

Caretaker must stay

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power and backtrack from its stance on the caretaker system.

"We along with the people will not accept any arrangement for holding (parliamentary) elections under a political government on any pretext including court verdict," Khaleda said at a crowded press conference at her Gulshan office in the capital.

She went on, "An acceptable caretaker government will be formed through discussion, and based on consensus of all after the resignation of this government. And in the same way, a neutral and strong election commission will be constituted. Parliamentary election will be held under that caretaker government and election commission, who will create a congenial atmosphere for free and fair polls."

On today's hartal, Khaleda said, "BNP called the hartal to protect the people's right to vote, and to protest the attempt to hold farcical elections under a political government by scrapping the provision for caretaker government." She urged all to make the hartal a success.

Earlier on Friday, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina urged the main opposition party to come to parliament to discuss their demand

regarding caretaker government system, which was declared illegal by the Supreme Court recently.

Rejecting outright the PM's call, the leader of the opposition in parliament said, "She [PM] is making different types of statements. She has already said there is no scope to continue the caretaker system. So, our (opposition) opinion will have no importance."

The former prime minister said court verdict is not mandatory for parliament, but the government is conspiring to implement its own plan using court verdict

Asked whether BNP will accept immediate past chief justice ABM Khairul Haque as chief adviser if the existing caretaker system is continued, she said Khairul Haque is a controversial person. "Had he been a neutral person, we would accept him. He did not play a neutral role when he was chief justice. So, he will not be able to act neutrally also as chief adviser."

Without giving details, Khaleda said there are other options also. "A deadlock (over this issue) will be over if the government just announces that the system of caretaker government will continue."

She warned the government about the consequences of blocking hand-over of power in a peaceful

and democratic way.

The BNP chairperson said the prime minister wants to hold the next election staying in power to avoid a polls debacle. "We also know that she (PM) will try to form a Khairul Haque-led caretaker government if she fails to abolish the caretaker system as per her plan. And she will also depend on electronic voting machine."

Asked about the call for withdrawal of today's hartal made by the business community led by the Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industry, Khaleda blasted the FBCCI president, saying, "An individual said this. He is a cadre of Awami League. What is the importance of his demand?"

She ruled out the possibility of her party's return to parliament to place proposals concerning caretaker system, and said the House has become ineffective since the opposition was not allowed to speak.

The opposition leader made a blistering attack on the government for what she said its failures and for implementing the agenda of its foreign masters instead of resolving the crises in people's life.

Acting Secretary General of BNP Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir and members of the party standing committee were also present at the press conference.

Proposals

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ing of the JS special body before it submits its recommendations to the parliament.

Sources at the Jatiya Sangsad Secretariat told The Daily Star that the JS special committee is likely to place its report on amending the country's charter by June 8.

"The fifteen-member JS body has already completed most of its work and will meet today to give its proposal a final shape," Anisul Islam Mahmud, a member of the committee told The Daily Star.

"We have almost completed drafting proposals and recommendations and the committee might submit its report before the parliament within the next two or three days," he said.

The House on July 21, 2010 formed a 15-member special committee headed by Syeda Sajeda Chowdhury to chalk out a proposal for an amendment the constitution. The committee is devoid of representation from the main opposition BNP.

When asked about the committee's stand on the much-debated caretaker government system, Anisul said they will leave this sensitive issue for parliament to settle.

The JS special committee came up with the decision to do so after Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina on May 30 at a meeting with the special committee expressed her disagreement with the committee's proposal to keep the caretaker government system in place for the next two general elections.

Earlier this month the committee exchanged views with different political parties -- except BNP which did not join the dialogue -- leaders of the civil society, media personalities, educationalists and intellectuals regarding the amendment of the country's constitution.

In these view-exchange meetings most of the participants opined keeping the caretaker government system in place for at least the next two general polls.

Nine 'rapists'

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the charge sheet. The following day, Serafina lodged a case accusing them of rape with the police station.

Later, Surshunipara Catholic Church's priest Bernard Tudu and 12 other community leaders lured the victim's family into making an out-of-court settlement in exchange for Tk1.40 lakh.

Failing to endure the humiliation, Serafina set herself ablaze on February 17 this year. Three days later she succumbed to her injuries.

On February 23, Godagari police recorded the suicide provocation case accusing 13 community leaders excluding the rapists and arrested 10 of them.

The arrestees are Bernard Tudu, other community leaders Bishwanath Tudu, Sisti Tudu, Jotin Hembrom, Monir Murmu, Lobin Hembrom, Amin Murmu, Samuel Mardi and Poresh Murmu of Amtulipara village, and Bishwanath Tudu of neighbouring Shimla village.

Serafina's mother Shusana Soren on March 10 lodged another case with the court naming the nine rapists.

Upon the court's order, the police investigated both the cases and pressed the charge sheet.

Out of the 10 arrestees, Bernard Tudu and Bishwanath Tudu were bailed out in the last week of March.

Blast kills four Nato soldiers in Afghanistan

AFP, Kabul

A bomb attack killed four foreign soldiers from Nato's US-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in eastern Afghanistan yesterday, the military said.

"Four International Security Assistance Force service members died following an improvised explosive device attack in eastern Afghanistan today," a statement said.

Wildlife in jeopardy

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our wildlife.

One thing is quite clear now. Our forests, or for that matter whatever is left, can no longer give food and shelter to wildlife. The animals are coming out of the little green cover that is left in search of food and are killed by humans.

With the vanishing forests, the last of the animals and birds are going extinct too. I have often found people killing jungle cats and civets because they raid chicken coops for food. A villager cannot sustain the loss of his poultry to a hungry cat. He has little time to think that the same fishing cat he is killing for eating his chickens is actually doing him more help by preying on rodents that damage his crops.

The few forest patches that are left around are in a pathetic condition. I have found people commercially harvesting wild jackfruits meant for langurs and all other mammals and birds to be shipped to the cities. Illegal logging is rampant. Lawachhera and Satchhari forests have been degraded so heavily over the last two years that they can be easily said to be in their deathbeds.

These patch forests are all isolated islands. And that poses another serious threat to our wildlife. The animals and birds are all confined in a small place. And that is how they are denied of the genetic variety. Inbreeding is causing the ultimate damage to the species. When the same genes circulate among a small group, physical

deformities are bound to develop. That is why we now see sick and deformed monkeys in the forests. That is why the crocodiles are found infertile. There are only eight long-tailed macaques left in Teknaf. They have absolutely no hope any more. Even if nobody kills them, they are bound to vanish because of lack of genetic variation. The fate of Haspid Hare, sloth bear or clouded leopard is now thought to be sealed with no recent sightings. They are just some names waiting to creep into the IUCN's list of extinct animals.

The birds are facing a hard time too. While some species like whistling ducks, gadwalls and common shell ducks are proliferating because they are strong survivors, we see too few vultures or hill mynas. You consider yourself lucky if you get to see a black francolin that only survives in Tetulia in the north. And Alexandrian Parakeets are seldom found in some small pockets like Sherpur. Dr Reza Khan and I have searched extensively the hill tracts and come empty handed without sighting any white-winged wood duck. This wonderful bird is now deemed extinct. So are greater adjutant, swamp francolin or Bengal Florican.

We have destroyed bird habitat extensively to see this sorry state of birds. Water bodies have been filled or poisoned. We have cut down all the tall trees so that big birds cannot find any nesting place. We have finished off soft-fleshed

trees like civet fruit trees to deny nesting place for many birds like white-winged wood duck. And we have introduced foreign species of trees instead of indigenous kinds. These introduced species like acacia have little impact on wildlife preservation.

And look at tigers, our last pride. Once they roamed through Bangladesh. Now they are all locked in a small place called the Sundarbans. They are not used to saline water condition. Yet they have to somehow survive there. Or die slowly. Their food has diminished as we have poached deer. Now they come to our villages in search of food and then get killed regularly. You cannot blame the villagers much. They are getting killed by tigers too. The human-tiger conflict is now all time high.

And what else could we expect when we destroy our forests. We have not even cared to create a special, task-oriented department solely for wildlife. The forest department is too insufficient to care for birds and animals.

We are a lucky generation. We have at least seen some of the last wildlife. Our next generation will not.

The Awami League had promised in its election manifesto that if elected it will work towards conserving biodiversity. It has been two and a half years since the party has been in power. We still wait for implementation of its promise when we will no longer see that habitat is destroyed and wildlife killed.

Radical reform day's order

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radical reform as whatever greenery is left is still under great threat. The government should have a department that will only grow trees, restore forests and replace foreign trees like acacia and eucalyptus with the home-kinds.

Reza suggested dividing the forest department into three components -- natural forest and soil conservation, wildlife and biodiversity, and commercial forestry. The first two components will only be engaged in preserving trees and wildlife.

"If the department requires fund for the preservation and forestry, it can have another component only growing commercial trees -- may be foreign kinds," he said, adding that it should be done on an urgent basis as the country's remaining seven percent of forest is a drastic come-down from 22 percent mark of the 1950s.

The wildlife expert suggested making the institutions multidisciplinary involving local people from policy making level to field level.

"How can you or I or anyone believe that a department that failed to protect our tigers, elephants, rhinos, buffalos and many other wild animals for 150 years would be able to do it now? They must be tasked

with a new people-oriented mandate," observed Reza.

Currently the forest department is following the work plan initiated during British rule in 1860s when they managed forest to get supplies for making railways, steamers or launches. "The job of the forest department is now to catch those who fell trees, realise penalty from them and deposit the money to government treasury. That should not be the system. You cannot save forests in Bangladesh if you have that kind of approach," said Reza citing examples of clear felling of trees by the forest department.

Clear felling means removal of everything growing on the ground causing the top soil to be washed away with the first burst of monsoon. "Once the top soil is gone, nothing grows there," he said, adding that it is a tree that helps store rain water deep underground, not the soil.

"Most of the rivers in Bangladesh are either dead or silted up badly. Why have it happened? It is because of indiscriminate felling of trees in the mountains and hills of India and Bangladesh.

"Besides, the trees planted there are allowed to grow only for a short time. As a result, their roots do not go

deep enough to hold rain water for rivers," said Reza.

"Bangladesh has lost many of its original wild animals. There is no forest here that hasn't lost a species or two. We used to have elephants in Madhupur Garh and the last rhino in Sundarbans was killed in 1905."

Moreover, food animals are now found only in Sundarbans. These animals below in the food chain must survive to keep larger animals from going extinct.

"But almost all the food animals have disappeared. Tigers are cornered with sea on one side and humans on the other while Sundarbans is the only place where they can find food," observed the wildlife expert.

He said no other mangrove forest in the world has such population of tigers except for Bangladesh and West Bengal.

"A Tiger cannot survive in salty environment. Now what choice do tigers have when their forest is encroached and encircled by human settlements?"

"If this situation happens to persist, there will remain only a few kinds of animals that proved to be really useful for our own survival. The other kinds will simply be wiped out if we don't restore the lost forests immediately," added the expert.

Body found

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Barna Shikhalaya at Ahmedbagh in the area.

Officer-in-charge (OC) Mohammad Asaduzzaman of Sabujbagh Police Station said they found Rakib's body hanging by the neck with his sister's scarf from the ceiling fan. The body had been sent to Dhaka Medical College morgue for autopsy.

The OC suspects that the boy might have tried something he saw in the television and met the consequences. At the DMC morgue, Rakib's cousin Liton told reporters that he, his elder sister and younger brother were watching TV with Rakib yesterday. Around 9:00am, Rakib told them that he was not feeling well and went to another room.

About 20 minutes later Rakib's sister Khadiza Akhter, 13, went to the room and found it locked from inside. When she pushed open the door she found the body hanging, added Liton.

Commuters

JATIYATABADI Sramik Dal set fire to the very bus that carried them to Rajuk Bhaban in Motijheel from Gazipur shortly after 2:30pm to create panic among people ahead of the hartal, said Shahidul Haq, officer-in-charge of Paltan Police Station.

They were to join a programme to be addressed by BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia at Mahanagar Nityamancha, he said.

Pickets from a pro-hartal procession hurled bricks at four buses at West Kazipara in Mirpur at about 4:50pm.

Police arrested three pickets from the spot.

Pro-hartal pickets set fire to another bus at Mirpur-10 shortly after 6:00pm. Law enforcers arrested three pickets from the scene.

Another bus was set ablaze by pickets at Palashi intersection at about 6:05pm. Fire fighters doused the flame.

Two more buses -- one at Bangla Motor and another at Fakirerpool -- came under arson attack at about 7:40pm.

Pickets torched five more buses at Kataban, Kamalapur, Jurain, Asad Avenue, and Moghbazar level crossing between 7:00pm and 10:00pm. They also set ablaze a taxi cab at Khilkhet.

Two major opposition parties -- BNP and Jamaat-e-Islami -- on Wednesday called a dawn-to-dusk hartal today across the country to protest what they say the government move to scrap the caretaker government system.

Dhaka Metropolitan Police Commissioner Benazir Ahmed said additional police personnel were deployed at key points in the city to ward off any pre-hartal violence.

The law enforcers would do their best to resist violence in the name of hartal, the DMP commissioner said at a press briefing at the DMP headquarters.

Several socio-political organisations urged the main opposition BNP to withdraw today's hartal considering people's plight and the nation's financial loss.

BNP does not have any right to disrupt the country's development in the name of hartal, said speakers in a discussion organised by Bangladesh Awami Olama League at Dhaka Reporters' Unity auditorium.

They urged BNP to return to parliament to find a solution to the issue.

Bangladesh Christian Association in a meeting also demanded withdrawal of today's hartal.

ADB agrees

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executives of the multilateral lending agency at its 3-day Asia Solar Energy Forum's Conference in Bangkok that ended on June 1. A delegation led by Prime Minister's Energy Adviser Dr Tawfik-e-Elahi Chowdhury attended the conference.

Officials attended the conference said The plan needs about \$3 billion investment of which it proposed for 60 percent capital fund, 20 percent long term soft loan and 20 percent investment by the government and by private sector.

The ADB arranged the conference as part of its policy to promote renewable energy, particularly the solar-based power system in the Asian countries. The lending agency has planned to introduce 3,000 MW solar-based power system in the region by 2013.

Sources also said Bangladesh proposed a plan for introducing 500 MW solar panel-based system that includes solar irrigation pump; solar roof top in urban areas; and mini grids solar plants in rural area.

The plan also includes social impact project where solar power will be delivered to rural health centers; schools and other important institutions.

Delegations from most of the Asian countries including India, Pakistan, Nepal, Bhutan, China and Maldives participated in the conference.

Forests dip to 10pc

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Recently, satellite image analysis under National Forest Assessment project in association with Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) found that forest areas in Bangladesh are not more than 1.44 million hectares.

A population pressure of 1,075 people a square kilometre and lack of environmental planning have led to the country's forest depletion, which is fastest in South Asia, experts say.

Statistics show, the annual deforestation rate in entire South Asia is 0.6 percent and 3.3 percent in Bangladesh.

In the backdrop of deforestation across the globe, the United Nations General Assembly declared 2011 the International Year of Forests to campaign for

sustainable management and conservation of all types of forests.

Today is the World Environment Day. This year the theme of the day is Forests: Nature at Your Service.

A country should have at least 25 percent forest coverage to meet the global standards while in Bangladesh it is less than 10 percent including all natural forest and the planted woods.

A joint report of forest department and FAO says 78 percent of forest areas in Bangladesh are disturbed.

In the country, the total forest cover in 1990 was 1,491 thousand hectares, 1,468 thousand hectares in 2000, 1,455 in 2005 and in 2010 it was 1,442 thousand hectares, the report adds.

The rapid deforestation has put the country's biodiversity and wildlife at stake.

Over the last 100 years, Bangladesh has lost about 10 percent of its mammalian fauna, three percent avifauna and four percent reptile, International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) found in 2004.

Another 201 species of the country's wildlife are threatened with extinction, the local chapter of IUCN says.

The country has lost one-horned rhinoceros, Javan rhinoceros, Asiatic two-horned rhinoceros, wild buffalo, nilgai, swamp deer, hog deer, wolf, pink-headed duck, common peafowl and marsh crocodile, says the forest department website.