

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 Dasho 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 Thungkar, 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.

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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 said the reforms within the party had been undertaken under the leadership of the chairperson since the declaration of the state of emergency, but later the process was stopped following the

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.

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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 accused thugs 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".

100 hurt

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The meeting could not bring any solution, as CBA (collective bargaining agents) leaders of the four jute mills did not attend the meeting, KMP commissioner told The Daily Star.

The clash erupted when thousands of workers with the assistance from hundreds of school students began to hurl brick chips at police at 8:00am.

Rapid Action Battalion, Bangladesh Rifles and Armed Police Battalion members assisted police to control the situation.

Over 22,000 workers and employees of the four state-owned jute mills have been on agitation since Tuesday demanding payment of their salaries and wages.

The agitation took an alarming turn Friday when the BJMC authorities laid off the workers of the four mills on Thursday evening.

All markets have remained closed since Friday morning and security forces have stopped vehicular movements at Khalishpur industrial belt.

Khaleda sets out

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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.

Khaleda's family sources said she met Tarique as part of an arrangement before her departure.

During negotiations earlier, the former premier had insisted that the military-backed caretaker government allow her to meet her son at the jail. But the government did not want such an arrangement to avoid the press, the sources said.

KHALEDA'S HOUSE

The sources could not say anything about the future state of the Khaleda family residence at Moitul Hossain Road in Dhaka Cantonment. "We will come to know soon how the government intends to maintain it," said a family source.

Defence sources had previously told The Daily Star that the defence forces had been asking Khaleda to leave this house since the January 11 change of government.

The house was allotted to Ziaur Rahman as deputy chief of army staff soon after the Liberation War. Zia however continued to stay there after his promotion to the post of army chief, and also after his takeover as chief martial law administrator and then as president.

After the assassination of Zia in 1981, the then Sattar government gave this house to his family at a nominal price. Khaleda family has been staying there since then. She became prime minister thrice but never left this house.

Tenders cancelled

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Bangladesh (JMB) raiding different places in Kurigram.

The arrestees are: Neamul Arif Likhi Chaudhury, 26, Ershadul Haque Mithu, 26, Mokhlesur Rahman Mithu, 20, and Mamun, 22, 15 months to set up these plants.

The plants are Regent Textile Mills 20MW unit at Barabkundu, Chittagong (Tk 2.48 per unit), Summit Industrial Power 30MW at Rugganj, 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), Saiham 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).

Advisers okay

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The advisers, after discussing the report of the technical taskforce, approved the proposal for signing the cross-border road agreement.

Construction of a 23-kilometre road from Gundhum in Cox's Bazaar (Bangladesh) to Bolibazar in Myanmar will boost trade and commerce between the two neighbouring countries, the meeting was apprised.

The meeting also extended by another year the deadline for attaining requisite teaching aptitude by registered non-government primary schoolteachers recruited before July 1, 1992. The one-year time extension will be effective from November 18, 2006.

Of the total 44,000 registered non-government primary schoolteachers in the country, 20,000 have attained the mark of qualifications for their job while 24,000 still could not qualify.

The meeting also discussed the Health, Nutrition and Population Sector Programme (HNPS) and gave guidelines for overall improvement of health services and its management.

All members of the Council of Advisers, cabinet secretary, press secretary to the chief adviser and secretaries concerned attended the meeting with Chief Adviser Fakhruddin Ahmed in the chair.

13 JMB suspects

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Motor registration

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electricity and fertiliser prices.

Removing tariff exemptions on certain capital machinery and other 'zero-rated' items have also been recommended to improve revenue and reduce leakages through misclassification.

The Fund proposed that the government complete auditing the performance of Pre-Shipping Inspection (PSI) companies to overcome the flaws in customs administration.

Reminding the government of persistent problems in revenue collection over the years, it called for fundamental reforms in the revenue system.

It said the National Board of Revenue (NBR) operations should be limited to tax administration and they must not include tax policy formulation. A steering committee with finance adviser at the helm should be formed to oversee separation of tax policy from tax administration.

The Fund lauded the government's intentions to issue securities to the public banks to pay off the Bangladesh Petroleum Corporation's (BPC) massive debt [to them]. But in that case an automatic price adjustment mechanism should be introduced to prevent further losses, it added.

The state-owned corporation should seek to finance transactions without government guarantees, the IMF mission observed adding that the BPC must strive to raise its operational efficiency.

Rare fish

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armoured cover and it is gentle and harmless in nature, said Md Manzoorul Kibria, assistant professor of zoology department of Chittagong, yesterday.

The fish was caught during fishing in Sahur Khan Dighi owned by Mabud Ullah Khan on Friday morning.

Curious to see the unknown fish, Mabud Ullah informed the teachers of zoology and marine science departments of Chittagong University.

They brought the fish to Chittagong Press Club yesterday morning but none could ascertain its species.

"The catchers allowed me just 10 minutes to see the fish and I could not identify the species. But as far as my knowledge goes, the fish does not belong to any species of this subcontinent," Prof Manzoorul said.

"There are over 700 such species in the Amazon Basin in South America, especially in Brazil. It might come here as part of an aquarium collection," he said.

Mabud Ullah told journalists that he would hand over the fish to researchers concerned for its better preservation and use for academic purpose.

Iraq PM to lobby for Egypt talks

AFP, Undated

Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki will begin a regional tour today to drum up support for next month's international conference in Egypt aimed at quelling the raging bloodshed in Iraq.

His tour comes to the backdrop of a warning by US Defence Secretary Robert Gates to Iraqi leaders that they need to work faster to reconcile their rival factions as American support cannot be taken for granted for ever.

On Saturday, eight people were killed in Iraq, including a town mayor and four members of a Kurdish Shiite family from the northern oil hub of Kirkuk.

Gunmen killed the family, beheading their eight-year-old girl, police Captain Mohammed Ibrahim said, suggesting a sectarian motive.

Mahdi Abdul Hussain, the mayor of Musayyib, a town south of Baghdad, was killed in a roadside bomb along with his bodyguard, said police Lieutenant Hatim al-Hadiri.

Maliki will leave for Cairo on Sunday and is expected to travel on to Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and other regional states for preparatory talks ahead of the May 3-4 meeting, Iraqi officials told AFP.

The ministerial meeting, a follow-up to an ambassadors' conference last month in Baghdad, will be attended by Iraq's neighbours and the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council, plus Japan, Canada and Germany.

"Egypt will be his first stopover where he will hold talks with President Hosni Mubarak, before moving to Kuwait and other countries in the region," an official at Maliki's office said on condition of anonymity.

In Cairo, the state news agency Mena added that Maliki would also meet with his Egyptian counterpart, Ahmed Nazif.

Mahmud Othman, a Kurdish MP close to the government, said Maliki is also expected to visit Saudi Arabia during his tour.

"The prime agenda for his trip is to discuss the preparations for the meeting," he said.

Neither official could say whether Maliki will visit Iran, which has still not confirmed its attendance at the Egypt meeting amid a dispute over five Iranian officials held prisoner by US forces in Iraq.

If Iran were to attend the high-profile gathering at the Red Sea resort of Sharm el-Sheikh, its officials would sit at the same table as US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice who has already confirmed she will be there.

"Iran has demanded that at least three of the five Iranians detained by US forces in Iraq must be released before the Egypt conference," Othman told AFP, referring to the Iranians seized on January 11 in the northern city of Arbil.

"This has almost become a condition for them to attend the Sharm el-Sheikh meeting," he said, adding that US authorities may free them given the implications of the meeting.

The US military said on Saturday "there is no change to the status of their detention right now."

Othman said Baghdad was urging Tehran to attend the conference as Shiite Iran's support is seen vital in stabilising violence-wracked Iraq.

Washington accuses Tehran of funding and training militant groups to fight its forces in Iraq, and alleges that the detained Iranians are "intelligence officers" suspected of aiding the anti-American insurgency.

Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki said on Saturday that Iran will make its position clear next week, complaining that the conference risks weakening the positions of Iraq's neighbours.

"The definition of the Sharm el-Sheikh meeting weakens Iraq's neighbours," Mottaki told the Kayhan daily. "Some decisions have been made over which no consultations have been carried out first."

The conference aims to create a framework within which world powers and Iraq's neighbours can help Baghdad end the brutal sectarian conflict that has killed tens of thousands of people since last year.

To quell the bloodshed, most of which is focussed in Baghdad, about 80,000 US, Iraq troops are patrolling the capital's mean streets as part of the new security plan.

On Friday, Gates warned Maliki that American troops will not do so indefinitely.

"Our commitment to Iraq...is not a commitment to have our young men and women patrolling Iraqi streets open-endedly," he said, adding that it was a strategy to give Maliki "time for progress for justice and reconciliation."

But Maliki told visiting Australian Defence Minister Brendan Nelson on Saturday that the plan was progressing.

"The security plan currently in action is going in the right direction despite the challenges," he told Nelson, who made a surprise visit to Baghdad.

BBC dialogue

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Centre in the capital.

AL Presidium Member Suranjit Sengupta, BNP Vice-Chairman Maj (ret'd) Hafiz Uddin, former director general of Bangladesh Institute for International and Strategic Studies Maj Gen (ret'd) Ghulam Quader and Coordinator of Nijera Kori Khushi Kabir featured out the four-member panel of the Sanglap.

Both the BNP and AL leaders said reforms in the two major political parties should be made in presence of the two top leaders -- BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia and AL President Sheikh Hasina.

Presence of the party chief is not a bar to bringing reforms in the party, Suranjit said replying to a question on reforming politics by omitting the two party chiefs. In case of reforms, laws should be formulated so that one person cannot hold the top post of the party more than twice and could not concurrently hold the chief posts of the party and the government.

"There is no provision in our Constitution to form a national government. But considering the present context such a government can be formed after the next election," said Suranjit. He said the people of Bangladesh would never allow any Pakistan-style system.

In bringing party reforms, there should be role of the two party chiefs who were former prime ministers of the country, Hafiz Uddin said.

"I support formation of a national government only after holding elections and if it comprises the winning party and those in the second and third positions," he said, replying to a question on forming such a government in Bangladesh in line with the government of Nelson Mandela of South Africa.

It is not known what the caretaker government is going to do, he said, adding that people did not tolerate any autocratic government in the past.

Maj Gen Quader, on the other hand, spoke for keeping the two party chiefs out of politics.

"The two party chiefs instituted dynasty instead of establishing internal democracy within their parties and there were extreme examples of dictatorship in both the parties. When political parties were in power, they did not bring any party reforms or establish internal democracy. How can we expect them to bring reforms now?" the former army official said.

Quader, who is currently executive director of Centre for Peace and Strategic Studies, a private think tank, said the armed forces did not take over power during the antagonistic situations of the country in recent months.

"The army knows that people will not tolerate a Musharraf-style democracy in the country," he said.

The army has no plans to bring any 'special form' of democracy in the country as only the political parties will decide it, he added.

He, however, supported the army chiefs' recent statement

regarding the balance of power between the president and the prime minister.

In a democratic process a national government can be formed after election, he said.

Khushi Kabir said the system, not the persons, should be reformed and a national government could be formed if the major political parties consider it.

There is a move to bring a Pakistani style of democracy in the country and for this the two chiefs of AL and BNP are being forced to stay abroad, she said.

BBC Bangla Service in conjunction with the BBC World Service Trust organised the Sanglap, moderated by Kamal Ahmed, a senior producer of BBC Bangla Service.

Windies

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his fifty in 29 balls but was out flashing one to Stuart Broad at the third-man fence off Andrew Flintoff.

His dismissal bought Lara to the crease.

Smith and Lara were just beginning to look dangerous as a partnership before Smith was out to an 'out of the world' diving catch at point by Paul Collingwood also off Flintoff.

Smith scored a patient 61 with six fours.

Ramnaresh Sarwan was out cheaply, caught behind off Liam Plunkett for 3.

Samuels however shook off the stigma off running out Lara in his last match to unleash a blitz of hitting that sets the tone for what looks to be a big score.

England captain Michael Vaughan elected to field after winning the toss against the West Indies in the two teams' last match at the tournament.

Lara was making his last international appearance, having scored 10,387 runs in 298 one-dayers with 19 centuries before this game.

The stylish left-hander is the leading Test scorer with 11,953 runs in 131 matches with 34 hundreds.

The match is also the last for Duncan Fletcher as England coach.

England and the West Indies have failed to qualify for the semifinals and are now fighting for the fifth-sixth placings. Both have four points from six matches.

Defending champions Australia, New Zealand, Sri Lanka and South Africa have made it to the last-four.

England made three changes from the team that lost to South Africa by nine wickets in the previous match, bringing in James Dalrymple, Stuart Broad and Liam Plunkett.