

## EC restarts talks with parties Feb 24

BNP excluded for leadership dispute; 15 parties to join dialogue

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The Election Commission (EC) kicks off the second round electoral reforms talks with political parties on February 24.

The commission yesterday said it will separately sit with three parties each day to complete the talks in five days. These parties had attended the first round of the talks during September-November last year.

However, the EC has excluded the BNP from its talks schedule as it could not yet hold the first round talks with the party because of disputes over the party leadership.

The second round talks will clear the passage for the caretaker government to initiate steps next

month to hold a national dialogue with the political parties to ensure holding of a credible parliamentary election.

The EC Secretariat will send the invitations to 15 political parties next Saturday and Sunday along with the summary reports of the first round of talks.

On the BNP issue, Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) ATM Shamsul Huda yesterday said, "We have waited four months for the internal disputes of the BNP to be resolved. We have also requested the party leaders to resolve the disputes."

The EC is ready to sit with the BNP at any time after the court resolves the issue, Huda told reporters at the EC Secretariat.

### DIALOGUE SCHEDULE

Feb 24	BDB, LDP, Samyabadi Dal
Feb 25	WPB, CPB, AL
Feb 26	JP (Ershad) JSD (Inu), NAP
Feb 27	JIB, JSD (Rab), JP (Manju)
Feb 28	Ganotantri Party, KSLJ, IOJ

In November last year, the EC invited the BNP led by M Saifur Rahman to the electoral reforms talks on November 22. But the BNP faction led by Chairperson Khaleda Zia challenged the EC decision in the High Court (HC). The matter is still pending with the court.

"We cannot wait anymore for

the BNP to resolve its disputes," the CEC said, adding that they hope the disputes would be resolved soon.

**TALKS SCHEDULES**

The EC will sit with Bikalpadhara Bangladesh, Liberal Democratic Party and Samyabadi Dal on February 24 at 10:00am, 12:00 noon and 2:30pm.

The talks with Workers Party of Bangladesh, Communist Party of Bangladesh and the Awami League are scheduled for February 25.

On February 26, the EC will sit with the Jatiya Party (JP) led by HM Ershad, Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal (JSD-Inu) and National Awami Party.

Talks with Jamaat-e-Islami

## Hannan Shah out of jail again

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Adviser to BNP chairperson Brig Gen (ret) Hannan Shah was released on bail yesterday after he spent a night in Joydebpur Police Station in Gazipur in connection with an extortion case.

Hannan was arrested Wednesday night at his Mohakhali DOHS home in the capital just 24 hours after he was released from Narayanjan jail on a three-month interim bail which the High Court gave.

A Gazipur court released Hannan, BNP leader vocal in his support for party chairperson Khaleda Zia, on bail after police produced him before it in connection with the extortion case filed by Morshed Mollah, a union parishad member, with Kapasia Police Station.

Morshed in the case alleged that Hannan demanded Tk 3 lakh from him on March 3, 2006 in exchange for a work order of a cross dam building project.

## Relaxing emergency a must for polls

Law adviser says this is needed for pre-election activities of parties

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Land ministry.

In cases of local government elections, relaxing of state of emergency may take place area-wise on the basis of electoral schedules, Hassan Ariff said.

Although he had underscored the need for relaxing the state of emergency on different occasions, when asked about completely lifting it, the law adviser said, "It's quite a different decision which I cannot give alone."

When state of emergency is in force, some fundamental rights remain suspended temporarily and the caretaker government is considering relaxing it gradually, he said.

"But to hold elections, the rules which block activities relating to

elections must be modified."

Hassan Ariff also would not give any specific timeframe for relaxing or lifting of the state of emergency "as it needs a consensus decision of the government."

On whether the government is not lifting the state of emergency fearing public wrath, the adviser replied, "I cannot say that."

On another inquiry, Hassan Ariff said he does not have "any idea or any information" that prices of essentials are increasing as state of emergency has been in effect for a long time.

Responding to a query about holding election on schedule, he said there is no provision in the constitution that says the

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## CITY POLLS Draft voter list to be published on Feb 18

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The Election Commission (EC) will publish a draft voter list for four city corporations and seven municipalities on February 18 and finalise it next month aiming to hold polls to those local government bodies in April.

According to its decisions

## Offshore exploration bidding opened

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Petrobranga yesterday announced the 2008 offshore oil and gas exploration bidding round inviting offers from international companies by May 7.

The bidding will offer eight shallow water blocks and 20 deep sea blocks - each having an exploration area between 3,000 and 7,000 square kilometres. The bidding is the first of its kind for the country where the focus is kept exclusively on the Bay of Bengal.

India has been exploring the Bay heavily in recent years and has discovered 100 trillion cubic feet (tcf) of gas and two billion barrels of oil.

Even Myanmar last year discovered 7 tcf of gas in an offshore area which may be overlapping with Bangladesh's maritime boundary.

Petrobranga has been making preparation for this block round since 2006.

In a press release yesterday, Petrobranga announced some important features of the contract under the bid. These include full

reparation of profit, no signature bonus or royalty, and no duty for equipment and machinery imported for petroleum operations during exploration, production and development phases.

As per the contract, the contractor will give a carried stake of 10 percent to the government only for shallow offshore blocks, and will enjoy the provision for assignment, 100 percent cost recovery, maximum 55 percent cost recovery per calendar year.

The contractor will also oblige to a mandatory seismic programme and one well for each block exclusive of biddable work programme.

The contract will have provisions for a discount on gas sale, discovery and production bonuses and annual contract service fee.

The contractor will also be allowed to go for local marketing of gas only if the government refuses to buy it first.

Petrobranga also declared the evaluation features. The bidder will have the authority to operate in at

## 24-acre Pallabi land recovered in drive against illegal structures

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

National Housing Authority (NHA) yesterday started bulldozing illegal structures on 24 acres of land at a Wakf Estate in Doaripara in Pallabi, leaving over 5,000 families homeless.

The NHA officials with 500 workers led by three magistrates started demolition of two and three-storey buildings, tin-shed concrete houses and other structures at 10:00am with eight bulldozers. About 550 policemen were on hand to ward off any unwarranted situation.

Many of the house owners were confused to remove their household goods in what they said was a less-than-24-hour notice. Many of them burst into tears seeing helplessly the bulldozers knocking down their houses.

"Where will I go now with my wife and children?" Manik Mian cried out in tremendous frustration. He said it would be tough for



## Link with second undersea cable soon

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Chief Adviser Fakhrudin Ahmed yesterday said the government has taken steps to get connected with a second submarine cable soon to overcome some weaknesses that have limited the adoption of ICT in all sectors.

"Despite some successes during the last few years in this sector, including formulation of National Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Policy -2002, adoption of ICT in all sectors have so far been limited," Fakhrudin said.

He was inaugurating the

SOFTEXPO 2008 at Bangladesh-China Friendship Conference Centre in the capital, organised by Bangladesh Association of Software and Information Services (BASIS).

The CA said the government has identified some of the key reasons behind the limited adoption of ICT. These include lack of awareness of what ICT could offer, insufficient telecommunications infrastructure and Internet connectivity, expensive Internet access, absence of adequate legal and regulatory frameworks and shortage of requisite manpower.

## Property of ex-DAB leader Zahid to be attached

COURT CORRESPONDENT

A Dhaka court yesterday ordered the attachment of properties of AZM Zahid Hossain, former leader of Doctors' Association of Bangladesh (DAB), his wife Rifat Hossain and advocate Mujahidul Islam in a case filed in connection with concealing information in their wealth statements.

Meanwhile, Anti-corruption Commission (ACC) pressed charges against former minister and BNP leader Shahjahan Siraj, his wife Rabeya Siraj, former Awami League (AL) lawmaker Alhaj

## Import of rice below \$510 price stopped

STAR REPORT

Import of rice from India through Benapole land port was hampered yesterday as the Indian customs authorities suddenly imposed restriction on the export of rice that is priced below \$510 a tonne.

A correspondent from Benapole quoted importers as saying that they had imported 6,500 tonnes of rice at \$ 505 per tonne on Wednesday, but yesterday, Deputy Commissioner Anwar Hossain of the Indian customs authority at

Petrapole land port enforced restriction on the export of rice that was priced the same.

However, after engaging in arguments with the Indian customs authorities, Indian traders convinced the Indian customs officials to allow export of 1,000 tonnes of rice at \$ 505 a tonne. At least 50 trucks loaded with rice were sent back after failing to gain customs approval.

The Indian customs authorities also harassed the exporters by

## Maya jailed for 13yrs for amassing ill-gotten wealth

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

A special court yesterday sentenced former state minister for shipping Mofazzal Hossain Chowdhury Maya to 13 years imprisonment for amassing wealth illegally and concealing wealth information.

Judge Ashraf Hossain of the Special Court-5 sentenced the accused in absentia in a courtroom set up at the MP Hostel in the Jatiya Sangsad Bhaban Complex.

The court also fined the Awami League (AL) leader Tk 5 crore and ordered confiscation of about Tk 6 crore of his ill-gotten wealth.



Maya would have to serve an additional year in jail if he fails to pay the fine.

The court acquitted Maya's wife Parvin Chowdhury, their sons Sajedul Hossain Chowdhury Dipu and Rasheedul Hossain Chowdhury and Dipu's wife Subarna Chowdhury as charges brought against them of abetting Maya to acquire wealth through dishonest means were not proved.

The AL leader was sentenced to 10 years rigorous imprisonment for amassing wealth illegally and to three years simple imprisonment for concealing information in his



The picture on the left shows a building at Panam Nagar near Sonargaon in Narayanjan before it was restored by the Department of Archaeology. Following the restoration and the paint job, right, much of the building's motifs have become obscure. A number of buildings at the archaeological site suffered the same fate.

## SUBSIDY IN FUEL IMPORT \$900m sought for cash-strapped BPC

REJAUL KARIM BYRON

The Energy Division has requested the finance ministry to arrange a loan of \$900 million for Bangladesh Petroleum Corporation (BPC) as it is going through huge financial losses due to under-pricing of imported petroleum products.

The loan request came following the corporation's failed effort to get \$500 million from Bangladesh Bank (BB). The central bank refused to provide the amount, saying the BPC has already got \$300 million loans in the current fiscal year and any new loan would create a pressure on the foreign exchange reserve.

Sources said BPC, the govern-

ment-owned monopoly in importing petroleum products, incurred a loss of Tk 3,000 crore in July-December period of the current fiscal year.

"We are now putting emphasis on using foreign currency for food and fertilizer imports," said a BB official. "If we provide such huge loans to the BPC, it may create a crisis of foreign currency in the market," he added.

Energy and Mineral Resources Secretary Mohammad Mohsin told The Daily Star that the BPC's estimated loss in the current fiscal year will be about Tk 6,000 crore because the government has not adjusted the prices of petroleum

## 4 traders held with 12lbs cobra poison

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Pabna

The Rapid Action Battalion (Rab) has arrested four traders with around 12 pounds of cobra snake poison, worth at least a few crore taka, from Tiarpura village in Bonwarinagar Union under Faridpur upazila yesterday.

Rab suspects that the arrested may have links with international smuggling rings, which smuggle the poison through Bangladesh to India and other neighbouring countries.

On receiving intelligence that the traders were trying to sell the rare cobra snake poison in the village, Rab formed an operation, team from members of its Pabna and Kushtia camps.

A few members of the team then