

Britain, India, Pakistan for early polls

UNB, Dhaka

Britain, India and Pakistan yesterday hoped Bangladesh would have a free, fair and credible general election in the shortest possible time to meet the aspiration of the people.

The observations came from British High Commissioner Anwar Choudhury, Indian High Commissioner Pinak Ranjan Chakravarty and Pakistan High Commissioner Alamgir Babar after their separate courtesy calls on Foreign Affairs Adviser Iftekhar Ahmed Chowdhury at his office.

"I think the caretaker government needs to focus on election and how a credible, free and fair election can be held as soon as possible," Anwar Choudhury told reporters, adding, "We welcome the steps so far taken by the caretaker government."

Asked if he thinks the agenda set by the caretaker government is ambitious, the envoy said he will not comment on that but said the people and political parties will look into it. "What everybody seems to be agreed is that they want a free, fair and credible election."

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UK offers help in fair polls, transparent ballot box

UNB, Dhaka

The United Kingdom (UK) offered all help in holding a free and fair general election in Bangladesh, including supply of transparent ballotbox.

British High Commissioner Anwar Choudhury extended the assistance as he called on Law, Justice and Parliamentary Affairs and Information Adviser Mainul Hossain at the latter's office yesterday.

The envoy discussed the issues of voter ID card and transparent ballot box, assuring all necessary cooperation from his government in this regard.

Anwar thanked Mainul for taking initiative for separation of the judiciary from the executive.

The law adviser suggested the high commissioner to cooperate with a reconstituted election commission as per their requirement after the EC reform—now under process.

Mainul also thanked the envoy for their cooperation in various fields of Bangladesh.

Anwar Choudhury also met Communications Adviser Major General (ret'd) MA Matin at his office yesterday.

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Be honest and neutral or face punishment

CA tells secretaries people's lack of trust in bureaucrats has to be remedied

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Chief Adviser (CA) to the Caretaker Government Fakhruddin Ahmed in his first meeting with secretaries to the ministries yesterday warned them of severe punitive measures if they do not carry out their duties with sincerity, honesty and neutrality.

Fakhruddin held a two-hour-long meeting with the secretaries in Bangladesh Secretariat where he later spent hours in his own office yesterday.

Cabinet Secretary Ali Imam Mazumdar said, "Politicisation of the administration is not a new phenomenon. We want to be liberated from this poisonous atmosphere."

"Some people voluntarily get involved with politicisation, while others become victims of circumstances created by the

politicisation," he said.

Fakhruddin stressed, "Government officials have to remember that no political party is their master. They are the servants of the people's republic."

Pointing out that tax paid by the citizens pay for government officials' wages and also runs the government, Fakhruddin said, "All officials have to ensure that the government services are delivered to the people's doorsteps."

The newly appointed CA said he believed in those values while he was a public servant and hoped that the government officials will also be inspired by the values.

"Government officials will have to rise above all fears and act neutrally to ensure transparency and accountability in the government," Fakhruddin said.

Reiterating his resolve for cleaning up the administration,

Fakhruddin said, "The people's lack of trust in government officials has to be remedied."

"Whatever changes are required to ensure impartiality in the administration, will be brought into existence," he added.

Addressing the high officials of the state the CA said, "Don't do anything that might give rise to questions in the people's minds."

Fakhruddin observed, "The responsibility of running the country lies with a government elected by the people," but he requested the officials to assist the council of advisers in fulfilling the prerequisites for holding an election, namely the people's trust in the administration.

"While it is our (the caretaker government's) main priority to hold a credible election, it is also our duty to sustain and strengthen

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Resignation Acting CEC still waits for president's request

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Acting Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) Justice Mahfuzur Rahman yesterday said he would consider stepping down as the poll chief if the request comes from President Iajuddin Ahmed.

He however questioned the authority of Law Adviser Mainul Hossain suggesting that he and the other election commissioners resign voluntarily.

"You'd better ask him [law adviser] how he could say this," Mahfuz said when reporters sought his comment on the law adviser's suggestion.

"We are in constitutional posts and we have taken oath to be here," added the acting CEC.

Earlier on Thursday, he and his deputies kept mum when asked whether they would resign in the wake of growing clamour for their exit.

The previous day, Mainul suggested that the EC would have to be reconstituted to pave the way for a

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Sangu drains out huge money from country

Developer's recoverable costs rising while gas production on decline

SHARIER KHAN

The country's only offshore gas field Sangu has become a never-ending financial drainage system for the country, as the foreign developer Cairn's recoverable costs are increasing every year and gas production level decreasing.

Cairn has already taken out \$491 million until 2005, against a recoverable cost of \$555 million. The recoverable cost within this year would exceed \$600 million. This cost is nearly three times that of a single on-shore gas field developed by other foreign oil companies.

All the while, the financially weak Petrobangla last year swallowed an audit objection of \$239 million against the Sangu investment. These objections were raised over the years for either unauthorised expenditure or over-expenditure. Allegations are made

against two Petrobangla high officials that they undermined national interest in clearing the objections. The clearance of this audit objection, however, remains to be approved by the Petrobangla board.

A nearly similar picture is seen with Chevron's Jalalabad and Moulvibazar gas fields where the US company has been allowed to take out \$275 million against a total investment of \$474 million, along with a total audit objection of \$222 million. This entire audit objection has remained unresolved.

A financial comparison of the two operators shows that the country's first offshore gas field Sangu has become a massive foreign investment drainage system for the country. Such high investment is not producing enough gas compared to Jalalabad and Moulvibazar. Offshore fields are supposed to

be costlier, but the investment figures of Sangu versus Jalalabad and Moulvibazar fields are shockingly disproportionate in terms of performance.

While Cairn's \$555 million Sangu field is now producing around 90 million cubic feet gas per day (mmcf), Chevron's \$474 million Jalalabad and Moulvibazar gas fields are producing 340 mmcf.

Cairn sources said the audit objection issue has been resolved through a six-member committee. This committee formed in 2005 was comprised of two members from Petrobangla and four from Cairn and its financial partner Halliburton.

"This committee worked for 14 months and held at least 30 meetings. At these meetings, Cairn produced original documents on

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Government aims for anti-graft body overhauling

JULFIKAR ALI MANIK

The caretaker government will amend the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) Act and is strongly considering reconstitution of the three-member anti-graft body that has remained non-functional since its formation in November 2004.

"The previous government deliberately made a crippled commission which, we found, needs a total reform," said Communication Adviser Maj Gen (ret'd) MAMatin.

He is one of the seven members of the committee formed at the first formal meeting of the advisory council on Monday to find ACC's legal, administrative and institutional flaws.

While the committee, headed by Law Adviser Mainul Hossain, is yet to begin its work formally, its members have already started their individual studies.

"When we start working together, we will share our observations and recommendations to yield the best output in terms of making the commission effective in combating corruption," a committee member told The Daily Star

yesterday, seeking anonymity.

The newly formed caretaker government led by Dr Fakhruddin Ahmed set curbing corruption as one of its prime pre-poll tasks.

Following strong criticism and frustration from local and international experts over the ACC's failure to function, the caretaker government resolved to address the commission's institutional, legal or administrative flaws to make it functional.

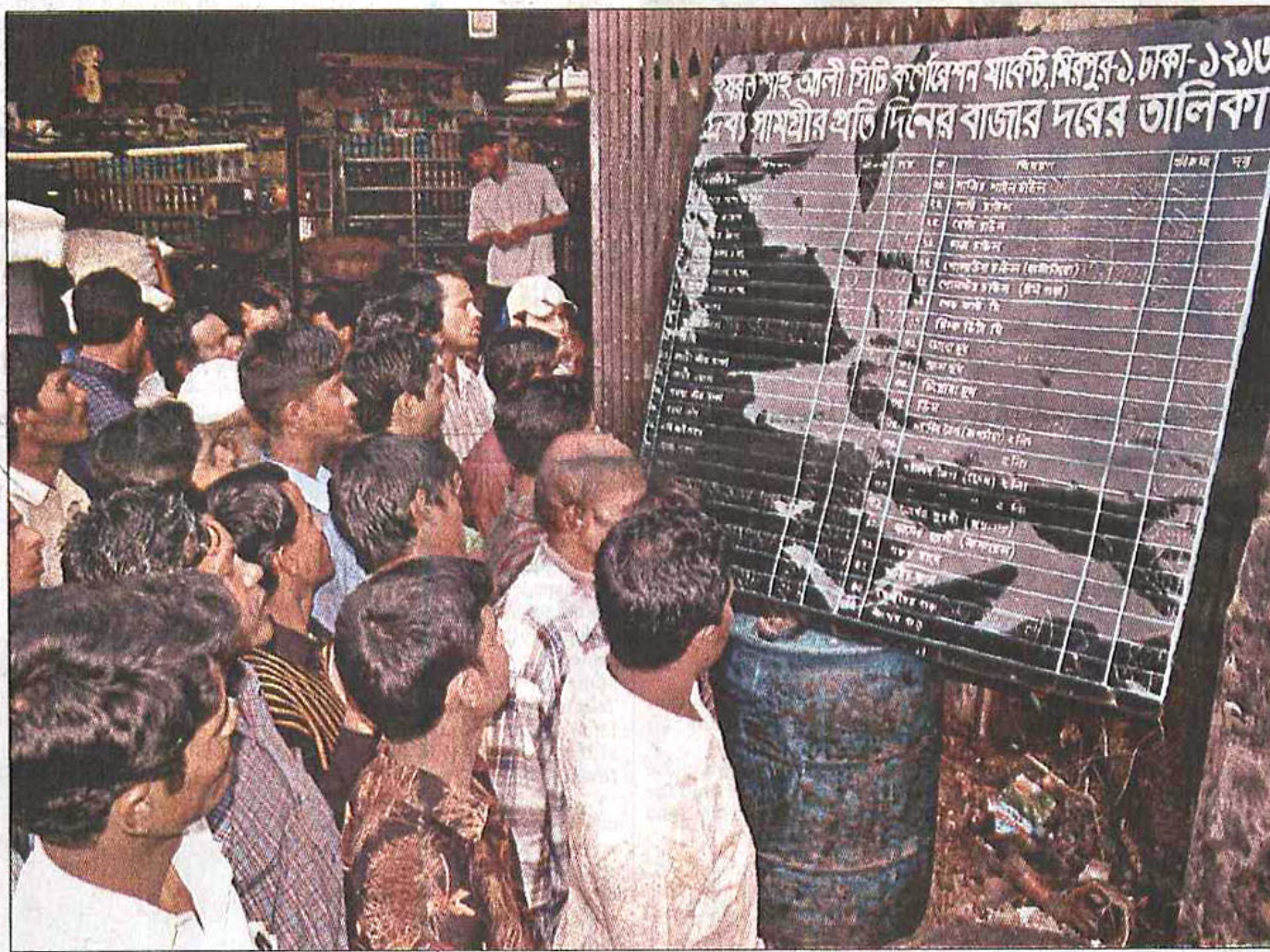
The newly formed committee is strongly considering bringing changes to the offices of the ACC chairman and two commissioners as they have failed to take any effective measure to fight corruption, said a source.

Asked if they are going to reconstitute the ACC soon, Adviser MA Matin, who served as the chief of the erstwhile Bureau of Anti-Corruption (Bac), chose not to make any comment at this moment.

He, however, said, "They [the chairman and two commissioners] were appointed on political consideration."

Matin said the committee will

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Traders and customers at Shah Ali kitchen market in Mirpur in the capital look at the price chart put up by Dhaka City Corporation yesterday to make the customers aware of commodity prices.

ILLEGAL STRUCTURES More demolition in city

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Rajdhani Unnayan Karttripakkha (Rajuk) and Dhaka City Corporation (DCC) authorities yesterday tore down different illegal establishments in the city under ongoing eviction drives.

In presence of a Rajuk team led by Magistrate ASM Emdadud Dastagir, the law enforcers knocked down an under-construction mosque at Kalachandpur in Baridhara area.

"Locals were building the mosque with a 10-storey foundation on the Rajuk land," said Dastagir.

The Rajuk drive was stretched to the Baridhara diplomatic zone as well. There, iron fences erected on the Rajuk land in front of different houses were bulldozed.

"We tried to clean up the entire UN Road. Pedestrians have long been facing difficulties for those illegal fences on the walkways," said the magistrate.

The eviction team removed fences also from the Baridhara Park.

Meanwhile, the Dhaka City Corporation (DCC) authorities yesterday ran a massive drive in the city's Mohammadpur area.

They pulled down shanties and other illegal establishments in different places across the area,

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BNP's Ward-39 unit office is built on a footpath at Karwan Bazar in the capital. The photo was taken yesterday while the drive for demolition of such illegal structures continues.

Two time bombs, explosives found in ditch

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Police detectives recovered two powerful time bombs and some bomb-making materials from a ditch adjacent to Bara Aulia shrine near Taltola Bazar in the city's Khilgaon area late on Monday.

Tipped off, a team of Detective and Crime Intelligence (DCI) unit of police raided the area at around 11:00 pm on Monday and

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Oriental Bank asked to sue Obaidul, ex-MD, 21 others

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Bangladesh Bank (BB) yesterday asked Oriental Bank to file criminal cases against Obaidul Karim, chief of the Orion Group, ex-managing director Koyes Sami and 21 other present and former officials of the bank for involvement in embezzlement of about Tk 595 crore.

The central bank sent a letter to the chief executive officer of Oriental Bank referring to recent

investigations into huge fraud in the bank that found involvement of at least 22 officials and majority shareholder of the bank Obaidul Karim.

The investigations found that Obaidul Karim misappropriated about Tk 488.50 crore through unauthorised issuance of 371 Inter-Branch Debit Advice (IBD). Another Tk 106.47 crore was embezzled by providing loans

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Schoolteacher becomes victim of Rab official's vindictiveness

Relatives allege

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Kustia

Delwar Hossain Dilu, a primary school teacher who was claimed by Rapid Action Battalion (Rab) to have been killed in a "crossfire" early Sunday, was rather a victim of a Rab official's vindictiveness, claimed Dilu's relatives and colleagues.

Terming Dilu's death a "cold-blooded murder", they said the Rab official had enmity with Dilu over the murder of his elder brother three years ago and killed Dilu to take revenge.

At a press conference yesterday at Radhanagar Non-Government Primary School, where Dilu was a teacher, his uncle Abul Kashem said Rab member Ashraf Ibne Sayeed of Bandbil village of Alamdanga upazila in Chuadanga came to the house of Dilu with a team on Saturday around 12:00 noon and picked him up.

Later, a Rab press release said Dilu, 37, died in "crossfire".

The Rab told local journalists that they had information that a group of criminals were holding a secret meeting behind a petrol pump near the Bandbil rail gate. When they reached there, the "criminals" opened fire on the Rab team. The law enforcers retaliated and the gunfight continued for half an hour.

Later, the Rab found Dilu's dead

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CTG PORT Long stay for ships takes toll on consumers

RAFIQ HASAN

Long delays at the Chittagong port cause huge financial losses to ship operators, which add to cost of business and raise prices for consumers.

Most of the ships at the country's premier Chittagong port have to spend 24 to 99 hours whereas in Singapore and Malaysian ports, ships stay only for around 12 hours, shipping sources said.

A World Bank report on strategic issues in ports pointed out that the turn around time for feeder vessels in Chittagong is 6-10 days, which is two days in Bangkok and one day in Singapore. It leads to inordinately high cost in the Bangladesh port that moves a container for \$600 while a port in a neighbouring country can do it for \$150-300, the

report said.

This discrepancy taxes Bangladesh's economy and passes the cost of inefficiency onto consumers, the report noted.

In ports such as Singapore and Malaysia, booking of cargo ceases at least 12 hours before its arrival but at Chittagong Port booking starts only after arrival of a ship.

The booking continues for at least 24 hours. But the shipping agents can prolong the time with the permission of the traffic department.

According to World Bank report all three major ports in Bangladesh suffer from overstaffing, labour strikes, cumbersome customs procedures, outdated and inefficient work rules and outdated inflexible management practices.

Joscow View, a container carrier

ship that anchored at the Chittagong Container Terminal (CCT) on December 25, left on 29 staying at the terminal for 99 hours.

Of this time, the ship was under operation for only 15.9 hours. The terminal took 32 hours to start discharging cargoes and the rest 50.4 hours was wasted for delay (break) in the work of loading and unloading cargoes.

During the 15-hour operation, the ship discharged 433 TEUs (twenty equivalent unit) containers and loaded 572 TEUs.

Another ship Kota Rukan spent a total of 96 hours at the CCT after anchoring at the terminal on December 18. The ship also spent 29 hours idle time at the terminal before starting operation. The loading and unloading was

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AUG 17 BLASTS 3 JMB men to walk gallows

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, Bogra

A special tribunal in Naogaon yesterday sentenced three members of the banned militant outfit Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) to death for their role in August 17, 2005 serial bombings in the district.

The condemned convicts are -- Abdul Quaiyum alias Bhodu alias Kayes, 25, of Pura Pathanpur Madhyapara in Nyamatpur upazila of Naogaon, Minhajul Islam alias Sohail Rana, 18, of Khamarkandi village in Sherpur upazila of Bogra and Abu Sayeed Sheikh alias Hussain, 24, of Sreekol village in Kumarkhali upazila of Kushtia.

Of them, Abu Sayeed was tried in absentia.

After examining the records and 31 witnesses, Judge Abu Ahmed Jomadar found them guilty of exploding bombs and pronounced the judgement at a packed courtroom at around 12:00 noon.

Seven bombs were simultaneously set off at different places in

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