

AL may face strong hurdles in next polls

Hasina tells party lawmakers

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Saying that the Awami League might face strong hurdles in the next general election, AL President Sheikh Hasina yesterday asked her party's lawmakers to start their campaign from now on to win people's heart.

In a meeting of Awami League Parliamentary Party (ALPP) at the Jatiya Sangsad Bhaban, Hasina asked the treasury bench lawmakers to resolve the party's conflict at the grass-roots before the election.

"Go to your areas, increase contact with people from all walks of life. Tell them about our government's various successes in different sectors to win people's heart," an AL MP quoted Hasina as saying.

"Leaders who will get detached from the people will not be spared,"

she said.

Hasina also asked the lawmakers to start election preparations from now on, saying that the next parliamentary polls would be held in 2019.

About a recent verdict of a Canadian court, Hasina, also president of the ALPP, said, "A Canadian court has termed the BNP a terrorist organisation, which finally proved that the BNP is really a terrorist organisation. Jamaat is a proven terrorist organisation. You should tell the people while campaigning in your areas," an AL MP quoted Hasina as saying.

"They [BNP and Jamaat] had carried out atrocities in the past, highlight these before the people of the country," Hasina said.

"The BNP would join the next election to be held in 2019. So, we may face

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Special police unit

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"I hope the unit will be formed within the next two months," Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan told The Daily Star last week.

"We are creating the new unit as we don't have enough police personnel to ensure foolproof security for the VIPs and at the keypoint installations.

"Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina is aware of the matter," he added.

Asked, officials at the police headquarters said the proposed unit would not be providing security to the president and the prime minister.

President Guard Regiment, Special Security Force and Special Security and Protection Battalion (SPBn) jointly ensure the security of the president and the PM.

A part of Bangladesh Police, the SPBn, which has some 1,100 members against 1,400 posts, also provides security to the Very Very Important Persons (VVIPs), including any head of state or government visiting Bangladesh.

Security personnel from the districts or the local police stations ensure the protection of the VIPs whenever they go out on a trip, the police headquarters said in their proposal.

They suffer badly as they also have to perform their regular duties simultaneously. So, the need for the formation of a new unit has been there for long, it said.

The proposal also said if the proposed unit was formed, the protection of the VIPs during their movement and security at their homes and key point installations would easily be coordinated and controlled from one centre.

So, the officials from the district police and the local police stations would be able to play a more effective role in maintaining law and order in their respective areas, it said.

For example, many VIPs travel to different districts using Dhaka-Chittagong and Dhaka-Sylhet highways in Narayanganj.

"On average, I had to assign 90 policemen and 15 vehicles every day for VIP movement [on the highways]. The law enforcers were divided into six teams," said a former additional SP of Narayanganj.

The teams received the VIPs whenever they entered the district and left them to the other district under its police protection. Often, the law enforcers have to wait for a long time to receive the VIPs.

"In case of any sudden violence, we used to face a serious crisis of manpower," the police official, wishing not to be named, told The Daily Star.

Another official at the police headquarters said currently, they need 2,000 members for ensuring the protection of the VIPs and guarding their homes and 22,000 others for ensuring security at the key installations across the country.

Asked how the "Guard and Protection Police" would ensure security at those installations, he said the proposed unit would only take the responsibility of the "sensitive" establishments.

On numerous previous occasions, different ministries and departments sought police security for the installations and the force met their demand accordingly.

ROLES OF THE WING AND BATTALIONS

The administration and operations wing will monitor and control the administrative and operational activities of the new unit. The Protection Battalion would ensure security of the VIPs, Guard Protection Battalion would be entitled to provide foolproof security at the homes of VIPs and KPI Battalion would ensure security at the key point installations.

Asked, a top official of the police headquarters said they need not change any law or formulate one for the formation of the unit.

The police headquarters also requested the Public Administration Ministry to create a total of 3,188 new posts for the proposed unit. The posts would include a DIG, four SPs, six additional SPs, 38 assistant SPs and 1,871 constables.

The official said the members would either be recruited or posted to the unit from their existing units.

Around Tk 160 crore would be required annually for the new battalions. The police headquarters also demanded 260 vehicles for the unit, he added.

Recently, police have decided to create commando teams in all metropolitan areas and range police units to deal with any crisis situation like a militant attack or hostage situation.

Now, only Dhaka Metropolitan Police has a Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) Team under the Counter Terrorism and Transnational Crime Unit to deal with such situations.



Visiting Indian Foreign Secretary Subrahmanyam Jaishankar meets Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina at her office at the parliament building yesterday.

PHOTO: PMO

PM's India trip in April

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Sheikh Hasina would take place in the first half of April.

"We have got couple of dates in April from the Bangladesh side ... the window is in the first week and third week of April. Our (Indian) Prime Minister's Office will have a view on this," said an Indian diplomat on condition of anonymity.

"It was not a formal proposal, the Bangladesh side informally proposed the two probable schedules in April just to consider," the diplomat told The Daily Star, adding, "Perhaps after checking with our PMO it will be finalised."

Jaishankar, who landed in Dhaka from China yesterday afternoon after attending the first India-China Strategic Dialogue, had a nearly 30-minute meeting with Hasina.

After the meeting with the PM, the foreign secretaries of Bangladesh and India had a meeting at the Le Meridien hotel and discussed a wide range of issues, including Hasina's visit, and reviewed the implementation of the 60-point joint statement issued during Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Dhaka visit on June 6-7, 2015.

Jaishankar will depart for New Delhi this morning.

Diplomatic sources said the Indian foreign secretary conveyed Modi's message to Hasina that New Delhi was ready to welcome her.

This time Hasina will be the guest of Indian President Pranab Mukherjee and will stay at the Rashtrapati Bhavan, said a diplomatic source, adding, "This is a unique honour for her since she will be

first prime minister from Bangladesh to receive this honour."

Even though Hasina visited India thrice in recent years -- to receive a degree, attend the funeral of President Pranab Mukharjee's wife, and attend Bimstec Outreach meeting in Goa on the sidelines of BRICS summit -- it will be her first state visit in her current tenure as prime minister.

Her last state visit to India was in January 2010.

"Through the visit, the bilateral ties between India and Bangladesh would be strengthened further," the Indian foreign secretary told the prime minister, reported UNB and BSS news agencies.

The visit would mainly focus on mutual interests and development initiatives alongside connectivity, Jaishankar said.

Referring to mutual solution to various problems between the two next-door neighbours, including Land Boundary and enclave problems, Hasina said, "We can solve any problem through discussions if we have good intention."

Hasina underscored the need for increasing connectivity between the countries as well strengthening cooperation in other sectors for the welfare of the people of the region.

When the Indian foreign secretary raised the issue of Saarc, which is now stalled, she said, "We shouldn't let it die."

About the BBIN (Bangladesh Bhutan India Nepal) Motor Vehicle Agreement,

Hasina stressed the importance of making the initiative effective for the greater interest of the four nations.

"The BBIN initiative should be made effective and we should solve any problem regarding the initiative through discussion," she said.

The Indian foreign secretary said his country would take more development projects in Bangladesh as per Bangladesh's need.

State Minister for Foreign Affairs M Shahriar Alam, PM's Principal Secretary Kamal Abdul Naser Chowdhury, Foreign Secretary Md Shahidul Haque and Indian High Commissioner to Bangladesh Harsh Vardhan Shringla were present.

During his Dhaka visit in 2015, Indian Prime Minister Modi had extended an invitation to Hasina to visit India.

Earlier, Hasina's trip was deferred twice as both the countries reportedly failed to find a mutually agreeable date over the last couple of months.

Meanwhile, the High Commission of India in a press release yesterday said the Indian foreign secretary briefed the Bangladesh prime minister on recent developments in India-Bangladesh relations and the region.

He also discussed preparatory aspects of the proposed visit of Hasina.

Later, the two foreign secretaries reviewed the areas of bilateral cooperation. Both sides noted with appreciation that there has been excellent implementation of decisions made during Modi's last visit to Bangladesh.

Gaibandha SP transferred to Khagrachhari

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The home ministry transferred Ashraful Islam, superintendent of Gaibandha police, to Khagrachhari yesterday, 15 days after the High Court ordered for immediate withdrawal of the SP for not cooperating in a judicial inquiry into the torching of Santal houses.

Mashrur Rahman Khaleed, a deputy commissioner of the Detective Branch of police in the Dhaka Metropolitan Police, will replace him.

According to a home ministry order, Ashraful will now be the commander of 6 Armed Police Battalion (APBn) in Khagrachhari's Mahalchhari.

Commander of the 6 APBn Jamshed Ali has been transferred to Naval Police in Dhaka as a SP, it said.

On February 7, the HC ordered the authorities concerned for immediate withdrawal of Ashraful for not cooperating properly in an inquiry over the torching of Santal houses during an eviction drive in November last year.

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Pakistan on edge

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Police and administration officials confirmed it was a bomb attack, as the provincial health minister Khawaja Salman Rafique and rescuers supplied the casualty toll.

"Four people died on the spot while another four died of their wounds in the hospital," Rafique said.

No group has yet claimed responsibility.

Just over an hour later rumours of a second blast in another affluent area nearby sent ambulances racing to the scene, though authorities later said the reports were false.

Panic also spread on social media as citizens exchanged messages purporting to be warnings from intelligence agencies, including one that falsely stated a general curfew had been ordered over Lahore with shoot-on-sight orders.

The rumours underscored growing nervousness across the country as a series of assaults shook Pakistanis emboldened by what had been a prolonged lull in violence.

The attacks included a previous bomb in Lahore on February 13 which killed 14 people, and a devastating suicide blast at a Sufi shrine in Sindh province that left 90 devotees dead.

The incidents, most of which were claimed by the Islamic State group or the Pakistani Taliban, have dented optimism after the country appeared to be making strong gains in its decade-and-a-half long war on militancy.

Gas to become 22.7pc costlier

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conference at the BERC office in the capital.

The two-phase increase means expenditures of households and commercial users on gas bills would go up by around 50 percent.

Gas prices for households have doubled over the last eight years. The BERC last raised gas prices in September 2015.

This time, CNG price has gone up to Tk 38 per cubic metre from Tk 35. It will be Tk 40 from June 1.

Prof M Shamsul Alam, energy adviser of the Consumers Association of Bangladesh, said they had opposed the gas price hikes during the public hearings held by the BERC in August last year.

"This is illogical, and it goes against the interests of the consumers," he said, adding that the price has been increased in line with the energy ministry's plan.

The rights activist also said the decision to increase the prices in two phases was a violation of law as the prices cannot be increased twice a year. Alam said the CAB would challenge the decision in court.

Abdul Matlub Ahmad, president of the Federation of Bangladesh

NEW GAS PRICE

CONSUMERS	CURRENT TARIFF (PER CUBIC METRE)	TARIFF FROM MAR 1	TARIFF FROM JUN 1
Power plants	Tk 2.82	Tk 2.99	Tk 3.16
Captive generators	Tk 8.36	Tk 8.98	Tk 9.62
Fertiliser companies	Tk 2.58	Tk 2.64	Tk 2.71
Industries	Tk 6.74	Tk 7.24	Tk 7.76
Tea gardens	Tk 6.45	Tk 6.93	Tk 7.42
Household: stove with metre	Tk 7	Tk 9.10	Tk 11.20

Chambers of Commerce and Industry, said export-oriented industries would lose competitiveness on the international market due to the gas price hike, which would push up the production cost.

"Similarly, the prices of some goods will rise on the domestic market because of increased cost of production. And inflation will rise," he told The Daily Star.

At a press conference at the BNP chief's political office in the capital's Gulshan, BNP Secretary General Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir said, "The hike in gas prices is anti-people and illogical."

He demanded that the government cancel the decision as it would add to the sufferings of the people.

Talking to The Daily Star, a number of consumers expressed unhappiness over the price hike.

Sohel Rana, who works at a private company in the capital, said the 50 percent increase in gas price is totally unacceptable as living costs are going up every day.

In August last year, trade bodies, rights groups and energy experts opposed the government move to hike gas prices at the public hearings on the distributors' proposals for increasing

the prices.

The latest price hike comes at a time when all consumers, including households and industries, are suffering from shortage of gas supply.

As per the BERC decision, gas prices for power plants will go up to Tk 2.99 per cubic metre from Tk 2.82 now. It will be Tk 3.16 from June 1.

Industries that use generators for producing electricity from gas will see gas price rise to Tk 8.98 per cubic metre from Tk 8.36 now. It will be Tk 9.62 in June.

Rahman Murshed, a member of the BERC, said distributors had sought 94.9 percent increase in gas prices, but the commission increased it by only 22.7 percent.

According to Bangladesh Economic Survey 2016, households consumed about 13 percent of the total gas produced in the country in 2014-15, while CNG-run vehicles consumed 5.37 percent, power plants 40 percent, captive generators 17.12 percent, fertiliser companies 6.16, industries 16.79 percent, tea gardens 0.09 percent, and commercials 1.04 percent.

BERC members Mahmudul Huq Bhuiyan, Md Mizanur Rahman and Abdul Aziz Khan, among others, were present at the briefing.



Inspired by Abdus Samad Sheikh, officials of the British High Commission in Dhaka planted a tree on the premises of their office yesterday. The Daily Star on Wednesday honoured Samad, locally known as "Tree Samad", who has been planting at least one tree every day for the last 48 years.

Inspired

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Faridpur, during the paper's 26th anniversary celebrations on Wednesday night.

In an email to this paper, Ryan said, "The dedication to Faraaz Ayaaz Hossain and the work of the change makers and Abdus Samad were humbling. Inspired by Abdus Samad, today myself and colleagues at the British High Commission purchased a tree and planted it within our grounds. We

have shared The Daily Star article on our Facebook and twitter."

Speaking at the celebration programme, Samad, who has been planting at least one tree a day over the last 48 years, urged all to plant trees.

"How much can I do alone? You all should plant trees," Samad had said.

The high commission's Facebook post read, "Responding to Samad's call, we at UK in Bangladesh decided to plant a Shiuli Tree to get the ball rolling."

PHOTO: BRITISH HIGH COMMISSION

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number of caves during my nature and wildlife watch in the hill areas. The first and foremost among them is the Kudum of Harikhola semi-evergreen forest in Teknaf followed by Rongikhali at Nihla, Ali Surang at Alikadam, Badur Surang at Boga, Ruangchari Surang, Thindu Surang at Thanchi, Debottor Surang at Bangchari and more than dozens in the CHT area.

While entering those caves for searching wildlife, we followed the cave walk rules and took adequate care to minimise disturbance. Unfortunately, it has been noticed that tourists not only annoy the wildlife but also damage the caves by collecting orchids, stones, pebbles and hunting or trapping wildlife (turtles, crabs, prawns) during their cave tour. The Alutilla cave in Khagrachhari has

become one of the most vulnerable places, as the natural features there are being destroyed and the wildlife within are killed.

People usually enter the cave with Moshal (torch) which is detrimental to the cave-dwelling animals, as they are mainly nocturnal and cannot withstand light with unusual flame and glow. Loud noise and waste disposal also pose a threat to the delicate and fragile ecotone of a cave.

During the cave exploration and filming expeditions, we have reported a wide variety of life forms in the caves. The common species observed include spiders, harvestmen, pseudoscorpion, millipedes, crickets, cockroaches, beetles, flies, woodlice, crabs, shrimps, crayfish, etc. Many of these animals are depigmented or totally white with

reduced eyes. Birds like swiftlets, shrews, bats and oilbirds that roost and nest inside the caves use "echolocation" technique to navigate inside the dark caves. In the subterranean waters of some of the caves, cavefish are found. In addition, caves are also a treasure trove of certain indigenous plants like fern, mosses, orchids and the pitcher plants.

Most cave animals are invertebrates, but there are also some troglomorphic vertebrates. Amphibians (frogs, toads, salamanders), Aves, mammals (rats and other rodents, insectivores, pigs, felines, etc) and bats can also be found there.

Most of the caves in CHT have impressive water pathways, stream passages, trunk passages and key-hole passages. The caves range in size

from small hillside openings to vast interconnected subterranean systems of many chambers and galleries.

Only five decades ago, the area was a deep forest and home to wildlife like tigers, elephants, deer, leopards, langurs and bear. Some areas were impenetrable. Only a few indigenous people lived there.

Commercial tree plantation, illegal logging, and dam megaprojects are to blame for the destruction of the precious ecosystem of the forest. Rubber, teak, eucalyptus and tobacco cultivation for export has also negatively affected the ecosystem.

Many sacred places in nature are associated with caves. Hill-dwelling people revere the caves. To protect this unique ecosystem, it is necessary to take strict measures.