

Boycotting parties

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voters crept into the list during the rule of the AL.

"New voter list could not be prepared due to the case filed by Awami League and so the next election will be held on the basis of the current list which was prepared during the Awami League tenure," she said, adding that now it is the Election Commission's responsibility to update the voter roll and it is a continuous process although the Awami League boycotts the election by making it an excuse.

She termed the memorandum of understanding signed between the AL and Khelafat Majlish a cheating with the people as AL later said that it is nothing but a strategy to win the next election.

Having lost their way after the failed programmes with sticks and oars, Awami League

is looking for all possible ways to win the election through sacrificing their ideology and principles, she said.

Criticising the massive transfers by the caretaker government, she said, "Large-scale reshuffles and transfers in the administration have weakened the administration, leading to the rise in crimes."

"The Awami League's demands are endless," the former prime minister said, adding that the AL forced the interim government to meet almost all their demands and that this interim government had to face more demands than any other.

Describing Ershad as an 'advertisement of corruption', she said, "Awami League said they will fight against corruption but the Awami League president held a press conference with a convicted person [Ershad] beside her and asked the government to allow that per-

son to take part in the polls."

Accusing the AL of double standards, Khaleda Zia, said, "The Awami League claimed that they are an election-oriented party but they are boycotting the election. They said they believe in secularism but they signed a most controversial memorandum of understanding with a religion-based party."

"They [AL] alleged that government did not prepare a list of real criminals but the party nominated many real criminals as their candidate. They said they do not want to create suffering for people but they have called blockade again for January 7 and 8," she said.

Narrating the development works and successes achieved in last five years, she said they would lead the country to more development if they are voted to power again.

Later in reply to a question, BNP Secretary General Mannan Bhuiyan said preparation of a clean voter list and voter ID card will get priority if they are elected next time.

Many political parties will participate in the election but there is nothing to do if any political party wants to stay away, he said.

Jamaat-e-Islami leaders Ali Ahsan Mohammad Mujahid and Qamaruzzaman, Jatiya Party (JP) Chairman Anwar Hossain Monju, BJP Chairman Nazir Rahman Manjur, BNP Standing Committee member M Saifur Rahman, Dr Khandaker Mosharraf Hossain, advocate Khandker Mahbubuddin Ahmed, Moudud Ahmed, Islami Oikya Jote (Amini) chairman Mufti Fazlul Haque Amini and Moulana Ishraq were also present at the press conference.

Cold spell kills 35

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till noon yesterday and the sun was not sighted. People were virtually forced to stay inside their houses and normal life was paralysed.

Agriculture experts say the cold spell would harm as well as benefit cultivation of cereals, other crops and fruits in the region.

Elias Hossain, chief scientific officer at the Wheat Research Centre (WRC), Rajshahi, told this correspondent that the bitter cold is 'good for blossoming of mangoes, litchis and other summer fruits as well as for wheat, maize and pulse.

He however added if the biting cold continues for more than a week, it will increase pest attack on various crops, including paddy saplings and roots of potato plants.

Our Dinajpur correspondent reported that at least five people died in Thakurgaon and Panchagarh yesterday from viral diseases as the cold wave blows across these districts, Dinajpur and other northern districts.

Sources at Panchagarh Sadar Hospital said last night, at least two people died of cold-related diseases at the hospital in the last 24 hours.

Three people died of viral diseases in Thakurgaon in the last 24 hours, district health official sources said last night.

Our Nilphamari correspondent, quoting district health offi-

cials, reported that a child died of pneumonia at Dimlia upazila health complex last night. People of char areas in the Teesta river are suffering the most in the present cold wave. They are passing their days without warm clothes and many of them without food for lack of work due to the inclement weather.

Our Gazipur correspondent says an elderly woman died from cold bite at Samantapur in the district town.

Our Munshiganj correspondent reports: River erosion victims in Sadar, Tangibari and Lauhajung upazilas, who usually live under the open sky, have been the worst sufferers in the cold spell.

A UNB report says 10 people died from cold in Natore, Chapainawabganj, Magura and Rajbari districts in 24 hours till last night.

Six of them, including a one-week-old baby, died of diarrhoea, pneumonia and other cold-related diseases in Natore town.

In Chapainawabganj, a young man and a woman died of such diseases.

In Magura, Abdur Rauf, 82, of Barishat village in Sadar upazila died from cold.

Besides, Abdur Rahman Sardar, 90, of Bura Mollarpara in Goalundo upazila of Rajbari died of cold-related diseases at Goalundo hospital in the early hours yesterday.

North Korea

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The United States monitors North Korea by satellite and spy planes that fly along the fringes of the reclusive communist state's airspace to watch for suspicious movements.

"Certain activities have been detected near a suspected North Korean nuclear test site but currently there are no specific indications related to an additional test," said a South Korean source familiar with the North's nuclear programme.

The source asked not to be named and declined to explain how the latest movements were spotted.

Another government official in Seoul said vehicle and personnel movement had been spotted near the site of the North's first test, Yonhap news agency reported.

That official said, however, that there were no signs of cables being laid or electronic monitors being installed, which might indicate a test was imminent.

South Korean Foreign Minister Song Min-soon, meeting US officials in Washington, did not discuss reports of an impending test, Yonhap cited a senior South Korean official as saying.

"South Korea and the US consistently share information," the official said. "So far, we have not heard about an imminent test."

The ABC report said intelligence was inconclusive, but the preparations in hand were similar to steps taken by North Korea before its October 9 test. Many analysts say that first test was not fully successful.

The two Koreans, the United States, Japan, Russia and China failed in their latest round of talks in Beijing last month to make any progress in efforts to have the North suspend its nuclear programmes in exchange for aid and pledges not to attack it.

North Korea was rebuffed at those talks in its insistence that it be treated as a nuclear power.

South Korea's Defence Ministry said last week that North Korea has probably extracted more than 50 kg (110 lb) of plutonium since 1994, with more than 30 kg obtained since 2003 while it was engaged in the six-country negotiations.

North Korea hailed its nuclear test as "an auspicious event for the nation" in editorials in official media to welcome the New Year, adding that it planned a further boost to its military strength.

"The DPRK's (North Korea's) nuclear deterrent serves as a powerful force for defending peace and security in Northeast Asia and guaranteeing the victorious advance of the cause of independence," one editorial said.

Basque airport

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received at 1:15 pm (1215 GMT).

Nevertheless, regional police elected to evacuate the facility at Loiu, just outside Bilbao, "as a precaution".

The incident came six days after a huge bomb blast killed two men at Madrid airport. The blast followed three telephone warnings, including one in ETA's name.



PHOTO: STAR

People returning to Dhaka yesterday after spending the Eid holidays with their near and dear ones. The picture was taken from Kamalapur Railway Station.

Hundreds held

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demands, he might seek army help during the blockade.

Of the 594 arrestees produced before the court yesterday, 250 were shown arrested in regular cases, 14 under Section 54 of the Criminal Procedure Code and the others under the DMP Act.

After hearing, the court sent the 250 to the central jail and fixed January 8 for their bail hearing and released 330 others on bail, court sources said.

Several hundred relatives of the mass arrest victims gathered around the CMM's Court yesterday to get them released on bail. Relatives of many of the arrestees were found crying as the breadwinners of their families were held.

When contacted, 18 of the 33 police stations in the capital said they arrested around 450 people till yesterday noon and forwarded them to the CMM's Court. Of them, 68 were arrested by Mohammadpur police, 35 by Pallabi police, 21 by Mirpur police, 38 by Tejgaon police, 25 by Gulshan police, 41 by Sutrapur police and 24 by Motijheel police.

Some of the grand alliance leaders arrested in the capital included Information and Research Secretary of City AL Azizur Rahman Bachchu, Ward-91 AL unit President Mokbul Hossain and Ward-8 unit Publication Secretary Nazrul Islam and Ward-94 Jubo League unit Joint Convener Zakir Hossain.

Besides, police raided houses of a number of AL leaders and activists on Thursday night.

LDP announces

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22 election. People will resist the election," he said talking to the press after the meeting.

He said leaders and activists of LDP will not return home until lajuddin resigns and the January 22 election is cancelled.

Mannan urged all leaders, activists and supporters of the LDP to make the January 7-8 blockade announced by the grand alliance a success.

LDP President Badruddoza Chowdhury chaired the meeting which was attended by party presidium members Alamgir Kabir, Major General (ret'd) Anwarul Kabir Talukdar, Mohammad Ali Zinnah, Barrister Ziaur Rahman Khan, Dr Nurul Amin Bepari, Prof Jahanara Begum, Ali Kadar, Abdul Karim Abbasee and Mahi B Chowdhury.

Two held

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Islamic organisation, Hizbut Tuhidin. But later they denied their involvement with any such organisation.

They however admitted that they were arrested from a mosque in Boda upazila in Panchagarh on December 22 last year with books and leaflets on Islamic revolution. They got released on bail on December 30.

"They are giving inconsistent information. We are interrogating them but it is yet to be confirmed if they are involved with any militant group," said the OC.

Akhtar also said the two will be showed arrested under section 54 of Criminal Procedure Code and the police will produce them before court today.

Communal deals

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the giving Alems (religious law experts) the charge of issuing fatwa if the AL-led grand alliance wins the next general election.

The deal contradicts with the AL ideology and goes against free thinkers and secularists, he said. Among others, parishad leaders Prof Shyamal Natra, Prof Dipak Das, Subhas Baral and Prof Maran Dutta spoke.

"We never expected that the Awami League would resort to such a culpable act only to get vote in the election," said Dr Shailendra Nath Chanda at the rally.

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Hasina

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while the vote thieves on the other. Take decision as to which side you will choose... There is no place for vote thieves in this soil. We want to end the game of vote thieves through movement," she said.

The AL chief, who earlier announced the boycott of the January 22 election, said her party cannot give legitimacy to the polls, results of which have been prepared in advance.

"We want a free, fair and credible election where people can vote freely to choose their government," she said.

About Khaleda Zia's persistent demand for election within 90 days, Hasina said although the BNP chairperson refers to 90 days, she keeps mum about Articles 121 and 122 of the constitution that mentions a flawless electoral roll. "How a fair election is possible without a fair voter list?"

Reminding the consequences of the election on February 15 in 1996, she said a one-party election will not be allowed.

She urged the people to boycott the January 22 election and said: "Don't turn up at the polling centres on January 22. Resist the unilateral election."

Awami League leaders Motia Chowdhury and Obaidul Quader and Swetchhasebak League General Secretary Pankaj Debnath were present in the meeting presided over by Bahauddin Nasim, president of Swetchhasebak League.

Oil prices at lowest

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Shum, senior rincipal at Purvin and Gertz Inc in Singapore.

Crude prices have tumbled in the new year as unseasonably warm weather curbs demand for heating oil in the northeast United States, the world's biggest energy consumer.

"The market is also reacting to the bearish US inventory data showing a rise in distillates and oil reserves," Shum said after the latest US weekly report on stockpiles.

US stockpiles of distillates, which includes heating fuel, rose by two million barrels to 135.6 million barrels in the week ending December 29, compared with forecasts for a gain of 850,000 barrels.

Crude oil inventories dropped 1.3 million barrels to 319.7 million—less than the anticipated 2.0-million-barrel decline.

Gasoline (petrol) reserves rose 5.6 million barrels to 209.5 million, almost four times market expectations for a rise of just 1.5 million barrels.

"The fact that distillates rose in the first week of January was significant and goes back to lack of winter fuel demand," Fimat analyst John Kiduff said.

The slump in prices has extended from the end of last year despite efforts by the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (Opec) to cut production and lift prices.

Shum said the market is testing Opec's resolve to cut production by an additional 500,000 barrels per

day in February.

The US National Weather Service has said demand for heating oil will be about 33 percent below normal this week.

Shum said that with crude oil prices dipping about nine to 10 percent in just two to three days, investors have been pulling out of the commodities market.

"The weather remains the wild card in the market, with no geopolitical tensions driving the market at the moment," Shum said.

"But geopolitical tensions like the unresolved Iranian nuclear issues and Iraqi turmoil may re-emerge," he added.

US urges CG

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all parties to set aside narrow, partisan agendas and join together in serious, constructive dialogue to create an acceptable environment for participation by all major parties in the elections.

The statement said: "Violence has no place in a democratic society. While political protest is an integral part of democracy, violence is not."

It praised the political leaders for the restraint they have shown and called on all parties to reject violence and refrain from provocation.

Elections that are free, fair and credible are a critical part of any democracy. Past elections in Bangladesh were generally acknowledged to meet internationally recognised standards of fairness, the statement said.

Democrats take control of US Congress

AFP, Washington

Democrats took control of the US Congress on Thursday, promising ambitious reform and tough new oversight of Republican President George W. Bush's policy in Iraq.

In his official capacity as president of the US Senate, Vice President Dick Cheney swore in 33 new and returning members of the 110th Senate in an official midday ceremony, as the lawmakers pledged "to well and faithfully discharge" their legislative duties.

In the House, top Democrat Nancy Pelosi, 66, became the first woman to take the job of speaker, making her next in line for the presidency after Cheney and the highest ranking woman ever.

She accepted the speaker's gavel and ended 12 years of Republican control of the lower house of Congress.

"In this House, we may belong to different parties, but we serve one country. We stand united in our pride and prayers for our men and women in the armed forces. They are working together to protect America, and we, in this House, must also work together to build a future worthy of their sacrifice," she said.

The oath-taking formalizes the sweeping new political order in Washington in the aftermath of November's historic legislative elections, and signals dramatic new political change as Congress's most conservative political caucuses cede power.

As of Thursday, Holocaust survivor Tom Lantos, 78, who voted for the Iraq war but now is calling for dialogue with Syria and Iran, will head the House International Relations Committee.

In the Senate, another fierce White House opponent, Harry Reid, 67, will be the new majority leader, while Joseph Biden, 63, who hopes to run for the White House in 2008, will head the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

Reid vowed at a press conference Thursday that a "new day" had dawned in Washington, and he pledged to work cooperatively with Republicans.

"Our efforts are going to be to work in a bipartisan basis, in an open fashion, to solve the problems of the American people," he said after a meeting with his Republican counterpart, Mitch McConnell.

McConnell, now in the minority party, agreed that it was high time to "get past the level of partisanship that we've witnessed in recent years and develop stronger personal relationships, as well as work across party aisles."

On the margins of the formal events, former president Bill Clinton told reporters he expects a new spirit of bipartisan cooperation in Congress as Democrats take control of the usually fractious US Legislature.

At a briefing at AL's central office on Bangabandhu Avenue, the 14-party alliance termed BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia's press conference speech as 'false, misleading and self-contradictory'.

Through the speech of Khaleda, lajuddin's musk has been unveiled and it is apparent that he [lajuddin] follows Khaleda's directions, Abdul Jalil said at the briefing.

OTHER PARTIES' DEMONSTRATIONS

A number of political parties including Jatiya Party (Ershad), Communist Party of Bangladesh (CPB), Zaker Party, Bangladesh Shamajtantrik Dal (BSD) also staged simultaneous demonstrations in the capital as well as other parts in the country to resist the January 22 polls with demands of resignation of President lajuddin from the office of the chief adviser.

Power deals

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even if implemented without any favouritism or corruption will always be costlier."

A senior official said, "Small power plants -- government-owned or private -- have always been costly. In the past, the Awami League government had implemented the 110 MW oil-fired barge-mount Khulna power plant. Since it is oil fired, the average power price for this plant in 2005-06 swung up to Tk 8.49 per unit because oil price is globally very high. Besides, in 2004-05, it sold power for Tk 5.92 per unit as oil price was lower."

Similarly, the average power tariff of the NEPC barge-mount 90 MW plant and Westmont 90 MW barge-mount plant hovered around Tk 3.80 and Tk 3.68 per unit in 2005-06, though these are gas-fired. The official explains, "These deals were made in terms of dollars, and have become costly because of high rate of dollars."

The country's power load shedding has exceeded 2,200 MW and next year this might reach 2,500 MW as the BNP-led alliance government miserably failed to pursue adequate power schemes. Despite a serious crisis situation, the alliance government last year initiated more than 40 small power projects as 'rewards' to various BNP men. Ultimately that bid fell off due to serious pressure from the World Bank and the government resorted to a smaller scale scheme.

the next six months," he told reporters in impromptu remarks just before the swearing-in ceremony.

After the official oath-taking ceremony in the House, newly elected Muslim US Representative Keith Ellison was to be sworn during a private ceremony on a copy of the Koran once owned by president Thomas Jefferson.

Speaking to ABC News in a broadcast which aired Thursday, Ellison, the first Muslim to be elected to the US Congress, said it was only natural that he would take his oath on the Koran, the book of his Islamic faith.

"It's the scripture that I read every day, and it's the book that I draw inspiration from," said the incoming lawmaker, who converted from Roman Catholicism to Islam while a student in college.

Indications are the Democrats plan to fully use their newfound clout, with an ambitious domestic agenda for the first 100 hours including bills to raise the federal minimum wage, expand stem cell research and end subsidies for big oil companies.

"Democrats ran on this agenda and were elected on this agenda. We promised the American people swift passage of these bills, and we fully intend to make good on that promise," incoming House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer said Tuesday.

But an even more dramatic sea change can be expected on US policy in Iraq. The new Democratic majority has set high on its agenda hearings on quelling sectarian strife in Iraq and perceived administration mistakes getting into the war.

The new Congress opens as Bush prepares to announce an overhaul of his Iraq policy, including an expected short-term "surge" of thousands of additional US troops into Iraq -- a plan which has garnered thin support from Democrats and Republicans so far.

Kushtia

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between 1:30am to 2:00am, police said.

Later, Dilip Biswas phoned local journalists to inform them of the 'execution' of the two persons who the outfit leader claimed were 'wicked'.

Kushtia and Meherpur police went to the spot in the morning, recovered the dead bodies and sent to Meherpur General Hospital for autopsy.

The gruesome killings during anti-crime drives and increased vigilance by law enforcers have spread panic among the people of Kushtia, Meherpur, Chuadanga and Jhenidah districts.

Rab and police have started a massive hunt to arrest the criminals, sources said.

With the new one, now five factions of PBCP-ML are on the front in the southwestern region to establish a so-called 'classless society' in the country.

The other factions are PBCP-ML, PBCP-Janajuddho, PBCP-Lal Pataka, and PBCP-Communist Juddho.

Bush shuffles top

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television and major US print media reported.

Admiral William Fallon would replace retiring General John Abizaid, 55, at the Central Command, which oversees US forces from the north Africa to central Asia.

In Iraq, Lieutenant General David Petraeus would replace General George Casey as the man in charge of all US and coalition forces, according to the reports.

The White House declined to challenge the reports.

Both Abizaid, 55, and Casey, 58, had expressed reservations about a reported plan to increase the number of US troops in Iraq.

Fallon, 62, currently the head of US forces in the Pacific, was a navy combat pilot during the Vietnam War and is a veteran of NATO operations in Bosnia. During the 1991 Gulf War he commanded an attack squadron.

Petraeus, 54, is best known for his role in training Iraqi security forces from mid-2004 to September 2005. He currently heads the US Army Combined Arms Centre at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas.

During the 2003 invasion Petraeus commanded the 101st Airborne Division, and was widely praised for his subsequent work administering the northern city of Mosul.

Bush had little to say his Iraq speech next week when he spoke to reporters after a meeting Thursday with Chancellor Angela Merkel.

The president held a nearly two-hour video conference with Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki during which he said he made clear Washington expects "a full investigation" over the controversy sur-

rounding Saddam's execution.

"I wish, obviously, that the proceedings had gone in a more dignified way," Bush told reporters. "But nevertheless, he was given justice; the thousands of people he killed were not."

White House officials said they were unsure whether Bush would consult Maliki again before he unveils his eagerly awaited proposals for waging the war in Iraq in a speech expected as early as Wednesday.

US sanctions

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lasting, overall and appropriate solution to the Iranian nuclear issue," Hu was quoted as saying.

"China's policy is consistent. We wish to preserve the international non-proliferation system and preserve peace and stability in the Middle East," Hu said according to the television report.

The report did not detail what Larjani, who has been meeting with Chinese leaders in Beijing this week, told Hu regarding the Islamic republic's nuclear programme.

China, which has major energy interests in Iran, supports Tehran's right to a programme.

China last month voted in favour of the UN resolution, but Beijing sought to water down the measure and has said it prefers negotiations instead of sanctions.

The sanctions take aim at Iranian efforts to enrich uranium, which the United States and others fear could be used to make a nuclear weapon.

Iran insists its atomic programme is entirely peaceful and it has every right to the full nuclear fuel cycle.