

## We can be repressed

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to restrict the media. The media in Bangladesh will not allow even an iota of restriction imposed on them.

We understand what is national interest, what is good for our people and how people's rights can be better served. We also know our responsibilities and how to be restrained, if necessary. The fact that those in power felt the need to start the discredited and hateful system of issuing press advisory over the phone is not only shameful but also suicidal. Such advisory only protects those who are afraid of transparency and openness. They cannot be friends of Dr. Fakruddin's government, not for that matter of Bangladesh or of anybody who has the country's interest at heart.

It is a well-known experience and one that is globally applicable that media restrictions only serve the corrupt and the vested interest groups. Anybody or any group devoted to serving public interest has nothing to fear from a free press. In the past when media censorship existed in the country whom did it serve? Never the public. We accept that free media have not always succeeded in eliminating the corrupt and the criminal elements from the society. But that has been so because the people in power never used the media reports in investigating further and finding out the truth. The government of the day, irrespective of any party, in fact blamed the media for maligning them and as such protected the corrupt simply because of the nexus that grew between the politicians and the criminals. Even under such constraints, whatever little public interest has been served it was due to the relentless pursuit of the journalists to expose corruption. Few other groups did as much for public interest as the media.

Take the most recent political crisis. The nation would have had to suffer a one-sided election, with the most flawed voter list and partisan bureaucracy imaginable but for the media. If President Iajuddin really pursued public interest he would have gotten our full backing even after assuming power unconventionally, according to some illegally. But he got the very opposite from the media as a result of which people have been better served.

With the declaration of emergency, an overall legal cover has been brought into effect within which the government now has the power to institute some restrictive rules for the purpose of maintaining law and order and related governance issues, including restricting some fundamental rights. But it does not automatically mean that a government will have to issue restrictive rules in all the fields covered by the emergency provision of the constitution.

Therefore we urge Dr. Fakruddin not only NOT to go in the direction

## New advisers assert

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The CA along with Law Adviser Barrister Mainul Hosen later at a meeting with acting Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) Justice Mahfuzur Rahman and EC Secretary Abdur Rashid Sarkar discussed ways for holding a free and fair election.

"Both the council of advisers and the Election Commission are looking for ways to hold a free and fair election," the EC secretary said emerging from the meeting with the CA adding that the EC will soon sit for dialogues with major political parties seeking their opinion for holding the next parliamentary election in a free and fair manner.

The meeting of the council of advisers reviewed the existing law and order situation and directed the law enforcement agencies to carry out their duties carefully so that no one is harassed.

It also discussed allocation of portfolios and the CA distributed some portfolios among the advisers, keeping the ones not distributed under his own custody.

About inducting the rest of the advisers into the council, Adviser Abdul Matin said the issue was discussed in the meeting which decided that the rest of the advisers will be inducted in a couple of days.

Sources said some advisory committees, including on establishment to reshuffle the administration, will be formed after induction of the rest of the advisers. A committee on law and order will also be formed, the sources added.

As it was the first meeting of the newly formed council of advisers, they discussed a wide range of issues from law and order to the upcoming election including reconstitution of the EC, sources said.

"We will have to examine some legal matters on different issues including the constitutional provision for holding the election within 90 days of dissolution of the last parliament," an adviser said adding that the meeting however did not assign any adviser to examine the legal provisions. "Actually, we will collectively examine all the issues," he said.

Another adviser said they felt that the people's confidence in the caretaker government and the EC should be reinstated for holding a free and fair election, but they did

of press restrictions but also to issue a clear statement re-asserting the centrality of free media in his policies and categorically stating his government's full commitment to the highest degree of freedom for the media. Such a statement by the Chief Adviser is very necessary because the lower level government and law enforcement officials, especially those corrupt officials who have a lot of dirty linen to hide, may use the pretext of the emergency to harass the media professionals. They also sometimes act on behalf of the corrupt businessmen to intimidate the investigating journalists to desist them from following their stories.

We have said so in the past and repeat ourselves now that free media have greatly enhanced Bangladesh's prestige globally. It is a matter of pride for our people. Of the things that give a positive image of our country, free media is high among them. Restricting it in any way will come at a great cost to our international goodwill. Since the promulgation of emergency almost all the foreign press that contacted this writer for comments, and it was nearly two dozen, all invariably asking about the fate of press freedom under the present circumstances.

We wish the new caretaker government well. We pledge our full co-operation in all its pro-people and pro-democracy activities. We will vigorously support its good actions and criticise the bad ones. We may even be merciless on occasions. But all our actions will be solely guided by national interest and the desire to strengthen democracy and empower the people to have a greater say in running their country. As for the immediate task, all our effort will be directed to the holding of a free and fair election at the earliest. This, as we know, is also the number one task of the new caretaker government and in that sense we are allies. There cannot be any sense on part of Dr. Fakruddin's government to debilitate its ally, perhaps the most valuable one. So, Dr. Fakruddin, say NO to press restrictions, and say it repeatedly and loudly so that the whole world can hear it and the enemies of the free press lurking in the shadows know that they have no place in the 21st Century Bangladesh.

**Postscript:** After conclusion of this piece, the news came that the advisory council in its first meeting decided to uphold fundamental rights as much as possible under the purview of emergency. We are heartened by this decision, but we would have preferred if upholding press freedom was separately mentioned.

### HC asks law enforcers not to harass Mamun, his wife

COURT CORRESPONDENT

The High Court (HC) yesterday issued a rule asking the law enforcement agencies not to arrest or harass Gias Uddin Al Mamun, managing director of a private television channel, Channel 1, and his wife Shahina Yesmin without following the provisions of the Criminal Procedure Code (CrPC).

The Division Bench comprising Justice Syed Mohammad Dastagir Hossain and Justice Mannun Rahman passed the order following a writ petition filed by Mamun and his wife seeking a direction from the court, according to a press release.

The HC also directed the agencies not to raid their residence without following the CrPC provisions.

Senior Advocate Khondker Mahbubuddin Ahmed moved the petition on behalf of the petitioners.

### EC to invite

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In reply to a question, he said the separate meetings with the two political alliances may take place by tomorrow (Tuesday).

"As meetings and processions are not allowed now, the EC has decided to postpone the local government elections," Sarkar said.

On the nearly two-hour meeting, he said, "We discussed how to address the present prevailing situation and hold a free and fair election by overcoming the present problems."

But they did not discuss the reconstitution of the EC, Sarkar said.

After rescheduling the upcoming election several times, the EC was firm to hold the election on January 22 amidst a boycott by the Awami League-led grand alliance that demanded preparation of a correct voter list and a fresh election schedule.

The CEC and EC secretary earlier said they had no alternative to holding the election within the stipulated 90 days set for the interim caretaker government.

### AL wants

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party held a meeting to review the latest political developments and give the combine's formal reaction on the state of emergency declared on January 11 following the resignation of President Iajuddin Ahmed from the post of chief adviser. AL presidium member Abdur Razzak chaired the meeting.

"We believe in constitution, democracy, election and fundamental rights," Jaili, also AL general secretary, said in his short speech.

Terming Iajuddin's quitting the post of the chief adviser 'people's victory,' Jaili said, "His [president] speech has proved the legitimacy of our demonstrations."

Senior 14-party combine leaders Abdur Razzak, Tofail Ahmed, Suranjit Sengupta, Sheikh Fazlul Karim Selim, Rashed Khan Menon, Hasanul Haque Inu, Bimal Biswas, Nurul Islam, Dilip Barua, Pankaj Bhattacharya, Syed Zafar Sazzad, Hazi Abdus Samad, Latif Siddiqui were present at the briefing among others.

### 3 JMB cadres

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picked up Mojibor Miah, 42, from his house at the same place.

They also arrested another member of the banned Islamist militant outfit Abul Khaer, 23, of Khoddo Tampat under Sadar upazila from the house of one Muchha Miah of Purbo Goneshpur.

The Rab-5 chief said they would continue hunting of the JMB militants as they have information about their regrouping to conduct fresh attacks in the country ahead of the execution of the death sentences of the convicted JMB kingpins.

### Old temple

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of antiques including terracotta bricks, iron nails and clay bowls have been dug up during the excavation.

The lower part of the temple was decorated with arch shaped panels of terracotta and terracotta bricks. At least 60 such bricks have been found.

The structure of a small room was also discovered. A lawn like space was discovered in front of the small room. It is presumed that the small room was used for keeping the idol.

Beside the lawn, nine brick-built steps with railing on both sides have been discovered. The lower part of the temple was decorated in three stages with terracotta and ornamental bricks.

The RD said the entire structure of the temple is likely to be excavated at the end of February this year if the excavation work goes on smoothly. The work started last December.

### 2 outlaws

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General Hospital morgue for autopsy.

Officer-in-charge of Ataikula Police Station SM Shamsul Haque said the dead were accused in several criminal cases, including murder and robbery cases.

## BDR, BSF

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feared the situation might escalate. The local and officials sources said the Indian side used automatic weapons along the borders of these three districts to fire hundreds of bullets at Bangladeshi villages and nearby BDR outposts from yesterday midnight. They said the BSF triggered the exchange of fire.

BDR, police and local public representatives said the BSF troops of Pukhrani camp under Noyabari Company of 10 BSF Battalion suddenly opened fire at Bangladesh from a place opposite to Majhipara BDR outpost in Tentulia upazila of Panchagarh.

The on-patrol BDR men of Majhipara outpost retaliated. The exchange of gunfire continued till 5:30am yesterday, creating panic in the area.

In another incident, both the border forces exchanged gunfire till this morning when the BSF troops of Adadanga camp of 172 BSF Battalion opened fire in the early hours yesterday towards Hapania BDR outpost of Naogaon without any provocation.

Sources said both BDR and BSF forces exchanged gunfire when BSF men of Mathurapur camp of 115 BSF Battalion opened indiscriminate fire towards Bangladeshi villages and the BDR 29 Rifle Battalion outposts at Koria, Bhutiapara and Pagladewan of Joypurhat early yesterday.

Fear and panic have gripped the

entire frontier areas of these three districts and the people are apprehending further escalation of the situation, local public representatives told BSS.

Hundreds of villagers on both sides of the border started fleeing to safer places leaving their properties. Dozens of villages have already were a deserted look along the borders. But there was no report of any casualty from the Bangladesh side.

When contacted, BDR Commanding officers Lt Colonel Shaedul Haque Shahed of Panchagarh 25 Rifle Battalion and Lt Colonel Zahid Hassan of Naogaon 28 Rifle Battalion and officials of Dinajpur sector of BDR claimed the BSF side fired first and the BDR retaliated on self-defence.

"We have already lodged strong protests against the BSF actions and atrocities and asked our BSF counterparts to hold flag meetings and explain the reasons behind this kind of provocation," they told BSS.

Earlier, the BSF side sought apologies on Friday to the BDR authorities during three flag meetings when the BDR men strongly protested the killings of four Bangladeshi villagers and injuring four others on Tentulia, Porsha and Joypurhat borders.

The BSF side also assured the BDR authorities that they would not repeat such incident in the future.

## Toxic ship barred

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They asked the Bangladesh Bank not to allow opening of an LC in favour of the importer and asked the Chittagong Port Authority not to allow the ship to beach.

The letter read, "The department has obtained information that MT Apheron carries hazardous materials onboard and scrapping of the ship will cause environmental pollution."

"Now the importer will not be able to bring the ship into Bangladesh territory unless it is decontaminated," said Ashraf.

Apheron and her sistership Gudermes, are on the list of '50 ships in the spotlight' created by Greenpeace International, an environmentalist watchdog fighting against potential threats to the world's biodiversity and environment.

Both the ships are in the Indian Ocean sailing for Bangladesh and are believed to have hazardous wastes such as asbestos, PCB, toxic paint and fuel residues on board.

The Basel Convention affirmed in Geneva on 29 October, 2004 that ships can be considered toxic waste under international laws and that its 163 signatories must control export of ships under the terms of the convention.

In 1995 the Basel Convention banned export of hazardous wastes, including materials for recycling from developed to developing countries.

In a writ petition in relation to another toxic ship, Alfaship, the High Court (HC) directed the director general of Department of Shipping to frame a set of rules to regulate entry of toxic ocean liners into the country, said Director of Bangladesh Environmental Lawyers Association (Bela) Syeda Rizwana Hasan.

"Actually the list of 50 by Greenpeace is not all," she said adding, "There are many more hazardous ships being scrapped frequently in developing countries like Bangladesh."

"The shipping department needs to have an office in Chittagong as well because the department presently can inspect at best ten ships per month from Dhaka," said Musharraf Ashraf.

Bangladesh lacks specific laws

## Court accepts

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different dates of the case.

Dr Kamal and 11 others were present in the court during the passing of the order regarding exemption from appearing in person.

After scrutinising the case docket (CD) and other relevant documents, Metropolitan Magistrate Towfiqul Islam accepted the charge sheet and issued an arrest warrant against another accused Habibur Rahman, an outsider, as he has been absconding since the incident.

Earlier on December 22 last year, Detective Branch (DB) Inspector Naimur Rahman, who is also the investigation officer (IO), pressed charges against 13 including Dr Kamal, Amir and Rokan, showing 28 people as prosecution witnesses.

The other charge sheeted defendants are former Supreme Court Bar Association (SCBA) secretary advocate Enayetur Rahim, former SCBA vice president advocate Subrata Chowdhury, barrister Tania Amir and advocates Sheikh Awsfar Rahman, Subrata Saha, Khairul Alam Pipul, Mohammad Khasruzzaman, Suhrawardi and Syed Mamun Mahbub.

Barrister Omar Sadat, son-in-law of BNP leader and former minister Shahjahan Siraj, filed the with the CMM's Court on December 4 nam-

## DU student strike finally postponed

DU CORRESPONDENT

Chhatra Sangram Parishad (CSP), an alliance of 14-party backed student organisations, yesterday postponed its indefinite student strike at Dhaka University (DU), "taking into account the greater interest of the students."

The university administration, however, resumed the academic activities from Saturday saying that the state of emergency reopens the university automatically as all kind of political activities are banned across the country.

At a press conference at Dhaka University Central Students' Union (Ducus), the alliance leaders called off the strike enforced for more than two months. BCL President Mahmud Hasan Ripon, General Secretary Mofazzal Haider Chowdhury Roton, Shariful Kabir Swapan and Ali Hasan Torun were present at the conference among others.

The CSP, led by Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL), called the strike from November 20 protesting JCD's attack on its leaders and activists on the campus the previous day and demanding peaceful co-existence of all student bodies.

Jaliyatabadi Chhatra Dal (JCD), student wing of BNP, drove out the leaders and activists of the CSP and barred them from re-entering the campus and holding organisational activities since the previous caretaker government took over on last October.

The alliance leaders and activists returned to the campus after around three months' stay outside at a time when political activities are restricted due to the state of emergency.

At the press conference yesterday, the alliance leaders demanded the authorities ensure and maintain peaceful co-existence of all student bodies on the campus and immediate arrest of the armed cadres of the JCD.

If the university authorities fail to meet their demands within a short time, they will launch movement against the vice-chancellor (VC), pro-VC and treasurer, as they have been patronising the JCD cadres, Ripon said.

### Ctg port

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The CPA also revived the monitoring cell in a bid to bring back complete normalcy at the port within two weeks.

"We've taken some steps that would help ease the serious container congestion and hopefully the port will be back to normal operations within 10 to 15 days," CPA Secretary Syed Farhaduddin Ahmad told The Daily Star.

The CPA officials also sought sincere cooperation from the importers and exporters to speed up the port operations.

"Our efforts will not bring any immediate fruit unless the importers and exporters come forward and cooperate with us by taking quick delivery of their containers," said an official seeking anonymity.

The port official alleged many importers and exporters developed a habit of keeping containers in the port yards for weeks instead of taking delivery.

Earlier on Thursday, the government in a circular declared the port service 'indispensable' for the next six months.

Regarding the circular, the port secretary said the government just renewed its 'old order' considering the overall situation.

### Photojournalists

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trees worth around several lakh taka for only Tk 40,000, said the sources.

The trees were sold to four different buyers through an open bid, but involved under-the-table transactions, a number of university officials alleged.

Swapan Miah of Bismillah Furniture Mart, one of the buyers, admitted that the actual value of the trees is higher than what his business paid for. He was told that the trees were being chopped down to make room for a garden.

An engineer working for the university, Ekramul Huq, said the trees had no significance and those were chopped down to slash the density of tress and make breathing space for mango trees for better growth.

A gardener however said the trees were cut so that no one can hide behind the trunk of those trees and to have a better view of the whole campus from the tower on top of the vice chancellor's (VC) residence.

Campus sources alleged that VC Dr M Ershadul Bari had his eyes on the trees and made the move to make a quick buck out of the sale.

The VC however refused to talk to the press on the issue. After the journalists were held, the public relations officer of BOU could not be reached for comments either.

### 3 wounded

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A case was filed with Paltan Police Station while the assailants remain on the loose. Police suspect that the motive behind the criminals' actions might be previous disputes with the storeowner.

## Iraq president flies to Syria for security talks

DAMASCUS, Syria

Iraqi President Jalal Talabani arrived in Syria yesterday on the first such high-level visit in three decades to a country accused by the United States of fuelling the violence in his homeland.

Talabani's trip comes just days after US President George W. Bush vowed to take tough action against alleged meddling in Iraq by both Syria and its main regionally ally Iran.

It also coincides with a Middle East tour by US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, who is seeking to shore up Arab support for Bush's new strategy in the war-ravaged nation.

Talabani will hold talks with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and other officials during the trip, his first since Baghdad and Damascus restored diplomatic ties in November after a 26-year rupture.

"The aim of the visit is to evaluate and strengthen mutual relations for the benefit of both the countries," said a statement from Talabani's office.

Iraq was for decades ruled by a rival branch of the Baath party that remains in power in Syria but then Iraqi president Saddam Hussein severed relations after Syria backed Iran when his troops invaded in 1980.

On Friday, an official from Talabani's office said the two presidents are to sign a number of agreements on security and trade.

Syrian Vice President Faruq al-Shara said on Wednesday that " rapprochement between the two countries is aimed at consolidating relations" and "is not happening because of external reasons" related to the United States.

As leader of the rebel Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, Talabani was one of many Iraqi opposition figures to spend lengthy stays in Syria during the 1980s as well as to hold a Syrian passport.

Talabani's office said in March 2004 that he had returned his Syrian passport "with a message of thanks and acknowledgement of the support this country granted at the time to the Iraqi opposition".

Washington has repeatedly accused Damascus of turning a blind eye towards foreign fighters using its territory to enter Iraq and take part in a raging anti-US insurgency, but Baghdad has insisted on building ties.

During an address to the nation Wednesday in which he announced plans to boost troop numbers in Iraq, Bush also vowed to cut off Iranian and Syrian support to "terrorists" in Iraq.

"We will interrupt the flow of support from Iran and Syria. And we will seek out and destroy the networks providing advanced weaponry and training to our enemies in Iraq," Bush said.

But following the speech, the White House on Friday took the unusual step of dismissing what it called a "rumour and urban legend" that the United States was gearing up for military action against Iran or Syria.

Damascus has insisted that it is already cooperating with Baghdad, having in December signed an agreement aimed at strengthening security on their common border.

"Contrary to arguments circulating in the media and political circles, Syria has cooperated, and continues to cooperate, on securing and stabilizing the situation in Iraq," the Syrian embassy in Washington said Friday.

The embassy said that since the US-led invasion of Iraq in March 2003, Syria had captured thousands of individuals attempting to illegally cross the border into Iraq and extradited them to their home countries.

Last month, US Senator Arlen Specter said Assad had told him that he had tried to engage the United States to work with his forces to seal the porous

## No 'temporary'

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through the political horizon," she said.

Rice said she was told during her trip that the United States needed to deepen its involvement in Mideast peace efforts. "You will have my commitment to do precisely that," she said.

"The Palestinian people have waited a long time for their own state. The Israeli people have waited a long time to live in security and peace with their neighbors," she said.

Abbas also said he is determined to go ahead with early elections if the latest round of coalition talks with Hamas fails.

The two rival Palestinian factions have made repeated attempts to form a coalition Cabinet but failed because of disagreement over key posts, such as the interior and finance ministries, and the government's political program.

Hamas, which has dominated the Cabinet since winning parliamentary elections in March, has balked at international demands it recognize Israel, renounce violence and accept existing peace deals before Western sanctions on economic assistance to the government could be lifted.

The international community, including the U.S., insists that any Palestinian government recognize Israel's right to exist, but Hamas has refused to do so.

Ahead of Rice's visit, Palestinian Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh of Hamas contended that Israel and the U.S. were trying to fan the flames of a Palestinian civil war. Fighting between Abbas' Fatah faction and Hamas gunmen has repeatedly erupted in Gaza in recent months.

The U.S. policy of backing Abbas and ignoring Hamas "is doomed to

border, but that "the United States has not been responsive."

Talabani's delegation includes Interior Minister Jawad Bolani, Trade Minister Abdel Falah al-Sudani, Water Resources Minister Abdel Latif Rashid and national security advisor Muwaffaq al-Rubaie.

## India to host global energy confce today

AFP, New Delhi

Energy ministers from 10 oil-producing countries were expected to attend an oil and gas conference starting today in New Delhi against a backdrop of tumbling oil prices, officials said.

The oil ministers of Nigeria, Iran, Venezuela, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Sudan, Romania, Myanmar, Sri Lanka and Yemen were slated to be at the conference, Indian officials said, according to the Press Trust of India.

The meeting comes as oil prices have slid by up to nine dollars since the start of the year, hit by an unseasonably warm winter in the United States that has knocked US fuel demand and boosted stockpiles.

Members of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (Opec) have expressed concern about the plunging price of oil, which has slid some 14 percent since the start of the year.

On Saturday, Iran and Venezuela called for new Opec oil production cuts to support plunging world crude prices. The sharp falls have prompted speculation that Opec could soon hold an emergency production meeting.

The meeting's theme is "Energy, Economy, Equity, Ecology". It is part of the International Oil and Gas Conference and Exhibition "Petrotech-2007" organised by India's state-owned Oil and Natural Gas Corp.

### UK denies

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Bangladesh to further its development."

The British mission once again noted that a credible election with full participation is necessary. "The UK's position has consistently been to urge all parties, without favour or preference, to engage in constructive dialogue to find a way to achieve this."

### Hand over

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programmes which could be the cause of the disruption of economic activities and security of public life and property," the press release said.

After a meeting of the party standing committee with Chairperson Khaleda Zia in the chair, BNP Secretary General Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan read out the release at a press briefing held at Hawa Bhaban.

The meeting attended by all the members of the standing committee discussed the latest political situation, Bhuiyan said.

The reporters, however, were not given any chance to ask questions.

fail because the Palestinian people are not bought with money, and no one believes that trying to lure some (Palestinians) will lead to results," said Ghazi Hamad, a Hamas government spokesman.

On Saturday, Rice met separately with Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni and Israeli Defense Minister Amir Peretz. Last month,