

People the victims again

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driving, kept trying to draw Arif to him in vain.

"Why did they burn my face? Why can't they fight among themselves?" he cried out, shivering with the pain of having 15 percent of his body burnt.

His vehicle was hit with a petrol bomb in front of the capital's Eastern Plaza in the afternoon. The synthetic shirt he was wearing automatically caught fire, setting him alight. The flesh on his left hand melted to the bone.

Sabed, 33, said his passenger brought him to the DMCH. The passenger escaped unhurt as he already got out of the vehicle and was paying him when the attack came.

"This is a blockade, not a hartal. Then why can't we be on the streets?" Sabed told The Daily Star.

A similar attack came on Rubel, another burnt CNG-run auto-rickshaw driver of Comilla, the day before the blockade began.

"I can even accept it when we are not allowed to go out during hartals. But why are we not allowed to go out on the other days? How do we live?" gasped out Rubel, lying in the DMCH burn unit.

He was attacked around 7:00pm on Monday (that is 11 hours before the blockade "officially" began) on his way home through Comilla Biswa Road. One picket first charged the vehicle with a bamboo stick, overturning it. He was thus trapped inside, and the picket threw a petrol bomb on his auto-rickshaw.

"A passerby opened the door and hauled me out," he said.

His wife Nasima Begum said, "When I first got the news, I thought he was dead. I am happy that my worst fear did not come true, but now I am crying because I do not have a single taka on me.... How do I buy medicine?"

Rubel had been prescribed at least three injections, among other medicines, but Nasima only had the money to buy one, which cost her Tk 1,100. Some of these have to be given daily.

The helpless woman is completely alone in a city she does not know. "Rubel has no brother and no relative. I do not know where the money will come from."

Around 9:00pm, a human hauler driver was brought in from Madartek with 60 percent burns.

As Mozammel Haque, 19, was wheeled into the operation theater, his 12-year-old helper, Noman, stared with glassy eyes.

"I saw him burning inside. They held the door and did not let him out," said Noman, his face to the floor, shuffling his bare feet. He lost his shoes somewhere in the chaos.

Pickets, posing as passengers, asked Mozammel to stop. When he did, they threw a petrol bomb inside the front compartment. One



Seven-year-old Rakib at DMCH

rammed the door shut with his body, preventing Mozammel from escaping.

He could only be pulled out when the pickets left. Noman was at the back and jumped out when the vehicle was set aflame.

"There were 10 to 12 passengers inside...they wanted to kill us all," Noman said.

Another CNG driver was brought to the DMCH with 15 percent burns.

Nizamuddin, 40, was carrying passengers to Rajarbagh in the capital when four pro-blockade men surrounded his vehicle.

"They doused my vehicle with petrol and set me on fire," said Nizamuddin. The passengers escaped unhurt and helped him out.

Earlier around 4:00pm, Anwara Begum was brought to the DMCH with her head wrapped in a blood-soaked cloth. The 42-year-old was hit in the head by a cocktail thrown from a rally in Shantinagar.

Her skull cracked, leaving a gaping hole the size of a fist.

Chances of her survival are slim, doctors said.

A cook at a bank in Malibagh, Anwara was on way home from work when she was attacked, said her nephew, Rony.

Meanwhile in Chandpur, a seven-year-old boy sustained burn injuries as he was caught up in a clash between the Awami League and BNP supporters.

Rakib, the victim, was watching television in a shop when warring factions of the two archrivals aimed their anger at the boy, who had nothing to do with the fight.

"A man called Sharif took up a stick to hit Bacchu. In response, Bacchu picked up the kettle of boiling tea and flung it at me," said the boy, who sustained 15 percent burns and is now being treated at the DMCH.

Sharif is a local AL supporter and Bacchu is with the BNP, said Rakib's mother, Lucky Begum.

Previously, at least 19 children were affected by hartal violence, with two dead, including 14-year-old Monir who had been burnt by arsonists on November 4.

Ensure security

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Narayanganj office on fire by miscreants have prompted the secretariat to make the fresh request, sources in the EC said.

The secretariat also apprehended that many election offices might come under attack during the ongoing political turmoil, they said.

Their fear came true as miscreants blasted handmade bombs at the EC's Rajshahi office on Monday night and set its offices in Bogra and Feni on fire yesterday.

EC Secretary Muhammed Sadique said they had not made any security threat assessment but sought protection considering the recent bomb blasts at some offices and the act of arson at Narayanganj office.

"Most of our field-level election offices are on the roadsides. We requested the government and all others concerned to ensure security of the offices," he told The Daily Star last night.

Mainuddin Ahmed, additional secretary of the home ministry, said they beefed up security

of election officers across the country on getting intelligence on Monday.

According to the intelligence sources, miscreants might attack the officers and burn down election materials, including ballot boxes.

Asked what sorts of measures were taken to guard the election offices, he said, "We already deployed law-enforcers, in both uniform and civil dresses, to foil any possible attacks."

Mokhesur Rahman, director general (DG) of Rapid Action Battalion (Rab), also said necessary instructions were given to the forces to guard election officers.

About attacks on some offices since Monday night, he said, "There might be sudden attacks at some places even after the security measures."

Meanwhile, the cabinet division on Sunday instructed the deputy commissioners of all districts to give security to the field-level election officers.

There are 512 election offices at upazila level, 64 at district level and 10 regional offices across the country.

Level playing field absent

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He urged the Election Commission to extend by seven days the deadline for submission of nomination papers for the 10th parliamentary election, saying, "Our party will not be able to finalise the candidates for the polls within this time [December 02]."

His comment on a level playing field indicates that Ershad wants to benefit by keeping the government under pressure on the one hand, and be in the favour of the main opposition BNP on the other, said party insiders.

In order to be in BNP's good books, Ershad will not take action against senior JP presidium member Kazi Zafar Ahmed, who recently blasted Ershad for siding with the ruling party.

The party insiders said Ershad will watch the ongoing political situation until the last date for submission and then take a decision about the polls.

They added that Ershad and Zafar, who is on good terms with BNP, have seen their ties deteriorate due to a disagreement between them about joining the recently formed all-party cabinet.

Zafar had lambasted Ershad in a statement on

Saturday, saying the JP boss had joined the cabinet without discussing it with the party presidium.

He said the act was tantamount to "betraying the nation" and urged the party leaders and activists to take a stand against the JP leaders who are loyal to the incumbent government.

Ershad met him in a hospital the next day and later told the media that he doubted if Zafar had really made the statement. Even if he had, it was because he had a grudge, Ershad said, adding that Zafar was in the party and will remain in the party.

"I wrote the statement, and there is no doubt about it," Zafar told The Daily Star on Monday.

Drawn attention to his relationship with the BNP, he said Ershad had asked him several times last year to maintain good relations with BNP and he had obeyed him.

Asked about whether he would join the opposition alliance, stay with the JP, or form his own party, Zafar said he will declare his decision soon after he gets well.

Asked about the Sunday meeting, Zafar said he had only listened to Ershad, without making any comments himself.

Governance goes on in confusion

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committee meeting.

Due to this confusion, the planning ministry suspended a meeting of the Executive Committee of National Economic Council (ECNEC) yesterday, a day after the Election Commission announced the schedule for the 10th parliamentary election.

Talking to The Daily Star, Cabinet Secretary M Musharraf Hossain Bhuiyan said the notice on the purchase committee meeting was issued before the announcement of the polls schedule. "Now we are examining the electoral code of the conduct whether we can hold the meeting," he added.

The ECNEC approves projects, while the procurement proposals are endorsed by the purchase committee, mentioned Musharraf. "In case of procurement, there are some contractual obligations. A bid is cancelled if procurement proposals are not approved in time."

Procurement costs increase if the authorities go for tender for second time. So, there is an issue of profit or loss for the government, which should be taken into consideration, he pointed out.

"If any conflict arises between the development needs and maintaining the level playing

field in the election, we will prioritise the election," said the cabinet secretary.

The finance minister on Sunday said an order on fixing a separate pay scale for bankers in state-run banks will be issued within 2-3 days. But the finance ministry is confused whether the order can be issued.

Officials said three previous elections were held under caretaker governments, which could not make policy decisions. Those governments were authorised only to make decisions on routine affairs.

But this time around, the election is going to be held under an elected government and the ministers will also contest the polls.

"It's not clear in the electoral code of conduct which works can be done and which cannot be," said an official, adding that the Indian electoral code of conduct clearly mentions everything by using examples and sample questionnaires.

On Sunday, former adviser to a caretaker government Akbar Ali Khan told this newspaper, "In the current structure of the government, the ministers will run the government as well as contest the election. So, they cannot make any decision, policy or routine, which could influence

Zimbabwe court frees top rights lawyer

AFP, Harare

A Zimbabwean court yesterday freed prominent rights lawyer Beatrice Mtetwa, who had faced charges of obstructing the course of justice during a police raid.

"There is no evidence that the accused person prevented police from searching. She is therefore discharged," Harare magistrate, Rumbidzai Mugwagwa ruled yesterday.

Mugwagwa said from the facts presented in court there was no evidence that Mtetwa "obstructed the course of justice" when she arrived on the scene of a police raid at the offices of aides to then Prime Minister Morgan Tsvangirai.

Ashraf, Fakhrul

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would speak to the prime minister and then inform him the PM's response.

On October 26, Fakhrul sent a letter to Ashraf, proposing talks on the polls-time government. The AL leader later called Fakhrul back.

Meanwhile in a late night development, Fakhrul met US Ambassador in Dhaka Dan W Mozena at the latter's residence in the city, BNP sources said.

In the one-to-one meeting, the two discussed the country's latest political situation and the next general election, added the sources.

This correspondent, however, could not confirm the development from the US embassy sources.

Zafar Iqbal, Yasmeen

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scheduled for November 30 prompted their decision.

"When the process of holding the combined admission test was almost complete, a group of people who used to support them suddenly started opposing the process," the statement reads.

They also explained why they supported the combined entry test.

"Though the question paper would be the same, the universities could maintain their own standards of admission process through the combined test as the universities would prepare separate merit lists. Besides, the candidates could take the test at their preferred or nearest centres without having to travel from one place to another," they said in the statement released yesterday afternoon.

Talking to The Daily Star, Dr Yasmeen Haque further explained that an aspirant who registered for admission to both the universities would have to qualify according to the admission requirements of individual universities, no matter where he took the test.

The combined entry test would greatly lessen the hassles of students and guardians, Dr Yasmeen added.

Dr Mozammel Haque, a member of the SUST academic council, told our Sylhet correspondent that the decision of postponing the test was made at an emergency meeting of the council with the Vice Chancellor in the chair yesterday afternoon.

The step was taken as a number of local organisations and student bodies were moving against the combined admission test system and requesting for separate admission test for SUST, he added.

Earlier on Monday, a group of civil society members of Sylhet met the VC and requested for cancelling the combined test system. Besides, representatives of local Awami League, BNP, JSD, BSD, Samyabadi Dal, CPB and some student groups handed over separate memos to the VC for the same.

They argued that since the standard of education was not the same at the SUST and the JSTU, holding one admission test for the two universities would not be justified. They also expressed fears that students hailing from Sylhet and surrounding areas would be deprived under this system.

As the news of the duo's resignation spread, several hundred students took out a procession on the campus demanding the two teachers reverse their decision and the test be taken as planned earlier.

Professor Zafar Iqbal who is also a noted writer of the country was the head of the electrical & electronics engineering department and had been with the SUST since its inception in 1991. Professor Yasmeen Haque was the dean of the School of Life Science in the same institute.

A dream

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materialise his goal. But yesterday's blockade might have shattered his dream.

Like every other day, 17-year-old Isahaq Ali was cycling from his home at Haragram Sheikhpara to Rajshahi Government College playground for a practice session around 7:15am yesterday.

He was passing by 18-party pickets trying to block the road in front of the college when an armoured personnel carrier (APC) arrived there and swung into action.

Isahaq immediately turned round to look for a shelter. As he tried to enter a building leaving his cycle behind, two stray pellets of a rubber bullet hit him. First he was hit on the back and the second pellet pierced through his left eye and lodged deep inside.

As the pickets fled the scene and the police stopped firing, his fellow cricketers rescued him and whisked him to Rajshahi Medical College Hospital on his bicycle.

Prof Lutfar Rahman of neurosurgery said a CT scan showed the pellet dug deep inside his eye. The young cricketer was transferred to Dhaka for an operation around 1:00pm.

Associate Prof Enamul Haque of ophthalmology at RMCH said the eye of the young cricketer might not survive.

Jamilur Rahman Saad, director of Jubo Cricket School where Isahaq is a student, said Isahaq was a talented young all-rounder with good potential. "He was selected for Rajshahi Premier League cricket under Allied Club scheduled to start on December 15," said Saad.

"He was also selected for the upcoming second division cricket league on behalf of Young Pegasus in Dhaka," Saad said, adding that he showed all the determination, sincerity and love for the game of cricket.

Isahaq is a first-year student of Rajshahi Barendra College, and a good student too, said Isahaq's father Najim Uddin.

Najim, a deed writer, hardly manages to run his family of three sons and one daughter. Choked in tears, Najim said other cricketers who loved his son were looking after his treatment as he had no ability to bear the expenses.

48-HR BLOCKADE

Defence absent again from war crimes tribunal

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The International Crimes Tribunal yesterday closed the cross-examination of a prosecution witness in the case against Jamaat-e-Islami leader AKM Yusuf as his senior counsel did not show up even after the court had issued an ultimatum.

Senior defence counsels of war crimes accused have been remaining absent from court proceedings during hartal or blockade. There was no difference yesterday, the first day of the BNP-led opposition's 48-hour blockade.

Sheikh Afzal Hossain, a war-wounded freedom fighter, on Monday testified that Razakars had killed at least seven people on orders of Yusuf near Chulka Bazar in Bagerhat during the 1971 Liberation War.

The court then fixed yesterday for the cross-examination of Afzal, 12th prosecution witness in the case.

When the court sat around 11:15am, Gazi MH Tamim, a junior defence counsel, said the defence had preparation for the cross-examination, but he could not reach his senior, Syed Mizanur Rahman, over the phone since morning. So he prayed to the court for time.

"Why he [Mizanur Rahman] couldn't appear [before the court]?" asked Justice Obaidul Hassan, chairman of the three-member tribunal.

Tamim said he himself had faced difficulties while going to the court because of the blockade. In response, the judge said the court had

information that some High Court benches sat despite the blockade.

"Everyone could come. So why couldn't he [Mizanur]?"

"A war-wounded freedom fighter came from Bagerhat to testify. Yet, the counsel remains absent.... Are you making a mockery?" Obaidul said.

Tamim was then given time till 2:00pm to get his senior to the court. If he failed, he himself would have to conduct the cross-examination. Otherwise the court would close it, the tribunal chief added.

At 2:28pm, when the court sat again Mizanur did not appear. Tamim sought two days' time. The court rejected the petition and asked him to cross-examine the witness. But when Tamim declined to do so, the court closed the cross-examination.

The international crimes tribunals sit on the days of hartal and blockade but cannot proceed much with the cases as the senior defence counsels remain absent. A few junior counsels usually appear to seek adjournments.

Meanwhile, the tribunal asked the defence of Jamaat leader Mir Quasem Ali to submit documents and a list of witnesses by December 2.

Monday was fixed for submission of the documents but following a defence petition, the court gave the additional time as "a last chance."

Quasem is facing 14 charges of crimes against humanity committed during the Liberation War in 1971.

BNP's lethal vagueness

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decide whether to venture out or remain indoors.

Announcing the programme on Monday night, BNP acting secretary general Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir read out a statement that only mentioned when the countrywide blockade would start and end.

He did not clarify whether schools, colleges and other educational institutions would remain within the purview of the blockade. There were no words also about any exemption for the press, utility services etc.

As journalists asked Fakhrul to explain the scope of the blockade, he left the briefing room, saying, "No question... thanks."

Earlier, BNP leaders used to mention the coverage of their agitation programmes including hartals.

Vagueness of this blockade programme has left millions of students and their guardians anxious.

"We usually don't send our son to school during hartals. But as it was a blockade, I was

unsure whether to send him to school. In the end, I took him to school and found it open," Ziaul Haque, who lives at the city's Sankar, told this correspondent.

Unlike Ziaul, many parents took their children to schools only to find them closed.

"We hope the political parties will show the minimum responsibility by clarifying their programmes and lessening our anxiety," Jahanara Begum, another guardian who lives at Mirpur-10, told this correspondent over the phone.

Asked, BNP Joint Secretary General Rizvi Ahmed yesterday said essential service-oriented organisations and their vehicles, mass media and ambulances usually fall outside the purview of hartal and blockade.

About educational institutions, he said, "If anybody wants to keep their school open, then we cannot say anything."

However, he added, the blockades ultimately turn into hartal-like programmes.

Rizvi also said the ongoing blockade would be in force on all roads across the country.

Spare students

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examinations will be held from 9:30am to 12:00noon on Friday, an official handout said. More than 29 lakh class-V students are taking the examinations that began on November 20.

Students of other classes and those from English medium schools are passing a distressing time too.

Many schools are holding annual examinations while the students of English medium schools are taking half-yearly exams. Exams are also going on in colleges.

The authorities of educational institutions were nonplussed as they came to know about the announcement of the blockade Monday night. They could not make any decision that night regarding the class or exam schedules.

Moreover, the opposition did not make any formal announcement as to whether the educational institutions would be out of the blockade's purview.

Amid confusion, some schools were open yesterday while some were closed.

Manju Ara Begum, principal of Viharunisa Noon School and College, said the authorities finally suspended exams of the college section, considering the security of the students.

The guardians were also puzzled. Many parents risked their lives to bring their children to schools yesterday as there were

exams.

"We were in the dark as to what were out of the blockade's purview. So, with fear, I took my child to the school as there was an exam. Seeing the video clips of violence on television, I was extremely frightened," said Ibrahim, whose child studies in Sahid Bir Uttam Anwar Girls School and College.

The politicians are least concerned about the sufferings of people and the nation, the economy and the future of students, said another guardian.

The children lose interest in their studies as the volatile political situation makes things uncertain, said a mother.

"The opposition said the government would have to take the responsibility of the damages while the ruling party blamed the opposition. Where are we?" she said.

Officials of the directorates of the primary and secondary education said they were uncertain whether the annual exams would complete on time.

The authorities have to complete the annual school examinations by December first week as per the Election Commission's request, said an official of the Directorate of Secondary and Higher Education, seeking anonymity.

But the current situation indicates that more violent programmes like hartals and shutdowns may be declared and in that case "we will be in trouble," he said.

Employment as DMD



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