

Roadmap to election

FROM PAGE 1

They observed that Bangladesh is now at a critical juncture and the most important task for the military-backed administration is to hold the election and hand over power to an elected government.

"We sincerely hope the country will return to the democratic process by holding a free, fair and credible election within the time frame," said Japanese ambassador in Dhaka Masayuki Inoue at a seminar on July 28.

"Of course it would better hold the election earlier than schedule if necessary preparations are completed," the ambassador added.

Many of the diplomats said that the EC seemed to be in a dilemma about whether to prepare a voter roll with photographs, voters ID card or national ID card. It took a long time to reach a decision to that end and still does not seem sure about its action.

Asked about the commission's announcement [to The Daily Star] Thursday that it would hold talks with the political parties next month on electoral reforms regardless of the ban on indoor politics, several envoys said this is definitely a positive move but it is not clear to them how the EC would do that.

"We strongly support the interim government's efforts to fight corruption and appreciate its promise to hold elections by 2008, and we are ready to extend all possible help," said a diplomat from a western country.

"But we want to see a major development to that end by the end of this year. We want to see progress in preparation of the voter list, and political and electoral reforms in the next three to four months," added the envoy.

The progress made by the government so far is not sufficient to hold the election late next year, said

a European nation representative adding, "The government should immediately allow limited political activities so the parties can implement their reforms and also sit in a dialogue with the Election Commission on electoral reforms."

Criticising the prolonged state of emergency, the diplomat said, "It seems like this will continue and might have a negative impact on all sectors. It will definitely raise question among the development partners of Bangladesh."

Diplomatic sources said a good number of foreign missions and UN bodies have recently taken opinion from journalists, businessmen and other communities at informal group meetings. There, many came up with negative views about the military-backed administration.

A diplomat of an influential European country said that they have met a cross-section of people on different occasions lately, and prevalent among them appeared to be the doubt about the conduct of an election as per the roadmap.

The official said like theirs, other missions regularly send report on the current political situation, popular views, press cuttings etc to their governments who look forward to reforms and election in Bangladesh.

Diplomats said if there is no significant headway in efforts to hold the election as per the roadmap, their countries might exert pressure on the government in every possible form within the diplomatic norms.

Most of them believe that democracy forms the basis of rule of law. So it is necessary for the country to come out of emergency situation and return to democracy as soon as possible.

Clashes with rebels kill 52 in Philippines

AP, Manila

Clashes between Philippine troops and suspected al-Qaeda-linked militants have killed at least 52 people on volatile southern Jolo island, the military said yesterday.

The death toll included 25 soldiers and 27 militants, based on updated field reports, according to Maj Eugene Bata, spokesman for the military's Western Mindanao Command.

The military's initial report said 19 soldiers and one militant were killed.

The fighting erupted Thursday when suspected Abu Sayyaf extremists ambushed a truck carrying troops headed to market, then fought a gunbattle with soldiers in pursuit.

Another 10 soldiers and an undetermined number of militants were hurt, Bata said. He said the militant death toll was based on confirmed intelligence reports, but that the rebels carted away their dead and wounded. There were no reports of new clashes Friday.

The insurgents killed nine soldiers before fleeing the second major attack on government troops in recent weeks, said Maj. Eugene Bata, spokesman for the military's Western Mindanao Command.

Troops from the same unit pursuing the militants came upon a bigger insurgent group, sparking a firefight that left 10 soldiers dead and 10 wounded, said Army Col Antonio Supnet.

AL launches relief

FROM PAGE 1

Razzak said it is unfortunate that political parties will not be allowed to conduct the relief work with their party identity. "Not for banner, we stand beside the flood victims to serve them," he said.

Presidium member Tofail Ahmed said Awami League always stood beside the distressed people at times of natural disaster. He said the party decided to conduct relief operation after the government made it clear that the emergency would not be an obstruction to relief work.

Motia Chowdhury said the government relief goods are inadequate to meet the demand. The way the government undermined the political parties was unwarranted.

Awami League leaders Advocate Rahmat Ali, Latif Siddiqui, Mukul Bose, Sahara Khatun, Prof Nazma Rahman, Dr Mostafa Jalal Mohiuddin, Sultan Mohammad Mansur and Advocate Qamrul Islam were, among others, present.

JSD President Hasanul Huq Inu and Executive President Moinuddin Khan Badal visited the flood-hit Sirajganj yesterday and distributed relief among the victims.

On behalf of Khaleda Zia, Brig Gen (ret'd) Hannan Shah will lead the BNP team to Tangail and Sirajganj today for distributing relief materials among the flood affected people.

Rocket projectiles

FROM PAGE 16

rocket projectiles yesterday and explosives experts might examine those today, CID officials said.

Of the projectiles, 25 were made in England and four in Germany.

Meanwhile, several CID teams are trying to track down one Lalon who brought the projectiles packed in a carton to the office of Trans Air Express courier service at Arambagh. The CID team that seized those also arrested three staff of the courier service.

The three arrestees — Rezaul Karim, Nur Alam alias Badal and Sayed Kamruzzaman alias Kamrul alias Tanu — told CID investigators that Lalon kept the carton at their office, saying it would be sent to Chittagong. Then he left the office saying he is going to bring more cartons.

CID officials yesterday produced the arrestees before a Dhaka court seeking a seven-day remand for them. It could not however be known what the court did.

Labour-friendly

FROM PAGE 16

Bangladesh Economic Association President Qazi Kholiuzzaman Ahmad moderated the roundtable and economist Anu Mohammad presented the keynote paper.

Anu Mohammad urged the government to adopt a labour-friendly and independent jute policy in order to revive the jute sector and protect labourers. He said the jute sector has been destroyed during the last three decades as part of a conspiracy unleashed through the World Bank and International Monetary Fund's reforms suggestions.

The multilateral donors have become successful in implementing their blueprint to destroy the jute sector in the country in collaboration with local manageable political leaders, bureaucrats and consultants.

Criticising the donors he said it is clear to all that the donors have an intention to make the country "industrially bankrupt" as they suggested closing jute industries in Bangladesh while recommending setting up of new jute industries for the Indian government.

He said the government should take immediate steps to protect the jute sector by introducing a practical jute policy ignoring donors' suggestions.

Economist MM Akash, former secretary Salauddin Ahmed spoke among others.

Land grabbers

FROM PAGE 1

Forest officials said most of the forests were robbed from the forest department through forgery of land records and other documents with the help of local corrupt revenue, land and forest officials.

Before grabbing any forestland, encroachers prepare relevant documents said a forest officer who has been working in Dhaka central forest zone.

"When we file a case, the court order goes in favour of encroachers as they are able to produce documents in their names," he said.

"Sometimes we cannot even enter our own forests due to the cases filed by encroachers," the forest officer added.

In Gazipur the number of land related cases is more than 2,400, sources said.

According to a government gazette notification of 1950, the amount of forestland in Gazipur was more or less 63,000 acres under Kaliakoti, Sripur, Kachiaghata and Rajendrapur forest ranges of Dhaka central forest zone. But over the years the grabbers encroached on one sixth of that area.

Recently the government filed cases against Partex Group as it had grabbed 27 acres of forestland in Rajendrapur range.

"We had 39 acres of forestland there. But when Partex grabbed the land we went to the land office and found that only 40 decimal of land is recorded under the forest department the rest was recorded under an individual's name," said the forest officer.

Partex Group later started grabbing forestlands which are still recorded under the forest department.

"We filed cases against them," said another forest officer who archives the documents in the forest office.

A high ranking forest officer said over the years a significant portion of the forestlands was recorded under individual's names through the Revisional Survey (RS) record conducted since 1965.

With the help of land offices and revenue offices, some influential local people and politically influential people from Dhaka recorded forestlands in their names according to the RS record. They also were able to show memos of land tax payments prompting the court to give judgments in favour of the encroachers.

"If we want to collect land records,

in most cases land officers tell us that it is not possible to provide land records since the record book is torn," said the forest officer.

According to forest department documents, the department currently have disputes with Sattar Textile regarding 1.44 acre of forestland, with Aziz International over 46 decimals of forestland, and with Fare Trade over one acre in Kaliakoti forest range.

Besides, Apex Knitwear is occupying 3.5 acres of forestland, Solar Ceramic is occupying 2.84 acres, Mita Textile 4 acres, How Are You 5.12 acres, One Textile 6.52 acres, Grawell Ceramic 7.44 acres, RAK Ltd 4.26 acres, Rashua 4.06 acres, Ridish one acre, Hamim Group 4.08 acres and Sava Garden 10 acres in Sripur forest range.

But all of them have documents in their favour, the validity of which the forest department questions, sources said.

The forest department also said one Dr Abdur Rahman got hold of 89 acres of forestland and established a 'Touhidi Trust' there in 1977. The forest department filed a case against the trust and got a verdict in its favour in 2005.

"But before we could take possession of the disputed forestland, Touhidi Trust filed another case with a lower court obstructing the recovery," said a forest official who dealt with the case.

During the regime of the last government, Orion Group grabbed 23 acres of forestland in Araisho Prasad mouza under Bhaluka.

"The government changed the category of the land from forestland to khas land and allotted that to Orion group. It was a government decision, so we could not do anything," said an official requesting anonymity.

Following the flood in 1988, which had inundated most of the capital, industrialists started setting up their factories on comparatively higher grounds in Gazipur.

Within the last two decades the encroachers grabbed one fourth of the forestland in Gazipur. A forest official said if the government do not take stern measures to stop the encroachment, slowly the whole forest by the GazipurMymensingh highway will be encroached upon.

Plane crash in French Pacific kills 17

AP, Papeete

A small airplane plunged into the sea moments after taking off from the French Polynesian resort island of Moorea, killing at least 17 people in the territory's worst-ever plane crash, officials said Friday.

Two Australian tourists, two European Union officials, and a group of Polynesian environmental and tourism officials were among the 20 people aboard the Twin Otter DHC6 turboprop when it crashed Thursday, French officials said. The cause of the crash was unclear.

Rescue workers, helped by French navy ships and local fishing boats, recovered the bodies of 16 passengers and the pilot, the No. 2 French office in the territory, Jacques Witkowski, said on RTL radio.

"There is little hope of finding survivors at this hour," he added, because the plane sank immediately in deep waters.

He called it the worst-ever airplane accident on French Polynesia.

The plane went down within a minute after takeoff. The Air Moorea flight was heading for Tahiti, 11 miles away, on what would have been just a seven-minute journey.

The Twin Otter plane was returned to service after a major upgrade in November 2006 and had two new engines, Witkowski said. It was unclear when it first entered service. He would not comment on the possible cause of the crash, saying it was up to investigators to determine.

The island of Moorea is a popular resort location prized for its stunning beaches and green hilly peaks. The plane carried out regular flights between Moorea and Tahiti for Air Moorea.

Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade said Friday that the two Australians passengers were from Victoria state, but that they had not been identified.

French President Nicolas Sarkozy, vacationing in the United States, issued a statement expressing condolences to the families of the victims, and "to all Polynesia, and to the Australian and European authorities."

He ordered the junior minister for France's overseas territories, Christian Estrosi, to travel to Polynesia immediately.

50Kg chunk

FROM PAGE 1

happened. The ice piece took about an hour to melt into water.

Many of those who gathered there collected this water considering it a divine blessing.

Police visited the house and collected some water as evidence of the incident.

"It (the ice chunk) did no other damage except to Mazid's house," said Sub-inspector Nazrul Islam of Putia Police Station.

5-nation

FROM PAGE 16

Peery class frigate HMS Adelaide, the Singapore Navy's French La Fayette class stealth frigate Formidable and the Japanese Navy's two destroyers — Oonami and Udachi.

In addition, the six-day manoeuvre will also see in action shore-based Jaguar deep penetration strike aircraft of the Indian Air Force as well as the Indian Navy's Sea Harrier jets and Sea King helicopters from the INS Viraat.

The American carriers will be carrying their full complement of F-18/A Hornet, F-14 Tomcat and F-15 Eagle fighters, anti submarine helicopters and airborne early warning planes.

Indian defence officials pointed out that the location of the planned naval exercise has been chosen to maintain distance from the arc of the Pacific Ocean, and the borders of Russia and China where such moves could arouse Beijing's sensitivities.

According to media reports, Indian top naval officials said the multilateral exercise is in no way targeted at any country.

China however expressed its concern over the multilateral Bay of Bengal exercise and had alleged a quadrilateral arrangement against it comprising India, US, Japan and Australia.

The US-India military relationship has grown by leaps and bounds in recent years. Since 2002, the United States and India have been partners in more than 30 military exercises.

The defence relationship between the US and India has further reached a new dimension with the recent bilateral agreement for peaceful nuclear cooperation.

Robbery

FROM PAGE 16

The bandits got down from the train near Malibagh rail crossing. Passengers alleged that there was no security guard in the compartment.

The injured passengers were admitted to different city clinics and hospitals.

Meanwhile, police yesterday arrested four people in connection with the train robbery.

Afghan anti-terror meet hears calls to oust Nato force

AFP, Kabul

A council of Pakistani and Afghan tribal leaders debating ways to end al-Qaeda-backed terrorism in the region heard calls yesterday for Western forces to be thrown out of Afghanistan in favour of Islamic troops.

Pakistani tribal elder and former MP, Malik Fazal Manan Mohmand, told 700 delegates seated in a giant white tent that the presence of Nato and US-led forces in Afghanistan was a major cause of insecurity.

Pakistan had helped Afghanistan battle the invading Soviets in a jihad, or holy war, but Kabul had now brought in a new foreign force, he said.

"How can I accept that yesterday jihad against the Russians was a must, and today this is not a jihad?" he asked.

"There is no need for the Nato forces. Bring Islamic countries' troops," said Mohmand, from Pakistan's Mohmand Agency, in a heated address that earned him a smattering of applause.

His call came on the second day of a three-day "peace jirga", aimed at persuading the fiercely independent tribes from the remote border regions to root out Taliban and al-Qaeda elements using their mountainous territories as hideouts.

The unique gathering of delegates from both sides of the border — tribal chiefs, parliamentarians and other leading figures — went into closed session Friday which was expected to extend into Saturday.

Another delegate, Afghan MP Sardar Mohammad Rehman Ogholi said it was undeniable that "some terrorists" were entrenched in the Pakistani tribal belt along the Afghan border and should be asked to leave the region.

"If they did not, Pakistan will grab them by one hand and Afghanistan by the other and we will together throw them away," the parliamentarian said, to warm applause.

"It is also clear that they are unin-

Fallout of floods

FROM PAGE 1

that of the previous years," he said. Shadhat Hossain said people are infected with diarrhoea mainly because they drank or used contaminated water. "Water must be boiled or purified with purifying tablets," he suggested.

The government should undertake preventive measures and supply oral saline, he said, adding that most of the patients are adults and are suffering from severe diarrhoea.

A large number of children suffering from fever, pneumonia and skin diseases were rushed to Sir Salimullah Medical College Hospital, and Shishu Hospital in the capital yesterday, sources concerned said.

It would take at least a week for the floodwater to recede from the eastern part of Dhaka and more than 10 days from the old parts of the capital, according to Flood Forecasting and Warning Centre (FFWC). The water levels of the major rivers of the country are also falling fast, FFWC said.

The water level of the Balu, which caused flooding in the eastern part of the city, is falling at a rate of 4.5cm a day, while the Turag, now flowing 54cm above danger level, is falling 5cm a day, FFWC said.

Floodwaters in most northern areas of the country will completely recede in the next four to five days and the overall flood situation of the country will mark a significant improvement in the next seven to 10 days, said FFWC Assistant Engineer Mustafa Sorwar last evening.

A total of 16 people died due to flood-related reasons yesterday raising the death toll to 226 in this year's flooding.

The government so far gave administration of districts 13,415 tonnes of GR (gracious relief) rice, Tk 4.51 crore in GR cash, Tk 1.22 crore as housing building grants, Tk 48.50 lakh as GR cash for dry foods, Tk 39.50 lakh as GR cash for relief and rescue operations.

Our staff correspondent Hasibur Rahman Bilu and Golam Mostafa Jibon in Sirajganj reports: Thousands of children are infected with skin and other water-borne diseases due to shortages of food and drinking water in the district.

Many children admitted to North Bengal Medical College Hospital were found to be infected with skin diseases.

District Sadar Thana Health Officer Abdul Momen said, "Diarrhoea may take an epidemic form there."

The diseased, however, are not getting proper treatment. Hasina of Sadar upazila, who took shelter at Polytechnic Institute flood shelter, said her three-year-old daughter was infected with an unknown skin disease and has been suffering for the last five days but there was none to treat her. Many like Hasina made the same complaint.

Three gruel kitchens will be opened in Sirajganj Sadar and Kazipur of the district today (Saturday), said Sirajganj Deputy Commissioner Ibrahim Khail.

Our correspondent in Manikganj reports: At least 184 people were infected with diarrhoea yesterday raising the total to 1,063 in the district. District Relief and Rehabilitation Office sources said.

The sources said the floods washed away crops on 83,165 acres of land. A total of 4,706 houses, 532km of road, 13km of embankments, 67 bridges and culvert, 139 educational institutions were damaged in the floods.

A total of 33,536 people out of the 6,35,946 flood victims of the district took shelter in the 145 flood shelters of the district. The district administration distributed 600 tonnes of rice and Tk 14 lakh in cash among the flood victims.

Our correspondent in Mymensingh reports: A schoolboy drowned in the Brahmaputra near Madhumari village

vited guests," he said, apparently referring to the al-Qaeda movement made up of "jihadis" from various Islamic nations.

As delegates pondered the region's future in Kabul, Afghan and coalition forces said they killed at least 10 Taliban in a 13-hour battle in the flashpoint southern province of Helmand. Scores of others may also be dead or wounded, they said.

The day before, Pakistan's military pounded militant hideouts in the north of the country and said it had killed at least 10 al-Qaeda and Taliban fighters.

Extremist violence and "Talibanisation" — the enforcement of the hardliners' strictly Islamic code of behaviour that — are growing worries for the neighbours, both allies in the US-led "war on terror."

Kabul and Islamabad have traded accusations about the causes of the unrest, with Washington warning also that al-Qaeda is being allowed to regroup in remote tribal areas of northwestern Pakistan.

Afghan President Hamid Karzai opened the jirga, the Pashtu-language word for assembly, on Thursday by urging delegates from the neighbouring countries to work together to find a solution to the growing violence.

There were new calls for unity Friday.

"We share a common book, the Koran, religion and language. We have never fought on any of these issues," said Afghan parliamentarian Shukria Barakzai.

"Let's put our hands together to solve our problems... Let's talk for peace," she said.

The meeting is due to wrap up Sunday with a "joint strategy" to fight the extremists, amid growing unrest which has seen a spike in terror attacks in both countries.

Tk 65cr plan

FROM PAGE 1

He said agricultural rehabilitation is the first priority now and the administration in the districts has been asked to make a priority list of the affected farmers owning small land.

"Once the floodwater completely recedes, we can assess the total amount of crops damaged and formulate a comprehensive plan for rehabilitating the farmers," CS Karim said, adding that the Ministry of Finance has already allocated Tk 30 crore for the programme.

"The farmers, however, will not be given any cash," he said, adding that the upazila and union agricultural rehabilitation committees will implement the programme under the overall supervision of the district rehabilitation committees.

He said the Department of Agriculture Extension (DAE) would monitor the programme centrally. The farmers in the flood-affected areas have already started their preparation for future crops without depending on the government, he added.

"It is a huge shift of mindset of our people. They are now more focussed on structural rehabilitation rather than relief and so on," he said sharing his experience from recent visits to a number of northern flood-affected districts.

Replying to a query, the agriculture adviser said they cannot guarantee that their programme will be 100 percent successful. "We hope that we can implement it successfully," he said.

The government sensitised the farmers beforehand about the flood and there was no delay in any rescue or relief operations, he

claimed. The NGOs, business bodies and voluntary organisations were well incorporated in the district rehabilitation committees, he noted.

Agriculture Secretary Mohammad Abdul Aziz said, "Apart from the government initiative of growing aman seedlings on 500 acres of land, we have asked each upazila [upazila agriculture extension department] to motivate the farmers to grow seedlings on at least 10 acres of land."

This will surely help a lot in supplying aman seeds, he said, adding that seedlings on one acre could be transplanted in 20 acres. The farmers who have up to 2.5 acres of land will be given seeds free of cost for one bigha of land, Abdul Aziz added.

He said 48 percent of aman seedlings, 17 percent of aus, 41 percent of vegetables, 20 percent of seedbeds, 25 percent of planted aman and 36 percent jute were damaged in the flooding.

Fish worth Tk 202 crore was washed away in 48 districts in about 32,620 tonnes of fish and 583 tonnes of prawn. Livestock worth Tk 15 crore was destroyed in the floods.

A programme of Tk 36.33 crore has been prepared to rehabilitate farmers with small fish farms.

Food and Disaster Management Secretary Dhiraj Malakar and other officials were present at the press briefing.

Khaleda wants

FROM PAGE 1

briefing in his Mohakhali residence in the capital.

He said BNP will start its relief operation from today under his supervision with directions from Khaleda Zia as the party Secretary General Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan did not respond to the phone call from the chairperson.

Meanwhile, Mannan Bhuiyan yesterday said his faction of the party has already started its relief operation in different places of the country.

"Our district level leaders and former lawmakers have already started the relief operations in their areas," he told reporters in his Gulshan residence in the capital.

Party sources said the two rival factions of BNP led by Khaleda Zia and Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan will distribute relief materials separately among the flood victims. Leaders of the Bhuiyan-led faction recently in a meeting decided to carry out their relief operation through the faction's former lawmakers and district level leaders, while leaders loyal to Khaleda Zia will start their relief distribution from today through a few local leaders.

Khaleda Zia is scheduled to visit the flood affected areas in Sirajganj and Tangail today but the government had yet to give her the permission till filing this report last night.

Relief and Disaster Management Adviser Tapan Chowdhury however said during a news briefing on Wednesday that Khaleda Zia would not be able to visit the affected areas due to security reasons, but the home ministry would take the final

decision.

Hannan Shah yesterday talked to the home secretary and requested him to take necessary measures so that Khaleda is able to join the relief operations in Sirajganj and Tangail according to the schedule announced by the party.

Later during the briefing Hannan Shah said Khaleda Zia told him that she will take all the responsibilities if she faces any problem during her visit to the flood affected areas without government security.

"I hope the government will give the permission by today," Hannan said yesterday, adding that their motive is not to put the government through any trouble.