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Poll date depends on how much reforms parties want

Two advisers say voter ID cards would take a long time

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

A new schedule for general elections depends on the extent and scope of reforms demanded by political parties to ensure free, fair and credible polls, two advisers to the caretaker government said yesterday.

It would take longer to hold the elections if political parties want voter ID cards but it could be held much sooner if only an update of the 2000 voter list is required, they told reporters.

Both the advisers -- MA Matin and Mainul Hossain -- cited updating of voter list, reconstitution of the Election Commission (EC), national ID cards, transparent ballot box, reform and depoliticisation of the administration as priorities for the CG.

They said there is no longer a time limit for holding elections as

the constitutional 90-day timeframe is not applicable now. So, it does not matter whether it would take three or six months to hold polls if necessary and reforms demanded are implemented.

But the two advisers did not see any need to prolong the state of emergency, and said they will work for polls without the influence of 'black money' and separation of the judiciary during their tenure.

"We will discuss with political parties their reform demands regarding the election. If they ask for national ID cards, it would take a long time. But, if they want only the 2000 voter list to be updated, an election could take place much sooner," said Matin, adviser for communications, shipping, civil aviation and tourism, and liberation war affairs.

"There are several major demands including introduction of

voter identity cards, reconstitution of the Election Commission, preparation of voter list and depoliticisation of the administration."

He went on, "It is not a matter of two or six months. Reform of the election process will take a long time. We need support of the people and political parties to implement those."

"The national crisis is there. It is largely a political crisis and we (advisers) have discussed how to resolve it."

The adviser stressed, "We will have to attain our goals and objectives of priority reforms to make the elections acceptable at home and abroad."

Asked about the state of emergency, he said, "There is no need to prolong the emergency." He emphasised the need to protect fundamental rights.

Law, Justice and Parliamentary Affairs Adviser Mainul Hossain told reporters at his office, "The constitution has already been violated in terms of the president taking oath as the chief adviser and the inability to hold elections within 90 days. What is done is done. So, we have to protect the constitution as much as we can and move towards holding an acceptable election."

Asked when they expect the polls to be held, Mainul said they could hold elections even within two months if they want, but the CG's main concern is to ensure legitimacy of the election by making it free, fair, neutral and credible.

"We want to hold an election free from the influence of black money. If dishonest people are elected representatives of the people, their wishes will not be fulfilled. So, we have discussed this

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Farmers collecting paddy seedlings from a seedbed near the flood protection embankment at Rayerbazar in the capital for transplantation as the IRRI season is going on.

25 injured as farmers clash with cops over fertiliser

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Sirajganj

At least 25 people including police were injured when the law enforcers clashed with farmers who put up barricades on the Dhaka-Bogra Highway in Raiganj upazila of the district for hours yesterday demanding fertiliser.

Following the prolonged barricade and the clash, hundreds of vehicles got stranded on both sides of the spot on the highway, causing untold sufferings to the passengers.

Local sources said some 2,000 farmers from several neighbouring villages of the upazila went to the local fertiliser dealer Mozibor Rahman alias Meherchand's store at Shahebganj bazar in the morning, but the dealer failed to supply them with the required quantity, sparking off anger.

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BNP clique trying to change president

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

A section of BNP leaders are making moves to change the president, who holds the defence portfolio during the tenure of the caretaker government with the authority of transferring and promoting the armed forces personnel.

Losing confidence in President Iajuddin Ahmed, BNP is lobbying for a new face in the presidency believing that a change might help it in the upcoming election.

Iajuddin's last speech on Thursday night frustrated the BNP leaders and now they want someone 'more loyal' to them in the presidency, sources said.

The leaders who want to change the president believe that the speaker of the last parliament

might act more favourably to BNP if made the acting president following resignation of Iajuddin.

The BNP leaders already sent a message to the president expressing their desire. A senior official of Bangladesh met Speaker Jamiruddin Sircar, who is supposed to act as the president in absence of Iajuddin, sources said.

A BNP delegation led by Salahuddin Quader Chowdhury, parliamentary affairs adviser to the immediate past prime minister, yesterday held a three-hour long meeting with the Speaker in his office in the parliament complex.

They left the speaker's office hurriedly without saying anything to the media about the meeting. Asked by The Daily Star, former whip Rezaul Bari Deena said, "The

meeting did not discuss what you think it discussed." He left the office without giving any scope for asking further questions.

Afterwards, the speaker met Deputy Speaker Akhtar Hamid Siddiqui at his office. According to the constitution, if the speaker assumes the office of the President, Akhtar will become the acting speaker.

Issues regarding the president's resignation dominated the discussions and there was a significant amount of pressure on President Iajuddin to resign, sources said.

Another section of BNP leaders do not support the move arguing that it would make it evident that BNP has plans to manipulate the upcoming election, sources said.

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Adviser briefed about looming power crisis

UNB, Dhaka

Top officials of the power and energy ministry yesterday apprised new adviser Tapan Chowdhury of the enormous problems the country is likely to face in the coming days in both sectors.

They told the adviser that the power shortage will be between 1,500 and 2,000 MW while gas shortage will be over 200 million cubic feet (mncf) per day.

The adviser held separate meetings with the top officials of the power and energy divisions and their respective subordinate bodies on his second working day yesterday.

Meeting sources said the officials also told the adviser that the country will have to face extensive shortage both in power and gas supply in the coming summer as

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TALKS ON POLLS

EC wants dialogues but yet to invite alliances

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The Election Commission (EC) yesterday did not send any invitation letter to the two major political alliances, asking them to have talks with the EC on how to hold the ninth parliamentary election, although it is trying to get their consent for dialogues.

Meanwhile, EC Secretary Abdur Rashid Sarkar on Sunday said meeting with the major political alliances might start today.

However, Acting Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) Justice Mahfuzur Rahman yesterday said, "Letters are yet to be sent and time and the date for dialogues have not been fixed."

"We are keeping in touch with them [political parties]. Their consent is also required," he said.

"Election is not being held on January 22," Mahfuzur told the reporters at the doorstep of the EC as he was leaving his office.

He said the fate of the January 22 elections, whether it has been postponed or cancelled, depends on the caretaker government.

"[It] postponement or cancellation depends on the decision of the advisers," the acting CEC said, adding, "What the council of advisers is saying now is that the elections can not be held on January 22."

On the possible date for the next elections, he said, "We will discuss

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Army men pick up 3 Ctg ward commissioners

STAR REPORT

Army personnel arrested three Awami League-backed ward commissioners of Chittagong City Corporation (CCC) and a BNP-backed union parishad chairman in the district yesterday.

The arrestees are Mohammad Hossain Hiron, CCC commissioner of Pahartali ward, Jahar Lal Hazari, commissioner of Anderkilla ward, Mohammad Aslam Hossain, commissioner of south Halishahar ward, and Delwar Hossain Delu, chairman of Korerhat union parishad of Mirersarai upazila in Chittagong.

Our staff correspondent reports from Chittagong: The troops arrested Hiron, who is accused in a number of criminal cases, at his Ambagan home in Pahartali around 12:15pm yesterday. Hazari was arrested around 12:30am

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Judicial probe of defamation case against Hasina stalled

COURT CORRESPONDENT

ADhaka court yesterday adjourned the judicial inquiry of a defamation case filed against Awami League (AL) Chief Sheikh Hasina until March 15 as BNP Senior Joint Secretary General Tarique Rahman could not appear before it yesterday.

Metropolitan Magistrate ABM Abdul Fattah passed the order following a time petition by the defence lawyers on behalf of the complainant.

On December 19 last year, Tarique filed the case with the Chief Metropolitan Magistrate's Court against Hasina accusing her of conducting 'malicious campaign' against him.

After hearing the petitioner, the court ordered judicial inquiry into the case without taking the matter into direct cognisance.

In the complaint, Tarique said Hasina on November 3 told a public meeting at Paltan Maidan that

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2 PBCP men killed in 'shootout'

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Pabna

Two members of the outlawed Purbo Banglar Communist Party (PBCP) Janajuddha faction were killed in a 'shootout' with Rapid Action Battalion (Rab) inside a primary school compound under Ataikula thana in Pabna during early hours Monday.

The dead were identified as Anwar Hossain, 35, son of Manik Sarder from Alokchar village under Ataikula thana and Chand Ali, 25, son of Babar Ali from Nandanpur village under Santhia upazila. Anwar was an assistant regional

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Plucked chickens are sold at Tongi on the outskirts of the capital at only Tk 50 a kg although its normal price at kitchen markets in the capital is at least Tk 80 a kg. There are allegations that dead fowls are sold at Tongi, but the sellers claim they buy at lower prices excess chicken from the suppliers of meat to posh restaurants and clubs. They also sell veal, mutton, fish bone, chicken skin and heads at cheaper prices to low-income people.

Asthma takes alarming turn

Increasing air pollution main reason, say experts

MAHBUBA ZANNAT

The number of asthma patients coming for treatment at the hospitals greatly increased in last 10 years, marking an alarming rise of such patients in the recent time.

Turning up of new asthma patients in National Institute of Diseases of Chest and Hospital (NIDCH), which was only 2,000 in 1996, gradually rose to 4,000, 6,000 and 7,500 in 1998, 2005 and 2006.

Excessive presence of particulate matter (PM) in the air leads to pulmonary diseases like asthma, said Dr Mohammad Nasiruddin,

project director of Air Quality Management Project (AQMP).

Fume emitted from diesel run vehicles, brick kilns and factories, and dust are the sources of PM-10 and PM-2.5 (fine particulate matter), he said, adding that the presence of particulate matter in the air multiplies in winter due to dry weather.

Experts, however, attributed the rise of admission seeker asthma patients also to higher level of awareness, better diagnosis facilities and increase of population.

Around 70 lakh people of the country are suffering from asthma,

showing a prevalence rate of 5.2 per cent, which is almost the same in India, China and Pakistan, said Asif Mujtaba Mahmud, an associate professor of NIDCH.

"The disease is a chronic process and people are attacked with acute asthma mostly in winter when the weather is dry, dusty and cold. Fifty per cent of asthma patients come to hospitals from November to March," he said.

During November 2005 -- March 2006, a total of 3,367 newly diagnosed patients received treatment from the centre, Asif said.

In the NIDCH, the number of

newly diagnosed patients in November 2003 -- March 2004 was 1,925 while it was 2,217 in November 2004 -- March 2005, he said.

"It is a worldwide observation that environmental pollution and urbanisation are mainly responsible for higher prevalence of asthma and cold is its triggering factor," said Prof Ruhul Amin of Dhaka Shishu Hospital.

During this winter average PM-10 and PM-2.5 have been measured to be 335 and 187 microgram per cubic metre in the air in Dhaka

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Canadian minister for talks among govt, parties for fair election

UNB, Dhaka

Canadian Foreign Minister Peter MacKay has urged the new caretaker government and the leaders of the main political parties in Bangladesh to enter into a constructive dialogue in order to establish the condition for a free and fair election.

"Canada is deeply concerned about the current direction of the political process in Bangladesh, which has led to unprecedented politically motivated violence and a state of emergency," he said in a statement released by the Canadian High Commission in Dhaka yesterday.

MacKay said: "We are also concerned at the suspension of key civil liberties, and urge the parties to establish the condition for a free and fair election soon."

He said Bangladesh and Canada have been development partners for the past 30 years.

Bangladesh has fought hard to achieve an independent democracy, and Canada has supported it in this process and worked actively to contribute to the future of the country, the Canadian minister said.

"We look to its leaders to find a suitable solution to end this crisis," he added.

HC injunction on earth-filling of Gulshan Lake

UNB, Dhaka

The High Court (HC) yesterday issued an interim injunction on earth-filling work by Rajdhan Udayan Katiripakhkhia (Rajuk) on Gulshan Lake in the city's posh area to prepare residential plots.

Passing the order upon a public interest litigation (PIL) writ petition filed by Bela, Bangladesh Environment Lawyers Association, a division bench comprising Justice Syed Dastagir Husain and Justice Mamnoon Rahman issued a rule upon the government and others to explain why the earth-filling work on the lake should not

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ORIENTAL BANK SCAM CASE

ACC leaves out key man Obaedul Karim

Blames BB's delay in sending report

JULFIKAR ALI MANIK

The Anti-corruption Commission (ACC) filed 29 cases against 14 'culprits', who had swindled Oriental Bank, but mysteriously left Obaedul Karim's name out of the list, who had been categorically named as the key swindler in the Bangladesh Bank (BB) investigation report.

The ACC however claimed to The Daily Star that more cases will be filed and the 'main culprit' will be charged based on the BB investigation report.

The BB investigation implicated Oriental Bank's majority shareholder and chief of Orion Group, Obaedul Karim, in misappropriation of Tk 596.60 crore in collusion with his bank's high officials and some managers.

The persons accused in the cases are, former managing director of the bank CS Koyes Sami, former deputy managing director Imamul Haq, Assistant Vice-president Fazlur Rahman, Executive Vice-president Kamrul Islam, Senior Vice-president Shah

Md Harun, Senior Assistant Vice-president Abul Kashem Mahmud Ullah, Assistant Vice-president Mohiuddin Ahmed, Senior Executive Vice-president Mahmud Hossain, senior officials Touhid Uddin Khandaker, Syed Mahmud Hasan, Tarikul Alam, Zahir Hossain, ANM Asifur Rahman, and former official Anif Quadri.

An ACC official noted that the commission filed the cases against the 14 in connection with siphoning of Tk 33.30 crore from Oriental based on its own findings. When it filed the cases on December 28 and 29, it did not have the BB investigation report in hand.

"We repeatedly asked the central bank to give us the investigation report that had been filed in September. But the central bank delayed its response and gave us a copy on December 30, coinciding with the Eid holidays. That's why Obaedul Karim's name was not incorporated in the first 29 cases," said an ACC official.

Sources however said ACC's own inquiry had been flawed as

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