



BNP may join polls at the last moment: PM

RASHIDUL HASAN

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina yesterday said the BNP might join the national election at the last moment to make it controversial.

While addressing a meeting of Awami League Parliamentary Party (ALPP) at the Jatiya Sangsad Bhaban, Hasina also said some western powers want to keep the AL and the BNP away from polls and install a subservient government in Bangladesh.

"If they can foil the upcoming election, they can install a puppet government in Bangladesh," an AL lawmaker quoted her as saying.

"We have to hold the polls braving this conspiracy," the MP quoted her.

"I'm conducting surveys in every six months, and nominations will be given based on it," AL MP Kazi Keramat Ali quoted the PM as saying. She said many lawmakers present in the meeting might not get the AL tickets. "Those who will have possibilities to win will be nominated."

Hasina asked the MPs to work for the nominees. "Those who will oppose the party-nominated candidates, their politics will come to an end for good," she warned.

She said she will not take any responsibility to ensure the victory of any candidates in the next election. "You have to take your own responsibilities and win in the election."

Forgetting conflicts, the PM instructed all to work together and ensure the party's victory in the next polls.



FARMGATE FOOTBRIDGE

Promoting pedestrian safety and urban mobility

AYMAN ANIKA

In the bustling streets of Farmgate, pedestrians find themselves trapped in a relentless dance of dodging vehicles and the mere act of crossing a road can be a perilous adventure. Thankfully, the Farmgate footbridge emerges as a solution to this longstanding problem – a safe route for pedestrians in a city dominated by automobiles. The bridge, demolished about one and a half years ago, was reopened on October 15.

Taking inspiration from the architectural practices of Louis I Kahn, designer of our National Parliament Building, Shareq Rauf Chowdhury, principal architect, and Nur-e-Dipha Muttaqi Ananya, architect and urban transport planner of URBECO Consultants Limited, have designed the architectural and urban transport planning of the footbridge.

The designer team was the winner of the ARCASIA Awards for Architecture in 2015 for socially inclusive design and the FuturArc Green Leadership Award in 2014.

Shareq Chowdhury informs, "Our goal has been to encourage people to use the footbridge and promote healthy urban living. We tried to design a bridge that people from all walks of life can use conveniently, unlike most mega projects in Dhaka. This footbridge will be a part of their daily lives."

The design of this bridge is a fusion of modernity and functionality. Having a width of 21 feet, the footbridge is 206 feet long. It connects both sides of the bustling road, easing the daily commute for thousands of people, who frequent the Farmgate area. The main purpose of widening the bridge is to allow pedestrians to walk with ease.



PHOTO: ZUBAYER MAHMUD BHUIYAN

Shareq specifies that the bridge has an additional wing of 70 feet in length that connects towards Holy Cross School and College. With well-constructed railings, 24/7 CCTV monitoring, and proper lighting, it provides a safe and well-illuminated passage even during nighttime.

About the design features and aesthetic elements of the bridge, Ananya shares, "We tried to explore a contemporary interpretation of Louis I Kahn's experiments with diffuse light and truss structures and attempted to rethink the concept of footbridge as an elevated public realm by incorporating urban pocket spaces with planter boxes."

"The three-pocket spaces on the side of the bridge have been placed so that people can stand, and enjoy the view. The visual permeability and diffuse lighting through the tensile structure allows passive surveillance and safety for not only women and children but also a large number of students using this bridge."

According to the architects, there will be a plaza under the bridge so that thousands of people, including school

students, can get off the bus and go directly across.

This pedestrian bridge and the plaza will facilitate the much-required connectivity of the public transport network between metro rail, buses, and feeder modes for the educational institutes that exist within this vicinity.

Beyond its functional aspects, the Farmgate footbridge is a stunning sight to behold. Its sleek, contemporary design seamlessly blends with the landscape of the elevated expressway and metro rail – adding an element of architectural beauty to the city.

On the footbridge, people can be seen taking selfies or admiring the view. Shareq and Ananya designed the Farmgate footbridge with inclusivity in mind so that the bridge serves the people and speaks for the city itself.

As our city continues to grow, such projects are vital for creating a safer, more efficient, and vibrant urban environment. The Farmgate footbridge is not just a structure made of steel and concrete; this new addition to the cityscape is a promise of better days to come and a reminder that progress is, indeed, a continuous journey.

Trials now rolling well into the night

FROM PAGE 1

The Daily Star can confirm seven such night-time trials between August 28 and October 18 – all involving BNP and Jamaat leaders and activists.

On August 28, for example, the court recorded statements of 16 witnesses, all police personnel, in two phases. The hearing of one case against Iqbal lasted from 10:30am to 12:15pm, and that of another from 5:30pm to 8:00pm, the lawyer said, requesting anonymity.

"The court was able to record testimonies of only three witnesses during the office hour. As darkness fell, I pleaded with the court to fix another date to complete recording the witness depositions. But the court continued with the hearing," the lawyer added.

"I have been practising in Dhaka courts for 17 years. I have never seen any night-time trials in my career," said Syed Zaynul Abedin Mesbah, who is not representing Iqbal, but is a defence lawyer for at least 700 cases filed against BNP leaders and activists.

The Daily Star has analysed the court records of the last six hearings in one case and five hearings in another case filed against Iqbal with Bangshal police. The records show the intervals between hearing dates have grown noticeably shorter, even falling within days, since July this year.

In one case, his last six hearings at the Additional Chief Metropolitan Magistrate's Court-3 were on September 20 last year, and January 1, May 22, August 23, August 28 and September 13 this year.

The same court heard the other case on December 15 last year, and April 30, June 11, August 28 and September 19 this year.

Asked about the legality of court proceedings at night, Dhaka Metropolitan Public Prosecutor Abdullah Abu said, "It may have happened once or twice. But when you have such a large number of witnesses before the court, you cannot help but break the norm."

THE RUSH TO FINISH

On October 10, Law Minister Anisul Huq admitted to The Daily Star that the government has instructed the prosecution to take steps for quick disposal of old cases.

"Since there is a backlog of cases, I have asked the public prosecutor's office to be active Otherwise, the trials would not end," he said, adding that the government did not issue any separate order to dispose of the cases against BNP leaders.

But a mid-level police officer, who was present during Iqbal's trial on August 28 to make sure that his junior officers gave their statements "properly", told The Daily Star they

have clear instructions from the government to finish off the trials involving BNP and other opposition party leaders before the national election.

The urge on the part of the prosecution to do so is evident in the way proceedings of some 250 cases, filed against top BNP leaders and key activists a decade ago in the capital, are progressing over the last few months.

Many of these leaders are potential candidates in the upcoming election, and their conviction might mean they will be ineligible to contest in the polls. Multiple lawyers dealing with some of these cases said a number of Dhaka courts have been recording depositions of prosecution witnesses beyond court hours.

Latest on October 18, Metropolitan Magistrate Court-14 held trial proceedings until 8:30pm, Metropolitan Magistrate Court-6 until 8:00pm and Additional Metropolitan Magistrate Court-2 until 7:00pm, lawyers representing the accused BNP and Jamaat leaders and activists told The Daily Star.

The Metropolitan Magistrate Court-14 recorded statements of 11 prosecution witnesses from 1:00pm to 8:30pm in a case filed with Paltan police, said Mohi Uddin Chowdhury, a lawyer for accused BNP leader Rafiqul Alam Majnu.

At the Additional Metropolitan Magistrate Court-2, a defence lawyer for BNP leader Mohammad Adil requested the court to set another date for hearing after the clock struck 5:00pm. But the court rejected the plea and recorded statements of five more prosecution witnesses.

The lawyer, requesting anonymity, said the court did not consider his appeal although he told the court that he was feeling unwell.

BNP leaders say this is proof that the government is using the judiciary to keep their leaders and activists busy in courtrooms, even at nights, before the election.

BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia's Adviser Habibur Rahman Habib is one. Along with 18 others, Habib faces a case over alleged vandalism in front of Jamuna Future Park during a political programme on January 4, 2015.

Not a single hearing took place all these years as no prosecution witnesses – all police members – appeared before the court, said his lawyer Syed Zaynul Abedin Mesbah.

When witnesses skip hearings repeatedly, the court first sends summons twice, followed by an arrest warrant (courts can issue arrest warrants for witnesses too). When this does not work, the court sends

non-bailable arrest warrants first to the police commissioner, then to the police chief and finally to the home ministry, asking them to produce the witnesses before the court to testify.

"In Habib's case, all these legal options were exhausted, but no prosecution witnesses appeared before the court all these years," he said.

Suddenly on August 17, all seven prosecution witnesses, including the investigation officer, came to the Additional Chief Metropolitan Magistrate Court-3 and testified.

"The testimony began around 4:00pm and continued till 8:30pm," Zaynul said.

On October 9, Habib and several other BNP leaders were sentenced to four years in prison in this case.

Advocate Abu Bakar Siddique, who is representing hundreds of BNP and Jamaat leaders and activists in dozens of cases, also gave a similar account of how cases against opposition men are suddenly coming to life after nearly a decade.

On July 24 and October 1, prosecution witnesses, all of them police officers, appeared before two courts to testify in two cases for the first time since Paltan police filed the cases in 2013 over vandalism and crude bomb explosions.

In the first case, the proceedings lasted eight hours till 8:30pm, with about an hour's lunch break, at Dhaka Metropolitan Special Tribunal-13. The court recorded depositions of seven witnesses in presence of all 13 suspects, including Jamaat leaders Al Amin and Nurul Alam.

In the second instance, Additional Chief Metropolitan Magistrate Court-2 heard testimonies of nine police officers in a separate case against the 13 over the same incident until around 9:00pm, Abu Bakar said.

Like in the case of Habib, the BNP chairperson's adviser, not a single prosecution witness came to the court over the last one decade despite repeated summonses, arrest warrants, and non-bailable arrest warrants, he added.

'DESPERATE TO PUNISH'

BNP leaders allege the government has taken the move to imprison their leaders and activists to "vacate the field" ahead of the general election.

They say the move also aims to keep thana and ward-level BNP leaders and workers busy in courts so they cannot join the anti-government movement.

"The government is desperate to punish our leaders and workers using the courts to hold an election like the ones in 2014 and 2018," BNP Secretary General Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir told The Daily Star.

He also alleged that since assuming

power in 2009, the Awami League government has been using the state machinery in a planned way to file "ghost cases" against thousands of BNP leaders and workers.

There is no official data on the number of cases filed against opposition party leaders and activists.

According to BNP's case record preservation cell, 1,41,633 cases have been filed against 49,26,492 leaders and activists of the party and its affiliated organisations since 2009 till September this year.

The Daily Star could not independently verify the data, but if the BNP count is right, its leaders and activists were sued in 10,000 cases every year or 27 cases every day since Awami League took office in 2009.

In Dhaka division alone, 15,079 cases have been filed against 6.16 lakh leaders and workers during the same period, according to BNP's case record preservation cell.

In different Dhaka courts, trials of around 30 cases are at the final stage, meaning judgments in these cases are expected in the coming months. Recording of witness depositions is underway in some 220 other cases.

Around 15,000 central, thana and ward-level leaders of BNP and its associate bodies are accused in these 250 cases filed between 2012 and 2015, mainly on charges of vandalising and torching vehicles, blasting crude bombs, and obstructing police to carry out their duties.

According to BNP sources, at least 97 leaders and activists of BNP and its front organisations have been convicted and jailed across the country over the last eight months or so. At least 59 of them are from Dhaka, including Jubo Dal Organising Secretary Ishaq Sarkar, former ward councilor Hamidur Rahman and Dhaka city Jubo Dal (north) Convener Sharifuddin Jewel.

BNP leader Amanullah Aman is already in jail on corruption charges. Iqbal Hasan Mahmood Tuku faces an arrest warrant after he was convicted in a graft case and sentenced to nine years in prison.

Lawyers say there are hundreds of BNP leaders and activists who face more than 50 cases each, and their trials have gathered pace. They have to come to the court almost every day for hearings in three to four cases.

Dhaka City (south) Chhatra Dal Joint Convener Golam Rabbani Robin is one of them. A civil engineer, he has lost his job as he needs to appear before the courts almost every day in the 62 cases he faces.

"Brother, I am tired of coming to the court every day. I would rather be hanged than tortured this way," he said.

Bullet-hit body found in rubber garden

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Bandarban

Police recovered the bullet-hit body of a young man from a rubber garden in Bandarban's Naikhongchhari upazila early yesterday.

Shahidul Islam Prakash Shahidullah, 28, was a day labourer by profession, said the his uncle Alam.

Police and locals said his body was found in the middle of the rubber plantation by some workers in the morning.

Sub-Inspector Nurullah Bhuiyan, in charge of Baishari Police Camp, said after being informed by locals, police recovered the victim's body around 9:30am and sent it to Cox's Bazar Sadar Hospital for autopsy.

The reason behind the murder could not be known immediately, said the police official.

The deceased's uncle Shahabuddin suspected that criminals took Shahidul to the hills early morning and killed him there.

"It was a pre-planned murder," he alleged. A case is being filed in this regard, added SI Nurullah.

Woman dragged out of home, murdered

Criminals also injure brother

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Chuadanga

A group of criminals murdered a woman and injured her brother after dragging them out of their house in Chuadanga's Darshana upazila.

The body of Monzura Khatun, 32, of Mohammadpur village, was recovered from a local crop field last morning.

At the same time, her brother, Alamgir Hossain, was rescued from the same field and admitted to Chuadanga Sadar Hospital.

said the criminals dragged him from his house last night.

Confirming the matter, Zakia Sultana, assistant superintendent of police, said Monzura's body was sent to Chuadanga Sadar Hospital for autopsy.

Quoting locals and family, police said a group of criminals broke into their house, took Alamgir at gunpoint to a local crop field, and tied his hands and feet. When Monzura protested, they took her there also and assaulted her.

A special team of police is working to identify the perpetrators, ASP Zakia said.

Nagad, Kori

FROM PAGE 1

sponsors are more or less the same as the mobile financial service provider Nagad.

Muhammad Farid Khan, a director of Summit International and the brother of Awami League presidium member Faruk Khan, is an investor in Nagad Digital Bank.

For Nagad, the preliminary approval for the digital bank will put to bed its quest for getting the appropriate licencing for its operations.

Nagad is now running its MFS operation without a full-fledged licence from the central bank as it did not fulfil all licencing criteria. At one point, it wanted to run its MFS operations with an NBF licence and it obtained the licence in May.

In August, Nagad surrendered the NBF licence and sought a digital bank licence.

"Nagad's digital bank will literally become a dream-fulfilling powerhouse of Bangladeshi people, digitally orchestrating every facet of one's financial journey," Tanvir Ahmed Mishuk, founder and MD of Nagad, told The Daily Star.

Nagad intends to propel millions of unbanked individuals into the financial fold and play a role in achieving a "Smart Bangladesh", he added.

Other than Nagad and Kori, the BB also decided to allow the three bank-led applicants to open digital banking windows.

Bank Asia-led Digital, Brac Bank-led bKash Digital Bank, and Digi10, a consortium of 10 private banks, can open digital banking windows as they already have the full-fledged banking licence, said BB spokesperson Md Mezbahul Haque.

The central bank is preparing the necessary guidelines for the window, he said, without elaborating whether the 10 private banks that came together for Digi10 will open individual digital windows.

The banking watchdog will also review the performance of Nagad and Kori over the next six months and issue LoIs to three more shortlisted candidates: Smart Digital Bank, Japan Bangla Digital Bank and North East Digital Bank, Haque said.

Three committees of the central bank assessed 52 applications for digital banks and shortlisted nine names. The list was placed at the 430th meeting of the board of directors of the central bank.

Of the nine applications, the board struck off one proposal as it was submitted by an insurance company, Haque added.

Meanwhile, economists questioned the timing of handing out digital bank licences, which comes about two months before the national election.

"It will not be right to give approval to anything new now, more so amidst the current economic crisis. If something is given, it should be after

the national election," said Ahsan H Mansur, executive director of the Policy Research Institute.

Mansur, a former chairman of Brac Bank, advised the BB to provide licences to financially sound companies capable of running them.

While there is a need for digital banks in the country, the central bank should give licences after thorough assessment, said Mustafa K Mujeri, a former BB chief economist.

"It would be wise to give the approval after the upcoming parliamentary election in January next year. The economic situation is not good and there is a crisis in the banking sector."

266 killed in Gaza

FROM PAGE 1

in support of Israel and strengthen the US defence posture in the region after "recent escalations by Iran and its proxy forces" – a reference to Hezbollah, Palestinian and other militants.

Washington has deployed a significant amount of naval power to the Middle East, including two aircraft carriers, support ships and about 2,000 Marines, to help deter attacks by Iran-affiliated forces.

Austin said a Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system and extra Patriot air defence missile system battalions will be sent to the region and more troops put on standby.

Iranian security officials told Reuters Iran's strategy was for Middle East proxies like Hezbollah to pursue limited strikes on Israeli and US targets but to avoid a major escalation that would draw in Tehran, a high-wire act for the Islamic Republic.

Israel has amassed tanks and troops near the fenced border around Gaza for a planned ground invasion aiming to annihilate Hamas.

With Israel keeping up daily bombings, Palestinians said they received renewed Israeli military warnings to move from Gaza's north to the south to avoid the deadliest theatre of the war.

Kohli, Shami

FROM PAGE 1

cut short Shubman Gill's promising knock of 26.

India reached 100-2 in the 15th over when heavy fog caused low visibility, forcing the players off the pitch for a while.

After play resumed, Trent Boult bounced out Shreyas Iyer (33) and New Zealand dragged themselves back into the contest with the wickets of KL Rahul and Suryakumar Yadav.

Kohli and Jadeja, who made 39 not out, then combined in a crucial stand to set up India's victory.