

## JS may pass EC law this session

Set to be placed Sunday, draft seeks legal cover for past ECs formed thru search committees

PARTHA PRATIM BHATTACHARJEE and ASHUTOSH SARKAR

The ongoing parliament session is set to pass a law aiming to give legal cover to the chief election commissioners and other commissioners appointed through search committees in the past.

Once passed, the law will also provide a legal shield to all activities of those search committees.

Appointments of all the CECs and other commissioners recommended by the search committees will be considered legal, and no question can be raised in any court over this matter, reads the draft law, titled "Chief Election Commissioner and Election Commissioner Appointment Act, 2022".

Ahead of the general elections in 2014 and 2018, president picked CECs and other commissioners in 2012 and 2017 following recommendations by search committees.

The current Election Commission led by CEC KM Nurul Huda was formed on February 15, 2017. Its tenure expires on February 14.

Law Minister Anisul Huq yesterday said the president would appoint the upcoming CEC and other commissioners upon recommendation by a search committee to be constituted as per the proposed law.

"A bill on forming the Election Commission will be placed in parliament on Sunday. I hope it will be passed in the current Jatiya Sangsad session following all legal procedures, including scrutiny by the parliamentary standing committee concerned," he told The Daily Star.

As his attention was drawn to the matter, election expert Badiul Alam Majumdar expressed his surprise.

He said the move was nothing but a government effort to "legalise all the misdeeds of the past Election Commissions".

"Once the new law is in place in this form, there will be a lack of transparency in appointments of CEC and other commissioners," said Majumdar, also Shujan secretary.

The draft law does not mention whether the names to be recommended by the search committee and the criteria of the selection would be made public.

Not disclosing the names might raise suspicion and questions in public mind over transparency in the appointments.

Last month, Shushashoner Jonno Nagorik (Shujan) handed a draft law titled "Chief Election Commissioner and Election Commissioners' Appointment Act 2021" to Law Minister Anisul Haq to help the government frame the law.

The draft proposed that the search committee will recommend

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A sluice gate being installed at the mouth of the Rajarkhali canal on the bank of the Karnaphuli in Chattogram. To lessen the impacts of waterlogging, various local organisations are installing around 40 such sluice gates at points where canals in the port city fall into the river. The photo was taken yesterday morning.

PHOTO: RAJIB RAIHAN

## COVID-19 12 dists at high risk

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The number of coronavirus cases has continued to increase rapidly with the health directorate reporting 9,500 fresh cases yesterday, 1,093 up from the previous day.

According to the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS), this is the highest single-day count after 10,126 cases on August 12.

Against a total of 37,830 tests, the positivity rate was 25.11 percent yesterday, the highest since August 8. Besides, 12 Covid-19 patients died in the same period.

Fueled by the Omicron variant, the country has been witnessing the third wave of Covid-19 since the beginning of January.

The ongoing spike in Covid-19 cases has put 12 districts, including Dhaka, at high risk, according to the weekly analysis of the DGHS till Sunday.

Regions above 10 percent positivity rate are considered as high-risk, between 5 and 10 percent as medium-risk, and below 5 percent as low-risk zones, as per the DGHS.

Other high-risk districts were Chattogram, Rajshahi, Jashore, Kustia, Bogura, Gazipur, Dinajpur, Lalmonirhat, Panchagarh, Rangamati, and Khagrachhari.

Meanwhile, 32 districts were at medium risk, including Sylhet, Feni,

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## Prioritise rapid test

Experts for making antigen kits available everywhere for free to curb Omicron spread; govt has no plan to distribute them outside health centres

MOUDUD AHMED SUJAN

When countries are shifting to at-home rapid antigen tests for detecting the coronavirus to keep pace with the Omicron's blistering speed of transmission, the government has stuck to its policy of keeping the self-administered kit available at only healthcare points.

At present, the rapid antigen test kits can be found in 545 public and 100 private healthcare points across the country, according to the Directorate General of Health

Services (DGHS).

Also called lateral flow tests, the tests require rubbing a shallow swab inside one's nostrils and throat and then exposing the swab to a few drops of a liquid reagent, which looks for protein antigens that live on the coronavirus's surface.

In about 15 minutes, one can find out whether they have been infected with the coronavirus or not. The tests are excellent at flagging people who have high viral loads

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