

Interim govt. not neutral, say parties

By Haroon Habib 11-17

DHAKA, JULY 26. Even before completing two weeks in the office, the non-party caretaker government headed by Mr. Justice Latifur Rahman is facing criticism for some significant steps it took. While it justifies the actions proper for holding a free, fair and credible election keeping in view its constitutional mandate, the Awami League led by the former Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina, objected to some terming them "hasty decisions".

The 4-party Opposition alliance led by Begum Khaleda Zia, which initially hailed the decisions, too has changed its stand and started questioning the "neutrality" of the caretaker government.

Besides making drastic changes in the civil administration for which the interim administration was criticised by many commentators also, the Government on Wednesday effected major changes in the police administration. It also changed the Secretary of the Election

Commission which evoked a strong protest from the Awami League.

The Chief Adviser of the caretaker government today hinted at a further reshuffle in the administration. In a newspaper interview published today, Justice Latifur Rahman urged political leaders and parties to exercise restraint and help him conduct the elections. "In a democracy, tolerance is the key word which the political leaders of Bangladesh should integrate into their political culture," Justice Rahman told *The Daily Star*.

Addressing the Secretaries of different Ministries today, Justice Rahman said the people expected the caretaker administration to function neutrally. He said he had made some changes in the administration "from (the) logical outlook of ensuring its full neutrality in every task".

The interim government has also decided in principle to bring some major changes to electoral laws, and an Ordinance by the President,

Mr. Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed, is likely to be promulgated soon. Amid the controversy, Justice Latifur Rahman told the media that he would not be influenced by any party or opinion but would do what he felt right in the interest of conducting a credible election.

Mr. Rahman is now trying to organise a meeting between the two top leaders - immediate past Prime Minister and Awami League chief, Sheikh Hasina, and the BNP chairperson, Begum Khaleda Zia. "I feel seriously that political leaders must talk to each other and try to bring about a congenial atmosphere for free elections. If the leaders of the major political parties talk to each other, the nation would feel assured and my task as head of the caretaker government would become much easier." The Khaleda Zia-led alliance in which the fundamentalist Jamaat-E-Islami is playing a key role initially praised the interim government. But it too changed its stand alleging that the administration was "not neutral".

THE HINDU

27 11 2011

15 hurt in Dhaka university clashes

Dhaka, Nov. 14 (Reuters): At least 15 students were wounded in gunbattles and clashes between rival groups trying to eject each other from dormitories in Dhaka University, Bangladeshi police and officials said today.

"The situation here is still volatile," said a police officer guarding the campus.

Officials said the violence erupted yesterday after Professor Anwarullah Chowdhury was named vice-chancellor of the university, which has a student body of 30,000 and a history of politically-fuelled violence.

Police said at least 70 students had been killed and more than 500 hurt in clashes at the university in the past 30 years.

Chowdhury said he would take steps to free the campus from any kind of terrorism and restore peace.

University officials said violence broke out after members of the Jatiyatabadi Chhatra Dal (JCD), the student wing of the ruling Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), sought to remove members of the rival Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL) from four dormitories.

The BCL, the student front of the opposition Bangladesh Awami League led by former prime minister Sheikh Hasina, said JCD activists attacked them with guns, home-made bombs and sticks a day after the new vice chancellor took office.

On Monday authorities removed former vice chancellor A.K Azad Chowdhury, who was known as a strong supporter of the Awami League. His successor is said to have the blessing of the BNP, headed by Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia.

Khaleda's government, which took charge on October 10, has removed the vice-chancellors of several universities across the country on Monday without assigning any reason. Education ministry officials called the changes long overdue. Police said they feared more clashes.

THE TELEGRAPH

15 NOV 2007

2007 NOV 2007

Race for Bangla^{7/3} President^{11/1}

Dhaka, Nov. 11 (AFP): Two candidates, including foreign minister Badruddoza Chowdhury, are to contest Bangladesh's presidential election, officials said today.

Members of the 300-seat parliament will vote on Wednesday for a successor to President Shahabuddin Ahmed, who has completed his five-year term. Chowdhury and another candidate, lawyer Mohammad Rowshan Ali, submitted their nomination papers yesterday.

Ali said he had been backed by two lawmakers of the opposition Jatiya party faction, led by former military dictator Hussain Muhammad Ershad, but the party said it had not officially nominated anyone to contest the election.

Chowdhury, the founding secretary general of the ruling Bangladesh Nationalist Party, looks certain to win the election because the government has a huge majority in the 300-seat parliament.

Also, the main opposition Awami League party is boycotting parliament because it alleges last month's parliamentary elections were rigged.

Chowdhury has reportedly said he wants to hold the presidency as his last political position.

The President in Bangladesh has a largely titular role.

THE TELEGRAPH

Badruddoza *11* **elected President**

DHAKA, NOV. 12. The Bangladesh Foreign Minister, Mr. Badruddoza Chowdhury, was today declared Bangladesh's 13th President after his lone rival withdrew from the running for the largely titular position, officials said. *10-15*

The Election Commission said the lawyer, Mr. Mohammad Rowshan Ali, took back his nomination papers today, the last date for withdrawing from the contest. No reason was given. *Banker*

Mr. Chowdhury is due to be sworn in on Wednesday. The 300-seat Parliament will not hold a previously scheduled vote for the President as there is only one candidate to succeed the President, Mr Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed, who has completed his five-year term. — AFP

13 NOV 2007

13 NOV 2007

Besher ENEMY WITHIN *508*
Hasina must engage in introspection

IN appointing new faces to important party posts like the deputy leader of Opposition in parliament and her political secretary, Sheikh Hasina is giving enough indication that she will not hesitate to dump the old guard to rejuvenate the party. While there is no doubt that the highly partisan actions of Bangladesh President, the chief adviser of the neutral caretaker government and the chief election commissioner enabled Begum Khaleda Zia's BNP-led four party alliance to secure the two-thirds majority in the 1 October Bangladesh parliamentary poll, many in the Awami League's old guard contributed no less to the party's debacle. Not that the new generation of leaders are more competent but some of the old guard were fossils and corrupt, not to speak of factional politics. Twelve sure seats were lost because of factional feuds. In fact some of the old guard have come to prove that the Awami League itself is its worst enemy. Because of their nuisance value Hasina could not get rid of them. Some of her ministers made money from deals which are public knowledge. It is tragic that Awami League leaders refused to draw lessons from the blunders of their earlier three and a half year rule of early seventies. Now that her party is in the Opposition she must take a hard second look. Five years moved the Awami League away from its traditional source of strength — the people.

That the party had lost touch with the masses and had become organisationally defunct is not unknown to Hasina. The bulk of the 64 district committees had no organisational set up. Ministers usurped organisational powers which they used indiscriminately to neutralise their rivals. Even the party's central headquarters in Dhaka was non-functional as none of the leaders cared to visit it. Sheikh Hasina has done the right thing by undertaking an intensive tour of the districts. The more she comes to know the harsh realities the easier it will be to take the corrective action.

THE STATESMAN

Bangla panel to probe attacks on minorities

UNITED NEWS OF INDIA

DHAKA, Nov. 9. — The Bangladesh government has formed a committee to enquire into the recent attacks on minorities in the country.

At a Cabinet committee meeting on law and order yesterday, Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia decided to form the inquiry committee which would report within a week on the condition of minorities following the recent attacks on them.

Headed by Prime Minister's principal secretary Mr Kamaluddin Siddiqui, the committee is mandated to report on incidents of violence against minorities and their exodus, if any.

Members of the council of ministers and ruling party MPs will also visit different areas and gather reports on violence.

They would also verify the allegations of exodus of Hindus from here.

Bangladesh's mission in Kolkata would also be asked to report on any case of migration to India.

The committee was formed as a result of media reports on widespread atrocities by the ruling Bangladeshi Nationalist Party and Jamaat terrorists on the minorities, mainly Hindus, for voting for former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's Awami League.

Sheikh Hasina, who is now on a post-election organisational tour of southern districts, alleged that at least 500 Hindu women were raped and their houses and property were either looted or burnt down by the activists of Begum Zia's coalition with Islamic fundamentalist organisation, Jamaat-e-

Islami.

A leading English daily, the Star, today published a report on thousands of Hindu women and children being tortured at Ananda Prashad village in southern Bhola district before and after the election.

The daily said at least 200 women were raped in this village by local terrorists of the BNP.

Police admitted the fact but could not take any action since the victims did not file any cases out of fear.

Two members of the Hindu community were killed following attacks by the ruling party goons at another village in Mirersarai in southern Chittagong where an organisation, by the name of Hindu-Bouddah-Christian Oikay Parishad, has called for a hartal on November 15 to protest against the atrocities.

THE STATESMAN

Hasina asks minorities to resist BNP-Jamaat attacks

Dhaka, November 7

FORMER BANGLADESH Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has asked the country's Hindu minority to retaliate against any further attacks by the supporters of the ruling party BNP and its allies.

Hasina's Awami League, said to enjoy the support of the 30-million minority population, including nearly 20 million Hindus, lost last month's parliamentary elections to Prime Minister Khaleda Zia's BNP-led four-party coalition. The alliance includes the rightwing Jamaat-e-Islami.

Since then, there have been reports that Hindus in Bangladesh have been targeted by the ruling coalition. At a rally attended mostly by Hindus in Faridpur district, Hasina said, "No more wailing and woes, build up resistance and retaliate if any further attack comes from terrorists of BNP-Jamaat."

Hasina urged Hindus to be united and said her party would stand by them. "This is your country, your motherland. Irrespective of our religious beliefs we liberated this country, shedding much blood.

"You should live here with your full rights," she said. "If the alliance leader (Zia) thinks she can eliminate Awami League by holding the hands of Jamaat, she



REUTERS PHOTO

Bangladesh Prime Minister Khaleda Zia and other members of her Cabinet pray at the grave of slain ex-President Ziaur Rahman in Dhaka on Wednesday.

is making a mistake."

The latest incident of attacks on Hindus occurred at Mirersari in Chittagong district in which one person was allegedly chopped to death, and 16 others seriously injured.

Reports said a gang attacked Hindus at village Daspara on Monday night and looted 20 houses. Twelve people were arrested.

Bengali language daily Janakantha quoted a Hindu woman as saying: "The attackers asked us to leave Bangladesh." The attacks on the minorities

had started before the October 1 elections but intensified after the debacle of the Awami League.

Reports say thousands of Hindus have fled their homes and taken refuge elsewhere in the country. Some have reportedly crossed over to India.

The Bangladesh Mahila Parishad, a woman's group, last week said repression of minority communities was taking a serious turn as the authorities had not taken any action against the attackers.

Indo-Asian News Service

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES

8 NOV 2001

CHANGE IN DHAKA-I

Bangladesh Must Learn From Pakistan

By PARMANAND

THE 1 October general election in Bangladesh seems to have changed its polity and politics not only substantially but also disturbingly. Elements of consensus and cooperation have not been very enduring in this South Asian state that came into existence on 16 December 1971 after breaking away from Pakistan. But the politics of conflict and confrontation that became visible after the election is a matter of serious concern.

It is altogether a different matter that the Bangladesh Nationalist Party-led four-party alliance not only succeeded in obtaining a two-thirds majority in the Jatiya Sangsad but also in marginalising the Awami League, the party which was very largely responsible for the creation of the new state, and which alone could complete a full five-year term between 1996 and 2001.

Not even many activists or supporters of the BNP, the Jamaat-e-Islami, the Jatiya Party (Naziur) and the Islami Oikya Jote — the four parties that constitute the governing alliance — had anticipated such a massive mandate that the coalition procured.

CORRUPTION

The boat — the elections symbol of the Awami League — was visualised by many as sinking fast. Of course, the Awami League leader and former Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina Wajed, seemed complacent and over-confident. By the time she saw the reality, it was too late. The Sheikh Hasina government had, indeed, many achievements to its credit. Despite prolonged political unrest, periodic social upheavals and rising lawlessness, the country had achieved an average GDP growth rate of about five per cent. Unveiling the party's manifesto on 10 September, Hasina had said that her government would ensure an annual growth of seven to eight per cent and try to make the entire population literate by 2003. On the other hand, agricultural production was booming and the country had overnight transformed into a food surplus state.

The country had, indeed, done exceedingly well in terms of infrastructure. The bridge across the Jamuna river was commissioned and six more bridges were nearing completion. Several hundred kilometres of expressways were built. At the same time, there were reports of corruption against several of Hasina's ministers.

Nepotism was being practised

ministerial colleagues lost the election — and many of them were defeated by big margins. Law and order was also deteriorating fast during the last days of Hasina's government making many Hasina supporters feel alienated.

The situation, if anything, was quite favourable to Begum Khaleda Zia, the country's Prime Minister during 1991-96, and the widow of General Ziaur Rahman, the country's chief Martial Law Administra-

had opposed the formation of Bangladesh in 1971 and collaborated with the Pakistani army — left nothing to chance by scaring minority voters, particularly Hindus, who have traditionally been voters and supporters of the Awami League. They were taunted as "Indians" and asked not to participate in the polls. The coercion did work well and the Jamaat has continued its coercive activities even after the election results.

Another factor that apparently contributed to the miserable performance of the Awami League was the attitude and modus operandi of the neutral caretaker government under Justice Latifur Rahman. Ever since he took charge — under the constitutional provision effected in 1996 because of the agitation led by Sheikh Hasina — in July, he indulged in a large-scale reshuffle of officials and did his best to ensure the appointment of the BNP-supporting civil servants in influential positions.

Rumours on an understanding between Rahman and Khaleda Zia about making the former the country's next President kept doing the rounds. Justice Shahabuddin Ahmad is to retire soon.

STATE RELIGION

Notwithstanding Hasina's charge that the poll was "crudely manipulated" and her threat of launching a nationwide agitation, Begum Khaleda Zia was sworn in on 10 October. The 60-member Khaleda ministry comprises 28 cabinet ministers, 28 state ministers and 4 deputy ministers though it was clear at the outset that the BNP had a clear majority on its own.

On 2 October — much before



THE STATESMAN

5 NOV 2001

Bangladesh
110-17

Fraught times

The new Khaleda Zia regime has assumed power in a charged atmosphere in Bangladesh. Haroon Habib reports.

THE NEW Khaleda Zia Government in Bangladesh has set itself 25 targets to achieve in the first 100 days in office. It began with a call to the people to "wage war" on terrorism and achieve economic emancipation. But the first challenge for the Government has been tackling the terror unleashed, allegedly by the ruling coalition's hoodlums, against opposition Awami League activists and the minority Hindu community. There have been widespread reports, especially from the rural areas, of murder, rape and looting.

Bangladesh, for the first time after 1971, witnessed an orgy of communal violence, forcing hundreds from the minority community to flee their homes. The atrocities, many believe, may be the result of the pre-election campaign which had serious communal overtones. Some even allege it was a political decision.

The new Home Minister, Air Vice-Marshal (retd.) Altaf Hossain Chowdhury, accused the media of "exaggeration". Top BNP and Jamaat-e-Islami leaders saw it as the Awami League's "post-election strategy". But the fact remains that the Hindus had to celebrate Durga Puja without festivity this year.

The new Parliament began its maiden session on October 28. The Awami League with its 58 MPs (after vacating four additional seats and deciding

not to contest the byelections) refrained from joining the session. Instead, it held a massive rally in Dhaka announcing a nation-wide programme to protest the "killing, repressions, loot and rape" of its leaders, workers and also the minority community for being its voters.

The Awami League, which got nearly 41 per cent of the votes polled, claimed the results were "manipulated under a well-orchestrated blueprint". A section of the major newspapers have also publicised instances of rigging and the "highly partisan role" of the caretaker Government, the Election Commission and the law-enforcers. The charge is that they were out to defeat the Awami League in at least 120 to 125 of 300 targeted constituencies.

"Unfortunately, we had to fight a six-party alliance that included the caretaker Government and the Election Commission as well," alleged the Awami League leader and outgoing Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina Wajed. But her rivals portray the League's debacle as the genuine outcome of a fair election where the four-party BNP-led alliance fought unitedly against a single opponent.

Though the credibility of the October 1 polls, in which the BNP headed by Begum Khaleda Zia and fundamentalist outfits such as the Jamaat together got a rare two-thirds majority, is still under question, the new Government is visibly settling in. Mr. Atal Behari Vajpayee was the first Head of Government to congratulate Begum Zia.

The Khaleda Government has decided to publish within the next 90 days a White Paper on the Hasina Government's corruption. It also quickly cancelled the last Government's allocation of "Gano Bhaban" as residence for Sheikh Hasina considering her security threat as the surviving daughter of the nation's slain founding hero and re-named it "Prime Minister's residence". The Government also ordered adjournment for two months the hearings of all "political cases" filed against the BNP and Jamaat leaders and workers during the Awami League rule.

The impounding of passports of several former Ministers, restrictions on foreign tours of several Awami League leaders and forcible occupation of student dormitories and business establishments, and the driving out of pro-Awami League teachers and students

from various educational institutions, allegedly by the ruling coalition's activists, are other contentious issues.

Export of the country's natural gas to India has also become a major issue. A "secret gas deal" with American companies has been widely alleged. The Awami League and the Left parties allege that the ruling combine struck a "secret deal" before the election to export gas through pipelines up to Delhi. UNOCOL, meanwhile, submitted a pipeline development plan to Petrobangla, state-owned body, to export gas to India. The Minister for Energy and Mineral Resources, Mr. Mosharraf Hosain, says the Government will take a quick decision, probably by November 15.

The issue of gas export was virtually the creation of the traditional anti-Indian parties during the Awami League tenure. But now that has changed. Sheikh Hasina has described her party's debacle as the "forced defeat under a blueprint" since her Government had refused to export gas before ensuring 50 years of domestic reserve. "Gas is the only resource we have. However, it is tough and dangerous for the poor to keep a wealth in their possession," she said at her first massive post-election rally in Dhaka. She pledged "all out resistance" to any move to sell gas undermining national interest.

Never before has India figured so prominently in a post-election scene, particularly as the target of secular forces, always dubbed "pro-Indian" by the now ruling coalition.

In response to the Government's moves, the Awami League has also decided to publish a White Paper on the previous BNP Government's corruption and the details of the October 1 election held "under a blueprint".

Given its parliamentary strength, the ruling coalition is not unlikely to make moves to amend the Constitution to suit its political needs, including a provision for a "separate electorate" for the minorities. But these moves are still premature.

The Afghan war is also influencing the post-election scenario in Bangladesh. With the traditional U.S. critics remaining silent because they are now in power, the secular pro-liberation forces are gradually turning anti-American for the killing of innocent civilians.



The export of gas is one of the several contentious issues in Bangladesh.

4 NOV 2001

Hasina drops Awami old guard

UNITED NEWS OF INDIA

DHAKA, Nov. 2. — In her bid to rejuvenate her party, Awami League chief Sheikh Hasina today appointed new faces to the important posts dropping the old guard.

The appointment of former Speaker Mr Abdul Hamid as deputy leader of the Opposition in Parliament came as a surprise since earlier, party's general secretary Mr Zillur Rahman and Mr Abdus Samad Azad had held this vital post in 1996 and 1991 Parliaments.

Sheikh Hasina also appointed Mr Abdus Shahid as chief whip of the Opposition. Mr Shahid was also the whip in last Parliament.

On 24 October, AL parliamentary party had entrusted Sheikh Hasina with the authority to appoint the deputy leader and the chief whip of the Opposition.

When contacted, AL presidium member Mr Abdul Jalil said former Speaker Mr



Sheikh Hasina: New faces to bolster party

Abdul Hamid would be quite competent as deputy leader of the Opposition because of his long parliamentary career.

The AL chief also appointed ex-state minister Mr Saber Hossain Chowdhury as her

political secretary.

Mr Saber told UNI that he would try to build up the office of political secretary as an institution with modern thoughts and technologies apart from his job of keeping Sheikh Hasina posted on developments in domestic and international politics.

Dr Hassan Mahmud, a former bureaucrat, has been appointed personal aide to Sheikh Hasina.

The changes and fresh appointments came against the backdrop of AL's dismal results in the 1 October Parliament elections.

Party's mid-ranking and grassroots leadership in different forums pleaded to Sheikh Hasina for inducting fresh faces in vital portfolios of the organisation to bring dynamism in the party leadership.

Insiders hinted that Hasina might go for more changes in the party top-order through next council session likely to convene sometime next year.

THE STATESMAN

3 NOV 2002

BANGLA MINORITIES

516 Begum Zia must protect them *Baran*

BE GUM Khaleda Zia's assurance to Brajesh Mishra, Atal Behari Vajpayee's special envoy, that her BNP-Jamat e Islami-led coalition government would protect minorities may provide some solace to New Delhi since several thousand persecuted Bangladeshi Hindus, Santhal adivasis, Buddhists and Christians have sought refuge in West Bengal and Tripura in recent weeks. New Delhi's concern is greater since minorities in at least 21 districts have become targets of unceasing violence and terror on the part of Islamic zealots for having voted for a "secular" Awami League perceived by them to be stooges of India. New Delhi's concern is not misplaced since for over a decade Tripura was home to about 60,000 Bangladeshi Chakma refugees because of their persecution in the neighbouring Chittagong Hill Tracts.

The extent of persecution, which includes loot, arson and even rape, has rendered lakhs homeless. Some leading Dhaka dailies have taken home minister Altaf Hussain Chowdhury to task for dismissing persecution reports as "partly exaggerated, partly conspiracy, partly rumour and partly true". Unfortunately, Chowdhury's statement is identical to that of Justice Latifur Rahman who as chief adviser of the caretaker government had labelled reports of persecution of minorities as "highly exaggerated". In fact it was Justice Rahman who by administrative inaction aided and abetted persecution during his three-month caretaker rule. Chowdhury calls these incidents a "conspiracy" of the Awami League and minority bodies. There is no doubt that such utterances will only encourage those engaged in minority bashing. He should also take note of the observation of the Bangladesh Human Rights Commission that police inaction was to blame for minority persecution.

THE STATESMAN

— 2 NOV 2001

BANGLA MINORITIES

Time for action to protect them

IT is disappointing to hear the same cliches being repeated by ministers of the BNP-led government that they would not tolerate persecution of minorities in Bangladesh. Heart rending reports of their continuing persecution and the killing of a principal of a Chittagong college in broad daylight by supporters of Jamat e Islami, are still being published by Bangladesh's press. How can Reaz Rahman, minister of state of foreign affairs, dismiss reports of communal atrocities as "politically motivated" when Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia herself has asked her principal secretary and other senior secretaries to prepare a report on the nature and extent of such incidents? It is incredible that a former foreign secretary is apparently ignorant of the reason for about 20,000 Bangladeshis streaming into West Bengal and Tripura in the last six weeks. Hasn't he read countless letters written by victims and published by Dhaka dailies urging Begum Zia to "save the minorities by taking away our voting rights since we are not supposed to have a political choice of our own"? It is a travesty of fact to say that "only criminals" have gone to India. The hapless victims are still streaming into India either by bribing the police or dodging Bangladeshi border guards. The effort to deny the problem fails.

Thankfully there are senior ministers like Saifur Rahman who don't share this perception and want to see the Government's intent to deal with communal elements with an iron hand translated into action. He deserves kudos for speaking up from public platforms and calling Durga Puja Bangladesh's own festival. His seemingly "friendly advice" to the home minister, a former chief of air staff, at a recent meeting — "Do you know what's happening on the ground? Don't float in the air, have your feet firmly on the ground" — was actually a sharp reprimand of the minister's inability to deal with the communal carnage. Already some key officers of the worst affected districts have been transferred for dereliction of duty. We hope Saifur Rahman's courageous lead will succeed.

THE STATESMAN

25 NOV 2001

Hasina loses shield for life

Dhaka, Nov. 28 (Reuters): The Bangladesh government has decided to scrap a law providing life-long security by special forces to former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and her only sister, officials said today.

They said the decision was taken yesterday at a Cabinet meeting headed by Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia, Hasina's arch rival, who was swept back to power in October's general election.

Bangladesh's main Opposition Awami League has called for half a day's strike next Sunday in Dhaka to protest against the government move to scrap the security law.

"We are calling for the strike under a very stressful situation and over concern for the safety of our party leader," Awami League General Secretary Zillur Rahman told a rally in the city today.

"This is a conspiracy to put Sheikh Hasina's life at risk deliberately," he said. Sunday is a working day in Bangladesh.

Witnesses said hundreds of riot police with rifles, tear gas and water cannons guarded the rally, attended by 3,000 people.

Hasina, the country's first Prime Minister to serve a full five-year term, handed power on July 15 to a caretaker authority headed by former chief justice Latifur



Sheikh Hasina, Khaleda Zia. (AFP/AP/PTI)

Rahman which supervised the election as required by the country's constitution.

Hasina rejected the election outcome, saying the vote was rigged, and has refused to join parliament which is now holding its first session.

The officials said the proposal to scrap the law protecting Hasina and her sister Sheikh Rehana, adopted only weeks before Hasina's term ended, was expected to be approved by parliament in a few days.

The law, strongly opposed by Khaleda's Bangladesh Nationalist

Party, envisaged "security would be provided to Sheikh Hasina and her sister — daughters of independence leader Sheikh Mujibur Rahman — for rest of their life by the Special Security Force."

Mujib, who led Bangladesh to independence from Pakistan in 1971, was killed along with his wife, three sons and many relatives in an August 1975 coup.

His daughters survived the coup as they were outside the country at the time.

Bangladesh's High Court sentenced to death 15 former army officers convicted of killing Mujib

and his family three years after Hasina came to power in 1996. Six are in prison and the rest are at large.

The Awami League said the special security law took into account threats from extremists, including Islamic fundamentalists and sympathisers of Mujib's killers.

But law minister barrister Moudud Ahmed told reporters late yesterday the law was "inconsistent with the provisions of the constitution."

He said Hasina and her sister were eligible for full protection under the country's existing laws. Hasina's Awami League has protested the move as "vindictive and vengeful" and threatened to launch a movement against it.

League leaders said they would hold a protest rally in Dhaka later today "to highlight the risks to Hasina's life" once the special protection is withdrawn.

Hasina lives at the Dhaka home of her husband Wajed Ali Miah, guarded by SSF troops, who also escort her while travelling.

If the law is scrapped, Hasina would be entitled to protection by police only as leader of the opposition and member of parliament, League leaders said.

Change of guard in Bangladesh — II

By Muchkund Dubey

410-10 350/10

ANOTHER MAJOR concern in India is that the BNP's accession to power would adversely affect Indo-Bangladesh relations. The general impression prevailing in India is that the Awami League is pro-India whereas the BNP is not particularly friendly. This impression is erroneous. For neither the Awami League nor the BNP is pro or anti-India. Both of them are fiercely pro-Bangladesh for which they must be respected, even though it may not always be in India's interest. Besides, it is significant that no party made India an election issue. India did not figure at all in their manifestos and was rarely mentioned in the election campaign. Moreover, on several issues affecting India, the two parties reflected similar views in their manifestos. These were basically nationalist and not anti-India views.

If one goes by the experience of dealing with BNP Governments, it is true that Indo-Bangladesh relations had come to a standstill during the last year or so of Begum Zia's Government. But the then Government of India is as much, if not more, to blame. Begum Zia came on an official visit to India within a year of coming to power in 1991. This was hailed as the harbinger of more active and dynamic bilateral relations. But the Government of India did not take any initiative to deal effectively with any of the issues raised during the trip. The then Prime Minister did not pay the much expected return visit to Bangladesh. Thus by sheer inaction, both sides worked inexorably towards a stagnation of the relations. In this the larger share of the blame must be attributed to the bigger neighbour which is endowed with greater capacity to act.

The image of the Awami League as a pro-India party puts the party at a disadvantage in securing public approval for agreements and measures designed to resolve bilateral issues. The BNP suffers from no such constraint. Rather, every demonstration of its success in striking deals with the big neighbour goes to its credit. India had very meaningful relations with the BNP regime under Presi-

dent Ziaur Rahman and during the first few years of Begum Zia's Government. Under the former, an agreement had been reached on most of the parameters, except price, for selling gas to India. There was an agreement in principle on allowing the transit of Indian goods through Bangladesh territory to other parts of India and operational details to give effect to it were being worked out. Again, the quantum jump in India's exports to Bangladesh took place during Begum Zia's Government after Bangladesh embraced liberalisation in a full-fledged manner. There is going to be no rollback of liberalisation under the BNP Government. If at all, it is going to be further accelerated which would open further

opportunities for Indian exports. Besides, the business community which has developed vested interests in dealing with India is generally better represented in Parliament and the Government during the BNP's rule than under the Awami League.

However, it is very doubtful that Dhaka would take the risk of re-opening such a complex agreement which represents a very delicate balancing of the interests of the two countries. The Bangladesh Government would, of course, insist on a faithful implementation of the agreement, which is quite understandable.

The promise in the BNP manifesto to bring about appropriate changes in the Chittagong Hill Tract Agreement would appear to be more plausible, as the BNP has successfully sought the votes of the Muslim settlers in the CHT, whose representative has won one parliamentary seat from that area. The Government, therefore, will be under pressure on this issue. It might create problems for India and for

India must make the first move in getting closer to the new Government in Bangladesh.

The BNP's position on gas export to India appears to be more constructive than that of the Awami League. Whereas the BNP manifesto states that the sale of gas will be made "on the basis of transparency and in the wider interest of the country", the Awami League manifesto talks about such sale only after ensuring that at least 50 years' requirement of the country are met. The BNP manifesto keeps open the possibility of providing transit facilities to India when it says: "No country will be allowed to use Bangladesh landmass, waterways, sea coast and airspace for military purpose." This is of course unexceptionable.

The stipulation in the BNP manifesto that the party on coming to power, would seek appropriate changes in the 30-year agreement on water-sharing with India, is certainly a cause of concern for India.

Indo-Bangladesh relations by causing further exodus of Chakma refugees to India. But it will pose greater problems internally for Bangladesh. Hence the new Government should be expected to tread warily on this delicate path.

It will be tragic if, in the context of its present U.S. and Pakistan-centric foreign policy, India ignores the change that has taken place in our eastern neighbourhood and follows a *laissez faire* policy in conducting relations with the new Government in Bangladesh. India must make the first move in getting closer to the new Government. The Prime Minister should send a special envoy to convey his greetings to Begum Zia and his invitation for the earliest possible visit by her to India. India should go on taking all possible and politically prudent initiatives to maintain an active relationship with Bangladesh through frequent high-level visits, activation of all existing institutions for conducting bilateral relations and creation of new institutions. We should not also be in an indecent hurry to pressure Begum Zia to take decisions on issues of our interest like gas sale, transit, rail links etc. which

over the years have got unnecessarily politicised. Let her take her own time in deciding on these issues. Let these decisions be taken under her own internal pressure of economic logic, objective reality and national interest.

It will be so much better if the special envoy is also authorised to convey to her Government, India's positive response to Bangladesh's long-pending request to grant duty-free entry into the Indian market for 25 groups of products. Economics is by far the most important dimension of India's relations with Bangladesh. In this, trade is the crucial component, which is bound to acquire greater buoyancy with the acceleration of liberalisation in Bangladesh. Bangladesh's heavy dependence for export earnings on ready-made garments ensures during the years to come a large market in Bangladesh for India textiles.

The present Government, as the previous ones, will definitely raise the issue of huge deficit in the trade balance in favour of India. This can be explained away on solid economic grounds such as: a trade deficit is not necessarily disadvantageous to a trading partner; trade deficit with India is merely an assertion of India's comparative advantage vis-a-vis third countries, etc. But that will not do. This is more of a political issue and that of the very character of the long-term bilateral economic relations than a matter of mere trade imbalance, in a static sense of the term. For serving better its political and long-term economic interests, it is incumbent on India to help Bangladesh bring about structural changes in its economy, particularly in the external sector. This should be done by helping enlarge the production base and export capacity of Bangladesh and by moving quickly towards unilateral free trade with it. This is what the developed countries are most probably going to do in the next round of WTO trade negotiations. Why should India, which has such a vital stake in its economic relations with Bangladesh, not show the way?

(Concluded)

THE HINDU

3 0 1 1 2001

Opp boycotts Bangla House maiden session

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA ⁵¹ ₁₀

DHAKA, Oct. 28. - Bangladesh's new Parliament under the leadership of Prime Minister Khaleda Zia began its maiden session today with the main opposition Awami League boycotting it.

The BNP deputy and former minister, Mr Jamiruddin Sircar, was elected the new speaker while Mohammad Akhtar Hamid Siddique



Khaleda Zia

became the deputy speaker, officials said. Begum Khaleda Zia's main ally, Jamaat-e-Islami, sat on the treasury bench for the first time in Bangladesh's 30-year history. The 56 MPs of Awami League were not present at the 300-member Jatiya Sangsad which met nearly a month after the 1 October election. Sheikh Hasina and her party deputies were sworn in as Members of Parliament on Wednesday.

THE STATESMAN

29 OCT 2001

Zealots force Bangla minorities on the run

Arindam Sarkar
Kolkata, October 28

FOR MANY Hindus in Bangladesh this Puja brought no *pratima* or *pandal*, no beats of the *dhak*, no joy.

Fear of fundamentalist attacks forced many people to flee their homes and cross borders to Malda, North and South Dinajpur. Organisers toned down the festivities with most of the 1,400 Pujas in Bangladesh being a lowkey affair this year.

Sources say attacks on minorities have spiralled since Khaleda Zia came back to power this month. In the third week of October, about 50 families sought refuge in Malda and other West Bengal districts. All of them reported atrocities committed by fundamentalists owing allegiance to the BNP.

The refugees are from Pabna, Jessore, Nachon, Shibganj, Rajshahi and Dinajpur districts, said one of the refugees. "Many are still coming in from Noakhali, Maguda and even Chittagong. Some have entered Tripura as well."

Deben Mahanta of Kashidanga village in Shibganj district, who has taken refuge at Habibpur in Malda, said: "We were not even allowed to organise the

Puja. Dhaks were banned. They said we are pro-India and anti-Islam."

One of his countrymen, Hementa Barman of Dikul village in Dinajpur, is now in Bengal's South Dinajpur district. He said the "atrocities" increased after the strike against Afghanistan.

The spectre of attacks has been so large that some of the Puja committees did not put up *pandals* or install idols. In place of the *pratima* the *mandap* had a *manga ghat* instead. Even the famous Dhakeswari Mandir at Dhaka lacked the usual colour and gaiety.

The only bright spot has been the Durga Puja at the Ramakrishna Mission ashram in Dhaka, which was celebrated in a modest but its usual way.

The Zia Government had assured India of a peaceful Pujas after the VHP staged demonstrations in New Delhi. But a senior Bangladeshi official says there has been little difference in the situation.

"There is a Hindu minister in the BNP Cabinet. But despite assurance from Deputy Minister for Water Resources Gautam Chakrabarty that the Government would ensure peace during Pujas, the reality is different."

Khaleda sets tough terms on Page 7

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES

2 OCT 2001

Change of guard in Bangladesh

110-12 23/10 By Muchkund Dubey

THE WAY the recent parliamentary elections were conducted in Bangladesh once again confirmed its position as one of the largest functioning democracies of the world. On the basis of my observance of the 1996 elections, I can vouchsafe that elections in that country are a massive scale celebration of democracy. The mood is festive. People turn out in large numbers in their resplendent best using all available modes of transport. The voter turnout in the last elections was 74.87 per cent, only fractionally below the turnout of 74.96 per cent in 1996. Women are generally seen outnumbering men in the queues at the polling booths.

The Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) of Begum Khaleda Zia scored a landslide victory in the elections, capturing an absolute majority of 182 seats by itself, and 201 seats alongwith its allies. Once nominations are made for the 30 reserved women seats, which is the prerogative of the winning party, the alliance will command two-thirds majority in Parliament, enough to pass constitutional amendments.

The Awami League of Sheikh Hasina, reduced to only 62 seats, was shaken by the election results. It cried fraud and threatened not to accept the results. Fortunately, now it seems to be coming to terms with the reality. One hopes that this will mark an end to the now-too-familiar pattern of behaviour of the major opposition party of Bangladesh not accepting election results, refraining from participating in the parliamentary process and frequently resorting to strikes to topple the Government in power. This had made a mockery of democracy in spite of the resounding confidence in it pronounced by the people from time to time.

Henceforward, the Opposition's claim to wrest power should be based on the way it plays issue-based politics, the soundness of the alternative policy options offered by it and the personal examples of probity and integrity of its leaders and rank and file. It is also hoped that Begum Zia will show magnanimity in victory and conduct governance and parliamentary process in a non-partisan manner. In this regard, the wise advice given by her to her party work-

ers to respect pictures and shrines and not to try to grab other's property and generally not to take the law into their own hands, is a very good augury.

Bangladeshi observers and experts have attributed the Awami League's stunning defeat to electoral arithmetic. The party fared miserably in terms of winning seats in spite of its largest share of the popular vote. In fact, its share of votes have been steadily rising from 33.67 per cent in 1991 to 37.44 per cent in 1996 and 40.02 per cent in 2001. The party lost the 2001 elections because it decided to virtually go alone. It was too sure of itself, even presumptuous.

The advice given by Begum Khaleda Zia to her party workers not to take the law into their own hands is a very good augury.

It disgraced and severed links with some of its allies such as Kader Siddiqui. It made no attempt to bring the leftist parties on its platform. It did try to and partly succeeded in breaking away Gen. Ershad's Jatiya Party from the BNP alliance. But that did not prove effective in arresting the alliance bandwagon so skilfully put together by Begum Zia. A faction of the party, JP (Naziur Rahman) stayed with the alliance. Besides, Gen. Ershad had been sufficiently discredited by the time of the 2001 elections to be able to win only 14 seats as against 32 in 1996. The party share of the popular vote came down from 16.40 per cent and 6.52 per cent.

On the other hand, the BNP alone got 37 per cent of the popular vote; with its alliance partners, it claimed 46.52 per cent of the vote. The value of electoral alliances lies not only in the number of seats that small partners bring to the alliance pool but also in their augmenting the votes polled by the principal partner, which makes a real difference in clinching victories in marginal constituencies.

Though the electoral arithmetic has been the most important factor for the Awami League's debacle, it is not the only cause. For, if the Awami League had not

gone down in public esteem due to its other grave flaws, it could have overcome the combined strength of the BNP alliance as it indeed set about doing. But, alas, its own disadvantages and deficiencies were too numerous and glaring to have enabled it to swamp the strength of the alliance. The first disadvantage was the incumbency factor which not only generates in voters a desire to change, but also puts greater onus on the ruling party to behave. The mistakes of the incumbent are viewed by the voters in a magnified light. When it comes to the breakdown of law and order or instances of public misdemeanour, it is

the ruling party which first becomes the target of public ire. There is also a weakness on the part of the incumbent to indulge in ostentatiousness and act in an overbearing manner. This generally creates a negative impression among the people. Therefore in order to continue to command the support of the people, the ruling party has to act with greater responsibility and circumspection.

The Awami League miserably failed this test. There were allegations of unbridled corruption indulged in by its leaders and their relatives. There were numerous examples of its using *mastans* (toughs) to terrorise people. The party's insistence on protecting some of the known criminals among its leaders became the talk of the town. Its leader's propensity to project her image externally with regular foreign visits did not leave a good impression. The hurried enactment of a law authorising her to continue to stay in the Banga Bhavan, the official residence of the Prime Minister, and her lingering on there even after relinquishing charge, was widely disapproved. The damage had been done by the time she moved out. Finally, extraordinary ineptness and irregularity was shown in allotting the party ticket for contesting the

elections. This resulted in a loss of quite a few seats to rebel candidates.

Many in India are concerned that with the BNP's accession to power, the Islamic component of Bangladesh nationalism would acquire higher salience, which would not only adversely affect bilateral relations but may also pose problems for India's own pluralistic society. The BNP has its own known predilections in this direction. But more importantly, it is feared that the Jamaat which shares power in the Government would work assiduously for imparting a more pronounced Islamic orientation to the Bangladesh society and polity. This apprehension, though not totally unfounded, is highly exaggerated.

The Jamaat's own strength in Bangladesh politics is exaggerated. In successive elections, its seats in Parliament has never exceeded 20 and its share of the popular vote 15 per cent. In the last elections, its number of seats came down to 17 from 18 in the 1991 elections. Its share of the popular vote has declined continuously from 12.13 per cent in 1991 to 8.61 per cent in 1996, and to just 4.31 per cent in 2001. Besides, the Jamaat in Bangladesh, in spite of being a part of the Jamaat-e-Islamic mainstream of the Indian sub-continent, has been tempered by the liberal Bengali salience of Bangladeshi nationalism.

As for the BNP, the dominant section of the party consists of freedom fighters. I am personally acquainted with most of the top BNP leaders and technocrats included in the Cabinet and I know that they are liberal. Besides, with the vast majority of the Bangladeshi population being Muslims, it is inevitable that all the political parties would in some measure or the other pander to Islamic sentiments. Thus, both the Awami League and the BNP included in their manifesto identical words to the effect that no law will be passed which goes against the tenets of Islam. With the BNP Government in power and given the pressure of the Jamaat, there may be a more pronounced swerve towards placating Islamic sentiments. But there will be no swing of the pendulum. For, there is a self-correcting mechanism built into Bangladesh society against such a swing.

THE HINDU

28 OCT 2001

14 OCT 2001

Police raid houses of Awami League leaders

By Our Special Correspondent

DHAKA, OCT. 27. The new Government headed by Begum Khaleda Zia has taken a tough line against its political opponents, ordering police to raid the houses of the senior Ministers and key figures of the previous government led by Sheikh Hasina.

The Anti-corruption Bureau has started preparing a series of corruption cases against several former Ministers, Awami League MPs, including the former Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina, and her sister, Sheikh Rahena, according to several Bangladesh newspapers. The corruption cases against Sheikh Hasina include the purchase of MiG-29 and a Frigate for the Bangladesh Air Force and Navy. As many as 39 politicians are likely to be chargesheeted in corruption cases, the newspapers said.

In a dramatic move, police seized the passports of five Awami League leaders after ordering a ban on their overseas travel. The Special Branch of Police raided the houses of the former Ministers, Mr. Abdur Razzak, Mr. Tofael

Ahmed, Mr. Mohammad Nasim, Dr. Mohiuddin Khan Alamgir and Mr. Suranjit Sen Gupta, parliamentary Affairs Adviser to the former Prime Minister.

Mr. Tofael Ahmed and Mohammad Nasim handed over their passports to the police while Mr. Abdur Razzak and Mr. Sen Gupta deposited their passports with the Parliament Secretariat the next day. The former Planning Minister, Dr. Mohiuddin Khan Alamgir, is now out of the country.

The Home Affairs Minister, Air Vice-Marshal (Retd) Altaf Hossain Chowdhury, told journalists that he had no knowledge about the seizure of passports which was done by the Bureau of Anti-corruption that remained under the Prime Minister's Office. But the former Chief of Air Force has admitted that the bureau has collected documents that prove "*prima facie* involvement of these former ministers in corruption".

The former Home Affairs Minister, Mr. Mohammad Nasim, the organising secretary of the party, said, "this proves that the ruling

coalition is mentally weak and doubtful about its victory in the last election", adding, "we are not terrified by their repressive measures. We have survived this kind of acts in the past".

In an official statement, the Awami League condemned the Government's action, saying it was part of the plan the new ruling coalition is implementing all over the country.

Meanwhile, the High Court has quashed a corruption case against the Prime Minister, Begum Khaleda Zia, and her former personal secretary for their alleged overspending of funds in refurbishing her Dhaka Cantonment residence.

In another development, the Chief Metropolitan Magistrate's court of Chittagong dismissed the murder case of Begum Khaleda Zia's husband, Gen. Ziaur Rahman, after reviewing the case diary filed by the CID. The murder case was filed 20 years ago following the assassination of Gen. Ziaur Rahman, the then President, in an army coup in the port city.

THE HINDU

28 OCT 2001

Zia calms minority-attack jitters



National security adviser Brajesh Mishra with Bangladesh Prime Minister Khaleda Zia in Dhaka. (AFP)

Dhaka, Oct. 27 (PTI): Bangladesh Prime Minister Khaleda Zia tonight assured Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee's special envoy that her government would protect the minority Hindus who recently came under attacks in that country and increase bilateral cooperation.

Zia assured the envoy, Brajesh Mishra, during a 45-minute meeting at her residence in the first high-level contact between the two countries since the change of guard in Bangladesh after the October 1 general elections.

After the meeting, Mishra said he handed over to Zia a letter from Vajpayee but did not divulge its contents.

During the meeting, the special envoy articulated Delhi's concerns over the spate of attacks on minorities in Bangladesh soon after the elections.

Responding to the concerns, Zia said her government would safeguard the minorities and prevent the recurrence of such attacks.

Mishra said the possibility of export of natural gas from Bangladesh to India came up during wide-ranging discussions with Zia but did not give out details on an issue politically sensitive in Bangladesh. Zia said she would move Bangladesh's relationship and collaboration with India to a higher level.

Emphasis was put on economic cooperation during Mishra's talks with Zia.

The meeting rounded off the day-long visit of the Prime Minister's emissary to Bangladesh during which he also held talks with foreign minister A.Q.M. Badrudoza Choudhury and leader of the opposition and Awami League chief Sheikh Hasina.

The Bangladesh Prime Minister is learnt to have hinted at the

possibility of exporting gas to India but said the government was mulling over the quantum.

Mishra is understood to have conveyed to Zia that India was keen to know the Bangladesh government's decision as early as possible.

The issue of attacks on Hindus is understood to have come up for discussion between Mishra and Badrudoza Choudhury as well as with Hasina.

The Bangladesh foreign minister condemned the attacks on minorities and assured that the government would do everything to prevent their recurrence.

However, Bangladesh foreign secretary Shamsheer Mobin Choudhury told reporters that the issue of attacks on minorities did not figure in the talks.

Mishra and Badrudoza Choudhury also discussed the developments in Afghanistan. The national security adviser is understood to have told the foreign minister that "we should look at

the nature of a post-Taliban dispensation in that country".

The two sides also agreed on their approach to the situation in Afghanistan.

Bilateral issues and economic cooperation came up for discussion between Mishra and Badrudoza Choudhury. "We talked in general terms on these matters," Mishra told newsmen after an hour-long meeting.

Anti-government rally

Bangladesh's newly elected parliament will meet for its inaugural session tomorrow even as the main opposition Awami League called for an anti-government rally to "build up strong resistance against the repressive acts of the government".

Awami League leaders at a meeting yesterday called upon the people to join its October 28 rally at Paltan Maidan (the capital's main meeting ground) to build up resistance against the government.

THE HINDU

THE TELEGRAPH

BANGLADESH'S eighth parliamentary election of 1 October was a clear verdict against the five-year rule of the Awami League government as also a total rejection of the country's 1971 war of liberation and the ideals which inspired the struggle.

All those pro-Pakistani fundamentalist forces who were defeated in the liberation war have not only been resurrected but restored to power as equal and honourable partners in Begum Khaleda Zia's BNP-led four-party alliance government with the Jamat-e-Islam and Islami Oikya Jote as constituents. This combination is going to change the character and course of Bangladesh politics.

There can be no doubt, however, that the landslide victory which gave Begum Zia's alliance more than a two-thirds majority in a 300-seat parliament is not an honest reflection of the popular will as various forms of electoral and administrative manipulations and fraud were resorted to in at least 50 seats, forcing the Awami League to bite the dust. The neutral caretaker government failed miserably to create a level playing field. The "historic" victory shocked even Begum Zia's BNP cadres; there were no spontaneous outpourings of joy as their sole concern was whether the Awami League would accept the verdict lying down.

Saifur Rahman, the BNP's conscience-keeper and Begum Zia's No 2 in the alliance government and presently minister of finance and planning, called the victory "dangerous for democracy as absolute power corrupts absolutely". Known for his plain speaking, he thought "this brute majority may make us reckless and tempt us to do things which will lead us to dig our own graves. This does not make me happy".

The election campaign and voting pattern reflected the massive communalisation of Bangladesh politics. Islam and protecting Osama bin Laden had greater appeal than upholding the "lofty" ideals of *muktijuddho* which are now considered expendable baggage. To BNP and Jamat leaders, Islam and the Islamic way of life should be the state's guiding principle since 88 per cent of 13 million Bangladeshis are Muslims. An Islamic identity would bring economic spin-offs.

More Muslims voted for the Islamist alliance even though they knew that none of Begum Zia's warnings, like Hasina ceding eastern Bangladesh to India and converting mosques into temples, were true. "The result shows that no secular party with Bengali nationalism as its creed can ever come to power," Sheikh Hasina told me, adding, "I might have to forge ties with moderate Muslim outfits like the Khilafat Andolan to take on the Islamists. Politics here has undergone a big change." Indeed it has, as even pro-Beijing Left radicals find nothing wrong in the Jamat's agenda of further Islamising Bangladesh "because this is a Muslim majority country".

The campaign by *muktijoddhas* and the relatives of 1971 martyrs "to treat the electoral battle as another liberation war for trouncing the pro-Pakistani Rajakars, Al Badr and Al Shams trying to grab state power, "fell on deaf ears. In fact 40 such candidates (32 of the four-party alliance mostly belonging to the Jamat and IOJ) were identified whose victory, they said, would mean "committing treachery with the lives of 30 lakh martyrs and the hon-our of 200,000

Whither Bangladesh?



women who had been violated in the liberation war". Both the Awami League and the *muktijoddhas* sought to defeat prominent Jamat candidates like Matiur Rahman Nizami, who was the chief of the Pakistan Army-sponsored killer squad Al Badr, or "Killer Rajakar" Dilwar Hossain Saidi. But not only did this not have any impact, it proved counter productive in that it unleashed a Muslim backlash against the Awami League and the *muktijoddhas*. Both Nizami and Saidi won by 78,000 and 31,000 votes respectively. Maulana Fazlul Haq Amin, a founder Rajakar, defeated his Awami League rival by 44,000 votes although in the 1996 poll he had lost his security deposit. In fact this time he was a hero to his voters for leading a movement against a High Court verdict banning *fatwa*.

The attack on the World Trade Center and subsequent developments boosted the electoral campaign and prospects of Begum Zia's alliance.

Even to Dhaka's elite Muslims, whose children are well settled in America, bin Laden became a popular hero. Ever since 11 September, the *imams* of various mosques, as part of their sermon, lionised bin Laden and praised his crusade for Islam. A quiet takeover by the Jamat of the majority of mosques helped. In fact, bin Laden had emerged as a major issue and cast a spell on Muslim voters who had been told by the BNP, Jamat and other fundamentalist partners that this election would not only decide the fate of Islam in the country but also whether "we are with or against Laden".

The refrain of the campaign of the four-party alliance was "Muslims must vote us to power as Hasina is an agent of Hindu-istan and can't support Laden and our Islamic cause". Begum Zia at election rallies harped on the

In his analysis of the controversial election tactics employed by Begum Khaleda Zia's alliance to seal a landslide victory, MANASH GHOSH says the new BNP-led coalition that has taken over will change the country fundamentally

theme of banishment of Islam and Islamic values besides the closure of all *madrassas* if the Awami League was retained in power. The Awami League, she said, had harmed Islam and Muslims. The four-party alliance was viewed as a better custodian of Muslim interests. Begum Zia's empathy for Islam sounded more honest. They felt that because of the solid support from fundamentalists, she was better equipped to stand up to US pressure on the bin Laden issue.

Begum Khaleda Zia's victory is also an outcome of her political skill in polarising and consolidating all anti-Awami League forces, including the fundamentalists, under cover of her alliance. While she went on consolidating the Islamists with single-

minded devotion, an over-confident Sheikh Hasina, satisfied with the path-breaking achievements of her rule, went on isolating the Awami League even from its natural allies thinking her party had enough support to take on Begum Zia's alliance single-handed. "Hasina no longer seeks our advice. She only wants our votes," rued Professor Anisuzzaman, Bangladesh's leading intellectual.

The tie up between the BNP and the fundamentalists was very much a symbiotic relationship — the BNP needed fundamentalist votes to win marginal seats and the fundamentalists needed BNP support to increase their tally. Begum Zia even had HM Ershad's Jatiya Party in the alliance although she knew of his hatred towards her for jailing him for five years on corruption charges. The sole purpose of evolving a front was that the total of 33 per cent of her BNP votes and the 11 per cent of the fundamentalists far surpassed the 38 per cent votes of the Awami League. In fact that's what precisely happened in the elections with Begum Zia's alliance polling a little over 46 per cent of the votes against the Awami League's 40 per cent.

She allowed the entry of staunch Islam-ists into her party who, besides being known for their pro-Pakistan leaning, were "committed to bury the liberation war and secularism for good". For a while they were expelled for making anti-Begum Zia state-ments but election compulsions forced a compromise ensuring their return. The nature of her commitment to stand by them can be gauged from the fact that she sur-rendered 37 BNP seats including one from where her sitting party MP had been elec-ted in four successive elections. She also made it known that between the fundamentalists and the

muktijoddhas she pre-ferred the former. She has not forgiven her husband's man Friday, Oali Ahmed, a free-dom fighter, for daring to contest a seat which the Jamat claimed.

The Awami League's image problem with Muslim voters was largely to blame for its poll debacle. While it professes secularism as its political creed, to out-match the BNP's Islamic image it indulges in a wide variety of religious oneupmanship, which hardly carries conviction. A month before the election, Sheikh Hasina performed *umrah* and throughout the campaign wore a *hijab* (black religious band) on her fore-head.

Vote politics bulldozed the Awami League's ideology so badly that while drafting the party's poll manifesto a senior leader suggested that the expression "traders in religion" replace the words "Muslim fundamentalism so as not to hurt Muslim sentiment". It is this inner contradiction which prevented the Awami League from physically protecting the minorities. The politics of expediency has cost the Awami League the votes of both the majority and minority communities.

The Awami League's debacle was also due to its image problem — many of its former MPs and also some ministers and their sons had become "symbols of terror" — which neutralised much of the good image created by its significant achievements. These MPs and ministers with their armed goons countered the terror of rival parties and also committed excesses. The party leadership did nothing to curb them. They hijacked prime property, indulged in extortion and even smashed the limbs of jour-nalists who exposed them. Their excesses alienated the party from Bangladesh's business community which supported Begum Zia's alliance to the hilt. But the irony is that while the Awami League's "symbols of terror" were badly defeated in the elec-tion, their counterparts in the BNP and Ja-mat, still having criminal cases pending against them, won hands down.

The partisan attitude of the neutral caretaker government and the controversial role of the election commission was another factor. Within minutes of its taking charge, the NCG replaced 13 secretaries of different ministries and transferred 1,500 officials including district magistrates, su-perintendents of police and officers in charge of *thanas*. Those who replaced them were mostly BNP and Jamat men who made no secret of their political affiliations. The district magistrate of Feni tar-geted only Awami League goons but did nothing to those of the BNP and Jamat who were allowed to ransack, loot and burn the houses of minorities. Over 60,000 minority voters in Feni alone could not vote because of the terror unleashed on them. "It was not a four but a five-party al-liance that I had to fight because of the controversial acts of the NCG," Sheikh Hasina complained.

The conduct of the election commission in many cases was not above board. In many booths, more votes were polled than the actual voters. The district magistrates complained that the results they had sent and those announced by the EC differed wide-ly. There were innumerable complaints of minority voters being turned away by poll-ing staff. The eighth parliamentary elec-tion was in many ways different from the seven that preceded it

(The author is Senior Leader Writer, The Statesman, Kolkata.)

Bangla exodus after assault on women

FROM ARID HOSSAIN

Dhaka, Oct. 21: Growing violence against the minority community has forced thousands of families to flee their homes in Bangladesh, according to human rights groups and newspaper reports today.

In spite of Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia's assurance of security, there have been more reports of vandalising and looting of Hindu homes and smashing of idols of the goddess Durga.

Newspapers published photos of young Hindu women who have been molested during attacks on their homes reportedly by supporters of Begum Zia's new coalition.

Denying the charges, Khaleda Zia's government has said reports of anti-Hindu violence have been "baseless, exaggerated and politically motivated".

Home minister Altaf Hossain Chowdhury said in a speech yesterday that he has been scouring the country for incidents of anti-Hindu attacks.

But the rights groups said many persecuted families have fled to India. In many cases, men have stayed back, sending women out to either far off villages or towns or to India.

"The minority Hindus have suffered harrowing torture, including rape of teenage girls, by gangs of supporters of the new government," Rokeya Kabir, head of Nari Pragati Sangha, a leading women's rights group, said.

Volunteers of Kabir's group visited dozens of predominantly Hindu villages in seven districts in the past two weeks. "Our volunteers have met families whose women were raped. Many of them would not speak out for fear of more attacks," Kabir said. She told the tale of torture on Shefali Rani, a village council member at Agailjhara in Barisal district.



A protest against the attacks on minorities in Bangladesh. (AFP)

"Terrorists attacked and ransacked Shefali's home on October 2. They beat her up and then gang-raped her," Kabir said. Rani has since fled to Ramshil village in Gopalganj district, the home region of former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. Several thousand Hindu families have taken shelter in this region.

Anil Kumar Shil, a farmer, told another news conference that his teenage daughter was raped by a gang of Zia's supporters in a recent attack. The family has travelled to Dhaka from the northern district of Sirajganj.

The Hindus have been targeted on the charge of supporting Sheikh Hasina's Awami League party in the October 1 parliamentary elections. The polls were swept by Zia's four-party alliance that includes two Islamic fundamentalist parties, Jamaat-e-Islami and Islami Unity Council.

Hindus, Buddhists and Christians account for nearly 10 million of the country's 75 million registered voters. Hindus, the largest minority group, have traditionally supported Hasina's party for its secular policies and close relations with India.

"Bangladesh is a country of religious harmony free from communalism," Begum Zia said in a televised speech on Friday, her first since winning the elections.

Promising security to Hindus, Zia warned the nation against "those who want to create division in this country of excellent religious harmony".

Local newspapers have reported incidents of more violence. On Sunday, *Matribhumi* reported that Hindus have sent their young women out of their villages after attacks by supporters of Zahiruddin Swapan, a lawmaker from Zia's party, charges he has denied.

THE TELEGRAPH

22 OCT 2001

Borderline case

Khaleda should listen well to the tales the refugees tell

THE portents were clearly manifest. Right through the run-up to Bangladesh's general election of October 1, the country's minorities — said to make up a tenth of the electorate — have been feeling the pressures exerted by Islamic activists in the country. Some were even warned not to exercise their vote. When Khaleda Zia's BNP, along with three other parties, including the fundamentalist Jamaat-e-Islami, notched a famous victory in the election, one of the first public statements she made was to reiterate her commitment to a secular Bangladesh. But going by the reality on the ground, it looks like she would need to do more than express pieties if she is not to preside over the further polarisation of Bangladesh society along religious lines.

To make a beginning, she should listen to the stories of frightened Hindu families fleeing into West Bengal from across the border. This newspaper, in fact, did just this and recorded tales of brutality and horror. The exodus began, it appears, even before the verdict of the general election was known. This seems to imply a concerted and well-planned campaign of intimidation by vested interests. Things seem to have got even worse over the days that Khaleda has been in power. Bangladesh politics has always witnessed this battle between the extremists and the moderates for political space. Khaleda Zia's husband, Zia-ur-Rehman, when he came to power after the coup that ended the Sheikh Mujib era, had

very significantly amended the clauses defining secularism in the constitution to give it an Islamic thrust. General Ershad, who followed him, continued the process by introducing the Eight Amendment which gave Islam the status of the state religion. It is the familiar story of religion being used to buttress political power and, indeed, provide a cover for administrative ineptitude and misgovernance. It is always easier to manage serious contradictions, such as those Bangladesh faces, by using religious fundamentalism as a diversionary issue.

But Khaleda should also have discovered the limits of such blinkered politics, having presided as the nation's helmswoman in the early nineties. If Bangladesh is to project itself as a significant regional power, it would necessarily have to adopt a forward thinking vision, one that breaks free of the hold of the mullah and reap the benefits of modernity. It was, incidentally, during her tenure that Taslima Nasreen found herself so cruelly targeted by extremist elements after her novel, *Lajja*, proved to be a bestseller. The treatment meted out to Nasreen brought Bangladesh an international notoriety that it still has not quite shaken off. It would be far more sensible of Khaleda if she steers a more sensible course this time and keeps the lunatic fringe in her country firmly under check. Her success in this project will be measured by the speedy return of those who fled the country in the wake of her return to power.

INDIAN EXPRESS

Bangla minorities harassed

FROM FARID HOSSAIN

Dhaka, Oct. 16: Durga Puja celebrations will be muted this year in

Bangladesh. The Hindus have decided to cut down on festivities to protest against violence aimed at minorities in this predominantly

Bangladesh 5-3 17/10
Muslim nation. The decision of the Hindu-Buddha-Christian Oikya Parishad comes in the wake of increasing attacks on minorities since the October 1 elections.

Several thousand Hindu families have fled their homes in Agailjhara in southern Barisal district and taken refuge in neighbouring Gopalganj, the home district of former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina.

Hasina lost to rival Begum Khaleda Zia, whose four-party alliance, including Islamic fundamentalist outfits Jamaat-e-Islami and Islami Oikya Jote, swept to power winning more than two-thirds of the seats in the 300-seat Jatiya Sangsad.

The Hindu-Buddha-Christian Oikya Parishad, representing 12 per cent of the country's 130 million people, has blamed the attacks on "terrorists" from Khaleda's Bangladesh Nationalist Party and the Jamaat.

According to reports in leading dailies such as *Ittefaq*, *Sangbad* and *Prothom Alo*, the attacks started before the elections.

The violence — extortion, threats, forceful eviction or occupation of land and rape — was aimed at keeping the minority voters away from the polling stations. In the post-poll violence, the minorities have been targeted for supporting Hasina's Awami League. The country's minorities have traditionally backed the League for its secular policies.

Home minister Air Vice-Marshal (retd) Altaf Hossain Chowdhury has dismissed the reports about attacks on religious minorities as "baseless, exaggerated and politically motivated".

He told reporters that only a small part of the incidents are said to be true, but most of these have been blown out of proportion. Chowdhury, however, warned that violence against the minorities will not be tolerated.

THE TELEGRAPH

DANGEROUS LIAISONS

ME-13
19/10

While Khaleda Zia relishes an unexpectedly huge poll victory, Bangladesh worries about her Taliban-like coalition partners

Udayan Nambodiri
Dhaka

Bangladesh is always good with surprises. Nobody could guess how desperately people wanted change till the results of the country's third general elections were declared last week. Sheikh Hasina did not know what hit her. Even Khaleda Zia was taken aback by the huge mandate in her favour.

The Awami League's strength was reduced by more than half in the 300-strong Parliament. In this young and troubled democracy — 16 of Bangladesh's first 20 years were under full or quasi-military rule — there is no credible mechanism for measuring the nation's pre-poll mood.

So, when the results were declared, surprise was the predominant reaction. And then, of course, the analysts took over. Their conclusion: the pure arithmetic of coalition politics prevailed. The alliance of Khaleda's Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) with the fundamentalist Jamaat-e-Islami, the Jatiya Party — founded by former military ruler Hussien Mohammad Ershad — and a fringe Islamic group called the Islamic Oikya Jot ensured the wholesale transfer of the anti-incumbent vote into a common basket.

Within hours of it becoming clear that Hasina had lost, she called a press conference to announce her rejection of the mandate. This was predicted. In fact, diplomats of Bangladesh's donor countries (whose contributions account for a large chunk of the country's kitty) were publicly stating that a bigger fear than a bloody election campaign (this time, more than 40 were killed and over 500 injured) may be the aftermath.

"Bangladeshi democracy has overcome several hurdles, but the last one remains — getting the two parties to work together between elections," says the ambassador of a European country. Even though the European Union's election observer group had given the conduct of the October 1 elections a clean hit, it didn't matter to Hasina.



She could hardly be heard amid the lusty slogans raised by party functionaries that afternoon. "The election may have been free, but it was certainly not fair," she was heard saying above the din. Evidently new to the power of coalition politics, many Bangladeshis were equally confounded by the result. After all, the Awami League's vote share had risen from 37.44 per cent to 40.24 per cent this time.

Bangladeshis want normalcy

While the surprised but rhetoric-weary nation wanted to move on, Hasina was unrelenting. The following day, she announced a plan for off-parliament opposition. Bangladeshis, by their response to Hasina's petulance, showed signs of having had enough of bandhs and street fights, which have claimed an average of 30 lives a year since 1991.

Hasina, while in the Opposition in 1991-96, commanded

enough street power to paralyse the nation every other day. This time, however, the sting was missing. But the Begum boycotted the swearing in of the new MPs. However, the few meetings she called since the debacle have flopped. Under the watchful eyes of the security forces and the disapproving donor nations who contribute to more than 65 per cent of the GDP, Bangladesh this week showed signs of limping back to normalcy.

But the expectations that people have heaped on Khaleda's graceful shoulders are scary. The Begum who, in her first innings as prime minister, made liberal education compulsory and threatened parents keeping their daughters away from school with imprisonment, could not have selected a worse time for aligning with the hard-liners.

In the post-September 11 global scenario, even a remote linkage with an Islamic fundamentalist

group can be potentially damaging. The Jamaat of Bangladesh may lack the muscle-power of its Pakistani counterpart, but certainly has a firm support-base in a country slipping into penury with each passing year.

Fear of fundamentalists

Though the BNP's own overwhelming majority in Parliament may suppress for a while the Jamaat's plans to convert Bangladesh into a full-fledged Islamic state, Khaleda had no choice but accommodate hard-liners like Matiur Rahman Nizami and Ali Ahsan Mohammad Mujahid in her first Cabinet. "They will extract their pound of flesh, make no mistake about that," says S.A. Malek, former political adviser to Hasina.

Noted women's rights activist Zarina Rahaman Khan points out that the Jamaat's original manifesto had propounded the exclusion of women from public life, making *burqa* compulsory



A BIG BOTHER? Khaleda Zia's hard-headed policies in the past and her latest alliance with the fundamentalists bode ill for India

and institutionalising the *Shariyat*. "This alliance is potentially obnoxious. Bangladeshis uphold the liberty of their women. If Khaleda tries to Talibanise us, there will be civil war," she adds.

But Khaleda's press adviser, Riazuddin Ahmed, tries to play down these fears. "These are the kind of alarmist speculations that Hasina will try to thrive on for the next five years."

Still, disturbing signs prevail. The bombings on Afghanistan gave the Jamaat its first provocation for a show of strength. The country already has a huge network of *madrasas*, funded by what Bangladeshis call "petrodollars and Pakistani agents", which may be used to further the rise of fundamentalists. This could have grave consequences for India.

The big neighbour, for the first time, was not an issue in this election. In 1991 and 1996, Khaleda made India-baiting a major plank of her campaign. However, after five years of Awami rule, which saw the final settlement of the 30-year-old Farakka dispute and the opening of bus and rail linkages.

India's fears

But there are other dangers lurking about. Within hours of her victory, the first reports of land grab on Hindu property began to reach Dhaka. For the country's estimated 10 per cent Hindu minority, a BNP-Jamaat government means insecurity.

In 1991-96, the BJP had made a poll plank out of its distinction between "infiltrators" (Muslims) and "refugees" (Hindus). Khaleda, if her past is any indi-

cation, may quite enjoy the discovery of more pressure points for application on India. On a visit to New Delhi in 1992, she had coolly told P.V. Narasimha Rao, "there are no Bangladeshi infiltrators in India — only Bengali Muslims." She whipped up national hysteria over Tin Bigha and several imagined Indian invasion plans for arm-twisting the big neighbour into giving economic deals.

In return, she gave precious little except headache. The ULFA camps in the Chittagong Hills were, in fact, given police protection. The Bangladeshis were fed so much hatred that Hasina, who succeeded her in 1996, found it impossible to negotiate the sale of natural gas to India and work out a transit agreement to give India's north-east access to the

Chittagong port.

As for Islamic fundamentalism, the world, after September 11, is a different place. Donor countries are expected to frown upon government that flirt with fundamentalists. "Bangladesh, with worse human development indicators than Nepal, already has a semi-sovereign status as far as the developed world is concerned," points out the Editor of a leading Dhaka newspaper.

For all available indications, Khaleda has an unenviable task on hand, dealing with the problems she has inherited, having been responsible for some of them herself.

India will be watching without a doubt, but it can take some comfort from the fact that so will the others, including the big guns now waging a war against terrorism.

Speaker's decision averts crisis in Bangladesh

By Our Special Correspondent

Bangladesh 10-11

DHAKA, OCT. 7. The Awami League, led by Sheikh Hasina, is going ahead with its plans of launching a countrywide agitation for fresh election despite negative feedback from the people.

However, the Speaker of the last Parliament, Mr. Abdul Hamid, who belongs to the Awami League, has announced that he would administer oath to the MPs-elect on October 9, 10 and 11.

This will delay the formation of Begum Khaleda Zia's government by a few days but it has averted a possible constitutional crisis. The Bangladesh National Party (BNP) and its allies have welcomed the Speaker's decision as his refusal would have required Presidential intervention and finally a ruling from the Supreme Court.

Though Sheikh Hasina and her party leaders will not take oath, the high command has given the green signal to the Speaker. Significantly, the party is contesting the re-polling for 16 constituencies to be held on October 8. "The Speaker is an institution. He will definitely administer the oath," Sheikh Hasina told a private television channel. Despite allegations about the "highly partisan role" of the interim government and the "neutrality" of the Election Commission and law-enforcing agencies, angry grassroots leaders of the Awami League have targeted some Ministers and their relatives, as responsible for the debacle, owing to rampant corruption and ineffectiveness while in power.

It is now believed that the poll management of the BNP and the Jamaat-led alliance, whose election fund was enormous, was far more "professional"

than that of their rival. The votebank of the radical Islamists also played a crucial role. Despite the debacle, the Awami League's vote increased by nearly three per cent compared to 1996.

Controversies and a visible feeling of disbelief about the poll results apart, the national mood is against the Awami League's decision to launch a movement for fresh elections. Western diplomats and observers have certified the October 1 poll results as "free, fair and credible" while the United States said on Friday that it looked forward to working with a new government. Business leaders have also urged all parties to "accept the poll verdict and behave responsibly" in the interest of the country's economy, even as they congratulated Begum Zia. The Chief of Army Staff, Lt. Gen. Harun-ar-Rashid, has also congratulated Begum Zia, media reports said.

The Awami League though is readying for its "non-cooperation movement" after the expiry of the October 10 ultimatum.

It believes that since the results were "crudely manipulated under a blueprint" far beyond "any reasonable calculation" and also the caretaker government's "partisan role was sufficiently proved", it was hopeful of convincing the people about the "electoral fraud".

Meanwhile, the image of the BNP and the Jamaat-led alliance has taken a beating after its activists attacked Awami League supporters, freedom fighters and members of the minority community across the country.

Many people died and scores were injured during the last six days, according to newspaper reports.

THE HINDU

12 OCT 2001

Khaleda sworn in, BNP tally up



CHANGE OF GUARD: Bangladesh Nationalist Party chairperson Begum Khaleda Zia is sworn in as Prime Minister in Dhaka on Tuesday. — AP/PTI

AFP & UNI

DHAKA, Oct. 9. — More than 200 newly-elected deputies, including PM-elect Begum Khaleda Zia of BNP, were today sworn in as MPs. Begum Zia heads the BNP-led four party alliance which won a landslide two-thirds majority.

Re-polling took place yesterday in parts of 15 seats where voting was suspended during the October 1 polls for the 300-seat Parliament due to alleged irregularities. Results of the 15 seats announced yesterday showed Begum Zia's BNP and allies won 11 of them, while one went to the Awami League.

The latest tally from 298 constituencies showed the BNP-led alliance winning 214, Awami League of outgoing Prime Minister

SANGMA FOR GAMBIA

LONDON, Oct. 9. — The former Indian Lok Sabha Speaker, Mr PA Sangma, will lead a nine-member Commonwealth team of observers for the Gambian presidential elections due on October 18, the Commonwealth secretary-general, Mr Don McKinnon, announced today. — PTI

Sheikh Hasina Wajed winning 62, and an Islamic alliance led by former ruler Lt-Gen. Hussain Mohammad Ershad with 14 seats.

Six seats went to independents. Polling in two constituencies has still to take place. Voting was postponed on legal grounds in one constituency and due to the death of a candidate in the other.

The swearing-in was administered by outgoing speaker Mr Abdul Hamid at a simple ceremony in the parliament complex.

Meanwhile, about ten thousand people, mainly from the minority community, have fled their homes in Barisal district in Bangladesh following attacks by activists of the BNP-led alliance, UNB News Agency reported today.

Since the unofficial results were declared, supporters from the victorious four-party alliance have been attacking defeated Awami League leaders and supporters, the news agency said.

Newspaper reports said houses and property of Hindus, who are considered supporters of former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's Awami League, were looted and set ablaze in villages and towns.

The new lady next door

Bangladesh

The Bangladesh Nationalist Party-led alliance government will certainly try to undo much of the Awami League's legacy, writes Ashis Chakrabarti

clare February 21 as the International Mother Language Day.

As the October 1 general election day in Bangladesh approached, Sheikh Hasina Wajed and her party, the Awami League, had one fervent prayer: the United States of America's attack on Afghanistan should not happen before the poll day. Officially, both the Awami League and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party endorsed the support of country's caretaker government for the US-led coalition's war efforts against international terrorism. But the League's secular politics and its traditional acceptance among the Hindu minority made it vulnerable in a campaign that increasingly gathered religious overtones since the September 11 attacks on America.

Although the League's principal contender, the BNP, did not overtly play the "Islam under threat" card, its partner, the Jamat-e-Islami, found in the American war efforts a precious opportunity not to be wasted. Irrespective of what the contending parties did, the anticipation of the attack on Afghanistan, which was painted in the public mind as the first assault on Islam, had definitely coloured the poll-eve political consciousness in the Muslim-majority country. America's Afghan war eventually did not begin before the election day; but the imminent conflict did its bit to shape the climate of opinion. The covert campaign told the people that Awami League's boat (the party's election symbol) could not ensure a safe ride in the gathering storm over the Islamic horizon.

But the world events only rocked the League's boat that had already found itself drift on choppy poll waters. Even before the September 11 terrorist strikes on the US, Wajed found herself up against tremendous odds. Her fate seemed to have been sealed the day the BNP struck up the alliance with the Jamat-e-Islami, the Islami Oikya Jote and a faction of the Jatiya Party, thereby ensuring that the anti-League vote was not split in any significant manner. Thus, arithmetic put her at a great disadvantage. The Jamat secured only three seats in the 1996 elections, but its votes were nearly nine per cent. The split in the anti-League votes had helped the party in as many as 46 marginal seats in those elections. The BNP's poll managers realized that their chance lay in winning all anti-League votes.

Once the BNP succeeded in this, the League banked on the possibility of the Jatiya Party of the former president, H.M. Ershad, cutting into its opponents' votes. The 75-year-old former military dictator, who cobbled up another coalition with the Islamic Shashantantra movement, was hoping to play kingmaker again, fielding candidates for 281 out of 300 seats. In 1996, when the League won 146 seats and the BNP 116, Ershad's Jatiya Party with 32 seats came in handy for Wajed. She held out the carrot to the majority of the Jatiya Party MPs, split the



Voice over

party and made one of them a minister in her government. But the Jatiya Party has since split into three factions and Ershad's diminishing appeal is now confined to his native Rangpur district. The Ershad coalition's tally of 14 in the elections this time could still be a factor in a hung verdict. But the results left him in the lurch as much as it stumped the League.

If the arithmetic was against the League, the politics of the Wajed government, particularly in the months preceding the elections, also queered the pitch for the party. The lawlessness and the rule of the goons made it look as if the government had abdicated before it faced the polls. The criminals who created this fear psychosis belonged to both the League and the BNP. But the League government's failure to stem the tide cost it dearly at the hustings. Similarly, the corruptions of League ministers and leaders hurt its poll prospects more. Public memory being short everywhere, the people did not re-

member that the previous BNP regime was as corrupt, if not more.

While its failings took the campaign centre-stage, the League government's successes were relegated to the background. And the successes were truly laudable. Wajed not only gave the country's economy a 5.9 per cent growth last year, but achieved the first ever self-sufficiency in food. The inflation rate was kept under control. In the early years of the government, it brought to an end the decades-old insurgency in the Chittagong Hill Tracts.

Despite opposition from the BNP, the old controversy over the sharing of the Ganga water with India was settled through the 1996 pact. For a nation whose birth pangs began way back in 1949 with the demand for Bengali as the official language of former East Pakistan, Wajed brought international recognition to her people's long and bloody language struggle by getting the United Nations to de-

But the past, however glorious, does not always help either the present or the future in electoral politics. The League's obsession with the 1971 liberation war and the legacy of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman could not give it the poll advantage it had so fatuously hoped for. As the Congress in India could not reap electoral benefits forever by harping on M.K. Gandhi and its role in the Indian freedom movement, Rahman or the League's role in Bangladesh's liberation war could not be the inexhaustible fund from which the League could draw poll benefits. Actually, the League's invocation of history did not stir many of the post-1971 generation of voters to its side. No wonder it did not create a ripple of hate toward the anti-liberation forces like the Jamat and a section of the BNP.

As it takes over power, the BNP-led alliance government will certainly try to undo much of the League's legacy. To begin with, it will dislodge Rahman from the constitutional pedestal on which Wajed had put her father. He may now be placed alongside Ziaur Rahman, Khaleda Zia's husband, in the new pantheon of national heroes. Wajed passed an incredible piece of legislation which made it a criminal offence to publicly denigrate Mujibur Rahman. That law may now go. Khaleda Zia may not interfere with the trial of Mujibur Rahman's assassination. But her government will definitely not give it the priority that Wajed had given it. It is unlikely that Zia will oblige her Jamat and Islami Oikya Jote partners by changing the constitution to make Bangladesh an Islamic nation.

But it is Wajed's foreign policy initiatives, especially with regard to India and Pakistan, which might undergo substantive changes in the new regime. The first test will come in December when the Ganga water pact is due for a review. The BNP may also change some clauses in the agreement that brought peace to the Chittagong Hill Tracts because of their implications for relations with India. The concern in some Indian quarters that the militants in India's Northeast will be again encouraged to set up camps inside Bangladesh, which Wajed dismantled, seems exaggerated.

Pakistan may want it so, especially in the context of a beleaguered western front of terrorism against India. But Zia may be more circumspect than before because of the international concern against terrorist groups and the instruments of terror. There is, however, no doubt that the new Bangladesh regime will be as keen to do business with India as the previous one. The BNP's earlier tenure showed that the sound and fury at Dhaka's Paltan maidan is merely the business of politics. The business of government is a different ball game.

Wajed's foreign policy initiatives, especially with regard to India and Pakistan, may undergo substantive changes in the new regime. The BNP may also change some clauses in the Chittagong Hill Tracts agreement because of their implications for relations with India

THE TELEGRAPH

10 OCT 2001

Khaleida to ride over protests

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE 57 11

DHAKA, Oct. 6. — Prime Minister-elect Mrs Khaleida Zia's Bangladesh Nationalist Party prepared today to take office in the teeth of protests from the outgoing government about the fairness of this week's election.

The Speaker of the old parliament indicated he may not administer the oath to new MPs with his defeated Awami League calling for a fresh election and threatening to boycott the legislature.

The Awami League of outgoing Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina protested that last Monday's polls, in which it was rejected by a two-thirds vote for the Islamist-allied BNP coalition, was marred by vote-rigging.

But in a statement released here,



Begum Khaleida Zia

former US President Mr Jimmy Carter urged Sheikh Hasina to "accept the election results in order to

strengthen Bangladesh's democratic process." Mr Carter, who canceled a trip to Bangladesh to serve as an election monitor after the terrorist attacks in the USA, has already telephoned Mrs Zia to congratulate her on the landslide win.

US state department spokesman Mr Richard Boucher said yesterday, "The election was well carried out" and that Washington accepted the results.

"Bangladesh does need stability and democracy and we look forward to working with the new government in that matter," Mr Boucher told reporters.

The new MPs were due to be sworn-in tomorrow, but outgoing parliamentary Speaker Mr Abdul Hamid said he may not administer the oath as the Awami League is planning to boycott the Assembly.

THE STATESMAN

7-10-73

THE sweeping victory of Begum Khaleda Zia in Bangladesh's general election follows an all-too-familiar pattern. Time and again, in different parts of the sub-continent we have seen incumbent governments swept away in a devastating shift of popular mood. Now it is Bangladesh's turn.

Notwithstanding the outgoing Prime Minister's claim that the polls were rigged, and her announced readiness to resist by all means at her disposal, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party is set to be comfortably ensconced in authority for the next phase of the country's political life.

Sheikh Hasina will be missed in India. She was seen as an able and bold leader who was not shy of pursuing a policy of friendship with India.

In this, she harked back to her father Sheikh Mujib, the father of his nation. In the often overheated political atmosphere of Bangladesh, friendship towards India is frequently misconstrued as subservience to the much larger neighbour, but Sheikh Hasina did not permit such considerations to daunt her.

She was pragmatic in her approach, realising that both countries had much to gain from each other, and so she worked successfully to solve, or at least to contain, problems instead of trying to milk them for domestic advantage.

The most important problem that was successfully tackled in her time was that of Farakka. For decades, this had plagued ties between India and Bangladesh. It seemed no less intractable than Kashmir at the other end of the sub-continent, defying repeated attempts to resolve it and becoming more difficult with each such attempt.

It caused a great deal of bad blood and mutual recrimination. Only when Sheikh Hasina came to power some five years ago was there the will and desire to do something about Farakka. The West Bengal leadership under Jyoti Basu and the

Warm up to Khaleda

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Indian Foreign Minister of the time IK Gujral were of the same mind, which meant that it proved possible to put this troublesome and contentious issue out of the way.

Sheikh Hasina deserves great credit for her statesmanship in dealing with this matter.

Once Farakka was off the agenda, the road was open for better relations.

At that time, India's foremost concern was cross-border operations from Bangladesh in support of militancy in the contiguous areas of India's North-east.

New Delhi had suffered the frustration of encountering endless denials from Dhaka of any involvement in such operations, or even that they were taking place at all.

It was not till Sheikh Hasina came to power that something was done to curb them. If they were not completely eliminated, it was despite her wishes, and their persistence showed how deeply entrenched in Bangladesh are pro-Pakistani elements and the ubiquitous ISI.

While this may remain a concern for the future, during Awami League rule

WIDE ANGLE

SALMAN HAIDAR



Bangladesh Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia holding sheaves of paddy, her Bangladesh Nationalist Party's election symbol. Whatever be the difficulties that lie ahead, at this point she must receive the acknowledgement that her democratic victory commands. — AP/PTI

India's anxieties on this score were greatly reduced.

This is not to suggest that there were no problems or that India's expectations when Sheikh Hasina came to power were fully met. A prominent disappointment was in the area of transit.

Situated where it is, Bangladesh has much to offer India by way of transit routes between West Bengal and the North-east.

The pre-Partition network of road, rail and river transit can readily be re-activated, to the vast benefit of both countries: India has only laborious and uneconomical alternatives and Bangladesh cannot afford to sniff at the transit fees it would earn.

But it has not been possible to restore these routes in the face of consistent Bangladeshi opposition.

There is no discernible logic to this negative approach which tends to characterise Indian requests for transit facilities as an effort to strike at the sovereignty of Bangladesh, and on that basis mass agitations have been threatened. For such reasons, Sheikh Hasina felt compelled to go slow on this particular

issue. Precious little progress has been made, not even to institute a regular bus service like that between New Delhi and Lahore, or to advance an agreed project for a train from Dhaka to the pilgrimage site at Ajmer that is a magnet for the Bangladeshis.

Elsewhere, too, in matters of trade and economic exchanges, the results fall well short of what was hoped. Yet there was confidence that in the second term, the Awami League government would be able to push things along at a brisker pace, but if there is to be a second term it is far in the future.

Begum Khaleda Zia had the support of the Right-wing Islamic parties for her campaign.

These groups have never been more than a minor presence in Bangladesh parliament, and after its resounding success, the BNP does not need their support to form a government.

Nevertheless, one can expect them to be considerably more influential than they were, which can be a complication in Indo-Bangladeshi ties.

They appear to be close to counterpart bodies in Pakistan and elsewhere, with a vested interest in keeping their distance from India, and thus working to exaggerate, not ameliorate, bilateral problems.

Whatever be the possible difficulties that lie ahead, at this point Begum Zia must receive the acknowledgement that her democratic victory commands.

India has to be ready to do business with the new government and hope that in some crucial respects, the BNP has evolved and grown in its years of opposition. There are scores of issues that can be built into bilateral problems. But there are also numerous opportunities for better cooperation.

While acknowledging Sheikh Hasina's very important contribution, India has to be ready to work closely with the new regime.

(The author is a former Foreign Secretary.)

10-17
2/10

The verdict and after *Bengal*

THE FOUR-PARTY alliance led by the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) chief, Begum Khaleda Zia has got a stunning and unprecedented two-thirds majority in the elections held on October 1. The polling was generally peaceful and the voter turnout massive. The elections for Bangladesh's eighth Parliament virtually wiped out the Awami League, which led the nation's War for Liberation from Pakistan and was also the guardian of the nation's secular values and religious tolerance.

The BNP-led alliance included the fundamentalist Jamaat-e-Islami and the Islamic Oikya Jote (IOJ), whose "reserved votes" may have played a vital role in the unprecedented electoral victory. But the results are contested by the Awami League, which headed the last Government, as "nakedly manipulated under a blueprint" by a syndicate of the caretaker Government, the Chief Election Commissioner and the BNP-led alliance.

The Awami League president, Sheikh Hasina, has given an ultimatum to the Election Commission to cancel the results and announce a fresh poll schedule by October 10. Otherwise, her party would launch a "non-cooperation movement" from the following day. "We are not going to accept the results... not going to take oath... what is the justification in accepting some seats allotted to us by the conspirators," she declared.

The two-thirds majority for the BNP and the fundamentalists gives them the right to re-shape the polity of the country where the Muslims are an overwhelming majority — the minorities are just a little more than 10 per cent. The BNP-led Government can even change the Constitution.

The BNP can form a Government on its own. But it may be difficult for Begum Khaleda to ignore the radical Islamic partners. Bangladesh could then get a Government which includes the religious fundamentalists who had opposed independence from Pakistan and collaborated with Pakistani troops in committing genocide.

The poll results belied the general expectation that it would be a neck-and-neck race between the Awami League and the BNP-led alliance. Begum Khaleda had claimed from the beginning that her alliance would get two-thirds majority; she has been proved right.

Sheikh Hasina, however, maintains that the results were "crude-



Begum Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina... can they have a constructive engagement?

ly manipulated". "The people spontaneously cast their votes, but they stunned to see the results. The caretaker Government has betrayed the nation. It is a destruction of a noble system of conducting a free and fair poll," she says. Sheikh Hasina has from the beginning been alleging that the caretaker Government was partisan. She accused Mr. Justice Rahman's administration of implementing a "blueprint" by first staging an "administrative coup" and finally subverting the popular mandate by a "media coup". She said the voting rights of the people, restored after a long-drawn struggle against the military and pseudo-democratic forces, were snatched in a "very crude way".

The Awami League's debacle was so complete that at least 20 Ministers and party stalwarts lost, and this seems incredible to many. Most of the major leaders of the fundamentalist parties have won.

Besides allegations of violence and intimidation, the Awami League has raised questions about the fairness of the process of vote counting, compilation and announcement of the results. The allegations of booth-capturing, collaboration of a section of the security forces with the BNP-led alliance, and threats to minority voters cannot be blithely brushed aside. The country's civil society leaders have alleged that 70 lakh people of the minority communi-

ty could not exercise their franchise. The South Asian Union against Fundamentalism and Communalism has accused the caretaker Government and the "pro-Taliban" four-party alliance of compelling the minority voters not to go to the polling centres.

Sheikh Hasina has remarked that "those who do terrorism in the name of religion, those who do not believe in the very inde-

pendence of Bangladesh, would now form the Government."

At her first news conference after the electoral victory, Begum Khaleda, however, appealed for unity, peace and stability. She also urged the Awami League to cooperate with her in combating "terrorism and corruption". She said the people had voted against "divisive politics" as they did not want to see a "divided country".

Begum Khaleda also appealed to her supporters to show tolerance, and not to show disrespect to the portraits of the country's slain founding hero, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, which are displayed in streets and offices. Unless the laws are amended, Mujib, whose killers are condemned to death and their execution is awaiting approval of the highest judiciary, will remain the "Father of the Nation" and the day of his assassination will be treated as "National Mourning Day".

The BNP-led alliance has won a two-thirds majority in Bangladesh's Parliament. But, the Awami League is alleging fraud. Haroon Habib reports.

But the newspapers reported quick re-occupations of all university dormitories, destruction of Mujib's portraits, and driving out of Vice-Chancellors. Religious fanaticism in the country could rise even if the BNP tries to block it on tactical grounds, say commentators. There are also apprehensions about whether the results have any link to the developments after the September 11 terrorist attacks on America. Osama bin Laden's followers are quite active in Bangladesh.

The concept of having a non-party caretaker Government has also been called into question. Only time will tell what ultimately awaits Bangladesh's democracy. By all indications, Sheikh Hasina, Mujib's daughter, has chosen a path which is thorny. Asked whether she would ultimately accept the results "under pressure", she said: "I am the daughter of such a person that I'd rather die before I succumb. I have all the right to save my country's image".

Hasina begins street protests

FROM ASHIS CHAKRABARTI

Dhaka, Oct. 5: The Awami League began its street shows today to protest what it has called a "rigged" election and demand fresh polls. But the protest rally outside the League's central office on Bangabandhu Avenue here

drew far fewer crowds than the massive meeting with which the party had ended its poll campaign last Friday. The rally did not have much of an impact on life in Dhaka. The movement will begin in the rest of the country tomorrow.

Party activists and sympathis-

ers shouted slogans echoing their leader Sheikh Hasina's rejection of the poll verdict. But the dominant tone was more of frustration and sadness than anger.

While party supporters were yet to come to terms with its humiliating defeat, blaming it on a "conspiracy jointly hatched" by the caretaker government and Khaleda Zia's Bangladesh Nationalist Party, more and more voices within the party are speaking up against mistakes of the leadership.

At a meeting of the party leadership yesterday, several district leaders accused some of the central leaders of "misleading" Sheikh Hasina.

Worse still for the party, the critics even accused Hasina of having promoted her own relatives in her government. There were also dissenting voices that urged her to reconsider her decision to boycott the next parliament.

They also wondered how the party could take part in the October 8 repolling in 90 centres if the leadership wanted the entire poll cancelled.

But Hasina stuck to her guns, ignoring not only these voices within the party but also appeals from the diplomatic community and foreign poll observers' teams who met her here today before she left for Chittagong. In fact, she brushed aside a suggestion that she might eventually succumb to pressures from the international community. "How can Sheikh Mujib's daughter succumb to any pressure," she asked.

Meanwhile, reports of attacks by the BNP and its poll partner Jamat-e-Islami on League supporters are pouring in from all over the country. In many of these incidents, the attackers smashed portraits of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, founder of the nation.

Activists of the BNP's student wing, Chhatra Dal, are on the rampage at Dhaka and other university campuses, assaulting Awami League's student activists and chasing them away from the university hostels.

10-05-1990
D. B. CHAKRABARTI

NEW TEAM IN DHAKA

51861 Khaleda Zia romps home

THE convincing victory of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party-led alliance breaks with trends of previous elections, which have been roughly balanced with neither of the two principal groupings — around the Awami League and the BNP — gaining huge majorities. This time around, the BNP and three allied parties have won 202 of the 283 declared seats, which gives it a two-thirds majority in the 300-seat legislature. Although the Awami League government provided the country with economic growth over five years, in South Asian conditions of mass illiteracy, the benefits of development take time to trickle down and are not enough to quell discontent. Sheikh Hasina has alleged massive rigging and malpractices in an unusually bloody campaign with around 300 killed, and vowed not to accept the verdict. She has said her party will boycott Parliament, and the Awami League plans to hit the streets with a call for fresh elections. But international observers have testified to polling being largely free and fair. Sheikh Hasina finds it difficult to accept the verdict due to the viciousness of the campaign; she also has the precedent set by the BNP, which boycotted Parliament during her rule and shut down the country for more than a hundred days with strikes and violent demonstrations. While these are signs of the fragility of Bangladesh's democracy, Hasina ought to play by the rules and move on, biding her time till anti-incumbency and the current against fundamentalism works in her favour.

The BNP has been making overtures to the fundamentalist and ISI-friendly Jamaat-e-Islami, which won an additional 17 seats. Since the BNP has made Islamising noises and has a two-thirds majority they will now be pressed to amend the secular Constitution. Begum Khaleda's opening statements after her victory have been reassuring — she has said that religion will not play a part in her administration as an Islamic republic was not an alliance pledge. However she has played the Islamic card and will have to struggle to widen her options. Sheikh Hasina had kept the ISI out, but the latter is certain to manoeuvre for influence with the new administration, trying to open a second front in Pakistan's proxy war against India. South Block needs to be vigilant and make matching manoeuvres to ensure, for example, that ULFA and other terrorist organisations are not allowed to set up base in Bangladesh, and that the porous Indo-Bangladesh border is not used to infiltrate terrorists into India. One good sign is that the BNP-led alliance has a massive majority and does not need to depend upon Islamic radicals. There is also the issue of transit rights for Indian goods to the northeast, which Sheikh Hasina sat on out of fear of being perceived as pro-India. Khaleda has made pragmatic moves in the past, for example by opening up Bangladesh to Indian goods during her previous tenure; her reputation as a tough bargainer should allow her to enter into a mutually beneficial deal with India on transit rights. South Block is known to take a paternalistic view of Bangladesh, which breeds distrust; it has to dust off complacency and embrace the new team in Dhaka.

THE STATESMAN

OCT 2002

India, Pak vie to woo Khaleda

Udayan Nambodiri
Dhaka, October 4

INDIAN HIGH Commissioner to Bangladesh Mani Lal Tripathi called on Bangladesh's Prime Minister elect Khaleda Zia and handed over Atal Bihari Vajpayee's letter of felicitations on her election. Tripathi is learnt to have informally extended the Indian Prime Minister's "personal invitation" for her to visit New Delhi at her "earliest convenience".

New Delhi's swift move in establishing rapport with the new dispensation in Dhaka is being watched with interest. Vajpayee's letter, released in India yesterday, was the first by any head of Government to Khaleda. Diplomatic observers discerned a certain "freshness" about India's policy towards the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), which was earlier regarded as bit of a hard cookie by New Delhi.

While Tripathi made his courtesy call, his Pakistani counterpart, Iqbal Ahmed Khan, chatted up senior BNP leaders. His

turn to call on Khaleda came two envoys after Tripathi's departure. The bonhomie that was apparent in the ante-room was in marked contrast to the experience Pakistani diplomats had with the outgoing Awami League Government of Sheikh Hasina.

A senior Pakistani diplomat here told *Hindustan Times* that the Pervez Musharraf regime was looking forward to a new relationship with Bangladesh. The statement issued by the Pakistani Foreign Office on Tuesday talked of the need to revive "fraternal ties" between the two countries. "In our engagement with the previous Government we found it too chained to the past but with the new dispensation it will be different," he said.

Hasina was strident in her anti-Pakistanism, which is rooted in the Awami League's memories of 1971.

India had no cause to complain against this. But the new closeness between Islamabad and Dhaka represents a challenge for New Delhi.

Therefore the *Hindustan Times* is reporting that ditching Hasina will turn out to be a bad loser. The Awami League leader called a meeting of her frontal organisations today and reiterated her demand for a fresh election. However, the party would not boycott the repolling ordered in over 90 centres.

Dhaka is gearing up for a massive demonstration tomorrow when she is expected to launch the non-cooperation movement. She also said the Awami League's elected MPs would boycott the swearing in of new legislators and leave Parliament if elections are not launched before October 10.

New Delhi, according to sources here, believes Hasina should "simmer down" and work as a responsible Opposition leader. India feels that the significant rise of the Janate Islam as a political force and the unprecedented fallout on the country's 10 million Hindu population places a burden on the Awami League, a secular force in Bangladeshi politics, to play its role as an Opposition force both in Parliament and outside.

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES

5 OCT 2002

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Hasina threatens Parliament boycott

Udayan Nambudiri *HF-1*
Dhaka, October 3

SULKING UNDER yesterday's humiliating electoral defeat, Awami League leader Hasina Wajed today said her party will boycott Parliament and launch a sustained agitation demanding fresh elections.

With Hasina talking tough, Bangladeshis are bracing for a fresh spell of political unrest, especially since the Awami League is miles ahead of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party in terms of cadre strength.

Khaleda Zia, who today staked claim to form the Government, has rejected Hasina's allegation that the Caretaker Government had rigged the polls.

The BNP chief met President Sahabuddin Ahmed and requested him to ensure that the notification making her alliance's victory official be issued at the earliest.

9/10 Bangladesh
The new Government, she urged the President, ought to be sworn in by October 7. The BNP and its allies have won a huge mandate of 202 seats. Khaleda is expected to announce her team of ministers within a couple of days.

Hasina, though, remained adamant and said her party supporters would hit the streets on October 5 with a "struggle for restoration of democracy". She addressed the Press today and threatened to launch a "non-cooperation movement" if her demands were not met by October 10.

Khaleda, fresh from her electoral triumph, wasn't provoked into making rash statements against her rival. Instead, she directed her supporters to remain calm and keep their victory celebrations at a low key. According to reports, student activists of the Awami League were driven out of their Dhaka University hostels



HASINA WAJED

last night, allegedly by supporters of the BNP.

Reports of sporadic clashes between BNP and League supporters came in from some parts of the country. One person was killed and 20 injured in post-poll violence. There was trouble in Bagherhat.

Foreign observers have urged Hasina to accept the electoral

verdict gracefully. "She should fulfil her role as a responsible Opposition leader," a foreign diplomat said.

Vajpayee's message: Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee today felicitated Khaleda on her "emphatic electoral success" and assured her of his Government's commitment to further enriching Indo-Bangla relations.

"I look forward to working with you to promote cooperation for the progress and prosperity of our peoples," he said in his congratulatory message.

The Prime Minister pointed out that as close neighbours India and Bangladesh shared strong links of geography, history and culture and the long-standing friendship between the two countries was based on abiding bonds and common values.

Related report on Page 11

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES

4 OCT 2001

A NEW WAVE IN BANGLADESH? 110-10

THE MASSIVE MANDATE obtained by Begum Khaleda Zia's Bangladesh National Party and its allies has provoked her chief adversary, Sheikh Hasina, to dispute the fairness of the latest parliamentary election. A stunned Sheikh Hasina is furious over what she regards as "crude rigging" under the apolitical caretaker Government that oversaw the arrangements. Bangladesh's current constitutional practice is to hold general elections under caretaker administrations with no manifest links to the competing parties. Sheikh Hasina, who stepped down as Prime Minister at the end of her tenure to pave the way for the latest election to the Jatiya Sangsad, is willing to concede, nonetheless, that the voters were indeed "free" to exercise their franchise. By making such an arguably fine distinction, she is eager to point out that only one principle of the democratic dictum about a "free and fair poll" has been abided by in Bangladesh at this time. In a sense, this unusual contention seems to have something to do with her abiding faith in the country's self-determinant "freedom" which her father, the late Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, had successfully striven for. Yet, the burden of Sheikh Hasina's unorthodox comment is not lost on the national consciousness, with many opinion-makers in Dhaka urging her to accept the electoral verdict and move on as a constructive leader of the opposition with a chance to be Prime Minister yet again in due course. Obviously, the overwhelming concern of the pro-democracy Bangladeshis is that there should be no lurch to the autocracy that their country had witnessed prior to 1991. It is in this context that Sheikh Hasina should reconsider her apparent plans for a campaign against the latest election results, unless incontrovertible evidence can indeed be cited. For the moment, though, the initial comments by several key international poll observers indicate their overall satisfaction with the transparency and general fairness of the October 1 election.

It is an irony that Sheikh Hasina, who was in

power prior to the latest general election, should now complain about the integrity of the polling and the vote counting. Yet, she will not call for the abolition of the practice of holding a general election under a caretaker administration. She will not abandon her own "brainchild" — the idea of preventing the political parties in power at any given time from influencing the elections that might be held under their direct purview. If Bangladesh had felt constrained to opt for such additional safeguards without relying exclusively on autonomous bodies to conduct polls, the fragility of its democratic fabric is the prime consideration. While violence has often marred the politics of this densely populated South Asian state, it deserves praise for having stayed the democratic course so far. However, the immediate future of this democracy will be determined by the gathering political confrontation between Sheikh Hasina and Begum Zia. 110

A matter of electoral arithmetic is that Begum Zia's allies, who advocate a narrow Islam-oriented political agenda, may have actually contributed handsomely to the stunning margin of her victory. Now that her triumphal return to power as Prime Minister seems assured, Begum Zia has struck the right note by asking her followers to practise political tolerance. "Terrorism" or acute lawlessness across the country and a corruption-ridden economy have been identified as her immediate challenges. While Sheikh Hasina is widely seen as a proactive champion of Bangladesh's democracy, her record in office left much to be desired. Begum Zia, on the other hand, seems to have begun well on several counts. She says that Bangladesh will not become a religion-based state in spite of the preferences of some of her allies. This pledge should not be mistakenly interpreted as an answer to the current international confusion over religion and politics. However, no such note applies to her stated agenda for regional diplomacy — good neighbourly relations with India and a revival of the South Asian spirit.

THE HINDU

4 OCT 2001

Khaleda begins negotiations on govt

ASSOCIATED PRESS

DHAKA, Oct. 3. — Begum Khaleda Zia began consultations today to form a new government after her four-party alliance gained a thumping two-third majority in parliamentary elections.

Her defeated rival, former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, has challenged the tallies of Monday's ballots. Foreign observers however, said the election, supervised by a neutral caretaker administration, was free and fair.

Based on unofficial results, the Election Commission announced today that Khaleda Zia's Bangladesh Nationalist Party and allies had won 202 seats of the 283 where voting was completed.

Neither of the two women had promised to accept the election results. Sheikh Hasina said she would do so only if she felt the election was fair. Yesterday night, as preliminary results showed a Zia landslide, the former Prime Minister told reporters, "There was massive rigging and irregularities, and harassment of our supporters based on a pre-planned blueprint to ensure our defeat."



An Awami League demonstration in Dhaka on Wednesday against the election results. — AP/PTI

Hasina's Awami League from the 146 she won in 1996 elections, and a surprise to experts who had predicted a close vote. Small parties and inde-

pendents won the remaining 19 seats. Results from 16 seats have been held up because re-polling will be needed at 130 centers where voting was postponed because of violence. Six people were killed and about 100 were injured on election day.

No date has been set for the re-polling, but it has to be done before 15 October, the deadline for parliament to approve the new Prime Minister. However, that did not stop Begum Zia from meeting with aides and leaders of her allies, the Islamic fundamentalists parties, to discuss cabinet seats.

"We have a clear mandate to form a new government and we are making preparations," Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan, a close aide to Khaleda Zia, said today.

Begum Zia told a news conference yesterday that religion would not play a part in her administration. "An Islamic republic was not an alliance pledge," she said. Bangladesh, with a 88 per cent Muslim population, is governed by secular laws, something two of her fundamentalist allies want to change.

Bangladesh newspapers today prominently carried Khaleda Zia's appeal for unity.

THE STATESMAN

4 OCT 2001

Thumbs Up for Khaléda

The electoral verdict in Bangladesh is not unexpected. Sheikh Hasina's government was not proof against the unfulfilled expectations of the electorate, despite providing the country stability and sustained economic growth since it came to power in 1996. Given the high poverty and illiteracy rates of South Asian countries, it is in a sense impossible for any government to satisfy an electorate and so the iron law of incumbency operates, demanding the replacement of governments after one term. The corollary of this is that Sheikh Hasina can be expected to be returned to power if she takes the verdict on the chin and not lose nerve and do things that could inflict harm on her party and the always fragile polity of Bangladesh. One reason for the sweep is Begum Khaleda Zia's shrewd coalition-building that roped in two Islamic outfits, the Jamait-i-Islami and the Islami Oikkya Jote (Islamic Unity Front). This is a matter of some disquiet not just for India but Bangladesh's fledgling democracy and largely secular polity. Significantly, Begum Khaleda has been prompt in denying any move to convert Bangladesh into an "Islamic republic". Begum Khaleda's victory is a good occasion to re-look at India's policy towards Bangladesh. There has been a tendency towards paternalism on the part of New Delhi given India's role in the creation of Bangladesh and its links with the Awami League.

But sentiment and personalities cannot have a place in state-to-state relations. India has to deal with whoever is elected by the Bangladeshis and formulate a policy that will promote Indian national interests without in any way harming our neighbour. There are few neighbourhoods that are as close and as interdependent as India and Bangladesh. Not only do the two countries share the same rivers, but also a common past, cultural heritage and even a language. Hundreds of thousands of Bangladeshi migrants reside in India and thousands cross over every year. This porous border is a concern because it has also been used by terrorist elements to cross into India. All these issues provide both a challenge and opportunity for the two countries to work their relations to mutual benefit. In the past five years both countries have taken steps in this direction, but a lot remains to be done. The 1996 treaty on the sharing of Ganga waters appears to be working, the Chakmas have been repatriated and trade has grown. After the unfortunate incidents on the border earlier this year, there seems to be a fresh determination to complete the task of demarcating the border. Issues of transit facilities for India's north-east, and the utilisation of Bangla natural gas remain as does New Delhi's concern over Bangladesh's unconcern over the use of its territory by elements inimical to India. Besides SAARC, the two countries are also linked through the BIMST-EC which is a 1997 economic cooperation grouping linking Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, Sri Lanka and Thailand. Begum Khaleda's test will be to see whether she will build on the foundations laid by her predecessor or take a different route, one prompted on by her India-baiting allies. So far all the indicators are that she intends to run a moderate government and conduct "proper", if not friendly relations with India. Hopefully the scale of her victory will enable her to keep the Islamic radicals, many of whom are also bitterly anti-India, in check.

THE TIMES OF INDIA

4 OCT 2001

Unhazed by Khaleda Friday formula, Delhi offers hand



Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia after the poll results were announced. (AFP)

FROM PRANAY SHARMA

New Delhi, Oct. 2: One of the first changes expected to be put in place once the new dispensation takes over in Dhaka will be re-scheduling of the working system of the government by declaring Friday as the only weekly holiday.

It is likely to be a clever move by the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) leader and future Prime Minister Khaleda Zia aimed at keeping both the hardliners and the people of her country happy. But what is the message she is giving out to the outside world and particularly to India?

Is she willing to shed the secular character of the country, which the earlier regime pursued, or is it sheer pragmatism that led her to opt for Friday as the weekly holiday in a pre-dominantly Muslim country?

Sheikh Hasina's Awami League, which was decimated in the

polls, was seen as pro-India. By logic, therefore, BNP is expected to adopt a contrary line.

But experts and policymakers are divided over whether Khaleda, the Prime Minister, will be as vocal in highlighting her anti-Indian feelings as she had as Khaleda, the Opposition leader.

One of her first tests will come at the end of the year, when the Indo-Bangladesh treaty on sharing of Ganga water comes up for review. The occasional hiccups notwithstanding, the arrangement on water sharing for the past five years passed smoothly. It remains to be seen how the new BNP government views the situation and whether they demand any change in the current arrangement on what many feel is a sensitive issue.

India today came out with a short statement on the outcome of the Bangladesh elections, making it clear that it "looks forward to

working together" with the next government in Dhaka.

Once Khaleda Zia is formally sworn in as the Prime Minister, her Indian counterpart, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, is expected to write to her. But the Indian Prime Minister will need all his skills as a seasoned politician and diplomat to convince her that Delhi does not have any favourites in Dhaka and will continue to maintain as friendly a relation with her as it did with Sheikh Hasina's government.

Many observers believe that no government in Bangladesh can survive for long by pursuing a hostile policy towards India. "Sheikh Hasina may well have been dubbed pro-Indian, but Khaleda Zia will never consider herself to be anti-India," said a senior Bangladeshi diplomat.

He argued that despite a change of government in Dhaka, its attitude towards India has not changed fundamentally.

It is argued that bilateral trade had increased significantly during BNP rule. Moreover, the Teen Bigha corridor was opened up for the first time when Zia-ur-Rahman, Khaleda's husband, was in power in Bangladesh.

Diplomats from both India and Bangladesh feel that if the current level of interaction between the two sides continue, there is little to worry about souring of relations between Dhaka and Delhi.

But there are some areas where the BNP is likely to prove tougher negotiators than the League government. This is particularly true for the negotiations on giving transit rights to India through Bangladesh territory.

The Hasina government, despite its excellent relations with Delhi, could not grant India the rights. It remains to be seen whether Khaleda will be more accommodative on the issue as Prime Minister.

THE TELEGRAPH

3 OCT 2001

Khaleda gets absolute majority

PTI & UNI

DHAKA, Oct. 2. — Former Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia's Bangladesh Nationalist Party-led coalition today romped home with two-third majority in the 300-member Parliament, handing out its key rival Sheikh Hasina's Awami League its worst electoral drubbing.

But, Sheikh Hasina rejected the outcome of the polls alleging there was a "conspiracy" to "manipulate" the elections and threatened agitations.

With results of 282 of the total of 300 constituencies available, the four-party combine led by BNP secured 202 and its ally fundamentalist Jamaat-e-Islami bagged 16.

Awami League, which fought the poll alone, bagged just 61 seats.

Khaleda Zia will take over the office of the Prime Minister for the second term after ruling the country from 1991-1996.

Begum Zia tonight ruled out the possibility of the country becoming an Islamic Republic.

"Though it was mentioned in the manifesto of one of the alliance partners, the BNP government will have nothing to do with it," she told reporters.

She said Bangladesh would maintain good relation with the neighbouring countries.

India's reaction: India today said it looked forward to working with the new Bangladeshi government where Begum Khaleda Zia's BNP has won, adds SNS. An external affairs ministry statement said: "We look forward to working together with the next government in Bangladesh."

■ Assam hopes BNP will change stand, page 2 //

THE STATESMAN

3 OCT 2001

Resounding win for Khaleda Zia

^(w) ^{HD-1} ^{Zia} ^{Bangladesh}
DHAKA, Oct. 2. The former Bangladesh Prime Minister, Begum Khaleda Zia, sought to put to rest worries that she might abandon the country's secular laws and rule it as an Islamic state, after a preliminary count in the national elections handed her four-party coalition a resounding win on Tuesday.

With State television reporting that unofficial results gave Begum Zia's coalition 203 of the 299 parliamentary seats, worries have emerged that the three Islamic parties in her coalition could push for a religious state. So far, ballots for 282 seats have been hand-counted, State television said.

Begum Zia, leader of the Bangladesh National Party, told a packed news conference that she would form an alliance with the Islamic parties but religion would play no part in her Government.



The former Bangladesh Prime Minister and the BNP leader, Begum Khaleda Zia, is all smiles at a press conference in Dhaka on Tuesday. — AFP

"An Islamic republic was not an alliance pledge," she said.

The Awami League of Sheikh Hasina trailed with 61 seats, and

small, non-aligned parties or Independents won 18 seats, the television said. Official results are not expected until Wednesday. If it wins, Begum Zia's coalition would have until October 15 to form a new Government and select the next Prime Minister.

Begum Zia's main opponent, Sheikh Hasina, immediately challenged the count. She cited massive rigging and irregularities and harassment of her party's supporters.

According to the preliminary figures, the 203 seats held by Begum Zia's coalition included 17 representatives from the Jamaat-e-Islami and the Islami Oikya Jote. Begum Zia, 56, asked her supporters for thanksgiving prayers but urged them to refrain from street celebrations to avoid clashes with their defeated rivals.

— AP

Hasina's charge: Page 14

THE HINDU

7/11

Khaleda romps home, Hasina cries foul

Udayan Namboodiri
Dhaka, October 2

KHALEDA ZIA'S Bangladesh Nationalist Party today looked set to win a two-thirds majority in the 300-member Parliament, her four-party alliance handing out a crushing defeat to the Awami League. When reports last came in, the BNP was forging ahead having already notched up a tally of 186.

Perceived as a formation that came to power on an anti-India plank, the BNP's landslide win

could spell trouble for India. Routed and humbled, the Awami League refused to accept the verdict. Its leader, Hasina Wajed, rejected the result alleging widespread irregularities in the conduct of elections.

Referring to the Jamaate-Islami, the BNP's "fundamentalist" ally, she warned that Bangladesh could be on the brink of being led by "terrorists working in the name of Islam". The Jamaat won 17 seats. Calling the elections a fraud on the people, she didn't rule out the possibility of her

party boycotting Parliament. The interim administration, she charged, had colluded with her rivals. "Voters were intimidated. The minorities weren't even allowed to exercise their democratic rights. They were told to leave the country forthwith."

Hasina lost one of the five constituencies she contested. Khaleda Zia, fresh from her unprecedented victory, said the love and affection of her countrymen had overwhelmed her. Khaleda, widow of assassinated former President Gen Zia-ur-

POLL TALLY	
TOTAL SEATS	300
BNP + alliance	186 + 16*
Awami League	61*
Islamic Jatiya	
Oikya Jote	12*

* Results at midnight

Rehman, emerged from her restrictive lifestyle to lead the BNP. She has served a five-year term as Prime Minister of Bangladesh. The latest counts showed that

the League's strength in the House has dwindled to 61, down from 151 in the last Parliament. A number of its senior leaders, including Begum Motia Chowdhury, Abu Sayed, Abdus Samad Azad, Tofail Ahmed, Sajeda Chowdhury and Musharraf Hossain lost their seats. Azad, though, managed to salvage some pride when he won one of the two seats he contested.

Political commentator Syed Anwar Husein attributed Hasina's humiliating defeat to a strong anti-incumbency wave

sweeping the country.

Dhaka, considered a League bastion, too voted BNP. Khaleda's party bagging all eight seats in the city. The other alliance in the race, the Hussein Mohammed Ershad-led Islamic Jatiya Oikya Jote, won 12 seats.

BNP workers took over the capital city today, sprinkling coloured water on pedestrians and organising victory marches.

There was gloom in the League office with leaders holding strategy sessions, chalking out plans for a sustained agitation. The

League is stronger than the BNP in terms of cadre strength and Hasina supporters today put up banners in some localities proclaiming the day as "shoke dinas".

The League's belligerent reaction almost created a panic among Bangladesh's donor nations. Hours after Hasina's outburst, Joachim Miranda, head of the European Union's Election Observation Mission in Bangladesh, urged her to accept the popular mandate

Related report on Page 7

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES

3 OCT 2001

Battle of the begums

Khaleda's victory shows her new maturity as a politician

ANTI-INCUMBENCY is not peculiar to India as the results of Monday's parliamentary elections in Bangladesh clearly prove. The stunning defeat suffered by the Awami League led by Sheikh Hasina shows there was an undercurrent of popular disenchantment with the ruling party which neither psephologists nor political analysts had fathomed. The former prime minister is less than graceful when she attributes the victory the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) led by Begum Khaleda Zia achieved entirely to rigging and other electoral malpractices. In making the charge, Hasina forgets that the idea of a caretaker government holding elections was mooted and incorporated into the Bangladesh constitution at her own behest. However, the charge does not take the sheen out of the victory the four-party alliance led by the BNP has achieved. Zia's comeback is in many ways more spectacular than Hasina's victory in 1996, in that her party has obtained a clear majority on its own. But, at another level, the results denote a mere exchange of seats between the two feisty begums.

In 1996, when Sheikh Hasina was elected prime minister, it was seen as the end of 21 years of ruthless oppression, freewheeling corruption and overt and covert martial law. Obviously, she could not sustain that impression as, in due course, Khaleda Zia proved herself a doughty campaigner and lampooned Hasina for her corrupt and autocratic ways. Interestingly, in this election, Khaleda

made few references to her slain husband as was her wont. Of course, she made full use of the perception among some sections of the voters that Hasina is close to India in order to put her on the defensive. Khaleda knows only too well that there is a large anti-India constituency in Bangladesh willing to be exploited. But this time she also took care to woo minority votes by visiting the famous Dhakeshwari temple and promising protection to Hindus and their property. Her visit to the temple was proof of her coming of age as a politician. Such skills will hopefully help her in her second stint in office.

Though the India factor played a role in the elections, the results do not matter much to India. It is true that during Hasina's time a thirty-year Ganga water sharing treaty was signed with Bangladesh. A peace accord on the Chittagoing Hill Tracts was also put in place. But throughout her tenure, Hasina appeared to be eager to remove the impression that she was close to India. This was clear during the border skirmishes in April this year when she took a "tough" stand against this country. Her government was as reticent or as forthcoming as Khaleda Zia's was to Indian appeals for cooperation in fighting insurgency or ending the illegal migration from Bangladesh. For Indian diplomacy, therefore, the change of guard in Dhaka will not make much difference. After all, a country can't choose its neighbours or the leaders of its neighbours. It has to live with them.

INDIAN EXPRESS

3 OCT 2001

Khaleda leads; five killed in Bangla poll violence

AGENCIES

DHAKA, Oct. 1. - Riding a strong anti-incumbency wave, Begum Khaleda Zia's Bangladesh Nationalist Party tonight appeared set for a resounding victory in the general elections, reports said.

Five people were killed and nearly 1,000 injured amid sporadic poll violence. The voter turn-out was a record 80 per cent, reports said.

According to preliminary results announced by the election commission, the BNP was leading in 61 and its ally, Jamaat-e-Islami, in four seats.

Sheikh Hasina's Awami League was leading in 15 constituencies while the former President, Mr HM Ershad's Jatiya Party was leading in seven. Independents were ahead in five seats and the Jatiya Party (Manzu) in one seat.

The victims are all political workers killed in clashes with rivals in Bhola and Barisal.



A Bangladeshi soldier stands guard as women queue up to vote during the parliamentary elections in Dhaka on Monday. - AP/PTI

Polling was suspended in 109 centres for various reasons, including snatching of ballot papers. Two candidates - president of the Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal and a BNP nominee - were arrested for allegedly indulging in malpractices.

THE STATESMAN

2 OCT 2001

It's a crucial choice: secularism or fundamentalism

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A policeman carries a ballot box at the election material distribution centre in Dhaka on Sunday. - API/PTI

MAMASH GHOSH
STATESMAN NEWS SERVICE

KOLKATA, Sept. 30. — Bangladesh goes to the polls tomorrow to elect its eighth Parliament. Never before has the country witnessed such a fiercely fought election, nor for that matter has any election been so clearly polarised on religious lines. The run-up has been marred by unprecedented clashes between rival parties and bombings of political rallies which so far have claimed about 300 lives with Sheikh Hasina's Awami League being at the receiving end.

The electoral battle is between the Awami League representing the ideals of liberalism, democracy and secularism, and Begum Khaleda Zia's BNP-led four party Islamic alliance which wants Bangladesh to be turned into an Islamic state and establishing "Islami Hukumat".

BANGLADESH GOES TO POLLS

In terms of political stability and economic development in South Asia the poll outcome will be significant, especially against the backdrop of the gathering storm in Afghanistan. For India the electoral verdict will be crucial since peace, stability and development in its North-east are greatly dependent on the nature of government that is installed in Dhaka. Begum Zia has lent full support to "wars of independence that gallant freedom fighters of India's subjugated north-east are waging to free themselves from the Indian yoke." Victory for her alliance will mean renewed support to Indian insurgents, just as she provided during 1991-96 BNP rule, which will further destabilise the troubled North-east. Already she has promised to renegotiate with Delhi, Sheikh Hasina's "unequ-

al" Ganga waters treaty which she says is a total sell out to India and has adopted a radical agenda to "put India in place." But it is the Black Tuesday that has given a shot in the arm and Sunna void. This has been the main campaign plank of the two parties which have strong fraternal ties with Pakistani outfits and even favour confederation with Pakistan.

This is natural since many of their present leaders had taken part in massacres, rape and carnage of 1971 as they were committed allies of Pakistan whose breakup they dourly resisted. Their students' fronts raised slogans to turn Bangladesh into Afghanistan ("Amra sabai Taleban, Bangla hobey Afghanistan"). In Narail the Islami Oikya Jote's candidate against Sheikh

Begum Zia's alliance is sure to

See BANGLADESH: page 9

THE STATESMAN
1 OCT 2001

BANGLADESH:

Bombay 5/9 (Continued from page 1) 1/10

Hasina is a little known Mufti, a product of Karachi's International Islamic University who has connections with Harkat-ul-Ansar. His surprise nomination shocked many since both the BNP and Jamat had better candidates. The mufti filed his nomination soon after his return from Saudi Arabia where he had gone after being released from jail for bombing a Kadiani mosque.

Maulana Saeedi, a senior Jamat leader and the alliance's candidate from Pirojpur, has called his much respected Awami League opponent Sudhansu Haldar a "Hindu Kafir." His leading role against 1971 liberation war and open collaboration with the Pakistanis had earned him the stigma of "Rajakar." But he now flaunts it as a badge of honour and has appealed to Muslims to "vote for a Muslim Rajakar than a Hindu Kafir." For the first time since liberation the fundamentalist scourge is haunting the minorities so badly that at many Awami League rallies they were too scared to recite excerpts from their religious scriptures fearing attack from the Jamat.

During the last two months' stewardship of the neutral caretaker government, systematic attacks on minorities have been carried out by the Jamat. The purpose is to create a scare so that on election day they do not come out to vote; the minorities who have traditionally voted for the Awami League, are a determining factor in at least 40 of 300 parliamentary seats.

The fundamentalists have targeted Sheikh Hasina. Jamat has called her a Hindu since she allowed herself to be anointed with the customary Chandan tilak while receiving the Deshikottama from Visva-Bharati. She has been called an infidel for allowing the Venezuelan President to kiss her hand at an international gathering. Millions of posters bearing pictures of her "unislamic acts" adorn the walls.

The high pitched communal campaign of the Islamic alliance is the most distinguishing feature of this election. Begum Zia has sought to project Awami League as an enemy of Islam who will banish Islam and closure of all madrasas. It will also mean disbandment of the army and bartering away the country's sovereignty to India. She recalled how the servitors of Islam were jailed and humiliated by Hasina during the movement by clerics against the high court forbidding them from issuing fatwas. If voted to power she has pledged to reappoint the khatib of Bangladesh's national mosque whom Hasina had removed because he had got involved in movements against the court verdict.

The Islamic resurgence in this election is the result of Begum Zia roping in the support of fundamentalists for her own ends. She is banking heavily on the solid 10 per cent votes that the Jamat and other fundamentalist parties have. Arithmetically she is well ahead of Awami League's 37 per cent vote share when the 10 per cent Islamist votes are added to her BNP's 33 per cent. This is why she has closely identified herself with the fundamentalists and campaigned intensively for the victory of their candidates. By acknowledging them as equal partners of her coalition she has not only lent them political respectability and sought to wash away their stigma of being political pariahs but also brought them to the centre stage of national politics. In fact if voted to power the Jamat for the first time since 1971 will be part of any Bangladesh government and will claim to key portfolios.

The communal and negative campaign of Begum Zia has put Awami League on the defensive. Sheikh Hasina has been forced to say that if voted to power again she will not enact laws, which go against the spirit of Islam. She had to highlight her efforts to promote Madrasa education and how she ensured salary for Maulavis from the state exchequer. Actually the communal onslaught overshadowed the real achievements of Hasina's five-year rule in such a way that her gains like turning Bangladesh from a perennially food deficit into a food surplus state, holding the price line of rice and other essentials, alleviating poverty and boosting exports have all been pushed to the sidelines.

What is also likely to affect Awami League's electoral prospects is the "highly partisan functioning of the neutral caretaker government" which forced Hasina to say publicly that the NCG's main agenda was to ensure victory of Begum Zia's alliance. She is banking heavily on women voters, about 50 per cent of the total.

THE STATESMAN

1 OCT 2001

Violence cloud over tight Bangla race

Ban Nadir H-1 1/10

Udayan Namboodiri
Dhaka, September 30

A CLOSE race is expected in Bangladesh which goes to the polls tomorrow with independent monitors fearing widespread violence during the voting.

Khaleda Zia, the main opposition Bangladeshi Nationalist Party leader, expects to cash in on an anti-incumbency wave against the five-year Awami League rule under Hasina Wahed.

In the highly polarised election fray, the voters have to choose between the two. In 1996,

Hasina formed a Government by breaking the Jatiya Party of former military ruler General H M Ershad. This time the General's party, which is almost a nonentity, can be safely ruled out.

A party has to secure 151 seats in the 300-member House to get a majority. With neither party looking at certain victory, frenetic horse-trading is expected once the results are declared.

The scales are weighed against the BNP, which has more rebels than the Awami League, as Khaleda had to accommodate the hardline Jamaat-e-Islami, the Islami Eikya Jot and a faction of the Jatiya Party. There

are at least 50 dissidents in the BNP camp who are posing a threat to the party's vote bank.

The Awami League is going it alone and has managed to keep the rebel voices in check.

The escalation in violence in the run-up to the polls is another sign of the tight race ahead. Already more than 40 people have been killed and hundreds injured.

"One of the begums has to lose, but neither wants to be the loser. So we expect widespread violence after October 3," said former Ambassador Syed Mohammed Hussien in the leading English language daily.

The Independent.

Several foreign envoys echoed him with US Ambassador Mary Ann Peters, British High Commissioner David Carter and other mission heads urging both parties to "accept the people's verdict gracefully".

Khaleda said: "I am prepared to accept a negative verdict if the polls are free and fair."

Hasina has already warned her supporters to expect an unfair outcome as Latifur Rehaman, chief adviser to the caretaker government, is favouring the BNP.

Related report on Page 11

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES

Minority vote could dictate outcome of Bangla polls 1/10

Dhaka, September 30 *MG 11*

THE 10 million minority voters in Bangladesh, most of them Hindus, could emerge as the deciding factor in the country's October 1 elections, say analysts.

The country's 10 per cent minority population, which also comprises Buddhists and Christians, could make a difference in at least 20-25 seats in the 300-seat Parliament. More than 70 million people will vote in tomorrow's elections.

The tilt of the minority vote bank could decide which of the two main political groups — the Awami League (AL) and the four-party alliance led by Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) — would form the next Government.

"Minority voters are the determining factor in several seats in Jessore, Khulna, Faridpur and Nariyal districts and Chittagong Hill Tracts. They could dictate the outcome in at least 20-25 seats, which could make all the

difference in the final count," said Haroon Habib, former chief of the national news agency. He predicted a thin margin for the winning party.

The minority vote bank has traditionally backed Awami League's candidate Sheikh Hasina, who is viewed as a liberal. "Both AL and BNP are wooing the minority voters. But, AL definitely has an edge over the BNP," said Niaz Ali, another political observer.

One of the major reasons for the minority voters' tilt towards the AL is their continuing persecution by alleged Islamic fundamentalists, who are said to be resorting to terror tactics to prevent the estimated eight million Hindu voters from exercising their franchise.

There have been reports from many minority-dominated areas of attacks on Hindus, warning them to stay away from voting stations on Monday. Reports from Jessore, Thakurgaon,

Barisal, Narayanganj and Nariyal said Islamic radicals were openly threatening them.

One of BNP's allies, the rigid Jamaat-e-Islami, has stated that if the alliance were voted to power they would declare Bangladesh an Islamic State. "This has not gone down well with the minority community," said Habib.

Several candidates of the BNP are said to be former collaborators (Rajakars) of Pakistan's Al-Badr army that persecuted Bengali Muslims during the 1971 war. The AL has alleged that the BNP, by fielding such "traitors", was undermining the concept of Bengali nationhood that gave birth to Bangladesh.

"If minority voters could vote without fear, the AL could be more sure of its victory. But it seems their (Islamic fundamentalists') terror tactic is working," a Hindu voter in Dhaka said on condition of anonymity.

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THE HINDUSTAN TIMES

SEP 30 2001

'India factor' muted on Bangla poll canvas

FROM ASHIS CHAKRABARTI

Dhaka, Sept. 30: Unlike in previous elections, the so-called "India factor" has been largely missing in Bangladesh's election campaign this time. Both the Awami League, usually seen here as India's favourite, and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, the habitual India-baiter, have steered clear of India-related rant and rhetoric.

On the eve of tomorrow's polls, BNP chairperson Khaleda Zia, however, indicated today that her party would not like the India-Bangladesh Friendship Treaty to be renewed. At an informal meeting with journalists here, she said the two countries had "friendly relations" but that did not mean the treaty needed to be renewed.

The 25-year treaty which lapsed in 1999 had been an election issue in 1996 when the BNP accused the Awami League of succumbing to Indian pressures to renew it. But the League government of Sheikh Hasina did not revive it, thereby taking the steam out of the BNP campaign on this.

The other major "India factors" in the 1996 campaign were the agreement on the Tin Bigha corridor in Cooch Behar district of north Bengal in 1993 and more importantly, the agreement on the sharing of Ganga water at Farakka barrage, which came after the elections in December, 1996.

The BNP and its allies had used these issues in the last election to try and build up anti-India sentiment.

A couple of days before the elections, one Dhaka newspaper sympathetic to the Jamat-e-Islami came up with a wild story alleging that a "blueprint" for rigging the polls to help the Awami League had been prepared at the Fort William in Calcutta.

It is different this time. The right of passage given to India



Begum Zia, Sheikh Hasina

across the Tin Bigha corridor is no longer seen, as the BNP then alleged, as a "surrender of Bangladeshi sovereignty to India".

The Sheikh Hasina government silenced its critics by signing a 30-year treaty with India on the Ganga waters issue. The BNP had threatened to "paralyse" the government if it agreed to a treaty of less than 10 years.

One reason why the BNP-led four-party alliance had left India out of its poll rhetoric is, according to analysts here, that it had realised the futility of India-baiting as an electoral ploy.

Also, both the League and the BNP have accepted that they had no choice but "to do business with India as a neighbour", said an official of the Indian high commission.

But India would not like to see political instability across its eastern borders. The problem is that neither the League nor the BNP-led alliance is poised to get a clear majority in the 300-member parliament.

In the event of a hung parliament, the Jatiya Party faction led by former president H. M. Ershad may again be the deciding factor.

The Jatiya Party and its three minor allies are contesting 182

seats. The League is contesting all 300 seats while the BNP has put up 249 candidates of its own and has left 31 to Jamat-e-Islami and the rest to the Islami Aikya Jot and another faction of the Jatiya Party.

But piecing together a majority this time may be a little more difficult than last time. In 1996, the League, which won 146 seats as against the BNP's 116, got the support of the undivided Jatiya Party. In addition, it took advantage of the constitutional provision for nominating 30 women members, thereby adding up a comfortable majority.

The provision for nominating 30 women members has since lapsed because it was allowed in the constitution for 10 years only. The new government has to amend the constitution to provide for these nominations again. But that, too, is unlikely because a constitutional amendment requires the support of the two-thirds of the parliament members.

In Bangladesh, it is difficult to hope for any understanding between the BNP and the League on any issue. Hence the greater uncertainty this time over the aftermath of a hung verdict.

THE TELEGRAPH

- 1 OCT 2001

Bangla angst over hardliners in fray

8-11-79
Dhaka

deadline tomorrow for rallies. Collaboration by some of the Islamists with the Pakistan Army during the 1971 war is the main grievance of secularists and war veterans. Islamists expect this poll will put them in power for the first time, sparking concern among liberals who fear further erosion of Bangladesh's founding principle of secularism.

10 DIE, 300 HURT ON LAST DAY OF RALLIES

roughly double the number of casualties during the 1996 campaign. But officials said they hoped violence would stop or substantially ease after campaigning for Monday's polls officially ends at midnight on Saturday.

Four activists of the Awami League were shot dead by paramilitary soldiers near Chittagong port late on Friday and three others died in clashes between militants from the Awami League and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party.

A high-powered law and order committee met here on Friday night. A spokesman said they felt some of the polling stations in the capital could become troublesome, even as security forces prepared to impose a 48-hour ban on political meetings beginning midnight today. Tension simmered across the country ahead of the final

AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

DHAKA, Sept. 29. — About 2,000 people protested today over fears that Bangladesh could be transformed into a Taliban-style hardline Islamic state after the 1 October election. The demonstrators — including relatives of six celebrated fallen veterans of Bangladesh's 1971 War of Independence — formed a human chain here in protest against Muslim fundamentalist candidates contesting the polls.

Islamist parties are contesting 37 seats in elections to the four-seat Parliament under a Bangladesh Nationalist Party. The protesters said candidates of the alliance's Jamaat-e-Islami party and the right-wing Islami Oikya Jote would, if elected, undermine secularism, remove democracy and withdraw women's basic rights.

"The identified anti-liberation forces and collaborators



Singers, actors and painters demonstrate in Dhaka on Saturday against the presence of fundamentalist elements in the elections. — AP/PTI

of Pakistan are trying to capture power in the name of the four-party alliance," they said in a published appeal. They warned "if these forces are voted to power, the lives sacrificed by ... freedom fighters will be meaningless".

Meanwhile in sporadic violence around the country, the toll in the blood-stained campaign climbed today. At least 10 people were killed and 300 injured in shootings, bomb attacks and gunfights in violence today, police said. Violence flared across the country of 130 million people despite authorities deploying 55,000 troops in a desperate effort to improve law and order.

Police said nearly 290 people have been killed and thousands injured in poll violence over the past few weeks between supporters of Awami League and arch-rivals Bangladesh Nationalist Party.

The Awami leader, Sheikh Hasina Wajed, held a relatively peaceful rally here today marking the climax to a whistle-stop campaign. The BNP is headed by Begum Khaleda Zia. The poll is being overseen by a non-party caretaker government headed by the former chief justice, Mr Latifur Rahman, who took over on July 15 from Sheikh Hasina, the first PM here to serve a full term.

Hasina held her last pre-election rally here yesterday and Khaleda one this afternoon. Then the two will make separate live broadcast on the state-run television.

BANGLADESH POLL

Doubts about it being free, fair and peaceful

SUNDAY'S bomb blast at an Awami League rally in Khulna, which claimed eight lives, is the most serious incident in the run up to Bangladesh's eighth parliamentary election scheduled for 1 October. The blast follows the pattern of four earlier ones this year which targeted parties and functions secular in character. Over 50 people have been killed in blasts set off at the Communist Party rally in Dhaka's Paltan Maidan, the Bengali new year's function at Dhaka's Ramna Green, the Awami League central office in Narayanganj and a village church in remote Faridpur. The Awami League, which is leading the charge of the secularist forces against the Islamists led by Begum Khaleda Zia's four-party alliance, has borne the brunt of these blasts. Matters have not improved even after the unprecedented deployment of 65,000 military and para-military personnel well ahead of the elections. The neutral caretaker government seems to be failing in its primary duty of creating an atmosphere conducive to peaceful elections. The pre-poll clashes and killings are unprecedented. Actually the NCG has made itself controversial by taking decisions which, even to impartial observers, seem downright partisan. Sheikh Hasina has openly questioned its neutrality. There is little doubt that her cousin Sheikh Helal was the target of the bomb blast.

That Islamic fundamentalists are behind most of these blasts is not in doubt. They have motivation, political will and the means to carry out such nefarious acts. Begum Zia by aligning with fundamentalist parties like the Jamat-e-Islam and Islamic Oikya Jote has provided them with political respectability. She has not discouraged them from their hate campaign against minorities. A prominent Jamat candidate has called his Awami League rival, a prominent minority leader, a *kafir* and demanded his banishment. The election commission has refused to take action despite the district administration's demands. All this has emboldened the fundamentalists to be more reckless and has led to attacks on minorities in the districts. No wonder apprehension is being voiced that if these trends are not reversed it may vitiate the outcome of the parliamentary poll. If that happens Bangladesh's nascent democracy will be the worst casualty. Bangladesh is poised on the brink of another disaster.

THE STATESMAN

27 SEP 2001

U.S. has not sought help: Dhaka

By our Special Correspondent

DHAKA, SEPT. 17. Bangladesh has denied it received any U.S. request for airspace and port facilities in the event of an attack on Afghanistan.

Mr. Shafi Sami, Special Assistant to the Chief Adviser in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, told newsmen today, "My answer is no." when asked to comment on a newspaper report which suggested that the U.S. Government had sought permission from Bangladesh for using a number of strategic facilities for a possible attack on Afghanistan or other terrorist havens in the region, "if the need arises."

Asked how Bangladesh, which

had earlier condemned the terrorist attacks, would respond if the U.S. made such a request, the spokesman of the interim Government, who was recently appointed as the Special Assistant to the Chief Adviser, Mr. Justice Latifur Rahman, said, "we will cross the bridge when we come to it."

Press reports also said Mr. Sami had convened a meeting of former Foreign Ministers and Foreign Secretaries on Sunday to discuss the U.S. request.

Mr. Sami said Bangladesh abhorred terrorism in all its forms and the President, Mr. Shahabuddin Ahmed, and Mr. Justice Latifur Rahman had already condemned the tragic incidents.

"There has been a consensus and unanimity in Bangladesh in condemning the terrorist attacks on the United States."

Meanwhile, the Foreign Office has said about 50 Bangladeshis were feared killed in the attack on the World Trade Center, but they could identify only a few of them so far.

The caretaker Government has denied the presence of any Taliban leader in the country, though a high-powered delegation of the Awami League, which ruled the country for the last five years, on Sunday apprised the President of its "concern" over the reported infiltration of Taliban leaders into Bangladesh.

THE HINDU

18 SEP 2001

Jamaat may pressure BNP on Islamic state

By Our Special Correspondent

DHAKA, SEPT. 8. With elections less than a month away, the only party which has announced its election manifesto so far is the Jamaat-E-Islami, the dominant partner of the Begum Khaleda Zia-led alliance.

The Islamic organisation has declared that if voted to power, it will make Bangladesh an Islamic republic. Under the Constitution, Bangladesh is now a People's Republic. The Jamaat-E-Islami is confident that the combine will win the two-thirds majority in parliament that is required to make any constitutional amendment. The party manifesto was announced by its Ameer (president), Maulana Matiur Rahman Nizami at a news conference here. The Jamaat has also pledged to "rehabilitate the freedom fighters" if voted to power, a commitment that goes against their fundamental beliefs as they were the only party that collaborated with the Pakistani army during the nation's war of liberation.

As a partner of the Begum Khaleda Zia-led alliance, the Jamaat is contesting 31 out of 300 seats. Political analysts believe that the strong cadre-based party may put pressure on the Bangladesh Nationalist Party to come to an understanding on the issue of Islamic republic. The other partners in the alliance, including the Islami Oikya Jote (IOJ) and a faction of the Jatiya party will favour declaring the country an Islamic republic. Some minor partners



The Bangladesh Nationalist Party chairperson, Ms Khaleda Zia, announces her party's election manifesto at a function in Dhaka on Friday. — AP

of the Khaleda alliance have long been demanding enforcement of strict Islamic laws. Some of them are also alleged to have Taliban connections. Maulana Matiur Rahman Nizami, who was the chief of the infamous Al Badar outfit that killed most of the leading Bengali intellectuals during the end of the 1971 war, said "to implement the manifesto we will launch a movement inside and outside parliament".

The former President Mr. H.M. Ershad, has got back the party's "plough" symbol after a protracted legal battle with another faction led by Mr. Anwar Hossain Manjoo.

Mr. Ershad, along with the Pir of Charmo-nai, an orthodox sectarian leader, recently formed the Islamic Oikya Front. He is fielding more than 200 candidates but he has been barred from contesting the polls after a conviction in a corruption case.

In the election manifesto of his party, Mr. Ershad declared that he would create six provinces in the country if voted to power. The implementation of this pledge will also require a constitutional change.

Meanwhile, there has been widespread concern over the chief of the interim Government, Justice Latifur Rahman's recent remarks that he will consider any proposal for him to become the next President.

In a joint statement, a group of eminent personalities demanded an immediate clarification from the head of the caretaker government about the comment he made while exchanging views with members of the Overseas Correspondents' Association.

They feared that Justice Rahman may have already got an assurance from certain political parties to become the next President. The statement termed Justice Rahman's comments "immoral" and said it went against the spirit of the non-party Government.

THE HINDU

Bangladesh parties announce candidates

By Our Special Correspondent

DHAKA, AUG. 31. All the major political parties in Bangladesh have announced the lists of their candidates for the October 1 general election that has generated world-wide interest.

While the Awami League of Sheikh Hasina declared nominations for the 300-seat Jatiya Sangsad (Parliament) on August 27, the BNP-led four-party combine did it a day later. The smaller parties too have announced their lists. The combine of 11 left-leaning parties announced a list of over 200 candidates, saying they would contest the poll unitedly. It is expected that the Awami League, which is seeking to return to power with a greater majority, will have no major problem in the candidates selection process. But the Awami League too is facing problems in many constituencies. Frustrated aspirants reportedly revolted in some places.

But the situation in the Begum Khaleda Zia-led alliance seems more difficult. The major partner, the BNP, has so far earmarked 249 seats for itself, 31 for the Jamaat-e-Islami, 14 for a faction of the Jatiya Party and seven for the Islami Chhaya Jote. The high command of the Ja-



The Bangladesh Awami League candidate, Dr. H.B.M. Iqbal, in the car is cheered on his way to file nomination papers for Parliament elections in Dhaka early this week. — AP

won only two seats. In many places ticket aspirants from the Jamaat confronted BNP leaders, particularly those who played important roles in the country's War of Liberation in 1971. The Communications Minister in the last BNP regime and freedom fighter, Col. Oli Ahmed, had to seek police protection alleging that he might be killed by the Jamaat-e-Islami's cadres. Col. Oli's seat was wanted by a key Jamaat leader in Chittagong. In some places, the militant Islami Chhatra Shibir of the Jamaat-e-Islami openly went against the party leadership for more seats from the BNP. Similarly, many BNP leaders, who were denied tickets to accommodate the Jamaat and other partners, also revolted.

By and large, the Awami League high command seemed happy with its nominations. The leaders said they had chosen the "best possible candidates". Referring to the discontent in some party circles, they termed it as "temporary" and hoped that things would come under control soon. Sheikh Hasina, meanwhile, issued warnings against any "indiscipline" and advised all to work for the candidates since, according to her, the coming election was "the second liberation war".

maat-e-Islami seemed happy over getting 31 candidates included in the list, thanks to hard bargaining. In the last election the party had

Interim Govt. provokes criticism with poll move

By Our Special Correspondent

B. 20/8/15
+ P. 15

DHAKA, AUG. 29. Even as controversy continues over an amendment to the electoral laws, the interim Government led by Mr. Justice Latifur Rahman has now approved a second amendment to the controversial provisions which most major political parties of Bangladesh are opposed to.

The recently promulgated ordinance gives the Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) absolute powers which are in contravention of the country's constitution, according to senior constitutional experts and major political parties. The Chief Election Commissioner, Mr. M. A. Sayed's action in forming a "security council" with the three chiefs of the armed forces and himself as the chief, without the knowledge of the other three Election Commissioners, has been met with protests.

While the Begum Khaleda Zia-led BNP-Jamaat axis endorsed most of the new provisions but objecting to some, the Awami League led by Sheikh Hasina, objected to the creation of the Security Council with the CEC as its chief.

Mr. Abdul Gaffar Chowdhury, a columnist and litterateur, who now lives in London but writes regularly in Dhaka's leading dailies, has expressed apprehension at "the implementation of a secret blueprint" to defeat the secular democratic forces which freed Bangladesh from Pakistan in 1971.

While critical about the Awami League for its lapses when in government, Mr. Chowdhury — whose song "*Amar bhaer rakte rangano ekushe February, ami ki bhulite pari* (how can I forget the blood of my brothers shed on February 21) was the guiding spirit of the secular Bengali nationhood — also chided Sheikh Hasina for not understanding beforehand "a subtle conspiracy".

Mr. Chowdhury said: "Despite limitations and shortcomings the survival of the nation's secular democracy depends largely on the winning of the Awami League — the pro-liberation forces — in the coming election...I have every reason to believe that the Pakistani hands are quite visible. Otherwise the caretaker Government headed by the former Chief Justice of the country could not have replaced the nation's Liberation War heroes from various key State positions and replaced them by the known anti-liberation elements, including the war criminals of 1971".

Sheikh Hasina, who launched her formal election campaign from Sylhet today, earlier told a gathering of the country's intellectuals and leading professionals that "a secret plan" to install the "defeated forces of 1971" in power was on. She hoped that the interim Government would refrain from actions which exposed its "partisan character".

Sheikh Hasina said "Please do consider the coming election as our second liberation war...I am telling you a serious conspiracy is on to undo the popular mandate."

With elections a little more than a month away, the leading players have finalised their candidates — a tough task because of internal feuding — and are expected to announce the lists within a day or two. The alliance of the Jamaat-E-Islami and BNP is facing a crucial test of its unity as disagreements have already surfaced over seat-sharing. Begum Khaleda, however, expressed her confidence that her alliance will win the elections with two-thirds majority.

According to Begum Khaleda, the country is now united in "resisting the Awami League".

From source: The World Heritage Report 1999

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES

5 AUG 2001

PORTENTS IN DHAKA

Caretaker government becomes controversial

FOR the first time since 1991 Bangladesh's novel experiment with the concept of a neutral caretaker government to conduct fair elections has run into rough weather. Since its installation in office on 15 July, the NCG have taken a series of controversial measures. To correct a few appointments made by Sheikh Hasina for electoral advantage the NCG have gone overboard and replaced as many as 1500 key officials mostly by supporters of the BNP and Islamist groups. Some had openly collaborated with the Pakistanis against Bangladesh's liberation war and participated in the massacre of Bengalis. The head of Bangladesh's official news agency, a respected journalist and freedom fighter, has been replaced by a committed Pakistani loyalist who had played a key role in the genocide of Bengalis in Chittagong. Mainstream newspapers have expressed outrage against the appointment of "this well known war criminal" and forced the NCG to institute an inquiry. Even heads of sports control boards have been replaced although they have no role in elections. Such moves are unprecedented.

Sheikh Hasina is not wrong to publicly accuse the NCG of pursuing an "unfortunate partisan line" whose purpose is to defeat the Awami League by following a "Pakistani blueprint". BNP and Jamaat leaders admit that many appointees are their own men. No wonder there is no let up in the Islamists' attack on the minorities. The ones in Jessore are their latest victims. Nor have the huge arms stockpiled by the Islamists been touched. Unless the NCG can assert itself and rise above partisan considerations not only will 1 October's parliamentary elections be threatened but Bangladesh's nascent democracy may be in serious jeopardy.

THE STATESMAN

Holy kickoff to Hasina campaign

Dhaka, Aug. 27 (Reuters): Former Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina today kicked off a campaign for October's parliamentary elections by offering prayers at the shrine of a great Muslim saint.

She was following a custom that has seen politicians launch campaigns at the tomb of the saint Hazrat Shah Jalal in the north-eastern district of Sylhet, 280 km from Dhaka.

Hasina's bitter rival, Begum

Khaleda Zia, also made the trek to the shrine earlier this month.

In a less spiritual way, however, Hasina is doing her best to secure victory.

Hasina will fight the polls on October 1 from five constituencies, the maximum her country's constitution allows an individual to stand from.

Her Awami League political party unveiled a list of candidates in which several ministers in her former government will also

stand from more than one seat at the October 1 election.

Contestants include three former army chiefs and an ex navy chief and a popular television performer. "We are announcing candidates for 283 of parliament's 300 seats. The rest would be named shortly," said former industry minister Tofael Ahmed, who is himself contesting three seats.

"The seven seats are expected to be offered to influential leaders of smaller parties who are expected to join the League," Ahmed said, but gave no details.

Besides Hasina, only nine women were named to contest the election, including three former ministers.

Hasina's opposition, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) of Begum Khaleda Zia, also a former Prime Minister, said it

also named 173 candidates today.

Next Wednesday is the deadline for contestants to submit applications to the Election Commission. The election would be supervised by a caretaker government headed by former chief justice Latifur Rahman, who took over on July 15 from Hasina at the end of her five-year term in office.

Hasina's government was the first in Bangladesh's history to serve its full term.

The country's constitution requires the non-party caretaker authority to hold new election within three months and ensure the voting is free and fair.

Police said political strife has killed more than 200 people and injured more than 1,000 since Rahman took charge, vowing to stamp out violence and seize illegal weapons. Bangladesh's former

"I will seek support from other political parties to form the next government after October 1 general election," Ershad told reporters as he unveiled his party's election manifesto. Ershad, 71, will not himself not be in the fray after Bangladesh's High Court stripped him of his membership of parliament and barred him from contesting polls for five years on grounds of "moral turpitude" for conviction on a graft charge.

"My party will secure more than 35 seats," Ershad said, in a reference to the total of 300 seats up for grabs.

Political observers expect a closely fought election between the Awami League political party of immediate-past Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) of her predecessor Begum Khaleda Zia.

The likely outcome would be a hung parliament in which Jatiya's support would be crucial for the League or the BNP to form the government, they said.

The Telegraph

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THE TELEGRAPH

28 AUG 2001

Interim Govt.'s actions come under a cloud

By Our Special Correspondent

DHAKA, AUG. 26. In an unprecedented move in the history of Bangladesh, a caretaker Government whose sole duty is to hold a free and fair election, has taken highly controversial steps one after another.

According to reports appearing in the mainstream Bengali newspapers, many of the actions taken by the Government were "highly controversial and questionable". Mass circulated dailies such as *Janakantha*, *Sangbad* and *Bhorer Kagoj* were critical of the mass transfers of top bureaucrats and the termination of contractual jobs given by the immediate past Government of Sheikh Hasina. They termed these moves as a "a well-chalked-out conspiracy to destroy the caretaker Government's concept itself".

Supporters of the secular democratic forces which are known as "pro-Liberation" in Bangladesh politics, have also expressed alarm at what they dubbed as a "planned conspiracy to rehabilitate pro-Pakistani elements in key positions by replacing those senior professionals who fought in the nation's War of Liberation in 1971".

On her return home from abroad three days ago, the Awami League leader and former Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina, publicly accused the Government of toeing "an unfortunate partisan line" and decried that respected freedom fighters in key positions were being replaced by "either 'Rajakars' — local collaborators of the Pakistani army in 1971 — or

'war criminals' of the nation's independence war against Pakistan". It is hard to guess why such things are being done by a caretaker administration whose job is only to hold the election. The Awami League's general secretary, Mr. Zillur Rahman, has issued several statements meanwhile, saying, "a subtle conspiracy" was on to defeat his party in the October 1 election. Mr. Rahman also accused a "Pakistani blueprint" in the unprecedented transfers and appointments in the civil bureaucracy and police departments.

But these actions of the Government have been heartily welcomed by the Begum Khaleda Zia-led alliance in which the fundamentalist Jamaat-e-Islami plays a key role. According to several Bengali newspapers and the English daily, *Bangladesh Observer*, the Government has created "unnecessary controversies" and suggested in their special commentaries and editorials that those actions must be reviewed and corrected in the interest of maintaining the neutrality of the administration.

However, Begum Khaleda Zia and her Jamaati allies alleged that the Awami League was not allowing the administration to run independently. They said the party was applying "pressure tactics".

The daily *Prothom Alo*, which had been critical of the Awami League government, has also questioned some recent postings and removals in the state-owned media organisation, BSS, and BTV. The Government has removed senior professionals with



Bangladesh school children hold placards demanding free and fair general elections in Dhaka recently. — AP

pro-Liberation backgrounds and replaced them by "highly questionable persons with anti-Liberation backgrounds".

"Agreed, the past government may have appointed its chosen persons in some selected positions, but can those persons be replaced by those who have strong links with another political party, and are also accused of being involved in activities like killing of Bengalis in the nation's war of Liberation?", the daily questioned in an editorial while commenting on Mr. Haroon Habib's removal as the chief editor of BSS.

It is understandable that in the highly politicised Bangladesh society, the caretaker Government had to take steps most judiciously to "depoliticise the administration", if at all required, in the interest of holding the general

election in a free and fair manner. But the question is how the Government would justify the removal of scores of chairmen in Bangladesh's sporting arena, including the chief of the Cricket Control Board, Mr. Saber Hossain Chowdhury, whose able leadership earned a name for the country in world cricket? How can Dr. Syed Mudasser Ali, a freedom fighter and Director General of the Bangladesh Health Services, who has been transferred out of the job, affect the free holding of the elections? And how will the Government justify its actions in removing the directors in nationalised banks?

At least 1,500 key officials have been removed and newspapers said most of them have been replaced by supporters of the anti-Liberation lobby. The chief of the national news agency BSS, Mr. Haroon Habib, a freedom fighter, has been replaced by Mr. Mofakharul Anam, a non-Bengali and half the members of whose family still live in Pakistan.

Major dailies, freedom fighters and cultural and literary organisations have criticised the removal of Mr. Habib and alleged that Mr. Anam had played a key role in several massacres of Bengalis in Chittagong during the nation's War of Liberation.

In the face of serious allegations and investigative reports about the new boss of the BSS carried by the media, the Government has constituted an inquiry committee to investigate whether Mr. Habib's removal was done properly and whether his successor was a "war criminal".

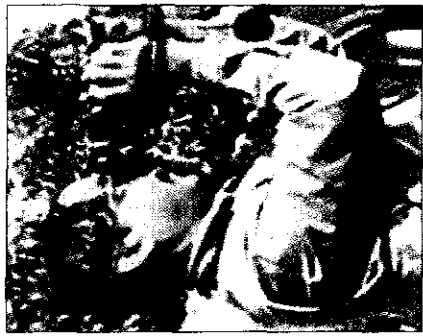
Kabir an old target of fundamentalists

Achintyarup Ray
Kolkata, November 25

NOTED BANGLADESHI journalist, writer and human rights activist Shahrir Kabir — who was arrested by the BNP-Jamat Government in Bangladesh on Friday — has long been a target of the fundamentalists. If not State fundamentalism.

In August last year, Kabir was stabbed in Dhaka allegedly by members of Harkat-ul-Jihad, an outfit said to have links with the Taliban. At that time, he was making a documentary film on Kashmir militancy and was attacked just after he returned from a visit to Kashmir.

This time, Kabir was arrested by the alliance Government at the Zia International Airport as soon as he reached Dhaka after a two-week visit to Kolkata. He came to Bengal to film a documentary on the homeless people who crossed over to India follow-



SHARRIR KABIR

ing oppression on them after October 1 elections in Bangladesh.

He met human rights activists, politicians and other like-minded people here. He even wanted to meet the Chief Minister to discuss the refugee issue, but didn't

get an appointment.

Just after the attack on his life last year, Kabir told reporters in Dhaka that the attackers were members of Harkat-ul-Jihad. But nobody has been arrested in the case more than a year after the incident. And now, the case is likely to be hushed up, said Bidyut Debnath, a long-time friend of Kabir and a member of Dakshin Asia Moulabadi O Sampradayika Birodhi Andolan (Movement against fundamentalism and communalism in South Asia).

The forum is organising a meeting at Calcutta Press Club tomorrow to condemn the arrest. The meeting will be attended by Mrinal Sen, Phoolarenu Guha and Amlan Datta.

Commenting on his friend's arrest, Debnath said: "It was not unexpected. Those who raise voice against fundamentalism in Bangladesh are very likely to become under attack".

A spokesman for the Ekattorer

Ghatak Dalai Nirmul Committee — which is headed by Kabir — said: "Our committee has long been demanding the trial of war criminals who killed the Mukti-joddhas (freedom fighters) during the 71 war. And now that those war criminals are in power, it's quite natural that they will try to weed out all secular forces and people who participated in or supported the Mukti-joddha.

Though it's being highlighted as attacks on minorities, but the attacks are more political than communal in nature. Many people of the majority community are also being attacked, killed and had to go underground after the BNP-Jamat came to power".

Kabir is an outspoken critic of Islamic fundamentalism. Aside from journalistic work, he heads the Ghatak Dalai Nirmul Committee — the main anti-fundamentalist group in Bangladesh. His family suffered a lot during the 71 war. His two elder brothers

— Shahidullah Kaiser and Zahir Raihan — were killed by Razakars during that period. Kabir himself has been facing death threats for the past few years.

In the Eighties, he worked for *Bichitra*, a weekly magazine run by the Bangladesh Government. He visited east Europe on behalf of the magazine in 1989, when the USSR and other socialist countries disintegrated. He was sacked in 1991 when Khaleda Zia came to power. Presently he is a freelance reporter and handles the South Asia desk of the Netherlands-based International Institute of Social History.

SONIC/ULTRA SONIC RAT REPELLERS
 Rats No More Problems
 ISCORP: 1801, Bhagrat Palace (P.B.-1174)
 Delhi-6, Ph: 3868642, 3860388, Fax: 3861315

Khaleda to answer court over attacks on Hindus

Dhaka, November 25

BANGLADESH'S HIGH Court has ordered the Government to explain why steps should not be taken to protect the country's Hindu religious minority as media today slammed the arrest of a senior journalist who campaigns against Islamic fundamentalism.

The court gave the government one month to explain why it should not be asked "to take proper steps to protect the country's religious minorities from terrorist attacks on minorities," judicial sources said.

Judges Abdul Matin and Marziul Huq issued the order last night following a petition filed by Ain-o-Salish Kendra, a legal rights group. Kendra alleged that in the run up to last month's polls, "the minorities came under various threats, attacks and persecution and were subjected to looting of their properties." "Women and children were also subjected to rape and torture," it said citing its independent investigation and newspaper reports.

In a related development, journalist and anti-Muslim fundamentalism campaigner

Shahriar Kabir, arrested for alleged anti-state activities on his return from India three days ago, was scheduled to be brought before a magistrate's court here today for the hearing of a bail petition, a spokesman for his group said.

He said the government might petition to keep him in detention for further questioning.

"We have already petitioned the court to remove him to hospital on health grounds and also give him division" to separate him from petty criminals at the Dhaka central jail, the spokesman said.

Kabir had been filming and writing about the alleged attacks on Bangladesh's minority Hindu population around the October 1 general elections which brought Prime Minister Khaleda Zia's Islamist-allied government to power.

As part of his investigation he visited India to speak to Hindus who fled Bangladesh because of the alleged attacks. The government has denied that Hindus have been attacked.

A home ministry statement said Kabir was "involved in a heinous bid to tarnish the image of Bangladesh and its

government." It said items seized from him, including pictures and video footage, were "objectionable, misleading, instigating and provocative to destroy communal harmony."

"Kabir had made a whirlwind tour across India with ulterior motives to shoot video films," it said, adding the government was investigating with a view to taking legal action against him. Kabir reportedly denied the charges and said he was doing his job.

The Daily Star newspaper blasted the government for arresting the journalist, saying "whatever Shariar Kabir has said were public statements and there is nothing which suggests anti-state activities." "We say this because statements coming from the official word almost sounds like he has been found guilty even before his trial."

The Prothom Alo and Sangbad dailies also protested the government's "high-handed attitude" and called for his release.

The Alo said everything he did was in the open and called on the government to respect human rights in dealing with him.

AFP

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES

26 AUG 2001

Bangla govt rejects partiality charges

Dhaka, Aug. 21 (PTD):
Bangladesh's caretaker govern-
ment tonight rejected charges of
partiality and asked political par-
ties to respect the people's man-
date in the October 1 parliamen-
tary elections.

Chief advisor of the interim
administration justice Latifur
Rahman said in a televised ad-
dress to the nation his govern-
ment was not against or for any
political party but is following the
constitution in a non-partisan
manner.

Calling upon political parties
to respect the people's mandate,
the former chief justice, without
naming Sheikh Hasina and
Begum Khaleda Zia, said he was
worried at the level of distrust
and intolerance between
the two major contenders for
power.

He said the present situation
in the country was more complex
than during 1991 and 1996, when
general elections were held under
neutral caretaker governments,
due to greater influence of black
money and criminalisation of so-
ciety.

"All these cannot be cleared in
the brief period before the Octo-
ber 1 elections," he said in the 15-
minute speech.

The Awami League has ques-
tioned the neutrality of the
Rehman government and de-
manded cancellation of appoint-
ments of all those who the party
said had political leanings in the
interest of free and fair polls.

THE TELEGRAPH

THE TELEGRAPH

22 AUG 2001

Bangladesh CEC promises fair polls

By Haroon Habib

DHAKA, AUG. 19. The Bangladesh Chief Election Commissioner, Mr. M.A. Syed, has announced the much-expected election schedule with the polling date fixed for October 1 and assured that all steps would be taken to hold a free, fair and credible election.

"The success of any election largely depends on the behaviour of contending candidates... I politely urge them to follow the election code of conduct and maintain peace showing mutual respect being imbued with democratic spirit," he said in a speech over radio and television tonight while announcing the schedule.

Under the schedule to elect the country's eighth Jatiya Sangsad — Parliament, the last date for filing nominations is August 29, while the nomination papers will be scrutinised on August 30 and 31. September 6 has been fixed as the last date for withdrawal of nominations while the voting will be held on October 1 (Monday). The country is going to elect a new Parliament after the last Parliament, for the first time in Bangladesh's history, survived its full term and a democratic Government led by the Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina, completed its full tenure.

The CEC said that despite fears

of possible inclement weather, the election schedule was fixed after considering weather forecasts, consulting local and foreign meteorological experts and political parties.

Mr. Syed "categorically" said the independent Election Commission as well as the President and the Caretaker Government were pledge-bound to hold a neutral and peaceful election and "we simply assure you to do everything possible so that you can freely go to polling stations and return home safely." The CEC said the army would be deployed along with paramilitary BDR, police, and ansars.

Mr. Syed said the independent commission made some changes in the rules to avoid confusions involving the election results in view of the "bitter experiences" in the past.

Under the changes, all election agents will have to sign the result sheets and they would be provided with copies of results. The presiding officers will write the number of votes polled by the candidates in words along with figures.

He said the commission this time had increased the number of polling centres to cope with the growing number of voters estimated to be about seven and a half crore.

He urged the government officials and employees to be engaged in election duties to maintain strict neutrality ignoring all illegal and unwanted influences assuring that the commission would ensure their all out security. But, he warned, in the event of failure to discharge duties with neutrality, the officials would face tough actions including imprisonment, retrenchment and penalty under the existing laws and be barred from duties in all future polls.

The Election Commission will now enjoy more power and elevated status, having authority over the entire district administration in line with the Constitution and existing electoral laws with the announcement of the election schedule.

No Deputy Commissioners or Superintendents of Police and their subordinate officials serving in the district will be transferred to any place without prior consultation with the commission until 15 days after the declaration of the result of the election, legal experts at the commission said.

"It shall be the duty of all executive authorities to assist the Election Commission in the discharge of its functions," Article 126 of the Constitution says.

Under the Representation of People Order (RPO), the Deputy

Commissioners and Superintendents of Police and their subordinate officials and the judicial officers below district judges must render their support for the purposes of election.

The commission may also transfer any official under the district and police administration if it thinks necessary for the sake of a free and fair election. "A Deputy Commissioner or Superintendent of Police or any officer subordinate to any of them shall be transferred outside the district if the commission requests in writing that such transfer is necessary in the interest of fair election," section 44 E (2) of the RPO says.

It also said "no person whose name appears in a panel prepared under Article 9 shall be transferred outside the district without the prior approval of the Returning officer till the polls are taken."

The commission has already prepared a panel of polling personnel including the Presiding Officers, Assistant Presiding Officers and Polling Officers.

Under another law enacted in 1991, the district administration and other officials concerned may face rough disciplinary actions including suspension and demotion for "deliberate failure" in election duties.

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20 AUG 2001

20 AUG 2001

Caretaker Govt.'s action sparks row

By Haroon Habib

Dhaka *1978*
DHAKA, AUG. 18. The caretaker Government of Bangladesh, which has completed one month in office, has touched off a controversy by effecting a major shake-up of the police and administrative set-up.

The Awami League led by Sheikh Hasina has accused the Government of replacing "pro-Liberation" officials with "identified anti-Liberation elements".

The massive reshuffle in the administration was welcomed by the four-party alliance led by Begum Khaleda Zia. It is significant that the fundamentalist Jamaat-e-Islami plays a key role in this political grouping.

The Awami League and its supporters in the cultural, intellectual and professional fronts have termed the shake-up as a "subtle conspiracy" to ensure the party's defeat in the election.

"We are really alarmed at such actions of the caretaker Government, and it appears to us that they are virtually fulfilling the agenda of a particular political party", said Sheikh Hasina, who on Thursday left Ganobhaban, the state guest house which she had used as her official residence as Prime Minister.

"I am leaving Ganobhaban since questions

have been raised by certain quarters and a case has been filed against the Cabinet decision to allocate me the state guest house", she told reporters as she walked out of the red-brick building.

"I have now left Ganobhaban, now let the BNP chief Begum Khaleda Zia leave the residence of the former army chief and President at the Dhaka cantonment".

The cantonment residence has been used by Khaleda Zia ever since her husband, Gen. Ziaur Rahman, was assassinated in 1981.

The caretaker Government observed "National Mourning Day" on Aug. 15 by paying tributes to the nation's Founding Father, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, whose assassins are still awaiting the final verdict on their conviction.

The President, Mr. Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed, and the Chief Adviser to the Caretaker Government, Mr. Justice Latifur Rahman, paid tributes to the national hero at his Dhanmandi residence, where he was assassinated in 1975 along with most of his family members.

A leading member of the Council of Advisers, Syed Ishtiaque Ahmed, visited Mujib's grave at Tungipara, 100 km from Dhaka.

In their messages on the day, the President

said the assassination of Mujib was "an indelible disgraceful chapter" in the nation's history.

The Chief Adviser said the nation achieved independence under Mujib's fearless leadership. "He placed an independent and sovereign Bangladesh in a prestigious position in the world arena".

Meanwhile, the Mujib murder trial faced another setback on Thursday after defence counsel said they felt "prejudiced" to make submissions before the judge of the appeals court, Mr. Justice Golam Rabbani, and demanded reconstitution of the Appellate Division.

The judge, who was embarrassed, announced that he was withdrawing from the case. The Chief Justice, Mr. Mahmudul Amin Chowdhury, said Justice Rabbani had decided to withdraw himself from hearing the case in line with the time-honoured values of the court as "mere doing justice is not enough, it must be seen to have been done".

Legal experts said in accordance with the Constitution and relevant laws, the President would now appoint a High Court judge in the Appellate Division on an ad-hoc basis in place of Justice Rabbani.

THE NEWSPAPER

1978

TEST FOR DHAKA

Caretaker government must act constitutionally

THE neutral caretaker government in Bangladesh whose constitutional mandate is to oversee and conduct next October's parliamentary elections in a free and fair manner is having a tough time with the two main contending parties — the Awami League and the BNP — accusing it of favouring the other in winning the parliamentary poll. In fact so sharp is their attack that many rightly feel that it is uncalled for and is meant to keep the caretaker government under pressure. But is this fair? For instance the main Opposition leader Begum Khaleda Zia has accused the caretaker government of "not being neutral as it has allowed the presence of pro-Awami League bureaucrats all over the administration which would make elections a farce." Ironically she had expressed "complete satisfaction" and "lauded" the caretaker government's efforts in transferring the "pro-Awami League secretaries from key ministries" three days after it was sworn in. She has even threatened to launch a movement if the administration was "not freed from Awami League influence." Some of her alliance leaders have even threatened poll boycott. Of 40 killed in political clashes since the caretaker government was sworn in on 15 July almost 30 belong to Awami League. Hasina too has doubted the neutrality of the caretaker government by accusing it of "adopting hurried measures to ensure electoral victory of a particular party."

Leaders of both major parties must realise that they can't doubt the neutrality of the caretaker government just because its actions are not to their liking. The welcome feature of this government is that so far it has not sought to humour either of the two main parties. It has to formulate and implement policies which will have wide general acceptance and not serve vested interests of any political party. Hasina, being the enunciator of the unique caretaker government concept, should not say or do anything which would help her rivals undermine it and frustrate the elections. It is clear from the demands of Begum Zia and her three alliance partners that they do not want elections to be held by the constitutional deadline of 90 days of the caretaker government taking charge. They want more time for sorting out their differences in reaching seat adjustments. This is a constitutional impossibility.

THE STATESMAN

13 AUG 2001

Transfers done to ensure neutrality, says caretaker Govt. ^{m/8}

110-12
By Haroon Habib ^{Don't know}

DHAKA, AUG 11. Less than a month in office, the caretaker Government headed by Mr. Justice Latifur Rahman has made drastic changes in the police and civil administrations, transferring, appointing and re-appointing several thousands of officials to give the administration a "neutral look".

Thought criticised for the alleged "harassment", the interim Government has defended the transfers, saying such transfers and postings will continue till the poll schedule is announced. Four advisers (who are equivalent to Cabinet Ministers) said here at a joint news conference that the transfers and postings in the administration were made "to create an atmosphere conducive to free and fair elections". Mr. Abdul Mayeed Chowdhury, who holds various portfolios, including that of Information Ministry, said the transfers and postings would continue till the election schedule was announced. The caretaker Government appears determined to prove its "neutrality" but its actions have been questioned by the media and a section of politi-

cal parties, particularly the Awami League, which have labelled these actions "unjust" and "mysterious".

One major task that the caretaker Government has undertaken is the amendment to the Representation of People's Order (RPO) which regulates the country's election. The President, Mr. Shahabuddin Ahmed, who is now the supreme commander of the armed forces, has promulgated an Ordinance bringing major changes in the 1972 electoral laws.

The Ordinance empowers members of the armed forces to arrest anyone without a warrant while performing election duties. However, the amended law authorises the election commission to take punitive measures against members of law-enforcing agencies if they "fail to discharge" their election duties.

The Awami League is in favour of the deployment of the army during the elections to maintain law and order but opposes giving it magistracy powers. But the Awami League's main challenger, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and the Jamaat-E-Islami are in favour of giving the armed

forces magistracy powers. A leading Bangladesh daily, the *Janakantha*, asked whether the forthcoming elections were going to be held "under democratic environment, or under a mini-martial law."

The Ordinance amending the 1972 RPO empowers the Election Commission to formulate rules based on this electoral law. It also suggests punitive measures against any violation of decisions of the Election Commission considering as disregard for the High Court.

Meanwhile, the chief of the four-party rightist alliance, Begum Khaleda Zia, has begun her formal election campaign from Sylhet. She claimed that her alliance, despite the fact that it has yet to finalise seat-sharing among partners, will win the next poll and form a "nationalist government". Her rival, Sheikh Hasina has asserted no one will be able to defeat her party through conspiracy in the next election if the party workers stand united behind the candidates. "People will vote for Boat (her party election symbol), and there is no force in the country that can beat the Awami League."

THE HINDU

12 AUG 1991

Polls on schedule: Bangladesh President

119.17
By Haroon Habib 6/8

DHAKA, AUG. 5. The Bangladesh President, Mr. Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed, has said that the general elections, which are to be held within 90 days of the caretaker Government taking office, will be held within the time limit.

According to Mr. Ahmed, there was no scope for extending the 90-day deadline even in case of natural calamities striking the nation.

The strong assertions of the head of state, who is now more than the titular head with defence under his command and the caretaker Government accountable to him, have earned the appreciation of those who have been fearing that some political parties were conspiring to delay the election. But the President, who, as chief of the country's first caretaker Government, had successfully conducted the 1991 general elections, must have also displeased a powerful section who are strongly opposed to an early poll schedule.

The President also stated that the elections must be held by October 11 since the caretaker Government took oath on July 15.

Mr. Ahmed, who was speaking to members of the Dhaka Reporters Unity, also ruled out the possibility of any serious violence during the polls. "Adequate measures will be taken and the caretaker Government will immobilise the use of illegal arms if complete recovery is not possible", he said.

On the slow progress in recovering illegal arms, the outspoken President who had crit-

icised both the Awami League government and opposition BNP time and again during last five years, blamed political parties for the use of arms.

Mr. Justice Ahmed, who is now the supreme commander of the armed forces, also disapproved of deploying the army for recovering arms or giving them magisterial powers during the election. "Arms recovery is the job of the police. The army should not perform the role of the police." He also said that except in the case of any catastrophic situation, the role of the army should be limited to cooperation with the civil administration.

The President's assertions must highly frustrate the BNP-led four-party combine led by Begum Khaleda Zia, the main challenger of the Awami League headed by Sheikh Hasina. The BNP alliance has been strongly opposing announcement of the poll schedule "before ensuring a congenial atmosphere". It has also been demanding review of all political cases filed during the tenure of the Awami League and asking for the publication of a "white paper" on the "misrule" of Sheikh Hasina. It also demanded that the Government "clean up the administration, removing Awami League supporters".

But Sheikh Hasina has issued a warning that if the schedule of election was not announced soon, her party would resist "all moves to frustrate the evil designs". Hasina said the caretaker Government's function was only to hold the

election within the constitutional time-frame, and that it had no right to review the actions of an elected government.

While the President ruled out deploying the army in recovering illegal arms, a high-power delegation of the BNP called on the Chief Advisor, Justice Latifur Rahman, and demanded "urgent deployment of the army for recovering illegal arms towards creating a congenial atmosphere for a fair election".

Both the BNP and its ally, Jamaat-e-Islami, are strongly in favour of giving the army magisterial powers during the election. But the Awami League is opposed to any such measure which might undermine the supremacy of the civil administration. The BNP expressed its appreciation of "all the steps taken by the caretaker Government", though Begum Zia had claimed earlier that the Government was "not neutral." She also commented that fearing sure defeat in the election, the Awami League had started criticising the caretaker Government.

The Chief Advisor, meanwhile, assured representatives of the international community that all necessary steps would be taken to hold the Parliamentary polls in a free, fair and transparent manner. "I expect partnership and support of your Governments and organisations to help meet the challenges of carrying forward Bangladesh into the new millennium", Justice Rahman told heads of diplomatic missions and representatives of international organisations and donor agencies.

THE HINDU

Bangladesh committed to democracy: Carter

By Haroon Habib

DHAKA, AUG 4. The former U.S. President, Mr. Jimmy Carter today expressed optimism that democracy had a bright future in Bangladesh. "The future of democracy in Bangladesh is very bright" he told a news conference before winding up a three-day pre-election observation tour here.

The former U.S. President said Bangladesh was "just for continuation and improvement of democracy", a process which would be further strengthened with the holding of the forthcoming elections in a free, fair and peaceful manner. He said the people of Bangladesh were committed to democracy as exemplified in the elections of 1991 and 1996 which were "honest and fair" and accepted by all parties. The institution of caretaker government was a demonstration of that commitment, he observed. But Mr. Carter was quick to add that the threat of violence and the inability of parties to work together after the elections were the biggest problems facing Bangladesh. He expressed the hope that if the solemn pledges made by political parties during interactions with him were followed, the situation would improve.

Mr. Carter, who arrived here on Thursday heading a five-member delegation from the U.S.-based National Democratic Institute (NDI) and the Carter Centre to observe the pre-election situation, said the party leaders had said they would accept the poll results, renounce violence and hartals and ensure a meaningful role for the opposition in the next parliament. "We prepared the commitments and they endorsed those with some moderation".

Earlier, Mr. Carter gave a brief summary of the outcome of his meeting with the Chief Adviser, Mr. Justice Latifur Rahman of the caretaker government and politicians and read out the salient features of the recommendation



The former Bangladesh Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina, with the former U.S. President, Mr. Jimmy Carter, at a hotel in Dhaka on Friday. — AP

made by his delegation to make the coming elections beneficial for democracy in Bangladesh. He said the NDI and the Carter Centre would continue to monitor the election process and extend their assistance to advance Bangladesh's democratic development. Mr. Carter, who expressed satisfaction over the pre-poll situation, said his delegation felt that both legal and illegal arms should be confiscated before the elections. "I have no doubt about the holding of the elections in a fair and peaceful manner, he said." Mr. Carter felt that if needed, the caretaker government could deploy the armed forces to recover illegal arms.

Describing the caretaker government as a unique feature of Bangladesh, the former U.S. President said countries having similar situations could opt for this mechanism to hold fair polls.

Replying to a question, Mr. Carter said neither wealth nor full literacy were guarantees for a flourishing democracy and cited that despite being "cent per cent literate there is no democracy in Cuba". "I don't think there is democracy in China," he observed and added that intolerance certainly impeded the growth of democracy in many places, including Bangladesh.

THE HINDU

Bangla poll panel wants full autonomy

DHAKA, July 25. — Bangladesh Election Commission must be given full autonomy to hold free and fair polls, the chief election commissioner, Mr M A Syed, said.

He said: "We need total freedom to recruit employees for the commission, design budget and formulate rules and regulations on our own to ensure free and fair elections." He was speaking to reporters after a meeting with the advisory council on EC's reform proposals.

The council on Monday had approved the draft ordinance to amend the Representation of People Order.

The amendment proposal is the first ever since the RPO was enacted in 1972 before first general elections in 1973.

Mr Syed, whose appointment a year ago was opposed by the Begum Zia-led Opposition alliance, gave the examples of independence of the election machinery in India. — PTL

THE STATESMAN

HD-14
167

Bangladesh Chief Adviser sworn in

By Haroon Habib

DHAKA, JULY 15. Justice Latifur Rahman, the former Chief Justice of Bangladesh, was sworn in as the Chief Adviser of the neutral caretaker government here this evening.

President Mr. Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed administered the oath of office, at a 10-minute ceremony, when the third constitutional interim government took over following the end of the full five-year tenure of the Government led by

Sheikh Hasina. Leaders of the four-party opposition alliance including its chief, Begum Khaleda Zia boycotted the ceremony. They criticised President Shahabuddin Ahmed for allegedly listening to the advice of the outgoing Prime Minister, and not them, regarding the timing of the swearing-in of Mr. Latifur Rahman. Begum Khaleda Zia, however, later congratulated Mr. Rahman in a statement, which also said that the four-party alliance had boycotted the ceremony to protest the change in schedule.

THE HINDU

1 JUL 20 1990

Bangla caretaker govt likely

UNITED NEWS OF INDIA

DHAKA, July 14. — Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina Wajed is likely to hand over power to a non-party caretaker government tomorrow to seek a fresh mandate as the country's Parliament stood dissolved last night after completion of its five-year term.

Former Chief Justice Latifur Rahman is expected to be sworn-in as Chief Advisor tomorrow by President Shahabuddin Ahmed. With Justice Rahman's swearing-in, Sheikh Hasina's Cabinet will cease to exist.

The Chief Advisor will then appoint at least 10 Advisors of the caretaker government that would hold general elections within 90 days of the Parliament's dissolution, by 14 October.

5-12 15/7
Sheikh Hasina earlier advised the President to appoint the Chief Advisor on 15 July or any day set by the President.

Security beefed up: Armed Bangladeshi riot police today set up security posts at key points here ahead of the expected appointment of a caretaker ruler to lead the country to new elections, adds

Refuter. There were threats by Opposition parties to impose "people's rule" unless the caretaker authority takes over immediately.

Hasina's government will be the first in Bangladesh's

history to serve its full term.

Fears of violence have grown since four people were killed and about 100 wounded in sporadic clashes yesterday and the day before between Awami League activists and others loyal to the Opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party headed by Begum Khaleda Zia, Hasina's predecessor in power.

Hasina has promised an orderly transfer of power and to keep trying to uphold democracy.

Khaleda told thousands of supporters in Dhaka last night that the "nation feels

relieved that Hasina's autocratic rule has ended".

"The country's administration will be taken over by the people if the appointment of a caretaker government is delayed," she said.

Paramilitary forces have been called out in several cities, including the Chittagong port city to reinforce security.

In Dhaka, police barricaded roads leading to the often volatile Dhaka University and let teachers and students through only after checking identity cards and bags, witnesses said.

University officials said Hasina and Khaleda's student supporters were preparing for a campus battle today. Students play a key role in Bangladeshi politics and rival groups regularly fight each other for control of their campuses.



Sheikh Hasina: Term ends

THE STATESMAN

Bangla House

5/9 dissolved 1/2/7

DHAKA, July 13. -- Bangladesh Parliament was dissolved tonight at the end of its five-year term amidst stray violence that left one dead. This is the first time in Bangladesh's 30-year history that Parliament has completed its term. The prime minister, Sheikh Hasina, is set to step down paving the way for a neutral caretaker government which will supervise general elections later this year.

- PTI

THE STATESMAN

710-154
1972

Khaleda calls for rally tomorrow

By Haroon Habib

DHAKA, JULY 11. As the countdown for the transfer of power to a caretaker authority began, the Cabinet of the Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina held its last meeting on Monday and the Opposition called for a midnight march on July 13 to coincide with the end of the "autocratic tenure".

The four-party Opposition alliance led by Begum Khaleda Zia has announced that it will "celebrate the end of the autocratic rule" with a mass procession in Dhaka. The ruling Awami League has decided to continue the current parliament session till 12 p.m. on July 13 in response to the Opposition's threat to "drag the Government down" with a mass agitation before it completed its tenure.

Begum Khaleda Zia's directive to her party-men to demonstrate on July 13 was termed as "provocative" by the ruling party which in turn has decided to observe a "Democracy Festival" from July 13 not only in Dhaka but all over the country to mark the completion of five years in government. It remains to be seen if the political demonstrations will lead to a deterioration of law and order. The President, Mr. Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed on Monday hosted a traditional farewell dinner for Sheikh Hasina's Council of Ministers.

At a massive rally on Monday, Begum Khaleda Zia asked the people to take to the streets on midnight of July 13 if the Government failed to hand over power at 12.01 a.m. to coincide with the dissolution of the seventh Parliament. She asked the incoming caretaker Government to recover illegal arms and arrest terrorists. She also placed two significant de-



The Bangladesh Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina Wajed, prays beside the coffin of the Parliament Speaker, Humayun Rashid Chowdhury, at the Parliament House in Dhaka on Wednesday. Chowdhury (72), a career diplomat and who was once the President of the United Nations General Assembly, died from cardiac arrest late on Tuesday. — AFP

mands: one that local observers be allowed inside the polling stations and the second that the army should be given judicial powers to ensure peaceful polling.

The Awami League has opposed the first demand, saying it may create lawlessness if local poll observers were allowed. On the question of giving magistracy powers to the army per-

sonnel, the Awami League said it was in favour of army deployment but said it must be under civil authority. These two questions will be resolved after the caretaker Government to be headed by Mr. Justice Latifur Rahman assumes office on July 14-15. The Chief Election Commissioner, Mr. M.A. Sved said the general elections were likely to be held during the first week of October.

BH 101

Khaleda party boycott of House to rob women MPs of 30 seats

Dhaka, July 9 (Reuters): Women legislators in Bangladesh are on the verge of losing their 30 guaranteed seats in parliament because of a boycott by the main opposition party, which is led by a woman.

A three-decade old law geared to ensuring women are represented in the 330-seat parliament is due to expire when the current session is dissolved on July 13 to prepare for new elections.

Law minister Abdul Matin Khasru proposed today a constitutional amendment to extend the life of the reserved seats.

But the amendment can only be passed if the Bangladesh Na-

tionalist Party (BNP), which has boycotted parliament since 1996, sits in the house to provide the remainder of a two-thirds majority needed to pass the proposal.

"The speaker and we all in the government made a desperate plea to Begum Khaleda Zia and her party members for a brief return to save the reserved seats. But she has ignored it. This is very unfortunate...especially because Khaleda herself is a woman," Khasru said.

Khaleda told a rally in Dhaka today afternoon that she wanted women to directly contest election rather than being nominated to the reserved seats.

"If the BNP wins the next election we will make necessary provision for that...which will make the women's role in the world of politics more glorious," she said.

"We are not against women's empowerment but want to push it harder," Khaleda told cheering supporters.

Women make up half of Bangladesh's 130 million population.

Few come forward to contest elections, but two women are among the most powerful in the country — Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and BNP leader and former Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia. Earlier this week,

speaker Humayun Rasheed Choudhury urged the BNP lawmakers make "at least a day's return" to help the passage of the amendment.

Today, women MPs shouted protests in parliament at Khaleda's stance and urged Bangladesh women not to vote for her party in general elections due in October.

"They are out to destroy an important women's right that has been enshrined in our constitution and respected for decades," lawmaker Panna Kaiser said.

Deputy Speaker Abdul Hamid renewed the appeal, saying "I believe there is still some time left

for the BNP to show up and perform their duty."

Hasina is due to hand over power to a caretaker authority in the middle of this month at the end of her five-year term in office. Khaleda will be her main challenger in the October polls to be held under the caretaker administration.

A policeman was killed and six others injured in a battle with government supporters who blocked a train bound for the capital today, officials said.

Police said hundreds of suspected pro-government activists stopped the train — bound for Dhaka from the port city of Chit-

tagong — at Arkhola, 30 km north of the capital.

The militants gave no reason for their action, but police said they were apparently looking for supporters of opposition parties heading for Dhaka for an afternoon rally.

They removed wooden sleepers and erected barricades, holding up the train for at least three hours.

"As police tried to drive the militants away they attacked police with sticks and iron rods," police officer Muqilur Rahman said.

"Constable Mohammad Zahiruddin was seriously injured and later died."



Khaleda Zia

THE TELEGRAPH

Task cut out for Bangladesh interim govt.

By Haroon Habib

9/7
DHAKA, JULY 8. The third caretaker government in Bangladesh's history that assumes office within a week with the mandate to conduct the general elections, will face challenges and risks much bigger than those faced by its predecessors, political analysts believe.

10.17
The Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina's term expires on July 13 when the caretaker regime will take over. Even as the country is preparing to witness a constitutional transition of power for the first time, preparations are underway for the caretaker government to take over and to conduct the elections within 90 days from the day of its swearing-in.

Against the backdrop of heightening political tension, the former Chief Justice, Mr. Latifur Rahman, will take over as the chief adviser of the caretaker regime. Justice Latifur Rahman, who has had a chequered judicial career, has to pilot the country during the interim period, tackling anti-social elements and black money in the backdrop of political conflicts between rival camps.

10.17
They say political issues, including conflicting demands on the voters' list, reform of the Election Commission and violence caused by religious fundamentalists were also likely to pose a challenge to the caretaker government.

The two previous caretaker governments were headed by the then Chief Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed who is now President and the former Chief Justice, Mr. Habibur Rahman, in 1991 and 1996 but the magnitude of the political crisis was less at that time. Justice Latifur Rahman, who was born on March 1, 1936 in Jessore, was enrolled as a lawyer of the erstwhile East Pakistan Supreme Court in 1965. Apart from his career in the legal profession, Justice Rahman taught in Dhaka's two reputed colleges after he obtained the Masters degree in English literature from Dhaka University. He also obtained the Bachelor of Law degree from the same university.

He joined as an additional judge of the High Court division of the Bangladesh Supreme Court in November 1979 and was elevated to the Appellate Division in January 1990. He retired as

the Chief Justice of the country on March 1, 2001. The Awami League formed the government on July 23, 1996, after winning the general elections and the seventh Parliament began its tenure on July 14 the same year. The current Parliament will complete its term on July 13.

According to the Constitution, the President should appoint the head of the caretaker government from among the immediate past Chief Justice and his predecessors within 15 days of dissolving Parliament. The President will also appoint advisers to the interim government, not exceeding 10, in consultation with the chief adviser. Justice Latifur Rahman has given his consent to be the chief adviser to the caretaker government.

Sheikh Hasina expressed the hope that her party would return to power in the elections. She has made only one demand to the caretaker government: hold the elections on schedule at any cost. The Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), the main rival of the Awami League, is also hopeful that the Opposition alliance would win the people's support in the polls.

11/11

200 hurt in Bangla clashes

AGENCIES

DHAKA, July 7. — A general strike shut down a northern town today after violent political clashes yesterday injured nearly 200 people, including 20 policemen, police said.

Schools and shops were closed and vehicles stayed off the streets in Rangpur, 248 km north of Dhaka. The town remained cut off from rest of the country as the strike halted trains and long distance buses.

No clashes were immediately reported during the day's strike, a local police officer said on condition of anonymity.

Meanwhile, a BNP leader, Mr Habibun Nabi Sohel said: "We called for the strike as police sided with the Awami League activists

and beat up our workers."

Yesterday, hundreds of political activists from Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's Awami League and the main Opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party clashed with each other.

Police intervened, firing rifles and tear gas shells to stop the violent crowds after they vandalised stores and smashed 12 cars.

Two junior government ministers, Mr Anisul Huq Chowdhury and Mr Ashiqur Rahman, escaped the violence unhurt, he said.

The ministers had arrived to address a political rally sponsored by the Awami League at the town's public library playground, where the BNP also planned a similar rally at the same time.

THE STATESMAN

3 JUL 2007

MD-12
21/7
9/7

Ex-judge to head caretaker govt. in Bangladesh

By **Maroon Habib**

DHAKA, JULY 3. Mr. Justice Latifur Rahman, former Chief Justice of Bangladesh, will head the caretaker government when the Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina leaves office on July 15 on completion of her Government's five years in office.

Mr. Rahman, who will head the interim administration as per Constitutional provisions, has the extremely tough task of holding free elections within the next 90 days. Mr. Rahman met the President, Mr. Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed reportedly to discuss the formation of his 10-member council of advisers, and also the preparations for holding a violence-free credible election. Mr. Rahman retired from the top judicial post in February this year.

With less than two weeks to go before the caretaker government takes over, both the ruling Awami League and the main Opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) are finalising their choices of advisers for the interim administration. The two major political parties are also planning rallies in Dhaka and elsewhere beginning July 9, mainly as a show

of strength and to voice their demands to the incoming caretaker government.

Though Sheikh Hasina has announced that she will hand over power on July 15, the Begum Khaleda Zia-led Opposition has demanded that she step down immediately, calling her announcement to hand over power two days after her term expires as "unconstitutional and ridiculous". Constitutional experts say a delay of one or two days makes no difference as the outgoing Prime Minister, under the present Constitution, can continue to function for the next 15 days if the President so desires till the caretaker government is formed.

The Opposition, meanwhile, has urged Mr. Justice Shahabuddin to take steps for the formation of the caretaker government "as soon as the time for the incumbent ends". But just ahead of the power hand over, a sensitive issue has cropped up involving the security of the two surviving daughters of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Parliament recently passed a law which would give Sheikh Hasina and Sheikh Rahena life-long State protection, including accommodation. Even as the parliamentary measure elicited adverse reaction, a Cabinet

decision taken on Monday enraged the Opposition even further. In view of the fact that a court has sentenced to death most of the ex-army officers in the Mujib murder trial, the Cabinet decided that Sheikh Hasina would continue to stay at "Ganobhaban", the official residence of the Prime Minister even after she leaves office on July 15.

The *Daily Star* reported today that Sheikh Hasina thanked her Cabinet colleagues for the decision but said in a lighter vein that she would take her own decision whether to stay there. The Law and Justice Minister, Mr. Abdul Matin Khasru said the decision was taken to ensure Sheikh Hasina's security by keeping the "Ganobhaban" under State ownership. The BNP and other Opposition parties have objected to the Cabinet decision, arguing that it could undermine the image of the caretaker government and influence the next election. The ruling party denied the charge, saying the arrangement was only for Sheikh Hasina's security and had nothing to do with the constitutional functioning of the caretaker government.

THE HINDU

4 10 2011

Hasina set for power transfer

7-3 safe
Dhaka, June 29 (Reuters) — Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina said she will hand over power on July 15 to a caretaker authority which will oversee parliamentary elections within three months.

Hasina will be Bangladesh's first head of government to complete a full five-year term and transfer power according to the constitution.

"I would advise President Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed to form the interim caretaker government in line with the Constitution on July 9 following the last cabinet meeting of my government," Hasina told the state-run BSS news agency.

"I will hand over power on July 15," she said. BSS said in a report

Mc...
late yesterday Hasina also announced plans for a celebration to mark July 15 as a "remarkable day" in the country's history.



Hasina

The constitution says general elections are to be held under a non-party, caretaker administration to ensure a free and fair vote.

The caretaker administration will be headed by retired chief justice Latifur Rahman, BSS said.

Hasina took office after her Awami League won the last parliamentary elections in June 1996, defeating former prime minister Begum Khaleda Zia's Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP).

Khaleda will be Hasina's main challenger in the election due to be held in October.

THE TELEGRAPH

Barbora
10-9

Hasina Govt. completes full term 24/6

By Haroon Habib

DHAKA, JUNE 23. Defying tradition, an elected government completes its full five-year tenure in Bangladesh's 30-year political history today.

The credit goes to the Bangladesh Awami League, the party that led the nation to independence in 1971.

The Government led by the Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina, one of the two surviving daughters of country's slain independence hero, took oath on June 23, 1996, following the Awami League's electoral victory.

To celebrate the occasion through a three-day *Janatar Utsab* (People's festival) from today, Ms. Hasina inaugurated the festival at the historic Paltan Maidan here in which thousands of party supporters took part.

The Awami League has also made preparations to stage big shows till July 13, as the present government will constitutionally

function till then. In 1975, most family members of Ms. Hasina were gunned down. She and her younger daughter, Ms. Rahena survived. The party had to fight a long, arduous struggle for 21 years to come to power.

Marking the occasion, Ms. Hasina addressed the nation over radio and television last night. Urging the people to keep watchful eyes against any conspiracy to undo the right to vote and democracy, she said her government would honour the people's mandate in the coming election. She has ruled out the possibility of declaring martial law to tackle the growing terrorism menace in the country.

Despite sharp criticism that the Awami League had acted 'pro-Indian' the world community has acclaimed the government for success in various fields. The allegation has been mainly from the opposition alliance led by Begum Khaleda Zia.

In addition to signing a 30-year Ganges Wa-

ter Sharing Treaty within six months of assuming office, the Hasina Government brought an end to the vexed insurgency problem in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) by signing a peace accord with the Parbatra Chittagrain Jana Sanghati Samity (PCJSS) in December 1997.

Bumper harvests for the last five years and better agriculture management have helped her revamp the country's agro-based economy and maintain an average GDP growth of over 5.5 per cent.

But Ms. Hasina was criticised for enacting a new law that ensured lifelong state security and accommodation to the two surviving daughters of the Father of Bangladesh (Hasina and her younger daughter).

The Opposition, which failed to win the people's support for its anti-government movement, has called yet another hartal on June 26.

THE HINDU

THE HINDU

THE HINDU

22/6 BANGLA BLAST 516

Terrorists try to achieve heinous objective

SATURDAY'S bomb blast which ripped through the Awami League office in Narayanganj killing 22 people is the most serious incident of its kind to have rocked Bangladesh. There is little doubt that the nature and purpose of the attack were political. The message sought to be conveyed was that any office of the ruling Awami League and its local influential MP could be made a target and that those responsible for the recent spate of bombings were unstoppable. With every blast the casualty figure is rising. The most ominous feature is that targets are being chosen selectively: cultural functions of organisations with secular and nationalist credentials and meetings of the Awami League and the Communist Party for whom secularism is a creed. Sheikh Hasina too is a target. Places of worship belonging to religious minorities like Christians and Ahmediyas have not been spared. Interestingly none of the Opposition leaders, their party offices nor their functions have been targeted for reasons which are obvious. There is little doubt that Begum Khaleda Zia's fundamentalist allies who believe in terrorism are pursuing a violent path whose purpose is selective Awami League cleansing from pockets ahead of the mid-October parliamentary poll. Their calculation is that this will demoralise the Awami League.

There is no doubt that the blast was aimed at liquidating the "tough" local Awami League MP because of his muscle power, good work and stand against the fundamentalists. Also his presence made it difficult for the Opposition to wrest Narayanganj and some of the neighbouring seats from the Awami League. Nothing could be more preposterous than to suggest that Hasina masterminded the bombings to justify special protection for herself and her sister. The Awami League has to show restraint, this will expose the guilty.

THE STATESMAN

11/10/81

Pak, Afghanistan source of bombs, says Hasina

AGENCIES

DHAKA, June 20. - Mrs Hasina Wajed today said that Pakistan and Afghanistan appeared to be the source of bombs which have killed 81 people in Bangladesh since 1999.

She told the official BSS news agency that suspects arrested for the blasts "claimed that they took training in Afghanistan (and) the materials they used for making bombs came from Pakistan".

A series of bomb blasts since 1999 has wounded 400 people across the country. The latest blast was just four days ago and killed 22 Awami League members in Narayanganj.

Police arrested about a dozen people, including a teacher from a Muslim religious school who reportedly confessed his involvement, and one Opposition member.

Security Bill passed: Bangladesh National Parliament today adopted a new law to provide special security to the Prime Minister and her sister, Sheikh Rehana, amidst continued boycott by Opposition led by Begum Khaleda Zia.

The law was passed amid a 36-hour general strike called by the Opposition four-party alliance yesterday alleging an attack on the life of alliance chief Zia.

The Opposition parties have been voicing their disapproval of the law ever since it was

mooted.

The Awami League government justified the bill claiming continued threats to the lives of Hasina and her sister - the only survivors of the Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rehman.

Meanwhile, Jatiya Party of former military ruler HM Ershad demanded similar protection for all former Presidents and Prime Ministers.

The proposal was rejected by the Awami League-dominated House. The Opposition earlier said the law would influence elections, a claim the ruling party rejected. The Jatiya Sangsad (Parliament) would complete its current term in three weeks time after which Seikh Hasina is to hand over power to a caretaker government paving the way for fresh polls.

Strike: A countrywide strike to protest against an alleged attack on Bangladeshi Opposition leader, Begum Khaleda Zia, entered its second day today amid tight security imposed after a spate of bombings.

Police said one man was killed and two were wounded by a bomb packed with metal fragments in Dhaka last night.

Suspected strike activists threw three small bombs outside the home of the Speaker of the Parliament, Mr Humayun Rashied Choudhury, on Monday night, the chief parliamentary whip, Mr Abul Hasanat Abdullah, told the House on Wednesday.

THE STATESMAN

27 JUN 2001

Hasina security Bill approved

Dhaka, June 20

5/11

BANGLADESH NATIONAL Parliament today passed a new law to provide special security to Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and her sister Sheikh Rehana amidst boycott by the Opposition led by Khaleda Zia.

The law was passed during the 36-hour general strike called by Opposition four-party alliance yesterday alleging attack on the life of alliance chief Zia. The Opposition parties have been voicing disapproval of the law ever since it was mooted.

The Awami League Government justified the bill claiming continued threats to the lives of Hasina and her sister—the only survivors of the father of the nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rehman. Meanwhile,



Jatiya Party of former military ruler H M Ershad demanded similar protection for all former Presidents and Prime ministers.

The proposal was rejected by the Awami League-dominated House. Opposition earlier said the law would influence elec-

tions, a claim the ruling party rejected. The Jatiya Sangsad (Parliament) would complete its current term in three weeks time after which Hasina is to hand over power to a caretaker Government paving the way for fresh polls.

Lukewarm response to Bangla bandh

The opposition-sponsored 36-hour Bangladesh strike failed to keep people indoors on the last day today though business establishments and educational institutions remained closed and inclement weather dampened the enthusiasm of the sponsors, who called the shut down.

Although life has been partially disrupted and major shops, business establishments and educational institutions

were closed, the strike failed to keep people confined to their homes.

With more and more motorised vehicles and bigger number of cycle rickshaw, the streets of Dhaka looked more like a holiday during major festivals than the usual barren streets with agitated supporters of Opposition.

Heavy monsoon rains also had an impact flooding most streets in the capital of Dhaka. Besides, long distance buses, all other transports including air, riverine and railways were functioning with some delays. Large number of trucks and other vehicles were seen plying last night defying the ban. However, long distance buses did not move.

PTI

THE STATESMAN

Strike disrupts Dhaka life

FROM ANIS AHMED

Dhaka, June 19 (Reuters): A strike to protest against an alleged attack on Bangladeshi Opposition leader Begum Khaleda Zia and to press demands for her security disrupted transport and business today but there were no reports of violence.

The two-day strike was called by the Opposition after pro-government activists were accused of throwing stones and firing shots at a car carrying Khaleda Zia, former Prime Minister and head of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), on Sunday.

The attack came after the government blamed the Opposition for a bomb blast at a ruling Awami League party office at Narayanganj, near Dhaka, on Saturday night, which killed 22 people and left many fighting for their lives.

The government has vowed to hunt down those responsible for the bombing, which has been condemned by the United States.

"There can be no justification for such senseless violence," Bangladesh's official BSS news

agency today quoted state department spokesman Richard Boucher as saying.

He said: "Political violence has plagued Bangladesh for too long. The United States deplores all politically motivated acts of violence, intimidation and harassment and urges all parties in Bangladesh to respect the fundamental rights of others, including freedom of movement and of assembly."

BSS said Indian external affairs Minister Jaswant Singh, in a letter to his Bangladesh counterpart, expressed "great distress at reprehensible acts of violence in Bangladesh. "The government of India shares the concern of the people and government of Bangladesh and strongly condemn all acts perpetrated by extremist elements to subvert democratic process," Singh said.

Security tightened

Nurul Islam Majumder, chief security officer at Dhaka airport, said: "Airport staff and airlines have been put on special alert in the wake of the recent bombings."

Police said security had also been tightened at foreign missions and major establishments across the country. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina has blamed the BNP and its allies for Saturday's blast and for a series of deadly blasts which have killed nearly 100 people over the last two years.

Hasina today visited Narayanganj, 15 km from the capital, to console the relatives of the dead. "She struggled to hold back tears while trying to console the grieving families," one witness said.

The BNP demanded a judicial inquiry into the bombing but the call apparently failed to placate angry government supporters.

Khaleda later issued a statement saying her party had nothing to do with the bomb attack in Narayanganj. "The BNP was not in any way involved in the Narayanganj Awami League office bombing," she said in a statement late yesterday. Police have arrested three suspects in connection with the Narayanganj attack. Khaleda said Sunday's attack on her car was a "government attempt" to kill her.



Sheikh Hasina consoles a boy whose father was killed in the Narayanganj blast. (Reuters)

THE TELEGRAPH

7 6 JUN 2007

Bangla Opposition strike evokes partial response



REUTERS
Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina on Tuesday consoles a boy whose father was killed in the bomb blast at Narayangaj near Dhaka. At least 22 people were killed in the blast at an office of the ruling Awami League party on Saturday.

Dhaka, June 19

A 36-HOUR nationwide general strike called by the Opposition alliance today evoked partial response in Dhaka and rest of the country.

Shops, business establishments and educational institutions remained closed but rickshaws, the main mode of transportation in capital Dhaka, were plying on the streets in presence of large number of police and paramilitary personnel.

The strike was called by former Prime Minister Khaleda Zia's Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP)-led four-party opposition alliance to protest an alleged attack on a convoy carrying her on Sunday.

The strike, first since the 72-hour bandh which ended on April 25, saw ruling Awami League Party supporters occupying the streets, who were parading the central Dhaka.

Inclement weather has dampened the whole exercise to some extent and the opposition is conspicuously absent in the city centre. Police said the processionists were looking for shelter and heavy downpour scattered the gathering. Zia charged the ruling party for carrying out the attack on her motorcade saying it was an attempt on her life and claimed around 100 shots were fired at her motorcade.

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES

Bill to protect Bangladesh's first daughters

FROM FARID HOSSAIN

Dhaka, June 18: The government today introduced a Bill in parliament seeking to give lifelong security to Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and her younger sister Sheikh Rehana as daughters of the country's assassinated independence leader Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

The Bill titled "The Father of the Nation Family Members Security Act 2001" was placed before the House two days after 22 people were killed in a bomb attack on a ruling party political rally in Narayanganj town near Dhaka.

The Opposition has called it an attempt to muster political mileage in the campaign for a general election due in October.

Hasina's ruling Awami League party holds more than the single majority in the 330-member Jatiya Sangsad or parliament for the easy passage of the bill. In Bangladesh laws are enacted by single majority votes.

The Bill has been sent to a parliamentary standing committee for

review, a usual practice to give final touches. The committee has until Wednesday to send it back for a vote. It was, however, approved by the Cabinet on June 11, before the latest blast.

Hasina and her younger housewife sister Sheikh Rehana seek the special security as the only surviving members of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's family, their father and the country's first President assassinated in a 1975 military coup.

Rahman was killed along with his wife, three sons and 11 other members of his family in his Dhaka residence. Hasina and Rehana escaped as they were vacationing in Germany during that time.

The Awami League lawmakers cheered Abdul Matin Khasru, law and parliamentary affairs minister, as he read out the main features of the Bill. They were joined by the members from the both factions of Opposition Jatiya Party.

Members from the main Opposition, Bangladesh Nationalist Party have boycotted the parlia-

ment in a 2-year campaign to force Hasina's resignation accusing her government of corruption, incompetence and harassment of political rivals. Hasina denies the charges.

"It is our constitutional obligation to arrange special security for the surviving daughters of our slain leader," Khasru said.

He said the death sentence given to the 12 former military commanders in Rahman's murder "increased danger for the daughters of the father of the nation." The death penalty has been appealed in the Supreme Court.

In their speeches before parliament several ruling party lawmakers mentioned Saturday's explosion as another reason why they see special protection for their leader.

In its 30 years of independence Bangladesh has witnessed two Presidents slain, three military coups and 19 failed coup attempts.

Intense political rivalries have often led to violence and killings.

The Bill provides for permanent protection of Hasina and her

sister by the highly trained Special Security Force or SSF, a privilege reserved only for the President and the Prime Minister. They will given protected houses. In that case Hasina will continue to get state protection even as a former Prime Minister. Under laws Hasina has to step down as Prime Minister three months before the general election to allow a non-party caretaker administration to supervise the polls. She said she will step down on July 12, the day her five-year term ends.

"The Bill will discriminate other political leaders against Sheikh Hasina. Hasina will continue to get state facilities, while others will not," Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan, a spokesman for the main Opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party said.

Khaleda Zia, chairperson of BNP, lives in a guarded house inside Dhaka Cantonment, the country's largest garrison. She was given the house after her husband military-ruler-turned president Gen. Ziaur Rahman was as-

sassinated in 1981 military coup.



Police guard the street in front of the Awami League party office in Narayanganj, 15 km from Dhaka. (APP)

THE TELEGRAPH

1996

BLOOD OMENS ^{19/10/6}

Saturday night's bomb blast at the ruling Awami League's office at Narayanganj, in which at least 22 people were killed and over 100 others injured, is the worst example so far of the politics of violence and murderous revenge that has been the bane of Bangladesh for so many years now. Most observers of Bangladeshi politics would link this and three other explosions earlier this year, as Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina Wajed has done, to the parliamentary elections due in October. In fact, Ms Wajed has directly accused the opposition of masterminding the Narayanganj blast. The opposition parties, she has argued, have taken to violence fearing defeat in the elections. Her accusations may have provoked the backlash by Awami League supporters who allegedly attacked a convoy of cars in which the opposition leader, Begum Khaleda Zia of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, was to travel to some southern districts. Forced to cancel her trip and return to Dhaka, she did what she has done umpteenth times in the past four years — call a 48-hour nationwide *hartal*. Although she has called for a judicial probe into Saturday's blast, it is clear that the BNP and its allies will use the tragedy as fodder for their poll-eve politics of confrontation.

The roots of the country's political malaise actually go much deeper. In a sad irony of history, much of Bangladeshi politics and society is today deeply divided on attitudes to the country's 1971 liberation war as well as to the legacy of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and his family. Ms Wajed's unrelenting attempts to bring to book the leaders of the 1975 coup, which killed her father, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, and many others in the family, have only added to the desperation of the suspected groups and their leaders. These groups are known to have enlisted the support of fundamentalist and terrorist groups at home and abroad to try and hit back at Ms Wajed and her government. The arrest of two Freedom Party sympathizers for alleged complicity in the Narayanganj blast once again exposes these forces. The party was launched by some of the 1975 coup leaders as they tried to come overground and legitimize their entry into the country's political scene. It is no coincidence that only earlier this month, the cabinet enacted a law giving Ms Wajed and her family members life-time protection at government expense. For the people at large, however, the grim reality is that the dark shadow of violence looms, not just over Ms Wajed, but over the entire nation. The latest tragedy thus must have come as a bad omen to the people for whom the prime agenda in the coming elections must be an end to the cult of violence — and of hartals that have badly hit the nation's economy.

THE TELEGRAPH

Zealot-ultra nexus blamed for Bangladesh blast; toll 22

5-1
18/6
PRESS TRUST OF INDIA

KHALEDA'S CAR ATTACKED

DHAKA, June 17. — The blast in Awami League's Narayanganj office last night has exposed a nexus between zealots and international terrorist groups, the Bangladesh government said today. The toll has risen to 22.

The foreign minister, Mr Abdus Samad Azad, briefed Dhaka-based diplomats about the blast and told them that it had exposed "the unholy nexus between extreme zealots and fundamentalist elements having links with organised transnational terrorist groups."

Three persons have been arrested, including a journalist Shamsul Alam Liton. He is an activist of the right-wing Freedom Party. The party leader,

DHAKA, June 17. — The convoy of the Bangladesh Opposition leader, Begum Khaleda Zia, was attacked by some unidentified people and later her vehicle was surrounded by Awami League supporters near Dhaka today.

Begum Zia alleged that the Sheikh Hasina government was trying to kill her. The four-party Opposition alliance, led by the BNP, has called a 48-hour nation-wide strike from Tuesday to protest against the attack. — PTI

Lt-Col (retd) Faruqur Rahman is a self-confessed killer of the Prime Minister's father, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

Police identified another of the arrested, Shah Alam, as a Bangladesh Nationalist Party worker. The third was described as a woman factory worker.

The Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina, has blamed her opponents for the attack. "They're en-

gaged in politics of blood. They're threatening to stage a repeat of 1975," she told Parliament. Her father was killed in a 1975 coup.

About 400 workers of the ruling party were attending a meeting in the office when the bomb exploded around 9.30 p.m. yesterday.

More than 100 were injured, among whom was a League

MP, Mr Shamim Osman.

Witnesses said a brief exchange of gunfire followed the blast. "Apparently some people were trying to shoot Shamim Osman while he was being transferred to hospital. His supporters returned the fire," one of them said.

Both parties say their rivals have heavily armed members ahead of October's polls.

The foreign minister pointed out the involvement of Harkatul-Mujahideen in an explosion in Dhaka on 14 April in which 10 people were killed.

Workers of the Awami League and its frontal organisations marched through the streets of Dhaka and other towns to protest against the blast. They shouted slogans against fundamentalists.

THE STATESMAN

18 JUN 2007

Khaleda motorcade attacked

Bangladesh
HTI

1896

Bomb blast toll rises to 22

Dhaka, June 17

Bangladeshi Opposition leader Khaleda Zia's motorcade was attacked at Kajitpet near Dhaka this morning. And later in the day, men believed to be ruling Awami League supporters trapped it in a siege on the outskirts of the capital.

Begum Zia has accused the Government of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina Wajed of trying to kill her. No independent confirmation of the attack was immediately available, but it came a day after the worst terrorist attack in the country in recent times: Twenty-two ruling Awami League supporters died when a bomb ripped through their party office during a meeting in the river port of Narayangunj yesterday.

"The motorcade carrying Begum Zia came under attack when she was returning to Dhaka this morning cancelling her planned trip to the southern Bangladeshi districts, Pirojpur and Jhalakathi," Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan, secretary-general of Bangladesh Nationalist Party told reporters here.

Begum Zia told reporters here that "shots were fired" at her motorcade and "the Government wanted to kill me".

When Begum Zia set off for her election rallies later in the day, Awami League supporters

surrounded her car at Amin Bazar on the outskirts of Dhaka, police said.

"No one in this country is secure," Khaleda said as the four-party Opposition alliance led by her party called a 36-hour general strike across the country in protest.

The Government has blamed religious zealots and transnational terrorist groups for the Narayangunj explosion that killed 22 ruling party supporters. Fourteen died instantly, while the rest died later in hospital.

The local Awami League MP, who was about to address the meeting when the explosion took place, was among the injured. About 400 Awami League supporters had gathered in the party office for the meeting when bomb went off at 9.30 pm, blowing off the tin roof of the house. The impact of the blast was felt in other houses in the neighbourhood.

The Prime Minister has ordered a probe into the blast. She said the attack was aimed at creating panic ahead of the general elections.

Foreign Minister Abdus Samad Azad told diplomats that the explosion pointed to the "the unholy nexus between extreme religious zealots and fundamentalist elements with organised transnational terrorist groups".

PTI, AFP

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES

18 JUN 2001

U.S. envoy's remarks raise hackles in Dhaka

By Haroon Habib

DHAKA, JUNE 15. With the Sheikh Hasina's Awami League Government on its last leg before general elections, Western diplomats here have voiced concern that the election should be credible and transparent, without which, they felt, foreign investment might not be forthcoming. *Barak*

Envoys from the European Union have hinted that they will send poll observers. The E.U., one of Bangladesh's biggest development partners, has also asked the leading political parties to avoid confrontation and practice tolerance so that democracy and development can go hand in hand. Ms. Mary Ann Peters, U.S. Ambassador to Bangladesh, has even advised for the next Government already. She has suggested a "five-point action economic agenda" in the areas of ports, power, garments, natural gas and phones that the next Government must give priority to in its first 100 days. "I realise that this list is not sacrosanct, but I offer it as a starting point for the new Government". The U.S. Ambassador's comments have provoked criticism from left-leaning political parties, intellectuals and student organisations but Ms. Peters maintains that her plan is good for Bangladesh's economy.

16/6 10/15
On the question of foreign poll observers, the Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina has been positive. "We will welcome as many as they come..." she said but added in a lighter vein, "We are getting lots of advice now when democracy is fully functioning. But where were they when Bangladesh was under military and pseudo-democratic rule and elections were just a farce?" On the U.S. envoy's remarks, Sheikh Hasina said every political party had its own election manifesto on which basis it would run the government. She did not elaborate, however.

The main Opposition leader, Begum Khaleda Zia, who has sought the presence of foreign poll observers, has maintained a silence over the U.S. Ambassador's comments. But smaller political parties and left-leaning organisations and intellectuals have termed the comments "most undiplomatic" and "interference in internal matters". The U.S. envoy while making her remarks public also said the forthcoming elections were going to be crucial for Bangladesh's emerging democratic institutions. She expressed confidence that the country would rise to this challenge by holding a free and fair election.

THE HINDU

THE HINDU

THE HINDU

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15/6

Bangladesh Cabinet okays Bill on life-long security to Hasina

By Haroon Habib

DHAKA, JUNE 14. The Bangladesh Cabinet has approved the draft of a controversial bill that seeks to provide life-long security to the Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina, and Sheikh Rahena, the two surviving daughters of the country's slain founding father, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

The bill, likely to be passed in the last session of Parliament which is currently on, has evoked sharp criticism, particularly from the mainstream Opposition, which announced an agitation programme against the measure.

The political opponents of the ruling Awami League portrayed the proposed law as "a ploy to influence the coming election", but the bill has received widespread support from the ruling party and its allies which have said it was "extremely necessary in view of the constant threats to the lives of Hasina and Rahena".

During her address to the nation over radio and television earlier this week, Sheikh Hasina, who is set to leave office on July 13 next, did not mention about the bill. Rather, she narrated her Government's achievements during last five years and appealed to the people to vote for her party "to enable it to serve the nation for a second term to achieve economic emancipation and strengthen the democratic process."

She said she would hand over power to a care-taker Government as per the constitutional provisions. "You favoured us as custodians of your votes and we have protected the values and dignity of your votes."

The preamble to the draft bill says: "Whereas Father of the Nation and the first President of Bangladesh Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman contributed greatly to the emergence of an independent and sovereign Bangladesh through life-long struggle for the attainment of the people's self-rule and establishment of their political, economic, social and cultural rights; And whereas the Father of the Nation and most of the members of his family were killed on August 15 in 1975 as a result of a planned conspiracy while he (Mujib) was engaged in building the newly-created and war-ravaged Bangladesh as a modern and prosperous country; And whereas threat on the lives of the other living members of the Father of the Nation is being noticed as a sequel to that sort of conspiracy; And whereas in view of the this type of apprehension, it is appropriate and necessary for the state to formulate laws for taking necessary steps for the security of the said members."

The rules relating to the family members of the Father of the Nation will be considered as "very important person" as defined under Section 2(d) of the Special Security Forces Or-

dinance, 1986, and accordingly under that ordinance, the daughters of Mujib will be given life-long security by the Government as provided to all very important persons.

To ensure security for the members of the Father of the Nation, the Government will take steps to also provide accommodation for each member of the family and other necessary facilities.

Political observers are sharply divided on the issue of providing full state security to Sheikh Hasina and Sheikh Rahena. The Opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and Jamaat-e-Islami have announced a country-wide demonstration on June 20 protesting the proposed law. The Begum Zia-led four-party alliance is likely to make it an issue ahead of the election.

The Law Minister, Mr. Abdul Matin Khasru, explained that the law is "very simple, and the same level of security could be ensured through an executive order. But as the Government believes in democracy, we are processing it through Parliament".

Sheikh Hasina was targeted for attack several times in the recent past by plotters belonging to fundamentalist forces. The Awami League Central Working Committee recently adopted a resolution saying "there is no compromise on security of Hasina and Rahena".

11/11/14

11/11/14

HASINA'S SECURITY

Opposition should not make an issue of it

A DEBATE is raging in Bangladesh regarding a proposed bill seeking special security and other provisions for Sheikh Mujib's two surviving siblings: prime minister Sheikh Hasina and her younger sister Sheikh Rehana. Its outline provides special protection for both after Hasina on 12 July hands over power to a neutral caretaker government which will oversee next October's parliamentary poll. The bill proposes to bestow some official status on Hasina and grants her continued use of the prime ministerial residence. Begum Zia's BNP-led-opposition has asked President Shahabuddin Ahmed to discourage the Awami League Government from enacting this "deleterious legislation". The Opposition is justified in its apprehension that the bill's enactment will undermine the spirit and authority of the neutral caretaker government. Enjoying the trappings of office by Hasina will send wrong signals to the administration. Hasina in her party's interest should not provide ammunition to the Opposition.

While much of the Opposition's apprehension is valid, security to Hasina, Rehana and their families has to be provided. Hasina has been the target of four abortive attempts on her life. Those responsible for liquidating her family are not only still around but have publicly vowed to "finish the unfinished revolutionary task of 15 August 1975." Both conspirators and killers know that because of Hasina some among them who have been caught and tried are about to be executed. And those who have managed to escape trial are not safe either. Hasina is a thorn in their flesh. This consideration alone makes protection of Mujib's daughters necessary. This is the least a grateful nation could do. Any Opposition move to scuttle the special protection will arouse suspicion. Surely the Opposition does not want to be responsible for another national tragedy.

THE STATESMAN

14 JUN 2001

Lifetime security for Hasina

REUTERS

DHAKA, June 12. - Bangladesh government has drafted a law to provide special security to Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and her sister, daughters of the country's slain independence leader, Mujibur Rahman, for the rest of their lives.

Officials said that the draft law, approved by the cabinet late last night, would be placed before Parliament for formal adoption before Ms Hasina handed over power to a caretaker authority on July 13 at the end of her five-year term in office.

"Security would be provided to Sheikh Hasina and her sister Sheikh Rehana - daughters of independence leader Sheikh Mujibur Rahman - for rest of their life by the Special Security Force (SSF)," a law ministry official said.

"The SSF would decide the level of security they require, including secured accommodation and other necessities for the two sisters. But it is presumed that the two sisters would get security like the head of state or government for their entire life," the official added.

The Opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party, headed by Hasina's predecessor in power Begum Khaleda Zia, criticised the proposed law as "partisan" and vowed to resist it through a mass public campaign. But the ruling Awami League said, the BNP had no power to stop the law as it had been boycotting Parliament since July 1999.

"Any protest on the streets would not be able to resist enactment of the law to protect the two sisters," home minister Mohammad Nasim said.

THE STATESMAN

10 JUN 2006

Khaleda woos Hindus with eye on polls

Dhaka *Ba-Naba* 9/6
XII-10

WITH GENERAL elections in Bangladesh only months away, Opposition leader and former Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia is wooing the minority Hindu community, offering sops to it if her Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) is voted to power.

Notwithstanding BNP's close ties with fundamentalist the Jamat-E-Islami, Begum Zia paid a visit to the famous Dhakeshwari Temple here on Wednesday — her maiden visit to a Hindu shrine — and urged the Hindus to extend support to BNP in the coming poll.

Hindus constitute 12 to 13 percent of Bangladesh's 130 million population.

Accusing Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's Awami League, traditionally perceived sympathetic towards Hindus, of "grabbing land of temples, cremation grounds and houses of Hindus", Begum Zia was quoted by newspapers as assuring the Hindu community that BNP would stand by them if "they are attacked". Zia said on Wednesday, "If any body attacks, we will protest. If they (Awami League) attack, inform us and we'll stand beside and protect you as brothers and friends."

The occasion for Begum Zia's visit to Dhakeswari Mandir, the national temple of Hindus, was part of the observance of 20th death anniversary of her husband and Bangladesh's slain president Gen Ziaur Rahman. It was the first time that the death anniversary of Zia was held at a Hindu temple in the capital.

Begum Zia, who had campaigned in the 1996 election that "azan (call for Muslim prayer) would be replaced by blowing of conchshells" in Bangladesh if Awami League came to power, was greeted at Dhakeshwari Temple in the same traditional Hindu style.

It was during Begum Zia's prime ministership that around 3,000 temples in Bangladesh were damaged, many women raped and properties of Hindus

8 die in floods

MONSOON RAIN caused mudslides and flood in parts of Bangladesh, killing at least eight people and stranding tens of thousands in their inundated villages, officials said on Thursday. At least 100,000 people have been marooned in a flooded region 192 km northeast of Dhaka, said Dhaka's Flood Control and Information Centre. Many villagers are using boats to get around.

Floodwaters washed away a railroad culvert in eastern Brahmanbaria district, cutting off railway links with Dhaka. Five children died on Wednesday after a mudslide buried five huts in Brahmanbaria. Three men drowned in floodwaters in southern Barguna district.

AP, Dhaka

destroyed following the demolition of Babri Mosque in India in December 1992. Begum Zia continued to accuse her political rivals that they were "repressing" the Hindu community. BNP respects all religions.

Zia said if voted to power, Hindu institutions would be developed and steps taken so that people of all faiths could practise their religion properly.

Hindus in Bangladesh, till the other day, had a very poor representation in Government jobs, especially at the higher echelon. Before Awami League came to power 1996, not a single minority had occupied the post of secretary, the top job in civil bureaucracy. At present, there are five Hindus among 56 secretaries.

Besides three ministers, including one of Cabinet rank, the Hasina Government has appointed three minority members as chiefs of diplomatic missions out of about 50 resident missions that Bangladesh maintains around the world.

PTI

Bangla Opp threatens to boycott polls

DEUTSCHE PRESSE AGENTUR

ROW OVER BILL PROTECTING HASINA

DHAKA, June 5. - The main Opposition party in Bangladesh today threatened to boycott the coming general elections if the government went ahead with the adoption of the controversial Special Security Bill in the national parliament. The Bill which provides for life-long special security measures for Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and her younger sister Sheikh Rehana is being vehemently opposed by the Bangla-

desh Nationalist Party as being discriminatory.

"We may seriously consider boycotting the upcoming polls if the ruling Awami League doesn't drop plans to press for the passage of the bill in the House," said senior BNP leader Mr Badruddoza Chowdhury.

The Bill is expected to be tabled in the current parliament's last session before the 330-member House is dissolved at the expiry of its five-year term

in July paving the way for a general election under a non-party caretaker government.

The parliamentary polls are expected in October. The dissolution of the House will be preceded by the transfer of power by Sheikh Hasina to a caretaker administration.

The government is seeking special security measures for Hasina and Rehana as daughters and only surviving close family members of the coun-

try's founder President Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

With the enactment of the Bill Sheikh Hasina will get state security even after stepping down from power, parliamentary sources said.

Mujib and most of his family were killed in 1975 in a mutiny by a group of army officers. The rebel officers, who had also overthrown Mujib's government, were put on trial in 1996 when Hasina returned to power at the head of the Awami League.

THE STATION

F 0 10 100

Security tightened in Bangladesh after blast kills 11

Army posted in all churches

Dhaka, June 4: Security was tightened around churches across Bangladesh on Monday after an overnight bomb attack on a Christian place of worship in southern Bangladesh left 11 dead and 20 critically wounded.

Armed policemen were posted at churches in the capital Dhaka and the southern port city of Chittagong and elsewhere in the countryside.

Official sources said paramilitary border soldiers were kept in a state of alert for possible deployment after a powerful device went off in a Catholic church on Sunday in the Christian village of Baniarchar in Gopalganj district, south of Dhaka.

Witnesses said a powerful device exploded inside the church engulfing the main prayer hall with smoke as Sunday's mass was in progress.

"I heard a big bang and people were screaming all around me," said eye witness Hubert Bairagee, who was also wounded and was receiving treatment in the Gopalganj hospital. No one has claimed responsibility for the bombing, but the police suspect Islamic extremists could be behind the attack.

Official sources said several people from the site of the blast were detained for interrogation.

The blast shook houses and spread panic in Baniarchar and other Christian and Hindu villages in the neighbourhood.

This is the first major attack on a Christian church in Bangladesh after the former eastern province of Pakistan broke away from Islamabad in 1971 adopting secularist policies. The last bombing incident took place in April inside a park in Dhaka where a Bengali New Year's musical show was in progress.

The attack which was blamed on a local Islamic militant group killed at least nine people.

All the dead are local Christians, the police said.

Gopalganj, the home constituency of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, has a large minority population, mostly Hindus and Christians.

Ms Hasina called the attack a move by religious fanatics to destroy communal peace in the Muslim majority country.

Army explosive experts were investigating the bomb attack. An initial probe revealed that the bomb was fitted with a timer device and was planted under a bookshelf inside the church.

The police have sealed off the area after the incident. Several critically wounded were flown to Dhaka for treatment. (DPA)

THE ASIAN AGE

7-5-00

10 die in Bangla church blast

Dhaka, June 3 (Reuters): At least ten people were killed and 16 wounded when a bomb exploded during Sunday prayers at a Roman Catholic church at Baniarchar in southwestern Bangladesh, officials and police said.

"Ten people have been killed and 16 wounded in the blast during Sunday prayers at Baniarchar

Christian mission," said Jawadul Karim, press secretary to Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina.

Police said nine people died at the mission church at Baniarchar in southwestern Bangladesh. A tenth victim died in hospital. All the victims were Bangladeshi men.

No group or individual has

claimed responsibility for the blast. Police said the bomb was believed to be hidden in a sack kept inside the church and it went off soon after the prayers had begun.

Splinters from the powerful bomb tore through the corrugated iron roof of the brick-walled church, police said but gave no further details.

Michael Rozario, Archbishop of Dhaka, condemned the bombing and demanded a proper inquiry.

"Such an incident at any prayer place calls for condemnation. I hope authorities will con-

duct a proper investigation," he said.

Karim said Hasina immediately ordered an investigation into the incident and asked army explosive experts to visit the area, which is near her Gopalgonj hometown.

Police at Gopalganj said the bomb exploded during a morning prayer session. Baniarchar, about 230 km from Dhaka, has a large number of Christian residents, police inspector Shah Alam said.

It was believed to be the first bombing at a church in overwhelmingly Muslim Bangladesh.

THE TIMES OF INDIA.

4 JUN 2001

119-17
2/16

Row over security cover for Hasina

By Haroon Habib

DHAKA, JUNE 6. The Bangladesh Jatiya Sangsad, which meets on June 6 in its last session, is likely to enact a new law for providing security to Sheikh Hasina, who is going to complete her five-year tenure as Prime Minister, marking a landmark in the country's parliamentary history.

The current Parliament, which will complete its term on July 13, is the first one to do so in Bangladesh's 30-year history. The previous Houses could not complete their terms either due to military interventions or anti-Government agitations.

The issue of Sheikh Hasina's security, after she steps down from the office, has started causing serious concern among the Awami League's policy planners. A party delegation met the President, Mr. Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed, and explained to him the different aspects of the planned legislation to provide security to Sheikh Hasina and her sister, Sheikh Rehana, the two surviving daughters of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, who led the nation to freedom from Pakistan. The assassins of Mujib, many of whom are at large, were sentenced to

death by the High Court recently.

While the security threats to Hasina and her family members are real, particularly ahead of the crucial election and in view of the risks they face now after the conviction of Mujib's killers, the issue was taken up by the mainstream Opposition politically. A delegation of the main Opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) met the President on May 28 and requested him not to give assent to the proposed Bill.

The Opposition has alleged that after passing the law to ensure state security to Sheikh Hasina, she would continue to live in "Ganobhaban", her official residence, and this would have a psychological impact on the voters in the coming election. They also complained to the President that in the name of state security, Sheikh Hasina would continue to enjoy state protocol.

A high profile delegation of the ruling party, while informing the President of their firm stand on "no compromise on the security issue of Hasina", criticised the Opposition for "misinterpretation and falsehood". They said the Opposition leader and the former Prime Minister, Begum Khaleda Zia, had been con-

tinuously enjoying all such facilities, since the assassination of her husband, Gen. Ziaur Rahman, in 1981. The Awami League delegation consisting of senior Ministers, expressed grave concern over threats to Sheikh Hasina's life. In such a situation, they observed, providing special security to Hasina was the prime responsibility of the state. "We are now more concerned about her security after the High Court verdict sentencing the killers of the Father of the Nation", the Finance Minister, Mr. S.A.M.S. Kibria, told reporters after coming out of Bangabhaban, the President's house.

The ruling party leaders pointed out that such security measures were ensured for former Prime Ministers and Presidents and their family in many countries, including India and Sri Lanka. Even Begum Khaleda Zia and her children have been enjoying all facilities including housing, cars, allowances and maintenance cost of her two houses — one in the Dhaka cantonment and other in the posh Gulshan residential area — for more than 20 years. Despite being the daughters of the country's independence leader, Sheikh Hasina and her sister had refused facilities offered by the past military Governments.

THE HINDU

4 JUN 2001

Bangladesh feels the 'English pinch'

DHAKA: Patriotically proud of its Bengali linguistic heritage, Bangladesh is now facing the "English pinch" in global competition from information technology to sport.

A nation which fought for independence from Pakistan 30 years ago on the basis of its Bengali language, Bangladesh has suddenly found itself trapped in a situation where there is no alternative to English.

Misspelt billboard signs and restaurants which welcome customers with the friendly but baffling: "You be in our guest and please like any menu from arrangement ultimate sea food" point to a need to improve English standards.

Commentators have laid the blame for declining standards in many quarters, but agree that this South Asian nation has no choice but to enhance English language skills to face the challenges of global competition.

"For the development of the software industry, the English-speaking population should be developed to a great extent," telephone engineer Mohammad Yousuf Niaz said.

Bangladesh should learn from India's example and set up a "knowledge triangle," like that of Bangalore, Madras and Mysore, to face global competition, he said. Businessman Ahsanul Haq said he was frustrated by the lack of executives with English skills to handle foreign guests and foreign correspondence.

"I think we are slowly feeling the English pinch after years of negligence, but I wonder how to cover the gap and produce quality executives with needed language skills," he said.

The country's need for better English is being felt on the cricket pitch as well as in the company boardroom. The Bangladesh Cricket Board recently urged its players to learn English to help build a rapport with their Australian coach Trevor Chappell. During Bangladesh's maiden foreign Test tour to Zimbabwe last month, the team manager found there was a communication gap between the team and Chappell due to the players' lack of English.

Banishing English to the backyard of the education system, to be replaced with Bengali after independence in 1971, "created a major gap," said Syed Monjurul Islam, a senior English professor at Dhaka University.

"We need a national education policy," he said. (AFP)

THE TIMES OF INDIA

2 - MAY 2001

Islamic extremism worries secular Bangladesh

Dhaka

AS DAY breaks over Dhaka, hundreds of men and teenage boys, dressed in white and wearing Islamic caps, hop off trains, ferries and intercity buses.

They have travelled from remote villages to the capital's madrasas or religious schools for a course on Islam. At the schools, which spring up regularly with funding from oil-rich Gulf States, they sit in crowded classrooms, their heads buried in Arabic scripture.

The thousands of tiny madrasas in Dhaka have become part of a debate over whether Bangladesh is developing a culture of Islamic extremists that could overturn its reputation for

religious tolerance. The country's laws are secular, though its population of 130 million is 86.6 per cent Muslim. But in the last two years a series of attacks on political rallies and cultural events such as concerts — some Islamic clerics say singing is sinful — have raised questions about the influence of Muslim radicals.

Among the incidents behind the debate on Islam's influence is the flight from the country in 1999 by author Taslima Nasrin after Islamic fundamentalists accused her of blaspheming Islam in her writings.

They called for her death when she suggested changing the interpretation of Islamic law to give women more rights. Then last year, when then US President Bill

Clinton was on a visit to Bangladesh, he cancelled a trip to a village in a forested area after intelligence warned of a possible attack by Muslim extremists.

Police in southeastern Bangladesh also are investigating an attempted attack on a rally for Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. They say they are looking for a Muslim leader with possible links to the Afghanistan-based Saudi militant Osama Bin Laden.

Bangladeshi Islamic leaders deny allegations that they are trying to establish a purist ideological regime like the Taliban of Afghanistan, where Bin Laden lives in exile. Moulana Jashimuddin, who runs a madrasa in Dhaka's old city, says, "It is outrightly wrong to accuse us of

being fundamentalists. What we teach here makes a man neither religious nor worldly. The aim of our religion is to reach god."

Students at the schools are encouraged to do their own cooking and bring their own bedding to cut costs. They study the Quran, the sayings of Prophet Mohammed, Islamic history, and Arabic literature and grammar.

On some evenings, closed-door sessions are held to explain where Islam is under threat. Israel and Hindu-majority India invariably are mentioned.

Prime Minister Hasina denies her country risks falling into Muslim extremism. "People of Bangladesh are deeply religious, but they do not like religious fanaticism," Hasina says.

Her administration faced a crisis in February when Islamic activists staged violent protests demanding that a court overturn a ruling that said religious edicts did not have the force of law.

Islamic groups have assumed importance ahead of the October parliamentary elections because they are being courted by the opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party of former Prime Minister Khaleda Zia.

Zia and the Islamists have a common foe — India, Bangladesh's Hindu majority neighbor, which Muslim parties often blame for Bangladesh's problems. India is an election issue since Prime Minister Hasina is seen as pro-Indian.

AP



THE HINDUSTAN TIMES

28 MAY 2001

HD-18

Khaleeda faces a tough test 24/5

By Haroon Habib

DHAKA, MAY 23. The main challenger of the ruling Awami League in Bangladesh and former Prime Minister, Begum Khaleeda Zia, is facing a tough test to her leadership even as the Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina, is set to hand over power to a neutral caretaker government in mid-July to hold the general election.

Begum Zia has apparently abandoned the politics of hartal, the condemned political weapon she used during the last three years to pull the Government down. The crucial ballot war is set some time in early October.

Only a few months ago the chairperson of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) sounded confident that her 4-party combine would continue to remain a "strong Islamic nationalist force" and be able to sweep the election defeating the "secular, pro-Indian" Awami League. Her observation was more or less right since she could successfully command



the support of the Islamic radicals including the "pro-Pakistanis".

But Begum Zia's alliance suffered a major blow from one of its key-sponsors, former president Gen. H.M. Ershad, who severed his Jatiya Party's relations with the Begum Zia-led alliance after coming out from jail last month. Gen. Ershad is trying to float a new alliance.

Gen. Ershad's "betrayal", as Begum Zia puts it, followed the

much-talked about expulsions of two "hardliner leaders"—Mr. Salahuddin Quader Chowdhury (MP), and Mr. Anwar Zahid, press adviser to the Opposition leader, from the BNP. These two, known for their anti-Indian stand, commanded a sizable number of party "hardliners" and their dramatic exit from the party and alliance has caused concern for the BNP.

Another challenge Begum Zia faces is the persistent pressure of her alliance partners, the fundamentalist Jamaat-E-Islami and the Islami Oikya Jote (IOJ), on selecting common candidates for the 300 parliamentary constituencies. Analysts believe that Begum Zia's chance of returning to power and the fate of her alliance virtually hinge on an amicable settlement.

In fact, Begum Zia has no option but to hang on to the Jamaat which is pressuring her to complete the seat sharing well ahead of the formal electioneering. The BNP policy-makers wanted to de-

lay the tricky job as long as possible, but the Jamaaties have sensed this and are forcing for early completion.

Many Opposition strategists agreed that the sharing of seats among the alliance partners will not be an easy job. "It's a tough task indeed. But we must do it because without this we cannot achieve electoral victory," said a senior BNP leader.

A few months ago, when the Begum Zia-led alliance was in its full form, the BNP supremo intended to concede 100 seats to the allies. But the scenario changed dramatically with the exit of Gen. Ershad from the alliance. Besides the Jamaat, the BNP has now only two smaller components which have no seats in Parliament nor can they bag one unless backed by the BNP.

According to party insiders, Begum Zia has now decided to give 50 to 70 seats to the Jamaat and the other two.

THE HINDU

24 MAY 2001

Bangla Opp. sets term to end strikes

Dhaka, May 16 (Reuters): Bangladesh's main Opposition party said it will not call any strikes in the run-up to a general election later this year if the government stops what it described as the repression of its members.

"We will not call any strikes if the government stops repression, like arrests and filing of false cases against Opposition leaders and workers," Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) secretary-general, Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan, said today. BNP leader Begum Khaleda Zia made the offer to stop all strikes in a meeting with business leaders late yesterday, he said. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina said her arch foe Khaleda's decision was welcomed.

"I welcome her decision which is definitely a relief for every body," Hasina told a news conference on her return from a summit for least-developed countries in Brussels. Hasina said the Opposition campaign against her government had failed as the strike proved detrimental to the economy and the nation.

A four-party Opposition alliance, led by Khaleda, has enforced more than 85 days of countrywide strikes since Hasina took office in 1996. Business leaders say the stoppages have cost Bangladesh \$66 million a day in lost production and exports.

17 MAY 2001

HASINA'S TROJAN HORSE

Must be careful of enemies within

THE discovery of a car bomb outside Sheikh Hasina's residence in Dhaka is further proof of worsening political scene and lawlessness that has gripped Bangladesh in recent months. Last year a powerful explosive device was found at the venue in her native Kotlipara where she was to address a rally. The involvement of fundamentalists in that attempted blast is proved beyond doubt. Dhaka since January has been rocked by two major blasts which killed in all 20 people. The first blast at a Communist Party rally claimed eight lives. The second at the "Batamool" *Pahela Baisakh* function claimed 12 lives. About two years ago an identical number of lives were lost in another blast when a leftist cultural group, Udichi, was performing in Jessore. The organisers of all three functions are in the vanguard of a popular movement against fundamentalists. All this is not welcome to the country's Islamists, a section of which has vowed to Talibanise Bangladesh. The car bomb was discovered in a vehicle belonging to an Awami League member. This is no surprise since Sheikh Hasina has many Trojan horses in her party. Their acts and deeds in recent months have tainted the party's image. One MP used hired goons to oppose a BNP-sponsored hartal killing innocent bystanders. Goons of another Awami League MP in Noakhali battered a local journalist because of his critical writings.

Sheikh Hasina must know that not only Islamists in the Opposition but also quite a few fifth columnists in her own party pose a threat to her. After all it was her father's closest confidants in the party like Khondokar Mushtaque Ahmed, Taheruddin Thakur and Shah Moazzem Hossain who hatched the conspiracy with a section of the military to stage a bloody coup by liquidating Sheikh Mujib's family. What was worse was that they justified the killings and protected and rewarded the killers. To make their position more safe, they ordered the killing of four top Awami League leaders in Dhaka jail. In fact many believe that traditionally Awami League has been its own worst enemy. Whether Monday's attempted blast was another such manifestation investigations alone will tell. But there is no doubt that with parliamentary elections just round the corner there are elements in Awami League who are out to give political mileage to the Opposition. Sheikh Hasina better be careful.

THE STATESMAN

13 MAY 2001

VESTED PROPERTY

Bangladesh Should Implement New Law

By PARMANAND

In a significant development which has the potential of having far-reaching consequences, the unicameral Bangladesh Parliament, the Jatiya Sangsad, on 8 April, unanimously adopted "The Vested Property Return Bill, 2001". Notably, the Bill creates provisions for the return of certain listed vested property to its actual owners or their Bangladeshi successor or successor-in-interest. Politics in Bangladesh is rarely dull and unexciting, but usually it moves in negative directions. On 8 April, though, it moved in exceedingly positive directions. And the consensus was unprecedented.

The main opposition party in the Jatiya Sangsad, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, had been boycotting the House for about two years before the passage of the Bill. It is altogether a different matter that the Jatiya Party, led by former President General HM Ershad, returned to Parliament a few days ago, risking its formal expulsion from the mainstream opposition combine. The BNP, the JP, the Jamaat-e-Islami and the Islami Oikya Jote, today, constitute the four-party alliance.

BOLD STEP

Undoubtedly, the Bill's passage is perceived as a bold step by Sheikh Hasina's government to remove the "black law" enacted during the 1965 Indo-Pak war with the sole purpose of suppressing the minority Hindu community. For decades, the leaders of the minority community, including the secular, political and other forces, had been demanding the law's annulment.

It was only after genuine attempts to achieve a consensus that the Sheikh Hasina government finally abrogated it. After the emergence of Bangladesh in 1971, the Sheikh Mujibur Rahman government had replaced "enemy" with "vested" property in the law. In truth, it was on 4 September last year that the Bangladesh government decided to return the properties largely belonging to the minority Hindu community. The cabinet, in September last year, had formed a committee of ministers to draft a law for the purpose.

Under the rules, the properties of a section of Hindus, who left the then Pakistan after 1947, were declared enemy property and vested with the government for management. According to official records, the size of the vested property is 7,57,70,508 acres. The country's official news agency, Bangladesh Sangbad Sangstha, quoting a recent study, says about 50 lakh members of the Hindu community or 10 lakh Bangladeshi Hindu families were adversely affected by the law. The chief of the study team and general secretary of the Bangladesh Economic Association, Dr Abdul Barakat, had said in September that 95 per cent of the Hindus, whose properties were confiscated, were in Bangladesh. Only five per cent left for India.

Under the Bill passed on 8

April, a "Vested Property Tribunal" will settle applications for the return of listed vested property to its actual owner or his or her Bangladeshi successor-in-interest. The Bill provides that some listed property, now vested in the government, would be returned to the original owners, or their Bangladeshi successor or the successor-in-interest of the original owners or their successors. It also proposes that the occupant



of the vested property — be it the government or someone authorised by it — would be allowed to remove any structure or movable assets from the vested land.

The question of supreme importance now is: will the Hindus deprived of their properties get them back in reality and without much difficulty? While the unanimity shown by all parties in the Jatiya Sangsad is encouraging, various fundamentalist and obscurantist forces in Bangladesh may try to scuttle the law's implementation. One hopes that the government of Bangladesh — be it the present one or the new one that comes into being after the polls later this year — will implement the new law both in letter and spirit.

WELCOME

The BNP had not reacted immediately to the government's decision in September last. Nonetheless, several opposition Jatiya Sangsad members in their individual capacity had endorsed the government's stand, and had stated that the "black" law be better scrapped. Disturbingly, though, the Inquilab, Bangladesh's religious fundamentalism's main mouthpiece had in September accused Sheikh Hasina's government of planning to hand over properties — left out long ago — to six lakh Hindus, and went to the extent of warning the government of "bloody clashes", if that decision was executed.

Various segments of the Bangladesh civil society, though, have welcomed the government's moves. Nim Chand Bhoumik, leader of the Hindu-Bouddha-Christian-Oikya Parishad, said, though late, the government's initiative was a positive step. Bhoumik stressed that the demand for annulment of the Vested Property Act had very much become a national demand. Describing the decision as "overdue for a long time", Dr Kamal Hossain, a noted legal expert and foreign minister during Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's days, also welcomed the government's

Bangladesh stated that progressive forces had decided to do away with the black law even before the state of Bangladesh had become a reality. Obviously, the government did not take the initiative in a vacuum, and there was a strong background against which the Prime Minister had decided to act. Shudhanshu Shekhar Halidar, a noted minority leader, praised the government's decision and stated that the government's initiative had taken care of the long-cherished demand of the Hindu minority.

Shaikh Razzak Ali, a former Speaker of the Jatiya Sangsad and currently a BNP member of the House, quite expectedly, welcomed the government's decision with caution, warning against any hasty action, for, he feared it might give rise to disputes and complications. Nevertheless, as early as September Shaikh Razzak Ali welcomed the formation of the cabinet committee for this purpose. On the other hand, Hasanul Haque Inu, leader of the Jatiya Santantrik Dal described the government's decision as "courageous" in the sphere of equality of rights and rule of law. Significantly, Inu also stressed that the issue should not be linked with electoral politics.

OTHER ISSUES

There is no doubt that over the years, Indo-Bangladesh ties have become more positive and purposeful. The two countries reached a broad agreement on sharing of waters of common rivers in January this year. Abdur Razzak, Bangladesh Water Resources Minister, called the outcome of the meeting of the Joint Rivers Commission in January a "big achievement", as India had agreed to help conduct a feasibility study on Bangladesh's plan to construct a barrage across the Ganges to resolve the water crisis in the downstream Farakka barrage. The Indian Water Resources Minister, Arjun Charan Sethi and his Bangladesh counterpart also agreed to an interim arrangement for sharing the Teesta waters.

In another significant development on the bilateral ties front, the railway route between the two countries was re-established through Benapole on 21 January with the arrival of a goods train from the Indian border point of Petrapole. The Sonar Bangla, the 35-wagon train carried foodgrain from India on that occasion. The then Indian railway minister Mamata Banerjee and Bangladesh Communication minister Anwar Hossain, along with senior railway officials, were present.

To make matters better, prospects of the much-awaited Indo-Bangladesh gas pipeline project have also brightened. Significantly, Unocal, the US energy company, recommended in January that it was the only feasible alternative for utilising the natural gas reserves. Jim Stone, the South Asia chief of Unocal, said in an interview that a decision was expected immediately after the un-

THE STATESMAN

29

Mujib killers' sentence *Ban Na* stayed

Dhaka, May 4 *H 11 375*

AN APPEAL court on Thursday granted a temporary stay on the death sentences handed to 12 former army personnel for the murder of Mujibur Rehman, court sources said.

The appellate division of the Bangladesh Supreme Court stayed Monday's high court verdict confirming the sentences. It ruled after hearing provisional appeal petitions filed by two of the convicted killers.

The ruling gives the convicts an extra month to prepare their appeals of the sentences. Normally, 30 days are given to appeal.

The high court confirmed the sentences given 11 former army officers and a soldier convicted in 1998 of killing Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and 15 of his relatives in a 1975 military coup. The high court acquitted three others for lack of evidence.

Four of those convicted are in Dhaka Central Jail. Eight others are fugitives abroad who were tried in absentia. Bangladesh is signing an extradition treaty with the US, where two of the killers live.

AP

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES

MAY 2001

Bangladeshi Jamaat

DHAKA: The Jamaat-e-Islami is a small but influential force in Bangladesh and is part of the four-party opposition alliance ranged against Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's government. Its ameer, Maulana Motiur Rahman Nizami, spoke to Siddharth Varadarajan about the recent Indo-Bangladesh tension, the role of Islamist parties in the country and how they reconcile their present position with the fact that they opposed the 1971 liberation war.

What is your opinion on the recent border clash with India?

Border clashes occur every month. In fact, during the five years of the Awami League government, there have been 300 incidents of BSF violence in which 400 Bangladeshis have been killed, including several from the Bangladesh Rifles (BDR). In terms of the recent incidents, as far as I know, the BDR did not engage in any offensive action.

The basic problem is that the 1974 Indira-Mujib accord has never been implemented. We ratified it almost immediately but not the Indian Lok Sabha. If one goes back even further, the 1947 partition was done in such a way that there many complex problems of border demarcation. The boundaries were not drawn with intelligence. Maybe those who drew up the lines didn't want the people of this region to live in peace, they wanted the conflict to remain. In any case, the 1974 accord provided the basis for settling these problems but this was never done.

The only thing the BDR did was to seize — without a fight — a freedom fighters' camp at Padua which had been taken over by the BSF in 1971. India should have solved the matter through negotiation. Instead, it attacked the BDR at Boraibari. What happened of course — the loss of lives — was unfortunate.

How do you think the Hasina government has handled the crisis?

After Padua, the Awami League government should have been alert. Even now, they are not protesting the illegal BSF intrusion at Boraibari. The Vajpayee government has protested so loudly about everything; yet, she has been quite silent. *People in India were shocked by the way in which the dead bodies of the Indian soldiers were carried, tied to bamboo poles. And then there are allegations of torture, custodial killings...*

It was the public which carried the bodies that way, not the BDR. As for the question of torture, the post-mortem report of our doctors does not tally with the BSF's allegations.

What will the Jamaat do in the coming elections? Are you apprehensive that the four-party alliance against the Awami League seems to be splitting?

Opposition parties always form alliances against the ruling party. Let's see who remains and who stays. But then this alliance against the Awami League is the need of the times.

The government has blamed 'Islamic fundamentalists' and 'anti-Liberation forces' for the deadly bomb attack during the Bengali New Year celebrations of Poila Boisakh in Dhaka last month in which 10 people died. What is your reaction?

The government has a responsibility neutrally to investigate who was behind the criminal attack and tell the nation. Without any investigation, the government should not attempt to pass judgment. Sheikh Hasina immediately blamed the communalists and fundamentalists. May be this was a way of covering up for the real culprits. Earlier too, in the Jessore bombing of 1999, our student wing was accused and many

Poila Boisakh?

We have a stand on cultural matters that what goes against the teachings of Islam should not be indulged in. But there is nothing wrong in people organising festivities for the new year. We are not opposed to this.

The Jamaat and other Islamist trends opposed the creation of Bangladesh in 1971. What is your view towards Pakistan today? Do you think reunification might be possible?

It is absurd and improbable to talk about Bangladesh and Pakistan being one country again. After December 16, 1971, no Islamic group in Bangladesh has ever called for reunification. As long as Pakistan was one country, we were loyal to it. Now that Bangladesh is an independent country, we are committed to it.

How do you react when you are labelled as anti-liberation forces?

This is sheer propaganda by our enemies. It shows the extent of their political bankruptcy. There is still a Muslim League in India and the Congress continued to exist in Pakistan until it merged with the Awami

League. If someone was involved in crimes in 1971, it is one thing. But if someone held different views in 1971 and you take them to task for this for the rest of their lives, this is not fair.

It is said by some that the Jamaat is trying to make inroads in the Bangladeshi army.

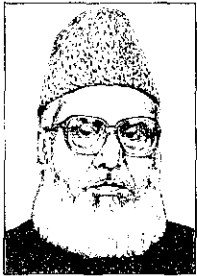
Such propaganda is aimed at making the politics of a democracy unhealthy. The Jamaat opposed Ayub Khan's martial law. During Ershad's martial law, the Jamaat joined the Awami League and Khaleda Zia in opposing him. We do not believe in achieving anything through armed means. Only through the political support of the people. So we are not interested in cultivating any specific professional group. The army is part of the people. It should be above politics, a symbol of unity. This is our political doctrine.

Given that Bangladesh is an 'Islamic' country, why does the Jamaat do so badly in elections?

For an ideological party, the present political system does not favour it. The same is true for the Communist Party. But we are not in a hurry. We are going to the people, educating them slowly. If we were just a normal party playing power politics, we would get more seats. But we don't use black money, terrorism, or false promises.

What kind of relations do you advocate with India?

We want friendly relations with India but not those based on domination and expansionism.



Uday Shankar

“After December 16, 1971, no Islamic group in Bangladesh has ever called for reunification. As long as Pakistan was one country, we were loyal to it. Now that Bangladesh is an independent country, we are committed to it”

were arrested but then released because there was no evidence. The investigation report for that has still not been published. I think these things are being orchestrated by the government to discredit its opponents — to blame the Islamic opposition and even the BNP.

But doesn't the Jamaat as a group oppose secular cultural events like the Poila Boisakh celebrations?

We always declare what we believe, but we don't believe in imposing anything through force. This goes against the philosophy of the Jamaat-e-Islami. Terrorist activities in Bangladesh have their origin in the leftist groups. It is they who believe political power flows from the barrel of the gun. This is not a belief of the Islamic groups. The genesis of terrorism in the present context is also tied to the fascist activities of the ruling Awami League.

To get the blessings of the US, the AL government has started talking of Osama bin Laden, of a new group called the Harkatul Jihad, but we don't even know who these people are and whether they even exist or not.

But what is your attitude towards

THE TIMES OF INDIA

7 MAY 2007

Thousands to watch over Bangla polls

Dhaka, May 6

A RECORD 32,000 observers will monitor Bangladesh's parliamentary vote in October, a human rights group said today.

Past elections in this nation of 130 million people have been marred by charges of vote fraud, rigging and violence. Shafiqul Haw Chowdhury, executive director of the Bangladesh Human Rights Commission, told reporters that each voting district would have 107 election observers.

The commission will invite observers from 20 countries, including the USA, UK, Sri Lanka and India.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's five-year term ends on July 13 and fresh elections must be held within 90 days.

Bangladesh, an impoverished nation, is of the size of Iowa or Greece. The per-capita income is \$150 a year and seven out of ten people are illiterate. Many do not have access to two meals a day.

In 1996, Bangladesh introduced a system that requires the Prime Minister to resign at least three months before the voting date. The elections are held by a caretaker administration, headed by a retired chief justice.

Hasina had promised to hold elections by June, but changed her mind in the face of an Opposition campaign for immediate dissolution of the 300-seat Parliament. The Opposition has been organising general strikes to force her out of office. In April, eight days of nationwide shutdown caused \$544 million in lost production. At least eight people were killed and dozens wounded in related street violence.

The four-party Opposition alliance, led by former Prime Minister Khaleda Zia, accuses Hasina's Government of corruption, mismanagement and harassment of political opponents.

AP

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES

7 MAY 2001

Court confirms death for Mujib killers, Bangla celebrates

Dhaka, May 1: Lawyers defending the convicted Army officers charged with the assassination of Bangladesh's founder President Sheikh Mujibur Rahman on Tuesday said that they would go to the highest appeals court for saving the neck of the alleged killers.

Lawyer Khan Saifur said he would file a petition with the appeals bench of the Supreme Court asking for overturning the death sentences on twelve former Army officers earlier confirmed by the high court.

Tens of thousands of supporters and admirers of Mujib burst into jubilation on the streets of the capital Dhaka after a high court judge in Bangladesh on Monday confirmed the death sentences passed by a lower court on two former army men for murdering Mujib and most of his close family members about 26 years ago. Justice Mohammad Fazlul Karim after a 42-day hearing upheld the 1998 verdict of a Dhaka district court under which former Colonel Mohiuddin Ahmad and a soldier Mosleh Uddin were condemned to die for their involvement in the mutiny which had also overthrown Mujib's elected civilian government. With Monday's confirmation by the high court the number of army men condemned to die for the massacre of 15 August 1975 stood at 12. Prime minister Sheikh Hasina, Mujib's elder daughter and political heir, said the verdict was a triumph of justice. (DPA)

THE ASIAN AGE

2 MAY 2001

What did you tell Vajpayee, Opposition asks Hasina

DHAKA, APRIL 29. The Bangladeshi Opposition today used the border crisis involving India as a vital political tool to embarrass the Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina, demanding she make public her recent telephone talk with her Indian counterpart, Mr. Atal Behari Vajpayee.

"Let the people know what you and Mr. Vajpayee discussed by phone by playing the taped talks," the Bangladesh Nationalist Party secretary-general, Mr. Abdul Mannan Bhuiyan, told hundreds of demonstrators of the four-party alliance at a rally held as part of countrywide demonstrations against a "weak-kneed" foreign policy of the Government and against the "killing of Bangladesh Rifles (BDR) personnel by the Border Security Force in the frontier area of Rowmari."

Mr. Bhuiyan also expressed admiration and respect for the BDR personnel for "their bravery in protecting the country's frontier" amidst applause and slogans against the Sheikh Hasina Government. The BNP leader accused the Government of its "subservience" and India of showing a "big brotherly attitude" which he claimed led to "painful incidents" along the border.

Dhaka unruffled

A Government official said Bangladesh may not mind if India took the issue of the border fracas to the International Court of Justice (ICJ). "Involvement of a third party would help Bangladesh resolve existing border problems

hanging for the past 30 years," a senior Home Ministry official said when his attention was drawn to a recent statement of the Union Minister of State for Home Affairs, Mr. I.D. Swamy, during his recent visit to Meghalaya.

Charging Bangladesh with war crimes, Mr. Swamy had said India would take the Rowmari incident to the ICJ. "It will help establish before the world that India intruded into Bangladesh territory and the BDR had to open fire in self-defence," the official responded.

Probe begins

Meanwhile, the Government began an investigation into India's charges of torture of 16 BSF personnel killed on April 18. "Our investigation into the conditions under which the (Indian) BSF men were killed has begun," the Foreign Secretary, Syed Muazzem Ali, said. "The Indians have informed us of the allegations that the bodies were mutilated. We will investigate thoroughly in conformity with the allegations."

"The investigation will cover in what conditions they got killed, where their bodies were lying, who retrieved those (bodies), when the bodies were taken for autopsy and how those were handed over to the Bsf," Mr. Ali said.

Normality returns

Reports from Guwahati said normality has returned to Manakachar, Karimganj and Belonia along the Indo-Bangladesh border. None-

theless the BSF is on a maximum alert, a BSF official said. A strict vigil was being maintained along the entire border with Assam, Meghalaya and Tripura.

Flag meetings would continue at regular intervals between officials of the BSF and BDR to defuse any tension arising on the border. Intensified patrolling was continuing along the borders to prevent any further attacks, the senior official of the BSF headquarters in Agartala said.

Meanwhile, the Manakachar police will also question the two injured soldiers returned by Bangladesh in connection with the FIR filed by the BSF regarding the killing of 16 soldiers. At present, BSF officials are questioning the soldiers undergoing medical treatment at Tura and will submit its report to the Centre.

Fresh clashes?

According to a Dhaka report, a senior Bangladesh security officer said fresh shootings had broken out from the Indian side on Friday adding that BSF officials denied any such incident. "We heard gunshots near Achintapur border outpost on Friday night," Maj. Abul Quasem Mohammad Arif of BDR, Dinajpur sector, said.

Another BDR official, who asked not to be named, said both sides were continuing to bolster their forces at vulnerable points along the frontier. ... UNI, PTT, Reuters

The divide run

EVEN 30 years after independence, two distinctive forces — the secularists and the fundamentalists — are still struggling for supremacy in Bangladesh, though the issue was believed to have been resolved with the birth of the new country in a war that was fought in the spirit of secular Bengali nationhood. And, as a fresh national poll nears, the confrontation is sharpening by the day.

The fact that Sheikh Hasina, daughter of the country's independence architect, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, was elected to power in June 1996 only further embittered the forces behind the bloody changeover in 1975 when her father was assassinated. They have become all the more aggressive, particularly on the question of India. More so after the recent border clashes were contained thanks to the political maturity of New Delhi and Dhaka. The Awami League Government, dubbed "the stooge of India" by the Begum Khaleda Zia-led Opposition alliance, is now being charged with "surrendering" the country's interests to the "enemy". Despite the tensions, it is hard to believe that the recent border skirmishes have caused any major injury to India-

*Even 30 years after independence, t
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Bangladesh continues, says Haro*

Bangladesh relations. But the quick resolution of the crisis has frustrated the political enemies of Sheikh Hasina.

Under Bangladesh's Constitution, the Awami League will be in the office till July 13. After that power will automatically be transferred to a neutral caretaker Government which will hold an election to the Jatiya Sangsad (Parliament) within the next 90 days. But the violent street protests by the mainstream Opposition has vitiated the situation. During the first three weeks of April, the Begum Khaleda Zia-led Opposition, in which "anti-Bangladesh" forces and "Taliban-like fundamentalists are alarmingly active, has enforced 204 hours of hartal. The successive shutdowns have proved disastrous to the national economy. The bomb blasts and arson also claimed a dozen lives and caused widespread destruction of property.

In fact, the violence has only stiffened Sheikh Hasina's resolve. In response to fresh hartal calls even after she

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velopment inputs which are absent in these areas. The Das are landless tribals who live in scattered hamlets.

In places just 60 km away from Hyderabad, there are Lakshadweep "tandas" (hamlets) with no roads or electricity. The area is unable to support sustained agriculture. As a result, there is large-scale migration during the dry season. What little work people could do in the past, through Government-sponsored road works, has stopped as under a World Bank-financed infrastructure programme roads in Andhra Pradesh are idly being widened and improved with the use of heavy machinery.

In many parts of Nalgonda district, there is a high incidence of fluorosis. The absence of adequate health facilities increases morbidity and mortality amongst the people. And literacy efforts are practically non-existent due to the abysmal literacy rates, particularly among women.

Apart from the stark reality of existence without water, work, and therefore with very little food, Lambada society has been infected by some of the worst social customs of mainstream Indian society — dowry included. In earlier days, families paid a bride price. Today they have to pay dowry. As a result, they prefer to sell their daughters, rather than raise them.

The State Government has responded to the scandal by issuing a Government order prohibiting biological parents from "quishing" their children tophanages on grounds of poverty. In the past, it was this practice that was exploited by agents who kept nominal records of children who had given up their children. Closer scrutiny revealed that the addresses and names of the biological parents were fictitious. In any case, most of the poor people who sell their babies rarely deal directly with the agencies. It is middlemen who go to villages, procure the babies and then sell them in Hyderabad, or in Chennai.

Also belatedly, the State Government has laid down guidelines to set up a board to give certificates of recognition to adoption agencies. But there is practically no check kept on orphanages. As recent events have revealed, they are no better than holding centres for registered adoption agencies to pick up children. Also, in the past, agencies like Mr. Subbiah's managed to get themselves registered. So how will the situation be different another two years down the line? Ms. Rao argues that the steps the Government has taken will merely push the problem underground. There could be more instances of female infanticide. "You cannot legislate away a social problem," she says.



Police face Opposition activists in Dhaka.

BSF killings aimed at overthrowing Hasina

MANASH GHOSH
STATESMAN NEWS SERVICE

KOLKATA, April 24. — The gruesome killing of 16 BSF officers and jawans in Barabari by Bangladesh Rifles and civilians was part of an "opposition conspiracy" to destabilise and overthrow Sheikh Hasina Wajed before 13 July.

On that date, her government's five-year term ends and she is to hand over power to a neutral caretaker government for holding parliamentary elections in mid-October.

The recent incidents, including the bombs blasts — one at a Communist Party rally in Dhaka in January, the other on Bengali New Year's day at Dhaka's Ramna Race Course — are said to be part of a concerted opposition attempt to destabilise Bangladesh.

This is the view of senior Awami League leaders, contacted over the phone in Dhaka today. They said the other objectives of those who masterminded the torture, killings and mutilation of BSF personnel's bodies were to stall the polls and derail the democratic process to save Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's killers whose death sentences, served by a lower court, are awaiting confirmation by Bangladesh High Court. The confirmation is due in the next few weeks.

The Awami leaders said that with Sheikh Hasina trying to ensure that her father's killers don't go unpunished the Bangladesh Nationalist Party and Jamat-

e-Islami led opposition. They and an influential section of the government had benefited from Mujib's killing and were trying desperately to create a situation that may lead to Sheikh Hasina's assassination.

The Opposition has taken recourse to such heinous attempts, for it's certain that its agenda of ousting Sheikh Hasina through hartals was floundering, they said.

The sole purpose of the brutish acts of killing and mutilating the bodies was to create such revulsion in India that would evoke in a serious retaliation, causing heavy casualties on the Bangladeshi side, the leaders said. That would help BNP's Begum Khaleda Zia and Jamaat-e-Islami leaders to create a mass hysteria against Sheikh Hasina and portray the retaliation as the result of her policy of, what they call, "subservience to India."

Information available with the leaders and some Bangladeshi journalists who visited Barabari reveal the BDR on "instructions from above" let the local armed militant activists of Islamic Chhatra Sibir, student wing of Jamat, to lynch the BSF jawans. The BDR personnel, both in uniform and mufti, joined in the torture and with the gun-toting Sibir activists shot the BSF jawans. The Jamat has a formidable base at Rowmari where the killings took place.

The BDR director-general, Major-General Fazlur Rahman, has tried to explain



Family members of BSF constable Sukhinder Singh with other mourners at his residence in Kotha Majithi village in Gurdaspur district on Tuesday. — PTI

that the bodies had been mutilated because some scavengers fed on them. But the Bangladeshi leadership and journalists consider that to be a lie meant to cover up his misdeeds. Maj-Gen Rahman, through a freedom fighter, was educated in a madrassah and is considerably fond of Islamic militants, with whom he interacts closely. A known jingoist, he has been striving to cast himself in the mould of Zia-ur-Rahman, though he's distantly related to Sheikh Hasina.

The BNP and Jamat have hailed him as a national hero and warned that if he's

"victimised" it would cause serious problems for Sheikh Hasina.

Dhaka has been wondering how could a border incident of such magnitude happen without Sheikh Hasina's knowledge. India's restrained reaction has somewhat upset the BNP and Jamat leaders. They have alleged that the incident was a "got-up game" of Sheikh Hasina with support from BJP leaders to give her mileage in the polls. The purpose, they say, is to project Sheikh Hasina to Bangladesh's Muslim majority as not pro anti-India.

But this has not carried conviction with discerning Bangladeshis, who say Hasina wouldn't follow such an adventurist path before the polls and when the opposition, specially pro-Pakistani fundamentalists, were baying for her blood.

She is aware of the consequences of pursuing such a "dangerous line" that had the potential to snowball into a major border skirmish. "It will be suicidal for her. The sole purpose of the BDR operation, at the opposition's behest, was to compromise her politically because of which neither she nor any of her party leaders has been able to comment on the event. Don't forget Bangabandhu too was a victim of a conspiracy. The BNP and Jamat are trying to do the same to Hasina," said one of Sheikh Hasina's close aides.

Even some of Dhaka's leading dailies have started questioning the timing, the motive and urgency of the BDR to

to lay a siege on the BSF outpost in Pyridwah, though there are many such "adverse possessions" on 3,000 acres on both sides of the border. The Indira-Mujib pact of 1974 favoured status quo till the problems of the enclaves and "adverse possessions" were sorted out through a mutually agreed exchange programme.

One reason why the exchange couldn't take place, according to the foreign ministry, was the dour resistance put up by the former West Bengal chief minister, Mr Jyoti Basu, who feared that that would adversely affect his party's interest by displacing people on a large-scale.

The border killings has showed the Awami government in poor light. Not only were Sheikh Hasina, who is also the defence minister, and the home minister, Mr Mohammed Nasim, who oversees BDR operations, initially unaware of the incident but reacted very late in their damage limitation exercise.

The argument given is that they were not in the know of the serious magnitude of the happenings. In fact the Prime Minister has of late been blaming the security agencies, especially policemen, for the current state of lawlessness for, she says, the middle cadre police officers were stuffed with BNP activists. It is to discredit her government that police were not seriously investigating the recent bomb blasts which had badly tarnished her government's image.

THE STATESMAN

25 APR 2001

Bangla blunts impact of strike

Dhaka, April 24 (Reuters): Bangladesh blunted the impact today of the second day of an Opposition-led nationwide strike by tightening security to prevent violence and allow people to travel, witnesses said.

Numerous pedal rickshaws and some motorised vehicles poured into the streets in Dhaka and some shops reopened. The Opposition's 72-hour strike aims to force Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina

to step down before her term expires on July 13 and hold an early election.

Opposition leaders said they decided not to enforce the strike in the port city of Chittagong tomorrow, the third day of the stoppage, so as to allow a local wrestling contest called Bolikhela to be held.

"The port city will be free from strike tomorrow. We don't want to disrupt the traditional contest," said one leader of the main Oppo-

sition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP).

Police prohibited traffic in Dhaka's Minto Road area, where most government ministers live, and the official residence of the leader of the Opposition Begum Khaleda Zia, chief of the BNP and a four-party Opposition alliance, is located. Khaleda does not live there, but uses it as a party office.

"The prohibition (on traffic movement at Minto Road) is intended to ensure safety of the ministers," the police said, without giving details. They added the streets of Dhaka and Chittagong were virtually free of Opposition pickets today.

THE TELEGRAPH

25 APR 2001

Death and blasts in Bangla shutdown

Dhaka, April 23 (Reuters): One man was killed by police firing and several were injured in violence as an Opposition-led general strike largely paralysed transport and business across Bangladesh today.

Witnesses said police opened fire after strike activists hurled home-made bombs at security officers at Dhaka's Demra suburb around evening. Police said at least 15 people were injured in sporadic bomb blasts and clashes elsewhere in the capital today.

Vehicles were mostly off the streets and shops were shuttered in Dhaka, a city of nine million people. Witnesses said the number of Opposition activists on city streets was less today than in previous strikes as security had been stepped up because of fears of violent clashes.

The strike halted trade on the country's two stock exchanges in Dhaka and Chittagong, disrupted work at the Chittagong port and shut schools and many businesses, witnesses said. Trains, ferries and flights of state airline



Children carry food for policemen on duty in Dhaka during the first day of the Opposition's 72-hour nationwide strike. (AFP)

Bangladesh Biman operated on schedule, transport officials said. But flights of the private GMG airline, which operates domestic routes, were suspended.

The action was the latest in a string of Opposition protest strikes aimed at forcing the government to step down and hold an early election. The government has refused.

Opposition leader Begum

Khaleda Zia yesterday asked her party leaders and activists to ensure a "strong presence" on the streets. Supporters of the ruling Awami League said they too would be out.

Police said dozens of crude bombs exploded and several vehicles were set on fire in Dhaka last night, before the three-day countrywide stoppage began at 6 am (12 am GMT) today.

THE TELEGRAPH

24 APR 2001

Hasina regrets follow clean chit

FROM CHANDAN NANDY
AND BIDHAYAK DAS

April 22: Setting in motion reciprocal gestures on a day emotions ran high, Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina spoke to her Indian counterpart Atal Bihari Vajpayee, expressed "regrets" and promised a "thorough" investigation into charges of torturing BSF jawans and mutilating their bodies.

Hasina's assurance came hours after Delhi declared that the "Bangladesh government was unaware of the unilateral action on the part of the Bangladesh Rifles".

Hasina, who runs the risk of a backlash in domestic politics if she is seen as yielding ground to India, expressed regrets but added that a "full investigation" would be conducted.

She can address critics at home by saying the expression of "regret" is a humanitarian gesture and not equivalent to an apology. The Bangladesh high commissioner told a television channel as much, making it clear that the "question of apology will be

decided only after investigation... as to who started it and what happened".

During the 30-minute conversation -- the first bilateral contact at the highest level since the eastern flare-up -- Vajpayee conveyed to Hasina a "deep sense of hurt and anguish" over the torture and pointed to the "utter disregard" shown by BDR to global conventions, a PMO spokesman said.

The BDR earlier handed over two critically-wounded jawans and the decomposed body of another to the Border Security Force. They have been taken to the 118 BSF headquarters at Tura in Meghalaya. BSF inspector-general V.K. Gaur said a protest had been lodged with the BDR as the weapons of the BSF men have not been returned.

Union home secretary Kamal Pande told reporters after a meeting chaired by Vajpayee that the Baroibari killings were "a brutal act of murder". The government will try to make a *suo motu* statement on the flare-up in Parliament tomorrow.

"It is quite clear that eight of the bodies bore point-blank bullet wounds with mutilations and mul-

23/4
tiple injuries. Another BSF jawan bore wounds of strangulation," Pande said. But he absolved Dhaka. "When the foreign secretary is saying so (that the killings were a unilateral BDR action), I believe it is with some responsibility."

However, intelligence operatives have contested the claim that massive troop movements took place without the knowledge of the Dhaka military brass or the political establishment. Hasina holds the defence portfolio.

Intelligence sources said BSF officers posted along the border at Mancachar had picked up snippets of conversation between Bangladesh army officers on wireless that one battalion be deployed at Pyrdiwah and five at Mancachar. Messages to move in two brigades of BDR's 19 division battalion were also intercepted.

Intelligence reports have also established that five battalions of the Bangladesh army had moved in uniforms towards three places in Meghalaya.

But officials conceded in Delhi that the Indian forces might have unwittingly lit the fuse by carving a footpath on "occupied" Bangladesh territory.

THE TELEGRAPH

23 APR 2001

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DHAKA BLAST

An ominous portent for Bangladesh

THE bomb blast which killed 10 people in Dhaka during a cultural function to welcome the Bengali new year has an ominous portent for Bangladesh specially when parliamentary elections are just six months away. There is no doubt that the blast was an attack on those secularists who have been trying to resist the growing influence of Islamists in their effort to make Bangladesh, if not a fundamentalist state like Afghanistan, at least an Islamic Republic. This attack is a first for the country, unless taken seriously it will not be the last. Since the Pakistani days their contention has been that Islam and not Bengali language and culture should be the hallmark of people living in east Bengal. This had prompted President Ziaur Rahman to drop secularism as one of the state principles of Bangladesh's constitution and encouraged President Ershad to make Islam the state religion. With the Awami League coming to power, Bengali nationalists have sought to assert themselves but the message is that Islamists will not hesitate to resist nationalists by violent means.

Begum Khaleda Zia and her BNP are greatly to blame for the Islamist resurgence. By forging an electoral alliance with fundamentalists like the Jamaat-e-Islami and the Islami Oikya Jote and making common cause with them on emotive issues like *Talaq* she has given outfits some respectability. The BNP has forsaken the centrist path and allowed communalists and Pakistani collaborators to draw up party strategies. Reformists like the former finance minister Saifur Rahman have been marginalised. This has encouraged the Islamist outfits many of which are getting foreign help. Their objective is to destabilise Bangladesh in every possible way. Already Bangladesh has several hundred Taliban volunteers who had arms training in Afghanistan. Islamists are fishing in troubled waters. Begum Zia is riding a tiger. Can she change direction?

THE STATESMAN

23 APR 2001

BDR men get ready coffins of dead BSF jawans at Mymensing on Friday. Fifteen bodies were handed over to senior BSF officers at Mahendraganj border post.

BDR hands over 15 mutilated bodies

Rahul Karmakar
Guwahati, April 20

THE BANGLADESH Rifles handed over 15 bodies of BSF personnel a little after 6 pm today.

The bodies were so mutilated that the BSF officers initially refused to accept them. Only seven were identified as that of BSF men, the rest were disfigured beyond recognition.

The bodies were handed over at the Boroibari point on the Indo-Bangladesh border, 6 km from Assam's Mankachar town.

The BDR was supposed to hand over the bodies around 10 am. The formality was delayed as the flag meeting between the two frontier forces could begin only after 3 pm.

The wrangle continued for three hours as the BDR insisted that the mutilated bodies belonged to their Indian counterparts, but the BSF refused to buy it. Finally, the BSF decided to accept the bodies.

BDR officials said the marks on the bodies indicated that they might have been lynched by Bangladeshi villagers. They said the BSF men were lured into Boroibari by their BDR counterparts in the pretext of exchanging pleasantries.

No sooner did the 20-odd BSF men enter Boroibari than hordes of Bangladeshi villagers armed with sticks and farming implements pounced upon them.

The BSF men, unable to fire on civilians, paid with their lives. Using Bangladeshi vil-

lagers may have been a BDR ploy, the officials said.

The genesis of the villagers' ire is believed to be 'adverse possession land' held by India, which also claims that Bangladesh occupies such land housing Indian citizens since Bangladesh's birth in 1971.

Earlier in the day, Dhubri SP AJ Baruah said BDR men had fired a few rounds at dawn, raising doubts about the BDR's intention of handing over the bodies.

The guns fell silent along the Mankachar sector today. But over 3,000 villagers who had fled the villages along the border are too scared to return yet.

On Page 9: BSF Intelligence caught napping

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES

21 APR 2001

Bangla politics behind BDR firing

DIPANKAR ROY
STATESMAN NEWS SERVICE

SHILLONG, April 19. — The sudden and unprovoked belligerence by Bangladesh Rifles since Sunday midnight in Dawki (Meghalaya) and Mancachar (Assam) sectors on the India-Bangladesh border may be attributed to the compulsions of electoral politics in Bangladesh.

General elections in that country are due in October. The siege of Pyrdiwah village, 85 km from Shillong, and the reported killing of 16 BSF personnel at Boraibari in Mancachar sub-division of Dhubri district, threaten to harm the friendship that India and Bangladesh have developed over the past few years. Five more are injured and in hospital.

BDR has said that the 325 acres of land on which Pyrdiwah is located

belonged to Bangladesh. Going by the border pillars, the village and the location of the BSF post therein one can hardly dispute the fact that it indeed is on the Bangladesh side of the border. Fact remains though, that the area has been under Indian administration since Partition and records prove that the then East Pakistan Rifles accepted this, Bangladesh, too, didn't bother too much about the area being under Indian occupation for 30 years. Why this sudden use of force now?

The timing of the BDR action is significant because of elections in Bangladesh. Both the ruling Awami League and the main Opposition party, Bangladesh Nationalist Party, have their own compulsions. Sheikh Hasina's Awami League is seen as being too soft on India by BNP and other fundamentalists who are anti-Indian.

The latter does strike a sympathetic chord in a large section of the Bangladeshi people with its anti-India stand. The BNP stands to gain if it can manage to provoke India in taking military action against Bangladesh just before the elections.

The party is in a position to manipulate such a thing too, given the fact that it has supporters in the middle and lower levels of the administration, military and the BDR.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina will be hard put to call off any action against India without inviting further criticism from her political opponents.

Going by that, it is perhaps politically wise for Sheikh Hasina, too, to show that her government isn't weak-kneed when it comes to dealing with India as her critics make her out to be.

Laying siege on Pyrdiwah sends out a

strong message to the electorate that while being friends with India, Bangladesh won't sacrifice the country's interests. Fence sitters, at least, would be convinced that BNP and the others will have to look for new areas where they can pin down the government and Awami League.

After Pyrdiwah, they can't continue to be strident in their attack against Sheikh Hasina for her and her party's stand on India.

Be that as it may, Pyrdiwah and Boraibari have probably become weapons in the hands of the Congress, in particular, against the BJP in the coming Assembly elections, mainly in Assam. The party may well try to project the BJP-led government as incapable of preventing incursions into the country by even Bangladesh, which is militarily not comparable to India.

THE STATESMAN

20 APR 2001

9 die in Dhaka concert blasts

Dhaka, April 14

TWO BOMB blasts at an open air concert in Dhaka on Saturday left at least nine people dead and 50 injured. The second blast, about 45 minutes later, wounded a policeman.

The concert, at Dhaka's lush Ramna Park, was part of the Bengali New Year celebrations and had attracted a crowd of about 15,000 people.

No organisation has claimed responsibility for the blasts.

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina condemned the blasts and blamed it on "forces who opposed Bangladesh's independence (from Pakistan) and want to destroy Bengali culture."

"I urge all Bangladeshis to resist the evil forces trying to jeopardise democracy and retard (economic) progress," she said.

Khairul Anam Shakil, general secretary of Bangladesh's leading cultural group, Chhayanot, dubbed the explosions as an attack on Bengali culture.

"I am deeply depressed and disturbed by the incident. We have been holding such concerts for over 40 years to highlight Bengali culture but never before have we become a target of terrorism," he said.

Some people in the crowd could have carried in the bombs, said a witness.

One had his belly and chest badly ruptured," he said. "Others left the scene hurriedly, leaving behind two more bombs. One exploded, hitting a policeman and the other live bomb



People run away as victims lie on the ground at the site of the bomb blasts in Dhaka on Saturday, Bengali New Year's Day.

was lying on the ground."

Police, however, believed that the bombs had been detonated by remote control.

State-run Bangladesh TV interrupted normal broadcasts to appeal for blood donations. Private television network ETV,

which was broadcasting the concert live, showed the dead and wounded lying on the ground in pools of blood, while others were screaming and running away.

In March 1999, at least 10 people were killed and more than 100 wounded in a similar bomb

attack at a meeting organised by another cultural group, Udichi, in western Jessore.

Police and Udichi officials blamed the attack on Islamic fundamentalists or other "terrorist" groups.

Reuters

Hasina sees conspiracy to destroy Bengali culture

Dhaka new year concert blasts kill 9



FROM FARID HOSSAIN AND REUTERS

Dhaka, April 14. A bomb exploded at a Bengali new year open-air concert in the capital today killing at least nine people and wounding nearly 50, witnesses said.

A second blast about 45 minutes later wounded a policeman, they added. He was examining the bomb which was lying near the explosion site of the first one. A third bomb was found in the park and was later diffused.

Seven people were killed instantly while two died in state-run hospitals, doctors said. Several persons were critically injured and the death toll is expected to rise. Speaking on condition of anonymity, a policeman investigating the blasts said the first explosion was triggered by a timing device.

The concert, at Dhaka's lush Ramna Park, was part of celebrations marking the Bengali new year and, according to witnesses, had attracted a crowd of about 15,000 people. No group has claimed responsibility. The blast occurred at 8 am (2 am GMT).

Zia Islam, a photographer, said: "I heard a small sound and then saw the area covered in thick smoke. I was surprised to see so many casualties."

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina

by the incident. We have been holding such concerts for over 40 years to highlight Bengali culture but never before have we become a target of terrorism," he said.

Political and cultural groups staged street protests outside the capital shortly after hearing the news. They wore black badges and demanded "exemplary punishment" for the killers. Moulana Matiur Rahman Nizami, chief of Bangladesh's largest Islamic political party Jamaat-e-Islami, said his party opposed violence. He held the government responsible for today's blasts, saying "the authorities have utterly failed to ensure people's safety and protect lives."

Bangladesh's ruling Awami League accuses the Jamaat of helping the Pakistani army in the killing, torture and rape of Bengali nationalists during the 1971 war. State television interrupted normal broadcasts to appeal for blood donations. The private television network ETV, which was broadcasting the concert live, showed the dead and wounded on the ground lying in pools of blood, while others were screaming and running away. In March 1999, at least 10 people were killed and more than 100 wounded in a similar bomb attack at a meeting organised by another cultural group, Udichi, in Jessore.

People run for cover after a bomb blast at Dhaka's Ramna Park on Saturday during a concert arranged to celebrate the Bengali new year. (Reuters)

wounded at the Dhaka Medical College Hospital, and later told a gathering of diplomats: "The Bengali new year began with a bad omen."

"The bombing was a political-ly-backed attack on innocent people by communal forces," she added. "Power-mongering political parties are involved in the at-

tack). President Shahabuddin Ahmed said he was deeply grieved by the loss of lives at a non-political rally.

Khairul Anam Shakil, general secretary of Bangladesh's leading cultural group, Chhayano, also condemned the bombings as an attack on Bengali culture. "I am deeply depressed and disturbed

Bangladesh surprise bounty for minorities

Udayan Nambodiri
New Delhi, April 9

IT WAS a historic legislation that Bangladesh's Jatiya Sangsad passed yesterday—the Vested Property Return Bill 2001. One that will have as much impact on Indo-Bangladeshi relations as the Ganga Water Treaty of 1996.

By this law, Hindus, whose lands and properties were forcibly taken over by the Ayub Khan regime during the 1965 Indo-Pakistan war, through the Enemy Property Act, would be entitled to reclaim their ancestral lands and homes.

Significantly, the Bill has been passed just ahead of the country's general elections.

The Government has undertaken to make a list of all returnable property within six months, and set up tribunals to determine ownership. Properties taken over by the Government in public interest from forcible occupiers may not be returned but their owners or successors would be entitled to compensation.

India sees this as a great step ahead since it promises to restore the confidence of the Hindu minority on the Bangladesh Government.

Interestingly, the BJP, when out of power, had focused on this issue during its campaigns in West Bengal. In its bid to sway voters, the party harped on the plight of their Hindu brethren across the border.

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES

10 APR 2001

Bangladesh bill to return vested property to Hindus passed

By Haroon Habib

DHAKA, APRIL 8. The Bangladesh Parliament has unanimously adopted "The Vested Property Return Bill, 2001," creating provisions for the return of certain listed vested property to its actual owners or their Bangladeshi successor or successor-in-interest.

The passage of the bill today is seen as a bold step by the Sheikh Hasina Government to scrap the "black law" enacted in the midst of the 1965 India-Pakistan war with the sole objective of suppressing the Hindu minority community.

The leaders of the minority community, including the secular, political and other forces have been demanding the repeal of the law for decades. The Hasina Government has finally repealed it after a thorough scrutiny fearing repercussions. The Cabinet agreed in principle for its repeal months ago.

The State Minister for Land, Al-haj Rasheed Mosharraf, moved the bill, which was adopted by the House as no amendment was moved. Notably, the Begum Khaleda Zia-led opposition alliance has been abstaining from the House for about two years, though Gen. Ershad's Jatiya Party returned to Parliament a few days ago risking

the formal expulsion from the mainstream Opposition combine.

Under the bill a "Vested Property Return Tribunal" will settle applications for the return of listed vested property to its actual owner or his or her Bangladeshi successor-in-interest. The bill will repeal the Enemy Property (Continuance of Emergency Provision) (repeal) Act of 1974.

After the emergence of Bangladesh, the Sheikh Mujib-ur-Rahman Government replaced the word "enemy" with "vested" property in the law, but could not repeal it because it was toppled in 1975. Though the ruling Awami League has repealed the law, its repercussions, including litigation problems, are yet to be seen.

The bill provides that some listed property, now vested in the Government, would be returned to the original owners or their Bangladeshi successor or the successor-in-interest of the original owners or their successors. It, however, proposed that the occupant of vested property, be it the Government or someone authorised by the Government, would be allowed to remove any structure or movable assets from the vested land. In case of the Government having acquired a vested property, its owner would be duly compensated.

9 APR 2001

KHALEDA'S GAMBIT

Banality
SR Prescription for self-destruction 29/3

WHAT is Begum Khaleda Zia up to? Does she want to plunge Bangladesh into renewed turmoil by serving an outrageous ultimatum on Sheikh Hasina's Awami League Government that it should resign by this month end or face a wave of nationwide general strikes and mass movements? Was this necessary specially when Sheikh Hasina had publicly announced transfer of power to a neutral caretaker Government after 17 April and holding of elections by 12 June? It is clear that Begum Zia's strategy is to secure political and electoral mileage by staging a mass upsurge which, she thinks, would force Hasina to hand over power. She is convinced that this would provide her an edge in the elections just the way Hasina secured it in 1996. Khaleda abhors accepting any concession from Hasina. Wresting it by force is what satisfies her ego even if it means disrupting the democratic process. Yet early this month people had welcomed her demand for elections in May as this was a big departure from her hartal and gherao politics. And Hasina's election offer was a positive response even though she had the option to stay in power until 13 July.

Unfortunately Begum Zia by her oneupmanship is trying to put Bangladesh's wobbly democratic system in jeopardy. Does her party have the organisational strength, cohesion and mass support to throw a popularly elected government out of power? Is such an approach morally tenable? Even Sheikh Hasina's mass movement could not dislodge her BNP government from power in 1996. Unless Sheikh Hasina commits a massive blunder Begum Zia's ultimatum is bound to be counter productive. Already she and her party MPs have lost considerable popular sympathy and credibility by boycotting parliament for the last four years although they chose to enjoy all the perks and privileges of MPs and even former part of parliamentary delegations abroad. Begum Zia's hartals and gheraos are evoking a poor response. She must realise that it is in the Opposition's as well as the nation's interest to stick to the democratic path. Anything devious would be ruinous for her and Bangladesh.

THE STATESMAN

29 MAR 2001

Bangladesh: transformation & turmoil — I

By Muchkund Dubey

189-12 293

IN A report I had prepared at the end of 1972 for the United Nations, on technical assistance requirements of the fledgling state of Bangladesh, I had predicted that it was among the few developing countries which had the best chance of transforming its feudal society and colonial economy. This prognosis was predicated on its cultural and linguistic homogeneity, the resilience of its people, displayed over centuries, to man-made and natural disasters, and their having come through the baptism of one of the most heroic wars of liberation fought in modern times. It has taken a good 30 years and several upheavals for this prognosis to start coming true. A silent transformation is under way in Bangladesh.

Some of the social indicators have registered dramatic improvements. The literacy rate has reached 62 per cent which is higher than that of Nepal and Pakistan and the same as that of India. There has been spectacular progress in increasing adult literacy which India has found a tough nut to crack. The population growth rate has come down to 1.7 per cent as compared to over 3 per cent in Pakistan and a little below 2 per cent in India.

Bangladesh has the largest and most effectively functioning civil society organisations anywhere in the Third World. Organisations such as the Grameen Bank, the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Centre (BRAC) and the Gano Swasthya Kendra have become international names. The Grameen Bank's micro-credit operation has entered the lexicon of development literature and has been replicated in numerous countries. The BRAC covers millions of people under its activities. And the Kendra played a pioneering role in the formulation of the WHO's recommendations on essential drugs.

Bangladesh provides an excellent example of democratic decentralisation in South Asia. Since the restoration of democracy in 1991, there has been no suspension of local bodies and no hiatus in elections to them. The district and village self-government institutions became the indispensable ally of the Central Government in coping with the unprecedented flood of 1999. The relief operation involved

the import of 4.9 million tonnes of grain and the distribution of 4.6 million cards under the Voluntary Group Feeding Programme (VGF). Not a single starvation death was reported due to the failure of entitlement. Thanks to the network of representative bodies at the local level, the VGF cards reached those really in need and the distribution was by and large corruption-free.

The post-flood management of agricultural production was so efficient that the next year's food output reached the record

level on the economy. This deficit has now been wiped out.

The saving/GDP ratio in the 1990s was 14.2 per cent. This is still well below the 26 per cent for India and above 40 per cent for China. But it represents a qualitative improvement over the less than 5 per cent during the initial years after the liberation. At that time tax revenues were almost non-existent, except customs duties, and foreign assistance used to finance over 90 per cent of development expenditure.

The export structure has been totally

Bangladesh has the largest and most effectively functioning civil society organisations anywhere in the Third World.

transformed during the last 6-7 years. In 1991, three products — jute, tea and fertilizers — accounted for 86 per cent of total exports. Today two-thirds of the export earnings come from readymade garments. The total exports in value terms have more than doubled between 1991-1996. Since then there has been a further increase of 50 per cent. Export earnings have grown at the rate of 12 per cent per annum during the decade. Foreign exchange reserves have been maintained at around \$2 billions during the last few years. They do not provide a highly comfortable cushion, but are sufficient to meet two months' import requirements. The debt servicing ratio at 15 per cent is considerably lower than that of India. This is mainly due to Bangladesh's eligibility as a least developed country for concessional foreign assistance.

During the last few years, Bangladesh has put in place elaborate and well-targeted social security schemes. A stipend of Taka 150 is provided to old farmers, widows and deserted women. At least 10 women are covered under this scheme in each village. Girl children are given stipend to go to school and similar stipends are provided up to class 10 to both boys and girls for not dropping out.

In the economic field, the country has achieved food self-sufficiency and an average per annum rate of growth of 5 per cent in GNP during the 1990s. This has been possible mainly because of the excellent performance of the agricultural sector. There has been a sustained increase in grain production over the last four years. The state has played a crucial role in bringing this about mainly by propagating high yielding seeds, providing subsidised inputs and through massive injection of agricultural credits. The annual grain deficit in Bangladesh was seldom above 2 million to 2.5 million tonnes. However, this seemingly small deficit imposed an onerous bur-

den on the economy. This deficit has now been wiped out.

Bangladesh started liberalising its economy from the late 1980s. The average tariff has come down from 42 per cent in 1990 to 17 per cent now, as compared to the level of 25 per cent prevailing in India. The highest tariff rate has come down from 400 per cent to 50 per cent, for, non-tariff barriers have been practically eliminated. There is a new surge of entrepreneurship visible in Bangladesh. Production and export capacities are being sought to be developed in new areas, particularly in small scale and village industries. Efforts are be-

ing made through induction of technology to reduce costs and improve quality to be competitive internationally.

Unfortunately, the most natural and easily accessible market, India, still remains by and large closed to Bangladesh. India is following a shortsighted, niggardly and over-cautious incremental approach towards opening up its market to imports from Bangladesh. A Bangladesh request to grant duty free access on a non-reciprocal basis for a list of 25 product groups has been under consideration for more than two years now, though the Prime Minister conceded the request in principle during his visit to Bangladesh in May 1999. While India is hesitating, a consensus is fast emerging in the international community to grant non-reciprocal duty free access to all manufactured and semi-manufactured exports from the least developed countries. This is likely to be one of the main offers of the developed countries in the upcoming WTO round of negotiations.

This is also despite the fact that among external suppliers, India has been the biggest beneficiary of the Bangladesh's policy of trade liberalisation. India's exports to Bangladesh have increased eight-fold since 1975. If informal trade is taken into account, India's total exports to Bangladesh now amount to over \$3 billions. Very few in India know or recognise that Bangladesh is India's 8th largest export market and the third largest if informal trade included.

One of the most remarkable achievements of the Bangladesh Government has been the peace accord reached with tribal populations of the Chittagong Hill Tract. Though the accord remains controversial domestically, as is bound to be the case with any agreement on such a complex and contentious issue, there is no doubt that it has brought long awaited peace to the region and has cemented national unity and cohesion. The Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina, has displayed extraordinary courage and rare foresight. This is one of the few examples of leadership in the Third World — and the only one in South Asia in recent years — coming to terms with the aspirations of ethnic minorities in an amicable manner.

THE HINDU

28 MAR 2001

Bangla Opp's quit-ultimatum to Hasina

57-10
22/3
AGENCE FRANCE PRESSE

DHAKA, March 21. — Bangladesh's Opposition parties today issued an ultimatum to the Prime Minister, Mrs Hasina Wajed, to resign by 30 March or face a nationwide general strike.

"The government has until 30 March to resign and hand over power to a caretaker government or else we will enforce a non-stop two-day nationwide general strike from 1 April," Mrs Khaleda Zia, chief of the main Opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party, told a rally organised by the four-party Opposition alliance in central Dhaka.

Mrs Zia added that if that did not work, "There will be continuous strikes and other things."

"I am also demanding that the Prime Minister recommend the dissolution of the national



Mrs Khaleda Zia



Mrs Hasina Wajed

Parliament to the President," Mrs Zia said.

"I am also appealing to the President to form a caretaker government, which will ensure free and fair elections." Leaders of the BNP-led Opposition alliance and supporters cheered and clapped as Mrs Zia announced the action plan.

Sheikh Hasina Wajed "officially" informed the Bangladesh President, Shahabuddin Ahmed, yesterday that she was ready to hand over power to a caretaker government after 17 April to prepare for elections by 12 June, political sources said.

She has, however, warned that if the BNP-led four-party Opposition alliance issues any ultimatum for her resignation or announces a plan of street protests, she might withdraw her offer for early polls.

Her five-year term officially ends on 13 July.

THE STATESMAN

22 MAR 2001

Bangladesh Opposition's ultimatum to Govt.

By Haroon Habib

DHAKA, MARCH 22. The Opposition leader and chief of Bangladesh's 4-party alliance, Begum Khaleda Zia, has issued an ultimatum to the government to resign by March 30 for the next caretaker Government to hold early polls, failing which it would observe non-stop hartal on April 1 and 2.

Begum Zia issued the ultimatum on Wednesday against the backdrop of the Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina's pronouncement that she would hold early polls before June 12 and transfer power to a caretaker Government any day after April 17.

At a massive rally here on Wednesday, Begum Zia asked Sheikh Hasina to advise the President to dissolve Parliament forthwith. She also requested the President to start the process of the formation of next caretaker Government which will conduct the election.

The Prime Minister termed the threat "unfortunate." She said at a meeting here today that during the last nearly five years of her tenure Begum Zia and her political allies had issued a series of ultimatums which did not work. "I have decided voluntarily to hand over power to a caretaker authority, to hold early elections, and also wanted to transfer power any day after April 17....I also announced that my party is ready to face a fresh people's mandate before June 12. "Why then the ultimatum....they want to pull me down by force. In response, if I say, well, if you have strength, pull me down, let's see your strength?"

While Sheikh Hasina's reaction was guarded, key ruling party stalwarts, including the Industries Minister, Mr. Tofail Ahmed, and the Home Affairs Minister, Mr. Mohammad Nasim, said the Opposition had taken the "ges-

ture" of the Government as "weakness".

In a sharp reaction to the Opposition's ultimatum from a similarly huge rally on the outskirts of Dhaka the same day, key Awami League leaders said they would now continue in office till their last official day, then July 13.

While issuing the ultimatum from a "grand rally" Begum also "ordered" civil servants not to obey the Government's "illegal orders" and also urged the donors not to sanction fresh loans or disburse funds for the Government. She also announced a programme that includes non-stop hartal "till the fall of the Government."

From these challenge and counter challenge, analysts believe that the possibility of holding an early election may be bleak. A large section of the ruling party was in fact strongly in favour of completing their tenure till July 13, since the Opposition's street agitation did fail to yield any effective pressure on the Government so far. But they finally decided to go for early polls after the party chief, Sheikh Hasina's dramatic announcement came that she was ready to go for election before June 12 and leave office any day after April 17.

The leaders of the left democratic parties have termed the Opposition's ultimatum "unnecessary" saying the resignation debate was completely useless as the tenure of the present Government would end in two months. They also fear that certain quarters have been trying to foil the entire election process. The Opposition's ultimatum and the Government's counter-challenge to change its decision on holding early polls, analysts say, may not only make the fate of the election uncertain but also force the country to enter in a volatile phase.

THE HINDU

23 MAR 2001

Bangla volte-face on elections

51-11
23/3

REUTERS

DHAKA, March. 22. - The Bangladesh government has pulled back from a decision to hold elections in June after Opposition parties called for it to quit by the end of March, a spokesman at the Prime Minister's office said today.

On Monday, Prime Minister Mrs Hasina Wajed said she would hand over power to a caretaker authority after 17 April and hold the next election around middle of June.

But yesterday, Opposition leader Begum Khaleda Zia said the Prime Minister must quit by March-end and hold the election in May. She threatened to call a two-day non-stop countrywide strike from 1 April in a fresh attempt to oust Mrs Wajed.

"Certainly the government's position on the next polls has changed, the Awami League is now firm to complete its term in office," the Prime Minister's office said. Mrs Hasina Wajed took office in 1996 and she need not step down before 13 July.

On expiry of her term, Mrs Wajed is constitutionally bound to hand power to a non-party caretaker authority that will hold the new polls within three months.

Industry minister Mr Tofael Ahmed said: "Our pledge to hold an early election no longer stands following the ultimatum issued by Begum Khaleda Zia."

"She had mistaken the government's goodwill as weakness. So we have accepted the challenge and will now stay in office until the term ends on 13 July," Mr Ahmed said.

THE STATESMAN

23 MAR 2001

Bangladesh Government pulls back from election pledge

Dhaka, March 22

THE BANGLADESH Government has pulled back from a decision to hold elections in June after opposition parties called for it to quit by the end of March, a spokesman at the Prime Minister's office said on Thursday.

On Monday, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina offered to hand over power to a caretaker authority after April 17 and hold elections around middle of June so that Bangladeshis would be able to vote before the rainy season starts.

But on Wednesday, Opposition leader Begum Khaleda Zia said Hasina must quit by end of March and hold the election before the end of May. Otherwise, Khaleda threatened to call a two-day non-stop countrywide strike from April 1 in a fresh attempt to oust Hasina. "Certainly the Gov-

ernment's position on the next polls has changed. The ruling (Awami League) party is now firm to complete its term in office," the Prime Minister's spokesman told Reuters.

Hasina took office in 1996 and she need not step down before July 13. On expiry of her term, Hasina is constitutionally bound to hand power to a non-party caretaker authority that will hold the new polls within three months.

Industry Minister Tofael Ahmed said: "Our pledge to hold an early election no longer stands following the ultimatum issued by Khaleda Zia. She had mistaken the Government's goodwill as weakness. So we have taken the challenge and will now stay in office until the Government's current term ends on July 13," Ahmed said in an immediate response to Khaleda's warning.

"The opposition, apprehending a massive defeat in the coming election, are trying to stay away from the vote on one pretext or the other.

They are also conspiring to plunge the country into a deep political crisis," Home Minister Mohammad Nasim said.

A four-party opposition alliance, headed by Khaleda, chief of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, have held more than 80 days of often-violent national strikes over the past four-and-half years in an effort to force Hasina to resign.

The BNP lawmakers have also boycotted Parliament since July 1999 trying to push ahead their campaign against Hasina's Government, which they branded as "corrupt, inefficient and repressive." The prime minister has denied the charges.

Reuters

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES

23 MAR 2001

Hasina plans to quit next month

ASSOCIATED PRESS

DHAKA, March 20. — Bangladesh Prime Minister Mrs Hasina Wajed plans to step down next month to pave the way for general elections.

Mrs Wajed said yesterday she was ready to transfer power to a neutral caretaker government any time after 17 April — a legal pre-requisite to holding elections in Bangladesh. She said the nation could go to the polls in June.

Mrs Wajed's five-year term ends on 12 June. In 1996, Bangladesh introduced a system that requires the Prime Minister to resign at least three months before elections that are supervised by a non-partisan caretaker administration headed by a retired chief justice.

"We consider 17 April a red-letter day in our history. So will hand over power any day after it," Mrs Hasina said at a foundation laying ceremony of a new soccer stadium in Dhaka's



Sheikh Hasina Wajed

Kamalapur district. On April 17, 1971 Bangladesh's (then East Pakistan) government in exile was launched during a nine-month war of independence from Pakistan.

The Parliament, which is meeting in the last week of March, is to be dissolved by the country's president, Mr Shahabuddin Ahmad, before the caretaker government takes charge.

Mrs Hasina's announcement on transferring power by follows demands by an Opposition alliance for her to quit office immediately and hold parliamentary polls in May. She, however, said she would not resign immediately.

Four main Opposition parties have accused her administration of corruption, incompetence and harassment of political rivals — charges that the government has denied vehemently. The right-wing alliance includes the main opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party and the fundamentalist Jamaat-i-Islami party. It has threatened to launch a non-cooperation movement against the government if its demands are not met.

The Opposition alliance, headed by former Prime Minister, Ms Khaleda Zia, will hold a rally in Dhaka tomorrow.

Awami League is expected to win an absolute majority in the 300-seat national Parliament.

THE STATESMAN

21 MAR 2001

Bangla ultras release Western hostages

HT Correspondent
Agartala, March 17

THE HOSTAGE crisis in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) of southeast Bangladesh has been resolved with the release of three foreign nationals after a month of their kidnapping.

The kidnapers freed Britain's Tom Selby, 28, and Danes Torben Mikkelsen, 48, and Nils Hulgaaard, 64, early Saturday morning.

Sources said the hostages were released from a hideout in dense forests of Rangamati district of the hill region and they walked out of the forests.

A security contingent found them and took them to their camp. They are said to be in sound health.

Senior Bangladeshi officials as well as representatives from Danish embassy and British high commission reached the area following the development.

Reports reached here said the foreigners were tracked down at Kashkhali in Rangamati. It was not known whether the release was fallout of any agreement with the kidnapers who had been demanding 1.6 million dollars as ransom.

The authorities had established contact with the kidnapers through tribal village

chiefs.
Selby, Torben and Hulgaaard engaged in a road construction work were kidnapped on February 16 at Guniapara in Rangamati.

It is believed that the kidnapers are Chakma tribals and they represent a group opposed to the 1997 peace accord ending the 22-year-old bloody insurgency in CHT.

The incident was attributed to be a part of wider plan to make the world known of the resentment over the peace agreement signed between Bangladesh Government and erstwhile guerrilla group Santi Bahini. The accord apparently returned peace in the 14,200 sq km region.

Bangladesh Government that had been under tremendous pressure following the incident, pressed several top politicians, particularly those from Chakma tribe, to help early and safe release of the hostages.

The release however could not take place as expected and on one occasion Tribal Affairs Minister Kalpa Ranjan Chakma blamed the media for reporting that Government has decided to pay off the ransom.

Whether the Bangladesh authorities struck a secret deal with the kidnapers to secure safe release of the British and



The three European engineers rescued on Saturday wave to the media after reaching Dhaka. They are Torben Mikkelsen (far left), Nils Hulgaaard (far right), both from Denmark, and Tom Selby (centre), from Britain

Danish nationals, remained a mystery.

The release of the foreigners also paved the way for the armed

forces to restrict movement in CHT, home of 12 tribal clans, mostly Chakmas.

The huge deployment of Army

AP PHOTO

in the area had been a bone of contention prior to the peace accord.

Bangla troops free European hostages

51-12
183
UNITED NEWS OF INDIA

DHAKA, March 17. - Army troops stormed the kidnapper's jungle hideout, and freed the three abducted Europeans early today, ending a month-long hostage crisis in Chittagong hills.

Mr Torben Mikkelsen (48), and Mr Nils Hulgaard (64), from Denmark, and Mr Tim Selby (28), from Britain were flown by a military helicopter to Dhaka after their rescue.

Security sources said the foreigners, abducted on 16 February were rescued unhurt from one of three huts in Nakshichari jungle in Kawkhali Upazila.

Lt Col Ashraf and his team raided the kidnapper's den about 5.30 a.m. local time, firing about 100 shots to free the captives.

"We cordoned off the area at night, and used handmikes asking the abductors to surrender, but to no avail," a military officer said.

Some people were seen fleeing the huts during firing, but the troops refrained from firing since it was hard to identify in the dark whether they were hostages or abductors. Some weapons and documents were reportedly recovered from the huts.

After their rescue, the three European engineers of a Danish company, Kampsax, were taken to the nearest Kashkhali army camp. Rangamati Brigade Commander, Brigadier General Golam Rabbani, welcomed them.

Later they were flown to Dhaka, and taken to a combined military hospital for routine checkup. "They are looking very well," a British High Commission official said.

Mr David Weston (56), of Britain, and his Bangladeshi driver, Abdul Motaleb, were set free immediately, and asked to bring the ransom. Later the abductors dropped their ransom demand of 9 crore taka, and accepted a government amnesty offer during negotiations through mediators.

Bangladesh elections likely by mid-June

By Haroon Habib

DHAKA, MARCH 15. The Bangladesh Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina, has announced that her party was ready for polls before June 12.

The Election Commission has started speeding up work for the elections, keeping the middle of June as the tentative schedule. The last parliamentary elections were held on June 12, 1996, when the present Awami League returned to power after 21 years of political struggle that followed the assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

A close aide of the Prime Minister said that Sheikh Hasina would transfer power to a neutral caretaker Government, as stipulated in the Constitution, at an appropriate time for facilitating the election. The aide was also quoted as saying that despite suggestions by some ruling party stalwarts and senior Ministers to complete the term, Sheikh Hasina decided to seek a fresh electoral mandate. Sources in the ruling party said the decision to go in for early polls was a unanimous one. The Government has begun preparations to hand over power, possibly before April 10. As the first step, the Prime Minister will request the President to dissolve the Parliament by March-end.

The four-party Opposition alliance, at a meeting on Monday, once again demanded that the Prime Minister step down immediately if she is "really for holding the elections early". The Opposition parties are likely to make their seat adjustments after their supremo, Begum Khaleda Zia, returns from her China visit.

Meanwhile, the Chief Election Commissioner (CEC), Mr. M. A. Sayeed, met the President, Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed, on Monday and apprised him of the preparations being made for the election.

THE HINDU

13 MAR 2001



Police drag an Indonesian protester by the hair during clashes in front of the Golkar Party office in Jakarta on Tuesday. — AP/PTI

Bangla elections may produce weak coalition: World Bank

REUTERS

DHAKA, March 13. — The Bangladeshi parliamentary polls, due in three months, could produce a weak coalition, threatening reforms and flow of foreign aid, the World Bank said in a report.

"The election could result in a weak coalition, or the new government may not be willing to invest political capital in reforms," said the Bank's annual country assistance and strategy report for Bangladesh. It said foreign help would be constrained in case of a weak coalition government.

"In such a case, the current unsatisfactory situation of stalled or slow reforms would be likely to prevail in the near-

to medium-term, and the Bank group assistance programme would continue to be constrained by weak political will...

"The resulting low levels of lending could lead to a deterioration in the Bank group's relations with the government, which has already complained that the level of assistance was too low in the previous and current financial year (July-June) to sustain the investment needed for growth and poverty reduction."

Bangladesh receives around \$2 billion annually from international donors to finance development and imports. The aid package is announced at a meeting of Bangladesh's aid donors held in Paris every

April, headed by the World Bank.

"Bangladesh's development is a mosaic of achievements and disappointments," the report said.

"During the past decade, indicators of economic and social well-being have improved steadily. Real per capita income grew by about three per cent per annum. Rice, the main staple, and other food items became more available and affordable. Similarly, life expectancy, infant mortality, literacy and access to safe water improved appreciably. Nevertheless many daunting development challenges remain. Despite relatively strong economic performance in the late 1990s, massive poverty, and inequality persist."

THE STRAITS

14 MAR 2001

Khaleda for polls on May 31

By Haroon Habib

DHAKA, MARCH 11. The general elections in Bangladesh may be conducted a little ahead of the Sheikh Hasina Government completing its five-year tenure. This possibility has become stronger with the Opposition too demanding polls in May.

The Opposition leader, Begum Khaleda Zia, met the President, Mr. Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed, and put forth her demand to hold the election on May 31. Begum Zia's proposal was in response to the Prime Minister's offer that elections would be conducted anytime the former wanted.

The Prime Minister's offer has landed the four-party Opposition alliance in a dilemma. The alliance, which is led by Begum Zia, has been demanding the resignation of the Government and early polls, and when the Government offered to hand

over power to a caretaker authority and conduct early elections, the Opposition was caught offguard.

Sheikh Hasina has also questioned the Opposition's ongoing street agitation. "What's the use of causing suffering to the people... wait for a few months, and face the election," she urged the alliance.

What the Opposition wants is clear. Sensing that the election is near, it has decided to continue the agitation, including issuing the Government an "ultimatum" for its resignation, to claim that the Government resigned under its pressure. This, the alliance hopes, will pay political dividends.

The two camps seem to be preparing the ground for the final clash which, many fear, might prove damaging for the young democracy, particularly if there is largescale violence.

THE HINDU

12 MAR 2001

Three foreigners kidnapped in Bangladesh

SF 12 REUTERS 1872

DHAKA, Feb. 17. - Three foreigners were kidnapped late yesterday by suspected tribal guerrillas in the Chittagong hill area of southeastern Bangladesh, security officials said today.

Officials said two Danes, Mr Torben Mikkelsen and Mr Nils Hulgaard, and a British, Mr Tim Selby, were kidnapped by unknown gunmen, who were demanding a ransom of 90 million taka (\$1.6 million).

They were abducted at gunpoint yesterday at Guniapara near Rangamati hill town, about 400 km from the capital Dhaka, officials said.

Another British citizen, Mr David Weston, and a Bangladeshi driver were also taken at gunpoint but later released unhurt. Moreover, the abductors told Mr Weston to come back with the ransom.

Bangladesh's state news agency, BSS, quoted army sources as saying that a hardline tribal group, the United People's Democratic Front (UPDF), was the prime suspect.

"There is still no news about their whereabouts after more than 20 hours," police inspector, Mr Abdul Kader, told Reuters from Rangamati by telephone.

Bangladesh's state news agency, BSS, said those abducted were consultants visiting a road development project being financed by Danish aid.

The Danes were employees of Denmark's construction consultancy firm KAMPSAX, headquartered in Copenhagen, BSS reported.

The UPDF was led by Proshit Khisha, former leader of the militant Hill Students Federation which has been demanding full autonomy for the Hill tracts.

THE STATESMAN

18 FEB 2001

Ambition's ugly face

Wreaking vengeance on Sheikh Hasina is all that Khaleda Zia is concerned with. That she espouses the cause of Islamic fundamentalists to achieve this end is causing her BNP party moderates much concern, writes MANASH GHOSH



Bangladesh Nationalist Party leader Begum Khaleda Zia: Obsessed with getting even.

It is paradoxical that political instability continues to dog Bangladesh at the beginning of the new millennium despite the significant strides the country has made, especially in the economic and social spheres, which have greatly buoyed its deprecit image.

For the second successive year Bangladesh, once despised by Henry Kissinger as an international basket case, is not only self-sufficient but has also a food surplus which has perked up the economy. In 1999 it stopped importing food and has recently begun exports because of its overflowing food godowns.

The price of rice — the country's political barometer and which spawned numerous anti-government movements — is now at an all time low of Taka 10 a kg. Dhaka's rickshaw-pullers admit they've never had it so good, what with their families enjoying two square meals a day, seven days a week. The price line of many essentials has been kept so steady that even the poor have a disposable income which they spend on consumer durables — as was the case during the recent Id. After years, the other economic indicators — industrial production, exports and revenue collection — have also risen appreciably.

Politically, though, it continues to remain as volatile and unstable as ever. Democratic institutions like parliament have become almost defunct. Begum Khaleda Zia's Bangladesh Nationalist Party-led four-party Opposition alliance has preferred to confront and fight its political battles against Sheikh Hasina's Awami League government on the streets.

Sunday's not so impressive gherao of the government secretariat in Dhaka and countless poorly assisted harlots called by her to overthrow the "zalim Hasina" government are part of her confrontationalist stance.

The MPs of her party and two other alliance partners, the Jatiya Party and the Jamat-Islami, have been boycotting parliament for almost four years as they are convinced that battles fought on the streets will lead to a "gonowuithan" (people's uprising) resulting in Sheikh Hasina's ouster. The root of the political unrest lies in Begum Zia's refusal to accept defeat to Sheikh Hasina in the 1996 parliamentary poll. Wreaking vengeance upon Sheikh Hasina is all she's concerned with.

Begum Zia has not forgiven Sheikh Mujib's daughter for using the issue of a neutral caretaker government as a contrivance for defeating her at the polls. In the current anti-government movement she, as a

tit for tat, has employed all those allies and tactics which Sheikh Hasina once used to harass and force her government to accept the popular demand of holding parliamentary elections under a neutral caretaker government. Begum Zia hopes that if her movement succeeds in forcing Sheikh Hasina to resign it will be a moral victory which would brighten her party's prospects of coming to power in September's parliamentary poll.

But what has compounded and qualitatively changed Bangladesh's politics with far reaching implications is Begum Zia abandoning her party's once centrist and nationalist stance. In her drive to oust Hasina, she has made the BNP veer to the extreme right so it can make common cause with an obscure fundamentalist ally — the Islamic Oikya Jot headed by clerics — which recently declared *jehad* against the rule of law and constitutional governance. The IOJ clerics have not only challenged the Bangladesh High Court's right to outlaw *fatwa* but have also conferred a death sentence on the two judges who committed the "un-Islamic act of taking away the right of the *mulanas* to issue edicts."

They have also vowed to make *fatwa* legal and talbanise Bangladesh. In fact, the slogan "*Aamru sabai Talban*", Bangladesh *habeey* Afghanistan. (We are all Talban and Bangladesh will become Afghanistan) is an anthem they chant on Dhaka's streets. They admit receiving financial and material support from foreign Islamist bodies for turning Bangladesh into an Islamic state. This is also what the Jamat, the Jatiya Party and the pro-Islamist faction in the BNP are clamouring for.

Having failed to dent the Sheikh Hasina government with a parliament boycott and getting nowhere with the street movement, a power-crazed Begum Zia now blindly follows the Islamists on the *fatwa* issue. The religious overtones of this, she believes, has the potential to snowball into a mass movement which will catapult her to power by destabilising the Sheikh Hasina government.

She believes she has at last seized an emotive and politically relevant issue with which she can outwit Sheikh Hasina. And she feels vindicated in her stand as even Sheikh Hasina, to appease the fundamentalists, has just announced plans to form a *Sharia* board and a separate *Sharia* bench in the Supreme Court, which has been

denounced by liberals both within and outside her ruling Awami League.

For Begum Zia, no one is untouchable in her quest for power. She is pleading for the release of Jatiya Party chief HM Ershad although she, when Prime Minister sent him to jail for corruption, of which he was convicted by the Supreme Court and disqualified from participating in elections. Her identification with the fundamentalists has become so singular that she is espousing the cause of even those fundamentalists to whom Bangladesh and everything connected with its liberation are anathema.

She uses blatantly communal language, of the Pakistani Jamat variety, in decrying the Awami League and India. Her warning, "There will be no Islam, no mosque, no madrasa and no Bangladesh if Awami League stays in power", trademarks all her public speeches. Her dependence on the Islamists for advice because of her communal disposition, has made her vulnerable to

chaos and mayhem. But she is unwilling to compromise and oblige. "I won't mind if my government goes for executing them," she says emphatically.

The BNP moderates fear that by providing leadership to the Islamists, Begum Zia is sending a wrong signal to the country's power caucus — comprising the military, bureaucracy and the business community — that she is implementing the fundamentalist agenda of seizing state power and staging an Islamic revolution.

The *mulanas* have little acceptance in the power caucus and among the urban voters and rural women. In fact, women are scared of a "*mulah raj*", having been the worst victims of *fatwa* which has belittled their status.

The urban middle class and the new generation of voters, once the BNP's mainstay because of its reformist approach, are also disillusioned with Begum Zia for espousing the Islamist cause and her preference for everything Middle East at the cost of Banglali culture, identity and ideals of the freedom struggle.

She lost considerable public goodwill over the Irfan Raza episode. Instead of condemning outright the Pakistan deputy high commissioner's revolting remark on Bangladesh's liberation war, she waited for that country's response to the shocking episode and moderated her reaction so as to not offend Islamabad. This was resented by the freedom fighters and even by many nationalists in her party. Her other handicap is her total estrangement from the Left which is at variance with the pro-Left stance of her late husband Ziaur Rahman.

The result of the BNP's strong Islamist bias is that the party's leading intellectuals feel encouraged to publicly demand a change of the national anthem (*Amar Sonar Bangla* by Tagore) as it does not reflect the will and aspirations of the country's Muslims and also because it is the "work of a Hindu". Another party intellectual embarrassed Begum Zia by explaining why Ziaur Rahman had built a children's park at Ramna Race Course, where Lt-Gen Niazi had surrendered. According to him,

this was done to erase the humiliation a Pakistani general had suffered at the hands of an infidel. All this has dispirited the BNP moderates. "We are nobody in the party," rues Saifur Rahman, one of the party's three surviving founders who heads the moderates. He is respected for his intellectual probity, boldness and extraordinary financial prowess. "The outsiders have derailed the party from its moderate path. As a result, mistakes are being made which are damaging the party."

His greatest regret is Begum Zia's decision to boycott parliament which he feels is a wrong political tactic to deal with a party like the Awami League. He also opposes the move to resign from parliament in March. He blames the "outsiders" (mostly former Muslim League members who joined the BNP) and defeated party candidates for the "forced" boycott. Taking advantage of her gullibility, they advised her against going to parliament saying, "Madam, the Awami Leaguers would abuse you."

Says Mr Rahman, "Once an elected government is installed it should be recognised and given time to settle down. We staged a noisy walkout on the very first day the sixth parliament met. It is undemocratic to dislodge an elected government through a street movement. I had thought of Sheikh Hasina's attempt to do this to us in 1995-96. Unfortunately we, including the Awami League, are unable to comprehend basic democratic principles. We have no enlightened politics. At times I feel so frustrated that I want to leave politics."

Moderates in the party like Rahman still feel that if 113 BNP parliamentarians were to properly project Sheikh Hasina's failures in the House, this would have a greater impact than the current street movement. Hundreds of thousands of investors were ruined because of the stock market crash caused by a handful of unscrupulous people. "But our absence denied us the opportunity to thoroughly expose a corrupt, heartless and ineffective Awami League government. As a result we failed to politically exploit the issue and allowed Sheikh Hasina to go soot free," says a dejected Mr Rahman.

There is no doubt the BNP's failures have immensely helped Sheikh Hasina to rule with considerable ease and confidence.

(To be concluded)

(The author is Senior Writer, The Statesman.)

Fatwa sparks Bangla clashes

AGENCE FRANCE PRESSE

'PAK ARMY SHOULD SAY SORRY'

DHAKA, Feb. 10. - Fifteen people were injured in clashes in northern Nilphamari district of Bangladesh after a Fatwa, a religious edict, was issued against a Muslim cleric, the Bhorer Kagoj reported today.

Moulana Musa, the main cleric of a mosque, was the latest target of a Fatwa over a marriage.

He had conducted the marriage of the younger son of a family castigated by the village, after some members of Khatur village refused to accept divorce by the family's elder son, the report said.

Musa's rivals announced yesterday it would be against Islam if Muslims offered prayers under him. This sparked off the clashes.

Fatwas issued by local village clerics solely on their religious authority is a contro-

NEW DELHI, Feb. 10. - A Pakistani human rights activist, Ms Asma Jehangir, has asked her country's Army to apologise for its atrocities committed on Bangladeshis in 1971.

Ms Jehangir, who was addressing a seminar in Dhaka on Thursday, was quoted by BBC (Urdu) as saying that the Pakistani Army had engaged in ethnic cleansing in 1971.

Her demand for an apology has come after a controversy started by Pakistan's deputy High Commissioner in Dhaka who said that the Mukti Bahini was responsible for violence in the then East Pakistan.

Ms Jehangir said if the Pakistani army tenders an apology for its atrocities, relations between the two countries would become cordial. Since the publication of the Hamoodur Rehman report on the 1971 events in Bangladesh, the government in Dhaka has been demanding an apology from Pakistan for its Army's actions in 1971. The report has given details of the loot, rape and murders committed by the Pakistani army. Bangladeshis were enraged when Gen Musharraf said Bangladesh must forget the past. - UNI

versial issue in Bangladesh.

This has divided opinion in the country after a High Court ruling in January outlawed the practice, leading to a series of violent protests by

Muslim extremists in which about a dozen people were killed and around 200 injured.

The Supreme Court has suspended the ruling for six weeks.

THE STATESMAN

11 FEB 2001

11 FEB 2001

11/2

At stake — freedom

THE SHEIKH Hasina Government has finally started hitting back at the country's religious fundamentalists and the forces which still dream of seeing a united Pakistan in the name of religion, undoing the independence of the former East Pakistan, even after 30 years.

The risk for the Government is that this is election year and it has just months before handing over power to a caretaker authority for holding the polls. The ruling party believes the current religious frenzy is the result of a "blue-print" in which "a secret agency" of a particular country is deeply involved. It does not believe that the "conspiracy ahead of the election" will succeed.

Over the years, fanatics aiming at 'Talibanisation' of Bangladesh have flourished, mainly because of patronage from outside the country. Initially it was under cover, but they now enjoy the open blessings of Begum Khaleda Zia, the main Opposition leader, who, despite criticism and warnings from her own sympathisers, brought all the radical groups under the banner of her four-party alliance. During the violence-marred hartals, the militant fanatics have enjoyed the vital support of the mainstream Opposition. Is the BNP-led alliance trying to use the fundamentalists to regain power or have the extremists already gone out of control?

Much before the present flare-up of fundamentalist violence and the subsequent police crackdown, secular thinkers had been issuing repeated warnings about the impending danger. But no one, including the ruling Awami League, took the warnings seriously.

Suddenly came an issue — the High Court verdict declaring *fatwas* illegal. This bold and landmark judgment generated new hope for women's empowerment and liberation from age-old superstitions and religious oppression. But the mullahs were angry. The ruling was challenged and the Appellate Division of the Supreme Court stayed it partially. But the religious extremists did not stop there. They organised a large rally in Dhaka on February 2, assembling militant Madrassa teachers and students from all parts of the country, and finally

The present crisis in Bangladesh is a fight between progressive-secular and fundamentalist forces who want to turn it into a radical Islamic state.

HAROON HABIB reports.

issued death threats terming the two High Court judges, who ruled *fatwas* illegal, *murtads*.

It was a frenzy in the name of religion on February 2 and 3 as

the fundamentalists caused a series of violent incidents — killing a police constable inside a mosque, burning and destroyed public and private property. The police, after initial restraint, went on the offensive. A large number of bombs and weapons were recovered from madrassas. Thousands of such fortified institutions have been built across the country over decades for religious education.

Only a few days ago, police also arrested several key leaders of a secret armed Rohingya organisation, which was working for an independent Arakan Muslim state that included Chittagong and portions of Myanmar. A large number of sophisticated weapons, documents and also videotapes of the military operations of

Afghanistan's Taliban Mujahideen were also seized from their secret hideouts. Similar seizures were also made from various madrassas.

The Government arrested on specific charges the two top fanatic leaders — Maulana Azizul Haq and Fazlul Haq Amini, president and secretary general of the Islamic Oikya Jote (IOJ). Amini, the key man, recently formed an organisation to revive fanaticism — Committee for implementation of Islamic laws. Ironically, these fanatics are the central leaders of the Begum Zia-led Opposition alliance which recently vowed to overthrow the Hasina Government through a "people's upsurge".

For the first time, the fundamentalists decided to fight the police and the paramilitary BDR with guns, bombs, bricks and other lethal weapons. They also derailed a passenger train killing and injuring many.

The mullahs are also angry with non-governmental organisations, which work for women's empowerment and poverty alleviation. The NGOs organised a huge rally in Dhaka on February 3 to denounce the *fatwabaj* and the anti-liberation forces.

The fundamentalists, including the most organised Jamaat-e-Islami, an ally of Begum Zia's party, do not have any popular following, but their armed cadres, foreign funds and cheap religious slogans cause concern for secular-democratic Bangladesh. Even during the recent show of strength in the streets when several militants were shot dead by the police, they received little sympathy from the common people. Although critical about the Awami League's governance on several issues, the Left-democratic parties supported the Government's actions against the extremists, saying such measures were long overdue. The powerful print and electronic media of the country are also totally against the fanatics.

The present crisis in Bangladesh is a fight between progressive-secular and fundamentalist forces who want to turn it into a radical Islamic state. The ruling Awami League, despite its visible shortcomings and constraints, represents secular and progressive Bangladesh.



Bangladeshi women rally against certain religious edicts and (below) police take on fundamentalists... heading for a showdown.



THE HINDU

11 FEB 2001

Seven killed in Bangla clash

REUTERS & PTI

DHAKA, Feb. 6. - At least seven people were killed and about 100 injured in a clash between Islamic activists and security forces that erupted for the second day today in the town of Brahanbaria bordering Tripura.

Witnesses and officials said Bangladesh Rifles were called after the activists, armed with locally-made guns, crude bombs and knives, exchanged gunfire with police and opened rail tracks disrupting services between Dhaka, Chittagong and the north-eastern parts of the country. The state-run BSS news agency, however, said some of those killed might have lost their lives in cross fire.

Most of the wounded belonged to the Islamic Oikya Jona, an alliance of extreme front wing groups, which enforced the

shutdown here demanding the release of several top fundamentalist leaders in Dhaka.

Today's violence was the fallout of a nationwide shutdown on Saturday enforced by the activists, leaving a policeman and two others dead. Bangladesh authorities waged the anti-hardliner campaigning with a heavy hand and arrested the IOJ chief, Maulana Azad Haque, and secretary-general, Maulana Fazlul Haque Khan.

The IOJ launched its campaign last week against a December High Court verdict banning fatwas by Muslim clerics subjecting women to flogging for alleged adultery and prevented them from marriage and working with men.

The IOJ demanded the ruling be repealed and the judges who passed the order and others supporting the ruling be "punished by death."

THE STATESMAN

7 FEB 2001

Bangladesh court rules fatwa illegal

By Haroon Habib

DHAKA, JAN. 2. In a landmark judgment, the Bangladesh High Court has declared fatwa as illegal and also ruled that a fatwa given by any unauthorised person was illegal and that it must be made a punishable offence by Parliament immediately.

The High Court judgment on Monday will have a far-reaching impact, including a possible protest by fundamentalists. It was delivered against the backdrop of an increasing number of fatwas which are mostly given by semi-literate mullahs against women. The Division Bench comprising Justice Mohammad Golam Rabani and Justice Najmun Ara Sultana, the first woman judge in the country's history, said any fatwa, including the instant one, was unauthorised and illegal. "Fatwas means legal opinion which means legal opinion of a lawful person or authority. The legal system in Bangladesh empowers only the courts to decide all questions relating to legal opinion on Muslim and other laws in force," said the judges.

Meanwhile, women organisations welcomed the judgment,

saying it would be a weapon to fight religious fanaticism which is one of the major causes of repression of women in the country. They have also termed the judgment as "a big relief" considering their long-drawn struggle against the Fatwabaj. The Bench gave the verdict after hearing the suo motu rule on the Deputy Commissioner of Naogaon. The Court asked the official to show cause why action should not be taken against him for failing to act against a maulana whose fatwa had destroyed a housewife Shahida of Atiha village in Naogaon district.

The court recommended that "a fatwa by an unauthorised person or persons must be made a punishable offence by Parliament immediately, even if it is not executed." The court also suggested that the study of Muslim Family Laws Ordinance must be introduced in all schools and Madrasahs and that the khatibs in all mosques must be directed to discuss the ordinance in their Friday sermons. With the court verdict, the maulana, who declared the marriage of Shahida Begum with Saiful Islam illegal, will be tried.

THE HINDU

23 JAN 1990

BNP alliance plans to quit Parliament

By Haroon Habib

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DHAKA, JAN. 30. The main Opposition Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and its partners in the four-party alliance, which have been boycotting Parliament for the last 18 months, are now thinking of resigning their seats en masse.

In the last 18 months, they entered the House only once in a token participation, and that too to preserve their membership. The parliamentary boycott has evoked adverse reaction among different quarters, including within the Opposition's own ranks but the supremo of the alliance, the former Prime Minister, Begum Khaleda Zia, believes the boycott had public support.

At a recent press meet, Khaleda Zia was asked why the BNP had boycotted the House for so long. Her answer did not satisfy even those who are critical of the ruling Awami League. One of the outspoken BNP law makers, Major (Retd) Akhtaruzzaman, recently defied the party whip and attended Parliament, criticising the boycott as one imposed by party hardliners. He was, however, expelled from the party and lost his membership due to a strict anti-floor crossing law.

Begum Khaleda asked, "How can we go to a Parliament where the Speaker disallows Opposition members from taking the floor by cutting off the microphone and where vile abuse is hurled at Opposition leaders, includ-

ing myself." Foreign observers and donors believe that Begum Khaleda's criticism of the Government would have been far more effective if she had done it in Parliament. Many Opposition sympathisers also believe that the strongest Opposition in the country's parliamentary history has lost much of its credibility by abstaining from Parliament. They have described it as a soccer team refusing to take the field. Moreover, the Opposition has not substantiated its allegations against the ruling party by mobilising adequate public support outside Parliament though it has gone for a number of agitations in the last 18 months to force the Government to quit office.

The Government initially tried to persuade the Opposition to return to Parliament. The Speaker, Mr. Humayun Rasheed Chowdhury, also made some efforts to bring the Opposition back to the House. He wrote to the leader of the Opposition, inviting her and her allies back to Parliament. But the Opposition leader rejected his requests.

Observers say since the present Parliament's tenure ends in the second week of July, it is late for the Opposition to return to the House. Some BNP sources say that the central command of the Opposition is still determined to continue the boycott and has resolved to resign en masse. But the Opposition has to decide the timing of the resignation. The Opposition policy makers know that the anti-

Government movement has not yet reached the stage where it can force the Government to resign before the end of its tenure on July 13. According to Article 123 (3) of the Bangladesh Constitution, elections must be held within 90 days of the dissolution of Parliament. If the Opposition now resigns from Parliament, the Government may opt for byelections in all those seats, in spite of the possibility that it may not be credible.

The en masse resignation, the Opposition think-tank fears, may give the ruling party the opportunity to make whatever amendments it wants in the Constitution by attaining two-thirds majority through the byelections.

Begum Khaleda Zia has now demanded dissolution of the "one-party Parliament" and immediate elections. In fact, though Parliament has lost its effectiveness due to the prolonged boycott of the mainstream Opposition, it is yet to become a one-party show.

The rebel group of Gen. Ershad's Jatiya Party and the left-wing Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal (JSD) are still in Parliament as partners of the Sheikh Hasina's "Government of national consensus". The ruling party has rejected Begum Khaleda's plea for dissolution of Parliament, reminding her that the last Parliament during her tenure had continued to function for nearly two years even without a single Opposition member inside the House.

It was a forced day off for Akhtar Hussain on Friday due to the Trinamool Congress-sponsored 12-hour bandh in Kolkata. — Reuters

Violence mars Bengal bandh

By Our Special Correspondent

KOLKATA, JAN. 5. The 12-hour bandh called by the Trinamool Congress in West Bengal today to protest the terror unleashed on its supporters by the communists, was marred by incidence of violence. Hundreds of Trinamool supporters hit the roads in Kolkata and other districts of the State terrorising people, torching and stoning buses, blocking roads, stopping train movement, vandalising property and attacking police personnel on duty.

Kolkata and the rest of the State were virtually on the boil when news was spread of the "fictional" torching of 18 Trinamool supporters in Chotoangra village, about 21 km from Garbeta town near the Bankura border.

Most shops, business establishments and educational institutions remained closed. The State Government offices recorded above 50 per cent attendance. Industries by and large remained unaffected.

However, mediapersons who

rushed to Chotoangra, could not get a confirmation from either the police or the CPI(M) about the incident, the basis of which was an FIR filed this morning in the Garbeta police station by Mr. Abdul Gani Rahman claiming that his house was set on fire and his family members burnt to death. Even the police and the local administration could not provide any clue. A team of the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance accompanied by the Trinamool leader and Railway Minister, Ms. Mamata Banerjee, is to visit the village tomorrow.

In Writers' Buildings, the Chief Minister, Mr. Buddhadeb Bhattacharya, said a house in the village had caught fire but none died while the CPI(M) headquarters on Alimuddin Street denied knowledge of the incident. As news of the "massacre" spread, tension ran high in the State's already-charged atmosphere.

The Trinamool leaders, meanwhile, held a press conference and sent a message to the Prime Minister as well as the Home Min-

istry to re-examine their demand for imposition of President's rule in the State. They reeled out the names of 14 party supporters, allegedly burnt alive.

While the Trinamool leaders accused the communists of "butchering" party supporters and demanded President's rule, Ms. Banerjee locked herself in her South Calcutta residence, "unwell" with fever and a hurt foot. The Trinamool alleged that the CPI(M) supporters had made an attempt on her life on January 3, day of the rally, but failed as "God was kind to Trinamool".

According to Mr. Pankaj Banerjee, Trinamool chairman, a group of CPI(M) supporters last night set the house of Mr. Rahman, a Trinamool functionary, on fire where 18 party supporters took shelter. "The attackers slit the throats of the four children who tried to escape. The rest were burnt to death," he said. "We could identify 11 of them. Three were charred beyond recognition."

Plea for Central rule: Page 13

6 JAN 2001

BNP wants to grab power through conspiracy & violence

DESPITE having many pathbreaking achievements to its credit, the most significant of which include making Bangladesh self-sufficient in food, holding the price line of essential commodities and sustaining an economic growth at six per cent, Sheikh Hasina Wajed's four-and-a-half-year old government is still the target of a virulent hate campaign of Begum Khaleda Zia's BNP-led four-party alliance.

Begum Zia and her alliance partners are yet to reconcile to their defeat in the 1996 parliamentary poll. The sole purpose of their campaign and strikes is to destabilise and dislodge the ruling party by fair or foul means — more by the latter than the former. Except for brief interregnums, the Opposition BNP, Hussein Mohammad Ershad's Jatiya Party and the fundamentalist Jamat-e-Islam have boycotted parliament and called numerous strikes as a means to mount pressure on Sheikh Hasina to step down. But all this has been to no avail. Excerpts of an interview:

Why does Bangladesh continue to have confrontational politics despite making rapid strides in the economic sphere? Don't its leaders realise that such a course would prove ruinous for the country?

We are not to blame for this. The Bangladesh Nationalist Party and its allies are pathologically different from democratic parties. Don't forget that the BNP was not born through any democratic process. It was born in cantonment, with the help of the military, which had usurped power through political assassinations and by banishing democracy. Moreover, there is no mention of parliamentary democracy in BNP's constitution. Naturally, democratic ideals, thoughts and practices are foreign to it.

Its boycott of parliament on specious pleas is proof. Not only the media but also some of its prominent leaders have criticised the party's stand on the boycott. The party does not believe in making parliament the focus of all its political activities. Many of its leaders want to grab power through conspiracy and violence. It's quite natural that the party would pursue a line which is confrontational in nature. The BNP's strategy is to keep tension and combat alive, so that it can wrest power in case of trouble. The behavioural pattern does not surprise me at all.

Are you suggesting that there will be no end to the politics of confrontation?

The BNP has not yet got over the shock of its 1996 defeat. Having had its birth in power it now finds extremely difficult to stay out of

power. The party thinks only the BNP has the right to stay in power. All this talk that the so-called BNP moderates want their party to return to parliament is hogwash as almost all the BNP leaders do not believe in democracy.

What has the Opposition been able to achieve through its confrontationalist approach against your government? Ask them. Actually the agenda of the BNP and its allies is clear; to protect by any means the self-confessed killers of Bangladesh and the four national leaders. They will go to any length. The killers will have to be protected as they have shown that governments can be changed through killings. The main purpose of the BNP-led movement against my government is to save the killers from the gallows.

Are you happy with the court's divided verdict on your father's killers?

The court has given a split verdict which will soon be considered by another court. But I am happy with the way the trial was conducted by adhering to the due processes of law. Despite demands for a speedy trial, I preferred an open one under normal laws since I wanted to make a departure from the practices of special courts and tribunals of martial-law days.

The sole purpose of this time-consuming exercise is to bring to justice those who instead of being punished for their heinous crimes had been rewarded by successive governments.

But the trial has not been welcomed by those who have been beneficiaries of the 1975 killings.

It is natural that they would not like it. Many of them are those who still don't acknowledge Bangladesh's existence. But sadly for them, they cannot make it part of Pakistan again. Even the ordinary Bangladeshis are now enjoying the fruits of freedom and economic wellbeing. Parties which are still Pakistan-minded are unable to accept the reality of Bangladesh. We are exposing and isolating them politically.

Did the Irfan Raza episode embarrass



The Bangladesh Nationalist Party-led Opposition is pursuing a confrontationalist line to topple Sheikh Hasina Wajed's Awami League government, says the Bangladesh Prime Minister in a wide-ranging interview to MANASH GHOSH

them in any way?

What the Pakistan deputy high commissioner said about our liberation war was intolerable.

No self-respecting nation can accept what he said about our struggle for independence. What he said was an expression of frustration, resulting from Pakistan's humiliating defeat in the 1971 war. There are also parties which similarly vent their frustration. We want good relations with Pakistan and peace in the region. My efforts bear testimony to this.

Why is your government unable to control terror and lawlessness in some parts of the country? Doesn't that affect your government's image?

Don't forget that it is the deliberate policy of some Opposition parties to create lawlessness, to show my government in a poor light. For instance, it is part of Jamat's strategy to create terror in those parts where it is strong. The BNP students wing — Chhatra Dal — is involved in looting petrol stations. Known criminals have been made leaders of Chhatra Dal because of their ability to create lawlessness. If the Opposition parties behave so irresponsibly, it is difficult for me to banish lawlessness.

But the situation is not as bad as it is made out to be. This time women did their shopping well past midnight not only in Dhaka but elsewhere too. In the last four years, Dhaka University has not seen any clash or gun fight between rival students' groups which in the past claimed lives at regular intervals. The universities no longer suffer from session-jam which had once made students restive.

The Opposition alleges that part of the lawlessness is because your party also harbours criminals?

I have not spared the son of my first cousin who is our party's chief whip in parliament. The son of my party MP has been hauled up for his criminal acts. I did not hesitate to arrest my party MP in another case. I haven't compromised on law and justice.

Unfortunately, I am not getting cooperation from a section of the police in dealing with crime. The BNP during its rule inducted party cadres into the police. Some of these

recruits are also involved in criminal activities.

Is it being done to discredit your government?

People know the reason. For the last two years, we have become self-sufficient in food. Since 1999, we have stopped importing food-grain. We have raised food production to over 25 million tons against 19 million tons during BNP rule. Rice is available at 10 taka a kg. This enables the poor to have two meals a day. In four successive years, we have helped farmers produce bumper harvests which have steadied the price line and brought inflation to the lowest ever level: 1.3 per cent.

Exports, industrial production and revenue collection are up by about 20 per cent. The economic growth stands at six per cent. Through right policies and good governance, I am trying to alleviate poverty in the country. I have introduced a host of beneficial schemes for the weaker sections of the rural community.

This is changing the face of rural Bangladesh. Our country has ceased to be a basket case. I can say this proudly that since the bloody changeover of 1975, I am the only ruler who — or any of her children — has not made money either for personal or party gains. I have broken the tradition of rulers who, either personally or through their near and dear ones, amass wealth by looting the national exchequer.

What will be your strategy for the coming parliamentary election?

The pro-liberation forces will fight unitedly. But the sole consideration for nomination will be the candidate's winnability. There is no place for emotion in realpolitik. We lost 35 seats in the 1991 poll as we were swayed by emotion while selecting candidates.

What will be the fate of the Enemy Property Act? Will it be repealed?

How can anyone expect the issue to be resolved overnight. In a parliamentary system, things like this take time to get sorted out. There are certain processes to be followed.

Will Bangladesh export gas to India?

I cannot be extravagant with a strategic resource like gas. Our national needs are our first priority. Our internal demands are huge. I don't want Bangladesh to subsist on gas earnings.

(The author is Senior Writer, The Statesman, Kolkata.)

BNP wants to grab

conspiracy & 1

DESPITE having many pathbreaking achievements to its credit, the most significant of which include making Bangladesh self-sufficient in food, holding the price line of essential commodities and sustaining an economic growth at six per cent, Sheikh Hasina Wajed's four-and-a-half-year old government is still the target of a virulent hate campaign of Begum Khaleda Zia's BNP-led four-party alliance.

Begum Zia and her alliance partners are yet to reconcile to their defeat in the 1996 parliamentary poll. The sole purpose of their campaign and strikes is to destabilise and dislodge the ruling party by fair or foul means — more by the latter than the former. Except for brief interregnums, the Opposition BNP, Hussein Mohammad Ershad's Jatiya Party and the fundamentalist Jamat-e-Islam have boycotted parliament and called numerous strikes as a means to mount pressure on Sheikh Hasina to step down. But all this has been to no avail. Excerpts of an interview:

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Are you suggesting that there will be no end to the politics of confrontation?

The BNP has not yet got over the shock of its 1996 defeat. Having had its birth in power it now finds extremely difficult to stay out of

power. The party thinks only the BNP has the right to stay in power. All this talk that the so-called BNP moderates want their party to return to parliament is hogwash as almost all the BNP leaders do not believe in democracy.

What has the Opposition been able to achieve through its confrontationist approach against your government?

Ask them. Actually the agenda of the BNP and its allies is clear; to protect by any means the self-confessed killers of Bangabandhu and the four national leaders. They will go to any length. The killers will have to be protected as they have shown that governments can be changed through killings. The main purpose of the BNP-led movement against my government is to save the killers from the gallows.

Are you happy with the court's divided verdict on your father's killers?

The court has given a split verdict which will soon be considered by another court. But I am happy with the way the trial was conducted by adhering to the due processes of law. Despite demands for a speedy trial, I preferred an open one under normal laws since I wanted to make a departure from the practices of special courts and tribunals of martial-law days. The sole purpose of this time-consuming exercise is to bring to justice those who instead of being punished for their heinous crimes had been rewarded by successive governments.

But the trial has not been welcomed by those who have been beneficiaries of the 1975 killings.

It is natural that they would not like it. Many of them are those who still don't acknowledge Bangladesh's existence. But sadly for them, they cannot make it part of Pakistan again. Even the ordinary Bangladeshis are now enjoying the fruits of freedom and economic wellbeing. Parties which are still Pakistani-minded are unable to accept the reality of Bangladesh. We are exposing and isolating them politically.

Did the Irfan Raza episode embarrass



The Bangladesh Nationalist Party-led Opposition is pursuing a confrontationist line to topple Sheikh Hasina Wajed's Awami League government, says the Bangladesh Prime Minister in a wide-ranging interview to MANASH GHOSH

them in any way?

What the Pakistan deputy high commissioner said about our liberation war was intolerable.

THE STATESMAN

16 JAN 2001

power through violence'

No self-respecting nation can accept what he said about our struggle for independence. What he said was an expression of frustration, resulting from Pakistan's humiliating defeat in the 1971 war. There are also parties which similarly vent their frustration. We want good relations with Pakistan and peace in the region. My efforts bear testimony to this.

Why is your government unable to control terror and lawlessness in some parts of the country? Doesn't that affect your government's image?

Don't forget that it is the deliberate policy of some Opposition parties to create lawlessness, to show my government in a poor light. For instance, it is part of Jamat's strategy to create terror in those parts where it is strong. The BNP students' wing — Chhatra Dal — is involved in looting petrol stations. Known criminals have been made leaders of Chhatra Dal because of their ability to create lawlessness. If the Opposition parties behave so irresponsibly, it is difficult for me to banish lawlessness.

But the situation is not as bad as it is made out to be. This time women did their Id shopping well past midnight not only in Dhaka but elsewhere too. In the last four years, Dhaka University has not seen any clash or gun fight between rival students' groups which in the past claimed lives at regular intervals. The universities no longer suffer from session jam which had once made students restive.

The Opposition alleges that part of the lawlessness is because your party also harbours criminals?

I have not spared the son of my first cousin who is our party's chief whip in parliament. The son of my party MP has been hauled up for his criminal acts. I did not hesitate to arrest my party MP in another case. I haven't compromised on law and justice.

Unfortunately, I am not getting cooperation from a section of the police in dealing with crime. The BNP during its rule inducted party cadres into the police. Some of these

recruits are also involved in criminal activities.

Is it being done to discredit your government?

People know the reason. For the last two years, we have become self-sufficient in food. Since 1999, we have stopped importing food-grain. We have raised food production to over 25 million tons against 19 million tons during BNP rule. Rice is available at 10 taka a kg. This enables the poor to have two meals a day. In four successive years, we have helped farmers produce bumper harvests which have steadied the price line and brought inflation to the lowest ever level: 1.3 per cent.

Exports, industrial production and revenue collection are up by about 20 per cent. The economic growth stands at six per cent. Through right policies and good governance, I am trying to alleviate poverty in the countryside. I have introduced a host of beneficial schemes for the weaker sections of the rural community.

This is changing the face of rural Bangladesh. Our country has ceased to be a basket case. I can say this proudly that since the bloody changeover of 1975, I am the only ruler who — or any of her children — has not made money either for personal or party gains. I have broken the tradition of rulers who, either personally or through their near and dear ones, amass wealth by looting the national exchequer.

What will be your strategy for the coming parliamentary election?

The pro-liberation forces will fight unitedly. But the sole consideration for nomination will be the candidate's winnability. There is no place for emotion in realpolitik. We lost 35 seats in the 1991 poll as we were swayed by emotion while selecting candidates.

What will be the fate of the Enemy Property Act? Will it be repealed?

How can anyone expect the issue to be resolved overnight. In a parliamentary system, things like this take time to get sorted out. There are certain processes to be followed.

Will Bangladesh export gas to India?

I cannot be extravagant with a strategic resource like gas. Our national needs are our first priority. Our internal demands are huge. I don't want Bangladesh to subsist on gas earnings.

(The author is Senior Writer, The Statesman, Kolkata.)

Bangla drops two Mujib holidays

Press Trust of India

DHAKA, Dec. 23. — Bangla-
deshi's new government headed by
Prime Minister Begum Khaleda
Zia today dropped two public
holidays marking the birth and
death anniversaries of the coun-
try's founding father Sheikh Muji-
bur Rahman.

The weekly Cabinet meeting
cancelled 17 March and 15
August, the birth and death anni-
versaries respectively of Sheikh
Mujib, practiced as holidays for
the past five years during the
tenure of arch rival Sheikh Hasina
of the Awami League.

The Cabinet meeting decided
to "follow the same calender" that
existed before Sheikh Hasina
came to power and amended the
holiday list.

However it restored 7 Novem-
ber as a national holiday in rem-
embrance of the day when Begum
Zia's husband General Ziaur
Rahman was freed from captivity.

THE STATESMAN

24 DEC 2001

Abul Karim
D. 1912 51-9

Vindictive act

Khaleda misses chance to befriend Hasina

The scrapping of a bill by Bangladesh parliament recently that provided special security for the country's main Opposition leader Sheikh Hasina and her sister was a vindictive act which prime minister Begum Khaleda Zia should have avoided in the interest of her own reputation. She had promised the opposite if she was elected: of uniting and not dividing the country's people and polity. The enactment has botched any possibility of building bridges Sheikh Hasina's Awami League. The political maturity and magnanimity, that was expected from Begum Zia towards her arch political foe in the wake of her victory, are sadly missing. Her own party had expected her to strengthen the country's wobbly democracy by gestures which would create conditions for Awami League to lift its boycott of the eighth parliament. She did this despite being fully aware that the politics of confrontation and hartal of the last decade had done irreparable damage to Bangladesh and continuing with this ruinous tradition would spell disaster for the country. Also not unknown to her were the risks involved in scrapping the enactment which would make Sheikh Mujib's two surviving siblings highly vulnerable to attacks from those who had liquidated the rest of their family and still remain unrepentant and unpunished for the crimes of 1975. In fact some of the killers have vowed to complete their "unfinished task" and the scrapping of the special law may help them reach their much desired objective.

There is no logic in what Begum Zia's law minister has said that the special security enactment had to be scrapped as the existing laws were enough to protect Mujib's daughters. This despite several attempts made on Sheikh Hasina's life while she was the prime minister and which, shockingly enough, had been justified by some BNP leaders. Actually by scrapping the law Begum Zia has made herself more vulnerable should anything untoward happen.

THE STRIPPER

1912 51-9

No place for India, Mujib in Dhaka

Imran Rahman
Dhaka, December 16

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12/12

BANGLADESH TODAY marked its 30th Victory Day. The celebrations in the Capital were dull as millions had left Dhaka for the Id holiday.

Going by the politicians' speeches and the media reports India had no contribution to make in the nation's struggle for liberation and there was no mention of the 12,000 Indian troops killed in action.

Even the much-used photograph showing Indian commander Lt General Jagjit Singh Aurora with vanquished Pakistani counterpart Lt General Amir Abdullah Khan Niazi obtaining the instrument of surrender of 90,000 Pakistani troops at Dhaka on December 16, 1971, was conspicuous in its absence.

Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, who had spearheaded the Bengalis movement for rights of self-deter-

POLICE PRESENCE DURING JUDICIAL PROBE ILLEGAL

THE HIGH Court has declared illegal and void the presence of police during recording of deposition of witnesses in case of judicial inquiry into crimes committed by the police.

A Division Bench passed the order. The order followed hearing of two criminal revision petitions filed by the Bangladesh Society for the Enforcement of Human Rights challenging the legality of an order of the chief metropolitan magistrate's court in Dhaka.

HTC, Dhaka

mination, suffered the same fate and was completely blacked out in official supplements published by the Information Ministry of the Khaleda Zia Government.

The impression inferred from the newspapers was that Major Ziaur Rahman, the husband of Zia, was the only hero of the 1971 war. Zia's photo took up most of the front page with Mujib relegated to the background.

It was Ziaur Rahman, then a major in the erstwhile Pakistan Army and posted in Chittagong in March 1971, who had first called upon the Bengalis to revolt against the Pakistani troops after the invaders cracked down on the night of March 25 earlier that year. While Zia had inspired the nation into an armed struggle on behalf of Mujib through his strong voice of defiance through a clandestine radio station at Kalurghat in Chittagong, Mujib chose to be arrested by the Pakistani Army from his residence in Dhaka.

President A Q M Badruddoza Chowdhury and Prime Minister Zia paid tribute to the three million Bengali martyrs. The Prime

Minister then visited the grave of Zia. Chowdhury, who resigned from the ruling Bangladesh Nationalist Party after becoming the neutral President, skipped the last venue.

The Awami League of former Prime Minister Hasina Wajed visited the house of Mujib in Dhanmondi, Dhaka, to lay wreaths before the portrait of the country's founding father. Mujib is buried at his village at Tungipara in Gopalganj district.

Later, the Awami League leaders, led by acting party president Abdus Samad Azad visited the National Martyrs' Memorial at 11 am, straying from the usual early morning hours devoted for such occasions. The Awami League, which claims to be the only pro-liberation force of 1971, says it has drawn up a weeklong programme for the Victory Day celebrations. Hasina is in Miami to celebrate Id with her children.

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES

17 DEC 2001

Corruption cases filed against Hasina

Press Trust of India

DHAKA, Dec. 12. — Two months after the Bangladesh Awami League was voted out of power, corruption cases were filed against its chief and former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina Wajed and six of her senior former cabinet colleagues. Mrs Wajed, currently on a trip to Britain and the USA, is accused in two cases of alleged financial irregularities to the tune of \$122 million. If convicted, she could face jail, a fine or both.

Her former ministerial colleagues charged in the cases include home and telecommunications minister Mohammed Nasim, works minister Mr Mosharraf Hossain, state minister for foreign affairs Mr Abul Hasan Chowdhury, state minister for power Mr Rafiqul Islam, state minister for jute Mr AK Faizul Haq and

deputy minister for local government and rural development Mr Saber Hossain Chowdhury.

Mrs Wajed, when asked to comment on the filing of cases against her, is reported to have told reporters in London that she would fight the cases. Cases were filed also against nearly 40 former and in-service officials including the controller general, yesterday in Dhaka police stations by the government's anti-corruption bureau, reports said.

The Bureau of Anti-Corruption filed 12 cases with the clearance from Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia who is currently on a private pilgrimage to Mecca. Awami League today reacted sharply to the graft and other charges brought against the former premier and six other ministers and termed the action "politically motivated".

"This is a manifestation of political vendetta and a tactic to narrow political opponents. The

government is trying to divert public attention as it failed to cope with real problems at hand," acting president of AL and former foreign minister Mr Abdus Samad Azad said.

He said by filing cases against Mrs Wajed and other former AL ministers, the government was trying to weaken the party leadership so that no anti-government movement is waged in the near future.

Mohammed Nasim has described the cases as "false and politically motivated."

Among the officials against whom corruption cases have been filed are former air chief air vice-marshal Mr Jamaluddin Ahmed, former home secretary and currently election commissioner Mr Safiur Rahman, former defence secretary and currently comptroller general of Bangladesh Mr Syed Yussuf Hossain and former chairman of Public Service Commission Mr Mostafa Chowdhury.

Hidden truth

Dubious probe will not help Begum Zia

It is unfortunate that Bangladesh's cabinet committee on law and order recently decided to endorse the inquiry report prepared by the secretary to prime minister Begum Khaleda Zia saying that there was not much substance in Press reports of rape and torture of minority women nor was there any truth that minority property was looted and destroyed on a large-scale by the ruling party supporters following the 1 October Bangladesh parliamentary poll. According to the inquiry, Press reports of several thousand persecuted minorities crossing over to India were "found baseless". The composition of the committee aroused serious misgivings, the reasons were obvious. Apprehension was not unfounded as the home minister and the BNP secretary general themselves had already called Press reports on atrocities on minorities as "highly exaggerated and containing half truths." Both had dismissed the assaults as "some isolated" incidents organised by political rivals to malign the new Government. A denial syndrome is forcing Begum Zia's government to repudiate what the whole world knows to be true. The notoriously partisan approach of the neutral caretaker government and subsequently by Begum Zia emboldened the fundamentalists to go on the rampage in a more violent form forcing Amnesty International to urge the new Dhaka government to stop persecution of minorities. The enlightened section of the Bangladesh Press, whose bold expose of the most horrendous incidents forced the government to order an inquiry, called the official report a "hogwash" deserving total rejection. Even the Bangladesh Supreme Court has accepted the fact that Hindus were being persecuted and served a show cause notice on the Government in this regard.

The Bangladesh Press has wisely counselled Begum Zia saying that in today's world of fast communication it is futile to issue such blanket denials since the whole world through radio and TV "already knows the real truth". In fact, internationally this has badly sullied the image of her newly installed government and provoked the Indian Hindu fundamentalists like the VHP and Bajrang Dal to make the ridiculous and objectionable demand that Bangladesh grant a separate homeland for its minorities. Both the Muslim and Hindu fundamentalists in the sub-continent have always had a mutually beneficial and symbiotic relationship. What they have done on both sides of the border merely reaffirms that relationship.

THE STATE

14 DEC 2001

Bangladesh High Court puts gas export on hold

Press Trust of India

516 2/12 ✓

DHAKA, Dec. 6. — The Bangladesh High Court has imposed a three-month restriction on the government to export natural gas through a pipeline to India.

The court issued an injunction yesterday asking the government to restrain from signing any Production Sharing Contracts (PSC) and exporting natural gas.

A Division Bench of the court passed the order upon a writ petition filed more than three years ago. During the ban period, the court would hear the petition.

A former secretary of the government and two others, including a journalist, filed the petition on 19 November, 1998 to stop gas export.

They said there was no provision in the PSC signed by the government with the international oil companies to export natural gas through pipeline.

Prospects of exporting natural gas to India brightened following the installation of Khaleda Zia's Bangladesh Nationalist Party-led coalition government in October.

The court ruling came as international oil companies have been pressing the government to allow the export of natural gas produced in Bangladesh.

The court, which gave a moratorium on signing new PSCs for three months, asked the government to show cause as to why it should not be directed to formulate a national strategy policy through parliament to ensure participation in the PSC.

Whether the authorities would follow the directives remains a question as petitioner's counsel informed the court that even after a issuance of a rule in 1998, the then government signed eight PSCs.

Meanwhile, the energy minister, Mr AKM Moharrar Hossain, said a technical committee has been appointed for assessment of the gas reserves in the country.

He said the committee would submit its report in a month.

He said that a realistic assessment was needed to deal with 10 international oil companies which have signed PSCs in the early part of this year.

"The government is in a delicate situation in deciding whether or not to honour the terms of the PSCs," the minister said.

Leading geologists have vehemently opposed the idea of gas export before meeting domestic demand.

During a discussion yesterday, they stressed on diversified use of gas for sustainable development and suggested the government stop pilferage in the energy sector and use gas for economic benefits.

American oil giant UNOCAL recently submitted a proposal to construct a 1,400-km pipeline from gas fields in Bibiyana in Sylhet to Delhi for supply of gas to Indian market.

THE STATESMAN

- 7 SEPT 2001

1 10 2001

Khaleda talks tough on lawlessness

Dhaka, December 3

PRIME MINISTER Khaleda Zia warned of stern action against lawlessness in Bangladesh after police cracked down on the first strike called by her arch-rival since losing power.

Zia, said at the end of the first session of the eighth Parliament yesterday, that the Opposition Awami League of former Prime Minister Hasina Wajed should end its boycott of Parliament.

"We will continue to be tolerant, but we will not tolerate any attempt to create anarchy. ... Stern measures will be taken against anarchy," she said in an apparent reference to Sunday's Opposition-called general strike.

The Government has said it is doing everything possible to tackle the crime situation and blamed some of the incidents on their political rivals charging they were trying to tarnish the administration's image.

Former Awami League MP Mokbul Hossain, the editor of daily *al-Amin* who was detained Sunday for questioning, was jailed for a month under the tough Special Powers Act. His son was recently arrested for alleged possession of an illegal weapon, which he insists was licensed. The Special Powers Act lets the Government detain an individual for up to 90 days without specifying the reason. The Prime Minister said: "We will be tough with anybody, in or outside the government, found guilty of creating anarchy. Nobody from top to bottom will be spared."

PTI

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES

24 20.

Bangladesh oppn leaders hurt during strike

DHAKA: Bangladesh Parliament on Sunday repealed a law that provided special security to former premier Sheikh Hasina while top leaders of the opposition Awami League were among several hurt when the police used batons and fired tear gas shells during a half-day strike to protest the move.

The strike, called by the Awami League, generally passed off peacefully with no major incidence of violence except causing partial disruption of normal life in the city.

The bill allowing special security for Sheikh Hasina and her sister Sheikh Rana, daughters of Bangladesh's founder Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, for being "under constant threat" from his killers, was repealed by Jatiya Sangsad (Parliament) by a voice vote.

Piloting the bill, law, justice and parliamentary affairs minister

Moudud Ahmed said it was the responsibility of the state to provide security to all the citizens.

He said the government would take adequate and appropriate measures for security of Hasina, the leader of the opposition.

The police stopped hundreds of protesters in central Dhaka from marching on the streets while many top leaders of Awami League, including former ministers and MPs, were arrested.

The police also baton charged party activities and used several rounds of tear gas shells forcing people to leave Awami League office, witnesses said.

Several people were injured, while at least five Awami League members were picked up by police, witnesses said.

Those injured during police action in Dhaka on Sunday were

Ahsanullah Master, MP, and Mota Chowdhury, a former minister and agriculture secretary of the party and Abdur Razzak, also a former minister, party sources said.

Awami League leaders said the police action on the peaceful demonstrators was unwarranted.

About one hundred were arrested and 50 injured, party sources added.

The strike was also called to protest acts of repression on party activists and minority population, deterioration of law and order situation in the country, and upward trend in the price of essentials.

Schools and business establishments were closed during the hartal.

This was the first strike called by Awami League, which had, while in office, pledged not to call hartal even if they were in opposition.

THE TIMES OF INDIA

3 DEC 2001

Hasina shield scrapped

578
3/12
Bangladesh
Reuters & PTI

DHAKA, Dec. 2. — Bangladesh's parliament today scrapped a controversial law providing life-long security to former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina Wajed, whose party called a strike in Dhaka over moves to drop the law.

The Nation's Family Members Act, 2001, providing lifelong security coverage to Sheikh Hasina and Sheikh Rehana, the only surviving children of the "father of the nation" Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, was passed in June this year.

Parliament made its decision in the absence of Mrs Wajed's Awami League, which refused to join

the House in protest against alleged rigging in the October polls.

Law minister Mr Moudud Ahmed told parliament, "The decision to scrap the unnecessary law would save the poor country a huge amount of money on account of protecting just two individuals." Awami leaders said the move to change the law was a conspiracy to put Sheikh Hasina's life at risk.

The Awami League general secretary, Mr Zillur Rahman, vowed more protests.

The eight-hour bandh, which began at 6 a.m. (local time) today kept most motor vehicles off the roads and many business establishments remained closed, witnesses said.

Police wielding batons and firing teargas arrested at least 25 Opposition activists today and detained a former legislator, Mr Moqbul Hossain, last night in Dhaka, witnesses said.

"Police seemed determined not to allow any procession on the streets," said Mr Mofazzal Hossain Chowdhury, a former minister and leader of the Awami League. "They are chasing and grabbing our people although we vowed to hold a peaceful protest," Mr Chowdhury said. "This is a violation of our fundamental right." Authorities said they deployed more than 5,000 police and paramilitary guards in the city of nine million.

THE STATESMAN

3 06 2001

US sermon to Dhaka on ^{Bangladesh} minority rights _{HT-11}

Washington, November 30

THE UNITED States has urged Bangladesh to respect religious rights and human rights and practice tolerance.

Replying to questions over minority Hindus recently coming "under attack" in Bangladesh, the US State Department deputy spokesman Philip Reeker today said, "I am not aware of the particular situation there in recent weeks.I think we have been clear in our calls ...for tolerance, for respect for human rights, respect for religious freedoms and the norms that that contains. And I think that it's important for Bangladesh to pursue those aspects of a democracy so that they can move ahead too and deal with the problems they have — the need for economic development and reform."

He said the US will continue dialogue with Bangladesh.

PTI

THE STATESMAN