

‘BNP tried to fix meeting with Ram Madhav in Bangkok, but Indian side chickened out’

Agency
Dhaka, Dec. 29

With Bangladesh Nationalist Party's chairperson Khaleda Zia in jail since February and her son and political heir, Tarique, living in London, a bespectacled 70-year-old man enters the party office in Gulshan neighbourhood, Dhaka's most posh locality as everyone stands in attention. Dressed in a maroon sweater, stylish checked muffler and black coat, the man has a hoarse voice since he has given more than 200 speeches in the last two months of campaign. He asks for a warm water and settles down in one of the sofas. "There is no campaign, it's a reign of terror, that too State terror," says Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir, secretary general of the BNP, the main opposition party, in an exclusive conversation with The Indian Express. He is the man running the party, in the absence of the Zia family, and will play a leadership role — if they win the elections. A few months ago, he stitched up the Opposition alliance as he approached veteran secular icon, Kamal Hossain, and is challenging the Awami League-led ruling alliance under incumbent Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in the upcoming parliamentary elections on December 30. A self-confessed spartan eater and of medium built, he is not a tall man. But, he is right now the tallest leader among BNP leaders, who is leading the party's election campaign. His first complaint are about how the police is being used by the ruling party. "bhoyaboho obostha (it's a dangerous

situation)," he says, with an air of resignation, as he narrates how his wife and daughter, a 32-year-old teacher, were also stopped by the police while campaigning. "I can't conceive that such a situation can happen," he says. Lodged in a 19th century rundown jail in old Dhaka, Zia is allowed to meet her family and party leaders once in 15 days. While her sister Selina Islam, brother Shamim Iskander and sister-in-law Kaniz meet her and give her fresh set of clothes, Fakhrul has been able to meet her three times since February. "We took her permission before announcing our entry into elections," he says. He confers with Tarique, who also faces corruption charges and lives in London for a decade now, over encrypted apps. Tarique interviewed the candidates being given tickets for the polls from London over Skype. So, in the absence of the Zia family, he is the face of the party. Zia is apparently suffering from multiple ailments, including joint pain, diabetes, and has been allowed an attendant in the jail. "I represent people of Bangladesh. We are a liberal democratic political party," "We look forward to economic development, and social and economic progress," he says. But, most importantly, he says, "We believe in democracy". He adds that the BNP re-introduced multiparty democracy in 1991, when Gen H M Ershad's regime ended. "We tried to meet Indian leaders outside the country. We sought appointment from the Indian High

Commissioner, sought and met three times, it's not the other way around," he says, but feels that Indian diplomats are not keen to meet and engage with the BNP leaders since they don't want to upset the incumbent government led by Hasina. "We seek friendship with India. And contrary to the perception in India, we don't believe in communism, fundamentalism," he says emphatically. "That's a totally a false perception that we are anti-India, this is part of Awami League's concerted propaganda," he says. But, many in Bangladesh remember the last BNP regime led by Khaleda Zia, from 2001 to 2006, when there were attacks against minorities in 2001 and subsequent anti-India activities. Indian diplomats in Dhaka feel that BNP has lot to "atone" for what they did, when they were in power. But, Fakhrul is a pragmatic leader. "We have been reaching out to India, including our Chairperson Begum Zia's visit to Delhi in 2012. We thought with BJP in power in 2014, things will improve. She had a very good meeting with Modi, but nothing happened after that. There was no follow up," "We were disappointed. We tried to fix up a meeting with BJP's general secretary Ram Madhav in Bangkok in August this year, but the Indian side chickened out," he told The Indian Express. The BNP-Jamaat-e-Islami alliance between 2001 and 2006 has been a baggage for him, and he is trying hard to shed that image. "When we are questioned about Jamaat, I tell you, See BNP is not Jamaat. BNP doesn't believe in Islamic laws, it doesn't

believe in fundamentalism. We have no fascination for Jamaat," he says, but he realises that he has to walk the talk when they come to power. While Jamaat-e-Islami is de-registered as a political outfit by the Bangladesh election commission, 22 leaders — who were with Jamaat — are contesting the elections on BNP's ticket. "The tie-up with Jamaat is a strategic tie up. With them, we have an advantage in 50 seats where the margin is thin and the fight is tough. Without us, they are reduced to just three seats," he says, with complete realpolitik in his mind. But, will they be part of a future government. "No way," he says. During the 2001-2006 regime, the Jamaat-e-Islami, as a party, had been extremely vitriolic towards India, which Delhi is mindful of. "BJP is a right-wing political party, RSS is also there. But we don't have a problem engaging with them," he says, without bringing in equivalence. "Unfortunately, I don't know why India ignores the misdeeds of the Awami League government which includes torture, disappearances etc. India is being blamed by the common people, there is a perception that India is helping Awami League. Awami League is a hated political party. But, just because of India, it has survived, it's India which has strengthened Awami League," he said. He goes on to say that Bangladesh's police and bureaucracy have "good connections" with the Indian High Commission. Fakhrul says that his main agenda is the "right to vote" and "live freely", so

that no one is picked up by the police. Hailing from a political family, he entered student politics, and was part of progressive, left leaning East Pakistan students' Union, which played a role in the liberation war. After studying economics in college, he said that during the liberation war, he crossed over and went to India to mobilise people. After liberation, he joined the education service in government and taught economics in college. After 18 years of teaching, he quit and joined politics. "It is impossible to imagine BNP without the Zia family," he says, swearing his allegiance, and attributes it to the family's "belief in Bangladeshi nationalism". "She is a real charismatic leader," he gushes, as his colleagues nod. He says that one of the first things will be to get her out of jail, if the BNP comes to power. So, will there be same treatment meted out to the Hasina family. He says, "There won't be a politics of vengeance." In his free time, the septuagenarian loves to watch movies, especially Bangla classics starring Uttam Kumar and Suchitra Sen. Filmmaker Satyajit Ray's movies are his favourites, and he picks "Apar Sansar" as his most favourite, as well as Ritwik Ghatak's Meghe Dhaka Tara. He also likes Govind Nihalani's movies, "I loved Tamas." He also lists Gautam Ghosh and Nandita Das, as some of his favourites. As he sits in office, with a painting of a paddy field behind him, the BNP's topmost leader in Bangladesh, says, "I never aspire to be PM. I will do whatever my party's leaders asked me to do."

J&K: Four militants killed in encounter with security forces in Pulwama



Agency
New Delhi, Dec. 29

At least four militants were killed in an encounter with security forces that broke out early Saturday morning in South Kashmir's Pulwama district. This is the second encounter in the last 24 hours in the area. According to police, a cordon and search operation (CASO) was launched by security forces in Rajpora following inputs about the possible presence of militants in the area. "The encounter is underway in the area," a senior security official said. "Brief exchange of fire between security forces

and terrorists at Hanjan," Jammu and Kashmir Police tweeted. "The area has been cordoned off," it added. On Friday, a LeT militant was killed in an encounter in Banderpora area of Pulwama. A J-K police official had said that the slain militant had joined the outfit around five months ago. He was later identified as Ishfaq Yousuf Wani, a resident of Koil Pulwama in South Kashmir. A large number of people participated in the funeral of the slain militant which was held at his native village Koil in Pulwama later in the day. Soon after the killing of Wani, clashes

broke out in some parts of South Kashmir. Meanwhile, Hurriyat chairman Mirwaiz Umar Farooq claimed that the cordon and search operations (CASO) launched in the extreme cold weather should immediately stop. "At #JamaMasjid today. Grossly Inhuman on part of GOI that even in this severe cold as mercury has dipped to minus 8 degree celsius, children women and men forcibly brought out of their homes for conduct of Cordon and search operations (CASO)! This should be immediately stopped," Umar had tweeted after addressing the Friday gathering at the Jamia Masjid in Srinagar.

PM Modi to visit his Lok Sabha constituency Varanasi, hold rally in Ghazipur today; key NDA allies to skip

Agency
Uttar Pradesh, Dec. 29

Prime Minister Narendra Modi will visit Varanasi and Ghazipur in Uttar Pradesh and Varanasi today (December 29) where he is expected to inaugurate developmental projects. PM's second visit to his Lok Sabha constituency in the last two months comes at a time when the BJP faces pressure from its allies demanding a better share of the pie ahead of the General Elections 2019. During the visit, Modi will inaugurate the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) and South Asia Regional Centre (ISARC) in Varanasi and attend the 'One District, One Product Regional Summit' at Deendayal Hastakala Sankul in the holy city. He will also launch developmental projects worth Rs 508 crore. Later, he will also launch a commemorative postal stamp on the Maharaja Suheldeo in Ghazipur where he will also address a public rally. IRRI and ISARC at campus of National Seed Research and Training Center (NSRTC) in Varanasi will serve as hub for rice research and

training in South Asia and SAARC region. 'One District One Product' is government scheme aimed at enhancing the skills of local people and increasing the reach of the indigenous trades, crafts and products from small towns and small districts in the state. A senior minister in Yogi Adityanath's cabinet and SBSP president Om Prakash Rajbhar, an MLA from MLA from Zahooraabad assembly constituency in Ghazipur district, said we won't attend the programme. Rajbhar expressed his displeasure over the commemorative postal stamp on backward caste leader Maharaja Suheldev Rajbhar not carrying his full name. Earlier, another NDA ally Apna Dal (S), had declared its leaders won't attend the programmes of the state government citing "friction" with BJP. Apna Dal (S) is represented in the government by its leader Union Cabinet minister Anupriya Patel, an MP from Mirzapur, adjacent to Varanasi. Anupriya said he supports her husband and Apna Dal (S) leader Ashish Patel's accusation that BJP ignores its smaller allies. Apna Dal

holds clout in 15 of 80 Lok Sabha seats in UP. Apna Dal Chief Ashish Patel told ANI that the party's leaders won't attend PM Modi's rally in Ghazipur today, saying, "arrogant attitude of BJP UP leaders is insulting weaker sections of society". He appealed to PM to intervene in the matter. "We will not be part of any Govt programmes in UP, even today's (PM's event in Ghazipur)".

Army rescues over 1,500 stranded tourists in Sikkim

Agency
Gangtok, Dec 29

The Indian Army has rescued more than 1,500 tourists stranded near the 17th Mile in East Sikkim close to the India-China border following heavy snowfall, an official said. The tourists were returning from Nathu La and Tsomgo (Changu) Lake on Friday evening when snowfall in the region blocked roads, leaving over 300 to 400 civil vehicles stranded at various points on Jawahar Lal Nehru Road, East Sikkim District Magistrate Kapil Meena said.

Leh, Kargil experience coldest night of season

Agency
Srinagar, Dec 29

There was slight respite from the intense cold conditions at most places in Kashmir Valley even as Leh and Kargil in Ladakh region of the state experienced the coldest night of the season, the MET office said on Saturday. The night temperature rose slightly across the valley, except in Kokernag, providing some relief to residents. However, the mercury went down in Ladakh region of the state, an official of the MET Office here said. Srinagar the summer capital of Jammu and Kashmir which had experienced the coldest December night in nearly three decades on the previous night at minus 7.7 degrees Celsius, saw the mercury rise half-a-degree to settle at a low of minus 7.2 degrees Celsius last night. However, the official said the night temperature in the city was still over five

degrees below normal for this time of the season. He said Qazigund the gateway town to the valley - in south Kashmir recorded a low of minus 6.2 degrees Celsius up from minus 6.7 degrees Celsius the previous night. Kupwara in north Kashmir recorded a low of minus 6 degrees Celsius last night, the official said. The night temperature in Pahalgam, which serves as one of the base camps for the annual Amarnath yatra in south Kashmir, settled at a low of minus 8.3 degrees Celsius last night up from minus 9.5 degrees Celsius on the previous night. The official said the ski-resort of Gulmarg in north Kashmir recorded a low of minus 7 degrees Celsius an increase of over two degrees from minus 9.3 degrees Celsius the previous night. Kokernag town in south Kashmir was the only place in the valley where

the night temperature dropped last night. The town registered a low of minus 5.8 degrees Celsius as against minus 5.5 degrees Celsius on the previous night. The night temperature in Leh town in Ladakh region of the state dropped over two degrees from the previous night's minus 15.1 degrees Celsius to settle at a low of minus 17.5 degrees Celsius last night, the official said. He said last night was the coldest night of the season so far there and Leh was the coldest recorded place in Jammu and Kashmir. The nearby Kargil recorded a low of minus 16.7 degrees Celsius, the official said, adding last night was the coldest night of the season so far there. Kashmir is currently under the grip of 'Chillai-Kalan' the 40-day harshest period of winter when the chances of snowfall are most frequent and maximum and the temperature drops

considerably. 'Chillai-Kalan' ends on January 31, but the cold wave continues even after that in Kashmir. The 40-day period is followed by a 20-day long 'Chillai-Khurd' (small cold) and a

10-day long 'Chillai-Bachha' (baby cold). However, the winter this season has been dry so far, although there was a spell of early snowfall in the valley in first and second week of November.

Explosion at Jammu bus stand, no casualties

Agency
Jammu, Dec 29

A low-intensity explosion rocked the main bus stand here, with the police suspecting that a grenade was lobbed to target the police station building in the vicinity, police officials said Saturday. No casualties were reported in the explosion that occurred around midnight, the officials said. Quoting preliminary investigations, they said it is suspected that the grenade was thrown from a moving vehicle to target the police station building, located near the

main entrance of the bus stand. The grenade fell short of the target and exploded in the air, without causing any damage or casualty, the officials said. They said police immediately cordoned off the area and an alert was sounded to track the culprits. This was the second attack on the Jammu bus stand in over seven months. Earlier on May 24, two policemen and a civilian were injured in a grenade attack on the under-construction bus stand along the B C Road. The accused were subsequently arrested.