



Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina cutting the cake at the graduation ceremony of National Defence Course and Armed Forces War Course at the NDC Auditorium in Dhaka yesterday.

PHOTO: PID

16,000 tea workers

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As the local administration is getting ready to start the process of acquiring the area, thousands of tea workers yesterday gathered on their land at Chandpur Tea Estate with bows and arrows, axes, spears and whatever homemade weapons they could find, some were in war paint, to protest the takeover bid.

For the last one week, workers of Chandpur Tea Estate, Ramgonga Tea Estate and Begum Khan Tea Estate belonging to Duncan Brothers Bangladesh Ltd have come together. They are the ones who stand to lose their land and they have been on strike to protest the takeover.

The workers came in their hundreds chanting slogans like "Amar Mati Amar Ma, Kerey Nitey Dibona (My land, my mother, we shall not let them snatch it away)."

They vowed to let their blood flow and yet they will not allow anyone to take away their land.

"Our wage is so low that the food we get from the land helps us survive," said Ramesh Rajbanshi, a tea worker. "When we need emergency money for treatment or anything, we lease the land and get money. If it is taken from us, we have nothing."

A tea worker gets Tk 69 as daily wage and 3.5 kgs of wheat a day per family as subsidized ration. Absentees do not get anything.

"The administration says we'll get jobs in mills and factories, but we don't have any skills. All we know is

tea plucking. We'll simply die for want of food," says Annapurna, another tea worker. "Outsiders will benefit out of this, not us."

As workers go on protest, Duncan officials say they have written to the government about the importance of this land for the workers' survival.

"We have not touched this land for over a hundred years because the workers depend on it to survive," said a senior official of Duncan.

Director of Duncan M Nurul Alam said he did not get any formal letter on takeover of the land for the proposed economic zone.

Meantime, local political interests are keen to see the whole project go ahead. Chunarughat Upazila Chairman Abu Taher wants to see the SEZ start on the land.

Tea workers allege he is interested because he can then get contracts for the land development. Taher, on the other hand, says he wants the SEZ as it will bring prosperity to the area.

"Prosperity it will bring but not for us," says Paban Dey, another tea estate worker. "We'll not get jobs. Outsiders will come in and get the jobs."

As tension runs high, workers and their leaders hold nightly meetings on their strategy. They repeatedly pledge to lay down their lives if needed to hold on to their land. The workers in the neighbourhood are on high alert fearing attacks from those who want the SEZ to go through. At night, they do not go out of their own

areas.

"For four generations we have lived on this land and this is the first time we are facing this uncertainty," said Atit Bakti, a dark, lanky worker of 54. "We will starve to death if this land is taken from us."

Ardashir Kabir, chairman of Bangladesh Tea Association, opposed the idea of setting up the SEZ on tea estate land and said Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, when he was the chairman of Bangladesh Tea Board, had announced that the land of tea estates would remain intact.

"He said this keeping in mind the workers' tradition and their poor condition," Kabir said. "Tea industry labourers are not like any other industrial labourers. They lead more of a pastoral life and use the land to supplement their income."

He said the industry gets relief on cost by letting the workers use the land. Now if the land is taken away, the companies will have to pay more to the workers. It will make the industry's investment unviable.

"We had written to the government from our association and mentioned that there are 1200 acres of Khas land available in Habiganj," Kabir said. "The economic zone can be set up there instead of the tea garden land."

Paban Chowdhury, executive chairman of Bangladesh Economic Zones Authority (Beza) could not be reached for comment despite repeated attempts by The Daily Star.

Iran to ship enriched uranium to Russia

REUTERS, Dubai

Iran will export most of its enriched uranium to Russia in the coming days as it rushes to implement a nuclear deal and secure relief from international sanctions, Tehran's nuclear chief was quoted as saying on Saturday.

Drastically reducing its stock of enriched uranium, which can be used in nuclear weapons, was at the heart of the deal Iran reached in July with a group of six world powers.

Under its terms, Iran must cut its stockpile to around 300 kg (660 lb) and mothball most of the centrifuges that produce the enriched fuel. It must also remove the core of a heavy water reactor at Arak so it cannot be used to produce plutonium, another potential bomb-making source.

Once the United Nations verifies those steps, international sanctions will be lifted, giving Iran access to global markets for the first time in years and opening a lifeline for its ailing economy.

"In the next few days around nine tonnes of Iran's enriched uranium will be exported to Russia," nuclear chief Ali Akbar Salehi was quoted as saying by state news agency IRNA. That is roughly the amount that Iran must export to bring its stock down to the required level.

He said the enriched uranium would be taken out of Iran on board a Russian ship. Iran has already received a shipment of yellowcake, an unenriched uranium compound, from Russia in exchange for the stockpile.

IU closed

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"terrorists" and "extortionists". Around 200 activists clashed around 1:30pm.

Witnesses said both groups fired at least six shots.

Officer-in-Charge of IU Police Station Saiful Islam Choudhury said police, deployed on the campus after Thursday's clash, had chased both groups.

"We fired two shots in the air and two teargas canisters and dispersed the factions," he said.

Saiful group took cover in Bangabandhu Hall and Mizu group in the humanities faculty area during that time.

The university authority meanwhile in an urgent meeting with the Proctor and other statutory bodies decided to close the university ahead of the winter vacation, scheduled from December 24 to January 3, and vacate the dormitories.

Proctor Mahbubor Rahman said male students had been asked to vacate their dorms by 4:00pm yesterday afternoon and the female ones by 10:00am today.

According to sources on campus, the two factions had been at loggerheads over different issues, including a tender for various construction work on campus which is worth Tk 44 lakh.

BCL unit President Saiful blamed a few Awami League-backed teachers for patronising factional politics on campus.

"My vice-president [Mizu] is creating anarchy on campus bringing outsiders in and threatening contractors for toll from the ongoing bidding," Saiful claimed.

Mizu blamed his president and secretary for "taking a cut from the recruitment of teachers at different departments".

IU Vice-Chancellor Prof Abdul Hakim Sarker said the authorities had been forced to close the university having failed to control the infighting between the BCL factions.

"We will sit with the factions ...," he said.

Waste

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HSC exams in the mid 90s.

But one day, he saw something interesting and it instantly caught his attention. At a butcher shop, three to four men were collecting a part of a cow's stomach that is usually dumped.

Curious, he followed them for a while and found out that a huge pile of that particular thing was being cleaned, and processed with salt inside a warehouse at Kalurghat area. They were about to be sent to China through the illegal channels.

"Suddenly, the idea of legally exporting omasum to China popped into my mind and I shared it with my family, relatives and friends. But almost everyone thought I had gone mad," Elias recalled.

"It's just a dog food. How can even you think of exporting anything like this?" he quoted one of his uncles as saying.

One of his friends then came forward to help him. He introduced Elias to a Chinese woman in Dhaka. The woman had adequate knowledge about processing omasum and she taught him the skills.

A few days later, he came back to Chittagong and started to collect and process the item, though in a limited scale, at his own warehouse.

"One day, I was approached by a Pakistani group that gave me \$1,225 for a tonne of omasum," Elias recalled. "There has been no looking back since then."

In 2005-2006, he started his own company Kemriz Sea Foods International. Later, he launched another, Jimco Trade International.

Today, he has 18 business competitors. All such companies have formed their own association -- Bangladesh Omasum Exporters Association, Elias said.

Some 15 containers, each having 60,000 to 70,000 pieces omasum, are now exported to China via Thailand, Hong Kong and Vietnam every month, said Romakanta Mazumder, president of the body.

Omasum exporters said their business would further expand if the government incentive in the sector was increased to 30 percent. The incentive has been decreased to 5 percent from 15 percent recently, they added.

Struggling with identity

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American and Muslim identities.

Judeh, for instance, said she has told her children that their actions may face extra scrutiny because they are Muslim.

She teaches her 8-year-old son to never utter the words "blow up" at school, regardless of the context, and to never pretend he is playing with guns, even if his friends do. Her son has asked if people hate him and his family, Judeh said, a question she can find difficult to answer after receiving hateful comments and threats because of her hijab.

The problems have gathered pace since gunmen loyal to Islamic State killed 130 people in Paris on Nov 13.

But even before the Paris violence, anti-Muslim sentiment was on the rise, swept along by rhetoric from US presidential candidates - from Republican Ben Carson's comment in September that Muslims were unfit for the presidency to billionaire Donald Trump's recent call for a ban on Muslim immigration.

Former Florida Governor Jeb Bush, a Republican whose presidential campaign has struggled in recent months, has said the United States should only allow in Syrian refugees who can prove that they are Christian - a tiny fraction of the millions driven from the war-shattered country.

Some Muslim families say they fear a rising tide of hate crimes directed against their faith, such as when a pig's head was found outside the door of a Philadelphia mosque on Dec 7, an incident that made national headlines. Pork and pork byproducts are haram, or forbidden, in Islam.

Some discrimination goes largely unnoticed, such as when a woman threw hot coffee at a group of Muslims praying in a park in California on Dec 6. The Council on American-Islamic Relations, which tracks such incidents, says the scale of vandalism, damage and intimidation at American mosques this year is the worst in the six years it has kept records.

Since the Nov 13 Paris attacks, there have been at least 37 suspected anti-Islamic hate crimes in the United States, including 11 in the week after the San Bernardino shooting, compared with an average of 12.6 a

month over the past five years, according to a study by California State University, San Bernardino, which cited Federal Bureau of Investigation data.

Many of the country's 2.8 million Muslims say they fear such tensions may become uglier during a presidential race that is already tapping a vein of anger and bigotry.

Young Muslims said they often feel the need to prove how American they are to distance themselves from radicals.

For some, such as 27-year-old Sara Haddad, that means reminding people that they watch football or listen to pop music.

"I love the Dallas Cowboys," she said, referring to the popular Texas professional football team. "We have Thanksgiving with my parents. It's almost like you have to do this thing where you say, 'I'm so American,' but at the end of the day, what is American?" said Haddad, a cancer research scientist in North Carolina who has a six-month-old daughter.

She said she has not decided how to explain militant Islamists or anti-Muslim rhetoric to her daughter when she is older. She likens the predicament to parents wondering when to tell their children Santa Claus does not exist, hoping their innocence will stretch for as long as possible.

"9/11 destroyed my childhood innocence," she said, referring to the Sept 11, 2001, attacks. "I don't want to believe that in five years it'll be this bad or worse."

Jinan Al-Marayati, a 15-year-old Muslim who attends a Catholic school in Los Angeles, said she often feels pressured to defend her religion when Islamic State comes up in class discussions.

She encourages questions from teachers and classmates, she said, but sometimes tries to downplay her Muslim and Palestinian background when she is with her American friends.

"I feel like I have two identities," Al-Marayati said. "With my Muslim friends, I feel like I'm not Muslim enough. Around my non-Muslim friends, I don't talk about stuff that's going on because it'd make them uncomfortable."

20-PARTY ALLIANCE

Partners reluctant about joint campaign

RASHIDUL HASAN

The BNP yesterday received a poor response from the top leaders of the 20-party alliance for jointly taking part in the campaign of the December 30 municipal polls.

Many alliance leaders were unwilling to join the polls campaign fearing reprisal from the government. They also alleged that the BNP paid little attention to them while picking mayor candidates to back.

Some leaders pointed out that there was a divide between the BNP and Jamaat over nominations.

Talking to The Daily Star, Islami Oikya Jote chief Abdul Latif Nejami said they would not be able to join the polls campaign as they would be busy with the preparations for the party's council meeting slated for early next month.

Golam Mostafa Bhuiyan, secretary general of Bangladesh Nap, said his party chief would not take part as he would be busy with other activities.

However, the secretary generals of the alliance components at a meeting at the BNP chief's Gulshan office yesterday reached a consensus to campaign jointly to ensure victory for the mayor hopefuls from alliance.

There were no representatives from the Jamaat and Islami Oikya Jote at the meeting of the 20-party leaders.

Talking to newsmen after the meeting, BNP acting secretary general Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir said the meeting decided to reach a consensus with the independent mayor candidates from Jamaat-e-Islami, a key component of the alliance, across the country.

Meeting sources said the representative of Khelafat Majlish alleged that the party was not given proper attention during mayor-aspirant selection.

"We were asked to send BNP a list of our mayor hopefuls through an email. We sent one, but the email bounced back. When we called the BNP leaders over the phone, they neglected us," an alliance leader quoted the Khelafat leader as saying.

Another leader asked what they would do if there were mayor candidates in a particular municipality from the BNP and also Jamaat.

Fakhrul in response said although the BNP were trying to reach a consensus with Jamaat on this issue, the alliance partners were free to support any candidate.

Sources in Jamaat said the party backed 31 mayor candidates in as many municipalities. Besides, 150 councillor hopefuls from the party were in the race.

BREACH OF POLLS CODE

In Mymensingh, a court sent two supporters of the Awami League mayor candidate in Muktagacha to jail yesterday for allegedly stabbing a supporter of Jatiya Party mayor hopeful three days ago.

The two are Shiblu Miah, 22, and Mobarak Hossain, 21, police said.

In Chuadanga Sadar upazila, a mobile court fined BNP activist Nayan Ali Tk 10,000 for violating the electoral code of conduct during campaigning. He was putting up billboards on a road for BNP mayor nominee Mir Mohiuddin.

In Bakerganj municipality of Barisal some AL men swooped on the supporters of the BNP mayor hopeful during campaigning, leaving at least five injured.

The polls officials in Chatkhil of Noakhali fined councillor hopeful AHM Faruk Tk 5,000 for using loudspeakers after 8:00pm.

Meanwhile, BNP chief Khaleda Zia last night asked leaders of different pro-BNP professional bodies to campaign for the 20-party nominated candidates.

During a meeting at her Gulshan office, she said the alliance was taking part in the December 30 municipality polls even though it knew the polls would not be free and fair.

She urged them to let people know about the irregularities the government and the ruling party commit, a professional body leader quoted Khaleda as saying in the meeting.

Our correspondent from Mymensingh and three correspondents from Chuadanga, Barisal and Noakhali contributed to this report.

Tea workers

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"If the administration does not take any decision [to meet our demand], we will go on an indefinite strike from December 28," Makhan said.

The union leader issued the ultimatum while addressing a rally at Chandpara, the chosen site of the proposed SEZ.

Workers of four tea gardens in Chunarughat meanwhile passed the sixth day of an indefinite strike demanding cancellation of the government move.

The current lessee of the land is Duncan Brothers Bangladesh Ltd, a British firm. M Nurul Alam, director of the firm, told The Daily Star he had not received any formal letter regarding establishment of the economic zone.

Additional forces have been deployed in the area to avoid any untoward situation, said Amulya Kumar Chowdhury, officer-in-charge of Chunarughat police.

Cops want no journalist

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ballot casting. Therefore, rules should be introduced for journalists to cover the voting day from outside the polling stations.

Another senior police officer suggested the EC formulate specific rules on journalists' behaviour on polling day. Otherwise, it may create misunderstandings among law enforcers and journalists over entering and staying inside the polling stations like in the past, the sources added.

Some mid-level police officials alleged that a section of the media always highlighted negative news in line with their "business policy".

In response, the EC said it would not impose any such restrictions on journalists because the media play the role of a helping hand to find out irregularities, an election commissioner told The Daily Star, asking not to be named.

After the meeting, Chief Election Commissioner Kazi Rakibuddin Ahmad, however, urged the media men not to stay inside the polling stations for long.

"If a large number of journalists throng a polling centre at a time, it will hamper voting activities. So one group should leave the polling centre after staying a few moments to create chances for other groups," the CEC said.

In Dhaka and Chittagong city corporation polls in April, some journalists faced obstructions by law enforcers to enter polling stations.

About the role of ROs, the EC thinks the ROs in some municipalities are not discharging their duties properly.

An election commissioner said media reports portray different incidents of rules violation almost daily. But the ROs claim nothing is happening. "What is the truth? The returning officers should inquire into the news reports."

The CEC and another commissioner also criticised the role of law enforcement agencies and polling officials in some past elections.

Several incidents of capturing polling centres and ballot stuffing occurred in some previous elections in the presence of sufficient law enforcers, the CEC said.

"The law enforcers will have to respond promptly if any untoward situation occurs on voting day," he added.

Another commissioner said they faced an embarrassing situation both at

home and abroad over some allegations of regularities by law enforcers and polling officers in previous elections.

An election officer proposed that the EC issue show-cause notice and take legal steps against MPs and ministers for rules violation, as the ROs at rural level may not dare do so.

The EC, however, did not pay any heed to it and said the ROs would closely monitor it and take legal actions against the rule-breakers and send report to the commission.

About law and order, two senior intelligence officials suggested taking extra security measures in northern districts as the region has seen a spate of militant activities recently.

Militants may target public gatherings of electoral campaigns, one officer warned.

Another intelligence official cautioned that intra-party conflicts centring on rebel candidates of the ruling Awami League might rise in the coming days.

Briefing reporters after the meeting, the CEC said the overall situation was favourable for holding a fair election and candidates were campaigning in a festive mood.

Replying to a query, he said the current situation did not call for army deployment.

Ex-Jubo Dal leader stabbed to death in Jhenidah

Family says he was just a fish farmer

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Jhenidah

Unidentified criminals stabbed Minto Hossain, former pro-BNP Jubo Dal organising secretary of Barabazar union, to death in Kaliganj upazila of Jhenidah yesterday.

Minto, 31, was the owner of a fish farm in Andulpota village in Kaliganj. Locals and police said around 2:00pm yesterday unidentified criminals entered his fish enclosure and attacked him with sharp weapons.

They slit his throat for good measure before leaving the scene.

The victim's relative and Jubo Dal acting secretary Mozaffar Hosain said Minto was just a fish farmer.