

## AL, BNP leaders sit for 3rd time

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the polls-time government, reforms in the Election Commission, and making the administration neutral.

In response, the AL side asked the opposition to stop its destructive programmes like hartal and blockade, give up the demand for caretaker government and accept the constitutional guidelines on the formation of polls-time government.

The party also proposed that the BNP sever relations with war criminals and Jamaat-e-Islami.

Both the sides have apprised their party chiefs about the dialogue proceedings.

AL General Secretary Syed Ashraful Islam and BNP acting secretary general Mirza Fakhru Islam Alamgir led their sides in the third round of dialogue held in presence of UN Resident Coordinator in Dhaka Neal Walker at a UN project office in Gulshan.

AL's Amir Hossain Amu, Tofail Ahmed and Gowher Rizvi, and BNP's Khandaker Mosharraf Hossain, Abdul Moyeen Khan and Shamsher Mobin Chowdhury also attended yesterday's dialogue.

AL and BNP sources, however, said they hardly see any chance of reaching a consensus.

## No blockade

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Their suffering began after crossing the Bangabandhu bridge on the Jamuna river, as Jamaat activists had blocked the Sirajganj-Bogra highway with logs and trees in protest at the execution of Jamaat leader and convicted war criminal Abdul Quader Mollah.

The family had to pass the night there stranded.

In the morning, they resumed the journey behind an army convoy and reached Bogra bus terminal around 2:00pm. But the convoy was going to Rangpur, not where the family was heading.

From Bogra, Lutfor and his family were to go 50 more miles to Naogaon, braving the road blocked with logs and trees by Jamaat-Shibir men.

"We have passed a terrible night on the road. It is still uncertain whether we would be able to reach home safely with our daughters and all these belongings," said Lutfor holding his two-year-old daughter in his arms.

Not only Lutfor and his family, hundreds of people, including the elderly and children, suffered and fell prey to uncertainty reaching their destinations due to highway blockades by Jamaat supporters.

Most of the travellers picked Friday assuming they would be able to move easily as no political party -- BNP or its key ally Jamaat -- had declared blockade or shutdown for the day.

## It's people of Bangladesh

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the statement following opposition leader Khaleda Zia's press statement on Thursday. She had urged the Indian government to express solidarity with "the position the world community and people of Bangladesh had taken regarding the political stalemate".

An official spokesman of the Ministry of External Affairs yesterday said, "Our relations with Bangladesh are broadly based and inclusive. India has always and will always respect the wishes of the people of

## 18-party mulls fresh blockade

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political development, including the possible fate of the ongoing talks and her party's next course of action.

On the dialogue, she said the government was spending time in the name of

sus by the two parties at this crucial stage when the deadline for candidacy withdrawal had expired.

**CEC BRIEFING**  
Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) Rakibuddin Ahmad yesterday said the situation had become difficult to ensure participation of all political parties in the next general elections.

"But the possibility of a consensus will always remain alive. If everyone [politicians] reaches a consensus, they will be able to find a way," he told reporters at the EC Secretariat in response to a query whether it would be possible for BNP to participate in the election as the deadline for nomination withdrawal had expired yesterday.

On Jatiya Party (JP) Chairman HM Ershad's letter requesting him not to allocate the symbol "plough" to any other candidate, the CEC said, "We have directed the returning officers about it and they will make the decision on this matter as per law."

On Wednesday, citing that JP would not join the polls Ershad had requested the CEC not to allocate the party's symbol "plough" to anyone.

But halfway in the journey, they discovered that the highways to the northern districts were blocked.

"Who knew that I would have to face such suffering on Friday?" said Mahmudur Reza Shafi, who left the capital for Rangpur on Thursday. He had to walk miles and hire rickshaw van when possible after Sirajganj up to Bogra.

Yesterday around 2:00pm, Shafi was seen passing the Bogra bus terminal on foot along with many others.

Early in the afternoon, a silent but aggressive procession of people was seen going both directions of the highway in front of Bogra bus terminal. Not far away, smoke was billowing from fires made on the roads with chunks of brick and concrete lying here and there.

"It was unexpected. Travelling should have been easier today [Friday], as there was no hartal," said construction worker Rezaul Karim, who also had to walk since morning yesterday from Naogaon to go to Sirajganj.

In the afternoon, elderly farm worker Rafiqul Islam and seven of his mates were also found walking since the morning from Nandigram, Bogra for their village at Dimla in Nilphamari. By bus it usually takes three and a half hours to go the distance.

"We have remained stranded since Saturday last due to the blockades and hartals. Already, we have spent half our earnings from farm work since we have

Bangladesh. It is for the people of Bangladesh to decide their future."

"We are confident that as a democracy the people of Bangladesh will resolve their differences through dialogue and peaceful means, in an atmosphere free of violence."

Answering a question about the execution of war criminal and assistant secretary general of Jamaat-e-Islami Quader Mollah, the spokesman termed it an outcome of the internal judicial processes and laws of Bangladesh.

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Deputy Managing Director (Administration & Finance)

## 128 elected

YEAR	NUMBER OF CONTESTING PARTIES	NUMBER OF CANDIDATES	NUMBER OF MPS ELECT UNOPPOSED
2014	16	600	128
2008	38	1567	0
2001	54	1939	0
1996 [June]	81	2574	0
1996 [February-15]	41	1450	49
1991	75	2787	0
1988	8	1192	18
1986	28	1980	0
1979	29	2547	11
1973	14	1209	11

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go to polling stations on January 5.

In four districts -- Chandpur, Sariatpur, Madaripur and Gazipur -- not a single candidate has got any rival in any seat.

Those who are going to be elected uncontested have mostly been nominated by the ruling Awami League.

They include party stalwarts like Syeda Sajeda Chowdhury, AMA Muhith, Amir Hossain Amu, Tofail Ahmed, Syed Ashraful Islam and Obaidul Quader, ex-home minister Muhiuddin Khan Alamgir and controversial AL leader Shamim Osman of Narayanganj.

JP (Manju) chief Anwar Hossain Manju, who became advisor to the prime minister last month, looks set to get elected uncontested from his home district Pirojpur. Even his party leader Nurul Islam Talukder will not have any rival in his constituency of Bogra, a bastion of the main opposition BNP.

Four Jatiya Party leaders, who did not withdraw their nomination papers despite a directive from party chief Ershad, will also be elected unopposed from Mymensingh 5, Bogra-2 and Kurigram 2 and 3.

Of them, AKM Maidul Islam, a sitting lawmaker from Kurigram-3, said he had instructed his aides to submit the application for the withdrawal of his candidacy but somehow they had failed.

About the polls, he said, "I'm not interested in the polls. This is a farcical election and if I take part in it, I will also be reduced to a farce."

Workers Party leader Fazle Hossain Badsha is also on the list of those being elected without contest from Rajshahi-2.

Backed by the AL, 10 candidates of the Workers Party, Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal and Tarikat Federation will contest the polls on the AL electoral symbol "boat". AL chief and prime minister Sheikh Hasina yesterday requested the chief election commissioner to allocate the symbol to her party.

The number of MPs-elect uncontested would have been higher had all candidates nominated by the Ershad-led Jatiya Party withdrawn their candidacies yesterday.

In a competitive election, the possibility of a candidate's getting elected unopposed is very slim. In polls held in 1986, 1991, 1996 [June], 2001 and 2008, none was elected unchallenged.

Eleven were elected uncontested in each of the 1973 and 1979 polls, 18 in another farcical election held by the Ershad regime in 1988 and 22 in the canceled parliamentary polls slated for January 22, 2007.

Only 651 contenders will take part in the upcoming national election amid a boycott by the opposition. Each of nine other parliamentary polls held since 1973 had more than 1,000 candidates.

The BNP-Jamaat-led 18-party alliance and some other parties will not participate in the January 5 polls. The 18-party combine has all along maintained that it will not contest any election held without a non-party caretaker administration.

Worsening the situation, the Ershad-led Jatiya Party recently announced a boycott, saying the atmosphere for an inclusive election is absent.

## Boy critically

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Only one road separated him from the safety of his neighbourhood when he suddenly discovered himself in the middle of a clash, said Asma.

"The clash started all of a sudden. Before he realised it, he was down on the ground," described his mother to The Daily Star.

"My son lay in a pool of blood for around twenty minutes before he was rescued ... that too by another child. No one else dared to save my boy," she went on.

The minor Asma referred to is Mohammad Jewel, a 17 year old, who rescued Shanto while he was lying motionless on the ground.

Shanto's two-year-old brother was with him. He had gone missing after his brother fell down, said Asma.

"An acquaintance spotted him and dropped him home. I almost lost both my sons," she added.

Ashrafuzzaman, deputy commissioner of police of Motijheel zone, told The Daily Star that the police fired rubber bullets as the protesters were hurling homemade bombs at them.

Earlier, two 14-year olds, Mohammad Arzu and Siam, were killed by rubber bullets in separate hartal clashes in Chandpur.

Arzu was caught in a clash between local factions of Awami League and BNP on October 28, while Siam was shot by rubber bullets while allegedly throwing a crude bomb at police on December 3.

With the addition of Shanto, 19 children had been victimized in the mindless political violence since October 26 with three of them succumbing to injuries.

Meanwhile, the air at the burn unit of DMCH was still heavy with the sufferings of arson victims.

Abdul Aziz, the auto-rickshaw driver who came in from Chittagong bearing 35 percent burns, wheezed heavily lying on a bed in the Intensive Care Unit (ICU). The man could barely breathe as his windpipe was burnt in the attack during the opposition's blockade programme on December 2.

Medical sources said his condition was critical.

Bahar, the son-in-law of policeman Nurunnabi who was burnt in an arson attack on a bus in Shahbagh on November 28, told this correspondent that he still feared for the life of his father-in-law.

"I can have a sigh of relief only when he is brought out of the ICU," he said.

However, the family shared a joyous moment recently when Nurunnabi could take his first solid meal since the incident.

"His throat was burnt, so he had a lot of difficulty eating," said Bahar.

## UN chief also 'spoke'

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The report of UN chief's telephone conversation with the PM was widely published earlier in Bangladeshi media. But his talk with the president was unveiled yesterday through a report published in UN News Centre.

Ban called the premier to resolve differences over upcoming parliamentary elections through dialogue.

According to UN News Centre, he [Ban] also spoke with President Abdul Hamid by phone as a senior UN political official wrapped up a five-day visit to Bangladesh with a warning that the current political crisis is exacting a heavy, human, social and economic toll, seriously threatening the hard-earned economic and social progress that Bangladesh has achieved.

"The leaders have shown statesmanship," UN Assistant Secretary-General for Political Affairs Oscar Fernandez-Taranco told a press conference prior to his departure from Dhaka on Wednesday, after concluding his meetings with the government, opposition leaders and election officials.

"It remains critical to reduce tension and to continue to engage in constructive

dialogue so as to create a congenial atmosphere," 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," Taranco told the media.

The major parties have so far failed to resolve their differences over the conduct of elections and supporters of both parties have been clashing with each other and with the security forces.

Scores of people have been killed, hundreds injured, and there has been extensive destruction of property, according to UN News Centre.

"At this moment the world is remembering Nelson Mandela's legacy," Taranco said, referring to the South Africa's first black president who died last week.

He added that there is ground for an agreement and the country's leaders must continue their dialogue in the spirit of goodwill and compromise.

Earlier this month, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay urged the country's political leaders to

## Ershad not ill

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Hospital] in the name of treatment for arrest."

Apart from picking up Ershad, the government has taken various measures, including withdrawal of nomination papers from about 40 parliamentary seats to ensure win for JP lawmaker aspirants.

JP presidium member Ziauddin Ahmed Bablu lobbied another presidium member Raushan Ershad and some other top JP leaders for contesting the election. To ensure win for Bablu, AL lawmaker from Chittagong-9 (Kotwali-Bakalia) Nurul Islam BSc has withdrawn his nomination paper, said party sources.

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