

41 killed as bus goes up in flames

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Comilla

At least 41 people were killed when an overloaded bus fell into a ditch and burst into flames at Suwagazi in Comilla on the Dhaka-Chittagong highway yesterday.

The overcrowded bus, belonging to SR Paribahan, a transport company, was speeding towards Chittagong when it lost control 20 kilometres from Comilla town and veered into a ditch around 1:15pm. The bus instantly burst into flames when its fuel tank ruptured and the diesel caught fire.

Comilla's Deputy Commissioner (DC) Mohibul Hossain Chowdhury told The Daily Star last night, "We have recovered 41 bodies from the wreckage. We do not think there are any more bodies."

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Rescuers try to pull the wreckage of the ill-fated bus back on the highway after it veered into a ditch and exploded near Suwagazi in Comilla yesterday.

BLOCKADE
CG orders army, law enforcers to show zero tolerance

UNB, Dhaka

The caretaker government yesterday ordered army, BDR, Rab and police to show zero tolerance in dealing with a three-day blockade programme, according to a police source.

The Awami League-led grand alliance will enforce the blockade across the country for three days starting from today to press for a fresh election schedule after preparing a correct voter list and resignation of President Iajuddin Ahmed from the office of chief adviser.

The source told the news agency that the law enforcers, including army, would be posted at different strategic points in the capital to ensure smooth movement of traffic and peace and safety to public life.

He said some 10,000 to 12,000 police will be guarding the streets

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Grand alliance's 72-hr blockade begins today

Massive security measures, Bangabhaban siege on Jan 9, alliance may go for continuous blockade from next week until election day

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Awami League (AL)-led grand alliance's countrywide 72-hour blockade starts today amid the caretaker government's resolve and elaborate plan to thwart the demonstration for electoral reform 'at any cost' short of a negotiation.

The blockade slated to be a 48-hour one was stretched by another 24 hours last night by the grand alliance. It has threatened to lay siege to Bangabhaban, the office of the president, on the extended day of the blockade.

Sources said the government, if necessary, will use the army along with other law enforcement agencies to foil the demonstration as the

army was already used to face a hartal on December 21 for the first time in the last 15 years since restoration of democracy through a mass upsurge in 1990.

Ignoring repeated urges from different corners, President and Chief Adviser (CA) Iajuddin Ahmed till yesterday did not initiate any step to resolve the political crisis centring the parliamentary election set for January 22. He rather assumed a tough posture against the grand alliance's planned demobilisation.

Instructed by the home ministry led by Iajuddin Ahmed, Dhaka Metropolitan Police, which had launched blanket arrests on Thursday to foil the blockade,

yesterday imposed an indefinite ban on rallies, processions and other forms of demonstrations which might create obstacles to vehicular traffic on the streets of the capital, and informed the city residents about the decision using megaphones.

The grand alliance comprising AL-led 14-party, Jatiya Party (JP), Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), a faction of Islami Oikya Jote and Islamic Front Bangladesh called for the blockade demanding resignation of Iajuddin Ahmed from the post of chief adviser, and announcement of a new election schedule following 'proper updating' of the voter list.

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Poll preparations in a mess

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

With only 15 days in hand, preparation for the next parliamentary election is still in disarray as the Election Commission (EC) Secretariat is yet to specify the number of voters, ballot papers to be printed, polling stations, and contesting political parties.

In an unprecedented way, the EC Secretariat officials kept giving estimated information on these issues.

"I cannot exactly tell at this moment the number of polling

stations, contesting candidates and political parties," Deputy EC Secretary Mihir Sarwar Morshed told reporters yesterday.

According to the deputy EC secretary, the number of voters is around 9.33 crore while the number of polling stations is about 34,000.

Mihir, however, said they published the list of polling stations in an official gazette on January 4 in accordance with the electoral laws that require publishing of the list at least 15 days before polling day.

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Polls to be held on time: Iajuddin

UNB, Dhaka

power to an elected government through holding election in time. I seek cooperation from all in protecting the constitution."

Referring to the Election Commission (EC) announcement for holding the election on January 22, the president noted that the EC had already taken all measures for holding the election.

"My government has ordered the law enforcers to take stern measures so that no quarter can disturb law and order in a planned way to thwart the upcoming elections," the president said.

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In a statement, on the eve of the 14-party-led grand alliance-sponsored two-day blockade across the country, he said nobody can impede the constitutional provision for holding the general election.

"I'm committed to handing over

'CA's statement comes from Hawa Bhaban'

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Reacting to President and Chief Adviser (CA) Iajuddin Ahmed's statement last night Awami League (AL)-led grand alliance leaders said the CA wants to bring back BNP-Jamaat coalition back to power through holding a one-sided election on January 22.

"The president has become the chief adviser by violating the constitution. He became the chief adviser to bring back the BNP-Jamaat coalition back to power and he has made that clear through his

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EU poll mission may not go ahead if crisis persists

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The European Union yesterday said their Election Observer Mission for the upcoming general election in Bangladesh might not proceed as expected, if political stakeholders fail to resolve the ongoing crisis.

The international credibility and economy of Bangladesh would suffer a major blow if the current electoral process fails, the EU further observed.

"The EU calls on all political parties and stakeholders in the Bangladesh election process, including the Caretaker Government and the Election Commission, to work urgently and cooperatively towards a solution which meets the rights and expectations of the people of Bangladesh and which satisfies international democratic standards," says a press statement released by the local EU presidency.

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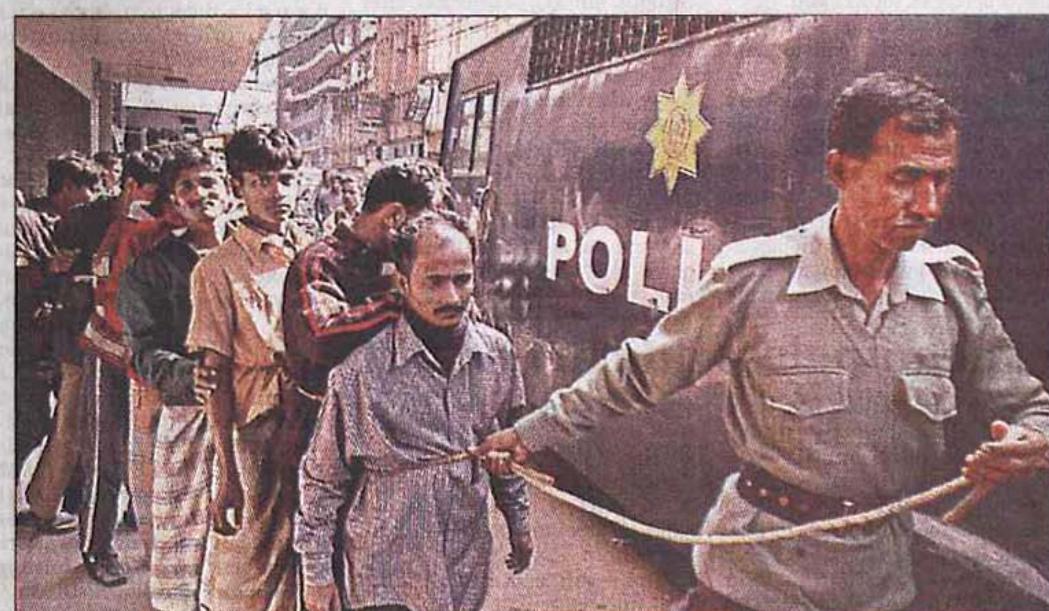
FAKE VOTERS
EU poll observers question Khaleda's claim

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The European Union Election Observer Mission (EUOEM) yesterday said they could not find the source of the observations made by BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia on Friday, when she said the EU in 2000 suspected the then voter list contained 13 million false voters.

"We have not been able to establish the source of the figures attributed to the EU election observer mission," said Graham Elson, deputy chief observer of the EU presidency.

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Police, left, take arrestees to a Dhaka court yesterday as the law enforcers continue wholesale arrest ahead of the blockade that starts today; A woman and her son, above, break down in tears at Motijheel Police Station after police picked up her husband.

PHOTO: STAR

Ordeals of mass arrest victims

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Sixty-year-old Saleha Begum was sobbing hysterically in front of the Chief Metropolitan Magistrate's (CMM) court, Dhaka yesterday as her son, a mass arrest victim, was facing a magistrate who would decide whether he would be set free or put behind bars.

Braving the chilly weather and wearing an inexpensive thin sari, Saleha came to the court anxious that her family of six would face severe hardship if the lone

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Cry for fertiliser in North Farmers take to streets, block roads

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Facing crisis of urea fertiliser at the peak season for Boro cultivation, the farmers brought out processions and created blockade on the highways at different places, especially in the northern region.

Hundreds of vehicles remained stranded for about four hours on Rangpur-Lalmirhat and Rangpur-Kurigram roads due to the blockade by the farmers.

While the farmers are demanding smooth supply of fertiliser, many dealers in those districts increased the price exorbitantly on

the pretext of short supply, reports say.

Bangladesh Fertiliser Association (BFA), however, claims that there is no shortage of urea fertiliser in the country as nearly four lakh tonnes of urea is in stock.

"We have sufficient stock and supply of fertiliser and there is hardly any chance of a crisis till the end of January," said BFA Chairman Kofiluddin Ahmed.

Asked about farmers' agitation

for fertiliser in different districts, the chairman said there might be some shortage of supply in remote areas as there was transport prob-

lem for more than three days during the Eid holidays.

Besides, the supply was hampered as the movement of trucks on the highways was slowed due to thick fog for the last couple of days in the northern districts, he said.

He further said that the delivery of urea from the BCIC factory was hampered as the authority issued a circular asking every dealer to come at the factory gate for getting supply.

Earlier, dealers used to get supply by the transport agency through authorisation letter,

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FBCCI for emergency if deadlock prevails
Other business bodies yet to endorse call

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The country's apex trade body yesterday urged the caretaker government to declare a state of emergency if it fails to persuade the two major political parties to reach a consensus within 24 hours to break the deadlock over the upcoming election.

But top business leaders said

they are yet to endorse the call of the Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FBCCI) for declaring a state of emergency to save the country from political confrontation.

Criticising the chief adviser for failing to maintain neutrality, the FBCCI leaders said the chief

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REUTERS/STAR

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US, UK envoys hold closed door meeting with Hasina

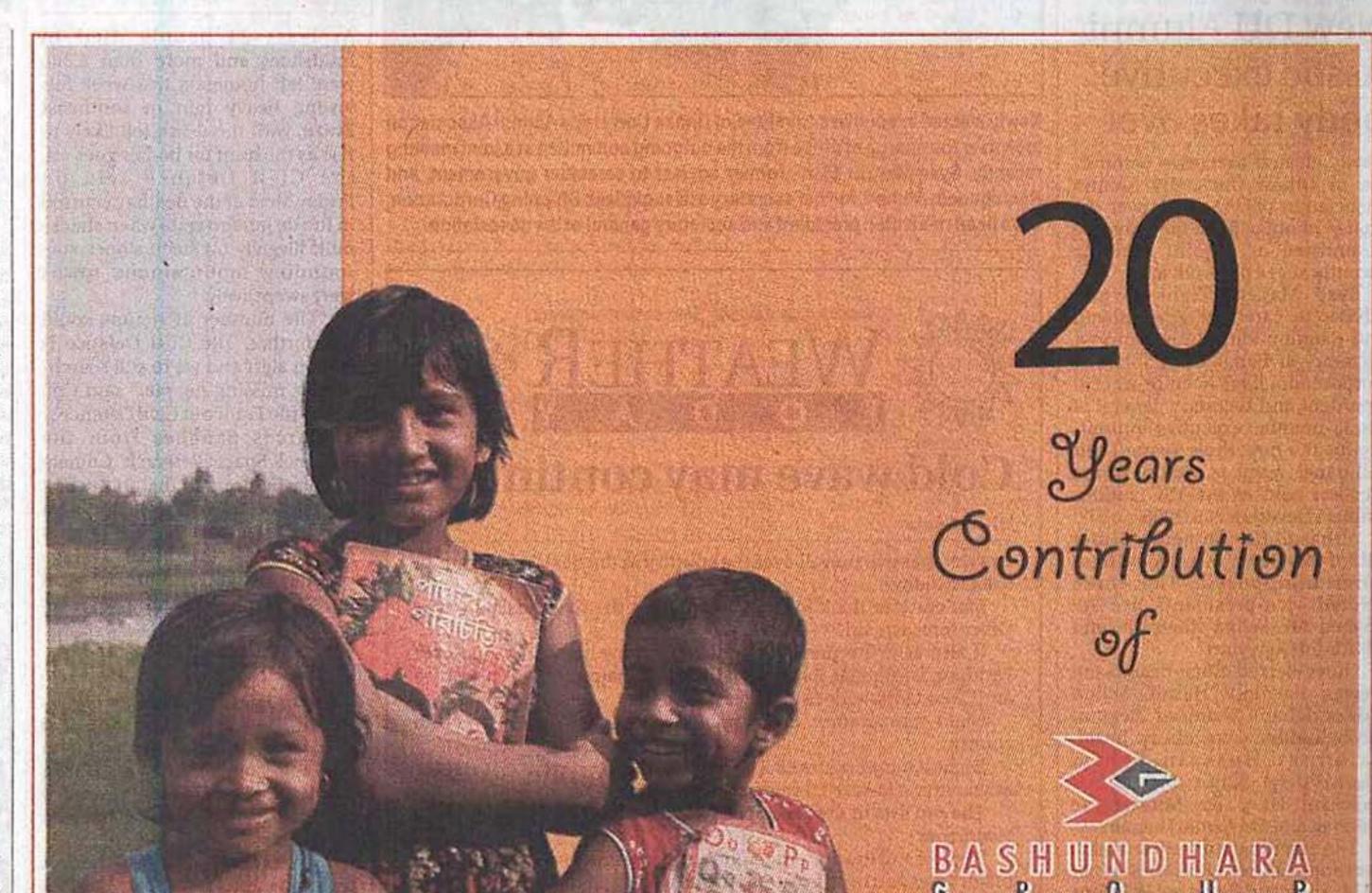
STAFF CORRESPONDENT

US Ambassador Patricia A Butenis and British High Commissioner Anwar Choudhury held an unscheduled closed door meeting with Awami League (AL) President Sheikh Hasina at her residence last night to discuss ways to resolve the ongoing political crisis.

Sources said the pair of high-

level envoys is also scheduled to meet BNP Chairperson Khaleda

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