

Truck kills 2, injures 1 in city

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

A brick-laden truck ran over and killed two women and injured another in Dholaiapar area of the capital around 10:30 last night. Shahnaz, 23, died on the spot while Sumona, 17, died after she was taken to Dhaka Medical College Hospital (DMCH).

Achhia, 17, was being treated at the DMCH with a broken leg and other injuries, said Abdur Razzak, officer-in-charge of Shyampur Police Station.

The victims were workers of an electric fan factory, he added. Locals caught the truck along with its driver and handed him over to police, he said.

People clash again in Nilokkha union

15 hurt, 50 homes torched

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Narsingdi

Supporters of former and current union parishad chairmen in Nilokkha union, who had locked in a clash that left four people killed a month ago, fought each other again in Narsingdi's Raipura yesterday.

At least 15 people were injured, and around 50 homes were looted and torched in Birgaon village, police said.

Equipped with sticks, spears and other homemade weapons, the men of incumbent chairman Tajul Islam and former chairman Abdul Haque attacked each other over establishing supremacy in the remote char area.

On information, police went to the spot and fired shots in the air to disperse the people fighting.

Additional police had been deployed in the area to avoid untoward situation, said Azharul Islam, officer-in-charge of Raipura Police Station.

IS blast kills 48

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his explosives among them".

Images from the blast scene showed blood stains and scattered shoes across the sandy ground.

IS claimed responsibility for the attack, saying in a statement that a "martyrdom seeker" had gotten through security checkpoints before blowing himself up.

The attack comes eight days after a similar bombing at Al-Sawlaban claimed by IS killed 48 soldiers and wounded 29 others.

Yemeni authorities have fought a months-long campaign against jihadists who remain active in the south and east of the impoverished Arabian peninsula country.

IS and its jihadist rival al-Qaeda have taken advantage of a conflict between the government and Yemen's Huthi rebels, who control the capital Sanaa, to bolster their presence across much of the south.

The two extremist groups have carried out a spate of attacks in Aden, Yemen's second city and headquarters of the internationally recognised government whose forces retook the port city from the Huthis last year.

But al-Qaeda has distanced itself from the December 10 attack, claiming that it tends to avoid "the shedding of any Muslim blood" while focusing on fighting the "Americans and their allies."

LONG-RUNNING CONFLICT

Al-Qaeda has long been the dominant jihadist force in Yemen, located next to oil-flush Saudi Arabia and key shipping lanes, but experts say IS is seeking to supplant its extremist rival.

Washington regards al-Qaeda's Yemen-based branch as its most dangerous and has kept up a long-running drone war against its commanders.

In August an IS militant rammed his explosives-laden car into an army recruiting centre in Aden, killing 71 people in the deadliest jihadist attack on the city in over a year.

A Saudi-led coalition has since March 2015 supported loyalist forces fighting the Huthis.

The Arab coalition intervened after Huthi rebels allied with troops loyal to Yemen's former president Ali Abdullah Saleh seized the capital Sanaa and overran other parts of the country.

But the coalition later turned its firepower also at Sunni jihadists, supporting forces loyal to President Abedrabbo Mansour Hadi in their bid to flush extremists out of south Yemen.

The Yemen war has killed more than 7,000 people, about half of them civilians.



A BNP delegation led by its Chairperson Khaleda Zia meets President Abdul Hamid for talks on the new Election Commission formation at the Bangabhaban yesterday afternoon.

PHOTO: PID

President hopeful, BNP happy

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committee, while former Appellate Division judges, a neutral and honest professor of a university or a respected and distinguished personality and a neutral, honest and competent senior female citizen might be considered for the membership of the search committee.

Khaleda gave the president a sealed envelope containing the names of 10 prospective members of the search committee.

The names could not be known despite contacting majority of the delegation members. They said they didn't know who are on the list.

With a call for cooperation from different political parties to form a strong EC, the president told the BNP delegation, "I believe your proposals will play positive roles in forming the next Election Commission."

Later in a briefing, BNP said the president told the delegation that he would examine procedural issues for forming a search committee by next month and another scope for talks over the EC formation might be created.

During the talks, Khaleda said if the EC can be constituted on the basis of consensus among all political parties, it will be considered a right step towards the advancement of the country.

She also pointed out the need for

formation of a polls-time government.

"Unfortunately, questionable roles of the Election Commission in the last two national elections and local body polls for the last several years frustrated people at home and abroad and made them lose confidence in our electoral system," she said.

Khaleda observed that it has become necessary to devise a permanent system through talks for holding the national elections -- under a polls-time neutral government and overseen by an EC acceptable to all.

In her written statement, the BNP chief thanked the president for inviting the party to the discussion and wished him success in his initiative regarding the EC formation.

Holding talks with the BNP, the president initiated dialogues with registered political parties over the EC formation. The tenure of current EC led by Kazi Rakibuddin Ahmad will expire in February next year.

BNP HAPPY

"We are happy and hopeful after today's [yesterday's] meeting with the president," BNP Secretary General Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir later said.

"We're very optimistic that the president as the guardian of the country will play a proper role in resolving the country's political crisis."

The president has long been involved in politics and he is respected

by all, Fakhrul said at a briefing, held at the party's Nayapaltan central office immediately after the talks.

He added the BNP chief gave the president specific opinions about the formation of a search committee.

She also pledged that her party would extend all-out cooperation to the president in forming the new EC.

POLLS-TIME GOVT

In her written proposals, Khaleda said only constituting a neutral Election Commission on the basis of consensus is not enough to hold a free, fair, participatory and credible election.

A free and fair election cannot be ensured without all-out administrative and logistic support of the government and assistance of law enforcement agencies and the security forces.

"Without a neutral election-time government, such co-operation cannot be ensured and it is not possible to hold a free, fair and credible election. We shall provide the framework of a neutral election time government before the nation at a convenient time."

HUMOUR AT BANGABHABAN

The meeting started at 4:37pm at the Durbar Hall of the Bangabhaban and ended at 5:35pm.

When the BNP delegation entered the Bangabhaban, the president asked the BNP chairperson, "How are you doing?"

In reply, Khaleda said, "I'm alright."

After the delegation members took their seats, Abdul Hamid approached each of them and exchanged greetings.

He asked Abdul Moyeen Khan, "How are you Natin Jamai [grandson-in-law]?"

The president then asked Moudud Ahmed, "How are you doing, senior?"

"I am fine," replied the BNP leader, who is a senior lawyer at the Supreme Court.

Then president took his seat and told Khaleda that Moyeen Khan is his Natin Jamai. In reply, Khaleda said, "Really? I did not know that."

Abdul Hamid made queries about Khaleda's health.

Hamid told her, "When you and I were in parliament, we could see each other. But now I am away from parliament."

Khandakar Mosharraf Hossain asked president, "How do you like it in the Bangabhaban?"

In reply, Hamid said quoting former president Abu Sayeed Choudhury, "I am a very costly prisoner."

At this point, Moudud said, "You are getting younger day by day."

After the meeting, BNP delegation was entertained with fish finger, chicken patties, juice, cashew nut, sandwich and *sandesh*.

President's Press Secretary Joynal Abedin briefed reporters after the meeting.

Talks history offers food for thoughts

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then chief justice Shahabuddin Ahmed to lead the interim government after Ershad resigned as the president.

The Shahabuddin government was successful in leading peaceful transition to democracy through holding a free and fair election in February 1991.

Again, parliamentary democracy was brought back through peaceful means following a consensus between all political parties.

In the run up to the 1991 elections, the then EC, led by Justice Abdur Rouf, held a successful dialogue with 67 political parties resulting in unanimous formulation of an electoral code of conduct. In the talks, all the political parties agreed to abide by the agreed code in electioneering.

The CHT Peace Accord was another significant outcome of successful talks between the government and the Parbatya Chattagram Jana Samhati Samiti in 1997. This brought an end to decades-long insurgency in the three hill districts.

During the Fakhruddin Ahmed-led caretaker government, the Election Commission, led by ATM Shamsul Huda, had held several rounds of talks with political parties and was successful in bringing sweeping electoral reforms, including mandatory registration of the political parties with the EC.

Take two more instances of holding of successful talks between the AL and the BNP.

Under the mediation of the then Speaker, leaders of the then ruling AL and the BNP agreed on January 14, 1997 to resolve a crisis in parliament.

Leaders of the AL and the BNP sat for talks again on February 2, 1998, to resolve the stand-off in parliament. They reached an understanding and the BNP returned to the House ending a boycott.

GLOOMY CHAPTER

The other side of the dialogue story is a sad one indeed. Whenever talks collapsed, it brought disastrous consequences. On every occasion, the country's people, economy and democracy restored in 1991 had to pay dearly.

Failure of negotiations between the AL and the BNP mediated by some eminent persons in October 1995 to resolve the political crisis resulted in massive street violence and eventually a one-sided parliamentary election in February 1996.

The then BNP-led government

formed through the election was forced to introduce a non-partisan election-time government system in weeks. It was also forced to step down at the end of March 1996, paving the way for fresh parliamentary election in June 1996.

It was again the BNP-led government that created a political crisis by increasing the retirement age of the Supreme Court judges through a constitutional amendment in 2004.

The amendment paved the ways for chief justice KM Hasan to become the chief adviser of the election-time caretaker government.

The AL-led opposition vehemently rejected the constitutional amendment, saying they would not accept Justice Hasan as the chief adviser. It came up with a set of electoral reform proposals including the one for the formation of the EC on the basis of consensus among the political parties.

The BNP-led government did not pay heed to the AL proposals. It appointed a Supreme Court judge, MA Aziz, as the chief election commissioner and other election commissioners. This worsened the political situation.

The Aziz-led EC was itself in disagreement over the preparation of a fresh voter list. To resolve the problem, it decided to hold talks with political parties seeking their opinion on it. It invited more than 100 political parties. The AL-led opposition alliance boycotted the talks which turned into a farce, drawing the EC into controversy.

Towards the fag end of its tenure, the BNP-led government agreed to sit for talks with the AL to break the political deadlock. Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan and Abdul Jalil -- deputies of their parties -- held several rounds of talks in Jatiya Sangsad Bhaban.

Emerging from talks, Bhuiyan and Jalil kept assuring the worried nation that they were making progress. But it was a bluff. The talks yielded no positive results, as both the parties stuck to their guns.

The tenure of the BNP government came to an end with the crisis remaining unresolved. Street violence flared up. Then president Iajuddin Ahmed opened talks with the political parties to break the impasse.

The BNP rejected the AL's proposal for an alternative to Justice Hasan.

All of a sudden, Iajuddin, on the BNP's advice, assumed the office of the

chief adviser, ignoring the constitutional provision. The crisis worsened further.

Some of his advisers, however, moved to break the political deadlock by holding talks with political parties. They prepared a package of proposals in this regard.

But Iajuddin, allegedly on the BNP leaders' advice, stopped the advisers' initiatives. He even appointed two more election commissioners.

At one stage, the AL-led alliance pulled out of the election scheduled for January 22, 2007.

Yet, the Iajuddin-led government was determined to hold the one-sided election. The AL-led alliance intensified street agitation and announced that they would resist the polls. The country was plunged into a complete political chaos. In such a situation, the armed forces intervened. A state of emergency was declared on January 11.

The crisis centring the election-time government prevailed again in 2011 when the AL-led government abolished the caretaker government system by amending the constitution.

The constitutional amendments not only allowed the AL to stay in power during the election, but also allowed all MPs seeking re-election to stay in office.

This time, the BNP-led alliance took to the streets for bringing back of the non-partisan election-time government. The AL rejected the demand. A political deadlock prevailed ahead of the 2014 election with escalation of violence.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina then offered to form an all-party election-time government and invited the BNP to join. But Khaleda Zia rejected the offer and kept demanding a re-introduction of the caretaker government.

Hasina even made a phone call to Khaleda inviting her to sit for talks, but she refused.

The United Nations sent its key official Oscar Fernández-Taranco in early December of 2013 to Dhaka for a four-day whirlwind visit to discuss with political leaders a mutually acceptable formula to hold "inclusive, non-violent and credible" election.

He held several rounds of talks with AL and BNP leaders. But the talks failed to break the deadlock, resulting in a one-sided parliamentary election on January 5, 2014, and

153 MPs elected uncontested.

HOPE AGAINST HOPE?

The above examples of success and failure offer food for thought for top politicians who are meeting the president.

During the talks, the political parties are supposed to give their opinion on the formation of the new EC in February, which will conduct the next parliamentary election after two years.

The president's initiative generated hope for the formation of an acceptable EC though the record is not much inspiring. In 2012, the then president Zillur Rahman formed the present EC, led by Kazi Rakibuddin Ahmed, through a search committee following talks with political parties.

But the current EC is apparently one of the weakest and controversial ECs. It conducted the January 5 one-sided parliamentary election. Almost all the local government elections held since 2014 were mired in controversies.

A strong EC now matters more than ever due to the absence of an election-time non-partisan administration. In such a situation, the role of the EC would be significant in conducting the next parliamentary election.

The president's move came hot on the heels of BNP chief Khaleda Zia's proposal for formation of the EC on the basis of consensus among the political parties.

The party might urge the president to take steps for forming an all party election-time government during the next general election.

Success of the president's move, however, depends on the political will of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina who is chief of the ruling AL. Because, the president has no power to do anything on his own without the advice of the prime minister in this regard.

The talks might not yield positive outcomes if the current trend of distrust remains among politicians. If political parties draw inspiration from their previous successes in resolving disputes, they might be able to move away from the confrontational political culture and begin a fresh chapter of cooperation, which would contribute to making the next parliamentary election participatory.

So, success of the talks between the president and political parties is immensely important.

Biman to file

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"If the slightest proof of sabotage is found, steps would be taken to ensure highest punishment against the persons involved," the minister added.

Who would file the case and against whom would be determined after discussion with the home ministry, Menon told the briefing hours after he had received a 200-page report with recommendations from the probe committee formed by his ministry.

The committee made seven recommendations regarding security, four to ensure security of the VIPs, three for Civil Aviation Authority of Bangladesh (Caab) and 10 for Biman Bangladesh Airlines.

According to the report, the Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) was not followed properly. The people responsible for certain tasks including maintenance of checklist and supervision did not carry out their duty properly, the minister elaborated.

The report says SOP for VVIP flight is erroneous as video footage shows a lot of people moving around the VVIP flight. However, nobody could say who those people were and why they were around the aircraft, the minister said.

Menon added that he would summarise the findings and recommendations of all three reports and meet the prime minister within a couple of days to determine the next course of action.

Biman Bangladesh Airlines, civil aviation regulator CAAB and the aviation ministry formed the three committees to investigate the cause behind the technical glitch in the special flight.

Probes by all three committees have found that the VVIP flight carrying the premier made the emergency landing at Ashgabat International Airport in Turkmenistan after a loose nut had caused leakage of engine oil lowering the oil pressure of engine No 1 of the Boeing 777-300ER aircraft.

"At some stage this could have been dangerous. We are fortunate that there was no harm to the prime minister. But, it is the question of topmost state security," Menon said at the briefing held at his ministry's conference room.

Biman has already suspended nine of its officials for their neglect of duty. Six of them were suspended after a Biman probe committee had submitted its primary report.

Three more officials were suspended later after investigation found their negligence of duty.

"We are examining if a case will be filed against all the nine suspended officials," the minister added.

MPs asked

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corporation mayors and other VIPs enjoying government facilities are not allowed to campaign or take part in other election activities.

The notices were issued following allegations filed by party rival candidates with the office of the returning officer in Pabna.

Talking to The Daily Star, Returning Officer Rekha Rani Balo, deputy commissioner of Pabna, said, "We issued notices against the Pabna-5 and Pabna-3 lawmakers today [yesterday] for their involvement in election campaign."

"We've asked the lawmakers to explain their participation in election campaign with the candidate," the DC said.

Samsul Haque Tuku, lawmaker of Pabna-2 constituency, also asked for votes for the AL-backed candidate, but no complaint was lodged with the returning officer's office in this regard.

Rejaur Rahim Lal, senior vice-president of Pabna AL, is the party-supported district council chairman aspirant. His rivals are Mahjabin Shirin Pia, Saidul Haque Chunnun and Kamil Hossain, all ruling party leaders.

Mahjabin is the daughter of Land Minister Shamsur Rahman Sherif Dilu. Kamil and Mahjabin filed the complaints against the lawmakers a few days ago.

For the last few days, Golam Faruk, also general secretary of Pabna district AL, held several meetings with the chairman candidate in different upazilas. He campaigned in Chatmohar, Sujaganar and Bera upazilas, said the complainants.

On Saturday, he attended a meeting with Tuku at Bera Municipality Auditorium and asked people to vote for Rejaur.

On Thursday, Faruk along with Mokbul attended another meeting at Chatmohar Upazila Parishad Auditorium. On Wednesday, he joined the election campaign at Satbaria union parishad office.

Rejaur was present in those meetings.

The Daily Star has obtained photographs of the programmes.

Contacted, Faruk claimed, "As the secretary of the district unit Awami League, I attended the organisational meetings of different upazilas in the last few days. But those were not election campaigns."

About Rejaur's participation in the meetings, he said, "Rejaur attended the meetings as he is the senior vice-president of Pabna Awami League."