

## 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 (retd) M Sakhawat 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 72 hours to participate in the electoral reform dialogues unitedly.

But yesterday as the deadline was coming to an end, pro-Khaleda faction leaders sat in a meeting 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 R A Gani, Khandaker Mahbubuddin Ahmed, Chowdhury Tanvir Ahmed and 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 all 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, Khaleda 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 unit," 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 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 (retd) Mahbubur Rahman --- are in the rival camp. He mentioned Mannan Bhuiyan as expelled.

## AL central body

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Tendency towards Hasina and Khaleda 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 Ashraf 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 ill 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.

The leading cause of head-on collisions on the highway is due to the fact that the number of lanes on the highway has remained the same despite the tremendous increase in traffic over the years, they said.

Other causes of the rising trend in accidents on the highway are numerous traffic rules violations including reckless driving, speeding, overloading of both passenger and cargo vehicles, carrying passengers on top of vehicles and running unfit vehicles, said sources at local road transport authority office.

The drivers appear to have taken over the highway with their lawlessness as their crimes always go unpunished, alleged locals adding that no one has ever seen any member of Highway Patrol Police on this highway.

Adding to the hazards caused by the unruly drivers, several dilapidated bridges on different locations of the highway make the road even more perilous for all its users.

Passengers who frequent this road demanded that the authorities ensure passenger safety by taking stern action against the unruly drivers while the drivers stressed on the need for increased lanes for safer operation of vehicles on the highway.

Akther Ali Sarkar, deputy commissioner (DC) of Tangail, said the authorities are also concerned about the rising accidents on the highway and two more lanes are needed to curb accidents on it.

"It is also very important to increase the number of Highway Patrol Police personnel and setting up a trauma centre on the highway," he further said.

Abdur Rouf Khan Sandesh, president of Tangail District Bus-Coach Owners' Association, admitted that the drivers' reckless driving is the main cause of frequent casualties on this highway.

## 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.

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 ballotees and non-ballotees 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 ballotee 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 commissioners' office by July 7.

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

## 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.

The government earlier cancelled the licences of two agencies - Jibril 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.

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 Bangladeshi 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.

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

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.

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## 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.

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