

# Bhutan warms up for democracy

## Votes for first time in dummy elections

AFP, *Guwahati*

Residents of the remote Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan were voting for the first time in the country's history yesterday in "dummy" elections designed as a warm-up for democracy.

Authorities in the "Land of the Thunder Dragon" are hoping to teach people how parliamentary polls work, ahead of the planned transformation next year from absolute monarchy to parliamentary democracy.

"The response has been quite encouraging," chief election commissioner Dashi Kunzang Wangdi told AFP.

"There is nothing to complain about and we are so far happy with the turnout," he said. "We expect the overall turnout to be about 70 percent by the time voting closes."

An estimated 400,000 people are eligible to vote in the tiny Buddhist nation, which is about the size of Switzerland and sandwiched between Asian powerhouses India and China.

Real elections for a new parliament are due to be held in 2008, the culmination of a plan by former king Jigme Singye Wangchuck -- who handed his crown to his young Oxford-educated son, Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck, in December -- to change with the times and assume a more ceremonial role.

This is in contrast to King Gyanendra in the nearby Himalayan kingdom of Nepal, whose ill-fated attempts at guarding dictatorial powers has placed his monarchy on the verge of being dismantled.

"The king is there to encourage the people to vote and personally witness the first democratic process," Wangdi said, adding the 26-year-old king was observing the polls in Tungkar, his family's ancestral village which is a two-day drive from the capital Thimphu.

For centuries Bhutan, which was never colonised, has chosen to remain isolated from the outside world, maintaining a barter economy and allowing few foreigners to visit. It had no roads, telephones or currency until the 1960s.

For the "dummy elections," voters have been asked to choose between the fictional Druk (Thunder Dragon) Blue Party, the Druk Green Party, the Druk Red Party and the Druk Yellow Party.

A second stage of polling -- a square-off between Saturday's first and second-place winners -- will take place May 28.

"The elections will give us a chance to evaluate our readiness for holding the big elections in 2008," election official Wangdi said.

## BNP high-ups

FROM PAGE 1

statement "I fear this kind of interview will destroy the unity of the party at a time when reforms and cleansing drive within it are going on," he said.

"Many party leaders and workers expressed their anxiety to me over telephone--many of them even met me after watching the interview," he said in a statement read out to reporters after a meeting with some former BNP lawmakers and leaders at his residence yesterday.

The BNP leaders and workers termed Hannan's claims a "conspiracy" to weaken the party.

"Hannan Shah is a puppet wire-pulled by those who are trying to send Khaleda Zia into exile in Saudi Arabia," a former lawmaker told The Daily Star after meeting with Bhuiyan.

Dhaka City Mayor and BNP city unit President Sadeque Hossain Khoka said, "[Khaleda] will take decision considering the image of Shaheed President Ziaur Rahman.

"We have to think about the people and the leaders who are in jail," he said, adding that it does not matter what a few people are claiming to the press.

Khoka said, "Political decisions cannot be taken unilaterally...it should be collective as the party is in crisis. So, the senior leaders will take proper decision."

After hearing Bhuiyan's reaction, Hannan Shah told reporters, "At last these leaders have managed to come out of their shells and met Bhuiyan."

Meanwhile, Bhuiyan was asked why she was taking the risk of being arrested by returning to Bangladesh, she said, "I am taking the risk for the people. I want to be back with my people on my own soil."

"Sacrificing everything I am struggling to establish the rights of the people, so whatever my fate, I will return to Bangladesh," said the AL chief.

When the AL chief was asked what she will do in case the airline authorities refuse to accept her as their passenger, Hasina replied, "I still don't know what they will say. I will approach them first. If they refuse to carry me, then I will take a decision about what to do."

Regarding the British parliament members' (MP) opinions about the ban imposed by the caretaker government on her return to Bangladesh, Hasina said, "They are deeply concerned about the ban on my return home."

"They [the MPs] supported me wholeheartedly when I expressed my intention of returning home. Many MPs are personally trying to persuade the British Airways," she added.

## CPD to study price hike reasons

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) has undertaken an investigative study to identify and examine the reasons behind the recent price spiral of essential items in the markets.

The study, which is at its final stage at present, was undertaken following a request by the ministries of commerce and finance, said a press release of the CPD.

The non-government think tank would come up with concrete policy suggestions towards reducing volatility of prices of essential commodities and stabilising the markets on the basis of the study.

The products covered under the study are rice, onion, brinjal, green chilli, potato, wheat, flour, egg, edible oil and full cream powder milk, the press release said.

The study with three stages -- pilot survey, a full-scale survey and analysis and policy recommendations -- has already completed the first two phases.

A pilot survey was conducted within the Dhaka and Narayanganj cities on March 19-20 this year, while five teams of CPD researchers visited different parts of the country from April 1-10 to conduct the full-scale survey. The study team members also visited several government agencies like

Trading Corporation of Bangladesh (TCB), Ministry of Food and Disaster Management, Bangladesh Rifles, Bangladesh Agriculture University and National Board of Revenue (NBR) for secondary information.

The data generated from the survey and other sources are being processed and analysed currently, the press release said adding that a report is being prepared on the findings, which would be made public very soon.

## Mayor Minu

FROM PAGE 1

Mohishbathan area in the city lodged the extortion case accusing the mayor and 10 others including district BNP vice president Nazrul Huda and former city BNP secretary Shafikul Haq Milon.

Other accused in the case are BNP activists Sentu, Mainul, Babu, Ranju, Shamsul, Islam, Ashraf and Mamun.

Plaintiff Shamsul Islam Khan, a governing body member of Evergreen Model College at Baharampur, alleged that all the accused individuals are associated together and they demanded Tk 4 lakh from him on March 29, 2007.

In his case statement, Khan alleged that in 2006 during the founding of the college, Minu called him up along with college principal Abu Yusuf Selim at his office and asked them to include Nazrul Huda, Milon and local BNP activist Sentu in the governing body of the college.

As Khan and principal Selim denied to comply with Minu's demand, the mayor threatened them of dire consequences.

Later on July 4, 2006, Nazrul, Milon and Sentu went to the college and demanded Tk 1 lakh in toll since they were not included in the college governing body. At that time they forcefully took out 10 pairs of benches and desks worth Tk 13,000.

This year on March 29, the accuser thus attacked and assaulted Khan near Baharampur bypass intersection. The criminals this time demanded Tk 4 lakh from him and threatened with death.

Khan also said after the incident, the ones involved with the founding of the college now feel insecure about their lives.

Mayor Mizanur Rahman Minu, while talking to the journalists, claimed that the allegations made in the case were baseless. "I am sure my political rivals had roles behind filing of this case...it's a conspiracy".

## Hasina

FROM PAGE 1

dawn upon the caretaker government and they would let me return to Bangladesh," Hasina said yesterday.

About whether she had talks with her party leaders about her return, she said she has constant contact with the leaders of different levels.

Regarding news broadcast on a private television channel that she was not returning, she said sometimes confusions are spread with references to 'sources'.

When Hasina was asked why she was taking the risk of being arrested by returning to Bangladesh, she said, "I am taking the risk for the people. I want to be back with my people on my own soil."

"Sacrificing everything I am struggling to establish the rights of the people, so whatever my fate, I will return to Bangladesh," said the AL chief.

When the AL chief was asked what she will do in case the airline authorities refuse to accept her as their passenger, Hasina replied, "I still don't know what they will say. I will approach them first. If they refuse to carry me, then I will take a decision about what to do."

Regarding the British parliament members' (MP) opinions about the ban imposed by the caretaker government on her return to Bangladesh, Hasina said, "They are deeply concerned about the ban on my return home."

"They [the MPs] supported me wholeheartedly when I expressed my intention of returning home. Many MPs are personally trying to persuade the British Airways," she added.

## Khaleda sets out

FROM PAGE 1

He might be included in the team at the eleventh hour, considering his experience as the PS, the source pointed out.

As of last night, nothing could be known about exactly where the family would stay in the Middle Eastern monarchy. It is however certain that for the time being the Saudi government will treat her as an Umrah Hajj participant.

**MEETING TARIQUE**

Early yesterday morning, stage was finally set for Khaleda's departure following a series of dramatic developments beyond public eye.

Anticipating the sequence of events in which Khaleda was

expected to meet her son Tarique at Dhaka Central Jail, a large number of journalists waited at the jail gate throughout Friday night. But nothing happened there, and the journalists returned at dawn.

One source told The Daily Star at 6:00 am yesterday that the former prime minister is scheduled to meet her son at around 6:30 am. But he declined to say whether they would meet on the jail premises or somewhere else.

A family source said Khaleda had come out of her cantonment residence at 6:15 am but nobody knew where she was going. She however did not go to the central jail.

Later, sources close to Khaleda

family said that the authorities had brought Tarique out of the central jail at around 5:30 am and sent him to Kashimpur jail. On the way, Tarique was taken to a place in Dhaka Cantonment where his mother joined him. Tarique's wife Zobaida Rahman was accompanying Khaleda.

Without disclosing what was

discussed there, the sources said that after this episode, Tarique was taken to Kashimpur jail.

The Daily Star correspondent repeatedly called Kashimpur jail authorities over phone but they did not respond learning that a journalist was making these calls.

This correspondent also contacted the authorities of Dhaka Central Jail where a high official declined to say if Tarique was shifted from this jail, and advised him to contact the higher authorities.

But neither the office of inspector general of police nor that of the deputy inspector general (prisons) responded to any phone calls yesterday.

The plants are Regent Textile Mills 20MW unit at Barabikundi, Chittagong (Tk 2.48 per unit), Summit Industrial Power 30MW at Rupganj, Narayanganj (Tk 2.49 per unit), Summit Power 30MW in Jangalia, Comilla (Tk 2.53 per unit), Rafique Power 20MW in Feni (Tk 2.57 unit), United-Neptune Commercial 30MW at Mawna Gazipur (Tk 2.58 unit), Sajam Power 10MW in Habiganj (Tk 2.6 per unit), Youth Spinning 20MW in Tangail (Tk 2.76 per unit), Comilla Spinning 20MW in Narsingdi (Tk 2.74 per unit), and Energypac Confidence Power 10MW in Sirajganj (Tk 3 per unit).

The hill near Cox's Bazar beach, which is ecologically critical, was

levelled and its trees worth a few

hundred crores of taka were cut

down and sold by the district administration to prepare residential plots for bureaucrats.

Environmental organisations

yesterday lauded the government decision of cancelling the allotment and the housing project.

"This is excellent news for the

inhabitants of Cox's Bazar," said Sharminia Rashmin, president of Cox's Bazar Bachao Andolok

(Movement to Save Cox's Bazar).

"This initiative will save our

existence as well as the existence of

the forest from the forest ministry, illegal.

"The allotment of the hilly land to the deputy commissioner of Cox's Bazar under the banner of Bangladesh Government Employees' Welfare Board, has been cancelled," said a government high official while talking to The Daily Star.

"Therefore the housing project has also been cancelled," he added.

"Those who already got plots in the controversial housing project will be provided with plots at other places," said the highly placed source.

Environmental organisations

yesterday lauded the government

decision of cancelling the allotment

and the housing project.

The 51 acre of what was once a

forest is now a vast expanse of flat

exposed earth after the district

administration decided to turn it into

a residential area ignoring the forest

department's objection.

Cox's Bazar," she added.

The deputy commissioner of

Cox's Bazar yesterday confirmed

that the government cancelled the

housing project at Kolatoli.

Meanwhile, the Department of

Environment (DoE) of Chittagong

on February 12 filed a case against

five local district officials including

the deputy commissioner of Cox's

Bazar accusing them of cutting hills

and other illegalities, said an official

of DoE, Chittagong.

The hill near Cox's Bazar beach,

which is ecologically critical, was

levelled and its trees worth a few

hundred crores of taka were cut

down and sold by the district adminis-

tration to prepare residential plots

for bureaucrats.

The hill near Cox's Bazar beach,

which is ecologically critical, was

levelled and its trees worth a few

hundred crores of taka were cut

down and sold by the district adminis-

tration to prepare residential plots

for bureaucrats.

The hill near Cox's Bazar beach,

which is ecologically critical, was

levelled and its trees worth a few

hundred crores of taka were cut