

They talk twice, agree to nothing

FROM PAGE 1
polls-time cabinet.

During the talks in presence of UN envoy Oscar Fernandez-Taranco, the ruling party maintained the election must be held under the current constitutional provisions and Sheikh Hasina would continue to head the election-time government.

On deferring the polls date, AL leaders said the fixture might be revised to give three or four days for filing nomination papers only if the BNP-led opposition stopped blockades and hartals, according to the AL and BNP leaders who attended the dialogue.

But the BNP delegation disagreed with the AL and reiterated that Hasina must step down as the PM to make way for installing a nonparty person as head of the election-time cabinet, they added, requesting anonymity.

According to BNP sources, party chief Khaleda Zia instructed her negotiators to make "no compromise" on the Hasina issue.

Wrapping up his five-day visit, Taranco, UN assistant secretary general for political affairs, told a press briefing that it was now the responsibility of the two parties to continue the talks to reach a consensus.

Asked to comment on the developments over the last two days, a senior AL leader who attended the parleys, said: "The South Pole and the North Pole cannot meet."

Another AL leader who held a meeting with Taranco and is monitoring the development said chances of any solution were slim as the BNP remained rigid on its stance.

A member of the BNP team also did not see

much hope.

"He [Taranco] has done his job -- engaged us in talks. His mission is successful. But we are where we have been," he said, sounding frustrated.

Neither parties, however, briefed the media or issued any statement on yesterday's talks. After the first round of talks on Tuesday, both parties had issued statements about their engagement and commitment to talk further.

AL General Secretary Syed Ashrafur Islam led his party's delegation. Other members were Amir Hossain Amu, Tofail Ahmed and Gowher Rizvi.

BNP acting secretary general Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir led the opposition team that included Khandaker Mosharraf Hossain, Moyeen Khan and Shamsher Mobin Chowdhury.

At a regular press briefing, BNP leader Nazrul Islam Khan yesterday said the opposition alliance would continue its agitation until a solution to the crisis came.

The AL for its part has instructed its grassroots to take to the streets to counter the opposition agitation that aims to foil the January 5 election.

In addition, the AL has started distributing letters among its nominees on the allocation of electoral symbol. The party nominees will submit the letters to the returning officers, seeking party's electoral symbol, boat, when the allocation of polls symbols starts on December 14.

"The government is determined to hold the election and the Awami League wants the polls in due time," Agriculture Minister and AL

Presidium Member Matia Chowdhury told this newspaper.

INTERNATIONAL EFFORTS

Earlier in December last year again in May this year, the UN chief sent two delegations led by Taranco to encourage the AL and the BNP to resolve the crisis through talks.

In August, Ban Ki-moon himself called Hasina and Khaleda and urged them to hold talks for a peaceful resolution to the crisis.

Then in September, US Secretary of State John Kerry wrote letters to the two top leaders, calling on them to engage in talks to settle the issue of the election-time government.

In addition, diplomats of different countries stationed in Dhaka have long been urging the two sides to hold talks.

But none of these efforts seem to have yielded any results.

Amid all these, the Election Commission on November 25 announced the polls schedule.

The BNP-led opposition rejected the schedule and started enforcing blockade from the next day. The date for filing nomination papers expired on December 2, with the opposition alliance not filing any nomination.

Against this backdrop, Taranco again arrived in Dhaka on Friday to try to broker a dialogue between the two camps to forge a consensus.

Before his arrival, the UN chief wrote to Hasina and Khaleda urging them again to hold talks and requesting them to assist his envoy.

During his stay, Taranco made serious efforts to bring the two sides to a discussion table and eventually succeeded. But a desired outcome appears a far cry.

Solution possible

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He said political leaders had the goodwill to end the crisis, otherwise there would not have been two meetings between representatives of Awami League and BNP on Tuesday and yesterday and an agreement to sit for a third.

"This is an important accomplishment. In this dialogue, compromise would be decisive in finding a solution," he said at a press conference held at Hotel Sonargaon.

When asked if there was a proposal on the table to end the deadlock keeping Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in power, he said, "I will not go into the details ... all the issues that are relevant to this current situation have been raised and discussed."

Asked about a proposal on curtailing the prime minister's powers in the polls-time government, he again refused to go into details on the dialogue discussions.

Taranco, the UN assistant secretary-general for political affairs, who was on his third visit to Dhaka in a year, said the solution had to be home grown.

He said, "There are measures that would contribute immensely -- a call by all sides to end the violence, the release of opposition political leaders, and a mutually satisfactory solution to concerns regarding the election schedule."

Asked whether his mission has been successful, he said, "Let me be very frank and sincere here ... I'm very happy with the results."

About the second-time cancellation of his second meeting with the prime minister, he said yesterday was very hectic. "As you know

many things are happening. It is a matter of scheduling."

When The Daily Star asked what could be the consequences if the dialogue failed, he said, "Everybody in the room knows what will happen if the dialogue failed. I won't answer that question. This is a leadership issue, this is a decision that takes courage."

He sidestepped a question if the UN chief had telephoned the prime minister by saying Ban Ki-moon was actively engaged in Bangladesh as he liked the country very much and appreciated the progress it achieved in the socioeconomic areas.

Sources in the Prime Minister's Office, however, confirmed that Ban had indeed called Sheikh Hasina yesterday.

In his opening statement before the press Taranco said the current political crisis was exacting a heavy human, social and economic toll on Bangladesh. This has resulted in increasing tension and seriously threatens the hard-earned economic and social progress that Bangladesh had achieved.

He strongly urged all to exercise restraint, uphold human rights, and to respect the rule of law.

Taranco, who arrived here on December 6, had discussions with the prime minister, the BNP chief, foreign minister and foreign secretary, the chief election commissioner, a number of senior advisers to the prime minister and the opposition leader, as well as leaders of major political parties and representatives of the civil society.

AL to offer JP 60 seats

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Ershad recently announced that his party will stay away from the polls and quit the "election-time government".

Meantime, around 20 JP candidates, including Ershad and his brother GM Quader, yesterday applied for withdrawal of their candidacies, report our district correspondents.

Top leaders Rawshan Ershad, Anisul Islam Mahmud and Ruhul Amin Hawlader are yet to withdraw their candidacies.

Ershad on Monday directed his party candidates to withdraw their nomination papers by December 13, the last date for withdrawal of candidacy.

Taking to The Daily Star, JP presidium member Kazi Firoz Rashid said its nominees have started withdrawing their candidacies on the directives of the party chief. The party chairman has sent three letters to the returning officers of Rangpur-3, Lalmonirhat-1 and Dhaka-17 constituencies, he added.

But the letter for the Dhaka-17 constituency was rejected as it was backdated.

Dhaka district returning officer Zillar Rahman said, "Ershad's withdrawal prayer was rejected as he mentioned December 5 [instead of December 11] as the application date. I told them [party men] to submit a fresh copy."

allocating electoral symbol to the candidates.

The party, however, did not issue letters for the constituencies, which it wanted to give up to its allies and Jatiya Party.

AL Joint General Secretary Mahbubul Alam Hanif said they started distributing the letters on the basis of seat sharing agreements with other political parties.

Paralysed by fear

FROM PAGE 1
The moulds used to make tube-well and agricultural equipment lay forlornly on the dusty floors of Gunjan Metal Works, one of the 41 farm machinery manufacturing units housed inside the BSCIC park. There was no shrilling noise of the scrap metal melting machine, and the buckets that carried the molten metal to the moulds slouched next to it.

"This is the first time since 1985 that factories in Bogra have remained closed during shutdowns," said Ainul Hoque Sohel, president of Foundry Owners Association of Bangladesh.

The reason for the suspension of production, he says, is the progressively low worker turnout. Even if there is no production, workers still get paid a certain sum for clocking in. But for the past couple of days, the lure of that sum cannot get them to leave the safety of their homes.

"Most of our workers stay in rural areas. They cannot even come on bicycles as there are pickets in the village roads as well," said Sohel, also the managing director of Gunjan Metal Works.

The ongoing series of shutdowns and blockades is costing him Tk 2 lakh a day.

"We can neither bring our raw materials from Chittagong nor can we sell the already-produced goods. Transactions are totally off, although this is the peak season for farm machinery sales and its equipment."

Sohel said the situation is increasingly deteriorating, and if it continues for long, many loans will be classified in the not-too-distant future.

China for dialogue

STAFF CORRESPONDENT
A Chinese special envoy yesterday stressed the need for dialogue between political parties for peace and stability in Bangladesh.

Luo Zhaohui was speaking to reporters after meeting BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia at her Gulshan residence last night.

"Of course Bangladesh is going through a crucial stage. We've discussed various matters related to the domestic [Bangladesh] situation. Actually, I'm here to be aware of the current situation," he said. Luo led a five-member Chinese delegation to the meeting.

"It's quite clear that cooperation, dialogue, peace and stability are very important things as confrontation would not benefit the country. It won't also be beneficial for our bilateral cooperation," mentioned the envoy.

It's plot to kill him

Jamaat says on Mollah
STAFF CORRESPONDENT
Jamaat-e-Islami yesterday claimed that the government, out of political vengeance, was trying to kill Abdul Quader Mollah, disregarding the constitution, the Supreme Court and the jail code.

Issuing a statement, it claimed that the government made a plan to kill Mollah even though several countries and the UN had requested the execution of Mollah to be stopped.

Jamaat also claimed that the government sponsored criminals were involved in the countrywide violence and that it had nothing to do with it.

Protesting ongoing violence, the party said the violence across the country did not have any relation to the party's movement. It denied of being involved in the arson of Supreme Court Justice SK Sinha's village home in Moulvibazar yesterday.

Jamaat urged people to observe the opposition's ongoing blockade until Friday morning to protest against the government's "conspiracies" to hold the election and "murder" the

Fate hangs in the balance

FROM PAGE 1
Jamaat leader was to walk the gallows.

Mollah's lawyers took the stay order from the chamber judge by apparently dodging the state counsels.

None from the attorney general's office was present at Hossain's residence where he issued the order after hearing Mollah's stay petition filed on Tuesday night.

The decision frustrated family members of the Liberation War victims, Gonojagoron Mancha activists and people of all walks of life, who were eagerly waiting that night for the execution of Mollah, infamous as Mirpurur Kosai (the Butcher of a Murphy).

Jamaat enforced a countrywide hartal for the last three days to protest its leader's death warrant issued by the International Crimes Tribunal-2 on December 8.

Mollah filed a petition with the chamber judge on Tuesday night, seeking a review of the SC verdict that awarded him death penalty for committing crimes against humanity during the 1971 Liberation War.

Talking to The Daily Star on condition of anonymity, a SC lawyer said if the petition is not settled today, the case proceedings would be delayed till January next year with the court going on annual winter vacation from tomorrow.

The counsel, however, said if the court wishes, it might hear the petition during the vacation.

The court will reopen on January 2 next year.

MK Rahman, additional attorney general and coordinator of the prosecution team, said court proceedings on the review petition might be completed today, as the attorney general had already placed his arguments yesterday.

He said the defence lawyers made lengthy arguments on the petition's maintainability yesterday and might place further arguments today.

Mollah's counsels might intentionally

prolong their arguments today to delay the court proceedings, said Rahman.

During yesterday's hearing, the convict's lawyer Abdur Razaq told the court that according to the constitution, his client had the right to move the review petition in the apex court.

He argued that the SC has inherent powers to review its verdict.

Attorney General Mahbubey Alam opposed it, saying the petition was not acceptable as per the constitution, since Mollah had been tried and convicted under the International Crimes (Tribunals) Act, 1973.

During the proceedings, Chief Justice Muzammel Hossain expressed dissatisfaction at media reports that the attorney general was holding a meeting with the chief justice at the latter's residence while the SC chamber judge was dealing with Mollah's stay petition at his residence on Tuesday night.

The attorney general can make an appeal or place an argument before the chief justice but cannot hold any meeting with the CJ, he observed.

The media shouldn't publish any report without verifying the authenticity of the information, he added.

Earlier in the day, Mollah's lawyers submitted a petition to the SC, seeking an extension till January 2 of the chamber judge's order that stayed Mollah's execution till 10:30am yesterday.

The state counsels also filed a petition with the apex court for vacating the stay order.

Four other SC judges dealing with the review petition are Justice Surendra Kumar Sinha, Justice Md Abdul Wahhab Miah, Justice Syed Mahmud Hossain and Justice AHM Shamsuddin Choudhury Manik.

The apex court on September 17 sentenced Mollah to death, overruling the judgment of the ICT-2 that had given him life term for committing crimes against humanity in 1971.

Masuma loses

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"I gave her a pen and paper. And she tried to write something, her hand trembling."

Her sister said Masuma tossed about restlessly in the last few days. "She wanted to return home as soon as possible. Now she has returned home, but in a way we never expected," she said.

"She was not involved in politics. What was her fault then, for which she had to die so painfully?"

Meanwhile, the arson victims at the DMCH burn unit passed another day yesterday, with none of them improving significantly.

One of the victims, bus helper Mohammad Alamgir, 25, had sustained burn injuries at Mawa in Munshiganj early Saturday.

"I don't remember exactly how I escaped from the bus. I only remember that something terrible was happening and that I was going to die. My only thought was how to get out of the bus," he recalled.

"When I made it out of the bus, it was engulfed in flames."

Alamgir was sleeping behind the driver's seat in the parked bus when it came under attack.

However, as the day turns to night, some form of life seems to return at the town centre, as some hopeful restaurants and small shops open for business.

"We would be harassed if we keep stores open during the shutdown hours," said Mohammad Raju, a grocer, who laid out his stall in the evening.

Abdur Rahman, who runs a tiny footwear store in the town centre, said there is not much business to be done in the evening hours. "I open my store every day but hardly anyone comes. I have to spend from cash to manage my family needs nowadays."

But it is for the day labourers that the economic stupor has hit the hardest.

"It has become very tough for me to meet my family's needs these days. Transport is off and so is my income," said a day labourer declining to share his name for fear of reprisal. He helps loading and unloading of goods from vehicles.

"Hunger knows no law. So, I have to bear family expenses by borrowing," the upset breadwinner added.

His group got engaged in a front battle with Al-Badr men at Chandgaon in Chittagong and defeated the enemies.

In the early hours of November 30, Al-Badr led by Quasem, Pakistani army and Razakars besieged their house, said the witness. They detained him along with his elder brother and five other cousins and hit him with rifles before taking them blindfolded to NMC School, he added.

Amran said 10 to 12 more freedom fighters were picked up from different parts of the city and were brought to the school. All the detainees, apart from two, were boarded on two trucks and taken to an Al-Bar torture camp set up at Dalim Hotel in the city's Andarkallah area.

"Mir Quasem Ali controlled the [Al-Badr torture] camp. I was taken to a room and tortured brutally by sticks, electric wire and other weapons. I fainted frequently and each

time they poured water on my face so that I regained consciousness," said Amran.

At one stage, the blindfold was taken off and Quasem interrogated him about their arms, training and manpower, said Amran, adding that Afsar Uddin Chowdhury, who was Amran's senior in his college, had taken notes.

According to the witness, Afsar is the general secretary of Chittagong city Jamaat and editor of Daily Karnaphuli.

After interrogation, Amran was taken to another room where he found Sanaullah Chowdhury, Jahangir Alam Chowdhury and Shafiu Alam Chowdhury, who were acquainted to him, said the witness.

"From a discussion with them I learned that on November 28, a freedom fighter was tortured and killed inside their room. His name was Jasimuddin, a teenage from Sandwip," he said.

From Swapan, an employee of the camp,

He saw them burn to death

FROM PAGE 1
His wife Sumi Aktar and seven-year-old daughter Sanjida Aktar were buried at his village in Ullapara under Gazipur when he was undergoing treatment in Dhaka for the injuries he sustained in the incident.

Following the arson, the bodies were kept in Gazipur Sadar Hospital morgue. Yesterday, those were handed over to their relatives.

Adam, a security guard, who sustained burns in his left hand and right leg, is now at a relative's place in the capital's Rampura after undergoing treatment in Dhaka Medical College Hospital (DMCH).

As Adam was unable to move because of his injuries, he could not go to Gazipur and see his wife and daughter Sanjida.

"They killed my wife and one daughter and injured me and my youngest daughter. I am so unlucky a father that I could not even see my daughter before the burial," Adam told The Daily Star over the phone.

His eldest daughter Arifa, 8, escaped

Witness testifies on killing of 5

FROM PAGE 16
learn about their force.

Amran, first prosecution witness in Quasem's case, said freedom fighters had rescued 100-150 detainees including him from the camp on December 16, 1971.

At the last part of his 64-minute testimony, the witness identified Quasem, who was his classmate in school. Quasem, who is facing 14 charges for his alleged involvement in crimes against humanity, was produced at dock yesterday.

According to the prosecution documents, Quasem was the general secretary of Islami Chhatra Sangha, the then student wing of Jamaat. Chhatra Sangha later turned into Al-Badr, an auxiliary force of Pakistani army, that was especially responsible for the killings of the intellectuals.

After his testimony, the three-member tribunal led by Justice Obaidul Hassan

adjourned the proceeding until December 17. The tribunal also fixed December 29 for Amran's cross-examination.

The 61-year-old witness from Chittagong said Quasem, former primary and mass education minister Afsar Ameen and lawmaker Moinuddin Khan Badal were his classmates at Chittagong Collegiate School.

Amran said as an activist of Chhatra League, he had taken part in the movements for Six-Point Demand, Mass Upsurge of 1969, and campaigned for Awami League candidates in 1970 and 1971. He added, when he was a first-year degree student, he joined the Liberation War.

After receiving training in Bihar in India, he returned to Chittagong in mid-September as a group commander of BLF and took part in different guerrilla operations along with five other BLF groups, said Amran.

Amran added on the night of November 29,

Sanauallah, Jahangir, Shafiu and others learned that three to four other detainees were also killed in another room of the camp, said Amran, adding that he was tortured in between December 1 and 10.

On December 13, Quasem, doctor Shamim and another man had gone to their room and said he would be released if he helped them to capture three members of the freedom fighters' high command, the witness said.

"But I said I would do that if they released all four, who were kept detained in that room," he said, adding, on the morning of December 14, Shamim and the man again went to their room and informed them that they would be executed soon.

But they did not go to the room on December 15 and next morning freedom fighters and relatives of the detainees had rescued them, added Amran.

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From Swapan, an employee of the camp,

unhurt while two-year-old daughter, Sadiya, suffered severe burns in both her legs.

The tragedy struck the family when they were going to visit Adam's 85-year-old father in Sirajganj after he had fallen sick.

They were inside the cabin of the lorry which was set ablaze. The driver and helper of the lorry along with Adam and his two children survived the attack.

Meanwhile, Sub-Inspector Nazmul Haque, in-charge of Bhogra police camp, filed a case with Joydebpur Police Station, accusing 30 identified and 60 unidentified people of the arson attack.

Two persons, Jahid Hossain and Zohur Uddin, both aged 30, were arrested in this connection, he said.

Another incident of arson happened on November 4 at a spot within two kilometres radius of the place where Adam's family was attacked on Tuesday. In the earlier incident, 14-year-old Monir, who was inside his father's parked lorry, died of burns at DMCH.