

Indian Muslim campaign aims to break stereotypes

REUTERS, Kolkata

A powerful Muslim group in India, home to the world's third-largest Islamic population, has launched a campaign to spread progressive values in the community and break stereotypes, its leaders said yesterday.

Thousands of clerics and volunteers of the Jamaat-e-Islami Hind, the biggest body of Indian Muslims, are meeting fellow Muslims in towns and villages with the message that a right understanding of Islam would defeat perceptions that Muslims are "fundamentalist" and "militant".

"Our aim is to explain to the community that the true values of Islam do not talk about jihad as an excuse to take up arms," Rahamat Ali Khan, a senior Jamaat leader, told Reuters in Kolkata.

None of India's 140-million Muslims have been found to be members of Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda but dozens of Islamist militants have been arrested or killed in recent years in connection with separatist violence or terrorist attacks.

The Jamaat commands widespread influence among Muslims, especially in the countryside, and has around 5 million members and volunteers.

About 80 percent of India's 1.1 billion people are Hindus and Muslims account for about 13 percent of the officially secular nation.

Jamaat's campaign started last month after a study ordered by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh on the status of Muslims revealed they felt they were seen by other communities as unpatriotic and needed to prove they were not terrorists.

It also said Muslims were among the least literate and poorest, along with Hindu Dalits, formerly "untouchables", and were likely to be in prison in disproportionate numbers.

The literacy rate for Muslims is lower than the national average and the status of Muslim women is worse, with many unaware of their rights.

"We are calling for education for all family members, especially girls, and equal rights for women as this is what Islam really preaches," Khan said.

Muslims, especially in rural areas, often follow the Fatwas or edicts of local Islamic clerics. Many Muslims also live in urban ghettos and worry about the possibility of religious riots breaking out.

Analysts say Muslim alienation has increased since the early 1990s after hardline Hindus razed a disputed mosque in northern India, sparking riots that left thousands dead.

Jamaat members are telling Muslim women that under Islamic law, if their husbands die, their brothers-in-law and fathers-in-law have to look after them and not allow them to become destitute by throwing them out of their houses.

They are also meeting Muslim families and educating them of their rights and leaders say thousands are attending meetings in several states.

"The response to our call has been overwhelming," said Syed Qasim Rasool Ilyas, another Jamaat leader.



Information Adviser Mahbubul Alam, third from right, and Chinese Ambassador to Bangladesh Chai Xi, second from left, inaugurate Narandi-China Friendship Complex at Narsingdi on Tuesday. National Press Club President Reazuddin Ahmed, extreme left, was also present on the occasion.

Narandi-China Friendship Complex inaugurated

BSS, Narsingdi

The Narandi-China Friendship Complex was inaugurated at Narandi village under Monohardi upazila of the district on Tuesday.

Information Adviser Mahbubul Alam and Chinese Ambassador to Bangladesh Chai Xi inaugurated the complex, built at a cost of Tk 35 lakh, by hoisting the national flags of Bangladesh and China.

The complex was built as per a Chinese architectural design with the financial assistance of the Chinese government. It will offer facilities like computer training, music and vocational training.

Presided over by Reazuddin Ahmed, editor of the News Today and incumbent president of National Press Club, the function was also addressed by Mokhesur Rahman Chowdhury, adviser to the president.

The function was also addressed by Deputy Commissioner of Narsingdi Kamal Uddin, newly elected President of National Press Club Shaukat Mahmud, its General Secretary Kamal Uddin Sabuj, BFUJ Secretary General Ruhul Amin Gazi, Convener of Narsingdi Press Club Mohammad Abu Taher and Executive Director of Narandi-China Friendship Complex Lt Col (ret'd) Joynul Abedin.

Mahbubul Alam said Bangladesh and China are friends for long. He thanked the Ambassador of China for helping the construction of the complex. He also recalled the close relations between the two countries.

Chai Xi said the friendly relations between the two countries will continue to grow from strength to strength. He also said China is always ready to support development efforts of Bangladesh.

Earlier, Narandi villagers arranged a cultural function in honour of the special guests on Narandi School premises.

Avalanches kill 3 in French Alps

AFP, Grenoble

Three off-piste skiers were killed on Wednesday in snowslides in the French Alps, taking the avalanche toll in the region to four since the start of the week, the gendarmerie said.

A local 20-year-old man, who was buried in an avalanche while skiing in the high-altitude resort of Chamonix, died in hospital on Wednesday night of heart failure.

UPDF demands free, fair polls

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Khagrachhari

Leaders of United Peoples Democratic Front (UPDF), a regional political group of Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), yesterday placed 4-point demand for holding a free and fair election.

The demands included resignation of Iajuddin from the post of chief adviser and hand over of power to a neutral caretaker government, reconstitution of Election Commission and preparation of correct voter list, and neutralisation of administration.

The demands were placed at a press conference at their election campaign office at Sanibarbar in the district town.

The UPDF also boycotted the coming polls as their all candidates withdrew nomination papers from three CHT constituencies on January 3.


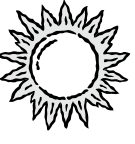
They said the caretaker government has so far taken preparations for a 'state-managed election in favour of BNP-Jamaat-led 4-party alliance'.

UPDF central committee member Samari Chakma said an atmosphere conducive to a fair election has yet to be prevailed as the caretaker government Chief Iajuddin Ahmed is busy in holding an election to reinstate the BNP-Jamaat government.

"As a valid voter list is yet to be prepared and published while the administration is totally politicised by ex-BNP-Jamaat government, it is impossible to hold a free and fair election under Iajuddin," she said.

"On the other hand, the army is obstructing UPDF activities in Chittagong Hill Tracts. Now they are harassing our party men under 'Operation Uttarari' and ordered us not to open election campaign office in all upazilas in CHT," claimed UPDF Election Conducting and Coordinating Committee Secretary Pradipon Khisha.

UPDF central committee members Animesh Chakma, Milton Chakma, Hill Women Federation President Sonali Chakma, Democratic Youth Forum (DYF) Secretary Mithun Chakma, Pahari Chhatra Parishad Secretary Ujjal Chakma were present at the press conference.



WEATHER TODAY

Cold wave may continue

UNB, Dhaka

The prevailing mild to moderate cold wave over Dhaka, Rajshahi, Sylhet and Chittagong divisions and the regions of Jessore, Satkhira, Chuadanga and Barisal may continue in the next 12 hours until 6:00pm today.

A Met Office forecast said dry weather will prevail over the country and moderate to thick fog may occur over the river basins. Light to moderate fog may occur elsewhere over the country during late night until morning, it said.

Highest temperature 25.0 degree Celsius was recorded yesterday at Cox's Bazar and lowest 7.2 at Jessore and Chuadanga.

The sun sets in the capital at 5:25pm today and rises at 6:43am tomorrow.

Highest and lowest temperature and humidity recorded in some major cities and towns yesterday were:

City/Town	Temperature		Humidity in percentage	
	Max	Min	Morning	Evening
Dhaka	24.0	10.5	93	83
Chittagong	18.1	12.6	83	54
Rajshahi	19.6	7.9	99	87
Khulna	21.0	10.5	75	71
Barisal	21.7	9.8	94	78
Sylhet	23.8	10.0	97	89
Cox's Bazar	25.0	13.4	62	66

Iran women chip away at male political supremacy

AFP, Qazvin

Banned from becoming president and with just a dozen MPs, women have started making inroads in the male-dominated world of Iranian politics by boosting their numbers on local councils.

Former high school teacher Fatemeh Ashdari, 42, was one of dozens of women who made a strong showing in December's municipal elections by winning a seat on the city council in the city of Qazvin northwest of Tehran.

"Somebody has to take the first steps to pave the way for the next generation," the energetic, chador-clad Ashdari, a conservative, told AFP.

"Women cannot just have the decorative jobs of an advisor or a consultant. Men have to allow us to make our mistakes and learn," she said.

Ashdari is one of four women who will sit in the new nine-member council in Qazvin after the December 15 elections, where women represented just one-sixth of the 180 candidates in the city.

While Iranian women have yet to make a major breakthrough on a national stage, their success in the municipal polls was startling -- out of 264 seats available on councils in provincial capitals, 44 went to women.

And in a number of cities and towns, it was female candidates who polled the most votes, most notably in the cities of Shiraz and Hamedan where two women who are still in their 20s pocketed the highest number of votes.

Ashdari said she won her second term on Qazvin city council with "the least publicity as people were happy with my work in the council and got me in again simply by the word of mouth."

She attributed her success to "being there for people and following up persistently on their demands" after resolving property disputes, expanding green spaces and promoting cultural centers for women.

"I miss out on a lot of family life but it is a very rewarding job," said Ashdari, who is juggling motherhood and chairing two charities and council membership.

Qazvin resident and civil servant Mohammad Taheri, 31, voted for Ashdari as he said he was "fed up with male candidates with big titles who do not deliver on their promises".

"Women did not let us down in the two previous councils", he said. "And they run households so efficiently, the city is just like a big house."

Fakhrosadat Mohtashampour, a former deputy interior minister for women's affairs, said it was no surprise that Iranian women, who now outnumber men at universities, had done so well in elections.

"Despite their small role in politics there are large numbers of educated women who are doing all kinds of jobs. There is no surprise they fared well in municipal polls," he said.

"Women are generally more caring and in the council there is room for attention to people's individual needs."

Ashdari spends hours in her office listening to people's complaints about their problems, some of which are not relevant to her municipal duties such as needing an urgent kidney transplant or a legal dispute over an inheritance.

The ambitious councillor's next target is the parliament and she deplores the fact that there are so few female lawmakers in the body - just 12 out of 290.

Mohtashampour believes Iranian society is prepared to accept more women in key decision-making roles but partly blames the major political parties for not doing enough to attract and involve women members.

"In legislative elections, people mainly vote for party candidates," she said, adding her reformist Participation Front party had initially decided to nominate few women in the municipal polls for Tehran, but had to reduce it to three in a coalition with other groups.

"The reformist parties in particular have to invest in women and explore their potential," she said.

Mohtashampour is also an advocate of affirmative action and positive discrimination to allocate a certain quota for female members in parliament.

"It is true that women have to be empowered first, but if there is no will to use their expertise, they will only be disappointed and alienated."

Since the Islamic revolution, no woman has served as a minister in an Iranian cabinet.

Reformist president Mohammad Khatami, who swept to power with the help of female votes, started a new trend by naming two women to serve as vice presidents for the environment and women's affairs.

Hardline successor Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has kept up his predecessor's tradition by filling the same portfolios with women, but all ministries are still headed by men.



Alhaj Abdul Barik, a freedom fighter and retired army sergeant, begins a fast-unto-death at Mukhtangan in the city yesterday demanding implementation of the quota system for the wards of the freedom fighters in recruiting class four employees under the food directorate.

Rare Nepal rhinos disappear mysteriously

REUTERS, Kathmandu

Dozens of endangered Great One-horned rhinoceros have mysteriously gone missing from a nature reserve in southwest Nepal over the past few years, a wildlife official said on Wednesday.

Authorities introduced 72 rhinos, also known as the Indian rhinoceros, in the Babai Valley, 320 km southwest of Kathmandu, as part of a conservation drive that started in 1984.

"We have records showing 23 rhinos had died due to poaching or other causes. The rest are missing," Laxmi Prasad Manandhar, a senior official at the Department of National Park and Wildlife Conservation, said.

But he ruled out the possibility of all the 49 missing rhinos falling prey to poachers.

"If poachers had killed them they should have left behind the bodies" after taking away the horn, he said, adding that just one rhino skeleton had been found during an extensive search in June.

"Where did they go? I have no answer. It is a mystery," Manandhar said.

The rhinos were moved to Babai Valley from Chitwan National Park on Nepal's southern plains under a conservation scheme supported by global conservation group WWF.

In December, Nepal's Supreme Court ordered the government to step up security at Chitwan -- the Himalayan nation's biggest rhino reserve -- after local media reported at least 10 animals had been killed since July.

Officials say at least 12 rhinos had died in the past six months in Chitwan where their population dropped to 372 in 2005 from 544 in 2000.

Their numbers fell mainly due to poaching for horns which are believed to have aphrodisiac qualities and are in great demand in China.

Army to start recovering illegal arms

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chalking out security measures on the polling day, sources at the EC Secretariat said. "In consultation with the Election Commission, the home ministry will finalise its security measures at and around the polling stations," a senior EC official told The Daily Star yesterday.

Asked whether the polling is going to be risky due to the boycott decision of the grand alliance, the EC secretary said of course it would hamper the congenial situation but the EC would do its best to hold the elections smoothly. "We will ask the caretaker government to ensure security of the voters so that they can cast votes free from any risk."

The EC today starts printing of ballot papers for the election but it is yet to know the exact number of voters.

"I can't say now what is the exact number of voters," Rashid Sarkar admitted. "We will come to know this soon."

Asked about his feelings about the 'one-sided' election, he replied, "None likes such election but there is nothing else we can do."

The returning officers (RO) yesterday completed allocation of poll symbols for the political parties and independent candidates. They can start election campaign today.

Meanwhile, the grand alliance today holds rallies and brings out processions against holding of the January 22 election, in line with its decision to boycott and resist the polls.

It will also enforce a 48-hour countryside blockade on January 7 and 8.

The caretaker government on Wednesday decided to deploy army to take control of the streets ahead of the countryside blockade.

The grand alliance comprises AL led-14-party, Jatiya Party, Liberal Democratic Party, Zaker Party, a faction of Islami Oikya Jote, and Islamic Front Bangladesh.

SECRETARY'S BRIEFING

On election preparations, the EC secretary said they have completed procurement of election materials and packing and printing of different polls-related forms, which would be sent to the polling centres anytime.

Asked whether rescheduling of the election is possible, he said EC constitutional experts find no alternative to holding the polls by January 25. "Even if there is an alternative, none can assure that all the political parties will take part in the elections," he added.

Rashid further said there is no scope to shift the polling date beyond the 90-day time limit because filing of nomination papers, scrutiny and withdrawal of those have been completed. "Even some of the candidates have already been elected unopposed."

Asked whether the electoral roll has reached all the 300 constituencies, he said the main list prepared in 2000 is already available everywhere. The updated list has also been sent to most of the constituencies and it will be sent to the remaining constituencies shortly.

Replying to another question, he said flaws in the list are possible and their correction is also possible on specific complaints. "It is not a big problem, I think."

Chinese hero's memory burns bright in Penang

REUTERS, Penang

The fate of China's last imperial dynasty was sealed in an unlikely place -- an indigo-blue shop house jammed into a bustling commercial street on the Malaysian island of Penang.

Here, early in the last century, Chinese revolutionary leader Sun Yat-sen, shattered by the strain of leading nine failed rebellions against the country's crumbling Qing dynasty, broke down and begged discouraged supporters to aid him one last time.

"I will not trouble you again," historian Khoo Salma Nasution quoted the distraught 44-year-old as telling the Chinese migrant merchants who had funded his efforts.

"The rest was history," she added. "The money raised from his supporters funded two rebellions in 1911, which overthrew the Manchu dynasty and made him China's first provisional president."

Sun, the father of the revolution that toppled China's last emperor in 1911, died in 1925, and is a hero in China despite being the former leader of the Kuomintang, or Nationalist Party, defeated by the Communists in 1949.

The 1910 meeting with his backers in Malaysia, known to history as the "Penang Conference," was held in utter secrecy in Sun's headquarters on Armenian Street, crowded round with secret society dens and temples built by migrant Chinese traders.

Sun, a Western-educated physician exiled by the Qing government, plotted the Canton uprising from his base in the bustling then-British-controlled port of Penang on the west coast of colonial Malaysia.

Few traces of the dynamic leader remain, apart from an exhibition of photographs that commemorates his brief stay on the island, where Sun had sought refuge from the Manchu-dominated Chinese government.

Yet the house, with its narrow passages, small courtyards, winding staircases and hidden rooms, bears powerful testimony to the secrecy that surrounded Sun's revolutionary activities.

"This was his life. It was always in the shadows," said Khoo, whose family has owned the house since it was bought in the 1930s by her grandfather, an arms dealer who wanted a place to store his stock.

HERITAGE CONSERVATION NETWORK

Now, almost a century later, Khoo's shop house serves a different purpose as the home of the Lestari Heritage Network, which runs a programme of heritage conservation projects around Asia, as well as a publishing firm, to document its activities.

The network, run by Khoo, has helped fund efforts to restore heritage buildings in former mercantile and colonial centres in India, Indonesia, Pakistan and Thailand.

Agencies such as the Japan Foundation and the New York-based Institute for Cultural Enterprise have helped provide the funds.

"Sun Yat-sen used the shop house as a base for his revolutionary activities," said Khoo. "We are coming full circle with the shop house as a centre for heritage conservation."

She added, "My family thought I was crazy to spend so much money and effort to restore the shop house. But they now realise this shop house could have been lost forever if nothing was done."

She declined to say how much she had invested in the project.

Her efforts have paid off.

China officially recognised the site when President Hu Jin Tao visited the shop house in 2002 and presented a commemorative plaque to Khoo. At the time, Hu was China's vice-president.

But other sites in Penang associated with Sun have slowly begun to disappear. Sun's house, located in a different part of Georgetown, has long since been demolished.

Sun held secret gatherings in Penang to spread his ideas about overthrowing the Qing dynasty and canvassing for funds.

He was able to tap into the sentiments of the vibrant Chinese migrant community, which was bitterly upset over news that their home country had been ravaged by famine and torn apart by civil war and clashing warlords.

"These buildings can piece together Sun's Malaysia story but they face an uncertain future," said Khoo, lamenting that agencies of the state and federal government had shown little interest in conservation efforts in Georgetown.

"People here are slow to realise that Penang has such links to international history. It is a shame."

But one proof of Sun's presence in Penang still lives on, in the form of a Chinese newspaper launched in the shop house for distribution among his supporters.

Today, the paper, which features Sun's calligraphy in its masthead, is Malaysia's longest-running Chinese daily with a circulation of up to 72,000 in 2005.

"Sun Yat-sen knew how to move the hearts and pockets of the overseas Chinese with his speeches," Khoo said. "The newspaper brought it to another level. Now, that's all we in Malaysia have of him."

One killed, 150 hurt in Habiganj clashes

UNB, Habiganj

A young man was killed and around 150 people were injured in a series of clashes between two groups of people at Bamoi village in Lakhai Upazila yesterday.

The violent groups also set fire to 25 houses, ransacked over 100 houses and looted valuables during the clashes.

Police said the clashes between two groups led by Shahinur and Faruk Mia began at about 9:00am over a trifling matter.

Witnesses said the clashes erupted in sequel to an altercation between Mizan Mia and Humayun Ahmed at Abu Mia's tea stall on Wednesday night.

Both the groups chased each other and used homemade weapons during the clashes.

On information, Sadar police went to the spot and brought the situation under control at about 2:00pm.

Some 20 injured were admitted to Sadar Hospital while others to local Upazila Health Complex.

Indonesian flood victims in camps

AFP, Jakarta

Thousands of people who fled flash floods on the Indonesian island of Sumatra two weeks ago are unable to return home as their villages are buried under mud, aid workers said yesterday.

Some 400,000 people escaped the floods, with 365,335 people displaced in Aceh province alone as whole villages were swallowed and homes washed away.

In the worst-hit district of Aceh Tamiang, more than 12,500 houses and 75 schools were destroyed along with 460 kilometres (280 miles) of road, the official Antara news agency said.

"There are no more floods (in Aceh), but residents' homes are still covered with mud up to one meter (more than three feet) deep, so they have to remain in camps," Indonesian Red Crescent spokesman Dharma Wijaya told Antara.

Death anniversary

Today is the third death anniversary of Dr Syed Fazul Haque, former professor of Radiology, Medical Colleges of Bangladesh, says a press release.

On the occasion, a doa mahfil will be held at his residence at Dhaka Cantonment.

Relatives, friends and admirers are requested to attend the doa mahfil.

Alhaj Sharif Ullah Chowdhury

Today is the 21st death anniversary of Alhaj Sharif Ullah Chowdhury, one of the founders of Narayanganj Ideal School and Amishapara College of Noakhali, says a press release.

On the occasion, milad and doa mahfil will be held at his son's residence at Dhanmondi in the city at 11:00am.

Relatives have been requested to attend the mahfil.