

FIFTH SESSION OF SANGSAD BNP-Jamaat bashing dominated discussion

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Rapping of BNP-Jamaat's "subversive activities" during the blockade and hartal largely dominated the fifth session of the 10th parliament that ended on Thursday.

The House should rather have focused its discussion on legislation, the president's speech and the government's development activities, said experts.

Speaker Shirin Sharmin Chaudhury and almost all the lawmakers, including Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and opposition leader Raushan Ershad, came down hard on BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia for enforcing blockade and hartal during the Secondary School Certificate exams and "killing common people in petrol bomb attacks across the country."

Taking the floor on the thanksgiving motion on the president's speech and point of order, most of the Awami League and Jatiya Party lawmakers demanded that the government take firm measures to contain "BNP-Jamaat's violence" and arrest the BNP chief.

President Abdul Hamid addressed the Jatiya Sangshad on January 19, the first day of the session. Chief Whip ASM Feroz tabled the thanksgiving

motion on the president's speech.

The business advisory committee of parliament had decided to run the session until March 5. Later, it was extended until April 2. Lawmakers said the session was extended to avoid convening another session before the budget session in June. Convening a parliament session within 90 days of the last one is mandatory.

In a meeting on February 27, the business advisory committee decided that the House would have 45 hours for discussing the president's address.

During the 39 business days of the fifth session, the MPs discussed president's speech for 60 hours and 30 minutes, about 15 hours more than the stipulated time. A total of 236 legislators took part in the discussion, according to a release of the parliament secretariat.

Eleven bills, including one private member's, were placed before parliament. Eight of them were passed.

Before prorogating the session on Thursday, the Speaker blasted the BNP-Jamaat for "resorting to subversive activities".

Democracy, said Shirin, does not support terrorism and violence; it is not acceptable to anyone. She hoped people would take democracy forward by resisting terrorism and violence in future.



Students of Fine Arts Faculty of Dhaka University, popularly known as Charukola, yesterday prepare colourful masks for Mangal Shobhajatra, a key attraction of the Pahela Baishakh celebrations in Dhaka. Pahela Baishakh, the Bangla new year, is less than two weeks away.

PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

Farmers struggle to recover loss

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He faced a similar fate during the previous winter as well due to hartals ahead of the January 5 polls last year.

"It has become very difficult to take a living off farming. Every time we hope for some stability, things get only worse. We are deprived of just prices [for our produce]," he told The Daily Star over the phone recently.

Millions of farmers like Naresh are bearing the brunt of hartals and blockades by the BNP-led alliance for almost three months now.

The Daily Star interviewed farmers from Gaibandha, Nilphamari, Rajshahi, Natore, Chapainawabganj, Meherpur, Jessore, Narsingdi, Barisal and Pirojpur districts.

They said the country's northern and south-western districts had been more affected than those in other parts. It is because these districts are

more linked to the vegetables and other crop markets in Dhaka, Chittagong and elsewhere.

Jahangir Alam, an agriculture economist and former director general of Bangladesh Livestock Research Institute, estimates that the farming sectors lost around Tk 200-250 crore every day during last winter due to the blockade.

Most truckers wouldn't work fearing bomb attacks by blockaders, and those who would work would charge double the usual fare.

"We have learnt that a trucker who usually charges Tk 10,000 to transport vegetables from Rangpur to Dhaka demanded Tk 20,000 or more for the same job during the blockade," he said.

"Much of the vegetables perished or was sold at a very low price," Alam said, adding that such events have

rendered many rural people jobless in the last three months.

LOW RICE PRICE ANOTHER CONCERN

Already in a tight corner, farmers fear a far worse time ahead as the prices of paddy and rice have recently slumped and it happened right ahead of Boro harvesting season, which starts in late April.

According to the agriculture ministry, the production cost of paddy and rice this Boro season will be Tk 20 and Tk 27 a kg. But farmers said each kg of paddy now sells at Tk 15-16 and coarse rice at Tk 25-26. And the price may go further down with the new harvest.

"In December-January, I sold paddy at Tk 17.5 per kg, but it came down to Tk 15 in March," said Bibha Begum, a marginal farmer of Bandapur village in Rajshahi's Tanore.

The picture was somewhat the same elsewhere, and farmers blame it on rice import from India.

Farmer Babul Akhter of Jessore's Sharsha said while Bangladeshi fine rice was sold at between Tk 45 and 48 per kg, Indian rice of same quality is available for Tk 38-40.

According to the commerce ministry, private sector imported around 11 lakh tonnes of rice from India since June last year, and are continuing to do so despite the promise of a bumper Boro output this season.

Farmers and analysts believe if rice import continues this way even when the Boro harvest begins, it will adversely affect farmers, who account for more than half the country's 16 crore people.

Ataur Rahman, director general of Food Policy Monitoring Unit of the food ministry, said it's the private

sector, not the government, which is importing rice, and asked this reporter to contact the commerce ministry for further queries.

Contacted, a commerce ministry official said, "If we restrict rice import in a free market, the rice prices will go up and it will affect consumers."

The official added the ministry had no plan to ban the import.

Given the situation, the government should give higher allocation in the next budget to compensate the affected farmers. Otherwise, farmers will invest less in future and the country may face food insecurity, noted Jahangir Alam of the Livestock Research Institute.

"To strike a balance between the prices of Indian and the local rice, the government should impose duty on rice import," he added.

Death toll

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Eight bodies were recovered from the river and several others went missing as the trawler capsized in the river after being hit by a sand-laden bulkhead on Thursday afternoon.

The Dhaka-bound trawler with some 70 to 80 passengers on board started in the morning from a traditional fair, known as the Beltali Lengtar fair, in Matlab of Chandpur.

Around 12:45pm, the bulkhead hit the trawler in Aliganj area of Fatullah when it sank. Although many passengers could swim ashore, several others went missing.

With the three, 11 bodies were recovered from the river after the accident, said Momtaz Uddin, deputy director of Narayanganj Fire Service and Civil Defence.

They also heard that two people were still missing. The rescue operation would continue today, Momtaz added.

They're coming back, finally

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"A militant group released them in Sirte from where they tried to reach Tripoli. But they were caught by local armed forces in Misrata. The army kept our two people and another Ghanaian under their custody for interrogation. Finally, the VAOS rescued and brought them to Tripoli," ASM Ashraf Islam, counsellor (Labour Wing) at the Bangladesh embassy in Tripoli, told The Daily Star over the phone yesterday.

Unknown militants abducted Helal

Uddin of Jamalpur and Anowar Hossain of Noakhali along with seven other foreigners -- four Filipinos, an Austrian, a Czech and a Ghanaian -- from the Al-Ghani oilfield in the south of Sirte on March 6.

Later, they freed the Bangladeshis and the Ghanaian but the other six were not released, said Ashraf.

Yesterday, they were taken to Malta from where they would be sent home, said Ashraf. "The VAOS authorities told us that they would send them

back to Dhaka from Malta by Sunday," he added.

Replying to a query about the kidnapers, he said Helal and Anowar informed them that an unknown militant group abducted them and kept them confined for a few days.

Meanwhile, the families of Helal and Anowar said they heaved a sigh of relief as they could talk to them directly yesterday and on Thursday.

"I'm extremely happy that my father called me directly from Libya. He is

safe now," Helena Akter, daughter of Helal, told The Daily Star yesterday.

Fear and uncertainty gripped the family as they could not contact Helal for the last few days despite his release from militants, she said. "We have been crying and praying to Allah for my father's safety. We couldn't sleep thinking about him."

Anowar's wife Marfua Khatun also expressed satisfaction after she talked to her husband. She is now counting days for her husband's return.

World, Iran hail deal

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unambiguous Iranian recognition of Israel's right to exist."

His comments followed a special session of his powerful security cabinet in the wake of Thursday's framework agreement between the Islamic republic and world powers, hammered out at marathon talks in Switzerland.

"The cabinet is united in strongly opposing the proposed deal," he said.

"This deal would pose a grave danger to the region and to the world and would threaten the very survival of the state of Israel."

ance" in the talks, the official IRNA news agency reported.

Reaching out to Iranian hardliners who have opposed any deal that would curb Tehran's nuclear activities, Zarif said the agreement was not finalised.

"This set of solutions will be the basis for writing a final document," he said.

"We are proud because we will never surrender... but in return for the advantages that we gain, we will give things in return so we can move on," he said.

'HISTORIC MISTAKE'

Residents lined the streets as Zarif drove away from the airport, many carrying Iranian flags, with the minister emerging from the sunroof of his car and waving to the crowd.

Khamenei will have the final word on the agreement, under which Iran agreed to sharply curtail its nuclear programme in return for the lifting of sanctions.

Iran's arch-foe Israel, widely assumed to have atomic weapons of its own, slammed the outline agreement as a "historic mistake" and said it would threaten the survival of the Jewish state.

"This framework is a step in a very, very dangerous direction," government spokesman Mark Regev told journalists, adding that Iran's "single goal" was to build a nuclear bomb.

Iranian President Hassan Rouhani said the drafting of a full accord was to begin immediately after Thursday's announcement. He was to make a statement later to reporters in Tehran.

Under the outline deal, the United States and the European Union are to lift all nuclear-related sanctions on Iran once the UN atomic agency has verified that Tehran has stuck to its terms.

All past UN nuclear resolutions on Iran would also be lifted.

The so-called P5+1 group -- the United States, Britain, China, France and Russia plus Germany -- hope that the deal will make it virtually impossible for Iran to make nuclear weapons.

Successful implementation of the deal could put Iran and the United States on the road to better relations after 35 years of animosity since the 1979-1981 hostage crisis in Tehran.

But Obama needs a deal which he can sell to hostile Republicans in Congress, who remain suspicious of Iran's pledges and are threatening to push for new sanctions from April 14.

And analysts were warning that the agreement was far from done.

"This accomplishment is not final. It is as fragile as the forces against it are formidable," Ali Vaez from the International Crisis Group told AFP.

Who got what from Iran nuke deal

FROM PAGE 1

THE UNITED STATES

A Cut Back in Centrifuges

One of the primary concerns over Iran's nuclear programme was its amassing of centrifuges, which can be used to enrich uranium into the material needed to make an atomic bomb.

According to the parameters of the deal, Iran has agreed to reduce by two-thirds its currently installed centrifuges. The 19,000 installed today would be cut to no more than 6,104 for the next 10 years. The 13,000 decommissioned centrifuges will be sent to monitored storage by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

Iran also has agreed not to build any new nuclear enrichment facilities for the next 15 years.

The "Breakout" Time

Right now Iran's "breakout time," or the time it needs to actually produce a bomb, is two to three months.

Under the new agreement, the timeline will be extended to one year over the next 10 years.

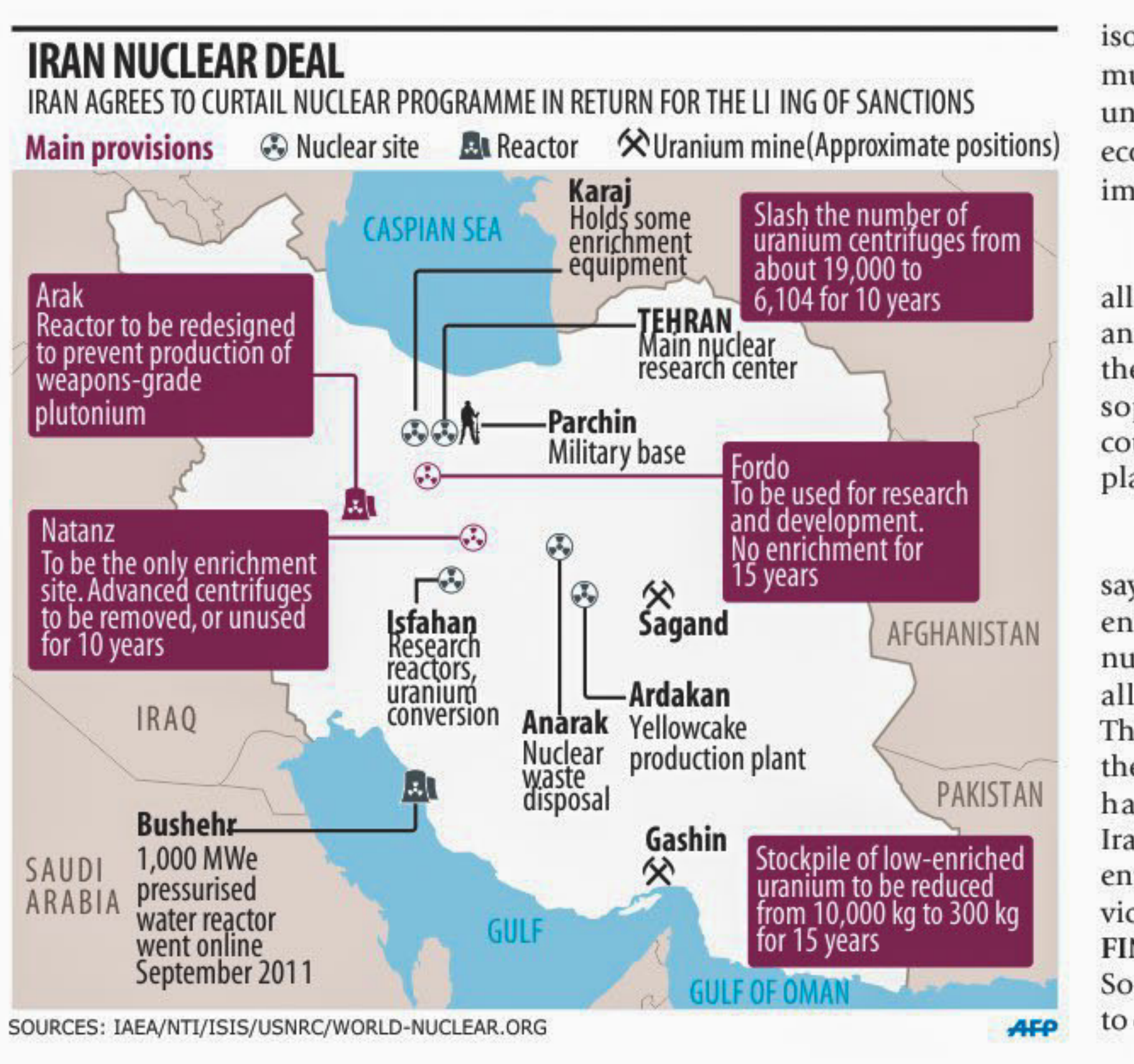
Stockpile of Nuclear Material

Iran will have to reduce its current stockpile of 10,000 kg of low-enriched uranium to 300 kg over the next 15 years, according to the deal.

That uranium will also not be allowed to be enriched over 3.67 percent. That's a level at which nuclear power reactors can operate, but much lower than what is considered "bomb-grade" enrichment of around 90 percent.

Inspections and Verification

As Obama said in his Rose Garden speech after the announcement of the framework, "If Iran cheats, the world will know it."



The way the world will find out about that cheating? An extensive number of inspections. The framework agreement stipulates that no easing in sanctions of any kind can begin until Iran submits to inspections and verifies that it has dismantled its nuclear programme.

According to Secretary of State John Kerry, Iran has agreed to allow the IAEA to "investigate any suspicious site or any allegations of covert nuclear activities anywhere."

The agreement stipulates that IAEA inspectors will have "regular access" to any of Iran's nuclear facilities as well as the supply chain that contributes to its program.

IRAN

Sanctions Relief

Iran's primary incentive for engaging the West in nuclear talks was to lift crippling economic sanctions levied by the US, European Union and the United Nations. Many, but not all of those sanctions, would be lifted as soon as Iran proves it is submitting to the process.

For years, these sanctions have put severe pressure on Iran's economy and

isolated it from the international community. At a time when Iranians are unable to even use a credit card, the economic benefits could prove to be immense.

Research and Development

Under the agreement Iran would be allowed to continue nuclear research and development, a practice critics of the deal say could be used to research sophisticated nuclear reactors that could eventually be put to use in any plans to develop a bomb.

Deep Buried Reactor at Fordow

Although the tentative agreement says Iran will no longer be allowed to enrich uranium at its deep-buried nuclear facility at Fordow, Iran will be allowed to keep the facility open. That's seen by critics as a concession by the US, which ultimately would like to have seen the facility shuttered. Iranian negotiators will surely present this portion of the agreement as a victory for Tehran.

FINAL TAKEAWAY

Some Republicans have already vowed to derail the deal.

In an interview with ABC News, Sen. Tom Cotton, R-Arkansas, said the deal was "not only a list of very dangerous US concessions that will put Iran on the path to a nuclear weapon."

"I plan to work with all of my colleagues on both sides of the aisle who have already expressed disquiet about terms such as these, to stop this deal from going forward, to keep America safe, and to prevent a nuclear arms race in the Middle East," Cotton said.

In Tehran, reports indicate Iranian citizens have taken to the streets to celebrate the conclusion of the talks and the proposed lifting of sanctions.

"Such a deal paves Iran's path to the bomb," he added.

"And it might very well spark a nuclear arms race throughout the Middle East and it would greatly increase the risks of terrible war."

Israel is the Middle East's sole, albeit unacknowledged, nuclear power. It has been the loudest opponent of reaching a deal that would leave Iran with atomic capabilities.

Shortly after the outline of the deal was revealed, Israeli officials criticised it as "a historic mistake which will make the world far more dangerous."

Iran and six world powers agreed the outlines of the deal aimed at curbing Tehran's nuclear drive on Thursday -- in a major breakthrough in the 12-year standoff between Iran and the West.

US President Barack Obama welcomed the "historic understanding" with the Islamic republic after decades of hostility, warning like other leaders that work remains to finalise a highly complex agreement by June 30.

In Iran -- where crippling sanctions over its nuclear ambitions have left many suffering -- the mood was joyful.

Hundreds of Iranians took to the streets of Tehran in celebration after the agreement was announced, with drivers sounding their horns in approval along the capital's longest street, Val-e-Asr Avenue.

Arriving in Tehran from the negotiations in the Swiss city of Lausanne, Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif and his team were welcomed by dozens of well-wishers.

"Viva Zarif! Viva Araghchi!" the crowd chanted, in reference to the minister and top negotiator Abbas Araghchi.

In remarks at the airport, Zarif praised supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei for "his remarkable support for the negotiating team and his guid-

ance" in the talks, the official IRNA news agency reported.

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