



Govt working to create conducive environment for free, fair polls

PM tells European commissioner; she'll return home today

DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENT

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has briefed a European commissioner about how the Awami League government is working to create a conducive environment for free and fair elections.

During a meeting with European Commissioner for International Partnerships Jutta Urpilainen in Brussels on Wednesday, the PM also highlighted the party's efforts to restore democracy in Bangladesh.

Hasina spoke about establishing an independent Election Commission, biometric information-based voter list, and transparent ballot boxes, said a foreign ministry statement yesterday.

She discussed these when Urpilainen called on her at her hotel, on the sidelines of the Global Gateway Forum on October 25-26.

It is the first meeting that the European Commission hosted since the initiative was launched in 2021 to support the global infrastructure gap in the developing countries of Africa, Latin America, and Asia.

Urpilainen hoped that the upcoming general election in Bangladesh would be held in a free and fair environment.

The commissioner expressed the EU's commitment to further deepen the Bangladesh-EU relationship and underscored potential

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The Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman Tunnel under the Karnaphuli in Chattogram. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina is to inaugurate the country's first tunnel tomorrow. The 3.31km tunnel will help improve road communication with Cox's Bazar and Bandarban.

PHOTO: STAR

Israel hints at several Gaza 'invasions'

Hamas says Israeli strikes killed '50 hostages'; more than 7,000 killed in Palestinian enclave

AGENCIES

Israel said its ground forces had made a big push into Gaza overnight to attack "Hamas targets" as Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said it was still preparing for a ground invasion that could be one of several.

The Israeli ground operation came as the United States and other countries are urging Israel to delay a full invasion fearing it could spark a wider war.

Gaza is reeling from almost three weeks of Israeli bombing triggered by Hamas' intrusion in southern Israel. Gaza's health ministry yesterday said that 7,028 Palestinians had been killed in the air strikes, including 2,913 children. Meanwhile, Hamas yesterday said

Israeli strikes on Gaza have killed almost 50 of the hostages its fighters seized in a cross-border attack which it launched on October 7.

Humanitarian supplies in Gaza are critically low but world powers failed at the United Nations to agree on how to call for a lull to the fighting to deliver significant amounts of aid.

The United Nations agency for Palestinian refugees, UNRWA, said it urgently needed fuel to maintain life-saving humanitarian operations in Gaza. Israel has refused to let in fuel with aid shipments, saying it could be seized by Hamas.

More than 613,000 people made homeless by the war are sheltering in 150 UNRWA facilities across the shattered territory.

Ansars should not be given powers to detain

Recommends JS body

RASHIDUL HASAN

Amid strong opposition from police, a parliamentary body yesterday recommended that Ansar members are not given powers to detain suspects, frisk them, and seize goods.

The parliamentary standing committee on home affairs in a meeting at the Jatiya Sangsad Bhaban yesterday recommended amending the Ansar Battalion Bill, 2023, section 8, which had a provision for empowering Ansar members.

Home Minister Asaduzzaman Khan Kamal placed the bill in the House on Monday, during the last session of this parliament and with just less than three months to go until the national elections. The bill had been sent to the committee for scrutiny with a request to submit its

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BSF returns body of Bangladeshi two days after he was shot dead

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Thakurgaon

India's Border Security Force (BSF) returned the body of a Bangladeshi man to local enforcement authorities Wednesday night, two days after he was killed in BSF firing in Thakurgaon's Baliadangi upazila.

The body of Md Nur Jamal was handed over following a flag BGB-BSF meeting.

The company commander-level flag meeting was held at the zero line along Beurjhari border near Pillar 380 in Baliadangi upazila around 7:00pm, said Md Samsul Alam, company commander of Ratnai BGB border outpost.

After the meeting, the body was handed over to police, who later handed it over to the victim's family.

BGB sources said BSF members of Sonamoti camp opened fire on a group of five to six people when they entered India illegally through the border near Pillar 382-2s, leaving Nur Jamal dead on the spot.

Later, they took the body to their camp while the other group members escaped unhurt, the sources said.

Protesting the incident, BGB sent a letter to BSF for holding a flag meeting.

Responding to the call, BSF joined the meeting on the day of the incident and confirmed the death.

Madrasa student killed in hit and run

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, Ctg

A 15-year-old girl died after being hit by a lorry on the Chattogram-Dhaka Highway when she was going to her madrasa in Chattogram's Sitakunda upazila last morning.

The deceased was identified as Tanjina Akter, daughter of Mohammad Hossain of South Wahedpur village in Wahedpur union of Sitakunda upazila, said police.

She was a ninth grader at Shah Sufi Maolana Noor Ahmad Dakhil Madrasa in Kamoldaha area.

Tanjina was going to the madrasa on foot on the highway around 9:00am when the Chattogram-bound lorry hit her, said Shahadat Hossain, officer-in-charge of Kumira Highway Police Station.

Locals took her to a hospital, but she died of her injuries on the way. Locals chased the lorry for some 200 yards, but the driver managed to flee the scene, he added.

Cops all geared up, AL men too

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supporters gather there, especially since the BNP is set to hold its rally at the time.

Shapla Chattar will be treated as a Key Point Installation and police provide security accordingly, officials said.

A key point installation is a place declared by the home ministry as crucial for the security of the country and the economy.

AL leaders from different city units said they were asked to be fully ready to dominate the field. "The AL cadres will not be out on the streets empty handed. They will be prepared to defend themselves and retaliate against attacks," said a leader.

Awami League General Secretary Obaidul Quader yesterday claimed that the BNP was openly threatening with violence.

"If our peace rally is attacked, our leaders and activists will not sit idle. The Awami League is committed to

protecting the lives and property of the people," he said, addressing a press briefing at his office.

"We will not go to BNP's programme to attack them. But if our rally is attacked, we will resist and retaliate," added Quader, also the road transport and bridges minister.

AL leaders say the BNP rally will be attended by Jamaat men, whose sole purpose will be to cause violence.

On July 25, Obaidul Quader said, "We have heard that a large number of firearms have been illegally brought to Bangladesh from India, and the BNP is storing them."

AL leaders believe that those firearms will be seen on the streets tomorrow, and should that be the case, the AL's response will be fitting.

Even though Jamaat is not likely to get permission to hold a rally at Shapla Chattar, Jamaat acting amir Mujibur Rahman at a virtual press conference yesterday asked supporters not to

be misguided by the "provocative, undemocratic and unconstitutional" government directives.

Jamaat and its student wing Shibir have been sending Telegram messages asking followers to be on the streets. This correspondent has seen some of the texts.

The game is zero sum, they believe, and they are calling out their men to be ready to even accept death, said Jamaat sources.

In the messages, the Jamaat promised to overthrow the government tomorrow, said the sources, adding that Jamaat leaders are instructing their followers to be equipped with bamboo sticks.

Jamaat and Shibir men also took out processions in different districts yesterday.

Mahid Uddin, additional commissioner (crime) of Dhaka Metropolitan Police, said police would be on the streets prepared to handle any unstable situations.

Reserves to hit \$24.5b

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As a result, the deficit in the financial account will reverse to \$0.2b. At the end of last fiscal year, the financial account had a deficit of \$2.1 billion.

The developments mean the gross foreign reserves will hit \$24.5 billion at the end of June next year, enough to comfortably meet IMF's minimum net reserve target of \$19.5 billion. The Daily Star has learnt from BB officials involved with the proceedings.

At the end of last fiscal year, gross reserves were about \$24.8 billion, down from \$33.4 billion a year earlier.

Economists though remain sceptical that the reserves will perk up to the level projected by the central bank.

"It depends on the policy measures taken after the election," said Zahid Hussain, a former lead economist of the World Bank's Dhaka office.

For the reserves to hit \$24.5 billion at the end of the fiscal year, the supply of dollars will have to increase much from remittance and exports.

And that would depend on how much the exchange rate premium – which is the difference between the exchange rates prevailing in the official and kerb markets – narrows.

"If the exchange rate is not market-based, that will not happen."

Asked if the dissipation in political uncertainty will convince exporters to bring in their export proceeds, Hussain remains doubtful.

"After elections, I think a portion of the export proceeds will come in if the exchange rate premium is reduced. If we expect that \$5-6 billion will come in without any reforms, it is highly unlikely," Hussain added.

Ahsan H Mansur, executive

director of Policy Research Institute, deems the central bank projections highly optimistic.

"At the time of election, reserves will come down to about \$16 billion. So building up \$8 billion in reserves from February will be a big challenge. You can't compress imports further. It is difficult to say where the global economy is heading, so how exports will fare is uncertain."

Other than massive policy changes after the election, extremely favourable conditions are needed for reserves to go back up to \$24.5 billion at the end of this fiscal year.

"We had extremely favourable conditions only twice. One was during Atiur Rahman's time as governor in 2011-12 and another was during the pandemic," said Mansur, also a former economist of the IMF.

BNP will resist if attacked

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the party, told The Daily Star yesterday.

The top brass of the BNP held a series of meetings with its front and associate bodies and also with district unit leaders to take stock of the situation and finalise the party's next course of action.

"Seeing the attitude of the government and the law enforcers, the movement programmes will be finalised," a senior leader said.

Taking lessons from the December 10 rally, party top brass asked BNP leaders and activists not to make any provocative comments. Last year,

senior leaders were arrested and the party office was raided.

BNP Senior Joint Secretary General Ruhul Kabir Rizvi said the rally would be peaceful despite the "provocative" comments by ruling party leaders.

He claimed that over 1,200 leaders and activists were arrested over the last few days.

To join the rally, BNP leaders and activists have already reached Dhaka. Those from nearby districts will reach Dhaka tonight or early tomorrow.

Unlike other times, the party leaders and activists are reaching the capital on public transport.

The BNP leaders said a three-tier leadership system was introduced so that the activists are not without a leader if a leader is arrested.

The party asked its activists to be aware of rumours spread through social media and to ask their unit leaders if there was any confusion.

Leaders of the party said a volunteer team, 550 strong, will maintain discipline at the rally.

During a visit to the party office, a thin presence of BNP activists was seen as the party asked its leaders and activists not to roam around the office after arriving in Dhaka.

EC must try to bring all parties to polls

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election is not participatory and competitive.

"You [EC] should call the political parties [to meetings] time and again so that you can at least say you invited them but they did not show up," he said.

Referring to the EC's statement in the workshop's concept note that the expected environment is still not there for holding a free, fair, participatory, and festive election, Iqbal said, "Sometimes it is better not to tell the truth. The election is only two and a half months away. How will the polls be fair if someone now says that a favourable environment has not been created?"

Zahid Newaz Khan, chief news editor of Channel i, said the parliamentary polls are less than three months away, but the people still doubt whether the elections will take place.

"Can the Election Commission negotiate with two political parties as a last resort?" he asked.

Editor and Publisher of The Daily Star Mahfuz Anam said that the CEC has already mentioned that they have invited political parties to talks, but some of them did not show up.

"I would say you should continue inviting them. If needed, invite them 10 times. If they turn down the invitation, people will consider that you have tried your best," he said.

He supported the EC's plan to send ballot papers to the polling stations on the morning of the voting day and

appoint returning officers from the EC officials. "These are two good steps. We hope you will take the right decisions."

Mahfuz Anam said the election tribunals should announce their judgments promptly, otherwise their judgments will be less credible.

Daily Khaborer Kaogj Editor Mostofa Kamal asked whether the EC can tell the ruling party that a good election should be held for the betterment of the country and its people.

Mustafiz Shafi, editor of the Protidiner Bangladesh, said there is no alternative to dialogues among political parties for a free and fair election.

Daily Jugantor Editor Saiful Alam expressed optimism that the commission will set an example by holding the polls in a free and fair manner.

He stressed the need for creating a level playing field for all political parties.

Chief Editor of Maasranga Television Rejoanul Huqsaid the issue over which the BNP and its like-minded parties do not want to take part in the polls is a political issue and that the EC has nothing to do with it.

Naem Nizam, editor of Bangladesh Pratidin, said the EC's statement on the absence of conducive situation ahead of the announcement of the polls schedule might create fear among the political parties who want to run in the elections.

Chief Election Commissioner Kazi Habibul Awal said some political

parties did not respond to their calls for dialogue, yet they would continue inviting those parties.

About concerns over his comment on unfavourable election environment, the CEC said, "The language may be wrong. I would still say that the environment is not fully conducive. But that doesn't mean that we won't hold the election."

He said the EC has repeatedly stated that the general election should be participatory and "effectively competitive".

Referring to the CEC's statement that presiding officers will halt elections if those are not conducted properly, Daily Observer Editor Iqbal Sobhan asked the CEC what he would do if irregularities occurred across the country.

In response, Habibul said, "In such a situation, elections will be suspended nationwide and those will take place again. If irregularities occur at specific polling centres, voting will be stopped there and fresh elections will be held. We have to be courageous."

He also said presiding officers would "carry out their duties as the CEC" at their respective polling stations. They have been instructed to take measures to prevent election irregularities.

Election commissioners Brig Gen (ret'd) Ahsan Habib Khan, Rashida Sultana and Md Alamgir, AIN Bangla Chief News Editor ZI Mamun, News 24 Executive Editor Rahul Raha, and Zahirul Alam, chief editor of NTV, among others, spoke at the programme.

Over 1,200 BNP activists

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from Wednesday night till 8:45pm yesterday, adding that at least 16 false cases were filed against opposition activists.

BNP Joint Secretary General Khairul Kabir Khokon was among the arrestees. He was picked up by detectives from a house in Dhaka's Sipahibagh area early yesterday.

Confirming the arrest, Razib Al Masud, deputy commissioner of Motijheel Division, said, "He was accused in many cases in Dhaka and elsewhere."

Meanwhile, 205 people were produced before the Dhaka's Chief Metropolitan Magistrate's Court over the last two days.

Of them, 122 were arrested on Wednesday from different parts of the capital in 40 cases filed on different dates last year and this year. Many of them are BNP members.

The same night, five leaders and activists of BNP and Jamaat were arrested from different places in Dinajpur's Ghoraghat upazila.

Police yesterday also detained 45 leaders and activists while raiding

the house of Jatiyatabadi Sramik Dal President Salahuddin Sarkar in Tongi.

Meanwhile, police and Rab have set up checkpoints on roads leading to Dhaka ahead of the rally and have been searching vehicles, checking ID cards, and questioning commuters about their destination, reason for visit and occupation.

The check posts were set up in Amin Bazar, Jahangir Nagar University, Srinagar in Munshiganj and Bhanga in Faridpur.

Law enforcers also ramped up surveillance on hotels and student messes in different parts of the capital.

With the ruling AL announcing a counter rally at the south gate of Baitul Mukarram mosque – merely 1.5km from BNP's declared rally venue – and Jamaat-e-Islami's vow to hold their separate one at the nearby Shapla Chatta on the same day, police are fearing violence and sabotage.

A sense of fear and panic has also spread among city dwellers over the multiple rallies on the same day.

Dhaka Metropolitan Police spokesperson Faruk Hossain said they have analysed the threats and an

adequate number of law enforcers will be deployed to ensure public safety.

He denied the claims that the arrests of BNP members were made centring the rally.

"Rather, a regular drive is going on to arrest people accused in cases or those charge sheeted, and the arrests are made with warrants. Many accused who were absconding are being arrested. There might be BNP leaders and activists among them," he told The Daily Star yesterday.

On the other hand, families of many arrestees on Wednesday night said their near ones are neither involved in politics nor accused in any case, yet they were arrested "on suspicion".

Speaking to The Daily Star, the sister of a college-going arrestee who was waiting near a court to meet her brother, said, "My brother is a college student. I told him to go out and get some food last [Wednesday] night. After he went out, police arrested him from Ambagan area in Hatirjheel around 8:00pm"

Like her, over 100 people related to those arrested on Wednesday were gathered at the Dhaka court area to meet their loved ones.