

# Assad to take part in polls

Europe set to arm rebels as regime forces retakes key supply road

AFP, Damascus

Close Damascus ally Iran yesterday said that President Bashar al-Assad will take part in Syria's presidential election next year and that the people will choose whomever they want as their leader.

Meanwhile, dozens of troops and rebels were killed in a ferocious dawn battle on the outskirts of a strategic city near the Turkish border, while the army said it had recaptured an important highway leading to second city Aleppo.

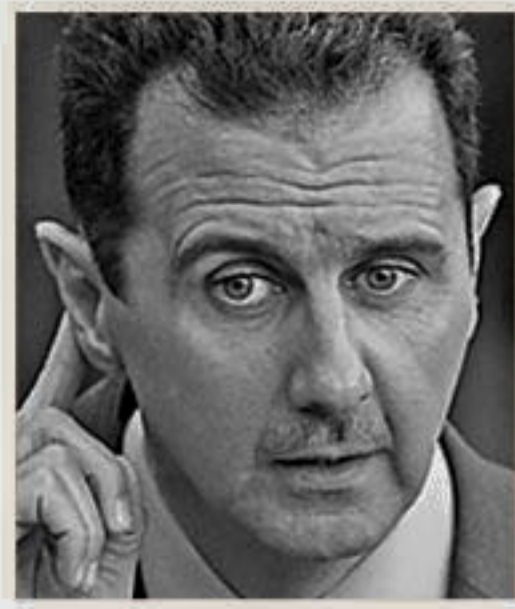
Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Muallem was in Tehran yesterday for talks aimed at ending the nearly two-year conflict that the United Nations says has killed at least 70,000 people.

At a press conference with Muallem, Iranian Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Salehi said that, "in the next election, President Assad, like others, will take part, and the Syrian people will elect whomever they want."

Meanwhile, he said, the "official position of Iran is that... Assad will remain legitimate president until the next... election" in 2014, said Salehi.

The Syrian minister condemned the announcement by US Secretary of State John Kerry on Thursday that Washington would provide \$60 million in "non-lethal" assistance to support the Syrian political opposition.

Meanwhile, the representative of the Syrian opposi-



tion in Britain said some European countries are expected to break with Washington and start supplying the Syrian rebels with weapons in the next few months.

The National Coalition's London representative, Walid Saffour, predicted that by the next meeting of the western and Arab Friends of Syria group in Turkey, due in late spring or early summer, "there will be a breakthrough that will end the restrictions of the European countries".

Russian leader Vladimir Putin and US President Barack Obama discussed Syria and other urgent issues by telephone Friday, the Kremlin said, noting that the call was initiated by Washington.

"Within the context of the Syria crisis, Putin noted the need to end military activities as soon as possible," the Kremlin statement said.

The statements come as Syria's army said it seized control of a road leading from Hama in the centre of the country to Aleppo international airport, scene since mid-February of fierce battles pitting troops against rebel fighters.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights confirmed the report, adding that the road is significant because it will allow new troop deployments and supplies to reach the area surrounding Aleppo international airport and nearby Nayrab military airport.

# CHAVEZ HEALTH CONDITION Venezuela rejects his death rumours

REUTERS, Caracas

Senior aides and relatives of Venezuela's Hugo Chavez countered a crescendo of rumours that the socialist president may be dead from cancer, saying he was still battling for his life.

"There he is, continuing his fight, his battle, and we are sure of victory!" his older brother Adan Chavez, the governor of Barinas state, told cheering supporters on Friday.

Speculation about Chavez, 58, hit fever pitch this week, fed in part by assertions from Panama's former ambassador to the Organization of American States (OAS), Guillermo Cochez, that the Venezuelan leader had died. He challenged officials to prove him wrong by showing the president in public.

"The launching of absurd and bizarre rumours by the right wing simply discredits them and isolates them further from the people," said Chavez's son-in-law Jorge Arreaza, adding that the president was "calm" in a hospital with his family and doctors.

Vice President Nicolas Maduro, the OPEC nation's de facto leader and Chavez's preferred successor, urged Venezuelans to stay calm, patient and respectful of the president's state.

"The treatments Commander Chavez is receiving are tough, but he is stronger than them," Maduro said after a Catholic Mass in Chavez's honour at a chapel in the hospital.



# War trial won't stop

FROM PAGE 20

opposition leader's stance on the war crimes trial.

"It is unfortunate that the leader of the opposition stood against the people's aspirations.... When the whole country is raising its voice for the trial of war criminals, she [Khaleda] is favouring the war criminals," she mentioned.

Jamaat and Shibir can enforce hartals as they do not believe in the independence of the country. But how can the opposition leader call a hartal when the SSC examinations are underway, ques-

tioned the prime minister.

Khaleda Zia has isolated herself from the people by not paying any heed to the people's voice, noted Hasina.

She urged the opposition leader to listen to the demands of the people and stand by them.

The prime minister castigated Khaleda's recent visit to Singapore, saying that the trip was aimed at hatching a plot to foil the trial of the war criminals.

"We liberated the country by sacrificing blood. I can assert that there will be no room for razakars, Al-

Badr and Al-Shams on this soil," she said.

**JAMAAT DOESN'T BELIEVE IN ISLAM**

Blasting Jamaat-Shibir, the prime minister said they do not believe in Islam, rather they believe in the ideology of Jamaat founder Abu Ala Moududi.

"Can any Muslim desecrate a mosque, humiliate an imam and burn a prayer mat in the mosque?" she asked.

Jamaat and Shibir, said the AL chief, had killed people in 1971 and they are still resorting to killings, looting and arson.

Hasina mentioned that

her government has taken action against those who have profaned Hazrat Muhammad (SM) and will do the same in future. "We never tolerated any disgraceful comments about our beloved Prophet Hazrat Muhammad (SM) and we will not allow them [Jamaat-Shibir] now."

The prime minister laid the foundation stones of the Seventh Bangladesh-China Friendship Bridge (Kazirtek bridge) on the Arial Kha and three other bridges.

Regarding the local demand for an international airport, the premier

said the government will examine the economic viability of the airport on this side of the Padma and decide accordingly.

AL leaders Shahajahan Khan, AFM Bahauddin Nasim and Ahmed Hossain spoke, among others.

**PADMA BRIDGE WITH OWN FUND**

Inaugurating the river training work of the Padma bridge project near the Jazira site at East Naodoba of Shariatpur, the prime minister said the bridge would be constructed with local funds. The government will allocate Tk 20,000 crore in four years

for constructing the bridge.

Besides, negotiations have been going on with several countries including Malaysia over financing the project, she added.

The construction of the main bridge will follow the construction of the approach roads within a few months, noted Hasina.

The government, she said, has enough foreign exchange reserves and there will be no negative impact on the economy if the bridge is built with own funds.

Conspiracies were hatched from the very beginning of the mega project, but the government has dealt with all of them, she maintained.

The AL chief urged people to vote for her party in the next general election to continue the development projects.

Communications Minister Obaidul Quader and Deputy Speaker Col (ret) Shawkat Ali spoke, among others.

# Shun hartal

FROM PAGE 1

of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industry.

"The law and order situation is deteriorating by the day, which is hurting the image of the country," the statement says.

"If the political unrest continues, the inflow of foreign direct investment and employment will cruelly be compromised."

The shutdown will severely hamper transportation of goods in all land and sea ports, much to the frustration of exporters, the business leaders said.

"The export of garment items is rebounding now after months. Plus, orders are shifting from China to Bangladesh. Now is our time, so we do not want

any more hartals," said Shafiul Islam Mohiuddin, president of Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA).

"The economy has been progressing despite the country's limitations, global financial meltdown and stiff competition globally. To retain the momentum, political tolerance is imperative," the business leaders said in the joint statement.

The business community also said the political parties should consult them for an amiable solution.

"We are asking the businessmen to think of an alternative to hartal. The hartals will destroy the economy," Ahmed told The

Daily Star after the meeting.

AK Azad, the immediate past president of the FBCCI, told The Daily Star that they will observe the political situation for a few days.

"If it further deteriorates we will sit together soon to take a decision as our backs are against the wall now," Azad said.

In another joint statement, the BGMEA and Bangladesh Knitwear Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BKMEA) said many garment factories will face discounts, order cancellation, deferred payments due to not being able to make shipments on time.

The garment sector is challenged by the double-dip recession in the

European Union, the troubled US economy, weak infrastructure, gas and power crises, higher production costs, price reduction of exportable items, appreciation of the taka against the dollar and threat of cancellation of the GSP.

Terming the frequent hartal programme suicidal, the leaders of the trade bodies said many industries will face closure if the political shutdown continues for long.

"Hartals during such a critical time will foreign the country's main foreign currency-earning sector."

"As a result, many employees will lose their jobs, which will affect the socio-economic balance of the society," the statement

said, while urging the political leaders to resolve the crisis through discussion.

At a media briefing, Baharine Sultan Bahar, president of Jago Bangladesh Garment Sramik Federation, a platform for garment workers, said the garment sector will face severe challenges because of the political unrest.

"I fear that the international buyers will shift their orders to other countries if the political situation does not improve immediately," Bahar said.

The businesses also expressed sympathy over the death of nearly 50 people, including police personnel, in the countrywide violence over the last few days.

# Khaleda Zia & 'genocide'

FROM PAGE 1

nationalist sentiments of the people of Bangladesh.

The acting secretary general of her party, the BNP, has warned, in old, time-worn manner, that any assault on the sentiments of the majority, meaning Muslims, population of the country will not be tolerated.

Meanwhile, efforts are being made by insidious elements across the country to paint the legitimate, patriotic protests at Shahbagh's Projonmo Chottor as a coming together of atheists. In death, Ahmad Haider Rajib is being demonised by the

sands of young Bangalees who, in a bold demonstration of loyalty to the founding principles of Bangladesh, have only asked that the war criminals of 1971 pay for their misdeeds.

Khaleda Zia, as a former prime minister, should have known better than to misinterpret these recent deaths of individuals as an act of genocide. Since its founding in 1979, BNP has never found it necessary to draw attention to the genocide which left three million people dead in the war against Pakistan in 1971.

Khaleda Zia and her party seem to have never understood the feelings of a nation which has made it known, over the decades, that anyone who undermined the Bangalee struggle in 1971 will not have a respectable place in Bangladesh's history. In

effect, the BNP and its leadership, by clearly taking the side of the Jamaat in this on-going movement for the war criminals to be brought to justice, have chosen to pit themselves against history. There are even young elements in the BNP who feel distinctly uncomfortable with the path their leaders have chosen for the party.

The discomfort extends to the rest of the country when Mirza Fakhru Islam Alamgir chooses to play the religion card in this struggle for the soul of the country. His attempt to denigrate the Shahbagh movement as one aimed against Islam comes in tandem with the attacks on Hindu homes and families by violent activists of the Jamaat. The BNP did not have to pander to the whims of an angry, petulant Jamaat. It could have demonstrated its under-

standing of contemporary political realities by empathising with the young. It could have been the party's chance to pull itself away from its controversial links with an organisation which remains condemned in history.

By opting to be with the Jamaat and so condone its vandalism, by stoking the old, outmoded Pakistani slogan of Islam being in danger, by refusing to listen to the voices of those who will be tomorrow's leaders, Khaleda Zia, Alamgir and their loyalists have further distanced themselves from the nation. They have failed to distinguish between their need to be on the right side of history and their terms of endearment for the Jamaat.

Khaleda Zia has said nothing about the burning of the national flag by

Jamaat activists. Mirza Alamgir has spoken not a word about the damage to shaheed minars across the country by Jamaat goons. But they now see genocide being perpetrated and Islam being undermined in the country.

Genocide was what the Pakistan occupation army carried out, in association with the Jamaat, in 1971. And Islam was grievously assaulted by the Pakistan army when its soldiers killed God-fearing Bangalees, raped their women and left copies of the Holy Quran burning in the villages they pillaged. The Holy Prophet and his religion were humiliated when the Jamaat and its murder squads picked up good citizens, tortured them to an agonising death and dumped their corpses in desolate brickfields.

The BNP is in grave need of soul-searching.

# NEWS IN brief

## Obama to visit Russia in September

AFP, Washington

US President Barack Obama will visit Saint Petersburg for September's G20 summit and will also hold a meeting with President Vladimir Putin at the G8 summit in Northern Ireland in June.

The White House made the announcement Friday after the leaders spoke by phone to discuss the Syria crisis amid testy relations between Russia and the United States, which have deteriorated.

## Al-Qaeda's top leader killed in Mali

AFP, Bamako

Al-Qaeda's top commander in Mali has been killed, Chadian President Idriss Deby Itno said, signalling a significant blow to the rebels in the seven-week French-led intervention against Islamist insurgents.

Several newspapers in Abou Zeid's native Algeria had reported his death and Washington

## Sick UK queen cancels Wales visit

AFP, London

Britain's Queen Elizabeth II has cancelled a planned visit to Wales yesterday due to a bout of gastroenteritis, a Buckingham Palace spokesman said.

The 86-year-old monarch had been due to attend a military celebration in the city of Swansea to mark St David's Day, the national day of Wales.

"She is experiencing symptoms of gastroenteritis. The queen is currently spending the weekend in Windsor as usual," a spokesman told AFP on Friday.

## Bullet train derails in Japan

AFP, Tokyo

A Japanese bullet train carrying about 130 passengers and crew derailed in heavy snow in northern Japan yesterday, although there were no reports of injuries, media reports said.

The first car of the "Komachi" No 25 bullet train came off the rails on the high-speed Akita Shinkansen line in Akita, Japan's national broadcaster NHK and other media said.

## Saudi arrests 176 protesters

AFP, Riyadh

Saudi police have arrested 176 people, including 15 women, for holding an illegal protest to demand the release of Islamist prisoners, the official SPA news agency reported late Friday.

The agency, quoting a police spokesman, said protesters were arrested "after refusing to break up a gathering outside the offices of the investigation bureau and the prosecution in Buraida," in central Saudi Arabia.

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