

# Don't plot to foil polls

Prime minister asks BNP

UNB, Dhaka

Coming down heavily on the BNP for attacking police and torching their vehicles, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina yesterday asked them not to hatch conspiracies to foil the forthcoming parliamentary elections.

"I would like to tell them that they should try to cooperate [with the Election Commission] in holding the election, not hatch conspiracies to foil the polls as they [BNP] decided to join the election," she said.

Hasina, also the AL President, made the remarks in her introductory speech at a meeting of the Awami League Parliamentary Board at the party's Dhanmondi office.

She said they had conspired during the election in 2014, but could not succeed. "They won't be successful this time too as people are with us."

Hasina said people wanted the election to be held amid a festive atmosphere and to cast their votes in the election for formation of a government



of their choice.

The PM said a festive mood had been created as all political parties and alliances, including Jatiya Oikyafront, had already announced to join the national election.

Talking about Wednesday's attack on police in front of BNP's Nayaplatan central office, she said, "When there's a festive atmosphere, BNP feels very unwell. They pour water on the festivity."

Hasina said a BNP leader surprisingly brought a procession there and launched the attack that left many policemen wounded and three police

vehicles torched.

She added that they had resorted to the arson attack again as they did in 2014 and 2015. "With this, it has been proved that they can't do anything other than resorting to violence and arson attack," she said.

The PM also extended her gratitude to the police for showing restraint and patience during the attack.

About the BNP leaders' remarks that Bangladesh Chhatra League activists torched the police vehicles, she questioned when and why Chhatra League activists went there. "They (BNP leaders) are masters in shifting the blame on others after resorting to such activities," she said, condemning the incident.

Additionally, she said she was optimistic that the people of Bangladesh would reelect the Awami League as her party had developed the country massively in the last 10 years.

Mentioning that the country would continue to move forward and its development would keep going on, the PM

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**BNP activists being taken to Chief Magistrate's Court by police, as their relatives and well-wishers wait on the court premises yesterday. Around 65 activists were picked up from different areas following the clashes between police and party supporters in front of the BNP Nayaplatan central office on Wednesday.**

PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

## Not willing to go home

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He said India has built 250 houses and another 500 will be set up near Maungdaw township. Besides, China is building 1,000 houses.

"It's not enough only to build houses. Primary schools for children and health centres, clinics are also needed. The work is going on."

The foreign minister said Bangladesh told India and China to build the houses at places from where the Rohingyas fled. "In that case, the refugees would be willing to go there."

Mahmood said no attempt was made to force the refugees to return home. Bangladesh always wanted a sustainable and peaceful solution to the problem through dialogues, he told reporters.

Earlier in the afternoon, Refugee Repatriation and Relief Commissioner Abul Kalam said they were fully prepared to start the repatriation but postponed it due to unwillingness of Rohingyas.

The announcement came following his two-hour visit to the Unchirprang camp in Teknaf, where hundreds of Rohingyas staged demonstrations against the repatriation.

Four buses went to the camp, which houses around 22,000 refugees, in the morning to take the families to the border area for repatriation.

"Our majhi [community leader] called us in the morning and asked to gather together at the CIC [camp in-charge] office for repatriation," said Abdul Shukur, a Rohingya enlisted at the camp.

Some other families also went to the CIC office, expressed their unwillingness to return home and placed some demands for their safe return to Rakhine.

"We demanded safe return to our homesteads, not to any camp. We demanded justice for the persecution," Shukur said.

Amanullah, a majhi at Unchirprang camp, said, "We can't return to a unsafe place. They could kill us. We can't let our people to be persecuted again."

Rohingya community leaders said some families of the camp fled their shanties on Wednesday night to avert repatriation.

Some 750,000 Rohingyas entered Bangladesh since August 25 last year escaping a brutal military crackdown on them in Rakhine. They joined some 300,000 others who had fled earlier waves of violence in the Southeast Asian country where they have been denied citizenship since 1982.

A UN report has detailed mass killings and gang rapes with genocidal intent in the crackdown and urged prosecution of Myanmar's commander-in-chief and five generals under international law. Myanmar denied the allegations, saying the campaign was a response to the attacks by Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army.

In an unprecedented move in September this year, International Criminal Court ruled it could prosecute Myanmar for alleged crimes against humanity against the Rohingyas.

Amid global criticism, Myanmar signed a repatriation deal with Bangladesh in November last year. The repatriation was supposed to start on January 23, but was delayed apparently for procedural issues.

Dhaka earlier had sent a list of more than 8,000 Rohingyas to Naypyidaw. Some 5,000 of those names were verified by Myanmar.

Under global pressure, Myanmar signed a tripartite deal with UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) and the UNDP that would assess the situation in Rakhine in June, two months after the UNHCR signed a deal with Bangladesh to facilitate the repatriation.

In a meeting of joint working group, comprised of officials from Naypyidaw and Dhaka, late last month, the decision was taken to begin the repatriation from November 15. Two camps -- one at Ghundhum and the other in Teknaf -- were set up for the refugees to stay before they are repatriated. In the first phase, 2,260

Rohingyas were listed for return.

The UNHCR, which was mandated to determine the voluntariness of the refugees for return, interviewed the Rohingyas in the camps since Tuesday.

The refugee agency urged Bangladesh to halt the repatriation now, saying the conditions in Myanmar were not conducive.

Prof CR Abrar, who teachers international relations at Dhaka University, said it was not surprising at all that the Rohingyas would reject the repatriation now.

"How can the Rohingya go back to Rakhine where people still face rights abuses and confinement?"

There was remorse for the brutal act and none was held accountable by the Myanmar authorities yet, he told The Daily Star.

"There is a threat for Rohingyas of being interned in the camps for the rest of their life," Abrar said.

**'HALT REPATRIATION'**

New York-based Human Rights Watch yesterday demanded the authorities halt the repatriation.

"The Bangladesh government will be stunned to see how quickly international opinion turns against it if it starts sending unwilling Rohingya refugees back into harm's way in Myanmar," Bill Frelick, the group's refugee rights director, said in a statement.

It said Myanmar has done nothing to create conditions for safe and dignified returns or to address root causes of the crisis, including statelessness, impunity for grave violations by the military and recognising Rohingya ethnicity.

The refugees in Cox's Bazar say more than 124,000 Rohingya have been confined to camps in Rakhine since displacement in violence in 2012.

The reception centres and transit camps Myanmar built this year to process and house returnees are surrounded by barbed-wire perimeter fences and security outposts, similar to the camps where the internally displaced Rohingyas are now confined, the HRW said.

**'DON'T RUSH REPATRIATION'**

Expressing deep concern over the proposed repatriation, the Canadian government yesterday in a statement said the return of Rohingyas must not be rushed.

"The crisis continues. Violence and impunity persist in Rakhine state, and refugees continue to flee the country. The Rohingya must not be repatriated to an environment where violence and gross human rights abuses continue to be perpetrated," reads the statement.

## Grassroots

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candidates. We did not send any list to the centre. Party's secretary general will make the final decision."

BNP Organising Secretary Ruhul Quddus Talukdar Dulu said the local leaders were asked to send lists of prospective candidates but they did not send any such list.

Election Commissioner Mahbub Talukder yesterday said opinions from the grassroots may get ignored during the nomination process.

"I think, the grassroots will not have a say in the process as mandated by the RPO," he told a discussion at the EC office.

"We want wise and patriotic people in the parliament; and this has to be done through voting. That's why it is essential that the grassroots have a voice."

In each constituency, at least ten to fifteen BNP leaders are in the race to obtain party tickets.

Over the last four days, around 4,000 BNP leaders collected the forms.

Meanwhile, Jatiya Oikyafront has decided to contest the election with BNP's symbol of sheaf of paddy.

Nagorik Oikya Convener Mahmudur Rahman Manna told reporters about the decision during a meeting at Dr Kamal Hossain's chamber.

## Pollution by 'plastic' campaign

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There are good reasons to be worried about PVC disposal. Items made of PVC remain unchanged for decades and when any breakdown occurs, its composition stays the same. PVC is not degradable.

The most alarming fact is, if the material is burnt at low temperatures, below 1,000 degree Celsius, it generates highly toxic chemical compounds called dioxins, said Mominnur Rahman, associate professor of environmental pollution management at Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (Buet).

To explain how poisonous dioxins are, he said one molecule of dioxin in 1 billion air molecules can be carcinogenic, meaning it can cause cancer.

According to a paper by a PhD author from Columbia University, toxicological studies have not been able to establish a "threshold" dose below which dioxins have no biological impact.

Human development, reproduction, and immune systems are highly sensitive to dioxins, said the author, Joe Thornton, who was part of a "campaign to eliminate PVC products from medical devices due to their central role in dioxin formation in medical waste incinerators."

An assessment is necessary to know the magnitude of PVC banner use, its

environmental impact, and the severity, AH Md Maqsood Sinha, executive director of Waste Concern, told The Daily Star on Sunday.

Visiting nearly a dozen digital printing shops in Paltan last week, it was learnt that PVC banners have become so popular that machines, imported from China, were now available even in districts.

"We used to get orders from outside Dhaka [ahead of election]. Now clients get them in their local areas," said shop owner HM Rasel.

Still, his business is good because the demand increased manifold. Over the last month, his shop printed nearly 1,000 PVC banners at Tk 14 per square feet. Rasel has a target of printing 1 lakh PVC banners in the run-up to the election scheduled for December 30.

"Now, we are printing coloured banners. Once electoral symbols are allotted, the banners will be black and white," he added.

Environmental concern over the rampant use of polythene or plastic materials is not new here. Environmentalists have time and again called upon the authorities to rein in the manufacture, sale, and use of such products.

On November 6, a group of organisations working against pollution, including Bangladesh Environmental

Lawyers Association and Poribesh Bachao Andolon, wrote to seven ministries, demanding an end to manufacture, marketing, and use of plastic materials through a strict implementation of Bangladesh Environment Conservation Act, 1995.

The industries ministry, commerce ministry, and the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change are among those written to.

The government, if convinced that an "article is injurious to the environment", as suggested in the 1995 act, can impose absolute ban on production, use, import, and stock of the article.

**MINIMISING DAMAGE**

To better manage the disposal of those plastic banners, Maqsood, of Waste Concern, a social business enterprise for waste recycling, said the Department of Environment, city corporations and the EC should identify all stakeholders and sit with them to formulate guidelines on how to reduce environmental damage.

"Some of them may be recycled," he said adding that the country does not have the technology to recycle multi-layered laminated banners.

To keep those from being littered, the authority should collect them, reduce them into smaller pieces before dumping them into a landfill, Maqsood added.

Echoing him, Air Commodore Zahid Hossain, chief waste management officer of Dhaka South City Corporation, said plastic waste would be kept separately in the landfill to recycle those in a year or two.

"The city corporation will begin the recycling process."

Surprised when asked about how the authorities plan to dispose of PVC banners, Senior Secretary of Local Government Division Zafar Ahmed Khan said, "You've pointed out an important issue. We'll look into it."

The Election Commission itself can take steps against the use of PVC banners, as was seen in neighbouring India. Prior to Assembly election in its five states in 2016, the election commission of India asked political parties not to use plastic banners for promotion during electioneering.

Farhad Ahmmed Khan, joint secretary of Bangladesh Election Commission, said they have no legal mandate to forbid politicians from using PVC banners in campaigns.

"It is the duty of the Department of Environment [DoE], he said.

Director General of DoE Sultan Ahmed said, "Political parties need to be conscious about its [PVC banner] adverse impacts."

"We'll hold a meeting with our officials in this regard to lay out our action plan," he said.

## No more deferring polls

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alliance led by the BNP and several other opposition parties, met Chief Election Commissioner KM Nurul Huda on Wednesday and demanded that the election be deferred by a month.

In response, the CEC said the EC would declare its decision following a commission meeting.

The EC will have to perform some duties, keeping the legal and constitutional aspects in mind. It would require time. This is why the EC cannot defer the polls anymore, the EC secretary said.

He also mentioned that the Biswa Ijtema would be held in January which was also a reason for not delaying the election. However, seeking anonymity, a top official of the Ministry of Religious Affairs told The Daily Star that the Biswa Ijtema would be postponed due to election and security concerns.

As a response to the EC's decision, the Secretary General of BNP Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir told The Daily Star that the decision indicated it did not want a free and fair election.

"It proves that EC's decision is nothing but a reflection of the government's wish," Fakhrul said.

On November 8, the EC set

December 23 as the date for the election. Later, on November 12, the commission revised the election schedule and declared that the election would be held on December 30 following Oikyafront's demand for deferring the polls.

**EC WARNS AROS**

In the daylong briefing yesterday, the EC secretary asked the assistant returning officers of Chittagong, Sylhet and Barisal divisions to ensure equal opportunity for all candidates.

No violation of code of conducts during the polls would be tolerated. The AROs should appoint neutral presiding and assistant presiding officers for a free and fair election, Helal added.

He urged the AROs to hold meetings with local law enforcers, executive magistrates and others to review the election atmosphere.

Indicating Wednesday's clash between police and BNP activists in front of the party's Nayaplatan central office, he then asked EC officials to be cautious about "untoward incidents".

At least 20 BNP men were injured -- some were hit by rubber bullets -- in the clash which broke out around 12:45pm when police tried to disperse party men during the sale of nomination forms.

Meanwhile, the cabinet division yesterday also issued a letter asking all the officials under relevant ministries and divisions to be neutral while performing election duties and assist the EC for a free and fair election.

**EC CONSIDERS ARMY DEPLOYMENT**

Army and Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB) would be deployed at least a week or 10 days before the election, said the EC secretary Helal. He also asked the AROs to take necessary actions for arranging accommodations for the army and BGB personnel.

Election Commissioner Mahbub Talukdar warned the AROs of stern actions for any failure or negligence in performing their poll-time duties.

**OIKYAFRONT SEEKS PERMISSION TO USE BNP'S SYMBOL**

Ganoforum Executive President Subrata Chowdhury, on behalf of the newly formed political alliance Jatiya Oikyafront, handed over a letter to the EC yesterday, seeking permission for using the BNP's electoral symbol "sheaf of paddy" in the election.

Jatiya Oikyafront members -- Ganoforum, a faction of Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal led by ASM Rob, and Bangladesh Krishak Sramik Party -- informed the EC about its decision of using BNP's symbol, Helal said.

On the other hand, Fazle Hossain Badshah, general secretary of Workers Party of Bangladesh, a component of the AL-led alliance, told The Daily Star that they had informed the EC about using Awami League's electoral symbol "boat" under the alliance.

**EC CANCELS ALL LEAVE**

EC cancelled all sort of leaves of returning officers, assistant returning officers and field-level officials till December 30, a deputy secretary of the EC told The Daily Star.

A directive in this regard was sent to all the offices on Wednesday night, he added.

**FOREIGN DIPLOMATS WANT TO SEND OBSERVERS**

Foreign Minister AH Mahmood Ali yesterday said foreign diplomats were pleased with the political consensus on the upcoming election and many of them wanted to send observers in the polls.

"The CEC announced new date for polls. Earlier, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina held dialogues with different political parties, including the Jatiya Oikyafront. It seems all are very pleased as the election process is moving forward," the foreign minister told reporters after a briefing with the diplomats at the state guest house, Padma, yesterday evening.

## Now is time for lobbying

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that those already holding public offices would not get party tickets.

They bought the nomination forms only for publicity in their areas as part of their plan to contest future elections.

"I know I will not get nomination this time. But still I bought the nomination form to present myself as a future leader of my constituency. This is only for publicity in my area," said a nomination-seeker from Jessore.

Against this backdrop, the AL parliamentary board yesterday sat to pick party candidates from the rest of the 2,000 plus aspirants. Hasina chaired the meeting at her Dhanmondi party office.

The selection of candidates began with the Rangpur Division, starting

from Panchagarh-1, known as constituency number 1. Sources said the meeting discussed the popularity of different candidates as found in various surveys. The selection process is expected to be completed in a week.

But a fresh row over sharing seats with the Jatiya Party, AL's ally, will make the job even more difficult.

On Monday, the JP sent a letter to the AL, requesting it not to announce candidates in the seats that the ruling party wants to share with the JP, sources in both the parties said.

The JP argued that if the names of the candidates are announced, the AL aspirants may not withdraw their candidatures, which will make it difficult for both parties to win.

In its reply, the AL asked the JP, led by former military ruler HM Ershad

who is now Hasina's special envoy, to declare names of their candidates in all the 300 seats. The AL will do the same. And once they reach an agreement on seat-sharing, either party will withdraw their candidates from those seats, the sources added.

"We requested the Awami League not to name their candidates for the seats it will offer us. If the party names its candidates and later shares those seats with us, it will create a misunderstanding," JP Secretary General Ruhul Amin Hawlader told The Daily Star.

In the interest of the alliance, both sides must make sacrifices to get expected results, he added.

**'70 SEATS FOR ALLIES'**

AL's partners in the 14-party alliance want up to 116 seats while the JP alone

is seeking 100, sources said.

However, the AL may set aside about 70 seats for its allies, with up to 40 for the JP. The JP has 29 MPs in the current parliament.

AL General Secretary Obaidul Quader himself hinted yesterday that they would share 65-70 seats with their allies.

The AL is planning to offer six constituencies to Workers Party and five seats to Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal (JSD-Inu). It will also have to set aside some seats for Dr Badruddoza Chowdhury-led Juktafront, JSD-Ambia, Bangladesh Tarikat Federation, Jatiya Party (JP-Manju) and several other smaller parties.

The ruling party has already asked its 14-party allies to provide the names of their winnable candidates.