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Advisers agree to talk with political parties

Timetable, agenda not fixed yet

SHAKHAWAT LITON and SHAMIM ASHRAF

The council of advisers at a special meeting yesterday agreed to open dialogues with the political parties to discuss the overall situation to ensure holding of a free and fair election.

But the meeting chaired by Chief Adviser Fakhruddin Ahmed did not fix any timetable or agenda for the talks the political parties have been demanding to resolve the present political crisis.

The major political parties welcomed the move and asked the caretaker government to immediately announce the date for the dialogue.

ers at the meeting raised the issue of opening a dialogue with the political parties to gain their trust while other advisers supported them.

The first meeting since the inclusion of five new advisers last Wednesday also discussed how more political activities can be allowed, the sources added.

Talking to reporters after the meeting, newly appointed Adviser Maj Gen (ret'd) Ghulam Mohammad Quader described the demand for holding talks with the political parties as "valid" and "logical".

"The government will definitely hold dialogues with the political parties today or tomorrow," Quader said.

Adviser AMM Shawkat Ali, who was also appointed Wednesday, said it is a must to hold dialogues with the political parties to resolve the present political crisis.

Asked about the timetable for the talks, newly appointed Adviser Rasheda K Choudhury said the talks might take place after the Election Commission (EC) completes its electoral reform talks with the political parties.

When her attention was drawn to the EC plan to complete the talks by mid-February, Rasheda said the government may then begin the talks after that time.

This is the first time in exactly one year since the declaration of

the state of emergency that the council of advisers has underscored the need for opening talks with the political parties.

Political analysts observed that the chief adviser brought major changes to his cabinet on the eve of completing one year of the interim rule to give an impression of initiating new measures to improve the overall situation.

Chief Adviser Fakhruddin Ahmed is likely to address the nation tomorrow, on the day he assumed the office of chief adviser last year, outlining the new measures to make the administration dynamic for holding the stalled

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AL, BNP, JP want early date for talks

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Awami League (AL), BNP and Jatiya Party (JP) yesterday welcomed the government move, for holding dialogue with the political parties and urged the government to fix dates as early as possible to find a solution to the current crisis through discussion.

They also expressed hope that the misunderstandings between the political parties and the government would be cleared through the dialogues.

"After the date is fixed, we will discuss the national crises, implementation of electoral roadmap, lifting of state of emergency, among others, at the dialogue," AL Presidium member Amir Hossain Amu told The Daily Star.

Council of advisers at a meeting yesterday agreed in principle that the government should sit for dialogues with the political parties

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3 special assistants to CA appointed

Portfolios reallocated among advisers; new ones see price hike, fair polls toughest jobs

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Three special assistants to the chief adviser were appointed yesterday with the rank and status of state minister, aimed at expanding the cabinet of the caretaker government.

The special assistants are Brig Gen (ret'd) MA Malek, former PDB chairman, Prof M Tamim of Buet, and Barrister Debashis Roy.

Chief Adviser Fakhruddin Ahmed, meantime, reallocated portfolios to his advisers yesterday, a day after five new advisers were sworn in into his council of advisers.

The newly appointed advisers

see price hike of essentials and inflation as the toughest challenges for the caretaker government besides holding a free, fair and acceptable general election by the end of this year and handing over power to an elected government.

In their primary reaction while assuming office at Bangladesh Secretariat yesterday, none of them supported the demand for holding elections by June.

Talking to newsmen, the new advisers could not give any timetable for lifting the state of emergency saying it needs a collective decision.

"The present government's main challenge and objective

would be handing over power to an elected government by holding a free and fair election so that they get a congenial atmosphere for work," new Education Adviser Dr Hossain Zillur Rahman said.

Side by side, another major challenge is to keep moving the wheel of the economy, he added.

Zillur has set his priority on improving the quality of education through institutional reforms.

"Keeping in mind the declining standard of education in rural areas (compared to urban areas) I'll try my best to minimise the difference," he said.

Asked to comment on the

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AI chief terms HR record poor

Says SPA being manipulated to detain politicians, journalists, businessmen

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Amnesty International (AI) Secretary General Irene Khan yesterday termed the present human rights situation in the country 'unsatisfactory' saying that the government has committed rights abuses that have added new patterns to those done by the previous regimes.

The government should suspend the Special Powers Act (SPA) as it is being manipulated to detain politicians, businessmen and journalists, the AI chief observed and expressed concern about the



Irene Khan

armed forces' carrying out civilian functions without rules of accountability.

She was delivering the concluding statement of her visit at a press conference in a city hotel.

The AI chief also presented a memorandum of recommendations to the government and political parties.

A Bangladeshi, Irene called on the government to seek UN advice to open an independent commission of enquiry into the war crimes committed during the Liberation War in 1971.

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President, CA's messages on CG's 1st year completion

UNB, Dhaka

President Iajuddin Ahmed and Chief Adviser Fakhruddin Ahmed yesterday gave separate messages marking the completion of one year of the present caretaker government.

The president in his message expressed the hope that a free, fair and acceptable election would be held by 2008 as per the Election Commission roadmap, which would hasten and consolidate the forward march of democracy.

The president said after assuming office, the present government has played a significant role in establishing the rule of law, rooting out corruption and building an exploitation-free society.

The government's activities in last one year earned praise at home

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BRIBERY Ex-state minister Salahuddin jailed for 7 years

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

A special court yesterday sentenced former state minister for communications Salahuddin Ahmed to seven years' imprisonment for taking Tk 1 crore in bribe from a contractor.

The court acquitted former lawmaker Qazi Saleemul Huq, managing director of GQ Ball-Pen Industries Ltd, as the charge brought against him for abetting Salahuddin in extorting the money was not proved.

The Fifth Special Court of Judge Ashraf Hossain also fined Salahuddin Tk 1 crore, in default of which he will have to serve another year in jail. The court ordered confiscation of the money Salahuddin took as bribe.

The verdict was given under section 5(2) (d) of the Prevention of

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CPD ON STATE OF ECONOMY

Inflation, low agriculture production, investment sloth main challenges

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

High inflation rate, low agricultural production, slow growth of investment and sluggish export trends are the major challenges confronting the caretaker government, Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) yesterday said.

These would be serious obstacles to achieving the key macroeconomic targets set in the budget for fiscal year 2007-08, Mustafizur Rahman, executive director of

CPD, said speaking at a press briefing on 'State of Bangladesh Economy in FY2008'.

As the caretaker government sets its sight for a free and fair national election in 2008, performance of the economy would be crucial in implementing its election plus agenda as well as creating an environment conducive for the new government to getting on with moving the economy forward in 2009, he added.

According to CPD, the next six

months will be a critical period for Bangladesh as its economy is coming under rising pressure in the form of higher domestic prices, higher import payments, sluggish export performance, stalled investment growth and pressure on the balance of trade and payments.

The country's premier think-tank, however, lauded the government for successful handling of relief operations after floods and Sidr last year, good currency

SEE PAGE 19 COL 4

BRAC BANK HEIST 191 tolas of gold, diamonds recovered, 4 held

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Detectives in separate drives in the city and Munshiganj yesterday arrested four members of the gang that looted Dhanmondi branch of Brac Bank and seized 191 tolas of gold ornaments, diamonds and other valuables from them.

The DB team arrested three of the gang in Munsiganj and recovered 141 tolas of gold ornaments, 13 tolas of silver ornaments, two diamond rings, a diamond piece, a gold made wristwatch and Tk 3 lakh earned from selling gold from their possession.

In a separate raid, DB police picked up another gang member Maher Ali, owner of a shoe shop at Gulistan, from his shop. They later raided his Mirpur house and recovered another 50 tolas of gold ornaments.

They arrestees are Raja, Majnu SEE PAGE 19 COL 8



PHOTO: STAR

Detective Branch of police yesterday show the recovered gold ornaments looted from the vault of BRAC Bank branch at Shukrabad in the city. Three persons held in Munshiganj in connection with the heist are also seen.



PHOTO: STAR

A badly mutilated covered van at a CNG filling station in the capital's Badda area. The gas cylinder of the van exploded yesterday while being refuelled, killing the owner of the vehicle.

26 killed in suicide attack on Pak cops

AFP, Lahore

At least 22 police and four civilians were killed in a suicide bomb attack yesterday outside the high court in the commercial heart of Lahore, Pakistan's second largest city.

The bomber triggered a device packed with ball bearings when police stopped him outside the court, two weeks to the day after the assassination of opposition leader Benazir Bhutto in a gun and suicide bomb attack.

Up to 60 people, many of them police officers, were rushed to hospital after the explosion in the

city's main commercial district, the latest in a wave of suicide attacks that have killed hundreds across Pakistan over the past year.

Dead police officers, dressed in full riot gear with protective vests and helmets, were seen lying side-by-side where they had fallen. A dead horse, still attached to a vendor's cart, lay nearby.

"Twenty-two policemen died in the attack, six are critically wounded," Lahore police chief Malik Iqbal told AFP.

"Around 35 have minor injuries. The suicide bomber approached the police picket and was signalled

to stop," Iqbal said.

Hospital sources said four civilians were also killed in the blast.

The blast ripped through a busy square in front of the Lahore High Court as about 60 riot police gathered ahead of a protest by lawyers against the rule of President Pervez Musharraf.

"It was a very loud blast. I was one of the first who rushed out of the court and I saw a man bleeding from his nose and his mouth. He died minutes later," said lawyer Khurram Latif Khosa.

"I saw about 50 to 60 injured

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1 killed as CNG cylinder explodes in vehicle

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The owner of a covered van was killed yesterday as the gas cylinder of the vehicle exploded during refuelling at a CNG filling station in the capital's Badda area.

The gas cylinder exploded with a bang at about 4:15am while van owner Ilias Khashru, 42, was checking the refilling of the cylinder which he had got installed earlier at a CNG conversion plant in the city's Tikatuli.

He was killed on the spot. The driver of the van, Abdur Rahman, 32, was also injured in the explosion and was admitted to Dhaka Medical College and Hospital.

The explosion badly damaged the boundary walls of the CNG

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Gen Moeen asks traders to shun unfair means for stable rice price

UNB, Dhaka

Army Chief General Moeen U Ahmed yesterday urged the business community not to adopt unfair means and to keep price of rice stable.

"The job of the government is to control the price hike of rice. And our duty is to cooperate with the government in this regard," he said.

He made the remarks after receiving money in cash and relief materials for the Sidr-affected people at Army Officers' Mess at Dhaka Cantonment.

The army chief noted that, after a study, they found out that rice

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Robbers kill man to loot Uttara house

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Robbers strangled an elderly man to death and looted jewellery and cash worth over Tk 8 lakh raiding the Uttara house of film actress Shabnam Parveen in the capital early yesterday.

Father of Shabnam, Syed Shamsul Haque, 60, died during the robbery as the robbers suffocated him, said family members. He came to Dhaka for treatment on Wednesday from his village home in Manikganj.

The dead body was sent to Dhaka Medical College morgue for autopsy.

Shabnam Parveen said at

around 1:30am, a gang of around 15 masked robbers broke the lock of the main door and entered her ground floor flat in her four-storey under-construction building located at Sector 12 of Uttara.

The criminals first entered the building using a ladder and then broke the lock of her residence, she added.

"I heard some noise, but I did not bother, thinking that my father or mother was struggling to close the bathroom door," said Shabnam.

"Moments later, a group of the robbers entered my bedroom and started tying the hands and legs of

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Ex-president of Dhaka Club arrested

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Members of the task forces arrested former Dhaka Club president Selim Bhuiyan at his Gulshan office yesterday afternoon.

Members of the Anti-Corruption Commission task force picked up Selim from his office of International Trade Corporation at the Land Mark building on Gulshan Avenue at 5:30pm. They handed him over to Gulshan police at 9:30pm.

Gulshan police said Selim was arrested in connection with a corruption case.

Sources meanwhile said the immediate past president of Dhaka

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