

Constitutional recognition of indigenous people demanded

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Speakers at a national consultation meeting yesterday demanded constitutional recognition of the indigenous people to establish their rights in the country.

They also called for the recognition of the traditional and common property law of the ethnic community.

Jatiya Adivasi Parishad and Bangladesh Adivasi Odhikar Andolon in association with Gram Bikash Kendra (GBK), Dinajpur organised the meeting at the National Press Club in the city as a follow-up to Adivasi Convention held on November 4, 2006.

Presenting a keynote paper, General Secretary of Jatiya Adivasi

Parishad Rabindranath Saren said development of indigenous people was supposed to take place side by side the development of the mainstream community, but they are still being tortured and forced to leave the country.

Officials of the forest department are destroying forests in Bardendra areas and on the other hand, they are evicting indigenous people from their lands charging them with destroying forests, he said.

So far, ethnic people have been evicted from 6,500 acres of land in the northern region of the country, he said.

He also demanded a separate ministry for indigenous people and reserved seats for them in parliament.



Prof HKS Arefin speaks at the national consultation meeting on the demands of indigenous people at the National Press club in the city yesterday.

Gaza, where tragedy and news are never far away

REUTERS, Gaza

The sound of explosions boomed over Gaza City as Israel carried out another air strike against Palestinian militants behind rocket attacks and I expected a familiar sight as I hurried to the scene.

But after forcing my way through a crowd of onlookers, I was unprepared for what awaited me on June 13 last year.

Among the dead was a militant killed by a missile. But another missile had hit the nearby home of my cousin Ashraf, 29. Ashraf, his son Maher, 6, and another of my

Farmers blockade Benapole-Jessore road for diesel

UNB, Benapole

Outraged by severe disruption in diesel supply during the current Iri-Boro season, farmers of the area blockaded Benapole-Jessore road at Talashari area for four hours yesterday morning.

Hundreds of vehicles got stranded on the road due to the blockade causing untold sufferings to the travelling people amid the biting cold.

The farmers also besieged the petrol pumps in the border areas in demand of uninterrupted fuel supply. Pump owners of those areas suspended selling of diesel to the farmers for the last one week.

Later, Sharsha upazila UNO and local police brought the situation under control.

New DU Alumni Assoc executive body takes over

Newly elected executive committee of Dhaka University Alumni Association (DUAA) took over the charge of office from the outgoing committee at a joint meeting recently, says a press release.

Syed Manzur Elahi, former adviser to caretaker government, and Raquibuddin Ahmed, former secretary at Bangladesh Shipping Corporation, have been re-elected president and secretary general of the association.

Abbasuddin Ahmed, former MD of City Bank, was elected treasurer unopposed. The three elected vice-presidents are AF Shahed Ali, Selina Khaleque and Md Abdul Quayyum.

Other elected office-bearers are Dewan Rashidul Hasan, Selina Akhter Jahan, Shamsad Begum, Mesbahuddin Chowdhury Imrul, Refaquat Hossain Fahim Chowdhury, Khan Md Babor Ashraf Haq, Dr Mustafizur Rahman and SM Azmal Hossain.

The executive committee members are ABM Rezaul Kabir Kawsar, AKM Shamsuddin, Abul Kashem Chowdhury, Asaf Khan, Iqbal Sobhan Chowdhury, KMH Shahidul Haque, KMSA Kaiser, Monwara Islam, Munira Khan, Muhammad Zamir, Monsur Ahmed Chowdhury, Mahbub-uz-Zaman, Morshed Sanaullah Kayani, Dr Pravath Chandra Biswas, SM Obaidullah, Soraiya Alam, Dr Shahadat Ali, Dr Taslima Monsur and Zeenat Ara Bhuiya.

Hasan Azizul Haque, Golam Murshid receive Prothom Alo Book award

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Eminent authors Hasan Azizul Haque and Golam Murshid were awarded 'Prothom Alo Book of the Year: 1412' at a ceremony at a city hotel yesterday.

Receiving the awards, the authors said it is very gratifying to receive awards, but frustrations creep in when humanity is disgraced and war criminals are rewarded.

Hasan Azizul Haque won the award for his novel 'Agunpakhi' (firebird) in creative category, while Golam Murshid was awarded for his book 'Hazar Bachharer Bangali Sangskriti' (Thousand years of Bangali culture) in intellectual category.

Instituted by the Protom Alo, the award carries a crest, a certificate and Tk 50,000.

Prof Anisuzzaman, chairman of the jury board, gave away the awards to the winners.

In a tone of despair, Golam Murshid said those who killed the intellectuals in this country only 35 years ago now get the opportunity to share state power.

The history of the nation changes with the change of the government, he added.

Sazzad Sharif, deputy editor of the Prothom Alo, moderated the programme. "The writers transform our experiences into a shape and keep our dreams alive," he said in his welcome address.

Prothom Alo Editor Matir Rahman said, "We are passing a critical time. The things we pride ourselves on are gradually disappearing. But still the writers and artists are continuing to inspire us."

Justice Muhammad Habibur Rahman, Zillur Rahman Siddiqui, Prof Muzaffer Ahmed, Dwijen Sharma, Qayyum Chowdhury, Mahbub Ul Alam Chowdhury, Inam Ahmed Chowdhury, Nawazesh Ahmed, Aliqu Haque Chowdhury, Serajul Islam, Mostafa Zaman Abbasi, Hasnat Abdul Hai, Shamsuzzaman Khan, Rafiq Azad, Asad Chowdhury, Rashid Haider, Ramendu Majumder, Mofazzal Karim, Asma Abbasi, Selina Hossain, Maleka Begum, Syed Manzoarul Islam, Brig (Retd) M Shakhawat Hossain and Shaheen Akhter were present at the programme held at the Sheraton Hotel.

1,384 phensidyl bottles seized

UNB, Salkhira

Bangladesh Rifles (BDR) personnel fired eight rounds of bullets on smugglers and recovered 1,384 bottles of phensidyl from them at Hadhdah frontier in the district on Friday midnight.

BDR sources said some smugglers entered into Bangladesh territory with contraband goods in the night when they fired eight rounds of bullets.

Sensing danger, the smugglers fled from the scene leaving the phensidyl bottles. None of the smugglers was injured.

Rains, mudslides kill 24 in Brazil

REUTERS, Rio De Janeiro

At least 24 people died in mudslides and more than 8,300 were left homeless this week following heavy rain in southeast Brazil, with the death toll likely to rise as the hunt for bodies goes on, the Civil Defence said on Friday. Most of the deaths occurred in Rio de Janeiro state when shacks built illegally on steep slopes surrounding mountainous towns were swept away.

"The number of victims could rise further. The Civil Defence is still on alert and we're still searching for missing people," said Cpl. Leonardo Franco at Civil Defence.

Marcos Sanches from the National Space Research Climate Studies Centre said that in the first five days of January the Mantiqueira mountains near Rio de Janeiro received half the usual average monthly rainfall, and further rains were likely this weekend.

Obituary

Siddikur Rahman Khan, an organiser of the War of Liberation and social activist, passed away due to old age complexities at Dhaka Medical College Hospital yesterday morning at the age of 85, says a press release.

He was also in charge of the first freedom fighters' camp of Agartala Congress Bhawan.

He left behind his wife, his only son and a host of admirers to mourn his death.

He was buried at his family graveyard at Ghatil village in Brahmanbaria.

Qulikhani and doa mahfil will be held at his village home after Juma prayers on Friday to pray for the salvation of his departed soul.



PHOTO: STAR

Winners of Prothom Alo Book of the Year - 1412 award Hasan Azizul Haq, 3rd from left, and Golam Murshid, 3rd from right, pose with the jury at the award giving ceremony at Hotel Sheraton in the city yesterday. Members of the jury board are Hayat Mamud, extreme left, Abdus Shakur, 2nd from left, Dr Anisuzzaman, 4th from left, Belal Chowdhury, 2nd from right, and Bashir Al Helal, extreme right.

AL boycotts polls to create constitutional vacuum

Says Mannan Bhuiyan

UNB, Narsingdi

BNP Secretary General Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan yesterday

accused Awami League of trying to create a constitutional vacuum in the country by boycotting the national polls.

"After placating Jatiya Party in the grand alliance, Awami League felt confident of their victory in the polls. But Ershad has been declared ineligible to contest the election by the court that convicted him for

corruption. That is why AL has boycotted the election," Bhuiyan told a public meeting at Madhabdi.

Khairul Kabir Khokan, who had poised to contest Bhuiyan in the upcoming polls but withdrew his nomination paper later, presided over the meeting.

Referring to the move to resist election by the AL-led grand alliance, Bhuiyan said everyone has the right to take part in the election but none has the right to resist it.

He pointed to AL's recent deal

with Shaikhul Hadith Azizul Haq and said, "They are opportunist, bereft of political ideology. Maulana Haq was branded as rajakar when he opposed Awami League... Once Dr Kamal Hossain was branded as half rajakar. He will be regarded as patriot if he returns to Awami League."

Spitting venom at Awami League, the BNP leader said "It's a political party that never honoured their commitment to the people."

Poll preparations in a mess

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The EC Secretariat still does not know the number of contesting political parties although the returning officers sent the list to the EC Secretariat on January 4 after completing allocation of election symbols and three days have passed since the last date for withdrawing candidature.

A senior EC Secretariat official, however, told reporters yesterday afternoon that 1,448 candidates are contesting in 283 constituencies while contenders for 17 seats have already been declared elected unopposed.

This is also the first time that the EC Secretariat has started printing ballot papers without calculating the exact number of voters. The deputy EC secretary acknowledged the fact.

The EC, which started printing ballot papers for the 283 constituencies from Friday, plans to complete the task on January 18.

Meanwhile, the EC has cancelled its planned division and district level conferences for elec-

tion officials as the election has now become one-sided following boycotts by the Awami League-led grand alliance and a few other political parties.

The division level conferences were scheduled between January 9 and 10, and the district level conferences between January 11 and 12.

Upazila nirbahi officers (UNO) acting as assistant returning officers, adjutants of district ansar, additional superintendents of police, upazila election officials and others involved with different election duties were supposed to attend the conferences, sources said.

The EC Secretariat also postponed its previous plan to send election materials to the districts from January 5 on security grounds. Sources said these materials would be sent after the deployment of the armed forces.

Little activity was seen yesterday at the EC Secretariat, which is preparing to hold the ninth parliamentary election on January 22, as most officials were absent from the

office.

Although the EC Secretariat earlier cancelled all holidays, no EC members attended the office yesterday. Even the EC secretary was absent as of 4:00pm.

The EC is yet to permit the district election officers, who acted as registration officers for updating the voter list, to delete and include names following receipt of applications after the December 8-15 door-to-door visit.

Talking to The Daily Star yesterday, a few district election officers said they cannot correct the mistakes in the updated voter list without the EC permission after the announcement of the election schedule.

The election officers also do not know when they will get the permission.

The EC will use three voter lists on January 22. The original list was prepared in 2000, another one was prepared by updating the original list, and the last one is being prepared following the correction of mistakes in the updated voter list.

Poll results to be meaningless due to boycott

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election. Two of its allies, Jatiya Party and Liberal Democratic Party, have also said they will not participate in the election.

"This brought immediate doubts as to whether the vote would go ahead at all, but officials from the Election Commission (EC) confirmed on January 4 that it would." They argued that the constitution stipulates that a general election must be held 90 days after the end of the term of the previous government.

The report said the AL and its allies have accused the caretaker government of being biased in favour of BNP, which won the October 2001 election and was in office until October 28 last year.

Over the past three months, the AL has been pressing through various channels, including general strikes and street protests, for reforming the system. Their complaints have focused on the position of President, Iajuddin Ahmed-who appointed himself chief adviser to the caretaker government when the original candidate, whom the AL accused of favouring the BNP, Withdrew-and the partiality of the

EC, which has been accused of attempting to rig the election in favour of the BNP.

The AL has questioned the legality of President Ahmed's role and the amount of power he has accrued.

The Election Commission whose job it is to conduct a fair and free election has become for the opposition a symbol of partisanship. Although CEC Aziz has gone on a three months' leave, his temporary departure has not diminished the AL's concerns about the impartiality of the EC, especially as his replacement, Mahfuzur Rahman, is deemed by the AL to be equally suspect. The AL claims that the revised electoral register is flawed and contains as many as 14 million non-existent voters.

The report said the election boycotting parties have said they will take part only if President Ahmed relinquishes his position as chief adviser, an accurate voter list is published and the officials (including those in the EC and the attorney general) are replaced.

It seems unlikely that the president, having refused most of the

opposition's demands since he took over the charge of the chief adviser in late October, will make these changes by January 22. The AL is therefore unlikely to reconsider its decision to boycott the election.

The report said the EC has said the vote will proceed as planned with only the formerly incumbent BNP and its allies participating. "The result will lack legitimacy. This will undermine the credibility of the next government and will leave it open to challenges by the AL and its allies."

It said if one conclusion can be drawn from the current crisis, it is that the mechanism introduced in 1996 to liberate the democratic process from vicious confrontational two-party violence-an unelected caretaker government-had failed.

Moreover, the EIU report said Bangladesh's polluted mainstream politics has left the country's institutions weak and made the holding of fair elections difficult. The institution of a caretaker government seems unlikely to survive the current crisis.



PHOTO: STAR

Communist Party of Bangladesh stages a demonstration at Muktangan in the city yesterday demanding cancellation of the election schedule.

FBCCI

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adviser alone is responsible for the political impasse as he did not implement the package proposal.

There is no way but to declare emergency to save the country from chaos, confusion and confrontation, the FBCCI leaders said at a press briefing in the capital after a board meeting of the trade body.

They also said before declaring an emergency the chief adviser can seek the Supreme Court's reference for taking more time to hold the national election with participation of all parties.

"We businessmen want an election where all political parties take part, including the two major parties," said Mohammad Ali, acting president of FBCCI. "If there is no way to hold such an election, please save the country from any kind of confrontation by declaring an emergency," he urged the chief adviser.

He said the country's economy has been greatly suffering because of the political deadlock for the last couple of months. "The standoff is not only hampering the country's image abroad, it has also forced the country towards a confrontation," he added.

"If the situation continues, the transport system will collapse, ports will remain idle, factories will shut down, and entrepreneurs will become loan defaulters--and all will lead the businesses to a grinding halt," Mohammad Ali said.

Replying to a query, he said, "I am sorry to say that there is no proper practice of democracy among the political parties, even the two major parties."

He regretted that the business leaders have several times tried to persuade the political parties to reach a consensus over the election, but failed.

On holding the election within 90 days as per the constitution, Mohammad Ali said the constitution is not like the Bible or the Quran, and it can be changed if the political parties can reach a consensus.

OTHER BUSINESS BODIES

"We are yet to know about the FBCCI stance on the state of emergency," said Mahbubur Rahman, president of International Chamber of Commerce-Bangladesh (ICC-B) at a hurriedly called press briefing yesterday.

Urging the leaders of two major political alliances to sit together and resolve the ongoing political turmoil, the ICC-B president said, "We believe, in democracy everything is to be solved through formal dialogues."

"We are very concerned about the ongoing political situation. But at this moment we are not endorsing the FBCCI stance," said Annisul Huq, former president of Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA).

"The caretaker government will take constructive and neutral moves to resolve the political stalemate," he hoped.

The briefing was presided over by the ICC-B president, SM Fazlul Haque, president of BGMEA, Fazlul Haq, president of Bangladesh Knitwear Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BKMEA), AK Azad, president of Bangladesh Chamber of Industry (BCI), Hossain Khaled, president of Dhaka Chamber of Commerce and Industry (DCCI), AH Sarker, president of Bangladesh Textile Mills Association (BTMA), SM Shafiuzzaman, president of Bangladesh Association of Pharmaceutical Industries were also present at the press briefing held at the BKMEA office in Dhaka.

The business leaders said the country's overall internal and external business, especially export-oriented industries have been experiencing losses since the last few months due to the political impasse.

Citing the fall in exports, the BGMEA president said, "Apparel exports have fallen to \$663 million in October of the current fiscal year from \$907 million in August due to the political unrest."

He also urged the president and chief adviser of caretaker government to save the apparel industry by taking immediate steps to resolve the political crisis.

The ICC-B president said, "It will be the best for the nation to hold the general elections where all political parties participate."

"The country will fall into a long-term crisis, if the caretaker government failed to resolve the political predicament and the general elections were held without the participation of all major parties," Annisul Huq said.

"We are worried about further political unrest, which may begin from tomorrow [Sunday]. The country's top business associations including Bangladesh Employers Federation and Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce and Industry (MCCI) already expressed their solidarity with us," the BKMEA president said.

DHAKA
T O D A Y

Film exhibition

A film exhibition on the War of Liberation, organised by Rainbow Chalachitra Sangsad, will begin. Venue: National Museum auditorium. Time: 4:00pm.