

POLLS SCHEDULE

AL won't accept change in charter-set time frame

Says Quader

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Awami League will not accept delaying of the elections beyond January 29, said its General Secretary Obaidul Quader. "The constitution has set a time frame for the elections. We will never support deferment of the polls beyond that deadline. We will not accept any such changes," he said while briefing reporters at the AL president's political office in Dhanmondi yesterday.



The tenure of the current parliament expires on January 29. According to the constitution, the national election must be held anytime within the last 90 days of a parliament's tenure. The 90-day countdown began on November 1.

Alleging that the BNP wants to obstruct the January 7 polls, Quader said, "They want to make the election questionable. Now they are openly putting up obstacles and taking a stand against the election."

He said sanctions should be imposed on those who are trying to obstruct the polls.

"They [BNP] are obstructing the democratic process and setting fire [to vehicles] one after another. Why are those, who talk about human rights, good governance, and fair elections, silent now?"

Quader said by calling hartals and blockades and attacking law enforcers, a vested quarter is challenging the constitution and democracy.

"Why is there silence about those who are obstructing the elections? I want to ask the civil society members about it. No one has said anything yet. Europe does not say anything, America does not say anything either."

"They [the US] said earlier that they clarified their stance regarding those who would try to obstruct the election. Why are they not saying anything now?" Quader said.

AL Organising Secretary BM Mozammel Haque, Office Secretary Biplab Barua, Liberation War Affairs Secretary Mrinal Kanti Das, and Deputy Office Secretary Sayem Khan, among others, were present at the briefing.



People greet cricket star Shakib Al Hasan after his vehicle reached the Parnanduali area of Magura town. Shakib returned to Magura for the first time yesterday after securing the Awami League ticket for the Magura-1 constituency.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

CLASHES WITH REBELS  
Myanmar military pounds Rakhine town

AFP, Bangkok

Myanmar's military is carrying out a sustained offensive involving fighter jets to regain control of a key town from an armed ethnic minority group, its fighters and residents said yesterday.

The Arakan Army moved into Pauktaw, a town of 20,000 people close to a crucial deepwater port in the capital of western Rakhine state, on November 15.

It opened a new front in an offensive by an alliance of ethnic minority groups across northern Myanmar that has shocked the nation's junta, cut trade routes to neighbouring China and led to more than 330,000 people being displaced since last month.

Pauktaw has become one of the key battlegrounds, and residents contacted by AFP yesterday reported heavy battles in and around the town, which is 25 kilometres (16 miles) from

Sittwe, the state capital. "They (the junta) have been firing heavy weapons at the town continuously," one resident told AFP by phone, requesting anonymity for security reasons. "Yesterday a jet fighter dropped two bombs that started a fire," said the resident who said they were sheltering in a nearby village, adding the blaze was still burning.

AFP has reported fighting in Pauktaw over the past two weeks. But the accounts from the residents, as well as a statement from the Arakan Army (AA), provided the most detailed accounts of the battle for control of the town.

A resident of Sittwe said the military was shelling Pauktaw from bases around Sittwe. "They are firing artillery from Sittwe towards our towns especially Pauktaw every day, day and night," a resident told AFP, also requesting anonymity.

239 children tortured by teachers so far this year Says ASK report

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

A total of 28 children were sexually harassed and 239 tortured by teachers so far this year, according to an Ain O Salish Kendra report.

Last year, the numbers were 23 and 109, respectively.

The findings of the study titled "Dialogue with Journalists: Child Rights Situation in Bangladesh and What to Do", based on reports published during Jan 2020-Nov 2023, were revealed yesterday.

According to the report, 14 and 3 children were sexually harassed in 2020 and 2021 respectively. 125 and 67 were tortured in 2020 and 2021.

BUILDING COLLAPSE

3 Bangladeshi workers die in Malaysia

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Three Bangladeshi migrant workers were killed after an under-construction building collapsed in Malaysia's Penang state on Tuesday, said the Bangladesh High Commission in Kuala Lumpur yesterday.

The victims are Mokaddes Ali of Bogura's Shibganj, Saiful Islam of Cumilla's Debidwar and Ahad Ali of Pabna's Chatmohar, according to the press release from the high commission.

The deceased's bodies have been kept at Penang General Hospital.

The mission said it was working to send the bodies home and realise compensation from the victims' employers.

A beam measuring about 12m long and weighing about 14 tonnes had fallen and knocked down 14 other beams in the incident, said Mohamed Usuf Jan Mohamad, Penang deputy police chief.

There were 18 workers assigned to the site, but nine of them had gone out for prayers at the time of the incident.

"So far, we have identified the three deceased. Two died at the scene and another at the hospital. We believe there are four more victims still trapped under the collapsed structure," he said, adding that all workers are Bangladeshis.

Two injured workers were rescued from the spot and they were undergoing treatment at Penang General Hospital, the mission said, adding that the incident happened around 9:45pm (local time) on Tuesday.

The rescue operation was underway and details of the incident would be revealed when the operation ends.

Malaysia's English daily The Star yesterday reported rescuers were still searching for four missing workers believed to be pinned under the rubble.

Woman beaten to death over trifling matter

STAR REPORT

A woman was beaten to death allegedly by her neighbours following a dispute over a trifling matter in Noakhali yesterday.

The incident took place at Jaganananda village in Kabirhat upazila, said police.

According to locals, around 6:30am, Aleya Begum, 50, went to the house of Rezia Begum and complained that some of her ducks ate paddy from Aleya's cropland.

Later, an argument broke out between them.

At one stage, Rezia and her family members beat Aleya with sticks, leaving her critically injured, said OC Rafiqul Islam of Kabirhat Police Station.

Later, locals took her to Noakhali 250-bed General Hospital, where doctors declared her dead, he said.

The OC said the neighbours went into hiding after the incident. Police are trying to arrest them.

Raushan

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Due to the deepening rift between Raushan and Quader, the JP may face another split soon, several pro-Raushan leaders told The Daily Star.

Asked for comment, JP Secretary General Chunnun yesterday said, "We respect Raushan Ershad as the party's chief patron and the opposition leader. If she wants to participate in the election, we will give her a nomination form."

A form will also be issued to the party's Joint Secretary General Saad Ershad if he wants to run, Chunnun added.

"The rest of Raushan Ershad's followers are not involved in the party and they don't hold any party posts either. So, there is no crisis in the party," he told The Daily Star.

Chunnun said the party has been able to nominate some 300 candidates because there is no crisis in it.

Asked whether the party may face another split, the JP secretary general said, "Nothing will happen to the party. There is no division in it."

He said every citizen has the right to form a party. "Five to six parties have been named after the Jatiya Party. But there is only one Jatiya Party which has the electoral symbol of a plough."

However, the JP yesterday nominated Abu Musa Sarkar, general secretary of its Mymensingh unit, to vie for Mymensingh-4 where Raushan is the current MP.

The news was confirmed last night by DeLoar Hossain Jalali, press secretary to Quader.

Rejecting Chunnun's claims, Golam Moshir alleged that Quader and Chunnun created obstacles to the participation of Raushan, Saad Ershad and their loyal leaders.

Quader earlier said that the national election would not be free and fair under the Awami League government.

Raushan on the other hand maintained that the JP must participate in the national election in line with the constitution.

The party on November 22 announced that it would participate in the polls as it was assured by different stakeholders, including the Election Commission, that polls would be free and fair.

On November 27, the JP announced a list of its candidates in 287 seats. According to the list, Quader will run in Rangpur-3 and Dhaka-17.

Saad Ershad, the incumbent MP from Rangpur-3, said his uncle Quader "hijacked" his constituency which was earlier represented in parliament by his late father HM Ershad.

According to sources, the JP suggested Saad vie for Dhaka-7.

Cyber Security Agency exists only in name

FROM PAGE 1

After the establishment of the agency in December 2018 – three months after the Digital Security Act was passed in the parliament – more than a year had elapsed before the organisational structure could be finalised.

In May 2020, the ICT division submitted a proposal for 1,021 positions to the public administration division.

However, the public administration division bargained to bring down the headcount to 235 in January 2021. That number was brought down further to 120 by the finance division.

The finance division put in another condition: not all positions could be filled up at once. In the first year, 50 positions would be filled up, in the second year, there would be 40. In the third year, the rest of the recruitment would be done.

After that, the finance division took almost six months to finalise the pay grades and positions of the employees. This is how the entire 2021 had passed.

In April 2022, the cabinet division recommended creating the positions, and two months later, the ICT division issued the order.

The ICT division sent the draft recruitment rule to the public

administration and after some other procedures, the cabinet division approved the agency's recruitment rule in June this year.

The agency also had trouble finding personnel to run it.

During these five years, the agency saw a handful of director-generals, all of whom came from the ICT division and were on additional duty.

In January, Abu Sayed Md Kamruzzaman was appointed on a full-time basis.

At present, the agency employs about a dozen individuals and none of them are permanent staff members; they are all assigned to the agency from elsewhere or from projects under the ICT division.

What is more alarming is that most of them do not have any expertise in cybersecurity.

"I don't want to blame anybody for this," Kamruzzaman told The Daily Star.

The delay in appointing manpower to the agency was mainly due to misconstruction as many government agencies do not understand the importance of cybersecurity, he said.

"Many officials have no idea about the importance of the citizen's personal data security. We need a very

large team to perform the overall task."

And to attract the right talent, the remuneration for the agency needs to be higher than the other government jobs as the demand for programmers and cybersecurity experts is very high, he added.

The agency has also become a revolving door of directors: it saw six directors leave this year.

According to the act, the agency must be constituted with two directors. In reality, it never had any full-time director.

After repeated letters from the ICT division, the public administration division had two directors for the agency, but the instruction was cancelled before they could join.

Just one director is currently serving the agency on a part-time basis: Saiful Alam Khan, who is the project director of the Bangladesh government's e-Government Computer Incident Response Team (BGD e-GOV CIRT).

"No one wants to come here as no one finds it a rewarding place to work," said an official of the ICT division requesting anonymity to speak candidly on the issue.

Even officials from the ICT division are reluctant to work at the agency as an additional charge, he said.

According to the law, the agency should have a national computer emergency response team and digital forensic labs to prevent cyberattacks or take necessary steps if any attack happens. But the agency has none of these.

There are such teams under Bangladesh Computer Council's projects, but their activities are limited to mostly listing incidences of cyberattacks as they also lack manpower.

"It is the failure of the ICT division that the agency remains non-functional – ICT division failed to build the agency properly," said Mustafa Jabbar, who served as the telecom minister from May 19, 2019 to November 29, 2023.

Zunaed Ahmed Palak, the state minister for the ICT division, could not be reached for comment despite repeated attempts.

Contacted, Md Shamsul Arefin, secretary at the ICT division, said: "It takes time to prepare the structure and create positions for an agency that is formed under a law. However, the ICT division always made efforts for this and now we are trying to get human resources as early as possible."

However, experts criticised the

government's indifference towards the agency.

"It is the classic example of the government's inability to conceive the significance of this agency in the rapidly growing digital context at personal, professional and national spheres," said Abu Saeed Khan, a senior policy fellow at LIRNEasia.

The current state of the agency underscores that either the concerned policymakers have failed to realise the importance of cybersecurity or they showed negligence towards the issue, said Sumon Ahmed Sabir, a technology expert.

The task of the agency, with some wings, is to form policy, conduct audits and take measures so that the government sites, financial institutions and so on can ensure their cyber security, he added.

And it appears that there would be further delays in making the agency functional because of the name-change of the law under which it was formed.

"We were at the last phase of appointing the human resource. But we now have to start over again as the status of the agency was not clear in the previous law, which is specified in the new one," Kamruzzaman said.

37 BNP, Jamaat men jailed

FROM PAGE 1

Station against 16 people, including Habib.

Four prosecution witnesses testified.

Defence lawyers on multiple occasions this month told The Daily Star that prosecution witnesses were failing to name the accused in their testimonies but the accused were still being convicted.

Another Dhaka court yesterday sentenced 22 leaders and activists of the BNP and Jamaat to 27 months in prison in a case filed over political violence in the capital's Uttara in September 2018.

BNP Information and Research Affairs Secretary Azizul Bari Helal, and leaders Abdus Salam, Khokon Mia and Aminul Islam are among the convicted.

Police lodged the case on September 18, 2018, and later pressed charges against 32 people in connection with illegal gatherings and preventing law enforcers from carrying out their duties.

The court yesterday acquitted 10 accused in the case.

ABBAS, ALTAF, ALAL DENIED BAIL

Three Dhaka courts yesterday denied bail to BNP Standing Committee Member Mirza Abbas, Vice-Chairman Altaf Hossain Chowdhury, and Joint Secretary General Syed Moazzem Hossain Alal.

Additional Metropolitan Sessions

Judge's Court-2 rejected Abbas's bail plea in a case filed with Shahjahanpur Police Station.

During the hearing of the plea, his lawyer Mohi Uddin Chowdhury told the court that his client was implicated in the case as a part of a conspiracy to harass him.

He said Abbas was not present at the scene and mentioned that his client was ill.

Additional Metropolitan Sessions Judge's Court-7 denied Altaf bail in a case filed with Ramna Police Station over the attack on the residence of the chief justice on October 28.

Additional Metropolitan Sessions Judge's Court-1 rejected the bail petition of Alal in a case filed with Paltan Model Police Station over the vandalism of the Bangladesh Police Liberation War Museum in Rajarbagh Police Lines and the snatching of a police firearm during a clash between BNP activists and police on October 28.

The same court, however, granted BNP Vice-Chairman Shahjahan Omar bail in a case lodged with New Market Police Station over the torching of vehicles on November 4.

Police arrested Abbas at his Shahjahanpur home on October 31, Altaf in Tongi area on November 5, Alal in Shaheenbagh area on October 31, and Shahjahan in Uttara on November 5.