

Hasina wants reforms deeper

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politicians, which she dubbed as an attempt to smear her and party's image.

During the hour-long interview, Hasina also talked about the attempts to float new political parties, the caretaker government, the graft charges against her and her future which seems bleaker than ever.

The Daily Star correspondent had to negotiate through a number of security barriers to reach Hasina at her Sudha Sadan residence. At the entrance, he had to face multiple questioning sessions by the law enforcers.

The lounge of her residence that once used to be teeming with party leaders and workers has now virtually become an office of plain-clothesmen. Only a few low-key leaders and personal staff were seen inside the house.

About the 21-point proposal reportedly drafted by the senior party leaders who had tailed her wherever she went in the last 26 years but have kept aloof for the past two months, Hasina smilingly said she does not know who actually has drawn up the proposals.

She added that when indoor politics is prohibited, it would be quite interesting to know who prepared those and how.

"Anyway, I have got the proposals and feel that a number of changes should be made to those," said the AL president with a mix of scorn and resolve in her voice. If one cannot be in the post of party president twice then the same should be applicable to other posts, she added.

"Again, if the party chief cannot become the head of the government then no one—from a presidium member to the general secretary—should be allowed to be in the cabinet. Earlier, a similar system was there when Bangabandhu left his ministerial portfolio and got back to the general secretary's post," she said without a trace of hesitancy.

The former prime minister said one group would run the party and the other would run the government. That's how it all had been in the party constitution. "But we had to amend the constitution as no other political party had such provisions in theirs," said Hasina, a former student leader.

"The BNP constitution gives its party chief the right to head the government. By seeing these, our leaders wanted to change our constitution to adjust to others," she added.

VIEWS ON INTRA-PARTY REFORMS

Hasina said if the ban on politics goes then we will obviously bring reforms in the party. It is time to resume not only the indoor politics but politics in general as lots of time have already gone by.

Reform is a process that calls for counsils to be held with leaders and workers from across the country. "The government must allow political activities or else how will we carry out reforms?" she asked.

She said, "I have already collected constitutions of major political parties from various countries and commissioned a team comprising Syed Ashraful Islam, Saber Hossain Chowdhury, Abdul Mannan, Abdul Mannan Khan, and Dr Dipu Moni, among others to examine those and prepare a draft.

"Usually, we form different committees ahead of every council and they come up with proposals for reforms in the party constitution, manifesto, and the economic policies. Those recommendations are placed before the AL Central Working Committee and implemented depending on the leaders' opinion."

Moreover, she said, reforms are not to be confined to political parties only. It was the AL that had placed detailed proposals for electoral reforms for the first time in the history of Bangladesh.

"The onus is on the caretaker government to implement the 31-point proposal [submitted by the AL] for electoral reforms. We want to see how many of those have been realised."

"If our proposals were executed to the letter, it would obviate the need for further reforms," she said.

About some of her party colleagues meeting without her, she said, "Well, the government should answer to this question. When there's a ban on indoor politics, how come those meetings took place? Isn't it contradictory?"

"I have heard that they meet at luxurious restaurants. I wonder who pays for those."

She argues, "The government says it will lift the ban soon but at the same time it allows some people room for intrigue and betrayal, and instigate attempts to split the political parties. Aren't these political activities? And don't they expose the double standards that this government applies?"

She added that the law should be allowed to take its own course. The government must not pursue the policy of differential treatment.

ABOUT EFFORTS TOWARDS NEW PARTIES

Asked for her reaction about the subterranean move to float new political parties, she said, "It seems like the intelligence agencies are out to form a new political party by

whatever means it takes. They might use force, torture or entice the politicians into the fold.

"Besides, a group of politicians with questionable track records are already there to jump on the bandwagon. Now what about their wealth statements?"

"I'm afraid if a new outfit is formed with them the election would surely be rigged. Those who will be in power through a stage-managed election will waste no time in plundering the national wealth.

If it becomes that easy to make it to the parliament then how those to be elected shall be held accountable, she questioned.

Queried what she believes has led to the current situation, Hasina said the "unbridled corruption and misrule of the BNP-Jamaat coalition have brought the country to a point where it now risks losing democracy".

"Their lust for power and fortune, and patronage of crime and militancy—all have disgraced the political fraternity. Even those who have long been working to entrench democracy and the rule of law are now being subjected to a wholesale character assassination.

"The corruption charges levelled against me and my fellow partymen are baseless.

"The motive behind filing false cases against us is to belittle the politicians. On the one hand, they are backing a bunch of crooked political leaders but on the other, they are harassing the ones they don't like," observed Hasina.

ON CORRUPTION CHARGES

Sheikh Hasina flatly denies ever having been involved in any corruption. She said the charges brought against her are false. "I have heard that 30 similar cases will be filed against me. They will probably file cases for every development work we have done between 1996 and 2001," she said jokingly.

"If cases are filed for my contribution to the country's development, then one day cases will be filed against the caretaker government as well for everything they are doing now ...cases will be filed for every purchase they are making for civil, military, police or other sectors," said the former premier.

People are being coerced into bringing charges against her, she claims adding that some are being lured into filing extortion cases against her.

"I just don't understand what makes the government take such an attitude towards me. Earlier, when an extortion case was filed I got back to the country. Because I knew it was utterly false and the almighty Allah and the people are with me. I always have a strong confidence in my people and they won't believe the falsehood being spread," she said.

"Why should it be extortion when individuals having allegiance to Awami League contribute funds for running the party?" questioned the AL chief.

It's a bad precedent and it will backfire on those who are doing this, she said adding that no one can say for sure that they won't be charged similarly in future.

"The BNP-Jamaat alliance too failed to heed the lessons of history while in power. Did they ever know that such an irony awaited them?" she asked.

Hasina warned that overdoing is never good for anyone. Those who do excesses always risk sliding into the pit they dig themselves.

"I want to say it loud and clear that filing false cases to harass me and disgrace me and my family in the public eye is not right. Those who [government] are doing this might have to face the similar fate someday," said Hasina, once a student leader.

"I can say unequivocally that I never demanded money from anyone. It's beyond my nature. Even in my childhood I would not ask my mother to buy anything for me," she continued.

She said people voluntarily donate to the party fund. Every political party in our country depends on donations and our workers and supporters have always been generous in contributing to the party's cause.

Asked if the party will cease to be the way it is in the event of her being detained, Hasina defiantly said things will be okay once the government will allow political activities. "I know the countrymen, and my party workers and leaders very well," she added.

"They [conspirators] made at least 19 attempts on my life. Failing to wipe me off the face of the earth, they are now out to eliminate me politically," Hasina said adding that she has resigned herself to the conspiracies that she believes would go on as long as she is dedicated to the betterment of the country.

"I know keeping faith in people is the most important thing if I'm to beat the plots. People know it's all a game and they also know who the players are," she said referring to the circumstances she's in.

WHAT IF SHE'S ARRESTED

According to the party constitution, the senior most presidium member will take over as acting president. Though it's [the question] kind of irrelevant in the present context

when there's a state of emergency in place. The partymen had decided that Zillur Rahman will lead the organisation in my absence.

ABOUT WEALTH
Asked why she does not declare her assets when she wants the caretaker government advisers to do so, Hasina said those who seek others' wealth statements should produce theirs first.

She said she has already submitted her wealth accounts to the Election Commission. Of the bank accounts shown, one was opened in 1969, one in 1975, one in 1981 and another in 1986. "Tk 2-crore shown was in the account opened in 1986 when for the first time I became a member of parliament," she said elaborating on her bank balance.

The sum that I started to deposit in 1986 grew to be Tk 1 crore in 93 and Tk 2 crore currently.

I have only one fixed deposit that I opened in 1979 with Tk 20,000. I don't know what that amount has added up to over the years.

About the account she holds jointly with her sister Sheikh Rehana, she said, "The money came from my household income and from our warehouse leasing. Some came from Tungipara from our father's property."

She went on, "Actually, I don't know the exact size of our property in Tungipara. My grandparents' joint property there was yet to be distributed to the next generation. The land of my parents and grandfather is clustered together and the income from that goes to our joint account."

To sum up, she said, her family runs mostly on inherited agricultural land and products.

"I don't own any house in Dhaka. The house I'm living now is my husband's. Despite a long stay in the UK we don't have any property there either," she observed.

I made a resolution after 1975 that I won't make a penny for me. I opened a fixed deposit account so that I can run my family after retirement.

"Nothing to be worried," she said adding that the fixed deposits and the lands she has are enough to lead a humble life.

RETIREMENT

Asked if she will retire from politics as she had announced she would do once she is 57, the AL chief said she is ready to sacrifice anything for the sake of the people.

"I considered going into retirement in 2001. But as I saw my partymen being persecuted after the 2001 election, I changed my mind. I'll be no more in politics once the basic rights of the people are ensured," she observed.

THE BANGLADESH SHE ENVISIONS

The people of Bangladesh are unfortunate for whenever an opportunity comes for them to step ahead, conspiracy gets in the way. For instance, she said, martial law was declared after the Jukta Front election and the father of the nation was killed after the independence. If he were alive, the country would not have to look up to Singapore or Malaysia, rather it would have been a model for others.

"Again in 2001, when we had made the country self-reliant in food, expanded the commerce and brought back confidence among people, the election was rigged to defeat us."

Detailing successes of the AL government in 1996-2001, she described those years as golden rule.

WHO ARE BEHIND 'CONSPIRACY'

Those who have been doing it for years are at it again, she said when questioned who she means when she speaks of plots.

"Vested interest groups here shelter and use the corrupt elements and victimise those who work for the welfare of the society. They kill the popular and patriotic leaders and individuals."

"They fear popularity and patriotism," she said.

The ones who want to keep the nation mired in misery and those who never wanted the independence are the real conspirators, said the former premier.

Lightning

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Mosharrif, of Mituani village in Chouhali upazila, was struck by lightning while working on his cropland in the afternoon.

300 villages

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concerned district administrations about how many villages are flooded," said officials.

Heavy rains have damaged the Bagmati embankment in Muzaffarpur and cut off several areas from the district headquarters after several small bridges on the National Highway 77 submerged under the water, a Muzaffarpur district administration official said on condition of anonymity.

According to the Central Water Commission, the water levels of the Bagmati, Kosi, Gandak, Ganga and Punpun rivers are nearing the red level mark indicating tough days ahead.

Arafat's home looted

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returned to the streets, as residents ventured out to take stock of the new reality on the ground.

No police could be seen in their headquarters in Gaza City, with only members of Hamas's paramilitary force milling around the building.

The West Bank-based chief of police -- a Fatah loyalist -- banned officers in Gaza from cooperating with Hamas, saying those who did so would be treated as mutineers.

"General Kamal al-Sheikh has ordered all police in the Gaza Strip to cease work and not to cooperate with the interior minister and the sacked government," a statement said.

"All those who disobey these orders will have to assume their responsibilities before the law and will be considered as mutineers who refuse direct orders from their hierarchy."

Another police officer Said Osama, who like his colleagues asked that his full name be withheld, told AFP that he had no intention of working under Hamas.

"I cannot work now with this illegal government. Ezzedine al-Qassam are taking our arms as members of Fatah. But as a police officer, I am under the law and I do not violate the law," he said.

Abu Khaili, a 35-year-old police captain, echoed the sentiment.

"I will not go back to work, no matter what it costs me," he told AFP. "Not after what we have seen in the past few days. We don't trust them, they are killers. I am not Fatah and I am not Hamas. I'm a Palestinian policeman, I am here to protect my people, not kill them."

Zaki, a 35-year-old member of the pro-Fatah security services, vowed not to surrender his arms to the Islamists.

"We will not give up our arms, whatever it may cost us," he said. "All of us are hiding our guns. They will not find anything."

"If they threaten us, we will go out at night like them, put on masks like them and fight them."

He told how Hamas gunmen had ransacked and burned the home of a fellow security officer.

"Hamas has launched a purge operation against the members of preventive security. What they are doing is revenge."

Meanwhile, gunmen loyal to the secular Fatah faction of Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas stormed the parliament building in the West Bank Saturday in search of supporters of the rival Hamas movement.

Militants from the Al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigade briefly scuffled with the Hamas-backed deputy speaker of parliament but the intervention of a Fatah official helped prevent him being abducted.

"Armed men from the Al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades entered Hassan Khreish's office and shouted that he was an ally of Hamas," the deputy speaker's spokesman said. "There was a scuffle but he wasn't kidnapped."

Khreish himself paid tribute to parliament staff and a Fatah official for preventing his abduction.

He told Al-Arabiya television that masked gunmen had tried to assault him after he told them that only the Palestinian flag should fly

over the parliament building in the central West Bank town of Ramallah.

"Staff from the Palestinian Legislative Council then intervened and a Fatah official condemned what was happening."

Fighters loosely linked to the Fatah party of Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas ransacked dozens of offices linked to the rival Hamas movement in the West Bank on Saturday, in apparent revenge attacks after the Islamists seized power in the Gaza Strip.

Members of the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades destroyed offices at an Islamic school, a cultural centre, charities, local television and local radio in the city of Nablus, witnesses and Hamas said.

It was the latest in a spate of incidents of vandalism in the West Bank, a Fatah stronghold, against the targets of Hamas, the Islamist movement whose fighters overran pro-Fatah security forces in the Gaza Strip this week.

The assault on parliament was one of a rash attacks on Hamas targets across the West Bank carried out in apparent retaliation for the ransacking of Fatah offices and homes in the Gaza Strip since the Islamists seized the territory on Thursday night.

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Over the past few days, offices and stores linked with the Hamas have been torched and ransacked across the occupied West Bank.

But most of the movement's top leaders in the territory are in Israeli custody beyond the reach of Fatah loyalists.

Woman dies

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staff told the family members that the operation would take half-an-hour.

The relatives became suspicious finding the operation still continuing even after three hours.

At 11:00pm they discovered Rahima's dead body at an ambulance kept behind the hospital.

Locals thronged the spot hearing the family members' screaming and stopped the hospital staffs, who allegedly were trying to take the body to an unknown place by ambulance.

The police later visited the spot and recovered the dead body, which was later sent to the Dhaka Medical College Hospital (DMCH) morgue for autopsy.

Family members told the reporters yesterday at the DMCH morgue that Rahima died from wrong treatment.

Rahima's son Aman Ullah filed a murder case with Mohammadpur Police Station accusing four persons—Akram, owner of the hospital, Shariful Islam, the manager, and two doctors Fayzul Haq and Amzad Hossain.

Sub-inspector Shahab Uddin of Mohammadpur Police Station, also the investigation officer of the case, told The Daily Star that all the staffs including the doctors fled when the police went to the hospital to recover the body.

He said they locked up the hospital after the incident.

Thousands of Thais

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The size of the crowd was rivalled by the number of security personnel, with more than 10,000 police mobilised for the protest and another 13,000 soldiers on standby in case of any violence, officials said.

The military also beefed up security around its nearby headquarters, blocking the road with metal barricades and surrounding the compound with barbed wire, said police spokesman Colonel Supisarn Bhakdinarinach.

About 150 police were guarding the home of the king's top adviser, Prem Tinsulanonda, who is accused of masterminding the coup.

Organisers had said they expected 50,000 to join the rally, which was due to last late into the night.

Army-installed Prime Minister Surayud Chulanont said Saturday he was ready to hold talks with "any parties" to bring an end to the political upheaval that has rocked the country.

"I am always ready to talk to any parties to solve problems," Surayud said on Thai television.

But the protest organisers vowed to

press ahead with the rally.

"The junta should get out. Negotiation is good, but as long as the junta remains in power, it is useless," said protest organiser and Thaksin ally Jatuporn Prompan.

Earlier in the week, the junta gave Thaksin approval to return home for the first time since the bloodless September 2006 coup and fight to regain 1.5 billion dollars in assets frozen by Thailand's powerful anti-graft body.

On Friday, the 57-year-old deposed premier vowed to defend himself against allegations of corruption.

The assets freeze was just one of several legal blows Thaksin has suffered in recent weeks.

A powerful anti-corruption team set up by the military recommended in May that he and his wife Pojama face charges over a controversial land purchase.

3 journos held

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With the arrest of Udoy and Siraj, the joint forces have so far arrested four journalists of Khulna region on charges of bribery.

On April 10, the joint forces arrested Khulna bureau chief of Dainik Inquilab ATM Rafique at his office with Tk 20,000. He received the money as bribe from two officials of the Sundarbans Forest Division. Rafique has been sentenced to four years imprisonment in the case filed under the Speedy Trial Act.

On the night of June 14, the joint forces arrested Dakop upazila correspondent of Khulna based Dainik Prabartan at Shankha Market while he was receiving Tk 3,000 in bribe from shrimp farm owner Hashem Howlader of the upazila.

Malaysia

FROM PAGE 1
their daily basic salary was 18.50 Ringgit but on arrival in Malaysia, they had to sign a new job contract form, which fixed the daily basic salary at 15 Ringgit.

They said the outsourcing company subtracts 222 Ringgit in the name of permit deduction, 160 Ringgit for meal purposes and 7 Ringgit in the name of water, electricity and medical costs from each worker a month.

"For no reason, the authorities deduct money from our salaries. They even deduct as fine the price if a small part of a machine is destroyed," the workers complained adding the authorities do not give them any time for prayers, even on Fridays.

"If we protest, 'madam' (a factory high official) says they could not run the factory as per the Malaysian government's rule," read the letter.

It said the company neither provides any food nor accommodation though it deducts money from their salaries for meal purposes. The company is supposed to provide accommodation as per the job contract.

The 'madam' also forces them to work for 10 hours a day instead of eight hours, stated the letter signed by about one hundred workers urging "Please save us. Otherwise, we shall starve to death in Malaysia. Please come to our aid."

A source, who recently visited Malaysia and gathered information on the Bangladeshi workers, said about 50 percent workers are suffering from such exploitation as many of the employers are not well reputed.

Over 50,000 workers went to Malaysia since the manpower export began in August last year.

On the other hand, a human rights organisation in Malaysia recently gathered information that about 1,000 Bangladeshi workers were stuck in various places in West Malaysia, especially in Cameron Highland.

In an earlier letter to Bangladesh High Commission, the workers alleged that they were kept at different places in groups of 10 to 20 so that they could not communicate with any authorities for redress. "We were even beaten up if we did not want to go to the hill caves," it noted.

An official of the human rights organisation however said some Bangladeshi recruiting agencies contacted some of the unemployed workers very recently and managed short-term jobs for them.

As per the new Malaysian rules, once the employers or the outsourcing companies get home ministry approvals for hiring workers from Bangladesh, the Bangladesh High Commission is supposed to attach the approvals only after inspecting the workplaces.

The Bangladesh High Commission must have made mistakes in inspecting the workplaces for which the outsourcing companies got the scope to cheat the workers, an official of the human rights organisation told The Daily Star.

When contacted, Link-up International Ltd Managing Director Khaja Ahmedur Rahman said he knew nothing about such allegations. "If the allegations are true, the Malaysian government will take actions," he said.

Abdul Matin Chowdhury, secretary to the ministry of expatriates' welfare and overseas employment, said there is no scope for such abuses under the present arrangement of manpower recruiting in Malaysia.

"If the allegations are found true, Bangladesh High Commission and Malaysian government will certainly take action," he said.

Evacuation

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from Lalkhan Bazar belong to only five out of around fifty colonies of Motijharna, one of the densely populated slums of the city.

Local Ward Commissioner Kabir Ahmad Manik said that they have been making announcements among the people living in the foothill slums through loudspeaker since Friday evening to leave their risky homes for the time being and take shelter at the centres.

Around one ton of rice, 50 kg lentil, 160 kg potato, 20 kg salt, three sacks of flattened-rice and 20 kg of molasses were distributed among the affected families as relief from the joint coordination centre of the joint forces and district administration yesterday, sources said.

Tigers fly

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The first Test will begin on June 25 at the Premadasa Stadium while the second is scheduled from July 3-7 at the P Sara Stadium, both in Colombo. The tourists will then move to Kandy to play the third and final match from July 11.

After the Test series, Ashraf's boys will play a limited-overs warm-up match before they play the three-match one-day series on July 20, 22 and 24 respectively.

SQUAD

Mohammad Ashraful (captain), Mashrafe Bin Mortaza (vice-captain), Habibul Bashar, Javed Omar, Mehrab Hossain, Shahriar Nafees, Rajin Saleh, Shakib Al Hasan, Khaled Mashud, Shahadat Hossain, Syed Rasel, Mohammad Rafique, Abdur Razzak, Mohammad Sharif and Mushfiq Rahim.

AL leaders plan

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chief, sources in the AL said.

The pro-AL lawyers on Hasina's request have started consulting among themselves for taking necessary steps in this regard. A number of lawyers yesterday during a meeting discussed options of launching the legal fight for Hasina, the sources added.

"Initially, we are thinking about ways to clear the obstacle to Hasina's USA visit. If the court asks the government to withdraw the restrictions imposed on her USA visit, she would be able to leave the country," a senior lawyer, who was present at the meeting, told The Daily Star.

An AL leader, however, yesterday said a writ petition might be filed with the High Court (HC) challenging the government-imposed restrictions on Hasina's going to USA on Friday.

Hasina, however, has yet to direct the lawyers whether they would move for obtaining her bail in the two extortion cases filed against her, an AL source said.

A senior AL leader, who is regularly maintaining contact with Hasina, told The Daily Star that they have already talked to Hasina about bringing in foreign lawyers.

"If we finally decide to bring in lawyers from abroad, the expatriates, who are well-wishers of the AL chief, will gather the funds for employing foreign lawyers," the leader said.

The AL leader, however, expressed doubt whether the government would allow foreign lawyers enter Bangladesh to provide legal aid to Hasina.

Eminent jurist Dr Kamal Hossain, Barrister Amir-Ul-Islam, Rakanuddin Mahmud and some others' name are being discussed as legal advisers to the ACC. Some of the senior lawyers have already given consent to the ACC's proposal for being appointed as legal adviser, sources said.

Advocate Khan Saifur Rahman, Khandakar Mahbub Hossain, Anisul Haque, Basat Majumder, Mahbubur Rahman and Habibullah are among the senior lawyers the ACC has been trying to recruit.

Talking to The Daily Star yesterday advocate Anisul Haque said he was appointed as a senior prosecutor to the ACC last week. He, however, said he put a condition during his recruitment that he

US launches

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for his unannounced visit, brought him to a city all but shut down by a security lockdown. Iraqi leaders imposed a strict curfew this week after a bombing of an important shrine north of the city.

It is Gates fourth trip to Iraq since he took the Defence Department over last December. He was meeting with military and political leaders to assess progress, and continue to urge the Iraqi government to move more quickly toward reconciliation and to stabilise their country.

Petraeus provided few details of the new offensive, but said he believes it will help the military make some progress in Iraq, where the war is in its fifth year and US casualties have surpassed 3,500. Gates and his military leaders are under intense pressure from Congress and the American public to begin to show real progress in Iraq so that troop withdrawals can start.

There are currently about 155,000 US troops in Iraq.

At the same time, Gates and US Ambassador Ryan Crocker expressed the continuing frustration with the lack of political progress by the Iraqis to meet a number of benchmarks set by the US, including oil revenue sharing legislation and political reconciliation.

"We are pressing hard on those," said Crocker. "The Iraqi government is pressing itself. Progress has been frustratingly slow. We will see where we are by September."