

# Taliban back Western peace proposal

## Agree to open office in Qatar

BBC ONLINE

The Taliban said yesterday that they have reached a preliminary agreement to set up a political office, possibly in Qatar, as part of Western plans to end the war.

A statement confirmed the move, which has been backed by Afghan President Hamid Karzai.

Both the US and Germany have been pushing for such a representation in an effort to kick-start negotiations.

The office is seen by some as a key step towards ending the 10-year-long conflict in Afghanistan.

The move was welcomed by the Afghan High Peace Council, which is seeking a negotiated end to the war, as "a gesture of good faith".

But it still remains unclear if the insurgents, who claim to be winning the war, are prepared to engage in truly meaningful peace talks - and whether they could take place while international forces continue to kill Taliban fighters and commanders, says the BBC's Quentin Sommerville in Kabul.

In their statement, the insurgents said

Afghanistan's "current problem" began with the US-led invasion of 2001 and "the two main sides which were involved in this are the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan [Taliban] and on the other side is the United States and their foreign allies".

It said the Taliban movement "always tries to solve the issue or the problem with the opposite side through talks" and warned the Western coalition that they would "never force the Afghans to obey them by force".

"For the sake of a better understanding with the internationals, we have an initial understanding to have a political office - including in the country of Qatar."

The statement added that they wanted prisoners released from the US-run detention centre in Guantanamo Bay, as part of a deal.

And it also rejected as false reports by "Western press and officials" about negotiations.

The agreement to set up the liaison office would give the group an address where negotiators could meet, says our Kabul correspondent, and some see this agreement as a critical step.

# France calls for more sanctions

## Tehran warns US aircraft carrier to stay away from Gulf

AFP, Paris

French Foreign Minister Alain Juppe said yesterday that Iran was continuing to develop nuclear weapons and called for stronger sanctions against Tehran as Iran warned US.

"Iran is pursuing the development of its nuclear arms, I have no doubt about it," he told French television I-Tele. "The last report by the International Atomic Energy Agency is quite explicit on this point."

"This is why France, without closing the path of negotiation and dialogue with Iran, wants stricter sanctions," he added.

He said French President Nicolas Sarkozy has proposed a freezing of assets of Iran's central bank and an embargo on exports of Iranian oil, a move also being considered by the European Union.

Meanwhile, a US aircraft carrier currently deployed in the Middle East should "not return" to its base in the

## Strait of Hormuz

World's biggest oil transit waterway "chokepoint"



Gulf, the head of Iran's armed forces declared yesterday, adding ominously there would be no repeat warning.

"We advise and insist that this warship not return to its former base in the Persian Gulf," Brigadier General Ataollah Salehi told reporters, according to the armed forces website.

"We don't have the intention of repeat-

ing our warning, and we warn only once," he was quoted as saying.

The warning came just one day after Iran's navy completed 10 days of manoeuvres at the entrance to the Gulf with the test-firing of three missiles designed to sink warships.

The aircraft carrier Salehi was referring to was the USS John C Stennis, one of the US navy's biggest vessels.

The US vessel last week passed through the Strait heading east across the Gulf of Oman and through a zone where the Iranian navy

was holding its manoeuvres. The US Defence Department said the passage was "routine."

The United States keeps at least one aircraft carrier in or near the Gulf at all times, on rotations of weeks or months. It maintains the base of its Fifth Fleet in the Gulf state of Bahrain.



## Iran jails ex-president's daughter

BBC ONLINE

The daughter of the former Iranian President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani has been sentenced to six months in prison for "making propaganda against the ruling system".

Faezeh Hashemi Rafsanjani's trial took place behind closed doors last month.

According to the conservative website Mashregh News, she has been banned from taking part in political, cultural and media activities for five years.

She has 20 days to appeal against the sentence.

Correspondents say that her punishment may be turned into a suspended jail term on appeal, as often happens with opponents of the Iranian authorities.

Faezah Rafsanjani has given interviews in recent months in which she defended her father's position - and this appears to be her offence. Akbar Rafsanjani has refused to condemn Iran's two most prominent pro-reform leaders.

Faezah Rafsanjani is a former MP and the most politically active of Rafsanjani's children. She was briefly detained in February 2011 after taking part in a banned protest march.

The former president's political influence has decreased in recent years.

He now retains only one political position, as head of the Expediency Council, but his term there ends in April and it is unclear whether he will keep that role.

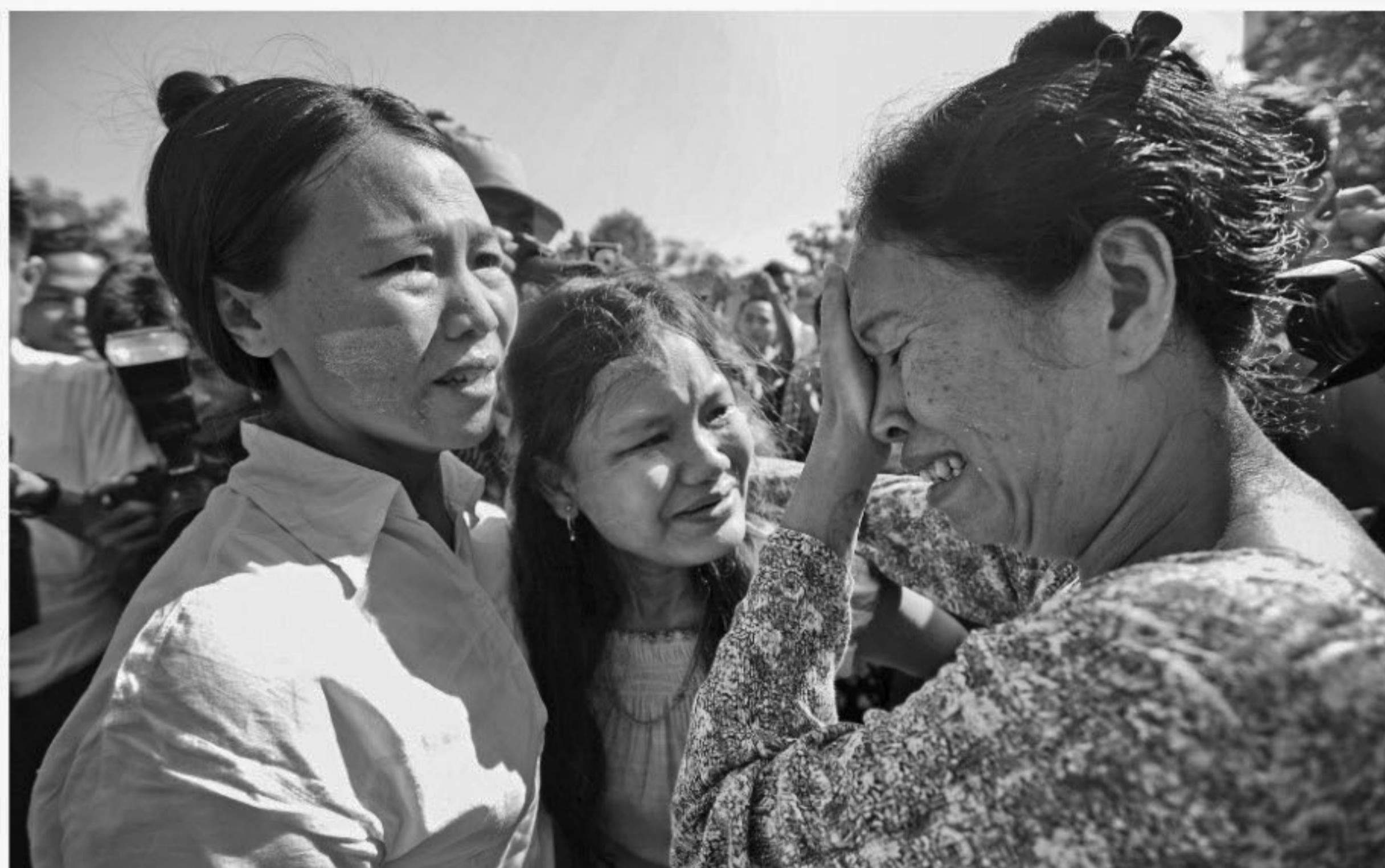
## Jordan hosts Middle East peace talks

AFP, Amman

Israeli and Palestinian negotiators gathered in the Jordanian capital Amman yesterday for their first face-to-face meeting in 16 months but both sides insisted full-blown talks remained some way off.

Jordanian Foreign Minister Nasser Judeh, who was to host the meeting between Israel's chief negotiator Yitzhak Molcho and his Palestinian counterpart Saeb Erakat, said it was a "serious" bid to help relaunch moribund peace talks.

Quartet envoy Tony Blair was also to attend the session, along with other officials of the grouping, made up of the European Union, Russia, the United Nations and the United States.



Relatives react upon the release of a Myanmar prisoner from Insein prison in Yangon yesterday. Activists and Myanmar's opposition expressed frustration after an order to cut jail terms for all inmates appeared to fall far short of hopes for an amnesty for political detainees. Prisoner releases began after the army-backed government announced a general reduction to sentences, but failed to mention the plight of top dissidents.

PHOTO: AFP

## Probe body formed

FROM PAGE 20

distribution in some areas. The submission of the investigative report is due within seven working days said Education Minister Nurul Islam Nahid at a press briefing held at the secretariat.

The minister warned that punitive actions would be taken against those involved in irregularities in textbook distribution.

The government is capable of finding out whether the textbooks meant for free distribution are sold in the market and would take stern action against those involved, he said.

The government on January 1 started the distribution of around 22.13 crore copies of textbooks among 3.12 crore students from primary and secondary levels.

The minister said as educational institutions were closed for holidays after the

annual examinations, many students are yet to get admitted for the next session which is why they are not getting the books on time.

Nahid also directed the district and upazila education officers to supervise the textbook distribution.

Headed by joint secretary (secondary) of the education ministry, the other members of the committee are director (secondary) of Directorate of Secondary and Higher Education (DSHE), member (text) of National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB), deputy secretary of primary and mass education ministry and deputy director of Directorate of Primary Education.

Education Secretary Dr Kamal Abdul Naser Chowdhury, NCTB Chairman Prof Mostofa Kamal Uddin and DSHE Director General Prof Noman-ur-Rashid were also present at the briefing.

## ACC enquiry

FROM PAGE 1

The enquiry found that the compensation was given (to UK firm Edmund Nuttal Ltd) by the then BNP-led alliance government in addition to the construction cost in compliance with the rules, regulations and conditions of the contract.

"There is no evidence that criminal intention influenced the process of compensation. It was given under specific circumstances and following proper procedure," ACC Chairman Gulam Rahman told The Daily Star yesterday.

Construction of the Tk 400 crore bridge began during the tenure of the previous Awami League government in 1999 and ended in 2002 when BNP headed by Khaleda was in power.

"There was nothing wrong in the activities of the government to deal with the issue of compensation," read an ACC

document prepared after evaluating its probe report.

"A government has to take a lot of decisions to keep the state running. In this case, the decision of compensation for the company was not influenced by any individual interest," said a top official of the ACC, requesting anonymity.

Meanwhile, the anti-graft body last year exempted Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina from two allegations as enquiries found those baseless.

The ACC, however, filed a fresh case last year against Khaleda, leader of the opposition in parliament.

"Development activities of the state might face serious impediment in future if the activities (of BNP-led government) concerning Bhairab bridge) are considered to be corruption only on the ground of "time-barred," read the ACC document.

Primarily, the consultant for construction of the bridge rejected the compensation demand on the ground of being "time-barred." And it is the only ground the probe found concerning charges of misappropriation of public money against the then prime minister.

The construction firm had demanded compensation of 17.847 million pounds on 13 grounds on different occasions during construction of the bridge. Though the demands were made following due procedure, the firm failed to produce details of the grounds within the stipulated 28 day - time.

Following refusal to pay the compensation, the matter was taken to the Dispute Adjudication Board, which decided payment of 11.503 million pounds in compensation. Both the government and the UK firm refused to accept the decision.

Then on the advice of legal experts and others concerned in the law ministry, the matter was settled amicably and a compensation of 8.60 lakh pounds was paid to the firm.

## EVM ready for use

FROM PAGE 1

The election commission (EC) officials here received all the required EVMs yesterday, and they will start distributing the machines to all presiding officers from 10:00am today.

Returning Officer Abdul Baten yesterday said experts from Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (Buet) will be present at every centre to solve any problem, if arises, instantly.

"All EVMs and webcams will be sent to all centre by today," he said, adding that each voter is now aware about the EVM and there is no possibility of facing problems while casting votes.

This is the first time the commission is going to use

the EVM in the entire polling in any elections in the country. It will use 421 machines in as many booths in 65 polling centres. Besides, 65 more will be kept reserved on the polling day.

The main opposition BNP decided not to back any candidate in the Comilla City Corporation polls as the EC turned down its demands for army deployment and not using EVM.

Earlier, the party had boycotted the election of Narayanganj City Corporation at the last moment on the same ground.

Considering the political controversy that the common people would not be

able to cast their votes through EVM, the election commission conducted a massive campaign in last one and half months to inform the voters about the system.

The EC officials have been organising programmes to educate voters about the EVM showing videos on large display panels at different public places in the city.

A total of 1,69,273 voters including 86,074 females will exercise their mandate on tomorrow's election to elect a mayor and 36 ward councillors.

Nine aspirants are fighting for the mayoral post while 287 are contesting the posts of ward councillors.

## BCL men swoop on Jagannath protesters

FROM PAGE 1

The Chhatra League activists then swooped on them, which triggered a clash that lasted until 10:30am.

Later, different left-leaning students' organisations under the banner of Pragotishel Chhatra Jote joined the demonstration around 11:00am.

Led by Chhatra League leader Saiful Islam Akondo, hundreds of Chhatra League activists attacked the demonstrators again.

Chhatra Front President Shariful Chowdhury, General Secretary Masud Rana, Chhatra Union Convener Faruk Ahmed Abir, Chhatra Federation President Tahmida Islam Tania, and students Mehrab Azad, Emrul Hasan and Morshed Khan were among those injured.

According to JnU officials, they were charging Tk 14,400, Tk 13,400, Tk 13,000 and Tk 9,200 for admission to A, B, C and D units for the 2011-12 academic year. They said the fees included the Tk 5,000

development fee.

Terming the students' demand illogical, Vice-Chancellor Prof Mesbahuddin Ahmed said the students have to pay the fee for the sake of continuation of various development activities on campus.

The VC also criticised the students for holding the demonstration.

Police said none was detained and no case was filed in this connection.

Meanwhile, two cases were lodged Monday night against around 350 people, including teachers and students, in connection with the daylong violence on the Kuet campus on Monday, reports our Khulna correspondent.

Kuet Teachers' Association yesterday issued an ultimatum to the vice-chancellor of the university that its six-point demand be met by January 8. The demands include expulsion of those involved in Monday's vio-

lence and attack on Kuet Teachers' Association President Mohammad Arif.

SM Zubair Siraj, a student of the electrical engineering department, was the complainant of the first case lodged with Khanjahan Ali Police Station of Khulna City at 11:00pm. He accused 40 people and 200 unidentified people of having been behind the violence.

Kuet Teachers' Association President Mohammad Arif and three other teachers were among the 40 accused in the case, said Sub-Inspector (SI) Shajib Rahman, investigating officer of the case.

The complainant of the case is a leader of the Kuet unit of Bangladesh Chhatra League, the SI said.

The second case was lodged around 11:30pm by Sub-Inspector Abdul Hye against 300 unidentified people in connection with attacking on-duty police. Kuet Teachers' Association

held an emergency meeting at its office on the campus yesterday.

The meeting demanded the immediate withdrawal of the names of four teachers from the first case and expulsion of the students involved in the attack on Prof Mohammad Arif.

The Khulna city unit of Bangladesh Chhatra League in a press statement Monday night accused some teachers and cadres of Jatiyatabadi Chhatra Dal and Islami Chhatra Shibir for the violence on the campus.

However, Khulna city unit BNP, Chhatra Union, Chhatra Shibir and Samajtantrik Chhatra Front issued press statements yesterday denying their involvement.

VC Prof Muhammad Alamgir Hossain in an emergency meeting with all deans, department heads, directors and dormitory provosts decided to form a committee to probe Monday's violence.

## White House race begins

AFP, Des Moines

The process of choosing a new US president begins every four years with the Iowa caucuses, a ritual seen by some as peculiar, but which is pivotal in shaping the field of White House hopefuls.

Voters in this largely rural midwestern state was scheduled to gather late yesterday in church basements, school auditoriums and even in some private homes for one of the US electoral calendar's quirkiest but most important electoral events.

Republican voters will make their choice of a nominee to oppose Barack Obama in the November presidential election, while Democrats in separate caucus gatherings will affirm Obama as their candidate for a second four-year term.

The lead-off state in America's election marathon since 1972, Iowa has what some critics say is an outsized role in determining the eventual nominees in November's general election.

The half-dozen Republican hopefuls vying for their party's presidential nomination all have spent considerable time in Iowa, in the months -- in some cases, years -- before Tuesday's caucuses to woo voters.

The state is among a handful to hold the more personal caucuses, rather than primaries. Viewed as "gatherings of neighbors," participants must publicly state their support for the candidate of their choice.

The ritual -- requiring that voters venture from home on a frigid winter's night to sit through hours of speeches about the candidates before casting their ballot -- ensures that only the most dedicated partisans take part.

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