

Roundtable

FROM PAGE 1 discussion.

The Bangladeshi diaspora can play a critical role in improving Bangladesh's image abroad, he said, adding that overseas employment, trade, attracting foreign direct investment and fighting terrorism are the key foreign affairs challenges for Bangladesh.

Sobhan said Bangladesh should devise strategies on the basis of the changed global scenarios--rise of India and China on one hand and the economic meltdown on the other.

Moderating the function, C-Fas Chairman Ashfaqur Rahman said, "The new government will have a lot of home work to do regarding foreign affairs."

In his keynote paper titled "Future Directions of Bangladesh Foreign Policy: Dreams or Nightmares?", Dhaka University Professor Imtiaz Ahmed detailed aspects of Bangladesh's past and present foreign policies and how it should be re-defined taking into consideration globalisation and the ongoing global economic crisis.

In a globalised world, economic growth is largely interlinked with foreign relations and the challenges facing the country are not going to end unless creative policy initiatives are undertaken to overcome them, he said.

If Bangladesh is to go beyond its current economic growth of over 6 percent, it needs to resolve its energy requirements on a priority basis, he said, adding that in that case the country needs to think beyond oil and coal and keep all options open.

"This would require investment in knowledge and expertise in drafting agreements at both bilateral and international levels. Any lethargy or slippage in what would be protracted external...is bound to cost Bangladesh heavily," said Prof Imtiaz of international relations department.

Referring to a recent research, he said should Bangladesh invest in the development of semi-skilled migrant workers, including catering to restaurant business and plumbing, and have them sent to Europe, it could end up raising the remittance flow up to \$30 billion, if not more.

"Here too, creative institutionalisation at home and external engagements is required," he added.

Former ambassador Harunur Rashid said some time foreign policy is determined by a small cabinet or stalwarts in the ruling party or the prime minister's secretariat undermining recommendations of the foreign ministry.

"There is no consensus or bi-partisanship regarding the country's foreign policy," he said.

He said national consensus is required on issues related to global warming as such environmental issues affect crop production, health and salinity of water.

Harunur Rashid advocated stronger inter-connectivity and transit facilities with India, Myanmar, China and other neighbouring countries. Such transit facilities will increase trade opportunities for Bangladesh, he said.

The former ambassador also stressed the need for paying more attention to the Bangladeshis living abroad.

"We must project Bangladesh as a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural country," he said.

Harunur Rashid said there is a communication gap between the politicians and the foreign office in regard to foreign affairs. He also recommended setting up of a research and evaluation unit in the foreign ministry to devise long-term plan.

Executive Director of

Delwar

FROM PAGE 1 leaders (Khaleida Zia and Sheikh Hasina) will move forward with more positive attitude for the welfare of people," Delwar told journalists at the BNP headquarters in the capital's Naya Palan.

Delwar urged the government and the Election Commission to decide quickly on their demands -- lifting of the state of emergency on the last day of withdrawing nominations, deferment of the upazila polls by a month, and scrapping of Election Commission's authority to cancel candidature.

Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) Dr Mustafizur Rahman said Bangladesh will have difficulties in getting market access for apparel to the US under the Obama administration as Obama will be more protectionist.

Bangladesh's foreign policy has to be devised considering the trade opportunities in the south block that includes India and China, he said, adding that carbon trading, territorial issues and nuclear energy should be the new focus of the foreign policy.

Former ambassador Anwar Hashim said, "Since globalisation is to stay, we have to devise ways to benefit from it and fight its negative aspects."

It is essential to determine the country's interests abroad and dispassionately evaluate the achievements and failure in the past 38 years to formulate a foreign policy for getting the benefits of globalisation.

"There are hundreds of issues and we have to prioritise those," said Anwar Hashim.

Former ambassador Muhammad Zamir termed water management, power, environmental degradation and food security the most crucial issues to be included in the foreign policy priority list.

The line ministries usually do not care about the foreign ministry and deal with external issues directly, he said, adding that the foreign ministry should take a coordinated approach in dealing with foreign affairs.

Putting emphasis on capacity building, Zamir said the foreign ministry officials should learn the languages of the countries where the number of Bangladeshi migrants is high and Bangladesh has trade interests.

Former ambassador Shamim Ahmed said it is necessary to look for employment opportunities beyond the Middle East because the decline in oil prices there may have negative impact on Bangladesh's labour market in the region.

The country's image cannot be improved ignoring half the country's populace - women, said ambassador Nasim Ferdous, adding that the foreign ministry should play a key role in creating a pool of female professionals and researchers.

Former diplomat and adviser to the caretaker government CM Shafi Sami said Bangladesh is failing to formulate an effective foreign policy because of polarised politics and lack of good governance.

Brig Gen (ret) Shahedul Anam Khan gave the welcome speech.

Former ambassadors Shamsheer Mobin Chowdhury, Serajul Islam, Kazi Anwarul Masud, M Shafiullah, chief editor of Bangladesh Sangbad Sangstha (BSS) Zaglul Ahmed Chowdhury and businessman SM Mainuddin Momen also spoke.

Defaulted loans

FROM PAGE 16 According to BB statistics, on September 30 overall defaulted loan stood at Tk 25,072 crore compared to Tk 22,624 crore at the end of December last year. This showed an increase by Tk 2,448 crore or 10.81 per cent during the period.

In the state owned banks (SOB), defaulted loans rose by four per cent or Tk 552 crore in the PCBs the increase was 37 per cent or Tk 1,795 crore, in foreign commercial banks (FCBs) the rise was 28 per cent or Tk 55 crore and in development financial institutions the rise was 1.21 per cent or Tk 45 crore.

Among the SOB, only Sonali Bank's defaulted loans increased while those with Janata, Agrani and Rupali banks decreased. Defaulted loans with Sonali Bank increased by Tk 1,226 crore.

Among the 30 PCBs, defaulted loans with 20 of those increased.

Of the increased defaulted loans -- Tk 1795 crore -- with the PCBs, Tk 1,000 crore increased in three months from July to September.

Defaulted loans with 20 PCBs increased by 32 per cent to 245 per cent. Of the 20, 12 PCB's defaulted loans rose by more than 100 per cent.

Sources in the central bank said, in recent times credit growth of the PCBs was 38 per cent. In some of those, the increase was 50 per cent. Due to quick growth of credit, the banks could not maintain quality of credit.

The IMF has also expressed apprehension that the PCBs would not be able to maintain credit quality.

In a report to the government last week, the IMF said, "There are serious concerns about credit quality, especially among private banks, some of whom have been expanding their loan portfolio at annual rates in excess of 50 per cent."

Outlaws kill businessman

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Kusthia

A businessman was shot dead by the operatives of outlawed Gono Mukti Fouz (GMF) at Ratulpura village in Sadar upazila of the district Friday night.

The victim was identified as Ashraf Ali Bokul, 56, a Chittagong-based businessman.

Sources said a group of 10-12 armed men of GMF led by notorious killers Sabdul, Siddik and Sakram stormed into the house of Bokul at about 9:00pm while he was discussing with some villagers his father's death anniversary.

The gang then asked others to leave the house and sprayed bullets on Bokul, killing him on the spot. The gang fled the scene by firing several blank shots.

Police sent the body to Kusthia General Hospital where an autopsy was done yesterday.

Police arrested five persons, including Ziarakhi Union Parishad (UP) chairman Sahin Mohammad Salauddin and former chairman Sawkat Ali alias Sako, for their alleged link with the murder.

Family sources said local criminals had long been demanding extortion money from Bokul and threatened him to meet dire consequences if he worked for his younger brother Anisur Rahman Jhantu who has been preparing to contest the election of Ziarakhi Union Parishad.

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3 robbers beaten to death

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Three suspected robbers were beaten to death by a mob at Baligaon village in Kaliganj upazila of Gazipur Friday night.

The deceased were identified as Shukur Ali, 32, Mona, 28, and Mehedi, 28.

Locals said a gang of 8-10 robbers entered the house of Harmuz Ali at about 11:00pm and tried to loot valuables. Hearing cries of the family members for help, local people went there and caught four bandits.

The angry people then beat up the robbers, killing three on the spot and injuring another robber, Hasan, 28.

Meanwhile, Kaliganj police arrested four alleged robbers - Sarwar, 25, Rana, 26, Habib, 28, and Sohel, 28, -- and conducted drives in Uttara, Tongi and Gazipur areas to catch other gang members.

Villagers also ransacked and set on fire the house of suspected gang leader Selim in the locality early yesterday. Selim went into hiding soon after the incident.

Abdul Baten, superintendent of police of Gazipur, told The Daily Star that the robbers could not take away anything from the house and they are the members of an organised gang.

Anti-graft drive

FROM PAGE 1 in consultation, not through compromise, with the government.

In an interview with The Daily Star, the ACC boss also said, "I won't deny that we couldn't achieve all that we thought was possible. I need not give the reasons that are by now quite obvious. I can only affirm that there was no dearth of sincere effort and urge on our part to do the best."

Sufferings of the public from graft did not ease in the last two years as the commission could not do much to check petty corruption, he added.

Besides, he noted, dealing with 'grand corruption' does not make an impression on the common people.

Asked if he is satisfied with the progress so far, he said, "No. I wish our efforts were not frustrated by the developments that were beyond our control."

Speaking from the anti-graft body's experiences, he said they find the black money whitening provision a hindrance to trying the corruption suspects, while money laundering is indeed a complicated matter to deal with.

Mashhud, also former army chief, said introducing governance, ensuring decentralisation, changing the arcane rules and regulations, and promoting a highly visible reward and punishment system will inevitably lead to reduced corruption.

Edible oil

FROM PAGE 1 by Tk 6 a litre in the wake of price hike of non-brand edible oil.

Wholesale price of all sorts of non-brand edible oil went up by Tk 250 to Tk 500 per maund (37.32 kilogram) in Khatunganj.

Consumers Association of Bangladesh Program Coordinator Quazi Fazlul Haque said such hike in prices is the result of poor market monitoring by the government and it is the consumers, who are suffering for it.

"The prices may not come down in line with the fall in international market. But, surprisingly it is increasing in the local market. It is a major failure of the government," he said.

The consumers suffered when oil prices went high in the international market and ironically when it is decreasing, Fazlul Haque said.

President of Bangladesh Vegetable Oil Refiners and Vanaspathi Manufacturers Association MA Rouf Chowdhury told The Daily Star that the stock of soya bean oil has decreased significantly as the importers reduced their imports in fear of loss.

He claimed importers and mill owners incurred a loss of Tk 1500 crore in the last two months due to the price fall in the international markets.

It takes a certain time to reach the oil in the country, he said adding they had to sell the oil in a reduced price though they imported oil at high prices when in the recent past.

Denying the allegation of artificial price hike, he said it is not true that the importers hiked it, rather the retailers and wholesalers are responsible behind the current price hike.

"Millers have already sold their lion share of oil to the wholesalers and retailers, so how can the importers get benefits by hiking the price," he argued.

On the other hand, the wholesalers said that it is true that there is a supply shortage

Crowley

FROM PAGE 16 Democratic Party Mohammad Aminullah in the chair, it was addressed, among others, by President of America-Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industry Gias Ahmed, Secretary Hasanuzzaman Hasan and New York City Council candidate Alauddin Bulu.

Crowley, also chairman of Bangladesh caucus in the US Congress, stressed the need for withdrawal of the state of emergency to create an environment conducive to holding elections in Bangladesh.

He called for a greater cooperation among the government, political parties and Election Commission to remove the differences.

Terming Bangladesh a 'real friend' of the US, Crowley said America wanted to see Bangladesh as a developed nation in terms of economic growth and practising democratic norms and values.

"If Bangladesh wants to survive in the present world economic recession, it must have a democratically elected government to run the affairs," Crowley said, adding that all have to play a proactive role to overcome the present political crises.

He also welcomed the announcement of BNP to participate in the general election and said the differences should be settled through dialogues.

TIB for EC

FROM PAGE 1 "This rule of the RPO is very important in ensuring the compliance of other rules of the RPO including the rule against violation of electoral expenditures by the candidates. This rule is also inevitable in order to establish sound politics so that the corrupt, owners of black money and terrorists cannot win the election," the statement said.

The TIB statement said a survey conducted by the organisation found that each of 122 candidates contesting for 38 constitutional seats in the scrapped January 2007 election spent on an average Tk 15.20 lakh, which was above the election expenditure ceiling fixed by the EC.

The electoral code of conduct was violated by the political parties and candidates in different ways then, it said.

TIB said neither the candidature of any candidate was cancelled nor were any of them brought to trial for violating the code of conduct.

On the basis of the real situation, the people demanded empowerment of the Election Commission to cancel the candidatures of the candidates for violating the electoral code of conduct and following the demands the RPO was amended with the section of 91(e), the TIB said.

in the markets, but the millers hoard a major share of oil and sell through the agents only when the price goes up in the markets.

He said importers reduced the import of soya bean oil significantly as its price did not decrease the way prices of palm oil came down in the international market.

AKM Fakhru Alam said they however think that the oil prices will come down as the new consignments of oil are arriving soon after a gap of three weeks.

When asked why prices of edible oil went high, Commerce Secretary Firoz Ahmed yesterday admitted that the price at domestic market has not come down. "There is some shortage of edible oil because of less import," he said.

He said the government would soon sit with the government on the issue. "Let us see what we can do."

AL, allies blast

FROM PAGE 1 Election Commission could not broker any consensus between the two major alliances on the issue despite multi-faceted communications and maximum efforts on their part.

His comment came after two days of intense discussions with the BNP-led four-party alliance collapsed.

"We informed the Election Commission that the education adviser made false statement to the nation. He did it either intentionally or mistakenly," AL spokesman Syed Ashraful Islam said at the EC secretariat.

The AL had not reacted to the adviser's comment until yesterday evening.

On Tuesday's meeting between five advisers and the AL-led combine, Ashraf said the alliance leaders asked them whether they had any specific agenda for discussion.

"They said no. We then asked them the reason for coming to us, to which they replied that discussions between the government and the four-party alliance had not been successful," Ashraf said.

"But the adviser blamed the grand alliance for the failure. We strongly protested and condemned the remarks," he said.

He said the grand alliance also urged the education adviser and the caretaker government to keep from such remarks in the future.

As the BNP-led alliance refused to take part in the December 18 parliamentary election, the caretaker government started negotiation with them with the proposal for deferring the polls to December 28.

The five advisers also held discussions with the AL-led grand alliance on the issue.

The BNP-led alliance however did not agree to the proposal as they had been pressing for deferring the polls by at least one month.

The government then announced that the parliamentary elections would be held as scheduled on December 18.

In the statement, the education adviser blamed the two alliances for failure of the talks.

Fresh schedules

FROM PAGE 1 alliance leaders about details of the discussion.

The alliance adjourned its meeting to send the delegation for discussions with the EC.

Syed Ashraf said it is the caretaker government, EC and the four-party alliance who are mainly concerned with rescheduling of the polls.

"We are no party to the matter. We are preparing for the parliamentary polls on December 18 as announced by the Election Commission," he said.

He said the whole nation hailed the plan for holding the polls on December 18.

"We have fixed our electoral strategy and planning for December 18. We have also finalised our election manifesto, which is now being printed," Ashraf said.

Speaking in return for anonymity, an election commissioner told The Daily Star last night that the commission will now talk to Chief Adviser Fakhruddin Ahmed about the outcome of the latest round of negotiations with the political parties.

In line with the administration's move to ensure participation of the BNP-led alliance in the parliamentary polls, the EC had earlier proposed that it would shift the polls to December 28.

Pro-AL lawyers sweep Bar Council polls

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Sammilito Ainjibi Samannoy Parishad (SASP), a forum of pro-Awami League lawyers, yesterday unofficially won in 12 posts out of the 14-member Bangladesh Bar Council election held Thursday.

Jatiyatabadi Ainjibi Oikya Panel (JAOP), a body of BNP-led four-party alliance lawyers, got two posts of the Bar Council, a statutory body regulating the lawyers.

The elected members from SASP are: Shafique Ahmed, Abdul Baset Majumder, Syed Rezaur Rahman, Parimal Chandra Guha, Zi Khan Panna, Md Kamrul Islam, M Enayetur RAHIM, Mohammad Israfil, AHM Khalequzzaman, AM Anwarul Kabir, Md Mesbahuddin Siraj and Md Yahya.

Two elected members from JAOP are: Abdul Malek and Badrul Islam Chunnun.

The lawyers said the unofficial results were received from their agents in the polls.

An official of the Bar Council yesterday told The Daily Star that they need at least five days for officially announcing its result though they are receiving the results from different polling centres.

He said polling was held in 79 centres set up on the Bar Association premises.

The attorney general, ex-officio chairman of the Bar Council, would announce the results of the election after receiving results from the polling centres, the Bar official said.

The elected members at its first meeting will elect a vice-chairman for the Council and form other standing committees to run the organisation for three years from the takeover.

Somali pirates vow to resist any assault on super-tanker

AFP, Mogadishu

Somali pirates holding an oil-laden Saudi super-tanker will fight back should any military intervention to free the ship be attempted, a member of the pirate group told AFP yesterday.

"I hope the owner of the tanker is wise enough and won't allow any military option because that would be disastrous for everybody. We are here to defend the tanker if attacked," Abdiyare Moalim said.

Speaking from the coastal village and pirate stronghold of Haradhere, off which the Sirius Star is anchored, he said he was one of the pirates on shore tasked with organising militias protecting the area.

Negotiations continue with the owners of the super-tanker, who on Thursday were given 10 days to pay a ransom of 25 million dollars (20 million euros).

A local fisherman told AFP that reinforcements of at least 10 well-armed men had joined the pirates holding the ship and its 25-strong crew.

"Early this morning, I saw at least 10 heavily armed pirates heading to the ship. Their boat returned after dropping them off," Hassan Ahmed said.

The member of the pirate group said the gunmen holding the Sirius Star and its 100 million dollar of crude oil had no intention of destroying the vessel, the largest ever seized by pirates off the coast of Somalia.

"Their intention is clear, I was speaking to them some minutes ago and they told me they are not going to destroy the ship or harm the crew. They are hoping to get what they demanded," he said.

Haradhere is 300 kilometres (180 miles) north of lawless Somalia's capital Mogadishu.

UN panel

FROM PAGE 16 Afghanistan and previously personal representative of the UN secretary-general for Afghanistan, will lead the panel.

Two other panel members are Bhojraj Pokharel, chief election commissioner of Nepal, and Aracelly Santana, former deputy director of the UN Electoral Assistance Division and most recently deputy special representative of the UN secretary-general for Nepal.

The panel begins its first visit to Bangladesh today and returns for about a week around the time of the election, before reporting back to Ban Ki-moon with its key findings and recommendations, the spokesperson added.

The UN secretary-general formed the panel in response to a request by the caretaker government of Bangladesh. Ban Ki-moon visited Bangladesh earlier this month and described the upcoming polls as a "historic opportunity" for Bangladesh.

US missile kills

FROM PAGE 16 Egyptian Abu Zubair al-Misri, another wanted al-Qaeda operative, a senior Pakistani security official said on condition of anonymity.

"The transatlantic bombing plot alleged mastermind Rashid Rauf was killed along with an Egyptian al-Qaeda operative in the US missile strike in North Waziristan early Saturday," a senior security official told AFP.

A Western diplomatic source told AFP the missile was fired from a jet across the border in Afghanistan.

British-Pakistani Rauf was arrested in 2006 in Pakistan over the bomb plot, sparking a worldwide security alert, and 24 people were detained in Britain in a major swoop.

A day later a massive security operation at London's Heathrow Airport resulted in mass cancellations for several days, amid fears of a terrorist attack using liquid explosives on London flights bound for the US and Canada.

The British government had requested Pakistan extradite Rauf to London, where he was wanted by police in connection with the murder of his uncle in 2002.

But four years later an anti-terrorism court in Pakistan dropped terrorism charges against Rauf relating to the conspiracy, although its order was suspended when the Punjab government lodged an appeal.

Rauf had then faced charges including impersonation, carrying a fake identity card and fake documents, which he denied.

He had been in custody under the Security of Pakistan Act when he escaped in December 2007 from Pakistani police custody, although all charges relating to terrorism had been dropped.

The Pakistani government ordered a high-level investigation of the suspicious circumstances of his escape, in which he broke free from handcuffs and ran off.

Seven other men suspected

of being part of the plot to bring down airliners over the Atlantic Ocean in 2006 face a retrial in England after a London jury failed to reach verdicts in September.

Three of the British Muslims were convicted of complicity to murder, a charge the trio had admitted to -- but with no-one was found guilty specifically of attempting to bring down airliners.

The plot allegedly targeted seven flights from Heathrow -- to New York, Washington, Chicago, San Francisco, Toronto and Montreal -- operated by United Airlines, American Airlines and Air Canada.

The missile strike which killed Rauf came days after a US drone attack killed six rebels, including an Arab al-Qaeda operative.

That attack prompted Taliban militants based in the rugged tribal territory bordering Afghanistan to warn of reprisal attacks across Pakistan if there were more strikes by the US.

Terror network chief Osama bin Laden is widely believed to be hiding in the tribal territory.

Washington has apparently stepped up its missile strikes against suspected al-Qaeda and Taliban hideouts in tribal areas, however the Saturday morning attack appeared to be the first that was not fired by an unmanned CIA drone.

Those strikes have come despite warnings from Pakistan that such attacks violate international law and could deepen resentment of the United States in the world's second-largest Islamic nation.

Pakistan has officially protested to the United States that strikes violate its sovereign territory, although some officials say there was a tacit understanding between the two militaries to allow such action.

President Asif Ali Zardari recently promised zero tolerance against violations of his country's sovereignty.

Obama plans

FROM PAGE 16 Obama acknowledged Saturday that evidence is growing the country is "facing an economic crisis of historic proportions." He noted turmoil on Wall Street, a decrease in new home purchases, growing jobless claims and the menacing problem of deflation.

He said he was pleased Congress passed an extension of unemployment benefits this week, but added, "We must do more to put people back to work and get our economy moving again."

Figures out this week showed new claims for jobless aid had reached a 16-year high. "If we don't act swiftly and boldly, most experts now believe that we could lose millions of jobs next year," Obama said.

He cautioned, "There are no quick or easy fixes to this crisis, which has been many years in the making, and it's likely to get worse before it gets better." But Obama said Inauguration Day, Jan. 20, "is our chance to begin anew."

Obama said getting congressional approval for his broad economic plan will not be easy.