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REGD. NO. DA 781

VOL. XVIII No. 22

DHAKA TUESDAY FEBRUARY 5, 2008

www.thedailystar.net

MAGH 23, 1414 BS

MUHARRAM 26, 1429 HJRI

20 PAGES PLUS STAR LIFESTYLE PRICE: Tk 10.00

CA says govt committed to polls by Dec

UNB, Dhaka

Chief Adviser (CA) Fakhruddin Ahmed has reaffirmed that his government is committed to holding the general election by December 2008 and "there no doubt about it".

The CA made the remarks when visiting Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary for South and Central Asian Affairs of US State Department Donald Camp met him at his office yesterday.

"We're on the path of holding a free, fair and credible election and we've embarked on institutional reforms," the CA told the senior US envoy.

Reforms of the political parties and revamping institutions will strengthen the foundation of democracy in Bangladesh, Fakhruddin said, adding that election is not the only element of democracy but institutional reform is also important in this regard.

He said the caretaker government is also seeing the economic

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CITY CORPORATION, MUNICIPALITY POLLS EC asks CA to relax or lift emergency

SHAKHAWAT LITON

The Election Commission (EC) yesterday at a meeting with Chief Adviser Fakhruddin Ahmed asked his government to create an environment conducive to holding elections to city corporations and some municipalities in April, either by relaxing or by lifting the state of emergency in respective areas.

The EC also suggested the emergency regime to gradually allow 'indoor politics' all across the country to facilitate electoral reforms including registration of political parties with the commission, which is supposed to be completed in June according to the announced electoral roadmap, sources said.

Being informed about the EC's

plan for holding the due polls to the city corporations in April, the chief adviser assured the commission of all out government cooperation. He told the EC that his government is also considering countrywide withdrawal of 'restrictions on indoor politics', the sources added.

The long meeting also discussed a draft ordinance, which had recently been approved by the cabinet, for freeing the EC Secretariat from the control of Prime Minister's Office.

Contacted by The Daily Star last night, Election Commissioner Brig Gen (ret'd) M Sakhawath Hussain said the EC asked the government to create an environment conducive to holding the city corporation polls according to the plans.

"Now it depends on the govern-

ment whether it will lift or relax the state of emergency to create the environment required for holding the polls," Sakhawath said referring to their discussion with the chief adviser.

Before meeting the chief adviser, Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) ATM Shamsul Huda yesterday afternoon expressed his doubts about the fates of the polls to city corporations amid the state of emergency, which strictly bans all sorts of political activity across the country, other than 'indoor politics' only in the capital.

"How can the elections take place if the state of emergency is not lifted? Contestants will have to be allowed to carry out their election campaigns," Huda told reporters

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Govt to monitor prices of nine consumer items

UNB, Dhaka

The caretaker government will regularly monitor the prices of nine consumer items, including five core food products, to curb price-hike.

Of the items, five core food products are rice, wheat, pulses, edible oil and powdered milk, while the rest four are salt, sugar, potato and onion.

Commerce Adviser Hossain Zillur Rahman said this yesterday after a meeting at the commerce ministry with traders, business leaders, economists and chiefs of different public institutions and organisations like NBR, Bangladesh Bank, Agriculture Extension

Department, Bangladesh Rifles and Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics. FBCCI Administrator and former adviser to a caretaker government Syed Monjur Elahi was present at the briefing.

"We have decided to give special focus on these nine items and

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HASINA EXTORTION CASE

Judge quits court after fairness questioned

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The judge hearing the Tk 2.99 crore extortion case against Awami League (AL) President Sheikh Hasina walked out of the courtroom yesterday as the defence and prosecution rowed over his decision, abruptly ending the day's proceedings.

Temper began to flare as soon as the Metropolitan Sessions Judge's Court allowed the prosecution to reopen plaintiff Azam J Chowdhury's deposition.

At one point, both the sides expressed resentment at Judge Azizul Huq's conduct and went on to say that if things do not improve they would not continue with this court.

Addressing the judge, defence lawyer Qamrul Hasan Khan said,

"You have already closed the deposition."

In reply, Azizul Huq flashed documents containing his signature and reading "to be continued".

Claiming it all had been written later, Qamrul said, "Before an open court last workday you asked us to begin cross examination of the plaintiff."

The judge again showed the records of the previous day's proceedings and maintained that his decision was to allow the deposition to continue.

"You have written it in collaboration with the prosecution," Qamrul told the judge who after a few minutes left the court without saying a word.

As Azizul stepped out, court officials followed him to come back later and say, "The proceedings are

adjourned till tomorrow."

Earlier, the detained AL chief and her cousin and co-accused Sheikh Fazlul Karim were produced before the makeshift courtroom at around 9:45am.

Despite protest from the defence, Chief Public Prosecutor (CPS) ABM Sharfuddin Khan Mukul tried to have Azam's statement on different issues including the reasons for delay in filing the case.

Amid ruckus, Azam resumed his deposition. He said, "Political governments have been in power since the occurrence of extortion. The case could have been influenced then and so I opted to wait for the caretaker government to come."

As the defence continued clamouring, the judge said if the situation continued to be like this he

SEE PAGE 15 COL 1

Seven months too late for announcement of poll date

Says Zillur about CEC's statement

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Awami League (AL) Acting President Zillur Rahman yesterday said the announced electoral roadmap might suffer a setback if the Election Commission (EC) announces the date for holding national elections seven months from now.

"It's not possible to hold the polls by 2008 if the election schedule is announced after seven months," said Zillur referring to CEC Dr ATM Shamsul Huda's statement on Sunday that the EC has to wait for seven more months to announce the election schedule.

He was speaking at a view-exchange meeting with the Jubo Mohila League (JML) leaders at his Gulshan residence.

Expressing disappointment over the CEC's remarks, he said if the date for holding polls is set after seven months, political parties won't have any time to make preparation for the polls.

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PHOTO: SAFIQ ALAM

A crow swoops down and grabs a piece of slaughtered chickens' waste dumped near a cage of live chickens at Karwan Bazar kitchen market in the capital yesterday. This could help spread diseases among fowls.

BIRD FLU 48,000 chickens culled in 24 hrs

STAR REPORT

At least 48,000 poultry infected with the bird flu virus have been culled across the country over 24 hours till yesterday afternoon as reports of more suspected deaths flow in.

The government has stepped up vigilance and opened more control rooms in its efforts to fight further spread of the virus across the country.

At least 26,000 poultry and domestic fowls were culled and 20,000 eggs destroyed at villages

within the one-kilometre radius of sadar upazila in Kushtia on Sunday night, reports our correspondent.

Officials have also begun compiling a list of poultry farms and chicken owners in the one-kilometre radius beyond this area.

District administration decided to cull the birds soon after the flu virus was detected at Kushtia Agro Centre, the biggest poultry farm in the district. At least 7000 fowls died at the farm on Friday night. Tests later confirmed that they died of

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SC stays HC bail order for Dr Towfiq

UNB, Dhaka

The Supreme Court yesterday stayed for a week the operation of the High Court order that granted an ad interim bail to former energy secretary Dr Towfiq-e-Elahi Chowdhury in a power plant graft case on Sunday.

Justice MA Matin of the chamber court passed the order following a government petition, seeking permission to appeal against the High Court order.

Granting the bail to Towfiq on a writ petition, the High Court had issued a rule on the government to explain why placing of the case

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ELECTORAL REFORMS EC to start next round of talks after Feb 12

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The Election Commission (EC) adopted a plan yesterday to hold the second round of electoral reform talks with political parties after February 12, no matter what verdict the High Court (HC) delivers on the nagging BNP issue.

On that day the HC will resume hearing a writ petition filed by a faction of BNP challenging the EC's invitation to M Saifur Rahman-led faction of the party to the first round of talks, which was sched-

uled for November 22 of last year.

The EC could not hold the talk with BNP in over two months due to the legal roadblock which also stalled the commission's plan for embarking on the second round of talks with the parties in last December.

Meanwhile the caretaker government's planned dialogues with the parties are being delayed as its advisers earlier said the interim administration will open its talks with the politicians after the EC's stalling talks with the parties are

wrapped up.

Under the circumstances the EC planned to go ahead with the second round of talks to finalise the electoral reform proposals without waiting for a resolution of the BNP issue, sources in the commission said.

The EC yesterday at a meeting discussed how and when to start the second round of talks and decided to wait till February 12 with hopes that the HC will deliver a decision on the BNP issue on that day.

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ACC focuses on disposal of 150 cases

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) is putting more efforts into disposal of over 150 cases, proceedings of which have been stayed by higher court following writ petitions of the defendants.

The ACC wants to get these cases filed by the commission disposed of, said ACC Chairman Lt Gen (ret'd) Hasan Mashhud Chowdhury while talking to the journalists at the ACC headquarters yesterday.

Replying to a query over the fate of probe report on the Gato corruption case submitted in

SEE PAGE 15 COL 2

Khulna mayor faints in courtroom

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, Khulna

Detained Khulna City Corporation (KCC) mayor Sheikh Tayebur Rahman yesterday fainted in the dock of a Khulna court after feeling pain in chest.

He was whisked off to the Khulna jail hospital by an ambulance.

The KCC mayor was produced before the Khulna District and Sessions Judge's Court in connection with a case filed under the Narcotics Control Act.

He suddenly felt pain in chest and fainted in the dock at about 12:30pm prompting the judge to stop the hearing of a prosecution witness in the case.

His wife Laila Rahman was also present at the court.

Earlier, Tayebur was brought to Khulna from the Dhaka Central Jail at about 10:00pm on Sunday.

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Swiss firm wins 50pc stake in Oriental Bank

It will pay Tk 350.77cr

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Switzerland-based ICB Global Finance Group Holdings AG has won the bidding for purchasing majority shares of the problem-ridden Oriental Bank at Tk 350.77 crore, a senior Bangladesh Bank official said yesterday.

The other bidder Domestic Investment Consortium offered Tk 251 crore for 50.1 percent stake in the private bank.

A five-member committee headed by Bangladesh Bank (BB) deputy governor Murshid Kuli Khan for evaluating the tender proposals opened the financial offers yesterday and found that the Switzerland-based consortium has offered the highest.

"The BB will formally announce the winning bidder's name on February 14 and place the documents before the higher authority," Khan told reporters at the central bank yesterday.

If the proposal of ICB Global Finance Group Holdings-AG is okayed, the BB would sign a sale and purchase agreement with the would-be purchaser on February 28, officials said.

Individuals and the government own the remaining 49.9 percent shares of Oriental Bank.

The BB in an advertisement on August 2 last year invited expressions of interest (EOI) for selling the problem-ridden bank to which six bidders responded. Of those, the above two submitted technical and

financial proposals.

The central bank took over the administration of Oriental Bank on June 19, 2006 following mismanagement and rampant corruption by some of the bank's directors.

The Switzerland-based ICB Financial Group Holdings AG operates in 10 countries worldwide.

From the initial issuance of a licence to operate a bank in Hungary in 1994, the ICB Banking Group within the last 12 years has established or acquired commercial banks in Eastern Europe, Africa and Asia.

The Group made its foray into Asia in 2003 by acquiring an indirect stake of 11.3 percent in Bank

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