

Nepal polls called off over Maoist demand

AFP, Kathmandu

Elections to decide Nepal's future were postponed indefinitely yesterday, ministers said, as government and Maoists squabbled over the fate of the monarchy and election systems.

The polls scheduled for November 22 were a key element of a peace deal sealed last year that ended a civil war launched in 1996 by the Maoists, who are demanding the abolition of the monarchy.

The seven party leaders (of the coalition government) have agreed to postpone the constituent assembly elections for an indefinite period. "Peace and Reconstruction Minister Ram Chandra Poudel told AFP.

Voters were to elect a body to rewrite Nepal's constitution and decide the fate of the Himalayan country's embattled monarchy.

The government has decided to call a special session of parliament on October 11 to discuss the Maoists' demands, Finance Minister Ram Sharan Mahat told AFP.

The seven parties in the coalition government issued a joint statement shortly after the postponement was announced, urging impoverished Nepal's donors to continue their support of the peace process.

"We regret the postponement of the elections but we want to assure people that we are committed to hold constituent assembly elections and a new date will be fixed soon," the statement said.

"We hope that the international community and the United Nations will continue their support of the ongoing peace process."

The head of the UN mission to Nepal's peace process said the postponement was disappointing and the political parties and Maoists needed to prepare in earnest for rescheduled elections.

"What is important now is that the political parties maintain their alliance and reach political agreements

to create the conditions for a credible constituent assembly election," UN representative Ian Martin said.

"I have no doubt that the UN and member states will remain committed to supporting the Nepal peace process," he added.

As part of last November's peace deal, the UN was invited to supervise Maoist weapons and soldiers who were confined to camps around the country as well as assist in the polls.

A spokesman said Nepal's Election Commission was ready to hold the November 22 polls and the delay was worrying.

"We had everything in place. The decision by the political parties has created a lot of confusion. The election commission is meeting regarding what to do next," said Laxman Bhattarai, the election commission spokesman.

The fiercely republican Maoists have been pushing hard for the immediate abolition of the monarchy as well as the change to the election system.

After agreeing to polls with a mixed first-past-the-post and proportional representation system, the ex-rebels demanded full proportional voting.

They vowed to disrupt the November ballot if mainstream parties refused their demands.

Analysts say the ultra-leftists have grown fearful of the elections as popular support has plummeted because of their continued strong-arm tactics and bloody unrest in the southern Terai region.

The delay could open the way to further unrest, a political analyst warned.

"The postponement has created an atmosphere of uncertainty and the very legitimacy and credibility of the government has come into question," said Kapil Shrestha, a political science professor at Nepal's Tribhuvan University.

"This will have national and international repercussions," he said.

Green chilli

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The wholesalers of Karwan Bazar gave different reasons for the price hike of onions. Some said they had to purchase it at a higher price while some said the increase in demand on the eve of Eid was responsible for the price hike.

Our correspondent in Khulna reported that onion was selling at Tk 48 per kg yesterday, which was Tk 36 last week.

Wholesalers said the price of onions might go up even further as import from India through Benapole border remains suspended since October 1. Quoting importers, they said the government of India stopped the export of onions following a price hike there.

Khulna district administration opened a cell to monitor the onion-price situation and to stop hoarding of onions.

Our Chittagong correspondent reports: Onions were selling at different kitchen markets in the city at Tk 42-43 a kg.

Traders, both in retail and wholesale markets, blamed poor supply as well as the Indian government's recent decision to suspend onion export for 15 days for the rising prices.

Meanwhile, powder milk of different brands including Nido, Dano, Diploma and Fresh saw a sharp rise in their prices at retail markets while the price of pasteurised milk fluctuated wantonly at retail markets during the last few days.

The 2.5kg pack of Nido powder milk rose to Tk 1,450, which was selling at Tk 1,250 four days ago, while the 350gm pack leapt to Tk 200 from Tk 165.

The 2kg pack of Dano powder milk rose to Tk 980 from last week's Tk 960. The one kg pack of Diploma powder milk rose to Tk 418 from Tk 392. The one kg pack of Fresh powder milk was selling at Tk 410 yesterday, it

was selling at Tk 384 a few days ago.

Powder milk traders of the wholesale market of Karwan Bazar said the companies gave them a new whole-sale price list on September 30 to be effective from October 1.

The price of Red Cow butter oil rose to Tk 338 from Tk 310 per 900gm container while the price of Red Cow ghee increased to Tk 415 from Tk 375 per 900gm container.

Vermicelli, a key dish on Eid, jumped to Tk 55 a kg from Tk 45 per kg while packed vermicelli (weighing 908gm) is selling at Tk 60. The price was Tk 48 four days ago. The 200gm pack of Banaphul Laccha Shemai (vermicelli) also leapt to Tk 23 from Tk 17.

Pasteurised milk of different brands was selling at prices ranging from Tk 40 and Tk 50 a litre at different city markets. Traders blamed poor supply for the price hike.

A grocer of West Razabazar told The Daily Star that the distributors gave only 50 percent of his demand forcing him to buy from other retailers to meet his needs.

The price of flour rose by Tk 2-3 per kg while prices of both local and farm chicken increased.

Price of four medium-sized local chicken leapt to Tk 450 from Tk 350 during the last four days while the price of farm chicken rose by Tk 10 per kg.

However, prices of spices, vegetables including aubergine, bitter gourd, parat, chichinga and jhinga dropped slightly at different kitchen markets in the capital.

Price of cucumber went down significantly, selling at Tk 20 a kg at different kitchen markets. It was selling at Tk 60 in the beginning of Ramadan.

The traders of Karwan Bazar said the supply of vegetables is adequate.

Law enforcement agencies continued their monitoring in different markets of city.

GSP hearing

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Humayun sought assistance from the international community to enhance capacity to further improve labour rights situation in Bangladesh.

Bangladesh embassy in Washington in a press release said the hearing is the beginning of a year-long review process that will examine verbal and written submissions and testimonies by all parties as well as determine the actual progress on the ground to come to a conclusion on an appeal by a US rights group for withdrawal of the GSP facilities for Bangladesh.

Ms Marideth Joy Sandler, executive director of GSP programme at the USTR, chaired the hearing.

Mr Jeffrey Vogt, global economic specialist of the rights body American Federation of Labour and Congress of Industrial Organisations (AFL-CIO), in defence of their petition highlighted the violations of labour rights in the export processing zones (EPZs), in ready-made garment (RMG) and shrimp industries in Bangladesh.

Vogt recognised that some progress has been made in recent years but said the progress was still unsatisfactory.

He suggested that more aggressive reforms are needed to protect labour rights in Bangladesh.

In response to specific queries about their objective in filing the petition, he said they want Bangladesh government to accord more priorities to ensure that labour

rights, as recognised in the international community, are respected in Bangladesh.

At the hearing, Brig Gen Ashraf Abdullah Yusuf, executive chairman of Bangladesh Export Processing Zones (Bepza), Syed Mahmudul Huq, chairman of Bangladesh Shrimp and Fish Foundation and Shabbir Ahmed Chowdhury, adviser of Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) in Washington, also testified before the Trade Policy Staff of the USTR.

The AFL-CIO made the appeal alleging that Bangladesh does not allow labour rights in its EPZs.

The BGMEA, Bepza, Bangladesh Knitwear Manufacturers and Exporters Association and Bangladesh Frozen Food Exporters Association protested the allegation.

Different labour organisations under the banner of Bangladesh Garments Workers Union Council (BGWUC) also raised voice against the complaint.

The AFL-CIO made four complaints in its petition. These include violation of domestic and internationally recognised workers' rights in the EPZs in Bangladesh, violation of domestic labour laws and internationally recognised labour standards in RMG industry, similar violations in shrimp and fish processing industries, and violent actions by government security forces against trade unionists, workers and labour rights groups.

13 AL leaders freed on bail in Sylhet

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, Sylhet

Thirteen leaders of Awami League (AL) and its front organisations, granted bail by a High Court division, on Monday, were released from Sylhet Central Jail on Thursday evening.

They are UK unit AL Joint Secretary Shafiqur Rahman Chowdhury, Sylhet city AL Secretary Misbah Uddin Siraj, former general secretary of Chhatra League district unit Nasir uddin Khan, Sylhet City Juba League President Syed Shamim Ahmed and Joint Secretary Asaduzzaman Asad, Sylhet Chhatra League President Zaglu Chowdhury, City Chhatra League Convener Habibur Rahman Selim, MC College Chhatra League President Saiful Islam Tipu, and AL leaders Prince Sadruzzaman, Selim Ahmed, Yousuf Humayun, Shamsul Islam and Ajay Dev.

The joint forces arrested 38 AL men at a house in Bateshwar area on the outskirts of the city on May 14 on charges of holding a political meeting, violating the emergency rules.

The High Court on August 22 granted bail to all the 38 AL men. Of them, 25 including nine expatriates were released while the rest could not come out of the jail as a fresh case was lodged against them under the Special Powers Act.

Envoy in KL

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assured the Bangladeshi envoy that all Bangladeshi workers, who have been given approval but are yet to arrive in Malaysia, will be allowed to enter the country, the high commissioner told Malaysian newspaper The Star Online.

According to the Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment, Malaysia approved three lakh Bangladeshi workers, of whom over one lakh are yet to leave Dhaka.

"The Home Affairs Ministry (of Malaysia) assured me that all previous approvals would be honoured," Khairuzzaman said, adding, "Things will be better handled this time." He said, "The measures are already in place and we will work closely with all parties involved."

Malaysia imposed the freeze on hiring workers from Bangladesh as many migrant workers remained unemployed, were not paid their salaries and other facilities as per contracts. A several thousand of them also got stuck at the Kuala Lumpur International Airport as their employers did not pick them up.

The Malaysian government in the latest agreements has made it mandatory that Bangladeshi workers not picked up within 24 hours of their arrival at the Kuala Lumpur Airport will be moved to an immigration depot where they will be kept for 72 hours before being deported.

Announcing the ban, Malaysian Home Affairs Minister Datuk Seri Radzi Sheikh Ahmad said the lackadaisical attitude of employers and local agents, especially in picking up the workers upon arrival, had created a big problem for the authorities.

Bangladeshi agents are also responsible for the problem as they have been splurging massive amounts of money and collaborating with the Malaysian agents to get as many Bangladeshis as possible for employment in Malaysia, the minister claimed.

Social problems created by foreign workers were also one of the reasons for the announcement of the freeze, he said.

Cold weather

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the Bay of Bengal.

"The situation will end with a rainfall. But we do not see any possibility of rainfall before next three-four days," said Samarendra Karmakar, director of the Met office.

The current spell of sultry weather has been causing coughing and viral fever.

The depression has been staying over the west central Bay and adjoining northwest area and it is likely to intensify further and move in a northwesterly direction, said a Met office bulletin.

In the bulletin, the Met office asked all fishing boats and trawlers in north Bay and deep sea to come close to the coast and proceed with caution until further notice.

\$60,000 seized

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to Patenga Police Station. A case was filed with the police station.

Acting on a tip-off, the coast-guard members stopped a private car near Air Force gate at around 1:30pm. After a search, they found 600 pieces of 100-dollar (US) bills amounting to Tk 42 lakh hidden in soap packets and milk containers.

During interrogation Mizan told the law enforcers that he went to the airport to receive expatriate Md Mohsin, 36, son of Mahbubul Huq of Fatikchhari, who returned home from Dubai in a Biman flight (BG 048) at around 10:30am.

Lt Commander Asaduzzaman of Bangladesh Coastguard quoted Mizan as saying that Mohsin gave Mizan the goods to carry and went away in a CNG-run auto rickshaw.

Bhuiyan for fair trial

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in the capital.

Stressing on a social campaign for curbing corruption in the country, he said it is not possible to curb corruption "only by repression and jailing people".

Bhuiyan said he wants unity among the party leaders as well as implementation of his reform proposals since the election is approaching fast. "I want party reforms to make the party acceptable and strong, and to establish the rule of law in the country," he added.

When asked if he is taking any initiative to unite the party again, he said they are heading to that direction, albeit cautiously. Everything will be achieved after an appropriate environment is created, he said declining to elaborate.

"I want to maintain the unity of the party as the election is coming near, unity and reforms both are important for the party as we don't want to go back to the situation that existed in the country before 1/11," he said adding that he is ready to accept the decision of the party council regarding his reform proposals.

"We want to hold the council with everyone's involvement in it, we have to arrange it in a way so that everyone may participate in the process," said Bhuiyan, who claims to be working to bring democratic reforms to the party constitution.

When a reporter sought his reaction about many peoples

thinking that if he and new Secretary General Khandaker Delwar Hossain sit for a negotiation, all the problems will be solved, Bhuiyan said personal amity is not the issue, rather political differences have to be resolved.

"I respect him [Delwar] as an elder, but it is not correct to think that political unity will be achieved only by sitting together," he said hoping that a political unity will somehow be achieved between the feuding factions of the party.

Asked if the crisis in BNP was sparked by the interim government's ongoing anti-corruption drive and the countrywide party reform fever, and if all these are going to harm the democracy, he replied "the society must be freed from corruption but not only by repression and jailing people".

"We have to create a corruption free society to establish democracy and good governance in the country," he said adding that all should cooperate in that endeavour.

BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia expelled Bhuiyan and joint secretary general Ashraf Hossain from the party and appointed Khandaker Delwar Hossain as the new secretary general, the day before her arrest, but Bhuiyan dismissed the order by terming it a violation of the party constitution.

When asked about the price hike of essentials and probable lifting of the state of emergency, Bhuiyan said those are matters of the government and it will be responsible for its actions.

Tofail cautions

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EC's electoral roadmap.

Talking to reporters in his Banani residence in the capital, Tofail said the caretaker government as well as the EC will have to be very careful in taking decisions regarding the upcoming election and electoral reforms.

Regarding mandatory registration of political parties with the EC the government and the commission should not take any decision which the political parties will not be able to accept, said the AL leader adding that if the commission or the government take any irrational decision regarding the matter then holding of the polls will become uncertain again.

"So the government, the commission, and the political parties must be very careful about the matter," Tofail said.

He also urged the people of the country not to 'misunderstand' him. He said the time is harsh for those who did not or will not betray the ideology of Gangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, adding that he himself does not fear the hard time facing him.

"If I get the letter from the Anti-corruption Commission, I will submit my wealth statement," the veteran AL leader said.

He also said no politician can carry out political activities without the help of the people, adding, "but those who are real politicians, those who never made political compromises for personal gains, those who never betrayed their parties, those who never reneged on the Bangladesh nation and will never be able to do so -- for them the time is ominous".

Meanwhile, Acting AL President Zillur Rahman yesterday demanded release of the detained AL chief and former prime minister Sheikh Hasina before Eid-ul-Fitr.

Addressing an iftar party in a hotel in the capital, Zillur said Hasina, the elder daughter of Gangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, has been detained based on fabricated charges.

The Dhaka city unit of AL organised the iftar where leaders of AL-led 14-party coalition were present.

Tofail Ahmed, Motia Chowdhury, Mukul Bose, Saber Hossain Chowdhury, Abdul

Mannan, Mahmudur Rahman Manna, Sultan Mohammad Mansur Ahmed, Asaduzzaman Noor, Vice-president Abdur Shahid, Advocate Quamrul Islam, Mukul Chowdhury and Faiz Uddin Mia were present from AL, while Gonotantri Party President Nurul Islam, Workers Party General Secretary Bimol Biswas, Gono Forum leader Pankaj Bhattacharya, Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal leaders Mainuddin Khan Badal and Syed Zafar Sazzad were also present among others.

Zillur said "I pray for Hasina's release before the Eid." Referring to the much talked about rift in the party, Zillur said there is no factional feud in his party, adding that AL is still united just like it was under the leadership of Sheikh Hasina.

He assured that the party will not be divided as long as he is the executive leader. "I am ready to sacrifice myself for the unity of the party," he said.

Agri ministry

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borrowed money to recover from lost crops and lost them again to floods are facing problems, as they would not get any harvest this season.

"So those farmers need help for their winter crops," said an official from the department of agriculture extension.

The first spell of floods started July 18 and stayed for three weeks and the second spell of flood that stayed for two weeks started in September 6.

According to the official data of agriculture ministry, crops, including Aus, Amon, vegetables, on 4,12,940 hectares were totally damaged while crops on 3,47,406 hectares of land were partially damaged, out of the 32,86,959 hectares of cultivable land of the country.

According to agriculturists, the second spell of floods damaged crops irretrievably since the farmers had no time to cultivate again. After the first spell, many farmers cultivated the late variety of crops.

Director of agriculture monitoring, under the department of agriculture extension, said, "We are yet to estimate the damage to crops caused by the floods."

The department of agriculture tried its best to minimise losses by taking a number of quick initiatives, including providing paddy seedlings and seeds to the farmers, he added.

REB under-billing

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The REB is enjoying a subsidised power tariff ever since its inception. But this forces the PDB to swallow heavy losses. While REB's average power sales rate for its customers is close to Tk 4 per unit, it pays less than Tk 2 per unit to the PDB.

In such a situation, the government in March decided that out of 67 Pali Bidyut Samities (PBS) of the REB which buy and sell PDB's power, nine major PBS will pay a different power tariff. These PBS will pay Tk 2.16 per unit and the other 58 PBS will pay Tk 1.82 per unit. The government asked the PDB and REB to identify these nine major PBS.

Accordingly, the PDB and REB identified these PBS, which are located around Dhaka and Narsinghdi, and sell power mainly to industrial customers.

From then on, the PDB sent its bills to the REB on the nine PBS using the new tariff structure. But the REB arbitrarily revised these bills on its own and paid the PDB at the rate of Tk 1.82 per unit. Strangely, the PDB's departments

concerned did not bring this matter to the notice of the authorities.

The PDB authorities came to know this following changes in some of the posts concerned a few months back. The PDB then raised objections with the REB but the anomalies continued.

And late last month, the PDB brought the matter to the notice of the power secretary showing that eight out of the nine PBS consumed PDB's electricity worth Tk 60 crore but the REB arbitrarily revised the bill on its own and paid the PDB only Tk 52 crore.

The power secretary asked the REB chairman to explain the anomalies but there was no response. The REB was then asked to clear the arrears within three days and punish those responsible for this irregularity. The REB immediately cleared one such bill and started processing clearance of other arrears.

"As per rules, the REB will have to pay the PDB an extra 2 percent over the arrears," said one source.

A PDB source alleged that some officers of general manager's rank were involved in the anomalies.

SYLHET BLAST Verdict in two cases tomorrow

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, Sylhet

Judgment in two of the six cases filed in connection with the bomb blasts at Sunamganj district headquarters on August 17, 2005, will be pronounced tomorrow.

Sylhet Divisional Speedy Trial Tribunal Judge Dipyoman Sarker fixed the date on Thursday.

The activists of the outlawed Jama'atul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) exploded bombs near Bar Association and DC's offices, Judge's Court premises, Eidgah, Mollikipur and bus stand areas.

Police submitted charge sheets against JMB operatives Abdul Aziz alias Hanif and Salahuddin alias Salehi for the blasts. Abdul Aziz gave confessional statement before a magistrate last year.

Besides, the Speedy Trial Tribunal awarded Aziz 14 years' rigorous imprisonment on September 12 for storing explosives at a house rented for JMB men in Sylhet city.

Suu Kyi

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small-scale protests after a massive mid-August hike in fuel prices but swelled into the biggest threat to the hardline regime since student-led demonstrations in 1988, which were put down in a massacre.

Although the security presence on Yangon's streets has eased, soldiers continue to enforce a curfew and raid activists' home overnight, residents say. Many Yangon monasteries are empty, leaving neighbours to wonder if the monks have been arrested, injured or worse.

Amid this week's flurry of international diplomacy, Gambari was due to brief the UN Security Council later Friday on his four-day mission to Myanmar, but China signalled early that it would block efforts to punish Myanmar.

China's UN Ambassador Wang Guangya, whose country, along with India, has close ties to Myanmar, said Thursday that Beijing still regarded the crisis there as an internal matter and rejected the idea of punitive measures.

"No internationally imposed solution can help the situation," Wang said.

India, which has been under fire for its low-key reaction, called for Aung San Suu Kyi's release, saying she can "contribute to the emergence of Myanmar as a democratic country."

Thailand's Prime Minister Surayud Chulanont and Singapore's Premier Lee Hsien Loong agreed to send some foreign ministers from the Association of Southeast Asian Nations to Myanmar next month, a Thai government statement said.

French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner also said he would soon travel to the Southeast Asia region to press for change, while Brazil unveiled plans to send a team of observers.

The UN high commissioner for human rights, Louise Arbour, called on Myanmar to allow rights monitors to enter the country, pointing to "pretty alarming" signs of abuses.

RMG workers

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Garment Factory in Dhaka EPZ and an export-oriented garment factory at Jamgara stopped their work and demonstrated on the same demands.

Police later brought the situation under control.

Tree lover

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government land so that nobody, not even his own children, can claim ownership of those trees in future.

Alimuddin's son Bhutto Pramanik often used to accompany him in planting trees. Bhutto said his father used to buy or collect the palm seeds from people. He would request students to bring the palm seeds wasted in their houses.

Thus Alimuddin planted 15,000 palm and date trees and a few coconut and rain trees from 1982 to 1987.

"The price of the 12,500 palm trees and 2,500 date trees my father had planted would be around Tk 3 crore at present," said Bhutto, who does not have the means to buy even their daily bread.

Asked why Alimuddin planted mostly palm and date trees, his son said cows and goats do not eat these trees, so the trees do not need extra care.

Children of Alimuddin are very proud of their father, who sacrificed his money, even his children's fortune, for the sake of environment.

Bhutto said once his father had 23 bighas of cultivable land but he sold them to maintain his family and plant trees. Later, at old age Alimuddin took a job at a brick kiln.

But Alimuddin is yet to receive any government recognition for his deed. Locals remember Alimuddin but no government agency has ever inquired who planted those trees.

The government has not even taken any initiative to save the trees. Locals said many people are often felling the trees.

Manpower export

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2,000 Malaysian Ringgit, equivalent to Tk 20,000 and Tk 40,000, as 'lobbyist fee' to their sub-agents.

These companies sign deals with recruiting agencies in Bangladesh for hiring workers, as well as with employers in Malaysia for supplying the workers. The outsourcing companies, as per the Malaysian rules, are responsible for paying the salaries and ensuring other facilities for the workers upon receiving the money from the employers.

Tenganita report is partly substantiated by a