



Visiting Oscar Fernández-Taranco, UN assistant secretary-general for political affairs, calls on Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina at Gono Bhaban yesterday. Taranco in the evening also met Opposition Leader Khaleda Zia, right, at her Gulshan home. PHOTO: BSS/BNP

# UN asks if polls can be deferred

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to bring all political parties to the polls, reports BSS, quoting Rizvi.

The prime minister assured the UN official that the EC could take any decision to create a level playing field for all political parties. The government has no authority to interfere in the activities of the commission, according to BSS.

"Taranco welcomed the government decision to uphold the constitution, saying there is no need for discussion on caretaker government at this stage," BSS quoted Rizvi as saying.

The state-run news agency added that Gowher Rizvi told reporters Taranco conveyed to the PM a special message from the UN secretary general.

"The message is that the UN wants to see Bangladesh in its role to continue the process of democratic institutionalisation and development.

"So the UN wants an inclusive, free and fair election with a consensus among the political parties."

Meanwhile, BNP Vice-president Shamsher Mobin Chowdhury told journalists of

Taranco's meeting with Khaleda: "I cannot comment on the progress or no-progress of the talks at this stage."

Taranco arrived in Dhaka on Friday night to try to break the political impasse centring on the election scheduled for January 5.

Hasina and Khaleda apart, he held talks with senior Awami League leaders, the foreign minister, the foreign secretary and six influential foreign diplomats based in Dhaka yesterday, the first day of his four-day visit.

During his meetings he clearly conveyed to the nation's top political players that the election must be "inclusive, free, fair and non-violent if the results are to be credible and acceptable" to the people.

"Time is very limited but the door [for talks] should be open," a highly placed source quoted Taranco as saying at a meeting.

During his meetings with the political leaders, Taranco called upon them to work together for a constructive dialogue to find a way forward and create an environment for an inclusive and peaceful election.

The UN official regretted the violence during hartal and blockade that has killed and injured many, a meeting source said.

He said the UN secretary general was seriously concerned about the latest wave of deadly violence ahead of the election and called upon all to respect the rule of law, exercise restraint and express views peacefully, the sources added.

He also made it clear that a solution would not come from the international community. It had to come from home.

Taranco noted that the UN always respected the constitutional framework and wanted the continuation of the democratic process so that Bangladesh's achievements and its social indicators remained unhampered.

The UN chief is very keen about Bangladesh and always inquires about the country because his first diplomatic posting was in Bangladesh, he mentioned.

He added that the UN was ready to provide electoral assistance and would jointly coordinate the international observers during the

election, sources said.

### DAY'S SCHEDULE

The UN team began the day with a breakfast meeting at German House where it held talks with German Ambassador to Bangladesh Dr Albrecht Conze, British High Commissioner Robert Gibson, Canadian High Commissioner Heather Cruden and ambassadors of the European Union and China, William Hanna and Li Jun, respectively.

The five-member delegation then met Foreign Secretary Shahidul Haque at his office and discussed the UN's electoral assistance and other election-related matters for about 45 minutes.

There the UN officials also met Foreign Minister Abul Hasan Mahmood Ali separately and discussed the political turbulence, violence and the upcoming election.

The minister briefed the team about the government's efforts for holding talks as also the initiatives taken for holding the election in a free and fair manner.

Before meeting the AL leaders, the UN assis-

tant secretary general spoke with US Ambassador in Bangladesh Dan Mozena at Sonargaon Hotel for about half an hour.

After the meeting with Taranco, AL General Secretary Syed Ashraf Islam sought cooperation from all for holding the election with the participation of all. But he added the polls would be on January 5 as per schedule.

Asked what he meant by all, he told reporters: "I am talking about those currently involved in the electoral process. There are many parties that are not taking part in the election.... I am talking about those participating in the election."

The AL delegation included Ashraf, Amir Hossain Amu, Tofail Ahmed, Mahbubul Alam Hanif, Faruk Khan, former diplomat Shaheed Reza and Gowher Rizvi.

### TODAY'S SCHEDULE

Today, the UN team will meet Jatiya Party Chairman HM Ershad at 9:30am, Chief Election Commissioner Kazi Rakibuddin Ahmed at 11:00am and civil society members at 3:00pm.

## MEETINGS WITH TARANCO

# AL wants no change in polls schedule

PARTHA PRATIM BHATTACHARJEE

The ruling Awami League yesterday told UN Assistant Secretary-General Oscar Fernández-Taranco that it does not want any change in the polls schedule.

At a meeting with the visiting UN official, they also insisted the government would not take any steps beyond the constitutional limits, meeting sources told The Daily Star last night.

Amir Hossain Amu, Tofail Ahmed, Syed Ashraf Islam, Gowher Rizvi, Faruk Khan, Mahabubul Alam Hanif and former diplomat Shahed Reza represented the AL at the two-hour long meeting at Hotel Sonargaon in the afternoon.

Fernández-Taranco said the UN doesn't want the government to go beyond the constitution, but it wants to see a peaceful election contested by all political parties. He also stressed the need for creating a level playing field for all political parties ahead of the election.

He asked the AL leaders whether anything could be done to bring all the parties in the electoral race by staying within the constitutional framework.

The AL delegation, in response, requested him to make suggestions in this regard. Fernández-Taranco said he did not come here with any fixed solution to the crisis. He would rather be looking to initiatives to ensure that all the parties contest the election.

"He told us he would discuss the matter with the other stakeholders and sit with us again," said an AL leader who was present at the meeting.

The AL team said if the EC changed the polls schedule, any aggrieved person might file a writ petition with High Court challenging the deferment.

The 10th parliamentary election is scheduled for January 5.

About the UN official's concern over the

arrest of top BNP leaders, the AL stalwarts said the BNP was a "terrorist party" and the law enforcement agencies rounded up the opposition leaders for "instigating violence."

Briefing reporters about the meeting, AL spokesperson and General Secretary Syed Ashraf Islam said the election would be held on schedule.

He expressed hope that the discussions with UN assistant secretary-general would be fruitful.

"We discussed nothing specific. The talks today were preliminary. We will meet again, and things will get clearer then," he mentioned.

At the start of the meeting, Fernández-Taranco appreciated different development measures and projects by the incumbent government. He also praised the prime minister for calling BNP chief Khaleda Zia and offering her to sit for talks.

# BNP sticks to polls-time govt without Hasina

RASHIDUL HASAN

BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia last night categorically told UN Assistant Secretary-General Oscar Fernández-Taranco that Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina must resign and a non-partisan person has to head the polls-time government.

Khaleda said this at a meeting with a five-member team led by Fernández-Taranco at her Gulshan residence.

The UN officials had two rounds of closed-door meetings with the BNP leadership that lasted over two hours. In the first round, party leaders Moyeen Khan, Shamsher Mobin Chowdhury, Reaz Rahman and Sabihuddin Ahmed talked with them for one and a half hours.

Then Khaleda had a one-to-one meeting with Taranco for 40 minutes, BNP sources said.

At the meeting with the BNP leaders, the UN assistant secretary general sought their views about the prime minister's October 18 proposal on the formation of all-party polls-time government. The BNP leaders said no election under Hasina would be free and fair.

They also mentioned the BNP chief placed a proposal on election-time government on October 21, but the government did not accept it.

The opposition leaders also informed Taranco that the BNP would not participate in the election even if a fresh polls-schedule is announced with Hasina still at the helm, a BNP leader told The Daily Star, wishing anonymity.

"We have also apprised them [UN delegation] of the prevailing atmosphere marked by arrests, killings and harassment of the opposition leaders."

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# Another bus helper burnt in sleep

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the main opposition BNP.

Yesterday's incident happened around 4.30am when Alamgir, 25, was sleeping inside the bus, owned by Great Bikrampur Paribahan, parked at the Mawa launch terminal parking yard, said Abul Kalam, officer-in-charge of Louhajang Police Station.

At the burn unit of the hospital, he could barely talk as his entire face was burnt. His

throat, chest and part of his stomach were also burnt, which, doctors said, made his situation critical.

Alamgir's breathing tract was injured because of smoke inhalation, doctors said.

He was coughing out blackened mucus, his brother Anis Sheikh told The Daily Star.

Lying on a hospital bed, Alamgir, a resident of Patabhogh in Munshiganj, was not being able to remember how he had got out of the bus.

"I was sleeping inside" was all he could say.

The launch terminal's security guard, Abdul Berek, said he had got inside the bus by breaking a window and helped the victim out. At that time Berek suffered minor injuries.

"Alamgir was banging his fists on the windows when the bus was on fire," Berek said.

At least 48 people have been injured in arson attacks in 21 days of opposition-enforced hartals and blockades since October 26.

Meanwhile, Jahanara Begum, admitted to DMCH on Friday night, has been undergoing treatment with uncertainty as to whether she

will recover and, if she recovers, who will bear her medical and living expenses.

"I am a poor hawkler. I sell clothes on the streets. I have lived alone my entire life after my husband left me.

"How will I survive now? Who will take care of me? I have already borrowed Tk 5,000 for my treatment," lamented Jahanara, who sustained 27 percent burns.

Jahanara said she had only one daughter, a housewife, to rely on for any support.

She had been burnt when blockaders hurled a petrol bomb at a battery-run auto-rickshaw she was travelling by at Shyampur in the capital on Friday.

The condition of another burn victim, Assistant Sub-inspector Nurunnabi, who had received 35 percent burns in the arson attack on a bus at Shahbagh on November 28, worsened yesterday, according to hospital sources.

The policeman is a diabetic patient and has been under observation at the intensive care unit of DMCH.



Fifty-year-old Jahanara at the burn unit of Dhaka Medical College Hospital yesterday. Criminals late Friday night hurled a petrol bomb at the Easybike she was travelling on in Shyampur burning 27 percent of her body. PHOTO: PALASH KHAN

# WTO clinches 'historic' deal to smooth trade

## KEY POINTS

Duty-free access; relaxed rules of origin for Bangladesh and other LDCs

Easing of red tape; automation of customs procedures

Reduction in costs of doing business

Safeguarding food security programmes in developing countries

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But the keystone of the landmark agreement is trade facilitation, meaning measures will be taken to cut red tape and streamline customs and port procedures to ease the movement of goods through national frontiers.

The International Chamber of Commerce estimates the feature will lower the cost of doing business by as much as 10-15 percent and add \$1 trillion to global output.

"For first time in our history, the WTO has truly delivered. This time the entire membership came together. We have put the 'world' back in World Trade Organisation," said a tearful Roberto Azevêdo, WTO's director-general, after a consensus was reached following gruelling negotiations that went past the conference's scheduled time.

Originally slated to end on Friday, the ninth WTO Ministerial Conference in the

Indonesian resort island of Bali dragged on to yesterday after a group of Latin American nations led by Cuba in the eleventh hour blocked a consensus in an effort to have the WTO call for the lifting of the 53-year old US trade embargo on the Caribbean island.

As a result, the members had to reconvene early yesterday morning, and Azevêdo, working with Indonesian Trade Minister Gita Wirjawan, managed to resolve the issue just before noon.

"This is a landmark," Indian Trade Minister Anand Sharma told the Financial Times, whose earlier hard stance over the food security issue threatened to derail the deal.

India wanted a pact that would satisfy its demands to exempt food security plans from being counted under subsidy spending caps, while the US was concerned that sur-

plus from India's food programme may get dumped onto world markets.

But on Friday night a compromise was reached. The agreement now lets India and other developing nations continue to subsidise their crops to bolster food security without having to worry about legal challenges, so long as the practice does not distort trade. This waiver will last for four years and if necessary can be continued even further.

"I view this as a victory for the farmers of India, for the subsistence farmers, for the poor farmers of all developing nations," Sharma told reporters afterwards.

The benefits of the Bali package are likely to take years to materialise, with Azevêdo set to prepare a roadmap for it over the next 12 months.

The agreement in Bali means that the WTO's role as a forum for negotiating trade

liberalisation agreements somewhat repaired. In recent years, the Geneva-based body was made to feel irrelevant, with an increasing trend towards bilateral trade agreements or alternative regional pacts.

"It looks as if tonight we have saved the WTO. That would be a historic event," said Karel De Gucht, the European Union's trade commissioner.

The ministerial meet, chaired by Wirjawan, also formally accepted Yemen as the group's 160th member. Yemen's parliament now has six months to ratify its accession package, the WTO said.

The WTO was formed in January 1995 after the Uruguay Round trade negotiations spanning 1986-1994 were completed. Apart from being a forum for world trade talks, the organisation arbitrates trade disputes between member countries.