and will bring out a colourful procession from its Naya Paltan central office premises today.

'Informal' move

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proposals, new advisers were appointed and tasked with resolving the crisis by forging a consensus between the two political alliances.

A meeting of the council of advisers on Wednesday decided to re-initiate moves to resolve the deadlock over EC reconstitution.

The president on Friday summoned three advisers—Shafiqul Haque Chowdhury, Dr Shoeb Ahmed and Ruhul Alam Chowdhury—at Bangabhaban and enquired about the progress of their move.

Adviser Shafiqul told reporters that night that they sought a few more days to complete the negotiations.

The advisers to the caretaker government yesterday attended the Victory Day reception at Bangabhaban, but they could not discuss the latest political situation with the president.

Talking to The Daily Star yesterday, an adviser said the council of advisers could not discuss the prevailing political situation since Wednesday's meeting as the chief adviser did not convene any meeting.

"We hope the chief adviser will convene a meeting of the council of advisers tomorrow to discuss the

latest situation," he said.

Another adviser said on condition of anonymity, "I am not aware of any kind of development over resolving the political deadlock."

Meanwhile, the time for filing nomination papers for the next parliamentary election is running out fast. The deadline is December 21.

But the AL-led 14-party alliance has already announced that it will not participate in the election under the current schedule.

The previous polls schedule had December 10 as the last date for filing nomination. The date was re-fixed in line with the advisory council's package proposal.

Political analysts said the situation is becoming complex with the crisis yet to be resolved although there are only four days for filing nomination papers.

If the AL-led 14-party alliance, Jatiya Party and Liberal Democratic Party, which have been demanding deferment of the election by over a month, do not file candidatures within the time, either the polls schedule will be re-fixed once again or the election will be held amid boycott by some major political parties.

Brickfields threaten

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feet, said environmentalist Propdi Chowdhury.

Propdi Chowdhury, also the programme supervisor of Centre for Sustainable Development (CFSd), said the diminishing forest in Khagrachhari is going to have a negative impact on the environment in the entire region.

A Mymensingh Agriculture University student, Sathowai Marna, blamed brickfields for trees without fruits — which is a common phenomenon in his village in Golabari, where water level is also on the decline during the winter.

An indigenous farmer, Mongshipru Marna, pointed out at the brickfields' impact on the local agriculture, "Paddy as well as other crop production is declining day by day as more and more cultivable fertile land is ending up as brickfields."

Mongshipru, a teacher at a local high school, also alleged that the brickfield owners regularly bribe the officials responsible for safeguarding public interest.

This correspondent made several visits to eight upazilas of the hill district and found that at least 44 brickfields in Khagrachhari, Matiranga, Mahalchhari, Manikchhari, Dighinala, Panchhaur, Ramgar and Laxmichhari use up around 2 crore mounds of firewood illegally per year.

The authorities there turned a blind eye to the violations of law by the brickfield owners where they have been using timber as fuel instead of coal, said the sources.

An official in the district administration on condition of anonymity admitted some government officials' involvement in the illegal activities and said the number of brickfields might be higher than 44. "We can't get the real statistics of the brickfields as some of (our) officials are also involved in these illegal activities."

Five of these brickfields have valid licences while 17 more are in the process of acquiring their licences, said a second-class magistrate in the district administration on condition of anonymity.

However, the DoE said only two out of the 44 brickfields have valid documents and licences.

The two licensed brickfields also use timber as firewood violating the environmental regulations, sources complained.

According to an estimate, at least 2.4 lakh maunds of firewood are required in each brickfield per year, sources said quoting a survey.

The brickfield owners, with the help of a section of dishonest employees of the forest department, cut down more than 13 crore timber trees to be

consumed at the brickfields, sources said.

Mohammad Nurunnabi, owner of a brickfield, admitted using firewood in his brickfield and wanted to 'negotiate' with local journalists as he already made 'negotiations' with authorities concerned on the matter.

A brickfield owner from Dighinala upazila said on condition of anonymity that the Brick Field Owners Association maintains liaison with the authorities and donates Tk 50,000 to 70,000 per field to their 'fund'.

Shah-e-Alam, district forest officer, denied any misuse of the forest in return of bribes by his officials and said, "I do not know of any such use of timbers as fuel in the brickfields. I will take proper action if I catch them in action."

Khagrachhari coordinator of Bela (Bangladesh Environmental Lawyers' Association) Muhammad Abu Daud said his organisation is considering taking legal action to stop abuse of the natural forest as firewood in the brickfields.

Magistrate Sheikh Farid also requested the deputy commissioner (DC) to form a mobile court to investigate the firewood and chimney issues. However, he could not confirm if the DC has taken any such initiative yet.

Military

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DMCH sources said the two other injured left hospital after receiving primary treatment.

Montu's brother Ruhul Amin filed an unnatural death case with Kafur Police Station, said police.

Call for unified

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Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, late president Ziaur Rahman and countless martyrs, Liberal Democratic Party president member and former state minister Redowan Ahmed criticised the so called 'national alliance'.

On Mannan Bhuiyan's comment, where he said that the war criminals and collaborators remain unidentified even after 35 years of liberation, LDP leader Didar Bakht expressed his deep shock, "How come Mannan Bhuiyan or Sadeque Hossain Khoka utter such a lie, while they themselves once fought against these Rajakars?"

The leaders also criticised Khaleda Zia's aide to let the war collaborators hoist the national flag at their vehicles and Tarique Zia's comment where he said Jamaat Shibir and BNP belong to the same family.

US health

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The FDA convened a two-day meeting of outside experts to discuss Ketek in light of concerns about its safety. An agency review found 13 reports of liver failure in patients treated with the drug through September. Reports of blurry vision also have been a concern. Doctors have prescribed the antibiotic more than 5.6 million times in the United States since the FDA approved it in 2004.

On Friday, the FDA panelists voted 16-3 to say Ketek's benefits outweigh its risks in treating pneumonia. In 17-2 votes, the outside advisers said that wasn't the case for bronchitis and sinusitis, which are less serious infections and often spontaneously resolve on their own.

Dr. John Jenkins, director of the FDA's office of new drugs, declined to say what action the agency would take. The FDA isn't bound to follow the advice of its outside experts, but usually does. "We will be assessing the advice we received from the committee and discussing that very shortly," Jenkins said.

The panel also recommended Sanofi-Aventis develop a medication guide to be given to patients, a move backed by the company. Dr. John Edwards, of Harbor-UCLA Medical Center in Torrance, Calif., and the panel's acting chairman, called the two-day meeting particularly challenging, since it came amid concern that companies have diminishing interest in developing new antibiotics and increased interest in safety issues linked to the drugs.

Many experts fear overuse of antibiotics is hastening the increasing resistance of many bacteria to older drugs, making the development of novel treatments critical. Some panelists suggested reserving Ketek for second-line use in treating pneumonia.

The label of the drug was changed in June to add a bold-type warning about the rare reports of liver failure and severe injury, some of them fatal. A majority of panel members said that cautionary language should be strengthened and placed in a so-called "black box" to warn doctors and patients of some of the risks associated with the drug.

The FDA's handling of Ketek remains under investigation by a Senate committee. Sen. Charles Grassley (news, bio, voting record), R-Iowa, said this week the FDA intentionally withheld information from FDA advisers when they met in 2003 to consider recommending approval of the drug. FDA officials said they would comment after reviewing his allegations, contained in a 20-page letter sent to the agency.

Sanofi-Aventis said the risks associated with the drug, also known as telithromycin, appear to be comparable to those of other similar drugs and that it represents an important option in treating respiratory tract infections.

CPJ concerned

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November 22 attack on Hasibur Rahman Bilu, a staff reporter of The Daily Star.

Unidentified men attacked Bilu when he was on his way to his office in Bogra. He was treated for the injuries to his legs and hand and is still suffering from the pains, CPJ quoting Bilu said.

"Bilu, who has written about corruption among Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and Jamaat-e-Islami members in Bogra, believes he was attacked in retribution for his reporting. No arrests have been made in the case; Bilu has continued working despite the attack," the letter read.

The letter mentioning news reports said journalists of Sathkira have demanded action against former BNP legislator Habibul Islam Habib for his alleged death threats to Prothom Alo reporter Kalyan Banerjee on November 23.

The journalist filed a police complaint. Two other reporters of Sathkira — Subhas Chowdhury of Dainik Jugantar and Jannabhumir reporter Mozaffar Rahman — also received death threats on November 24 and 25, the letter citing newspaper reports said.

The CPJ urged the president to address these new threats while mentioning that the government should also work to address previously unresolved cases in order to prevent further attacks.

The letter said 10 journalists have been killed for their work since 2000 with near total impunity and a pattern has emerged of the suspects being detained and released, trials postponed, and justice delayed.

The CPJ said no convictions were made in the killings of Mir Ilias Hossain, Shamsur Rahman, Nahar Ali, Harunur Rashid, Shukur Hossain, Manik Saha, Humayun Kabir, Sheikh Belaluddin or Gautam Das who were all murdered in the last six years.

"The record impunity has made Bangladesh one of the most dangerous places in the world for journalists," the letter read.

The CPJ said during the turmoil of this pre-election season, a free press is crucial to the strength of the democratic process. But the press cannot be free without the assurance of safety.

Kamrangirchar left

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pouring out allegations against the EC enumerators and the local BNP and Jamaat leaders and activists.

They said field level EC officials visited their slums and houses accompanied by local leaders of BNP and its front organisations.

Leaders of the local units of BNP and its youth front Jubo Dal took the EC officials to their supporters' houses and slums only, alleged the aggrieved residents.

"We saw some of the field level officials writing 'A' on their papers next to the names of known Awami League supporters and activists," alleged a local resident while many around him were also echoing him.

Mostafa, a local Awami League activist, was beaten by BNP activists as he protested against the alleged irregularities, said some eyewitnesses.

A former Jatiyatabadi Chhatra Dal activist of ward no 5 said the allegation is true, requesting anonymity.

"We supervised and helped the field level EC officials in their work," said Golam Rasul Shamim, son of Rafiqul Islam, the general secretary of the thana unit of BNP.

"We could not register the names of many prospective voters of this area as they might move out to other places in the city before the polling day," said Shamim.

Rafiqul Islam also admitted that BNP and its front organisation leaders

and activists 'helped' the EC officials in their work.

When confronted with the allegation that Awami League supporters and activists were being left out of the voter list, he however showed utter astonishment and termed the allegation as a 'baseless rumour'.

"They (field level officials) did not include us as voters," said Nurjahan, a resident of ward no 5, adding, "They rather told us to contact the thana election office."

"The field level officials left our slum without registering us as voters," claimed Sekandar (65) and Masuda Khatun.

"We were not registered as voters even at the time of the earlier updating of the list," Sekandar alleged.

Meanwhile, our Comilla correspondent reported that EC enumerators dropped the names of some seven thousand voters from the list in Sadar South upazila there.

The much talked about correction of the voter list in eleven days began on December 8 across the country amid lack of proper guidelines, preparation, and enthusiasm among the field level staff for the job.

Constant allegations of some major irregularities in correcting the updated voter list have been being reported both in the capital and elsewhere in the country since the process began.

Tax exemption

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"It is also argued that it violates the principle of equity and free flow of resources among alternative uses," the study stated, concluding, "The tax holiday facility may be withdrawn as suggested by the Revenue Reform Commission."

NBR sources said many businessmen and politicians misuse the tax-holiday for evading taxes, falsely citing income from agriculture and fisheries sectors that enjoy this facility to induce investment.

The study suggested the current system be replaced by the existing "accelerated depreciation allowances" or, a "reduced tax rate with a lower rate in earlier years", which would increase gradually.

The study also found tax exemptions are the highest in Value Added Tax (VAT) in terms of revenue loss and as percentage of revenue earning, and suggested a review of VAT to reduce exemptions. In this regard, it cited as examples commercial educational and training institutions, commercial renters, and income of brokers at the stock market.

For direct taxation, exemption is the highest in agriculture (15 percent), fisheries and forest (12 percent), and public services and labour and employment (5 percent), the study found.

Of the Tk 9,345 crore tax exemptions, Tk 1,028 crore is in the 'direct taxes' category, while indirect taxes account for Tk 8,317 crore. Of the indirect taxes, VAT exemption totals Tk 7,687 crore and customs duty Tk 365 crore.

The study recommended "organisational reinvention" of the tax administration, expanding the tax

base in categories such as income tax and VAT as well as setting an operational definition and methodology for 'tax exemption'.

The World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) are currently pressuring the government to reduce tax exemptions to boost revenue earnings.

JP calls hartal

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support for today's hartal.

In Niphamari town, JP and its front organisations brought out a huge procession and burnt an effigy of President and Chief Adviser Iajuddin Ahmed, alleging that he is acting on advice of BNP-Jamaat leaders.

Later, a public meeting was held at Bazar intersection, which was addressed by district JP Vice-President Shahjahan Chowdhury, former lawmaker Ahsan Ahmed and Poura JP President Khairat Hossain Shah.

The speakers warned that they would not allow holding of polls in the greater Rangpur if Ershad is kept out of the race for the polls.

In Gaibandha, JP brought out a procession followed by a rally in the town yesterday protesting the verdict and urging the people to observe hartal in the district.

Addressing the rally, JP Presidium member and former lawmaker Lutfar Rahman Chowdhury said that the verdict proves that the judiciary of the country is still not independent. Gobindaganj Upazila JP also held a rally at Chaturang point in support of today's hartal.

Latifur Rahman

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or partly.

In these reports, I was accused of using the influence of Prothom Alo and The Daily Star to increase my personal wealth and illegally occupying land in different areas.

Example was cited about the purchase of a land near Farmgate by Mediaworld, owning company of The Daily Star. These reports also focused on W Rahman Jute Mill, an inherited family property that I own but a small share.

All the above reports are either false, distorted or presented in ways where facts have been twisted to suit the purpose of maligning me. I strongly condemn these unfounded, ill-motivated and misleading news items.

It may be noted here that no reference has been made in the said reports about my acquiring any land anywhere in the country, except the land purchased by Mediaworld. The land in question was purchased by Prothom Alo in accordance with due formalities. A detailed rejoinder was sent on December 13 to Amar Desh, ntv and Rtv in this regard by The Daily Star and Mediaworld and it was published in The Daily Star and Prothom Alo on December 14. The rejoinder exposed explicitly the false allegations about the land purchase. Prothom Alo also sent its own rejoinder on December 13 to Amar Desh, Prothom Alo and The Daily Star, proving the falsity of the allegations about my using the influence on the paper for personal gain.

Today, I am issuing my own rejoinder against the above false and distorted reports involving my businesses and inherited property.

W Rahman Jute Mills is an inherited "extended family" property in which I have a mere 3.8 percent shares. The remaining shares are held by 40 other private shareholders. The Government of Bangladesh owns 49 percent of the shares. W. Rahman Jute Mills, like the rest of the composite jute industry, is a sick unit. Despite the severe financial constraints, W. Rahman Jute Mills has paid and is continuing to pay employees dues regularly within the parameters of an agreement reached between the management and employees in April 2003.

Regarding the allegation of false declaration for import of refrigerator components in January 2004, I would like to state that these charges were false and brought about at the instigation of a former powerful minister, triggered by some reports in Prothom Alo and The Daily Star concerning his son's business activities. Subsequently, our position was vindicated by the Hon'ble High Court which ordered release of the goods in question. This was an incident of 2004 and has been deliberately written again to malign my reputation.

I reiterate my surprise and outrage at the sustained attack on my reputation and goodwill by Amar Desh, ntv and Rtv. The minimum journalistic ethics of allowing me a response or comment in the original reports was not observed. No reporters from any of the above three media outlets bothered to contact me to verify the facts or take my version of the story. It can only be compared with the worst form of yellow journalism that is practiced anywhere.

It is obvious that the attack was triggered by a report on Mosaddak Ali Falu in Prothom Alo on December 4. (Comments of both Mr Falu and his business associate Enayetur Rahman were carried in the report). It may be noted that Mr Falu's own rejoinder was duly published in the Prothom Alo on December 5. Even after that if Mr Falu felt aggrieved he could have made reports about the paper itself or he could have taken recourse of the law, which would have been the normal course of action.

Without going for either recourse, Mr Falu's media outlets went for a free-wheeling false and vicious attack on my person and on my business. This was done perhaps in the misplaced hope that I will influence Prothom Alo and The Daily Star to desist them from further exposing activities of people involved in corruption using political power. This is not how these papers have operated in the past nor will they do so in future.

I would like to unequivocally state that both The Daily Star and Prothom Alo enjoy total editorial freedom for which they have gained the trust of millions of their readers. I will do everything, as I have done in the past, to make that editorial freedom even stronger. These two papers have gained public respect for their crusading role in exposing the corrupt elements in the society. They will carry on their task regardless of any attempt at intimidation or threat.

I would like to humbly state that my family has been in business for more than 100 years, beginning in 1885, and by the grace of Allah, I have established a modest reputation as an ethical businessman who has never used any influence by any government or any political party, ever."

V-Day celebrated at missions abroad

UNB, Dhaka

Bangladesh missions abroad yesterday observed the Victory Day.

The missions held discussions and offered special prayers for the salvation of the departed souls of the war heroes, according to messages received in Dhaka yesterday.

Celebrating the Victory Day, Bangladesh High Commissioner to Australia M Humayun Kabir, in a discussion meeting held on the high commission premises, called upon the expatriate Bangladeshis to work for innovation in thoughts and to convey the objective image of the nation before the international community.

President of Bangladesh Australia Association Canberra Inc. Abdul Quader, Dr Abed Chowdhury also spoke on the occasion highlighting the significance of the Victory Day.

Bangladesh embassy in Nepal also celebrated the day by holding various programmes.

All officers and staff, including their family members, and expatriate Bangladeshis attended the programmes.

Chavez denies

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the ailment would be kept secret to prevent Cuba's enemies from taking advantage of them.

The US broke official ties with Cuba following Castro's rise to power in 1959 and has had an economic embargo in place against the island since 1960.

Show of alliance

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BNP also held a preparatory meeting of its leaders of different districts adjacent to the capital. At the meeting BNP Secretary General Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan directed the grassroots level leaders to take all out preparations to make their rally a success. Bhuiyan in a statement also directed the party leaders to strengthen organisational activities in each unit.

80 hurt

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As the rival political activists started shouting angry slogans, the mayor took the microphone and tried to quell the situation.

But BNP leader Abdullah Al Noman took away the microphone from the mayor and started delivering a 'political speech'.

Angry supporters of the two parties threw brickbats and shoes at each other after a chase and counter chase, prompting police and Bangladesh Rifles personnel to charge baton on the feuding groups.

Twelve people were wounded during the incident. MOUNVIBAZAR

Fifty people were injured in a clash between the activists of AL and Jamaat yesterday afternoon, reports our correspondent.

AL was holding a Victory Day gathering in front of the AL office after a procession in Baralekha upazila where participants in a Jamaat procession, brought out in observance of the Victory Day, allegedly threw brickbats at them.

The ensuing clash left 50 people injured while several shops owned by AL supporters were damaged and five motorcycles of Jamaat supporters were burnt.

Police fired rubber bullets to bring the situation under control. MYMENSINGH

At least 10 people were injured in a clash between the activists of BCL and Jatiyatabadi Chhatra Dal (JCD) on the Bangladesh Agricultural University campus yesterday morning, reports our correspondent.

As the BCL and JCD men were going to the campus to place floral wreaths at Bijoy '71, a Liberation War memorial, at around 10:30am, the two groups got locked in a clash, sources said.

Three of the injured were rushed to Mymensingh Medical College Hospital.

The agitating students ransacked the offices of the provost and house tutors and broke the windowpanes of some 30 rooms of Isha Khan Hall and Shaheed Jamal Hossain Hall.

An uneasy situation is prevailing on the campus as the BCL, JCD and Chhatra Shibir have taken positions.

Additional police have been deployed on the campus.

PABNA

A clash between the AL and Jamaat activists left 10 people injured in the town yesterday afternoon.

The clash erupted at around 1:00pm when AL activists damaged a Bijoy Mancha (victory stage) that Jamaat men erected on a road at Doel Chatter, reports UNB.

Hill cutting

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complex. A case was filed with Chandanaish Police Station.

Some influential quarters have long been engaged in illegal hill cutting in different areas of Rajjoara, Hatia and Siraj Driverer Tek in Chandanaish for getting land and earth for sale to owners of brick kilns.

Bhutan's king

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when the country is slated to hold its first elections in the mountainous country known as a Shangri-la of breathtaking beauty.

The king is most famous for having decided to make his isolated mountain nation's priority not its GDP, but its GNH — or "gross national happiness".

The newspaper report gave no explanation why the abdication had come earlier than expected. But Indian news reports said the king decided to step down to allow the 26-year-old crown prince time to gain more political exposure.

"His Majesty Jigme Singye Wangchuk has handed over his responsibilities as the monarch and head of state of Bhutan to the Crown Prince Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuk," the newspaper said on its web site.

The crown prince, who studied at Britain's Oxford University, "now assumes full responsibilities of head of state," the newspaper said.

The decision shocked the 600,000 citizens of the kingdom, which also calls itself the "Land of the Thunder Dragon".

"The announcement has been greeted with shock and disbelief as nobody expected the handing over of power to the crown prince so early," U Dorjee, a businessman in the capital Thimphu, told AFP by telephone.

Cabinet members and guests present as the king made the announcement Thursday "were overcome by emotion and sat in a long and stunned silence," the newspaper reported.

The new king will be the fifth ruler in the Wangchuck dynasty that came

to power in December 1907.

"King Wangchuk has abdicated," a senior Bhutanese foreign ministry official who asked not to be identified said by telephone to an AFP correspondent in Guwahati, the main city in India's Assam state which borders Bhutan.

"There was no official coronation ceremony for the new king. Maybe a formal ceremony will take place later," the official said.