

Hasina

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measures to hold the next general election under a neutral administration.

Pointing to the demand, the PM warned the leader of the opposition about the "minus-two formula", an alleged plot during the tenure of the last caretaker regime to end the political career of both Hasina and Khaleda.

She added, "Those whom you [Khaleda] want to see in power will never leave if they can take power this time. We should not forget that those who want to take power as the third force were the architects of the minus-two formula."

"You suffered a lot and so did we. Therefore, we all have to stay alert so that the architects of the minus-two formula cannot come to power again. In a democratic system, only those whom the people vote for will assume power."

Sheikh Hasina said the next election will be held in a free and fair manner like the local government polls during the tenure of her administration.

The Election Commission is independent enough to hold free and fair polls. It is also independent financially. "I, therefore, urge the opposition to keep faith in the government as well as keep faith, confidence and trust in people."

Hasina said despite her administration's massive development activities in all cities, the ruling Awami League-backed candidates lost the recent polls to four city corporations as the elections were fair. "And we congratulated the opposition-

backed winners".
Defending her demand for the caretaker government system while in opposition in 1996, Hasina said the Awami League at the time pressed for it as the then BNP government had failed to hold free and fair elections.

In this regard, the PM mentioned the Magura by-election and some other elections held under BNP rule in 1991-96.

She added that the BNP's election model was "10 motorbikes, 20 hooligans, and the election was finished."

"On the other hand, our movement was aimed at protecting the people's rights to vote and food and it earned people's support." She said 2,500 people were killed at the UP elections during the BNP's tenure and every election was marked by massive rigging and election engineering.

Responding to the opposition leader's criticism over the Hall-Mark and sharemarket scams, the PM said, "Tanveer Mahmud of Hall-Mark scam was affiliated with the Hawa Bhaban [former political office of Khaleda and Zia Parishad [pro-BNP organisation].

If her [Khaleda] favourite Mosaddeq Ali Falu and Badal [Lutfar Rahman] are caught then it could be known where the money of the capital market has siphoned off."

On the claim that several thousand Hefajat men were killed by law enforcers at Shapla Chattar on May 5, the premier said the opposition was engaged in "information terrorism."

She also launched a blis-

tering attack on Khaleda Zia and her two sons over their corruption during the past BNP-Jamaat government.

On the cancellation of the World Bank's funds for the Padma bridge project, Hasina, without mentioning any name, said her government had not bowed down to the pressure for keeping a particular gentleman as managing director of a bank.

The WB brought allegations of "conspiracy of corruption" in the wake of a row over who would remain the MD, she alleged.

The prime minister categorically said the Padma bridge construction would start within the tenure of her government with its own funds.

She criticised the development partners for cancelling their funds for the Padma bridge project.

8 troops killed in Thai south blast

AFP, Bangkok

Eight soldiers were killed by a roadside bomb in Thailand's restive south early yesterday morning, an army spokesman said, raising questions over the durability of a fragile peace process aiming to end the near-decade long insurgency.

More than 5,700 people have been killed in a festering insurgency in Thailand's Muslim-majority southern provinces, but optimism for peace has flickered recently after talks between authorities and some rebel groups including the Barisan Revolusi Nasional.

Money whitening scope widens

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bill amid boycott by the opposition.

In the outgoing fiscal year, scope was given to people to whiten money by paying an additional 10 percent tax along with the normal tax. However, the National Board of Revenue had the authority to question the source of the undisclosed money.

As part of efforts to encourage investment, a provision has been introduced to the effect that no question will be raised about the source of the money if it is invested in

industries and other productive sectors.

The package VAT on small traders and shopkeepers will come down by Tk 1,000 from what had been proposed earlier.

With the aim of ensuring fire safety in garment industries, import duty on fire safety equipment has been lowered to 5 percent from the existing 10 to 15 percent.

The government has also withdrawn the proposal for an increase in supplementary duty on bidi by 10 and 5 percent depending on the number of sticks in each

packet.

Supplementary duty of 100, 30 and 60 percent has been slapped on imported biscuits, woven fabrics, and hair care products.

Hybrid cars up to 1800cc have been kept outside the purview of supplementary duty, while in the outgoing fiscal year, hybrid cars up to 2500cc were free from the duty.

The government has also retained VAT waiver on plastic and aluminium utensils and household items, though it had earlier proposed withdrawing the waiver.

Nasa tests Mars rover prototype in Chile

AFP, Santiago

Nasa scientists said Friday they were testing a prototype of a robot the US space agency hopes to send to Mars in 2020 in Chile's Atacama desert.

Nasa hopes to use this kind of rover to explore life-friendly sites found by Curiosity, the rover already searching for signs of life on Mars. It has been there since last August.

The researchers say the desert, the driest spot on Earth, mimics the conditions of the Red Planet, and the agency has used it in the past to test space-bound equipment.

The robot, controlled remotely from the US, will continue testing through Sunday.

The solar-powered 771-kilogram (1,700-pound) machine is equipped with cameras and a drill able to dig up to a meter (three feet) deep.

60 mummies found in pre-Inca tomb in Peru

AFP, Lima

Polish and Peruvian archaeologists have discovered a royal burial chamber with 60 mummies and some 1,200 gold, silver and ceramic objects from over 1,000 years ago in Peru.

The mummies -- including three princesses -- and other items date back to a pre-Inca culture called the Wari, who peaked between the seventh and 11th centuries, researchers said.

"This is a unique find," said archaeologist Giersz Milosz of the University of Warsaw on Friday. "This is the first Peruvian discovery of a royal tomb from the Wari culture," of which little is known.

The find, in an area known as El Castillo, about 300 kilometers (185 miles) north of Lima, follows two earlier finds by the Polish and Peruvian team in 2010.

The chamber was discovered two meters (six feet) underground and covered with 33 tonnes of gravel. The tombs of the princesses -- apparently wives of Wari chiefs -- were at one end of the 17 square meter (190 square foot) chamber.

Blame game on GSP

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Khaleda, however, denied having written the article Hasina was referring to and accused the government of trying to put the blame for the failures of the government on the opposition.

She also called upon US President Barack Obama to withdraw the decision on revoking GSP facilities for Bangladesh. In parliament yesterday, she claimed that the government had launched a propaganda campaign after having failed to retain the GSP facilities.

"It was the murder of Aminul and the Rana Plaza collapse that ushered in the decision of the GSP suspension. I would like to urge the government not to shift the blame for its failures onto others. Stop such propaganda at this critical stage," Khaleda said.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, on the other hand, claimed that it was her government that had persistently succeeded in keeping the GSP facilities amidst repeated notices served by the US administration.

Referring to Khaleda's article published in the Washington Times, Hasina said, "You all can get the article available on the internet. There can be nothing more shameful and unfortunate than for someone to write against her own country."

Hasina recalled that during Khaleda Zia's first government (1991-96), the European Union had revoked trade facilities for Bangladeshi shrimps.

Hasina said it was her government that had later restored the facility.

Claiming that the BNP had not done much for the readymade garments sector, Hasina said it was during her tenure that garment workers' wages were raised by 82 percent.

Finance Minister Muhith said as the BNP government's neglect had cost Bangladesh its GSP facilities at the European Union before 1996, the Awami League government after assuming power took various steps following which the EU restored the facilities.

Citing different steps

taken by the government for the welfare of workers, Muhith said Bangladesh was front ranking not only in producing commodities but also in promoting human development and welfare.

He said industries and commerce bodies, consumers and the US government should consider this.

Muhith said the leader of the opposition, the Jamaat-e-Islami and an influential quarter of the country had played an important role in getting the US to suspend GSP facilities for Bangladesh.

He said last year Bangladesh exported \$5.3 billion to the US, of which commodities worth \$35 million had GSP facilities.

Muhith said the financial loss due to the suspension would not be much, but it was sad that the facilities had been withdrawn for a country with such high prospects.

He said the impact of the suspension might be on the women of Bangladesh, who had made the country proud.

GSP Suspension

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Patrick Ventrell, press office director of the US State Department.

"The US will work with Bangladesh on the steps needed to potentially restore its GSP privileges, but that requires going through a process so that Bangladesh can make improvements," he said, a day after US President Barak Obama suspended trade benefits to Bangladesh because it failed to ensure internationally recognised workers rights and basic safety standards.

Replying to a series of questions on suspension of GSP facilities to Bangladesh

at the regular press conference in Washington DC on June 28, Patrick Ventrell said, "Successfully addressing these underlying labour rights and workplace safety issues will help ensure that there's never again another fire or collapse like we saw in some of these horrific incidents."

In reply to another question, Ventrell said, "We need to see improvement in worker and safety rights, including the right to freely associate and engage in collective bargaining."

"I don't think here from the State Department podium I can get into all the necessary actions. I'd really

refer you to USTR about the specifics, but that's sort of the broad areas that we're looking to cooperate with ..."

Asked if the US heard anything from Bangladesh or any kind of response, he said that he was not sure if they had been in direct contact with the US since this announcement.

On another question, Ventrell said the US wanted to help Bangladesh improve its economy and lift people out of poverty, but Bangladesh should maintain fire safety standards, make factories structurally sound, and improve worker safety conditions.

Khaleda

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government. I hope it will take the steps for the sake of the country and continuation of democracy," she said.

It was the first time in the last four years that the opposition leader took part in budget discussions in the present parliament.

While the BNP chief was making demands for a non-party polls-time government, treasury bench lawmakers shouted "no" several times.

In response, a visibly irritated Khaleda said, "You [the government] will be compelled to pave the way for holding the next election under a neutral administration."

"Our position is very clear about the polls-time government. We will not participate in any election under a partisan government since a level playing field cannot be ensured under such a government," Khaleda said amid a thumping of desks by opposition

lawmakers.

Since the ruling alliance has an absolute majority in parliament, it must take the initiative for amending the constitution to have a non-party polls-time government, she said.

Calling for "greater national unity", she said, "Let us shun the politics of revenge and conflict, and turn our country into a land of peace. And a free and fair election is imperative to make it happen."

"There is no alternative to holding the next polls under a neutral government with the participation of all political parties in the interest of a continuation of democracy."

She claimed that 90 percent people in the country were in favour of a non-party election-time government.

"Lack of confidence and mistrust" among political parties was the main problem in the country's politics, and no election would be acceptable as long as they prevailed, said Khaleda.

She also disputed the government claim that the next national polls under the present government would be free and fair, as the local elections had been held peacefully under this government.

Khaleda said the recent elections to the four city corporations were not absolutely free and fair. "Had the polls been free and fair, all your candidates would have lost their security money."

GRAMEEN BANK ISSUE
The BNP chief slammed the government over its move to split Grameen Bank into 19 zones. "It is very unfortunate that a renowned person like Prof Muhammad Yunus is disrespected and defamed at home though he has been bringing honour for the nation."

"We express our firm support for Dr Yunus and Grameen Bank."

She said the nation would be "intellectually bankrupt" if respected persons were not given due honour.

Brazil leader's popularity plummets after protests

AFP, Rio De Janeiro

President Dilma Rousseff's popularity has nosedived since Brazil's nationwide street protests erupted, a poll said Saturday as Rio braced for more demonstrations coinciding with the Confederations Cup final between the national squad and Spain.

A Datafolha poll said Rousseff's approval rating has plunged from 57 percent down to 30 percent since June 6-7.

News reports say she is skipping Sunday's football game to avoid the prospect of being jeered.

The poll added that the percentage of people who think her government is doing a "bad or terrible" job has risen from nine to 25 percent since.

In March, Rousseff's popularity stood at 65 percent.

This month her approval

rating dipped in all regions, according to the survey of 4,717 people conducted in 196 cities.

The latest poll, which has a margin of error of two percentage points, comes as a wake-up call for Rousseff and her ruling leftist Workers Party ahead presidential voting scheduled for October 2014.

"We expected this fall. It is serious for the government. The president has been weakened at a time when the economy is not performing well," said Andre Cesar, an analyst with the Brasilia-based consulting firm Prospectiva.

The protests initially broke out in Sao Paulo more than two weeks ago over increases in mass transit fares. But they quickly spread nationwide and mushroomed into a public outcry over substandard public services and the high cost of Brazil's hosting next

year's World Cup.

The hundreds of thousands of Brazilians who have taken to the streets have also been demanding an end to rampant corruption among politicians.

Obama carries dreams of millions of Africans

Says South Africa's president

AFP, Pretoria

President Jacob Zuma welcomed Barack Obama to South Africa yesterday, saying the first black US president carried with him the dreams of millions of Africans.

During a landmark visit which has been overshadowed by Nelson Mandela's failing health, Zuma said Mandela and Obama were "bound by history" as the first black leaders of their respective nations.

"You both carry the dreams of millions of people in Africa," he said.

South Africa is the second leg of Obama's most substantial visit to Africa since becoming US president almost five years ago.

With China gaining influence on the continent, Obama -- whose father is Kenyan -- has been heavily criticised for not paying enough attention to Africa and waiting so long to visit.

Obama visited Ghana briefly in 2009, in his first term as president.

But Obama's charm offensive has been overshadowed by the critical illness of Mandela, the former prisoner who became South Africa's first black president in 1994 after decades of apartheid rule.

"Our talks have taken place against the background of the ill health of our beloved former president Nelson Mandela, the founding president of our democracy," said Zuma.

"I know that he is your personal hero."

Obama said the long struggle against apartheid was a source of "personal inspiration".

Moscow to discuss nuke with N Korea: Report

AFP, Moscow

Russia will meet a delegation from North Korea next week to discuss a possible resumption of talks about ending Pyongyang's nuclear programme, the foreign ministry said according to a Russian news agency.

A top North Korean envoy, Vice Foreign Minister Kim Kye-Gwan, will travel to Moscow on Thursday for "consultations on the entire set of issues surrounding the North Korean nuclear program," the foreign ministry was quoted as stating by the RIA Novosti news agency.

He will meet Russia's First Deputy Foreign Minister Vladimir Titov and Deputy Foreign Minister Igor Morgulov to discuss "resumption of six-nation talks" on North Korea's nuclear arsenal, RIA Novosti said.

The isolated Asian state recently warned that hostility by the United States could lead to war at any moment, and vowed not to give up its nuclear power in the face of mounting UN and international sanctions following recent tests.

At the same time, North Korean diplomats have said they want talks with the United States, and Kim Kye-Gwan last week discussed restarting the six-party talks with China, when he met foreign minister Wang Yi in Beijing.

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