

President's

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already been officially invited to the dialogue, he said adding, "Two invitation letters have been sent to them from Bangabhaban at 6:00pm today [Sunday]."

"The dialogue will begin at Bangabhaban at 11:00am on December 22," he said adding that the president will sit with HM Ershad's Jatiya Party at 11:00am and JSD at 12:00 noon on the first day.

In the invitation letter, the president requested the political parties to join the dialogue with a delegation comprising not more than 10 members to discuss the appointment of the next CEC and election commissioners, he added.

Sources said the President's Office will gradually send invitations to other political parties. Before inviting the ruling Awami League (AL), the Office will talk to other parties to know their recommendations, sources added.

AL, JP and other components of the grand alliance hailed the president's initiative saying it would strengthen the democratic institution and its values.

The main opposition BNP had earlier rejected the president's dialogue on EC saying they, at first, want to discuss the issue of reinstating the caretaker government system, which has been nullified through constitutional amendments.

Talking to The Daily Star, AL acting General Secretary Mahbubul Alam Hanif said, "It is a great initiative by the honourable president. It will help strengthening democracy. And the country would get a strong Election Commission through discussion with all political parties."

He said they did not get any official invitation yet. Asked about BNP's stance, Hanif said, "If the BNP does not sit for the dialogue, it will be unfortunate."

JP Presidium Member Ziauddin Ahmed Bablu said there is no solution without dialogue. "If the next EC is formed through discussion, it will be out of controversy and good for democracy in the country," Bablu told The Daily Star.

BNP acting Secretary General Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir said on Saturday that his party will not sit for any dialogue with the government other than the caretaker government issue.

The formation of EC is not important for BNP right now, he said adding that it [BNP] demands the EC be formed in consultation with all political parties.

BNP factions

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December 9 on orders of the party chairperson, both leaders held a meeting and decided to work together.

Yesterday's move was made to dispel the rivalry between the factions and to make BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia's upcoming road march a success, said party insiders.

Khaleda is supposed to visit Chittagong next week as part of a countrywide road march programme.

At the rally, Abdullah Al Noman, BNP central vice-chairman, urged the people in Chittagong to unite and stand up against the government.

"This movement will not be of any party, rather it will be in the interest of people," he said adding that people from all walks of life should join together to strengthen this movement against the "autocratic" government.

At the rally, Ameer Khasru said the economy of the country had broken down and the government would not be able to pay salary to government staff after three months.

Mir Mohammad Nasir Uddin, former state minister for civil aviation and tourism; Golam Akbar Khondokar, president of the district's north unit of BNP, and Gazi Shahjahan Jewel, former BNP lawmaker and secretary of the south unit, also spoke at the rally.

One plot

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to mobilise activists from the city's outskirts.

It all started around 5:45am when a group of Jamaat men, ignoring the bone-chilling cold, silently assembled at Ramna Park and brought out a procession chanting slogans and marching towards the main street between Ramna Park and the Institution of Engineers, Bangladesh (IEB) compound.

Their slogans broke the morning silence and drew attention of the law enforcing agencies who had already been deployed there. Being informed, additional forces from nearby Shahbagh Police Station also rushed to the spot.

By that time BNP activists joined the Jamaat men. As they grew in number they tried to take positions in and outside the IEB compound, where BNP was scheduled to give reception to freedom fighters at 2:00pm.

Police and witnesses said the demonstrators tried to stage a sit-in on the main street around 8:30am in front of IEB, but police foiled their attempt and dispersed them by charging batons and lobbing tear gas shells. Police also picked up a few of the demonstrators.

Soon after that Molotov cocktails started to explode in different parts of the city, and within half an hour the chaos spread outside the city with sporadic blasts and violence between BNP-led four party alliance activists and police. The violence left two persons dead in Dhaka and Sylhet.

The activists of Jamaat and BNP exploded over 50 cocktails in several points of the capital, torched at least 13 vehicles including a police van, and vandalised a number of others, sending a shockwave through the residents who passed a terrifying day yesterday.

The incident reminded the city dwellers of Jamaat men's violence in September this year when they wanted to show off their organisational strength against the backdrop of the trial of war criminals.

BNP acting secretary general Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir yesterday however claimed that his party activists were gathered at different points of the city from early morning just to welcome the freedom fighters arriving from different districts.

But question rose about why the party activists were carrying Molotov cocktails for welcoming the freedom fighters.

No announcement was made by BNP earlier about welcoming the freedom fighters into the city in the morning. A party press release signed by its joint secretary general Ruhul Kabir Rizvi, issued Saturday night, requested all including the freedom fighters to go to IEB at 12:00 noon.

Even there was no direction from the party high-ups as to where the freedom fighters would be taking rest before the start of the reception, according to party insiders.

Surprisingly most of the senior leaders of the party were in the dark about what was going on out on the streets in the morning. It even took BNP 5 hours since the eruption of violence to issue a reaction.

Intelligence sources said the opposition had a plan to block roads with a huge gathering, but they could not do so due to a large presence of law enforcers.

As the plot to block roads flopped, the opposition activists opted for secret from Molotov cocktail attacks and rampant vandalism, the sources added.

BNP insiders claimed that most of the senior leaders including the party's acting secretary general, Mirza Alamgir were clueless about the plan to create a large-scale chaos.

Mirza Alamgir was seen writing a statement just before the press briefing convened by his party around 1:15pm, indicating that he was not prepared ahead of time about what to say in the briefing.

The party insiders claimed that a group of men close to Hawa Bhaban [for-

mer office of the BNP chairperson] clique were the masterminds of yesterday's violence. They planned the chaos to show their political and organisational strength ahead of the court verdict on Zia Orphanage Trust case filed against BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia. Many of them believe that the government might influence the court in sentencing Khaleda to a jail term.

To implement their plan, the Hawa Bhaban men held a series of meetings and tried to contact a number of "influential persons" over the last few months, and finally engaged Jamaat men to make their plan a success, the insiders said adding that some of the planners recently flew to Malaysia and Nepal.

Two close friends of Tarique Rahman, elder son of Khaleda Zia, have been living in Malaysia since the 1/11 changeover. Both of them were very influential persons during BNP's immediate past tenure in power. The two often travel to Nepal as well, the insiders said.

After the planners returned to the country, they again held meetings with the same "influential persons" and finalised their plan for yesterday.

They mainly wanted to cripple Dhaka City by gathering a huge number of party activists on the city streets near IEB where the BNP chairperson would attend the reception for the freedom fighters.

The plan was to bring out thousands of activists who would be joined by Khaleda Zia, and then they would stage a sit-in on the street for an indefinite period of time which might go on for days or even a week.

The planners were hoping that they would succeed in creating such a situation which would prompt the government to take repressive actions to disperse the demonstrators, which in turn would spark clashes that would go beyond the control of the government.

Bus crash in western Nepal kills 15

AFP, Kathmandu

A bus has plunged off a narrow mountain road in western Nepal killing 15 people, police said yesterday, the latest in a string of deadly accidents on the country's highways.

The driver lost control in thick fog on a highway on the country's western border with India, 700 kilometres west of Kathmandu.

"Fifteen passengers were killed when a bus skidded off the hilly road and fell down on a rocky cliff 400 metres (1,300 feet) below on Saturday night," district police sub-inspector Mahendra Saud told AFP.

Road accidents are relatively common in Nepal, due to poor surfaces, badly maintained vehicles and reckless driving.

At least 18 people including two children were killed in southeastern Nepal last month when a tractor pulling a trailer packed with pilgrims fell into a roadside canal.

Parliament will pass Lokpal bill: Advani

IANS, Ahmedabad

Senior Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leader LK Advani yesterday said that ultimately it would be parliament which would pass the Lokpal bill.

"We definitely need a strong and effective Lokpal, there are no two ways about it. But the fact remains that the Lokpal bill will be passed by the parliament only," Advani said.

"When we had met Anna Hazare and his team, we had pointed out some shortcomings in their version of the Lokpal bill which they admitted. Now I have no idea whether they have rectified any of those flaws or not," he added.

Death of a youth

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vehicles, set fire to some of those and fought street battles with law enforcers. Around 50 cocktails went off sending a wave of panic across the city.

Arif, a former cab driver who also received training to be an electrician, was waiting to go to Dubai as a skilled worker.

He was never engaged in any political activities, his mother said, although Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir, acting secretary general of BNP, insisted the 22-year-old was active in BNP politics.

His family, hailed from Shariatpur, supports Awami League, said Fatema and relatives.

"I woke him up around 7:00am. But he got angry and told me that he was supposed to go out at 6:00am," she said. "But he did not tell me where he was going."

Everyday, he usually woke up after 11:00am and went out in the afternoon, Fatema said about her slain son. "But the previous night he asked us to wake him up early in the morning, saying he had something important to do."

"I asked him to take breakfast before leaving," she said. But Arif said he was already late, and rushed out of their Siphahibagh residence.

He even did not have breakfast, she said as tears rolled down her cheeks.

Arif's sister Irin, a BBA student of Dhaka Model College, said she had received a telephone call from Dhaka Medical College Hospital around 11:00am.

There was an unknown person on the phone. Identifying himself as a policeman, he told her that her brother had suffered wounds in an accident.

"After we reached Dhaka Medical College Hospital around noon, we found him dead and came to know that he died in a bomb blast."

Arif had no link to any criminal activities. He was not a political activist either, Irin and her uncle Kabir Biplab told The Daily Star.

A top official of Dhaka Metropolitan Police (Motijheel division) said they have evidence that Arif was the carrier of the bomb that exploded killing him on the spot.

But contacted last night, Deputy Commissioner Anwar Hossain of DMP said they were not sure whether the youth was carrying a bomb or was killed by a bomb hurled by someone else.

AL blames

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His comments came a day after Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina accused BNP-Jamaat for all the 'mysterious killings'.

"The BNP-Jamaat alliance is carrying out these mysterious killings, murders and other criminal activities not only to protect the war criminals but also to destabilise the country," Hasina said at a discussion on Saturday.

"They will kill first and then start crying-- this is their characteristic," she observed.

Main opposition BNP earlier alleged that the AL government has taken up "secret killings" to gag the opposition.

Addressing the press conference, Hanif said when BNP-Jamaat coalition was in power they created and patronised militancy and blasted simultaneous bombs at 500 spots across the country, and now they have resorted to killings and violence to destabilise the country and democracy.

Hanif, also a special assistant to the prime minister, said people do not expect such heinous acts from the opposition. Rather, it is expected that the opposition would act reasonably to keep the country, democracy, and law and order stable.

He urged the BNP-Jamaat coalition to give up the politics of secret killings, violence and anarchy and come back to the healthy political practice.

He also urged the countermen to remain alert about the criminal activities of the opposition coalition.

Last US troops leave Iraq

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The war launched in March 2003 with missiles striking Baghdad to oust president Saddam Hussein closes with a fragile democracy still facing insurgents, sectarian tensions and the challenge of defining its place in an Arab region in turmoil.

The final column of around 100 mostly US military MRAP armoured vehicles carrying 500 US troops trundled across the southern Iraq desert from their last base through the night and daybreak along an empty highway to the Kuwaiti border.

Honking their horns, the last batch of around 25 American military trucks and tractor trailers carrying Bradley fighting vehicles crossed the border early yesterday morning, their crews waving at fellow troops along the route.

"I just can't wait to call my wife and kids and let them know I am safe," Sgt First Class Rodolfo Ruiz said

as the border came into sight. Soon afterwards, he told his men the mission was over, "Hey guys, you made it."

For US President Barack Obama, the military pullout is the fulfilment of an election promise to bring troops home from a conflict inherited from his predecessor, the most unpopular war since Vietnam and one that tainted America's standing worldwide.

For Iraqis, though, the US departure brings a sense of sovereignty tempered by nagging fears their country may slide once again into the kind of sectarian violence that killed many thousands of people at its peak in 2006-2007.

Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki's Shia-led government still struggles with a delicate power-sharing arrangement between Shia, Kurdish and Sunni parties, leaving Iraq vulnerable to meddling by Sunni Arab nations and Shia Iran.

The intensity of violence

Death toll 652

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The United States offered assistance to its former colony as the Philippine government and the Red Cross appealed for help to feed, clothe and house more than 35,000 people huddled in evacuation centres.

A 20,000-strong military force normally involved in fighting Muslim insurgents in Mindanao was leading rescue and relief operations.

A 30-member military and police rescue team landed yesterday in Bayug, a delta area near Iligan formerly home to a fishing community of up to 1,000 people, an AFP photographer saw.

The delta had been swept clean of most structures, leaving those left alive having to rebuild huts with scrap wood, and Lieutenant Colonel Efen Baluyot said only 43 people were known to have survived there.

Local freelance reporter Leonardo Vicente Corrales told AFP that rotting corpses were piling up unclaimed at mortuaries in Cagayan de Oro as overworked staff ran out of embalming fluid, coffins, and water to clean them.

"The bodies are decomposing too quickly because they are drowning victims -- because there is muddy water in their bodies," he said. One establishment, Somo

Funeral Homes, turned away the bodies of two drowned children. "We are already swamped. We only have four embalmers," its owner Ryan Somo told an AFP reporter.

The mayor of Cagayan de Oro, Vicente Emano, said he expected the death toll to reach 500 just in his city, which has a population of half a million.

The local authorities opened up fire hydrants and long lines soon formed as residents queued for fresh water.

In the hamlet of Macasandig, near Cagayan de Oro, teacher's wife Divilita Cuartero, 38, said she saw two dead bodies among the wreckage of houses near her own home, which was filled with mud from the nearby Cagayan river.

"I'm thankful that we woke up in time and were able to run toward the road, otherwise we would be dead by now," the mother of one told AFP.

The Philippine National Red Cross listed 346 deaths in Cagayan de Oro and 206 in Iligan. Smaller tolls were reported in other parts of Mindanao and the central province of Negros Oriental.

Gwendolyn Pang, the organisation's secretary general, said the 808 people listed as missing could be

and suicide bombings has subsided. But a stubborn Sunni Islamist insurgency and rival Shia militias remain a threat, carrying out almost daily attacks, often on Iraqi government and security officials.

GOING HOME

After Obama announced in October that troops would come home by the end of the year as scheduled, the number of US military bases was whittled down quickly as hundreds of troops and trucks carrying equipment headed south to Kuwait.

US forces, which had ended combat missions in 2010, paid \$100,000 a month to tribal sheikhs to secure stretches of the highways leading south to reduce the risk of roadside bombings and attacks on the last convoys.

Only around 150 US troops will remain in the country attached to a training and cooperation mission at the huge US embassy on the banks of the Tigris River.

trimmed as the death toll increased.

Authorities likened tropical storm Washi to Ketsana, one of the country's most devastating storms which dumped huge amounts of rain on Manila and other parts of the country in 2009, killing more than 460 people.

Philippine President Benigno Aquino has ordered a review of the country's disaster defences as it became apparent that residents were unprepared for such a deadly storm.

Ramos, the disaster agency chief, said the government faced a formidable task with 100,000 people needing help, including those who sought refuge at schools, government buildings and gyms.

The national government has begun airlifting mats, blankets and clothes to the affected populations of the south, he added.

Debris has to be cleared, electricity and drinking water have to be restored and damaged roads and bridges must be repaired, officials said.

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton sent condolences to the Philippines and said in a statement: "The US government stands ready to assist Philippine authorities as they respond to this tragedy."

Morning chaos

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including a police van, buses and taxicabs were torched, said Masudur Rahman, additional commissioner of Dhaka Metropolitan Police, (DMP).

Police detained 249 opposition activists in Shahbagh, Kakrail, Motijheel and Naya Palton areas, he said.

Five cases were filed late last night in connection with the violence in the capital. Arif's father Joynal Abedin filed a murder case with Motijheel Police Station without mentioning the name of any accused. Police filed two more cases in connection with the violence in Motijheel area.

Law enforcers filed another case with Palton Police Station against 250 unidentified people for torching a police van at Shantinagar.

Another case was filed with Mirpur Police Station against nine people for setting ablaze a public bus.

Police were preparing to file a few more cases, said DMP sources.

Witnesses and police sources said the first procession was brought out at 5:45 am by a group of Jamaat-Islami workers near the Institution of Engineers, Bangladesh.

The mostly young activists came out in silence under the cover of fog before baton-wielding police noticed them and soon dispersed the crowd. According to some witness accounts, police also used tear gas and rubber bullets during the clash.

The violence then spread to other areas in central Dhaka.

Similar violence also erupted outside the capital with the opposition activists torching at least 10 vehicles across the country. A man died when some unruly people torched two vehicles in Sylhet city, where 22 other

vehicles were vandalised, police said.

The government and the opposition blamed each other for the violence.

Home Minister Shahara Khatun held opposition leader Khaleda Zia responsible for arson and bomb attack in the capital and Sylhet.

"Khaleda was doing all these in a bid to foil the ongoing trial of war criminals," she alleged.

Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir, acting secretary general of BNP, accused the government of plotting the violence to what he said foil the party's reception for the freedom fighters where BNP chief Khaleda Zia was the chief guest.

Khaleda held a meeting with senior party leaders later in the night at her Gulshan residence to discuss the violence and the latest political situation.

Arifuzzaman Arif was rushed to Dhaka Medical College Hospital where doctors declared him dead. A resident of Uttar Goran, Arif was a trainee motor driver, his family said.

Irene Sultana, younger sister of the deceased, claimed Arif was not involved with any political party. The BNP acting secretary general, however, claimed Arif was his party worker.

Sanowar Hossain, assistant commissioner of DMP, also a member of bomb disposal unit, told The Daily Star that a primary investigation found that the deceased was carrying the bomb.

He said the bomb went off in his hand after he tumbled down while crossing the road divider.

Traffic flow in Motijheel area thinned following the incident.

Meanwhile, a group of youths torched a police van at Shantinagar at 7:30am and later vandalised a number of

vehicles and shops in the same area at around 10:10am, locals said.

The opposition activists also clashed with police in Farmgate area around 11:00pm when police tried to stop them from the rampage.

Around 12:00 noon, at least seven cocktails exploded in front of BNP central office and nearby Polwel super market at Nayapalton.

Ayub Ali, driver of a RTV television vehicle, suffered injuries there. Police, however, recovered a live cocktail from a lane opposite to BNP office.

After the Motijheel incident, police locked the main gate of BNP central office and took position before it.

In between 11:30am and 02:00pm, cocktails went off in front of Ruposhi Bangla hotel and Birdem at Shahbagh, Kataban and National Sports Council at Palton. The demonstrators torched and vandalised some vehicles in Gabtoli.

Another two cocktails exploded in front of the Jatiya Press Club at around 2:00pm when BNP leaders went there.

Two activists of Jatiyatabadi Chhatra Dal (JCD) Titumir College unit were picked up when they were locked in chase and counter-chase with police, said Shah Alam, officer-in-charge of Gulshan Police Station.

During the clash, the JCD activists also hurled stones at police, leaving Shah Alam injured.

Bangladesh Chhatra League, student wing of the ruling Awami League, brought out a procession around 1:30pm from Dhaka University premises, protesting the violence. The BCL activists also blamed the violence on BNP.

BNP will stage demonstration across the country today protesting the incident.

Prime suspect

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the prize money, they have to send credits to a certain mobile phone number, police said.

Rubel, 18, Belayet, 23, Kaiyum, 32, Sobhan, 19, and Fayeze, 23, were abducted from Maligram Bazar of Bhanga upazila in the district on December 6. They are still traceless.

On Thursday, Rafiqul Islam, nephew of Rubel, at a press conference said one Nirob of Algadia village under Nagarkanda upazila called Sobhan over the phone around 2:30pm on December 6 and asked the 19-year-old to go to Maligram Bazar.

As Sobhan along with Rubel, Belayet and Fayeze reached there, the gang hustled them in a microbus.

Police said this Nirob is none other than the arrested, Syed Masum. His brother Mobin, picked up by law enforcers Saturday, during interrogation said Nirob is not Masum's real name and that he is a member of the Welcome Party.

Indian Khasias

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along with three others went near the border yesterday morning when he was caught by some armed Khasias. His companions managed to escape the scene.

Later the Khasias shot him dead inside the Indian territory.

On information, the Dibir haor camp commander of the BGB protested the incident with the BSF at a meeting along the border at 4:30pm. BSF gave an assurance that the body would be returned.

Appointment

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the country as per article 59 of the constitution.

The Supreme Court in a verdict issued a guideline in 1992 saying that elected representatives will run the local government institutions, they added.

But the government appointed 61 district council administrators as per section 82 (1) of Zila Parishad Act 2000, which is contradictory to the constitution, the petitioners said.

After holding a brief hearing on the petition, the HC yesterday adjourned the hearing for three days, as the petitioners could not place the gazette notification on the appointment of district council administrators.

The vacation bench of the HC comprised of Justice Mirza Hussain Haider and Justice Md Mojibur Rahman Miah asked the petitioners' counsels to place a copy of the gazette notification in three days before the court.

Secretaries to the ministries of local government and rural development and law, public administration secretary and prime minister's office secretary have been made respondents to the writ petition.

Advocate Md Sowe Uddin Khan appeared for the petitioners.

Faulty seats

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Biman had to suffer a huge loss due to this wait as it could not get the go-ahead from the Civil Aviation Authority of Bangladesh. This is because Biman could not obtain the custom clearance certificate for its failure to pay the Tk 80 lakh duty.

Officials said the state-owned airlines needs to pay Tk 20 crore as instalment every month to repay the bank loan for Arun Alo.

Dhaka

**FROM PAGE 1**  
Dinajpur, Kurigram and Meherpur districts -- three of them were killed in Indian territory and another in Bangladesh.