

Govt readies agenda

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Communications Adviser Maj Gen (ret'd) Ghulam Quader told reporters after a preparatory meeting with LGRD Adviser Anwarul Iqbal and Commerce Adviser Hossain Zillur Rahman at the housing and public works ministry.

Zillur said they would first talk to major political parties to finalise the strategies and then with the small parties gradually. "We are trying different ways to create a ground to make the dialogue a success," he said.

Meanwhile, in a latest development last night, the AL decided not to hold any further talks—official or unofficial—with the government unless it receives any formal letter. The decision came at a meeting of the party's Presidium meeting at acting President Zillur Rahman's Gulshan residence with him in the chair.

Meeting sources told The Daily Star that the decision was taken following Monday's informal meeting between five advisers and four AL leaders without the party's knowledge of it. As senior leaders came heavily on Zillur for Monday's meeting, he apologised and assured them that no such meeting will be held further, the sources added.

The meeting attended by Syeda Sajeda Chowdhury, Amir Hossain Amu, Abdur Razzak, Tofail Ahmed, Suranjit Sengupta, Motia Chowdhury and Syed Ashraf Hossain was called following a phone call from the commerce adviser to party Presidium member Tofail for a second round "unofficial" pre-dialogue talk at state guesthouse Padma.

Both Tofail and Motia who attended Monday's meeting clarified their position and told the presidium that they were not informed about the unofficial talks before reaching the venue.

Briefing reporters after the two-hour meeting, acting General Secretary Syed Ashraf Islam said he conveyed the meeting decision to the education adviser.

"We will join the dialogue after receiving a formal letter and taking decision at the party forum," he said. About Monday's meeting, however, he said informal meetings could be held before the formal dialogue.

Asked about the date of the formal dialogue, Adviser Ghulam Quader said the date is yet to be decided. Adviser Anwarul Iqbal said, "The chief adviser will announce the date."

They said the informal talks with political parties will continue until fixing the schedule for formal dialogue.

"This kind of [preparatory] dialogue is very crucial for a successful dialogue to ensure a free and fair election. For this, we are meeting frequently," the commerce adviser said, adding that at yesterday's meeting they discussed different preparatory aspects of the dialogue.

TALKS WITH JP
Foreign Adviser Iftakhar A Chowdhury, Communications Adviser Ghulam Quader, Education Adviser Hossain Zillur Rahman and LGRD Adviser Anwarul Iqbal sat with JP acting Chairman Anisul Islam Mahmud, Secretary General Ruhul Amin Hawlader, and presidium members GM Quader and Ziauddin Ahmed Bablu.

After the one-and-a-half-hour meeting, Anisul Islam told reporters that issues including how to hold a free and fair election, elect honest and competent candidates and govern the country efficiently after the election came up for discussion.

Supporting the government idea on holding local government polls before the parliamentary election, they urged the government to take effective measures so that the pre-1/11 situation does not arise again.

Meeting sources said the JP leaders asked the advisers about the government position on lifting the state of emergency. The advisers told them that they would try for it but it is not possible to lift the state of emergency, it would be relaxed.

Meanwhile, JP Chairman HM Ershad yesterday called upon all political parties to sit together to reach a consensus on national issues.

Addressing a meeting at a city hotel, he urged them to sign the "citizens' charter" about what they would and would not do after the national election to prevent activities like hartal, street violence and boycotting parliament, among others.

JP's youth front Jatiyo Jubo Sanghati organised the meeting marking its 25th founding anniversary.

BNP FACTIONS ON DIALOGUE
BNP faction loyal to detained party Chairperson Khaleda Zia yesterday said they would not sit in the dialogue with the government without her consent while the faction led by M Saifur Rahman said they would attend the dialogue without Khaleda's permission since she is in jail.

BNP Secretary General Khandaker Delwar Hossain yesterday sought permission from jail authorities to meet Khaleda to discuss the government proposal for the dialogue.

Party's acting office secretary Ruhul Kabir Rizvi handed over Delwar's letter to the superintendent of the special jail on the Jatiya Sangsad Bhaban premises yesterday. DIG (Prisons) Maj Shamsul Haider Siddiqui told The Daily Star that they would take necessary steps after reading the content of the letter.

"We cannot join any kind of talks without the consent of the party chairperson," Delwar said at a press briefing at his Namflat.

He said BNP will not hold any formal or informal talks with the government if he is not allowed to talk to Khaleda, which, he said,

would make the talks fruitful.

Demanding parliamentary elections be held before December this year, he asked the government to lift the state of emergency and release Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina.

People will not accept any "doctored" election in the country, he said, asking the caretaker government to hold a free, fair and acceptable election "without dillydallying" and hand over power to an elected government "as people do not want to see a non-elected government any more".

Delwar accused the Election Commission (EC) of cheating and violating the constitution.

"It is not their [EC] task to hold the local government elections. The Election Commission wants [to hold the local government elections first] to delay the parliamentary election," he said.

He held the government responsible for "creating" split in the BNP. He said he would announce the next course of action of the party after consultation with party leaders.

Blasting the government for the ongoing food crisis, Delwar said the Monga-struck areas should be declared as "disaster prone" and emergency food relief should be arranged for these areas. He also demanded launching of rationing system for people.

At another press briefing at his Banani residence yesterday Maj (ret'd) Hafiz Uddin Ahmed, acting secretary general of the pro-Saifur faction of BNP, said they would join the dialogue without the permission of party Chairperson Khaleda Zia as she is in jail.

He, however, said if there is any instruction from the party chairperson, they will abide by that as they want to go to the dialogue as a united BNP.

Sources, meanwhile, said everything will be decided following today's verdict of the writ petition filed by Khandaker Delwar against the EC decision of inviting Hafiz to the electoral dialogue.

About an adviser's proposal to sit for a pre-dialogue meet, Hafiz said they are discussing the matter and will inform the adviser of their decision soon.

Hafiz said they will ask the government to announce the election date and suggest strengthening the food security and reducing prices of essentials.

Magistrate, cops

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and the two policemen hostage", said Sayed Nurul Islam, assistant commissioner, (AC), of Lalbagh-Kotwali Zone.

"On information, we rushed to the spot with additional force and rescued them", he said adding that Babul's supporters also pelted bricks at the law enforcers and hit SI Harun with a sharp weapon which police later seized from the commissioner's office.

Ward Commissioner Babul, however, said the attack was carried out by the evicted and their local sympathisers as the city corporation launched the drive without serving any notice beforehand.

He claimed that he bought the three-katha land and rented the shops on it.

Police arrested seven people in connection with the attack. Babul's brother Azizul Islam Mitlu, Mohammad Hannan, Shaheen Alam, Saleh Ahmed, Abdul Khaleque, Shahidul Islam and Mohammad Hanif.

Overloading

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accidents. It was given seven days' time.

The DG said they have filed a case with the marine court against persons found to have neglected their duties, and have also started departmental case as per rules.

On the basis of the probe body's recommendations, the BIWTA has launched a drive with 22 officials taking action against unfit and unsurveyed river transports operating in different routes. The drive also seeks to involve district administration and police administration in inspecting launches and vessels on a regular basis.

A mobile court also started operation on Tuesday at Sadarghat in the capital to take action against illegally operating marine vessels and violators of river traffic rules, he mentioned.

Moreover, a process is on to form a permanent marine investigation cell to check accidents in waterways and to form a strong marine police force to strictly enforce river traffic rules inside the 112 km waterways around the capital.

Shafiqullah said they have also taken some steps to reduce launch accidents. The steps include keeping the design of every launch and vessel inside it to enable an inspector to identify its fault, if any, and inscribing registration number on the body of every launch or vessel so that the same number cannot be used by others.

The ladders of all launches and vessels have been cut down to prevent people from climbing on their roofs, he said. And masters of passengers launches have been asked to complete training course to increase their skill.

According to regular survey of the DOS, about 4,300 launches ply the river routes. These include 2,100 passenger launches and about 200 big vessels while the rest are cargo carrying transports, the DG said.

Diesel subsidy

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litre of diesel due to the price hike of petroleum products, they add.

"There are additional demands from various ministries for subsidies of Tk 16,000 crore," a finance ministry official told The Daily Star. This is the reason why the finance ministry cut the subsidy in irrigation, he noted.

The Department of Agriculture (DAE) through a survey has identified farmers who cultivated Boro on highest 2.5 acres of land and sent to the agriculture ministry on Tuesday a list of farmers eligible for the subsidy.

DAE conducted the survey during January and March on the basis of a policy of the government on subsidy for irrigation. Distribution of cash subsidy will begin from April 20 and end by May 15, agriculture ministry officials say.

The farmers who have cultivated Boro with irrigation by diesel-run water pumps on the highest 2.5 acres land -- either of their own or leased -- will get the subsidy.

A seven-member union-level committee comprising Union Parishad chairman, member, a government-nominated woman member, a farmer, an NGO representative and a block supervisor will manage the subsidy distribution.

The district and upazila-level committees formed to oversee the distribution will include a member from the joint forces, sources say.

According to an agriculture ministry calculation, about 11.55 lakh diesel-run pumps -- 87 percent of the total number -- are in operation during this year's Boro cultivation. On the other hand, 80 crore litres of diesel worth Tk 3,200 crore is supposed to be used to run these pumps.

Farmers cultivate Boro on 49.35 lakh hectares of land this year, which was 43.75 lakh hectares last year. Of this, hybrid Boro was cultivated on 10.5 lakh hectares of land, according to the agriculture ministry record.

The government projects 1.75 lakh tonnes of Boro production this season, but many are hopeful the production will exceed the target.

Workers camp

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we were treated badly and some of us were beaten by the company's officials... That's when we decided to run away to our consulate," Arab News quoted him as saying.

The workers said they have not been provided the legally mandated minimum of 21 days of paid time off each year.

"Both my parents died last year in Bangladesh but my employer did not give me money or time off to attend their funeral," said another worker, Alauddin.

"We have been working for free for the last 16 months and the company has not even provided us with food. We had to live by borrowing money from our fellow nationals."

Ali Islam said the workers are asking for their unpaid wages as well as their end-of-service payments and tickets for return home. "Our salary was SR400 a month," he said. "Is that really too much for them to pay?"

EC's letter to BNP

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who is loyal to the party's reformist faction, to its electoral reform talks as the BNP representative.

Later, the EC cancelled the letter it had issued on October 5.

Lawyer Nasiruddin Asim had filed the petition on November 12 on behalf of detained BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia.

Besides staying the operation of EC letter, the HC on March 18 issued a rule asking the EC, BNP acting secretary general and six members of the party's standing committee, and the chief adviser to the caretaker government to explain why the EC invitation letter would not be declared illegal.

Lawyers for the petitioner had argued that according to the BNP constitution only the chairperson can convene a meeting of the standing committee, but that was not the case on October 29 when the BNP standing committee declared M Saifur Rahman and Maj (ret'd) Hafiz as acting chairperson and acting secretary general of the party.

They also pointed out that while the standing committee meeting needs a quorum of eight members only six were present at that meeting.

Khaleda had already appointed Khandaker Delwar Hossain the secretary general of the party after expelling Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan, exercising the power bestowed on her by the BNP constitution.

The petitioner's counsels argued that there is no scope for appointing an acting secretary general when a secretary general is already there.

The court issued the rule on Hafiz, ordering the defence to make him a party in the petition.

Meanwhile, BNP acting Office Secretary Rizvi Ahmed said they have received justice.

"We have stepped onto the first stage of victory through the High Court decision and we are confident we will also be victorious in releasing our leader Khaleda Zia," he told The Daily Star last night.

Standing committee member and pro-reforms leader Lt Gen (ret'd) Mahbubur Rahman, however, said they are ready for the dialogue and hope the EC will be able to sustain its decision through legal measures.

"We still represent the mainstream BNP and there is nothing to be upset," he told The Daily Star.

Bangladesh, British

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the comments during a news conference at the British high commission wrapping up her three day visit.

"Yes there are linkages between terrorism in Britain and Bangladesh," she said when asked if there is any link between terror groups in the two countries, but refused to divulge specific name of any militant group in either country.

"Linkages are highly likely because of the nature of international terrorism... terrorists travel widely, use dual nationalities," said Smith, adding, the countries have a shared interest in helping each other tackle terrorism in both short and long terms.

When asked if her government feels that Harkat-ul Jihad al-Islami, Bangladesh (Huji-B) is a threat to Britain, she answered, "Yes."

Asked if the UK is wary of any link between Al-Qaeda and Bangladeshi militant groups, she did not dismiss the notion, and said the global terror network does have the ability to work in a wide range of countries.

Smith said the vast majority of Britons, Bangladeshis, and British-Bangladeshi 'abhor' terrorism and are united to 'protect shared values of peace and freedom'.

The counter-terrorism joint working group will be comprised of personnel from both government's ministries on security, foreign affairs, intelligence and police.

Earlier in the day, after her meeting with Home Adviser MA Matin, Smith said a strong and stable democracy cannot be built without defeating terrorism, while Matin said the two sides discussed cooperation, especially potential British training of Bangladeshi counter-terrorism teams, to prevent terrorist attacks on the country's aviation industry.

Currently, Britain provides counter-terror training, and finances and organises counter-terror research by local think tanks, while having undisclosed counter-terrorism defence ties with Bangladesh.

AL, allies want

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Haq Inu echoed Razzak.

Razzak said they will also give one-third representation to women in their party's important bodies as per the policy and for this, they have been encouraging women to come forward and lead the nation.

Samajik Protirodh Committee organised the meeting with the political parties at the Cirdap auditorium in the capital where representatives of 42 women and human rights organisations took part.

Inu said that they would raise the issue of women development policy in their upcoming dialogue with the caretaker government.

"We will definitely talk about the trial of war criminals and women development policy in the dialogue with the caretaker government," he said addressing the meeting.

Pankaj Bhattacharya of Gono Forum said the movement demanding implementation of the women development policy would have to be extended across the country.

The spirit of liberation war will be suppressed if the policy is not implemented, he added.

Shah Alam of Communist Party Bangladesh (CPB) said that social freedom cannot be possible without the freedom of women.

At the meeting, the women leaders urged the caretaker government to cancel the review committee formed recently following the anti-women development policy demonstrations by a fanatic section backed by Jamaat-e-Islami.

Shaheen Anam of Manusher Jonno Foundation said the women development policy will have to be passed in parliament and for this the women leaders will press on.

Bangladesh Mohila Parishad President Ayesha Khanam moderated the meeting.

Aminul Haque

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lawmaker Joyal Abedin alias VP Joyal was granted ad-interim bail in a case filed against him for selling his duty-free car in violation of the rules.

ACC Assistant Director Syed Ahmed, also the investigation officer (IO) of the case, submitted the charge sheet to the Chief Metropolitan Magistrate's Court, showing 12 people as prosecution witnesses.

The IO prayed for issuing arrest warrant against Aminul Haque and the order to attach his properties, as he has been absconding since filing of the case.

The ACC filed the case with Ramna Model Police Station against Aminul Haque on December 5 last year for amassing wealth illegally and giving false information in his wealth statement submitted to the commission.

The commission in its primary investigation found that Aminul amassed wealth worth Tk 76.75 lakh beyond his known sources of income.

In the first information report (FIR), the complainant said that Aminul in his wealth statement concealed information about his assets worth Tk 76.75 lakh.

During her meeting with the chief adviser earlier in the day, Fakhruddin told Smith that the emergency power rules will be gradually lifted before the planned local government elections next month, reported UNB.

He also told her that informal talks with political parties had already started to move ahead with the election roadmap.

At the news conference Smith told reporters that she received 'strong assurances' from the chief adviser, the army chief, and the home adviser that institutional reforms and voter registration, among other preparations, are on track for the general election to be held by December.

Smith said she thinks, along with the international community, that holding free, fair, credible elections is a very important prerequisite for Bangladesh's international role.

She said Britain has always been more comfortable working with democratic governments.

The British home secretary said fair trials must be ensured for detained political leaders, maintaining the highest of standards and without fear or favour, adding that protection of human rights is an imperative for all law enforcement and security agencies.

Smith also said 54 cases of British nationals having been brought to Bangladesh under 'forced marriages' were reported to the high commission. The UK secretary had also attended an event on 'forced marriage' and ways to tackle the problem.

She earlier laid the foundation stone for a new model police station in Habiganj and met British-Bangladeshi in Sylhet yesterday.

Smith's visit has been the third high level trip by a British minister within the last four months, following visits by International Development Secretary Douglas Alexander in December and by Foreign Secretary David Miliband in February.

Unrest in DEPZ

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facilities and poor standard of meal.

At least 50 people including 15 police personnel were injured when the workers locked in a two-hour-long clash with police.

Meanwhile, the police and the authorities of the garment factory filed two separate cases accusing around 2,000 workers of the factory, Moreover, Bangladesh Export Processing Zones Authority (Bepza) formed a three-member committee to probe the incident.

Arif Mohammad Khalid, general manager (GM) of Experience Clothing Company Ltd, filed a case yesterday morning, accusing around 1,500 to 2,000 workers, said Ashulia police.

The factory GM in the case statement alleged that the rowdy workers during their rampage in the factory ransacked furniture and machineries worth around Tk 2 crore, added the police.

The Ashulia police on the other hand, filed a separate case on Tuesday night, accusing about 50 workers for attacking the police and obstructing police duties.

SM Abdur Rashid, GM of Bepza, told The Daily Star, "A three-member committee headed by Industrial Relations Manager Ahsan Kabir has been formed to probe the incident and the committee is asked to submit its report within seven days."

Responding to a query, he said the workers' demonstrations and rampaging were triggered by alleged deterioration in the quality of their lunch provided by the authorities.

Ashulia police said they arrested two more persons -- Kulsum, a worker and Mahub, an outsider -- in connection with the violence.

Hungry

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lives in a rented makeshift house near the Bogra Rail Station.

Hasina barely makes Tk 40 to 50 Taka in a day, selling the scrap papers.

"This money is not enough compared to the need of my four-member family. We need at least one and a half kg of rice everyday, but with this money I cannot buy more than a kg from the OMS outlet," Hasina told The Daily Star.

She says she dreads the onset of evenings now when her baby starts crying of hunger and she cannot breastfeed him, because she never gets to eat enough herself to produce any milk for the baby.

"I yearn to give my baby at least a piece of biscuit to suck on, but where is the money when I don't even earn enough to buy some rice to keep the rest of us alive," she sighs.

After living on bare minimums for the last couple of days, she went to a neighbour yesterday to borrow at least Tk 100 money to buy rice, but he had turned her down.

Dejected, she rushed to look for scrap paper on the roads. It was already 1:30 in the afternoon when this correspondent met her and she said she had no idea how much paper she would be able to find by sunset to sell.

The story remains the same everywhere.

The poor, ultra poor or even others from fixed-income brackets all have a commonality today. They are either forced to borrow money from the lenders to be able to afford average meal or pass days half hungry because the prices of essentials continue to rise.

Abdul Latif Sarker, an employee at a driving institute of Bangladesh Road Transport Corporation in Rajshahi and his schoolteacher wife Kohinor Begum earn Tk 16,000 a month between them but even this is not enough to manage their family of five.

"Not a single month goes by without me owing some amount or the other to local grocery shop. I have been borrowing money almost every month for the last few months to make ends meet," Latif said as he worries over how he will manage with the continuing price hike.

He has no idea how he will pay off his debts, Latif said.

Forty-year-old Robin, a locksmith, owns a makeshift shop in Bogra thana. He makes barely Tk 150 a day whereas he needs at least Tk 200 to feed his family of five.

He has not managed meat even for a single meal in the last one and half months, he said.

Though he is looking for the bare minimum for an average meal -- rice, potatoes, some vegetables and a little oil to cook them in, he is unable to buy.

"I did not need to borrow a single penny three months back. Now I have been borrowing regularly for just food for the last three months," he said.

Train services

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hours a day, railway officials and traffic police said.

Nearly 5 minutes are lost when a train passes a level crossing, they added.

Commuter trains are regional trains that shuttle between central business districts and commuter belts. Dhaka has a number of commuter trains operating within short distance such as to Tongi and Gazipur as well as inter-district trains such as Dhaka to Dewanganj and Dhaka to Brahmanbaria, that carry a large number of people daily.

"The step will help a lot in reducing traffic congestion in the city," Dhaka Metropolitan Police (DMP) Commissioner Naim Ahmed said.

Traffic gridlocks are caused due to stopovers at different level crossings during the office opening and closing hours and its impact remains throughout the day, he observed.

However, director general of Bangladesh Railway Bayelaty Hossain believes that the new plan will not see a significant improvement in the capital's traffic jam.

The DMP commissioner said that the trains scheduled to leave and enter the capital during the two hours, would be readjusted to less rush hours.

Five children

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village to attend an invitation and left the children alone in the lonely hut by the sea.

Rozina, Akkor and Asgar were studying under the light from the lamp while the two younger children, Nizam and Karim, were sleeping when the fire broke out.

The children were trapped inside the house as the fire spread and unable to escape. By the time the nearest neighbours noticed the fire and rushed to help, it was too late to save them.

Officer-in-Charge of Anwara Police Station, Mohammad Abdul Kader, said the whole village was in shock over what happened.

Chittagong Deputy Commissioner (DC) Ashraf Shamim, Superintendent of Police (SP) Mohammad Kamrul Ahsan and Patiya Circle ASP Tofael Ahmed and local Union Parishad Officer (UNO) Propid Das visited the spot yesterday.

The DC said his office would provide one tonne of rice and Tk 10 thousand in cash to the bereaved parents, while the UNO gave them Tk 5000 in cash.

An Unnatural Death (UD) case was filed with the police in this connection.

Violence rocks Nepal

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signed up for peace, they have been reports of intimidation by Maoist loyalists, many of whom have failed to adapt to civil life after years spent ambushing and bombing their way to the capital.

This has left the UN trying to reassure the Nepalese people, for whom democracy has been an all too rare event given the years of turbulence on the roof of the world, that the ballot will be secure.

The polls will be the most watched in Nepal's history -- with hundreds of international observers in the country. Security has also been stepped up, with precautions in place, including a ban on alcohol sales.

Nepal's main parties, the centrist Nepali Congress and the centre-left Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist-Leninist), are expected to grab most seats.

Analysts say the big question is whether the poll outcome gives the Maoists -- still listed by the United States as a foreign "terrorist" organisation -- enough political clout to motivate them to stay within the democratic system.

N Korea

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grants North Korea -- which tested an atomic weapon in 2006 -- energy aid and major diplomatic and security benefits in return for full denuclearisation.

The current phase required it to disable its main plutonium-producing plants and declare all nuclear activities by the end of last year.

The North says it submitted the declaration last November. The