

‘Will contest together as far as possible’

India’s opposition bloc passes resolution to fight 2024 polls

NDTV ONLINE

The opposition’s INDIA alliance will contest the 2024 Lok Sabha election “together as far as possible”, the bloc said yesterday, the final day of its meeting in Mumbai.

The wording of the INDIA alliance’s resolution, however, has raised eyebrows and spawned questions, specifically of the kind the grouping was meant to answer - just how united is the opposition as it bids to prevent Prime Minister Narendra Modi claiming an unprecedented third term.

The parties resolved to “coordinate respective communications and media strategies and campaigns with the theme “Judega Bharat, Jiteega



India” in different languages.

The resolution after INDIA’s third meeting also refers to seat-sharing arrangements, noting these will be “initiated immediately and concluded... in a collaborative spirit of give-and-take”.

The mega opposition meet - hailed by its members as the definitive weapon with which to take on the Bharatiya Janata Party - concluded with the release of resolutions, and some drama after ex-Congress leader Kapil Sibal made a surprise entry.

Another moment of apparent discord was struck by West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee, who opposed the political resolution because it included calls for a caste-based census. Bihar’s ruling Janata Dal (United) and Rashtriya Janata Dal, as well as Samajwadi Party from Uttar Pradesh, backed the inclusion of caste census in the resolution.

In more positive news though, the alliance announced a 14-member cross party “coordination committee” to work out issues and challenges like a possible Common Minimum Programme and the thorny problem of seat-sharing across the country.



First graders sing national anthem during a ceremony to mark the start of the new school year, amid Russia's attack on Ukraine, in Kyiv, Ukraine yesterday.

PHOTO: REUTERS

G20 SUMMIT IN NEW DELHI

Russia to block declaration if its views ignored: FM

REUTERS, Moscow

Russia will block the final declaration of this month’s G20 summit unless it reflects Moscow’s position on Ukraine and other crises, leaving participants to issue a non-binding or partial communique, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said yesterday.

Lavrov, who has served as President Vladimir Putin’s foreign minister since 2004, is due to represent Russia at the September 9-10 meeting of the Group of 20 leading industrialised and developing countries in New Delhi.

Putin is not known to have travelled abroad since the International Criminal Court issued an arrest warrant for him in March on suspicion of war crimes in Ukraine.

“There will be no general declaration on behalf of all members if our position is not reflected,” Lavrov told students at the prestigious Moscow State Institute of International



Relations.

The Kremlin casts the Ukraine war, which began when Russia invaded in February 2022, as an existential battle with an arrogant West that Putin says wants to dismantle Russia and take control of its vast natural resources.

The West denies any such intentions but says it wants Ukraine to defeat Russia on the battlefield and has imposed several rounds of sweeping economic sanctions in response to the invasion, which Russia calls a “special military operation”.

Other leading powers such as China, India and Brazil have called for peace but also reserved

the right to determine their own relationship with Moscow. China has accused the West of fanning the war by supplying Ukraine with weapons.

Lavrov said the West had raised Ukraine in meetings preparing for the summit, to which Russia had replied that “the issue is closed for us”.

He accused the West of undermining international institutions by pushing its own agenda and suggested that, if consensus could not be reached at the G20 meeting, a non-binding communique could be issued by the G20 presidency.

“Another option is to adopt a document that focuses on specific decisions in the sphere of G20 competences, and let everyone say the rest on their own behalf,” Lavrov said.

About 130,000 security officers will be deployed as India hosts the world’s most powerful leaders at the summit, a showcase for Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the country’s growing presence on the world stage.

SUICIDE BLAST

Nine soldiers killed in Pakistan

AFP, Islamabad

Nine soldiers were killed in a restive western region of Pakistan on Thursday after a suicide bomber rammed his motorbike into their military convoy and detonated, army and officials said.

Pakistan has witnessed a dramatic uptick in militancy since the Taliban returned to power in neighbouring Afghanistan two years ago, with attacks spiking along border regions.

“The suicide bomber was riding a motorcycle and he rammed his bike into a truck in a military convoy,” provincial minister Feroze Jamal Shah said.

The army said a further five soldiers were injured in the attack near the town of Jani Khel, however Shah put the figure at 20.

Thai king cuts ex-PM’s jail term to one year: govt

AFP, Bangkok

Thailand’s jailed former premier Thaksin Shinawatra had his prison sentence cut from eight years to one by the king yesterday, just days after he returned from 15 years in exile. The move came a day after the billionaire ex-prime minister, 74, applied for a royal pardon over graft and abuse of office convictions amid widespread speculation about a backroom deal to allow him clemency. Thaksin, twice elected PM and ousted in a 2006 military coup, was sent to prison last week immediately after returning to the kingdom for the first time since 2008. The partial pardon from King Maha Vajiralongkorn was confirmed by the official Royal Gazette, with the announcement pointing to his service to the country as prime minister. “He is loyal to the institution of monarchy. When prosecuted, he respected the justice system,” the statement said, noting that Thaksin also suffers numerous health problems. “His Majesty the King has granted him amnesty and reduced the sentence on Thaksin Shinawatra, the prisoner, to one year in prison, so that he could use his expertise and experience to develop the country further.” Thaksin is one of the most influential but divisive figures in modern Thai history.

ECONOMIC HARDSHIP

Syrians rally in south against President Assad

REUTERS, Beirut

Hundreds gathered in southern Syria yesterday urging President Bashar al-Assad to step down, capping nearly two weeks of demonstrations that erupted over poor living conditions but have spiralled into renewed calls for political change. “Bashar out, Syria free!” shouted a large crowd in the southern Druze city of Sweida. “Syria is not a farm, we are not sheep,” read another poster. Syria is in a deep economic crisis that saw its currency plunge to a record 15,500 Syrian pounds to the dollar last month in a rapidly accelerating free-fall. It traded at 47 pounds to the dollar at the start of the conflict 12 years ago. Demonstrations broke out in Sweida in August over the removal of fuel subsidies. Home province of most of Syria’s Druze community, Sweida remained in government hands throughout the war and was largely spared the violence seen elsewhere. Open criticism of the government remained rare in the areas it controls but as the economic situation grew worse, the discontent has gone public. Yesterday’s turnout was large despite apparent divisions within the Druze leadership over the demonstrations. Some Druze sheikhs have criticized protesters’ calls for Assad to step down and say that any improvement to the socioeconomic situation must come through dialogue.

Global leaders’ requests

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information officer.

On August 28, the global leaders and Nobel laureates, including former US president Barack Obama, in the open letter expressed concern about the safety of Yunus, stating that he has recently been targeted by what they believe is continuous judicial harassment.

They urged the prime minister to immediately suspend the judicial proceedings against him.

The foreign ministry said the letter is “marked by obvious gap of information and amounts to an affront to Bangladesh’s independent judicial system”.

“It comes as a surprise to the government that the signatories to the letter already reached their own conclusion about the merit of the sub-judice cases as well as the outcome of the judicial proceedings.”

The signatories have also recommended an alternative process of reviewing the charges against Yunus and his aides in a manner that is incompatible with Bangladesh’s established judicial system, the statement said.

It said the Anti-Corruption Commission had filed one such case under specific provisions of the Bangladesh Penal Code and Anti-Money Laundering Act- 2012 based on investigations concerning allegations of misappropriation of profits owed to the workers and employees of Grameen Telecom Ltd.

An ACC investigation found that Yunus, chairman of Grameen Telecom, along with its managing director and other board members “forged settlement agreement to misappropriate and illicitly transfer Tk252 million”, the foreign ministry said.

Further, the Department of Inspection of Factories and Establishments, Dhaka had filed a case under Bangladesh Labour Act 2006 for multiple breaches, including for not setting up Workers’ Contributory Fund and Welfare Fund as well as for not depositing 5 percent

of net profits to the workers’ welfare funds concerned since 2006, it added.

After losing a tax evasion case in the High Court Division of the Supreme Court, Yunus filed a petition with the Appellate Division of the Supreme Court which rejected the petition. Yunus then paid the overdue tax amount to the National Board of Revenue. A few more tax evasion cases against him are pending trial now, the statement said.

In the cases of depriving the workers of their rightful profit, Yunus moved the highest court on two occasions. The highest court passed judgments affirming that the first case had been properly initiated, and the framing of charges in the second case was legal and correct, it added.

The foreign ministry said this was not the first time that Yunus and his aides resorted to international lobbying over their alleged or proven violation of law. He had decided to sue the government for terminating his contract as the Grameen Bank MD even though he was past the retirement age stipulated in the Grameen Bank Service Rules, 1993.

“...Having evaded corporate and income taxes and having deprived workers over the years, Dr Yunus, a salaried employee of Grameen Bank, invested large sums of supposedly misappropriated and laundered money in commercial ventures.”

The statement said the allegations of persecution or harassment seem to follow a pattern that stems from a “victim mentality using human rights and democracy as an expedient cover”.

It said the signatories to the letter would be well advised to counsel Dr Yunus to operate within the bounds of law instead of making unjustified insinuations about Bangladesh’s democratic and electoral processes.

“The government would like to reiterate that no amount of veiled threats under the pretext of promoting democracy and human rights would detract the people of Bangladesh from upholding the rule of law,” the ministry said.

With this honour, comes more responsibility

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What we did was, the children who used to beg or sell things on the road, we took them to the Wonderland park. On the other hand, we involved children who had more privileged backgrounds to sell things on the street. We did this in order to give them a feel of street-dwelling children’s lives. It started from there. When we gave flowers to people, they gave us money and told us that we were doing a good job. However, we didn’t have the intention to collect money like that. When we saw that people were giving us money, we

started our second school. This is how the whole initiative acquired organic growth.

DS: Do the students who get involved with JAAGO Foundation get any benefit in going abroad for studies?

KR: Definitely. For the last five to seven years, universities in other countries have been considering co-curricular activities as a very important aspect. When they consider someone, they look at the result, and then they ask “what else did he/she do?”. A common thought is, “If we award you a scholarship, what

will you do when you go back to your country?” We have a relatively higher level of acceptance in four countries, as we do more work with them. The countries are the USA, UK, Canada, and Australia. Many of those, who want to go to these countries, come to us to do internships or volunteer work. In particular, many individuals are utilising the gap they get after finishing the SSC examination. Not only for scholarships or studying abroad, those who do the internship during their school life also get a feel of the real world which helps them in deciding careers and relevant fields of

study.

As a last word, I would like to say that though it was initially established as a channel for volunteer work, the JAAGO Foundation has now institutionalised itself as an NGO. In Dhaka, our head office is at Banani. We have offices in 14 other locations outside Dhaka. About 600 employees are working for our NGO. We will continue to work for the underprivileged in order to spread the light of education among all and encourage the youth to bring in social transformation. Not only within Bangladesh, we will extend our efforts in the international arena, too.

Govt-fixed prices exist only on paper

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Contacted, Fresh LP Gas Chief Operating Officer Mohammed Nurul Alam said they were following the BERC rate.

“We can control the distributors, but we have no control over the retailers who are increasing the price,” he said.

Asked whether they were selling at a higher rate to the distributors, he said they had reduced the commissions of distributors to keep prices on a par with the BERC rate, adding that they were not responsible for the commission the distributors were taking beyond the fixed price.

Alam, however, highlighted the issue of devaluation of taka against dollar as a major problem in opening LCs.

“The BERC fixes the dollar rate at Tk 111 but we are spending Tk 116 per dollar to open LCs. That’s why we have reduced the volume of our import,” Alam claimed.

Jakaria Jalal, head of division at another importing company Basundhara LP Gas Ltd, said they had reduced LPG import for around 30 percent due to some problems related to the opening of LCs.

This newspaper has collected a cash memo given to a distributor by another LPG importer Beximco LPG. The memo shows a 12-kg cylinder was sold for Tk 285 more and a 20-kg one

for Tk 410 more than the BERC rates.

Distributors, on the other hand, were found to sell 12-kg cylinders at Tk 1,430 in Mirpur areas.

Contacted, Beximco LPG Chief Executive Officer M Muntasir Alam said Beximco was selling LPG at the BERC-fixed rate and also bore the transport cost of their distributors.

SHOW-CAUSE NOTICES TO TWO IMPORTERS

On July 11, the BERC issued two show-cause notices to two importers, United Aygaz LPG LTD and Totalgaz, for selling LPG cylinders at a higher rate to distributors in early July.

As of filing this report, none of the companies replied to the notices. A BERC source confirmed The Daily Star that Totalgaz sought more time to respond, but United LPG didn’t reply even after the second notice was served on July 31.

The BERC usually announces the rate in the first week of every month, said SM Faruk Hossain, head of Brand and Communication at United LPG.

He said they replied the BERC’s July 11-notice, saying the distributor was not their own. “But later, we didn’t receive any further notice.”

Sobour Hossain, head of operations of TotalEnergies, told The Daily Star that he is not authorized to talk to the media.

TotalEnergies Managing Director

AS Krishnan could not be reached as he had been abroad.

Talking about the issues, BERC chairman Nurul Amin said, “They [the two companies] are yet to respond to the show-cause notices.”

“We will take action against them as per rule,” he said, adding that they fix the dollar rate based on the rate the companies provide at the meetings.

“All the charges for transportation and taxes are factored in calculating the pricing of the LPG. Yet we don’t understand why they don’t follow it. It’s an ethical issue.”

Asked about the market monitoring, he said, “We need to depend on the consumers’ rights protection directorate and the district administration as we have no executive power. We found that in some areas the fixed rate is not being followed.”

Prof M Shamsul Alam, energy expert and vice president of Consumers Association of Bangladesh, said the businesses in this sector have a lot of clout, with which they control the market.

“They manipulate the market sometimes by reducing imports, sometimes by stocking excess inventory,” he added.

As a quasi-judicial body, the BERC can take necessary action against

the companies, he said. After a long judicial fight, the pricing authority was awarded to the BERC by the high court in 2020. “They are obliged to ensure the energy justice for consumers. They should force the companies to sell the product at a fixed price.”

Besides, he added, the consumers should come forward to get LPG at a fixed rate. “They should collect the money receipts from the retailers and file complaints at the BERC.”

India

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Pakistan got their campaign off to a solid start with a whopping 238-run win against Nepal on Wednesday.

World number one batter Babar Azam and all-rounder Iftikhar Ahmed scored punishing hundreds as Pakistan posted 342 for six, and later leg-spinner Shadab Khan took four wickets for 27 runs as Nepal were bowled out for 104 in 23.4 overs.

Even though Pakistan are the technical hosts of the tournament, it is being co-hosted by Sri Lanka due to ongoing political issues between India and Pakistan.

However, the excitement surrounding the match could be spoiled due to weather conditions, with forecasts suggesting there could be moderate to heavy rain in Kandy over the weekend.