

Govt chooses

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Pran products for his household.

He went on to say that the company has become "too aggressive" in its growth ambitions, so much that it has "lost sight of standards of quality".

"I am not taking any chances with my family's health. I will boycott Pran's products from now onwards," said Hafsa Begum, a housewife who uses Pran's spices.

Meanwhile, the commerce ministry yesterday instructed the Directorate of National Consumer Rights Protection (DNCRP) to collect samples from the home market and test them in government laboratories including the Bangladesh Standards and Testing Institution (BSTI).

Meena Bazar will take its next step after learning the formal reactions of BSTI and the other concerned government agencies, Khan added.

However, the government has neither given the DNCRP a timeframe for filing of the report nor announced any interim measures before the test results are out.

Asked, Commerce Minister Ghulam Mohammed Quader said the government cannot take any action without proof. "We cannot take any action unless it becomes disqualified in the test results of BSTI -- we have no legal basis to advise consumers to avoid purchasing the product."

The developments come amid Pran's refusal to recall the product from the local market despite detection of lead as high as 53 parts per million (ppm) by the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and New York State Health Department. The permissible limit of lead in Bangladesh is 2.5ppm, according to the BSTI.

The country's one of the largest food processors, Pran claims that it had tested its turmeric powder on October 10 at the BSTI and BCSIR and is "100 percent sure" that there is no lead in the product.

High levels of lead consumption, particularly by infants, small children and pregnant women, can lead to delayed mental and physical development and learning deficiencies, said FDA in its press release posted on October 17.

"This obstinate behaviour of Pran is very irresponsible. So is the government's sluggish response," said Sultana Ahmed, another housewife who uses Pran's spices.

So far, four stores in the US have recalled the product.



A large number of villagers near Burir Badh on the north of Thakurgaon town fish in festive mood on Sunday following release of water from the dam.

PHOTO: STAR

Untrue, baseless

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"The remarks were untrue and baseless. We want to live with our own identity. We will not participate in the election to empower anybody," said the JP chairman.

Ershad had met Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina on Sunday night at Gono Bhaban, where senior leaders of both the parties were present.

Ashrafur told reporters after the meeting that Jatiya Party, a key component of the grand alliance, will compete against the AL in the next elections if BNP boycotts the polls. If not, the alliance will remain unchanged.

As per the constitution, the polls must be held between October 25 this year and January 24 next year. The government has plans to hold the polls

in mid-January.

"During the meeting last night, there was no discussion on whether Jatiya Party will stay with the grand alliance or leave it to participate in the elections," Ershad noted.

"But I was surprised to read Ashrafur's misleading comments in today's newspapers."

Speaking to reporters, he said the JP has been preparing to participate in the elections independently and has selected the candidates.

He mentioned that his party had participated in many polls as an alliance member but got nothing in return.

Describing the Sunday meeting as fruitful, he said several issues regarding the polls had been discussed. "We told

the prime minister that her last speech [televised on Friday] was not clear and there was no mention of the number of cabinet members."

He added, "I told the prime minister that the main opposition BNP would not accept her as the chief of the election-time government. But she told me she had information that BNP will contest the elections."

Asked why the JP had met the prime minister at Gono Bhaban, he said it was because Hasina had invited all political parties for dialogue during her Friday speech.

Government officials will follow her directives if Hasina becomes the chief. Therefore, Ershad observed, the opposition parties might fear this.

Economy at extra risk this time

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The first scenario having negative implications is, "If both parties continue to grapple over the institution of a caretaker government, we could see a repeat of the situation in 2007 when the military was forced to intervene."

Predicting the credit implication of such a scenario Moody's said, during the previous election cycle, the military-led government was successful in restoring a state of calm and taking measures to alleviate corruption. However, delays in the democratic election process, and implications of the political uncertainty for a prolonged period of time would undermine investor confidence, especially foreign investment, depress growth, and derail the normal course of policy

reforms. This would weigh on the sovereign rating.

According to the second scenario, even if elections are held on schedule, continued strikes and political tensions would weigh on investor sentiment and on economic growth.

Moreover, the lack of permanent solution to the electoral mechanism suggests that escalating tensions and violent protests would resume during the next election cycle, said Moody's report.

The best scenario would be to have a mutually agreeable electoral system that would lead to a more stable political situation with limited event risks.

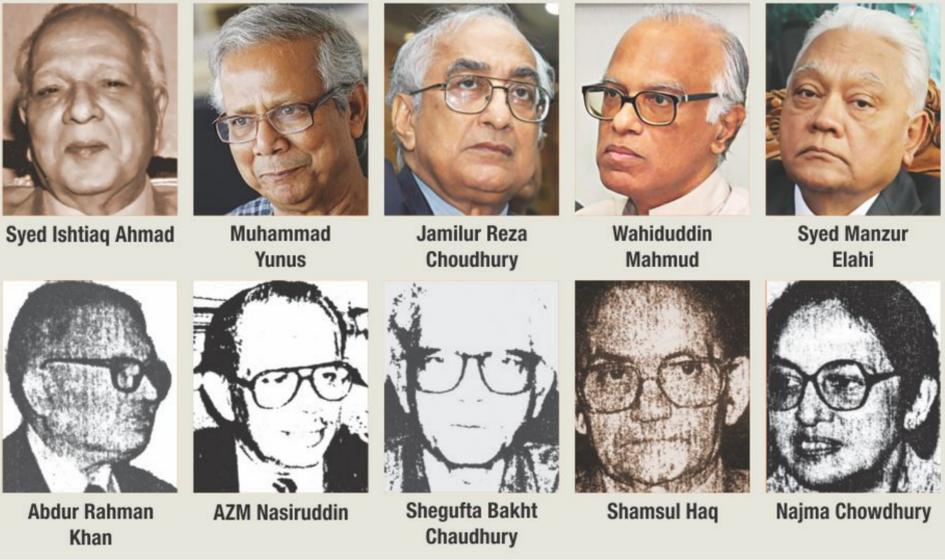
Moody's said, although Bangladesh was a secular state, the recent rise of Islamist parties added the risk of reli-

gious factors becoming entwined with political aspirations. In early May, the growing role of Hefajat-e-Islam became apparent when the party was able to organise two-day-long protests demanding anti-blasphemy law which quickly turned violent.

The agency said, another Islamist party, Jamaat-e-Islami, which had been an ally of the BNP, had recently been banned from participating in polls, because its charter was seen as violating Bangladesh's secular constitution.

The banning of Jamaat might be seen as being partly driven by the widespread protests in Shahbagh earlier this year, and could well lead to a further escalation in protests in the run-up to elections, said Moody's report.

1996 CARETAKER ADVISERS



2001 CARETAKER ADVISERS



Non-party caretaker

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ruling and opposition parties on her proposal.

"We do not want confrontation. We want compromise ... I am making a fervent appeal to the honourable prime minister to accept my proposal for the sake of peace, stability and democracy," she said.

In defence of picking 10 advisers from among the ex-advisers of the two previous caretaker governments, she said two credible elections were held with the participation of all political parties under those advisers in 1996 and 2001.

The AL won the 1996 election while the BNP won the 2001 polls.

By making the proposal, Khaleda has recognised the credibility of the 1996 caretaker government led by Justice Muhammad Habibur Rahman. Following the BNP's defeat in the 1996 election, Khaleda had questioned the role of that caretaker administration.

Similarly, Hasina and her party leaders slammed chief adviser Justice Latifur Rahman and

several other advisers of the 2001 caretaker government after the AL's defeat in the 2001 election.

Khaleda yesterday said, "The advisers to those caretaker governments [in 1996 and 2001] were praised by all for their neutrality."

She, however, didn't speak for the Fakhruddin Ahmed-led caretaker government that ran the country for nearly two years after January 2007.

The AL-led alliance won a landslide victory over the BNP-led combine in the 2008 election.

Khaleda Zia's proposal for picking a respected person as the head of the interim government is almost similar to one of the options of choosing the chief adviser in the caretaker government system scrapped in 2011.

The provision had empowered the president to appoint the chief adviser from among qualified Bangladeshi citizens after consultations with the major political parties.

And if it didn't work, the president himself would assume the office of chief adviser.

Ignoring all alternatives, the then president Iajuddin Ahmed assumed the chief adviser's office on the advice of the BNP that had elected him president. His assumption of the office deepened the political crisis that led to the declaration of a state of emergency.

The scrapped provision had empowered the chief adviser to pick 10 advisers in the caretaker government that was introduced in 1996 in the wake of violent protests by the AL-led opposition.

Assuming the chief adviser's office in October 2006, Iajuddin appointed almost all his advisers on advice from both the BNP-led alliance and the AL-led combine. But four of the advisers resigned the following month.

In her proposal yesterday, Khaleda spoke about the formation of a polls-time government only for the upcoming 10th parliamentary election, but said nothing about the interim government system for future elections.

Her proposal for a non-partisan chief of the

election-time government may remind people of a similar proposal made by Hasina about 18 years ago.

In 1995, the then prime minister Khaleda didn't accept a proposal from Hasina, then in opposition, for making a non-partisan person the head of the election-time government to break the political stalemate.

In her address to the nation yesterday, Khaleda stressed the need for a free, fair and competitive election to ensure continuity of democracy and a peaceful transfer of power.

"That is why we raised the demand for a neutral and non-party polls-time government," she said.

Commenting on Hasina's address to the nation, Khaleda said it was unfortunate that people's hopes and aspirations were not reflected in her speech, because it would not ensure a free and fair election participated by all political parties.

The prime minister didn't clarify who would head the proposed all-party election-time govern-

ment, said Khaleda.

It raised concerns among people that the premier was inviting the opposition to participate in an uneven competition, keeping power and administration in her grip, and the lawmakers in place, said the BNP chief.

"It is not acceptable to people. She left no room for discussions on the popular demand for a polls-time non-party government and made a proposal convenient only for herself."

"The nation is frustrated at the prime minister's statement. I feel that the matter can be resolved through discussions. The sooner it takes place the better," she said.

The BNP chief said she had made a specific proposal in light of people's wishes and expectations, and hoped the prime minister would consider it.

Before Khaleda made the statement, her Press Secretary Maruf Kamal Khan said reporters would not be allowed to ask any questions as her speech would be self-explanatory.

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Hasina to phone Khaleda soon

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election. We want to go for the polls together," the minister quoted Hasina as saying.

Contacted, Agriculture Minister and AL presidium member Matia Chowdhury confirmed to The Daily Star the prime minister's statement on the phone call in the office.

In a televised address last Friday, Hasina proposed forming an all-party

election-time government and urged the BNP to nominate its MPs for inclusion in the interim cabinet.

But the main opposition maintains it won't take part in the election, but will do so only if it is held under a non-party neutral caretaker administration.

On Sunday night, Hasina informed leaders of AL-ally Jatiya Party that she would talk with all other parties, including the BNP, about the formation of an

all-party polls-time government and election schedule.

According to AL insiders, the PM wants the next parliamentary election either on December 30 or 31. The Jatiya Party has extended its support to the plan.

"The schedule will be announced in mid-November," a senior AL leader told The Daily Star.

As Hasina at the meeting yesterday

elaborately talked with her cabinet colleagues about her plan to resolve the political impasse, some senior ministers discussed her proposal and the BNP's possible strategy. They congratulated her on Friday's address to the nation.

The PM strictly instructed them not to speak indiscriminately or give conflicting opinions about the polls-time government or the election. "Indiscriminate

talking will create confusion," she said.

Hasina, president of the ruling Awami League, asked the cabinet members to be cautious about giving reactions on the BNP's formula for polls-time administration.

"We will have to sacrifice because we have liberated the country. The BNP does not want the welfare of the people... they do not even believe in the country's independence. Whatever sacrifice is to

be made it will be by the Awami League," said the premier.

As Hasina earlier had announced that the next general election has to take place between October 25 and January 24, many were speculating yesterday this was the last cabinet meeting of this government.

But Cabinet Secretary Muhammad Musharraf Hossain Bhuiyan told journalists that more meetings will take place