

5 BNP standing body

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however not the duty of the EC to reunite two factions of a party.

Reporters got hold of Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) ATM Shamsul Huda last afternoon as he was leaving the EC Secretariat premises and asked him about the EC's next course of actions regarding the issue, but the chief declined to comment.

Talking to reporters on Friday and Saturday over the phone, the other two election commissioners --- Muhammed Sohul Hussain and Brig Gen (ret'd) M Sakawat Hussain --- however said the EC would take a decision in a couple of days.

The commission on Thursday held separate meetings with the two rival factions of BNP and asked them to reconcile within the next 24 hours to participate in the electoral reform dialogues unitedly.

But yesterday as the deadline was coming to an end, pro-Khaleida faction leaders sat in a meeting of an hour and a half with the EC claiming that they are the mainstream of the party.

In the letter the five standing committee members said without even engaging in a debate over the legitimacy of the much disputed October 29, 2007 meeting of the BNP standing committee, the EC is being informed that even four of the six members of the committee who had been present in that meeting, later through affidavits told a court that the meeting had not been of the standing committee.

"So, the Election Commission has no scope for considering the decisions taken in that so-called standing committee meeting," continued the letter signed by Dr RA Gani, Khandaker Mahbubuddin Ahmed, Chowdhury Tanvir Ahmed Siddiqui Shamsul Islam and Abdul Matin Chowdhury.

The October 29 meeting, ostensibly of the BNP standing committee, appointed M Saifur Rahman and Hafizuddin Ahmed as acting chairman and acting secretary general of BNP respectively giving rise to the current factional feud in the party that in turn is wreaking havoc in EC's electoral reform dialogue schedule.

The EC however considered the October 29 meeting's decisions as valid and sent an invitation to Hafiz of pro-Saifur faction on November 5 asking them to participate in the dialogue, ignoring the objections of BNP chairperson appointed

Secretary General Delwar, who is also a standing committee member.

"We hope, the election commission being a constitutional body will not engage in a fresh debate and it will communicate with Khandaker Delwar Hossain, who is the secretary general according to BNP's constitution, regarding polls and party related issues," the letter to the EC signed on April 17 said.

"Otherwise, responsibilities of ill efforts to make BNP look divided will squarely fall on the shoulders of the Election Commission," it went on.

Emerging from the meeting with the EC, Khaleida loyalist Nazrul Islam Khan, who led the four-member delegation, said the commission assured them of considering their demands.

"The Election Commission however requested us to be united, and we asked them to follow BNP's constitution in taking any decision regarding the party until that unity," Nazrul told reporters.

When his attention was drawn to a report published in a newspaper quoting two election commissioners that Saifur-led faction will be invited to the dialogue, Nazrul said, "We drew the two election commissioners' attention to the matter, and they denied making such comments."

Asked, what if the EC does not hold a dialogue with BNP at all since the party is divided, Nazrul said, "We will decide on our next steps through discussions if the Election Commission does so."

He however said without talking to BNP the EC cannot claim that its dialogues with political parties and public representatives have been over.

About BNP's standing committee, the highest policymaking body, Nazrul said eight of the twelve members of the committee are now available, and only two of them --- Saifur Rahman and Lt Gen (ret'd) Mahbubur Rahman --- are in the rival camp. He mentioned Mannan Bhuiyan as expelled.

AL central body

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"leniency" towards Hasina and Khaleida Zia, two detained former prime ministers.

Talking to The Daily Star, requesting anonymity, a senior AL leader yesterday said the government is clearly reluctant to release the AL president or send her to the US for treatment.

He said, "We are now indeed in a dilemma about what should be our plan of action for the coming days. Everything will be decided at the party's central working committee meeting."

Although Acting AL President Zillur Rahman has been saying they will not contest in the election without Hasina, neither the central working committee nor the presidium has taken any such decision.

Insiders said some members of the presidium, the highest policymaking body of the party, are in favour of contesting in the election even if Hasina is convicted.

Against such a backdrop, the presidium was supposed to meet yesterday to work out a way to deal with the situation, but the meeting was postponed at the last moment citing illness of Acting General Secretary Syed Ashraful Islam.

Earlier, the AL chief had instructed her party colleagues to contest in the election no matter how things turn out. She asked them to maintain a pro-election stance, so the unelected government may not stay in power for an indefinite period.

Hasina, who has been detained since July 16 of last year also asked her party's acting general secretary to remain alert, so none can foil or delay the election through excesses in her name.

Under the circumstances, AL leaders are looking for instructions from their detained chief Hasina, now admitted to Square Hospital due to ailing health.

Talking to The Daily Star, some of the leaders said Zillur's present hard-line stance is for putting pressure on the government to at least send Hasina to the US for treatment.

After its recent meetings with caretaker government advisers and other influential quarters, AL has been repeatedly calling upon the government to arrange overseas treatment for its chief. But it has not received any positive response yet, prompting it to move towards launching a movement for Hasina's release, said sources.

Home Adviser Maj Gen (ret'd) MA Matin's recent remarks that the government is not thinking about sending Hasina abroad for treatment, only hardened the pro-movement sentiment among the party's rank and file.

Talking to reporters at his Gulshan residence, Zillur Rahman said it is not possible for them to contest in the election with Hasina behind bars, adding that they will not contest in any election under the state of emergency.

The acting AL chief said, "The charges against the leader (Hasina) are baseless, false and fabricated, so a conviction is out of the question."

Zillur said they have a plan for a countrywide mass hunger strike next week demanding Hasina's release. The presidium will meet soon to finalise programmes including the hunger strike, he added.

Over the planned formal dialogue between the government and political parties, he said, "Whether we will sit with the government needs to be discussed at the presidium meeting."

Rail line

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His trip incorporates the Eurostar to Brussels, breakfast in Vienna and onward trains to Istanbul, where travellers must take the ferry across the Bosphorus linking Europe with Asia. The ferry will eventually be replaced by an underground tunnel, but for now passengers will be able to enjoy views of the Aya Sofya and Topkapi Palace.

Smith's journey continues with a Turkish express train to Lake Van, close to the Iraqi and Iranian borders, where passengers switch to another ferry to get to the Tehran-bound express, which is described as surprisingly modern.

Iranian engineers have extended their network through Kerman to the Pakistan border, where travellers will switch to a Pakistani train before continuing their journey to Quetta.

China, a big supporter of the project, is spending billions on extending rail lines to its Burmese border.

Trans-Asia railway sources said the only barrier to eventually connecting London to Yunnan province and Singapore was Burma's military regime, whose poor human rights record means that no foreign funding is available to rebuild its railways.

Smith, who always books seat 61, said the journey offered a return to romantic overland adventure, despite some security concerns on the Iran-Pakistan border.

"If you have the time, a taste for adventure and can arrange the necessary tickets and visas, this promises to be a truly epic overland journey," he said.

Gram Sarkar

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Forces under a single university. Earlier, those institutions were under various universities.

The Gram Sarkar Act 2003 was endorsed in parliament in 2003. A writ petition was filed with the High Court against the act the same year. Later, the court declared the act void.

Earlier, the council of advisers had approved in principle the Gram Sarkar (Rescission) Ordinance 2008 and the Bangladesh University of Professionals Ordinance 2008.

The other objective of the University of Professionals Ordinance is to "keep pace with advanced world in engineering, medical science, technology, war strategy and security and other areas".

It is also aimed at creating opportunities for higher studies and research at national level.

The president will be the chancellor of the proposed Bangladesh University of Professionals at the Mirpur cantonment in the capital.

The chancellor will appoint an in-service or retired major general as the vice-chancellor of the university for a three-year term. The senate will be the highest policy making body.

The education minister, army chief, navy chief, air force chief, principal staff officer (PSO) of the Armed Forces Division, UGC chairman, education secretary, vice-chancellor and pro-VC, dean, treasurer, heads of the institutions under the university, DG of the directorate of Secondary and Higher Education will be members of the senate while registrar will be member-secretary.

The ordinance contains 69 sections and 16 rules.

The government will provide funds for the university. The UGC and the university will be run like other public universities.

Members of the advisory council attended the meeting at the CA's office. The cabinet secretary, and the CA's press secretary were also present.

Two top leaders

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not the agenda, Anwarul said. "We're now working to build trust for the dialogue."

Communications Adviser Maj Gen (ret'd) Ghulam Quader, meanwhile, observed that the political parties' demand to free their leaders would not hamper the dialogue.

"Our talks are not being hampered. We can see the result," he told reporters.

The government is receiving feedback from the political parties, the communications adviser said, expressing hope that the dialogue would be successful.

Commerce Adviser Hossain Zillur Rahman also said that they are so far successful in their mission to prepare the grounds for the formal dialogue.

"We will sit with some more parties tomorrow, our discussion is about to end," he said.

The three advisers spoke with reporters separately at the Secretariat.

The government has so far held informal talks with the Awami League, Jamaat-e-Islami, Jatiya Party (Ershad) and Saifur Rahman-led faction of the BNP.

The BNP faction led by secretary general Khandaker Delwar Hossain is yet to sit with the government for the pre-dialogue talks.

Hajj agencies

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agreements on non-judicial stamps. One agreement would be with the government and the other with individual aspirant hajj pilgrims which would specify the facilities to be provided by the agency.

Each agency would have to provide guidelines for the pilgrims and hold orientation sessions at the hajj camp in Dhaka before their pilgrimage.

Out of 324 Haab members, 269 received the government-prescribed agreement forms and were asked to sign the agreement by March 31, sources said. The ministry later pushed the date to April 30 following requests from the agencies.

Ataur Rahman said about 15 agencies have already signed the agreement.

The 75 agencies that did not receive the letters are accused of wrongdoings in the last hajj and they have also been served with show-cause notices. They were served with the notices in early March after a three-member probe committee submitted its report on completion of its investigation.

The hearing regarding this has been completed and the ministry will inform its decision by April 30, the religious affairs secretary said.

Ataur declined to reveal the content of the report. "I shall keep mum for the moment," he said.

The possible penalties for the agencies include cancellation or suspension of their licences and fines.

"The agencies that would sign the agreement with the government and the pilgrims will not be able to deceive the hajis," he said.

The ministry on March 16 declared the hajj package 2008 for aspirant ballottee and non-ballottee pilgrims who would be going through government approved hajj agencies. It also raised the price of the return tickets of the pilgrims to \$1,350 from \$1,250.

This year the total charge for each ballottee hajj pilgrim (government organised pilgrimage) ranges between Tk 1,99,240 and Tk 2,20,140 to be deposited by July 6.

Duly filled in application forms have to be submitted to their respective deputy commissioner's office by July 7.

Ataur estimated the number of hajj pilgrims would be 65,000 this

year. Of them, 15,000 would make the pilgrimage under government arrangement, he added.

Law and Religious Affairs Adviser AF Hassan Arif earlier said punitive measures would be taken against hajj agencies concerned in case of any breach of contract with the pilgrims.

The government earlier cancelled the licences of two agencies--Jebri Travels and Dulafakir Hajj Agency--in connection with irregularities and "causing sufferings to last year's pilgrims".

Such incidents happen almost every year due to the absence of exemplary punishment.

Even though Haab welcomed the government move, it asked the government to reduce the airfare.

"The hajj airfares from neighbouring countries are between \$800 and \$900 whereas the government has fixed the fare at \$1,350 from Dhaka," Eyaqub Sharafati, Haab secretary general, told The Daily Star yesterday.

He also asked the government to make a flat airfare for pilgrims from Bangladesh since pilgrims going to Saudi Arabia from Sylhet and Chittagong would have to pay \$1,450.

RMG workers

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At a press briefing held at the Dhaka Reporters Unity in the city, Nazma Akhter, president of Combined Garments Workers Federation said, "A section of religious extremists are talking against equal rights for women. In doing so they are talking against the spirit of our liberation war and against our constitution."

"Bangladesh is not a Muslim republic and the laws of this country were not formulated as per the Islamic Sharia," she pointed out.

GSP leaders said people of this country have already rejected the radical Islamists and the way they want to run this country.

They criticised the government for their soft attitude towards religious radicals who are trying to get this policy scrapped.

Bangladesh is moving forward with the joint efforts of women and men alike and women's right to property and wealth is the demand of time, other speakers said.

Sahida Sarker, Firoza Begum, Jahannara Begum, Rokeya Sultana Anju, Mala Rani Das, Laboni Akhter, among others, were present at the briefing.

Mig-29 case

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Special Public Prosecutor Advocate Sharfuddin Khan Mukul informed the court of the hospital report that Hasina was not fit for appearing before the court.

The AL chief's counsel submitted a prayer to adjourn the charge-framing hearing for four weeks.

After arguments of the defence and prosecution lawyers, Judge Golam Mortoza Majumder of Dhaka Divisional Special Sessions Judge's Court set up on the Jatiya Sangsad Bhaban premises adjourned the hearing until April 27.

The six other accused are former army chief Mustafizur Rahman, former air force chief Jamaluddin Ahmed, Air Commodore (ret'd) Mirza Akhter Maruf, former joint secretary Mohammad Hossain Seraniat, former defence secretary Syed Yusuf Hossain and Managing Director of Unique Group Nur Ali.

Mustafizur, who is now on bail, also could not appear before the court for illness but the rest five were present in the court.

According to the case filed with Tejgaon Police Station against Hasina and four top defence officials,

the purchase of eight MIG-29 fighter jets during the tenure of the AL government caused a loss of Tk 700 crore to the public exchequer.

Names of Brig Gen (ret'd) Iftekhar-Ul-Bashar and former deputy secretary Hasan Mahmood Delwar were dropped from the list of accused due to lack of evidence while former army chief Mustafizur Rahman, Air Commodore (ret'd) Mirza Akhter Maruf, former joint secretary Hossain Seraniat and businessman Nur Ali were indicted in the case after investigators had found their involvement in the alleged scam.

Inspector Abdullah Al Zahid of the now-defunct Bureau of Anti-Corruption submitted the charge sheet to the Dhaka Chief Metropolitan Magistrate's Court on December 11, 2001, showing 40 people as prosecution witnesses.

Later, all the accused including Hasina filed separate petitions with the High Court for quashing the case. Following the petitions, the High Court stayed the case proceedings.

Hasina was arrested on July 16 last year after businessman Azam J Chowdhury filed an extortion case against her.

Obaidul Quader, wife

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ACC Assistant Director Ashrafur Islam filed the case against former state minister for youth and sports Obaidul Quader and his wife on October 30 last year, for concealing information about wealth worth Tk 15.55 lakh and accumulating wealth worth Tk 62.85 lakh illegally.

In the charge sheet, the IO said the charges brought against them had been primarily proved and they should be brought to trial. In the charge sheet, Ishratunnesa was accused of abetting Quader in acquiring the wealth illegally.

The former minister submitted a wealth statement of Tk 1.11 crore through jail authorities on June 14 following an ACC notice on May 29. In the statement, he declared a wealth of Tk 46.29 lakh under his name and Tk 64.12 lakh in his wife's name.

The information concealed in the wealth statement includes a flat bought at Tk 13.62 lakh and Tk 11,634 in cash in Fakirapuri branch of Rupali Bank, both in his wife's name.

Quader also showed lower price in the statement regarding purchase of a flat at Segun Bagicha. He also showed different sources of income of which the ACC found no evidence.

His wealth statement showed his sources of income include money received from relatives and friends, property in the name of his mother and honorarium from newspapers for writing columns and royalty on a book.

The joint forces arrested Quader on March 9. He was on the second list of graft suspects published by the ACC.

An anti-graft court on September 25 sentenced Ishratunnesa to eight years' jail in a tax evasion case.

Human rights

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Chairman Hasan Mashhud Chowdhury and the other commissioners.

"People are treated fairly and transparently," Anwar said in reply to a question on whether human rights of the corruption suspects are being respected.

"There must be transparency in these cases and there must be due process. That has been our position right from the beginning," the British high commissioner added.

Echoing British Foreign Minister David Miliband, who visited Bangladesh recently, he said the approach must be without fear or favour.

Asked if all he mentioned are being followed by the ACC, Anwar said that is not for him to comment, rather that is for the Bangladeshhi people to comment.

About cooperation between Scotland Yard and the ACC in bringing back the siphoned-off money, he said the Yard is cooperating with the watchdog so that the money siphoned off to his country could be brought back to Bangladesh.

On the performance of the reconstituted ACC, the British diplomat lauded its efforts, saying the anti-graft body has been extremely active and they have been trying to change people's hearts and minds on corruption.

"They have been obviously very active in terms of pursuing cases and it's certainly a very different Anti-Corruption Commission than the one that existed before," he added.

Anwar said according to the feedback from the people, the reconstituted ACC seems to be doing a good job.

He said during his visit to the ACC, he was shown the transformation of the watchdog in terms of new facilities brought in with the financial aid from the Department for International Development (DFID).

The outgoing British high commissioner said the commission now looks like a modern outfit.

DFID country chief Chris Austin accompanied the high commissioner.

VCs sought

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Technology University, Rajshahi and Jessore Engineering and Technology University, Jessore, BSS reports.

Member-secretary of the Search Committee requested the intending persons to send their complete bio-data within three weeks to its member-secretary in the Education Ministry, UNB reports.

KCC mayor

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with the Khulna sadar thana as complainant, accusing a total of thirteen people -- including five whose identities were not disclosed.

The complainant has stated in the FIR that those accused in the case embezzled Tk 10cr through forged vouchers in the name of purchasing chlorine gas for the water works department of KCC. The money was embezzled at different times from 1994 to 2006. The complainant said that chlorine gas was in fact never purchased.

The complainant further stated in the FIR that the mayor and others accused were also involved in spending Tk 15 lakh from the KCC fund, without proper authorisation, for construction of a building at Karori village under Fakirhat upazila in Bagerhat district.

Karori village is the birthplace of the detained mayor.

The six others named in the FIR are the mayor's nephews Kazi Shawkat Hossain Thandu and Kazi Sakawat Hossain Rentu, the suspended and now detained chief engineer of KCC Liakat Ali Sharif, executive engineer Liakat Ali Khan, acting chief engineer Nazmul Islam, executive Engineer of water works department Abdul Hannan.

The five others accused but not named in the FIR are all officials and employees of KCC.

Mayor Tayebur KCCed SM Hafizur Rahman, the complainant of the case, in October last year on charges of misappropriation of government funds allocated for implementation of the KCC MSP.

Rahman filed an extortion case against the mayor on November 2 last year with Khulna sadar thana. That case is under trial now.

Criminals

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gunshots I came out of my house and found three people lying in a pool of blood."

Emran and a few other locals rushed Enamul and injured Baset to Shikder Medical College Hospital at Hazaribagh but doctors there asked them to be sent to Dhaka Medical College Hospital (DMCH).

As they were taken to the DMCH doctors on duty declared Enamul dead. He received four bullets in the chest and abdomen.

Baset had two bullets in his waist and was undergoing treatment at the hospital.

Anwar was taken to Pangu (Orthopaedic) Hospital at Sher-e-Bangla Nagar.

Police could not give any reason for the attack.

Alauddin said Anwar had called them to the tea stall to find ways to recover a rickshaw stolen from their garage Saturday.

US forces threaten

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would like it to be," he said.

Soon after he made his statement, loudspeakers at mosques in Sadr's Baghdad bastion Sadr City blared out a call to arms and urged residents to "fight the occupiers."

Sadr launched two bloody uprisings from Najaf against US forces in 2004 in which hundreds of his militiamen were killed.

His fighters have been the target of attack by Iraqi and US forces since March 25 when Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki ordered his security forces to launch assaults on Shia militiamen in the southern city of Basra.

The battles spread to other Shia areas, including Wasit province, under Lynch's command, and Sadr City where they are still raging and where US forces have joined the fight.

Hundreds of people have been killed and scores wounded in the crackdown.

US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice during a surprise visit to Baghdad's Green Zone on Sunday gave a cautious response to latest developments.

"It's been very difficult to get a read of what his motivations are and what his intentions are," Rice told reporters before heading into talks with Maliki.

Iraqi security and medical officials said eight people were

killed in fresh clashes in Sadr City overnight, while the US military said five people with weapons were killed in American air strikes and another two people were shot dead after reportedly opening fire on US forces.

Meanwhile witnesses reported many people leaving the area in a fresh exodus sparked by the fighting.

"The ball is now in the government's court," Salah al-Obaidi, spokesman for the Sadr movement, told AFP on Sunday.

"We won't accept any further procrastination, false promises and political hypocrisy," Obaidi said. "If the government continues on its course, Sadr alone will decide the next steps."

The government has not immediately reacted to Sadr's warnings, but acting Justice Minister Safa al-Safi said all arrests in Basra and in Baghdad are being carried out "in accordance with court orders."

"Investigations related to those detained in Basra are legal and in accordance with human rights regulations," the minister said in a statement.

"The security operations in Basra and other cities are an attempt to restore the sovereignty of the state and to impose the law."

Suspected Huji

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locality, sources said.

Director General of Rab Hassan Mahmood Khandaker, however, told The Daily Star last night that they detained a man named Shihabuddin on allegations of his involvement in the banned Islamist militant outfit Huji. "We have yet to arrest him. We are still verifying whether the allegations brought against him are true," Hassan said.

He said Rab-7 was looking into the matter.

Sources said law enforcement agencies were hunting for Shihabuddin after his name had come up several times in the statements of detained Huji leaders.

Sources said Shihabuddin is suspected of having been involved in at least 18 grenade and bomb attacks between 1999 and 2004 including the grenade attack on an Awami League rally on Bangabandhu Avenue in the capital on August 21, 2004, the attack on former finance minister SAMS Kibria, the grenade attack on the British high commissioner to Bangladesh in Sylhet, and the bomb blast during Pahela Baishak celebrations at Ramna Batamul in the capital.

Meanwhile, sources said Shihabuddin is a member of Huji formed by Afghan war veterans. He was a close associate of detained Huji leader Maulana Abu Zafar alias Abu Sayeed as well.

After the arrests of Hannan and Zafar, Shihabuddin was trying to reorganise the banned militant outfit and chose the hilly area to run their activities.

Hearing deferred

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Writ petitioner Masood R Sobhan opposed the government plea as the matter has been delayed for disposal for long.

After hearing both the sides, an HC bench comprising Justice MA